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African Spirituality as Female Empowerment in the Works of Yvonne Vera and Toni Morrison

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Departmental Honors Thesis  
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga  
Education

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# Abstract

This thesis will use close reading and postcolonial and feminist criticism to argue that Africans and African-Americans, and consequently the works of Zimbabwean author Yvonne Vera and African-American author Toni Morrison, are connected by memory and rememory, including spirituality, generational trauma, oral tradition, and ritual reenactment and that this connection comes through the Middle Passage. The works of both authors reveal a transatlantic tradition of Black women employing African spirituality to challenge or overcome what bell hooks calls the oppressive systems of imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchies; however, despite the spiritual link between the peoples, Africans and African-American culture can never be one; individual experiences of slavery, colonialism, cultural assimilation, etc. have created divides. The connection between Morrison and Vera is closer linked not only by their shared historical and spiritual background, but also the connection between author and aspiring author. In her biography, Vera's mother says, "Toni Morrison was also one of her favourite authors and she would read her book, *The Bluest Eye*, regularly. This is the book that she would read every year on her birthday" which indicates that Morrison influenced Vera (Gwetai 1113). Using Dionne Brand's poetic nonfiction text, *A Map to the Door of No Return*, as theory through which to analyze the fiction texts, it also serves to close the geographic gap between Vera and Morrison, demonstrating how the Middle Passage is the place of the imagination to which both authors belong. The primary fiction texts used include Yvonne Vera's *Nehanda*, *Butterfly Burning*, and *The Stone Virgins*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *A Mercy*. Each of these texts

reveals the untold stories of the girls and women who have endured slavery, imperialism, or their legacies whom are “call[ed]...beloved, which was not beloved” (*Beloved* epigraph).

## Introduction

*To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below” (Mercy 161).*

In Zimbabwean author Yvonne Vera’s dissertation, *The Prison of Colonial Space*, she argues that all colonized people are imprisoned despite their legal status as free persons. She writes, “In Rhodesia dissenting individuals not held in formal prisons are classified as “Restricted Persons” or “Restrictes,” with the boundaries across which they could move or even “speak across” clearly marked. All colonized people are in one mode or another, restricted persons” (*Prison* 271). Vera’s writing demonstrates how the legal language of “restricted persons” mirrors the experience of so-called free persons under colonial rule. However, dissimilar to conventional imprisonment, even speech is limited, and not for a period of time, but from birth. Due to physical markers of race, those living in colonial societies are displaced and imprisoned by and within their own bodies with no guarantee of freedom in the future. Even further, colonizers inhabit the mind, forcing a sense of inferiority while controlling aspects of culture such as dress, familial structure, education, and religious practices. Vera’s novel, *Butterfly Burning*, explores this sense of entrapment and consequent disobedience that colonialism incites. Vera writes, “The people walk in the city without encroaching on the pavements from which they are banned...They understand something about limits and the desire

that this builds in the body...They spit on the pavements and move on” (*Butterfly* 6-7). As this passage asserts, for those who are imprisoned in their own land, such acts of disobedience become essential to relieve the buildup of desire for freedom in the body. Likewise, in America, Jim Crow laws limited African-American movement. When Denver goes into town to find a job, she is intensely aware that she is not welcome, “Denver kept her eyes on the road in case they were whitemen; in case she was walking where they wanted to... Suppose they flung out at her, grabbed her, tied her” (*Beloved* 301). Denver knows that simply walking in the path of a white person puts her in grave danger, illuminating the vulnerability she feels as an African-American female. Black women in Africa and America, by living in what bell hooks calls imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchies, are plagued with bodily entrapment and the desperation for freedom it produces.

In her article, Schreiber argues, “Deprivation of personal identity was necessary to maintain the oppressive system” (“Shared” 33). Like those under colonial rule in Africa, African-American slaves’ oppressors limited the ability to practice their own cultural identities in order to rule more effectively. Although newly arrived African slaves were not imprisoned in their homeland as illuminated in Vera’s text, they were similarly imprisoned by law within their own bodies based on physical racial markers in America. In her book, *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Dionne Brand describes this sense of captivity experienced by slaves and their ancestors, “Captured in one’s own body, in one’s own thoughts, to be out of possession of one’s mind; our cognitive schema is captivity...In the Diaspora, as in bad dreams, you are constantly overwhelmed by the persistence of the spectre of captivity” (Brand 29). Brand argues, like Vera, that one can be captive or imprisoned by one’s own body, not owning even one’s mind. Because

of generational memory of racially based violence and continual threats to the Black body, this sense of captivity has painfully survived into modernity.

Both America and Africa were patriarchal societies before and after colonialism, negatively impacting the experience of women in these societies. According to Vera and Brand, women are imprisoned within their own bodies by the will of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchies, multiplying the negative experiences of African and African-American women. Brand argues, “Perhaps the most regulated body is the female body...but the Black body is a close and symbolic second. The female body is also a “naturalized” body--like the Black body having no ability to articulate itself outside of its given “natural” functions” (Brand 37). Like the Black body whose “natural function” is to be ruled, subdued, and worked, the female body’s “natural function” is to raise children and serve the male population. Due to these expectations, the female body, the Black female body is ascribed “specific societal functions...quite outside of its own agency--functions which in fact deny and resist it's agency” that combines the expectations of females and Blacks in society (Brand 37). Due to the naturalization of the female body, Vera asserts that colonized women are “double-colonized through markers of gender and race...All suffer a “double biological subjection” (*Prison* 188-189). African and African American women face subjugation due to their race and gender by national law and societal prejudice, but also gender-based prejudice and abuse within their own homes and communities, making discrimination and feelings of imprisonment inescapable. Vera describes one prison narrative memoirist as “locked in her female body, afflicted with it, she cannot move far enough from it to feel her own strength” (*Prison* 197). Why Black women are subjected to this kind of bodily and mental imprisonment is illuminated by “intersectionality.” Contemporary theories of “intersectionality” suggests the inextricable interconnectedness of

different forms of discrimination and oppression – due to gender, race, class, but also sexuality, age, and religion. These structures of discrimination – and privilege – are mutually constitutive and impact... identities and social positions of people” (Sauer 87). Intersectionality helps to explain why groups such as poor Black Zimbabwean women are more often subjected to confinement and how these interactions of the various aspects of their identities informs their responses to oppression. The remainder of this thesis will explore moments of text where African or African-American women can escape the metaphorical imprisonment of being Black and being female to “feel her own strength” (*Prison* 197). This thesis will use close reading and postcolonial and feminist criticism to argue that Africans and African-Americans, and consequently the works of Zimbabwean author Yvonne Vera and African-American author Toni Morrison, are connected by memory and rememory, including spirituality, generational trauma, oral tradition, and ritual reenactment and that this connection comes through the Middle Passage. The works of both authors reveal a transatlantic tradition of Black women employing African spirituality to challenge or overcome the oppressive systems of imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchies; however, despite the spiritual link between the peoples, Africans and African-American culture can never be one; individual experiences of slavery, colonialism, cultural assimilation, etc. have created cultural differences. The following section will explore the connection between Africans and African-Americans facilitated by memory which survived despite the middle passage and the “rupture of geography” it produced (Brand 5).

## Memory, Rememory, and the Middle Passage

*“The Door of No Return is of course no place at all but a metaphor for place. Ironically, or perhaps suitably, it is no one place but a collection of places. Landfalls in Africa, where a castle*



*was built, a house for slaves, une maison des enclaves. Rude enough to disappear or elaborate and vain enough to survive after centuries. A place where a set of transactions occurred, perhaps the most important of them being the transference of selves” (Brand 18).*

Africans and African-Americans are connected through memory provided through those who suffered through the Middle Passage in which Africans were abducted, forced to endure the inhumane conditions of slave ships, and then sold into slavery in the Americas. In *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Dionne Brand seeks to define and explore what she calls the “Door of No Return,” or the location where Africans were forced from Africa, an elusive metaphorical place that connects African-Americans to the homeland from which they were driven. Despite the horrors of the Middle Passage, its victims safeguarded African culture by preserving and sharing their own memories, passing along stories, songs, and spiritual practices to fellow slaves and their children who would be born in slavery. In her article, “Personal and Cultural Memory in *A Mercy*,” Schreiber writes, “Vamir Volkan’s study of large-group behavior shows that ethnic groups have a long-term association across many generations and family involvements, often connected to religious beliefs and territorial settlement” (“Personal” 82). Volkan’s study provides scientific evidence that ethnicity, like those of African descent, can form the basis for a collective memory that is powerful enough to survive generations and that one aspect that often survives is spirituality, which is essential in African-American culture, affirming the importance of collective memory in sustaining African culture in African-American culture. Through memory and rememory, aspects of African culture have survived the Middle Passage and slavery, creating a collective memory of power and pain which continues to both benefit and haunt African-American culture.

Toni Morrison uses and defines the term “rememory” in her novel, *Beloved*. In *Beloved*, Sethe reflects, “Some things you forget. Other things you never do” (*Beloved* 45). Rememory, unlike memory can never be forgotten. She builds on the idea of the permanence of rememory, “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 don’t think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened.” (*Beloved* 45). Sethe illuminates additional characteristics of rememory; rememory is linked to place and rememories are such powerful occurrences that they will never stop happening in the place where they occurred, as if the event haunts the location, outliving the original possessor of the rememory. Through the concept of rememory, Morrison makes a connection to the African belief in a circular, nonlinear form of time. Sethe continues to build on the impact of rememory, saying, “Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on...And you think it's you thinking it up...But no. It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else” (*Beloved* 45). Unlike the previous quotes which focus on Sethe and personal experience with rememory, this quote reveals that rememory is an integral part of collective memory; it has a physicality that renders one able to access the rememory through bodily contact. African spirituality asserts that individuals are inextricably linked to the land of their ancestors. In this quote from *Beloved*, Morrison draws from the African belief that a person is linked to spiritual knowledge of land and people through African bloodline which becomes important for African-American’s accessing rememory of Africa through bloodline in Brand’s construction which will be explored further. Similar to Morrison, Zimbabwean author Yvonne Vera’s language concerning memory in her novel, *Butterfly Burning* mirrors the language of rememory in *Beloved*. Concerning the rememory of a woman who killed herself by swallowing a

sewing needle, as Zandile passes the woman's house, Vera writes, "Zandile walked past that memory" (*Butterfly* 90). Like Morrison, Vera's cultural background allows for the idea that rememories continue to occur in the location in which they originally happened. According to the works of Morrison and Vera, memory cannot only be transferred by word of mouth, but also through shared geography, aiding in the process of forming a collective memory between Africa and the Middle passage, the Middle Passage and America and then back to Africa. Morrison's idea of rememory asserts that individuals can be deeply connected through memory, sharing the same rememories which travel outside the normal boundaries of memory, uniting the people who share these rememories.

Rememory can be a negative experience, such as in the case of generational trauma. In her article, Schreiber writes, "What Morrison calls 'rememory,' the intrusive, uncontrollable repetition of cultural trauma, prevents the erasure of past trauma" ("Shared" 39). In this quote, Schreiber argues that rememory is a form of generational trauma that haunts those who possess the rememories, showing that these traumas can have a negative impact on those it affects. In *The Stone Virgins* Vera writes, "Bandages and stitches cannot restore a human being with a memory intact and true inside the bone. Only the skin heals" (*Virgins* 95). In this passage, Vera reveals that rememory, or memory can inflict emotional damage on the owner of the memory or rememory. With this argument in mind, rememories can damage those who "bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else" (*Beloved* 45). In her article, "Personal and Cultural Memory in *A Mercy*," Schreiber cites a study by Erik Hesse et al: "Parental behaviors...are predictive of specifiable 'second-generation' effects for the child...The parents' frightening experience itself is of course not 'real' for the second generation. What is real, however, is the developing child's interaction with a parent whose behaviors at times reflects their own original

traumatic experiences” (“Personal” 81). Hesse’s study reveals how a traumatized person can inadvertently pass on painful memories to his or her child, harming successive generations’ mental health. An example of this second-hand trauma is Denver in *Beloved*. Although Denver has never experienced slavery, she lives the trauma of her mother. Despite the pain of generational trauma, it nonetheless increases the unity of its members by formulating a system of shared memories.

While Memories can be traumatic, they can also connect African-Americans to their ancestors. Dionne Brand describes the effect of memory on herself and those who surround her, “These things I knew before I knew they had something to do with the Door of No Return and the sea. I knew everyone here was unhappy and haunted in some way...But I had a visceral understanding of a wound much deeper than the physical” (Brand 11). In this quote, Brand directly connects the Door of No Return with the Middle Passage to the modern-day psychic wounds of Blacks. This sort of dark influence from the past can only be from the lingering effects of memory and generational trauma. Brand continues to describe this haunting presence, “Flung out and dispersed in the Diaspora, one has a sense of being touched by or glimpsed from this door. As if walking down a street someone touches you on the shoulder but when you look around there is no one, yet the air is oddly warm with some live presence” (26). This passage mirrors Morrison’s language of memory; memories never stop occurring and one can “bump into them” and feel their presence. The quote also mirrors Morrison’s description of the character of Beloved as “the haunter” (*Origin* 91). This reflects the African spiritual belief that the dead can communicate and interact with the living such as in the case of Beloved’s and Brand’s mysterious “live presence.” Brand further develops the idea of the touch from the presence, writing, “The touch is full of ambivalence; it is partly comforting but mostly

discomforting, tortured, burning with angered, unknowable remembrance” (Brand 26). Brand characterizes the touch of the dead, the original owners of the rememory as comforting, indicating her desire to be connected with this deceased ancestor, yet its touch is also “burning with angered, unknowable remembrance” indicating that this anger that was experienced by an ancestor is in fact being transferred to herself, an instance of second-hand trauma through a rememory ( 26). Brand’s own experiences affirm Morrison’s theory of rememory. Although haunting and rememory is hard to verify scientifically, some African-Americans experience the effects of rememory which can be traumatic or comforting, yet always create some larger feeling of connectedness with the ancestors.

In addition to connecting African Americans to their ancestors who were slaves or travelled on the Middle Passage, rememory can connect African-Americans to Africa. Brand writes, “But to the Door of No Return which is illuminated in the consciousness of Blacks in the Diaspora there are no maps. This door is not a mere physicality. It is a spiritual location. It is perhaps a psychic destination” (Brand 1). Brand argues that the Door of No Return, a historicized threshold between times, is universally accessible to peoples of the African Diaspora through spirituality or the mind. This extends the limits of rememory, making rememory accessible through the additional means of spirituality and the power of the mind. Describing the experience of traveling to reconnect with Africa, Brand directly addresses rememory of Africa, “Many of the Diaspora have visited the Door of No Return at slave castles in Ghana or Goree Island. They tell of an overwhelming sense of grief and pain these visits give...Some have recorded a sense of familiarity beyond the door; some have spoken of a welcome, or of no welcome” (25-26). Descendants feeling a “sense of familiarity” or “welcome” in Africa indicates that rememory can reach across the ocean through spirituality or bloodline. This concept also

connects to the African spiritual belief that individuals are linked to the land of their ancestors, explaining the sense of welcome reported. Further, upon reaching the Door of No Return, Brand insinuates, these individuals feel the rememory pain of their ancestors who were stripped of their freedom at those slave castles. Of the millions who walked through the Door of No Return, none made it through unharmed, untraumatized. This incomprehensible pain profoundly affected its direct victims and those who have endured its lingering traumas and consequences. Using the wake as a symbol of the rippling effects of the movement of the slave ships along the Middle Passage, Sharpe writes, “Our individual lives are always swept up in the wake produced and determined, though not absolutely, by the afterlives of slavery” (Sharpe 8). Through a rippling effect, the Middle Passage and slavery still affect the ways in which society and the people in it live and interact today. Although according to Brand and Morrison, African-Americans are connected to one another and Africa through rememory, the physical separation that occurred during the middle passage has also created great cultural separation of Africans and peoples of the African Diaspora.

## The Rupture

*“It was a rupture in history, a rupture in the quality of being. It was also a physical rupture, a rupture of geography” (Brand 5).*

Although rememory of the Middle Passage and Africa has in many ways united Africans and African-Americans, individual experiences of slavery, colonialism, cultural assimilation, etc. have created cultural differences between the two groups. While African-Americans were enduring slavery and racial discrimination in the Americas, Africans were fighting for

independence from colonial rule. Both groups faced issues of assimilation. Africans were pressured or forced to assimilate to British customs and law and African-Americans endured the same process but with American customs and law. In addition to assimilating to American culture, African-Americans became assimilated to one another. Schreiber quotes Toni Morrison, “So you mix that all up and people who had nothing to do with each other originally from the areas and tribes they came from were suddenly lumped together and called black folks” (“Echoes” 160). Morrison’s words, “suddenly lumped” demonstrates the abrupt change for newly arrived slaves. Just moments before having had a unique history, land, and spiritual practices, Africans were expected to hastily shed their individual identities to become “black folks.” In *A Mercy*, the mother of Florens says, “It was there I learned how I was not a person from my country, nor from my families. I was negrita. Everything. Language, dress, gods, dance, habits, decoration, song--all of it cooked together in the color of my skin” (*Mercy* 165). As words of Florens’ mother express, the Whites saw all Africans as being the same or if they did recognize their differences, they did not care to acknowledge them. Deprived of country and family, slaves could lose a sense of personal identity, validation, and connectedness. For Florens, this estrangement from family and country causes her to hunger for gestures of approval and seek out a replacement for the mother she has lost. The expectation of cultural homogeneity among enslaved Africans paired with the “rupture of geography” and the separation of family members and countrymen led to a loss of individual African identities. The descendants of African slaves were not to become Ndebele-Americans or Shona-Americans, but African-Americans, a modern term that reflects the historical homogenization that occurred in America due to the divisive practices of American slavery. The loss of individual African identities in the Americas created a more profound rupture between Africans and African-Americans; Africans

do not see themselves so much as Africans, but as members of their individual countries and ethnic groups.

