

**In the Realm of the Shadow:
Conjuring Black Supernaturalism in
Stowe, Morrison and Hurston**
by

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ABSTRACT:

My thesis begins by interrogating the ways in which two texts by Harriet Beecher Stowe--Uncle Tom's Cabin and its follow-up, Dred--construct Black supernatural ability as racially innate and divinely specific. Harriet Beecher Stowe's notion of "Black spiritual superiority" invigorated racial tensions of the time and encouraged white reader's hyperbolic notions of Blackness. The undisputed architect of the Magical Negro trope, Stowe's creation forces the enslaved into a position to prove themselves superhuman; that is, the trope burdens their humanity with inhumane assumptions.

To contemporize my discussion of Stowe's work, I assert that her character, Uncle Tom, was the largest and most significant influence on the production of the Magical Negro, which has become highly visible in film and literature of the past half century. Additionally, the trope positions Black individuals as divided into two categories: ordinary criminals or supernatural creatures. Both of these assumptions deny Black humanity in the same way that black exceptionalism denies the existence of a human spectrum in the Black community. This polarization of types works to story the black experience into extreme poles, forcing perceptions of Blackness to recede back into "Uncle Tom-isms", relegated into the space of characters, stereotypes and relics.

Shifting from this historical perspective into a speculative lens, I argue that Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon* disavow the Magical Negro by engaging with Black Supernaturalism - a term that denotes a literary phenomenon which seeks to rework dominant notions of Black religious participation and traditional African Voodoo. My work excavates Black Supernaturalism through the anthropological and fictional works of Zora Neale Hurston, whose work formed the foundation upon which Morrison, and other Black authors, built their work. Further, Black Supernaturalism certifies and upholds communal traditions that certify magical storytelling, ghosts and impossible feats as palpably sourced in the scars of slavery borne by the black community.

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I thank the city of New Orleans and its residents for their enduring impressions, invigorating presence and significant impact on my life. My interest in Black literature and the subject of slavery began during a trip to New Orleans in 2007, during which the omnipresent and often regenerative conditions of racism in the American South, and the enduring scars of slavery, made a deep and lasting impression. My relationship with this city has been crucial to the direction and foundational thinking of this thesis.

Finally, my partner Cody, whose constant support and frequent reminders to eat, sleep, and enjoy, deserves my most heartfelt thanks. *If there's any kind of magic in this world, it must be in the attempt of understanding someone sharing something.*

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In the Realm of the Shadow: Conjuring Black Supernaturalism
in Stowe, Morrison and Hurston

Between 1692 and 1693, 200 people were tried for witchcraft in Salem, Massachusetts. Nineteen of those were found guilty, sentenced to death, and hanged in public for their perceived crimes. The first to be accused was a slave named Tituba, whose near psychedelic confession introduced Voodoo magic as the source of the devil's entrance into Salem. Yet the specificities of Tituba's life, particularly her racial identity, remain obscured, incorrectly assumed, or altogether forgotten. This historical erasure was not done purposelessly; rather, it is deeply rooted in the American tradition of whitewashing historical narratives. Tituba's story is one of many that fetishizes and fantasizes Black bodies, --particularly the enslaved, around whom exaggerated notions of supernaturalism pervade even today. What is significant about Tituba is not only her place in a very well-known and mythicized piece of American lore, but also the murkiness surrounding her actual role in the trials and the unsolved mystery of her racial identity.

Scholars and historians continue to debate Tituba's race even today. One such scholar, Veta Smith Tucker, contends that Tituba's racial identity experienced a gradual historical transformation which eventually resulted in her being labeled African. Smith Tucker ascertains that while Tituba was always known to be a slave, her Blackness came about as a result of a compulsion for racial purity, and a pure racial categorization of her: "Wedded to the modern myths of racial purity and exclusivity, contemporary scholars

continue to privilege one ethnic identity for Tituba over the other.” What is certain is that Tituba, who was “probably practicing Hoodoo”¹, found herself labeled as the instigator of the so-called demonic possessions and subsequent demonic activities alleged to have taken place in Salem. Curiously, historical and fictional depictions of Tituba range in perspective, with some representing her as clearly indigenous or ambiguously raced, while others physicalize her as distinctly African². These inconsistencies raise questions of motive, of course, but more pertinently, they identify a troubling national preoccupation with a categorically racial indictment. That is to say, Tituba’s gradual turn from Barbadian Indian to negro slave represent a staking point for the racialization of not only the justice system, but into the annals of the America (white) imagination, wherein supernaturalism, in turn, was racialized as distinctly Black or Black originated. Tituba’s story is salient in two ways: One, it identifies crucial racial biases and a compulsion for racial purity in the scholarly community, and two, it is the first known incident in which the intentional Blackening of an enslaved person’s racial identity in a juridical context was directly tied to their alleged involvement with the supernatural.

Themes of supernatural Blackness are not unique, and do in fact appear in various forms throughout American history. The idea is so prevalent in the US that it has acquired the status of trope. As suggested by its name, the Magical Negro is a Black fictional character whose identity is marked by supernatural abilities. These abilities have historically taken forms both benevolent, spiritually connected to God, and malevolent spiritually connected to the devil, demons, Hoodoo/Voodoo or the afterlife. Harriet

¹ Veta Smith Tucker, "Purloined Identity: The Racial Metamorphosis of Tituba of Salem Village." (*Journal of Black Studies* 30, no. 4, 2000), 631.

² Smith Tucker, 629.

Beecher's Stowe's abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and its sequel *Dred* represent a kind of staking point for the Magical Negro. The character Uncle Tom is famously pious, even provocatively so, to the point that he comes to represent a spiritual bridge between heaven and earth. He is infantilized, condescended and storied in such a way that positions him as a spiritual leader whose social and racial inferiority act as inducements for his supernaturalism.

Stowe's notion of Black spiritual superiority is inherently an act of othering which places the enslaved in not only a position to prove themselves beyond mere humanity but also into a constellating expectation of supernatural ability and divine connection. Much like America's racial history itself (most notably the myth of American colorblindness), Stowe's sentiment has not disappeared. Rather, it has adapted and shaped itself into the Magical Negro trope, which continues to pepper American films, books, and television with characters subject to this same supernatural othering.

Again, it must be noted that Stowe's approach to slave narratives finds a locus in a presumption of racial purity. Further, the anxiety with which she explores the symbiotic themes of white salvation locate both *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Dred* squarely in a sentiment of white supremacy. It is not difficult to identify the character of Uncle Tom as the disturbing caricature he surely is; however, a close reading of the novel will reveal the depth of ideological depravity with which Stowe treats his supernatural abilities. Tom's supernaturalism is buttressed by his mental simplicity, a narrative move that positions white abolitionism as a suture for white healing.

Contrastingly, Toni Morrison does not shy away from supernaturalism in her Black characters, she instead summons the supernatural functions as a mechanism of

community healing, a way forward and, more precisely, an examination and response to the phenomenon of motherlessness (both real and present as well as historical) in the Black community. Morrison's use of Black Supernaturalism resists the fictional tropification of Blackness initiated by Stowe's Magical Negro, and instead seeks to establish the cultural and rhetorical significance of supernaturalism in Black culture and literature. For Stowe, notions of racial purity contribute to Uncle Tom's prophetic status, whereas Morrison complicates this notion through deft characterizations of the strange and unexplained. In *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*, Morrison evokes the literal and metaphorical scattering of Black Americans through scenes of supernaturalism that engage the emotional dysmorphia of motherlessness, identifying the crucial source of diasporic pain back to systemic mechanisms of maternal denial. My thesis will focus on these fictional works, and will include a chapter length discussion of Zora Neale Hurston's significant anthropological contributions in *Tell My Horse* and *Mules and Men*, which I theorize provided the foregrounding wisdom on which Morrison, and other Black authors, built their work.

I have chosen to begin with Tituba not only because of her role in an iconic American tale, but because her story takes place prior to American nationhood, and in this way, foregrounds Morrison's later skepticism about the nation state and national identity. The Tituba incident ironically exists within an obscuring narrative of white female suffering, much in the way that Stowe would later couch the suffering of Black slaves within a moral obligation to salvage white female souls. Though later historicizations of the story highlight Tituba's hyperracialization, the significance of her spiritual mischaracterization as darkly supernatural endowed Stowe's Magical Negro

with the historically contextualized foundation it required to flourish. That is to say, it offered a crucial adulteration of Black spirituality from which Stowe drew heavily in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Dred*.

I would like to take a moment here to delineate a distinction between Black spirituality and what I term Black Supernaturalism. Black spirituality will be used in this thesis to identify notions of Black religious distinction, institutionally and individually, particularly as they are defined in Zora Neale Hurston's significant anthropological work, *The Sanctified Church*. Stowe's characterizations of Black spirituality tend to fetishize Black religious participation as hyperbolic and, more crucially, innately racial expressions of religiosity. Stowe's *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* provides frank characterizations of this tendency: "Their religious exercises are all colored by this sensitive and exceedingly vivacious temperament. Like oriental nations, they incline much to outward expressions, violent gesticulations, and agitating movements of the body."³

Black spirituality essentially differs from Black Supernaturalism in that its critical study veers towards cultural anthropology and holds little textual significance beyond Stowe's misrepresentations. What is more striking about Stowe's two protest novels is their cultural impact, and the extent to which Black spirituality was taken up at large to be representative of, as I stated previously, a fundamental element of Blackness, even a *biological* "something," which ultimately served to villainize Black spiritual participation, of which Black public assembly and religious music were intrinsic.

³ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, (Urbana, Illinois: Project Gutenberg, accessed from: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/54812/54812-h/54812-h.htm>), ch. 6.

Building off of Hurston's work in Haiti and New Orleans, which sought to establish a framework of Black life that de-essentialized spirituality from Blackness and repositioned it as both a cultural preservative and a form of resistance, Toni Morrison contextualizes the religious significance of West African Voodoo within literary works that move towards a reworked cultural foundation of Black spirituality. Black Supernaturalism, then, arises from these acts of reworking by engaging the known with the unknown in order to deconstruct the Magical Negro and de-tropify Black culture.

Uncle Tom, Dred and the Sutures of Stowe's Paranoid White Supremacy

Stowe's insistence on an Anglo-centric God figure locates itself inside a pseudo-spiritual maternal panic. The violence exerted on Uncle Tom is not so much a condemnation of the men exerting it as it is a warning to the white women charged with upholding the spiritual superiority of Anglo Christians. The violence itself is as Biblical as Tom's allegorical connections to Christ, marked by extreme humility and similarly hyperbolic stubbornness. But what is spiritual about Uncle Tom is narrow, transparent, and though Stowe strives for a translucent portrayal of Blackness, she instead achieves a worn trope, fatalistically determined and without personal agency. Indeed, Tom's divine accessibility is only able to reach its apex when in the presence of the white child, Eva, whose death provides further hallucinogenic fuel for Tom's one-man resistance.

However, where Tom's strength is accessed through white femininity, Dred's is accessed through violence. It is notable that Stowe's two principle male figures follow a predictable trajectory from non-violent resistance to violent, a move marked by Fanonian notions of violence in the psychologically and physically colonized. Stowe's inadvertent station as colonizer inevitably aligns her moral concerns with those of her fellow white countrymen, particularly women. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, she decrees non-violence as the single means through which the colonized-the enslaved-may achieve freedom. She insists that non-violence is the *Christian* insistence. But Fanon would suggest that in advocating non-violent resistance, her work, consciously or unconsciously, aided the continued subjugation, torture, and enslavement of the very people she claimed to support. By

holding out non-violent resistance, Stowe reinforces her own moral, racial superiority while simultaneously furthering the subjection of slaves:

At the decisive moment, the colonialist bourgeoisie, which up till then has remained inactive, comes into the field. It introduces that new idea which is in proper parlance a creation of the colonial situation: non-violence. In its simplest form this non-violence signifies to the intellectual and economic elite of the colonized country that the bourgeoisie has the same interests as they and that it is therefore urgent and indispensable to come to terms for the public good. Non-violence is an attempt to settle the colonial problem around a green baize table, before any regrettable act has been performed or irreparable gesture made, before any blood has been shed.⁴

Blood has been shed, of course, and it is the blood of the colonized which serves to weigh down Stowe's emotions of white guilt, as well as feminine and Christian duty. Tom's severance of self from reality is in itself an act of Christlike humility, requiring him to inhabit feminine selflessness and take on his fellow enslaved as children. Morrison would later take up in great detail the ramifications of such selflessness, delineating the post-traumatic healing process as integrally tied to her character's resemblance of self through speculative histories. But what of Tom's supernaturalism, and what of Cassy's? Cassy and Tom's relationship bares more relation to a mother-child bond in that Tom's guidance is verbal and spiritual rather than physical and literal. It must be noted that he lacks a libidinous drive entirely, acting as a spiritual guide endowed with unnatural purity. Yet Tom's asexuality, as it is characterized, fails to address the institutional dilemma dwelling within Black male sexuality, which allowed for misogyny only inasmuch as it suppressed any notion of a mature Black male. Darieck Scott, in *Extravagant Abjection*, aptly makes the point that "the emasculation trope has at its

⁴ Franz Fanon and Richard Philcox, *The Wretched of the Earth / Frantz Fanon ; Translated from the French by Richard Philcox ; Introductions by Jean-Paul Sartre and Homi K. Bhabha* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 23.

corollary the figure of castration, an image which does not remain only as a shadowy fear in the male mind as it does in Freudian theory but becomes practice in the long and ugly history of lynching black men”⁵ Indeed, Morrison’s treatment of Paul D in *Beloved* gestures to both of these notions, a subject which will be revisited in the following chapter. Furthermore, non-violence is the creed he has adopted from the bowdlerized Bible with which he has been provided, and in this way, Stowe perhaps reveals her own racialized fears, her own fears about Blackness.

