CHAPTER FOUR

Feminist Genealogy: History and Hauntology

4.1. Introduction

The various black social, political and religious movements did not always give voice to black women, did not allow their unique stories of suffering and transcendence to be told, heard and passed on to a new generation. Indeed, black women in America have historically been seen but not heard. Thus contemporary black women writers have turned to their writing to give voice to the buried stories of black women. In their novels, Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor use facets of African spirituality—such as ancestor worship, magic, voodoo, root work, the presence of ghosts, and communication with dead ancestors. The conjuring of a rich African heritage, particularly through the use of the supernatural, is juxtaposed with the mistreatment of Africans in America in a search for self-definition and regeneration. In *Beloved* and *Mama Day*, “the protagonist moves from a life of fragmentation and isolation to a (re)vision of wholeness and sense of community through an acceptance of his/her African-based heritage” (Wilentz 60). This transformation from isolation to communal re-entry is essential for the survival of black Americans.

Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* highlights the importance of confronting, reclaiming and transforming history, and it points to the healing potential of memory. It revives the past in the modes of haunting, memory and storytelling. In her novel, Morrison shows what slavery did to black people’s bodies and minds; what it meant for them to be owned by somebody else as well as the difficulties of claiming ownership of oneself. To explore the historical truth, Morrison uses
supernatural elements of magic realism. Her novel is not just a slave narrative and historical fiction but also a ghost story. *Beloved* is the story of the African-Americans who survived slavery; it is about the filling of historical gaps. Morrison rewrites the life of the historical figure Margaret Garner (1856), who killed her child to prevent her recapture into slavery. Gerda Lerner includes the story in her collection *Black Women in White America*:

Margaret Garner, seeing that their hopes of freedom were vain, seized a butcher knife that lay on the table and with one stroke cut the throat of her little daughter. . . She then attempted to take the life of the other children and to kill herself, but she was overpowered and hampered before she could complete her desperate work. (61)

Rather than reading *Beloved* in terms of “boundaries of self and the other” or “mother guilt” (Rushdy 578), this text can also be approached in critical terms concerned with the way in which a text authored by a Black woman redefines a collective history. Morrison’s slavery novel achieves the realist portrayal of great “social trends and historical forces” that George Lukacs endorses, in the classic historical novels, as offering a “prehistory of the present” (337). *Beloved* further suggests the influence on Afro-American historical fiction of magic realism, read in recent Latin American and third world fictional “histories” as a revisionary postcolonial narrative mode, mediating the cultural and epistemological clashes of colonial history (Slemon 20-21).

With *Beloved*, Morrison explores the profound way in which slavery defines the black experience and yet, the way in which the universal human experience informs black life after slavery. Bell Hooks writes, “Our history as black people can never be marked solely by the experience of enslavement; instead it must be marked by the fusion of circumstance between the
free and the bound” (155). What is very specific for this story is the mark of alienation that slavery left for African Americans. John Hope Franklin describes the way that Slave Codes embodied the repressive culture of slavery, almost completely denying personal wholeness (124). These laws forbade marriage, free mobility, self-defence, and a host of other activities among slaves. Today’s most of black writers, engaged in the profound mythopoetic enterprise of identification with slave ancestors, return Afro-American literary culture to its “roots,” reviving with new dignity the foundational genre of this literature, the slave narrative (Gates, “Language” xxxiii). Sethe and the characters in Beloved learn to confront that difficult history even though looking back to slavery means looking back to the maimed body and psyche. Ignoring or forgetting the past is even more damaging because the past demands recognition. In fact, recognition is required in order to accept the love that exists just below the surface.

The use of natural elements in voodoo and conjuring ties black people, and especially black women, even more closely to the natural side of the nature/culture dichotomy, it represents a supernatural aspect of nature that culture fears because it cannot comprehend it. Conjure abilities are found to run in families; the conjurers inherits their aptitude and the mantle of power, along with an expertise in herbal medicines. Though not every person of African descent believed in the authenticity of their power, conjurers still proved to be a vital to the survival of life in the New World. “The religious specialist,” as John W. Roberts calls the conjure figure, “was seen as a kind of generator of life-force and his or her presence in the community as essential to the maintenance of the quality of life that allowed individuals to attain the fullest ontological being” (80).
In Naylor’s *Mama Day*, Miranda (Mama Day) is a permanent fixture in domestic space, baking cakes from scratch, quilting, and tending to the garden at “the other place.” Her domesticity quietly extends into her healing work; she depends on the products from the garden and in the woods for the remedies she procures for the community. Her role as midwife and nurse are not separated from her domesticity. Miranda’s “gifted hands” are indeed a gift passed down through the generations of the Day family. As a folk healer and midwife, Miranda holds in her hands a mystery and influence that the people of Willow Springs respect and fear because she has skills and knowledge that no one fully understands. Moreover, as a descendant of the “greatest conjure woman on earth,” Sapphira Wade, Mama Day’s magical power is irrefutable. Mama Day certainly demonstrates a great deal of power, both spiritual and cultural, and it is clear that her opinion carries a great deal of influence among the people of Willow Springs. The island is often described as “speaking” to Mama Day, and the voice is often connected to the spiritual presence of the “Great Mother,” Sapphira Wade. Because Miranda is a direct descendent of Sapphira, she is able to harness the power of the island and of her incredible ancestor, and she is able to do miraculous things because of this spiritual connection. One could say that Miranda receives her gift honestly.

Mama Day is able to use her spiritual connection with the past and with others to help people in this life through life-enhancing acts. The affirmation of life that Mama Day demonstrates in her actions is a result of a spiritual connection to the island and its people; through a life spent helping, guiding, and being offered help by the people of the island, Mama Day has come to receive joy from life, and to see life as so valuable that preserving and nurturing it becomes her own life’s purpose.
4.2. The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*

*Beloved* examines the connection between an enslaved past and the distortion of identity. Slavery, after all, was a system predicated on dehumanizing and impersonalizing human beings; the system was called for the crushing of the language, family names, culture, and tribal history of the slaves. Bernard W. Bell defines *Beloved* as a “ghost story that frames embedded narratives of the impact of slavery, racism, and sexism on the capacity for love, faith, and community of black families, especially of black women, during the Reconstruction Period” (8-9). Morrison has incorporated conventions of the gothic novel in *Beloved* by using what she calls African cosmology to resurrect the ghost of Sethe’s daughter, and give her a voice.

For an Afro-American writer, slavery is a story known in the bones, and yet not at all. “How could she bear witness to what she never lived?” asks Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora* (103), crystallizing the paradox of contemporary black rewriting of slavery. Karla F. Holloway states:

*Beloved* proposes a paradigm for history that privileges the vision of its victims. Traditional processes of historiography are revised in this inversion. This is a critical posture for the novel to assume because slavery placed black women outside of the universe governed by the measure of history. Instead, the *aspect* of their being—the quality, nature, and presence of their state of being—becomes the appropriate measure of their reality. (169)

*Beloved* cannot recover the “interior life” of slaves, but by dramatizing the psychological legacy of slavery, it portrays that “interior” place in the Afro-American psyche where a slave’s face still haunts. Linda Koolish explains that *Beloved* is “a slave narrative in which the self is not
effaced . . . the narrator . . . provides to the reader a richly textured psychological and experiential view of personal and historical events” (421).

The enslaved Afro-Americans were treated like objects and were “moved around like checkers” with no respect to filial relationships (Beloved 23). In fact, most enslaved Afro-Americans were treated worse than animals. Beloved describes the horrible physical effects of slavery on the bodies of the characters. As Paul D notes, his and Sethe’s stories are the same; likewise, Sethe’s story is the same as Halle’s, and his is the same as Sixo’s. The stories they share with each other articulate the accumulated wisdom of communal thought (Perez-Torres 103). The physical effects on Sethe are devastating, schoolteacher uses her body for a “human vs. animal” anatomy lesson (Beloved 193). “Morrison revises the conventional slave narrative by insisting on the primacy of sexual assault over other experiences of brutality” (Barnett 420). Paul D is also punished for his attempt to escape by being harnessed like a farm animal and sold to work on a chain gang. He describes what it is like to wear a collar that prevents him from laying down (Beloved 227). After schoolteacher forces Paul D to wear an iron bit in his mouth, he knows that there “wasn’t no way I’d ever be Paul D again, living or dead. Schoolteacher changed me” (Beloved 89).