Like *A Mercy*, Morrison's *Beloved* examines how slave masters directly facilitated cultural erasure through widespread familial separation. In *Beloved*, Sethe says of her mother, "She must of nursed me two or three weeks...Then she went back to the rice and I sucked from another woman whose job it was" (*Beloved* 76). As was common among slaves, Sethe was not nursed by her own mother, but another slave, so that her mother's work would not be slowed. This separation of mother and child hindered the passing of culture. Sethe tells that her mother and Nan, her wet nurse, were "together from the sea" (*Beloved* 77). Sethe continues, "Nan...used different words. Words Sethe understood then but could neither recall nor repeat now. What Nan told her she had forgotten, along with the language she told it in. The same language her ma'am spoke, and which could never come back" (*Beloved* 77). Because ma'am and Nan speak the same language, it is likely that they were taken from the same area of Africa. Sethe's words show the process of cultural erasure. Although Sethe had two parental figures who spoke her native language, after Sethe's master sells her to another plantation, she forgets the African language of her mother and Nan, demonstrating how in just one generation, a few years even, a language can be lost by separating a parent from a child, or Africa from Africans. Sethe's words about the language, "which could never come back" highlight the permanency of this cultural erasure; not only will this language never come back for Sethe, but the individual African languages become lost to most African-Americans, beginning the process of estrangement between Africans and African-Americans. Despite individual slaves' efforts to preserve their culture and language, the widespread separation of families and ethnic groups worked against



their efforts. The loss of culture and language due to separation of families, as explored in *Beloved*, facilitated a cultural rupture between Africans and African-Americans.

The “rupture in quality of being” became apparent for author, Saidiya Hartman, who made a trip to Ghana expecting to feel welcomed and accepted in Africa. She writes, “My appearance confirmed it: I was the proverbial outsider...My customs belonged to another country...my too-fast gait...my unfashionable German walking shoes...Old and new worlds stamped my face, a blend of peoples and nations and masters and slaves long forgotten...A black face didn’t make me kin” (Hartman 1-2). In this quote, Hartman demonstrates the effect of American assimilation on her relationship to Africa. She becomes aware that her heritage is not strictly African, that her class and Westernized dress and behavior separate her from Africa. She is not accepted by the Africans she encounters simply on account of her dark complexion; her cultural differences create a divide she is unable to overcome. She expands upon her feelings of estrangement, “If the past is another country, then I am its citizen” (21). This sentence reveals the alienation of African-Americans, unwelcome in America, unwelcome in Africa, Hartman feels that she belongs to a country, a people who no longer exist. She continues, “I am the relic of an experience most preferred not to remember...I am a reminder that twelve million crossed the Atlantic Ocean and the past is not yet over. I am the progeny of the captives. I am the vestige of the dead” (21). Hartman explains that her very existence is a sort of rememory, a constant reminder of the horrors of her ancestors’ past, her very features reveal the “masters and slaves” who make up her DNA (1-2). Her existence haunts Western society by acting as a reminder of the horrors they inflicted. Brand records a similar feeling of estrangement, “To have one’s belonging lodged in a metaphor is voluptuous intrigue; to inhabit trope; to be a kind of fiction. To live in the Black Diaspora is I think to live as a fiction--a creation of empires, and also self

creation” (Brand 18). Because of the cultural separation of Africans and African-Americans, Brand sees “her people” as those who boarded the ships of the Middle Passage, a place, a country that does not truly exist outside of metaphor and which created powerful memories that unite the descendants of the trip. The aspect of self-creation is also similar to Hartman as she recognizes that African-American culture is not exclusively African or exclusively American, but the conglomeration of many influences and experiences. Brand’s reflections and Hartman’s experience in Africa help to illuminate the origins and effects of the rupture enforced between African and African-American culture.

Due to the rupture in history, geography and quality of being that resulted from the Middle Passage, for those of the Diaspora, their relationship with Africa is often a complex admixture of intimacy, estrangement, and ignorance. Brand describes her connection with Africa, “Africa is therefore a place strictly of the imagination--what is imagined therefore is a gauzy, elliptical, generalized, vague narrative of a place” (Brand 25). Although Brand has asserted that she feels a psychic or spiritual connection with Africa, this connection is still hazy. She does not know from which part of Africa her family originated and through processes of assimilation has lost touch with details of African life, so her connection only lies in her own mind and spirit, not experience. Morrison has a similar take on her connection with Africa, writing, “It was an idea of Africa fraught with the assumptions of complex intimacy coupled with an acknowledgment of unmediated estrangement” (*Origin* 101). This “intimacy” paired with “unmediated estrangement” expresses the mental unity Morrison feels with Africa, but also expresses the notion that daily she is physically separated from the land of her ancestors. Morrison expands on her relationship with Africa, “Africa was...a huge needy homeland to which we were said to belong but which none of us had seen or cared to see, inhabited by people

with whom we maintained a delicate relationship of mutual ignorance and disdain, and with whom we shared a mythology of passive traumatized Otherness” (100-101). Morrison’s quote demonstrates the complexity of the relationship between Africans and African-Americans. Due to the physical and cultural separation, both groups often are oblivious to the experiences of the other, even desiring to be separated, but share a common experience of Otherness that unites them. Despite the disjuncture, the shared “mythology of passive traumatized Otherness” creates a connection of experience that fosters a sense of unity capable of overcoming the separation (100-101).

Even though Africans and African-Americans have distinct cultures and histories that differ from one another, this sharing of experience “othering” is reflected in literature, such as in the works of African-American author Toni Morrison and Zimbabwean author Yvonne Vera. Works of literature such as Morrison’s and Vera’s, build and grow from one another. In Yvonne Vera’s biography, Vera’s mother says, “Toni Morrison was also one of her favourite authors and she would read her book, *The Bluest Eye*, regularly. This is the book that she would read every year on her birthday” indicating that Morrison influenced Vera and her work grew partially out of Morrison’s (Gwetai 1113). About the influence of authors on subsequent works, Brand writes, “Writing is, after all, an open conversation. Works find each other. They live in the same world” (Brand 128). Vera and Morrison’s works “live in the same world” because both women live and write in oppressive systems of imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchies. Despite their differences in culture and geography, they experience and write about similar concepts, being a Black female trapped in a world that hates both aspects of their identity. Like Brand’s idea of writings “living in the same world,” in her dissertation, Vera writes, “The author of a prison book rejects the singularity of authorship but perceives writing against the prison as a continuing

narrative among all prisoners...The prison book invites to be read as a chapter in a longer narrative” (*Prison* 89). The connection of Morrison and Vera is increased because as Vera was influenced by Morrison’s work in revealing the Black experience in America, Vera and Morrison’s writings can be read as an extension of one another, each “as a chapter in a longer narrative,” the narrative of the lengthy struggle to achieve autonomy as a Black female in imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchies. Both women draw upon a shared cultural past, such as elements of African spirituality, to inform their writing,

## **Spirituality as a Form of Female Empowerment**

*“The reality of the early African American slave was one in which the spiritual and physical realms converged” (Coleman 533).*

Although there has been a geographic and cultural rupture between Africans and African-Americans, rememory of a shared ancestral past among Africans and African-Americans connects the two groups. One such manifestation of shared heritage is the invocation of African spirituality as a form of female empowerment is in the works of Vera and Morrison. In his article, “West African Roots of African American Spirituality,” Will Coleman writes, “African Americans incorporated whatever beliefs from other ethnic groups complemented their own religious perspective. In so doing, they transformed the belief systems of other ethnic groups to suit their own purposes” (Coleman 534). With Coleman’s research on religious incorporation in mind, although many African-American slaves were converted to Christianity, slaves actively decided what aspects of Christianity to adopt and how to fit Christian ideas within their own

world-views, still preserving much of their African spiritual roots. An example of African spiritual preservation is in Santeria and Vodou which “used Catholicism as the subterranean mask to sabotage colonial attempts to annihilate them. They walked the same celestial geography as they implored Catholic saints” (Alexander 299). Using feigned assimilation as protection or purposefully incorporating Christianity into their own beliefs, African-American slaves cultivated a new set of religious beliefs; rememory of African spiritual practices continues to find its way into Christian African-American religious ceremonies. In her article, “Personal and Cultural Memory in *A Mercy*,” Schreiber writes, “By reactivating prior bodily activity, memory can be intrusive or can provide balm and relief” (“Personal” 81). For African-American slaves “reactivating prior bodily activity” of religious ceremonies, may have deepened homesickness, but also may have provided comfort and connection with Africa, leading African-Americans to continue to reenact African spiritual practices and teach them to new generations. Explaining how such African spiritual practices had additional benefits to women, Coleman writes, “Religious leadership of women was more acceptable in West African societies than in European ones” (Coleman 538). For female slaves who were severely subordinated, African spirituality allowed them to be individuals and leaders as no other area of life could provide. This thesis will explore women in the works of Vera and Morrison, such as Nehanda and Baby Suggs, Holy who enact or embody elements of African spirituality as a form of empowerment.

## **Ancestors**

*“To speak to the dead, one must assume a silence to exceed their own” (The Stone Virgins 95).*

In the works of Morrison and Vera, female characters utilize the spiritual powers granted to them by African spirituality through an integral part of African-Spirituality, the belief in the divinity of the Ancestors. Coleman explains the primary components of the African spiritual power structure, “The West African cosmos consisted of the supreme God, intermediary gods and goddesses, disembodied spirits, ancestors, and humankind” (Coleman 533). African spirituality consists of the complex interaction of these various forces of the spirit world. Coleman explains the interactions between the living and their ancestors in Africa and America, “As guardians, these spiritual beings were believed to both protect and chastise Africans and African American slaves,” revealing the parental role of ancestors to the living and that the belief in ancestors survived in America. In Vera’s novel, *Nehanda*, she elaborates on the role and power of the ancestors, ““The dead are not dead. They are always around us, protecting us. There is no living person stronger than the departed. When the whole village prays together, they pray to the ancestral *mudzimu* of their clan”” (*Nehanda* 23). This quote reveals that humans are subordinate to the dead and that the ancestors have the ability to answer the prayers of their descendants. Additionally, in Zimbabwean spirituality, ancestral spirits can possess the body of a spirit medium in order to guide the people. The ancestors communicate with the living through spirit mediums, nature, and signs.

In Vera’s *Nehanda*, the ancestors communicate through elements of nature such as the wind and the earth, but also through song and prophesy. Vera describes the interaction of the ancestors with Nehanda, “The first time she walked, a gust of wind nearly carried her off. Her mother saw and heard the towering cone of swirling dust speeding toward them like a hallucination. It was nodding like a spirit, and it's widening skirt turned madly in the frenzy of its own dance” (*Nehanda* 2). Present themselves at an important time in Nehanda’s development,

the ancestors show their approval of her maturation. Through the wind's human-like movements, such "nodding," appearing to wear a "widening skirt," and performing a dance, Nehanda's mother becomes aware that the ancestors are interested in her daughter. Additionally, Vera writes, "The child watched the wind come toward them. A voice rose from beneath the earth. She saw birth and death, and the presence of her ancestors. The wind was full of the sun. She heard it call to her with its song which emanated from within her: the spirits had presided over her birth" (3). Directly communicating with Nehanda, she hears the voice of her ancestors address her through song. The song is significant as song is an integral aspect of African spiritual rituals, but the sentence also states that the song "emanated within her," indicating that Nehanda has internal unity with the ancestors, becoming a part of the world of the ancestors. In addition to attending her first steps, the ancestors also "presided over her birth," further revealing the ancestors' involvement in Nehanda's life. Vera reveals that not only can Nehanda hear the ancestors, she can see them, "She saw birth and death, and the presence of her ancestors." The ancestors give Nehanda the gift of prophecy, marking her as an important figure in her society despite her gender. Through communication with the ancestors, Nehanda and her community learn of her destiny, allowing her to become a respected member of her community; this respect and trust facilitates her ability to lead the Chimurenga, or "war of liberation" (Britannica).

In another of Vera's novels, *Butterfly Burning*, Vera chooses similar language to that which she uses in *Nehanda* to signal the presence of the ancestors. In the book, Phephelaphi longs to connect to her deceased mother. Vera writes of the moment Phephelaphi reaches her mother, "She creeps to a corner in the room and kneels down into the sound which is low like a whimsical wind, almost inaudible at the beginning like dry leaves, but it grows gently up and she is able to cross and to touch, finally, before it reaches the ground, the hand falling down from the

doorway" (*Butterfly* 66). The phrase, "the hand falling down from the doorway" is a reference to the last time Phephelaphi saw her mother, in which her mother was shot and Phephelaphi's repeating image of the murder is her mother's falling hand. Like in *Nehanda*, the ancestors appear surrounded by language of nature, in this case wind and leaves. It is also important to note that this scene takes place as Phephelaphi is listening to *mbira* music. The *mbira* used during spiritual rituals and a tool to commune with the ancestors. In *Nehanda*, Vera describes the playing of the *mbira*, "The *mbira* players who sit in the outside of the circle of spectators send quivering mournful sounds through the air, reminding one of birth, of death and of the serene presences of the departed" (*Nehanda* 27). Similar to in *Nehanda*, music is used to transport individuals to a spiritual location, to connect them with their ancestors. This transportation is so powerful that Vera describes Phephelaphi's connection with her mother as being "able to cross and to touch, finally... the hand falling down from the doorway." This phrase indicates that the *mbira* music empowers Phephelaphi so intensely that she can touch the hand of her deceased mother. Explaining why the *mbira* music allows her to touch the hand of her mother, Berliner writes, "The *mbira* players' music is responsible for bringing about the initial possession of the medium, and for keeping the spirit at the *bira*. The *mbira* music brings Phephelaphi's deceased mother into the living world. This moment is important to the development of Phephelaphi, because being able to touch her mother gives her the closure she needs to move forward, but also, Phephelaphi invokes African spirituality to transcend typical human capacity.

With the aid of nature, but without the intervention of the *mbira*, in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, the ancestors communicate with Florens through signs to tell of her future and to help her on her journey. Throughout the novel, Florens sees many signs sent by the ancestors. While staying at a stranger's house Florens says, "I am not understanding anything except that I am in



danger as the dog's head shows and Mistress is my only defense" (*Mercy* 111). When Florens sees the dog's head in the kettle steam, she knows she must quietly escape; the ancestors guide her to leave before she realizes herself that she is in danger. Florens reflects, "Often there are too many signs, or a bright omen clouds up too fast. I sort them and try to recall, yet I know I am missing much, like not reading the garden snake crawling up to the door saddle to die" (3-4). This quote reveals that the ancestors communicate so frequently that it is difficult for Florens to read them all, consequently missing the sign of the snake. Vera uses a snake as a bad sign as well in *Nehanda*, "There! A snake along the road...let us kill it or else we shall have bad fortune" (*Nehanda* 7). The conversation in *Nehanda* paired in conjunction with Florens reflection about the snake from *A Mercy* demonstrates that the snake as a bad omen from the ancestors survived the Middle Passage to remain in America. Given another sign, Florens identifies the physical manifestation of the ancestors, "Remember the owls in daylight? We know right away who they are. You know the pale one is your father. I think I know who the other ones may be" (*Mercy* 108). Florens identifies that the ancestors can manifest themselves in physical forms, like in *Nehanda* where the ancestors manifest themselves as wind, and Florens can identify who the ancestors are based on the characteristics of their appearances. The owls encourage Florens as she knows her ancestors, people who care for her, are watching over her. Florens is empowered by the signs and appearances of the ancestors because they keep her safe so that she may complete both her physical journey and her journey of personal growth.

## Spirit Possession

*"In spiritual tradition that believes the ancestors live on, watching over the living, the belief in Vadzimu holds that ancestral spirits can choose to return, in times of family or national crisis, through living mediums [to] answer the needs of...the descendants she watches over"*  
*(Chigumadzi 64-65).*

Black spirituality is not limited to the day and location of a church service but occurs in nature or in the body through spirit possession. Spirit possession appears in both the works of Yvonne Vera and Toni Morrison. Spirit possession is the process of being inhabited by an ancestral spirit. An individual who is possessed by an ancestral spirit is referred to as a spirit medium. An ancestral spirit can inhabit mediums multiple times throughout history or inhabit multiple mediums at once (Chigumadzi 64-65). Describing the impact of spirit possession, Tony Perman argues that although when possessed, the ancestral spirit has control, the intimacy in which the spirit and the medium are connected partially defines the medium and affects their identity (Perman 60). Concerning the empowering aspect of spirit possession, Ngoshi writes, “The dead and especially their spirits are often raised to pedestal levels such that voices from the world of the departed are often given audience in spite of the fact that during their lifetimes the same persons could have been voiceless” (Ngoshi 453). Women in Zimbabwean society who were “voiceless” could attain influence in their communities through spirit possession in two ways, either as spirit medium or to return as a spirit and possess a medium.

