

***THE SEARCH FOR WHOLENESS AND DIASPORA  
LITERACY IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN  
AMERICAN LITERATURE.* Silvia Pilar Castro-Borrego,  
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Given the title and the emphasis editor Silvia Castro-Borrego has chosen for this volume of nine essays on contemporary African American (women's) literature, it might run the risk of being allocated to "New Age" or "self-help" shelf in your local bookstore. This, however, would be unfortunate because between the two book covers are some high-powered contributions to academic inquiry into what is usually relegated to the realm of "touchy-feely" psychology: no doubt most of us despair of the postmodern sense of fragmentation and would welcome a sense of meaning in our lives, not to mention the real joy of locating and actually being able to *privilege* integrity in the rat-race for economic survival that has dominated the last decades in particular. But so often essays dealing with the search for "wholeness" are less than impressive pieces of real scholarship, relying on the abstract and the theoretical but not pinpointing the concrete implications of the texts under study. Fortunately the academic inquiry found in this volume affords the seriousness of purpose that the very real search for wholeness in the writing of black women over the last three decades would merit. After all, in the words of Johnella E. Butler in the "Preface" to the volume, the very real concern is "the discovery of what it means to be human, how the sites of our humanity change with time and experience, and how ourselves and our experiences connect with one another, with groups, communities, locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally" (x).

The nine essays in the present volume cover many of the foremost contemporary black women authors—Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, Toni Cade Bambara, Susan Lori Parks, Lucille Clifton, Paule Marshal, Gayle Jones, and Toni Morrison—and although there are others missing, like Shirley Anne Williams and Ntozake Shange, they constitute a wide yet very representative range of authors who have both challenged and intentionally opened up the discussion of what it means to be whole. Focusing on these writers individually provides a vision of the whole as to the concerted effort made to re-focus our thoughts onto matters non-material and ultimately of greater importance. In her competent and well-written "Introduction: From Fragmentation to Wholeness, an Exploration" Castro-Borrego frames this search for integrity within a wider historical framework of the recovery of

suppressed or forgotten memory –re-memory, as Toni Morrison would call it—principally through an emphasis on myth and the oral tradition. Through their art the authors discussed in these essays envision and reclaim a different past which rewrites the traditional white his-story and places emphasis on the interior and formerly unwritten lives of black people. This new “orature” is often an attempt to erase the split of the ego in contemporary life and through its “subversive resilience” manages to achieve a “basic harmony of connectedness” which will lead to a spiritual reconstruction.

One might pinpoint the beginning of a wider awareness of this effort to the work of Alice Walker, who in 1981 published her concept of “womanism” in an attempt to expand the ideas of “feminism” to a body of women who felt excluded from the women’s rights movement ... and rightly so. The job was well-done, and “womanism” as a term made a rapid climb into the American dictionaries, and one would hope, into the philosophies of less-academic black (and white) women. Certainly the tide shifted momentarily thereafter and the world-wide feminist movement began (finally) to listen to women of color whose voices up to that point had not been heard within the concerns (rather “trivial” by comparison) of well-off white women. As one black woman commented early on in the 1970s: “White women want to be president of the bank; black women just want a bank account.” (The horrid irony of this was that, once again, the resurgence of the women’s movement had been sparked by and driven by the black movement for Civil Rights in the early 1960s).

Unfortunately, Isabelle Van-Peteghem Tréard, the author of the first essay, “Womanism, Sexual Healing and the Suture of Eco-spirituality in Alice Walker’s Novels,” has fallen under the spell of Walker to such a degree that she comes across as uncritically celebratory rather than as a more distanced critic. (Given the inclusion here of her correspondence with Walker this would be easily understood as it is obviously born of a more personal relationship.) While her emphasis on the need for including sexuality (specifically female sexuality) as an integral part of wholeness is to be applauded, this opening essay, however, centers more on the audience/readers than on the quest for spirituality in the writing itself.

