

Article

Christianity's Last Stand: Visions of Spirituality in Post-1970 African American Women's Literature

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Abstract: Christianity appealed to writers of African descent from the moment they set foot on New World soil. That attraction, perhaps as a result of the professed mission of slaveholders to “Christianize the heathen African,” held sway in African American letters well into the twentieth century. While African American male writers joined their female counterparts in expressing an attraction to Christianity, black women writers, beginning in the mid-twentieth century, consistently began to express doubts about the assumed altruistic nature of a religion that had been used as justification for enslaving their ancestors. Lorraine Hansberry’s Beneatha Younger in *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) initiated a questioning mode in relation to Christianity that continues into the present day. It was especially after 1970 that black women writers turned their attention to other ways of knowing, other kinds of spirituality, other ways of being in the world. Consequently, they enable their characters to find divinity within themselves or within communities of extra-natural individuals of which they are a part, such as vampires. As this questioning and re-conceptualization of spirituality and divinity continue into the twenty-first century, African American women writers make it clear that their characters, in pushing against traditional renderings of religion and spirituality, envision worlds that their contemporary historical counterparts cannot begin to imagine.

Keywords: Christianity; spirituality; African American women writers; 1970; healing; extra-naturalism

In her 1945 volume, *A Street in Bronzeville*, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Gwendolyn Brooks included a sixteen-line poem entitled “the preacher: ruminates behind the sermon,” which contains the following lines:

I think it must be lonely to be God.
Nobody loves a master. No. Despite
The bright hosannas, bright dear-Lords, and bright
Determined reverence of Sunday eyes. . . .

But who walks with Him?—dares to take His arm,
To slap Him on the shoulder, tweak His ear,
Buy Him a Coca-Cola or a beer,
Poop-pooh His politics, call Him a fool?

Perhaps—who knows—He tires of looking down. (Brooks 1963, p. 8)

The poem is striking in that it simultaneously looks backward and forward to how writers of African descent on United States soil depict Christianity in their works. On the one hand, Brooks is clearly conceptualizing the traditional Christian God—He who is omnipotent and deserves/expects worshipful adoration. On the other hand, Brooks reduces God to a human level by framing Him in the context of interactions that occur easily between individuals—walking, touching, slapping

on the shoulder, tweaking an ear, buying a beer, dismissing politics, and even daring to call Him a fool. In other words, Brooks has transformed God by personifying Him in human terms. She has thus reduced His power, snatched him out of his biblical role, and perhaps even called into question his willingness to be God of all. By so doing, she looks back to the tradition of African American writers who recognize and celebrate God's sovereignty, especially early poets such as Phillis Wheatley. However, she also looks forward to the tradition of African American women writers, such as Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker, and Paule Marshall, who challenge traditional conceptualizations of God and offer alternatives to His omnipotence and sovereignty. Her poem therefore recognizes where black folks were initially in relation to Christianity and where they ended up many centuries from that starting point.

Brooks thus anticipates two scholars of African American literature who recognize the significance Christianity has served throughout its history. As Richard Barksdale and Kenneth Kinnamon point out in their introductory comments to *Black Writers of America: A Comprehensive Anthology* (Barksdale and Kinnamon 1972), an early and well-respected anthology of African American literature, the "appeal of Christianity" (Barksdale and Kinnamon 1972, p. 2) was one of the two driving forces in African American literary creativity in its first century or so of existence (the other was "the quest for liberty and equality"). While this essay will focus on how African American women writers treat Christianity, it is worthy of note that several of the early writers in this tradition of the appeal of Christianity were male. For example, Jupiter Hammon, who was enslaved in Massachusetts, penned a poetic account of his salvation as early as 1760. Frederick Douglass wrestled with the inconsistencies of slaveholders keeping their fellow human beings in servitude and professing to be Christian, but he also held a Sabbath School for his fellow bondspeople (Douglass [1845] 1945). Years later, in his poem entitled "An Antebellum Sermon," Paul Laurence Dunbar envisioned a Moses-like figure leading black people out of bondage (Dunbar [1896] 1991). During the Harlem Renaissance, James Weldon Johnson published *God's Trombones* (Johnson [1927] 1955), which he subtitled *Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*. At mid-twentieth century, James Baldwin also engaged this topic, particularly in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (Baldwin 1953), which explores the religious conversion, as well as the backsliding, of a fundamentalist preacher who migrates from the South to Harlem. Recognizing that the appeal of Christianity attracted these and other male writers, I nonetheless focus for the remainder of this discussion primarily on women writers and their representations of how Christianity and various forms of spirituality shaped the lives of their characters from their arrivals in the New World to contemporary manifestations. From embracing Christianity to illustrating its contradictions and shortcomings, as Gwendolyn Brooks does, African American women writers have showcased responses to Christianity that range from acceptance to rejection and finally to suggesting that different kinds of spirituality might be more appealing to and useful for their female characters.

