

“Blessed Malelessness” as Womanist Critique? Toni Morrison’s Representation of Goddess in *Paradise*

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When I first went to the US as a high-school exchange student, I was told at the orientation that politics and religion are taboo subjects at a social gathering. After some years, I still remember the warning—and I do agree; religion is a risky topic anywhere anytime. So while I will prove myself foolish enough to step right in where angels fear to tread and talk about religion, I will at least focus on the civil aspects, and how authors deal with these civil issues through the use of religious symbols and images in their literary works.

My recent book deals with the various ways that three authors, Toni Morrison, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Leslie Marmon Silko, use religious images in their fictional works, and how each author draws from her own unique cultural resources. But today, I’d like to focus on African-American authors, and Toni Morrison in particular. First, I will offer a quick overview how religious representations in works by African-American women authors are related to political issues in terms of race and of gender.

Jeanette King, in her *Women and the Word: Contemporary Women Novelists and the Bible*, summarizes the problem as follows:

Just as the Bible has been used to construct woman as essentially inferior to man, it has also been used to construct the black races as essentially inferior to the white, so that the black female is doubly oppressed by this discourse, perceived both in gender and in color as being made not in God’s image (152).

As Professor Spillers has explored in her paper “Martin Luther King, Jr. and America’s Civil Religion,” however, African-American anti-slavery and anti-racist thought and movements have had a complex relationship with Christian organizations and Christianity in general.

Christianity has empowered the philosophies and movements that oppose slavery and racism. As the documents from the Civil Rights movement, including Martin Luther King’s speeches and writings, clearly demonstrate, Christianity has been the basis on which people from different backgrounds could join together to support each other in their effort to bring about justice.

The practice of using Christianity to support civil and political causes itself is not only African-American, but also all-American. King himself, in his famous “I have a dream” speech, makes this point by referring to “the American Dream”

and *the Declaration of Independence* when evoking Biblical images to demand racial equality and justice in the United States. The making of the United States, its victory over slavery, and his vision of racial equality are all eloquently described in the Biblical vocabulary he uses.

At the same time, it also goes without saying that Christian organizations have acquiesced, if not actively supported, slavery and racism. African-American criticism of racist practices among established churches has taken two courses. One is to criticize them and demand that Christianity be rightfully understood, or revised, and put to use to support and promote racial equality and justice. The second course is to reject Christianity as helplessly or innately racist, and look to other religions to provide the self-respect and moral support necessary to fight against racism. Malcolm X is of course a good example of this.

As for gender issues, in the US and elsewhere, Christian faith has spurred many women into activism on issues such as Abolition, alcoholism, and prostitution. Such activism led to the development of organized feminist movements. Many women used Biblical rhetoric in order to support their respective causes, including the rights of women and to justify their own “unfeminine” behavior and that of their colleagues. I would like to remind you of one good example here, that of Sojourner Truth.

“Den dat little man in black dar, he say women can’t have as much rights as men, ’cause Christ wan’t a woman! Whar did your Christ come from?... Whar did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothin’ to do wid Him.”... “If de fust woman God ever made was strong enough to turn de world upside down all alone, dese women togedder... ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now dey is asking to do it, de men better let’em.”
(116)

On the other hand, many women questioned the role of Christianity in terms of gender justice, and along with the development of feminist theology, some women have pursued ways to reinterpret or revise existing forms of Christianity to find a more egalitarian interpretation in terms of gender. Some, such as Mary Daly, have condemned Christianity—actually all the established religions—as hopelessly misogynistic and patriarchal, and have urged women to seek spiritual support elsewhere. And many have pursued this possibility in different and seemingly more egalitarian religions, including Zen Buddhism and Native American religions, witchcraft, and various forms of Neo-Paganism and so-called “New Age” spiritualism. Thus, in terms of both race and gender, both criticism of organized Christian practices and theology, and interest in non-Christian religious alternatives, have been motivated by political consciousness, appeared en masse, and have come to be represented in African-American women’s literature as well as elsewhere.

That said, the interest of African-American authors in religions of African origin goes back at least to the Harlem Renaissance era; Zora Neale Hurston’s

anthropological works on voodoo, such as *Mules and Men* and *Tell My Horse* immediately come to mind. It has only been since the 1970s, however, that many notable African-American women authors have emerged to address civic and political issues, concerning race and gender; many are feminist, though not all of them have chosen to call themselves that. Many of them, in dealing with political issues, use religious symbols and images both Christian and non-Christian.

