When Black Lives Really Do Matter: Subverting Medical Racism through African-Diasporic Healing Rituals in Toni Morrison’s Fiction

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One of the lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic is the ongoing precarity of African American people living in what Christina Sharpe refers to as “the wake” of slavery. Due to disparities in medical care, African Americans are nearly three times more likely than whites to contract the virus and twice as likely to die from it (Bloomberg et al.). Yet the COVID-19 crisis merely brings to the fore a well-established pattern of structural and systemic racism within the health care industry during the entire history of the United States. Harriet Washington terms the phenomena not a “racial health gap” but a chasm “wider and deeper than a mass grave” in which the health profiles of African American and white people appear as if they live in two different countries, constituting “a medical apartheid” (20). Medical apartheid in the United States is defined by disrespect for African American people’s bodies within a predominantly white medical establishment that views them as lesser or inferior and fails to provide even basic medical care. Investigations of racism, human rights, and social justice must consider this context of institutionalized health disparities as we attempt to move “beyond” the COVID-19 crisis.

Toni Morrison spent much of her career imaginatively detailing the unpredictability of African American existence within a racist society that continues a form of neo-slavery. A special focus of her writing is patriarchal violence and medical brutality against women’s bodies. Sethe’s physical form in Beloved (1987) is inscribed by Schoolteacher with a whip after she describes his pseudo-medical experiments on her body to Mrs. Garner; the beating is so severe that she has permanent scars on her back, a “tree” that she cannot see or feel. The women in Paradise (1997) have been raped and beaten to the point that their consciousnesses cannot even recall these traumas; however, no physician ever attempts to treat them, and one woman dies due to doctors’ refusals to provide medical care. Cee, in Home (2012), is the victim of a white gynecologist who...
experiments on her uterus and sterilizes her, with no repercussions to this doctor. Morrison depicts the decimation of women’s bodies not only by patriarchal violence but also by a racist medical establishment that cannot even see, let alone begin to heal, these harms.

However, Morrison also limns alternative modes of healing within a Black metacultural framework that moves between Nigeria, Brazil, and Egypt. Edward Tiryakian defines a metaculture as “a set of beliefs and symbols, generated in the distant past and renewed by succeeding generations of actors”; the metaculture frequently is invisible and unobtrusive but provides “the basic and ultimate frames and symbolism for action” (102). Such a paradigm allows comprehension of how African American individuals can employ African-diasporic traditions and practices that are empowering, but from which they have long been separated, and, more vitally, how they fuse such traditions with new paradigms to create healing rituals that begin to subvert the white, racist violence and medical apartheid that has been enacted on their physical forms.

As we move forward from the COVID-19 crisis, studies suggest that training more African American doctors, nurses, midwives, and physician assistants might curtail institutionalized medical racism (Bloomberg et al.). Morrison would agree with this, certainly. In her fiction, however, she looks first to a more basic level of healing in which African American people care for their own bodies within a sheltered community of Black metacultural healers and healing. Such a community may help them understand forms of medical apartheid when they attempt to navigate the health care system. I discuss medical racism and apply Morrison’s lessons to the COVID-19 moment that her writing trenchantly foreshadows. More extensively, however, I focus on three healers who elide the medical establishment to embody an ethics of care in which love of the bodies of African American individuals is at the center of healing. These healers are Baby Suggs (in Beloved), Consolata Sosa (in Paradise), and Ethel Fordham (in Home). The rituals created by these healers cannot completely override the damage wrought by patriarchal violence and medical racism; still, they begin to repair and even rewrite women’s corporeality through non-Western syncretic cosmologies that give power to women’s knowledge and to coalitional healing. An examination of these healers’ practices sheds light on the current moment of the COVID-19 pandemic by suggesting ways that African American people can stay “woke” and have agency when encountering traditional health care systems, which even today tend to view the bodies of African Americans as fodder for medical experiments, immune to disease, and not in need of ethical and humane medical care.

In linking healers across these novels written over a twenty-five-year period and spanning broad historical time frames, from the mid-nineteenth century into the late twentieth, I elucidate Morrison’s development of an African-diasporic metacultural framework for understanding and healing African
American individuals’ bodies that transcends white, Western comprehension of medical practices and (perhaps) medical apartheid. These works constitute Morrison’s ritual process of remembering—of bringing back, bit by bit, a Black feminine framework and body of knowledge from ancestral traditions that have been erased—and synthesizing this framework with knowledge gained in embodied, lived experience to create something that is always in flux and transforming. Across her career, we can see Morrison elucidating a syncretic African-diasporic framework that her characters fuse with embodied new knowledge not only to heal but also to gain insight and order in a white-dominant world that still refuses to provide equitable healthcare options or fully endorse the idea that Black individuals’ bodies and lives really do matter.

Overview: A Black Woman-Centered Metacultural Framework and the Generation of New Practices for Healing

Morrison’s three novels call attention to what she has termed “information discredited by the West,” information dismissed as “lore’ or ‘gossip’ or ‘magic’ or ‘sentiment’” (“Memory” 388). They articulate but also bring into being a Black woman-centered metaculture in which each of these healers embody the Yoruba-based African-diasporic river deity known as Òṣun (also spelled Ṫoshun) and impart to the women who are healed some degree of Òṣe—spiritual force, including the capacities for transformation and revitalization. Òṣe (also spelled Àshe) is understood as “life force, authority, or voiced power to make something happen”; once accessed, it “enables women to accomplish whatever they wish” (Abiodun 11). However, these women have never been to Africa. In “The Site of Memory” (1995), Morrison uses a metaphor to explain how cultural memory might be transmitted: “They straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. ‘Floods’ is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be.” She further explains that “like water, I remember where I was before I was ‘straightened out’” (99). There is a memory of subjugated knowledge that has been “corrected” by the dominant culture but that comes flooding back.

One goal of Morrison’s novels is reconnecting contemporary African Americans with healing practices and discredited knowledge because she believes that her novels function as “vehicles for cultural transmission” (“Rootedness” 340). Morrison also emphasizes the evolving quality of this knowledge, saying that the “civilization of black people . . . was there with its own everything. Everything was not worth hanging on to, but some of it was, and nothing has taken its place while it is being dismantled” (“Toni Morrison” 105). Baby Suggs, Consolata, and Ethel use aspects of the “civilization of black people”
that lies underneath white civilization, hanging onto those parts that are useful but also hybridizing it with their own lived knowledge. As healers, they develop new practices for healing, in concert with the community of African American women (and sometimes men) that surrounds them. These new practices might ameliorate the decimation of Black people’s bodies within the current medical regime, a regime in which African American individuals have higher rates of diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, and cancer than other groups, and African American children have a five-hundred percent higher death rate from asthma compared with white children (“Children’s”). The COVID-19 virus has itself widened the gap between Black and white life expectancy to six years, with the average life span being seventy-two for Black people and seventy-eight for whites (Colarossi). Black women have perished at a particularly high rate during the current crisis because they are disproportionally employed in frontline jobs in healthcare and transportation (Bertocchi and Dimico).

