Chapter Three
Mixed-Race Heritage: Assertion of Walker’s Cultural and Spiritual Hybridity

“Thinking together is enormously creative; it has huge survival value”.

(Ernest Callenbach, “Epistle to the Ecotopians”)

Alice Walker’s writings have, as their informing principle, an endorsement of her mixed-race genealogy. Whilst her work may not always be particularly ‘Indian,’ the influence of native American expression, whether emanating from unique geographical backdrop or distinct cultural narratives, is often present. Judith Plant explains the significance of earth-based spiritual beliefs of native Americans or Africans as an integral part of ecofeminist spirituality in these words:

The shift from the Western theological tradition of the hierarchical chain of being to an earth-based spirituality begins the healing of the split between spirit and matter. For ecofeminist spirituality, like the traditions of native Americans and other tribal peoples sees the spiritual as alive in us, where spirit and matter, mind and body are all part of the same living organism. (113)

The close connection of native Americans or Africans with land and nature cannot be understated. Many women writers have shown a keen orientation in foregrounding the role of indigenous peoples towards the creation of a sustainable, environmental ethic. Talking about the contributions of women writers in constructing an ecologically firm and just ground, Patrick D. Murphy, a noted critic writes:

The spirituality these women authors represent, like their sense of ecological responsibility and their inhabitational orientation, forms part of an alternative reality, which in the long haul will prove to be far less illusory than what passes for realistic in the current ecosuicidal milieu of transnational consumptionist culture. At a time when indigenous peoples’ very existence as living beings, as well as their collective
existence as cultures and individual existence as knowledge bearers, is coming under increasing pressure of displacement and efforts at dispersal, it is imperative to support the alternative representations of reality that these women authors provide through their instructive, enchanting, and hauntingly well written novels.

Walker’s mixed ancestry has given her privilege to speak on behalf of disparate cultures and traditions which apparently seem to be diverse and contested bodies of discourse. However, a close re-reading of these races and their ethnicities will bring out cross-cultural integration interfused with their shared history of oppression and exploitation, though not without its paradoxical limitations and ambiguities. In her essay, “The Closet of the Soul,” Walker writes:

But crucial to our development, too, it seems to me, is an acceptance of our actual as opposed to our mythical selves. We are the mestizos of North America. We are black, yes, but we are “white,” too, and we are red. To attempt to function as only one, when you are really two or three, leads, I believe, to psychic illness. . . . Regardless of who will or will not accept us, including perhaps, our “established” self, we must be completely (to the extent it is possible) who we are. (LBW 82)

Aijaz Ahmad has noted, insofar as hybridity “resides now in occupying a multiplicity of subject positions. Not . . . only does the writer have all cultures available to him or her as resource, for consumption, but he or she actually belongs in all of them, by virtue of belonging properly in none” (qtd. in Franklin and Lyons 51). Transcending the perils of fixity of cultural identities, the concepts of hybridity and the third space contribute to an approach that avoids the perpetuation of simple polarization and create multi-faceted patterns of cultural exchange and maturation. This space paves way for new forms of cultural meaning and production, blurs rigid boundaries and calls into question the established compartmentalization of culture and identity. Cultural difference, according to Homi Bhabha, is a “particular constructed discourse” and “cultural location is always an articulation of various intersecting and often contesting positions, and essentializing difference or isolating it from other positionalities is counterproductive. Race, class, gender and other forms of
difference are always being “constituted and negotiated in a cross-boundary process”’’ (qtd. in Olson and Worsham 362).

Hybridity can be used as one of the key tools of counter-discourse as the boundaries of race, nation, self, language and culture are relational, dynamic, and in a state of flux. Haz Yazdiha says: “Illuminating this mutual construction of culture, studies of hybridity can offer the opportunity for a counter-narrative, a means by which the dominated can reclaim shared ownership of a culture that relies upon them for meaning” (32). He further maintains:

Racial hybridity, or the integration of two races which are assumed to be distinct and separate entities, can be considered first in terms of the physical body. Historically, the corporeal hybrid was birthed from two symbolic poles, a bodily representation of colonizer and colonized. These mixed births, mestizo, mulatto, muwallad, were stigmatized as a physical representation of impure blood, and this racism long served as a tool of power. . . . However . . . these classifications of black and white no longer carry the same power of representation, yet the old labels persist. (32)

Though hybridity generates new cultural and spiritual meanings, yet its production has been problematic. Most historical research and theories being Euro-centric, their authenticity and validity have always been questionable. Most of the early literature written about African-Americans and native Americans had a lop-sided analytical approach, as Euro-Americans entrenched in binary oppositions like nature/culture, male/female, black-white deliberately tended to erase the history of cultural hybridity between African-Americans and native Americans. Jack Forbes reflects upon the obliteration of Afro-native American cultural exchange and states:

Thousands of volumes have been written about the historical and social relations existing between Europeans and the native Peoples of the Americans and between Europeans and Africans, but relations between native American and Africans have been sadly neglected. The entire Afro-native American cultural exchange and contact experience is a fascinating and significant subject, but one largely obscured by a focus
upon European activity and European colonial relations with “peripheral” subject peoples. *(Africans and Native Americans)*

The hegemonic control of the colonialists in undermining the historical facts about native Americans and African-Americans has been a deterrent in the dissemination of authentic information, since writer’s peculiar whims, cultural background, and personal prejudices give the past a different coloring. In the words of Francis Flavin:

“A ‘Historiography’ is not the study of history. Instead, it is the study of the writing of history. The way in which an individual, a people, or a nation writes its history reveals much about those who wrote it. The past itself does not change, but the way that people interpret it does. The elements of history that are emphasized or downplayed, and the value judgments assigned to them, all change—reflecting the writer’s own personal and cultural biases.

Whether documented or not, the contact between native Americans and African-Americans occurred in the forms of alliances whether marital, military, or slavish. In fact, the history of black Indians—when and where their relationships might have begun and what they are at present—is itself a rich topic for further research. A noteworthy thing is that the colonial documents and plantation records are a testimony to the racial and cultural exchange between both the races, creating ‘Contact Zones’. *Black Indians* is a powerful, illustrated book containing historical photographs and overview of slavery, runaway slaves, and black/Indian marriages in early American history. Besides being a definitive work in tracing relations between blacks and American Indians since the time of the conquest, the book gives a valuable insight into the neglected facts of the American history. The intersected lives of African-Americans and native Americans resulted not only in the emergence of black Indians, but also many common and overlapping beliefs, customs, rituals including the relationship between man and the natural world. Jonathan Brennan also describes ways in which Seminoles created a unique African-native culture more readily than other tribes, exemplifying “culturally and racially mixed communities” where “distinctions between African and native began to blur” (*When Brer Rabbit* Intro 7).
Since most of the native American literature was oral, a real understanding and unearthing of accurate history from their perspective has been a challenging task. Lindsey Claire Smith promulgates:

In order to achieve a more dynamic comprehension of race in American literature, it is necessary to recover and reexamine texts that complicate a polarization of black and white, and in so doing, unearth perceptions about American Indians that inform our notions of heritage, community, spirituality, and American identity. (1)

The recovery and emergence of new African and native American voices, while rife with arguments of identity politics, appropriation, sovereignty, and fragmentation, invite an engaging critical discourse synthesizing the voices of native American and African-American scholars in a vibrant rediscovery of shared and often intertwined histories. In the words of Jack Forbes: “Africans and Americans must now be studied together without their relations always having to be obscured by the separations established through the work of scholars focusing essentially upon some aspect of European expansion and colonialism” (Africans and Native Americans 1). According to Ruether, the aggressive combination of Christian mission and colonialism has been responsible for the cultural and genocidal uprooting of the native Americans, and writes further about the current exploitative practice of commodification of their cultures: “Today they are the target of new colonizing and commodification by multinational pharmaceutical companies that see their lands and traditions as possessed of valuable resources for food and medicine” (qtd. in IEWR 78).

Jonathan Brennan calls for an examination of writing within an interpretive framework combining both African-American and native American critical theories. To read only through one identity, he explains, leads to “misinterpreting the merging traditions that underlie the hybrid text” (Mixed 19). He suggests that “in order to really understand the tradition from which [ethnically mixed] writers create their literary works, one must also examine their parallel heritage without denying either one” (Mixed 19).

These intertwined lives of African-Americans and native Americans create a dynamics of shared and diverging pathways that inform and shape each other’s identity. It is a crossroads of both anguish and pleasure since the shared history is convoluted in many respects. When European nations began massive scale colonization of the native Americans
as well as that of Africans brought as slaves to the Americas, their target was to obliterate their cultures, languages, beliefs, and spirituality through genocide, removal, trickery, dislocation, and slavery. This unethical assault silenced and marginalized the native Americans, the original inhabitants of the Americas as well as the African-Americans. Winona La Duke writes:

Every Indigenous person has rankled and sickened at the omissions, stereotypes, and deception in a history written by a colonizer. The dehumanizing process is carried out through the words written, repeated, and branded upon a people, diminishing our stature as traditional people, as women, as a part of world history. (xv-xvi)

The present chapter seeks to ascertain the cultural and spiritual hybridity in Alice Walker’s novels which embody the shared oppression of the native Americans and African-Americans as well as the ‘exoticization’ and ‘commodification’ of their customs by the dominant Western culture. It also aims to foreground their fortitude in carrying on with strategic resistance against the neo-imperial powers. Walker’s rediscovery of shared and often intertwined histories of both the races did not allow her to be conceded into a singular identity, as she is herself a product of multiple racial and cultural identities. By projecting reciprocity and mutuality of relations as a desirable behavioral code in her fiction, Walker upholds the dignity of her mixed genealogy (the native American as well as the African-American) and affirms that indigenous peoples are the stewards of the earth and can lead the way towards reconciliation of gender roles and environmental justice so that the people of the world can co-exist peacefully. John A. Grim writes*:

The term “indigenous” is a generalized reference to the thousands of small scale societies who have distinct languages, kinship systems, mythologies, ancestral memories, and homelands. . . . Since these societies are extremely diverse, any general remarks are suspect of imposing ideas and concepts on them. Indigenous religions do not constitute a “world religion” in the same way as, for example, Buddhism or Christianity. Central to indigenous traditions is an awareness of the

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* These lines have been taken from an article which was originally published in *Earth Ethics* 10, no.1 (Fall 1998). Copyright © 1998 Center for Respect of Life and Environment.
integral and whole relationship of symbolic and material life. Ritual practices and the cosmological ideas which undergird society cannot be separated out as an institutionalized religion from the daily round of subsistence practices.