In their fictional works, non-Christian religions symbolize the cultural and spiritual survival of African Americans. Racial and gender justice for African-American women are represented in different forms: such as feminist-conscious use of the female deity, female rather than male characters in a privileged position in terms of religious rituals and access to the divine, and use of African-American spiritual resources that are originated in Africa.

For example, Ntozage Shange’s dance-drama, *for colored girls who considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* (1977), one of the most notably feminist-conscious works by her generation of African-American women authors, presents seven women who survive the ordeal of racism and sexism, and try to heal themselves and each other by finding the female god within.

Some authors express African-American feminine spirituality in the figure of a female character, who, deriving her power from non-Christian god, gods, or spirits, heals others, and especially other women, and give them strength to survive. For example, Toni Cade Bambara’s *Salt Eaters* (1980) and Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* (1988) both present an African-American woman who saves a younger woman’s life with the help of spirits. Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) presents a protagonist, Avey Johnson, an urbanized middle-aged middle-class black woman, who visits a remote Caribbean island, and restores her physical as well as mental health by witnessing and participating in the islanders’ religious ritual of African origin, which recalls the memory of her own ancestors.

Alice Walker explicitly deals with theological issues both in fiction and in essays. In fact, Walker’s *The Color Purple* has been influential in forming a school of African-American feminist theology, sometimes called “womanist theology” after the term that Walker created to mean “black feminist.” I will not go into the details of womanist theology here, but would just like to point out that it emphasizes an African-American feminist religious view that demands equality and justice. Please take a look at the famous quote, in which Shug Avery, a blues singer, tells the protagonist Celie her religious creed;

Ain’t no way to read the bible and not think God white, she say. They she sigh. When I found out I thought God was white, and a man, I lost interest. You mad cause he don’t seem to listen to your prayers. Humph! Do the mayor listen to anything colored say?... God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don’t know what you looking for. Trouble do it for most folks, I think.

Sorrow, lord. Feeling like shit.
It? I ast.
Yeah, It. God ain't a he or a she, but a It.
But what do it look like? I ast.
Don't look like nothing, she way. It ain't a picture show. It ain't something you
can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is
everything, say Shug.
Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be
happy to feel that, you've found It... (195, 96)

In her later works, Walker develops this religious view into the “Gospel According to Shug,” a version of African-American feminist spirituality—a syncretism of ancestor worship, goddess worship, African-American centrism, and Christianity in *The Temple of My Familiar* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*.

Toni Morrison is another author, along with Alice Walker, who has influenced African-American feminist theology, most notably by *Beloved*, in which an old black woman and ex-slave named Baby Suggs preaches to the people of her community and encourages them to live and to love each other even under the heavy burden of slavery and racism.

“Here,” she said, “in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes...And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. You got to love it, you! and no, they ain't in love with your mouth.... No, they don't love your mouth. You got to love it. This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved...” Saying no more, she stood up then and danced with her twisted hip the rest of what her heart had to say while the others opened their mouths and gave her the music. Long notes held until the four-part harmony was perfect enough for their deeply loved flesh. (107, 8)

Baby Suggs is speaking in the African-American religious tradition, urging people to survive and support each other. This speech is, moreover, characteristically womanist; using Jeannette King's phrase, it “provide[s] a discourse in which Black women's gender and race will be a source of spiritual strength rather than the mark of inferiority or defilement” (152).

Shug's womanist revelation in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* raises the issue of the color and gender of God the Father and in so doing, leads to a radicalized alternative deity. Toni Morrison, on the other hand, seems to emphasize the African-American characteristics within Christian tradition, by using Biblical words and images in order to support African-American survival and self-affirmation, as we have seen in the case of Sojourner Truth. And while Morrison fills her fictional world with supernatural events and women who “[practice],” (*Paradise*, 244) and people who accept them as part of everyday life,

African-American Christianity is depicted by Morrison as a living, resisting spiritual force.

Another such example, from Morrison, in addition to Baby Suggs’ speech in *Beloved*, is the funeral scene in *Song of Solomon*, in which Pilate, the dead woman’s grandmother, comes in late, and immediately starts singing of mercy and love, soon to be joined by her daughter. Pilate’s unconventional behavior, together with her name (which was picked randomly from the Bible by her illiterate father), functions to stretch the image of Christianity by mixing in “funkiness” to use Morrison’s own words, while Pilate’s song and the feelings she expresses are, I think, beautifully in accordance with any conventional and traditional Christian faith.

