The Mother-Daughter Ajé Relationship in Toni Morrison's Beloved

Introduction

Toni Morrison has often expressed disappointment with critical analyses of her art. In an interview with Thomas LeClair she said, "I have yet to read criticism that understands my work or is prepared to understand it. I don't care if the critic likes or dislikes it. I would just like to feel less isolated. It's like having a linguist who doesn't understand your language tell you what you're saying" (128). To my reasoning, Morrison is calling for an analysis that complements the art, one that is grounded in the artist's culture, language, worldview, and milieu. My goal with this essay is to attempt to address Morrison's critical challenge by using an Africana theoretical perspective centered on a force called Ajé to interpret the intricacies of the mother-daughter relationship in Beloved.

Ajé is a Yoruba word and concept that describes a spiritual force that is thought to be inherent in Africana women; additionally, spiritually empowered humans are called Ajé. The stately and reserved women of Ajé are feared and revered in Yoruba society. Commonly and erroneously defined as witches, Ajé are astrally-inclined human beings who enforce earthly and cosmic laws, and they keep society balanced by ensuring that human beings follow those laws or are punished for their transgressions. These women, honored as "our mothers" (àwọn iyá ọwa), "my mother" (iyá mi), and the elders of the night, are recognized as the owners and controllers of everything on Earth (Drewal and Drewal 7). Ajé's suzerainty comes from the fact that it is considered the origin of all earthly existence, and women of Ajé are euphemistically called "Earth" (ayé).

Odùduwà, the tutelary Òrìṣà (Select Head) of Ajé, is heralded as the "Womb of Creation" (Fatunmbi 85) and is symbolized by the life-giving pot of origins and also the "wicked bag" or earthen tomb in which all life forms find eternal rest and also regeneration. Ajé, the "daughters" of Odùduwà, are said to oversee creation and destruction, divination, healing, and the power of the word. Given its female ownership and administration, it is fitting that Ajé's terrestrial source of birth, actualization, and manifestation is the womb. Owners of Ajé are said to control reproductive organs, and they are bonded through the cosmic power and the life-giving force of menstrual blood. Importantly, Ajé can be genetically passed from mother to child.

Ajé's "sister systems" are found throughout Africa, and Ajé also survived the Middle Passage to exert marked influence on neo-African communities. However, while a Yoruba proverb

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asserts, “Kàkà kó sàm lára àjè ọ́ nbi ọmọ obinrin ju àjè wà nìyì lu àjè” [“Instead of the Ajé changing for the better, she continues to have more daughters, producing more and more ‘birds’ ”] (Lawal 34). Africana literature is not overly reflective of the mother-daughter Ajé relationship. Most writers depict Ajé as a controlling matriarch who uses her power, forcefully or gently, to guide her family and often the community. Another depiction is that of the young Ajé who is misunderstood by a mother who denies or is ignorant of her daughter’s force. In this case, it is often a surrogate mother Ajé who guides the young woman towards self-actualization. This surrogacy is apparent in Indigo and Aunt Haydee’s relationship in Ntozake Shange’s novel Sassafrass, Cypress, & Indigo; in Peaches’s connection to Maggie in Toni Cade Bambara’s short story “Maggie of the Green Bottles”; and to a more intricate extent, in Shug Avery’s mentoring of the adult Celie in Alice Walker’s The Color Purple.

Narrative/protagonist control also affects concurrent mother-daughter Ajé interactions. To forestall full conflict between the mother and daughter, many works depict a mother Ajé who is nearing death or has a waning force while the daughter’s Ajé is latent, as is the case with Janie and Nanny in Their Eyes Were Watching God. If both women are simultaneously active, they usually find separate spheres of existence and expression, as is apparent in Amos Tutuola’s My Life in the Bush of Ghosts, in which an uninitiated Ajé daughter flees her initiated Ajé parents and lives alone honing her force (114-18). Also in Toni Morrison’s Sula, emergent Ajé Sula Peace returns to Medallion to place her grandmother and community matriarch Ajé into the Sunnydale nursing home (94). Sula initiates a changing of the guard of Ajé; by removing Eva from the sphere of influence and interaction, Sula is free to realize and savor her personal and textual climaxes. Like most Africana textual communities, Medallion, the setting of Sula, is not large enough for two concurrently active Ajé, but there are texts that deal with this powerful confluence of forces.

Mother-Daughter Ajé’s Literary Lineage

To craft fiction in which there are two simultaneously active Ajé is to create a work humming with the layering and unveiling of indivisible paradoxical complexities. When Ajé is passed genetically and amalgamates spiritually and physically, the result is mothers and daughters enmeshed in a web of creation and destruction, love and hate, silence and signification. Although this study’s focus is Morrison’s Beloved, to clarify the intricacies of the mother-daughter Ajé relationship, I will frame my analysis within a brief discussion of two other works of lineage Ajé: Audre Lorde’s “bio-mythography” Zami: A New Spelling of My Name and Jamaica Kincaid’s short story, “My Mother.” These three works are linked in their interpretation of the role of the father in the mother-daughter Ajé relationship and in their exploration of sacred space. Ajé is a woman-owned and woman-administered force but, reflecting the structure of Yoruba cosmology, Ajé is a force of balance based on complementary pairs. The male aspect is essential to Ajé; and many males have this power and exercise it. However, in Zami, “My Mother,” and Beloved, the fathers and father figures are dead, not mentioned, or exiled from the sphere of spiritual interaction. In “My Mother,” no father is mentioned, and in Beloved, Halle, Sethe’s husband and the father of her children, is largely irrelevant to the primary action. Even if a father figure is present, as with Paul D in Beloved, he is pushed out of the sphere of interaction so that the lineage Ajé can define themselves for and against themselves. While the removal
of the male aspect from the space of interactions may be a commentary on the horrific struggles Africana men faced in lands riddled with slavery, neo-slavery, and colonization, these three texts intimate that a larger cosmic agenda is at work. Within the family unit the father occupies a position of indisputable relevance—even in his absence. However, in the mother-daughter Ajé relationship, the father is necessarily relegated to the outside.

Zami gives the clearest articulation of the role of the father in the mother-daughter Ajé relationship. In Lorde’s text we find the male force essential to creation but irrelevant, and possibly an impediment, to full spiritual expansion. Lineage Ajé finds its apex in a matrilineal trinity: “I have felt the age-old triangle of mother father and child, with the ‘I’ at its eternal core, elongate and flatten out into the elegantly strong triad of grandmother mother and daughter, with the ‘I’ moving back and forth flowing in either or both directions as needed” (Lorde 7). As Lorde describes a movement from a one-dimensional transference to a unified multidimensional spiritual trinity of Ajé, the triangle of origins, in which the father is indispensable, becomes a seamless matrix of Mother Power that imparts articulation, recognition of shared identity, and the ability to experience the individual wealth of Ajé concurrent to that of the group.