Morrison died in August of 2019, just a few months before the start of the COVID-19 crisis. Still, she was certainly aware of racist medical practices and of how, in effect, being Black in the United States is bad for one’s health, as one recent article puts it (Lavizzo-Mourey and Williams). To understand how she counteracts patriarchal violence and medical racism, I elucidate key African-diasporic concepts and analyze how healers fuse them with embodied everyday knowledge to create healing rituals that might work against this pattern. I am especially attentive to how all three healers refigure Òṣùn, an African-diasporic water deity associated with maternity, love, and sensuality, and considered one of the most powerful of all the orishas, or goddesses. Òṣùn is known as a healer by way of water; as George Olúṣọ́lá Ajibádé has demonstrated, Òṣùn’s role in curative process among the Yoruba people was vast, and before the advent of Christianity, many people had been “receiving healings through the water of Òṣùn” (90, 131). Ade Dopamu explains that Òṣùn is the goddess of a river that bears her name and flows through the town of Osogbo, where people actively worship her. Dopamu writes that “she is called the mother of children and barren women usually approach her through her priests and priestesses. Such women are given water from Òṣùn’s shrine or river to drink.” She possesses human attributes and is believed to have had interactions with humans in Osogbo, Nigeria. Òṣùn is especially associated with health, maternity, and concepts of women’s power. In addition, I would argue that Morrison focuses on this figure in part because of the horrific rate at which African American women suffer under white Western medical regimes during pregnancy, with maternal mortality rates that are four times higher than white women (Butwick et al.).

The transatlantic slave trade’s dispersal of culture made the maternal figure of Òṣùn a vital force outside of Africa, where she is known by other names. As Joseph M. Murphy and Mei-Mei Sanford note, “under conditions of enslavement and cultural marginalization, Òṣùn traditions became a key feature of African-
Atlantic strategies of adaptation and resistance to European values and spirituality” (5). Òsun is known as the primary leader of Ajé, elder women who are regarded as possessing spiritual power (Ase), including inherent capacities for spiritual or physical transformation, and who are associated with water and birds (Badejo, Òsun 77; Drewal and Drewal 11). As such, in Morrison’s fiction, Òsun functions as a vital feminine antidote to restrictive views of the power of African Americans and racist views of their bodies imposed by a largely white and male medical establishment.

In each novel discussed in this essay, women characters go through traumatic medical or pseudo-medical experiences that are intimately connected with their femininity. It is vital, then, that the healers depicted are influential women associated with women’s power. They have accessed their Àse but are also responsible for passing on this physical–spiritual life force to other women and potential healers. Òsun becomes a figuration not solely of a specifically African world cosmology but of the transformation of traditions that can help in the recuperation of women and (perhaps) men.

The healers themselves are products of a unique set of lived, embodied experiences that inform their practices of healing. Baby Suggs has had all her children (but Halle) stolen from her under slavery, and she has been beaten, raped, and worked for the bulk of her life. In response to this pervasive bodily violence, she develops a unique cosmology centered on radical bodily self-love in the face of anti-Black racism. Consolata Sosa is a thrown-away, sexually molested nine-year-old girl raised to adulthood by nuns who teach her to revile her corporeality. Yet in physical, sensual relationships she returns to bodily self-love and a refusal to separate body from spirit. Ethel Fordham has had a son murdered, and she presides over a community of women marked by sexual and other types of violence, but she teaches Cee an emotional and physical self-love and self-respect. Each healer takes embodied, situated knowledge and transforms it into a practice of transferring Àse: life force, agency, and voiced power to make something happen.

“If He Bathes Her in Sections, Will the Parts Hold”: Healing Rituals in Beloved

When Sethe first arrives to 124 Bluestone Road in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1855, her body has been decimated by multiple traumas: the “milk-taking” rape by Schoolteacher’s two nephews; the whipping she endured while pregnant; and her voyage while carrying her fourth (unborn) child, during which she nearly starves, injures her feet to the point where they are a bloody mass of flesh, and develops a fever that causes her to pour sweat onto her newborn child. Her consciousness is also scarred by the ordeals she sustained: viewing the lynched bodies
of her friends at Sweet Home, seeing the death of her mother, losing her husband, being separated from her children, and the removal of everything else she holds dear. Trauma is written onto Sethe’s body through the tree on her back and the decimation of her corporeal form.

Schoolteacher, it appears, has tried to domesticate Sethe’s body via violence. Moreover, he functions like a pseudo-medical authority in experimenting on Sethe’s body; as his nephew “suck[s] on [Sethe’s] breasts,” Schoolteacher is “watching and writing it up” (Morrison, Beloved 71). He is perhaps collecting data for a comparative racist medical treatise, as evidenced by the fact that he constantly asks Sethe questions and writes things down, and by his having his nephews line up her “human characteristics” on a sheet of paper against her “animal ones” (193). As H. Washington has shown, there is a long tradition of experimentation on enslaved and free Black individuals’ bodies for the purposes of “medical” research. White authorities at places such as Tuskegee felt empowered to use African American men as test subjects in studies that watched the progression of syphilis (without their consent and without treatment), and this sordid and infamous history no doubt has caused some amount of vaccine hesitancy among African Americans during the COVID-19 crisis. Like Schoolteacher, the white-dominant medical establishment has felt free to collect physical data from African American individuals, as we see in the example of Henrietta Lacks, whose cancer cells were harvested by doctors at Johns Hopkins Hospital in 1951 and used for research purposes without her consent; these cells have become the source of many medical discoveries, even including vaccines against polio and now research into COVID-19 vaccines. We cannot know Schoolteacher’s exact or specific goal, but like these later white scientists, he feels free to investigate Sethe’s corporeality and experiment on her body.

The struggle of the healing ritual in Beloved that Baby Suggs enacts, then, is to return Sethe’s body to her as a space for opposition and wholeness in the face of this dehumanization and experimentation. Critics most often analyze Baby Suggs’s preaching in the Clearing as a healing ritual. Linda Krumholz, for example, writes that this ceremony fuses “Christian symbolism and African ritual expressions” to create “a process of cleansing and rebirth” (398). Carol Henderson argues that Baby Suggs’s ceremony in the Clearing “re-members” the body one part at a time to create “a shared communal experience for the healing of personal pain” (158). However, a more private ritual begins when Sethe first comes to 124 Bluestone Road, and Morrison intriguingly resurrects this ritual several times at the end of the book. This is the bath that Baby Suggs gives Sethe when she first arrives:

She led Sethe to the keeping room and, by the light of a spirit lamp, bathed her in sections, starting with her face. . . . After each bathing, Baby covered her with a quilt and put another pan on in the kitchen. . . . She cleaned between Sethe’s legs with
two separate pans of hot water and then tied her stomach and vagina with sheets. Finally she attacked the unrecognizable feet.

“You feel this?”

“Feel what?” asked Sethe.