Beloved also shows how slavery affects the psyche of the characters. Sethe is in a fragile psychological state, “Would it be all right to go ahead and feel? Go ahead and count on something?” (Beloved 38) She only allows herself to care about her daughter, but slavery interferes in filial relationships to the extent that even the natural emotion of loving one’s children is dangerous. Paul D’s response to his experiences of slavery is to keep his feelings and love hidden “in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be, its lid
rusted shut” (Beloved 72-73). However, as Barbara Schapiro states, “the worst atrocity of slavery, the real horror the novel exposes, is not physical death but psychic death” (156). Under times of slavery, blacks were not allowed to have a sense of self, a sense of individuality or self-worth. The dehumanization which Sethe and Paul D experience as slaves causes them to lose their sense of self-worth and leaves them questioning their existence as humans. Schapiro argues, “like all of the other black characters in the novel, [Paul D] must work out of a condition of psychic fragmentation—his selfhood has been severely impaired, his status as a human subject denied by the slave culture” (167). These characters do not refuse to look back. Their history haunts them until they finally reconstruct the pieces of themselves and, in the process, embrace love. Through Beloved, Morrison merges self-love with love of others in a loving, yet critical affirmation of black humanity (West 19).

History is a construction of the dominant culture, and is comprised of its cultural logics and values, including racism. Angelita Reyes argues, “Morrison underscores that, although people cannot live in the past, they need to know their history” (70). Only by knowing her history, Denver is able to take action to save her life, as well as Sethe’s. It is an ancestral spirit, a voice of history—her Grandmother’s, which indicts her for not knowing her history and prompts her to take action, “You mean I never told you nothing about Carolina? About your daddy? You don’t remember nothing about how come I walk the way I do and about your mother’s feet, not to speak of her back? I never told you all that?” (Beloved 244) April Lidinsky notes that “countering Denver’s caution to act through stories of her family’s resistance to slaveholders, Baby Suggs inspirits her to reach the community beyond the porch of 124” (210).
Morrison revises the gothic by reincarnating the ghost of Sethe’s dead daughter who seems logical to Sethe, Denver, and Baby Suggs, who “understood the source of the outrage as well as they knew the source of light” (Beloved 4). Together they have come to accept what drove two sons away from home, the “spiteful” baby ghost (Beloved 3) who makes herself known by clashing of pots and furniture, pools of red light by the doorway, tiny hand prints in the cake. Sethe explains that it is “[her] daughter” (Beloved 10). Denver is able to see the ghost “a white dress knelt down next to her mother and had its sleeve around her mother’s waist” (Beloved 29). Into this scene walks Paul D, that rare “kind of man who could walk into a house and make the women cry” (Beloved 17). His arrival changes the climate of repression, he chases the invisible haunter from the house, and sparks in Sethe “the temptation to trust and remember,” “to go ahead and feel” (Beloved 30), for the first time in years. Together, Sethe and Paul D begin a mutual talking cure that promises a mutual future. The ghost in Beloved represents the psychological effects of the experiences of slavery repressed by Sethe, Denver, Baby Suggs, and other characters in the novel.

Beloved is indeed what Denver knows, both her sister and “more” (Beloved 266). Morrison gives her the distinctive name everyone privately gives to their most beloved; her name is the same as the only word inscribed on the headstone of Sethe’s dead daughter, and when Sethe first sees her, her water breaks (Beloved 52). Beloved also appears to be the age Sethe’s daughter would be if she were alive, “nineteen or twenty,” (Beloved 55) but she acts as though she is the age she was when she was killed, “like a two-year-old” (Beloved 98). For Sethe Beloved is her resurrected “crawling-already” girl. The community also believes that Beloved is the reincarnated ghost of Sethe’s daughter. Not only the characters accept the presence of ghosts without question, but Sethe tells Denver that “nothing ever really dies”
(Beloved 37) and another character states that “people who die bad don’t stay in the ground” (187), a traditional African belief (Hurston, Their Eyes 280). Beloved represents not just Sethe’s dead daughter, but also the millions of Africans who died during the Middle Passage and slavery:

There will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too . . . the men without skin . . . we cannot make sweat or morning water . . . they bring us sweet rocks to suck . . . we are all trying to leave our bodies behind . . . I cannot fall because there is no room to . . . those able to die are in a pile . . . then men without skin push them through with poles. (Beloved 210-11)

Morrison dedicated this novel to “Sixty Million and more,”—to the captured Africans who died on the Middle Passage and perhaps also to Africans who died violent deaths in America, after being sold into slavery, to the “beloved, which was not beloved.” Beloved represents the reality of ancestors. As Bonnie Winsbro points out, “with death she was plunged into the collective memory of the African-American experience” (132). Beloved is “the past incarnate” (Winsbro 135), a past that has to be faced up to, accepted, and dealt with, before it can disappear.

Denver embraces the return of her sister. She grew up a lonely child and is grateful for the companionship Beloved offers. The sisters are united in a number of significant ways, all of which have to do with the fact they were born to the same mother. Perhaps the most profound detail which connects Denver and Beloved is their mother’s milk. After Beloved’s violent death Denver “took her mother’s milk right along with the blood of her sister” (Beloved 152).
Additionally, the deprival of mother’s milk is a prevailing theme in the novel and an important part of Sethe’s memories of her own mother as well as what binds her to her daughters.

The problem of memory and its lack of a written record is one reason that Morrison used a ghost to illustrate the horrors of slavery. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. states:

Slavery’s time was delineated by memory and memory alone. One’s sense of one’s existence, therefore, depended on memory. It was memory, above all else, that gave a shape to being itself . . . The dependence upon memory made the slave, first and foremost, a slave to himself or herself, a prisoner of his or her own power to recall . . . Not only had the slave no fixed reference points, but also his or her own past could exist only as memory without support, as the text without footnotes. (*Figures in Black* 100-01)

Sethe would rather live in denial, “I don’t want to know or have to remember that. I have other things to do: worry, for example, about tomorrow, about Denver, about Beloved, about age and sickness not to speak of love” (*Beloved* 70). One of the reasons Sethe is so overjoyed by the resurrection of her daughter is that it relieves her of the need to explain the past and relive her actions, “I don’t have to remember nothing. I don’t even have to explain. She understands it all” (*Beloved* 183).

However, this repression of memory can cause “rememory,” what Sethe calls the ability of the past to repeat itself in the future. Sethe explains her experience of time and “rememory”: “Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world . . . even if I die, the picture of what I did, or know, or saw is still out there” (*Beloved* 35-36). Sethe
protects herself from rememory by trying to forget everything, and she protects Denver by warning her about what is out there waiting for her:

Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it’s you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It’s never going away . . . So, Denver, you can’t never go there. Never. Because even though it’s all over—over and done with—it’s going to always be there waiting for you. That’s how come I had to get all my children out. No matter what. (Beloved 36)

And though the plot turns upon the loss of a child, this history-as-daughter’s-rememory is pervaded with grief for lost mothers, Beloved’s aching desire for Sethe; Sethe’s mourning for Baby Suggs, and Sethe’s loss of her own mother, remembered in excruciating fragments, a hat in the rice fields, a scar under her breast (Beloved 61). Her mother sent to the fields, Sethe was suckled by the plantation nurse, “the little white babies got it first and I got what was left. Or none. There was no nursing milk to call my own. I know what it is to be without the milk that belongs to you . . .” (Beloved 200). Missy Dehn Kubitschek makes the insightful comment that “beneath Sethe’s passionate commitment to motherhood lies an equally passionate desire to be mothered, to be a daughter to her mother” (170). This multiple mourning for mothers inscribes the tragic experience of Afro-American children and women under slavery.

Morrison’s women are linked by a three-generation chain of scars, marking both bond and breach, Sethe’s mother urges her daughter to recognize her body in death by the scar under
her breast, and Sethe’s resurrected daughter bears on her neck the mark of her mother’s handsaw. Between them, Sethe has “a chokecherry tree” on her back, the scar of a brutal whipping.

Schoolteacher’s nephews whip Sethe for reporting their first act of violence against her, the tree is thus associated with Sethe’s violated motherhood, the visible sign of the crime she repeatedly laments, “They took my milk!” (*Beloved* 17) When Sethe’s daughter is restored to her, Sethe’s remarks fuse the resentment of a wet nurse and a rape survivor, “Nobody will ever get my milk no more except my own children. I never had to give it to nobody else—and the one time I did it was took from me—they held me down and took it. Milk that belonged to my baby” (*Beloved* 200). The scar evokes the brutality of slavery; however, trees are typically associated with immortality and the spirit world in African culture.

Sethe tells Paul D very succinctly when she goes to the barn to look for Halle, her personal misery continues when the milking occurs. One of schoolteacher’s nephews beat her while she was pregnant with Denver, injuring her so badly that “her back skin had been dead for years” (*Beloved* 18). Sethe narrates thus:

After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That’s what they came in there for. Held me down and took it. I told Mrs. Garner on em. She had that lump and couldn’t speak but her eyes rolled out tears. Then boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still.