The literary embracing of the Christian concept of believing that God plans one's destiny perhaps begins with Phillis Wheatley—and understandably. Here was this orphaned girl, forcefully taken from her African home, and landed in a Boston household where she was treated like mini-royalty. The circumstances of her existence—which probably included having to listen to tales of dark, "heathen" Africa—perhaps made it easy for her to believe that she had been fortunate to have been rescued and deposited in a "safe," though serving, environment. Wheatley ostensibly thanked God for having brought her from unenlightened, heathen Africa into the beatific light of the Western world. No matter our desire to have Wheatley question those so-called benign enslavers, her words are there to certify her position and to offer pushback from our own: "Twas mercy brought me from my pagan land,/Taught my benighted soul to understand/That there's a God, that there's a saviour too:/Once I redemption neither sought nor knew" (Barksdale and Kinnamon 1972, p. 41). Consider representations of God as well in the poetry of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper in the mid-nineteenth century, especially "The Slave Auction" and "The Slave Mother." In the face of separation from loved ones during total repression, mothers could cry out only to God, in whose image they assert they have been made. Consider Charlotte Forten Grimké's praising of God in her work among the recently enslaved on the Sea Islands:

"I will pray that God in his goodness will make me noble enough to find my highest happiness in doing my duty" (Grimke 1953, p. 137). She also remarks, on several occasions, about how those among whom she worked sang about and praised God. Belief in Christianity was still strongly prevalent in the 1920s in the works of playwright Georgia Douglas Johnson, whose characters in her lynching play, *A Sunday Morning in the South*, sing several rounds of religious songs as a young black man is falsely accused of rape and ultimately lynched. That outcome brings cries of "For God's sake" and repeated exaltations of "Lord have mercy" (Perkins and Stephens 1998, pp. 108, 109).

What I want to emphasize here is the seeming unqualified acceptance of Christianity from the beginnings of African American written literacy, an acceptance that would still be the case well into the first few decades of the twentieth century, not only with Johnson's characters but with others, such as Janie Crawford's grandmother in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Hurston [1937] 1990). They uniformly pray fervently for divine intervention in the troubles of their lives. It is shortly after all those praying women in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* try to work out their souls' salvation that African American women writers begin to punch holes in the idea that Christianity is the be-all and end-all of their existences. Indeed, Baldwin anticipates those writers in examining the tenets in that contradictory religion that lead persons of sensitive natures to question or reject it.

Yet Baldwin and his close friend, playwright Lorraine Hansberry, despite their personal quarrels with Christianity, were the standard bearers of the tradition in the 1950s. Some of Baldwin's characters, such as Esther in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, seemed to be damned for being out of the church. Esther is labeled a "scarlet woman" who deserves death in childbirth for having an affair with a preacher and bearing a child out of wedlock. Hansberry's Beneatha Younger in *A Raisin in the Sun* (Hansberry [1959] 1988) is viewed as being in danger of hellfire because she does not believe in God. Yet Baldwin and Hansberry were at war with Christianity. Baldwin's love/hate relationship with the religion haunted him from the time of his tenure as a youth minister in a holiness church in Harlem, where he preached between the ages of fourteen and seventeen. Hansberry was drawn away from Christianity through the intellectual traditions she embraced in college, as well as through those to which she was exposed under the tutelage of Paul Robeson.

No matter her own path, Hansberry created the character I credit with taking the last stand, that is, an unqualified position *in favor of Christianity*, in African American literature. That character is Mama Lena Younger, the towering grandmother and matriarch of the Younger family in *A Raisin in the Sun*, which opened on Broadway in March of 1959. The head of a family of black sharecroppers transplanted from Mississippi to Chicago, Mama Lena is as staunch in her Christian belief as she is solid in her large physical form. She is one of the long-suffering black women of Christian tradition who believes that God makes a way out of no way, that all one has to do is trust in His power, His promise always to supply one's needs. Mama Lena is therefore understandably *un*-understanding when her daughter Beneatha attempts to crack the very rock on which Mama's religious foundation stands. The conversation centers upon Beneatha's assertion that she is going to be a doctor:

MAMA (*Kindly*) 'Course you going to be a doctor, honey, God willing.

BENEATHA (*Drily*) God hasn't got a thing to do with it.

MAMA Beneatha—that just wasn't necessary.

BENEATHA Well—neither is God. I get sick of hearing about God.

MAMA Beneatha!

BENEATHA I mean it! I'm just tired of hearing about God all the time. What has He got to do with anything? Does He pay tuition?

MAMA You 'bout to get your fresh little jaw slapped! . . .

BENEATHA Why? Why can't I say what I want to around here, like everybody else?

MAMA It don't sound nice for a young girl to say things like that—you wasn't brought up that way. Me and your father went to trouble to get you and Brother to church every Sunday.