In *Paradise*, Morrison seemingly contrasts non-Christian goddess worship with African-American Christianity. I will argue, however, that her radical representation of the female divine is never totally apart from Christianity and its American and African-American religious tradition.

In Morrison’s novels, as in the works of many other African-American authors (such as Alice Walker, as can be seen in the quotation), the established church is often depicted as hypocritical, narrow-minded, and as leading to powerlessness and self-hatred. For example, in *The Bluest Eye*, Pauline, the protagonist Pecola Breedlove’s mother, relying on the narrow-minded morality of the established church for her sense of self-worth, condemns her alcoholic and out-of-work husband and does not believe Pecola when Pecola tells her that she was raped by her father, and thus driving Pecola into insanity. At the same time, in Morrison’s fictional world, church is often depicted as a uniquely African-American site of mutual support. In *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*, funeral scenes depict a church where people gather together in order to mourn the dead and console the grieving. In these novels, the church as a center of community is taken-for-granted and much needed part of people’s lives. In *Paradise*, Morrison, while sarcastically presenting the self-righteousness and hypocrisy of church-going folks, also emphasizes the flexibility and cultural specificity of African-American Christianity.

Paradise, Toni Morrison’s seventh novel, presents two communities. One is an all Black, middle-class town called Ruby, with a population of 360 and three churches. The other community is based in an old mansion called the Convent, where five women live together in “blessed malelessness” (177). Although safe from white racism and post World War II materialistic corruption, crimes, and even death, in the 1970s, the present day of the novel, Ruby has begun to have problems among its members. Some of the men, regarding the Convent as the cause of Ruby’s deterioration, raid the place and shoot all the women.

The Convent was originally built to be a private dwelling, and then was used as a Catholic boarding school for Native American girls. Its funding having been withdrawn and the Native American girls gone, nuns transferred to other places. Mary Magna, or the Reverend Mother, and her companion and maid Consolata

stay and live together, selling the garden products and home-made food while occasionally taking in and taking care of those who seek refuge or care. Consolata, rescued and “kidnapped” from Brazilian street at the age 9 by Mary Magna, loves her and takes care of her until she dies of old age. Eventually, four more women, each of whom has gone through traumatic experience and has been deeply hurt, comes to the Convent to stay.

While headed by a Catholic nun and then her faithful pupil, the four Convent women are not particularly religious, at least in the beginning. They resent Ruby’s male-orientedness and narrow mindedness, and one of them, Gigi, openly challenges the conventional middle-class respectability of Ruby by having an affair with K. D., an already betrothed young man, and then by wearing improper, scanty clothes and by playing and dancing to the radio music when invited to his wedding reception. The women, as well as some of the younger habitants of Ruby, regard the religious practices of Ruby as too “square,” helplessly boring, and hypocritical.

Consolata, as typical of the Morrison-esque characters, turns out to possess supernatural power to revive the fatally wounded or ill. At first reluctant to use the power, she is persuaded by Lone, a Ruby midwife who also possesses that power but now is too old to use it to save the life of Scout, a Ruby teenager, and then Mary Magna, until she becomes too old to live and asks her to let her die.

After Mary Magna’s death, Consolata becomes desolate and abuses alcohol to escape despair and loneliness. Eventually inspired by a mysterious young man, however, she becomes the spiritual leader of the women, and tells them about the Goddess Piedade;

In ocean hush a woman black as firewood is singing. Next to her is a younger woman whose head rests on the singing woman’s lap. Ruined fingers troll the tea brown hair. All the colors of seashells — wheat, roses, pearl — fuse in the younger woman’s face. Her emerald eyes adore the black face framed in cerulean blue. Around them on the beach, sea trash gleams. Discarded bottle caps sparkle near a broken sandal. A small dead radio plays the quiet surf. There is nothing to beat this solace which is what Piedade’s song is about, although the words evoke memories neither one has ever had... (318)

At first, it seems that Morrison has set up a contrast between Ruby and the Convent as patriarchal and Christian vs. matriarchal and non-Christian. Consolata worships Mary Magna and worships Mary the mother of Jesus Christ. She tells the other women that “Eve is Mary’s mother, Mary is the daughter of Eve” (263), emphasizing the matriarchal heritage of Biblical feminine authority. While on the other hand, Ruby is definitely patriarchal, as the town’s self-appointed historian Pat Best sarcastically summarizes its Bible-like genealogy as “the numbers, the bloodlines, the who fucks who” (217).