Though racial and cultural cross-exchange occurred, the extent and nature of cultural mixing are to be ascertained, since it is known that many civilized native American tribes including Cherokees held African-Americans as slaves. It is doubtless that Alice Walker is not unaware of the complex intersection of native American tribes and African-American tribes, whose foundation rests on alliance, negotiation, and exploitative institution of slavery. It has been portrayed in many accounts of racial mixing that this master-slave relationship between them was probably not as exploitative as between Europeans and their slaves. Many native American tribes assimilated African-American slaves into their societies, and later freed them forging an alliance by allowing and negotiating even inter-racial marriages between the two tribes. Africans and native Americans shared the common experience of enslavement, as is affirmed by Jude Jacques:

In addition to working together in the fields, they lived together in communal living quarters, began to produce collective recipes for food and herbal remedies, shared myths and legends, and ultimately intermarried. The intermarriage of Africans and native Americans was facilitated by the disproportionality of African male slaves to females (3 to 1) and the decimation of native American males by disease, enslavement, and prolonged war against the colonists. (115-16)

It is interesting to note that the familial organizational structure of these tribes was matrilinear or matrifocal, as Kay Givens McGowan maintains, “The great native American civilizations of the Southeast of the present-day United States—importantly including the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Muscogee, and Seminole—were matriarchal societies” (53). As native American societies in the Southeast were primarily matrilineal, African males who married native American women often became members of the wife’s clan and citizens of the respective nation. As relationships grew, the lines of distinction began to blur and the evolution of red-black people began to pursue its own course ("African Cherokee History"). McGowan maintains further:
Once the British gained more control over “the colonies,” Christian missionaries immediately began imposing their values regarding chastity, marriage, and morality on Southeastern women, in particular. The patriarchal society of the British dictated that men would be economically and socially dominant in this new land. Men, of course, were allowed to enjoy the double standard that was, well, standard in Europe.

(57)

According to McGowan, the new Americans put forth the notion that the uncivilized, non-Christian natives were incapable of caring for themselves but needed guidance to create “civilized” societies. The marginalization of matriarchy was now complete. McGowan explains:

While claiming to be the guardian of native Americans and their interests, the U.S. Government crafted policies, laws, and cultural frameworks that were to demolish what was left of the matriarchies of the so-called Five Civilized Tribes of the Southeast: the Muscogee, the Choctaw, the Chickasaw, the Cherokee, and the newly formed Seminole Nation, which consisted of Muscogees allied with escaped African slaves. (60-61)

Walker does not focus on the controversial nature of such ‘hybridity’, rather she attempts to foreground the feminist ideas and ecological harmony to be the backbone of the spiritual, religious, and social beliefs of native Americans and African-Americans. In an interview with Frank Barat, Walker asserts:

Bedrock for me is probably indigenous wisdom and medicine. It is crucial for the world to support, rather than eradicate, the people who can best teach us all how to live on and with the planet. One of the things still held in indigenous memory is the idea of Mother Leadership. Male planetary rule is not sustainable and in fact has led to the degradation of the planet we now experience.
The research attempts to study why she chooses to stay detached from the acrimonious issues confronting both the races. How can indigenous tribes contribute towards restoration of ecological balance of the fragile earth? Are there feminist and ecological lessons to be learnt from the African-Americans, native Americans or black Indians? At the same time, how is Western hegemonic discourse ‘fetishizing’ or ‘commodifying’ the traditional practices and rituals of indigenous tribes? Hence, another important aspect to be considered is the misappropriation or illegitimate patenting of certain indigenous customs as well as commodities (which have been their life-blood for centuries) by multi-national companies, causing environmental health hazards on one hand, and robbing indigenous tribes of their legitimate rights on the other hand.

Though Walker has some Scotch-Irish connection too, it is her African-American and native American heritage and teachings which contribute considerably to the rich tapestry of her writings. Walker’s literary writings reflect her acknowledgement and assertion of the unbroken chain of ancestors. These beliefs stem from all fragments of her mixed-race identity. She intersperses her writings with cross- and inter-cultural landscape of African-Americans and native Americans infusing a rich cultural and spiritual blend. In addition, she identifies black-Indian alliance as a source of resistance to colonization and its corollary—women devaluation and environmental degradation. Both the races have history and shared experiences of detainment, removal, relocation, murder, rape, and genocide at the hands of white Europeans which Walker explicates in her activism as well as her oeuvre.

Evoking and affirming her Cherokee heritage, Walker makes a special mention of it in CP, when Olivia tells how her father and Mama Nettie had created an Olinka alphabet:

The creation of this alphabet had been Corrine’s idea. She was Cherokee on her mother’s side, and her mother’s mother had been involved in the creation of the Cherokee alphabet and had also been an editor of the Cherokee newspaper ever printed in the Cherokee language. The fact that they had a newspaper was one of the reasons the Cherokee were considered one of the five “civilized” tribes of Indians in America. (151)

Through her writings, Walker synthesizes the plight of Africans and native Americans as colonizers distanced them from their lands through encroachment or displacement, and
eventually relocated them to barren lands or reservation areas. In the words of Kathryn Manuelito:

As indigenous peoples to this land, American Indian Nations have experienced colossal invasion from European powers, genocide, and indoctrination through reorganization of their communities and personal lives. American Indian Nations, today, maintain their identities and hold on to their sovereignty. (169)

Through the character of Ola (Fanny’s father) in *TMF*, Walker highlights the shared heritage or the cultural exchange amongst people belonging to different tribes and races. He is an African playwright who plans to use Elvis Presley as a metaphor, a kind of vehicle to put forward his thoughts regarding the psyche of Americans to negate any connection with the blacks or native Americans: “That in him white Americans found a reason to express their longing and appreciation for the repressed native American and black parts of themselves. Those non-European qualities they have within them and all around them, constantly, but which they’ve been trained from birth to deny” (189-90).

Walker’s novels are to be examined in the light of conceptual, cultural, and thematic framework discussed above. In *NTH*, Walker exposes the deplorable conditions of African-Americans as well as natives who are often pushed to the periphery of the mainstream society and meted out inhuman treatment in plants and factories run by the white capitalist class. Through the character of Lily Paul’s father who works in a meatpacking plant, Walker sustains her viewpoint. Lily Paul narrates, “Even then, the late Forties, immigrants from Eastern Europe and undocumented workers from Mexico were beginning to be offered the dirtier, lower-paying jobs that men like my father held; he was extremely upset by this” (97). The abject poverty and the humiliation faced by her father in the meatpacking plant makes him belligerent, hostile and abusive, and obscure his benevolent fatherly nature of which his children would get only an occasional glimpse.

In *CP*, Nettie’s letters to her sister, Celie, unmask the appalling condition of the local Olinkan tribe, as one of her letters reveals: “. . . The Olinka, along with their missionaries, were placed on a barren stretch of land that has no water at all for six months of the year” (204). Another letter mentions that the Olinka village is due to be planted in rubber trees by the European colonizers and further unravels: “The Olinka hunting territory has already been
destroyed, and the men must go farther and farther away to find game” (156). There are numerous points of convergence where one can notice Africans as well as native Americans facing displacement from their lands.

The racial mixing also generated a mixed response amongst the hybrids as Nettie in CP tells in one of her letters to her sister, Celie, about the Spelman Seminary where Corrine, a missionary, had received her training. She says:

Sixty years or so before the founding of the school, the Cherokee Indians who lived in Georgia were forced to leave their homes and walk, through the snow, to resettlements camps in Oklahoma. A third of them died on the way. But many of them refused to leave Georgia. They hid out as colored people and eventually blended with us. Many of these mixed-race people were at Spelman. Some remembered who they actually were, but most did not. If they thought about it at all (and it became harder to think about Indians as there were none around) they thought they were yellow or reddish brown and wavy-haired because of white ancestors, not Indian. (212)

The tension between the two races is also touched upon in Meridian when Meridian’s father and mother have an argument over his decision to lease out their land to a Cherokee, Walter Longknife. He believes: “But the land already belonged to them. I was just holding it. The rows of my cabbages and tomatoes run right up along the biggest coil of the Sacred Serpent. That mound is full of dead Indians. Our food is made healthy from the iron and calcium from their bones” (47). Meridian sees a similarity between Longknife and her father immediately: “He was a wanderer, a mourner, like her father; she could begin to recognize what her father was by looking at him” (54).

Walker reiterates the spiritual connection of the native Americans with the land, which becomes clear after one gets to the root of native American beliefs and traditions. In “Rituals, Beliefs and Customs of native American Culture”, the connection between land and native inhabitants has been explained:

Many of the native inhabitants of America had no such concept of land ownership. Native belief essentially held that the land was a gift from the creator, to be used in
common by all of the society for survival and sustenance. In many native societies, no single individual owned the land and no legal institution existed to exclude certain classes of persons from the land. Land ownership, then, was a fluid concept, especially among the nomadic tribes who moved from area to area with the seasons of the year.

