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"Fetch M'Dear": Healers, Midwives, Witches, and Conjuring Women in Select YA and Toni Morrison Novels

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ABSTRACT

"Fetch M'Dear": Healers, Midwives, Witches, and Conjuring Women in Select YA and Toni Morrison Novels

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Accusations and persecution of witchcraft have been embedded in global culture for centuries. For as long as these persecutions have occurred, women have found themselves accused most frequently. Older women with herbal knowledge were often called on to assist with childbirth or termination of pregnancies and this "secret knowledge" often led them to be suspected of supernatural abilities, often of a satanic nature. Intrigued by these wise women who appeared to have mysterious powers and a penchant for arousing the ire of men in the legal, medical, and religious communities, I began to notice their frequent appearance in novels. Does the presence of actual or perceived magic serve to improve the women's status in their community? I reviewed several examples of YA literature, two picture books, and four Toni Morrison novels to determine if magic, conjuring, and witchcraft were more powerful threats than sexism and racism.

DEDICATION

In memory of Dr. Glenn H. Birkitt, Jr. and in honor of our beautiful children,

Benjamin Gallagher and Nadia Hunter Birkitt.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

"I believe that men are generally still a little afraid of the dark, though the witches are all hung, and Christianity and candles have been introduced." Henry David Thoreau

From Halloween costumes and decorations, horror movies, and children's cartoons, to field trips in Salem, Massachusetts, witches have piqued our societal imagination and captured our attention in literature. Globally, accused women have been hunted and persecuted and this relentless pursuit of and frequent murder of magical women remains a source of fascination and entertainment. While reading select Toni Morrison novels and several examples of Young Adult (YA) literature and two children's picture books, I observed how authors create female characters endowed with mysterious, magical powers that rarely seem to benefit the women. The Newberry award-winning books, *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* (Elizabeth George Speare, 1958) and *The Graveyard Book* (Neil Gaiman, 2008) describe women and young girls accused of witchcraft in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The contemporary works, *Akata Witch* (Nnedi Okoafor, 2011) and *Children of Blood and Bone* (Tomi Adeyemi, 2018), both novels of speculative fantasy, will give examples of magical African young people. Virginia Hamilton's picture book, *The People Could Fly* (1985) is a folktale depicting magical slaves who can fly away from their suffering in pre-Civil war United States. Likewise, the children's book, *Tar Beach* (Faith Ringgold, 1991) is a re-telling of the folktale set in early twentieth-century Harlem. These tales of magical African American people will segue into a discussion of the uniquely mysterious conjuring women in four Toni Morrison novels. Although Morrison's novels may seem out of stead in a discussion with YA literature and picture books, high schools in the United States are teaching several of Morrison's novels. Young readers are encountering the books in their school libraries and Scholastic Books states that *Beloved* can be recommended for

grades nine through twelve. Similarly, Dr. Alan Teasley has identified *The Bluest Eye* as appropriate for individual reading for select high school students (1998).

The terms "magic" and "magical" will be used throughout the paper to describe often indescribable abilities and events performed by witches or conjuring women. Some of the female characters are overtly described as witches or conjuring women, but invariably, those described as magical or supernaturally powerful are often relegated to the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. The Black folktale of Flying Africans demonstrates the potency of some conjuring enslaved people, but set against the horrific backdrop of decades of slavery, it is hard to view those few escaping as a resounding victory. Along with their low social status, those accused suffer ostracism, injustices, and often death, as a result of their magic and witchcraft. Their power may give them a temporary position of authority and autonomy within their community, however, one repeatedly observes women who are gifted with actual magic manifest their power in situations where the dominant patriarchy threatens them with persecution and subjugation. Their magic is never enough to elevate them within the stronger, dominant prevailing culture. Ostensibly, the women are punished for witchcraft, but the persecution merely serves as an excuse to castigate women who dare to flaunt their independence and power in the face of the religious or legal patriarchy.

The only witches and conjuring women who exercise power and have personal agency are found in YA fantasy novels, but even those young women go through trials of humiliation and persecution. Ironically, the only way strong, independent, magical women can survive is within an imaginary fantasy construct. The reader is left with the uncomfortable notion that racism and sexism are the strongest forces in powerful women's lives.

CHAPTER 2. WITCHES, HEALING, AND MIDWIFERY

"What are our learned men save the descendants of witches and hermits who crouched in caves and in woods brewing herbs, interrogating shrew-mice and writing down the language of the stars?" Virginia Woolf

The persecution of women with perceived or actual supernatural powers has occurred in most countries and throughout the ages. The reasons women were targeted and persecuted were myriad, but the bulk of the reasons cited are because the women were perceived or became actual threats to the male-dominated communities.

Alice Markham-Cantor, writing for *The Nation,* states that "[t]he witch is the scariest, oldest female monster. She is angry rather than agreeable, uncontrollable rather than submissive. She can be disgusting or unapologetically sexual, or sexual *and* still unavailable, or simply old. She can be everything that women are instructed never to be" (2019). Rarely is it argued that the women accused of witchcraft possess magical abilities. Accusations were often based on mundane, naturally occurring events; magic was not necessary for farm animals to die or children to become ill from infectious diseases.

Persecution of witches crosses all boundaries of age and socioeconomic status. Sady Doyle, an award-winning writer on patriarchy and feminine power, informs that "the prototypical accused witch is not an old woman (as in Europe) but a child, often the child of a recently divorced or widowed parent. There is something vital to be said about how capitalism cruelly eliminates children who strain the community's resources . . ." (2019). It was not only poor, young women who were slaughtered to conserve capital as Lynn Stuart Paramore cites: "[s]ome older women may have been targeted as witches because poverty made them economic burdens" (2019). Often the women were damned whether rich or poor. Paramore, an economist who "studies the intersection of culture and economics," further contends that if women "managed to

secure independence, they were punished for that, too" (2019). Women could be accused and punished for needing financial assistance or as Markham-Cantor reminds, they were equally apt to be murdered "for owning land or for outliving their husbands" (2019).

A commonality in the novels discussed is the link between accusations of witchcraft and the women's skill in midwifery or natural healing. Maha Marouan, the director of African American studies at the University of Alabama, informs that "African diaspora religious beliefs . . . emphasize the importance of healing, knowledge of plants and a close relationship with all elements of nature, which are seen as endowed with levels of energy important to the maintenance and restoration of the adherents' physical and emotional balance" (4). The women in nearly all of the novels cited carry with them a natural healing knowledge that is passed down, predominantly as a matrilineal legacy.

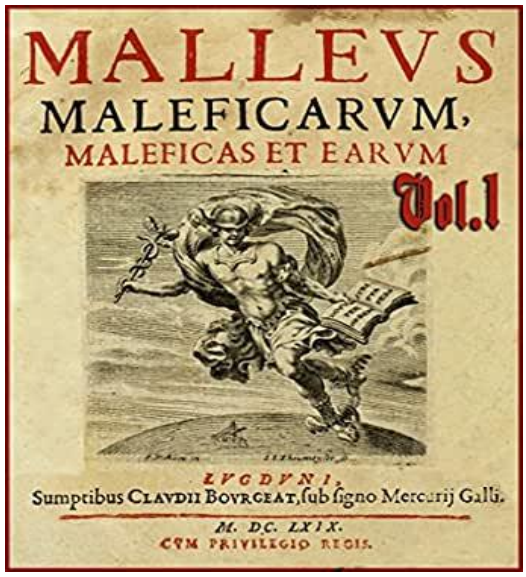

Figure 1. *Malleus Maleficarum* original Latin, 1486

Just as a wealthy widow could be accused and murdered as a witch in a blatant attempt to confiscate her property, so too, did the patriarchy resent a woman's ability to earn a living through healing and midwifery. Recorded as early as 1486, women acting independently from

the religious/legal hierarchy aroused suspicion. Doyle states "witches, according to witch-hunting texts like the *Malleus Maleficarum,* were women who kept child-birth and pregnancy in

female hands: midwives, abortionists, herbalists who provided contraception. They were killed to cement patriarchal power and create the subjugated, domestic labor class necessary for capitalism" (2019). If women in the community chose to have a midwife deliver their babies, the male-dominated medical community resented the missing income and prestige. Kathryn Rountree further states:

> It is clear from examining the crimes witches were accused of that hatred of wise women on the part of the Church and male medical profession stemmed from the fact that wise women threatened these patriarch institutions' exclusive control of power and knowledge. Wise women possessed healing knowledge and were thought to have access to power independently of God and men; they passed this knowledge on to other women; and, most ominously, they met regularly together to share knowledge, participate in rituals and, feared the inquisitors, plot who knew what. (224)

Throughout this thesis, the terms witch and conjurer or conjuring woman will be used synonymously as both terms describe people with supernatural abilities. Bernadette Bosky, a critic of fantasy and horror fiction, states that "[i]n England, those who provide services have generally been called "cunning men" or "cunning women"; they also have been called "conjurers" and "pellars" (apparently from "spell"). She further explains that most had

> knowledge of charms or herbs, but the cunning folk were specialists who knew more, were considered to have more power, and even possessed magical books.

> People came to them, and paid them, to cure their own illnesses or those of their domestic animals, to recover lost or stolen property, to find treasure, to tell their fortunes, and to provide love charms. Also, if someone had been cursed by a witch, the cunning man or woman could identify the witch and remove the spell; they also offered preemptive protection against witchcraft. Lesser practitioners, sometimes called charmers, specialized in one skill, such as curing warts. (695)

The accused women in Toni Morrison's novels, as well as the YA novels, excluding the fantasy genre, all share the common theme of independent women with natural healing powers or skill in midwifery. All will suffer because of these skills.

CHAPTER 3. *THE WITCH OF BLACKBIRD POND*

"Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." Exodus 22:18, KJV

Published in 1958 by Elizabeth George Spear, the John Newbery Medal-winning *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* illustrates the first example of witches in YA literature. Mary Helen Thuente explains that this example of "historical fiction" is "clearly within the tradition of historical romance" (50). She further defines the novel as a "realistic blend of history and romance with the situational and thematic resonances of the folktale" (51). Within this folk tale construct, the reader will note how a young woman and an elderly Quaker widow follow a pattern of innocent women who raise consternation within their communities.