BENEATHA Mama, you don't understand. It's all a matter of ideas, and God is just one idea I don't accept. It's not important. I am not going out and be immoral or commit crimes because I don't believe in God. I don't even think about it. It's just that I get tired of Him getting credit for all the things the human race achieves through its own stubborn effort. There simply is no blasted God—there is only man and it is he who makes miracles!

(MAMA absorbs this speech, studies her daughter and rises slowly and crosses to BENEATHA and slaps her powerfully across the face. After, there is only silence and the daughter drops her eyes from her mother's face, and MAMA is very tall before her)

MAMA Now—you say after me, in my mother's house there is still God. (*There is a long pause and BENEATHA stares at the floor wordlessly. MAMA repeats the phrase with precision and cool emotion*) In my mother's house, there is still God.

BENEATHA In my mother's house there is still God. (*A long pause*)

MAMA (*Walking away from BENEATHA, too disturbed for triumphant posture. Stopping and turning back to her daughter*) There are some ideas we ain't going to have in this house. Not long as I am at the head of this family.

BENEATHA Yes ma'am. (Hansberry [1959] 1988, pp. 38–39)

I call this Christianity's last stand in African American literature in part because Mama Lena can force a recitation, but she cannot force belief. No matter her words to the contrary, Beneatha has not changed her mind, and Mama Lena has seemingly temporarily forgotten some of the tolerance that so characterized Jesus (also, note as well that Hansberry, in capitalizing the pronouns in reference to God, inadvertently adheres to some Christian belief—or at least practice—as well). Christianity merely bolsters the tyranny that I assign to Mama Lena (most readers and scholars are wonderfully forgiving of her violence and her authoritarian management of everybody's lives). After Mama Lena Younger's appearance, Christianity disappears from African American literary texts altogether or evolves into different forms of spirituality. The Black Arts Movement and the Black Aesthetic of the 1960s brought with them a questioning of just about everything that did not evolve from within black communities, and that included Christianity. How could the religion be benign, militant young writers asked, if it were responsible for the very tenets on which racist America was founded? It must be rejected even as its original practitioners were to be rejected.

It is a fascinating process, therefore, to chart the transformation of religious belief in African American literary texts by women writers after the 1960s. And I should pause to say that some African American male writers were also sensitive to the limits of Christianity, such as Ishmael Reed in the African-inspired belief system that he espouses in *Mumbo Jumbo* (Reed 1970). Especially noteworthy among male writers is the reconceptualization of a mythic world view for people of African descent that Henry Dumas envisions in his works, especially in his short story, "Ark of Bones," which is also undergirded with African belief systems. The keepers of the Ark are ancient guardians who sail the world retrieving the bones of drowned people of African descent; they moan and recite "Aba aba, al ham dilaba" (Dumas 1974, p. 15) each time they retrieve such remains. African American women writers, however, are my focus here, and no work by such a writer signaled as dramatic a change in the transforming of religious belief than Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, a choreopoem that reached major stages in 1976. Playwright Shange had premiered the work in coffee houses in California and New York before staging its final version. A collage of tales that black women, identified only by the colors they wear, tell about their complex and often traumatizing life experiences, *For Colored Girls* dared to uncover the divinity within African American women. In a way, the women bring God to earth and thereby collapse the divide between human and divine even as they assert their own divinity.

These women, like Mama Lena, have undoubtedly endured the troubles of the world. However, unlike Mama Lena, they have refused to take their burdens to the Lord and leave them there. The women recount stories of sexual, psychological, and physical abuse. With torn bodies and worn minds, they seek

comfort in this world, *not* in the hereafter, *not* in a source that derives outside their world, and *not* in anything masculine. Their pain is encapsulated in perhaps the most striking narrative in the choreopoem. The Lady in Red, Crystal, tells the story of giving birth to two children for Beau Willie Brown, her common law partner, before he is drafted to serve in Vietnam. Returned to the United States, he suffers the mental traumas of war and drugs coupled with the psychological inadequacy of being unable to provide for his children. On a visit to Crystal and the children, he repeats his invitation to her to marry him. When she hesitates once again, he holds their two toddlers out of a fifth story window and, despite her protestations, drops them onto the sidewalk below. Crystal's pain in response to the deaths of her children epitomizes all the women's pain. They have suffered at the hands of their lovers, husbands, children, dreams, expectations, and desires—the hands of the intangible as well as the hands of the tangible. And they decide that no god beyond the skies can help them. They themselves must re-shape the impact of the hands that touch them.

They do this by coming together to provide comfort to each other. The seven women join hands, *healing* hands, in a circle at the end of the play. In response to the implied question, where is divinity, they assert: “i found god in myself/& i loved her/i loved her fiercely” (Shange 1975, p. 63). In their laying on of hands, they recognize no power to heal that is greater than the power inherent in them. Humanity and temporality triumph over anything in the supernatural realm. Women cannot go to men or to a masculine source of divine power for assistance with their problems with men. They can only turn to the goddess in the feminine and shape that divinity to suit their own purposes.