In addition to patriarchal absence, these women of Ajé navigate through a charged space that alternately symbolizes death and destruction, on the one hand, and creative and spiritual development, on the other hand. In Zami, the narrator describes the way her mother Linda, “a very powerful woman” and a “commander,” uses her Ajé to redefine destructive concepts—and to infuse them with power—for the sake of her and her progeny’s survival: “My mother’s words teaching me all manner of wily and diversionary defenses learned from the white man’s tongue, from out of the mouth of her father. She had to use these defenses, and had survived by them, and had also died by them a little. . . . All the colors change and become each other, merge and separate, flow into rainbows and nooses” (Lorde 58).

While Linda’s struggles give Audre the skills to survive, the source of Linda and Audre’s power lies not in the master’s tools but in the Mother’s Text. Lorde writes, “I grew Black as my need for life, for affirmation, for love, for sharing—copying from my mother what was in her, unfulfilled. I grew Black as Seboulisa, who I was to find in the cool mud halls of Abomey several lifetimes later—and, as alone” (58).

Linda’s seemingly blank pages bear the faded ink of the Book of Destiny (Fa), as penned by Seboulisa, Creator Mother and “Great determiner of destiny” (Gaba 79). In addition to patriarchal absence, these women of Ajé navigate through a charged space that alternately symbolizes death and destruction, on the one hand, and creative and spiritual development, the cosmic, textual, and physical mother, who, laughing at the nooses and crying through the rainbows, emerges from the ink as an original reflection of the Africana woman’s Self.

The unnamed characters of Kincaid’s “My Mother” navigate through a charged space that morphs from brackish pond to impenetrable darkness to ocean. The mother initiates her daughter into the force of Ajé by proving that space to be not a void but the expansiveness of Odùduwà (the Òrìṣà of creative and biological origins). The mother extracts educational and transformational tools from Odùduwà’s bottomless pot, and she
shares her finds with her progeny. For example, when the daughter sits on her mother’s bed “trying to get a good look” at herself in a completely dark room, the mother lights candles, and, by doing so, teaches her daughter about their multi-tiered powers of signification: “We sat mesmerized because our shadows had made a place between themselves, as if they were making room for someone else. Nothing filled up the space between them, and the shadow of my mother sighed” (Kincaid 54). Rather than illuminating the singular self, a mirrored unity is revealed, and the mother and daughter witness the singularity of their indivisible selves and their material and spiritual forms.

The profundity of and possibilities within blackness move the mother first to sigh and later to juba. The daughter’s shadow joins the mother’s in texturing free space with rhythm, vibration, and expression. The women sing praisesongs and pay one another homage: “The shadow of my mother danced around the room to a tune that my own shadow sang, and then they stopped” (Kincaid 54). Just as light made their shadow-spirits visible, their shadows reciprocate and impart existence through the space, in the light, and between the shadows. The mother reveals the space between her self and her daughter to be not a void, but a spiritual playground and classroom. The mother even enters into the cosmic space herself and emerges as a daughter of the Vodun serpent deity Damballah-Hwedo (Kincaid 55). However, the mother’s tutorials on spiritual expansion, that are also promises of shared power, provide brief respite for the daughter who vacillates between rapturous awe of her mother and pathological desire to destroy her.

Realizing her daughter’s paradoxical impasse, the mother conjures an ocean from a brackish pond, and sends her daughter on a boat ride to the Self. Having crossed the void she created only to find the architect of her existence reflecting her Self as always, the daughter finally enters into a “complete union” with her mother. Their union is metaphysical: “I could not see where she left off and I began, or where I left off and she began.” It is also physical: “I fit perfectly in the crook of my mother’s arm, on the curve of her back, in the hollow of her stomach” (Kincaid 60). The daughter anticipates reaching the same spiritual apex of amalgamated Âjé that Lorde achieves: “As we walk through the rooms, we merge and separate, merge and separate; soon we shall enter the final stage of our evolution” (60-61, emphasis added).

A Beloved Re-Embodiment of Âjé

“My Mother” is a text woven on a largely ahistorical tapestry, and liberated in that free space, the protagonists themselves constitute their only barriers to expansion. Beloved also revolves around a mother and daughter’s desire to enjoy a perfect unity. However, as the narrator poignantly reveals, enslaved Africans in America were struggling for existence in lands in which they could list relatives, especially children, who had been less loved than “run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized” (23). Rather than subject their progeny to the financially motivated, sexually depraved, and morally bankrupt whims of their oppressors, some mothers of Âjé returned the creations of
their wombs to the tomb-like “wicked bag” that holds destruction, creation, and re-creation. Although many discussions of lineage Ajé describe the mother killing (mentally, spiritually, or physically) her daughter, Morrison’s work forces us to re-evaluate this simplistic assessment. Tormented mothers of Ajé are not destroying their progeny. To quote Sethe, they are putting them “where they’d be safe.”

Having a safe, sacred space has always been of paramount importance to displaced African peoples, and under circumstances only she could have imagined, Odùduwà’s enslaved progeny attempted to recreate her sacred space of creation. Such spaces have been called the Arbor Church, the Conjuring Lodge, the crossroads, and the praying ground. What occurs in these spaces has been called many things, but it is all juba. In Zami, the space of juba is manifest in the linguistic tools and silences of Linda that are transformed by the daughter Audre. In “My Mother,” the space of spiritual interaction is the ever-present, ever-malleable brackish pond. In Beloved, various forms of juba are discussed in relation to the sacred spaces and times that facilitated them. Fittingly, the juba that is created by Sethe and Beloved, twice in the novel, is the exemplar melding of the spiritual and material under Ajé, and this Ajé-juba occurs both times at 124.

The primary setting of Beloved is a home at 124 Bluestone Road in Cincinnati, Ohio. From the opening of the work, it is apparent that 124 is a space of freedom, juba, and Ajé so complex that it can be considered a character. Morrison emphasizes 124’s humanity at the beginning of each of the novel’s three sections, which respectively describe 124 as “spiteful,” “loud,” and “quiet.” Sethe’s daughter Denver regards 124 as “a person rather than a structure. A person that wept, sighed, trembled and fell into fits” (23). While these descriptions of 124’s vitality are due to Beloved’s spiritual presence, the domicile had long been an arena for cosmic and material interrelations, and this development may be the result of its spiritual and numerological stationing. Perhaps Morrison named Bluestone Road after the healing blue-stone that, when applied to a cut, “burns like hell” but heals instantly (Grant-Boyd). The number 124 is the numerological equivalent of seven, the number of Òrìṣà Ogún, owner of iron, technology, and weaponry. Ogún’s role in protecting and empowering enslaved Africans and complementing Sethe’s Ajé is profoundly important. Additionally, Ousseynou Traore contends that readers unconsciously register the unseen number three in 1-2-4. The number three often indicates spiritual unity, and it is also the number of the alternately silent and signifying Yoruba trickster Èsù, who, similar to the concept of Beloved (discussed below), is omnipresent and omniscient.