Turning back to Cassy, I will note that in her, Stowe was sure to craft concrete connections between Blackness and supernaturalism. From Cassy’s interactions with Legree, we can further observe Stowe’s paranoia about the potential realities of Black spiritual or supernatural authority, though she stops short of endowing her Black characters with any tangible evidence of authority of whites. When Cassy threatens “the word”, Legree cowers, not because he has seen proof of Cassy’s ability to carry out a Voodoo curse, but because he harbors subconscious fears of what remains unseen to him about Blackness, culturally and spiritually of whites.

The performative nature of language allows for degrees of ideological “conjuring”. For Cassy, this takes the form of words and phrases that interact with Legree’s reality in such a way that he comes to view them as literal conjurings. Deborah J. Rosenthal rightly points to Cassy’s heritage as Stowe’s basis for supernaturalizing her: “With this Franco-Africanist shadow hovering over Cassy, readers view Cassy and her utterance in the context of a New Orleans diasporic belief system.”⁶ Building upon this

⁵ Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York, NY, New York University Press, 2010), 131.

⁶ Debra J. Rosenthal, “‘I’ve Only to Say the Word!’: Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Performative Speech Theory.” (Lincoln, NE: *Legacy* 27, no. 2, 2010), 243.

base, Rosenthal explores the generative qualities of Cassy's Franco-African heritage, stating that, for Legree in particular, "Cassy's performative language...relies on its iterability. such language would be a citation, or a quoted extract, of supernatural conjure that follows a certain code within established vodun practice."⁷.

Building off of Rosenthal's argument, we can observe the salience of conjuring language in Cassy relationships with her overlords in chapter 33. During a particularly tense scene, Cassy reacts to a threat of violence from an overseer by crying out, " 'touch me, if you dare! I've power enough, yet, to have you torn by the dogs, burnt alive, cut to inches! I've only to say the word!' "⁸. Cassy's engagement of an invocation contains obviously conjurative suggestions, classing her into a trope that Stowe found distastefully interesting, if nothing else. As Rosenthal points out, Stowe herself experimented in forms of pseudo-Christian occult: "Stowe typified her social stratum's interest in mediumship, mesmerism, and spiritualism by her participation in séances and her experimentation with a planchette"⁹. The character of Cassy's evocations class her as a practitioner of magic beyond this realm, reaching past the world of the dead and towards that of the devil. It is apt to reflect here on the story of Tituba, who's assumptive African identity resulted in her being storied, mythicized and heavily supernaturalized. Indeed, Cassy goes so far as to mock her captors, telling them "I've got the devil in me!"¹⁰, and insisting they've reason to fear her.

⁷ Rosenthal, 243.

⁸ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, (New York, NY: Bantam Dell, 2003), 403.

⁹ Debra J. Rosenthal, "'I've Only to Say the Word!': Uncle Tom's Cabin and Performative Speech Theory.", (Lincoln, NE: *Legacy* 27, no. 2, 2010), 243.

¹⁰ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 420.

Fanon also suggests that supernaturalism - myths and curses - serves the colonized merely by intensifying their representative horror, or, by liminally subverting the terror of the colonizers by presenting a terror that persistently looms, free of disapproval yet also free of provable reality. “Zombies,” Fanon insists, “are more terrifying than colonists.” He adds, “The magical, supernatural powers prove to be surprisingly ego boosting. The colonist’s powers are infinitely shrunken, stamped as foreignness. There is no real reason to fight them because what really matters is that the mythical structures contain far more terrifying adversaries.”¹¹ It is in this way that evocations of the supernatural serve as markers of devilry and agents of mysterious terror that insulate and restrict by deflection.

Stowe is careful to distinguish between supernaturalism and spiritualism, particularly in her representations of Tom and Cassy. What is less clear is whether we as readers are meant to take Tom’s divine porosity and Godly visions as literal or individually subjective. One wonders whether any of Stowe’s white characters would be considered spiritually porous enough to experience a divine vision like the one Tom experiences after Eva’s death. To return to Stowe’s depiction of Tom as simple- “that simple heart”, “his simple and unobtrusive influences”¹²- coupled with her assertions about Blackness from her *Key*, it is easily inferred that, above all, it is Tom’s Blackness that endows him with the ability to commune so easily with the divine. If, according to Stowe, spiritual porosity is dependent on a person being “utterly helpless and ignorant,” and if Black people, according to Stowe, are “confessedly more simple, docile,

¹¹ Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 19.

¹² Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 398, 449.

childlike,”¹³ the inference is not difficult to make. It is similarly easy to suggest that Cassy’s openness to dark magic and devilry are a result of *her* Blackness and her spiritual porosity.

Thus, the connections made by Stowe in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* cemented sentiments within predominant white culture which expanded into the modern era, where the adoption of Black spiritual authority as defined by white hysteria, guilt and fear has played out repeatedly, for example, in film. Krin Gabbard’s *Black Magic: White Culture and African American Culture* succinctly identifies the Magical Negro character-archetyped by Stowe’s Uncle Tom-as impetused by the need for white absolution or salvation. Drawing connections between white paranoia and longing over issues of Blackness, he asserts: “All these beings share an overriding desire to participate beneficently in the lives of white people while pursuing no connection whatsoever to African Americans. These films, including per Gabbard’s study, *The Green Mile* and *Ghost*, suggest that white Americans can like individual Black people but not Black culture.”¹⁴ As Gabbard points out, the Magical Negro’s existence is wholly dependant on his (and occasionally her) necessity to the white characters that surround him.

Theoretically, Uncle Tom served to aid white humanity by highlighting the atrocities they commit against the enslaved, and thus, their Anglo Christian God. There is no single protagonist that Tom directly aids, and in this way, he is not typical of the Magical Negro, acting rather as a kind of broad reaching prophetic figure. While Tom himself is concerned with the freedom of the enslaved, Stowe’s concern is aligned more

¹³ Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

¹⁴ Krin Gabbard, *Black Magic: White Hollywood and African American Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 173.

closely with a vision of Blackness that sees Black people as foreign, mysterious and even frightening, yet spiritually useful to whites. To free the enslaved, for Stowe, is an act of white salvation. As James Baldwin points out in “Everybody’s Favorite Protest Novel”, Stowe’s white characters lack the critical introspection that would require them to interrogate their own actions:

Sentimentality, the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion, is the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel...the mask of cruelty...*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—like its multitudinous, hard-boiled descendants—is a catalogue of violence. This is explained by the nature of Mrs. Stowe’s subject matter, her laudable determination to flinch from nothing in presenting the complete picture...and to leave unanswered and unnoticed the only important question: what it was, after all, that moved her people to such deeds.¹⁵

Indeed, Tom’s “hyperspirituality” allows Stowe to dehumanize and disassociate her white characters from him, both physically—as his supernaturalism is a consequence of his Blackness, and spiritually as his Blackness endows him with crucial cognitive simplicity, which is unavailable to *them* but allows *him* to communicate directly with the divine. The dehumanizing formula with which Stowe renders her Black characters naturally serves to humanize the white, slave owning class by catapulting them into the position of moral shepherdry. Yet by Stowe’s own ruminations, it is the slave owners who are in need of a shepherd, who comes in the form of Uncle Tom. Further, their dual station as owners of human property and thus sinners allows for opportunities of spiritual, moral and personal redemption. As Baldwin illuminates, Stowe’s white characters express gratuitous sentimentality while remaining void of reparative contemplation. Stowe mars the

¹⁵ James Baldwin, *Baldwin - Collected Essays / Notes of A Native Son / Nobody Knows My Name / The Fire Next Time / No Name in the Street / The Devil Finds Work*, (New York, NY: The Library of America, 1998), 12.

institution of slavery even while she opportunes infinite terms of redemption for white slave owners.

Stowe's insistence on mere moral redirection implies the sort of historical denial, even obliteration, that Hollywood films would later adopt, and Morrison would later excavate in her seminal novels. The emergence of the Magical Negro is no surprise when one considers the extent of our nation's urgency to recast, reconsider and redesign its past in order to fit a nationalistic fundament onto America's beginnings. Certainly, the Obama era furthered notions of a post-racial America by physically affirming liberalist fantasies of anti-racism and progressivism with the image of a long-awaited Black president. Indeed, it seems misanthropic, even denialist, to hold up the Obama presidency as yet another empty trophy won in a war of post-racial typology, a war devoid of tangible, cultural shifts and rife with ideologically drenched symbolism. However, if we are to consider the weight of images and the vast ideological potentiality of such trophies, we may illuminate the chief pitfalls of the *image* of a Black president.

Dylan Rodriguez's provocative essay, "Black Presidential Non-Slave," begins by illuminating the locus of white racial absolutism within Barack Obama's inaugural speech. The speech, seen and heard by millions around the nation, located Obama's intentions constitutionally and, on a broader cultural scale, served to usher in the so-called post-racial era. But as Rodriguez states, "This teleology of racial progress allows for a compartmentalization of genocidal slavery's temporality, spatiality and sociological effect". Even as Obama evoked America's constitution, a move intended to supplant racial disparity under a single unifier, the evocation narrowed slavery's legacy into a retrospective and sepia-toned lens, fitting the violence and genocidal psychopathy of the past

firmly into hindsight. “It is a bygone period of American history,” Rodriguez continues, “rather than a fundamental social architecture and discursive matrix guiding the formation of American racial power relations during and beyond the plantation era”¹⁶.

By evoking the constitution, Obama allowed for opportunities of white absolution by denying the inherently anti-Black, anti-indigenous and anti-other nature of the document. Similar to the popularity of Magical Negro characters, a trope that hoped to indirectly resolve racial tension by mimicking Stowe’s method of Black othering, so the Obama presidency experienced prodigious popularity for its false depiction of total racial resolution. Moreover, Obama’s election cemented Stowe’s original vision of non-violent, almost entirely non-confrontational emancipation. This was a vision the author attempted to shuck off with the character Dred, who denies the purity of pacifist revolution by denying its revolutionary potentiality altogether. To be sure, the falseness of the post-racial era served a timely narrative of white salvation that attempted to liberate the descendants of the slave owning class from what had become the fetters of America’s genocidal past. But, as Rodriguez posits, this is a pointed redressing of the past that attempts dissolution: “our historical moment – and the Obama national racial *telos* – cannot be politically severed from the substructure of racist/ antiBlack, genocidal and proto-genocidal violence that is formed in the crucible of racial chattel slavery”¹⁷.

It is no accident that Rodriguez repeatedly refers to the post-racial era as a myth. No more storied and long awaited a myth has existed in the American psyche. Whether the election of Obama proved that America *desired* union while denying the cruciality of

¹⁶ Julian Go and Dylan Rodriguez, *Rethinking Obama*, “Black Presidential Non-Slave”, (Bingley, UK: Emerald, 2011), 23.

¹⁷ Go and Rodriguez, 27.

concrete action, or whether it highlighted racial dismissiveness by applying vapid symbolism to the wound of slavery remains debatable. What is clear about the post-racial era is that its mythesization allowed for the perpetuation of racial hierarchies. The Obama campaign and election played out with near fictional perfection, culminating with a consummation so pictorially consumptive as to be blinding.

The 1990's, the decade leading up to the Obama presidency, experienced deliberate reshaping of Blackness in film and media. As Krin Gabbard suggests, the Magical Negro trope emerged in constant orbit to a centrifuge of white leading characters whose complexity, in plot and character, always superseded that of the Magical Negro. "At best," Gabbard states, "these films reveal a yearning among white Americans for reconciliation with their Black brothers and sisters."¹⁸ Similar to Stowe's Uncle Tom, the mythos of Black hyperspirituality as depicted in the Magical Negro reflected contemporaneous sentiments of white guilt and, above all, an urgency to smooth over the lingering tensions unearthed in the post-1965 civil rights era, tensions proliferated by the kind of anti-Black governmental policy and criminal justice amendments detailed in Michelle Alexander's now famous *The New Jim Crow*.

Indeed, Stowe's motive of white absolution reveals itself repeatedly, and pointedly, throughout the novel. We see Stowe breaking through the fourth wall and addressing her white audience, even Southern slave owners with nullified and apologetic language intended to salve: "To you, generous, noble-minded men and women, of the South,—you, whose virtue, and magnanimity and purity of character, are the greater for the severer trial it has encountered." "And does not the slave system," she continues, "by

¹⁸ Gabbard, 127.

denying the slave all legal right of testimony, make every individual owner an irresponsible despot? Can anybody fail to make the inference what the practical result will be?"¹⁹ The practical result, naturally, refers to the dissolution and damnation of white souls as a result of the perpetuation of the slave system. I do not suggest that Stowe's romantic stimulation of a racially paranoid white imagination was unique or exclusive. Surely, the abolitionist cause evoked suggestions of religious damnation as motivation for their cause. Merely, I am arguing that Stowe, in creating the character Uncle Tom, achieved a duality of purpose in storying Black hyperspirituality as romantic while flattering her white audience with fantasies of moral obligation. By positioning white salvation as the impetus for abolition, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* at last managed to arouse the support of white audiences for a movement previously deemed polarizing and extreme.

If we are to posit that the depiction of supernatural Blackness (distinguished from Black Supernaturalism) like that seen in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a reflection of white othering, we may also posit that this reflection is adjudicated by the prevalence of white hysteria and fear in response to the racially unknown. In the same way that Uncle Tom leaves white introspective interrogation undisturbed, the election of President Obama similarly alleviated white guilt in the form of a popular and easily acceptable political figure. It must be noted that the so called post-racial era was ushered in on the heels of paradoxical 1990's racial denialism and hyperfocus, in which the tropes of what Krin Gabbard calls "Tom" and "Anti-Tom" represented prevalently in film and the media. He suggests that the real-life racial melodramas of the day, including the beating of Rodney

¹⁹ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 504.