This laying on of hands is a pattern that occurs in several of the post-1970 texts. Gloria Naylor, for example, adopts the pattern in the story of Ciel Turner in *The Women of Brewster Place* (Naylor [1982] 1983). After Ciel has had an abortion in an effort to keep her man in her life, then finds him leaving anyway, and after her two-year old is electrocuted as Ciel stands pleading with the man to stay, she concludes that she has nothing for which to live. And she certainly lacks any will to pray or even to find a spiritual source within herself. Mattie Michael, the central figure in *Brewster Place*, comes to Ciel and takes her in her arms, rocking her through her grief in the way that women have done throughout the ages. In the process of rocking and by encouraging Ciel to remember other mothers' losses, such as those of captured African women dashing their children's brains against the sides of slave ships, Mattie inspires in Ciel an identification with the feminine, a tiny spark that enables her to keep on keeping on in ways that are as effective but that are decidedly different from Mama Lena Younger's Christian inspiration. Mattie's recognition of Ciel's desire to grieve herself to death, and Mattie's interventionist laying on of hands are what save Ciel. Mattie soothes her, bathes her, strokes her into regeneration. Woman to woman and the spiritual connection between them—no male god as mediator.

The same is true of Avey Johnson in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, which was published in 1983, the year after *The Women of Brewster Place*. Avey recovers from soul-threatening debilitation only through the laying on of hands of another woman. A middle-class housewife who spends her vacations on cruises, Avey becomes restless on one such trip and begins to realize the futility of her life. Taken ill on a small boat between islands, she undergoes the same purging and cleansing process that Ciel Turner undergoes—regurgitation and defecation—before she is washed, massaged, and re-stimulated into life by another woman. Please keep in mind that these are not lesbian encounters. These are situations in which women—even women who are strangers to each other—recognize the pain in other women and opt to do something, via the spiritual connections between them, about their suffering. The commitment to do something other than pray about the suffering enables the injured women to undergo a cleansing/conversion process comparable to those we find in traditional African American church experiences, but without the Christian overtones. Avey comes to understand that she is wasting her life by adhering to a straitlaced middle-class existence. She commits herself to restoring her great-aunt's home in South Carolina and to educating her grandchildren in the traditions of African and African American cultures. Those choices are infinitely better than packing twenty suitcases and going on cruises, where the most exciting part of the day is presentation of dessert.

Rosalie Parvay, who bathes and massages Avey Johnson, is one of many black women of spiritualist powers who seems to derive those powers from nature and harmony with the universe and, we might add, from ancestral African sources—instead of from God. Rosalie joins Minnie Ransom from Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (Bambara [1980] 1992) in using her hands to encourage transformation in Avey: "Immediately [Avey] felt the small hands from last night come to rest on her arm. . . . A laying on of hands" (Marshall 1983), hands that bathe Avey in a cleansing ritual from a woman with "special powers of seeing and knowing" (Marshall 1983, pp. 217, 218). The singing and dancing rituals in which Avey later participates also mark her newfound spirituality as centered in voodoo traditions that people of African descent brought to the Caribbean. Thus, Avey is re-centered, through a reverse Middle Passage, to unity and pride in her blackness. Rosalie's laying on of hands ties Rosalie to women throughout the African Diaspora who use their hands as communication points with the world, and their hands have impressive powers. This is certainly true of Mama Day's baby-catching hands. Gloria Naylor's titular character in *Mama Day* (Naylor 1988) has delivered most of the babies born in Willow Springs in the past seven or eight decades, and she has laid her hands on the sick and the infertile. She entreats George, Cocoa's rationalist husband, to just join his hands in hers and, together, they will be able to save her grandniece from the evils of conjuration. George's refusal does not make Mama Day's hands any less powerful, and it reiterates again the pattern of women saving women without the aid of men (alternative view: George as sacrifice—so he does help). From delivering babies, to picking herbs, to making peach cobbles, coconut cakes, and quilts, Mama Day has hands that powerful forces have anointed. One of those forces is Sapphira Wade, the conjure woman extraordinaire who is responsible for the Day family owning a significant portion of Willow Springs. Mama Day has inherited from Sapphira an extra-natural power that gives her the ability to know without knowing and to see without seeing. Another force is nature, with which Mama Day co-exists in special ways and from which she derives the materials that are the substance of many of her efforts to help her family and neighbors.

Although Mama Day talks to the traditional Christian God and respects His realm, she also recognizes other realms of power. They may not be precisely stated or even precisely knowable, but they exist, and those in tune with them can derive great power from them. Mama Day's democratic approach to belief and power illustrates a diversity that also appears in other texts after 1970. Women characters consistently find sources of power other than Christianity, whether it is Beloved transcending the barriers between life and death in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (Morrison 1987) or Clora existing somewhere between here and there in J. California Cooper's *Family* (Cooper 1991).

