SOUNDINGS

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"THE WORK OF YOUR OWN HANDS": Doing Black Women's Hair as Religious Language in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*

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> I think hands must be very important . . . Hands: plait hair . . . knead bread . . . spank bottoms . . . wring in anguish . . . shake the air in exasperation . . . wipe tears, sweat, and pain from faces . . . are at the end of arms which hold . . . Yes hands . . . Let's start with the hands . . .[1]

I.

In her 1988 novel *Mama Day*, Gloria Naylor creates a story-world filled with complex and emerging Western, African, and African American spiritualities and cultures. Naylor uses a variety of mini-narratives and symbols to connect divinity and the process of creation. One such symbol that she employs consistently throughout the novel is the image of hands, particularly hands doing Black women's hair.[2] The movement of hands metonymically invokes women's work and functions as a nonverbal symbolic language for divine activity — (re)creating, cursing, and blessing. That is, in *Mama Day*, Black women's hair is not just the *locus* of divine activity, and hands are not just the *vessels* through which divine activity is transmitted. Rather, the doing of hair — washing, combing, parting, oiling, brushing, braiding, twisting, and even cutting hair — is a language, a nonverbal language, for talking about God and God's activity in the world.

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soul that corresponds to the level of reality to which the symbol points. An adequate symbol is also not idolatrous. For Tillich, the most adequate symbol is the cross of Christ.[8] It points to transcendence, immanence, incarnation, unity with God, and self-denial all at once.

Tillich's analysis focuses solely on Christian theology, but his understanding of religious symbols can be expanded to non-Christian religious worldviews as well. Based on his work, we can draw three broad conclusions about religious symbols:

1. Religious symbols are limited, but we need them to express our understanding of God in the world.
2. Religious symbols point to the divine and participate in the divine but are not identical with the divine.
3. Most important, religious symbols can be objects, events, concept, or words. They can also be gestures.

IV. Nonverbal Language

The suggestion that gestures can be symbols leads us to the question of nonverbal language. Society often discounts gestures and other forms of nonverbal communication. As Stephen R. Portch notes, for example, readers frequently listen to what literary characters say and ignore descriptions of what they do. However, scholars are paying increasing attention to the ways in which nonverbal messages can function as languages, and some even assert that such messages can be more powerful than verbal ones. Thus, Portch argues that nonverbal communication can be more effective than verbal communication because of its ability to stimulate sensory response and send several messages simultaneously, and because it is less effective at covering the truth (lying) than verbal language.[9]

Nonverbal communication is always coded; as Edward Sapir points out, it is "an elaborate and secret code that is written nowhere, known by none, and understood by all."[10] Scholars disagree, however, about whether such codes are universal or culturally specific. Some argue that nonverbal communication had survival value and thus that nonverbal codes must be universal, and they point to what they see as similarities among nonverbal languages across cultures.[11] But others, more compellingly I think, insist that nonverbal communication is culturally specific. Thus, Elochukwu E. Uzukwu argues that each community or ethnic group designs its own gestures to express its experience of life: "No ethnic group imposes its pattern of communication or its way of doing on another group; nor does any group set aside another's designed responses to the impact of the universe arbitrarily."[12]

In *Worship as Body Language*, Uzukwu also argues that nonverbal language is explicitly religious and cultural and that gestures reveal the intimate link between the universe and creation. Referring to African societies, Uzukwu notes that in gestures, "the rhythm of interaction in the universe is discovered, re-created, and expressed bodily by humans."[13] In gestures, the individual, the community, and the universe interact:

> the self reveals itself, from head to toe, as one complex reality — visible, yet invisible; corporeal-incorporeal; part of, but also the center of a complex universe of interaction. . . . Body motions, whether accompanied by speech or not, embody the group, reveal its universe of beliefs, while not excluding individual responsibility.[14]

V. African Symbols in *Mama Day*

Like other symbols, the symbols in *Mama Day* arise from an everyday reality, and like other specifically religious symbols, they point toward the divine. One critic describes this aspect of the novel as follows.