King and the trial of OJ Simpson, relegated Blackness into binaries of Tom (victimized) and Anti-Tom (inherently violent). Evoking scholar Linda Williams, Gabbard contends:

...white Americans tend to conceive of race relations primarily in terms of exaggerated virtue and villainy. In the white imagination, Blacks tend to be either heroically suffering models of moral excellence, like Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom, or vicious defilers of white women, like renegade Gus in D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*...Rather than demonize one and exalt the other, Williams sees Tom and Anti-Tom and two sides of the same melodramatic coin that feed off each other and are still with us today.²⁰

Yet even as these binaries were perpetuated during the 1990's, a decade that surprised itself with revelations of deep racial tensions, Hollywood strove to supplant them with hollow, race baiting gestures attempting the appearance of equality. Black actors were suddenly receiving roles as judges, cops, and lawyers, roles designed to position Blacks as central to the power structures of law enforcement and criminal justice when, in reality, they remained at the mercy of these institutions. Far from leveling racism, placing Black actors in fictionalized versions of legal authority stimulated white paranoia surrounding judgement and the fragility of white supremacy while marginalizing Black authority into a hyperbolic and ventriloquized realm. In *High Contrast: Race and Gender in Contemporary Hollywood Film*, Sharon Willis supports the notion that selective, improbable racial casting, particularly in roles of legal authority, help to perpetuate, rather than dismantle, assumptions of Black racial omniscience: "So while such figures mark allusions to the social field, they simultaneously operate as indexes of paranoid fantasies that situate African Americans as the ones who know the truth about race, while

²⁰ Gabbard, 145.

avoiding any occasion for a reciprocated gaze that would cause the dominant culture to look at itself through another's eyes.”²¹

Racial omniscience, as it is written into the character of Cassy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, appears to constellate from a locus of white guilt. Cassy's chief antagonist, Legree, may seem to be devoid of remorse, yet reacts fearfully towards her threats of magical incantations, which, as a Christian, he has no reason to believe hold any real power. If Legree believes that Cassy can commit great physical harm merely by saying “the word,” is it thus improbable to assume his insecurities surrounding the frailty of his own power? Instead of assigning direct power to Cassy, Stowe alludes to her supernaturalism, writing that she “said something in French” to her master, who seems unable to or fearful of taking physical action against her: “Legree's face became perfectly demoniacal in its expression, as she spoke; he half raised his hand, as if to strike,—a gesture which she regarded with fierce disdain, as she turned and walked away.”²² Just as with the character Dred, Stowe denies Cassy any tangible supernatural power and instead provokes notions of the unknowableness of Blackness to inspire fear and, consequently, action. After all, Cassy's successful escape from slavery is impetussed by her skillful marionetting of a fake haunting, and relies heavily on Legree's presumptions about her innate supernatural ability.

For Fanon, the function of the supernatural in the colonized society is to contain the violent sentiments birthed by the colonizer's subconscious insistence on the animalization of the colonized. If we are to read Cassy and Tom as colonized, it is then

²¹ Sharon Willis, *High Contrast: Race and Gender in Contemporary Hollywood Film*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 6.

²² Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 405.

apt to draw a connection between their innately storied supernaturalism and Fanon's view that mythicizing reality insulates aggression. Fanon notes that the subjugated natives, prior to accepting the violent necessity of revolution, are "lost in an imaginary maze, a prey to unspeakable terrors yet happy to lose themselves in a dreamlike torment," Stowe dehumanizes her Black characters by supernaturalizing them, particularly in the case of Tom and Cassy. Cassy's "power" is particularly wrenching as an allegory for the racial unknown; that is Blackness which is foreign, shrouded and frightening to the white imagination. Because the colonizer/slave owner's psychological nexus is located, like Stowe's, within the notion of an Anglo-Christian God, all other denominations of spiritual authority are invalid, othered, and eventually villainized. As Fanon states, "The Church in the colonies is the white people's Church, the foreigner's Church. She does not call the native to God's ways but to the ways of the white man, of the master, of the oppressor."²³

However, Fanon's assessment of African spirituality, though useful, denies the complete reality of how supernaturalism and spiritualism functioned in African, and later, slave cultures. While Fanon attempts to rationalize practices such as the belief in zombies and spirits, Stowe fetishizes Black spirituality in the characters of Tom, Cassy and Dred. Her representations of Black messiah characters, in particular, establishes an Anglo-Christian origin to Black spirituality by dismissing individual or community power in favor of divine influence. Naturally, her approach dissociates from reality in the same way Fanon's does by disconnecting communal worth and meaning from ritual beliefs. Far more integral to slave culture than zombies or spirits were ritualistic practices with

²³ Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 7.

supernatural *assumptions and associations*. Sterling Stuckey's pivotal study *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* identifies the ring-shout as integral to the creation of a unified culture achieved by the enslaved in America. The ring-shout denotes a ritualistic dance style characterized by "dancing and singing...directed to the ancestors and gods, the tempo and revolution of the circle quickening during the course of the movement."²⁴ Stuckey explores the permeance of the ring-shout, from the slave ship to jazz culture, and argues its centrality to the existence of Pan-Africanism. *Slave Culture* is clear in its assertion that supernaturalism played a largely symbolic role in the lives of slaves.

Stowe's literalization of practices such as incantation and communion with the divine tend to marginalize "the self-generative nature of their [the enslaved] impulse towards freedom"²⁵ Indeed, by crafting the force of her narrative as divinely driven, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Dred* orient the sympathetic gaze of her white, (most likely) Northern reading audience towards a false representation of African simplicity as well as cultural homogeneity. As Stuckey points out, slaves in the Americas hailed from innumerable diverse cultural sources. In particular, their language diversity necessitated non-verbal methods of community building as a means of survival. The ring-shout, he contends, served to support this aim by way of inciting physio-spiritual connection to ancestral lands and practices as well as physical engagement with the present, each other, and a sense of mutual loss:

The repetition of stanzas as the dancers circled around and around with ever greater acceleration reinforced and deepened the spirit of familial attachment, drawing within the ancestral orbit slaves who may or may not have known either

²⁴ Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 12.

²⁵ Stuckey, 5.

a father or a mother, their involvement being an extension of that of others, the circle symbolizing the unbroken unity of the community.²⁶

Even as Stuckey admits African ethnicity was “an obstacle to African nationalism in the twentieth century,”²⁷ the setting of American slavery posed ethnic unity as essential to expressions of African unity. Complementarily, spiritualism and spiritual ritual helped to suture the wounds of a community of diasporic American slaves contenting with violence, familial disengagement, and attempts at cultural annihilation.

In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe addresses the cultural annihilation of the white slave owning class, acknowledging the paradoxical beauty and refinement of a society entrenched in a system of brutal forced labor. However, much of Stowe's blindness is expressed in what is left unsaid. Baldwin's criticism of her hyperbolic sentimentality is apt because it draws from the centrality of white supremacy that permeates her two protest novels. As Cassy's “word” is never made explicit, so Blackness, for Stowe and her audience, lingers in a realm of the unknown and the unknowable. What Blackness *is* remains inaccessible, antipodal, even untenable merely by way of its opposition to whiteness. This opposition, of course, snatches credibility only from the mythesized version of Blackness which exists in a wholly white imagination. It is the “other,” the flip side, the binary tropization of reality assigned to human bodies in order to dehumanize them. Stowe's dubious achievement is a skillful wielding of this equally dubious form of mental gymnastics. To be sure, her concern for the salvation of white, Christian women remains paramount. In light of this, her so-called protest novels are spread over with a kind of hand-wringing incredulity. Uncle Tom fashioned as a trope, then, does more

²⁶ Stuckey, 29.

²⁷ Stuckey, 3.

damage to Black humanity, as it is framed in Stowe's novel, than it invigorates a human bond.

Perhaps Stowe's greatest, and original, folly lies in what I have previously identified as her insistence on an Anglo-Christian model for the divine. It is this insistence, which takes the form of an unspoken assumption, which informs the bulk of slave characterizations in both *Uncle Tom* and *Dred*. From Stowe's *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, we know that the author harbored a decidedly mythicized perception of Africanness, rooted in mislead and spurious anthropological attempts to racially marginalize Blacks. In some sense, the socio-cognitive distortions lauded on Uncle Tom and Dred are not dissimilar from eugenically informed attempts to dissuade from Black humanity. The result is similar, if not equivalent. That Uncle Tom gave birth to the Magical Negro seems inevitable when viewed in retrospect. Stowe herself was convinced that racial equality did not represent in reality, and that whiteness and Blackness each denoted separate, unique, even symbiotic qualities: "Mesmerists have found that the negroes are singularly susceptible to all that class of influences which produce catalepsy, mesmeric sleep, and partial clairvoyant phenomena."²⁸ Socially and artistically, it is impossible to disassociate Stowe from her colonialist background, her subversion being rooted in thinly veiled hysterics. Her authority resides in a place of self interest. And so, the protest, the act of subversion she commits, remains necessarily tied to maintaining white supremacy.

We may consider whether the means justify the end. I question the authoritative stance that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* maintains as a protest novel. Indeed, I question Stowe's

²⁸ Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

subversion. If we are to engage in the interest of the colonized and the enslaved, from a modern perspective, it is necessary to seek out the reality of spirituality as it existed and exists today in the Black community. What is perhaps most striking about Uncle Tom is his distance from any community of fellow enslaved peoples. He stands alone in his unique supernatural abilities, an act that feels much more like an alignment with whiteness than individual conviction when we consider Stowe's anglicized version of Christianity. For Stowe, characteristics of Blackness, including their affinity for Christianity, are material consequences of race. Her denial of cultural influence in favor of a biological theory is, ironically, paradigmatic of Southern nationalism. It is a curiously Emersonian idea, one which forces us to contend with an early American fascination with multiple European (white) races while maintaining belief in a single negro race. Stowe's essentialism matches Emerson's paradoxical theories on race which were simultaneously sympathetic to the abolitionist cause while insisting on a Saxon myth that positioned white Americans as the recipients of hyper-masculinity, heroism, physical attractiveness and other favorable traits. One need not look further than Emerson's seminal study, *English Traits*, to identify him as a racial essentialist:

It is race, is it not? that puts the hundred millions of India under the dominion of a remote island in the north of Europe. Race avails much, if that be true, which is alleged, that all Celts are Catholics, and all Saxons are Protestants; that Celts love unity of power, and Saxons the representative principle. Race is a controlling influence in the Jew, who, for two millenniums, under every climate, has preserved the same character and employments. Race in the negro is of appalling importance. The French in Canada, cut off from all intercourse with the parent people, have held their national traits.²⁹

²⁹ Emerson, Ralph Waldo, *English Traits*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1966), 30.

But while Emerson admits that the physical influence of race is not insurmountable, Stowe makes no such qualification. Instead, hers is a wholly biologically tended portrait of Blackness which colors and supports the Saxon myth. Neither Emerson nor Stowe make moves towards a cultural anthropological approach to apparent racial differences, so enamored must they have been with a mythical notion of race and transference. This illuminated view begs the question, is it relevant to study the realistically white supremacist rootedness of many white abolitionists? I ask again whether the ends justify the means, whether the damage done by Stowe's tropization, simplifications and biologifications eradicate blame. For Stowe and Emerson, Americanness ties inextricably to Anglo-Saxonness, and for both, Blackness distinguishes itself as other, as separate from Anglo-Saxonism, as supplanted, foreign, spirited, and for this reason, as un-American.

I will return, briefly, to Stuckey's quote above. Stuckey rightfully draws attention to the lost parentage of the enslaved. The mere fact that so many of America's enslaved contingencies became communities at all is testament to the orbital potency of a shared spiritual identity even in the face of language loss, motherlessness and genocide. In this chapter, I have discussed the ways in which Stowe whitewashes Black spirituality by animalizing, degrading and de-intellectualizing shamanic or supernaturally suggestive Black characters. I would like to further my dissection of supernatural functions in slave literature and film by shifting from white authors to Black authors. The following chapter will reveal the intriguing differences in how supernaturalism and spirituality are portrayed from the perspectives of Toni Morrison's seminal novels *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*.

Disinterring Mothers, Motherlessness and the Violence of the Abandoned in Morrison's

Song of Solomon and Beloved

The ghost of a murdered baby haunts the house on 124. To doubt this is to deny the crucially divisive reality of the residents of the house, the community who avoid it, and the ghost herself. To begin to understand Morrison's use of a spiritual conduit between past and present traumas, it is imperative that we step beyond the concrete and into a shadow realm. Without this act of suspended disbelief, *Beloved's* message will never take hold. There are ghosts in some form in nearly every Morrison novel, but none as prolific, provocative or tangibly conceived as that of *Beloved's* ghost, who is able to break physical objects, harm human bodies and impose an unspeakable, spellbinding aura over the house. The ghost moves in hot, vicious strikes or hangs in a heavy pallet, immediately recognizable to anyone who passes the threshold.