“They used cowhide on you?”

“And they took my milk.”
“They beat you and you was pregnant?”

“And they took my milk!” (*Beloved* 17)

The milk is the only gift Sethe has for her children, a symbol of her motherhood, “Milk was all I ever had” (*Beloved* 195). “Her complete focus upon bringing the milk to her children, who have travelled to Baby Suggs’s house ahead of her, to the utter disregard of the pain she suffers during the journey, underscores how Sethe considers her milk to be of greater value than her body itself” (Field 3). Therefore, when recalling the incident eighteen years later to Paul D, the milking still causes her to weep. The theft of Sethe’s milk is clearly traumatizing to her, for, as Schapiro writes, “she feels robbed of her essence, of her most precious substance, which is her maternal milk” (159).

Hiding in the barn, Halle sees the entire incident of the milking. The horror of viewing the consideration and treatment of his wife as animal breaks Halle. Like Sethe, it seems that Halle didn’t want to see what was in front of him—he just “couldn’t get out” in time (*Beloved* 72). Seth’s womanhood is violated by the rape she has lived and her husband, the father of the owners of the “milk,” observes and does not stop it. Not only would he be unable to free her from slavery, he was helpless to halt the process of brutality. Escape from the plantation was Halle’s only other avenue for the salvation of his family and himself from slavery. Halle is last seen by Paul D “sitting by the churn . . . [with] butter all over his face” (*Beloved* 69).

Sethe maintains her decision to run though she was six months pregnant. Just as she had given up all hope of life for herself or the baby, Amy Denver, a white girl, helps her. She aids in the birth and delivery of Sethe’s baby, Denver, carefully wrapping her in the rags of her own skirt (*Beloved* 84). Sethe and her four small children came to live in freedom with Baby Suggs.
Baby Suggs washes Sethe, soaks her feet, “grease[s] the flowering back,” makes her a dress and drops just about anything to massage her neck when the weight of things remembered or forgotten was too heavy for her (Beloved 93).

When Schoolteacher arrives at 124 twenty-eight days after Sethe’s escape, Sethe flies to the shed to demonstrate her claim to herself and her children, the property that schoolteacher seeks as his own. Sethe reflects on this time, “bit by bit, at 124 . . . she had claimed herself. Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that free self was another” (Beloved 95). She pushes her “best thing[s]”, her children, into and over the veil; “[She] took and put [her] babies where they’d be safe” (Beloved 164). Sethe’s response when faced with returning to slavery and surrendering her children to that fate is “No. No. Nono. Nonono” (Beloved 163). She cut her two-year-old daughter’s throat with a saw, so that no “gang of whites [would invade] her daughter’s private parts, [soil] her daughter’s thighs” (Beloved 251). Commenting on Sethe’s murder of her baby, Morrison says, “It was absolutely the right thing to do . . . but it’s also the thing you have no right to do” (Rothstein 17). Motherhood does not liberate Sethe. It limits her self-image and her capacity for agency. According to Carole Boyce Davies, Sethe’s heroic response to enslavement paradoxically becomes the kind of mother-love that society enforces on women (54). Sethe believes death to be a kinder alternative than rape; that worse than death is the fact that “anybody white could take your whole self . . . [and] dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn’t think it up” (Beloved 251). Pamela E. Barnett analyzes Sethe’s actions as such, “For Sethe, being brutally overworked, maimed, or killed is subordinate to the overarching horror of being raped and “dirtied” by whites; even dying at the hands of one’s mother is subordinate to rape” (419).
Although some of the others saw schoolteacher and his posse “nobody ran on ahead” to warn Sethe and Baby Suggs of the imminent danger (Beloved157). Spite, malice and jealousy prevented them from alerting Sethe. Kristina K. Groover theorizes that here “the community fails to perform its role” (71), although Baby Suggs, known as an “unchurched preacher” (87) teaches them to love themselves through a hybrid sort of spirituality. She directs them to love each part of themselves, and of each other. That can only happen by honouring “the essential need . . . for mutual recognition” (157). Lidinsky has made the useful observation that Baby Suggs’s message of self-love, physical sensuality, and racial pride is a political, postmodernist response that calls into question “set notions of knowledge, history and identity” (Lidinsky 199). She reads Beloved as a novel that celebrates the politics of collectivity, with Baby Suggs being the character who best articulates that vision. The Cincinnati community of former slaves is indirectly responsible for Sethe’s infanticide. Melissa Walker says it is “the collaboration of the black community with the conditions of slavery that led to the murder” (37).

The day before the main misery, Baby Suggs had hosted a party to celebrate the safe arrival of her daughter-in-law, the guests wake up the next day resentful and envious of Suggs for having had the audacity to be so free and generous. Elizabeth Kella suggests that the community perceives Baby Suggs’ celebration as a threat to communal identity and a violation of exchange economy in making reciprocity impossible. She simply gave too much and therefore “offended them by excess” (Kella 138).

Sethe’s interpretation of love, saving her children from slavery through infanticide, indeed splits both she and Baby Suggs “wide open,” breaking them both (Beloved 162). As Clenora Hudson-Weems states, both Sethe and Baby Suggs are consistent in their love and
commitment to family; they both quest for wholeness through freedom (131). After a lifetime of resisting slavery and racism, Baby Suggs is beaten down, not only by the oppressive white society but by the failure of her own people, so that “her faith, her love, her imagination and her great big old heart began to collapse” (*Beloved* 109). After the misery, Baby Suggs isolates herself in her room. Although she concludes that “there is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks,” the communal disjunction which led to the misery also contributed to her eventual heartbreak and death (*Beloved* 89). In her postmodernist reading of *Beloved*, Lidinsky observes that Suggs’s death “forms the brutally lucid index of the limitations of masculinist models of individualism, for she does not fail the collective in her loss of faith. Rather, her loss of faith stems from the collective’s failure” (208).

The entire community then, and not just Sethe, was complicit in the misery. Indeed, as Walker points out, Sethe’s infanticide cannot be isolated from the social context—“slavery itself and the public policies—the Fugitive Slave Act and lynching—that slavery engendered”—within which it occurs (39). The betrayal by the community is itself a twisted, inhumane response to the brutality of slavery. When Sethe emerges, under arrest, to head to the jailhouse, their feelings of animosity and their continued hesitance in freely giving love are displayed afresh. “In perceiving Sethe as a monster for having killed her child, the community projected its own guilt for its complicity in that act” (Winsbro 152).

The continued hostility between Sethe and the black community serve as a barrier, which isolates her. Groover estimates “Sethe’s self-isolation unforgivable” (70). 124 is full of spite and venom. The baby’s ghost is understood to be “evil,” by Paul D, “sad,” by Sethe, and “lonely and rebuked” by Denver (*Beloved* 13). The ghost reminds her every day of the freshness of her past
history. Although she begins her day “working, working dough” as a means of “beating back the past,” she cannot beat back the ghost (*Beloved* 73). This time Sethe’s past refuses to be silent. She is trapped by her memories, “her brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day” (*Beloved* 70). Judith Thurman points out that the impossibility of erasing the past is due to the fatal relationships which slavery produces. In fact, these relationships—master-slave, mother-child, etc.—are “what we experience as most sinister, claustrophobic and uncanny in the novel, and [they are] what drive home the meaning of slavery” (Thurman 179).

After she escapes from Sweet Home, Sethe feels free to escalate the intensity of her love for her children, determining that they are “her best thing,” which she could not “draw breath” without (*Beloved* 203). Her love for them becomes what Morrison warns can occur specifically within the parent-child relationship; it becomes ownership love. “Too frequently love has to do with owning that other person . . . parents who simply adore their children and really and truly do want the best for them may, in fact, destroy them” (Bakerman 42). Sethe’s flaw is that she loves her children too much. Although such excessive mother love can be empowering, it can also be destructive. The misery, Sethe’s violent claim of her ownership of her children not only results in physical destruction, death of her baby girl, but also spiritual damage, creating the fracture between herself and the remaining children. Her two sons run away from home to escape the spitefulness of the ghost. Kubitschek accurately observes, “Sethe’s rigid idea of motherhood truncates her relationship with two of her living children” (168).

*Beloved* evokes the painfulness and impossibility of mothering in slavery. Baby Suggs admonishes Sethe for suggesting they move after the baby’s death, “You lucky. You got three
left. Three pulling at your skirts and just one raising hell from the other side . . . I had eight. Every one of them gone away from me” (*Beloved* 5). Baby Suggs and her husband decide that “whichever one got a chance to run would take it; together if possible, alone if not and no looking back” (*Beloved* 175). Their decision not to look back indicates a desire to forget their slave past, even if it means they must forget each other. “What [Baby Suggs] called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children” (*Beloved* 23). Such sentiments are echoed throughout the novel as almost all of the characters warn that it is dangerous to “love too much,” a caution born of American slavery and a slavers power to separate families.