Located on the “free side” of the Ohio River, 124 is where runaways and the officially free went to find succor, connect with lost relatives, and rebalance their shattered equilibrium. However, Baby Suggs transforms it into a space of spiritual healing. When the elder woman realizes and actualizes her Ora (power of the word), 124 becomes a healing gateway for the transformational juba of the Clearing. Located just outside 124, the Clearing is the African American equivalent of the sacred spiritual groves where West and Central African initiations and rituals, including sacrifice, take place. Similar to the Grandmother deity of Anlo people, Baby Suggs, holy consecrates the Clearing as the “Ground of all being,” and uses the Clearing and 124 to help her community determine its destiny (Gaba 79).

Communal mother and mother-in-law to Sethe, Baby Suggs uses the complementary spiritual forces of 124 and the Clearing for a two-tiered communal initiation process. After she has mended, as well as she can, the torn lives of the newly freed and still seeking, she calls them to the Clearing to mend their spirits.
They knew she was ready when she put her stick down. Then she shouted, “Let the children come!” and they ran from the trees toward her. . . .

“Let your mothers hear you laugh...” Then “Let the grown men come,” she shouted. . . .

“Let your wives and your children see you dance...”

Finally she called the women to her. “Cry,” she told them. “For the living and the dead. Just cry . . . .”

It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced, men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. (87-88)

Fully indicative of juba—the confluence of song, dance, prayer, lamentation, and exultation—calls in the Clearing invite the resolution of all conflicts and the unification of everything bifurcated. Initially, Suggs specifies roles for gender and age groups. As these roles become transformed through her Aje, they are bonded and melded to the point that such divisions are rendered meaningless because of their interdependence. The Aje of Africana women, the Ogo (male spiritual power) of Africana men and the ase (power to make things happen) of both, as manifest in the promise of their children, are united in the Clearing through Baby Suggs, holy.

The orature that accompanies the juba is not a religious sermon or catechism but a spiritual charge that transforms into a unified whole the few things that the Clearing participants dare lay claim—their bodies and spirits, and most fragile, their love:

Here . . . in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs, flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flap it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them . . .

stroke them on your face ‘cause they don’t love that either. You got to love it, you! (88)

Suggs’ Clearing calls invite all dichotomies to return to their original unified state. The power of her word transforms gender roles and individual and anatomical character until everything is merged and shared holistically. Revising the concept of human sacrifice, Baby Suggs, holy leads each communal member to submit every element of themselves—section by section, entity by entity—in order to reestablish connection with the communal Self and the “Ground of All Being.”

Baby Suggs is the Iyanla (Great Mother) of the textual community. She is the quintessential Aje: a benevolent force of determination who galvanizes the powers of the Earth with her staff of ase. As the governing heart of her community, Suggs is not merely the initiator of action, but she is also subject to communal critique and correction for improper actions. Twenty-eight days, one monthly moon after the arrival of Sethe and the newborn Denver, Suggs celebrates the arrival and life of her progeny by turning two buckets of blackberries and a few chickens into a feast to feed the entire community. The 28 days’ celebration of unity is a false one that calls Suggs’s application of Aje into question.

Interpreting Suggs’s feast of joy as a personal flaunting of wealth and a show of pride, the community removes its complementary protection from her. The Ohio community’s critique is subtle, methodical, and devastating. Rather than sending a warning about the riders who have entered town to steal her progeny, the community stands in perfect silence. Suggs’s trespass and the resulting communal correction spark the first pattern of mother-daughter Aje interactions.

Ajé are associated with birds that act as spiritual media. The Spirit Bird, Eye Oro, is capable of aesthetic creativity, astral cum physical destruction, and sublime protection. A Yoruba praise-
song describes the force of the Spirit Bird and the women who wield it.

Mo leyi nílé (I have a bird in the house)
Mo leyi níta (I have a bird outside)
Ti mo bá lá ṣóde (When I go on outings)
Ẹ fẹ́yá ọ mọ́ ọ́ (Give me my proper respect)
(T. Washington 55)

The “bird in the house” is a figurative reference to Odùduwà’s primal womb of power, which is replicated in all Africana women; the “bird in the house” is also a literal reference to the sacred calabash, in which the Spirit Bird is housed (Ojo 135). When this spiritually-charged Bird emerges and goes on outings, its power and potential are awesome.

Àjé’s birds of power take to wing often in Morrison’s fiction. In Paradise, buzzards circle over and signify at a wedding (272-73); in Sula, sparrows signal the changing of the guard (89). In Jazz, Violet is introduced as living with and later releasing her flock of birds, and Wild, Violet’s seeming mother-in-law and re-embodiment of Beloved, is signified by “blue-black birds with the bolt of red on their wings” (176).4 The Spirit Bird both recurs as a symbolic totem and regularly assists Morrison’s women of Àjé with their confounding actions. In Sula, matriarch Eva Peace is described in terms of Àjé. Swooping like a “giant heron,” Eva extends her arm in the manner of “the great wing of an eagle,” as she douses her son in kerosene before setting him ablaze (46-47). This mother creator-destroyer-protector, who “held [her son] real close” before killing him, also takes wing later in the novel and jumps out of her window in an attempt to save her daughter, who inadvertently has set herself on fire (75-76). Following Eva’s path, when Sethe sees schoolteacher’s hat, she sees a life that cannot be tolerated. She snatches up her children like Eye Òrò, “like a hawk on the wing... face beaked... hands work[ing] like claws,” to put them in a safe place.

She was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher’s hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything it was No. No. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe. And the hummingbird wings beat on. (163, emphasis added)

Guided by an invisible collective of Àjé hummingbirds, Sethe hides her children in the woodshed of 124. Melding her Àjé with the existent power of the Clearing and 124, Sethe creates in the woodshed an ojúbo, or praisehouse, where Òrisà are kept and worshipped with libation and sacrifice. Sethe takes her children, whom she defines as minor Òrisà—her “precious,” “fine,” and “beautiful” creations or re-embodiments of herself—inside the ojúbo/woodshed. There, the terrestrial mother Àjé begins the work of transformation—placing her children back into Odùduwà’s pot of existence and creativity. Under the institution of slavery, this return may well be the most profound expression of devotion. Using a handsaw, one of the iron implements of Ogún, as a tool of facilitation, Sethe returns the living deities of her self to the Mother, aware that Àjé and Ìyànlà, the Great Mother, are the only forces that can ensure her children’s safety.