> Naylor attempts to transcend the limits of modern language and summon the connecting strength of myth. . . . The mystery of religion is once again merged with the action of the daily life as the domestic acts and manual labor of the working man and woman are elevated to the sacred.[15]

This elevation to the sacred characterizes the work of hands in hair in the novel, work which comprises a symbolic, non-verbal religious language. Seen through Tillich's typology, hands and hair are liturgical sign-symbols, and the process of working with hair is a sacramental symbol of God's appearance in the world. But unlike the symbols Tillich analyzes, the work of hands in hair in *Mama Day* is an expression of divine activity that is culturally encoded in African and African American religious traditions, specifically in the traditions of conjure and of the Bakongo and Yoruba religions.

"Conjure" — shorthand for the actions, rituals, and spells of superstition, magic, incantation, poison, blessing, and cursing —

is an African retention within African American communities that has been syncretized with Christianity (and other cultural expressions) and that also subverts dominant (Western and male) assertions of power by drawing upon alternative and seemingly mysterious sources of power.[16] Conjure workers are folk healers who come from a variety of backgrounds. They range from religious leaders and community leaders to those on the periphery of the community, such as midwives, grannies, and story-tellers.[17] Conjurers believe that their gifts (of healing and cursing) come from God, and they draw upon and utilize (literally participate in) divine power. As Sharla Fett puts it,

> Healing [and conjuring] knowledge came to [black female conjurers] through dreams, signs, visions, guidance from God or 'Doctor Jesus,' and lessons passed on from previous generations . . . [their capabilities] rested on a spiritual source of power that could not [be] undermine[d]."[18]

Two of the most important influences on conjure are Bakongo and Yoruba religion, both of which play a role in *Mama Day*. Although Willow Springs is a fictional island, it is clearly intended to fit into the historical geography of the Sea Islands, a repository of Gullah culture. Gullah (or "Geechee") culture is unique because the Gullah people were able to retain more traditional African practices and beliefs than most other Black slaves and their descendants in America. This was possible for two primary reasons. First, the pattern of the slave trade came almost exclusively from the Ba-Kongo region of continental Africa (contemporary Zaire and Angola). Between 1735 and 1740, 70% of all incoming slaves to South Carolina and the Sea Islands were drawn from the Angola region.[19] After 1774, the Kongo-Angola region supplied the majority of slaves to the southeast United States. One result of these immigration patterns was a "powerful sum of 'Kongo-isms'" in the Gullah region.[20] Second, the Sea Islands were relatively isolated from mainstream European and African American culture. Some islands had no bridges connecting them to the mainland until the early 1900s. The result, in the words of one ethnologist, was that

> these Negroes [sic], more perhaps than any others in the United States, have lived in a physical and cultural isolation which is conducive to the survival of many old customs and thoughtways, both African and European.[21]

One aspect of Bakongo spirituality that plays an important role in *Mama Day* is the concept of the *nkisi*. As Robert Farris Thompson explains in *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, a *nkisi* is

> a thing we use to help a person when that person is sick and from which we obtain health . . . a chosen companion, in whom all people find confidence, a hiding place for people's soul, to keep and compose in order to preserve life.[22]

The *nkisi* originated in God and were distributed throughout the country in a variety of manifestations. These earthly manifestations of *nkisi* could be used to invoke divine assistance.[23] Each *nkisi* contains medicines and a soul which combine to give it life and power. The *nkisi* can represent an ancestor who returns to serve the one who beckoned (through the possession of a charm or herb) or a victim of witchcraft who has been captured by the one who possesses the charm or hair.

Yoruba religion also played an important role in the Gullah region, as Thompson points out.[24] In traditional Yoruba religion, there are various *orisa*, or spirits, who are less powerful than God but who are worshipped as a limitless horizon of vivid moral beings who are generous yet intimidating. The *orisa* are messengers and embodiments of *ase*, spiritual command, or "the-power-to-make-things-happen."[25] *Ase* is God's power made accessible to creation. It is morally neutral and can be used generously or selfishly, to kill or to give life, according to the purpose and nature of its bearer.[26] *Ase* originally descended in the form of a python, a viper, an earthworm, a small snail, and a woodpecker. *Ase* comes in multiple forms from lightning to blood and is often symbolized in the color white.