Walker reconciles the beliefs and vision of blacks as well as native Americans through juxtaposition of their ecological views. Charlene Spretnak asserts, “To traditional native cultures, the intricately balanced relatedness of the Earth community obviously calls forth awareness and sensitivity on the part of humans. Native people find the extent to which modern citizens are oblivious to the rest of the natural world incredible” (“Earth Body” 263). Many writers articulate the beliefs of mutuality and inter-connectedness of life (including plant and animal life) which are valued by many indigenous tribes and cultures. Carol Lee Sanchez affirms, “...they believe that everything in the universe is imbued with spirit and they embrace, acknowledge, and respect the animating force within/surrounding/beyond all things - including humans. The idea of “the Sacred” held by traditional Indians is all-inclusive, and to be connected to the Spirit World is to be “in communion” with the Great Mystery” (222).

In *Meridian*, Meridian’s father considers the black race to be responsible to some extent for the disappearance of the native Americans. However, Meridian’s mother does not agree with his viewpoint and tells him grudgingly, “Besides, you told me how surprised you were to find that some of them had the nerve to fight for the South in the Civil War. That ought to make up for those few black soldiers who rode against Indians in the Western cavalry” (49). Meridian’s father expresses his disbelief in the lop-sided judgment because according to him, neither side was guilty or innocent, “just ignorant” (49).

Though *Meridian* is a novel about the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s in the US, yet it is steeped in celebration of Walker’s native American heritage, which acts as a ‘sub-text’ of the novel. Walker admits, “...Meridian as a total work is the whole sub layer of Indian consciousness, which as I get older becomes more and more pronounced in my life” (*TWC60*). Meridian Hill’s father (a black man) has built himself a small white room in the backyard where he spends his time. In the novel, Meridian sees an old map which shows the
ancient settlements of Indians in North America and all over the walls are photographs of Indian chiefs like Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, Geronimo, Little Bear, and Yellow Flower and “[t]here were also books on Indians, on their land rights, reservations, and their wars” (46). The photograph of a “frozen Indian child” (46) whose mother lies beside her in a bloody heap, sends a wave of chill down the spine of Meridian. Meridian is sensitized about the brutalities perpetuated on the Indians by the Euro-Americans due to her father’s sensitivity and kinship towards them.

Meridian’s great-grandmother, Feather Mae underwent an epiphany-like transformation once at the Serpent mound which made her abdicate any religion that did not value physical ecstasy. She also understood the importance of place as she passed on her spiritual connection to the Sacred Serpent Indian burial mound. As a young woman, Feather Mae spent much time at the Sacred Serpent mound and eventually discovered an opening into the mound. She felt spiritually regenerated and rejuvenated after falling into a forty feet deep pit. Here, Walker foregrounds her love for earth-based spirituality shared by many indigenous tribes including native Americans. Meridian gains an understanding of being just a dot in the whole creation through an epiphany-like manifestation as was felt by her great grandmother, and she philosophizes about the relation between the living and the dead:

The Indians had constructed the coil in the Serpent’s tail in order to give the living a sensation similar to that of dying: The body seemed to drop away, and only the spirit lived, set free in the world. But she was not convinced. It seemed to her that it was a way the living sought to expand the consciousness of being alive, there where the ground about them was filled with the dead. (53)

In Meridian, Walker deliberates the plight of the Indians whose lands are snatched away for them to be turned into some profit-making enterprise such as tourist spots: “The Indian burial mounds of the Sacred Serpent and her father’s garden of prize beans, corn and squash were to be turned into a tourist attraction, a public park” (49). The scene points poignantly to the shared land issues of both Blacks and Indians, neither of whom are allowed to attain and keep land. In an interview with Moni Vasu, Walker states her opinion: “America is America. It was founded on the slaughter of the Indians, genocide of the indigenous people and the enslavement of black people – and all for profit. It’s a capitalist system. They have
enshrined that belief that profit matters more than anything else.” For the capitalists, land is a commodity to be used and exploited for monetary benefits whereas native Americans consider it as the basis of sustenance. Padraig Kirwan clearly defines the role and importance of land as per native American beliefs:

For the native American, nature and ecology represent and include what are often the most important elements of an aboriginal lifestyle. Fundamentally, the earth is the creator, a spiritual being containing a multitude of natural deities. In this way the land is the source of all sustenance — a powerful source of stories and tribal history, and also a definer of identity, both tribal and individual, whilst also providing physical sustenance.

In *Meridian*, the county courthouse adds further insult when after offering a small payment the family is further warned “to stay away from Sacred Serpent Park which, now that it belongs to the public, was of course not open to Colored” (56). Meridian does not share her love towards native Americans with her brothers. Meridian’s brothers were not interested in farming and “had no feeling for land or for Indians or for crops” (50), and for them, “the word “farm” was actually used as a curse word” (50).

In *NTH*, Hugh, a co-participant in the Amazon Rainforest gives a peep into the mindset of the Euro-Americans who, in the early days of moving West, could settle as much land as they could control from the Indians with the help of the U.S. Cavalry. He contrasts the limited knowledge of the early settlers in the Americans who could not understand the rhythms of the earth and nature with the holistic knowledge of the native Americans and their affiliation with the land. M. A. JaimesGuerrero maintains:

In a literal sense, indigenism means “to be born of a place,” but for native peoples, it also means “to live in relationship with the place where one is born,” as in the sense of an “indigenous homeland.” In this cultural context, an indigenous member has the responsibility to practice kinship roles in reciprocal relationship with his or her bioregional habitat, and this is manifested through cultural beliefs, rituals, and
ceremonies that cherish biodiversity (that is, human culture in relationship to bioregion): this is the context of a native Land Ethic and native Spirituality. (66)

In the novel, Hugh explains that the early settlers in the Americas died of dehydration as they thought there was no water. Their obliviousness is in contradistinction with the understanding of the natives who would just bend over, put an ear to the ground even while standing in a dry river bed and knew water could be found as they would “poke a reed in the ground, and drink” (NTH132). Hugh continues, “They knew every river, every stream, every rock, every tree” (NTH132). Despite the attempts of the Euro-Americans to starve the Indians out, it was difficult to eliminate them as they were physically and spiritually stronger, and could withstand the heat of oppression for long. However, they were shelterless, sick, grief-stricken at the deaths of fellow people, and the ‘sub-zero’ climate made them succumb to the harsh circumstances, but their spirits could not be subdued.

Hugh recalls an old man in two long braids who would regularly come alone, or with his son or grandson, to a spring to collect water and how heart-broken he was when he got to know that the energy development company was going to dig into the spring. Hugh tells Kate about the greed of these people when he shares how glad they were to know that the lake had dried up as “they could drill deeper with less fuss” (137). Hugh continues to tell Kate that instead of coal deposits, what they discovered were the bones of the Indian ancestors underneath. He says, “The bones of the old man’s people from thousands of years ago. Resting there forever with a huge body of water separating them from any disturbance . . .” (138). Hugh admits having undergone a transformation by witnessing the devotion of the old man and tells Kate, “Oh, that’s what it means to love, I thought. And had I ever loved? I thought not” (138). Echoing the sanctity attributed to land, and the rituals and customs of native Americans, Bastian and Mitchell posit:

Time is also viewed in relationship to space giving sacredness to locations where specific events took place. Through the cycles of nature, and indeed of human existence, the world and all that is in it are brought back to a spiritual center. Religious ceremonies and rites of passage are repeated, some with the passage of the seasons, and some with an individual’s movement through the phases of life. . . . Passing on the knowledge of ceremonies, songs, dances, beliefs and values, and their
language to the next generation is an important responsibility that many parents and elders take seriously. (38)

In the western thought nature evokes a vision of a physical world that is separate and distinct from the individual, a world where mankind is placed above the entirety of creation. Ecological surrounds are not paramount within such western conceptions. Acknowledging this insufficiency of western terms to describe native Americans’ cognizance of the environment and its constituent parts, native American author, Leslie Marmon Silko, has outlined the term ‘landscape’ as it is interpreted by her Pueblo tribe:

[T]he term landscape, as it has entered into the English language, is misleading. ‘A portion of territory the eye can comprehend in a single view’ does not correctly describe the relationship between the human being and his or her surroundings. This assumes the viewer is somehow outside or separate from the territory he or she surveys. Viewers are as much a part of the landscape as the boulders they stand on. (qtd. in Kirwan)

In addition to a sacrosanct relationship with land, native Americans and other indigenous tribes accrue a lot of importance to their ancestral past. Walker’s writings are rooted well in her ancestral past as she considers connection with ancestors and parents to hold the meaning of existence. Madhu Dubey suggests that Meridian’s “[e]cstasy at the Sacred Serpent subtends the political activism of her later life, as she draws the strength to fight for change from her own ancestral past” (135). Walker celebrates the traditions, rituals and beliefs of native American and African-American peoples which exhibit many points of convergence. Patricia Riley postulates:

In *Meridian*, Walker writes within an African-native American subjectivity that not only includes cultural elements from her Cherokee and African American heritage but, additionally inspired by Lakota (Sioux) culture and the heroic endeavor of the Lakota people to retain their autonomy, firmly links together the collective struggle
for freedom undertaken historically by native American and African American peoples. (242)

Though Meridian is a black girl, yet the native American roots of her father play an integral part in shaping her ‘African-native American subjectivity’. Meridian’s struggles, visions, spirituality and compassion in the novel can be equated with that of Black Elk, an Oglala Sioux’s holy man. His spiritual visions and life experiences have been captured by John Neihardt in his seminal book *Black Elk Speaks*. In Black Elk’s words, he started having visions when he was nine years old. Once while having meals with a man in his tepee, he heard some voices, “It is time; now they are calling you” (*Black Elk* 28). He recounts that he was called on by the spirits guides, could see all his grandfathers and grandmothers, and listen to a great Voice telling him to “[b]ehold a good nation walking in a sacred manner in a sacred land” (*Black Elk* 34). Tammy L. Montgomery writes:

Another of these beings confronts Black Elk at age nine with this announcement: “It is time; now they are calling you,” at which point the young boy falls ill and enters an expansive visionary state in which he not only realizes his calling but also envisages the future suffering of his people, the loss of the buffalo, and the broken circle or sacred hoop. This dark vision informs his vocation and directs his life ministry. (103)

Black Elk explains how he had been sick for twelve days and lying like a dead man all this while having visions. After twelve days, though his face was still puffed up, and legs and arms swollen, yet he felt good, and wanted to get right up and run around. In *Meridian*, Meridian Hill also seems to have achieved a similar stature of sainthood. Anne M. Downey explores, “Like Black Elk, she has a vision early in her life which convinces her that all spiritual beings are part of One Life. As she struggles to balance this belief with her knowledge of the oppression of her people, she becomes, like Black Elk, a spiritual spokesperson” (38). Also, one day Meridian “watched her father enter the deep well of the serpent’s coiled tail and return to his cornfield with his wholeframe radiating brightness like

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* The Oglala Lakota or Oglala Sioux meaning “to scatter one's own” in Lakota language is one of the seven subtribes of the Lakota people, who along with the Nakota and Dakota, make up the Great Sioux Nation. A majority of the Oglala live on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, the eighth-largest Native American reservation in the United States. The Oglala are a federally recognized tribe whose official title is the Oglala Sioux Tribe (previously called the Oglala Sioux Tribe of the Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota). See link: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oglala_Lakota#Artists
the space around a flame” (58), similar to the light that emanated from Black Elk after his vision (Downey 41).

Black Elk maintains the mutuality and reciprocity of all life forms and tells in his account the money-grubbing nature of whites, whom the Lakotas’ term as ‘Wasichus,’ meaning fat-eaters. In Black Elk’s account, the synergy of all life-forms once made up the life-blood of the traditional Lakota beliefs which began to be eroded by the mercenary Wasichus:

Once we were happy in our own country and we were seldom hungry, for then the two-leggeds and the four-leggeds lived together like relatives, and there was plenty for them and for us. But the Wasichus came, and they have made little islands for us and other little islands other little islands for the four-leggeds, and always these islands are becoming smaller, for around them surges the gnawing flood of the Wasichu; and it is dirty with lies and greed. (Black Elk 8-9)

According to native American beliefs, the spiritual vision is often accompanied by the physical symptoms of fainting, unconsciousness, and temporary paralysis. Walker seems to signify upon Black Elk’s experiences when Meridian collapses in a state of paralysis and experiences dreams or visions. Walker writes: “Four men had brought her home, hoisted across their shoulders exactly as they would carry a coffin, her eyes closed, barely breathing, arms folded across her chest, legs straight” (10). Once, for almost a month, Meridian seems to be in a coma-like state, but probably it is a spiritual preparation for a long struggle ahead in the Civil Rights Movement. Meridian’s unwavering commitment to the cause of the blacks seems akin to Black Elk’s struggle against the Wasichus. However, Black Elk lived with a lament that he squandered away his visionary gift and took upon himself the personal responsibility for the downfall of his people. Raymond J. DeMallie (the annotator and illustrator) in Black Elk Speaks writes:

* The Lakóta people are an indigenous people of the Great Plains of North America. They are part of a confederation of seven related Sioux tribes, and speak Lakota, one of the three major dialects of the Sioux language. See link http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lakota_people.
His visions placed a burdensome responsibility on him to use the powers given him for the benefit of the Lakotas, whose way of life and reason for living were both casualties of the Euroamerican conquest of the West. The metaphors of restoring the hoop of the nation and making the tree bloom summed up what Black Elk felt himself called to do, the responsibility that he had failed. (294)

Though Meridian is also bogged down by failures, yet her failures are more personal in nature than communal. She is burdened with the guilt of abandoning her child, thus failing the notion of ideal black motherhood. Meridian, nevertheless, assumes a different role, that of empowering her community by fighting for their legitimate rights in the Civil Rights Movement. Meridian’s identification with the Revolution and her vision of its fulfillment complements native American spirituality. “Meridian's vision of what a revolution should be is also circular” since she tells Truman that "revolution would not begin . . . with an act of murder . . . but with teaching . . . . I would like to teach again. I respect it when it’s done right. . . . I imagine good teaching as a circle of earnest people sitting down to ask each other meaningful questions” (qtd. in Downey 42).

Walker acclaims her indigenous cultural legacy and asserts its significance in the contemporary social and cultural context by drawing on the wisdom of the ancestors in venerating earth and nature. Silvia Pilar Castro-Borrego maintains that the concept of re-memory connects with the past through the ancestor figure, they both establish a vital link with myth since the ancestors are “timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom” (10). They function as bridge between history and myth because they join present experiences with those of the past, affirming cultural continuity and “instructing new generations in survival techniques” which are vital for the achievement of wholeness and for spiritual and moral growth. Ancestors, according to African views, are a “collective repository of wisdom rather than a group of heroic individuals”” (Borrego10).

Many characters in her novels are fragmented in the beginning, however as the novels advance, they tread on a self-revelatory path leading to wholeness and wisdom. Many a time, it is connection with and acceptance of the ancestors which act as a catalytic agent in their quest for self-identity. Kathryn Manuelito posits:
Like American Indian people, Walker holds grandmothers and ancestors in high esteem. She honors grandmothers and ancestors in her treasuring of quilts that they had made and passed down to their children. Their private lives and hardships are cherished memories that are represented by the fragments of personal clothing and patches sewn together to make quilt. (180)

In both the cultures (African-native American cultures), ancestors or forefathers are the true well-spring of wisdom and knowledge, and Walker invokes and incorporates the beliefs of both the traditions. Borrego talks about the beliefs of contemporary African-American writers:

It is usually the influence that the figures of the ancestors have on the characters, and through their memory containing the whole African tradition, that the ancestral spiritualism is evoked in these works. Ancestral spiritualism transforms the materialistic North American setting into a place of meaningful connection to African Americans with ancestral Africa, thus revealing to the African American individual a sense of belonging to a spiritual homeland. (8)

The voyage from ‘fragmentation’ to ‘wholeness’ is a spiritual odyssey which reaches its climax when the characters gain holistic understanding by connecting their own lives with their ancestors. In many cases, it is the acceptance and understanding of the relation with the parents which act as a therapeutic agent in gaining ‘wholeness.’ Ikenna Dieke maintains, “Iconography of memory as a doorway to the eternity of the past and of those loved ones that have passed away subtly subserves not only a participation mystique, but also a certain normative value of fundamental human relatedness” (509).

In addition to native American beliefs, Walker demonstrates her essential rootedness in the African-American culture, and the ‘Will’ not to be a passive agent in the white supremacist society. Her basic grounding in both the cultures allows her to empathize with their lot and has shaped her ecofeminist vision of justice and equality for all the marginalized groups. In Meridian, Miss Winters, a single, childless woman is the real matriarch of the school. While by all appearances, she seems to be an embodiment of the social and cultural
legacy of the Saxon college, being a graduate of the school herself, yet she stands in defense of her students, comforts them, and reinforces African-American culture through music, refusing to comply with the established norms of the Saxon college. Her compassion for Meridian is one demonstration of her kinship with the African-Americans. Miss Winters being a music teacher, the administration expects her to refine her students with lessons in classical European music. She is one of the three Black teachers at the college and is also the school’s organist required to play the English and German hymns every morning which she did. Nevertheless, her refusal to bow down before the college authorities to wipe out the African-American spiritual legacy of the Blues and the Jazz elevates her stature, and brings forth her unflinching courage to fight injustice as Walker writes:

In her music class she deliberately rose against Saxon tradition to teach jazz . . . and spirituals and the blues. . . . It was thought each year that she would never survive to teach at Saxon the following one. But she endured. . . . Her fights with the president and the college dean could be heard halfway across the campus. (Meridian120)

Walker’s interest in the continued violation of native American civil liberties and treaties as well as the struggle to regain sovereignty and affirmation of their distinct tribal customs also threads a running pattern throughout her writings. In BLFS, Walker foregrounds the plight of the Mundo tribe (a fictional representative of all indigenous tribes) which an anthropologist couple comes to study as the tribe is facing the danger of extinction and any information about it may not be retrievable once they go extinct. Michael Dorris posits, “White writers almost invariably portray native American cultures as fragile, regressive, deteriorating entities, teetering on the brink of extinction” (BLFS153). In the novel, Manuelito tells Robinson, “The Mundo everywhere are facing extinction. If there is no one studying us, we are not seen as valuable to the world. The ladinos come and capture us, force us to work in the forests and the mines. Rape our daughters and sisters and mothers” (BLFS155). In order to develop a rationale for the marginalization of the oppressed people and their devaluation, Western scholars develop an epistemology wherein all research and findings are suggestive of the hierarchical pyramid, through which they maintain an upper hand under the pretext of studying other races. Walker critiques the patriarchal tendency of the whites to study other races and tribes as a tool to keep up the self-notion of superiority, as is evident from the conversation of Irene and Susannah. Susannah maintains: “. . . generally
speaking, white people almost never study themselves. They prefer to study us and write about how we don’t quite measure up” (BLFS185). Irene adds: “Rather than risk humiliation and have to own up to an inferiority complex, they’ve spent the last millennia trying to prove there’s something inferior and wrong about everybody else” (BLFS185). Susannah is critical of her father’s anthropological interest in studying the Mundo tribe. In a conversation between Irene and Susannah, Irene seconds her viewpoint by saying that “it is ridiculous and ultimately insulting to study people” (BLFS184). According to Susannah, it is a “European trait” to study people and she also postulates the tendency of the Europeans to appropriate their customs: “Other folk who meet strange people want to dance and eat with them, go swimming and talk about what colorful or peculiar wildlife there is about” (BLFS184). One can notice the ecofeminist voice in the statement of Susannah who criticizes Europeans for the lack of concern for earth and asks rhetorically if they are actually from earth or another planet: “A place where the artificial is natural” (BLFS184).