At the heart of *Beloved* are Denver’s and Sethe’s journeys toward self-definition and a newly constructed sense of self. Beloved does act as a catalyst for the liberation of Sethe and Denver from their years of isolation and of incomplete or distorted identity. Ralph D. Story discusses “Sethe’s inner quest . . . for completeness; her destiny was to fulfil her promises as a mother: to love, to cherish, to protect, to teach and to give” (22). Sethe refuses to accept oppressive ways of living that do not allow her to love her children freely. In explaining to Paul D how she found the courage to escape slavery, Sethe admits:

> It was a kind of selfishness I never knew nothing about before. It felt good. Good and right. I was big, Paul D, and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between . . . Look like I loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn’t love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn’t mine to love. But when I got here, when I jumped down off that wagon—there wasn’t nobody in the world I couldn’t love if I wanted to. (*Beloved* 162)
Sethe with a fierce desire gives her children all that had been denied to her—mother’s milk, freedom and love. In her role as mother, she loves, and thereby provides an example of resistance to oppression.

Paul D’s arrival acts as a catalyst for Denver to voice the bleak isolation of her life. In his unexpected presence, Denver breaks down and spills out the frustration and loneliness she has kept hidden from Sethe all these years, “I can’t live here. I don’t know where to go or what to do, but I can’t live here. Nobody speaks to us. Nobody comes by. Boys don’t like me. Girls don’t either” (Beloved 17-18). When Paul D drives the baby ghost out and then heads upstairs with Sethe, Denver resents his presence and ejection of “the only other company she had” (Beloved 19). Beloved is not only a ghost of Sethe’s killed daughter, but also a symbol of the link between the present and the past. Therefore, through the recreation of the maternal bond, Sethe searches for her self-affirmation. It is not until Beloved’s physical arrival that Sethe is finally allowed to “re-examine her story with regard to sacrifice, resistance, and mother love” (Kella 129).

As soon as Sethe thought she had buried the past, “Paul D dug it up, gave her back her body, kissed her divided back, stirred her rememory and brought her more news” (Beloved 189). Beloved seduces Sethe in to telling her story. Coming from the place of the dead, this ghost begs to have history told to her. Talking about the past is usually too painful for Sethe, but with Beloved, she finds herself enjoying the process. Winsbro observes that “Beloved’s spirit feeds off the stories told by and about Sethe because these stories define her own individual rather than collective identity” (136). Once Sethe believes that Beloved is her baby returned to flesh, she thinks she has been freed from the pain of that trauma, “I couldn’t lay down nowhere in peace, back then,” she thinks, recalling her daughter’s death. “Now I can. I can sleep like the
drowned, have mercy. She come back to me, my daughter, and she is mine” (*Beloved* 204). The baby girl, who has come again eighteen years later, is the actual characterization of Sethe’s psychological torments. She embodies Sethe’s “quest for social freedom and psychological wholeness” (Bell 8).

When Sethe discovers Beloved’s identity, she interprets her reappearance as a sign of forgiveness and in immense relief turns her back on the world and devotes herself to loving Beloved; she believes she is forgiven and given a second chance. Beloved wants to completely join with her mother. “Rather than illuminating the singular self, a mirrored unity is revealed, and the mother and daughter witness the singularity of their indivisible selves and their material and spiritual forms” (Washington 181). Beloved’s goal is for her and Sethe to be joined as one. The novel then embarks upon 18 pages of “unspeakable thoughts, unspoken” (*Beloved* 199) by Sethe and her two daughters, now an isolated and passionate trio, who have joined together, bound up through history, memory, love and motherhood. Katherine B. Payant sees the moment in the women’s lives as reunion between the mother and the sisters, thus emphasizing the positive aspect of the ghost’s appearance (*Beloved* 199). Each speaks a monologue in turn, “Beloved, she my daughter. She mine;” “Beloved is my sister;” “I am Beloved and she is mine” (*Beloved* 200-210). Their voices then join in a fugue of woman-woman love, “You are my sister / you are my daughter / you are my face; you are me;” “I have your milk / I have your smile / I will take care of you;” “You are mine / you are mine / you are mine” (*Beloved* 216-17). The longings of all three may have created Beloved, “the ominous claim ‘mine’ reflects all three women’s claims on each other” (Kubitschek 169).
Beloved’s appearance disrupts the growth of Sethe’s relationship with Paul D and her journey for freedom, but it in no way hampers it. “Despite the characters’ efforts to diffuse the power of the past, the ghost baby, like the traumatic nightmare, intrudes on the present, forcing Sethe and Paul D to remember what they have tried unsuccessfully to forget” (Barnett 420). However, Beloved’s desire for Sethe cannot be met with Paul D’s protective, distracting presence; so Beloved moves him, through spiritual means, out of the house to the cold house, in order to have more access to Sethe. Ashraf H. A. Rushdy asserts, “Beloved represents to Sethe—the danger of the past’s taking over the present” (579). Beloved manages to separate Paul D from Sethe by moving him slowly from the house and seducing him against his will. Eventually, he is forced to give in to her order, “You have to touch me on the inside part and you have to call me my name” (*Beloved* 117). Paul D finds himself unable to refuse her, even though he “was convinced he didn’t want to” have intercourse (*Beloved* 126). It is an unstoppable event that fills him with “repulsion and personal shame” (*Beloved* 264). He considers the possibility that Beloved “was not a girl, but something in disguise” (*Beloved* 127). Indeed, Barnett links her to the succubus, “a female demon and nightmare figure that sexually assaults male sleepers and drains them of semen” (418). In some supernatural way, she effectively rapes Paul D.

Beloved moves Paul D out of the house just as Paul D had chased the baby ghost out of 124 Bluestone. In fact, it is Paul D’s own fear of facing his past that displaces him. Winsbro observes that Paul D ultimately must learn to face down his past, “Beloved becomes, in essence, the past that catches up with Paul D. When he moves from Sethe’s house, he is running not from Sethe but from Beloved, from a past that will continue to haunt him, driving him away from every place in which he hopes to settle until he stops long enough to turn and confront it” (Winsbro 147). After Paul D’s departure, Sethe erroneously concludes that he was wrong in
convincing her that there was a world out there that she could live in. She shuts up her spirit to anything outside of 124. “Whatever is going on outside my door ain’t for me. The world is in this room. This here’s all there is and all there needs to be” (*Beloved* 183).

In fact, playing and interacting with Beloved becomes the centre of Sethe’s focus, first to the exclusion of her job and then to the exclusion of Denver, “She cut Denver out completely. Even the song that she used to sing for Denver she sang for Beloved alone” (*Beloved* 240-41), Denver is forced into the role of outsider and assumes that role is her salvation. Beloved demands more and more from Sethe, while Sethe diminishes, so that it seems to Denver that “the thing was done,” “Beloved bending over Sethe looked the mother, Sethe the teething child . . . Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it . . . . And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur” (*Beloved* 250). Because of “Beloved’s absorption of a collective African-American memory in death” (Winsbro 139), her needs are so fathomless and bottomless that Sethe cannot reach her. No matter how much Sethe explained, cried and sought to convince Beloved of her love for her, “Beloved denied it” (*Beloved* 242). However, after Sethe kills Beloved to prevent her from being taken into slavery and to put her somewhere where she would be safe, Beloved “vacillates between rapturous awe of her mother and pathological desire to destroy her” (Washington 183). Beloved may not want to completely destroy Sethe, but she does wish to strip Sethe of any individuality she may possess, or, as Teresa N. Washington states, “she wants the two of them to ‘join’ and return fully unified to the ‘other side’” (183). The ownership love that drove Sethe’s desperate action was now being enacted through Beloved’s accusations and demands. “Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it. But there would never be an end to that” (*Beloved* 251). Doreathe Drummond Mbalia observes
that the adult ghost becomes “the personification of isolation and all things inherent in it, including selfish individualism, greed, and destruction” (90).

When Denver sees her mother “spit up something she had not eaten,” she leaves 124 to look for help and then work to support her mother, her sister and herself. She is encouraged by Baby Suggs spirit, which directs Denver to “go on out the yard. Go on,” it is the “rememory of Baby Suggs that finally transforms isolation into a quest for help” (Lidinsky 210). Denver must go into the world to find some, and so begins to bring her haunted family back into its community and into time. Kubitschek points out that “Denver feels her potential to become a mother while simultaneously affirming her status as daughter” (171-72). Denver’s new identity is an ideal blend of self-interest, personal responsibility toward Sethe, and a relationship with the greater black community. Groover summarizes this act as Denver’s “rite of passage into womanhood” (74). It can also be viewed as a voyage into adulthood and self-recognition in the eyes of the community. In other words, Denver provides a developmental model of a person who escaped the threat of total alienation and became aware of her place in the social structure.