“Nothing. Heave up.” She helped Sethe to a rocker and lowered her feet into a bucket of salt water and juniper. The rest of the night Sethe sat soaking. The crust from her nipples Baby softened with lard and then washed away. By dawn the silent baby woke and took her mother’s milk. (Beloved 93)

In this scene, Baby Suggs attempts to re-member (piece back together) but also awaken the parts of Sethe’s body that appear to be dead—such as her unrecognizable feet—and she attempts to help Sethe’s breast milk make its way to her daughters. In so doing, Baby Suggs begins to subvert the forced milk-taking that Schoolteacher has allowed, observed, and clinically annotated. Baby Suggs strives to rouse Sethe to her own possibilities for internal (emotional) and external (physical) regeneration by way of a Black metacultural framework that gives her agency. Schoolteacher has attempted to reduce Sethe to her bodily parts, yet the framework for healing that Baby Suggs develops stands in opposition to this breaking of Sethe’s corporeality and the disunion of it from her soul. That this framework is partial and incomplete in the novel only indicates that Sethe and Baby Suggs have not yet fully conceptualized its power.

K. Zauditu-Selassie describes Baby Suggs as a “spiritual roots worker” who can deliver the “collective memory of political, ideological, and cultural themes particular to African people” (153). However, as Baby Suggs bathes Sethe “in sections, starting with her face,” she figures a more specific ancestral antecedent: the powerful force of Osun. Especially evident in this passage is water symbolism: water is mentioned three times, bathing twice, and cleaning and soaking once each. Baby Suggs is undeterred by “roses of blood blossom[ing] in the blanket” but continues along with this ritual bath of purification. This bath allows Sethe to momentarily find joy, especially after another (small) immersion occurs as the “little girl dribbled clear spit into her face,” and Sethe laughs (Morrison, Beloved 93).

Baby Suggs attempts to awaken Sethe’s Ase, her physical–spiritual force. Cradling and nursing her baby, Sethe and the child have a moment of oneness as they “hit home together” (94). Baby Suggs accesses the power of Osun and Ase to heal (at least temporarily) Sethe. Osun is associated with purification through ritual waters individuals drink or drip on to their heads. Yet it must be noted that the detailed bathing of Sethe in “sections,” starting with her face and working down to her feet, is not part of the traditional Osun ceremony, at least as practiced in Osogbo, Nigeria (Ajibadé 52, 70). Baby Suggs generates a ritual process that invokes Osun’s healing waters (and her special attention to mothers) but goes beyond it to piece Sethe’s body back together and allow her to experience wholeness and self-love.
This bath is part of a larger ritual practice that Baby Suggs creates in the Clearing to heal from anti-Black violence. As Tiffany Hinton notes, the ritual in the Clearing “stresses the sacred ideal of humanity as predicated upon a primary regard for the self” (190–91). Baby Suggs tells the community that “the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine” (Morrison, Beloved 88), focusing on the power of the people’s envisioning of a world beyond the white man’s way of viewing them. In so doing, she fulfills the goal of the ritual process: to reconstitute community and a shared sense of humanity. She also tells the people to love themselves—body and soul—and to not allow whites to devalue them. She refuses traditional Christian dictums that separate the bodily self from the spiritual one (Henderson 155). To a certain extent, her preaching in the Clearing enables a larger communal ritual of healing that was foreshadowed in the bathing ritual. Baby Suggs pieces back together the “body” of the community by means of her emphasis on valuation of the collective corporealities of the individuals within it and her refusal to separate body and soul.

Nevertheless, the people of the community turn away from her in jealousy and spite. They have been corrected, it seems, and have come to resent her spiritual power: “Why is she and hers always the center of things? How come she always knows exactly what to do and when? Giving advice; passing messages; healing the sick; hiding fugitives, . . . preaching, singing, dancing and loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone” (Morrison, Beloved 137; emphasis added). Although they acknowledge her powerful “healing [of] the sick,” they do not comprehend that this healing power is not “hers alone” but belongs to all of them, so they do not warn her when Schoolteacher rides to town, a fact that she senses but cannot prevent (138). Baby Suggs’s enactment of a Black, metacultural healing perspective is suppressed, and she gives up on her ancestral wisdom. By the end of her life, she believes that “there was no grace—imaginary or real” and that “no sunlit dance in a Clearing could change that” (89). She is “straightened out,” and her memory of the metaculture’s curative power is subdued.

However, like the Mississippi water, the memory of healing practices continues to exist in other channels into which it has flowed. First, memory of the ancestral wisdom promoted by Baby Suggs exists in Denver, who hears a deceased Baby Suggs’s message of hopefulness when she finally ventures out into the world (244); this memory flows back when Denver most needs it. Moreover, Baby Suggs’s healing bath of Sethe is reiterated in the final scenes of the book, not once but twice. After Sethe has been nearly destroyed by the return of what seems to be her dead daughter, the women of the community enact what Lynda Koolish terms a collective rite of healing to rid Sethe of the ghost child (174). What Koolish and others have not noted is the way that Baby Suggs’s bathing of Sethe is born in this scene, as is her Oṣun (water goddess) presence:
For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. *It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash.* (261; emphasis added)

This passage can be conceptualized as a syncretic and coalitional ritual of exorcism that combines Christianity and Baby Suggs’s Òsun-like bath with a new embodiment of her preaching that breaks “the back of words,” of a patriarchal and anti-Black language that has been used to devalue African American people’s minds and bodies.

It is vital to note that Òsun water symbolism returns here and empowers Sethe to take agency in a different manner in the face of white oppression, including white pseudo-medical experimentation. Instead of attacking her child (her own “best thing” [273]), she attacks the white man (Mr. Bodwin, whom she perceives as Schoolteacher) who experimented on her body, drove her away from her sense of wholeness, and tried to take her child back into slavery, possibly to “measure [Beloved’s] behind before he tore it up” (189). Bodwin/Schoolteacher personifies not only slavery but also its peculiar disciplining and pseudo-medical dominance over the bodies of Black women, a dominance that has continued into the current COVID-19 moment via disregard for their medical needs, which has led to a much higher rate of death for African American women than for any other segment of the population (Bertocchi and Dimico). It appears, then, that the coalition of Black women who arrive to 124 Bluestone re-create Baby Suggs’s Òsun ritual and in so doing pass on a degree of Àse to Sethe; because of this, Sethe refuses to allow her child to be part of a racist pseudo-medical experiment that will treat her daughter’s body as an entity to be enslaved, measured, violated, and tortured rather than cared for and loved.