Morrison's novels are famously sparse on white characters, an authorial decision that forces readers to interrogate what Barbara Christian terms the "literary narrative in the bourgeois Western tradition."³⁰ What is left in the wake of this tradition is literature, and Morrison's, greatest gift: the psychological, emotional and political perspective of the historically invisible. We are never afforded the perspective of a white character's reaction to the house on 124, so the perceptions we do have are entirely those of Black characters, all of whom experience powerful and very real encounters with the ghost. The ghost is undeniable because in that its existence is unquestioned, and it is unquestioned

³⁰ Barbara Christian, "Beloved, She's Ours." (*Narrative* 5, no. 1, 1997), 37.

because it is perceived, immediately and without question. For Morrison's characters, supernaturalism is a fact of everyday life, orbiting a barely perceived barrier, ever present and accessible as long as you listen and keep your eyes open. Indeed, for Morrison herself, the supernatural is merely a quickening of a receptive set of senses. In a 2004 interview with NPR, she quipped, "I think of ghosts and haunting as just being alert. If you are really alert, you see the life that exists beyond the life that's on top."³¹

It is often the case that literary ghosts represent the unsaid or the unspeakable, which is of course tenable in the case of *Beloved*. The baby ghost can be tied to all manner of unspeakable trauma, and perhaps most broadly, can be viewed as a succubant manifestation of the greater trauma of slavery. I have already discussed the possibility that *Beloved*, as a character and a ghost, physically reattaches Sethe to her history of rape and other sexual trauma. Sethe utters "something" under her breath when reminded of an unknown memory, and we are left to wonder if this is intended to tie directly to rape, slavery at large, or the specific act of *Beloved*'s bludgeoning? But it must be reiterated that the ghost is *literal*, and enters the physical world masquerading as a human being. Whatever Sethe's memory contains, what is clear is its unspeakableness. In *Beloved*, memories of past trauma are kept close to the keeper, like incantations with the power to destroy physical worlds.

What *Beloved* illuminates that is so paradoxically jarring yet soothing is, simply, love. I would like to draw particular attention to Morrison's engagement of *motherly* love as it pertains to supernaturalism in the novel. Barbara Christian points out that *Beloved*

³¹ Toni Morrison, "Toni Morrison's 'Good' Ghosts", Interview by Renee Montagne, (*NPR Radio*, September 20th, 2004).

challenges any inexorable definitions of motherhood, fielding the questions about what it means to be a mother with a lyrical call and response of many shades. She asserts,

Morrison challenges our very definition of what it means to be a mother and suggests that motherhood itself is constructed, affected by specific societal/political constructs, even as it is basic to all human societies as we know it. Morrison interrogates our many meanings of motherhood, both for the mother and for the child, especially a daughter who of course is expected to become her mother on the level of possession, ownership, responsibility.³²

The many meanings of possession come into play with the appearance of a ghost who first presents traditionally and later mimics a human form. Morrison, as an author, straddles postmodern, post-historicist perspectives with an almost mesmeric approach. This further troubles the aim of her work, which seems to exist outside of time, separate from any historical moment, yet curiously preservative of the past. Her work interrogates more than motherhood, wading into the nature of time and history itself, questioning America's metanarratives and teleological inclinations. It is precisely for this reason that ghosts function so organically within the landscape of Morrison's novels. On an emotional level, *Beloved's* mumbling speech, numbing personality and imposing physicality dare us to look inward for the answers to our questions about love and possession, which are not mutually exclusive for any of the characters in the novel. *Beloved* is a spirit discontent to remain amorphous in a physical universe, unwilling to exist within the bounds of explainable reality. She breaks form in tandem with a literature that defies monolithic inclination.

Still, Morrison insists that she is not "experimental." Rather, she seeks to replicate the functionality of myth, story, and magic as it operates in the Black community. "The open ended quality that is sometimes problematic in the novel form," Morrison states,

³² Christian, 38.

“reminds me of the uses to which stories are put in the Black community.”³³ In this way, Morrison stands in direct opposition to Stowe and other white authors whose external perception of Black spirituality tends to reify histrionic, even despotic portrayals of Blackness as fantasies of the white imagination. For Stowe, ultimately, what is Black is skewed, slanted, even perverted. I do not wish to digress here into the ways in which Uncle Tom, Dred, and the myriad Black characters surrounding them serve little other purpose than to position whiteness as an unearned and inborn fidelity. Instead, I will return to mothers. In particular, I will focus on the characters Sethe, from *Beloved*, and Pilate, from *Song of Solomon*.

It is important to note that Sethe’s experiences are borne out the ordeal of enslavement, escape, and eventual freedom, while Pilate engages with slavery only speculatively. Pilate has been warmed and incubated in nectars most unmotherly. She is a bootlegger and practitioner of dark arts. Yet, I return to Christian’s assertion that motherhood itself - as a state of self, an attainment of status independent of mere bithgiving - is socially and politically constructed. Morrison, I would argue, was not necessarily writing from a feminist perspective, rather, as Daniel Taylor-Guthrie notes in the introduction to *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, “she might be classified as a nationalist”, adding, “though she says she finds political philosophies as such, including Black Nationalism, confining.”³⁴ Indeed, *Song of Solomon* in particular pushes against feminist notions of motherhood by providing for the failure of feminine liberty. By this I

³³ Toni Morrison, "An Interview with Toni Morrison.", Interviewed by Nellie McKay, (*Contemporary Literature* 24, no. 4, 1983), 427.

³⁴ Toni Morrison and Danille Taylor-Guthrie, *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), X.

do not mean to infer that feminine liberty as a cause is a failing, rather, the promise of libertarian feminists, that freedom from an oppressive and patriarchal state is sufficient to liberate the mind, is deeply assumptive and altogether simplistic.

For my purpose, I will assert that the oppressive state in both *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* is represented by the constellating circumstances of American chattel slavery. Indeed, Morrison's lexicon of novels probe the lingering ghosts of such a state, a dramatic body of work that returns again and again to *the* source of communal trauma. In the same way that libertarian feminism distills the systems of oppression behind the patriarchy, Black Nationalism delineates a racially based solution to what is not so much a problem as it is a haunting. And ghosts are not rid of so easily.

If we are to assert that motherhood is entirely constructed, and I do, then we must discover the reason for such a construction. For who does a constructed and imposed status of motherhood - something Stowe would assure us is earned and not delivered - serve? For whom is the status of "mother," if not for the status bearer? Pilate's motherly ministrings only take on a truly maternal glow when they are bestowed on Milkman, her nephew. For Reba and Hagar, her biological daughter and granddaughter, she has little to offer other than dramatic indulgences and occasional scorn. Reba and Hagar function in the same way that young children would, perpetually pampered and in constant need of distraction. For Pilate, the appearance of Milkman delivers a subject for whom her ministrings could at last provide guidance.

But Pilate's valuation of the intangible provides a foil to traditional Western, capitalistic tropes that position societal (romantic), political or monetary success as the apex of any journey of discovery. Yet Milkman's apex is so ambiguous, a literal leap

from Ryna's gulch with no tangible resolution, that the very concept of resolution comes into question. If the audience is to assume that Pilate dies after being shot by Guitar, we can then extend a degree of motherly martyrdom to her character. I hesitate to assign such sanctimony to any of Morrison's characters; there is a degree of skeptical simplicity to such an assertion that denies the work built up around Pilate, who manages to be both sexless and deeply feminine, motherly and authoritative; a living paradox. Furthermore, Pilate's origin story provides a degree of complexity to her mother status.

Rather than being birthed, Pilate is said to have "borned herself." The enigmatic, not altogether real Circe recalls Pilate's birth in the following terms: "I had very little to do with it. I thought they were both dead, the mother and the child. When she popped out, you could have knocked me over."³⁵ Pilate emerges navelless, a detail that sensationally denies any attachment to the act of her birth, or rather, denies her mother's role in the act. It is notable to mention that Pilate's mother was American Indian, a fact which, ideologically at least, removes her from the diasporic implications that will follow her daughter. But while those implications certainly tone and influence her life, Pilate manages to exist in a spiritual borderland, both literally and figuratively. In *Spectrality in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, Melanie Anderson provides an intriguing analysis of Pilate's straddling tendencies:

Her home is a communal place where she, her daughter Reba, and her granddaughter Hagar share responsibilities and avoid the normal indicators of society's progress. The home is on the edge of both the Black and white neighborhoods and on the edge of the surrounding urban area too...Pilate's house is a female crossroads of production, trade, and consumption.³⁶

³⁵ Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, (New York, NY: Plume, 1987), 244.

³⁶ Melanie Anderson, *Spectrality in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2013), 39.

Anderson further draws the conclusion that Pilate's existence and way of life stands in direct contrast to her estranged brother, Milkman's father Macon Dead Jr. By rejecting objectivity and materialism, she also rejects her own material stability. One gets the sense that Pilate could exist anywhere, at any time. She remains detached from her possessions, which in turn disengages her from Western materialism, and more abstractly, the physical world. She has corporeality, to be sure, but maintains a certain fluidity of shape that allows her to covertly navigate mainstream society - Macon Dead Sr.'s world - with relative ease. As a supernatural guide to Milkman, she is a "nexus of important family history that Milkman needs, and her belief in communal and extraordinary ways of knowing and being, rather than his father's love of wealth and status, transforms Milkman in the end."³⁷

That history contains the story of Milkman's grandfather's alleged flight out of slavery. The story is told by Susan Byrd, the granddaughter of the Indian woman who adopted Solomon's infant son after the flight incident. Her recollection engages with the self-doubt and insecurity expressed in DuBois' explanation of double consciousness: "From the double life every American Negro must live, as a Negro and as an American...from this must arise a painful self-consciousness, an almost morbid sense of personality and a moral hesitancy which is fatal to self-confidence."³⁸ Indeed, Susan's version of the story is framed by her own compulsion to assure Milkman of her disbelief in the events. She first states at the outset of her narrative that the story is "just some old folks' lie they tell around here," and later dismisses it as "just foolishness." Yet even as

³⁷ Anderson, 40.

³⁸ W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Souls of Black Folks", (Urbana, IL: Project Gutenberg, accessed January 6, 2020 from <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/408/408-h/408-h.htm>).

Susan seems concerned with dispelling the story as a myth, she alternately does not present as truly disbelieving it. In the very next line after she mentions that the story of the flying Africans is a “folks’ lie,” she contradicts herself with a statement that sounds like belief: “Some of those Africans they brought over here as slaves could fly. A lot of them flew back to Africa.”³⁹ Byrd’s own name, like that of Macon Dead, is a curious misspelling; a name that sounds like *bird* but denotes the woman, and suggests the insecurity with which she both believes and disbelieves the story.

Pilate, contrarily, is disengaged entirely from the cognitive insecurity of double consciousness. She moves through the novel with the tenacity of deep knowing, an omniscience and spectrality attributed to her by the Black, slave descended community in which she lives. Pilate, who “never bothered anybody, was helpful to everybody, but who also was believed to have the ability to step out of her skin.”⁴⁰ Her *skin*, Morrison assures us, is of so little consequence as to be able to be stepped out of at will. Morrison’s idiom here is telling. Pilate is not simply able to shape shift, teleport or perform other acts of bodily manipulation, and though she never literally sheds her Black skin, she performs elaborate acts of deracialization and hyperracialization. Perhaps most notable is Pilate’s ability to use and manipulate the racial tropes of dominant white culture to navigate white spaces. We see this most literally when she arrives to bail out Milkman and Guitar after they attempt to rob her, a scene which sees Pilate shaking and cowering before the white police officers, as well as performing a literal act of magic by shifting down her imposing height to serve the ego of authority. Milkman notes later, “Pilate *had* been shorter...she

³⁹ Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, 322.

⁴⁰ Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, 94.

didn't even come up to the sergeant's shoulders, and the sergeant's head barely reached Milkman's own chin. But Pilate was as tall as he was."⁴¹

In *Song of Solomon*, the real is in constant deliberation with the unreal. The seen contends with the unseen, reality with imagination, so that the concreteness of supernaturalism is continually denied. Morrison's skillful engagement with the minutiae of this shadowland - the space between knowing and unknowing - wrests an atomic echo, an ever-quivering question mark, into the lives of her characters. If Pilate can indeed shape-shift, what are the implications of such an ability for her, Milkman, and others? If she cannot, what is to be determined about the perceptive bent of those who witness, or believe they witness, her physical shrinkage? Unanswerable questions also frame the lived reality of Blackness in America, which is afflicted by a stasis of unknowing. The Macon family history is not unlike so much of Black history in that it is marked by conjecture, partial truths or merely forgotten. For Pilate, the unknowable past provides a spiritually dramatic tool to guide Milkman. Because the story of Macon Dead I's flight is both possible (his physical absence remains a mystery) and impossible (humans, theoretically, can't fly), Milkman is allowed entry into the shadowland that was once forbidden by his father's dogmatic sense of reality. He is, in this sense, allowed access to his own Blackness for the first time.

Much like Susan Byrd, Macon Dead Jr.'s staunch disbelief is complicated by his obvious fear of Pilate's abilities. Her connection to the diasporic scatter is physically cemented in a way that he cannot fathom, through her absence of a navel. Navelless and ominously witchy, Macon Sr. perceives Pilate's folk knowledge as useless, saying that

⁴¹ Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, 206.

she “can’t teach you a thing you can use in this world,” adding, “maybe the next, but not this one.”⁴² Pilate’s knowledge is only useless to Macon because he, like the white society he strives to imitate, draws a definitive line between the living world and the dead world. But we must consider whether such a line is powerful, in that it rejects supernaturalism and thus superstition, or *disempowering*, in that it denies the possibility of a restructured past, present and future for the descendants of slaves.

Pilate’s preservation of the flying African story not only secures its perpetuity into the future, through Milkman, but opens the theoretical space in which the past can be restructured, allowing for a different, albeit still ambiguously so, future. Her smooth stomach literalizes the diasporic trauma Macon hopes to deny, a trauma that traces itself back to systemic mechanisms of maternal denial. It must here be noted that Black Supernaturalism, as it appears in Morrison’s work, has specifically female implications.

Lena’s trenchant speech to Milkman towards the end of the novel serves not only as a long awaited release of her rage towards a patriarchal and, frankly, Westernized family dynamic, but also as a reductive against the denialist reality Milkman shares with his father. “From that hog’s gut that hangs down between your legs...” she tells him, “Well let me tell you something, baby brother, you will need more than that. I don’t know where you will get it or who will give it to you, but mark my words, you will need more than that.”⁴³ That *something* must surely come from Pilate, who is, among other things, a source of positive femininity for Milkman. Her life is lived in express of the Divine Feminine; ceding ordered, material acquisition for improvisation and spirituality. Pilate’s energy mirrors historical methods of Black expression, from the ring- shout to

⁴² Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, 55.