Those other ways of relating to the world around us are especially apparent in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (Bambara [1980] 1992). In this novel, which is essentially an extended healing session, a black woman, Velma Henry, has slit her wrists and stuck her head in an oven. Rescued and taken to the local infirmary, a local physician can sew her wrists back together, but her mind needs other attention. It comes in the form of Minnie Ransom, a significantly named and famous healer in the area who shares with Mama Day an understanding of the forces of nature, but who adds to Mama Day's diversity of spiritual possibility with African loa and Eastern religions.

Like *Beloved*, Minnie Ransom can commune with the dead. She can also actually leave her body, as Cooper's Clora does, but, unlike Clora, she can return at will. Minnie has been called into an understanding of her powers in the way that fundamentalist folk preachers frequently recount being called to perform their Christian services. Minnie's calling comes from another woman who has the power as well, from the very forces of the universe, and it seems more a cross at times than a gift or blessing. Indeed, during this process of calling/selection, Minnie's neighbors conclude that she is deranged:

They called her batty, fixed, possessed, crossed, in deep trouble. Said they'd heard of people drawn to starch or chalk or bits of plaster. But the sight of full-grown, educated, well-groomed, well-raised Minnie Ransom down on her knees eating dirt, craving pebbles and gravel, all asprawl in the road with her clothes every which way—it was too much to

bear. And so jumpy, like something devilish had got hold of her, leaping up from the porch, from the table, from morning prayers and racing off to the woods, the women calling at her back, her daddy dropping his harness and shading his eyes, which slid off her back like slippery saddle soap. The woods to the path to the sweet ground beyond, then the hill, the eating hill, the special dirt behind the wash house. (Bambara [1980] 1992, pp. 51–52)

Only Karen, who, after her own death, will become Ole Wife, Minnie's spiritual guide, understands what is happening in Minnie's selection process. Karen and the forces into which she has knowing seem to select Minnie for special work, and they give her power sufficient to achieve the work, including those powers the loa represent. By recognizing a history of spirituality that *precedes* Christianity, as well as the belief systems that co-exist with Christianity, Minnie Ransom adds a multiplicity to Mama Day's diversity.

Ole Wife, Minnie Ransom's ghost familiar, attends as Minnie lays hands on Velma's innermost being and draws her out of a will to die and into an exuberant desire for life. The pain that Velma has experienced from doing the jobs of seven people, having a cheating husband, and not being a very good mother to her adoptive son, all crystallized in the act of her attempted suicide. There is peace, she concludes, as well as safety, in annihilation. But Minnie stands at the gate, barring annihilation, just as Mattie Michael stood at the same gate with Ciel Turner. Life is too valuable, Minnie and Mattie argue, for it to be simply given up; both injured women must instead learn to accept the weight of living. Both interveners give to their charges a piece of themselves, and both women serve as the inspirational source through which the injured women reach out and grasp something that keeps them in this world.

Minnie and Velma sit on stools facing each other in the Southwest Community Infirmary in Clayborne, Georgia. Minnie duplicates and refines the laying on of hands that defined the interactions of the women in *For Colored Girls* as well as the relationship between Mattie and Ciel in *The Women of Brewster Place*. She holds on to Velma, talks to her, and encourages Velma to remember and then *let go* of the painful things that have brought her to this point. Velma sits in a semi-comatose state, but she is nonetheless able to hear and understand what Minnie is saying.

Minnie's healing process, which frequently includes the laying on of hands, is described thusly:

Calcium or lymph or blood uncharged, congealed and blocked the flow, stopped the dance, notes running into each other in a pileup, the body out of tune, the melody jumped the track, discordant and strident. And she would lean her ear to the chest or place her hand at the base of the spine till her foot tapped and their heads bobbed, till it was melodious once more. And often she did not touch flesh on flesh but touched mind on mind from across the room or from cross town or the map linked by telephone cables that could carry the clue spoken—a dream message, an item of diet, a hurt unforgiven and festering, a guilt unreleased—and the charged response reaching ear then inner ear, then shooting to the blockade and freeing up the flow. Or by letter, the biometric reading of worried eyes and hands in writing, the body transported through the mails, body/mind/spirit out of nexus, out of tune, out of line, off beat, off color, in a spin off its axis, affairs aslant, wisdom at a tangent and she'd receive her instructions. And the turbulence would end. (Bambara [1980] 1992, pp. 48–49)

If there are prayers here, they emanate from sources other than the Christian. Bambara was particularly known for her exploration of a variety of ways of knowing, a variety of spiritual ways of being in the world, and she allows all of those to be expressed in *The Salt Eaters*. She is not as democratic as Gloria Naylor, in that Christianity does not play a comparable role in the text to other ways of knowing and being. One of Velma's mentors, in fact, reiterates again and again how important it is for young people to discover ways of *being* in the world. In that discovery, Bambara allows them to keep their options open. If the loa sustains them, fine; if music and the dance of the universe sustains them, that is equally fine. So too with Eastern religions. Bambara finally collapses opposing systems into a syncretism reminiscent of Zora Neale Hurston's discussions of the incorporation of Catholic rituals into voodoo traditions.