The book’s penultimate scene enacts a more private iteration of Baby Suggs’s bathing ritual, this time featuring a male character, an unusual development in Morrison’s fiction, where men are sometimes isolated from women’s healing rituals. After the encounter with Bodwin, Sethe retreats to Baby Suggs’s bed to die. At this point, Paul D asks Sethe’s permission to bathe her, and she considers: “Will he do it in sections? First her face, then her hands, her thighs, her feet, her back? Ending with her exhausted breasts? And if he bathes her in sections, will the parts hold?” (Morrison, *Beloved* 272). Sethe invokes Baby Suggs’s ability to create spiritual and bodily integrity by means of the ritual bath, as she considers Paul D’s final statement to her: “‘You your best thing, Sethe. You are.’ His holding fingers are holding hers. ‘Me? Me?’” (273). Sethe’s question indicates that she is considering whether he can give her back her life force and ability to name herself (“me”) definitively as her own best thing. As Evelyn Jaffe
Schreiber writes, “reduced to a body in pieces, Sethe realizes that proper caretaking is her only hope of resuscitation” (44), but it is not clear that Sethe wants resuscitation.

Sethe is suspended between sickness and health, death and life. Baby Suggs lies in a similar liminal realm as she contemplates the meaning of colors, asking Sethe to “bring a little lavender in, if you got any. Pink, if you don’t” (Morrison, Beloved 4). This configuration of a limbo space returns in the characterization of Connie (in Paradise) and Cee (in Home), and eerily presages in a certain way people who lay ill in comas or on ventilators during the COVID-19 pandemic, stuck in an indeterminate state between life and death that some would leave and others would not. In scenes where characters lie in a state between life and death, Morrison invokes and remakes a specific aspect of African cosmology: the Kalunga line or zone. “Kalunga” itself means “thresholds between worlds” (in Kikongo) and is often associated with bodies of water, including the Atlantic Ocean, crossed during the Middle Passage (Bolster 63). Sethe is not dead but spiritually and emotionally riven; she must make the choice to cross back into the world of the living. It seems she is at least considering this, especially because she does not dismiss outright Paul D’s offer to bathe her but instead thinks of Baby Suggs’s healing ritual. In the face of the decimation of her body, she may choose health and life in the form of a homeopathic curative process with Paul D that reinstates the integrity of her broken corporeality. Paul D’s gaze on Sethe is not clinical, nor does it break her into parts as Schoolteacher’s did. Instead, he looks at Sethe and thinks of Sixo’s description of the Thirty-Mile woman: “[S]he gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order” (Morrison, Beloved 272). With this knowledge, Paul D might be able to step into Baby Suggs’s role as healer and create an alternative to the Schoolteachers of the world. Paul D might help Sethe create bodily and spiritual integrity via his re-performance of Baby Suggs’s Òṣun-like bath.

“Seeing in”: Insightful Healing through Òṣun and Candomblé in Paradise

As we see in the above discussion, under slavery a view of the bodies of African American individuals prevailed in which such bodies were viewed as fungible, or fodder for scientific experimentation. In the past, African American bodies were also viewed as resistant to various diseases, and such views have carried through into the present moment. For example, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, some individuals erroneously promoted the notion that Black people were immune to the disease or recovered quickly from it and therefore needed little treatment. Of course, this is not the case, and African Americans have a mortality rate two to three times higher than whites from COVID and often receive inferior
treatment when diagnosed with the disease. More recently, anti-vaccine forces have played on Black distrust of the medical establishment. At the same time, medical authorities have asked African Americans to trust in vaccines developed, in part, from research using cells taken from Henrietta Lacks without her consent (Wolinetz and Collins). Morrison’s novel *Paradise* speaks presciently to this broad context of institutionalized medical misinformation, distrust, and racism in its depiction of the experiences of many of the African American women in the book, and it points to the need for alternative sources of healing via the mother figure at its center: Connie (Consolata) Sosa. Consolata offers, as her name suggests, a degree of consolation and care of African American people’s bodies and psyches that is often absent within the white-dominant medical system, both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The all-Black town of Ruby at the center of the novel is named after an ancestor who died because “no regular doctor” would aid her; the hospital she goes to is looking for a veterinarian to treat her when she perishes (113). The mostly Black women who reside in a house outside the town known as the Convent also have been failed by the white medical establishment. For example, Mavis’s PTSD and status as a battered woman is ignored, even when she is beaten so badly by her husband that she ends up in the same hospital on multiple occasions (28). When Pallas is raped and impregnated by an older man while in high school, she is ridiculed rather than given medical treatment (254–55). Most of the women in the Convent have been sexually assaulted at some point, and the assumption by external authorities seems to be that this is an accepted part of Black women’s daily existence rather than something necessitating therapeutic or other medical treatment or intervention.

Consolata, the “mother” to these women, is herself an orphan who was subjected to “dirty pokings” at age nine (228); she was put into a hospital and treated for some of her physical infections but given no care for her psychic trauma (224). She is glad to be rescued from a life of poverty in Brazil by the nun Mary Magna, but Mary Magna only teaches her to view her physical form—and her sexual needs—as shameful. When Connie’s affair with Deacon (Deek) Steward ends, Mary Magna says “never speak of him again” and takes her on a trip to confess her sins and attend mass (241). Her only other physical relationship entails comforting Mary Magna during the nun’s death throes and finding a degree of pleasure in this embrace: “The small white head nestled between Consolata’s breasts, and so the lady had entered death like a birthing, rocked and prayed for” (223). After losing Deacon and Mary Magna, Connie lies in the Kalunga realm, somewhere between life and death: “Consolata woke to the wrenching disappointment of not having died the night before. . . . Already in a space tight enough for a coffin, already devoted to the dark, long removed from appetites, craving only oblivion, she struggled to understand the delay” (221). However, Connie does leave the basement and the Kalunga zone to take on an Ÿṣun configuration that enables
her to become a healer. Previously, she has been associated with Òṣun symbols—
birds and water—during her relationships with Deek. When she sees him, the
“wing of a feathered thing, undead, fluttered in her stomach” (226), and they
make love in the “shallow gully” of a “dry creek” (230–31). Later in the novel,
she is associated with a woman in Brazil named Piedade and the ocean (318).
It is also worth noting that the word “Piedade” in Portuguese can mean not
only pity, mercy, or compassion but also godliness.

How does Connie transition from a mostly drunk, broken-down woman long-
ing for death to Consolata, a powerful Òṣun mother-figure who helps the women
in the Convent heal from medical racism? She has been reviving people from the
dead for some time and developing curative practices. She learns some of the
practices from Lone DuPres, another healer: “Lone called it ‘stepping in.’
Consolata said it was ‘seeing in.’ Thus the gift was ‘in sight.’” Connie absorbs
Lone’s remedies “for all sorts of ills” and “experiments with others while the
‘in sight’ blazed away” (247). However, Connie must obtain “in sight” into herself
and learn a radical form of bodily love before she can create the rituals that repair
the broken women in the Convent. This happens in two ways. First, Connie is vis-
itied by a parallel spirit, a man with green eyes and “tea-colored hair” like
Connie’s, who speaks Connie’s language. He tells her that he has not come to
“see your girls. I want to see you,” and she laughs (252). Connie is accessing
Aṣe—her spiritual strength and power—by gaining the insight that she is worthy
of being loved and cherished.