Within the realm of ancestral spirits, some spirits are considered more powerful than others; one of the most powerful ancestral spirits in Zimbabwe is the female ancestral spirit Nehanda who only inhabits the bodies of female spirit mediums. Although she has multiple origin stories, one history says that Nehanda lived in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and was the daughter of the founder of the Mwenemutapa Dynasty (Chigumadzi 65). Upon her death, she became a Mhondoro, or powerful ancestral spirit who interprets the wishes of the Shona supreme being, Mwari (Britannica). After enduring the encroaching colonists, the spirit of Nehanda possessed a female spirit medium named Charwe. Nehanda-Charwe led the first Chimurenga, roughly

translated in English as “war of liberation” from 1896-1897 (Britannica). During the First Chimurenga, Nehanda-Charwe was captured, convicted of murdering the Native Commissioner for Mazowe, Henry Pollard, and hung after declaring, ‘my bones will rise again’ (Chigumadzi 64). In her book, *These Bones will Rise Again*, Chigumadzi writes, “the fire of these words was shut up in the bones that were buried in an unmarked grave. Bones that go into the earth and rise again and again. For decades, the embers of her bones would burn in resistance” (17). The words, ‘my bones will rise again’ served to reframe the hanging not as the death of her and the movement, but the promise of its continuation, while taking the power of life and death from the British and transferring it to herself and her people. By proclaiming that her bones will rise again, she makes a promise from the spiritual realm that she will return to lead her people to independence again. The rhetorical significance of Nehanda-Charwe’s final words, ‘my bones will rise again,’ launched her into the national mythos. During her lifetime, Nehanda-Charwe challenged the patriarchal structure of her society. One of the members of her Kraal said of her authority, “Nianda was chief of the kraal... Chitaura was the chief but Nianda had the power... I know of no other women who rule kraals” (Charumbira 124). By taking the symbolic role of chief, Nehanda opened a space for women in leadership. As an ancestral spirit who only inhabits female mediums, the female spirit Nehanda and the female medium attain a voice in a society that otherwise silences them.

In her novel, *Nehanda*, Yvonne Vera provides a fictionalized account of the life of Nehanda-Charwe in which she further empowers Nehanda by reframing her not as a nationalist icon, but as a feminist icon. Throughout the novel, men are in the background, denied names or significant dialogue. The only major male figure depicted in *Nehanda* is the male spirit medium, Kaguvi. Despite his maleness, Vera depicts Kaguvi as subordinate to Nehanda, “when he closes

his eyes, the voice of Nehanda comes to Kaguvi. The voice gives him strength, and he works with it towards achieving the goals of the rebellion” (*Nehanda* 60). Through these words, Vera argues that Kaguvi is not the inspiration behind the rebellion, but Nehanda. It also shows that Kaguvi depends on Nehanda’s strength, reversing typical ideas about male and female strength and continuing the pattern of female power in the novel. What honor Vera gives Kaguvi in early chapters is diminished through his actions once he is captured. Once the priest visits him, Kaguvi is quick to convert. The narrator describes the effect of the abandonment of his purpose, “the spirit departs in regretful spasms that send Kaguvi crawling from one corner of the room to the next...Kaguvi understands...No one can walk away from the departed, free and whole” (89). While Kaguvi chooses to “walk away from the departed,” Nehanda fervently resists the conversion attempts of the priest (89). This juxtaposition of Nehanda’s and Kaguvi’s responses to conversion attempts portrays that Nehanda, the female is the stronger and more dedicated warrior, elevating female spiritual power. In her novel, Vera reverses the typical power roles to highlight Nehanda’s role in the liberation struggle.

Vera’s depiction of Nehanda as a warrior empowers females, both in the novel and in reality. Of her personal relationship with Nehanda, Chigumadzi writes, “there is much confusion and much noise, so I struggle to hear the bones of Mbuya Nehanda and Mbuya Chigumadzi rattling in my heart,” (Chigumadzi 20). Demonstrating how Chigumadzi views Mbuya Nehanda as linked to her grandmother and herself, Chigumadzi shows that the spirit of Nehanda resides within the hearts of Zimbabwean women, connecting and empowering them. Similar to Chigumadzi, Vera shows Nehanda as a source of female empowerment. Vera’s account of the First Chimurenga focuses on females fighting (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 8). Vera writes, “The first three boulders fall simultaneously. An egg-shaped one is propelled by three women” (*Nehanda* 71).

Not only is the Chimurenga led by a woman, it is fought by women too. During subsequent Chimurengas, female military service is validated by Nehanda's legacy. Mkwesha-Manyonga writes, "Nehanda inspired women's demand to fight on the war front during the second Chimurenga," proving Nehanda continued to inspire women to fight decades after her death (Mkwesha-Manyonga 51). Concerning Nehanda's role as a feminist icon, Mkwesha-Manyonga continues "As a liberation war-hero rather than mother, Nehanda is presented to the nation as revealing the benefits of releasing women from confined gender roles" (51). Nehanda's success in breaking the traditional roles of wife and mother helped to make it more acceptable for women to break traditional gender roles. In both reality and within the novel, the spirit of Nehanda empowers women to enter positions of leadership.

Further honoring Nehanda, the manner in which Vera chooses to describe Nehanda's death portrays her as a victor instead of a victim, empowering her. As Nehanda dies, the narrator says, "she welcomes her departed, and the world of her ancestors. The whiteness around her eyes has turned to a redness that is also death. The chasm between the living and the dead is broken" (*Nehanda* 97). Here, instead of focusing on the way in which Nehanda dies, by hanging, Vera focuses on her spiritual transformation. This affects the audience's perception of Nehanda's death from a negative event to a positive event. Vera's choice to use the word "welcomes" communicates that Nehanda is gladly being united with the departed (97). Describing her destination as "the world of the ancestors" expresses that she is achieving a higher form of existence, which is a beginning, not an end (97). The final line of the novel reads, "the wind covers the earth with joyful celebration" (97). This sentence conveys that the wind celebrates Nehanda's sacrifice across the world, portraying African spirituality as nature's religion. The wind's reaction argues that Nehanda's death, ascension to the afterlife, and promised return

should not be mourned, but celebrated. The final passage in *Nehanda* strengthens Nehanda's character because Vera chooses to avoid painting her as a victim, but a willing martyr. By hanging her, the British wanted to diminish Nehanda's power; however, Vera's representation of her death reverses the Western historical narrative to frame her death not as death but achieving a higher plane of existence in which she would continue to serve and fight for her people. This belief creates hope in her descendants for the return of society once again ruled by the ancestors instead of invaders.

Vera draws upon Nehanda's legacy in *The Stone Virgins*, in which Thenjiwe symbolizes Nehanda, elevating her spiritual significance. About this connection between Nehanda and Thenjiwe, John Hawley quotes De La Cruz-Guzman, "Thenjiwe is used to represent Nehanda and her ancestral spirit since she is closely associated with bones" (Hawley 68). For example, Cephas continually discusses the importance and value of Thenjiwe's bones. Like Nehanda, Thenjiwe endures a grisly death, but Vera's description of her spiritual attributes creates Thenjiwe into a powerful figure despite her physical vulnerability. Like Nehanda, Thenjiwe feels that the history of her land is deeply important to her identity. The narrator states, "She knows that if she finds the shape of these roots, at least, he would know a deep truth about her land...Till he could relish that taste and know the shape of these roots, how can he, with truth and abandon, ever proclaim to linger, to love her as absolutely as knowingly, with all his mind intact" (*Virgins* 47). As it is imperative for a spirit medium to have a deep knowledge of the land and history of the people, Thenjiwe feels that her lover, Cephas, cannot love her until he knows the shape and taste of the roots of her land. Additionally, Vera describes Thenjiwe's spirit living on as essential, like that of Nehanda's spirit. Cephas says, "I will dig your body up to the moonlight, so that I can touch this beautiful bone. Touch it, touch it, touch it, till you are alive... With my

fingers on your bone, I tremble to imagine you not here, somewhere in the world, when I am alive, somewhere in the world” (45). Here, Cephas is already thinking of Thenjiwe’s death and the permanence, living quality of her bones. Like Nehanda, Cephas believes that he will be able to call on her after her death, making her alive once more through summoning her bones. It is necessary that like Nehanda, her bones will “rise again” to provide strength when called upon and that he and society would be more vulnerable without her presence. Thenjiwe’s link to bones and the land associates her with Nehanda, empowering her with all the meaning and attributes of Nehanda.

As Vera describes Thenjiwe as possessing spiritual powers, she empowers her over other individuals. A predominant attribute that Vera associates with both Nehanda and Thenjiwe is memory of the future. In *Nehanda* Vera writes, “The calabash which holds the memories of the future, carries signs of lasting beauty. Forgetting is not easy for those who travel in both directions of time” (*Nehanda* 3). In this quote, through the gift of prophecy, Nehanda transcends time and knows the future so intimately that it is like a memory in her mind, but these “memories” are disturbing, and she desires to forget them. Vera uses similar language to describe Thenjiwe’s power over time, “She has a lot to forget, so this is all right. She has no idea now, or ever, that some of the harm she has to forget is in the future, not in the past, and that she would not have enough time in the future to forget any of the hurt” (*Virgins* 36). Both the passage in *Nehanda* and the passage in *The Stone Virgins* reveals that the characters have access to memories of the future, accessed through communion with the spirit world, which they desire to forget because of the painfulness of these memories. However, this passage reveals Thenjiwe’s knowledge of the future is not as apparent as Nehanda’s as she feels and senses the hurt of the future but does not know from where it emanates. Like Nehanda, Thenjiwe cannot forget the

future because she “travels in both directions of time.” Additionally, Vera describes the pain of Nehanda and Thenjiwe in similar ways. During a scene of prophecy Vera writes of Nehanda, “Tears flow from beneath closed eyelids” (*Nehanda* 49). Likewise, In *The Stone Virgins* Vera writes, “Does she know that tears are flowing under her eyes even if she is not crying, flowing inside her, before her own entry into her own truth?” (*Virgins* 37). In both passages, Vera describes the women’s tears as hidden beneath the eyelids, ascribing them with strength in the burden they bear. Vera includes additional details that portray her very body as a spiritual artifact. When looking into Thenjiwe’s eyes, her lover “sees places he has never been, she has never been” (38). In this quote, Vera describes her body as a vessel for the knowledge of the spiritual world as revelations swirl in her eyes. Vera describes her bones as “beyond death, a fossil before dying...the bones beneath her breasts, a cage for memory” (37). This quote highlights the permanency of her bones like the bones of Nehanda, but also reestablishes the importance of Thenjiwe’s memories of the future. Vera describes Thenjiwe’s mind as an “heir to an eternity,” foreshadowing that despite her death, her spirit and her mind will not die (39). Thenjiwe and Nehanda both endure a gruesome death, have painful memories of the future, and spiritual responsibilities. Despite the pain of such gifts and responsibilities, Thenjiwe’s connection to the future gives her access to information not possessed by other characters, placing her above even her murderer in power.

In addition to Nehanda and Thenjiwe, in *Nehanda* and *The Stone Virgins*, Vera shows other female characters as possessing the powers of ancestral spirits, conveying all women as inherently spiritual beings. In *Nehanda*, Vera writes that the women who aided in Nehanda’s birth, “had willingly escaped the circle of time and claimed temporal cohesion that did not permit intrusion” (*Nehanda* 7). Like spirits, these women do not have to follow the normal flow of time.



In Vera's *The Stone Virgins*, the stone virgins, who are the paintings on rocks of the ancient virgins who were sacrificed at the King's burial, have similar abilities. Sibaso ponders, "are their arrows raised against time, these keepers of time?" (*Virgins* 103). By referring to the stone virgins as "keepers of time," Vera indicates that although sacrificed, the women in their afterlives have control over time, granting them immense power. In addition to achieving eternal spiritual life and the ability to influence earthly life through time, the stone virgins also achieve eternal earthly reverence through their sacrifice as they are immortalized by their representation on the stones. In another passage Vera writes about the stone virgins, "With their immaculate thighs and their tender voices and unblemished skin, they will make a new sun rise and set, so that yesterday is forgotten. Time can begin here in their arms" (57). As virgins, instead of life beginning in their wombs, they act as surrogates of time. Again, the quote references their control over time, but extends this to say that they control the rising and setting of the sun, putting humanity's fate in their control. In both novels, only women have power over time. This power elevates the women above men while granting them the abilities of ancestral spirits such as Nehanda and providing them a special gift to offer their people, validating the importance of females.

As Chigumadzi argues that Nehanda inhabits and connects the hearts of Zimbabwean women, Vera portrays the connection of sisters Thenjiwe and Nonceba as a type of spirit possession, strengthening the two. As stated previously, the spirit affects the identity of the medium (Perman 60). As Thenjiwe reflects on her relationship with her lover, Cephas, Vera writes "Thenjiwe wants him to hear their two voices together, so that he will know...that...Nonceba, who, though different, is also she, Thenjiwe. Then he would know all of her being, her sister nearer to her than her own shadow, who is her own breath flowing into her

body” (*Virgins* 48). In this passage, Vera describes their connection as physical and mental; their voices linger together, and they share the same breath. Another important feature of this passage is that it compares the sisters to a shadow of the other. Likewise, in *Nehanda*, Vera describes the spiritual association of shadows, ““A *mudzimu* is like a shadow. It follows you wherever you go. Everyone has a *mudzimu* because everyone has a shadow. Each of us is looked after by a *mudzimu*. But we must also look after them”” (*Nehanda* 23). As a *mudzimu* is an ancestral spirit, Vera compares the connection of the sisters as a spiritual connection in which the two are always united in a mutualistic relationship. Vera further develops the sisters’ connection, “Nonceba was so close to Thenjiwe, she could hear each of her dreams and tell her about them, because they dreamed the same dreams, only found different words to explain them” (*Virgins* 160). These dreams, like rememory are accessible to many people, but in this case must be accessed through ancestors. As dreams are associated with prophecy, Vera asserts that the sisters share access to the gift of prophecy and that they receive the same dreams indicates that they share a connection like that of spirit to spirit medium. Once Thenjiwe is murdered, the sisters’ connection continues, defying the boundaries of life and death, and Nonceba reflects, “She, Nonceba, knows how to follow Thenjiwe all the way to the sky, beyond life. Nothing can separate them from each other” (96). Despite the separation of the sisters, Nonceba continues to keep herself open to her sister, just now she must access the world of the ancestors. In several passages, Thenjiwe communicates with Nonceba from beyond the grave. She says to Nonceba, “To fly, first you close your eyes in the daylight, like this.’ Thenjiwe covers Nonceba’s eyes with her palms. ‘Can you see anything now?’ she asks...Nonceba would like Thenjiwe to remain close to her as this, surrounding her with her voice” (96). Thenjiwe makes vocal and physical contact with her sister in order to rouse Nonceba from her pain, strengthening her. In another passage, Thenjiwe allows

Nonceba to witness a communal rememory of the Matabeleland Massacre of which they are both victims, “These men were pointing guns at her two grown sons, threatening to shoot them if she did not listen...Her husband raised his voice toward her and said, ‘Kill me’...She...raised the ax above her shoulders till he was dead...Now Nonceba can see the woman with the ax...It is as though she is hanging from a tree” (88-89). In this passage, Thenjiwe relays a rememory of the massacre to Nonceba through her powers as a spirit, allowing Nonceba to see the things which she herself cannot forget. Through Thenjiwe’s transmission of rememory from the spirit world, Vera argues that rememories cannot only be “bumped into” through geography, but also intentionally transmitted from the ancestors, expanding the bounds of the transmission of rememories; They can be shared accidentally or purposefully. Through a form of spirit possession, Nonceba and Thenjiwe strengthen each other, but also enter a world of painful rememories that joins them with other women of the massacre.

Like Nonceba and Thenjiwe, in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Sethe, Denver, and Beloved share a consciousness. For an entire chapter, their thoughts intermingle as one and become increasingly more united. As an example, they say, “I am Beloved and she is mine...I have your milk. I have your smile. I will take care of you” (*Beloved* 264-267). “I have your milk” is associated with Sethe because one of her greatest traumas was being prevented from delivering her milk to infant Beloved. “I have your smile” is associated with Beloved because she fixates on seeing and mirroring Sethe’s smile which she feels was stolen from her when it could have provided comfort. “I will take care of you” is associated with Denver because she feels that she must protect Beloved from Sethe who murdered Beloved. “I am Beloved and she is mine” is a thought that is directly ascribed to each family member individually before appearing as one united thought. This thought is representative of the fact that Beloved holds the memories of all

slaves and that this memory is contained within and accessible to the living heirs as well. The ability of the three women to inhabit one another's consciousness is a form of spiritual power, like that of Nonceba and Thenjiwe who share the same dreams.