Esu-Elegba (also Esu-Elegbara) is the *orisa* that dispenses *ase*. Esu represents the crossroads, the point where decisions are made and options are opened or closed. Esu is the mediator or messenger of God and the other *orisa*. Esu is "the ultimate master of potentiality."[27] At the same time, however, Esu's power is ambiguous and can even be identified with evil. As Thompson points out, "Because of the believed unpredictability of Esu-Elegba, this West Coast spirit comes to be associated with the biblical Devil." The association of Esu with the Devil, Thompson also notes, highlights the "double" nature of this tradition, which is both "Kongo-Yoruba and Western."[28]

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Naylor invokes various symbols of Yoruba and Bakongo cosmology throughout *Mama Day* — in her descriptions of the island graveyard, for example, and in her discussions of various herbal medicines and curses. She identifies both Mama Day and Ruby as conjure women. As conjurers, Mama Day and Ruby have access to the divine power of *ase*, which they manipulate through their symbolic actions in order to effect personal or communal ends of transformation and change.[29] In addition, as Lindsay Tucker points out, both Mama Day and Ruby oscillate between beneficent and malicious activity, and they thus embody the ambiguous power of *ase*, its different options and uses.[30]

Seen in this context, both Ruby's cursing and Mama Day's curing of Cocoa are manifestations of the power of *ase*, and since the work of hands in hair is central to both, it is evident that this work plays a vital symbolic role in the novel. To understand this symbolism, we need to explore the meaning of three things in the novel and in the world of conjure and Kongo-Yoruba culture more broadly: hands, hair, and the particular pattern into which Ruby braids Cocoa's hair.

1. *Hands*

Hands play an important role in Yoruba art and in the story-world of *Mama Day*. In Yoruba art, hands represent ancestors. The left hand is the mother-hand, and the right hand the father-hand. Working together, they are described as "the hand-which-keeps and the hand-which-acts."[31] These beliefs emphasize the active, creative power of hands, as well as their role in connecting individuals to others and to their own pasts. This combination is evident in the work of hands in *Mama Day* as well. Even in the creation of Willow Springs, hands do creative and connective work. Willow Springs was literally given to the hands of a Black woman by God:

> The island got spit out of the mouth of God, and when it fell to the earth, it brought along an army of stars. He tried to reach down and scoop them back up, and found Himself shaking hands with the greatest conjure woman on earth. "Leave 'em here, Lord," she said. "I ain't got nothing but these poor black hands to guide my people, but I can lead on with light" (110).

In this story, hands connect God and the conjure woman, and the woman guides her people with her hands. Although she says that they are "poor black hands," the power we see connected with hands throughout the novel illustrates that they are not her greatest weakness; rather, they are her greatest assets and tools. Furthermore, this creation myth is celebrated through the ritual of the "Candle Walk," during which community members give gifts to one another and to those to whom they are grateful. The only requirement for the gift is that "it [comes] from the earth and is the work of your own hands" (110). In this gift-giving, hands and the work of hands imitate the divine creative act, connecting the divine to the human and human beings to one another.

The power of hands and touch has garnered considerable attention in contemporary scholarship. Scholars in the humanities and the social and medical sciences are acknowledging the healing power of touch in human hands. Massage, hand-holding, hugging, the laying on of hands, and numerous other forms of touch are increasingly being understood as central aspects of long-standing holistic, folk, and non-Western healing practices, such as the Japanese tradition of Reiki.[32] Touch is more complicated than a simple gesture, since it serves to connect persons and transfer energy. Indeed, in *Mama Day*, hands heal, curse, and connect as they transfer divine energy to different persons.

Hands also connect and build bridges between separated physical and spiritual entities.[33] When a storm destroys the bridge between Willow Springs and the mainland of South Carolina, a metaphorical bridge is being built on the island — between George's world and the world of Mama Day, between the secular and the sacred.[34] We are told of George's inability to "handle" the environment of Willow Springs, and we see him using his hands to help rebuild the bridge in his eagerness to leave the island. Mama Day even asks for George's hands when she needs him to assist in Cocoa's metaphysical healing. George must hand over his belief to her. Mama Day then takes his hands in hers as she walks him to different spiritually significant locations and places family artifacts into his hands. George, however, refuses to let go of Cocoa and finally asks, "Could it be that she wanted nothing but my hands?" (300).