Velma returns to wholeness and reclaims a desire to live as much because of what Minnie does as because of what Minnie inspires her to discover *within* herself. Velma similarly finds the divinity that the women find in *For Colored Girls*. And Velma finally comes to understand that her seeming trials have been mere preparation for what she will eventually have to endure. The text suggests that her role is to follow in the footsteps of Minnie Ransom and that Minnie is playing for her the role that Karen or Ole Wife played for Minnie. Velma's discovery of the power she has and the power into which it is her destiny to become linked could reasonably be read as the institutionalization of a goddess cult, or perhaps even the assumption of godhead without the cult connotation. Indeed, readers could arguably point to African-based influences in what Bambara offers as explanation for Velma's assumption of extra-natural powers. However, Bambara limits any possible separation between goddess and people by keeping Velma's feet solidly in the realm of the human. She, like Ole Wife and Minnie, can transcend the human on occasions, but she must also return. The major work required of her lies with humankind. And by envisioning life and temporal-expanding possibilities she *will be* able to accomplish that work.

Mama Lena Younger, for all her claims to Christian love, would probably predict for Velma, Minnie, the women in *For Colored Girls*, and just about everybody else after 1970 assignment to the lower rungs of hell. From the Christian perspective that Mama Lena espouses, all of these women would be considered workers of the devil. What is engaging about these works and characters, however, is their refusal to lock themselves into the Christianity that historical African American communities embraced. Such contemporary embracing would suggest acquiescence to a belief system that, for centuries, had been used, when convenient, to oppress them. Instead, these characters turn away from and develop alternatives to the religious practice that could potentially oppress them; they do not try to find within its oppression justification for its own contradictions.

Other post-1970 writers transform Christianity in other ways. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (Walker 1982) provides one example, while Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (Butler 1993) provides another. Walker's Celie begins the process of redefining spirituality by rejecting the visual images of Jesus and God that saturate African American churches. By positing that one such image looks like a fat white man in a local bank, Celie reduces presumed potency to a less than all-powerful level. While the white man in the bank might still have a lot of power, he is nonetheless no more human than she is. By redefining that crucial image, Celie is poised to be receptive when Shug suggests that God is not a she or a he, but an "It" that becomes annoyed if people fail to notice the beauty of nature. In its animalist reconceptualization of the spiritual, *The Color Purple* evokes African origins and moves thoroughly into the realm of nature that is so central to how Minnie Ransom understands her position in the world. Also, by granting to human beings the power to create God in their image—instead of imagining that they are created in the image of God—Celie and Shug anticipate the move that Butler makes in her treatment of spirituality in *Parable of the Sower*.

The title of Butler's novel suggests something biblical and perhaps even innocuous; the former is true, but the latter is not. Butler's *Parable*, published in 1993, is a post-apocalyptic look at the United States, and especially southern California. Twenty twenty-four is a futuristic time when the homeless outnumber those who have homes, and those who still have such structures reside within walled communities. Values that one might expect in a so-called Christian environment no longer hold true. People generally do not help each other—beyond the small groups that reside within the walled communities; rather, they steal, rape, rob, and kill before they can be killed. This is a world where people take a drug and set fires because of the sexual thrill it gives them; they have no remorse about the people who die in such fires. It is somewhat surprising, then, that Lauren Olamina, the young protagonist of the tale, is the daughter of a Baptist minister and actually undergoes the process of being baptized. Like Hansberry's Beneatha Younger, however, she questions her parent's faith. More striking, she articulates her own concept of being in the world. She may well be one of Bambara's futuristic children who brings together several ways of thinking about being in order to evolve her own system.

A member of a small walled community that is eventually assaulted and destroyed, Lauren initially experiences the safety that walls bring. She, her family, and the neighbors travel together in packs, protecting each other. They also go out into the hills for target practice; even fifteen-year-olds must learn how to shoot, for this is a world where guns and violence are pervasive. There is a constant clash between Lauren's father's desire to live up to the standards of his Christian teachings and the reality that exists just beyond his gates. That reality wins.

In recognition of the world in which she lives, Lauren adheres to this philosophy:

All that you touch
You Change.

All that you Change
Changes you.

The only lasting truth
Is Change.

God
Is Change. (Butler 1993, p. 3)

This belief is in direct contradiction to the very basis of historical African American Christian practice, which fervently asserts that God *never* changes ("Hold to God's *unchanging* hand," so one song goes). Identifying change as god places Lauren in the category of the many female characters in post-1970 literature who can envision something else, some other way of being in the world. And Lauren's world is one in which natural and human disasters belie any possibility for things remaining constant. Instead of fashioning a god who is static, and thereby running the risk of insanity from watching things change dramatically by the hour, Lauren fashions a useful spirituality, one that will sustain her and her people as they move toward a new space in a dying world.