Leaving her beloved Barbados following the death of her grandfather, Kit Tyler embarks on a sea-faring journey to live with her unsuspecting aunt and uncle in colonial Connecticut. While enduring the rigors and hardships of early American Puritan life, Kit learns that the love, wealth, and independence that she enjoyed with her grandfather will soon become distant longed-for memories. From the outset, Kit is described as "other" compared to the more respectable women on "the brigantine *Dolphin"* (1). Easily able to withstand the rigors of travel on the vessel without seas-sickness, Kit's ease with water will come back to haunt her as she leaps into the water to retrieve a child's doll (8). As a foreshadowing of her pending accusation and imprisonment, Nat Eaton informs Kit that "she (Goodwife Cruff) has been insisting to my father that you are a witch. She says no respectable woman could keep afloat in the water like that" (13). Thuente explains, "The fact that Kit's swimming skills would indeed keep her afloat were she put to the test emphasize how secular and natural beauty and the individual freedom which she represents do indeed make her "guilty" from the Puritan perspective" (54). Nat teasingly makes Kit aware that "a true witch will always float. The innocent ones just sink like a

stone" (13). A young, orphaned Kit Tyler defies the Puritan ideal of womanly behavior and is immediately miscast as a witch. We will meet more examples of these proud, independent, unique women who exist with the threat of violence and death shadowing their lives.

The novel continues with the boldly independent teen-aged protagonist becoming increasingly isolated by the hardships of the religious behavior mandates. Chastened by the religious leaders and her stern uncle, Kit flees to the Great Meadow where she encounters the novel's other "witch," the Quaker widow, Hannah Tupper. Kit first sees the old woman as the "gray figure bent over a kettle stirring something with a long stick" (78). Initially fearful of the old woman, "[t]he girl stared, horror-struck at the odd-shaped scar on the woman's forehead. Was it the devil's mark?" (91). Despite her initial misgivings, this ostracized young woman establishes a loving relationship with Widow Tupper who Thuente characterizes as Kit's "spiritual mother" (52).

Like other women who do not adhere to mainstream Christianity, Hannah suffers extreme isolation from her Puritan neighbors. Described by Kit's Uncle Matthew Wood as "a heretic" who "refuses to attend meeting," Hannah is forced to live alone in a tiny home near the water with only her cat as a companion (132). Her widowed status and Quaker religious beliefs place her at great risk for witchcraft accusations. Connecticut is not unique in its prejudice and mistrust. Hannah Tupper explains to Kit how she and her husband had been punished for their religious beliefs, including time spent in stocks and physically branded on their foreheads in Dorchester, Massachusetts (94).

Several of the novels discussed will present examples of magical women who can converse with the dead and appear to maintain a position straddling the living and the dead. This mysterious ability finds Hannah Tupper in frequent conversations with her late husband,

Thomas. While trying to escape the marauding townspeople, Hannah wails, “Where is Thomas? I can’t face it again without Thomas” (187). Rather than an actual, uncanny ability to communicate with the dead which we will discuss with Toni Morrison’s conjuring women, one understands Hannah’s conversations as more of a self-comforting confusion.

Many of the women described as witches or conjuring women appear as ancient, ageless, or immortal. Kathryn Rountree, an anthropologist and writer on Paganism and feminist spirituality, explains that the “numerous forms of the Goddess can be categorized broadly into what are referred to as “the three aspects of the Goddess” which correspond to three phases of women’s lives: the Maiden, the Mother, and the Crone” (226). Hannah is described as an old Crone: "Only a few feet away a woman was sitting watching her, a very old woman with short-cropped white hair and faded, almost colorless eyes set deep in an incredibly wrinkled face” (91). Rountree further explains: “The Crone, the old woman past child-bearing who speaks her mind without fear of losing male approval, offers nothing attractive to patriarchy. The Crone symbolizes death. The witch is Christianity’s diabolized Crone” (226). Kit aptly describes Hannah’s “crime” to her cousin:” She’s not a witch, and you know it. She’s a lonely old woman . . . you couldn’t help liking her if you knew her” (103).

Widow Tupper lives in a nearly idyllic setting, though extremely rugged and isolated from her community. A warm friendship develops between Hannah and Kit with each finding solace and acceptance in the other. Far from evil or diabolical, Thuente states that Hannah has a “gentle patience and spiritual wisdom about the nature of love and happiness” (52). Kit reasons, “Hannah Tupper was far from being a witch, but certainly she had worked a magic charm” (97). This old, earthy woman occupies an archetypal place in her community as a shunned Crone

living on the outskirts of the local town - a theme we'll see frequently repeated in Morrison's works.

As members of the Connecticut community begin to sicken, Hannah is accused of putting a "curse on (the) children" (182). In an abortive attempt to capture or kill the elderly widow, the community surmises that Hannah escaped through magic: "Tis not the first time she's changed herself into a creature . . ." and "she's gone straight back to Satan" (198). An elderly, widowed Quaker woman, content to live with her cat, farm animals, and a small garden becomes the scapegoat in the small community of distrustful, frightened Puritans. The folk tale aspect of this YA novel allows for the unrealistic rescue of Widow Tupper; however, a far more believable portrayal would have found the woman engulfed by the same flames which destroyed her home.

In a retrospective on the Salem witch trials, Stacy Schiff explicates how prosecutors and the community at large often plundered the estates of accused witches (384). Though Hannah barely survives in her tiny home on the outskirts of town, a member of the mob responsible for the destruction of Hannah's home states: "Here's the goats. Get rid of them, too!" "Hold on there! I'll take the goats. Witched or no, goats is worth twenty shillings apiece" (187). Although the community finds Hannah unfit for participation in the community, the mob is willing to accept the financial benefits of her ransacked home.

Thwarted in their attempt to punish the widow, the community, led by Goodwife Cruff and members of the religious and legal community, turn their rancor towards Kit and also charge her with witchcraft. Kit Taylor finds herself inexplicably charged with many mundane "crimes," in a manner that the reader will observe repeated in Toni Morrison's *Sula*:

> One man's child had cried aloud all night that someone was sticking pins into him. Another child had seen a dark creature with horns at the foot of her bed. A woman who lived along South Road testified one morning Kit had stopped and spoken to her child and that within ten minutes the child had fallen into a fit for five days. Another woman testified that one afternoon last September she had been sitting in the window sewing a jacket for her husband, when she had looked up and seen Kit walking past her house, staring up at the window in a strange manner. Whereupon, try as she would, the sleeve would never set right in the jacket. (212)

Commonplace annoyances were often found to be just cause for accusing women of crimes punishable by imprisonment, exile, and frequently, death.

Like the women in Toni Morrison's novels, the two women accused of witchcraft in *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* are powerless and without any influence or worth in their small-minded, repressive community of colonial Connecticut. These two women also follow the construct of those accused by the religious and legal communities; their "differentness" and independent natures are the main reasons for their ostracism and criminality. Succinctly stated by the angry, abusive Goodwife Cruff: "We do not welcome strangers in this town, and you be the kind we like least" (27).

Though very disparate women, Kit Taylor, a penniless, orphaned foreigner from a "heathen island in the West Indies," and Hannah Tupper, a seemingly ancient, widowed Quaker are both accused of witchcraft and are found as scapegoats for a community-wide infectious disease. Because this novel is for late grade-school readers, it is reasonable, though quite unrealistic, that both women escape harm. Neither are actual witches or conjuring women, but

both share similarities with other accused women and find themselves at the mercy of a community suspicious of them with a murderous attempt to subjugate them.

CHAPTER 4. *THE GRAVEYARD BOOK*

"Och, my potion is boiling. I need to say good night and keep an eye on the pot. Ye canna overboil newt's eyeballs." A Highlander's Passion, Vonnie Davis

Set in a contemporary British cemetery, Neil Gaiman's Newbery award-winning, *The Graveyard Book* (2008) introduces us to a cast of characters, both living and dead, and the recently orphaned Bod Owens. The protagonist of this fantastical story is raised by ghost parents with the assistance of a vampire and a werewolf and the plot is driven by the need for Bod to avoid the same murderers who violently killed his parents. In his Newbery medal acceptance speech, Gaiman explains the foundational basis for this novel: "Writing this book felt like a conversation with authors I'd loved, most obviously with Rudyard Kipling, whose *Jungle Book* became the wall I bounced my ball off" (qtd in Robertson, 33). Though all the characters are inordinately fascinating in their own right, this chapter will focus on Liza Hempstock, a dead, witch-ghost who appears to Bod while he surreptitiously explores her grave in the unconsecrated portion of the graveyard.

In her mortal life, Liza lived as a single, young woman who was both a healer and a spell-casting witch. She reveals her story to Bod Owens:

> One by one they gets up beneath the sky and tells of milk gone sour and horse gone lame, and finally Mistress Jemima gets up . . . and tells how as Solomon Porritt now cuts her dead and instead hangs around the washhouse like a wasp about a honeypot, and it's all my magic, says she, that made him so and the poor young man must be bespelled. (110)

The banal crimes that Liza is accused of are chronicled in the same manner as Kit Tyler's were described. The young women's crimes do not support the extreme punishments meted out

to them. Following in the footsteps of mistrusted women who are naturalists and healers, Liza is shown helping Bod with his sprained leg caused by falling from a tree after an attempt to grab an out-of-reach apple (107). After Bod hears Liza's of her murder by drowning, he declares, "Then you weren't a witch after all" (110). Liza boldly owns her identity and power: "What nonsense," she says. "Of course I was a witch" (111). Liza triumphantly recounts that she momentarily survived the initial attempt to drown her and with her dying breath, she "cursed each and every one of them there on the village Green that morning, that none of them would ever rest easily in a grave" (111). The young reader will not think that Liza was a malevolent witch, as she implies it was her first time to curse someone: "I was surprised at how easily it came, the cursing" (111). This novel is the first example discussed in my thesis of an accused witch who owns her identity as a powerful spell-casting person.

Liza is described as looking like a "pretty goblin:" one who would not "have needed magic to attract Solomon Porritt, not with a smile like that" (111). Confident in her worth, Liza sniffs, "As if it would take witchcraft to get Solomon Porritt mooning round my cottage" (112). She did not actively seek out Mr. Porritt's attention, but that attention ultimately led to her downfall and she exacts her revenge through her curse. All who watched her execution subsequently died of the plague and were unceremoniously buried in a mass grave (112). Hempstock's youth and attractiveness, as well as her seemingly solitary status, put her at risk for the accusation of witchcraft. Her vulnerability and lack of social standing in a male-dominated world, coupled with Jemima's father pacifying his jealous daughter, led to young Liza's arrest and execution. Liza manifests actual magical abilities before her demise and ultimately exacts her revenge on the entire patriarchal and religious community responsible for her death. Though powerless as a single young woman, she died a powerful witch in the end, responsible for the

death of the entire community and their subsequent mass burial in an unmarked grave. However, she was not powerful enough to prevent her murder and ignoble burial in an unmarked grave in the unconsecrated section of the cemetery. The whimsical and fantastical nature of this novel provides an apt segue to two examples of YA speculative fiction.