Piedade, who has a Portuguese name and black skin, is African-Brazilian, and I would argue that Morrison created her image after Yemanjá, the maternal

Goddess of the sea, from the African-Brazilian polytheistic religion of Candomblé. Candomblé is not as well-known as voodoo, but Morrison certainly had some knowledge of it when she was writing *Paradise*. She states that *Paradise*’s plot line was inspired by the news story about Brazilian nuns who were attacked and killed by the local men because the nuns were practicing Candomblé rituals. (Smith, B1. The news, Morrison adds in the same article, turned out to be untrue.) Yemanjá as Mother Goddess is not unknown to readers of African-American literature; Audre Lorde’s poem, “In the House of Yemanjá,” is included in her much acclaimed collection *Black Unicorn* and various other anthologies. Thus, Morrison’s use of Yemanjá can be understood as another example of the African-American feminist strategy of drawing from non-Christian goddesses, specifically of African origin in this case, to empower African-American women in a racist and sexist environment.

I would argue, however, that the Goddess Piedade is not as entirely un-Christian as she at first seems to be. Her name, which means “piety” and refers to the iconic figure of the grieving Mother of Christ, is of Christian, and more specifically Catholic origin, although, of course, Catholicism officially disapproves worshipping Mary. The description of her hands as “ruined” suggests her belonging to the Brazilian working class but also reminds us of the stigmata of Jesus Christ.

God’s image as a black woman, however radically unconventional, is not in disagreement with the old form(s) of Christianity, which Morrison’s Princeton colleague Elaine Pagels describes in her influential book *The Gnostic Gospels*. *The Gnostic Gospels*, based on the studies of the Nag Hammadi codices found in 1945 buried in a sealed jar in Egypt, depicts the variations within the early Christianity. In them, God had male and female aspects, or polytheistic aspects, and the female god reigned supreme. Morrison’s use of the Nag Hammadi poem, “The Thunder, Perfect Mind,” which Pagels quotes and discusses, in both *Jazz* and in *Paradise* as epigraphs, clearly indicates that Morrison was aware of Pagels’ controversial book. Piedade, thus, is not just a goddess of “New Age” feminist imagination and a Brazilian or African alternative, but also is rooted in Catholicism, and, according to Pagels, in Christianity in one of its most original forms.

The ending of *Paradise* suggests that both the Convent women and the people of Ruby will ultimately come to this Black Goddess for salvation and consolation. Morrison in fact presents a religious vision in which African-American Christianity, in accordance with its tradition, answers people’s needs and helps them to survive, first women in this case, but eventually men and women both.

I would like to mention that Morrison’s quest for a black female deity is seen also in her other works. Along with the female characters that have supernatural and life-giving power, a symbolically eccentric female figure who never speaks appears in her other works. In *Paradise*, Palace, one of the women who live in the Convent, sees a crazy-looking black woman dancing and singing on the

escalator of a department store just before she goes to see her mother in New Mexico whom she has not seen for 14 years. In *Tar Baby*, the heroine Jadine, a black woman who is a professional model in Paris, also sees an eccentric-looking black woman in a supermarket, and this incident drives her to return to her uncle's home on a Caribbean island.

In her latest novel *Love*, two female characters who are childhood friends but have competed for the love of a man regain their love for each other by recollecting a memory of a mysterious woman called Celestial. Although supposedly a prostitute, her name and a stigmata-like cut on her face evokes a Christian sacredness. Celestial is always seen at the beach, just as Piedade is, creating a superhuman image of a goddess. Celestial, like Piedade, functions as a symbol of empowerment and mutual love and support for women in a racist and misogynistic environment.

Morrison's representation of goddess worship in *Paradise*, however, most obviously shows her audacity to explore the power of religion in people's lives. Without abandoning the Christian faith that has been historically and culturally important to African-American people, and to America in general, she nevertheless challenges readers to reconsider the faith, its images and practices, by exploring the issue of the relationship of black female civil empowerment and the essence of the religion they live with—a risky, but deeply meaningful exploration.

I'd like to close with the quotation from Octavia Butler's science fiction story, "Bloodchild." In this, refugees from the earth live on another planet in which scorpion-like aliens become "partners" with a human to use their body as host for their eggs. Gan, a teenage boy who has been chosen by one of the aliens, points a rifle at his "partner" at a crucial moment of their conversation, and tells her that if theirs is a meaningful relationship, and not just a coercive reproductive arrangement, as in slavery, then there should be a risk necessarily attached to it. If an issue, such as religion, is essential to our lives, the way we live it, and the vision we need to have to survive our everyday life, talking about that issue is, of course, risky.

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