When the women of the town hear that Sethe’s murdered baby has returned, they overcome their long time disgust and decide to save Sethe from Beloved’s life-threatening abuse, “the past [was] something to leave behind. And if it didn’t stay behind, well, you might have to stomp it out” (Beloved 256). Mbaliya comments on the unity and communal bonds inherent in this gesture; “Once the enemy is identified, once it is out in the open, the community struggles collectively against that which divides them” (91). Now, instead of thinking of Sethe as the monster, the community changes its allegiance. “By perceiving Beloved as a demon whipping Sethe, the community projects its guilt for having whipped her themselves for eighteen years”
Moreover, it is significant that the community is involved in the exorcism because Beloved represents the pain of slavery they all suffer in some way. Her story is the story of a whole community, a small narrative that overflows into a larger narrative. The women share the feelings function as a self-help group to fight back the trouble. Amy Binder sees the road to social change in “subjective negotiations of a sense of individual self and identification with a group that aim together at forming collective identity” (qtd. in Kella 37). Female solidarity also empowers the female protagonists to establish their own identity. The ghost’s supernatural presence provides the community with a convenient scapegoat and an opportunity to atone for its past mistake, “Beloved acts as a supernatural agent—experienced as daughter, sister, witch, or demon-child—who engages others in a seemingly external but actually internal struggle resulting in rebirth, renewal, [and] resurrection” (Winsbro 153). Sethe’s journey inside in search of her own identity could not have taken place without the community’s reassessment.

Thirty-strong women come together in a communal effort of their own; they march to the house and perform a collective exorcism:

The voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (Beloved 261)

This baptism by sound marks Sethe’s rebirth into her new life and ignites a long-dormant tribal memory, thereby “joining her with her ancient heritage” (Kubitschek 174). Beloved disappears without a trace; by exorcising Beloved, the community exorcises the past, opening the way for
the old harmony, inspired and nurtured by Baby Suggs. Sethe cannot heal herself; she needs the collective power of the community. Mbali noted, “It is only through the collective will and the action of the people that Beloved, the enemy, dies” (91). Sethe now has an opportunity to redefine her identity on the basis of her cultural heritage. Despondent at Beloved’s departure, Sethe resigns herself to death; fully convinced that Beloved was “best thing” (Beloved 272). Sethe suffers from losing her child again and ends up a broken woman. She continues to deny herself the truth of her own self worth. “When you kill the ancestor,” Morrison said, “you kill yourself” (“Rootedness” 344). Taking leave of history, the novel leaves the slave mother to her own moment, to herself—whoever she was.

There is hope at the novel’s end when Paul D re-enters, as a Baby Suggs like figure, to wash Sethe, as Baby did when she had first arrived, and to call her to claim, to accept and to love herself. Paul D illustrates the qualities of the Africana man by participating in Sethe’s healing (Hudson-Weems 123). He tells her, “You your own best thing, Sethe. You are” (Beloved 273). Paul D “wants to put his story next to hers” and he tells Sethe, “Me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow” (Beloved 273). He helps her to see that her best thing was not wholly outside or inside herself, but in “her ability to remember, articulate, and live out that desire and loss in and alongside other stories as incomplete, as lonely, and as potentially loving again as hers” (Moreland 175). Healing allows Sethe to see that she is worthy of love—Paul D’s and her own. Sethe and Paul D look back to embrace their individual and communal history and move into a future where love is a real possibility. Walker notes that “Sethe and Paul D have finally come to terms with the past and have moved into the possibility of a future together” (45). With Denver out in the world, Paul D by her side, the ghost chased out of her life, and the community of women ready to accept her back into their fold, Sethe’s life
holds more possibilities than it ever has and offers a more “liberating vision of motherhood” (Kubitschek 165). Between Paul D’s and Denver’s compassionate nurturing, she may also fulfil her life-long need to be mothered. In fact, as Winsbro points out Sethe “regains a chance, under Denver and Paul D’s care, for a resurrected life of her own” (140). All of them have a chance to leave the past behind and start again by focusing on the future. They are agents in each other’s healing, and their relationship is intertwined with the community that surrounds them (Hudson-Weems 120).

*Beloved* is a fine illustration of the journey to self-reliance on a communal as well as individual level. The novel portrays successful development of the “black identity” in times when a black person is denied it. During the struggle for self-definition, Sethe and Denver learn to self-possess their own selves, and overcome the conviction of being someone else’s possession. African American women are a heterogeneous population, who can only be spoken of as a group in terms of the ways in which the intersection of race and gender in a racist and sexist society influences their lives. *Beloved* as a cultural text contains space for multiple positions and a “plurality of voices” (Henderson 22). Morrison posits that the black community as a whole must attempt to heal from the trauma of slavery and the Middle Passage by remembering and mourning their past. Forgetting or repressing will allow for the painful memories to intrude upon their lives, just as Beloved took human form to invade Sethe’s life. *Beloved* concludes with emphasis on the importance of communal participation in the processes of emotional and spiritual healing and stability. It delineates “the intrinsic value of collectivism to the African community” and risks of “isolation” both for the individual and “for the race” (Mbali 88-90).
4.3. Conjuring Moments: A Trace of Magic, Voodoo and the Supernatural in Gloria

Naylor’s *Mama Day*

A conjurer, as a historical figure, is an evolution and merger of the African medicine man and spiritual leader that survived the middle passage. Norman E. Whitten describes the conjurer as a “professional diviner, curer, agent finder, and general controller of the occult arts” (316). Conjurers are closer to their African roots than other, more acculturated African slaves. As Houston A. Baker argues, “one reason the conjurer is held in such a powerful position in diasporic African communities was her direct descent from the African medicine man and her place in a religion that had definable African antecedents” (79). Conjure women often carry the name Mother and hold considerable power within their communities; they are especially gifted with psychic abilities, or are known to have second sight. Often they are spoken of as being “two-headed.”

Gloria Naylor makes no secret of her belief in the supernatural. “I happen to believe that there are some people who can take you, or even take their own minds, to other planes. I believe in psychics. There are dimensions we are not privy to” (Carroll 161). Indeed, “to Gloria Naylor, the real world is not the world we experience with our five senses” (Reckley 87). Naylor makes it clear what her beliefs are, “I believe in the power of love and the power of magic—sometimes I think they are one and the same. *Mama* is about the fact that the real basic magic is the unfolding of the human potential and that if we reach inside ourselves we can create miracles” (qtd. in Fowler 92). Naylor’s *Mama Day* is a novel full of conjurers—Ruby, Dr.Buzzard, the maternal ancestor Sapphira Wade—in addition to Miranda, nicknamed Mama Day.
Mama Day is a canny and confident mix of midwife and conjure woman; of soul and psychology, who knows dangerous secrets. She can tell if life has begun inside a chicken egg by holding it to the light of a candle; she can diagnose internal cysts of a pregnant woman by slipping her hand inside “a path she knew so well that the slightest change of moisture, the amount of give along the walls, or the scent left on her hands could fix a woman’s cycle within less than a day of what was happening with the moon” (*Mama Day* 75). In a dark forest, “she knows every crook and bend, every tree that falls and those that are about to sprout” (*Mama Day* 117). Mama Day appears as a healer with “roots” in the past, strength in the present, and insight into future. Her healing powers transcend the world of science and verge on the magical. She has the girl of “second sight” (*Mama Day* 14), she has “gifted hands” (*Mama Day* 88). She uses these hands to care for the sick, to deliver babies, and to cultivate gardens. She feels the burdensome responsibility of her intuitive powers and her knowledge of nature and uses them only to advance the cause of life, making Bernice fertile or calling down lightning to punish the murderous Ruby. Mama Day is the essence of all good things, respect for life, for family and nature, a comprehension of the way to harness natural forces, an acceptance of death. Mama Day is an eternal, immortal figure. She is the reconciliation between all the Day family and also the islanders. Miranda uses her power with humility and with a sincere interest in the health of the community. She provides advice and aid to accomplish that which contributes to binding the community together.