⁴³ Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, 215

jazz music. Historically speaking, much of this expressiveness had the aim of being necessarily covert, hence the untraceability of improvisation, while maintaining a sense of personal dignity and historical connection.

In many ways, *Song of Solomon* is a book about Milkman's discovery of that energy within the femininity that shepherds and adjuncts his most pivotal experiences. Further, the novel derives tension from Milkman's unwillingness to experience social death-the kind experienced by Pilate-in order to achieve personal agency over his beliefs; or, in other words, to become his own person and decide his own history. *Beloved* could be viewed as a companion to *Song of Solomon* in that it addresses similar themes of self-worth and Blackness through an almost purely feminine perspective. But where *Song of Solomon* maintains distance from supernaturalism, *Beloved* dives in headlong. The novel evokes the literal and metaphorical scattering of Black Americans through scenes of supernaturalism that engage the emotional dysmorphia of motherlessness. The novel is perhaps the largest looming example of supernaturalism in this genre, famously featuring the fully grown resurrection of the main character, Sethe's, deceased baby girl, Beloved.

But before the woman Beloved appears, the baby's ghost haunts Sethe's new home in Ohio, driving off her boy children and enrapturing Denver, her only remaining child. Morrison goes beyond mere allusion, depicting real, physical violence sourced from the baby ghost, and later from the resurrected Beloved. Yet violence is not just violence in *Beloved*. Rather, acts of supernatural brutality, both mental and physical, find a supportive impetus in the characters on their receiving end.

Beloved's transformation from intangible to tangible not only disrupts the physical reality of the characters, but calls the nature of their perception into question.

This is not to suggest that Morrison intended *Beloved* to be a story of the mentally insane engaging with a non-existent spirit. To the contrary, the transformation from ghost to woman magnifies existing trauma, particularly in Sethe and Paul D, whose very particular reactions to this event, and the preceding haunting, serve to highlight the agonizing cognitive suffering they both share and carry, in different ways. The baby's ghost is introduced as an affirmative fact; invisible yet established. Disbelief is not entertained. Indeed, the ghost manifests itself in a variety of physical ways, stopping just short of appearing as a full blown apparition. What is notable about the spirit is its detectability, best exhibited by Paul D's reaction upon entering Sethe's house for the first time: " 'Good God.' He backed out the door onto the porch. 'What kind of evil you got in here?'" He asks Sethe, who replies. " 'It's not evil, just sad. Come on. Just step through.'"⁴⁴ To revisit my original claim, Paul D's instantaneous recognition of, belief in and, finally, fear of the ghost present him as both consciously and unconsciously engaged with the supernatural.

Yet, the term supernatural carries very distinct metaphorical weight in this instance. The ghostly presence can be felt but is corporeally absent. Its physical presence exerts itself in every way imaginable except an actual appearance. It is not my intention to speak to what the ghost *is*, but rather to explore observable connections between the entity and the phenomenon of maternal trauma as it is connected to slavery in the novel. Sethe's backstory carries her to freedom but denies her a salve for the lingering damage of her own maternal severance, as well as the damage done during the incident with Beloved as an infant. Her post traumatic stress further denies her this salve, forcing the

⁴⁴ Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, (London, UK: Vintage, 2010), 10.

ecology of her wounds to fester beneath a heavy brickboard of repression and the welcome and unwelcome distraction of continuous labor. What we observe in the opening chapters of *Beloved* is a Sethe who remains largely broken, displaying the physical and psychic wounds of her past, and largely suspicious of her own lovability. Fortressed by her own memories, Sethe's subconscious is allowed to convulse energetically, painfully and endlessly. The visiting spirit of her deceased baby surfaces, half conjured and half impulsed, providing a platform on which Sethe's unexplored pain can exist physically.

The ghost's poltergeist-like manifestations, including handprints appearing in a cake, shattering a mirror, even murdering the family dog, cement its basis in reality. However, the motive behind its initiation into reality, aside from being clearly identifiable as the baby Beloved, remains nebulous. We are left to wonder how a baby, an infant, could hold the depth of such rage, and how, if we are to take the ghost literally, the soul of a being barely formed in so many ways could make material decisions. Sethe's role in the baby's appearance is obscure at best, beyond the trauma she associates with the child's death, but close reading reveals intriguing suggestions. Morrison writes that Sethe was "counting on the stillness of her own soul" but had "forgotten the other one: the soul of her baby girl." Beloved's infancy at the time of her murder suggests the implicit maternal bond she shared with Sethe was her sole association with reality. Further, it can be inferred, in Morrison's universe of tangible souls, unquestionable entities and unmanageable ghosts, that even death was not sufficient to sever the maternal

bond. The ghosts violent tendencies align with this view, as Sethe goes so far as to say the baby's assaults are " 'no more powerful than the way I loved her' "45

Morrison scholar Pamela E. Barnett has argued that the character Beloved, specifically the carnally transformed Beloved, is a living, consuming, invading manifestation of Sethe's rape trauma, a theme she suggests surrounds Sethe's decision to murder her baby. In Barnett's words, "These incidents of rape frame Sethe's explanation for killing her baby daughter. Sethe tries to tell the furious Beloved that death actually protected the baby from the deep despair that killed Baby Suggs," adding, "For Sethe, being brutally over-worked, maimed, or killed is subordinate to the overarching horror of being raped and 'dirtied' by whites; even dying at the hands of one's mother is subordinate to rape."⁴⁶ Traumatic experiences of rape no doubt color Sethe's motivations for murdering Beloved, but I would like to expand on this theme. Any consideration of rape in this novel must imperatively include the background story of Sethe's mother, who was repeatedly raped by white men. Sethe herself only survived her own mother's infanticide because she was not a product of these rapes, but the child of a Black man and a fellow slave. When Sethe tells Beloved of the only interaction she had with her mother, the encounter is highlighted by a branding mark her mother tells her is the only distinguishing feature that will help Sethe identify her as her mother. Sethe responds by asking her mother to give *her* a mark, so that she will know who her child is. The scene makes a cryptic shift when Sethe suddenly removes herself from the conversation. Sethe is said to be "remembering something she had forgotten she knew. Something privately

⁴⁵ Morrison, *Beloved*, 5.

⁴⁶ Pamela E. Barnett, "Figurations of Rape and the Supernatural in *Beloved*," (*PMLA* 112, no. 3, 1997), 419.

shameful that had seeped into a slit in her mind right behind the slap on her face and the circled cross.”⁴⁷

Morrison dangles a mysterious “something,” an element of shame, some agent of repression, but we are left to speculate as to what the memory could be. The memory is initiated by Beloved, whose seemingly innocent questions lead Sethe down more than one dark avenue of recollection, and who often serves as the impetus of new forms of trauma in Sethe’s new free life. Sethe reflects on her mother’s death and the infants she killed before allowing Sethe to live: “As small girl Sethe, she was unimpressed. As grown-up woman Sethe she was angry, but not certain at what. A mighty wish for Baby Suggs broke over her like surf.”⁴⁸ What is clear about the memory is its initiation of shameful feelings for Sethe, feelings that dovetail into traumatic feelings of maternal longing and the fierce guilt inspired by her own act of infanticide. The memory may very simply be the murder of Beloved, an act intended to protect rather than harm. Beloved’s adult reincarnation presents an enormous question to Sethe’s reality. Acting as an agent of chaos, hypersexual and all consuming, she subverts Sethe’s perception of herself as a mother by questioning Sethe’s right to motherhood. Can a mother be a mother if she fails to provide for her children? If she fails, even, to keep them alive? As the story progresses, Beloved grows bloated and consumptive. The weakness with which she emerged from the river vanishes and an engorged, maleficent, all-consuming monster replaces the lithe young woman.

Towards the end of the novel, Morrison details the physical and mental toll that catering to Beloved has had on Sethe: “[Denver] Saw Sethe’s eyes bright but dead, alert

⁴⁷ Morrison, *Beloved*, 73.

⁴⁸ Morrison, *Beloved*, 74.

but vacant, paying attention to everything about Beloved—her lineless palms, her forehead, the smile under her jaw, crooked and much too long—everything except her basket-fat stomach.”⁴⁹ Sethe’s tends to Beloved as she would an infant, but the reality (ever shifting and constantly questioned) proves this approach to be insufficient. Ultimately, Sethe and Beloved cannot exist in the same universe. She is not merely the shadow of slavery, not merely the ghost, but living, breathing, infantilized yet materialized. Beloved’s maternalism is best observed in her exertion of psychosexual power over Paul D.

After having been forced out of the house into a shed by Beloved’s presence, Beloved seeks out Paul D in order to seduce him. “ ‘Sethe loves you, much as her own daughter. You know that.’ ” Paul D tells her, to which she responds, “ ‘She don’t love me like I love her. I don’t love nobody but her.’ ” Beloved then “drops her skirts,”⁵⁰ literally and figuratively shedding the hem of her feminine garments and revealing her carnal self. Beloved’s sexuality creates a disturbing Oedipal complex for Paul D, who is faced with the fierceness of indifferent eroticism from a being whose intellect is that of a child but who loves with the voraciousness that only a mother can express. Beloved has sex with Paul D and exerts the psychosexual power of slavery’s lingering presence in his life, it’s elements of sexual control and its demands on his masculinity. In order to have sex with Beloved, he must say her name, uttering that which is a name *and* a suggestion. He must, in other words, recognize her surveillant presence as powerful, personal, sexual and mothering all at once. She is here not to soothe but to placate, and she holds a sharply remembered knife behind her back. In this way, Beloved can be distinguished as

⁴⁹ Morrison, *Beloved*, 285.

⁵⁰ Morrison, *Beloved*, 137.

maleficently motherly. She is Mother Slavery, and she is a vengeful mother, much like the Anglo-Christian God of the slave Bible. By submitting to sex with her, Paul D also submits to the temptation to accept his male superiority, even if it is a stripped down, subverted and caged version.

For Sethe, Beloved's maternity is the specter of her own inability to be a mother (her infanticide) or have a mother, her *motherlessness*. The carnal manifestation of her murdered daughter develops the distended stomach of a pregnant mother, grown fat on Sethe's nearly fatal exertions of love. When Sethe believes the spirit of Baby Suggs nearly strangles her in the clearing, Denver suggests it was Beloved who did the strangling. Beloved massages Sethe's neck after the incident, behaving not unlike the abusive mother who slaps her child only to fold her in her arms afterwards, apologetic. She comforts Sethe not out of love, but because her overbearing presence exerts a deranged and dominating maternal control over Sethe, whose guilt over the murder of her child does not allow her to display or enjoy her own maternal instinct. Beloved steps in as a reminder of that guilt, exerting physical and psychological violence on Sethe in order to maintain the cognitive hold her dark past has over her.

It is apt, here, to revisit the scene of Pilate's birth. Denied the crucial aid of her mother's labor efforts, Pilate, as an infant, must also deny herself infancy and physically remove herself from the womb. We are told that the maternal scar-the navel-has left no physical mark on her body. She is a literal carnation of a motherless child, and it is metaphorically crucial that her mother dies *before* she is born. Pilate, collapsed upon in the womb which was meant to harbor her safely into the world, begins life with an

autonomous act of physical exertion. The rest of her life is spent performing other acts of extreme autonomy, yet always with ferocious love.

In this way, she is antithetical to Beloved, who holds out the violent, consumptive ache of motherlessness as a means of individual carnage. Where Beloved gorges on love, Pilate incubates in its potential, exudes it in her actions, and refuses the codependent impulse to demand it for herself. Morrison's supernaturalized representations of maternity in both novels crucially rework earlier tropes of gothic motherhood, like those invoked by Stowe. The move is characteristic of what Gina Wisker calls Afro-Caribbean speculative gothic horror. Wisker states that, "African-American and Afro-Caribbean women's speculative Gothic horror explores the duties of care that mothers and grandmothers have for the next generation, which needs to recuperate the past and revision the future."⁵¹ For Morrison, the theme of motherlessness routes her deeply damaged, often emotionally stunted or abandoned characters, towards a revised future which contemplates the past in order to move beyond the pain it causes.

Pamela Barnett suggests that a communal effort to disavow and forget the past is "the condition for traumatic return,"⁵² suggesting that Beloved's exit from the novel, and the lives of Sethe and her family, is not necessarily the conclusive end it seems to be. Metaphoricalized as a personification of slavery's enduring trauma (in particular, the trauma of rape), Beloved is the consequence of dismissing history. She is, in short, the afterbirth of repression, a monstrous physicality that feasts on covered wounds. Pilate seems to understand these consequences so deeply that she gives her life to allow

⁵¹ Gina Wisker, "Your Buried Ghosts Have a Way of Tripping You Up: Revisioning and Mothering in African-American and Afro-Caribbean Women's Speculative Horror.", (*Femspec* 6, no.1, 2005), 71.

⁵² Barnett, 425.

Milkman access to his own past. This is not to say that she expires in martyrdom. Rather, the conclusion of *Song of Solomon* is so ambiguous as to force the question: does Milkman fly or commit suicide? Indeed, the conclusion is less an ending and more an in-between space, like the one Pilate occupies throughout the novel. Beloved, too, exists outside of acceptable reality in that she is both living and dead, real and unreal. She exudes the unspeakable through indistinguishable terms, pressing on Sethe's reluctance to remember. Both Sethe and Milkman re-story double-consciousness in ways that complicate DuBois' notions of self-doubt and social hedging.