Margaret Washington Creel, a historian of Gullah culture, argues that the Gullah view of the world — with God at the apex, humanity at the center, and a spirit world of good and bad forces all around — and the Gullah belief that earthly life is significant but that death is not to be feared are distinctively African and are related to the Gullah's Bakongo roots.[45] Thus, it is not surprising to find the Bakongo cosmogram in Gullah culture. Thompson points out, for example, that the cosmogram plays a vital role in Gullah folk medicine:

> A main institutional channel through which Kongo ways were kept alive in North America was black folk healing. Men and women in black communities who practiced ancient cures compounded of leaves and roots also tended to know the cosmogram or its visual equivalents, such as the crossroads, or to use forked branches as mediatory emblems.[46]

Thompson also implies that the cosmogram is represented in the pattern of braiding hair when he notes that "Bakongo women were styling their hair in splendid concentric, spiral patterns to celebrate the restoration of black rule and the circularity of the royal enclosure of the ancient ideal capital."[47]

Naylor evokes the cosmogram in *Mama Day* when she describes the pattern into which Ruby braids Cocoa's hair:

> [Ruby] moves her hands along the temples to get the shape of the head before making the first part. A straight part down the middle, north to south . . . . The second big part crosses the first, going east to west . . . . North to south, east to west, round to square. (246)

Ruby braids the Bakongo cosmogram into Cocoa's hair with white twine representative of *ase* (246). The narrator lets us know that this pattern of braiding is typical in Willow Springs when she refers to "little dark girls, hair all braided up with colored twine," in the first pages of the novel (4).

VI. The Work of Hands in Hair as Divine Activity: Creating and Transforming

The connection that Naylor draws between the cosmogram and the pattern that Ruby braids into Cocoa's hair implies that the work of hands in hair is a divinely creative activity. By doing hair, Black women's hands are recreating a primordial environment. Cocoa alludes to this when she describes the peace she

feels as Ruby braids her hair, a process that takes her back to her childhood:

> Sitting on that little stool and letting her braid my hair brought that comfort back, the day she saved me from a spanking by removing the evidence that I'd been playing down in the ravine. Stickier problems had taken the place of cockleburs, but her huge legs were a fortress I could hide between and her voice was soothing. (245)

Ruby recreates Cocoa's childhood world as she is braiding hair. But at the same time, Ruby is also creating something new — the illness that is about to plague Cocoa.

The doing of hair is a transformative creation. When Ruby works nightshade into Cocoa's hair (while oiling it), she is cursing Cocoa. When Mama Day responds by cutting Cocoa's hair, she liberates Cocoa from Ruby's curse and initiates Cocoa's healing. Mama Day knew that there were several possible antidotes to Ruby's curse:

> [Ruby] hoped [Mama Day would] spend her time untwisting them threads and washing the poison out of [Cocoa's] hair . . . Ruby knows there were so many things [Mama Day] could choose from [to heal Cocoa and seek revenge on Ruby] . . . she could reach down in any flower garden . . . But all that would take time. (264)

Instead, Mama Day reaches into Cocoa's hair and begins to work — to cut. Once again, divine power is morally neutral and can be used for good or evil. Divine power that creates and transforms becomes incarnate, expressed, utilized, manipulated, *symbolized* in the way that Ruby and Mama Day's hands work in Cocoa's hair.

Hands working in hair are clearly ritual symbols.[48] Most scholars of ritual agree that ritual is composed (at the very least) of a leader, a community, and a repetitive act. The doing of hair in *Mama Day* entails each of these. First, Ruby and Mama Day function as ritual leaders. They are "shamans" who lead and guide the power that is manifest and honored in the ritual. Second, the entire population of Willow Springs functions as the community. From the little girls whose hair is often braided in this manner, to Cocoa's husband, George, who never fully understands what has happened to Cocoa, everyone witnesses and is involved in this particular expression of God's activity. Third, the doing of hair is, by its very nature, a repetitive process. A braid is created by the repetitive three-strand weaving of hair between fingers over and

over and over. Hair is cut by the repetitive movement of scissors. Oiling, parting, and brushing are also actions that require repetitive movements. These actions are nothing without repetition. In fact, if only one stroke of any of these movements were done, it would fail to be the full action. There is also the larger sense of ritual repetition: Braiding hair is intergenerational. Just as a woman's hair was done by her mother or grandmother, so she also does the hair of her daughter and granddaughter.[49]