Miranda Day receives the name “Mama” not because she has many children of her own—in fact, she has none—but because as midwife, she has “created,” or birthed, most of inhabitants of Willow Springs. She has served as mother not only to her own birth relatives but to many of the islanders, she has brought into the world, is recognized as the most powerful
conjurist on the island. *Mama Day* contains aspects of the literary othermother who acts as a substitute mother to her community, as well as the othermother who appears in a dream to encourage the female hero (de Weever 133-34). Mama Day gives up her chance to be a daughter because she must care for her own mother who grieves for a dead child, Peace, and begs her husband, “let me go with Peace” into the well that claimed their child’s life (*Mama Day* 284). Mama Day is forced to raise her sister after her mother’s suicide and she is a self-sacrificing character forced into the role of family caretaker. When she is still a child; she gives up the chance to be a mother because she must care for everyone else’s children, She laments the loss of her childhood because she had “no time to be young” (*Mama Day* 88). For Miranda, “there was never no arms to hold her up, no shoulders for her to lay her head down and cry on, no body to ever turn to for answers” (*Mama Day* 283). Roger D. Abrahams concludes that the “little mama” role is a common one in African-American society; it is often granted to a young girl who has a “precocious ability to demonstrate her household abilities” (23). Miranda remembers her father attempting to comfort and convince her of the importance of her role, saying, “I can’t hold this home together by myself. And Abby, she ain’t strong like you. We need you, Little Mama” (*Mama Day* 89). “Being there for mama and child. For sister and child. Being there to catch so many babies that dropped into her hands. Gifted hands . . . Caught babies till it was too late to have my own . . . and’ve had—Lord, can’t count ’em—into the hundreds. Everybody’s mama now,” (88-89) and because of her multiple roles as midwife, healer and community leader, expands traditional ideas of motherhood. She symbolically serves as the “giver of life” for the inhabitants of the island. Indeed, “when we turn to the black American conjurer we find not only a magician” but also a “doctor” (Smith 5). Mama Day is not a biological mother, her position as creator is established through her close connection to the natural world. She is the “lady” or
leader of the women in Willow Springs. Suzanne Juhasz argues, “Mama Day is a fiction of the
good mother that includes the daughter’s romance with a man” (130). Mama Day commands
enormous respect and authority. Her age adds to her mystique and to her image as wise woman
and eternal mother because as the voice of the island suggests, she “is about as close to eternity
[as] anybody can come” (Mama Day 7). Miranda worries and cares about the residents of
Willow Springs because, like Baby Suggs in Beloved, Miranda’s definition of family is
expansive enough to include the entire black Community. Helen Fiddyment Levy observes that
Miranda “guard[s] the gates of birth and death, bringing her healing powers of growth to the
natural world” (282). She has learned long ago that “there is more to be known behind what the
eyes can see” (Mama Day 36).

The historical connection runs from the legendary free spirit who founded the
community, Sapphira Wade, through Miranda Day to Ophelia. They have bridged the gap of
ancestral conjuring with African roots and the spiritual milieu of their forefathers thereby
creating a healing narrative which Marjorie Pryse terms them as “metaphorical conjure women”
(5). Mama Day is a conjure woman, mid-wife and the emotional mother of the island. Sapphira
is the spiritual mother of the island, she is considered to be the genealogical “Great Mother” to
almost everyone on the island. She is a frightening presence that reminds the people of slavery,
broken hearts, and the overwhelming power of nature. Sapphira is “true conjure woman . . .
[whose name] is never breathed out of a single mouth in Willow Springs . . . Everybody knows
but nobody talks about the legend of Sapphira Wade . . . She could walk through a lightning
storm without being touched, grab a bolt of lightning in the palm of her hand; use the heat of the
lightning to start the kindling under her medicine pot-depending upon which of us takes a mind
to her” (Mama Day 3). She “turned the moon into slave, the stars into swaddling cloth, and
healed the wounds of every creature walking up on two or down on four” (*Mama Day* 3).

Because of her refusal to accept the role of slave and because of her knowledge of nature and female sexuality, she was given the title “witch.” As midwife, mother, matriarch, and archetypal mother, Sapphira embodies maternality. She was a slave sold to Bascombe Wade in 1819: “She married Bascombe wade, bore him seven sons in just a thousand days, to put a dagger through his kidney and escape the hangman’s noose, laughing in a burst of flames 1823: persuaded Bascombe Wade in a thousand days to deed all his slaves every inch of land in Willow Springs, poisoned him for his trouble” (*Mama Day* 3).

The beneficiaries of this powerful conjuring, the free, property-owning, self-governing African-Americans of Willow Springs, revere Sapphira as their founding mother and “the other place” as her sacred space. When she gave the surname “Day” to her seven sons, she cast herself as a maternal creator, mother of all of the Day, an identity Miranda underlines by referring to Sapphira as “the Mother who began the Days” (*Mama Day* 262). Amy K. Levin explains that Sapphira becomes “a mythical figure” to the people of Willow Springs because she had the “strength and ruthlessness” to knowingly break her lover’s heart and to take her freedom, despite the disadvantage of her position as a slave woman (77). As the novel’s community voice explains it, “Sapphira Wade don’t live in the part of our memory we can use to form words” (*Mama Day* 4). When Sapphira liberated herself from her white husband and master, Bascombe Wade, in 1823, she initiated a tradition of female power as well as a religious tradition, Candle Walk; the inhabitants of Willow Springs provide extra food and supplies to families whose crop did not do well that year. They march throughout the town carrying candles, singing and chanting “Lead on with light, Great Mother” (*Mama Day* 111). Harmony between the islanders is restored at Candle Walk, but its traditions are changing too:
Things took a little different turn with the young folks having more money and working beyond the bridge. They started buying each other fancy gadgets from the catalogues, and you’d hear ignorant things like, ‘They ain’t gave me nothing last Candle Walk, so they getting the same from me this year . . . . There’s a disagreement every winter about whether these young people spell the death of Candle Walk.’ (Mama Day 111)

Miranda remembers the ritual in her youth, remembers her father’s description both of differences from his youthful experiences and his own father’s still different celebration. Miranda voices a healthy acceptance of this change and other changes in the future as natural occurrences:

But that’s where the recollections end—at least, in the front part of the mind. And even the youngsters who’ve begun complaining about having no Christmas instead of this “old 18 & 23 night” don’t upset Miranda. It’ll take generations, she says, for Willow Springs to stop talking about the time “when there used to be some kinda 18 & 23 going on near December twenty-second.” By then, she figures, it won’t be the world as we know it no way—and so no need for the memory. (Mama Day 111)

The candles used to welcome and accompany the spirit—represent the spirit of the Great Mother who has returned in a ball of fire to Africa, and also stand for “the light that burned in a man’s heart”—the spirit of the white man Bascombe Wade who loved Sapphira and who surrendered all his land to her and her offspring. Both are parents of this island and part of its story of origins.
Therefore, “18 & 23” becomes a symbol for the collective memory of the people of Willow Springs, especially for their belief in Sapphira’s continued presence in their lives.

Slavery allowed Bascombe to do a terrible injustice to Sapphira who, in other circumstances, might have been able to give him a strong and pure love. As Mama Day observes “we ain’t had much luck with the girls in this family” (Mama Day 39), it is as though the females are all cursed. Mama Day thinks about how:

Most all of the boys had thrived: her own daddy being the youngest of seven boys, and his daddy the youngest of seven. But coming on down to them, it was just her, Abigail, and Peace. And out of them just another three girls, and out of them, two. Three generations of nothing but girls, and only one left alive in this last generation to keep the Days going—the child of Grace. (Mama Day 39)

Mama Day’s mother Ophelia in addition to having Abigail and Mama Day gave birth to Peace who, while still a baby, fell into a well. After her dead daughter, she jumped into The Sound. She died, in Mama Day’s words, “trying to find peace.” Of Ophelia’s three children only Abigail and Mama Day are still left. Mama Day has no children; Abigail had had three, Grace, Hope, and yet another Peace. The symbolic import of these names becomes clear and all three of these daughters are dead. Abigail’s Peace died even younger than the first Ophelia’s. Abigail’s Hope was the mother of Willa Prescott Nedeed (Linden Hills); Hope died shortly after Willa married Luther. The child of Grace, another Ophelia is the Days’ last one. Left by her husband “eight months heavy with his child,” Grace is unable to recover from the pain of her own heartbreak and, as Mama Day observes, chooses to “wither away in hate” and die rather than to overcome her loss and live on for her daughter (Mama Day 151, 278). Then, Miranda becomes
not only a mother to her grandniece Ophelia but a “Mama” to the whole island community of Willow Springs. For decades she is not only the community’s midwife but also its guardian of tradition and its central authority figure. Abrahams explains that Afro-American children are taught to emulate their mother’s behaviour, and it is asserted several times in the introduction that “if Mama Day say no, everybody say no” (Mama Day 6), which demonstrates the strength and importance of Mama Day’s influence and the unconditional respect for her role in the community (Abrahams 70).