CHAPTER 5. *CHILDREN OF BLOOD AND BONE*

"Go then, Fools," called the Witch. "Think of me, boy, when you lie old and weak and dying, and remember how you threw away the chance of endless youth! It won't be offered you again."
The Magician's Nephew, C.S Lewis

Witches appear not only in Young Adult fiction that focuses on Euro-American witch hunts but also in the fantasy/speculative fiction genre. Tomi Adeyemi's, *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) is the first in a trilogy exploring the genocide of a large number of magic people in this New York Time's best-selling piece of speculative fiction. This genre, according to Marvin Walter "allows for the literal representation of the others, the monster, the non-human through its depiction of alternative realities" (2019). Walter reads this novel through the lens of "monster theory and the politics of othering" (2019). Walter quotes Margrit Shildrick as explaining that "monsters signify both the binary opposition between the natural and the non-natural and simultaneously carry the weight of not just of difference, but of différance" (2019). Walter further contends that "Derrida's différance describes "the trace within that signals disruption"- the recognition of the same within the others and the others within the same that disrupts binary oppositions" (2019). He summarizes, "In short, the others are constructed as monstrous by being expelled from the category of the white, male human . . . and must be located . . . in black people, in foreigners, in animals, the lower classes, and in women (2019). This novel will further the contention that those outside what is considered mainstream are often subject to the caprices of the stronger, ruling class.

Katherine Murphey summarizes the novel as follows:

> Set in the African country of Orisha, the maji (magical people) and the k'osidan (non-magical people) have vied for power. King Saran, driven by hatred, raids

> across the country brutally slaughtering maji (who are normally marked by white hair as diviners or magical people). Zelie and Tzain's mother is killed in the Raid. King Saran's son, Prince Inan, finds that he can dream and interact with Zelie in their dreams. Princess Amari, repulsed by the murder of her servant and friend, Binta (a maji), runs away from the palace and comes under the care of Zelie and Tzain. Zelie can restore magic to Orisha or it can die with her. Both Amari and Inan realize they have the capacity for magic. King Saran kills his son, Inan, once he realizes this, but Zelie is able to restore magic to Orisha. (2018)

Zélie, the teenage protagonist, witnesses the death of her beloved and powerful maji mother during the initial Raid. After this Raid, children of the dead maji are often forced into slavery by the kosidan as payment for the king's usurious taxation. The community of diviners, though subjugated and hidden, continue to train for a hoped-for revolution and a return of their magic.

The reader initially meets Zélie as she spars with a peer in a studio disguised as a sewing factory led by Mama Agba, a powerful maji who escaped the Raid. We hear Zélie's thoughts as she considers her teacher: "You would never guess a woman her age could be so lethal" (3). Comparable to the strong matriarchs we'll find in the Toni Morrison novels, Mama Agba is also described in the same terms hinting at immortality that we're shown repeated in *Paradise's* Lone Dupres and Circe: "Mama Agba's always had a sage sense about her, the wisdom of a person who's seen beyond her years" (88). Mama Agba reiterates their cosmology to the girls under her tutelage:

> The maji rose throughout Orïsha, becoming the first kings and queens. In that time everyone knew peace, but that peace didn't last. Those in power began to

> abuse their magic, and as punishment, the gods stripped them of their gifts. When the magic leached from their blood, their white hair disappeared as a sign of their sin. Over generations, love of the maji turned into fear. Fear turned into hate. Hate transformed into violence, a desire to wipe the maji away. (15)

This work differs from the previous novels, in that the reader knows from the beginning that the magical powers are god and goddess-given talents. The powers are not kept secret and the maji weren't shunned or feared, but rather, were respected and honored. The members of the magic class were gifted with being easily recognizable: "Each maji was born with white hair, the sign of the gods' touch" (14). As described, violence escalates and the magically gifted are persecuted similarly to those in *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* and *The Graveyard Book.* Explicit in Adeyemi's novel is the girls' vulnerability to the ruling patriarchy. Mama Agba reminds the girls in her care, "I teach the way of the staff to any girl who wants to learn, because in this world there will always be men who wish you harm" (16). As Zélie and Inan travel to restore magic to Orïsha, they nearly come to blows over a plan to rescue their siblings. Zélie shouts at the Prince:

> *Trust* the guards? I scream so loud there's no doubt every fighter hidden in this godforsaken forest hears my voice quake. The same guards who chained my mother by her neck? The guards who beat my father half to death. The guards who grope me whenever they have a chance, just waiting for the day they can take everything when I'm forced into the stocks? (312)

Within the confines of a brutal patriarchy, YA literature confirms that the threat of male violence is an unquestionable risk to women. Those in power recognize the maji by their hair color; that overt signal of their strength is also one that prevents them from hiding their "otherness." Hair

color, texture, and style remain a recognizable way of "othering" and discriminating against in contemporary society and this intersection between racism and sexism will reappear in the Morrison novels as the conjuring women are penalized as a result of their gender, as well as their skin color.

Zélie fights many battles and accomplishes physically challenging feats that require skill, patience, and cunning. The strongest of the maji have been murdered and Zélie travels with her brother and the Prince and Princess. The same "coven" of four young people will be repeated in *Akata Witch.* Just as the young protagonist in *Akata Witch* will be referred to with a slur, Zélie and the remaining maji are denigrated with the insulting pejorative "maggot." Walter informs:

> Central to the justification of . . . oppression is the homogenisation of this divîner and maji through the discourse created by the kosidán. Typical to the process of othering, certain characteristics are allocated to maji and divîner, not allowing them any individuality in the discourse. This homogenisation finds one expression in the description of divîner and maji through a single derogative term: "Maggot." Mirroring derogative slurs used to marginalize both people of colour and queer men in Western cultures, the term "Maggot" strips divîner and maji of their humanity, simultaneously excluding them from the category human and classifying them as inferior through the animal connotation. (2019)

Despite the attempt to dehumanize her, Zélie is the strongest and most resourceful of the four young people, with both physical and intellectual prowess and a direct line of communication with the gods and goddesses of her time.

As the Toni Morrison novels and *Akata Witch* will illustrate, maternal strength and knowledge often directly passes onto female offspring. During one particularly emotional trial, Zélie's brother reminds her: "Mama was the most powerful Reaper I've ever seen. You're her daughter. I know you can do this" (241). Adeyemi promotes a female-centric plot, as only Zélie, a young teen-aged girl, can restore magic to her people. While on her heroic quest, Zélie is told by a priest-like character that "only a woman can become our mamaláwo" (165). Zélie has been chosen by the goddess and it is her skill, intellect, and ingenuity that will allow her to be successful.

After a treacherous hero's journey with many fantastical adventures, Zélie, with the assistance of her three cohorts, appears to bring back magic to her people. The mission would not have been successful without Zélie's strength and force of will. Walter summarizes the conclusion: "Finally, when Zélie at the end of the novel reconnects with the gods, she describes the feeling as including both maji and kosidán: 'Magic shatters through every heart, every soul, every being. It connects us all, threading through the shell of humanity,' which ends in the ultimate titular revelation: 'We are all children of blood and bone'" (2019). Zélie learns a profound lesson that shatters all notions of "otherness" in humanity.

Similar to how the women in the previous novels were ostracized and persecuted as "other," the maji and divîners were murdered, enslaved, or lived in fear of that happening because of their abilities and their appearance. Walter states that "[t]he novel sets up a way in which the divîner and maji can be oppressed despite their superior powers: Maji lose their powers through King Saran who manages to break their link with the gods . . ." (2019). The theme of powerful, magical women who are still marginalized and oppressed will be repeated in the subsequent novels, especially Toni Morrison's novels.

Walter also states:

> Adeyemi builds the novel's world in a way in which divîner and maji function as allegory for oppressed groups like women and people of colour. By arguing in favour of the maji's humanity, the novel thus demonstrates the inhumanity and cruelty of oppression and marginalization resulting from othering. (2019)

Murphey further argues that this novel "delve(s) into the horrors of the slave trade by honestly and unflinchingly incorporating it into . . . science fiction/fantasy trilogies and inviting us all to reassess the legacy of slavery in a time where we perhaps need it most . . ." (2018). The novel entertains the reader through the vibrant story-line, but also provides a contemporary context.

Adeyemi speaks for herself about the message of her novel in the "Author's Note:"

> *Children of Blood and Bone* was written during a time where I kept turning on the news and seeing stories of unarmed black men, women, and children being shot by the police. I felt afraid and angry and helpless, but this book was the one thing that made me feel like I could do something about it. (526)

Written as a novel to confront the violence perpetuated on Black Americans by the police force, *Children of Blood and Bone* illustrates a group of people who possess powerful magic, but are nevertheless, beaten and subjugated as "other." The novel ends optimistically as Zélie can restore magic to her people. Recognizing that the novel is part of a trilogy, the reader is left with an open-ended conclusion. *Akata Witch,* also written by a Nigerian-American woman will present similar themes but ends with the young female protagonist unambiguously successful.

CHAPTER 6. *AKATA WITCH*

"You've always had the Power my dear, you just had to learn it for yourself." Glinda, The Wizard of Oz. MGM film

Following in the footsteps of *Children of Blood and Bone, Akata Witch* illustrates another young girl on a magical hero's quest. Written by Nigerian-born, Nnedi Okafor, *Akata Witch* (2011), tells the story of Sunny Nwazue, a young Nigerian girl on a mission to discover the extent of her magical abilities. On this journey, she not only determines her place in her family, but also in the community of other magic people and, subsequently, their place in the community at large. Described in a *Time* magazine article as "a cross between *Harry Potter, The Chronicles of Narnia,* and Yoruba gods [. . .]," this novel places a secret group of powerful magic people, who live in a community of non-magical people, working behind the scenes to keep all safe from cosmic harm (2020).

According to S. R. Toliver, Okorafor is "an international award-winning author of African-based speculative fiction" (3). Tolliver further explains that "Black female writers use Afrofuturist literary spaces to explore their identities, subvert societally-enforced ideas about what it means to be Black and female, and create room for Black women and girls to define their existence in numerous and nuanced ways" (3). This genre of literature "fuses elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs" (Womack qtd in Toliver, 6). Within this definition, the reader follows Sunny Nwazue, an Albino twelve-year-old, as she learns of her superior magical abilities and her position within the global community of "Leopard People."