The fascination with Walker intrudes as well on the second chapter, first with a quote from her definition of “womanism” and then with an overly long introduction on the author’s position (very well know and re-hashed by now). This is, in fact, rather unfortunate, because once the essay centers on Gayle Jones’s *The Healing*, the more creative and pertinent analysis picks up and becomes very interesting. Tru Leverette’s reflection on the contemporary dilemma posed by postmodernism is a relevant caveat to the whole project—

[. . .] in this postmodern age when multiplicity and heterogeneity within the self are touted, the claim that one can become a homogeneous, centered being often is challenged. A poststructuralist critique would claim that wholeness is impossible, that

the core or center is lacking, that there cannot be, in fact, an authentic, unified self. (43)

—effectively and provocatively answered with “an acceptance of flexibility within systems, including that of the self, through the process of play” (44). “Perhaps,” the author continues, “it will be necessary, then to seek play (multiplicity and infinite possibility) before wholeness, to acknowledge the ways in which identity ‘plays’ with the structure of racial and gender categorization, rather than seeking a fixed and unchanging sense of self” (45). What makes this discussion of Jones’s *The Healing* most interesting is not its (possible) relationship with the author’s own life, but the uses of tropes from the African-American past, the tales of Jaboti, Harlan’s grandmother, about the Unicorn Woman and Turtle Woman. Jaboti’s logic is one that “allows for multiple perceptions and realities” (50), which curiously, given its mythmaking storytelling, locates the novel and its author firmly within the postmodern tradition. (For psychological coping strategies I was reminded of Yann Martel’s *The Life of Pi* as an inquiry into “multiple perceptions and realities.”)

Chapter Three, Denise Martin’s “African American Women Writers as Medicine Women” is such a useful and compelling essay that to my mind it should have opened the volume. While briefly acknowledging the work of contemporary novelists like Hurston, Angelou, Walker, Naylor, and Morrison, Martin centers her work on the writings of lesser known writers who draw on the African cultural memory of the medicine women, or *waganga*, who “actively and explicitly engage African principles and offer remedies for the sick, fragmented, or seekers of a conscious mental, physical, psychological and/or spiritual relationship with Africa” (59). Basing their spiritual healing on concepts like the *sankofa* (meaning in the original, “return and go take”), these writers draw on the living legacy of Africa as a “cultural and spiritual birthright” called “*n’singa dikanda* [. . .] a ‘bio-rope’ that links the youngest in the family to the most remote ancestor” (61) in which memory is medicinal, and in which the physical, made up of the elements of the natural world—singing, dancing, preparing food, or framing—, can provide a form of healing. The emphasis is always on the balance among three different aspects: from the Bakongo, *mwéla/môyo* (soul/life), *ngîndu* (mind), and *nitu* (body) (64).

Martin offers an overview of several key writers, giving their academic (and other wise) credentials, the names of the books they have written, their influence, and most interestingly their techniques. For a layperson in the field the discussion offers a good place to start: Sobonfu Somé has written extensively on Dagara healing rituals with a focus on women, but her publications are “unique in that they are specifically designed for western readers because they are written in English and in a way the mind cultured in a Western worldview can grasp and appreciate” (69-70). Moreover the personal story of Mama Zogbe, troubled for years by spirits, points up the “abysmal failure and inability of Western religions to address the spiritual needs of the African soul” (71); she specifically attacks the

misrepresentation of Mami Wata in academic discourse (71) and has written a large volume on the subject as well as set up a Mami Wata Healers Society for North America. Dona Richards/Marimba Ani, a trained anthropologist, became disillusioned with the “‘anti-Africanism’ inherent in the discipline and its pervasive denial of any connection between Black people in North America and Africa.” According to this writer, “The ethos of African people is spiritual, symbolic, intuitive, while the European ethos is material, literal, and objective” (74). Reading about her response to and attempts to bring “balance” into the academic discourse by dismantling “the social, historical, political, religious, epistemological, symbolic, theoretical, and/or ideological productions created by any Eurocentric thinker” (74) cannot but remind the reader of a Foucaultian analysis.