The role of historical denialism plays deftly into the hands of a restructured past that seeks to be eradicated by a colonialist dominant class. As the victors write the history, so goes communal memory in reaction to communal repression. Black Supernaturalism in fiction and Black culture, then, exists as a mechanism for the maintenance of that communal memory. It must be noted, though, that Morrison's use of the strange, ghostly and inexplicable is not to be associated with similar tropes in popular literature. She decried the idea of being labelled a magical realist, explaining to Paul Gilroy in 1993, "Just as long as they don't call me a magic realist, as though I don't have a culture to write out of."⁵³ Maggie Bowers suggests that Morrison sought to "address this insecurity by creating an African American cultural memory with her readership through acts of mutual imagination."⁵⁴

Morrison's insecurity is palpably rooted in the hegemonic dictates of an English which often serves to undermine, confuse, or misunderstand the language and stories of

⁵³ Bowers, Maggie Ann, Toni Morrison qtd. in "Acknowledging ambivalence: The creation of communal memory in the writing of Toni Morrison", (*Wasafiri*, 13, no. 27, 1998), 19.

⁵⁴ Bowers, 19.

non-dominant groups. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison acknowledges her own struggle to shape words that so frequently are rooted in a systemic evolution to which she was subjected but in which she was denied agency:

I am a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive ‘othering’ of people and language which are by no means marginal or already completely known or knowable in my work. My vulnerability would lie in romanticizing blackness rather than demonizing it; vilifying whiteness rather than reifying it.⁵⁵

With Morrison’s words in mind, her creative use of the supernatural has clearly subversive ramifications. Where the Magical Negro conjured by Stowe’s Uncle Tom and Dred characters bear witness to the perspective of the white imagination, Morrison’s Black Supernaturalism realizes in art the connective imaginative tissue of a reactualized Black history. To continue with this bodied metaphor, the themes of (specifically female) bodily dysmorphia present in so much of Morrison’s work urge a sense of collective viscera, one that forces metaphorical truths through scenes of bodily subjection.

Beloved’s curious pattern of speech is emblematic of what Morrison refers to above (the obfuscated white perspective as it notates Blackness). She speaks in childish bursts, in unceasing questions and unending requests. She is taken by the squares of orange color on Sethe’s quilt, mirroring Baby Sugg’s final fixation before death. *Color*, Morrison tells us; it is the bareness, the visual enchantment of color which draws her attention before anything else. As Stowe’s Cassy provokes the unknowableness of Blackness from a white, colonial perspective, so Beloved incites in Sethe the shadowland of her own past. Dysmorphia, represented in both *Song* and *Beloved*, violently adulterates

⁵⁵ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2015), X.

the worldviews of the characters that surround them. It must be noted that both of these novels deal specifically with representations of female dysmorphia, and as mentioned earlier, traumatic and even succubine hyperbolizations of pregnancy, birth, and motherhood. Pilate's missing navel is not entirely dissimilar from *Beloved's* color squares, both of which serve to redirect the narrative focus back to visuality (visual distinction being the oft stated root of racism).

I deliberately resist viewing Morrison's scenes of maternal dysmorphia through an Afro-Pessimist lens. Such a perspective forces symptomatic shame onto the characters who interact with the nightmarish physical manifestations of a dually horrific personal and communal memory. From this perspective, Africanness is the horror, and though one could argue Morrison seeks to beat down inborn physiological racism in a theatre of physical consequences, this fails to contextualize motherlessness. The subject is not particularly new, and many scholars have commented on Morrison's tendency to write orphaned or estranged characters. Andrea O'Reilly interprets motherlessness in Morrison as follows:

The frequency of maternal deaths in Morrison, as noted earlier, functions as a metaphor to symbolize the prevalence of motherline disconnections and disruptions and their damaging consequences, particularly for women. At the level of the individual character, being motherless— whether by death of, or separation from the mother— means that the daughter is far more vulnerable to the hurts of a racist and sexist culture, because she has not received the cultural bearing that would give her a strong and proud selfhood.⁵⁶

While this certainly holds true for *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, a distinctively supernatural substratum complicates maternity by inextricably binding it to death. The ghosts of the dead, as well as magic, hold stake in both novels. Black Supernaturalism,

⁵⁶ Andrea O'Reilly, *Toni Morrison and Motherhood : A Politics of the Heart*, (New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004), 78.

then, manifests through a forced perspective of the afterlife, which not only exists (if ghosts exist, it goes without saying) but holds unmistakable power over the present and past. I use the term Black Supernaturalism, here, in the literary sense, to suggest that its function is deeply connected to death. By extension, we may take the act of birth to be one also inextricably associated with death, a performance that moves the mother into the shadows and presses forth new life.

Death through childbirth was and still is a much more real possibility for African American women than for any other ethnicity. The proximity of childbirth to the afterlife would have been a serious consideration for women of both Pilate and Sethe's time, and for both characters, the act of birthing comes with distinct dissociative impressions. If pregnancy and childbirth leave the mother perpetually in question of achieving motherhood, then we can see a psychological, even dialectical opposition between motherhood and survival.

Morrison engages another dichotomy in *SOS*, that of rural and urban life and the issue of Northern migration. It is not until Milkman travels into rural Virginia that his survival, in its literal sense, is tangibly in question. He loses his way almost instantly, and is confused and a little put off by the Black community in Danville. Their unquestioning acceptance of him leaves him confounded, and it would not be entirely untrue to say that he feels a sense of "getting away" with taking advantage of them. He is given food to eat, clothes to wear, a place to sleep, even car repairs. The townspeople act as a unit, each willing to lend a hand in the service of upholding the dignity and, indeed, the survival of their community.

Without this communal effort, Milkman would have been without not only the historical and folk knowledge they imparted to him, but without what he needed to survive as well.

The town of Danville is unlike Milkman's industrialized Northern home in that it lacks the pure form of capitalism that he is accustomed to. There is no hard and fast rule that money can and will always be exchanged for goods and services. Instead, the community has crafted a system which allows for flexibility in these crucial exchanges. Services are sometimes used as capital for other services, goods for goods, and often, nothing at all is expected in return. The exchange, then, loses capital value, an experience that is disorienting for Milkman, if pleasantly surprising. For the first time, he encounters an economic system that denies the indisputability of his father's system. This system, operating within the United States, is not only fiscally subversive of the dominant culture, but questions Milkman's previously ingrained certainties about capital itself. Forced to contend with the existence of an alternative, he is at last on his way to accepting the material loss of his journey (the gold) and receiving the gift Pilate has been working to give him. That is, his lack of communal knowledge is bridged through acts of community aid and healing.

Song of Solomon is singular in Morrison's canon in its focus on fathers and fathering as opposed to mothers. Fathers, however, do not act as saviors or sages. They are not solely responsible for the passage of communal knowledge and ways of survival. Andrea O'Reilly theorizes that "fathers [in *SOS*] are seen as an integral part of the larger nurturant community. Their role is that of a communal othermother."⁵⁷ Morrison also

⁵⁷ O'Reilly, 83.

gestured to the imperative need for male influences, and the incompleteness, sometimes devastation, that the lack of such influences can impetus:

Hagar does not have what Pilate had, which was a dozen years of a nurturing, good relationship with men. Pilate had a father, and she had a brother, who loved her very much, and she could use that knowledge of that love for her life. Her daughter Reba had less of that, but she certainly has at least perfunctory adoration or love of men which she does not put to very good use. Hagar has even less because of the absence of any relationships with men in her life. She is weaker. . . Strength of character is not something one can give another. It is not genetically transferred.⁵⁸

Morrison's novels have a habit of denying that which *is* genetically transferred, e.g. skin color, in favor of that which is acquired through environment, personal or communal history, or simply living. The baby ghost in *Beloved* transforms into a full grown woman, but the transformation never seems quite complete. It is, in fact, more apt to say that *Beloved* is composed out of the physiological heat of transference from the baby, which is to say that her existence is reliant on the emotionally fraught limbo created by Sethe's trauma.

The baby ghost is almost paradoxical in that it should not be able to carry the "venom"⁵⁹ that is powerful enough to impact the physical world and carry off both of Sethe's boy children. When *Beloved* arrives, she is materially speculative in that she looks young but moves like an elderly person ("she moved like a heavier one or an older one, holding on to furniture, resting her head in the palm of her hand as though it was too heavy for a neck alone."⁶⁰) Later, she gains strength, but maintains the same speculative and shadowy nature with which she arrived. She is, in short, never operating within a plane of expected reality. She is unnatural, but not in the way Guitar accuses whites of

⁵⁸ McKay, 419.

⁵⁹ Morrison, *Beloved*, 1.

⁶⁰ Morrison, *Beloved*, 67.

being so (unnatural as a rule). Rather, it is because she embodies the perversity of the birth-death duality that is further complicated by Sethe's act of infanticide.

Pilate tells us "Ain't nothin natural about death. It's the most unnatural thing they is."⁶¹ She relates to Ruth the story of her father being shot, and how she has "seen him twice since he was shot."⁶² Pilate further insists that death is a choice, decided on by the individual, consciously or subconsciously. In the same exchange, she recalls how her mother died before she was born, an event that is suggestive of forced mother-child severance in the slave narrative. In *Beloved*, maternal agency is all but stripped from Sethe (and the novels other mother figures), leaving her open to the emotional claustrophobia that impetuses her crime.

Both Pilate's and Sethe's stories are bridged under the themes of maternal agency/motherlessness, physical dysmorphia and death. The frame of slavery, whether literal, as in *Beloved*, or historical, as in *Song of Solomon*, necessitates a sense of healing exigency between female characters, who struggle to reassemble the once permeate edges of their humanity - the sacred source of life (the feminine) and its perpetuation beyond death. If words call the physical reality into being, as African rhetoric teaches us, it is apt to honor Morrison's work in these novels as literal attempts to reassemble those edges.

⁶¹ Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, 140.

⁶² Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, 140.

Where Death and the Graveyard are Final: Voodoo as Subversive Precedence

“I got all kinds of children, but I am they mother. Some of ’em are saints; some of ’em are conzempt (convicts) and jailbirds; some of ’em kills babies in their bodies; some of ’em walks the streets at night—but they’s all my children. God got all kinds, how come I cain’t love all of mine? So says the beautiful spirit.” - Mother Catherine⁶³

In *Tell My Horse* and its predecessor *Mules and Men*, cultural anthropologist and author Zora Neale Hurston delineates Voodoo as a distinct and actively practiced religion. Her research opposes the branded and perverse treatment Voodoo has received in the dominant American (particularly white) imagination. Invariably, the dominant perceptions of Voodoo strip it of its religious significance, ritual force and cultural weight in favor of a glamorized conglomeration based on any number of influences, from literature to film, song and folk tales. These confused portrayals often identify the use of Catholic iconography as the source of evil within the practice of Voodoo, further reducing and subsequently categorizing it as dark and perverse. But, as Hurston observes: “The Haitian gods, mysteres, or loa are not the Catholic calendar of saints done over in Black, as has been stated by casual observers.” She adds that adepts of the religion utilize Catholic iconography not as a means of religious fusion or assimilative impulses, but rather because “they wish some visual representation of the invisible ones [gods].”⁶⁴ She uses the example of Damballah Ouedi, the supreme Mystere, whose signature is the serpent. Practitioners of Voodoo often use images of the Catholic Saint Peter, who is portrayed with snakes, to represent Damballah. The purpose is representation, rather than religious blending.

⁶³ Zora Neale Hurston, *The Sanctified Church*, (Berkeley, CA: Turtle Island, 1981), 28.

⁶⁴ Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*, (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2009), 114.

It is useful to observe the functional differences between Voodoo as it was practiced in West Africa and Haiti, and how it adapted in the New World. Hurston's text is significant both anthropologically and as it relates to literature in that it makes note of the religion as it developed in post-revolutionary Haiti, and thus marks New World representations as distinctly different in practice and in purpose. New World slaves, who continued to practice Voodoo under the suppressive forces that dictated their lives, integrated a distinctly subversive tone into their religious works and rites. Additionally, they advanced and accelerated their engagement in religious blending, enlisting Christian iconography, ritual and belief into the complex and pluralistic spiritual landscape provided by Voodoo. This blending is subtextually referenced in Hurston's first and second novels, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, in what Nancy Ann Wantanabe calls "a unique form of theological resonance through nature divinities that yokes the two novels. *Jonah's Gourd Vine* establishes the snake divinity Damballah's influence on its protagonists, John Buddy Pearson, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* shows the thunder god Shango's impact on the spiritual lives of its main characters, Jannie Mae Crawford and Vergible "Tea Cake" Woods."⁶⁵ Hurston's anthropological work in *Tell My Horse* managed to evade the clinical tone of other contemporaries working to establish a base for Afro-American folk life (Melville J. Herskovits's hierarchy of Africaness comes to mind⁶⁶), and had a clear impact on her fictional works.

⁶⁵ La Vinia Delois Jennings, *Zora Neale Hurston, Haiti, and Their Eyes Were Watching God*, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 2013), 238.

⁶⁶ Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, (New York, NY: Harper, 1941), <https://hdl-handle-net.sonoma.idm.oclc.org/2027/heh.02852>. EPUB. 16.

Wantanbe not only asserts that Jannie Mae skillfully parallels the Voodoo goddess of love, Erzulie, but adds that Hurston's pivotal novel is imbued "with West African traditional beliefs and practices— old and new— as pervasive natural forces emanating from a cosmic doxology that harmonizes with, reconciles, and even reinforces the beliefs of Christianity."⁶⁷ Despite this, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* often presents initially as theologically confused, or outright anti-Christian. While critical reactions to the novel were mostly positive, *Tell My Horse* was often criticized as being inconsistent and sensationalist. Her biographer, Robert Hemenway, marginalized the text as "her poorest book," noting that it did "not sell well," a failing he attributed to the political underpinning of the book: "She was a novelist and folklorist, not a political analyst or travelogist. Yet *Tell My Horse* is filled with political analysis, often of a naive sort, with superficial descriptions of West Indian curiosities."⁶⁸ However, as Wantanbe argues, the research and writing work of *Tell My Horse* pivotally foregrounded her popular works of fiction in ways that few critics of the time, and even contemporarily, recognize. Aside from the richly dualistic and balancing cosmology painstakingly collaborated in *Horse*, is the value of Hurston's spiritually and culturally honest work in Haiti.