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the body of Beloved is a medium for what Toni Morrison refers to as the "sixty-million and more" spirits that perished in slavery, although the spirit of Beloved, Sethe's murdered child, speaks the loudest. Morrison refers to Beloved as "the haunter...the ultimate Other" (*Origin* 91). Importantly, Morrison indicates that Beloved is a spirit. Morrison continues, "I inserted a speaking, thinking dead child whose impact--and appearance and disappearance--could operate as slavery's gothic image" (83-84). Important in this quote is that Morrison wanted Beloved to represent more than a single dead child, but the entirety of slavery, indicating that within Beloved is the memory, the spirit of the experience of all of slavery's victims. Writing about the influence of the spiritual world, Coleman states that African spirituality believes that "vengeance would be incurred from a wrathful ancestral spirit" and surely the spirits of abused African slaves would be wrathful, indicating why Morrison describes Beloved as a haunter (Coleman 535). Despite never having endured the slave ships of the Middle Passage, Beloved recounts details of the journey. She describes being in the water and says, "The man on my face is dead...I do not eat/ the men without skin bring us their morning water to drink...someone is thrashing but there is no room to do it in" (*Beloved* 259). Beloved describes the terrifying conditions of the slave ships, such as going hungry, having dead people lying so close to oneself that it seems as if they are on one's face, having no room to thrash. The men without skin who bring morning water are a representation of how an African who had never seen a white person might view them; the absence of coloring in the skin could have appeared to an African as no skin at all. Again, Beloved references the Middle Passage, "We are all trying to

leave our bodies behind...it is hard to make yourself die forever” (262). As in the Middle Passage, many slaves desired to commit suicide, the quote reflects the difficulty of making oneself die forever when one is constantly chained and observed. Many of the slaves who attempted suicide were denied the ability to end their own lives to avoid the horror of the Middle Passage and what lay ahead. Beloved’s access to memories of the slave ship indicates that she has a connection to the deceased who experienced the Middle Passage. As Stamp Paid approaches the house of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved, his experience particularly demonstrates that Beloved is possessed by the “sixty-million and more” victims of slavery in which, “He kept on through the voices and tried once more to knock at the door of 124. This time, although he couldn’t cipher but one word, he believed he knew who spoke them. The people of the broken necks, of fire-cooked blood and black girls who had lost their ribbons. What a roaring” (222). In this passage, the spirits of the murdered children, the lynched, and the burned, all “roar” at once within Beloved. The indescribable misery these restless spirits endured in life and subsequent wrath cannot be sufficiently expressed through words, but only through the horrific roaring emanating from 124. In *Beloved*, the victims of slavery who were without voice in life find their voice by possessing Beloved, and roaring their pain, thereby empowering them to speak and express their torment and wrath.

## Ritual Reenactment

*“The religious ritual across North and South America and the archipelago of being inhabited by the gods, goddesses, and spirits of Africa may be another method of way-finding”* (Brand 45).

Similar to spirit possession, ritual reenactment helps to unite Africans and African-Americans. In the Americas, descendants of African slaves have continued to perform ritual

reenactments which can help participants explore their heritage, “‘The moment of remembrance and reenactment’ fuses ‘the ancestral past and the experienced present’ to shape the identity of the individual” (“Personal” 82). Ritual reenactment is the product of subconscious behaviors and rememory, western influences, and active way-finding back to Africa to create a unique set of spiritual practices. As argued earlier, the practice of past African rituals can provide a sense of comfort and relief to descendants of the Diaspora, but ritual reenactment also deepens the bond of the community. Building upon the connectedness of rememory and ritual reenactment, Schreiber quotes anthropologist Paul Connerton, “participants in any social order must presuppose a shared memory.’ People who do not share a common past cannot share a ‘communal memory’ based on ritual reenactment” (“Personal” 81). While reaffirming the validity of communal memory, Connerton also argues that ritual reenactment itself cannot establish a communal memory; the success of ritual reenactment depends first on the existence of a shared memory, making African ritual reenactment exclusive to descendants of Africa. In Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, the women participate in two primary examples of ritual reenactment: Baby Suggs, Holy’s sermon and the exorcism, called “hlengwa” meaning “be cleansed” in Ndebele, of *Beloved*.<sup>1</sup>

In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs, Holy’s sermon in the clearing is a manifestation of ritual reenactment, but also a moment of female power and leadership. About how African spiritual leadership survived in America, Coleman writes, “The first religious leaders to be recognized as authentic by the slaves were not Euro-American Christian missionaries, but men and women who either had learned the priestcraft in West Africa or were taught by someone else who had”

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Philani Nyoni for providing information about and the language used by the people of Zimbabwe regarding the exorcising of bad spirits.

(Coleman 537). Coleman attributed the slaves' readiness to accept slaves' religious leadership to their "religious orientation [being] still very much rooted in African practices" (537). In *Beloved*, the narrator describes Baby Suggs, Holy's position as a preacher, "Accepting no title of honor before her name, but allowing a small caress after it, she became an unchurched preacher...Uncalled, unrobed, unanointed, she let her great heart beat in their presence" (*Beloved* 106). The small caress after Baby Suggs' name is that she allows others to call her "Baby Suggs, Holy." Coleman demonstrates the African roots in Baby Suggs' holiness, "Many West African societies had included a strong priestly class...Individuals who were considered to be especially gifted often became human "mediators"...The West African priest or priestess lived between the realms of the physical and the spiritual" (Coleman 536). As stated in *Beloved*, Baby Suggs, Holy does not have formal religious training, but because of the African tradition of the spiritually gifted being respected, Baby Sugg's Holy was accepted as the escaped slaves' preacher. Coleman continues, "These former priests and diviners often led their own quasi-religious meetings on the plantation, away from the supervision of Euro-Americans" (537). Coleman's description of religious meetings may explain why Baby Sugg's, Holy held her sermons in the clearing instead of a house or church building. Slaves became used to having meetings in nature to avoid being found, not to mention that African rituals took place in nature, as nature is a critical aspect of African spirituality. Baby Sugg's, a female former slave, asserting herself as a spiritual leader breaks the conventions of Western religion, class, and patriarchy, empowering herself and those who participated in her sermons using the power granted to her by African spirituality.

Even though Baby Suggs, Holy assumed the role of a Christian preacher, her sermons are an act of African ritual reenactment. Coleman describes the ways in which African spirituality converged with Christianity, "After their conversion to Euro-American Christianity... folk

preachers continued to exhibit a style that was characterized by rhythmic cadence, exclamations to the congregation, climactic shouting, singing, and ecstatic behavior” (Coleman 537).

Coleman’s research demonstrates how despite conversions, African-American sermons continued to be characterized by African spiritual practices. Baby Suggs, Holy exemplifies this union of African and Western. The narrator describes the events of the sermon, “It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced...until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath” (*Beloved* 107). Baby Suggs, Holy directs the congregation's actions which mirror the African ritual described in Vera’s *Nehanda*. Vera writes, “Some of the dancers are wearing *magosho* around their ankles.... The women are ululating and clapping” (*Nehanda* 47). Like in Baby Suggs, Holy’s Sermon, the African ritual consists of dancing and a mix of expressions of happiness and of mourning. The organization of such varied emotions and bodily expressions are indicative of African roots, not Western church services. The narrator recounts of Baby Suggs, Holy’s sermon, “Saying no more, she stood up and then 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” (*Beloved* 108). Again, elements of Baby Suggs, Holy’s sermon are evident in *Nehanda*. Vera writes, “The voices of the women are raised in song...They call out...A woman wails desperately and collapses on the mat” (*Nehanda* 48). In both passages, the authors present a complex song; the people are united in song, but also sing and wail the feelings of their own hearts. In this ritual, the individual becomes united with the group while maintaining his or her individuality. This mix of unity and individuality in song is unique to African spirituality as in Western Christianity predetermined words are sung by the



group. By calling upon African spirituality and utilizing the influence it affords her, Baby Suggs, Holy empowers herself and validates the heritage of her congregation.

In addition to the dancing, singing, and crying of Baby Suggs, Holy's Sermon, the content of Suggs' sermon reflects African ritual. In the age of "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," "She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more...She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine" (*Beloved* 107). In her sermon, Baby Suggs, Holy does not focus on sin or God, but on the congregation's self-acceptance. Baby Suggs, Holy continues, "'Here,'" she said, 'in "this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass... Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it...they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight... Hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize'" (108). In this passage, Baby Suggs, Holy acknowledges the ways in which the Black body has been brutalized by violences such as lynching. At the same time, she urges the people to accept their humanity, their ability to weep and dance which was prohibited by slavery. She finally puts supremacy on their ability to love which was also discouraged in slavery by means of familial separation. The purpose of Baby Suggs, Holy's sermon mirrors the purpose of the ritual in *Nehanda*. After releasing a variety of strong emotions, the "crowd respond[s] with deep chants that speak of their hope for the future...The people deafen themselves with song... 'Help us find ourselves...'" (*Nehanda* 49). Like Baby Suggs, Holy's sermon, the ritual moves to hope and a desire to "find oneself" in order to progress. Both *Nehanda*'s and Baby Suggs, Holy's rituals are empowering for the females as they are the leaders in the event, but it also empowers the group to embrace their humanity and love themselves.

In *Beloved*, the scene where the women of the town chase off the spirit of Beloved is another example of ritual reenactment. In the novel, Beloved acts as a bad spirit that plagues the

town. As she represents the memory of slavery, the women must take control of the memories in order to prevent the trauma from controlling them as it does Sethe. Before the exorcism begins, Morrison establishes the roots of African spirituality in the leader of the event, Ella. The narrator describes, “She was a practical woman who believed there was a root either to chew or avoid for every ailment” (*Beloved* 314). Revealing the origins of Ella’s belief in the healing power of roots, Coleman’s writes, “the art of “root working” or herbal medicine, either to heal or to kill, was also an important aspect of West African religion and magic.” (Coleman 535). Coleman’s research in conjunction with Morrison’s description of Ella reveals that Ella was influenced by African spirituality. Ella’s spirituality affects the subsequent exorcism. The belief that an exorcism is in order is also influenced by African spirituality. Morrison reveals Ella’s thoughts, “As long as the ghost showed out from its ghostly place...Ella respected it, but if it took the flesh and came in her world, well, the shoe was on the other foot. She did not mind a little communication between the worlds, but this was an invasion” (*Beloved* 315). Coleman writes of African interpretation of there being to “worlds,” “The perspective of the African American slave did not separate reality into clearly defined realms...These spiritual beings were taken seriously by both Africans and early African American slaves as part of their original spiritual heritage” (Coleman 533). Like Coleman asserts, Ella believes that the physical and spiritual worlds are intertwined, which is evident in that she “did not mind a little communication between the worlds” (*Beloved* 315). Ella’s belief that the ghost, or ancestor, took a fleshly form is also connected to the African belief in spirit possession. Due to African belief that women can act as spiritual leaders, Ella feels comfortable initiating and leading the exorcism of *Beloved*.

Once the women of the town join Ella in the ritual of chasing off the spirit of *Beloved*, the women demonstrate their connection to African spirituality through the use of charms.

“Some brought what they could and what they believed they would work. Stuffed in apron pockets, strung around their necks, lying in the space between their breasts. Others brought Christian faith--as shield and sword. Most brought a little of both” (*Beloved* 316). The phrase, “Most brought a little of both” shows that the women brought both Christianity and African spirituality to exorcise Beloved. Coleman’s research helps to explain why the women brought charms, “First, charms were important mediums for religio-magical work with the spirits” (Coleman 534-535). Specifically, the women bringing charms with them to the exorcism, believing they were useful to “religio-magical work with the spirits,” and would cleanse the spirit of Beloved is an expression of African spirituality. Consequently, the women are empowered to overcome an evil force in their community by knowledge of African charms.

Additionally, the women demonstrate their connection to African spirituality through use of call and response and song as a means of spiritual power. According to M. K. Asante, call and response, in which the audience reacts and interacts to the rhetor, is an important component of African rituals (Borchers 242). Morrison writes, “Denver saw lowered heads, but could not hear the lead prayer--only the earnest syllables of agreement that backed it: Yes, yes, yes, oh yes. Hear me. Hear me...Ella hollered. Instantly the kneelers and the standers joined her” (*Beloved* 317-318). In this passage from *Beloved*, as in African rituals, the women use the call and response method. A lead prayer calls out and the crowd responds, in this case with the words “yes” and “hear me.” A similar occurrence happens in Vera’s *Nehanda*. Vera writes, “The voice of Ibwe moves slowly through the assembly, uninterrupted, and reaches the women who respond with song and incantation” (*Nehanda* 35). Here, as in *Beloved*, the women respond to the words of the lead prayer. Use of call and response in the prayer in *Beloved* reveals elements of African spirituality in a prayer that could otherwise be interpreted as Christian.

As in *Nehanda*, the women in *Beloved* also use song in the ritual. As the women transition from words into song, Morrison writes, “They stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was sound, and they all knew what sound was like” (*Beloved* 315-318). With words that indicate traveling onto the past, Morrison signals the shift from the women utilizing Christian prayer with elements of African spirituality to purely African spirituality. For these women the “beginning” to which they step back into is their African roots. This sound which they all know is locked within their rememories of Africa. Morrison continues, “The voices of the women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until it found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound loud enough to sound deep water and knock the pods of chestnut trees” (321). The “code” that the women search for is the song used in Africa used to cleanse bad spirits. When they reach the code successfully, it is powerful enough to create a wave which “knock[s] the pods of chestnut trees” and causes Beloved to “explode...right before their eyes” (323). Important to note is that the mostly Christian prayer is not successful in exorcising Beloved; the women are only successful when they access their rememories of African ritual. Also, important to note is that Paul D.’s prior attempted exorcism is not effective; it is only when the women of the town join together to exorcise the spirit that the goal is achieved (62). The women in *Beloved* feel empowered by the tradition of female spiritual leadership in Africa and the practice of African ritual reenactment to assert power over their own lives and over the world of the spirits, and consequently, assert power over the legacy of slavery.

## **Willful Death as an Act of Spirituality, Protest, Freedom, Honor**

*“But to the Door of No Return which is illuminated in the consciousness of Blacks in the Diaspora there are no maps. This door is not a mere physicality. It is a spiritual location. It is perhaps a psychic destination. Since leaving was never voluntary, return was, and still may be, an intention, however deeply buried”* (Brand 1).

When spiritual acts such as praying and singing are not loud enough to be heard, women enacting African spirituality may participate in more extreme forms of spiritual speech. In Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” she describes *sati*, or “widow sacrifice” in which “the Hindu widow ascends the pyre of the dead husband and immolates herself upon it” (Spivak 93). In the essay, she explains that *sati* has been misinterpreted. Spivak writes, “What British see as poor victimized women going to the slaughter is in fact an ideological battle-ground” (96). Spivak argues that not death, but Western interpretation of *sati* has silenced the immolated women. Since *sati* can be utilized by women as route to heavenly rewards, pilgrimage, and protest, to characterize women as “victimized” ignores the ways in which this “(non)suicide” can act as a powerful communication tool of the subaltern population (95, 96, 98). In Western views, suicide is often viewed as weakness, but like in Spivak’s example, Vera and Morrison use the African legend of human flight to inform their argument that willful death can be empowering.

The significance of birds and the legend of human flight has its roots in Africa and these ideas have prevailed throughout the Black Diaspora. One such example is the legend of the Sankofa bird which survived the Middle Passage and maintained its significance in America among African-American slaves. Kwartang writes, “The Sankofa bird is a symbolic Ghanaian expression represented by a bird whose head is looking back while holding an egg in her beak, which is her future, her feet facing forward also symbolize moving into the future” (Kwartang

60). One idea that the symbolism of the Sankofa bird communicates is “it is not taboo to go back and fetch what you forgot,” (Cited in Kwartang 60). In this interpretation, the Sankofa bird is returning to the location where she left her precious egg. Although this interpretation has various situational applications, for Africans who have had Western customs imposed upon them, the Sankofa bird suggests returning to an unadulterated form of African culture. Another interpretation of the meaning of the Sankofa bird is, “to profit in the present from experiences of the past to prosper in the future” (Cited in Temple 136). This interpretation is likewise associated with a return to culture as Africans and African-Americans, such as the women explored in this thesis who utilize African spirituality, can benefit in the present from returning to traditional wisdom and practices. Temple writes, “The Black community has used Sankofa to define its experience through the naming of schools, bakeries, beauty products, businesses, rites of passage programs, and more” (Temple 129). The appearance of the Sankofa bird in African-American culture affirms that birds of African spirituality have maintained significance among African-Americans. In the novels of Vera and Morrison, this return to Africanness is always the key to solving a crisis or achieving greater self-knowledge, demonstrating the validity of the message of the Sankofa bird.

Associated with a return of Africanness or Africa is the idea of “flying Africans” which appears in the works of Vera and Morrison in instances of willful death. As birds and flight are important aspects of African spirituality, this tradition continued in the Americas to empower the people of the African Diaspora. Brand writes, “Stories of Africans flying home to Africa or walking home on the ocean floor abound in continental America and the archipelago. Africans born in Africa were said to know how to fly. If they arrived in the Americas, one legend has it, they did not eat salt, they could fly back home” (Brand 43). The legend of flight has persisted

more so than the legend of walking on the ocean floor as flight more intensely counters the imprisonment of slavery. The legend is informed by the symbolism of flight which among many cultures is symbolic of freedom. Further, to fly is to escape the ever-pressing force of gravity and to surpass the reach of other humans. To fly is to be impossible to imprison while engaging in a form of movement never before achieved by a human. Brand's phrasing indicates that oral tradition carried the legend of flight throughout the New World and across the generations which is indicative of the significance of the belief. Brand also says of this oral tradition, "When I was a child, old people told these stories with the greatest equanimity, perhaps only lowering their voices as if telling an important secret in case one needed, at another time, a way out," showing its implication as a means for freedom through generations (43-44). Her specificity in the first passage that it was only native-born Africans that possessed such power reveals a disconnect between Africans and people of the African Diaspora; it seems that the power of flight is associated only with deep intimacy with Africa. The legend that Africans can fly shows the deep faith the people had in the African body; the tangible African body could defy what man has known as his limitations to fly the long journey back to Africa. As demonstrated by the sermon of Baby Suggs, Holy, the enslaved had difficulty loving and believing in their own bodies due to the abuse of slavery, which is perhaps why the people of the Diaspora believed only native-born Africans could fly. However, as Brand's second passage points out, there were some who believed that African descendants could fly if they encountered a desperate enough situation. This ability to fly requires a close spiritual relationship with Africa. Brand explains one such example, "A neighbor from my childhood once told me that she was a Shango mother and that she knew many people who could go back to Africa when they 'caught the power'" (Brand 45). The phrase "caught the power" indicates that said power is a fleeting spiritual experience that

must be seized when it appears, indicating a less direct connection to the power than those who were native-born, but still accessible for their descendants who needed “a way out” (44). The belief in the ability to fly is indicative of the reclaiming of selfhood and heritage that was damaged by the traumas of the African Diaspora.