A second significant step occurs when Connie narrates her history of embody-
ment to the other women and revises its meaning. She tells the women of the
trauma to her young body and how Mary Magna erases this pain by denial of
her corporeality: “My child body, hurt and soil, leaps into the arms of a woman
who teach me my body is nothing my spirit everything. I agreed her until I meet
another. . . . When he fell away the woman rescue me from my body again. Twice
she saves it.” This “saving” entails deriding the body as “nothing.” However,
when Mary Magna becomes ill, Connie revises this precept: “When her body sick-
en I care for it in every way flesh works. I hold it in my arms and between my
legs. Clean it, rock it, enter it to keep it breath. After she dead I cannot get past
that.” It is crucial that Connie grasps that her physical relationship with Deek par-
allels the one she has with Mary Magna and that both were good: “My bones on
hers the only good thing. Not spirit. Bones. No different from the man. My bones
on his the only true thing. So I wondering where is the spirit lost in this? Is it true,
like bones. Is it good, like bones.” She also learns not to “break” apart the spirit or
soul from the body or “put one over the other” (263). This facilitates a rethinking
of the Christian theology she has been taught in which body and soul are sepa-
rated and the physical realm is devalued.

This new awareness compels her to locate rituals that heal both her physical
form and her spirit. She can hear the unspoken thoughts of the women in the
household and knows that each is haunted by specific degrees of sexual violence (222–23). Patriarchal society has written derogatory messages about their bodies and sexualities onto their corporeality. Seneca’s response of cutting “streets . . . and roads” of blood into her skin is just one extreme example of the way this trauma manifests (260). As mentioned, none of these women are given any form of medical treatment or psychological counseling for these traumas, which have alienated them from their corporeality and spirit. Therefore, the healing rituals Connie develops are meant to allow these women to repossess their physical and emotional selves using an alternative aesthetic body onto which they can transfer their bodily/sexual pain. Consolata leads the women to a moment of “body-discovery” that Karla F. C. Holloway terms vital in escaping the “disabling and often tragically disfiguring assault” of a racial and gendered “socio-political glare” (36). The “objective” gaze of a racist medical establishment that fails to see these women’s trauma is replaced by a ritualistic looking inward and a coalitional ethics of self-care and self-love.

The ritual offers a stark contrast to the white-dominant medical establishment’s lack of attention to the bodies and psyches of Black women, both in the past and in our current COVID-19 moment. First, Connie directs the women to lie on the cellar floor, which they must scrub until the stones are “as clean as rocks on a shore,” invoking the water symbolism of Òṣun. Then she creates the templates:

Consolata walked around her and painted the body’s silhouette. Once the outlines were complete, each was instructed to remain there. . . . She told them of a place where white sidewalks met the sea and fish the color of plums swam alongside children. . . . Of scented cathedrals made of gold where gods and goddesses sat in the pews with the congregation. . . . Then she told them of a woman named Piedade, who sang but never said a word.

That is how the loud dreaming began. (Morrison, Paradise 263–64)

As Ana María Fraile-Marcos writes, the stories of the women unravel “as a single loud dreaming shared by all” through which they “purge and eventually purify themselves” (28). It is important to stress that Òṣun water symbolism is a key part of the ritual. The past floods back in Piedade’s song and Connie’s description of a place where “white sidewalks met the sea”; this is also a realm where gods and goddesses sit with humans. Later Connie tells the women of her returned memory of the bath she was given by Piedade: “We sat on the sidewalk. She bathed me in emerald water” (Morrison, Paradise 284), and the women “sleep, wake, and sleep again with images of parrots, crystal seashells and a singing woman who never spoke” (285).

Consolata embodies Òṣun here, healing (in part) by an invocation of this water goddess. However, the women themselves also forward the new ritual generated, learning to heal each other. They form a sort of coalition of healers-in-training
who hear each other’s stories, a process that has been shown to be therapeutic (Chioneso et al.) but has often been absent during the COVID-19 crisis, when the concerns of African Americans as a group and even African American doctors are sometimes ignored, leading to death (Sykes). Pallas, for example, urges the women to buy art supplies and decorate the templates; they then use the silhouettes as a space to collectively hear, speak, and revise traumas inscribed onto their bodies: “That is how . . . the stories rose in that place. Half-tales and the never-dreamed escaped from their lips to soar high above guttering candles, shifting dust from crates and bottles. And it was never important to know who said the dream or whether it had meaning. In spite of or because their bodies ache, they step easily into the dreamer’s tale.” The trauma narratives become a shared burden and therefore are open to communal healing. Thus, when Seneca has “the hunger to slice her inner thigh,” she opts “instead to mark the open body lying on the cellar floor.” Pallas, for her part, draws “a baby in her template’s stomach,” and Gigi “drew a heart locket around her body’s throat.” Connie, via her Òṣùn presence, initiates them into the more-than-corporeal beings they are becoming and their own Àṣẹ and healing powers: “With Consolata in charge . . . they altered. They had to be reminded of the moving bodies they wore, so seductive were the alive ones below” (Morrison, Paradise 265). The ceremony allows the women to become “calmly themselves” and “no longer haunted” (266). The ritual therefore functions as an alternative to racist medical paradigms that ignore or denigrate the narratives of Black individuals and forwards instead a communal ethics of self-care and healing storytelling. It appears, then, that Connie has passed on Àṣẹ to these women and that they have been reborn via her transformation of the Òṣùn ceremony.

Beyond the Òṣùn water symbolism, the ceremony in the basement is part of a syncretic process in its invocation of Brazilian Candomblé rituals. As Jennifer Terry observes, “not only is patriarchal Christianity re-envisioned, but the African Brazilian religious practices of Candomblé . . . formulate a positive model of New World creolization” (61).10 However, no critic analyzes how Candomblé is hybridized with the Òṣùn figure and with Consolata’s own embodied experiences. The word “Candomblé” means “dance in honor of the gods” (Santos). Candomblé developed in Brazil through a combination of Yoruba religious practices with Roman Catholic traditions (Johnson 4). Thus, when the women in Paradise are nourished with “bloodless food and water” (265) and dance together “in hot sweet rain,” they are performing a dance in honor of the gods, or more particularly in honor of the god (or parallel spirit) who visited Connie: “Consolata, fully housed by the god who sought her out in the garden, was the more furious dancer.” The women “bow to the rapture” and let the water “pour like balm on their shaved heads and upturned faces” (283) as they enter the power of the Candomblé ceremony, which also has great resonance with the healing power of Òṣùn’s holy waters.
In the above scene, Òṣun coexists with and is blended into the Candomblé rituals; therefore, the rituals in the basement have overlapping features with the Brazilian ritual and the Òṣun festival’s poetic verses. According to Diedre Badejo, Òṣun is *evuji*, “a pleasing emanation, an awakening” (*Òṣun* 27), and *oloro*, “a confidante, the owner of words” (29). Connie leads these women into bodily self-awareness, awakening, and a type of communal speech that allows them to become the “owner[s] of words” as they recover their stories. Traditional verses or praise songs from the Òṣun ceremony activate the capacity of Òṣun to transform lives; Òṣun praise poems speak to the ability of consciousness to awaken and learn “the secret of being alive” through ritual (Badejo, *Òṣun* 19). The rituals bring each woman into the healing realm of Òṣun and awaken them to their own bodily aliveness, moving them beyond the medical apartheid of the dominant society.