In the final section on *Nitu* (Body) with its emphasis on food and the insistence that “the body cannot be approached in isolation, as an entity separate from spirit” (78), Queen Afua insists that this is an area with the largest gap between Africa and African Americans. However, by stating that “the conditions of women’s wombs also directly reflect the condition of women’s minds, spirits, and action” (76), this brush with essentialism will come close to antagonizing feminists of any color. Nonetheless, Martin’s honest (academic) conclusion, which not only carefully summarizes the essay but also sets out the limitations of the inquiry, make this a solid underpinning for the examination of the writers of fiction on display in this book.

Lily Wang Lei’s discussion of “Troublesome Tricksters: Memory, Object A, Foreignness, Abjection and Healing in Morrison’s *Beloved* and *Love*” is a well-written, provocative set of arguments, which ultimately almost defeats itself by trying to take on too much in one essay (as is indicated in the rather involved title). The discussion, which includes the perspectives afforded by the psychoanalytical analyses of Freud, Lacan, Kristeva, Klein and Kohut, is challenging and sophisticated (though why Baby Suggs’ sermon in the Clearing can also be read as a “ritual of abjection” is a puzzle), but trying to tie all these in with a “trickster aesthetic” is confusing and tenuous at best. Part of the problem is with the term itself, which is defined as “the general difficulty, even impossibility, of linear narrative in her jumbled dynamic world driven by the borderland-inhabiting trickster” (83), a loose definition into which many more postmodern narratives might fall without necessarily involving trickster figures. And with respect to Morrison, while this definition may apply to *Beloved*, it is not very applicable to *Love* which is much less “jumbled” and more linear. Ultimately this attempt is unconvincing and unnecessary to the discussion at hand. (The author might well have benefitted from Susana Vega-González’s excellent discussion of Junior as Trickster which is more relevant, concise and to the point.) Ultimately the (con)fusion of focus leads to certain misreadings of the novel: (1) as to Junior’s origins, there are no mountains in Florida (just glorified “hills”); she most likely

comes from the Ramapo Mountain People in Northern New Jersey;<sup>1</sup> (2) in the “dialogue” with Heed recounted on page 96, this is not based on Junior’s memory *per se*, but in her interior stream-of-consciousness when she sees Roman for the first time; and most importantly, (3) alleging that Junior is empowered “to triumph over them all” and that she is “escorted by her boyfriend Roman, she survives her boss and journeys towards psychic wholeness by the end of the story” (98-99) is simply misconstrued.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, alleging that not only L but also Baby Suggs are “trickster figures” is an unconvincing attempt to force these characters into this rather limited reading. I am not at all sure what the point of all this is. L is somehow accused of “suicidal motherlove,” murdering her “double,” Cosey, in order to protect her women children. (Mariangela Palledino’s essay on “Ethics, Narrative and the Dual Faces of Aphrodite: Toni Morrison’s *Love*” argues much more convincingly that Junior is actually L’s double.) The summarizing phrases of the essay are well-construed linguistically (e.g. “[...] only outsiders and ghosts can effect (*sic*) the powerful transformation of American history and slavery and conflict into material for communication and community-building” or “only by incorporating their double as well as the foreigner do her characters achieve wholeness (Kristeva)” [101]), but they do not logically follow from the hypotheses nor the discussion. Yet there are some good ideas on the application of psychoanalytic theory to the text; more focus would have brought them more clearly to the fore.

The first essay in Part II, “Confronting the Past: Recovery and Revision” (Chapter Five), begins with a strong essay: a well-written, well-organized “holistic” view of Lucille Clifton’s seventh book of poetry, *Quilting*. Carme Manuel Cuenca effectuates her critique by actually employing the spirit of wholeness through looking at the series of poems as a whole project, much like taking in the beauty of a quilt in its entirety, not just its individual pieces. Doing so simultaneously elucidates both the intellectual framework as well as the linguistic artistry of Clifton’s work here, much as the poet weaves her personal experience and thoughts with her religious background to come up with a challenge to the patriarchal writings of the Bible by laying out a new vision of the sacred. Yet Clifton is shown to be more interested in a definition of spirituality that brings her point of departure into sharp focus: “[...] spirituality engages an individual’s deepest feelings, it encompasses the religious attitudes and experiences of individuals, and it does not require belief in God or allegiance to institutional forms of worship” (Amanda Porterfield, qtd. in Note 2, 107). As Manuel Cuenca points out, this poet is involved in rewriting “sacramental rites with a feminized liturgy” (107).