Achieving flight is not always a physical journey but can also be a metaphorical flight. Although returning to Africa may be a physical destination for some who take flight, it can also be a spiritual location, which “according to *Home*,...the novel’s spiritual cartographies show us one way to get home, if we understood home as a place in the spirit, a place that is necessarily symbolic rather than real” (Wall 64). King reveals a grimmer side to the notion of flying back to Africa, “Newly enslaved Africans who, upon arriving at Ibo Landing in South Carolina and sensing the nature of things, turn and fly (or walk) back to Africa. Blacks who jumped over the sides of slave ships are said to have taken flight” (Property” 168). In this case, and in the case of Brand’s relative who walked out into the water in order “to find his way home,” going back to Africa coincides with physical death (Brand 44). However, in these cases, like in *sati*, this death is not to be thought of as a true suicide. For these Africans and descendants of the African Diaspora, “flight signals spiritual rebirth in freedom” (“Property” 168). As in the meaning of the Sankofa bird, when African Diasporic people “catch the power,” they are returning to their spiritual heritage to empower them in the present. Also, in African culture, death has a different meaning than in the West, “In traditional belief death is wisdom, confers understanding, elevates, grants speech, determines the unique utterance, the uncontested judgement (*Prison* 74). If those who fly do not reach Africa, they will at least achieve a higher form of existence, gaining wisdom and speech, which is especially valuable to the subaltern. As Spivak argues that *sati* is a form of speech, it manifests similarly in the instances of willful death in the works of Vera and



Morrison. A willful death as a form of protest and speech is powerful, because a “voice cannot be imprisoned. To realize its being, the colonial prison requires a body” (73). Despite the absence of a body, the speech of the deceased lives on and speaks in a way the individual was unable in life. Similar to *sati* in India, willful death in African and African Diasporic populations in its various forms can serve various empowering purposes.

## Suicide

*“One may not call these ways practical but they certainly suggest a mastery of way-finding. So much so that no known map is necessary, nor any known methods of conveyance. Except escaping the body” (Brand 44).*

As indicated in the introduction of this thesis, to be a colonized person, especially a colonized woman is to be imprisoned in one’s own body by the oppressive systems of imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchies. In reference to willful death, to kill one’s own body is to free oneself of the prison of the colonized body, achieving freedom in the spiritual world. Like Vera’s idea that the colonized body is a prison, Brand writes, “Getting to the Door of No Return then needs no physical apparatus except the mind; the body is the prison.” (Brand 45). As the Door of No Return is a spiritual location, it cannot be accessed physically; one must encounter it spiritually. In the case of colonization and slavery, “resistance depends on this possibility of an opening” (*Prison* 82). Due to the nature of slavery and colonialism these openings are rare. However, in the works of Morrison and Vera, death is used as an opening for resistance. For some of the characters in Morrison’s and Vera’s texts, one way for them to make this journey of freedom, spirituality, and self-love is through death.

In Vera's *The Stone Virgins*, Sibaso ponders the ritualistic death of the stone virgins who "walk into their own graves before the burial of a king" (*Virgins* 103). As in *sati*, the nature of the death is complicated. Sibaso questions, "Is this suicide or sacrifice, or both? Suicide, a willing, but surely private matter? Sacrifice means the loss of life, of lives, so that one life may be saved. The life of the rulers is served, not saved" (103-104). Such a death does not fit into clear categories of intention. However, as in *Sati*, the women gain spiritual rewards for their death. Sibaso claims that "their ecstasy is in the afterlife" (103-104). As subaltern beings during earthly life, they are denied power and the ability to speak, but in the afterlife, they become "keepers of time," demonstrating that as spirits, they have control over the movement of time, elevating them above the kings of earth (103). As members of an oppressed population during life, Sibaso says, "Perhaps they have been saved from life's embrace. Not dead" (104). According to Sibaso, having an early death allows them to avoid the pain of future abuse and oppression, and according to African spiritual beliefs, in their death they reach a higher, more powerful existence that is not possible for them in life. In Sibaso's reflections about the stone virgins, he reveals how even in ritualistic death, spiritual rewards can be a source of comfort for the oppressed. However, as Spivak argues, the feelings of the stone virgins cannot be accurately gleaned because their deaths may have been misinterpreted over time by dominant populations.

As opposed to the stone virgins, In *Nehanda*, Vera clearly characterizes Nehanda's death as a sacrifice. Nehanda's intentions are revealed in the passage, "Nehanda sees the future clearly and distinctly, and is fulfilled. But for now, her people will continue to be killed until evidence of her death has been found. They find her sitting in a clearing, waiting" (*Nehanda* 94). Although Nehanda can avoid capture, as she "sees the future clearly," she deliberately travels a place where the British will find her, evidence of her willing sacrifice. Like the stone virgins,

Nehanda's death is not a true death, as Vera reveals, "Our oral history does not even accept that she was hanged, even though the photographs are there to show it, because she refused that, she surpassed the moment when they took her body, and when they put a noose upon it, she had already departed" (Bryce 221). Instead of being killed, Nehanda's spirit exited her body to reenter the world of the spirits where she would continue to guide her people and await the time of her next return. In fact, Vera characterizes her death as "a ritual of another birth," which signifies that it is not the end of her life, but a door to another level of existence (*Nehanda* 77). The outcome of this second birth is revealed in the last page of the novel, "She welcomes her departed, and the world of her ancestors... The chasm between the living and the dead is broken... The wind covers the earth with joyful celebration" (97). Like the stone virgins, Nehanda enters the spiritual world as the two worlds converge. Additionally, nature is united in the joyfulness of her death as it celebrates, knowing that her death will benefit her people and is a beginning. In the book, Nehanda asks, "'Is death not better than this submission?'" which reveals that in addition to the death being a spiritual act, it is also an act of honor and protest (55). Nehanda would rather die than submit to the colonizers' destruction of her people, which in turn motivates her people to continue to fight and avoid submission. In her dissertation Vera writes, "If death is a means to freedom, then it is a joyful necessity" (*Prison* 228). This quote applies to Nehanda's death, because it is a step to achieve her people's and her own freedom which she can see in her dreams.

Like Nehanda, in Morrison's *A Mercy*, Florens' mother sees suicide as a form of protest. Important to note is that Florens' mother is only ever referred to as Minha Mae, meaning "my mother" in Portuguese and calls herself Tua Mae, meaning "your mother." Avoiding names is a pattern in Morrison. Like Minha Mae, Sethe's mother is called Ma'am while Beloved is named

for the word written on her tombstone and her true name is never revealed. Additionally, the real woman who inspired the character Sethe is Margaret Garner. While Sethe's owners are called Mr. and Mrs. Garner, Sethe is not referred to as Margaret or Garner. Morrison's reasoning for refraining from naming or altering names of some of her characters is perhaps best revealed in the explanation of Baby Suggs, Holy's name who discovers as an old woman about to be freed that the name on her sales ticket was Jenny Whitlow:

““Suggs is my name, sir. From my husband. He didn't call me Jenny.”

‘What he call you?’

‘Baby....’

Baby Suggs was all she had left of the “husband” she claimed... Now how could he find or hear tell of her if she was calling herself some bill-of-sale name?” (*Beloved* 175)

Baby Suggs, Holy chooses her own name, comprised of her husband's name, Suggs, and the term of endearment, her gave her, “Baby.” In naming herself, Baby Suggs, Holy rejects white labeling and names herself by what is most dear to her, her lost husband. Later, as a preacher, she adds “Holy” to the end of her name, identifying herself by another passion, spirituality. Similar to Baby Suggs, Holy, Sethe's mother names her after Sethe's father, whom she loves. The names Baby Suggs, Holy, Sethe, Ma'am, and Minha Mae all reject white naming and instead adopt the name of what is important to them, whether that is another person or a role such as spiritual leader or mother. As “mother” is Minha Mae's primary identity, she wants to give her daughter strength and knowledge. In the last chapter of the book, Minha Mae seeks to help her daughter understand the brutality of slavery. She describes suicide attempts on the Middle Passage, “When the canoe heeled, some of we jumped, others were pulled under and we did not see their blood swirl until we alive ones were retrieved...It was hard to figure out how to die...Refusing to eat the oiled yam. Strangling we throat. Offering we bodies to the sharks that follow all the way

night and day” (*Mercy* 164). The use of the word “offering” has a spiritual connotation that leads to a spiritual interpretation. For individuals journeying on the Middle Passage, the hope of being able to jump off the boat and fly back to Africa or to commit suicide and reach a spiritual realm helped motivate one towards extreme measures. Minha Mae expands on reasons for suicide, “I welcomed the circling sharks but they avoided me as if knowing I preferred their teeth to the chains around my neck my waist my ankles” (*Mercy* 164). For Minha Mae, suicide is a method of freedom; death is preferable to enslavement. Vera writes of a similar situation of death being preferable to captivity in her dissertation, “When he has turned into a man and is about himself to be imprisoned, he turns into air, into a nothingness. This transformation presents the greatest affirmation of freedom, and also the greatest mockery of an imprisoning authority” (*Prison* 71). Similar to Minha Mae, in this case, death is freedom. Additionally, like the man who turned into nothingness, for Minha Mae to commit suicide is the “the greatest mockery of [her] imprisoning authority” because to kill herself is to make her useless to her captors and to deprive them of their profit. As someone who is completely under another’s control, suicide can be a form of protest and reclaiming one’s body as one’s own.

In *Butterfly Burning*, several factors lead to Phephelaphi’s self-immolation. A young Zimbabwean woman who wants to become a nurse in the 1940s, Zandile, another woman warns Phephelaphi, “Makokoba is unkind to women who like you who pretend to be butterflies that can land on any blossom they choose” (*Butterfly* 129). Throughout the novel Phephelaphi is associated with butterflies, birds, and flight, relating to the African belief in human flight. This connection becomes clearer in Vera’s description of a painting on the wall of Phephelaphi’s and her lover, Fumbatha’s, dwelling, “The painting of a ship with a figure leaping into the ocean with bound hands. Underneath, a caption says A SOWER. Living here said something about harvest,

about the journey one traveled before time yielded its promise, about sowing seeds in water” (84). The figure’s bound hands reveal that the individual is an African slave jumping off a slave ship. His seeds are sown in water because through death he may reach Africa or spiritual freedom. This painting foreshadows Phephelaphi’s fate while also linking African and African-American legends of flight.

Through her suicide, Phephelaphi makes a protest against the patriarchy in which she lives. Vera describes Fumbatha’s thoughts about Phephelaphi, “He never wanted to let her go, even though they were strangers. He could never free her, even if she rose and disappeared once more into the water... Fumbatha had never wanted to possess anything before, except the land. He wanted her like the land beneath his feet from which birth had severed him” (*Butterfly Burning* 28). Despite Fumbatha’s apparent love for Phephelaphi in the beginning of the novel, his words of possession and ownership, especially when linked to land demonstrates that he does not see her truly as human and that he is not willing to let her possess herself. Phephelaphi begins to see his oppressiveness when she is accepted into nursing school and he forbids her from pursuing it, because of which “her heart rises in agony of longing” (71). However, when she decides to become a nurse anyway, Phephelaphi discovers she is pregnant, which by law prevents her from being admitted. To pursue her dream, she secretly performs a grisly abortion on herself, which when later Fumbatha discovers her secret, he becomes enraged, and finally discovers “What words... he [can] use to hold her and keep her still” (31). His words “shattered her entire core and she became nothing, even more than she ever thought possible. She could never gaze at a star or walk again or lift her arms to clear cobwebs from her path, anything which required the swing of her arm or her feet rising was now impossible” (142-143). In addition to his destructive words which kill her self-worth, he impregnates her again, preventing her from

pursuing nursing using internal and external tactics. Earlier in the text, the narrator describes the desire for escape and death because of the imprisoning nature of colonialism, “Dying in your sleep. Not once, but several times. Fleeing from an image reflected from translucent shop windows. And then, again, sleep. Afterward, a brief resolve not to bend. Then saying yes” (7). Like in this passage, Phephelaphi feels a need to escape from the image she sees in reflections, black skin and a female body. For Phephelaphi, suicide means to never bend or say yes to the patriarchy in which she lives, that imprisons her and prevents her from “moving forward” and entering into “something new and untried” (71). Through death, Phephelaphi is able to usurp her own agency and regain control over the fate of her own body.

As in *sati*, Phephelaphi uses her suicide as a form of communication. When she was a child, Phephelaphi’s mother, Gertrude played a game in which she “lifted her arm loosely like a rope and brought her elbow round to her ear and listened to it...Gertrude listened... as though there was a message there... she could never move her own elbow all the way round, so she brought Gertrude’s elbow to her own and listened... She heard the hollow fluttering of wings” (*Butterfly* 76). Here, the text again references butterflies, which in the text are associated with freedom; Phephelaphi believes that there is freedom within her mother. As Phephelaphi is burning, she says, “Today I turn my arm and listen to all the silence in my bones. I hear something beautiful” (146). For the first time, through self-immolation, Phephelaphi can listen to the message within her, indicating that she has achieved a state of self-knowledge and freedom for the first time herself. When Fumbatha witnesses Phephelaphi’s self-immolation, she is able to communicate this message which she has finally heard within herself. The narrator reveals this communication, “Fumbatha had no idea that one day he would open the door and find her gone... She would be whispering something which he could not hear, a message he would recall

much later, when all his senses were finally free; he had moved from his own song into her astonishing melody.” (35). In African culture, song has a spiritual component. For Phephelaphi to communicate her “her astonishing melody” is to communicate on a spiritual level. Knowing that Fumbatha has heard her melody, heard the things she wanted to say but could not and which words could not express, Phephelaphi is able to speak for herself for the first time and feel closure that Fumbatha has heard it. In this way, suicide gives her a voice.

Like what is revealed in the sermon of Baby Suggs, Holy, loving oneself in a colonized body is difficult for Phephelaphi, and like Baby Suggs Holy’s congregation, Phephelaphi’s self-love comes through a spiritual experience. The narrator reveals that “She wanted a birth of her own,” which is similar in phrasing to Nehanda’s death (*Butterfly* 80). Like Nehanda, this second birth would come from death. Earlier in the novel the narrator says, “It is not being a nurse which matters, but the movement forward--the entrance into something new and untried” (71). Despite losing her dream of being a nurse, Phephelaphi does not give up on moving forward; she refuses to keep still as Fumbatha desires. Phephelaphi believes that in death, she will be born into a new existence which will be “new and untried” and in this way she will continue to progress in her existence, making a mockery of the forces of patriarchy and colonialism which imprison her.

From the beginning of the novel it is apparent that Phephelaphi desires to discover how to love herself, “She remained puzzled by one aspect of her belief, the question she could not answer was how a woman got to do that, how she got to love her own knees, and kiss her own elbows, how she got to feel she was all the breeze there is and all the mornings there are and all the loving there could be” (*Butterfly* 80). After Fumbatha’s words “pierced her like a spear,” and she is even more broken, she must learn to love herself through her self-immolation (142). Vera writes, “Phephelaphi seeks her own refuge... The flames wrap the human form, arms, knees that



are herself, a woman holding her pain like a torn blanket” (35-36). Through immolation Phephelaphi learns to protect herself, and the flames which kill her create a safety blanket in which she finally feels safe. However, she still acknowledges that she is inducing harm, “She waits, ready to be harmed, to be freed. She seeks surrender, a death as intimate as birth. A birth as certain as love...This quality of pain can only heal...She turns her arms over and sees them burn and raises them higher above her head, easily, tossing and turning her arms up like a burning rope” (35-36). Phephelaphi equates pain with healing and her death with birth, showing that she is willing to endure the pain necessary to continue to progress. As Phephelaphi describes the rope-like manner of her mother’s arms, her arms likewise become like ropes in flame, demonstrating that Phephelaphi has achieved the comfort, the freedom which her mother possessed. In flame, she finally finds the ability to love her body which she has searched for since the beginning of the novel, “A touch, her own genuine touch; to love her own body now, after he has loved and left it, to love her own eyebrows and her own knees, finally she has done so, embracing each part of herself with flame, deeply and specially...knowing that no matter when, no matter how, she will eventually rise into her own song” (150). Phephelaphi has gained full confidence in her ascension and a love for her own body which has been so abused. This passage mirrors the language of Baby Suggs, Holy’s sermon in that both describe learning to love individual body parts, showing that Black women, both in Africa and America must learn to overcome the induced self-hatred of colonial patriarchies.

Throughout the immolation scene, Vera uses repetition of imagery of flight and freedom. When foreshadowing Phephelaphi’s death, the narrator says, “she would be in flight like a bird, laden with the magnificent grace of her wings” (35). The description of Phephelaphi as a bird turns her gruesome death into a scene of beauty and grace while also making a connection to the

idea of human flight and spiritual ascension. The phrases “She has wings,” “She can fly,” and “She is a bird with wings spread” serve to emphasize this connection and her newly attained freedom and power. Her oppressors cannot fly, but she can, elevating her above them. On the final two pages of the novel Vera writes, “All she has to do is stop holding her breath down and let go, even though she is in a flood and buried in the most liquid breeze and will surely drown. So she does, releases her breath which she had held tightly down, a knot under her chest. As she lets go she feels nothing except her wings folding. A bird landing and closing its wings” (150-151). The painlessness of Phephelaphi’s death is revealed as the simple release tension she has been holding all her life because of the limitations inflicted upon her by the racism and sexism of the society in which she lives. Although after Fumbatha’s words, she asks “where would she find new ground?” (142-143) in her flight of flame, she has landed softly in a spiritual location of peace. In an interview Vera said, “Therefore, then, the place of the woman for me is the place of imagination” (Primorac 380). Phephelaphi, and all the individuals who participate in a willful death in this section must enter a place of imagination. To believe in a spiritual realm of freedom and power enough to willingly die is to have the utmost faith in a location, a state of being, that can only be accessed through the imagination. Through the spiritual acts of willful death, they practice spirituality, demand freedom, attain self-love, while protesting the prison that confines them.