Walker’s subversive polemic is thus sustained in the interpretation of the trait of the white people to study the other people, which is their way to camouflage their inferiority complex under the garb of empirical evidence. Susannah maintains, “They prefer to study us and write about how we don’t quite measure up” (BLFS185). Irene supports her by saying that they are out of sync with the rest of the people of the world. According to Irene, they have tried to reinforce their “deviant behavior” (BLFS185) craftily on television. Television has reduced the puppet show of Kalimasa (a Greek village) into a simply “televised” thing and polluted the men by making them “kill each other over piles of money” (BLFS185) and has turned many women into prostitutes for fun.

Walker is extremely critical of museums which display the remains of the dead Africans as well as native Americans shamelessly. Kathryn Manuelito seems to reiterate Walker’s views about the display of indigenous culture in museums:

In “Everyday Use”, Walker reminds her readers that grandmothers and ancestors do not represent a passé history. Quilts and other implements should not reside in museums and represent a static history of a people. Similarly, American Indian people treasure their regalia and everyday cooking and hunting implements as having life. Their lives captured in ethnographic reports, stereotypical images as seen in sports,
and their material culture on display in museums denigrate the essence of the living
and dynamic cultures of American Indian people. (BLFS180)

In *Meridian*, during her visit to the Capital’s museum of Indians, Meridian, a Civil Rights
activist sees a shameless display of the bones of a warrior “dug up in a crouched position and
left that way, his front teeth missing, his arrows and clay pipes around him” (54). Meridian is
disturbed and she feels nauseated to see such a shameless exhibit in the museum. Walker
interweaves the plight of the ‘objectification’ of the bodies of Africans with those of Indians.
Such ‘objectification’ helps to perpetuate the Western imperial notions of superiority through
shaping, reinscribing and promulgating racist notions, passing them off as scientific research.
Simpson reveals, “Two Indian writers, Walter and Roger Echohawk, point out that criminal
statutes in the United States strictly prohibit grave desecration, grave robbing and mutilation
of the dead, but are rarely applied in protection of Indian dead” (26).

In *TMF*, Mary Jane’s aunt Eleandra Burnham (a white lady) writes in her diary about
her visit to the British Museum of Natural History with her cousin T. where in a conversation
exchange, she tells her cousin that the German or Belgian people settling in South America
brought back pairs of everything they discovered so far including fish, leopards and birds but
the most shocking revelation comes when she uncovers the objectification of marginalized
people: “They even brought back a pair of Indians. People turned out in droves to see them.
But the poor things shivered and shook – they were just children – the whole time, and when
winter set in, poof, they died” (225). Rony elaborates, “Since its inception, the age of
mechanical reproduction has been accompanied by a fascination for the images and actual
bodies of indigenous peoples” (20).

For centuries, both Indians and blacks have been the target of racial discrimination
and considered as belonging to the lower forms of humanity; their bodies have been brutally
and shamelessly ‘objectified’. Sadiah Qureshi reveals:

Within this context, living foreign peoples were transformed into professional
“savages” and became tied to new forms of cheap mass entertainment. Simultaneously, importing people also became an organized commercial enterprise that was increasingly regulated and standardized by governmental involvement. (Intro
4)
In *NTH*, Walker portrays Lalika, a ritual participant in the Amazon, who is a victim of rape and has suffered brutality perpetrated by the police authorities in the jail. She is not the sole sufferer as her friend, Saartjie meets the same fate. She recalls having read the story of her friend’s namesake, Saartjie Bartmann, while in captivity. Saartjie Bartmann from South Africa was put in an exhibition because of her physical deformities and dubbed as ‘Hottentot Venus’. Lalika recalls in the novel the shameful display of Saartjie Bartmann in her life as well as after death: “... forced to show herself to incredulous Europeans all over Europe .... How when she died in childbirth she and the child were still dragged, embalmed and in an open coffin, around Europe ... parts of her body were cut off, pickled, and kept in a jar, ending up in a Paris museum” (*NTH*120). All of what is known about Bartmann has been researched and documented from the biased and dominant perspective of the whites. Bartmann suffered the indignity of public exhibition and became the subject of popular lore and public ridicule before her untimely death and subsequent dissection at the hands of Georges Cuvier, a French anatomist. Sander Gilman explores how the Westerners created a spurious scientific paradigm to pass off physical ‘difference’ as abnormality:

> Tomeettheirscientificstandards,a paradigmwasneededwhichwould technicallyplaceboth the sexuality and the beauty of the black in an antitheticalposition to that of the white. Thisparadigmwouldhavetoberootedinsome type ofunique and observable physical difference; they foundthat difference in the distinction they drew betweenthe pathological and the normal in the medical model. (212)

Gilman explains the web of negative stereotypes in which black females were perpetually enmeshed: “Inthenineteenth century, theblackfemalewaswidelyperceived as possessingnot only a“primitive” sexual appetitebutalsotheexternal signs ofthis temperament-“primitive” genitalia” (213). He discloses how the ‘constructed’ is made to appear ‘biological’ by the Western representation: “Thecentralviewisthatthese anomaliesareinherent,biological variationsratherthan adaptions” (218). However, it is not only black females who become the butt of ridicule. Walker brings into play the multi-faceted politics of race and gender, and intertwines the fate of females who are interpreted and deemed as objects, and supposed to stay within the expected mould in a patriarchal society.
In *Meridian*, she creates a character, Marilene O’Shay whose husband Henry O’Shay silences her subversive voice (alleged to be having an extra-marital affair) by strangulating her. He drags around her “mummified” (7) body from town to town, charging a quarter to see her. He claims to have preserved her body in life-like condition even after twenty five years of her death (kept ironically in a circus wagon for public view) and thus, turns her into a profitable commodity. Marilene is depicted as “patriarchy’s perfect, petrified, and commodified woman” (Pifer 81). Pifer further postulates, “Not only has Henry O’Shay “mummified” his wife into a “frigid fidelity,” he has also turned her body into a profitable specular commodity. . . . If Marilene O’Shay was objectified and privatized while alive, she is commodified and marketable once dead” (Pifer 81). According to her husband, she had been “an ideal woman, a “Goddess”, who had been given “everything she thought she wanted”” (5). His using the word “thought” has an ironical connotation, since by providing her with material comforts, her husband thinks he owns her body as well as her thoughts, and any deviation from patriarchal standards may prove fatal for her. Lynn Pifer maintains about Walker:“She also examines patriarchy’s ability to “kill” women, using the Marilene O’Shay exhibit as a virtual reminder, as well as a parody of society’s idolization of dead women as the perfect women (patriarchy’s version of “The only good Indian’s a dead Indian”) (79). Thus, the miserable fate of all women in a male-dominated society has been poignantly brought to light by Walker.

It is necessary to understand how the racist stereotypes underpin the vilification of black bodies. In Western thought, ‘black’ is considered sinful. So, according to Henry’s flier, the oddest thing about Marilene’s dried-up body is that “its exposure to salt had caused it to darken” (*Meridian*5). How deeply the notion of racial superiority is upheld by white males becomes clear when despite Henry’s attempt to paint her original color from time to time, the paint always discolors. From Henry’s myopic vision, his wife should seem white only as an emblem of his racial superiority: “Viewers of her remains should be convinced of his wife’s race, therefore, by the straightness and reddish color of her hair” (*Meridian*5).

The meanness of Whites is also exposed in attempts of the whites in creating stereotypes of native Indians to pass them off as uncivilized, brutes or savages; in need to be tamed and civilized by the Whites in the same manner as Africans. Meridian’s mother does not feel the same affinity for the Indians, as is felt by Meridian’s father, and she likes to believe in the images represented by the mainstream media which shows Indians as savages and ‘naked’. Meridian’s father resents her half-cooked knowledge as he is well aware of the
misrepresentation of native Indians by the television and contests with his wife to make her understand the implications of such stereotyping: “Naked? He ain’t naked. You believe all that stuff they put on television. He wears a workshirt and blue jeans. His hair is the only thing that looks like Indians look on TV” (47). Walker exposes the mind-set of white men when Meridian’s father becomes her spokesperson and articulates: “Grown-up white men don’t want to pretend to be anything else. Not even for a minute” (47).

Lynne (a civil rights worker)in Meridian is a white Jewish woman in the novel who is married to another black civil rights activist, Truman Held. Walker uncovers her masquerade or hidden feelings for blacks when she says, “To Lynne, the black people of the South were Art” (136). Being a part of the movement herself, she begged forgiveness; at times tried to hide her feelings, yet it was no use. Roberta M. Hendrickson reflects: “Lynne romanticizes poverty and suffering. Her emotions deny the humanity of black people and contradict the spirit and goals of the Movement. Lynne is like many white civil rights workers in her romantic view of blacks in the rural South” (122).

Besides objectifying women’s bodies in particular, the Euro-Americans have tried to dilute the sacred ceremonials, traditions and customs of the indigenous by commodifying or exoticizing them. Americans identify their superiority by setting themselves against the African-Americans and native Americans. Edward Said maintains: “European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate an even underground self” (11). Here, the meaning of Said’s Orientalism can be extended to include the domination over Africans as well as native Americans, or all the marginalized people of the world.

In TMF, Ola (an African playwright and Fanny’s father) tells his daughter the strategy of the whites to invent (unethically) the facts to downplay and degrade Africans. Ola explains:

The instinct for self-defence and self-preservation is innate, although there was a time, and very recently, too, when white scholars actually did studies that “proved” in their eyes, these instincts were innate in all people except us. They’d put us so far down, you see, they thought we’d never get up again, so thssasey advanced theories that showed our innate love of being down. (319)
Walker brings in her ecofeminist approach by sermonizing not to fall into the pit of “thingism” which is the “ultimate block across the path of peace” (TMF 319). Ola explains this to Fanny, “If every time you see a tree, you want to make some thing out of it, soon no one on earth will even have air to breathe” (TMF 319).