To say that Hurston threw herself into her anthropological endeavors would not be an overstatement; indeed, her research accepted the literal consequences of the religious-cultural immersion required to extract the knowledge presented in both of her large anthropological texts and synthesized in her novels. She took part in real Voodoo ceremonies, acting as both observer and initiate, an experience collaborated with and

⁶⁷ Jennings, 237.

⁶⁸ Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: a Literary Biography*, (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 248-249.

expanded upon in her earlier study, *Mules and Men*, which explores Afro-American folk life in Eatonville, Florida, and New Orleans.

We can find a succinct distillation of Hurston's epistemological nexus in Arnold Rampersad's preface to *Mules*: "Linking Eatonville and New Orleans is the communality and adaptability, the indomitable resilience of the imagination of Africans terrorized in the New World by objective reality in the form of slavery, segregation, and poverty."⁶⁹ Hurston factual tone in both works was the source of some controversy (*Horse* was described by one reviewer as a collection of "piquant thrills" and "anthropological gossip"⁷⁰ while *Mules* was derided as "lies," "sheer tall tales," and "some...Bible legends."⁷¹). Yet I argue that her realistic treatment of folk legends, historical/cultural contextualization of Voodoo/Hoodoo and use of magical storytelling are precisely that which established the foundation of Black Supernaturalism upon which authors like Toni Morrison built their anthologies.

I asserted in the previous chapter that Black Supernaturalism, particularly as it functions in Morrison's novels, is deeply connected to death, which operates not as a natural end but rather a beginning, a passage into spiritual significance and remembrance in the communal memory. I will add that this naturally connects Black Supernaturalism to the afterlife, the existence of which is not only indisputably accepted but actively engaged by Voodoo practitioners. Indeed, many of the ceremonies Hurston witnessed and participated in strived to create tangible associations between the living body, the immortal spirit, and the world of the dead. Spiritual intoxication was often achieved by

⁶⁹ Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men*, (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 2008), Xvii.

⁷⁰ Alain Locke, (*Opportunity* 17, February 1939), 38.

⁷¹ Lewis Gannett, *The New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review*, (October 11, 1935).

way of the means at hand, that is to say, those available in the extant universe. But these means never call into question the absoluteness of the connections being made. Hurston described one such initiation ceremony, undertaken in New Orleans under the supervision of infamous Voodoo priestess Marie Laveau's alleged nephew:

I was made ready and at three o'clock in the afternoon, naked as I came into the world, I was stretched, face downwards, my navel to the snake skin cover, and began my three day search for the spirit that he might accept me or reject me according to his will. Three days my body must lie silent and fasting while my spirit went wherever spirits must go that seek answers never given to men as men.⁷²

What might have seemed risky, even irresponsible, was to Hurston the necessary motions of intra-spiritual transcendence and nurturance as directed by a skilled practitioner. Her work and, perhaps just as pertinent, her participation, is crucial to understanding the development of Black spirituality as it pertains to church life, culture, folk-thought and art. The afterlife notions fostered by Morrison's Pilate character find their ancestral grounding in the speculative and infinitist notions of death delineated by the brand of blended Voodoo/Hoodoo that blossomed in the New World, particularly in New Orleans.

The Sanctified Church, Hurston's collection of essays on African American folklore and the Southern Black Christian Church, further supports the larger significance of her anthropological endeavors, which as I have previously asserted, had a constellating effect on Black authors through the twentieth century. Her essay on Mother Catherine, a New Orleans based spiritual leader who defies succinct definition, brilliantly limns the objective of communal authority in tandem with celebration of the individual to express the nexus of a transcendent tradition in the Black community. I use the term *transcendent* here in gesture to wider concepts within adapted New World Voodoo that seek to build

⁷² Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 199

off of spiritual intoxication in order to overcome trauma, both current and historical. I emphasize *communal* authority as well, in as much as it relates to the communal memory I discussed in the previous chapter, but also to reinvigorate the significance of communality to the rhetorical purpose of the fictional texts I have already discussed.

In order to sincerely interpret Mother Catherine, and Hurston's work with her, it is apt to first say a word about the world in which she lived. New Orleans' position at the mouth of the Mississippi and across the Gulf from Haiti and Cuba, as well as the "rapid succession of three distinct colonial eras"⁷³ allowed the city to absorb cultural and religious influences from Europe, the Caribbean, mainland United States and, to some extent, South America. New Orleans also experienced a full gamut of slave regimes, from the (by comparison) laxer Spanish version to the inhumanely cruel final form under American rule. Additionally, from the early eighteenth century through the end of the Civil War, the city was home to an unusually large population of free people of color, whose socio-cultural and religious impact can still be felt today.

Influenced by this population, New Orleans was for a time the only place in the New World where slaves were permitted to practice their own religions with relative freedom. Before the prohibitive sanctions of the British and later American eras, the practice of Voodoo, performance of African religious dances, and even the use of the sacred drums of the Mandingo and Kongolese were to some degree permitted. New Orleans' status as a French and Spanish colony through the first decade of the nineteenth century also insulated it, both legally and socially, from the despotic slave breeding

⁷³ Ned Sublette, *The World That Made New Orleans: from Spanish Silver to Congo Square*, (Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books, 2009), 277.

culture springing up in the Upper South, particularly Virginia. In the words of New Orleans historian Ned Sublette:

Spirits had likely been traveling back and forth between Louisiana and Saint-Domingue all along. The newly arrived Domingans' vodou that came en masse from eastern Cuba had to coexist, and merge, with a solidly established Afro-Louisianan spiritual practice that had grown up with a distinct set of African roots as well as influences from the Choctaws, the Natchez, the Houmas, and other Indian groups, developing its own identity parallel to Saint-Domingue.⁷⁴

The city is, in short, permanently stamped by the oldest and most diverse concentration of African Diasporic peoples in the continental United States.

With this in mind, I engage with Hurston's account of Mother Catherine as a singular record of an even more singular individual, whose spiritual and social nexus was located within an urban cradle of fierce importance to the development of Black Supernaturalism. It is an offering of intensity as outstretched by Catherine and interpreted by Hurston, and establishes the great "Mother Seal" as a crucially feminine intra-world conduit, guide and, perhaps most importantly, communal mother. In regards to Catherine's church, known as the Manger, Hurston signals deeply important communal tenets as expressed by the environment of worship:

All during her sermons two parrots were crying from their cages. A white cockatoo would scream when the shouting grew loud. Three canary birds were singing and chirping happily all through the service. Four mongrel dogs strolled about. A donkey, a mother goat with her kid, numbers of hens, a sheep—all wandered in and out of the service without seeming out of place. A Methodist or Baptist church—or one of any denomination whatever—would have been demoralized by any one of these animals. Two dogs fought for a place beside the heater. Three children under three years of age played on the platform in the rear without distracting the speaker or the audience. The blue and red robed saint stood immobile in her place directly behind the speaker and the world moved on.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Sublette, 283.

⁷⁵ Hurston, *The Sanctified Church*. 25.

Mother Catherine was known to service both whites and Blacks in the business of spiritual guidance,⁷⁶ a fact reinforced by and expanded on by Hurston's description of her church. As a communal (other)mother, Catherine's ideations of blended Voodoo and Christianity were sourced in a deeply African renunciation of a polarized and subjective afterlife, as well as an adapted (New World) belief in the sanctity of femininity. Also crucial to her system of spiritual guidance was a reverence for the act of birth, an element of older Voodoo cultures that Hurston gestured at in *Tell My Horse*: " 'What is the truth?' ...She [the Voodoo priestess] 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 source of life."⁷⁷ Under the distinctly Afro-American spiritual culture being cultivated under slavery, a culture that would retain the transcendent and musical elements of African religion, birth would have maintained its status as a tactile reminder of the "otherworld," what Catherine called the "between-world between this brown earth and the blue above."⁷⁸ It is particularly notable that Catherine's church, which in many ways foregrounded what would become the Southern Black Christian Church, rejected heaven and hell in favor of the in-between. Influenced by notions of the spirit's infinitism, the ambiguity of life permeated her belief system. These notions, confirmed and sharpened by the acrid scars of slavery, most likely contributed to overarching themes of infinitism and ambiguity which appear in earlier Black folk texts.

⁷⁶ Hurston, *The Sanctified Church*, 28.

⁷⁷ Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, 113.

⁷⁸ Hurston, *The Sanctified Church*, 26.

The Conjure Woman is one such text. Charles Chestnut's collection of Black folk tales contextualizes African folk thought as it operated under slavery and extended into the post-Antebellum South. The stories mix important elements of Voodoo within a semi-structure of localized folk beliefs, relying heavily on themes of magical objects and conjuring, the use of which yield varied results, while also blending in elements of Anglicized Christianity, such as the spiritual revival meeting. Each story shares the same frame narrative, which switches between the voice of the white Northerner John, and the former slave, Uncle Julius. Like Uncle Tom, Julius operates within the existing social parameters dictated by his status as a Black man. He is a former slave who finds willing listeners in John and his wife Annie. It is important to note that the stories take place during slavery but are recalled by Julius after abolition from within the frame narrative, a move that is reminiscent of the accessibility to traditional African religious concepts that many slaves found through the religious synchronicity of Christianity and Voodoo. That is to say that concepts of Voodoo were accessible *publicly* through Christianity, where the eternal life of the spirit represented a staking point of spiritual harmony.

Julius' tales are often stamped by ambiguous or even tragic endings, and while Julius himself is more than once emotionally overcome by the reality of these endings, his white listeners bypass the possibility of truth and instead seek to moralize the tales. The fourth tale in the collection, "The Conjuror's Revenge," recalls the story of a slave who is turned into a donkey by a conjurer for attempting to steal a pig. The conjurer feels remorse after attending a revival meeting and vows to reverse the spell, but is accidentally poisoned before completing the reversal, leaving the man with a clubfoot from his time as a donkey. After Julius finishes the story, Annie laments, "That story

does not appeal to me, Uncle Julius, and is not up to your usual mark. It is n't pathetic, it has no moral that I can discover, and I can't see why you should tell it. In fact, it seems to me like nonsense."⁷⁹ Annie's rejection of the tale is crucially tied to her belief in its lack of morality, the fact that it "makes no sense" and, in her eyes, serves no purpose. Julius is "puzzled" and "pained" by her rejection, responding with, "I can't make out w'at you means by some er dem wo'ods you uses, but I'm tellin' nuffin but de turf."⁸⁰ The verbiage of Annie's Anglo-Christian morality is literally removed from Julius' vocabulary, suggesting that conceptualizations of moral polarity have never had a place within his spiritual life. The tales are, in this way, satirizations of Stowe's simplified speculations on the spiritual simplicity of slaves.

Annie's reaction falls in line with Stowe's fetishization of Blackness as quaint, uncomplicated and childish. The supposed immorality of "The Conjuror's Revenge" challenges her internal racism through a forced perspective of complexity within Blackness and Black culture. Furthermore, Chestnut's insistence on material objectives (each story sees Julius in covert pursuit of a self-interested outcome) further *The Conjure Woman's* satirical objectives, but also complicates the hegemonic social order expressed by the frame narrative as well as Annie and John's patronizing reactions to Julius' stories.

Most of Julius' stories are met with incredulity by John and some level of sympathy by Annie, or some mixture of the two. Their experience of Julius is as a weaver of myth, and his stories fall into the category of myth, not *histories*, which is how Julius intends them. They are summarily moralized in the manner of fable, an act which not

⁷⁹ Charles Chestnutt, *The Conjure Woman*, (San Bernardino, CA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016), "The Conjuror's Revenge".

⁸⁰ Chestnutt, "The Conjuror's Revenge".

only strips humanity from the characters but casts them into the malleable realm of make believe, where the condition of their bondage is similarly marginalized. It is important to note that Annie is the chief moralizer of the tales, while John prefers to maintain a degree of distance that presumably lends him ideological superiority. At the beginning of “Sis Becky’s Pickaninny”, a tale about a slave woman who is sold away from her son, who is then transformed into a hummingbird that flies to visit his mother on her new plantation, John tells Julius, "your people will never rise in the world until they throw off these childish superstitions and learn to live by the light of reason and common sense."⁸¹ The story is framed within the context of Annie’s sudden “melancholy”, a state which leaves her open to vague forebodings of impending misfortune.”⁸² Annie’s condition is markedly improved after Julius tells his story and slips a “good luck” rabbit foot into her possession.

The “Sis Becky” tale challenges the incomplete portrait of motherhood under slavery as originally put forth by Stowe some fifty years earlier. Chestnutt moves beyond Stowe’s portrait of a peculiar institution towards a more complete vision of Black humanity. Becky’s use of the conjure woman gestured at the resistive authority available from within traditional Africanness, an authority relegated to the realm of horror and, later, gore. We need look no further than contemporary portraits of Voodoo to determine its fabled status in the white imagination. The message is clear: Voodoo is not a religion but a costume suited to mock virtue and true spirituality. It is connected to the dark and the unvirtuous unseen. The darkly sexual/maternal is mistaken for the devious, from the nefarity of beating drums to the tactility of Voodoo worship.

⁸¹ Chestnut, “Sis Becky’s Pickaninny”.

⁸² Chestnutt, “Sis Becky’s Pickanninny”.