### **Infanticide/Abortion**

*“She has emerged out of a cracked shell...She has endured the willed loss of her child...The mess and untidy chaos. This whole action had been about tidying up. Ordering the disorder”*

*(Butterfly 114-125).*

Just as death can be willed, in the works of both Morrison and Vera, Phepheelaphi, Sethe, and Sethe's mother, Ma'am, "endure the willed loss of [a] child." This phrase communicates the complex nature of the infanticide or abortion in these texts. Although the death is "willed," it is not truly wanted; the horrific nature of the killing and the consequences of it leads to trauma for the mother. In *Beloved*, Sethe describes her relationship to her children, "The best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty *her* all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful magical best thing--the part of her that was clean" (*Beloved* 308). In the sentence, "The best thing she was, was her children," Sethe describes her children as a part of herself, even the best part of herself. As a woman whose body has endured the abuses of slavery, the labor for her children is the only labor in which she has found joy. Through her children she can find beauty in her own body. To destroy her "best thing" is to destroy the best part of herself, infanticide becomes suicide. Phepheelaphi similarly sees the destruction of her child as the breaking of her own body. Dissimilarly, ma'am seeks to distance her children from herself. Despite the differences in motivation and feeling, for each of these women, the abortion or infanticide is an act of spirituality and/or empowerment.

When her former owners and slave catchers find Sethe in Ohio, Sethe takes her children to the woodshed and attempts to kill all her children and successfully kills Beloved as an act of spirituality, protest, and protection. In her book *The Origin of Others*, Morrison reveals that an old newspaper article about Margaret Garner inspired her to write *Beloved* which read, "She said when the officers and slave-hunters came to the house... she caught a shovel and struck two of her children on the head, and then took a knife and cut the throat of the third, and tried to kill the other--that if they had given her time, she would have killed them all...She alludes to the child being free from all trouble and sorrow" (*Origin* 77-79). The true story of mother and slave

Margaret Garner helps illuminate Morrison's character, Sethe. After enduring the brutal treatment of schoolteacher, Sethe says, "I couldn't let all that go back to where it was, and I couldn't let her or any of 'em live under schoolteacher" (*Beloved* 200). Because Sethe had personally experienced the cruelty of school teacher, Sethe is willing to go to any means to protect her children from him. Sethe reflects on her actions, "But my love was tough and she tough now... I'll explain to her...how if I hadn't killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her" (*Beloved* 246). For Sethe, it is better for her children to be killed young and lovingly than abused and murdered brutally by an owner. Like Vera's stone virgins, Sethe sees her murdered child as "saved from life's embrace. Not dead" (*Virgins* 104). In the moments before she killed Beloved, Sethe painfully "collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe" (*Beloved* 200). The description of "precious and fine and beautiful" communicate the love and the heartache Sethe feels in the moments before she tries to destroy her "best thing," while the words "carried, pushed, dragged" emphasize the difficulty in which Sethe completes her task, showing the emotional and physical strength she musters to kill her children. By dragging them through the veil, Sethe is dragging her children through the boundary between life and death, acting as a mediator between the two worlds. By describing death as "where they would be safe," Morrison shows that Sethe has enough faith in an afterlife that is better than her current world that she is willing to murder her "best thing." Coleman's research helps reveal why Sethe believes her actions are justified, "For the West African, there was no absolute good or evil; both principles resided everywhere in a somewhat symbiotic relationship to each other... Consequently, moral judgment was based on

the intent of the moral agent as well as on one's relationship with the gods and goddesses" (Coleman 534). As recent descendant of native Africans, Sethe uses what she has seen and experienced to determine her actions and sees her good intentions as enough to justify murdering her children. Additionally, her desperate murder protests the abuse of slavery. Sethe's actions shock every member of the slave-catching crew and give them a glimpse of the impact of their actions (*Beloved* 185). Although Sethe's violence literally and metaphorically haunts her and she incurs the judgment of her peers and her own children, (who either like her two boys leave her, or like Denver mistrusts her) Sethe's excruciating decision to "drag the teeth of that saw under the little chin... to squeeze her so that she could absorb, still, the death spasms that shot through that adored body, plump and sweet with life," her "best thing," is agonizing act of faith and protest against the injustice they all endure.

In *Beloved*, Morrison uses the previously discussed myth of the ability of Africans to fly. Before Sethe takes her children to the shed to kill them, Sethe is empowered by her spiritual heritage "Because the truth was simple...she was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher's hat, she heard wings...She just flew...And the hummingbird wings beat on" (*Beloved* 200). Like Phephelaphi who heard butterfly wings in her mother's arm, Sethe also hears wings in a moment of connection to the spiritual world. When Sethe hears the wings, she is hearing her heritage within her, and this heritage gives her the ability to fly in a moment of desperation. Although in most uses of the African myth of human flight, it is the flying individual who is saved, because of Sethe's deep love for her children, she uses her flight to protect them rather than herself. Earlier in Sethe's life she uses her ability to fly to help her children, "I tied Buglar when we had all that pork to smoke. Fire everywhere and he was getting into everything. I liked to lost him so many times. Once he got up on the well, right

on it. I flew. Snatched him just in time” (*Beloved* 196-197). In this case, Sethe once again uses flight to save her child who is in mortal danger. Morrison’s repetition of flight regarding Sethe’s protection of her children characterizes her as a deeply unselfish and passionate mother. Instead of using her power of flight to protect herself in moments of abuse or assault, she saves this power for the protection of her children. Sethe depends on altruistic African spirituality to act as a rescuing hero for her children.

Similar to Sethe’s infanticide, in *Butterfly Burning*, Phephelaphi’s abortions are a form of speech against patriarchy and colonialism and a means to freedom. A woman in 1940’s Rhodesia, Phephelaphi performs her first abortion using a thorn and the second baby she kills through her own self-immolation. Like Sethe, Phephelaphi recognizes her unborn children as a part of herself. During the abortion, the novel reads, “It is herself, her own agony spilling over some fine limit of becoming which she has ceased suddenly to understand...It is she... Her body breaks like decayed wood. Deep in the near deep of her, so close it is so deep and near in the same instant. She dares not look at her own harm. It is too near and new” (*Butterfly* 116). By writing the phrases, “It is herself... It is she” and “Deep in the near deep of her, so close,” Vera reveals that Phephelaphi feels that she and her unborn child are one and that this child is at the center of her being. At the moment of that her womb breaks, the words, “her body breaks like decayed wood” shows that this abortion is the marks the final blow to her body and spirit that has been slowly rotting from her imprisonment. The sentences, “Push. She has pushed it in... No fear. No excitement. This must be. In and out of a watery sac... Her own hand inserting an irreversible harm” reveal Phephelaphi’s strong resolve to complete the abortion, but also that she does not take the matter lightly. (*Butterfly* 116). The words “her own hand” emphasizes that she is taking responsibility for this “irreversible harm” of her unborn child and herself. However,

Phephelaphi “desires desperately what is beyond the pain” which is to escape the prison and consequent stagnation of her color and gender to become a nurse. Phephelaphi is willing to do anything to escape the prison of her body, including abortion and suicide. When she sees Fumbatha during her suicide, it becomes apparent that Phephelaphi recognizes, like Sethe, the burden of allowing a child to live in a White Supremacist capitalist patriarchy as she says, “She can whisper, before her voice turns to ash... the one true thing about their unburied child, the one inside her body, free and weightless like herself, now, safe, now” (*Butterfly* 150). As her final words, she wants to let Fumbatha know that not only is she safe in death, but their unborn child is also safer in death than living in the oppression of their country. In addition to being an act of spirituality and protection, Phephelaphi’s abortion protests the reigns of sexism which seek to control her. The imagery of birth in Phephelaphi’s abortion, Gagliano writes, “is a daring reinterpretation of genealogy; it unequivocally stakes a claim for the validity of female agency and self-liberation here achieved by means of the rejection of the traditionally enshrined female role of giving birth to and raising children” (Gagliano 157). Through abortion, Phephelaphi ignores societal expectations to initiate the start of her own life. During the abortion, the imagery, “She is lightning, burning like it. She is fire and flame, she is light” is similar to the imagery used in her suicide (*Butterfly* 117). This is significant as in both cases, flame is used as a signifier of the movement from one form of existence to another, a second birth. After Phephelaphi has buried her child, the narrator says, “She sees the place where she has been buried” (121). Phephelaphi sees the remnants of her aborted child as herself, but also sees her survival after the abortion as her own resurrection as she stands over her own grave. The imagery of pushing and “emerging out of a cracked shell” reverses the roles of birth. While a baby exits her body, it is not the baby being born, but herself. Although traumatized by her abortion,

Phephelaphi proves to herself that she has the strength to commit such an act completely alone in order to move into a new existence and reject the limitations society places on her as a female. The stipulations of being a nurse requires that if she is to become pregnant, she is to give up her dreams and become a stay-at-home mother. Her abortion refuses this constraint and so protests it. Phephelaphi's belief in an afterlife where her babies will be safe allows her to escape her limitations and achieve a new level of freedom.

Unlike Sethe and Phephelaphi, in *Beloved* Ma'am did not feel that the children she killed were a part of her. Nan tells Sethe of her mother's traumatic experience, "She told Sethe that her mother and Nan were together from the sea. Both were taken up many times by the crew" (*Beloved* 77). In this passage, Nan tells that Ma'am and herself were raped on the middle passage by crewmembers, revealing why she did not feel close to the children these rapes produced. Nan continues, "The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them" (*Beloved* 77- 78). Nan's words show that not only was Ma'am raped and impregnated by the crew, but she was also raped and impregnated during slavery. Her continual "throwing out" of these children illustrates Ma'am's dedication to not acknowledging the children produced by White rape. The words "threw away" suggests that while Ma'am probably did not violently kill her children, she likely abandoned them to die. The repetition of the words "threw away" also reveal Ma'am's emotions concerning the children; she viewed them as if they were garbage that could be carelessly tossed out. The detail that she did not give them names reveals more; Ma'am did not feel any sense of compassion or sense of shared humanity with the children as she deemed them unworthy of names. Nan discloses additional details that reveal more about Ma'am's relationship with these children. Addressing Sethe, Nan says, "She threw them all away but you. You she gave the name



of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never. Never. Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe” (*Beloved* 77- 78). Nan emphasizes that Ma’am’s sexual encounters with white men were rape with the repetition of the word “never.” Conversely, Ma’am putting her arms around Sethe’s father indicates that Sethe is the product of consensual sex. Unlike her brothers and sisters, Sethe receives a name, affirming Ma’am’s love for her. By naming Sethe after her father, Ma’am keeps this man a part of herself and her daughter, proclaiming their relationship and its fruit rather than throwing it away. In Vera’s dissertation, she writes, “The prisoner's constant effort is to deny the prison its ability to imprison” (*Prison* 116). For Ma’am, the Whites may be able to rape and impregnate her, but they cannot force her to care for or name the children they create. For Ma’am to kill these children is to deny the Whites the ability to imprison her heart and mind. In the death of these children, she protests her enslavement, asserts her freedom of mind, and reclaims the honor which has been stolen from her.

## Threats to African Spirituality

Although African spirituality has been used as a form of empowerment for African females and for people of the African Diaspora, it has also been abused by oppressors as a tool to increase oppression. Brand ruminates about this oppression of identity, “One had the sense that some being had to be erased and some being had to be cultivated...The African self so abiding yet so fearful because it was informed by colonial images of the African as savage and not by anything we could call on our memories to conjure.” (Brand 17). With the words, “some being had to be erased and some being had to be cultivated,” Brand argues that this possession was a two-part strategy, to eliminate the African culture within the people and replace it with a British

consciousness. As mission schools served to westernize Africans during the initial colonization, modern forms of this westernization still occur about which Brand writes, “Through the BBC broadcasts we were inhabited by British Consciousness” (Brand 17). The word “inhabited” is similar language used to describe spirit possession. Through British media, Brand feels that she and her peers were forcefully possessed by the spirit of their colonizers, their language and beliefs being continually communicated to them. The strategy of communicating negative images and beliefs to descendants of Africa serves to fill Black people of the Diaspora with loathing of their ancestry, taking advantage of the gradual forgetting that occurs as British possession grows increasingly strong with successive generations. The process of possessing the colonized not only happens among Black Diasporic peoples, but also in colonized African countries.

Colonizers are not the only ones who have appropriated elements of African spirituality for selfish gains. In *The Stone Virgins*, Vera draws attention to the ways in which the legacy of Nehanda has been used as a tool of oppression. Former Prime Minister of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, who has been criticized for his tyrannical and violent rule, used the myth of Nehanda to validate his rule. Chigumadzi explains his use of Nehanda, “In this telling, former president Robert Mugabe was the spiritual heir of the revered mediums of the ancestors Mbuya Nehanda and Sekuru Kaguvi who led the First Chimurenga” (Chigumadzi 27). With this story, Mugabe was more accepted as the nation’s leader. To symbolize the unity of Mugabe and Nehanda, “Images of Nehanda were also displayed above those of the new president, Robert Mugabe” (Lewis 33). However, actions such as the Mazowe farm evictions and the Matabeleland Massacres have proved to many that Mugabe was not a true spirit medium. Mugabe was criticized for the Mazowe farm evictions, whose evictees included a spirit medium of Nehanda,

because it led to mass homelessness and “replace[d] one elite race of landowners with another” (Mazowe 1). An additional example is the Matabeleland Massacres or “Gukurahundi (a colloquial Shona expression “the storm that destroys everything” or “clean out trash”) orchestrated by the Fifth Brigade answerable to Mugabe only” (Mkwesha-Manyonga 54). Policies such as these proved to many that Mugabe’s invocation of Nehanda was an appropriation of her in order to secure power despite his rhetorical attempts to construct himself as her spiritual heir. In Chigumadzi’s book, Mugabe and his people are referred to as “the spirit mediums of Rhodes.” This powerful insult demonstrates how deeply he is viewed as a betrayer of Zimbabwe as she equates Mugabe to the original colonizer of Zimbabwe, Cecil Rhodes, after whom the country was formerly named Rhodesia. Mugabe also misused Nehanda’s legacy during a later Chimurenga, in which “Nehanda possessed a woman called Kanzaruwa, who participated in the liberation struggle, although she was mostly used as a symbol for mobilization by the ZANU PF liberation movement”...’Once the children, the youth and girls in the area knew that Nehanda had joined, they came in large numbers’ (quoted Mkwesha-Manyonga 43). Dissimilar to the first Chimurenga in which Nehanda led the liberation war, in this example, political leaders forced Nehanda into the sidelines, relegating her to a military recruiter. According to Mkwesha-Manyonga, this misuse of Nehanda was not an isolated event, “In Zimbabwean political, historical, and aesthetic imagination, Nehanda has been cast as a national muse, and is invoked as the source of inspiration and legitimization for various nationalist projects (Mkwesha-Manyonga 42). In Zimbabwe, Nationalism has led to various national atrocities such as the Matabeleland Massacres which Vera discusses in *The Stone Virgins*. In the novel, Sibaso, a Zimbabwean soldier who rapes and removes the lips of Nonceba and murders Thenjiwe says, “I count each nameless ancestor on my dead fingers. The one buried in a noose.

Nehanda, the female one, she protects me with her bones” (*Virgins* 117). Nationalist propaganda makes Sibaso believe that Nehanda’s sacrifice secures her as a spiritual protector of the soldiers, regardless of their actions or intentions. Sibaso acknowledges that Nehanda is female, but his brutalities show that he ignores that she demonstrates the humanity and spiritual capacities of females. Instead, he sees females only as objects of pleasure and sacrifice to male authority and the nationalist cause. Believing Nehanda is behind his leaders, he participates in the brutal abuse and massacre in Matabeleland. In *The Stone Virgins*, Vera reveals how misuse of the name and legacy of Nehanda can have disastrous effects on the country, and especially its women.

Like Mugabe, Sibaso appropriates spirit possessions for his own damaging purposes. Christina Sharpe theorizes violence as a form of “monstrous intimacy” (Sharpe). In the rape of Nonceba and the murder of Thenjiwe, the narrator uses the language of spirit possession to describe how Sibaso’s violence is an obscene misuse of the intimacy of spirit possession, or monstrous intimacy. Vera describes Sibaso’s intimate, yet repugnant violation and murder of Thenjiwe, “His head is behind Thenjiwe, where Thenjiwe was before, floating in her body; he is in her body...He is...existing where Thenjiwe was, moving into the spaces she has occupied. Then Thenjiwe vanishes and he is affixed in her place, before Nonceba’s eyes. He slides into the dead body as though into a mute stream” (*Virgins* 73-74). The words, “he is in her body” and “existing where Thenjiwe was” indicate that like in spirit possession, Sibaso and Thenjiwe occupy the same body, but unlike rightful spirit possession, Thenjiwe is possessed and murdered against her will and this violation permanently “mutes” Thenjiwe instead of granting her greater authority and voice in her community. Instead of good-naturedly using her as a spirit medium for the good of her and the community, Sibaso wants only to possess the materiality of her body as an act of cruel dominance. Although there are good spirits like Nehanda, African spirituality also

believes in the existence of bad spirits as evidenced by the following passage from *Nehanda*, “The people in the village, haunted by ugly spirits, surrender them to the rocks. They live in dreadful agony until they can find a human companion” (*Nehanda* 22). In *The Stone Virgins*, Sibaso acts as a bad spirit who forces himself into a body and becomes “affixed in her place,” pushing out the owner of the body instead of mingling peacefully.