Ritualists also tell us that ritual has three social gifts: It creates order, community, and transformation. Doing hair literally creates order out of tangled or undone hair. It also creates community. It links the one doing the hair and the one who is having her hair done. As hands move through hair, they link the past, present, and future, connecting ancestors, elders, and youth in cultural contexts and spiritual conversation — just as the Bakongo cosmogram links the living and the dead.

As action and as ritual, then, the doing of hair is both creative and transformative. Hands moving in hair effect change. They (re)create and transform by blessing and/or cursing.

VII. Contemporary Implications

Gloria Naylor has a complicated agenda in her depiction of Willow Springs and the conjure world in *Mama Day*,[50] and her use of African religious symbols is clearly deliberate. She states in one interview, for instance, that "Mama Day is a very strong woman, and the values that she lives by she got through the powers of her African Ancestresses."[51] This argument need not be confined to *Mama Day*, however. There are numerous other contemporary sources suggesting that the movement of hands in hair is a religious language.

Across cultures and genders, hair styling is never as simple as it appears. It is usually culturally, socially, and politically laden. Styles are also religiously meaningful. In "Braids," Maria Luis Bombal states that hair is the wellspring of a woman's spirit:

> Because a woman's hair springs from the most profound and mysterious source, whence I bore the first trembling seed of life-evolving therefore to struggle and grow among many entangling forces, thrusting through the vegetal surface into the air and on upwards to the privileged forehead of its choice.[52]

Hair is *still* understood as a place of vulnerability, strength, and transmission of power. One critic notes that the literature of New World African women often describes Black women's hair in this manner:

> Hair is universally a strong metaphor for maturity, culture, beauty, sexuality and control. . . . A woman's hair is her essence. The literature proves it. She recognizes beauty in the length and thickness of her hair, finds culture and power in her hair, becomes jealous of others' hair, seduces and rebels with her hair. Men also know that hair is beautiful, sensual and powerful. When they seek to control their women, it is either directly through their hair or reflecting in their hair. There are times when she takes control of her life, and that, too, is shown in her hair. These women often come from oppressed cultures but are able to seek solace and comfort in their hair.[53]

The uses of hair in *Mama Day* subvert some of our traditional understandings of hair. Bombal believes that the cutting of hair "severs [women from their] ties with those magic currents which issue from the very heart of the earth."[54] The Biblical tradition seems to support this belief that cutting one's hair deprives one of strength and that women's hair in particular should be long. The story of Samson locates Samson's strength in his hair, and Paul often tells women to leave their hair long (1 Cor. 11:14-15) and not to braid it (1 Tim. 2:9, 1 Pet. 3:3). Many Black women still desire to have long hair, even when their hair will not naturally grow to socially approved lengths. Naylor reminds us that the cutting of hair is liberating, not only because it frees one from social prescriptions of what women's hair ought to look like, but also because it can be healing. The cutting can (re)connect one with Bombal's magic currents, one's spiritual depths, divine power, and grace.

The work of hands in hair also reminds us that the sacred is encountered in the mundane. We don't always hear God in the burning bushes, the great theological tomes, or the sanctified holy places of our traditions. In fact, women have not traditionally had the spare time — what with the duties of work and child-rearing — to live the mystical monastic life. Women often encounter God in the tasks that they normally perform. One author affirms this in the witness of the Biblical texts:

> Sometimes our most important encounters with God occur in unexpected places. One hardly thinks of a nursery, a laundry room, a nursing home, or a drugstore as a place to encounter the sacred.

> We associate holy places with mountains, sanctuaries, rivers, pastures, and quiet retreat centers. It is easy to forget that the common, everyday sites where we actually live out our commitments to one another are likely places to entertain the holy.[55]

Seeing God at work in the work of women's hands transforms our understandings of where to look for God's voice.