Living within a multiplicity of liminal spaces, Sunny is the child of two Nigerian parents but was born in the United States before the family returned to Nigeria. Though a Black child, she was born an Albino. Finally, she is a magical child existing in a powerful magical community living out of view of non-magical people. Sunny learns she is to be initiated into the formidable realm of "Leopard People". Her primer for learning about her newly found magic describes Leopard People: "A Leopard Person goes by many names around the world. The term 'Leopard Person' is a West African coinage, derived from the Efik term 'ekpe,' 'leopard.' All people of mystical true ability are Leopard People" (6). Chichi, Sunny's friend, explains the Leopard People cosmology to Sunny, "In some countries, we're called witches, sorcerers, shamans, wizards-things like that, I guess" (78).

Unlike the young Liza Hempstock or Kit Tyler, Sunny is not ostracized for accusations of witchcraft, but rather is bullied and shunned as an "akata witch." Similar to the slur "maggot" in the previous novel, Sunny discloses that the slur means "bush animal and was used to refer to black Americans or foreign-born blacks. A very, very rude word" (11). Her exclusion from her classmates is a result of equal parts jealousy of her intellect and derision at her Albinism.

Mary Bosede Aiyetor and Elizabeth Olaoye chronicle "several myths surrounding the albino in Nigerian folklore. It is believed among the Yorubas and some other cultures that albinos are agents of the gods, sent to families that have offended the gods or the ancestors. Some believe that the blood of albinos is useful in money-making rituals and in fashioning charms for long life, while others believe that drinking the blood of a person with albinism bestows magical powers" (233). At great risk for personal harm as an albino, Sunny "rises above

this stigmatized and misguided perception of her body through her discovery of her own magical powers . . .” (Aiyetoro, 233).

As we saw in both *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* and *The Graveyard Book,* children were not immune from accusations of witchcraft and its subsequent punishments. Sunny is aware that “[i]n some parts of Nigeria, people marked certain children as evil “witches.” These poor children were blamed for anything that went wrong, from illnesses to accidents to death. Eventually, the community would rise and enact all kinds of punishment to get rid of their “magical powers.” Really, it was just a form of child abuse” (78). Her friends assure her that they are not those types of “child witches” and that “[t]hose children are just normal innocent non-magical kids being scapegoated” (78). Sunny’s fear of being labeled a witch is justified as evidenced by the previous novels. As illustrative of the witch/monster trope, the reader is aware of the danger Sunny will face because she is seen as “other” by those in her African community.

Sunny’s strange appearance isolates her from her dark-skinned classmates and the requirement that she keep her powers secret from her parents isolates her from her family. However, the combination of her unique looks, her intelligence, and her strong power enables her to become a very potent Leopard Person. Once Sunny begins studying the literature available to the uninitiated, she learns: “We embrace those things that make us unique or odd. For only in these things can we locate and then develop our most individual abilities” (99). Her initial reality is one of ostracism and conflict, similar to the previous three examples, but her life as a Leopard Person grants her leadership, courage, and power.

In contrast to the Euro-American novels, the witches in Okorafor’s novel can be either male or female. Sunny learns that “[m]ost Leopard People are . . . born to two sorcerer parents-

strong ancestor connections" (52). Two of the three friends who form Sunny's "coven" are male and the teacher in charge of training them for their final battle is a powerful male witch. However, Chichi, Sunny's closest female friend, is equally, if not stronger and smarter, than the two boys. Chichi insists to the two males in their group that she is "the most knowledgeable" and "neither boy argued with her" (78). Refreshingly, the strongest characters in this novel are female. The magic present in the girls and women in this novel tends to follow a strong matriarchal lineage. We discover that Chichi's mother, who reads voraciously "is really, really brilliant . . . and a Nimm priestess" (213). The reader learns that "Nimm priestesses are chosen at birth. Their intelligence is tested before their mother even gets a chance to hold them" (214). Eventually, as part of her heroic quest for self-knowledge, Sunny learns her Grandmother's story from her mother, as the story had to be disclosed through the unassailable matrilineal line. Sunny's mother shares:

> My mother was a strange woman. She loved us dearly. Raised us to be smart and independent and educated. She watched us closely, like she was looking for something, but I don't know what. Whatever it was, she didn't find it. Not in me or my siblings. I think she'd have found it in you. (340)

Before her mother's disclosure, Sunny had been told that her grandmother was "a little strange . . . [m]aybe she was mentally ill" (52). The young reader understands concurrently with Sunny that her grandmother was a powerful Leopard Person, with the power to disappear, "right into thin air" (341). This scene has similarities with J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets.* In this scene, the young wizard Ron tells the group of friends that "Malfoy called Hermione something – it must've been really bad, because everyone went wild" (115. The

reader learns along with the characters in the narrative that Herminone was called a "'Mudblood,' . . . the most insulting thing he could think of . . . Mudblood's a really foul name for someone who is Muggle-born – you know, non-magic parents. There are some wizards – like Malfoy's family – who think they're better than everyone else because they're what people call pure-blood" (116). Identification with one's place in one's family, as well as one's community is a theme repeated in both of the fantasy novels. Sunny gains mental fortitude with this knowledge of her genetic strength and continues with her journey of obtaining skills and understanding of her power and worth.

When Sunny disobeys one of the Leopard People rules, she is sent to a magical library to receive her punishment. There she meets Sugar Cream, who is "the scholar on the inside" of the library. She is described as the "oldest and most respected" Leopard Person and is the esteemed "Head Librarian" (81). Ian Renga describes the mentors assigned to each of the four children as serving in the role of the "archetypal sage" (25). "Often depicted as old or haggard in appearance, the sage is typically presented as carrying the burdensome wisdom of experience from quests completed ages ago, a living repository of what could be called *dangerous knowledge"* (31). Sugar Cream serves as both a Crone and a Sage in this novel. Like Sunny, Sugar Cream has felt outsider status; her physical differentness due to "severe scoliosis" (188). Despite, or maybe because of their physical differences, both Sugar Cream and Sunny are among the most powerful witches. Their apparent physical uniqueness separates them from society at large, but those differences do not diminish their power. After proving herself to be both brave and a potent witch, Sunny is assigned as an apprentice to Sugar Cream, an honor and immense responsibility (334).

Interestingly, the female characters in this novel are not always benevolent. The evil Deity that a rogue Leopard Person tried to bring back into the world is a female figure. Chichi tells Sunny: “She (Ekwensu) is what Satan is to the Christians,” Chichi said. “But more real, more tangible. She’s not a metaphor or symbol. She’s one of the most powerful masquerades in the wilderness” (312). With the help of her friends, Sunny ultimately sends Ekwensu back to the realm she came from, saving not only herself and her friends but all of humanity.

Akata Witch radically changes the construct that the only option available for witches is imprisonment and death. Okorafor emboldens the young women in this novel with strength and agency to confront the prejudices of their time. Sandra Lindow quotes Nnedi Okorafor as stating that “fantasy is the most accurate way of describing reality” (47). She further contends that “sensitive subjects like young women’s development are easier to tackle when they are clothed in the fantastic” (47). “Okorafor’s protagonists’ magic talents,” Lindow explains, “develop through study, practice, and interaction with difficult environments” (53). The children also follow the “rules that can be learned in order to use magic safely” (Lindow, 53). This Young Adult novel illustrates strong, formidable women who are not only witches but concealed, heroic leaders at the novel’s conclusion. The female characters are neither reviled nor punished for their magic, but rather respected and honored within their secret communities.

CHAPTER 7. FLYING PEOPLE MYTH

"*For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could* ride *it*." *Song of Solomon, Toni Morrison*

After the literary examples of witches and accused witches in the eighteenth century, followed by two examples of African inspired magical people in the speculative fantasy genre, this chapter will bridge the YA literature to the Toni Morrison conjuring women through two samples of books for young children demonstrating the Flying African folklore. The myth of Flying Africans involves kidnapped, enslaved Africans arriving on American soil with the ability to utter magical incantations allowing flight. Though not described as witches, these conjurers have important magical abilities as evidenced by the numerous examples of flight in the literary canon.

Written by Virginia Hamilton, *The People Could Fly* (1985), the Coretta Scott King award-winning book written for children ages four to eight, retells the folkloric myth of an enslaved people magically returning to their homeland of Africa. Katherine Thorsteinson, a scholar of critical race theory and contemporary literature explains this myth:

> Traditionally, the Flying African myth has reflected the desire for freedom and cross-Atlantic return shared by generations of African descendants who inherited the trauma of forced displacement and enslavement throughout the Americas. Stories about New World slaves who could fly back to Africa over the encumbering sea and escape slavery have permeated black popular culture and sacred ritual. This myth was created under the painful conditions of the New World, reflecting the desire for free, cross-Atlantic return, and even death shared by enslaved Africans and their descendants. (259)

The Flying African myth appears in different versions of picture books, YA, and adult contemporary literature.

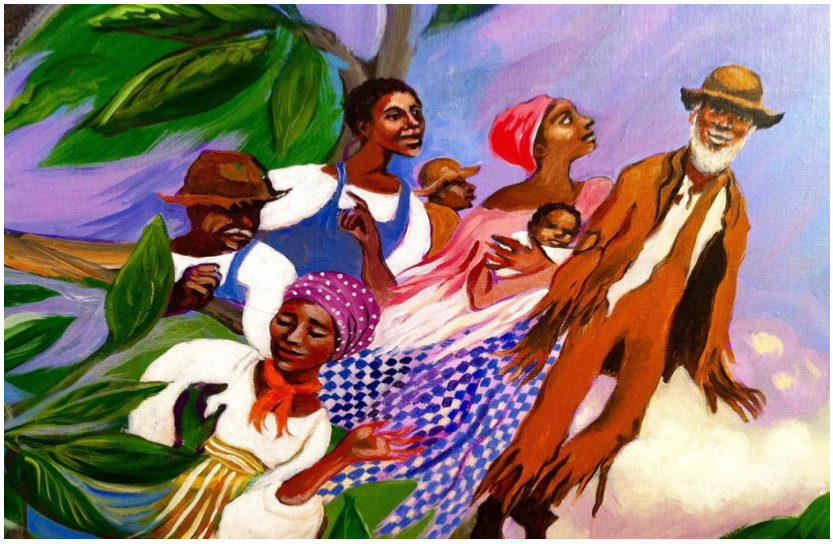

Figure 2. *The People Could Fly*, illustrated by Leo and Dianne Dillon, 1985

Hamilton's account tells the tale of Sarah and her elderly father, Toby. The young reader is introduced to the myth at the outset: “They say the people could fly. Say that long ago in Africa, some of the people knew magic. And they would walk up on the air like climbin up on a gate. And they flew like blackbirds over the fields” (166). Hamilton enlightens the reader to the fact that the African magic is altered when the men and women are “captured for slavery” (166). Unique to all the stories thus far, these magical people had wings while they resided in Africa: “Then, many of the people were captured for Slavery. The ones that could fly shed their wings. They couldn’t take their wings across the water on the slave ships. Too crowded, don’t you know” (166).