Sibaso enacts a similar evil form of spirit possession with Thenjiwe’s sister, Nonceba. Terence Ranger argues that after Sibaso murders Thenjiwe, Sibaso begins, “gazing at Nonceba, Thenjiwe’s virgin sister, [and] he sees her as a sacrifice” (Ranger 214). Misguided by nationalist discourse, Sibaso sees Nonceba as the stone virgins of old he sees on the sacred rocks. “He sees her dancing heels, her hands chaste dead bone, porously thin, painted on rock. Her neck is leaning upon a raised arrow, her mind pierced by the sun” (*Virgins* 78). The words “chaste dead bone,” “painted on rock,” and “neck ... leaning upon a raised arrow” are all descriptions given earlier in the novel to describe the rock paintings of the stone virgins. Sibaso continues describing Nonceba as a stone virgin, “She is a woman from very far, from long ago, from the naked caves in the hills of Gulati. She does not belong here... The shape and form of painted memory” (78). Describing Nonceba as a woman “from very far, from long ago” and “the shape and form of painted memory” shows that Sibaso sees Nonceba as the physical embodiment of the stone virgins. As he says that through the death of the stone virgins, “the life of the ruler is served,” Sibaso being a soldier misguided by nationalist propaganda, sees himself as an officiant of the return to African culture and thinks he has the right to enact his own version of the ritual to serve the rulers of the country. However, for Nonceba, she has no choice or promise of heavenly rewards for the pain she endures. Unlike Thenjiwe, Nonceba’s possession includes a mental component. During the rape Nonceba says, “I am... a companion to his every thought” (68). This

exchange of consciousness is demonstrated in the passage, “‘Spider legs,’ he insists...While he closes his eyes, I have the sensation that I am drowning, and see a multitude of spider legs stretch into the darkness” (81). Like in spirit possession, Sibaso’s and Nonceba’s thoughts are intertwined; as he closes his eyes and imagines spider legs about which he is obsessed, Nonceba not only sees Sibaso’s imaginings, but has bodily sensation and reaction as well, demonstrating the mental and physical violation. Interestingly, the text never mentions Sibaso seeing or feeling Nonceba’s thoughts, demonstrating the one-sided nature of this encounter. He does not desire to know or acknowledge her thoughts or pain during the violation. He wants only to invade her body and mind with his own, forcing his will upon her. In addition to the monstrous mental intimacy, Nonceba feels the physical possession, “He enters her body like a vacuum...He is at the pit of her being...She feels him inside her body. Near. He is as close as her own tongue, as close as her arms are to her body, her hair on her skin, close like her heartbeat; his breathing her breathing. She is breathing in. His sweat is in her nostrils. His perspiration” (68-71). Describing Sibaso as a vacuum describes how with this rape, he has sucked her being out to replace it with his own. She feels that he is as close as her own body parts and their breath and sweat mingles, making her feel as though she lacks and independent existence. Unlike the spirit possession experienced between Thenjiwe and Nonceba in which they mutualistically shared the same breath, Sibaso’s possession is parasitic, draining her strength and spirit. The narrator says, “He owns her like a memory,” (71) illustrating the intimate level in which he has invaded her. He has been in her mind and in her body, claiming her essence as his own permanently. Even after she is safe, he continues to haunt her thoughts. Sibaso’s heinous actions sacrilegiously reverse the intended blessings of good-willed spirit possessions such as Nehanda to irrevocably brutal ends, leaving Thenjiwe dead and Nonceba mutilated and traumatized. While women have successfully

used African spirituality to subvert oppressors, individuals such as Mugabe and Sibaso make it even more difficult for such women assert power against such negative forces.

## **African Culture and Spirituality is Key to Redemption**

In the works of Vera and Morrison, Whites represent death and the erosion of African culture. In *Beloved*, Morrison makes use of a Biblical allusion to the four horsemen of Revelation which represent conquest, war, famine, and death (*The Holy Bible: KJV*, Rev. 6:1-8). Morrison Writes, “When the four horsemen came--schoolteacher, one nephew, one slave catcher and a sheriff--the house on Bluestone Road was so quiet they thought they were too late” (*Beloved* 182). By comparing this group of Whites to the four horsemen of the Bible, the four horsemen embody all that is lethal and terrifying. With their arrival, the town and its people fall apart. Vera uses a similar strategy, “Was it not said by the late chief that our kindness would be our death?...’You met the symbol of death on your journey’s path?’...’We saw the sign, but the sign had decided to live among us’...’The sign was in the form of a human being. A stranger, but a human nevertheless’” (*Nehanda* 9). Like in *Beloved*, in Vera’s example, the destructive arrival of the Whites is foretold in a prophesy, not from the Bible, but from the chief. Vera also calls the Whites a sign and “the symbol of death,” demonstrating the destructive power of the Whites to the Africans.

While colonizers imposed death and destruction upon African peoples, Vera asserts that return to African culture and feminine spirituality has the power to cleanse the people of the

damages produced by colonization and shed the shackles of literal and metaphorical imprisonment. In *Nehanda*, this argument is apparent in Nehanda's words during her ceremony in which she becomes the leader of the rebellion, "'We needed more than our physical strength, we needed our old selves and clarity'" (*Nehanda* 53). With these words, Nehanda persuades her people that mere might cannot grant them freedom, but that they must first return to their "old selves" which means rejecting the culture of the Pioneer Column. Nehanda expands on this argument, "'Your ancestors shall protect you when you begin to release yourselves from this bondage'" (56). With these words, Nehanda claims that by accepting the ways of the invaders, the people are angering their ancestors. Without the help of the ancestors, they will go unprotected in battle. After some had stolen objects from the invaders, Nehanda says, "'Do not take anything that belongs to the stranger...We can become stronger and whole if we believe in our own traditions...The tradition of the stranger shall destroy us'" (66-67). She also talks of avoiding the "envying eye" (66). Despite the luxury in the objects of their colonizers, she advises her people not to use them or desire them as these objects and subsequent cultural degradation will lead to loss of strength. As a child, Vatete tells Nehanda a symbolic story "about the strangers who stole a child and placed her in a goatskin bag... 'The girl sang a song taught to her by her mother and put the men to sleep. She freed herself by chewing off the skin of the bag'" (12). Mangwanda analyzes this story "The abducted girl symbolizes Zimbabwe. The singing of the traditional song she was taught by her mother is a clear reference to the cultural legacy of the ancestors, and the chewing off the skin of the bag a clear reference to the liberation struggle" (Mangwanda 147). The story and its analysis show that although abducted, or colonized, through a return to African culture, Zimbabweans can regain their independence. The novel states, "Nehanda chews the goatskin, securing her freedom, frightened," foreshadowing that Nehanda



would be integral to helping the people return to their culture and gain freedom (*Nehanda* 15). In *The Stone Virgins*, Vera complicates this matter of a cultural renaissance and independence, “The war begins...No movement is allowed. The cease-fire ceases. It begins in the streets, the burying of memory. The bones rising. Rising...Memory is lost. Independence ends. Guns rise. Rising anew. In 1981” (*Virgins* 65). “The bones rising” refers to the memory of Nehanda returning; however, the words “memory is lost” indicates that although her legacy is reclaimed, it is quickly forgotten and misused for political means, such as by Mugabe. This loss of cultural memory, according to Vera, leads to the subsequent political unrest and violence which desecrates Nehanda’s legacy. In both *Nehanda* and *The Stone Virgins*, Vera argues that although Zimbabwe has been weakened due to loss of cultural memory, the country can reach its full potential through a return to their culture and spirituality.

Like in Vera’s works, in Morrison’s *A Mercy* and *Beloved*, Morrison argues that African spirituality can protect one against Whites’ attempts to constrain and even control the dark forces of the spirit world and the past. In *A Mercy*, on Florens’ journey, she faces many threats from Whites who see her as someone to be enslaved, violated, and held hostage. The guidance of her ancestors allows her to remain safe on her journey that leads to self-knowledge, indicating the importance of African spirituality in her development and safety. Schreiber argues that in *Beloved*, “Communal memory of slave-ship horror and plantation life materializes in the shape of Beloved, whose return challenges the community to learn how to live with the trauma of slavery...in order to function in the present” (“Shared” 32). One of the key moments of healing is when the women of the town gather to chase off the spirit of Beloved in which they enact African spirituality. This ceremony asserts power over evil in the spirit world, thereby Sethe from the abuses of Beloved. At the same time, the ceremony proclaims the women’s power over

the memory of slavery while uniting the women of the town and reintegrating Sethe and her family back into the community. Through exorcising the literal and metaphorical bad spirit of slavery, the town is redeemed. Without the use of African spirituality, Florens would not have maintained her safety or reached self-knowledge and Beloved would continue to haunt and abuse a fragmented and pained community. These examples show the indispensability of African spirituality to the healing of African and Black Diasporic peoples.

A return to African culture as the key to redemption is rooted in the Sankofa bird. In her article, Temple quotes N. K. Dzobo, “Sankofa is therefore a necessary journey into the past of our indigenous culture, so that we can march into the future with confidence and with a sense of commitment to our cultural heritage.” Sankofa, meaning to return for it, to go back for it... is thus a philosophy of cultural revivalism or cultural renaissance (Temple 138). For peoples of the African Diaspora or for colonized Africans, the Sankofa bird’s meaning of returning to the past or something forgotten can refer to a return to Africanness, which, in continuing this line of thought would profit their future. In context of African spirituality for women, reclaiming of past or lost African spirituality can benefit not only the individual, but all Africans and people of the African Diaspora. Critically, For Vera and Morrison, returning to Africanness and African spirituality, which is a protest against Western influence itself, is strong enough to fight and overcome powerful systematic oppression.

## Conclusion

*“What happens when women come into power and identify with it?” (Kristeva 26)*

While Sharpe argues that Black bodies “become the carriers of terror, terror’s embodiment,” embodied spirituality provides relief from this terror (Sharpe 15). For the women who are the subject of this thesis, spirituality is, as Jacqui Alexander argues, “a form of embodiment,” through which “practitioners become habituated to the spiritual, and this habituation implies the requirements are transposed onto the body” (Alexander 297). Consequently, “the body thus becomes a site of memory” (297). Such examples of spiritual embodiment include Baby Suggs, Holy’s dancing, Phephelaphi’s immolation, and Nehanda’s hanging, among others. These instances vary in permanency of physical change, but these acts are all transformational and reinforce bodily memory of ritual that allows the individual to escape the prison of the body to engage in an empowering bodily experience. As with spirituality, writing can also be an embodied experience. Toivanen quotes from *Writing Near the Bone*, in which Vera says that as a child she “discovered the magic of [her] own body as a writing surface” using her fingernails or dry grass (Toivanen 170). As quoted in *Writing Near the Bone*, Vera explains that “different body parts engender different kinds of writing: on thighs, the skin is soft and the text does not last, but generates ‘a sharp ticklish sensation which made us... laugh and feel as though we had placed the words in a hidden place’” and that other locations allowed them to write ‘deep into the skin and under skin where the words could not escape’... where words were ‘dug too deep would be pulsating still, unable to be quiet’” (170). Interestingly, this recollection reveals that from an early age, Vera’s writing was an embodied experience; Vera creates a physical relationship with words, allowing them to briefly or permanently mark her body and to let the most distressful words emanate from her through pulsating pain. Explicating this idea of embodied writing further, Vera says, “The woman I am is inside the writing, embraced and freed by it” (170). In addition to allowing herself to embody

writing, Vera allows writing to embody her in a reciprocal relationship of physicality, trapping words within her body while allowing them to speak through bodily pain, and also manifesting her spirit within words. This physical relationship between body and words continued into Vera's adulthood as she says, "You must *feel* it... Paragraph by paragraph. I feel transformed... I panic, my heart beats, and I think, if I had not written today, I would not be where I am right now" (Primorac 383). The feelings of panic and a beating heart reveal the physical impact of the act of writing, showing that the idea of embodied writing continued for Vera into adulthood (Arnett 34). Like her body was transformed by the words scratched into her skin as a child, the act of writing physically and mentally transforms Vera, freeing her.

Toivanen quotes Kari Weil who states that to French feminists, language represents "the ultimate tool of women's oppression and a potential means for subverting, if not escaping that oppression" (Toivanen 167). In the above quotes from Vera, she reveals that writing to her is a personal experience of freedom; however, French feminists argue that not only is language, or writing, a means to personal freedom, but if usurped and reappropriated by females, a powerful means to freeing the female body. As the social contract has historically asked women to give up their rights and safety for the good of nation or home, Kristeva writes, "Feminism has at least had the merit of showing what is irreducible and even deadly in the social contract" (Kristeva 34). The social contract is even more deadly for the Black women who are doubly subjugated. In *Demonic Grounds*, McKittrick illuminates the destructive nature of the oppressor's imagination which is validated by the social contract, "The classification of black femininity was therefore also a process of *placing* her within the broader system of servitude--as an inhuman racial-sex worker, as an objectified body, as a site through which sex, violence, and reproduction can be imagined and enacted, and as a captive human (McKittrick xvii). In a society that forces

women's bodies to be sites of masculine violence, for women to engage in a physical relationship with writing is to subvert the intrusions of violence; instead of having one's body marked with wounds, as Sethe's whipping leaves the shape of a chokecherry tree on her back, it is marked with expressions of her inner being, and her inner being and essence of her body is manifested in the texts she writes (*Beloved* 19).. McKittrick writes that the oppressors believe that "unruly deviant bodies do not have the capacity to produce space and effectively participate in geographic progress; unruly deviant bodies should be kept "in place" (9). Through writing, women escape the boundaries forced upon them by society. Not only does she fill up her own body, but her mind, her femininity becomes boundless, unable to be restricted by her body or society as her words circulate amongst individuals and across geographic boundaries. Her body is no longer crushed by words but freed by them. For Black female authors, Vera and Morrison, the act of writing itself and the feminist content of their writing subverts the social contract which seeks to oppress them.

In Kristeva's essay, "Women's Time," she asserts that modern feminism is not so much "concerned with the quest for equality but, rather, with difference and specificity" (Kristeva 21) "to bring out the singularity of each woman, and her multiplicities" (33). As women have often been left out of or stereotype in literature "woman must write her self; must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies--for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text--as into the world and into history--by her own movement" (Cixous 875). For the "singularity of each woman" to enter the public eye, it requires women, especially those subaltern populations of women, to write themselves and the stories of other women like them. Vera and Morrison participate in uncovering the hidden women of history by writing themselves,

Black women living in imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchies. Journalist Ellen Brown quotes Morrison, “If you find a book you really want to read but it hasn’t been written yet, then you must write it” (Cincinnati). For both Morrison and Vera, their personal identities have often been neglected in mainstream literature, even Black literature. As Cixous espouses, Morrison and Vera “write about women and bring women to writing,” giving their subaltern characters voice. While as Black females, Vera and Morrison and their characters are imagined in such cruel ways as McKittrick elucidates, these authors counter the imaginations of the oppressor and the authority of the social contract by proclaiming their own imaginings through writing, where oppressed women claim authority over their own fates. In her dissertation Vera writes, “It is through the act of writing initiated by Soyinka’s theft of a pen from a prison official, that he offers the most sustained resistance against the space of the prison” (*Prison* 81-82). For Vera and Morrison, writing against the imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchies is their “most sustained resistance” against their oppressors. The oppressed writing and empowering the fellow oppressed allows readers to realize the capacities of such individuals, influencing society's ideas about current power structures.

About Morrison’s work, Hostetler writes, “The figure of the dead girl--in particular, an unnamed, orphaned, discarded, or disregarded girl--that haunts each of these stories suggests not only the rupture with the past but a rupture within the psyche, and within narrative--the suppressed texts of gendered, feminine herstory within African American history” (Hostetler 39). Similar to Morrison, Vera’s characters are women who have been abused and tossed to the side. Both authors bring these voiceless women of history into the public eye. Cixous writes of the connection between women, “In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history” (Cixous 882). Like in the concept of rememory,

oppressed Black women share a communal memory of trauma that can reach across the ocean to connect one another that is strengthened by a common ancestry and spirituality. However, while Morrison and Vera both draw upon the idea of communal memory, they simultaneously write about the specificity of woman, writing within various time periods and traumas such as slavery and genocide to allow these specific women to enter public discourse. Vera's and Morrison's works explore the body, its ability to imprison the spirit, its destruction as a means to freedom, and its ability to give and take life. Like Spivak, these authors argue that the body can be used as a form of speech when the voice itself is silenced. Sethe's killing of her child and Phephelaphi's immolation are such examples of Morrison and Vera writing bodily speech. Although the characters in the texts of Morrison and Vera must use their bodies to communicate within the story, both authors afford the characters the ability to speak to the readers. One way they give their characters voice is by moving from third person point-of-view to first person point-of-view in moments of trauma (Erik Falk 257).