The beliefs of indigenous people are very different from the mercenary Euro-Americans. Unlike Euro-Americans’ notion of linear progression of time, native American people believe that time is cyclical and dynamic, and that this cyclical time functions not only in the spiritual realm, but in the day-to-day existence of all living things. One Hopi scholar has called this relationship “mythic reality”. In other words, the truth of this present, physical world exists simultaneously with that of the mythic, spiritual world (Handbook of native American Mythology 36). Walker captures the essence of cyclical notion of time (inseparability and fusion of past and present) in many novels especially BLFS and TMF. Ikenna Dieke writes, “In The Temple of My Familiar, time for Walker is a process of growth inseparable from the notion of the self and the self’s ineradicable link to the world outside. Especially crucial to each character’s quest for identity is the personal effort to recapture the past as a significant element in present experience” (508). In one of her dreams in NTH, Katedreams of an ancestor who discourses on the meaning of time and death: “Mistress Kate, you can have no idea how long it takes to die. Even if it is all over in an instant. Time is relative and you really understand it when you’re dying” (98).

In BLFS, Walker creates a band of people who are neither African nor Indian, but a blend. In her own words, she does “a lot of spiritual preparation, so the characters evolve from what feel like a state of grace” (“Alice Walker: On Finding Your Bliss” 198). The novel seems to have sprung up from her utopian vision of a society, where she touches upon feminist as well as environmental issues, making the Mundo tribe closer to her ecofeminist vision. The issues of birth, death, after-life, sexuality, spiritual awareness have been dealt with in a greater detail as compared to her other novels. Walker attempts to erase the distinction between mind and body (a dualism created by hierarchical Western patriarchy) and instill harmony where the binaries are not oppositional, but a part of the whole. In the words of Paul Carter Harrison:

Harmony is an important term as it is perceived according to the ancient concepts of African religion: the message is transmitted again with a freshness that still has its
effects upon us. These ideas reach back to the principle of polarity, in which opposites
are not seen as conflictive, but on the contrary, they make up the whole in life. (qtd. in Borrego 3)

In *BLFS*, Manuelito is a black Indian who recognizes Magdalena (daughter of an African-American anthropologist couple) as his soul-mate, and unravels the mysteries and ceremonies of his tribe before her. As has been discussed in Chapter one, Mundo spiritual beliefs are not in sync with the teachings or views of the Bible about heaven, hell, sin or salvation. Manuelito sheds light on their digression from traditional Christianity. He tries to make Magdalena shed off the dualist thinking into which she was born and brought up, and says, “In the world that you come from, people put too much emphasis on the mind. You could even say they have become mind only” (*BLFS*93). Magdalena is also called Mad Dog by the Mundo tribe and when asked by Magdalena why the mad dog is considered wise, Manuelito offers a profound insight into Mundo beliefs: “The mad dog is considered wise because it has lost its mind . . . which is one of the most difficult things in the world to do. Our people take herbs once a year to lose their minds all together, at once. Instead of thoughts, we have visions, and that is how we guide ourselves” (*BLFS*92). Manuelito tries to dispel the split between mind and body perpetuated by the Western capitalist thinking. His tribe does so deliberately so that mind and body become one. Such a thought comes close to Shamanic practices of taking some herbs and potions to transcend the ordinary world of dichotomized thinking and submerge oneself into the cosmic whole. Kathryn Manuelito posits, “Walker’s understanding of Mother Earth is similar to American Indian people’s veneration of Mother Earth. Walker’s usage of Mother extends from the Euro-Western definition of mother as female parent to a far greater realm of understanding Mother as Mother Earth for all humanity” (*BLFS*180).

Manuelito makes a transition to death while singing the initiation song and further tells Robinson why a “feeling of self-assurance on the path of death” (*BLFS*148) is not promised to him. He continues:

We do not believe in heaven or hell, Señor; we do not believe in eternal damnation.

We believe only in the unavoidable horror of hurting others and of likewise being
hurt. Being sorry and not being sorry. Forgiving and not forgiving. Our story is one
that continues only for as long as it takes us to do things. (BLFS148)

He continues: “We understand that the dead do not vanish at the moment of dying, but
continue to talk, so to speak, to weave their story about them, for a while longer” (BLFS150).
When Señor Robinson expresses his surprise that after coming to the other side (after death),
he has not spared a thought about his wife though he loved him so much, Manuelito proposes
a very philosophical answer: “That is the way you know that your love was fulfilled. There is
no need to think about the loved one” (BLFS151). His continued literal haunting of his
daughter Susannah shows that he needed to make peace with her and the essence of the
father-daughter relationship was yet to be felt and realized. Manuelito asserts: “The dead are
required to finish two tasks before all is over with them: one is to guide back to the path
someone you left behind who is lost, because of your folly; the other is to host a ceremony so
that you and others you have hurt may face eternity reconciled and complete” (BLFS148).

In her fiction, Walker recreates and retells the shared histories of oppression and
disenfranchisement faced by her characters in a way so as to bring them to a point of
convergence where each character reclaims his/her lost self and achieve wholeness by
remembering the past. Such a quest can be seen from an ecofeminist perspective as inter-
relatedness and mutuality form one of the core issues of ecofeminism. Arveyda, with a keen
sensibility of an artist “recognized the stress of oppression, dispossession, flight” (TMF18) in
the faces of Zedé and Carlotta. Zedé, Carlotta’s mother, finds herself reconciled to her past
after she unlocks her heart – the pressing stories of oppression; her love for a tribal Indian,
Jesus; her arrest for being a communist; years spent in prison; the miraculous escape from the
prison and finally refuge in North America -- before Arveyda. With him, she finds her lost
self and “became a different woman” (TMF45), as they travel through Mexico and Central
and South America experiencing and exploring natural lushness of landscape. Walker
narrates, “Gone the hesitant English that was a result of shyness, passionate excitement, or
fear . . . from the pain of relived experiences, she spoke with an eloquence that startled
Arveyada, who held on to her as she talked, not as a lover, but as the ear that might at last
reconnect her to her world” [italics mine] (45). Arveyda really fulfils his function as a
shaman by reconnecting mother and daughter. He helps Carlotta and Zedé become whole,
which they can only do by embracing their past rather than burying it.

120
In *TMF*, Suwelo’s problems with his wife, Fanny and lover, Carlotta find their origin in a bigger problem rooted deep down in his heart. The fact that he consciously blocks the memories of his parents, who were killed in a car accident, (the result of one of his father’s drunken rages, when Suwelo was in college) leaves his spiritual and personal growth stunted and fragmented. Although Suwelo never thinks of them, a sub-conscious layer of his heart yearns for parental care and wisdom. For Walker, the process of integration of all parts may be painful, but “to cut anyone out of the psyche is to maim the personality; to suppress any part of the personality is to maim the soul” (*LBW*85). Living in his uncle’s house in the company of Lissie and Hal, Suwelo develops a unique bond with them and later, invites them to his place for the weekend. This is because “. . . deep in his heart he was probably pretending they [Lissie and Hal] were his parents but he didn’t mind” (*TMF*239). Lissie says:

Terribly damaged human beings, especially if they were once beautiful and whole, are hard for people to remember by talking about. So it has been with you about your father. The war, the loss of much of his soul, the loss of his arm. The wearing down of your mother. . . . Hal and I are sorry we did not encourage you to speak to us about your parents . . . . I know you are caught up now in this knottedness with Fanny, and both Hal and I agree that the work with her is what has to be done. But part of your work with Fanny is the work you must do with your parents. They must be consciously called up, called *upon*, re-called. (*TMF*357)

She further elaborates his problem, “Hal and I felt you have closed a door, a very important door, against memory, against the pain. . . . And we urge you to open that door, to say their names . . . to find the connection of spirit and heart you share with them” (*TMF*357). Giving a discourse on the need to connect ourselves with our parents through memories, Lissie makes Suwelo realize the magnitude of his problem and suggests a possible solution: “if our parents are not present in us, consciously present, there is much, very much about ourselves we can never know.” (*TMF*357). She dwells on the necessity to memorize our past, though it may be painful as she maintains:

It is against blockage between ourselves and others – those who are alive and those who are dead – that we must work. In blocking off what hurts us more than the pain,
which, if we will only bear it, soon passes over us. But in the long run, the wall, which prevents growth, hurts us more than the pain, which, if we will only bear it, soon passes over us. (TMF358)

Towards the end of the novel, Suwelo has a physical as well as spiritual communion with Carlotta. His reconciliation with her stems from his realization of the gravity of his problematic and male-dominated attitude towards women. Having repressed the bottled-up memories for years, he finally uncorks them and recalls his parents’ deaths: “It sounds as if he’s finally admitting it to himself” (TMF403). Till now, he had closed off the door of his heart. Now he feels his mother knocking at the door, “He feels a chakra opening at the base of his spine. Something begins to unfurl, like a tiny flag, or a sleepy snake. His mother knocks on the door with more assurance” (TMF404). Though his mother, Marcia easily makes her way in, it is his father Louis, Sr., who stands behind her but he has no strength in his hands to let himself in. As a young man, he did not have cordial relations with his father, and to a great extent, he considers him responsible for the death of his mother. However, he finds himself at peace, when he understands, “But at least he lets himself understand his mother’s determination, at last, to get out” (TMF405). It is at this crucial moment he feels: “His father is standing at the door. He is not old and drunk, but young and handsome . . . . Suwelo is suddenly too tired to keep a watch over the door of his heart. It swings open on its own, and this father, whom Suwelo has never seen and whom he realizes he resembles very much, walks in” (TMF405).