Sarah, one of the main protagonists, “once had wings” (167). A young, new mother described as tired, hungry, and grossly overworked is whipped by the overseer while her infant is tied to her back. Beaten senselessly, she tells her father, “I must go soon” (169). Agreeing with

her untenable situation, Toby raises his arms to her and murmurs the magic words, "*Kum . . . yali, kum buba tambe"* (169). Sarah "flew clumsily at first, with the child now held tightly in her arms. Then she felt the magic, the African mystery. Say she rose just as free as a bird. As light as a feather" (169).

Once the magic was released, Toby sent a large number of the abused slaves flying home by "reaching out his arms to them" and uttering the magic words. Toby, described as "the seer," flies away with the others at the end of the story, but laments leaving the rest behind to "wait for a chance to run" (171).

Hamilton describes her re-telling of this folk tale as a "detailed fantasy tale of suffering, of magic power exerted against the so-called Master and his underlings. Finally, it is a powerful testament to the millions of slaves who never had the opportunity to "fly" away. They remained slaves, as did their children. "The People Could Fly" was first told and retold by those who had only their imaginations to set them free" (173). Magic was available to this group of enslaved people in the folk tale, but the young reader certainly will understand that great suffering surrounded these gifted flying people. The magic saved a limited number, but scores more remained enslaved despite this supernatural talent. Thorsteinson further explains that "[o]nce the magical language has been remembered, they all return collectively to the African homeland. Thus, the myth became a way of memorializing the past in order to look with shared hope for freedom in the future, yet the tragic irony of this shared hope is that, for the myth's very inception and continuation, some slaves must inevitably be left behind to tell the story" (261). The magic is powerful, but not powerful enough for everybody's escape.

Dorothy Lee states, "An analogous story suggests that it was enslaved former witch doctors, carrying the secrets and powers of their African people, who could initiate escape. Here

again a strange word is uttered and an exact moment defined for the leap" (65). This concept furthers the notion that the escape is not merely symbolic, but that the people believed that they truly could fly. Though the magic is not limited to just women or girls, those involved are at the utmost level of degradation and ostracism.

While Hamilton's version deals with flying slaves, Faith Ringgold's *Tar Beach* (1991) is a picture book that tells the story of a biracial eight-year-old girl set in 1939 Harlem. This urban tale relates Cassie Louise Lightfoot's struggles to understand the racial and economic inequalities in segregated New York City. Cassie flies over the city to claim for her family the George Washington Bridge, which her father has helped erect. Flying over the second structure she claims for her family, Cassie informs the young reader that her dad "still . . . can't join the union because Grandpa wasn't a member" (1997). Cassie boldly (and naively) states, "Well, Daddy is going to own that building, 'cause I'm gonna fly over it and give it to him. Then it won't matter that he's not in their old union, or whether he's colored or a half-breed Indian, like they say" (1997).

The picture book alludes to unemployment, periods of single parenting, and food insecurity while concurrently introducing the African Flying people myth. Flying is Cassie's only means of controlling her harsh living conditions by bringing imaginary economic ease to the family's financial hardships. Ringgold's work incorporates the myth of Flying Africans into a more contemporary and urban setting, rather than a rural, Southern plantation. Wendy Walters states that "folklore serves as self-representation" and that "these dynamic self-representations as adaptive responses [and] creative struggles against a system of oppression which has for centuries denied the selfhood of black people" (1997). Though Cassie does not have to transcend

the physical and emotional horrors of slavery, she must "rise above" the racism and economic suppression of African-Americans in early twentieth-century America.

The stories of flying Black people connect with the study of witches and conjurers in that their magic permits them to have hidden wings, articulate magical incantations, and fly. Not witches in the literal sense, but potent conjurers who suffer oppression and can use their powers in a limited manner that allows for their escape. If all are unable to tap into that magic, those who can fly serve as beacons of hope for those left behind. This flying motif will be illustrated again most aptly in Morrison's *Song of Solomon.*

CHAPTER 8. TONI MORRISON NOVELS

"And so I thought to send her to your Tituba –

Parris: *To Tituba! What may Tituba-?*

Mrs. Putnam: *Tituba knows how to speak to the dead, Mr. Parris.*

Parris: *Goody Ann, it is a formidable sin to conjure up the dead!*

Mrs. Putnam: *I take it on my soul, but who else may surely tell us what person murdered my babies?" The Crucible, Arthur Miller*

Toni Morrison's novels contain portrayals of black women, who, if not overt conjuring women, act as midwives, are proficient in natural healing arts, and have an eerie aura of otherworldliness. This supernatural aura often manifests as ambiguous events occurring outside the realm of science and standard medicine. The terms "magic" and "magical" will be used to describe these oft indescribable abilities and events performed by witches or conjuring women. This magical capacity gives the women some power and authority in their homes, but they remain firmly ensconced as second- class citizens as a result of the wider legal and religious patriarchy.

Four novels exemplify Morrison's use of potent women and their powers. *Song of Solomon* (1977) introduces the reader to a family with the ability to fly, echoing the Flying African myth illustrated in the children's book examples, but within the contemporary context of an extended Black American family. The novel also contains Pilate, a woman who "had not come into this world through normal channels" as illustrated by her lack of navel (28). The reader also meets another seemingly immortal midwife in the person of the aptly named, Circe. Described as "infallible," M'Dear in *The Bluest Eye* (1970) functions as "a competent midwife and decisive diagnostician" (106). She is not only physically imposing at six feet tall, but is "very, very old" with "four big white knots of hair" that give "power and authority" to her face

(106). Though not described as a conjurer, per se, the reader understands this woman's uncanny healing powers. *Sula* (1973) introduces us to a household of women, with the novel's namesake having an aura of magic and evil portents surrounding her. Sula's grandmother, Eva Peace, possesses the ability to interpret dreams and converse with the dead. Ajax's mother exemplifies the most provocative woman in this novel. An unnamed, little mentioned character who "was an evil conjure woman" divulges to the reader the specific items she needs to perform her craft (126). Lastly, *Paradise* (1997) reveals to us a group of women seeking sanctuary in a defunct convent led by Consolata Sosa, a woman known for her nurturing and healing abilities. We also meet Lone DuPres, an ancient midwife who unsuccessfully tries to protect the women in the convent and mentors Consolata, initiating her into her powerful practice. Despite their known skills in midwifery and herbal medicine, both women, literally and figuratively, remain on the outskirts of society.

All four novels abound in rich language describing the mysteriousness and magic surrounding several black women. Either despite or as a result of their strength and supernatural powers, these women remain on the utmost fringes of the legal and religious patriarchal communities they inhabit.

Toni Morrison's novels are Black women-centric, featuring strong females, often mothers, whose dialogue dominates the novels, and the women themselves direct the narrative. Within her storylines, Morrison frequently has an assertive woman who functions as the healer and midwife for her community. These midwives act not just as health practitioners but manifest an ability to treat medical conditions, while "seeing" and "knowing" things that defy scientific understanding. López Ramírez states, "The witch as a social outcast could subvert the patriarchal society with her 'hexes,' that is, actions questioning and challenging the social and political

system" (Madej-Stang vii). Ergo, witches customarily were women who did not fit into patriarchal gender patterns or societal norms" (43). The majority of the women in Morrison's novels willingly, or by societal demand, exist outside of "societal norms."

Song of Solomon naturally merges with the mythology of Flying African People as the reader is aware of the repetition of this flying theme in several places in this novel, thus reinforcing the importance of this myth. The narrative follows the growth and development of Macon Dead, known as Milkman, as he comes to terms with his position within his family, both living and dead. Macon is the main protagonist, but his journey is largely supported by the women in his family and those he encounters on his identity quest.

The plot structure of this novel presents Macon as usually surrounded by women. Two of those women exemplify Morrison's use of powerful, otherworldly women. Pilate Dead, Macon's paternal aunt, was born after her mother died during childbirth: "she had come struggling out of the womb without help from throbbing muscles or the pressure of swift womb water" (27). Unusual as her arrival is, "[i]t was the absence of a navel that convinced people that she had not come into this world through normal channels . . ." (28). Pilate learns at a young age that people are afraid of her because of that missing maternal link: "They thought she might hurt them in some way if she got angry, and they also felt pity along with their terror of having been in the company of something God never made" (144). This absence of a maternal connection places Pilate on the level of the Judeo-Christian mythic woman, Eve – another woman seemingly born without a mother.

Further connection to the Old Testament Eve is explained by Lee: "Pilate's is a home where naturalness is valued. Filled with music, it is set amid pine trees. It smells of the forest and blackberries, of apples and wine" (65). Lee reminds that "Milkman first sees her posed like some

ancient mother goddess, one foot pointing east and one west, suggesting in the directions her connection to both life and death. Her lack of a navel reinforces this sense of divinity, testifying to her miraculous birth and suggesting even the original earth mother" (65). Not merely an "earth mother," Pilate will reveal herself as a powerful conjuring woman, also.

Along with her indirect name correlation to Eva Peace, a conjuring woman found in Morrison's *Sula*, Pilate finds herself as the matriarch of an all-female household, a dynamic repeated in the Peace family structure of grandmother, daughter, and granddaughter. Within this conjuring, matriarchal construct, the reader first learns of Pilate's actual prowess as Ruth Dead explains to her son, Milkman, how she was assisted in his conception. When Pilate first arrives in town, she visits her brother and sister-in-law and is uncannily cognizant of problems with their marriage. Pilate successfully enables Ruth to mesmerize her husband back to their bed and ultimately become pregnant: "She gave me funny things to do. And some greenish-gray grassy-looking stuff to put in his food" (125). Unable to overcome Pilate's potent herbal potion, Macon "came to (Ruth) for four days. He even came home from his office in the middle of the day to be with me. He looked puzzled, but he came" (125). Pilate's magical abilities are not unknown to her brother and he immediately suspects his sister's paranormal involvement.