I myself frankly enjoyed looking up the specific quilt patterns that Clifton uses as epigraphs for the four different sections of her book— “log cabin,” “catalpa flower,” “eight-pointed star,” and “tree of life”— yet I found myself wondering just how the poems were chosen for each quilt pattern. The catalpa flower is especially suggestive of female sexuality, which Clifton incorporates into her “gift of

understanding” as an essential part of spirituality, and while Manuel Cuenca does an excellent job of tracing the “reversed biblical journey from Revelation to Genesis” (108), and empowering Eve, whose Hebrew name means “life,” I am still curious as to how each poem complements each part of the pattern. Akasha (Gloria) Hull neatly summarizes the thrust of Clifton’s work, in saying that the poet (1) Africanizes, (2) feminizes, (3) sexualizes and (4) mysticizes the original text (113), and certainly the essay reinforces Renita J. Weems acerbic observation that “God did not mean for us to be a footnote to redemption” (qtd on 119). This is an intriguing essay and one that leaves the reader curious and longing to explore Clifton in even greater depth.

Unfortunately this is not the case in Chapter Six, Immaculada Pineda Hernández’s “A Celebration of Female Ancestors in Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*,” yet let me clarify that this novel is one of my favorite books, both to re-read and to teach, so I am obviously a “demanding” reader in so much that I expect not only clarity but also exactitude in an essay of this nature. Introducing readers to this gem of a book might of itself be a worthy addition to the overall discussion on spiritual wholeness, but while the introductory remarks set out a clear agenda – (1) the identification of literary ancestors, (2) distinct African American literary features of the novel, and (3) the [rather vague] “functions of the different elements in the text” (132)— the essay doesn’t follow through. In the first section, many critics have indeed explored the relevance of Shakespeare’s “*The Tempest*” to Naylor’s novel, emphasizing Naylor’s indebtedness to both the Western canon as well as her African heritage, but the even more overt references to “*King Lear*” (George’s favorite book) go unexamined—issues of “blindness,” “belief,” and yes, even the traditionally clarifying storm. The possibility of intertextual references both to Wordsworth’s “*Lucy*” and to Hawthorne’s “*Pearl*” is tenuous at best and mostly reduced to the unsubstantiated speculation that if these characters “had been taught to conceive natural elements as inspired ‘intelligible subjects’ they may have become more appreciative of nature” (135).

For the most part the discussion of “distinct African American literary features” is limited to the concept of “orality,” and the metaphor of “*The Talking Book*.” Orality is not, of course, limited to the African American text, but there are features of this emphasis on the “spoken word” rather than the written that go unexplored. Framed by the “timeless” narrator, the actual narrative (also emphasized in an unusual “second person narration” between George and Cocoa) is explicitly opened and closed by the word “story.” In addition, the emphasis the novel places on the recovered bill of sale very much rewrites the original words to recover the lost heritage of black slaves ... a triumph of orality over literacy. And why limit the reading of Bernice’s pregnancy to “mere” psychology when the mystery of what happens at the Other Place is intentionally never revealed? At certain moments the timeline is garbled, and the interpretation of the death of George as a “ritualistic love

sacrifice” (144) comes too close for comfort to those DWM readings that I am so vehemently opposed to, precisely reducing the African elements to a Western understanding. The third section is superfluous and adds nothing to the discussion at hand because nothing is developed here and leaves the concluding remarks to a small paragraph emphasizing the role of black grandmothers ... certainly a reductionist view of this novel.