It is well-known that Beloved is a re-membering and re-ordering of the life, actions, and Àjé of a woman named Margaret Garner. In “The Negro Woman,” Herbert Aptheker recalls Garner’s act of Àjé which occurred in 1856: “One may better understand now a Margaret Garner, fugitive slave, who, when trapped near Cincinnati, killed her own daughter and tried to kill herself. She rejoiced that the girl was dead—‘now she would never know what a woman suffers as a slave’—and pleaded to be tried for murder. ‘I shall go singing to the gallows rather than be returned to
slavery’” (qtd. in Davis 21). Garner ordered her existence, and that of her progeny, with the only means available to her—her Ajé. And Sethe uses the same maternal, retributive, protective Ajé as the historical Garner. However, due to the brutality of the institution of slavery, the actions of Sethe and Garner are not rare or unique.

The Unwritten History of Slavery identifies another child-saving Ajé in Fannie of Eden, Tennessee. Fannie’s daughter Cornelia recalled that her mother was “the smartest black woman in Eden” and a woman with an Ajé-esque duality. Fannie “could do anything”: “She was as quick as a flash of lightening, and whatever she did could not be done better.” But she was also “a demon.” As her daughter recalled, “Ma fussed, fought, and kicked all the time. . . . She said that she wouldn’t be whipped. She was loud and boisterous. . . . She was too high-spirited and independent” to be a slave. “I tell you, she was a captain” (Rawick, Unwritten History 283). An enslaved captain, Fannie ingrained Ajé survival tactics into Cornelia from childhood, telling her, “I’ll kill you, gal, if you don’t stand up for yourself. . . . fight, and if you can’t fight, kick; if you can’t kick, then bite” (Rawick, Unwritten History 284).

As a living example of Ajé-resistance, when the plantation mistress struck her, Fannie beat her, chased her into the street, and ripped off her clothes. Fannie declared, “Why, I’ll kill her dead if she ever strikes me again.” Fannie is clearly historical mother to Sixo, the ever-self-possessed enslaved African in Beloved who grabbed his captor’s gun to provoke a stand-off. Cornelia recounted her mother’s reaction to the county whip-pers who had been employed to chastise her for beating Mrs. Jennings:

She knew what they were coming for, and she intended to meet them halfway. She swooped upon them like a hawk on chickens. I believe they were afraid of her or thought she was crazy. One man had a long beard which she grabbed with one hand, and the lash with the other. . . . She was a good match for them. Mr. Jennings came and pulled her away. I don’t know what would have happened if he hadn’t come at that moment, for one man had already pulled his gun out. Ma did not see the gun until Mr. Jennings came up. On catching sight of it, she said, “Use your gun, use it and blow my brains out if you will.” (Rawick, Unwritten History 287)

When Fannie declared, as would Brer Rabbit, “I’ll go to hell or anywhere else, but I won’t be whipped,” Jennings decided to send his unbeatable slave out of his Eden, but he told Fannie she could not take her infant, his “property,” with her. Truly Garner’s (and literarily, Sethe’s) sister of struggle, on the day she was to leave, Fannie took her infant, held it by its feet, and, weeping, “vowed to smash its brains out before she’d leave it.” Cornelia concludes, “Ma took her baby with her” (Rawick, Unwritten History 288). And yet Fannie was not exiled. She and her husband returned from Memphis to Eden and their children with “new clothes and a pair of beautiful earrings” (Rawick, Unwritten History 289). Fannie lived the rest of her life in as much peace as her Ajé and an oppressive society could afford her. Indicative of biological acquisition of Ajé, Cornelia grew to be just as Ajé-influenced as her mother.

Cornelia’s oral testimony about her mother is included in George P. Rawick’s The Unwritten History of Slavery. Morrison corrects the ostensible oversight implied in Rawick’s title when she writes the history and sprinkles the spirit of Fannie—from swooping vengeance to whip-grabbing stand-off to beautiful earrings—throughout Beloved. Using the methodology of the traditional Yoruba Óṣó, Sethe’s actions in her sacred space blend the lives of both historical Ìyà, Garner and Fannie. Sethe, as did Margaret Garner, succeeds in killing her third child, the oldest girl. When schoolteacher and his men enter the woodshed, Sethe holds Denver by her feet fully prepared to bash her newly born head open on the rafters. It is apparently important to
Sethe, Margaret, and Fannie that the girl-children be made safe, first and foremost. They are the ones who can grow to have their milk stolen, their wombs defiled, their womanhood mocked.

When Beloved opens, nearly 18 years after Beloved’s death, the home that was a sanctuary for Sethe and countless other displaced Africans is the desolate stomping ground for a wrathful “baby ghost,” who is the daughter successfully sent to the other side. Sethe and Denver live alone with the “ghost,” exiled from the community not because of fear, but because the community finds Sethe’s show of love, similar to that of Suggs, too prideful and selfish. From the outset, a condemnation of the grounds of pride seems a stretch in Sethe’s case. She is remembered as holding her head too high and carrying her neck too stiffly as the police led her away. It seems either the community is too judgmental or that Morrison is plying narrative control; however, from a Yoruba perspective, Sethe and Baby Suggs have trespassed a law of Ajé that “one must not display wealth” (Opeóla). The community, acting very much as a society of traditional African elders would, punishes Baby Suggs with silence after she celebrates her spiritual and material wealth with the magnificent feast. As a runaway slave, Sethe does not even own herself, let alone her children, by American standards. However, she dares to love and protect them with the only means at her disposal. By doing what no other communal member would conceive of doing to protect his or her wealth, Sethe’s private work of protection becomes a grandiose display. Her knowledge of her wealth and power is made obvious in her refusal to weep or beg forgiveness for her deed. Showing no remorse and exuding an air of “serenity and tranquility” after her actions, she loses communal respect and consideration.

Sethe’s crime of displaying wealth is an ironic one that speaks volumes about the complexities of the Africana community. In an interview with Elsie B. Washington, Morrison elaborated on the centrality of self worth to enslaved Africans in America: “Those people could not live without value. They had prices, but no value in the white world, so they made their own, and they decided what was valuable. It was usually eleemosynary, usually something they were doing for somebody else” (235). Sethe clearly values her children, as is evident in her descriptions of them, and she does for them what no person can do. But her trespass is better understood in the light of Morrison’s next statement: “Nobody in the novel, no adult Black person, survives by self-regard, narcissism, selfishness.” One could argue that the community doesn’t punish Sethe for saving her daughter; they punish the non-communal narcissism surrounding that act.