Macon Dead demands that his wife abort her child and when his angry demands violently escalate, Ruth returns to Pilate for additional supernatural assistance. Macon only ceases his aggression against his wife when Pilate places a small voodoo doll on his office chair: "A male doll with a small painted chicken bone stuck between its legs and a round red circle painted on its belly" (132). So fearful of this potent effigy, Macon does not even touch it, but

> knocked it out of the chair and with a yardstick pushed it into the bathroom, where he doused it with alcohol and burned it. It took nine separate burnings before the fire got down to the straw and cotton ticking of its insides. (132)

Morrison allows the similarities of Pilate and Eva Peace to continue throughout the novel. Just as Eva talks to her dead son, Plum, in *Sula*, Pilate tells Ruth that she "sees" her murdered father: "I see him still. He's helpful to me, real helpful. Tells me things I need to know" (141). Not the musings of a confused old woman like Hannah Tupper, but rather conjuring women with an unnatural connection to the afterlife.

As Milkman travels to retrieve gold that he believes his father and Pilate hid as children, he meets Circe. According to his family lore, Circe hid his father and aunt after their father was murdered for his lucrative property (231). We learn from the minister who gives Milkman directions to Circe's home that Circe "was a good midwife in those days. Delivered everybody, me included" (231). Circe delivered both the elder Macon and Pilate and had an innate affection for them and desire to protect them from harm. Manuela López Ramírez places Morrison's Circe within a mythological context:

> Circe is the witch of the forest, a mythic/fairy tale figure arising from merging diverse intertexts. In her, Morrison reinterprets the ancient Crone archetype, reclaiming the positive meaning of the word. Circe is not an ordinary witch. She resembles the hag of the fairy tale 'Hansel and Gretel' and, as her name suggests, she is also the mythic Homeric Circe. (45)

The Greek myth features Circe as a naturalistic goddess who is known for her knowledge of herbs and magical potions. Morrison enables her Circe to treat minor illnesses and injuries in

the footsteps of her Greek counterpart. Judith Fletcher states that Morrison's Circe's "strange Weimaraners with human eyes recall the men turned into wolves, who fawned on Odysseus' companions . . ." (413). Morrison endows her Circe with many of the same characteristics found in her mythological namesake.

Reminiscing on his youth, Macon Dead tells his son of his introduction and subsequent rescue by Circe. Bewildered and grieving after their father's murder, the young Macon and his sister, Pilate stumble to Circe's door where she takes them in and hides them from her white slave-owner and his family (166). Consistent with Morrison's portrayal of conjuring women, Circe is both a midwife and a healer. Knowledge of nature-sourced cures and treatments are in evidence as Circe cures Pilate's infected earlobe by putting "cobwebs on it to draw the pus out and stop the bleeding" (167). Milkman realizes that Circe was a "[h]ealer, deliverer, in another world she would have been the head nurse at Mercy" (246). Zauditu-Selassi reminds the reader that "one of the few spiritual roles permitted and reinforced during slavery was a midwife" (2007). Though intelligent, skilled, and capable, racism thwarts this woman's ability to live to her full potential.

Circe is one of several ancient women in Toni Morrison's novels. While learning where Circe lives from Reverend Cooper, Milkman states, "Sorry I didn't come out here long time ago. I would have liked to meet her. She must have been a hundred years old when she died" (233). The Reverend corrects him: "Older. Was a hundred when I was a boy" (233). Inexplicably, she is alive when Milkman arrives at the dilapidated home of her former slave owners. Milkman ponders this confusing paradox: "She was old, so old she was colorless. So old only her mouth and eyes were distinguishable features in her face" (240). Milkman's perplexed agitation continues:

> Milkman struggled for a clear thought, so hard to come by in a dream: Perhaps this woman is Circe. But Circe is dead. This woman is alive. That was as far as he got, because although the woman was talking to him, she might in any case still be dead – as a matter of fact, she *had* to be dead. (240)

While Pilate has a missing navel and is proficient with healing herbs and conjuring skills that involve voodoo, she still is a part of the natural world. Circe, on the other hand, appears to exist outside the normal realm of time and mortality. Morrison does not allude to Circe as a witch, but rather directly names her as such through Milkman's thoughts:

> He had dreams as a child, dreams every child had, of the witch who chased him down dark alleys, between lawn trees, and finally into rooms from which he could not escape. Witches in black dresses and red underskirts; witches with pink eyes and green lips, tiny witches, long rangy witches, frowning witches, smiling witches, screaming witches and laughing witches, witches that flew, witches that ran, and some that merely glided on the ground. So when he saw the woman at the top of the stairs there was no way for him to resist climbing up toward her outstretched hands, her fingers spread wide for him, her mouth gaping open for him, her eyes devouring him. (239)

Manuela López Ramírez explains that "the advent of patriarchy changed societies' treatment of women and their roles, especially those of old females by disempowering, demonizing, and making them invisible – oppressive tactics that lie at the core of the persecution of witches" (42). She further contends that "[i]n patriarchal communities . . . the Crone figure was suppressed and the fearful rejection of the Divine old woman, and by extension, that of all aging females began" (42). Morrison's Circe circumvents this "rejection" by supernaturally

outliving those who enslaved her. She gleefully states, ". . . I want to see it all go, make sure it does go, and that nobody fixes it up. I brought the dogs in to make sure" (247).

López Ramírez summarizes: "Like her Hellenic counterpart renowned for her vast knowledge of herbs and magical beverages and healing abilities, Circe 'is the ideal domestic provider, skilled in ancient medicinal arts such as prescribing cobwebs to stanch and heal Pilate's bleeding and infected pierced left ear.' Moreover, the witch has supernatural attributes: Pilate does not have a navel, and Circe is . . . 'timeless in age and sacred wisdom'" (46). Pilate and Circe are both examples of women with legitimate magical skills and abilities. As with the other novels, one is left wondering if this magic improves their lives. Pilate lives in a decrepit home but is surrounded by and nurtured with the love of her daughter and grand-daughter. However, her healing abilities and magic spells were not enough to prevent her granddaughter's suicide or her murder by a bullet meant for Milkman. Circe appears to end the novel in a surreal position of strength and power, but she lived her life in slavery, has survived all her family, and is living in a ramshackle, filthy home with only a pack of dogs for company. Circe's only worry is her dogs consuming her dead body: "I hope they find me soon enough and somebody'll take pity on me." She looked at the dogs "Hope they find me soon and don't let me lay in here too long" (245). Powerful women, but still suffering the injustices of poverty and racism. This ancient crone figure will be seen again in *The Bluest Eye*, but as a secondary character, rather than the prominent place Pilate and Circe hold in this novel.

Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye,* tells the coming of age story of three girls, Claudia and Frieda MacTeer and Pecola Breedlove, set in Morrison's hometown of Lorain, Ohio. The novel deals with the emotionally fraught subjects of racism, spousal and child abuse, incest

with a concurrent pregnancy, and mental health issues. Within this plot structure are two ancillary characters who embody Morrison's use of healing conjuring women.

Pecola's father, Cholly Breedlove, recalls his childhood spent with his guardian, Aunt Jimmy: "Sometimes when he watched Aunt Jimmy eating collards with her fingers, sucking her four gold teeth, or smelled her when she wore the asafetida bag around her neck" (103). Zauditu-Selassi states, "Aunt Jimmy, Cholly Breedlove's great aunt, belongs to a group of women easily identified in fiction as one of the wise women tied to an African past . . . The wearing of the asafetida bag is another practice of Aunt Jimmy's that indicates her being an African practitioner" (2007). When Aunt Jimmy became ill, her naturalistic cures were unsuccessful; "Finally it was decided to fetch M'Dear" (106).

M'Dear is described as "a quiet woman who lived in a shack near the woods" (106). We are given an immediate understanding that she is a poor, but "competent midwife and decisive diagnostician" (106). López Ramírez states that "the hag commonly lives isolated in a house deep in the forest at the periphery of the village, a place of liminality and transformation. . ." (43). Zauditu-Selassie furthers that explanation by stating that "M'Dear's proximity to the woods is an identifiable spiritual indication of her ability to access the spiritual realm. The "woods" is a metaphor for a place dense with spirits and an abode for the invisible powers consistent with West and Central African spiritual traditions" (2007). M'Dear, an archetypal Crone, rather than a Hag, stands in direct contrast to a hag we will encounter in *Sula*.

As another example of the seemingly eternal Crone, the reader learns that "[f]ew could remember when M'Dear was not around" (106). This description immediately places the woman in the same otherworldly, almost immortal realm as Circe. Zauditu-Selassie, describing M'Dear as "one of the timeless earth mothers," explains that "Morrison underscores the associative ideas

connected with these ageless, women as the repositories of indigenous knowledge" (2007). Cholly Breedlove asserts, "In any illness that could not be handled by ordinary means - known cures, intuition, or endurance – the word was always, "Fetch M'Dear" (106). M'Dear's innate, earthy knowledge will ultimately aid in the diagnosis and treatment of Aunt Jimmy and other members of her community.

M'Dear presents as a physically imposing healer with hair that gives her "power and authority to her soft black face" (106). Additional details to her uncanny nature advance M'Dear's position as a conjuring, supernatural woman. M'Dear carries a "hickory stick not for support but for communication" (106). This imagery places her in the sphere of biblical figures often portrayed with staffs, royal figures with scepters, and most aptly, Asclepius, the Greek god ever-present with a serpent-entwined rod who is most closely associated with doctors (Theoi Greek Mythology). While holding her stick, M'Dear diagnoses Aunt Jimmy through her senses; touching her cheek and hair, looking at her nails and feces, and listening to her chest and abdomen (107). Through this hands-on examination, she makes a diagnosis, recommends a treatment protocol, and further cements her "infallibility" (106). Aunt Jimmy and M'Dear are introduced to the reader as fascinatingly skilled women with powerful wisdom of African natural medicine and treatment. As both a midwife and an ancient healer, M'Dear is one representative of the cadre of mysteriously powerful women who Morrison positions as leaders in their communities, but the reader is fully aware of the fact that the women are living on the edges of a segregated, small Midwestern town.