Part III, “Wholeness and Spiritual Pilgrimages,” opens with “Examining the Spirit of Wholeness and Feminism in the Fiction of Toni Cade Bambara” (Chapter Seven). I must commend the work that Thabiti Lewis has been doing over the past years to give Toni Cade Bambara the attention that she merits. While this particular essay is somewhat repetitious in its long introduction and development, once Lewis settles into literary analysis (most particularly of “The Organizer’s Wife”), its succinct and straightforward argument is to be applauded. As Lewis points out, long before “spirituality” and “wholeness” began to emerge as critical focus in the early 1980s, Bambara was working through her folk background and her political consciousness towards integrity . . . and with a clear idea of what that actually meant. Lewis is strong on pointing out this author’s overt political commitment to her people, as well as her involvement in the political debates going on between Black Nationalism and the emerging feminist (this is pre-womanist) consciousness of the 1970s. As Lewis rightly points out, “it is important not to confuse Bambara’s spiritual wholeness with spiritual redemption, for her concern is with earthly matters” (154), locating her within the wider project of other African American women in what Akasha Hull calls a “triangle of energies”: “unfettered political and social awareness, charged with spiritual creativity” (155).

Although Lewis emphasizes the egalitarian nature of wholeness in Bambara’s fiction, he could also have noted her total fearlessness in calling out what she perceived as any infringement on basic human dignity. The early 1970s were a time of conflict and certain acrimony between black men and women, and the rhetoric of Black Nationalism was unfortunately marred with sexism. Included in Bambara’s ground-breaking collection of essays, *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (1970), is her essay entitled “The Pill: Genocide or Liberation,” a hilarious yet deadly serious diatribe against black brothers who encourage “their” women to refuse to take the pill because they need to provide black warriors for the cause. Bambara was sharp; she consistently poured her intelligence and political acumen not only into her fiction but equally into the practical service of her people. If there ever was a woman who summed up “integrity” in her own being, that was Bambara. Perhaps the only thing I missed here (and perhaps it would be impossible to relay in a short essay) is how funny she was ... without ever abandoning the razor-sharp analysis of her arguments. We lost a lot when we lost Toni Cade.

Konstantino Blatanis essay in Chapter Eight turns our attention to the avant-garde playwright, Suzan-Lori Parks, whom he initially locates within a

tradition of black playwrights of the twentieth century in order to point up her singularity and innovation. Parks's complementary plays, "The America Play" and "Topdog/Underdog" reenact history from its center void; in her words, "so much of African American history has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out" (171). The two protagonists of both plays come from a family of diggers, and Parks locates their story precisely in "the Great Hole of History," a "site of emptiness [...], a setting of terminal silence" (173). Blatanis describes how Park's introduction of "rep & rev" (borrowed from the terminology of jazz) continually revisits a phrase but subjects it to continuous revision. Playing with the well-worn terminology of American exceptionalism, the playwright revisits and rewrites its history in a "curious mix-up of fact and fiction" that produces parody. "The Foundling Father" finds his calling in his uncanny (black) likeness to Abraham Lincoln, and it becomes harder and harder for the protagonist to differentiate between his real identity and his impersonation. "Digging was his livelihood but fakin was his callin." With this confusion "Parks works with the desire to capture what is fake about processes of historical canonization that always erase and wash out valuable angles and dimensions" (176-77). As Blatanis so ably relates, Parks's work is full of comic instances yet rests ultimately on its "painfully tragic undertones." In his excellent analysis, he brings to the forefront her belief that "in the theater one does things, one creates events, one does not merely watch things" (174) and makes us "see" how this might be enacted. This essay is totally convincing and is helpful in facilitating access to this provocative playwright's work.