Sethe clearly understands what has the ultimate value in life and also the role racist oppression plays in devaluing what Nikki Giovanni calls “Black wealth”:

That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that comes to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and could think it up. And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own. The best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty her alright, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing. (Beloved 251)

Although the divine part of Sethe becomes maimed, dirtied, and twisted nearly beyond repair, her children emerge from her womb as whole, perfect, and shining as she once was. The statement, “The best thing she was, was her children,” makes it clear that Sethe’s act is not just an attempt to save the deified progeny that she has created, but an attempt also to claim the “magical,” priceless, and most exquisite aspect of her divine original Self.

THE MOTHER-DAUGHTER AJÉ RELATIONSHIP IN TONI MORRISON’S BELOVED
Abandoned by every living person except the daughter who nearly became the second recipient of her "thick" love, Sethe and her spiritual and terrestrial daughters exist in a perfect trinity of Mother, Daughter, and Spirit, that is broken only when Sethe goes out to work. 124's isolation from the larger Africana community emphasizes Morrison's point about Sethe's choosing individuality over communality, and it also facilitates the lineage Àjé's unification. Sethe's desire to help her "best thing" understand her actions and Denver's loneliness and frustration move the two women to summon their spiritual third. In invoking Beloved—"come on, come on, you may as well just come on"—Denver and Sethe use power of the word (Ọrụ) to impart unification of spiritual, physical, and geographic planes of existence at 124. In other words, they invite the hidden number three, the unifying spiritual member, to share their material space. Beloved, having received a ritual invitation, begins crossing all boundaries to enter the sacred realm prepared by her mother. However, the existence of enslaved Africans in America imparts a new dimension to invocative transformational juba: Beloved was sent to a safe place through the violent protective Àjé of a handsaw. In cosmic reciprocity, it is violence that precipitates her re-embodiment.

In Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart, after a child named Onwumbiko dies, Okagbue, the healer and diviner, gives the corpse special treatment. Because Onwumbiko is an ogbanje (àbíkú in Yoruba), a spirit child who torments parents by dying soon after birth, Okagbue slashes the corpse, and, holding it by one foot, drags it into the forest for burial. In a revision of Okagbue's treatment of Onwumbiko, Paul D takes a chair and beats Beloved's spirit without mercy as soon as he enters 124 (19). The healer and Paul D seem to have the same thing on their minds: "After such treatment it [the spirit child] would think twice before coming again" (Achebe 54). However, to quote Okagbue, Beloved is "one of the stubborn ones who returned, carrying the stamp of their mutilation—a missing finger or perhaps a dark line where the medicine-man's razor had cut them." Paul D's seemingly successful exorcism actually forces Beloved from the spiritual to the material realm. She arrives, and Sethe takes her in as she would any other young, orphaned African American woman.

Great scholarly debate continues to surge over who Beloved is and what she represents. The common theory that Beloved is a ghost is dubious because she eats, defecates, makes vicious love, dribbles and urinates, and washes and folds clothes on request. Beloved could be defined as ghost prior to Paul D's arrival, but the woman who reveals his Red Heart is no ghost. Morrison describes Beloved as a multifaceted entity: Beloved is "a spirit on one hand, literally she is what Sethe thinks she is, her child returned to her from the dead. And she must function like that in the text. She is also another kind of dead that is not spiritual but flesh, which is, a survivor from the true, factual slave ship. She speaks the language, a traumatized language of her own experience" (Darling 247). Beloved is each of these three things, and being a confluence of all, she is infinitely more.

Beloved reflects and represents all manner of Àjé's "ravage and renewal," for a people locked in the forgetfulness of the atrocities that have befallen them. As a spiritual force of sufficient tangibility to impregnate, Beloved is a ravished girl newly escaped from a defiler's prison: because she is too weak to walk, she glides over the earth or two-steps. Beloved is the "marked" child in African American culture who is affected, in vitro, by the horrors the mother witnessed. She is also the àbíkú child of the Yoruba—the one born-to-die—who is slashed and scarred to prevent return, but re-enters, from the spirit realm, the traumatized womb for
rebirth and perhaps a chance at terrestrial longevity. A child of countless sacrifices and as many Mothers, Beloved bears on her neck the scar of the one for whom she vows to bite away a choking, silencing “iron circle.” Beloved, as Ajé, is alááwú méjí (one of two colors). As a spirit, she kneels beside Sethe in white, the hue of ancestral transmigration, and arrives physically at 124 Bluestone Road clothed in black. Seated on the stump of cultural, ethnic, and ancestral cognition, the blackness of Beloved is the life-soil enriching the forgotten roots and the far-flung branches of the African family tree. Describing her journey through the Middle Passage, Beloved is the walking recollection of atrocities too horrible to remember, and she is the Mother who saved her descendants so that they would have the luxury to forget. The Mother whom enslaved Africans first thanked for their safe landings, no matter how vile the journey or the arrival, was Yemoja: the Mother of Waters, the Mother of Fishes. John Mason finds that Yemoja symbolizes the “universal principle of the survival of the species” (308). Beloved is Yemoja’s strolling promise. Indeed, when Beloved stalks into the forest at the end of her textual existence, it is not surprising that she bears the Great Mother’s fish on her Select/ed Head. Occupying various identities and positions—including those of protagonist, author, and intended Africana audience—Beloved defies any and encompasses all definitions.

As it relates to the textual mother-daughter Ajé relationship, in the initial stages of her arrival, Sethe is too close to the truth of Beloved’s life, death, and return to recognize her as her daughter. However, Denver, who took mother’s milk and sister’s blood in one swallow, realizes what one will not reveal and the other cannot see. It is through the slow process of rememory that Sethe understands who Beloved is. Carole Boyce Davies defines rememory as “the re-membering or the bringing back together of the disparate members of the family in painful recall,” involving “crossing the boundaries of space, time, history, place, language, corporeality and restricted consciousness in order to make reconnections and mark or name gaps and absences” (17).