Sula provides a unique perspective to the discussion of African American women as midwives and healers with paranormal powers. The novel's namesake is a college-educated Black woman who returns to her grandmother's house in the ironically named mountain-top

town called “the Bottom” (3). The novel focuses on the Peace family triumvirate of grandmother, Eva Peace, her daughter Hannah Peace, and her granddaughter, Sula Peace: The same central matriarchal structure found with Pilate and her daughter and granddaughter. Sula, “accompanied by a plague of robins” does not possess specific magical abilities, but sinister portents and negative energy surround her. (89). Nel, her closest childhood friend, “noticed the peculiar quality of the May that followed the leaving of the birds” when Sula returns home (94). Nel is not immune to Sula’s mysterious aura and realizes that “[a]lthough it was she alone who saw this magic, she did not wonder at it. She knew it was all due to Sula’s return to the Bottom” (95). The community, however, gives Sula an amusingly trivial set of “powers”: “Sula did not look her age,” “she had no childhood diseases,” “neither gnats nor mosquitoes would settle on her,” “when Sula drank beer she never belched” (115). In a fashion similar to Kit Taylor and Liza Hempstock's accusations, Sula is falsely blamed for causing accidents. She allegedly pushes Teapot down a set of stairs with a resultant fracture, triggers a man to choke and die on a chicken bone, and manifests a sty on a woman’s eye (115). The narrator helps the reader understand how Sula’s arrival becomes associated with evil and witchcraft: “[T]hey still dreaded the way a relatively trivial phenomenon could become sovereign in their lives and bend their minds to its will” (89). We are not led to believe that these accusations are based on fact, but one gleans that the community considers Sula to be “evil” (118). Admittedly, to some in the Bottom, Sula’s ostracism has as much to do with her leaving her community for education and employment, as much as for her sinister powers.

Sula dies alone in her ancestral home and some folks, described as “of the few who were not afraid to witness the burial of a witch” attend the service because “a strange woman [would not] keep them from their God” (150). Sula’s differentness from the women in her town and her

lack of social conformity puts her at odds with the rest of the community. The unexpectedness of her arrival, combined with the phenomena of a sky blackened with pigeons for two hours, leads the public to fear her arrival and question the subsequent sinister consequences of her return (89). Accused of evil and witchcraft, Sula is not the classically magical, conjuring woman normally described in Morrison's novels, but she represents an African American woman moving through society with an inexplicable aura. As with the other women, these powers do not prevent her social isolation or her premature death.

Sula's grandmother, Eva Peace, is a representative of the elder matriarch who has uncanny wisdom. Cheryl Wall aptly describes this woman:

> Her magnificence inheres in the greatness of her achievement (she keeps her children alive despite the societal odds), the grand scale of her expenditures (she is "creator and sovereign of [an] enormous house"), the splendidness of her appearance (her dresses stop at mid calf "so that her one glamorous leg was always in view"), and the arrogance of her ambition (she takes it upon herself to choose death for her son). Her neighbors stand in awe of her; they turn her into a legend. (1456)

López Ramírez states that "Morrison's Crones reverse the patriarchal archetypal image of the female elder. She revalues the traditional subservient and limited maternal domestic roles of aging females, and her household is transformed into a transgressive locus where women are empowered" (51). Though flawed, Eva stands as a feared and revered leader in her home and her small community.

We learn after her daughter's death that Eva can read dreams, and Zauditi-Selassie apprises the reader that Eva is "distressed after Hannah's death for not having recognized the signs that prefigured it" (2007):

> Eva mused over the perfection of the judgment against her. She remembered the wedding dream and recalled that weddings always meant death. And the red gown, well that was the fire, as she should have known. (78)

Eva's abilities do not provide her with the necessary warning to save her daughter from death and her discernment of the dream sadly arrives too late.

As young girls, while playing with a child nicknamed Chicken Little, Sula and Nel are responsible for his death by drowning. While swinging him "outward and around and around," Sula loses her grip and the toddler "sailed away out over the water" and drowned (61). Horrifyingly, neither Sula nor Nel seeks help for the toddler, nor did they ever reveal their culpability in his death. Towards the conclusion of the novel, a now-adult Nel visits Eva in her nursing home. Eva reveals to Nel that she knows the events surrounding Chicken Little's drowning death. Nel questions Eva about this heretofore secret knowledge and Eva readily admits that her deceased son "tells me things" (169). Zauditi-Selassie states that "African spiritual traditions, the Yoruba, in particular, regard death as a transition from this present earthly life to another life in the land of the spirits. Consonant with her understanding of life's continuation beyond the grave, Eva can communicate with Plum" (2007). An innate knowledge of information not readily available to others and the ability to communicate with her dead son places Eva in the company of otherworldly magical women. As with the other paranormal women, Eva's clairvoyance and seemingly omniscient abilities do not lessen her sufferings or her status as a solitary, old woman abandoned in a nursing home.

A final example of a magical woman in *Sula* is referred to only as "Ajax's mother" (126). The previous examples and those to follow involve women who are typically benevolent or morally ambiguous in their magical service to others. Ajax's mother is markedly different:

> She was an evil conjure woman, blessed with seven adoring children whose joy it was to bring her the plants, hair, underclothing, fingernail pairings, white hens, blood, camphor, pictures, kerosene and footstep dust that she needed, as well as to order Van Van, High John the Conqueror, Little John to Chew, Devils' Shoe String, Chinese Wash, Mustard seed and the Nine Herbs from Cincinnati. (126)

Bosky explains Ajax's mother's ingredients list in the framework of "mojo." She states

> Mojo is a term with origins in Africa, originally meant a charm; in the United States, from slavery times through the early twentieth centuries, it meant a small bag, filled with herbs, written prayers or spells, magical ingredients such as cemetery dust, and hair or fingernail clippings to tie the magic to an individual. Also called the mojo hand, conjure bag, and nation sack, such bags were usually protective, but could be used in casting a harmful spell. (699)

The passage implies that this "evil" woman is proficient in the dark arts and that she uses natural elements, like M'Dear's practice as a conjuring woman, but for more nefarious purposes. The narrator informs that "[s]he knew about the weather, omens, the living, the dead, dreams and all illnesses . . ." (126). Importantly, she makes a "modest living with her skills" (126). Ajax's mother is the first woman we learn who charges for her services.

Toothless and with a crooked back, Ajax's mother, a living embodiment of the archetypal Hag, neglects her children despite her "hoary knowledge" (126). Little else is known about this

woman other than her evil prowess and the fact that she is “as stubborn in her pursuits of the occult as the women of Greater Saint Matthew’s were in the search of redeeming grace” (127). Wall asserts, "With the utmost economy, the novel gestures to the mixture of the mundane and the supernatural, the homemade and the exotic that define the conjurer’s art. Readers may latch on to whatever details seem familiar and use their imaginations to understand the work that the character performs” (1458). She further contends that “[t]he dissonance created by her possession of this profound, if subjugated knowledge and the modest living it affords encapsulates the novel’s political critique. But the character herself makes no further appearance in the text” (1458). Ajax’s mother represents a powerful, darker side of magical women, but she remains firmly ensconced on the fringes of the African American community and is insignificant enough to disappear from the remaining text and to remain an anonymous character throughout a novel that places great import on naming.

Sula reveals three different types of mysterious women with otherworldly abilities. One observes Sula Peace, erroneously accused of witchcraft and evildoing, arriving with ominous and natural portents, and yet, dies young, friendless, and alone. Eva Peace, a reader of dreams, possesses an enigmatic, innate knowledge about a death that she did not have prior knowledge of and attributes this insight to communications with her dead son. Ajax’s mother, an unnamed “evil conjure woman” earns a living practicing her craft and remains harshly judged by her community. All three women live in a segregated, economically depressed, rural town despite the supernatural strength and power they possess. Powerful and potent conjuring women are no match for the cultural ills and poverty that surround them.

Set in the small town of Ruby, Oklahoma, *Paradise* (1997) ostensibly tells the story of an orphaned Portuguese woman, Consolata Sosa, raised at Christ the King School for Native Girls

by her beloved Mother Superior, Mary Magna (223). Yet, the novel follows the destructive path of several Black families who settled the town to self-segregate. Referring to themselves as "eight-rock," the men of these families hold rigid racial and gender roles for themselves and their family members. The close-knit and close-minded community is fatally rocked by the influx of women from the "outside" (193).

The convent school is located in an all-Black Oklahoma town, named Ruby. The school eventually closes, Mother Mary dies, And Consolata, also known as Connie finds herself hosting a variety of bereft, abused, neglected, peripatetic women. *Paradise* introduces two women who are both midwives and women with the spine-chilling ability to resurrect the dead. Lone DuPres, an elderly, orphaned woman raised by strangers, learns the skills of midwifery as an apprentice to her adoptive mother (190). She ultimately apprentices Connie into the realm of women healers when she first offers "to brew her something to help" with her menopausal symptoms. When Connie tells Mother Magna that her symptoms have eased with the brew, Mother Magna says, "Well, the teacher I am thinks 'baloney.' The woman I am thinks anything that helps, helps. But be very careful." Mary Magna lowered her voice. "I think she practices" (244). We learn from the religious leader that Lone is not merely an herbalist, but a mysterious "practitioner." Lone continues to visit Connie, offering her "information" (244). "Consolata complained that she did not believe in magic; that the church and everything holy forbade its claims to knowingness and its practice" (244). Lone manages to practice her conjuring without it affecting her mainstream religious beliefs. She tells Connie, "You stuck on dividing Him from His works. Don't unbalance His world" (244). The omniscient narrator informs the reader:

> Consolata listened halfheartedly. Her curiosity was mild; her religious habits entrenched. Her safety did not lie in the fall of a broom or the droppings of a

> coyote. Her happiness was not increased or decreased by the sight of a malformed animal. She fancied no conversation with water. Nor did she believe that ordinary folk could or should interfere with natural consequences. (244)

Connie is not interested in conjuring practices like M'Dear and Ajax's mother. Her Roman Catholic upbringing initially disallows her acceptance of her abilities. She will grow into her talents, however.