This is also an original ceremony that Consolata and the other women co-create in the basement, one that lasts six months, from January to July of 1976. Templates of bodies are not drawn in Candomblé or the traditional Òṣun ceremony. Consolata therefore designs a ceremony based on her own understanding of rituals in Brazil and childhood memories that flood back to her. However, this ceremony also draws on her comprehension of the radical act of self-love required to revise patriarchal histories written onto women’s bodies. Margaret Thompson Drewal notes that Yoruba ceremonies involve both “propitiatory performances for the deities, ancestors, spirits, and human beings” and also “play,” the ability to “improvise” (19). Consolata and the other women improvise and co-create a ceremony that serves their own needs.

This ceremony may allow them to enter the Kalunga zone, into which they disappear after the men from Ruby attack them. As previously mentioned, Kalunga is understood in Yoruba cosmology as the point at which the material and spiritual realms intersect. In the plot of the novel, the men from Ruby believe they have killed at least four of the women from the Convent, but when the undertaker arrives, he finds “no bodies” (Morrison, *Paradise* 292). The Kalunga zone, in Morrison’s incarnation, becomes a space of renewal and revivification of physical bodies. Indeed, all the women reappear later in the novel as visitations to the individuals they loved. Restitution and redemption are made from within this liminal space into which the women have escaped via the collective syncretic rites they design, which allow the women to recover but also transcend their individual bodies in acts of self-love and self-restitution. Moreover, at least one character believes the women will come back to the town of Ruby. While everyone worries about where the bodies of the women from the Convent have gone, Billie Delia wonders: “When will they return? When will they reappear?” (308).

Consolata appears to end the novel in the Kalunga space, hearing Piedade’s song and being rocked in her arms. As Consolata and Piedade sit on a beach in the novel’s concluding chapter, “the ocean heaves sending rhythms of water...
ashore” and they have “solace” evoked by “memories neither one has ever had” of “coming back to love again.” We could interpret this last phrase as concerning the fact that neither woman ever found lasting love. However, thinking more diasporically, Morrison invokes a space in which a Black metaculture becomes known to each woman, and particularly to Consolata, and they find love for the new rituals they have created and shared, which override the bodily disintegration enacted by patriarchy, Christianity, and institutionalized medical practices. Having transmitted these recovered memories, Consolata and Piedade continue to “shoulder the endless work they were created to do down here in paradise” (318). Earlier versions of this novel had the last word of the book beginning with a capital “P” (“Paradise”), which Morrison specifically changed in later versions, saying that it was a mistake (Smith E3). The last chapter focuses on the reclamation of self and the healing that must eventually occur in the physical world rather than only in the spiritual one. Shaun Myers writes that “the rooted practices linking black corporeality and divinity open up spaces in Paradise that facilitate an undoing of diasporic and gendered traumas, even if the novel ultimately but ambiguously casts women’s deaths as a requisite of patriarchy” (115). Yet the ending of the novel does not portray the women as permanently dead when understood from an African-diasporic perspective. If Consolata and the other women are in the Kalunga zone, a realm of potential bodily revivification, at least from Morrison’s point of view, there is the possibility of crossing back into the land of the living to shoulder more work. Connie and the other Convent women might return to aid more women through syncretic, embodied healing rituals that are coalitional and centered on the therapeutic power of hearing women’s voices and stories. Such rituals stand in opposition to patriarchal violence and racist medical practices because they insist on viewing Black women’s knowledge as a source of power and self-rejuvenation, certainly an important lesson not only during the period of the novel but also in the COVID-19 moment.

“Somewhere inside of You is the Free Person I’m Talking about”: Healing in Home

As we have seen, Baby Suggs (in Beloved) appears to be dead by the end of the novel, although her ancestral wisdom flows into other channels, while in Paradise Consolata is suspended in the Kalunga zone, with some implications that she may return to the physical world. In Home, the healing ritual is completed, and the women involved (Ethel Fordham and Cee Money) remain firmly in the material world, helping others. Perhaps by the time Morrison authors Home in 2012, she has become more cognizant of the need for and efficacy of a Black metacultural coalition that entails Black healers reaching out to members
of their community directly. Again, Morrison predicts developments during the COVID-19 pandemic, when alliances of African American doctors and nurses such as the Black Coalition against COVID-19 (BCAC) have explicitly engaged the African American community to dispel vaccine hesitancy and myths about the disease.11

In Beloved, Morrison’s healing practices strongly invoke Òṣùn, while in Paradise, she draws on both Òṣùn and Candomblé. In Home, Morrison develops a Black metacultural framework for recovery by employing not only Òṣùn but also Egyptian symbolism. She sets key sections of Home in the fictional town of Lotus, Georgia: Frank Money and his sister Cee (Ydicra) grow up there and, after diverse encounters in other parts of the country and the world, return to find healing.12 The lotus is an aquatic plant that grows in the mud of ponds and shallow rivers of the Nile. Because this flower opens its petals at dawn and closes them at dusk, in Ancient Egypt it became a symbol for the sun, eternity, and resurrection. This plant is associated with both healing and water, and when Frank first returns to Lotus, he hears Ethel Fordham singing, “Take me to the water. Take me to the water. To be baptized” (117). While there is certainly Christian symbolism in Ethel’s song, Lotus is a fitting place to invoke the maternal water goddess Òṣùn and also syncretize her by deploying another strand of symbolism concerning Egyptian processes of healing. Like the lotus flower, Cee grows up in mud but learns to open herself to dawn, the sun, and rejuvenation through ritual.

While Home is read most frequently in terms of Frank’s potential healing from the trauma of the Korean War, I focus instead on Cee.13 Like many of the women discussed in this article, Cee has been subjected to patriarchal violence and medical racism. Specifically, she has been experimented on by the racist and eugenist (65) physician Beauregard Scott, known as “Dr. Beau.” Dr. Beau is closely modeled on an actual doctor, James Marion Sims, considered by many to be the father of gynecology. Sims, however, experimented on his Black, enslaved female patients in brutal ways and so is a prime example of medical violation of African American people’s bodies.14 Morrison may also have in mind doctors who harvested cervical cancer cells from Henrietta Lacks (as mentioned previously) without her consent to develop many medical treatments, including current research used to study COVID-19 and eventually create vaccines. As with Lacks, in Cee’s case, there is no informed consent; Dr. Beau simply “sticks her with a needle to put her to sleep” and conducts his surgeries (121–22). His experiments cause Cee to develop a painful and life-threatening uterine infection and become infertile.