Beloved travels through the cosmic 16 crossroads, where Ajé meet (T. Washington 27, 53), to return home to 124. Upon arrival she opens Sethe’s “restricted consciousness” and demands the naming and claiming of her dismembered self therein. As Morrison develops it in Beloved, rememory is an unalterable, unforeseeable, and frightening process that is related to material and spiritual spaces and also to books. Beloved initiates the process by which she will be remembered gently. As she sits and watches Sethe comb Denver’s hair, she asks, “your woman she never fix up your hair?” and takes Sethe psychically back to the plantation where she grew up and to the mother with whom she had almost no encounters. Sethe verbally remembories that her mother showed her the brand burned into her breast and that her mother was so horribly lynched that “by the time they cut her down nobody could tell whether she had a circle and a cross or not” (61). Before the force of rememory can overwhelm her, the telling of the narrative is transferred. It is Sethe’s “restricted consciousness” that remembories being taught an African language by both her mother and her caregiver, Nan. Sethe’s rememory enlightens the reader to the fact that her Ajé and its methodology are as biologically derived as Fannie’s and Cornelia’s. Memories of Nan telling Sethe that her mother named her after a man whom she had loved, one whom she had “put her arms around,” and that she had killed the products of rape she gave birth to, well up in Sethe’s consciousness but do not cross her lips. While Sethe’s verbal rememory clearly helps Beloved cement her transitory spiritual self in the material world, the unspoken orature provides a doorway for other dismembered selves to enter.
The subconscious remembrances, recounted in third person by an omniscient narrator, are "spaces" that the author and historical and extra-textual communal members must fill (Wilentz 85). For example, Beloved's inquiries about Sethe's "diamonds," her request that Sethe "tell me your earrings," places at the mother's knee the historical Cornelia, who had been briefly abandoned in "Eden"; the fragmented Sethe, who had chosen to forget a gift from "Sweet Home"; the authorial Morrison; and all other seeking survivors. Additionally, in the passage where Sethe's concept of value is defined, as a result of free indirect discourse, the "you" that can be dirtied, shamed, used egregiously, and fouled is at once Sethe, potentially her children, Margaret Garner and her children, and also the reading audience. While it initially appears that the passage is comprised of Sethe's ruminations as directed to Denver, it is the narrator of *Beloved* who articulates Sethe's logical epiphany on value and opens the discourse and pronouns to include textual and extra-textual audience members. For another example, the question "How did she know?" follows Beloved's first spate of inquires (63). Although the reader assumes Sethe is thinking to herself, the space within the unspecified pronoun is quite wide. "She" can refer as easily to Beloved as to Morrison; furthermore, the query seems subtly directed at readers—as a question we must answer, a space we are obligated to fill.

As author-narrator, Toni Morrison is clearly the medium of remembrance. When the coalescence of history and tragedy are too much for her characters to bear, it is Morrison who writes the "unwritten" and her constructed narrator who verbalizes the "unspoken." It is not Paul D who recounts a flooded wooden cage, the Hi-Man, and a breakfast of horror. He had placed these painful humiliations "one by one, into the tobacco tin lodged in his chest [and] nothing in this world could pry it open" (113). It is Morrison, as other-worldly "Beloved" Self, who, at the three-road junction of history, the spirit realm, and the present, can share Paul D's rememory comprehensively. Expanding Lorde's Afrekeete-centered matrix of Aji, the holistic aesthetic of Morrison, the mediating iyá-iwé (Mother of the Text), makes the act of reading *Beloved* an initiation into the Beloved Self, the Beloved Spirit, and the ever-present past for spiritual, historical, and contemporary audiences.

As the novel's biblical epigraph makes clear, Beloved is a divine Pan-African paradox: she is human and spirit; recognized and dis-remembered; other and self; novel, character, and reality; "Sixty Million and more." The very existence of Beloved, let alone our reading the work, becomes a cosmic application of a necessarily stinging bluestone for every Africana person who bears but has ignored the genetic scars of slavery in order to survive but must remember every fragmented affliction in order to heal and evolve fully.

Although Sethe, as most Africana people, cannot safely re-member without sliding into an abyss of pain, she can and does articulate the painful uncontrollable process of rememory to Denver, and explains why she had to open her pot of creativity and place her best, most exquisite and magical creations safely inside it—away from the ever-threatening force of rememory and the more terrifying threat of repetition:

Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away. Even if the whole farm—every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. So Denver, you can't never go there. Never. Because even though it's all over—over and done with—it's going to always be there waiting for
you. That's how come I had to get all
my children out. No matter what. (36)

Sethe, like so many continental and
dislocated Africans, attempts to escape
a past that cannot be outrun, a past that
follows, taints, and tickles. By using Ajé
to save her daughter and exorcise the
force of Sweet Home from her and her
progeny's existence, Sethe consecrates
an infinitely more powerful space of
rememory. And when Sethe and
Denver summon her, Beloved returns
with an Ajé antithetically equal to the
love, intensity, and killing-pain of her
mother-self.

Morrison has explained the dou-
bling at work between Sethe and
Beloved as what occurs when a "good
woman" displaces "the self, her self." 
Morrison describes that dislocated
"self" as the Igbo describe the chi, the
personal spirit who guides one to one's
destiny and as the Yoruba describe the
giikeji, the heavenly twin soul with
whom one makes agreements before
birth. With Beloved and also Jazz,
Morrison has said that she tried to "put
a space between [the] words ['your'
and 'self'], as though the self were re-
ally a twin or a thirst or something that
sits right next to you and watches you" (Naylor 208). Most relevant to Beloved,
Babatunde Lawal and Ikenga Metuh
make it clear that the giikeji and chi
can become offended and angered by their
earthly representative's actions. Just as
the spirit twin can protect its human
complement from harm, "offending
one's spirit double or heavenly com-
rade may cause it to withdraw its spiri-
tual protection," leaving one suscepti-
ble to death (Lawal 261, Metuh 69-70,
respectively). Beloved is more than a
daughter; she is Sethe's "self," her
"best thing." Like the chi, she is a deity
to Sethe. However, Sethe's "best thing"
revises African cosmology; she with-
draws her dubious spiritual protection
only to go directly to her mother, at her
request no less, for full re-membering.

Beloved, her life, death, and return,
represents the juncture between the
rememory/reality of Sweet Home, the
bonding and bloody jubas of 124, and
the cycles of tragically dislocated
Africana peoples—who are doomed to
repeat past lessons if we fail to re-
member and evolve from them. As the
women at 124 navigate this immense
matrix of love and pain, shades of the
daughter Ajé's desire to kill her moth-
er, also prevalent in Kincaid's work,
emerge in Beloved. However, Beloved
does not want to destroy Sethe.
Instead, she wants the two of them to
"join" and return fully unified to the
"other side."