Mama Day sees magic in the woods on the island; she sees trees and flowers fluttering and hears them whispering. Willow Springs’ woods contain herbs, roots, stems and leaves that can be used for good or for evil—as medicine or as poison. There is a secret part of the woods, “the other place,” whose the supernatural can occur. Conjurors and spirits lurk in these woods; the rational gives way to the irrational. Mama Day’s healing powers arise from the world of nature, from the plants she converts to medicine, from the chickens that surround her house, from the trees and birds of the forest. Miranda’s communication with ancestral voices seems genuine and usually occurs during her solitary walks in the woods or during her clearing of the graves in the family cemetery, activities that reflect with some accuracy African beliefs about the dead. As Ralph Reckley points out Miranda communicates with all of nature, “Mama Day’s dialogue is all inclusive. She talks to the wind, plants, animals, and her dead ancestors” (Reckley 88). Miranda’s family graves are in the woods, and are arranged in groups of seven, “old graves, and a little ways off, seven older again. All circled by them live oaks and hanging moss . . . .” (Mama Day 10). Trees were planted directly on graves in order to guide the spirits on their journeys into the earth. Miranda’s extraordinary ability to see and hear is not always shrouded in mystery. Her lifelong acquaintance with the woods is responsible for her impressive knowledge since, when
“younger, the whole island was her playground; she’d walk through in a dry winter without snapping a single twig, disappear into the shadow of a summer cottonwood;” so comfortable is she in the woods that “folks started believing John-Paul’s little girl became a spirit in the woods” (Mama Day 79). Mama Day believes that the mind is more potent than the artefacts of voodoo. She is the undisputed matriarch of her community:

That she is indeed a kind of archetypal mother figure is underscored by her improbable age as well as by her creative powers. She defines the values of Willow Springs and guides its inhabitants just as surely as she exercises the powers of nature . . . . She also embodies and articulates the philosophy and moral vision that Naylor seems to recommend as an antidote to the gender and racial oppression . . . as well as to the spiritual emptiness and corruption she sees at the core of contemporary urban life. (Fowler 118)

When Ophelia and Miranda go both literally and figuratively in search of their mother’s gardens, Miranda tells Ophelia about her own family tragedy. As Pryse points out, such passing on of the oral tradition with its elements of genealogy, magic and naming, is a particularly female tradition that empowers the women who inherit it (20). Significantly, Miranda calls her by her proper name, Ophelia, for the first time, and Ophelia then realizes her connection to her great-mother Ophelia and to her mother, Grace, who had named her Ophelia in revenge for the desertion of her husband. Ophelia recognizes that her bond with Miranda and Abigail is eternal, “My bond with them was such that even if hate and rage were to tear us totally apart, they knew I was always theirs” (Mama Day 177). Miranda sees Ophelia as probably the last woman of the family line but a worthy descendant of Sapphira:
And now she strides so proud . . . . The lean thighs, tight hips, the long strides flashing light between the blur of strong legs- pure black. Me and Abigail, we take after the sons, Miranda thinks. The earth men who formed the line of Days, hard and dark brown. But the Baby Girl brings back the great, grandmother. We ain’t seen 18 & 23 black form that time till now. The black that can soak up all the light in the universe, can even swallow the sun. (*Mama Day* 47-48)

Ophelia has inherited the power and now, through Miranda, the knowledge of her foremothers. Levy makes the interesting observation that “Sapphira, Cocoa, and Mama Day form a sort of women’s trinity with mother, daughter, and spirit” (283).

Cocoa has lost both her parents; “What makes George’s case different is that he lacks the extended family, the surrogate parents, and the connection to a past history that would sustain him” (Fowler 107). Unlike George, Cocoa does have some family and a guarantee of survival because of the land the family owns. Land means safety and connection with the place of ancestors, which is what, affords people on Willow Springs not simply a connection with their past but also a hope for the future. New York has not given George a place to connect to the past other than Bailey’s cafe, which he connects to his mother and her supposed past as a prostitute. “His alienation from the past and from black cultural traditions is both explained and underscored by the fact that he is not only an orphan but illegitimate” (Fowler 104). Indeed, not only is George an orphan, he is the orphan of history. There is a sense of loss, “the rage of a bastard son” (*Mama Day* 106). He says to Cocoa, “You had more than a family, you had history. And I didn’t even have a real last name” (*Mama Day* 129). Even though Cocoa was raised in Willow Springs, she initially fails to grasp the vital concepts that Miranda and Abigail labour to
teach her. Cocoa notes that, together, they comprised the mother that she needed to have. She
notes that “If Grandma had raised me alone, I would have been ruined for any fit company. . . I
guess in a funny kind of way, together they were the perfect mother” (Mama Day 58). All of her
life Cocoa had been protected, guided and loved by two women who were intrinsically tied to an
entire community. Their lessons of life and womanhood translate into lessons in how to love.

Mama Day’s power cannot only be explained by science. She is also a conjure woman
because she can work beyond the range of the properties of herbs or scientific knowledge. When
in need, Mama Day goes to “the other place,” and she testifies to George, “I can do more things
with these hands most folk dream of—no less believe” (Mama Day 294). Mama Day can hear
whispers from her ancestors and the land itself, she is given knowledge with no rational source,
and she is held in great esteem on the island, where most people are unwilling to tangle with her.

George describes Willow Springs as edenic, “more than pure, it was primal” (Mama Day
185). Despite his adoration, paradoxically, George feels a sense of physical and ideological
displacement in “Naylor’s problematized paradise” (Lee 130). As he is unable to acknowledge
the powers of matriarchy, the central conflict arises. David Cowart asserts “the single great
source of disharmony, which Naylor intimates, lies in an overturning, enduring ego of
matriarchal authority and its divine counterpart. The world still reels for the displacement of the
Goddess—the Great Mother” (444). Though he observes the gifted hands of Mama Day in
helping the infertile couple Bernice and Ambush and her magical powers of delivering most of
the babies of Willow Springs, he dismisses her powers and remarks casually, natural remedies
are really in now. We have centres opening up all over the place in New York (Mama Day 195).
These comments of George reveal his “ignorance of the effectiveness of holistic healings”
(Cowart 447). He calls Mama Day’s healing strategy as “mumbo jumbo” (Mama Day 295). Susan Meisenhelder writes that George’s “constant attempts to accommodate Willow Springs to white cultural myth make it impossible for him to understand its more complex reality” (117).

Mama Day’s biggest challenge as a healer involves saving Ophelia, victim of Ruby’s “hoodoo.” Jealous at the attention her husband, Junior, is paying to Cocoa during a return trip to Willow Springs, Ruby inconspicuously poisons the “baby girl” out of mere spite, “A soft hypnotic voice with firm fingers messaging that warm solution into my scalp. It’s gonna make this pretty hair of your prettier—[Ruby] kept rubbing and rubbing—and these braids, she’d make sure these braids would hold good” (Mama Day 246). Larry R. Andrews notes that “Although Ophelia has been raised in Willow Springs by Miranda and Abigail, she is not fully aware of her foremother tradition or open to her instincts or alert to the evil represented by New York or by Ruby’s jealousy” (297). Cocoa’s illness thus has both a physical and mental dimension and is a symbol of her confused identity. Ruby has essentially exploited the rift between George and Cocoa, so that while Miranda can easily purge Cocoa’s body of the physical poison, “cleansing her mind of the mental poison requires understanding that mind and all of the past events that have contributed to its makeup” (Winsbro 121). Since Cocoa is suffering from more than the flesh, “Mama Day tells George, I can’t do a thing without you” (Mama Day 294). Mama Day knows that Ruby is dangerous because she is filled with hate, “creeping through the woods, picking up nightshade and gathering castor beans. Coming to the edge of the other place, the full moon shining on twisted handfuls of snakeroot . . . Ain’t no hoodoo anywhere as powerful as hate” (Mama Day 157). In this battle Mama Day as the incarnation of love can do only so much to combat Ruby, to heal Ophelia.
For Ruby who has done the damage to Cocoa, Mama Day follows a ceremonial approach that recalls African tribal ritual of marking the house of a criminal:

Lord, I called out three times. She don’t say another word as she brings that cane shoulder level and slams it into the left side of the house. The wood on wood sounds like thunder. The silvery powder is thrown into the bushes. She strikes the house in the back. Powder. She strikes it on the left. Powder. She brings the cane over her head and strikes it so hard against the front door, the window panes rattle. Miranda stands there, out of breath, with little beads of sweat on her temples. (Mama Day 270)

The result of Miranda’s climactic action is “[lightning] hits Ruby’s twice and the second time the house explodes” (Mama Day 273). Miranda justifies her actions against Ruby as an act of self-defence on behalf of the incapacitated Cocoa. George sees the event as extraordinary because the only time a lightning strikes twice in the same place is when “someone purposely electrifies the ground with materials that hold both negative and positive charges to increase the potential of having a target hit. No one was running around with that kind of knowledge in Willow Springs,” he concludes (Mama Day 274), but Mama Day certainly was.