Dr. Beau’s medical experimentation also leaves Cee in the Kalunga zone; when Frank rescues her she is “unconscious, occasionally moaning . . . dead weight” (115). However, Cee has always been a shadowy presence, a girl with eyes that were “flat, waiting, always waiting. Not patient, not hopeless, but suspended”
Cee therefore must be healed physically and emotionally. On an emotional level, she must learn that she is not what her stepmother Lenore calls a “gutter child” (45). Ethel Fordham teaches her this harshly:

“You ain’t a mule to be pulling some evil doctor’s wagon.”
“You a privy or a woman?”
“Who told you you was trash?”
“How was I supposed to know what he was up to?” Cee tried to defend herself.
“Misery don’t call ahead. That’s why you have to stay awake—otherwise it just walks in your door.” (122)

With this last comment, Ethel instates the brutality of institutionalized medical apartheid, calling it a “misery.” She recommends staying “awake,” and this is both a mental and a physical state: Cee must understand how to guard her physical body as well as her spiritual consciousness. She must learn self-love and self-ownership, like Sethe, Consolata, and the women in the Convent. This knowledge will help her combat not only patriarchy but also a racist medical establishment.

Ethel’s comments are embedded within a Christian framework, but Christianity is syncretized with Black metacultural practices to create healing. The ritual that Ethel and the other women of the community use to help Cee is multifaceted and again coalitional in that it involves many healers:

First the bleeding: “Spread your knees. This is going to hurt. Hush up. Hush, I said.”
Next the infection: “Drink this. You puke, you got to drink more, so don’t.”
Then the repair: “Stop that. The burning is the healing. Be quiet.”

As she healed, the women changed tactics and stopped their berating. Now they brought their embroidery and crocheting, and finally they used Ethel Fordham’s house as their quilting center. . . . Surrounded by their comings and goings, listening to their talk, their songs, following their instructions, Cee had nothing to do but pay them the attention she had never given them before. . . . Although each of her nurses was markedly different from the others in looks, dress, manner of speech, food and medical preferences, their similarities were glaring. . . . They took responsibility for their lives and for whatever, whoever else needed them. (121–23)

These women all have experienced grave trauma; from such experiences, they come to understand that “some evil was incorrigible, so its demise was best left to the Lord” but “other kinds could be mitigated” (124). They specifically comprehend the importance of distrusting white doctors; as Morrison writes, “nothing made them change their minds about the medical industry” (122). Therefore, the tripartite healing ritual described above is joined to a larger reparation wherein Cee joins a community of women who take responsibility for their lives and nurse and heal others. This healing is only possible within the “supportive social network that the black community provides” (Ramírez 131)
and the “therapeutic, communal environment” the women create (Visser 9). In this environment, Cee learns to move into maturity because these women teach her that “adulthood was there for all” (Morrison, Home 123).

Aspects of Cee’s cure also point to a Black feminine metaculture of healing and restoration. For example, the women give her calamus root (119), a traditional plant used for homoeopathic purposes, and curative foods and drinks (125). Morrison is not specific about the curative foods the women employ. However, we might be reminded of the medicinal tea that Lone DuPres makes for Connie to help her through menopause (Morrison, Paradise 243) and of the bloodless food and water with which Connie nourishes the women in the Convent. Morrison points again to the need for African Americans to find curative practices within an alliance of Black healers.

Jean Wyatt observes that “like their ancestors, the women of Lotus understand natural entities—plants, the sun’s rays—as able to cure spiritually as well as physiologically” (160). However, we must note here that Ethel is the center of the community of women, and her healing rituals invoke and remake African-diasporic practices. Morrison alludes to Egypt and a specific Egyptian goddess in the “sun-smacking” ritual that Ethel directs Cee to perform:

She was to be sun-smacked, which meant spending at least one hour a day with her legs spread out to the blazing sun. . . . Cee, shocked and embarrassed, refused. . . .

“Stop worrying your head,” Ethel Fordham advised. “I’ll be there with you. The important thing is to get a permanent cure.” . . .

What followed the final sun-smacking hour, when she was allowed to sit modestly in a rocking chair, was the demanding love of Ethel Fordham, which soothed and strengthened her the most. (Home 124–25)

While Ethel seems in many ways to be a Christian, this naked and gynocentric sun-smacking is far from Christian theology. Worship of sun gods and goddesses was common in Egypt and in other parts of Africa (Asante 34; Teeter 72, 93). In Ethel, who moves from chastising Cee to loving and healing her, Morrison may invoke the Egyptian sun goddess Sekhmet, a deity of war who became known for her healing and protective powers; in Egyptian cosmology, Sekhmet is the patron goddess to all healers (Wilkinson 181).

Nonetheless, the specific ritual Ethel generates goes beyond any Egyptian practice and focuses on Cee accepting her physical embodiment and generating self-respect, as made clear in Ethel’s speech after the sun-smacking: “Nothing and nobody is obliged to save you but you. . . . Don’t let Lenore or some trifling boyfriend and certainly no devil doctor decide who you are. That’s slavery. Somewhere inside is that free person I’m talking about. Locate her and let her do some good in the world” (Morrison, Home 126). Cee comes to the realization that “if she did not respect herself, why should anybody else?” (130). Physical self-love and emotional self-respect must be at the base of her empowerment. Guided
by Ethel and the other women, Cee begins to heal. Frank notices “how healthy she looked” with “glowing skin” and a “straight back” (126). The women deliver to Frank a woman who can now protect herself (129).

Morrison also depicts Cee’s movement into a self-love that she may eventually convey to Frank to help him heal, prefiguring the current context in which African American healers (doctors and nurses) have reached out directly to the African American community to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Frank is excluded from the community of healing women during Cee’s convalescence (119). He also remains trapped within his own fractured consciousness, a great deal of which centers on crimes of murder and possible rape he committed against a young female child during the Korean War; Frank has been given only minimal treatment for his debilitating PTSD. However, the novel ends on the banks of a river where Cee and Frank engage in a potentially curative ceremony. The ritual entails the careful burial of an African American father killed by his own son during a bout of man-fighting organized by a posse of whites (139), and it is a ritual created by Frank. In this scene, Cee views Frank’s fellow spirit, a man in a blue zoot suit, on the other side of the “rippling stream” (144). The waters may signify Ôsun’s powerful healing presence, and Cee might be functioning as an Ôsun figure who helps Frank to overcome his trauma via the ritual he has designed. Wyatt argues that “love is the agent of change” and that “Frank changes because Cee changes” but also acknowledges how quick and partial this change seems, pointing to a healing that has only just begun (160). It would certainly be the subject of another essay as to whether Cee might be able to heal Frank by means of Ôsun or other rituals. Yet given the capacity of the healing ceremonies elucidated across the three novels, and sometimes transferred to men, as we see in Paul D’s offer to bathe Sethe and in Connie’s parallel spirit, Frank might be brought within the circle of the Black metaculture and its syncretic, constantly transforming rituals. In other words, Frank, too, might eventually move beyond the medical apartheid practiced on African Americans by the dominant society, a form of racism that the COVID-19 pandemic has continued and even exacerbated.