In addition to complete re-mem-
berment, Beloved desires free, uninter-
rupted discourse with the fascinating
entity who put her in a safe place of
loneliness and confusion. To achieve
her aim, Beloved uses her Ajé to force
Paul D, with his distracting "love" for
Sethe, out of 124, and Paul D facilitates
the process. Having found out about
Sethe's saving action, he demands that
Sethe explain what to her is elemen-
tary. Rather than answer him directly,
Sethe circles—the kitchen, the topic,
the answer. She circles as would a buzz-
ard, that spiritual messenger; she
moves in the manner of the spirit-hum-
ingbirds that hover over her head.
Sethe's circles constitute issue avoid-
ance, and for many reasons: (1)
explaining her actions to Paul D would
be tantamount to explicating the eso-
teric to the layman; (2) her actions are
beyond the justification that his silent
query seeks; (3) Morrison makes it
clear that no human being, including
the "last of the Sweet Home men," can
judge Sethe (Darling 248). The ques-
tions Paul D asks belong only to
Beloved. But from another perspective,
Sethe's circular response to Paul D is
also no more than useless perambula-
tion. Until we address the Continental
terror that forced millions out of Africa
and onto alien lands, concerning bones
bleaching in the Atlantic and ancestor-
warriors chained on auction blocks,
Africana people will run without aim,
circle about, and seek out safe havens,
but will always bump into that silently
waiting and watching self.
Aside from Sethe’s reaction, Paul D’s inquiry about the newspaper and his counting Sethe’s feet make it clear that he is simply not ready, and he does not become prepared until the novel’s end, to be the complement that Sethe needs. Paul D is the primary male force in the novel, and it is in his Westernized masculinity—his acts of violence, his audacious attempts to query and judge, his revision of his tender Sethe song, and his refusal to accept Sethe’s “thick” love—that his unpreparedness is apparent. Consequently, he is moved out of the sphere and cannot move anything in it.

With the male aspect exorcised, Sethe and Denver harness all their power to re-member Beloved, and with the latter’s physical-spiritual reality, the three women become a trinity of Mother, Daughter, and Daughter-Divinity similar to the cosmic matriarchal trinity that Audre Lorde describes in *Zami*. But rather than the shared signifying “I,” a possessive “mine” flows among the women: “Beloved, she my daughter. She mine”; “Beloved is my sister”; “I am Beloved and she [Sethe] is mine” (200, 205, 211). Rather than the customary narrative style, to accommodate the space and the unspoken language of love of this trinity of Æjé, Morrison uses open-ended lyric free verse:

You are my face; I am you. Why did you leave me who am you?
I will never leave you again
Don’t ever leave me again
You went in the water
I drank your blood
I brought your milk
You forgot to smile
I loved you
You hurt me
You came back to me
You left me
I waited for you
You are mine
You are mine
You are mine (216-17)

More clearly here, Morrison expands English syntax to accommodate Beloved and to provide space for lost-found souls and intended audience members to enter. With the first line of the passage, *Beloved* becomes a mirror. The fathomless depths of the black ink encompass, absorb, and reflect every communal member, the pages provide reflection and refraction, the margins seem to radiate with unseen but impending revelations. But the glimpse of eternity Morrison offers her reader glints with a different light for Sethe.

Within the rhythms, de-riddling, and reunion of Beloved, Sethe, and Denver are accusations, gatherings-up of pain, demands of ownership, and reminders of debts impossible to pay. Sethe’s ἐνικέτē would ordinarily texture her existence and consciousness from the sacred realm. But in having equated her best self with her children, making the decision to save that precious self, and summoning the self for a discussion, Sethe comes face to face with her spirit, her embodied conscience, and her own (and all her people’s) past. As any good mother would, Sethe is resolved to nourish her own and our own “best thing,” but she doesn’t have the balance, discretion, or distance of the elder in “My Mother,” and she may not need it.

Sethe has recognized and become enamored by the living presence of her exquisite self, and she seeks to feed that self:

The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became; the brighter Beloved’s eyes, the more those eyes that used never to look away became slits of sleeplessness. Sethe no longer combed her hair or splashed her face with water. She sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while *Beloved* ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur. (250, emphasis added)

Eventually, Beloved forces Denver out of 124, and Beloved and Sethe, like Kincaid’s protagonists, revel in the voracious singularity of their duality. The Beloved-Sethe-Self has returned for what she was denied: maternal bonding, verbal milk, and complete reunification. With no other means to
appease her physical gnikeji (spiritual guide), Sethe gives herself to her Self.

Although the community women understand Beloved to be the slain daughter, she also represents Sethe's best self, that of each of the communal women, and through Morrison's efforts, the best self of all Africana people. Given the all-encompassing totality of Beloved, Sethe's initial saving act is not as selfish as it seems because she saves Beloved, who returns to remind, confound, and heal both textual and extra-textual Africana communities. However, by community standards, Beloved, as an all-in-one Deity, is too complicated, too brilliant, and far too painful for existence. Embracing the most superficial and the least painful aspect of Beloved's multitudinous Self, the communal women gather to destroy the "devil child" who is also their individual and collective "best thing."

The overwhelming and paradoxical truth of Beloved and the grief under-girding their collective consciousness move the women to take "a step back to the beginning." In the beginning, there were no whippings, no bits to suck, no lynching, no sanctioned lessons in racist brutality that tutored Hitler and the Boers. There was only Òrù. Rowland Abiodun, in the essay "Verbal and Visual Metaphors: Mythical Allusions in Yoruba Ritualistic Art of Orì," reveals the cosmic dimensions of the word Òrù. Stating that "words" is a lay translation, Òrù is also "a matter, that is something that is the subject of discussion, concern, or action," and it is the "power of the word" (Abiodun 252). An important "matter" and serious subject of concern, Beloved embodies and attracts Òrù. And just as Òrù, the power of the word, opened the path for wisdom (ogbón), knowledge (imì), and understanding (dùye) to enter the world at the beginning of creation (Abiodun 253-55), so too does the communal women's Òrù catalyze their creative, destructive, and interpretive abilities.

The communal mothers converge on 124, and they harmonize the vibrations of Òrù Òjè, the vibrations Odùduwà made when she pulled existence out of her Pot. They interrupt Sethe and Beloved's joining and invite them into the Clearing brought to their front lawn. Sethe's carefully nurtured "best thing" emerges as an òbìkù soon to give birth:

The singing women recognized Sethe at once and surprised themselves by their absence of fear when they saw what stood next to her. The devil-child was clever, they thought. And beautiful. It had taken the shape of a pregnant woman, naked and smiling in the heat of the afternoon sun. Thunderblack and glistening, she stood on long straight legs, her belly big and tight. Vines of hair twisted all over her head. Jesus. Her smile was dazzling. (261)

The women's response to the beauty of Sethe's Beloved-Self helps readers better understand the mother's rapture, devotion, and vanity. What is more, although condemning her in Western terms, the women have no fear of Beloved, for they know her well. Beloved is, like Denver, "everybody's child." These women do not bond to exorcise Beloved because she is "evil" or the "devil." I believe the women gather to destroy her because her presence and their acknowledgment of her reality, which is the answer and the rememory of each question and event pushed deeply into the subconscious, would quite simply break their hearts.