Given Silvia Castro-Borrego's definition in her "Introduction" to this volume of "spiritual wholeness" for African Americans as "an understanding and embracing of the African American past that interacts with the present" (8), it is entirely appropriate that she winds up this collection of essays with her own interpretation of Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, perhaps the novel that quintessentially explicates the search for wholeness and explicitly lays out the importance of the past for the present. Especially for those newcomers to the field, the story of Avey's metaphorical return to her African roots and her blossoming awareness of how she and her husband lost their way by conforming to the demands and value system of contemporary U.S. society provides an engaging introduction to the African American psyche and the difficulties of negotiating a place in the world that can fuse both the modern and the ancient. Interestingly, two of the most intriguing asides come in the notes: First, in a novel that emphasizes Africa and the Middle Passage and the Africans' forced and terrifying "migration" to the New World, the reference to Robert Hayden's poem "Runagate, Runagate" (200, Note 21) calls to the slave's run for freedom in the U.S. Might this not open up more possibilities for interpretation and intertextuality? How is this more immediate past also referenced in the novel? Secondly, in note 6 on page 192 we are informed that "*Praisesong* is the third novel in which Marshall emphasizes her characters'

necessity for a spiritual return. Marshall considers that her first two novels, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) and *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1969) together with *Praisesong* form a trilogy in this respect.” Unfortunately there is no reference given, but it is also an intriguing proposition. Including comments on the workings of the trilogy could have been an innovative contribution to a competent overview of Marshall’s novel had Castro-Borrego documented the source and elaborated on its pertinence at hand.<sup>3</sup> And if we add *Daughters* (1992), would the search for wholeness which also dominates the text in several of the female characters now expand the concept into a quartet?

Although a couple of the essays in this volume are uneven, the majority of the contributors provide new and engaging ideas to add to the discussion of spirituality in African American writings, and there is much to be pondered and assimilated. Although there is no specification in the title, the studies here are concerned solely with women writers, so the question might usefully be raised as to the importance of spirituality and wholeness for male writers. Moreover, the question of “Diaspora Literacy” announced in the title is never specifically addressed in any of the essays. While Castro-Borrego explains Vevé Clark’s usage of the term in her “Introduction” (9), and while the essays certainly assume an understanding of the concept, including the term in the title of the volume creates an expectation in the reader that it will be discussed more specifically. All the contributions to the volume focus on the importance of African concepts for African America and the African Diaspora in general, but the African concepts of ancestors, the *sasa* and the *zamani*, which emphasize our connectedness and indebtedness to those who have literally enabled our lives might also be relevant in a “post-religious” Western world. I would have liked to see the relevance of African spirituality pointed out for readers who are neither African nor African American. May I be allowed a personal anecdote?

A couple of years ago I had the privilege of teaching a class on contemporary African American literature to a small group of students, one of whom was struggling with the recent and untimely death of her father. Months after the class had ended she came by to see me for a personal talk, still grieving and unable to come to terms with her loss. Although she received the usual support from family and friends, she told me that nothing they could offer in the normal platitudes which offer accompany condolences was any consolation at all, and she wanted to know where she could read more about the African concept of death which we had discussed at length in our seminars on Naylor’s *Mama Day*. I offered her two complimentary things. The first was a copy of John S. Mbiti’s seminal work on *African Religions and Philosophy* (originally published in 1969); the second was an introduction to making a photographic album (using an internet program) in order to commemorate the life of her father (and easily provide copies to all her family and his friends), a physical form of *n’kisi*, suturing the wounds of the present by weaving

a story of the past ... not a commemoration of the dead so much as a celebration of his life. The combination provided her (us, as I had already performed this ritual for my own father) another way of stitching, weaving, healing the fragmentation through piecing together the continuity of life. We have much to learn from an African view of wholeness.

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<sup>1</sup> See Tally, particularly pages 17-19.

<sup>2</sup> In the reading of *Beloved*, a quote from Stamp Paid is misattributed to Paul D (94); all these errors disrupt the arguments.

<sup>3</sup> In the "Introduction" (4) to her book *Toward Wholeness in Paule Marshall's Fiction* (1995) and again at the end of her chapter entitled "Generative Spaces" (34), Joyce Owen Pettis also refers to the three novels which Marshall "rightly conceives as a trilogy" (34), as she does in her biographical essay on the author, but again, no references are given in either instance. While Pettis is referenced in the "Introduction" (13), Dr. Castro-Borrego does not use her work in this specific chapter on Marshall. I would have been interested in learning just how the two interpretations differed.

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