Morrison gives her characters voice in her novels, *Beloved* and *A Mercy*. In *Beloved*, Morrison allows those who endured the Middle Passage to speak through Beloved, "We are not crouching now... I cannot fall because there is no room to... those able to die are in a pile... the little hill of dead people... a hot thing" (*Beloved* 260). With passages such as these, Morrison allows those who never had the opportunity to speak of their trauma of the Middle Passage to speak to the world of it. Additionally, as previously mentioned, each of the women, Beloved, Denver, and Sethe all have their own opportunities to speak in first person for themselves as well. As Vera embodies her texts, the novel *Beloved* acts as a textual embodiment of the spirits of the "disregarded" Black women of the era of slavery and those who are affected by it. As within the house 124 Stamp Paid describes the roaring of the victims of slavery, the book itself

allows these individuals to roar; the suffering of those who survived and died on the Middle Passage, the women who were raped and beaten, whose children were sold or killed and who lost their husbands to selling or insanity, women who were categorized as animals, they all are given voice in the novel *Beloved*.

In the final chapter of *A Mercy*, Minha Mae has the opportunity to explain for the first time why she asked Jacob Vaark to take her daughter from her, “Neither one will want your brother. I know their tastes. Breasts provide more pleasure than simpler things” (*Mercy* 162). Although Florens believes her mother has chosen her brother over her, Minha Mae reveals that she was trying to protect her daughter from the rapes she has endured herself and says, “To be female in this place is to be a be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars from, the festering is ever below” (163). About Vaark taking Florens, Minha Mae says, “It was a mercy. Offered by a human. I stayed on my knees. In the dust where my heart will remain each night and every day until you understand what I know and long to tell you... Oh Florens. My love. Hear a tua mae” In addition to speaking in this chapter about her experience in the Middle passage as discussed previously, for Minha Mae, giving her daughter away and knowing that her daughter believes that she does not love her is one of her greatest traumas. Morrison allows Minha Mae to speak of her own “thick love” that saved Florens from becoming “an open wound that cannot heal” (*Beloved* 202). Like Sethe who used her ability to fly to save her children, when Jacob Vaark wants to take Minha Mae, she does not take the opportunity to save herself, but begs for him to take her daughter in her place. In this text, as Florens and Minha Mae know how to write, Morrison chooses to have to speak them speak in first person not through direct interaction with the reader, but through their own written text, Florens’ carved into a wall and Minha Mae’s written on an unknown surface. This physical act of writing serves the same



purpose as having the characters speak in first person to the reader as, “Writing which stems from the body signifies a re-appropriation of female corporality and voice” (Toivanen 168). Florens and Minha Mae gain the ability to speak of their trauma for themselves through writing instead of speech.

Before committing suicide, Phephelaphi speaks in first person point-of-view of her pain that leads her to decide to die. “Most of all I could not bear it because I was pregnant again and could not understand how he managed to do that to me when he had stopped loving me” (*Butterfly* 145). For Phephelaphi, this pregnancy is even more distressful because the baby is not a product of love, but a cruel burden Fumbatha inflicts on her, leaving her with a baby and no possibility of the future she longs for. Phephelaphi asserts that there is no hope of becoming a nurse, “I had to forget about my June Intake... and I will not. Will *not*... what he had left me with, for a little while, he came back to get, My being. My woman self tearing away” (145). She cannot bring herself to perform an abortion which broke her body “like decayed wood” or to live an unfulfilled life with her “woman self” torn away from her, so she must move forward spiritually instead (116). Through Phephelaphi, Vera allows the many women who have been imprisoned in their bodies, unable to pursue their dreams and forced to resign to a life of domestic servitude to husbands and children to speak. Similar to Phephelaphi’s speech during trauma, during her rape and mutilation, Nonceba of *The Stone Virgins* says, “I am trapped in my bones... He cut... Each part memorized, my dark blood, my voice vanishing. My mouth, a wound” (*Virgins* 109). Despite that in this moment, Nonceba is trapped in her own body and is unable to physically speak as her lips have been cut off and her voice has “vanished,” through the novel, Vera allows her to speak through her text of “the memory” which Nonceba says “is the blood in my bones” (109). By allowing Nonceba to speak of trauma in the Matabeleland

massacres, Vera allows her to be the voices of the real-life victims of the mutilations, rapes, tortures, and deaths of the massacre who were not allowed a chance to speak for themselves.

In addition to allowing oppressed women to speak for themselves by moving from third person point-of-view to first person point-of-view, Vera and Morrison take back the mainstream narrative that has oppressed women by empowering women in their texts. Brand argues that Morrison's novels "rewrit[e] of the myth of America... Against the official American narrative, Morrison narrates the African-American presence that underpins the official story but is rarely, truly braided among the narratives of the "pilgrims," the "founding fathers," the "west," and so on" (Brand 128). While African-Americans and African-American women are often left out of history, Morrison puts them back into history, correcting its false narratives. Schreiber writes, "While memory replays traumatic events, it's reconstruction of these events can protect the ego; the recall of positive aspects of the past, tied to concepts of connections that mirror a positive self-image, helps to combat trauma and it's lingering effects ("Shared" 32) Despite the powerful painful effects of communal memory on women of Africa and women of the African Diaspora, the rewriting of such painful memories, such as is performed by Vera and Morrison, have the ability to heal these same pained populations. By revealing the power of oppressed women, it reminds the oppressed populations that they too are powerful. Two key examples of Morrison and Vera empowering women who have been "knocked down" or misused are Baby Suggs, Holy and Nehanda.

Baby Suggs, Holy defies the constraints society burdens her with. Christianity has often ignored or forbidden women from acting as spiritual leaders. As a Black woman, this discrimination is magnified. However, Baby Suggs, Holy does not allow her crippled body, or her slave background prevent her from serving. Baby Suggs, Holy "became an unchurched

preacher...Uncalled, unrobed, unanointed, she let her great heart beat in their presence” (*Beloved* 106). Baby Suggs, Holy is described as unfit for religious service in every way, except for the fact that she has a “great heart.” This heart allows her to successfully preach in her community and even the other pulpits she visits including the “AME’s and Baptists, Holiness and Sanctified, the Church of the Redeemer and the Redeemed” (106). Baby Suggs, Holy is not discouraged by lines of denomination either. Through Baby Suggs, Holy, Morrison argues that women, even the old and abused can serve as leaders and spiritual leaders. Instead of maintaining obedience to formalities and divisions, Baby Suggs, Holy anoints herself to serve wherever she is needed. Her effectiveness criticizes the limitations placed on her based on race, gender, and social status.

After Nehanda’s hanging in the first Chimurenga, masculinist and nationalistic ideologies minimized and domesticated Nehanda’s power which has produced deadly effects for the nation, but especially the nation’s women. Using Vera’s Sibaso as an example of this deadliness, Mkwesha-Manyonga writes, “Sibaso is used by Vera to represent a generation that has been influenced by the type of nationalism portrayed in *Feso*... Vera holds Mutswairo accountable for creating a violently masculinist and ethnically exclusive nation” (Mkwesha-Manyonga 55). As the violent Sibaso is motivated to join the liberation war by *Feso*, Mkwesha-Manyonga argues that the nationalistic texts such as *Feso*, misuse Nehanda’s memory to justify nationalism and the violence which accompanies it. One such example of the deadliness of these ideologies is the Matabeleland Massacres or Gukurahundi which is the subject of *The Stone Virgins*. In the novel, despite his brutalization of women, Sibaso believes that Nehanda protects him, demonstrating the nationalist appropriation of her legacy. Nehanda has been given the title Mbuya, or Grandmother, and is frequently referred to as Mbuya Nehanda, domesticating and weakening her by “transform[ing] [her] into an archetypal figure of protection, woman as passive mother whose

value revolves only on her capacity to give birth to the nation's sons or to symbolize the nation's birth" and "denies her agency and renders her powerful solely as signifier" only useful as a means of military recruitment (Lewis 33). Although Nehanda was the original leader of the Chimurenga, men have appropriated her memory for their own uses, forcing Nehanda, her spirit mediums, and Zimbabwean women into the background in favor of a masculinist and nationalist national identity.

In Desiree Lewis's article, "Biography, Nationalism and Yvonne Vera's *Nehanda*," she argues that the novel, *Nehanda*, has become an important work in constructing Zimbabwe's national identity (Lewis 29). Lewis references a talk in which Vera "identified the rewriting of African identity as a key challenge in postcolonial Africa" (28). Vera's feminist take on Nehanda works to reconstruct the national identity as a more female-centered one. Chigumadzi describes the roles she took, usually held by men, "a political leader who defied expectations of African women's place in history...A military tactician... A spiritual leader... A visionary who is immortalized through her famous dying words" (Chigumadzi 62). While nationalist leaders have often tried to ignore these aspects of Nehanda, Vera focuses her writing on these roles. With her novels, Vera reclaims the feminist spirit of Nehanda through "the duality of Charwe/Nehanda, [in which] Vera deconstructs the colonist and nationalist binary of either woman or hero by having both in one body" (Mkwesha-Manyonga 42). In *Nehanda*, although Nehanda is at first criticized for not marrying or having children, as a character says "As long as a woman is not married, she will be talked about as if she were a young girls, even if she has already lost half her teeth," Nehanda's mother defends her, saying, "'Let my daughter be. Perhaps that which wishes to be part of her will not allow her to marry...She has ancestors, and a lineage, and totems that she respects, does she not? Is it not enough?'" (*Nehanda* 40). With this dialogue, Vera argues

that spiritual power and leadership is more valuable than adhering to gender expectations. Additionally, by focusing on Nehanda as childless and certainly grandchildless, Vera reveals how the nationalist tradition of calling Nehanda “Mbuya Nehanda” serves to take Nehanda off the battlefield and into the home. Vera’s portrayal of the people’s reaction to Nehanda’s leadership also serves to emphasize her power. During a ceremony, “The people clap their hands in unison, showing their submission to Nehanda’s spirit and truth” (53). The word “submission” elevates Nehanda above all of the other members of the clan, even the males. Nehanda, a woman, is the supreme leader of the clan. Additionally, although Kaguvi emerges as a male spirit medium, he still remains submissive to Nehanda, “The voice of Nehanda comes to Kaguvi. The voice gives him strength, and he works with it towards achieving the goals of the rebellion” (61). Vera describes Kaguvi as dependent on Nehanda for strength rather than the reverse which would be the more typical gender expectation. As Lewis asserts in her article, biographical construction is pivotal in national mythmaking (Lewis 31). *Nehanda* serves as a rewriting of African identity to be more positive and feature female empowerment. The text shapes the national mythos as it portrays the First Chimurenga as dignified and victorious as well as female centered. National myths become internalized by citizens and shape their values and the way they think of themselves and their country. Vera chooses to put male leadership in the background and focus on female strength, leadership, and female power, replacing the masculine national text of *Feso* with a feminist one for modern generations, altering the values of the country’s citizens. By re-empowering Nehanda, Vera empowers the females in Zimbabwe to be willing to shed gender-based restrictions and explore their power in society.

Although Vera and Morrison continually incorporate African spirituality into their texts, they also enact spirituality through writing. In *Nehanda*, Vera writes, “Only the dead make the

living speak” (*Nehanda* 97). In an interview, Vera demonstrates how this was the case for her while writing *Nehanda*:

“Nehanda is really at the centre of our spiritual beliefs as a whole nation, and to write about her was very daring. It transformed me [...] I felt in the end it came out of a state of possession. I had asked her in my traditional method of asking--get up before dawn to ask for her guidance--and she had visited [...] I felt a fierce sense of responsibility to tell this story and to do so, I had to co-exist with this Nehanda spirit. It really gave me a lot of strength as a woman.” (Bryce 222)

Vera’s experience reveals writing as an embodied spiritual practice. In writing *Nehanda*, not only was Vera reconstructing the national mythos, but also served as a spirit medium, permitting Nehanda herself to reside within her body to write the story as Nehanda wanted it to be told. Perhaps in a period of darkness in the country, Nehanda’s bones rose again, this time not in the form of a warrior, but in a writer in order to remind her people of their true heritage and to save them from destroying themselves in the name of nationalism. While Nehanda spoke through Vera, Vera herself feels empowered as she achieves a new level of spiritual ability by co-mingling with the spirit of Nehanda. Although Morrison does not speak of an intrinsically divine experience of writing as Vera, she accomplishes the same feat. Through her writing, Morrison allows the spirits of her ancestors to speak through her, writing them back into being.

Now both deceased, Vera and Morrison act as ancestors, guiding future Black female authors such as playwright Danai Gurira. As a Zimbabwean-American, Gurira embodies the connection between the two continents, being influenced by both Morrison and Vera. In addition to narrating the audiobook of *The Stone Virgins*, in an interview, Gurira said, “As I went into my adolescent years, a consciousness built up in me, perhaps because I started reading Toni Morrison, Alex Haley, James Baldwin... I started to connect the dots around why I was rejecting my people’s cultural markers and the dominating effects of Eurocentric culture” (“Black”).

These facts about Gurira's life reveal how Morrison and Vera have influenced her to write plays that advocate social change. Elements of Morrison and Vera are apparent in her play, *The Convert*. Gurira situates her play during the revolution, specifically mentioning that the colonists are in search of Nehanda. Although the protagonist, Jekesai, is initially persuaded to adopt Western religion and customs, after she sees her cousin killed "like a chicken" without a trial by the colonists and she is left "standing there with [her] Bible like a fool" she sheds her Western dress and takes revenge as instructed by the spirit of her father (Gurira 84). When Prudence discovers that the colonists' justice system does not apply to the native peoples, she chooses to abort her child, showing the same sentiment as Sethe and Phephelaphi, that it is better to kill the child than to see it brutalized. Gurira and Vera both explore the strength and composure demonstrated in stressful situations by females focused on spiritual purposes. During Nehanda's birth, the three women "asserted their strength through their calm postures, waiting" (*Nehanda* 3). This sentence portrays calmness as a marker of strength. In *The Convert*, Jekesai demonstrates this calm strength as she awaits her capture, "she sits on the floor in a manner typical of a young Shona muzezuru girl, legs bent to one side, feet neatly tucked under her posterior, back inexplicably straight. She waits" (Gurira 86). Nehanda is discovered in a similar state, "but for now, her people will continue to be killed until evidence of her death has been found...they find her sitting in a clearing, waiting" (*Nehanda* 94). The imagery of calm strength found in these novels undermines the assumption that women are too emotionally volatile to participate in stressful situations such as politics or war. Both are inspired by spirituality and in the face of execution, both women calmly sacrifice their lives to benefit the cause of their county. In the preface, Gurira writes, "They would regain their strength and rise again, this time to assure a differing outcome, only to repeat the cycle of oppression on their own," showing a

similar theme as *The Stone Virgins* in which the Matabeleland Massacres serve as an example of the ways masculinist nationalism is a deadly force (Gurira Preface). Gurira, like Morrison and Vera, argues that African spirituality is key to the redemption of the nation and to female empowerment.

While Vera and Morrison write from different continents, their writing reveals a shared African heritage, which Brand argues is the product of the legacy of the Door of No Return. As Vera asserts that the “prison book invites to be read as a chapter in a longer narrative,” the works of these Black female authors who have endured living in imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchies should be read as chapters in a longer narrative as well (*Prison* 89). As Brand asserts, their works find each other because they “live in the same world” (Brand 128). Morrison’s and Vera’s works are built from the Black female writers who came before them, and they simultaneously build up those such as Gurira who live on after them. Connected to the progression of these generations of writing, Toivian says, “while writing *alone* cannot contribute to a social and economic change, it is nevertheless an important aspect in transformation” (Toivanen 168). Although embodied writing does transform the individual, Vera, Morrison, and Gurira do not write alone, but with, by, and through one another, women writing women’s bodies into being, freeing them with words. Just as the women of the community come together to exorcise *Beloved*, the works of authors such as Vera, Morrison, and Gurira find each other, uniting their spiritual strengths to exorcise the bad spirits--the mutilators, decapitators, rapists, and oppressors--the true Sibaso’s of the living world, moving each generation of Black women closer to authentic freedom. Like the bones of *Nehanda*, the legacies of Morrison and Vera will rise again and again “answering the needs of the children of the soil, the descendants she watches over” (Chigumadzi 64-65).



## In-Text Citation Abbreviations

In-Text Citation	Full Citation
( <i>Mercy</i> )	Morrison, Toni. <i>A Mercy</i> . New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2008
( <i>Beloved</i> )	Morrison, Toni. <i>Beloved</i> . New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1991.
( <i>Origin</i> )	Morrison, Toni. <i>The Origin of Others</i> . Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2017.
( <i>Prison</i> )	Vera, Yvonne. <i>The Prison of Colonial Space: Narratives of Resistance</i> . 1995. York University, PhD dissertation.
( <i>Nehanda</i> )	Vera, Yvonne. <i>Nehanda: a Novel</i> . Ontario, Mawenzi House. 2007.
( <i>Butterfly</i> )	Vera, Yvonne. <i>Butterfly Burning</i> . New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000.
( <i>Virgins</i> )	Vera, Yvonne. <i>The Stone Virgins</i> . New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.
(“Personal”)	Schreiber, Evelyn. “Personal and Cultural Memory in <i>A Mercy</i> ” <i>Toni Morrison: Memory and Meaning</i> . Edited by Adrienne Seward, Justine Tally, University Press of Mississippi / Jackson, 2014, pp. 32-64.
(“Shared”)	Schreiber, Evelyn. “Shared Memory: Slavery and Large-Group Trauma in <i>Beloved</i> and <i>Paradise</i> .” <i>Race, Trauma, and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison</i> . Louisiana State University Press, 2010, pp. 80-92.
(“Echoes”)	Schreiber, Evelyn. “Echoes of “The Foreigner’s Home” in <i>A Mercy</i> .” <i>Race, Trauma, and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison</i> . Louisiana State University Press, 2010, pp. 157-176.

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