Sethe, for all her alleged vanity and pride, appears to be the text's most progressive figure. Having conferred with Odùduwà, she knows what "value" is and is not, and she knows how to protect what is priceless, not just for her personal satisfaction but for the evolution of the community. Sethe also turns the community's gifts of sustenance for her into sacrifices that nourish Beloved's pregnancy. And it is possible that Beloved's unborn child symbolizes the perfect and complete healing and evolution of Africana peoples. Additionally, and despite a case
of mistaken identity, Sethe's personal development is apparent in her decision to kill Bodwin, the Euro-American abolitionist owner of 124.

In this community, still reeling from the horrors of slavery and outraged by neo-enslavement, it is the external factor, that of Euro-America, that gives the priceless dollar values, that dirties the best thing, and that textually, moves stasis to action. Just as with schoolteacher, the arrival of Bodwin, new employer of Denver and owner of a Sambo figurine, expedites the convergence of the twin circles of Ajé. Bodwin is ignorant of two orbs of Ajé and his role in uniting them, but when Sethe sees him approaching, she thinks the defiler has returned, again, to enslave, sully, and steal her "best thing," and she releases her Spirit Bird: "She hears wings. Little hummingbirds stick their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thinks anything, it is no. No. Nonono. She flies. The ice pick is not in her hand; it is her hand" (263). When Sethe mounts on wings of Ajé to attack Bodwin, the communal women thwart her, and, again, through violence there is partial unification. The women save Bodwin and re-integrate Sethe. Her mother's violent community reunion leaves Beloved abandoned, but smiling. Her ultimate desire for holistic unification aborted, Beloved explodes, leaving "precious" and "fine" vestiges of her unspeakable self to take root in the soil, float on the waters, make darker and more defined the ink of the text, and burrow into the recesses and tickle the consciousness of all too forgetful minds.

This is healing ink. As blood, it stains memory and mind. Chemical oil scent laced with indigo, this ink is difficult to wash from the fingertips. It tattoos the soul. This ink demystifies sweet homes, discombobulates linear time. This ink, so Black it is rainbowed, so pure it signifies despite the Ethiopic's salty waters, so rich even its clarity complicates, could only have come from Odúduwa's cosmic womb. Bound by ink-blood oaths, buried solutions, and a proclivity for evolution, Lorde, Kincaid, and Morrison confab with the cosmic and re-fashion the forgotten. Dipping deep into the ink of Ajé, their words dance the jubas of mothers and daughters forsaken, lost, and found, and leave lessons to help us re-determine our Destiny.

Notes
1. MawuLisa and Mawu Sebou Lisa are synonymous terms for the West African Mother-Father Deity created by Great Mother Nana Bùрукù to give the Earth its form, rotation, and revolution, and to provide human beings with knowledge of their destiny through the Book of Fa. The worship of MawuLisa/Mawu Sebou Lisa, Nana Bùrukù and other deities in this spiritual system is indigenous to the Fon, Anlo, Ewe, and many other West African peoples. The Vodun deities and the Fa divination system of the Fon are similar to the Ôrisà and the Ifá divination system of the Yoruba. See Gaba 79; M. J. Herskovits 124, 155,176; and M. J. Herskovits and F. S. Herskovits 135.
2. Sethe witnessed shape-shifting juba as a child (31). The other form of juba represented in Beloved is in relation to the character Sixo who, when he was caught fleeing, first grabbed the gun of one of the captors for a stand-off and then began singing as he was burned alive. The narrator describes the words of the song and its rhythm as having a "hatred so loose it was juba" (225-26).
4. Morrison has discussed Beloved, Jazz, and Paradise as being a quasi-trilogy with the character Beloved being re-embodied in each text. See Cutter, "The Story Must Go On and On."
5. For one woman to "naked" (strip) another in a battle is a common tactic of humiliation I have witnessed several times in West Africa. See Alkali 84-85.
7. See Rawick, Kansas 91 and Rawick, Georgia 338.
8. In her review of J. Brooks Bouson's *Quiet As It's Kept*, Martha Cutter states, "Repeatedly, my students report that Morrison’s novels unsettle and perhaps even traumatize them as readers" (672).

9. Handley discusses Morrison’s "incantory powers [to] summon not only ghosts but also readers" (691). Also see Sale 42.


Grant-Boyd, Joan H. Personal communication. 9 Nov. 2000.


Call For Papers

African American Review is soliciting essays for a special issue on the Post-Soul aesthetic to be published in 2007. Greg Tate calls the Post-Soul “the African American equivalent of postmodernism,” and a working definition of the Post-Soul aesthetic could include, but not be limited to, this quotation from Thelma Golden, curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem (who prefers the term “post-black”): “For me, to approach a conversation about ‘black art’ ultimately meant embracing and rejecting the notion of such a thing at the very same time. . . . [The Post-Soul] was characterized by artists who were adamant about not being labeled as ‘black’ artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness.”

Recognized nearly 20 years ago primarily by Trey Ellis (“The New Black Aesthetic,” 1989), Greg Tate (“Cult Nats Meet Freaky-Deke,” 1986) and Nelson George (Buppies, B-Boys, Baps and BoHos: Notes on Post-Soul Black Culture, 1992), the Post-Soul aesthetic could be used to describe the work of Paul Beatty, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Danzy Senna, Mos-Def, Dave Chappelle, Me'Shell Ndege-Ocello, Colson Whitehead, Aaron McGruder, Ellen Gallagher, The Roots, Spike Lee, Saul Williams, Kara Walker, Living Colour, and Darius James, to name only a few.

In addition to these artists and provocateurs, prospective article topics include theorizing the Post-Soul as critical praxis; postmodernism and the Post-Soul aesthetic; observations, commentary, and critiques of the Post-Soul aesthetic and/or scholarship on the Post-Soul; critical readings of Post-Soul novelists, artists, filmmakers, musicians, et al.; critical readings of individual Post-Soul novels, art, film, music, etc.; gender and the post-soul aesthetic; social class and the Post-Soul aesthetic; hip-hop and the Post-Soul aesthetic; essentialized blackness and the Post-Soul aesthetic; naming the Post-Soul aesthetic—identifications and identity crises; mass marketing and/or mass communication and the Post-Soul aesthetic; the Post-Soul aesthetic and the African American vernacular traditions; satire and the Post-Soul aesthetic; the Black Arts Movement and the Post-Soul aesthetic; Ralph Ellison and/or Albert Murray and the Post-Soul aesthetic; the “cultural mulatto” archetype in Post-Soul texts; redefining blackness in Post-Soul texts; signifyin(g) and the Post-Soul aesthetic; politics and the Post-Soul aesthetic; Double consciousness and the Post-Soul aesthetic; the Post-Soul in the college classroom; Pre-Soul and Post-Soul; and Post-Sex(ualities) and the Post-Soul.

Completed papers are due December 31, 2005. Send queries, proposals, or papers to:

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