Finally, attention to the movement of hands in hair can transform and augment current understandings of religious language. One critic notes that conjure offers new explanations for suffering.[56] It does not invoke a dualistic system in order to define evil as the property of the devil or Satan, nor does it assert that God is evil or the source of evil. Instead, it locates evil in human agency, human intention, human use. God trusts humanity with morally neutral power. God is active and involved in the world through the *nkisi* and *ase*, but God does not will the evil that is sometimes manifest in the world.

Focusing only on linguistic metaphors confines our attention to the verbal, literate, and anthropocentric aspects of God's creation, while discerning nonverbal actions as religious language enlarges our understanding of religious symbols and divine activity. We see that God is embodied and incarnate in human hands, and also in hair, twine, nightshade, and herbs, and in the movement of these objects. Seeing God at work in the work of Black women's hands transforms our understandings of where God's activity and power are to be found.

NOTES

1. Epigraph from Nikki Giovanni, "Hands: For Mother's Day," *Those Who Ride the Night Winds* (New York: Morrow, 1982) 16.
2. Virginia C. Fowler, "Belief and Recovery of Peace: *Mama Day*," *Gloria Naylor: In Search of Sanctuary* (New York: Twayne, 1996) 119.
3. Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day* (New York: Vintage, 1988) 2. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.
4. Paul Tillich, "Theology and Symbolism," *Religious Symbolism*, ed. F. Ernest Johnson (New York: Institute for Religious and Social Studies, 1955) 108.
5. Tillich, "Theology and Symbolism" 108.
6. Tillich, "Theology and Symbolism" 110.
7. Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper, 1957) 96.
8. Tillich, *Dynamics* 97.
9. Stephen Portch, *Literature's Silent Language: Nonverbal Communication* (New York: Peter Lang, 1985) 2, 4-5.

10. Edward Sapir, "The Unconscious Patterning of Behavior in Society," *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir in Language, Culture and Personality*, ed. David E. Mandelbaum (Berkeley: U of California P, 1949) 556.
11. See Portch 2, for example.
12. Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, *Worship as Body Language, Introduction to Christian Worship: An African Orientation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997) 5.
13. Uzukwu 10.
14. Uzukwu 10.
15. Helen Fiddyment Levy, "Lead on with Light," *Gloria Naylor: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present*, ed. Henry Louis Gates and K.A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993) 278.
16. Sharla Fett, "'It's a Spirit in Me': Spiritual Power and the Healing Work of African American Women in Slavery," *A Mighty Baptism: Race, Gender and the Creation of American Protestantism*, ed. Susan Juster and Lisa McFarlane (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1996) 189-209; Yvonne Chireau, "The Uses of the Supernatural: Toward a History of Black Women's Magical Practices," *A Mighty Baptism* 171-88; Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery To Freedom* (New York: Oxford UP, 1977) 57-74.
17. Valerie Lee, *Granny Midwives and Black Women Writers: Double-Dutched Readings* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 1-22; Theophus H. Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1994); Lindsey Tucker, "Recovering the Conjure Woman: Texts and Contexts in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*," *African American Review* 28 (1994) 173-88; Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1935); Bonnie Winsbro, "Belief, Ethnicity, and Self-Definition," *Supernatural Forces: Belief, Difference and Power in Contemporary Works by Ethnic Women* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1993) 3-25.
18. Fett 199.
19. Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: Norton, 1974) 335.
20. Robert Farris Thompson, "Kongo Influences on African-American Artistic Culture," *Africanisms in American Culture*, ed. Joseph E. Holloway (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990) 150.
21. Guy Johnson, "Foreword," *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes*, by Georgia Writers' Project, Savannah Unit, Work Projects Administration (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1940) v; Yvonne Chireau highlights the intermingling of African and European traditions in Gullah:

    > [conjure] beliefs were not completely unfamiliar. Europeans and Africans both tapped into a galaxy of otherworldly visions, including ideas concerning the mediation of the dead and the powers of unseen entities. As Africans were exposed to the spiritual imagination of whites, they absorbed any ideas that were compatible with their own. Practitioners of astrology, divination, and fortune-telling attracted both whites and blacks, and various occult activities thrived in the American colonies. Moreover, the cultural influences went both ways. Evidence indicates that whites borrowed heavily from African slave traditions, including folk beliefs in witches, ghosts, spirits, and other forces. Undeniably, early American folk tradition possessed black and white roots. (174)

22. Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Vintage, 1983) 117.