Similarly, Fanny’s tortured self regains sanity when, persuaded by her mother, she gets ready “to accompany her on a quiet, restful, celebratory trip to Africa” (TMF305). Fanny is a victim of double oppression – the exploitative interplay of racism and sexism. The repercussions of this double colonization are that she withdraws herself from human contact. In case of Fanny too, the necessary connection with the past, that is, her meeting with her father gives her an opportunity to blow the dust off the covers and sense the scent of her heritage. Her discussions with her father, Ola(a noted playwright and politician) about the contemporary state of politics in U.S. and its racist policies provide a release to her pent-up emotions. Ola gives her an insight into white man’s attempt to dismember the relations with their ancestors. Walker writes: “He blocked the view between us and our ancestors, us and our ways; not all of them good ways. . . . He needed to keep us terrorized and desperately poor, in order to feel powerful” (TMF309). She confesses in a letter to Suwelo, “I feel like a
child, asking my father what I should do. But I confess it is a great relief, having a father to ask” (TMF308). Having spent all her life in a home with a mother, grandmother and Mama Shug, Fanny treads on a self-revelatory path where she meets her father and revels in the security and love which this relationship offers her. By going to Africa, Fanny makes a literal as well as symbolic journey which enables her to come to terms with her destructive anger (for which she sees a therapist too), and to harmonize all aspects of herself. Her inner peace develops from her practice of healing others as a masseuse. Fanny tries to help other people by her massages and by distributing Shug’s pamphlet. Hence, the past and present are interwoven inextricably and this fusion is characteristic of many indigenous cultures and beliefs.

Within an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural space, Walker tries to assimilate feminist thought and ecological teachings from uniquely indigenous perspectives. Fred McTaggart says, “In the Indian sense, all people, all plants, all animals, all objects in the universe are teachers because, if we let them, they can help us learn to find our own functions and the functions of other beings in the universe. The teacher does not give us facts or wisdom but rather leads us to the river so we can find our own food” (4). In all her novels, there are teachers in the form of fellow humans, animals and even trees. These teachers are capable of healing and purgation of the soul. In her poetry and fiction, her reverence and urge for the preservation of trees underscores her ecological standpoint from an indigenous perspective. The trees act as literary tropes to effect catharsis of the characters, in a literal as well as metaphorical way. Downey seeks to find similarities between John Neidhart’s *The Black Elk Speaks* and Alice Walker’s *Meridian*: “Both books deal with broken bodies and spirits, with circular images that speak of peace and equality, and with trees that represent growth and community. Where Black Elk puts down his burden with sorrow and hopelessness, Meridian picks it up and goes on, with determination and hope” (39).

In *Meridian*, the Sojourner Tree acts as an agent of subversion and resistance against the forces of oppression for the Saxon students. The Sojourner Tree is a sprawling magnolia tree in the center of the campus of the Saxon college. Named after a famous black feminist, Sojourner Truth, the tree is home to many stories buried beneath it. It was planted by a slave girl, Louvinie, on the Saxon plantation before it was turned into Saxon college. Louvinie, an expert in narrating blood-curdling tales of horror, met with a tragic fate. Once while trying to churn out “a masterpiece of fright,” the youngest of the Saxon children “slumped dead to the ground of a heart attack” (Meridian33). Later on, after the truth was out, her tongue was
clipped out at the root. Signifying on the black tradition, Walker tells about the curse of her native land that without one’s tongue in one’s mouth or at the special spot of her choice, “the singer in one’s soul was lost forever” (Meridian34). Fearing this fate, Louvinie had buried her clipped out tongue under a scrawny magnolia tree on the plantation. The tree afterwards had outgrown all other trees in a few decades and it was claimed by other slaves that it possessed magic: “They claimed the tree could talk, make music, was sacred to birds and possessed the power to obscure vision” (Meridian34). Hence, the tree figures as a force of resilience, for despite the indurate attempt on the part of the Master Saxon to muffle the voice of Louvinie, her stories continue. The tree itself becomes her voice and its accretion as the largest magnolia tree in the country is a testimony to the fact. It also echoes Walker’s own revolutionary thoughts. For years, the Sojourner hid those who had escaped from slavery and served as a hidden place to make love. During Meridian’s second year at the Saxon, there is a talk of cutting down the tree. Meridian’s protest against the cutting of The Sojourner “the Music Tree” by joining the members of the Chamber Music Ensemble and their dotty Hungarian conductor who chained themselves to its trunk, can be likened to the “Chipko Movement” in India by the women of Garhwal to prevent logging. The Chipko Movement had gained stance as a form of protest wherein the protesters would hug the trees so as to prevent them from cutting down. Despite the protest of the students, the tree is spared but the platform and podium are dismantled.

Many striking similarities can be witnessed between Louvinie, the slave child and Sojourner Truth (former slave, preacher, abolitionist, and feminist [1797-1883]). In the words of Nell Irwin Painter: “As an abused child, oppressed worker, and litigant, she was liable to be doubted in situations of the utmost seriousness.... “Truth,” her self-designation, raises a host of questions related to knowledge, representation, and communication” (Meridian463). The tree is symbolic of the shared oppression of Louvinie and Sojourner truth, though at the same time, acts as a voice of dissent and subversion, for which Sojourner stood throughout her lifetime. The status of tree also raises critical questions symbolically- the unsettling questions related to politics of hierarchy, representation, and identity. The incident of Wile Chile’s death stirs the entire campus and the girls protest in unison.

Walker unleashes the multi-layered politics of race, gender and environment by portraying Saxon College as a place where the girls are socialized into becoming ‘ladies’, where the unspoken laws are conformity and complacency. The college houses girls of mixed descent, the poor and the rich, the bright and the dull, the black-skinned and the white.
Hence, the racial and social divide exists on the campus of the Saxon college, reminiscent of the racial divisions prevalent at the Saxon plantation. Amidst this racial and cultural segregation, Walker uses the Sojourner Tree as a common vantage point from where there is a possibility of bridging the racial and social gaps, though only temporarily, and it is through the commemoration of Fast Mary of the Tower, Walker maintains that, “[s]o many tales and legends had grown up around the Sojourner that students of every persuasion had a choice of which to accept” (Meridian 35). The story goes that a young girl named Mary, had concealed her pregnancy and delivered a baby in the tower off one end of Tower Hall. After giving birth, she had chopped the infant into bits and fed it into the commode. When caught, she was flogged before her instructors and her parents and later on, hanged herself. As the Saxon girls cannot participate in this commemoration openly, they camouflage it as a slow May Day dance around the foot of the Sojourner, as it is the only friend and place of solace for fast Mary on the Saxon campus.

The first rebellious action, with Sojourner as the driving and guiding force, occurs when Meridian brings an abandoned girl, named Wile Chile assumed to be thirteen years of age, to her dorm in the Saxon campus. She is pregnant and a societal outcast. She is said to have arrived with a younger brother whose disappearance is rumored to be at the hands of a “local hospital for use in experiments, but it was never looked into” (Meridian 35). The plight of Wile Chile as well as her brother points towards the neglect of the blacks as well as native Indians at the hands of the white supremacist culture, as Andrea Smith laments, “The biocolonial ideology that casts native people as guinea pigs, instead of as people who deserve quality health care . . .” (116).

Wile Chile can be seen scavenging for food in the garbage cans and the powerful odor she emits from her body is very repulsive. Meridian’s efforts to provide refuge to Wile Chile incur wrath from the house mother, who refuses to allow her to stay, chiefly because of concern that her unsightly appearance and uncouth manners will negatively affect the other girls. When The Wild Child tries to escape and is killed by a speeder, the students are not allowed to hold her funeral in the Saxon Chapel. It stirs unrest and rage among the young women: “They shook loose their straightened hair, and all the while they glared at the locked chapel door with a ferocity that was close to hatred” (Meridian 38). The situation prompts chaos, confusion and riots, and unfortunately, though Meridian begs the rioters to destroy the president’s house, the girls destroy The Sojourner. Meridian displays a special kinship with this sprawling huge tree as Downey posits, “Although Walker gives the Sojourner an African
American history, for Meridian it is connected to native American spirituality for the tree “filled her with the same sense of minuteness and hugeness, of past and present, of sorrow and ecstasy that she had known at the Sacred Serpent” (93)” (qtd. in Downey 43). Meridian draws her spiritual strength from the tree but the misdirected rage of young women takes an ugly and misfortunate turn when the “mighty, ancient, sheltering music tree” (Meridian39) is chopped and sawed down.

Walker’s special affiliation and reverence for tree serves as a ubiquitous motif in all her writings including poetry, fiction and non-fiction. The roots of this love can be traced back to Walker’s native American heritage where trees are considered sacred. In the words of Fred McTaggart: “The Earth is our Mother or our Grandmother; she nurtures us on her bosom. The grass is her hair; the trees are our Grandfathers. These concepts are physical as well as spiritual, literal as well as symbolic . . .” (6).

In BLFS, Walker articulates her own love for trees and plants through the Mundo beliefs: “As for the rest, the Mundo believe the trees are close relatives, and that the wind itself is a relative, and is always caressing its kin, as it were” (161). Almost all of her female characters bear a unique kinship with plants, trees and the whole of Nature. Rather nature works as a binding and healing force for them, showing them a pathway to gaining spirituality and their lost sanity. In NTH, Kate goes to the extent of changing her name from Kate Nelson to Kate Talkingtree. “She had an instinctive understanding, perhaps from birth, that people and plants were relatives. As a child she had spent hours talking to, caressing, sitting in, kissing, and otherwise trying to communicate with trees” (71). In her open letter “To the Cuban Reader,” Walker writes:

And so, in NTH to Open Your Heart, the main character’s name is Kate Nelson; she changes her last name to Talkingtree, in the tradition of the other strain of DNA my own family claims, native American (Cherokee). But also because, in the novel, as a child, she had thought it natural – since she felt trees so deeply – that they should be able to talk. By naming herself in this way, she merges herself with trees, which is to say, with nature.