The conjure woman of the Southern plantation was a figure marred by the suspicion of the white imagination.⁸³ She suffered the paranoia of a nation reeling from 1804's Haitian slave revolt, and was viewed as variously dangerous, subversive, sexually mysterious and harmless. Chestnutt's tales frame the conjure woman figure within the imaginative hubris of white Northerner John, who's racial insecurity, as signaled by his hyperbolic shows of mental/moral superiority, immediately lacerates her from his reality. The purpose of the tales themselves to Julius is difficult to contextualize beyond their obvious folkloric value. Owing to their complexity and moral ambiguity, I argue that the tales offer an alternate landscape of authority, one that operates parallel to or within John and Annie's fantasy of domesticity. It must be reiterated that John and Annie are Northerners opportuning a new life in the South, and the tone of their perceptions of slavery (the institution had a "darker side" but is otherwise unmolested in their imaginations) are openly mocked by the severity and tragedy folded into Julius' *Conjure* tales.

"Mars Jeems Nightmare" is significant in that it is the only tale in which Julius *offers* a motive to his listeners, rather than alluding to it. John's mockery of the offering, asking Julius "did you make that up all by yourself?"⁸⁴ implies his continued unwillingness to accept not only Julius' reality, but his history. He further mocks that had Julius not told them the moral of the story, "it might have escaped us otherwise." John's marked sarcasm is interpretively informed by his own sense of superiority. Indeed, Julius's offering removes the possibility of ambiguity, thus challenging the hegemonic

⁸³ Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), 71.

⁸⁴ Chestnutt, "Mars Jeems Nightmare".

internal discourse through which John “entertains” his stories. By pointing out the moral of his story - those that treat others poorly will (at the very least) have nightmares - Julius disrupts the vantage from which John is able to enjoy the tale, a vantage from which he can romanticize and marginalize. Julius’ act no doubt comes off as rhetorical violence to John, who’s reaction to “Mars Jeems Nightmare” is singular in its paranoid tone.

Because Julius is no longer a slave, he lacks the circumstances of total social impotence that Morrison delineates as the literary framework inside which white characters are subject to representations of “blinding whiteness.” This “blinding whiteness,” Morrison argues, “seems to function as both antidote for and meditation on the shadow that is companion to this whiteness.”⁸⁵ Morrison adds that the “shadow,” or the foil to whiteness as provided by the presence of Blackness, is akin to a “haunting, a darkness from which our early literature seemed unable to extricate itself.”⁸⁶ I will reiterate here the singularity of Julius’ status as an ex-slave and John and Annie’s status as Northerners. In this way, the *Conjure* tales interrogate whiteness with skillful clandestinity and parody by removing the usual circumstances of white subjugation against Blacks. The technicality of Julius’ freedom is sharpened by the obvious limitations of his agency, or, to phrase this more distinctly, even though Julius is no longer enslaved, he remains tethered to whiteness for his survival. Still, Julius’ ability to rhetorically disturb his employer’s racial ideology suppresses John’s “blinding whiteness” from completely overcoming the “shadow”.

The Conjure Woman initiated the kind of complex Black literary subversion that would later appear in literary works by Black authors, like Morrison. Jeanette White

⁸⁵ Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 33.

⁸⁶ Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 33.

points out that Chestnut's use of the frame-within-a-frame narrative removes the presumption of active participation from the main characters, Julius, John and Annie, so that "none of these are participants in the action, although each is indirectly involved in either presenting or reacting to the tales."⁸⁷ I would add that the language of the tales, from Chestnut's use of vernacular to John and Annie's verbal othering of Julius, create a deliberate platform for charged reactions. Keen readers would surely notice that while Julius speaks much like Stowe's Uncle Tom, he maintains a sense of self interest, and indeed a sense of self, through his acts of rhetorical subversion. By removing racial violence from the contemporary reality of Julius, John and Annie, and replacing real slavery with wage slavery, Chestnut engages the tension, both geographical/proximal and social, that establishes a space in which violent ideological upheaval is possible. It is within this space of tension that the supernatural is able to rupture predominant assumptions of white superiority by first rupturing presumptions of perceived reality.

Furthermore, Julius's folkloric "truth" satirized already existing notions of Voodoo as a practice of magic, rather than a religion, and greatly helped establish a heritage of shifting truthfulness, reality and justice within the tradition of Black literature. More recent works, like Edward P. Jones' *The Known World*, build upon the linguistic and rhetorical foundations of Chestnut, projecting Black Supernaturalism against themes of truth malleability and knowledge restriction. Intriguingly, Jones' use of the supernatural denies orderliness or direct connections and instead accesses a chaotic energy that supplements the complex ideological landscape of his characters, some of

⁸⁷ Jeannette S. White, "Baring Slavery's Darkest Secrets: Charles Chesnut's 'Conjure Tales' as Masks of Truth. (Charles Chesnut's 'The Conjure Woman' and the Technique of Mask Employed in It).", (*The Southern Literary Journal* 27, pg.85-103, 1994), 89.

whom are Black slave owners. Black Supernaturalism serves the dual purpose of subverting white assumptions about Black Supernaturalism (like Stowe's beliefs) and helps to illuminate the labyrinthian mental ecology required of former slaves owning slaves themselves. The supernatural is an element of chaos, never elementally altering the plot but stirring confusion, causing questions about reality, and sowing atmospheric thickness.

Like Morrison, Jones builds his use of the supernatural out of the lived experience of Black Americans: "I realized that I was putting in everything that I had learned in life"⁸⁸ he stated in an interview when asked about "magic" and "superstition" in his novel. Jones' text is singular in its address of free Blacks owning slaves, a topic which necessitates difficult questions of identity and its relationship to the owning of human beings. Henry Townsend, the novel's central character, is a former slave who purchases his own freedom and goes on to own 35 slaves. Part of Jones' skillful exposure of slavery's labyrinthine network of generational pain stems from the fact that Henry's financial and social success is contingent on his lifelong participation in the system that once enslaved him. The novel is, in this way, a literal treatment of DuBois' Double Consciousness philosophy, but also an extension of Morrison's foundational studies in African Americanism, particularly her treatment of the horrors inflicted on, and in reciprocity with, the sacred motherly bond.

Stamford, one of Henry's slaves, experiences a critical moment of spiritual guidance in which he witnesses a series of supernatural events in succession. During a legendary storm, he watches crows fall dead from the sky, finds their bodies laid together

⁸⁸ Edward P. Jones, "Untold Stories: An Interview with Edward P. Jones", Interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson, *The Writer* 117, No. 8, August 2004), 20.

in a neat row by “something” unknown, feels the shells of the birds’ eggs fall on his head, and sees the corpses swallowed by the earth. He tucks the pieces of eggshell under the wings of each bird, and as he does so, sees a slave cabin, containing the 2 children for whom he was picking blueberries, fly through the air and land 10 feet from him.

Stamford’s attention to the eggshell—that which contains the potentiality of life—acts as a literalization of his own testimonies of generational trauma, as they stem from maternal severance. It must be noted that Stamford’s defining personality trait prior to this experience is his love of “young stuff”, his obsession with sex with young women. His preference is not organic, rather, it was suggested to him by an older slave that the only way to survive the perpetual trauma of slavery is to copulate with “young stuff.” By submitting to the suggestion, Stamford believes he is exchanging the pain of self-severance for sexual pleasure. Rhetorically, the move serves Jones’ overall attention to the circular violence of slavery, which is rooted in the obvious cognitive dissonance provided by Black slave owners. Indeed, Stamford’s sexual propensity for young women only serves to perpetuate the system of slavery in which he is entangled, providing opportunities for the birth of more slave children, and the continued cycle of mother-child severance.

Stamford’s experience with the crows invigorates him, and he goes on to establish an orphanage for Black children once he is freed. Morrison terms the Black community a “pariah community,” in that it “lives apart from but in juxtaposition to other civilizations.”⁸⁹ Her theorization suggests that efforts to congeal Black communal ties are in some ways inherent acts of self-isolation. Yet it follows, then, that they are also

⁸⁹ Morrison and Guthrie, *Conversations*, 168,

preservative. Stamford's establishing an orphanage for *Black* children is not only a marker of historical segregation, but a momentous gesture of community preservation. Because the cycle of familial care-taking, which Morrison describes as crucial to the survival of the Black community,⁹⁰ is disrupted under slavery, Jones' use of an orphanage draws crucial attention to maternal severance by highlighting othermothering in the form of community child rearing.

Jones' striking depiction of Black slave ownership builds upon Foucault's panopticon theory of self-regulatory oppression by de-bodying the source of communal pain. The result is perverse, in which the Black man faces the face of his oppressor, who looks and speaks as he does. The Black-white dichotomy is intrinsically disrupted, and self-regulation marries with self-hatred and self-loathing; the physicality of individual failure starkly present, the surveyor a mirror. The telling of the storm, crows and cabin are particularly personal, a meditative experience for Stamford, and crucially transformative in his own life. Not only this, but the panopticon is broken, and the spiritual knowing of the life-giving mother, the mysterious source of life, reveals itself in the broken eggshells, the devastated remnants of fetal reverence and protection. Stamford understands, for the first time in his life as a slave, that it is not "young stuff" which will free him, but the sacred re-memory as honored through generational bonds.

I am reminded of Hurston's description of her mother's death in *Dust Tracks on a Road*, in which the worth of the mother-child bond is at last realized: "Her mouth was slightly open, but her breathing took up so much of her strength that she could not talk.

⁹⁰ Morrison and Guthrie, *Conversations*, 131

But she looked at me, or so I felt, to speak for her. She depended on me for a voice.”⁹¹

Hurston’s work in Haiti and New Orleans affirmed the sacredness of the womb, and by extension, the feminine. The voice of the mother is the breath of life, and its natural conduit is the child. The nature of breath as a living source which travels between generations is a concept that Hurston would not become familiar with until well after her mother’s death, and yet it maintained a kind of intuitive value through the passage of folkloric wisdom. It is a gesture to the sacred life cycle, the personality of nature, which intuitively conveys its knowledge into those who listen, and the essentiality of re-memory as survival.

⁹¹ Zora Neale Hurston. *Dust Tracks on a Road*, (New York, NY: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006), 87.

Towards a Liberated Black Consciousness

Ned Sublette describes the dances at Congo Square in New Orleans as a kind of “sonic marronage” in which the slaves “could escape, if only for a few hours.” The dances represented a singular experience in the history of the enslaved in America, a time and place in which slaves were “allowed to hold public gatherings to dance, play ancestral drums, and sing ancestral languages.”⁹² Sublette points out that the drums were not only significant religious objects - the tangible connective tissue between the living and the sacred ancestral spirits - but were also tools of resistive force. Drumming took on a language in the Antebellum South, through which information was spread, a coded rhythm understood only by those privy to the key: the subjugated slaves. This is, in part, the reason behind laws passed to suppress the use of drums, an extension of what was often deemed a white cultural distaste for the raucous nature of the rhythmic beat. In reality, the suppression of drums was not a marker of distaste but an authoritarian tool designed to reinforce the hegemony of white supremacy. It was a precursor to further legal restrictions on the free movement of Black culture and community, including limitations on Black congregation, a collective of laws that became known as the Black Codes and lived on into the Jim Crow South.

I refer specifically to congregation, as it is the assembly of Black people, exchanging history, music and knowledge, that is perhaps the darkest form of “Black magic” from the perspective of the white imagination. Stowe, in her efforts to generate sympathy for the enslaved, instead engendered devastating and lasting impressions of

⁹² Sublette, 119.

Black congregation as smilingly simple, positioning Blacks as more concerned with percussive engagement, naked pleasure and a strivance for a spiritual connection that they were biologically subject to, but could not possibly understand. The undisputed architect of the Magical Negro, Stowe must also be credited for her abolitionist efforts, which lended credence to the cause by way of the emotional appeal that the nation perhaps needed at the time. In hindsight, her vision is limited, and maintains a preoccupation with white salvation that demands address. The allegorical approach of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Dred* allowed notions of Biblical worth and salvation to enter the white consciousness as it ruminated Blackness and the question of slavery. It must be reiterated, however, that her misappropriations of supernaturalism in Black culture maintain their hold on the American literary landscape. In short, it was Stowe's work that instigated the perpetually evolving, but always misconceived, manifestations of Blackness that appear so prominently in literature and film today. These manifestations are self-reproductive, askew, and continue to inform public perception of Blackness.

The conclusion of this thesis brings a reinforced sense of the catalytic nature of the texts I have chosen to examine. I use the word *foundational*, as these are all foundational works, particularly the progression from Stowe to Hurston to, finally, Morrison, whose nurturance of communal truths certifies the maternal, and indeed the feminine cruciality of survival as dictated by the "mysterious source of life." We think of the African religion, Voodoo, often as emblematic of otherworldly horrors, the "other" which opposes Stowe's "true" religion, and yet the fetishization of Voodoo allows for its reworking. It is, like the beating of ancestral drums, complex, coded, and balanced. Its stamp is alive in Morrison's work, whose treatment of the supernatural has been called

variously magical realism, *avante garde*, and a number of other insufficiencies. But Morrison's truth lingers in the borderland, the space between this earth and the blue sky above, where the enduring ambiguity of the soul and the energetic forces of life, remain unknown, but beautified.

As I read Morrison now, only months after her death, the force of her words strikes me again and again. Their salience penetrates the contemporary moment with a sharpness that sheds blood. She is the *kairotic* mother, the feminine source, and yet her work is fundamentally reflective, even as it points the way forward. As Pilate conduces her own birth, Morrison's spiritual discourse reaches back actively into the African, the American, marbling the walls of Hurston's foundational anthology in an act of ancestral guardianship. It is apt, then, to imagine the visual as well as the linguistic impression of the womb of knowledge from which she was able to imagine *Beloved's* crucial reminder and *Song of Solomon's* enduring gesture to the infinite possibilities of a liberated Black consciousness.

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