Conclusion: Playing with “Perfect Memory”

As a figuration of Ôsun, water is vital in all the healing rituals discussed, from the bath that Baby Suggs gives Sethe, to the healing rain in which the women dance at the Convent, to the “rippling stream” where Cee and Frank perform their final ceremony. “All water has a perfect memory,” comments Morrison, and is “forever trying to get back to where it was” (“Site” 98). However, memory is imperfect, fractured, fragmented, and incessantly evolving. All three novels transform Black metacultural rituals to create syncretic healing practices. Thus, Ôsun is syncretized with Candomblé, Egyptian symbolism, Christianity, and
with the healers’ embodied knowledge. This synthesis allows them to fashion original ceremonies that respond to the manifold formations of anti-Black violence and medical apartheid inflicted on African American people.

Still, it is important to remember in this COVID-19 moment that it is not enough to merely envision an alternative Black metaculture that heals African Americans. There are important implications contained within these rituals for our present era. First, Ethel Fordham is the only healer who survives in the real world, and she resides in the entirely Black community of Lotus. Morrison implies that in the face of anti-Black violence, sexism, medical racism, and the continued fungibility of the bodies of Black people, the community turn its attention inward toward coalitional healing that comes not from a white-dominant medical establishment but from community healers who might have a power to repair the bodies and spirits of African Americans, or at least keep them safe until more prevalent social change occurs.

Second, Morrison proposes that at the center of all forms of healing is a radical act of self-love and self-dignification. In a society that devalues African Americans and still gives woefully inadequate medical care to them, this is the most important message that Morrison’s fictions convey about healing: locate freedom and health within the Black community and metaculture before seeking other kinds of medical intervention, and remember to stay “woke” when encountering white medical authorities. Her fictions counsel readers to draw on the metaculture not only for emotional strength or physical healing but also to understand the “misery” (in Ethel Fordham’s words [Morrison, Home 122]) that white-dominant, Western medical practices can inflict, alongside whatever healing they might transmit. In this sense, her novels align with Afrocentric trends in medicine today. To take just one example, some childbirths occur within a Black community of midwifery rather than in white-dominant settings, with better outcomes for both maternal and infant survival (K. Thomas).

Of course, there are no easy answers here, only suggestions, ideas, and glimpses of a hope that exists in the metacultural world. Morrison’s fictions demonstrate the importance of powerful female healers who comprehend that body and spirit are not separate and that discredited “lore” can be helpful, powerful, and agentive. She also demonstrates the need for Black healers to directly engage Black communities and form coalitions that enable therapeutic storytelling and other diverse forms of healing. African American people can also employ metacultural knowledge to help them navigate traditional, Western, and white-centric medical practices as they simultaneously stay “woke” about the debilitating injustices and systemic racism of the health care system. Such lessons have only grown more urgent during the current pandemic, amid the misery, suffering, and death COVID-19 has caused for the collective health and spirit of African Americans.
Notes

1. There has been secondary criticism on healing practices in novels by Toni Morrison. However, no critic has analyzed the three characters discussed here as part of a syncretic African-diasporic and embodied metacultural practice of healing. For studies that deal to some degree with healing in Morrison’s writing, see Tiffany Hinton, La Vinia Delois Jennings, Jean Wyatt, Lynda Koolish, Manuela López Ramírez, Valorie Thomas, Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber, James Fitz Gerald, and K. Zauditu-Selassie.

2. On Ajé and Àse, see Diedre Badejo (“Authority” 128–39; Òṣun 67–102), Henry John Drewal and Margaret Thompson Drewal (9–14, 74–75, and 103), and Teresa N. Washington (“Mother-Daughter” 171-74; Our Mothers 3-110). Badejo makes the following distinction between Ajé and Àse, which I follow: “Women who embrace the principles of Òṣun worship, individually and collectively become àjé, powerful beings who activate their àṣè to help others who consult them” (“Authority” 131). For more discussion of this subject, see Rowland Abiodun.

3. Harriet Washington writes: “Dangerous, involuntary, and non-therapeutic experimentation upon African Americans has been practiced widely and documented extensively at least since the eighteenth century” (7).

4. In 1932, the US Public Health Service (USPHS) engaged the Tuskegee Institute in a research experiment called the “Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male”; the study involved 399 African American men with syphilis and 201 who did not have the disease. The study was not discontinued until forty years later (in 1972). By 1943, penicillin was a widely used and effective treatment for syphilis, yet no study participants were offered this medication. Informed consent was not collected, and participants were told they were being treated for “bad blood” (“Tuskegee”).

5. These unique cells have been used in many discoveries in cancer, immunology, and infectious disease. However, consent for research use of the cells was never obtained, and the family received no compensation (“Henrietta”).

6. For other critics who focus on Baby Suggs as a healer, see Judylyn S Ryan, who argues that Baby Suggs’s “ritualized healing performances” in the Clearing “(re)construct . . . cultural/spiritual kinship” and are a “primary vehicle for transforming the dismemberment precipitated by slavery” (54–55). Also see Jennings, who reads the dance in the Clearing as a call-and-response designed to promote self-love and rejoin spirit and body (163–65). There also has been some attention paid to specifically Africanist healing practices in Beloved; see Hinton, Jennings, T. Washington’s essay and book, and Zauditu-Selassie. Yet little specific focus has been paid to Baby Suggs’s role as an African-diasporic healer via Òṣun and the ritual bath.
7. In a rare reading of this scene, Schreiber notes how under Baby Suggs’s care, “Sethe returns from near death to the world of the living” (44).
8. The idea of Black immunity from various diseases goes back to the days of slavery and has persisted over time up into the current COVID-19 moment. For examples, see Chelsey Carter and Ezelle Sanford III, and Rana A. Hogarth.
9. On this point, also see Patricia San José Rico (88–89) and Channette Romero (423).
10. For other discussions of Candomblé in Paradise (1997), see Shaun Myers.
11. On 7 January 2021, the Black Coalition against COVID-19 (BCAC), an alliance of African American health and academic activists, launched its “Making It Plain” series with the goal of correcting misinformation about vaccine development and distribution by connecting Black experts with the Black community.
12. There is a Lotus Grove, Georgia, but no town simply named Lotus.
13. For critics who focus on Frank’s healing, see Aitor Ibarrola, Ramírez, Irene Visser, and V. Thomas. One recent discussion of Cee’s healing is by James Fitz Gerald, who argues for the value of mother knowledge in the novel: the women of Lotus “resurrect lessons from their mothers while relating their own personal experiences to pass the language of generational continuity onto Cee, as their ‘talk [and] their songs’ focus especially on the physical and psychological traumas they have suffered” (155); yet even in this powerful analysis, there is little attention to the metacultural or African-diasporic aspects of this healing process. Also see Zhenling Gan and Robin Chen-Hsing Tsai’s essay, which discusses the role of African American folk medicine in Cee’s recovery (244) but with little specificity.
14. For more on James Marion Sims, see H. Washington (59–74).

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