The narrator reveals that Lone "still believed that decent women had their babies at home and saloon women delivered in hospitals" (190). Recounting her mother's words, DuPres informs that "the midwife is the interference, the one giving orders, on whose secret skill so much depended, and the dependency irritated . . . "(272). A midwife like Circe, a healer like M'Dear and Pilate, and possessing an innate knowledge much like Eva Peace, Lone "sensed rather than heard the accident" that acquaints the reader to Consolata and Lone's mystical abilities (244). Arriving on the scene of an auto accident, Lone encourages Consolata to "step on in" and help the dead teenager. Lone reveals that she is too old to perform the resurrection and coaches Consolata on the skills which she somehow innately knows. The young man returns to life and Lone exalts, "You gifted. I knew it from the start" (245). Feeling guilty about her powers, Consolata confesses that her ability "seemed nasty to her. Like devilment. Like evil craft" (246). Assuring Consolata that she is not an "evil conjure woman," DuPres reinforces that her gifts are God-given (246). Consolata utilizes her "seeing in" to prolong her beloved Mother Superior's life until she recognizes that the old nun would have "recoiled in disgust and fury knowing her life was prolonged by evil" (247). With great soul-searching and with the support from her mentor, Lone, Consolata comes to uneasy terms with her supernatural abilities:

> Thus the gift was "in sight." Something God made free to anyone who wanted to develop it. It was devious but it settled the argument between herself and Lone and made it possible for her to accept Lone's remedies for all sorts of ills and to experiment with others while the "in sight" blazed away. (247)

Never quite fully accepting the sacredness of her gift, Consolata views herself as "half cursed, half blessed" and "damned" if she used her powers (248). The narrator affords us insight into Consolata's thoughts: "Troubling as it was, yoking the sin of pride to witchcraft, she came to terms with it in a way she persuaded herself would not offend Him or place her soul in peril. It was a question of language" (247). Connie acknowledges her gifts as "witchcraft," and becomes the strongest and most enigmatic of Morrison's conjuring women.

After Mother Superior's death, Consolata assumes full leadership of the convent and the group of abused, abandoned, and traumatized women who cycle in and out of the home. She morphs into a Mother Superior of her own making, requiring the women to lie naked on the basement floor, as she "painted the body's silhouette" (263). Utilizing religious symbolism, Consolata mysteriously facilitates the women into vivid dreams that enable them to tell their stories replete with their individual pain and horror. The verbalization of their stories allows the women to begin to heal from their trauma.

Connie has incredible powers, but the Convent itself seems to have a certain supernatural aura. One woman seeking refuge at the Convent, Mavis, grieves the death of her newborn twins who suffocated in her hot car while she was in the grocery store. While remembering her initial days at the convent, Mavis recounts the nightmarish trouble she suffered:

> Still, when the thing came at night she didn't fight it anymore. Once upon a time it had been an occasional nightmare-a lion cub that gnawed her throat. Recently it had taken another form-human-and lay on top or approached from the rear. "Incubus," Connie had said. "Fight it," she said. But Mavis couldn't or wouldn't. (171)

Despite these nighttime assaults, Mavis is comforted by the presence of her twins: "She still heard Merle and Pearl, felt their flutter in every room of the Convent" (171). The other women also heard Mavis' dead babies. One visitor admits that "I've heard children laughing, singing sometimes. But never crying" (130). The Convent houses not only a powerful conjuring woman but has a mysterious aura all its own.

Angry at the strange women who do not bow to their edicts and suspicious of their women traveling to the convent for assistance, the novel concludes with the men of the community storming the convent and murdering all the women. We "hear" the armed men's prophetic and angry thoughts as they hunt the women. One asks, "You think they got powers? I *know* they got powers" (275). Another ruminates, "Bitches. More like witches" (276). The men, following in a long line of previous examples, "other" the women by angrily stating "[b]efore those heifers came to town this was a peaceable kingdom" (276). They justify their murders by criticizing the women's lack of participation in their mainstream religion: "These here sluts out there by themselves never step foot in church and I bet you a dollar to a fat nickel they ain't thinking about one either. They don't need men and they don't need God" (276). Lone summarizes the dilemma the community has with the women: "Not women locked safely away from men; but worse, women who chose themselves for company which is to say not a convent but a coven" (276). As discussed in Chapter 2, some wealthy women were accused and

persecuted as witches out of simple greed. One man, Sargeant forthrightly explains his covetousness:

> But he would be thinking how much less his outlay would be if he owned the Convent land, and how, if the women are gone from there, he would be in a better position to own it. Everyone knew he had already visited the Convent- to "warn" them, which is to say he offered to buy the place, and when the response was an incomprehensible stare, he told the old woman to "think carefully" and that "other things could happen to lower the price." (277)

Not content to merely ostracize these women who "don't need men" or God, the angry male lynch mob shoots and kills all the inhabitants. The women disappear after the mass shooting and no explanation is given for the missing corpses. Maha Marouan explains:

> The massacre of the Convent women is clearly reminiscent of the witch hunts of early European and American history, where women were executed under the pretext of sexual deviance and practices of dark magic. After the shooting, however, the bodies of the Convent women mysteriously disappear in a surrealist manner of a witch tale, only to reappear in another realm, as strong and triumphant spirits. (13)

The murdered women materialize to family members and the visits appear to mend fences and provide closure to the women. It is not a stretch to understand their disappearance within the framework of the Flying African myth. Inexplicably, these women have been spirited away and their corpses are not found.

The novel ends with a cryptic scene of Consolata on a beach with Piedade. Melanie Anderson states that Connie is

> reconnecting with the singing woman she described earlier to her four proteges. The final image of the two women on the beach is not of a perfect place: "Around them on the beach, sea trash gleams. Discarded bottle caps sparkle near a broken sandal. A small dead radio plays the quiet surf. Similar to the Convent women's reclamation of their haunted pasts, these are images of detritus redeemed in that a broken radio can still "play" and "trash" can "gleam." (2008)

As with the other four women, Connie reconnects with a person from her past life in a place that seems less than paradisiacal. Anderson states that "[t]his space seems to be simultaneously earthly, spiritual, and timeless as the two women remember events that might not ever have happened and share each other's memories in a close connection" (2008). While sitting on the beach, the two women watch "[a]nother ship, perhaps, but different, heading to port, crew, and passengers, lost and saved, atremble, for they have been disconsolate for some time. Now they will rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in Paradise" (318). Anderson calls this beach a "space (that) is a true crossroads of physical and temporal space: a space of spirits" (2008). A similar liminal space is seen at the Convent itself when the local minister and his fiancée visit the space after the murders: "[T]hey saw it. Or sensed it, rather for there was nothing to see" (305). The minister saw a window and his partner saw a door. The omniscient narrator informs:

> Who saw a closed door; who saw a raised window. Anything to avoid reliving the shiver or saying out loud what they were wondering. Whether through a door needing to be opened or a beckoning window already raised, what would happen

if you entered? What would be on the other side? What on earth would it be? What on earth? (305)

Paradise illustrates Morrison's ability to create female characters who live within, but beyond the typical realm where most humans exist. The novel illustrates women who have the uncanny ability to resurrect the dead, deliver babies, administer abortifacients, and provide herbs used in spells. All these powerful skills do not, however, prevent the women from being judged as guilty by the community's patriarchy and subsequently hunted and killed in their sanctuary. The novel ends somewhat optimistically with the women's spirits carrying forth, but they are executed for their "otherness." They were magic, but they are still dead.

Toni Morrison's novels present strong, powerful black women in the roles of naturalistic healers, midwives, or eerie, magical conjuring women. These intrinsic skills provide the women with a certain degree of stature and influence within their African American female community, but their magic is irrelevant to the legal and religious patriarchy where they must coexist. Left to contemplate why these women are unable to use their strength and powers to assert their dominance and authority, the reader must struggle with the uncomfortable notion that racism and sexism are the stronger forces.

CHAPTER 9. CONCLUSION

"Gather ye ryte close, goode people. Come close until the fire near scorch ye, for I charge ye that alle must see how thee last true wytch in England dies. For wytch I am, for so I am judged, yette I knoe not what my true Cryme may be. And therefore let myne deathe be a messuage to the worlde. Gather ye ryte close, I saye, and marke well the fate of alle who meddle with such as theye do note understand." Good Omens, Neil Gaiman

Accusations of witchcraft and subsequent persecution for alleged crimes of magic or cavorting with the devil occurred globally and continues in parts of the world today. Society became fixated on these women who appeared to have special supernatural powers. A survey of the history of witch hunts revealed that women were often found suspect for a variety of reasons or no reason at all. Young, orphaned girls could be a drain on society's resources, as could elderly, infirmed widows. The poor were not the only vulnerable; wealthy, land-owning widows often found themselves suspected and their land seized. Greed and capitalism were not the only reasons a woman could find herself at the mercy of the religious or legal patriarchy. As women tended to care for the health and well-being of their children and other women, they acquired specialized knowledge and skill in herbal treatments for a variety of maladies. Certain knowledgeable women became local midwives and assisted in childbirth, rudimentary birth control, and pregnancy termination. This specialized knowledge and skills tended to exclude men, until a more organized, male medical profession evolved. Once men had a financial incentive to have women seeking their services and delivering their babies in physician sponsored hospitals, it financially benefitted the men to accuse these naturalistic healers of the crimes of witchcraft.

Within this context, I began observing witches, conjuring women, and mysterious healers and midwives in a large amount of literature and I became aware of how often the literary trope

of witchcraft or conjuring woman occurred. In the literature I examined, excluding the two pieces of speculative/fantasy fiction, the women accused of, or actually possessing supernatural abilities subsist in poverty and hardship. The two Euro-American YA novels present the sexism that comes into play with the accusations, and in Liza Hempstock's case (*The Graveyard Book*), her subsequent execution. The remaining novels present the accused women existing at the intersection of both racism and sexism. The novels, except for *The Witch of Blackbird Pond,* present fictionalized women who possess actual otherworldly powers. Toni Morrison's novels are rife with women who read dreams, perform spells, converse with the dead, resurrect the dead, are seemingly immortal, and whose bodies disappear after their deaths. The question that remains is despite all this unbelievable power, does the magic serve the women who possess it? After careful study, with few exceptions, the answer is it does not. In other words, regardless of their abilities, the women with these inexplicable powers reside on the outskirts of society, both literally and figuratively, are poverty-stricken, ostracized, and in several cases murdered despite their powers.

An exception is made for the young women in *Akata Witch* and *The Children of Blood and Bone.* Though both books have their magical teens experience hardship throughout their journeys, their magical abilities are celebrated and both young women are alive and flourishing at the novels' conclusions. It is a stark commentary that the only avenue for strong and powerful women to survive and prosper is in an imaginary fantasy construct.

The Flying African myth serves as a segue between a discussion of the YA novels and Toni Morrison's works. Several picture books retell this fascinating myth and it lends itself to further discussion of the magical abilities of certain people from Africa. Toni Morrison weaves the myth throughout *Song of Solomon,* as well as introducing the reader to the magnificently

powerful Circe and Pilate. It also can be argued that the murdered women in *Paradise* take flight and manage to be spirited away from the scene of their massacre.

Based on the examples cited, strong and powerful women, even when possessing supernatural, magical forces are unable to overcome the stronger powerful ideologies of racism and sexism. Though a grim observation, the fantasy writers give a glimpse of optimism that in a futuristic time or a parallel universe, the young women can use their strengths and talents and be successful leaders. One can only hope.

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