Parable of the Sower, then, is less biblical than the adoption of a biblical paradigm to explain the creation of a new religion, a new spirituality. The sower is Lauren, and the parable is her *Earthseed: Books for the Living*, a diary that she keeps. She therefore positions herself as Bambara positions Velma: to rise to leadership and perhaps even to goddess status within her world. The flexibility of the system of belief Lauren develops allows for occurrences that would negate a strict application of Christian principles. One of the primary tenets of Christianity, "Thou shall not kill," is irrelevant in Lauren's world. If one cannot kill in the jungle that southern California has become, then one will surely die.

Lauren is unique in the representation of African American female character, in that she becomes a killer, a very efficient one, during the course of the text. She and the women in Pearl Cleage's *Flyin' West* (Cleage 1994) have this trait in common, in that they act violently when necessary to protect community and friends. Lauren realizes that predators are ever willing to take advantage of the weak by stealing or outright demanding their food and provisions, and she must be prepared to protect herself and those around her. That predatory possibility increases once Lauren is forced from her walled community; consequently, everyone is on foot once Lauren's community is attacked and all her family is killed. She decides to move toward Oregon and the possibility of finding work, or at least a place to stay until space travel is available. The fact that she believes or hopes sufficiently to move is admirable. She collects people—her Earthseed—along the way.

Two facts are noteworthy about Lauren's movement and actions during the course of the novel. First, she travels disguised as a man, forming a group with the only other two members of her walled community who have survived. Because she has been visionary enough to know that the destruction was coming, she has prepared for it with food and other provisions. Thus, she is able to assume leadership from the beginning. The people initially joining the group believe they are taking orders from a masculine authority, and Lauren's ability to lead and direct serves her well. Butler therefore upsets usual expectations for female action and allows her character room for maneuvering.

Second, Lauren is hyperempathetic. Because her mother used drugs during her pregnancy, Lauren is marked with being able to experience the pain of anyone whose injury she witnesses. Naturally, when she kills predators at close range, she suffers with them as they die. The trait causes her to be immobilized on several occasions, but it is not ultimately handicapping. What is important about it in the spirituality consideration is that it is a curse and a blessing. As a person who founds a religion, it is important that Lauren be generally empathetic to the people willing to follow her. But if she rises—if they elevate her—to the status of goddess, she can literally feel their pain. She echoes Velma Henry in some ways, but she is unlike Velma in that Lauren's power—if we want to call it that—derives from a biological rather than a universal source.

Butler's creation of a physically and mentally powerful black woman whose very flaw seems less a flaw than a potential asset is something new in the literature—as is the creation of a religion in direct opposition to and denial of the power of Christianity. Butler also succeeds in expanding the belief system to incorporate men instead of it simply nurturing black women. The fact that its founder is female, however, ties it to all the other attempts to articulate spirituality from an African American female, if not feminist, perspective.

A few years earlier than Butler's *Parable*, Toni Morrison also articulated a new form of spirituality created in opposition to the circumstances in which its practitioners found themselves. In *Beloved* (Morrison 1987), Morrison allows Baby Suggs to name herself "holy," as Shange's women do, and to elevate herself to the status of preacher. Her congregation is black people newly freed from slavery, and her church is the open air of the forests in Cincinnati, Ohio. Baby Suggs teaches her people to love themselves, particularly their flesh, because other people do not. Self-love is the greatest love of all, and there is no blasphemy in it. Again, if Christianity has allowed slavery and has directed love to a source beyond the self, then reclamation of the self after slavery similarly means a re-directing of that love. Baby Suggs's teachings might not be as formalized as Lauren Olamina's, but they are nonetheless sustaining.

But Butler's new religion and Morrison's new spirituality are not the end of the story. Morrison's *Paradise* (Morrison 1998) takes us back to a convent in Oklahoma in the first half of the twentieth century. However, the nuns who occupy the Convent are not the primary focus of the text. They die out, and the women who replace them in the 1970s are anything but Christian. The Convent becomes home to five women—one black, three white, and one Hispanic (the latter was brought from South America by one of the nuns). The women end up in the Convent almost as Gloria Naylor's characters find their way to *Bailey's Café* (Naylor 1992)—because of some horrific physical or psychic violation. Mavis has allowed her twin babies to suffocate in a car while she shopped for groceries; Grace (Gigi), who has witnessed a child die in a riot in Oakland, has left her jailed boyfriend and come to Oklahoma looking for a rock formation in the shape of fornicating lovers; Seneca has been used as a sex slave; and Pallas's mother competed with her and took her boyfriend. These walking wounded find comfort with Connie, the girl—now woman—whom one of the nuns rescued. Connie thus becomes a kind of secular Mother Superior to the women.