Sapphira is the conflation of the need for a new woman-centred spirituality and ancient African ancestor worship. Dona Marimba Richards explains that in the African worldview, the African family includes the dead, the living, and the “yet unborn,” and the ritual of ancestor communion is emblematic of the interdependence of its parts (7). To make the dead more powerful, the living offer sacrifices; in return, the ancestors strengthen the force vital of the living, thereby promoting their general health (Richards 7). Thus, Miranda has to dream
Sapphira’s name and place herself at the ancestral home before she can help Cocoa, for all the efforts are symbolic gestures of ancestor communion.

Miranda knows that a sacrifice has to be made. In “the other place,” she discovers Bascombe Wade’s plantation ledger, inside the water-damaged ledger, she finds the bill of sale for her legendary great-grand-mother, whose name no one in Willow Springs knows. After a day of trying to decipher the name, Miranda “gets down on her stiffened knees and prays to the Father and Son as she’d been taught. But she falls asleep, murmuring the names of women” (*Mama Day* 280). In her dreams, she “opens door upon door upon door. She asks each door the same thing: Tell me your name. And her answer is to have it swing open so she’s facing another” (283). At last, when she is too exhausted to open even one more door, she reaches the nameless Mother, who cradles and nurses Miranda at her full breast, “Daughter . . . [Miranda] can’t really hear [the word] ’cause she’s got no ears, or call out ’cause she’s got no mouth. There’s only the sense of being. Daughter” (*Mama Day* 283). This is the appearance of “the mother who appear[s] in dreams or nightmares, either to encourage or to criticize the female hero” of which Jacqueline de Weever speaks, and Mama Day is definitely encouraged by her vision (133-34). In the end, it is “the beating of the Mother’s calm and steady heart” (*Mama Day* 283) that “tells” Miranda how to find the answer she is searching for, she “knows” (*Mama Day* 283) that she must uncover the old well where her sister Peace had died, she should “look past the pain” (*Mama Day* 284). In ancient Greek mythology, wells are sacred to the Mother. Wells connect the living people in the upper world with the loving and terrible Mother in the underworld. As the Mother has instructed, she intuits what she and George must do to save Cocoa. Mama Day tells her sister Abigail that she needs the help of George, “it’s gonna take a man to bring her peace” (*Mama Day* 263).
The turning point of the story comes when George is asked not only to believe in Mama Day’s power but to act on it. George’s ultimate defeat comes after the hurricane when the bridge is taken out and Cocoa is desperately ill, and no mainland doctor can be summoned. Knowing that George believes in himself, Miranda wants him to yield “that belief buried in George. Of his own accord he has to hand it over to her. she needs his hand in hers—his very hand—so she can connect it up with all the believing that had gone before . . . even a fingertip to touch hers here at the other place” (Mama Day 285). Armed only with Miranda’s walking stick—a symbol of power and the ancient ledger—a symbol of history and knowledge, George is to go into the chicken coop and search in the northwest corner for the nest of an old red hen, and bring back to Mama Day “whatever [he] finds” (Mama Day 295). Entering the hen house forces George first to face his fear of chickens, which he is able to conquer, but after battling to reach the most distant nest, all he finds are his “gouged and bleeding hands” (Mama Day 300). In the midst of his frenzied quest, he does realize what Mama Day wants from him, “Could it be that she wanted nothing but my hands?” (Mama Day 300)

The chicken coop houses eggs, the symbol of female reproductive power. Zora Neale Hurston noted chickens are especially important in sacrificial rites of the hoodoo culture of the Americans South and the Caribbean. She says that chickens were sacrificed so that their spirits could be instructed by the medium to carry out the wishes of the living (Mules and Men 202-05). When he is attacked by Clarissa, Mama Day’s hen, he uses the cane Miranda has given him to slash the hen and smash its skull, and in doing so he “incarnates all the mindless male violence” and turns into “a savage male” as Juhasz argues (140-41). George uses Miranda’s cane to cause the death of a symbol of life. George misses the symbolism of the eggs, of the old hen; thus, he “fails,” but his action allows his wife to live, “all of this wasted effort when these were my
hands, and there was no way I was going to let you go” (*Mama Day* 301). He must let go of his
t tightness, his “male” mind. When he can’t do that, he sacrifices himself on the altar of love; his
already weakened heart fails and he dies. George’s fate is not his own, no matter how carefully
he controls his surrounding and monitors his heart. Destiny is under no one’s control; and here,
destiny is controlled by nonrational forces. “While George is limited to the three-dimensional
world of the five senses, Mama Day is capable of exploring the world of the dead, the world of
the living, and the world of the unborn” (Reckley 95). Mama Day’s acceptance of both the
rational and nonrational forces in life leads her to a wider vision. Meisenhelder defines the
conflict between rationality and nonrationality, as conflict between white and black (127), and
Elizabeth T. Hayes knows this conflict as realism versus magical realism (182). George is like
the generations of other men who have lived on the island who also suffered broken hearts,
“those men believed—in the power of themselves, in what they were feeling” (*Mama Day* 285),
and they themselves alone were not enough.

George dies so that the Days can be saved, he sacrifices himself for love. Ophelia,
however, survives—a triumph of Mama Day’s love over Ruby’s hate. The event marks a victory
for the ancestors as well, for as Andrews writes, Mama Day “sees Ophelia’s illness in terms of
the whole tradition of suffering women, from Sapphira’s slavery to Miranda’s mother’s grief”
(299). She ends the suffering. In fact, George’s efforts to help Cocoa do more than demonstrate
his love for her. In saving her, he could save all the Day women, past, present and future (Loris
257). After Cocoa’s struggle for health she is reborn as a southerner resolved to accept her
unbreakable ties to island culture. She attains peace and enlightenment. Ironically, it is George’s
sacrificial death that, by allowing Cocoa to live, gives her a chance to complete her quest for
identity and wholeness. As well, George serves as spiritual guide for Cocoa to learn her
“Genesis” in the words and deeds of Willow Springs’ mysterious original matriarch, Sapphira. Sapphira’s appearance, and her role as the spiritual othermother to Mama Day, the community othermother, leads to the novel’s conclusion and to the salvation and survival of her people.

Mama Day, and by the end of the novel, Cocoa, communicate with ancestors during “solitary walks in the woods or during . . . clearing of the graves in the family cemetery, activities that reflect with some accuracy African and also Gullah beliefs about the dead” (Tucker 180). The exchange between Cocoa and her ancestors emphasizes the “mystical power in words, especially those of a senior person to a junior one;” the “words of parents, for example, carry power when spoken to children: they cause good fortune, curse, success, peace, sorrows or blessings, especially when spoken in moments of crisis” (Mbiti 275-78). Once Ophelia is restored to life, Miranda feels that there are no more secrets for Miranda herself to learn, that “the rest will lay in the hands of the Baby Girl—once she learns how to listen” (Mama Day 307). As Mircea Eliade pointed out, in many societies the community healer cannot affect a cure for the ills of the community until the creation story has been retold. Thus, when Miranda wonders if Cocoa will have a child to “keep the days going,” she seems to suggest that this “child of Grace” not only represents the line of the Days, but the very cosmos that is Willow Springs as it exists in both sacred and secular time (39). Miranda sees Ophelia on the hillside:

It is a face that’s been given the meaning of peace. A face ready to go in search of answers, so at last there ain’t no need for words as they lock eyes over the distance. Under a sky so blue it’s stopped being sky; one is closer to the circle of oaks than the other. But both can hear clearly that on the east side of the island and on the west side, the waters were still. (Mama Day 312)
Thus, Cocoa becomes the next guardian of the community of Willow Springs. *Mama Day*, the story of the conjure woman, is also the story of “the beginning of the Days,” a story that includes a goddess who must be recovered—as Sapphira will be recovered by Cocoa. It is also the story of the spirit of Africa that has travelled to the New World on wind and water.

The life-affirming, communal values of the ancestral figure liberate the protagonist from his or her materialism and rationality and allow him or her to embark on the quest for identity and wholeness. The clash of values between the two archetypes usually results in the battle for the soul of the protagonist. Mama Day battles George for Cocoa’s life and soul and Sethe must choose between Baby Suggs’s big old heart and Paul D’s tobacco tin of a heart. Using the devices of mythology, ancestor-worship, native spirituality, magic, voodoo and the supernatural, Morrison’s *Beloved* and Naylor’s *Mama Day* not only rewrite history in the words of the oppressed but also put forth suggestions as to how the black community and specifically black women, can transcend racism and sexism, how they can survive, love and be whole in a country that conspires to keep them fragmented and voiceless.
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