23. Thompson, *Flash* 117.
24. Thompson, *Flash* 117.
25. Thompson, *Flash* 5.
26. Thompson, *Flash* 6.
27. Thompson, *Flash* 19.
28. Thompson, "Kongo Influences" 156.
29. Bonnie Winsbro, "Modern Rationality and the Supernatural: Bridging Two Worlds in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*," *Supernatural Forces* 109-28.
30. Tucker 173-88. Tucker draws heavily on Henry Louis Gates's discussion of representations of Esu-Elegbara in African American literature; for this discussion, see Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988) 6-31, 35-42.
31. Thompson, *Flash* 11.
32. See Catharine Goboldte, "Laying on Hands: Women in Imani Faith Temple," *My Soul is a Witness: African-American Women's Spirituality*, ed. Gloria Wade Gayles (Boston: Beacon, 1995) 241-52; Monya Aletha Stubbs, "Be Healed: A Black Woman's Sermon on Healing through Touch," *My Soul is a Witness* 314-17; James Kirkland, Holly F. Matthews, C. W. Sullivan III and Karen Baldwin, eds., *Herbal and Magical Medicine: Traditional Healing Today* (Durham: Duke UP, 1992); Karen Piligian, "Therapeutic Touch: Using Your Hands for Help or Heal," *Health and Faith: Medical, Psychological and Religious Dimensions*, ed. John T. Chirban (New York: UP of America, 1991) 135-42.
33. Tucker 183.
34. See Winsbro, "Modern Rationality and the Supernatural: Bridging Two Worlds in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*," *Supernatural Forces* 109-28.
35. Tucker 183.
36. Georgia Writers' Project, Savannah Unit, Work Projects Administration, *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1940) 39.
37. Georgia Writers' Project 83.
38. Georgia Writers' Project 202.
39. Georgia Writers' Project 204.
40. Thompson, *Flash* 117.
41. John M. Janzen and Wyatt MacGaffey, *An Anthology of Kongo Religion: Primary Texts from Lower Zaire* (Lawrence: U of Kansas P, 1974) 34, qtd. in Thompson, *Flash* 106.
42. Margaret Washington Creel, "Gullah Attitudes toward Life and Death," *Africanisms in American Culture*, ed. Joseph E. Holloway (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990) 82.
43. Thompson, *Flash* 106.
44. Fett 201.
45. Creel 91.
46. Thompson, "Kongo Influences" 153.
47. Thompson, "Kongo Influences" 153.
48. There are numerous scholars — religious and anthropological — who study ritual processes. This following *brief* outline of ritual is found in summaries of works by Victor Turner, especially as noted and amplified in Tom Driver, *The Magic of Ritual: Our Need for Liberating Rites that Transform Our Lives and Our Communities* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991).
49. See Renita Weems, "Leah's Epiphany," *The Other Side* May-June 1996: 8-11, 44-46. She writes: "Leaning over Miss Wilhemenia, comb in mid-air searching for new spots to part and comb, I became privy to her most intimate lessons of womanhood . . . Yet some of my most enduring lessons on what it means to love, to forgive, to grow and to be open to mystery — which are the stuff of epiphanies — have taken place while interacting with my three-year-old daughter: trying to get her to sit still while I braid her thick, tangled hair" (10-11).
50. Rebecca Carroll, "Gloria Naylor," *I Know What the Red Clay Looks Like: The Voice and Vision of Black Women Writers* (New York: Crown, 1994) 161-63.
51. Carroll 162.
52. Maria Luisa Bombal, "Braids," *New Islands and Other Stories*, trans. Richard and Lucia Cunningham (New York: Farrar, 1982) 67.
53. Monica Anita Coleman, "Where the Power of a Woman Lies," *Harvard College Forum: The Academic Review* 7 (Spring 1993) 1, 6.
54. Bombal 67.
55. Weems 8.
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