Despite their histories, the women manage to co-exist rather peacefully. The Convent, as a retreat, places no restrictions upon them. Connie does not complain if they have affairs with the men in town (she has had one herself), or if they sunbathe in the nude. She finally decides, however, that they should reclaim something of themselves, and she institutes rituals that the local townspeople consider cultist and the devil's work. How the locals respond to the women allows Morrison to re-visit *Beloved* in her crossing of ontological realms and attempt to find a haven for women who are dead but not dead. Not exactly like Cooper's Clara, but certainly not like Bambara's Velma Henry, the women come to exist "down here in Paradise"—wherever that is. And, they assert, they must continue with the "endless work they were created to do" (Morrison 1998, p. 318; even using the word "down" is an interesting reversal from traditional Christianity, where Paradise is perceived to be "up"). Morrison saves her characters from themselves as well as from the world, but she does not allow that safety in a temporal space. Magical realism certainly informs wherever her characters end up, but their demises and their

departures are shrouded in mystery and supernaturalism. Morrison, like many of her contemporaries, envisions a world for black female characters where they can name their own way of being, where they can transcend all that would, like Zora Neale Hurston's Nanny, roll their horizons into a ball.

And yet Morrison shares the focus on and interest in African American women, in naming spirituality first and foremost from their perspective. The evils in *Paradise* are mostly contained in the patriarchs of the all-black town who use the Bible as their basis for naming evil. The women try to forge a different way of being in the world—or in the hereafter. They are the imaginative shapers of a new spirituality, and their efforts become one of the sharpest ways to distinguish how African American male and female character is represented in the literature.

Those shapers of a new spirituality are especially relevant in post-1970 literary texts by African American women writers in which Christianity is completely absent. I am thinking particularly of works in the science fiction, speculative fiction, and horror traditions. Female characters in such narratives derive their reliance on extra-natural energy from within themselves or by virtue of being initiated into a particular power cult by someone already in it. Consider the second Gilda in Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* (Gomez 1991). That young African American woman gets her power from the first Gilda, and it is the power of immortality inherent in vampire culture. She can therefore accomplish many things that mere mortals cannot, and she has special bonds—both physical and mental—with other women vampires. Similarly, Octavia E. Butler's protagonist in *Fledgling* (Butler 2005) has no Christianity hanging over her head as she lives out her vampire existence. Certainly, these characters have values, and they thrive on relationships and communities, but there is nothing that leads them to think of a power or a spirituality that exists outside of their own realms of being. Butler's Anyanwu in *Wild Seed* (Butler 1980) captures the pattern as well. Her gods are African and ancient but easily left behind as she migrates with Doro to the New World of North America. For the more than two hundred years that Butler traces her supernatural existence in the novel, Anyanwu does not bow to or create tenets of Christianity in her belief system. While what she believes is ancient and old, it does not ultimately guide her actions in the world. She uses her own powers, together with her shapeshifting abilities, to confront and dispatch any threats to her existence or to the existences of her offspring. Arguably, characters in these three novels take ideas about belief systems into realms that have absolutely no basis in anything African Americans have encountered on New World soil.

But representation merely harks back to history, and it is noteworthy that African American women writers are far ahead of women in historical black communities in trying to name a different way of being. Most of the real-life women who still adhere to some form of organized religion are naming it male and bowing to it. That is particularly ironic given the numbers of black women who comprise the congregations of most of these churches. Out of curiosity in Alabama recently, I observed the difference in numbers at the church into which I was baptized. On that particular Sunday, there were 27 men in church and more than 150 women. Like this church, most African American congregations are heavily—that is, 85% to 95%—female. But, as in Morrison's *Paradise*, the men are in charge. The women are mostly content to fill the servant roles that Celie finds to be her lot in the church in *The Color Purple*—they keep the church clean, provide the items the minister needs on Sunday morning, serve in Pastor's Aid clubs, prepare the meals for all the after-funeral gatherings, and generally remain vocally invisible. Tellingly, when I questioned a Baptist minister many years ago about the absence of female leaders, particularly deacons, in his church congregation, his reply was remarkable: "Dr. Harris," he intoned, "making a woman a deacon would be like a man having a baby." His articulation of gender hierarchy is reflected again and again—even into contemporary times—in the dynamics of such churches.

It warrants reiterating, therefore, that the literary counterparts to these historical women are so wonderfully vocal, so active in naming their pains and their needs, and so aggressive in insisting that it is important for those needs to be met. Those literary women do not even recognize that they have lesser roles to inhabit in some predefined patriarchal hierarchy. They challenge, re-define, and re-purpose, and they encourage other women to do so. They believe in themselves and their

capabilities and do not wait for masculine authorities to articulate how their energies might best be put to use. They join Anyanwu in being spiritual, if not physical, shapeshifters, and they therefore tap into powers and creativity that enable them to grace the earth with dignity and to re-define, consistently, ways of being in the world. Literature mostly does not imitate life in this instance, but it is certainly an instance in which those overburdened black women in churches throughout the United States could learn a thing or two from their literary sisters.

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