In one of her dreams in countryside, Kate talks to one of her ancestors who remind her of the atrocities and psychological trauma suffered by the slaves. At the same time, his rootedness
in earth and reverence for trees reminds Kate of the ecological imbalance created by clear cutting along Klamath River in Northern California. She laments: “The landscape that had been so lush and powerful was left bare and desolate; the young trees coming up had no shade to protect them from the blistering sun that baked the earth to ash” (100). Again, the message of remembering and staying close to ancestors takes a deeper ecological significance as he tells Kate in her dream, “Our job is to remind you of ways you do not want to be. Sometimes I think this message is the hardest to get across because it flies in the face of our need to have revenge. . . . Healing cannot be done by settling a score” (NTH100). Walker laments the logging and clearing of trees, leaving the landscape mutilated and barren by the Euro-Americans. The ‘thingification’ or ‘commodification’ of nature by the West spreads its ugly wings when Alma, Yolo’s ex-girlfriend in Hawaii tells him of the ruin and sabotage of forests, “The forests were completely exploited. No trees at all are left. They went to Asia, Europe, America. They were made into incense, matchboxes, doodads” (NTH79).

Walker makes Kate her spokesperson when she critiques the imperialist stance of the U.S. and its allies. She maintains that as an African-Amerindian woman from the South, Kate was “intimate from birth with America’s mean-spiritedness” (NTH192). Deep inside her heart is a longing of “cultivation of joy rather than pain” through the foreign policies of the U.S. so that “America would be the true leader of the world, not its biggest bully” (NTH192). Walker also hints at the subtle transition of power structures, from coercive brutal practices and discrimination against the blacks being metamorphosed into multi-national houses buttressing their power and control. There has hardly been any improvement in the lot of the marginalized who are still standing at the periphery, bearing oppression in a sly, masked way: “The people who had lynched and charbroiled black people and cut open black women’s bellies for sport had not died out and disappeared; they had morphed into people who worked for the Pentagon and could do this sort of thing from the air” (NTH192).

America’s imperialist strategies and control over Hawaii are fully brought out in the conversation exchange between Yolo and his former Hawaiian girlfriend, Alma. Alma laments that their fate had been sealed by the war for power and land between the U.S. and Japan: “They were fighting over us. Not because they wanted us. They wanted the land. Not for its own sake. For what they called ‘strategic purposes.’ The Americans made it illegal for us to speak our own language. They sabotaged, arrested, and dislodged our queen” (NTH126). In bitter tone, Alma recalls: “We were annexed” further says that Hawaii became “. . . the fantasy room. The place Americans went when everybody else on earth was fed up
with them. The playpen” (NTH127). Again, it hints that probably Hawaii is America’s surrogate self. In order to neutralize its own negativity, America projects its repressed desires onto Hawaii, which becomes a haven for tourists where they feed their fantasies. Alma tells how Hawaiians were displaced from their communal lands and were forced to work on plantations. Therefore, Walker attempts to inter-relate the fate of all the marginalized people in the world. The recognition of the intensity of gender and racial inequality, and its relationship to capitalism elevates the importance and centrality of fighting both the issues, if we are to live in a truly sustainable and socially just world. Walker’s writings undergird the importance of gender equality, non-racist attitude, and ecological balance.

The activist spirit makes Walker rise to the occasion and therefore, she creates characters who voice protest against the hegemonic capitalist powers which try to commodify the indigenous knowledge (which Vandana Shiva calls “biopiracy”). Shiva maintains that Western corporations are “[s]tealing centuries of collective knowledge and innovation” (Staying Alive xix). In NTH, she creates a character Armando (a powerful Shaman from the Amazon rainforest) who is accompanied by other Shamans of South America, on a visit to Washington, D.C. Armando plays an instrumental role in the novel by helping his participants heal psychologically as well as physically. He is aware of biopiracy carried out by pharmaceutical companies and plunges headlong undauntingly into the effort to prevent the companies from patenting their sacred medicine ‘yagé’. Kate is jolted from within to hear this and expresses her dismay: “But to patent Grandmother. It would be like patenting a human being. Or life” (218). The multi-national companies forego all moral and business ethics in the pursuit of more fame and money.

Sunita Pillai explores Walker’s identification of “fat-eating, chain-smoking, drug abuse as the fall outs of racism and capitalism” (2). According to Walker, the cure lies in nature’s therapeutic potential to heal and by redefining our equation with the Mother earth. She tells:

If we go to the root of our drug addictions in so many cultures and countries around the world today, we will discover that humans have an instinctive need to rely on natural medicines found in plants. They search for this medicine, unfortunately, in drugs or in plants that have been insulted and degraded to become substances that
harm rather than heal. One of my novels, *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart*, delves into this.

Walker reveals the ingrained, insatiable lust for money to be the ground for twisting and distorting the therapeutic effects of old medicinal plants. She opines:

What is happening is that the pharmaceutical companies wish to steal the medicines shared so freely by the shamans and to make money by selling them to the rest of us. They use twisted religious organizations to incite hatred against the very medicines that have helped poor and indigenous people survive their illnesses and traumas since time immemorial. (“At home in this universe”)

In an interview with Frank Barat, Walker loads her dice in favor of indigenous remedies:

I have had the privilege of standing in, sitting in, walking in, drumming in, with native Americans, Maori, Nungas [aboriginals of Australia], native Hawaiians and shamans of the Amazon. My constant prayer is that enough people with indigenous wisdom and training can hold on until the rest of humanity catches on to how essential they are.

In *NTH*, it is through the Shamans, Armando and Cosmi, Walker shows the psychological as well as physical healing that ritual participants undergo as a part of their shamanic journey. The novel is replete with American Indian influences such as shamanistic healing practices and the worship of nature. According to Christina Pratt, “The word “shamanism” does not express an ideology, like Communism or Buddhism, which are formalized systems of beliefs” (xi). “Shamanism is not a religion. The great religions of humankind are revealed religions. At their core are teachings that were revealed at some point in the past and are believed to be the word of whom or what that religion calls God. . . .” (Pratt vi). Pratt elaborates the beliefs and rituals of Shamans:

What shamans experience in the ecstatic states of trance that are necessary for their work is as real to them and the people they serve as the houses they live in, the rivers they swim in, or the conversations they have with their spouses. These experiences
reinforce and develop the shamans understanding of the universe as interrelated and interdependent energy vibrations and patterns. Their experience of life—both physical and spiritual—is also influenced and expanded by their experience in journeys and altered states of consciousness. (xi)

When Kate takes a hallucinogenic medicine known as Ayahuasca or yagé, she asks “for help for the humans of the planet and for the coming generations and for the animals and plants and rocks. She asks that she be guided to knowledge of how to act in the world for the highest good of all” (NTH64). Sunita Pillai asserts “The Shaman helps her to connect to an ancestral voice which is called the Grandmother voice. Gradually, this disembodied, pre-historic, motherly voice replaces the voice of the distant Christian God” (2). She maintains further, “The words of Grandmother remind Kate of the Earth’s need to fight back against all kinds of power-over relations” (2).

Pratt maintains, “. . . shaman often work with the spirits of their ancestors, honoring them for their wisdom and guidance. Shamans are distinguished from others of their communities by the depth and degree of their relationships with their ancestors. They often form working relationships with the spirits of a deceased ancestor as helping spirits in their shamanic practices” (xii). The activist steps required for ecological healing need the support of strong philosophical foundations so that it can lead to a redefinition and reconsideration of man's relationship with the non-human world. Alice Walker’s activism has filtered through into her writings, as she seeks to broaden the understanding of human beings through the medium of her literature. In NTH, the two Shamans, Armando and Cosmi, do not differentiate between whites and blacks while treating them. To them, all are in need of spiritual and physical healing: “And yet, here they were, tending the sick descendents of people who’d almost destroyed them. . . . Armando and Cosmi carried the Indian spirit of their ancestors, but their bodies showed traces of the long Spanish domination, as did their last names” (93). As Shamans, they consider it their duty to heal people without any regard for their history or nationality as Armando maintains, “A sick person has no history and no nationality” and adds, “If you cannot feel that way there is no possibility of becoming a curandero”(93).

Having grown up in the South noted for its oral folk-lore tradition, Walker imbibes the story-telling spirit of her foremothers and she uses her narrative technique to embody her concerns for the oppressed people as well as earth in structuring her oeuvre. She underscores the need for interrelatedness of the entire matrix of life that should be the hallmark of
sustainable communities. As an amalgam of many cultures and experiences, Walker has enriched the tapestry of her literary corpus by infusing contrasting colors of different traditions, and has made it stronger by the countless trials and struggles against any injustice. She has drawn upon her African as well as native American heritage, and has attempted a blending of their beliefs and traditions. According to Janheinz Jahn:

African philosophy is the philosophy of unity of all things, of ontological harmony and coherence in the world. Therefore, in traditional African culture, life and death, secular and sacred, night and day, black and white, ugliness and beauty are not antagonistic polarities, but are all constant and continuing forces (qtd.in Borrego 11)

Walker’s indigenous beliefs and ideas can be summed up aptly in these lines:

The fertility and health of all life, whether cultivated or wild, animal, human or plant are integral and equally important to the harmonious and sustained well-being of the whole web of life. Our ancestors regarded the earth as the living body of the Earth Goddess that continuously gave birth to existence; the source of life itself. Yet, life lives on life, the cycle of existence is a continuous self-devouring and self-recreating process of transformation and regeneration. All life must die and yet, death is a sacrifice to life that ultimately ensures its continuity. Thus, to our ancestors life and death were not so much seen as opposing forces, but rather as two aspects of the same inexplicable mystery. (‘The Spirit of the Earth: Trees and Fertility’)