Building Worlds with Both Hands:
Mythography in Twentieth-Century African American Literature

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ABSTRACT:

While location-specific literature, such as Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha novels, exists in a variety of cultural forms, twentieth-century African American authors have produced some of the finest examples of novels set in a specific place. African American writers also frequently construct entire histories for their fictional locations, which become an engrained mythology of the text. The cosmology of an author’s universe shapes the narrative of the novel and determines the rules by which the characters play their parts. In a distinct selection of twentieth-century African American novelists, we can see how writers Ishmael Reed, Toni Morrison, Octavia E. Butler, and Randall Kenan construct their towns—and worlds—using a particular set of tools. These tools include the use of folkloric character types drawn from the African American tradition—as well as original reinterpretations or deconstructions of those types, a particular focus on the relationship of a community to a central text, the inclusion of a doomsday or ‘Ragnarok’ event in the historic formation of the town or group, and an incorporation of non-African American ‘Others’ within the story of the place. Characters like prophets and sorcerers appear in Reed’s Yellow Back Radio Broke-down and Mumbo Jumbo, Morrison’s Sula and Paradise, Butler’s Parable of the Sower and Wild Seed, and Kenan’s A Visitation of Spirits and Let the Dead Bury Their Dead. Morrison’s Ruby, Oklahoma, expends an extraordinary amount of energy trying to determine if an inscription on a town monument should read “Be the Furrow of His Brow” or “Beware the Furrow of His Brow,” while Butler’s Parable protagonist, Lauren Olamina, develops an entire religious text within the text, called “Earthseed: The Books of the Living.” Randall goes so far as to title one of his Let the Dead chapters “Ragnarok!” and Reed’s Radio begins with a massacre of a town full of children. Butler’s Wild Seed and Parable both focus on expanding genetic diversity by mating characters of different races—sometimes in a particularly calculating way—and Morrison’s Oklahoma residents still feel the echoes of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Native peoples haunting their town. The tools deployed by these authors build to an mutually shared goal: empathy and compassion, a need for communities to extend understanding to their members and to outsiders in order to thrive and grow. Drawing upon the novels of—and criticism of—these mythographic writers, this paper makes the case that identifying the tools of mythcraft in locational literature helps readers to understand a broader current of thought within African American writing. By seeing patterns of cosmological construction in these novels, we can learn a great deal about the ways in which some African Americans deal with cultural history and the values which they think will enable future generations to grow communities.
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USING YOU AS A MEDIUM:
Hidden Myths and Literary Genesis

In 1991, Randall Kenan interviewed Octavia E. Butler for a special edition of *Callaloo* focusing on African American writers of science fiction and fantasy. Kenan had published his debut novel, *A Visitation of Spirits*, two years prior to the interview and his acclaimed short-story collection, *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead*, would appear on bookshelves the following year. Butler had finished her “Lilith’s Brood” trilogy in 1989, concluding a decade of accolades which included winning two Hugo awards. She was eagerly working on a new project, which would become the first two books of her unfinished “Parable” trilogy, *Parable of the Sower*. Kenan’s style is, or comes close to, magical realism, even garnering him comparisons to Gabriel Garcia Marquez from Terry McMillan¹. Butler’s work focuses on dystopian worlds infused with speculative fiction elements like time travel, space exploration, and planetary colonization. The prose in *A Visitation of Spirits* contains experimental elements—portions of dialogue written as stage direction and tangential paeans for hog slaughtering and tobacco. The prose in Butler’s novel series is sparse and direct, even confrontational at times, and actively subverts the notion that healing after slavery is possible: “She incorporates postmodern fiction literary techniques to critique the notion that historical and psychological slavery can be overcome” (Steinberg 467). The interview reveals that despite craft differences, both writers share much in common. Race directs conflict in both authors’ work, although it remains a single facet of the problems faced by each writer’s characters. At one point, Kenan asks Butler about the folkloric origins of her work, specifically focusing on her book *Wild Seed*, from the “Patternist” series. Butler describes the African mythology
behind the characters of Doro and Anyanwu, a pair of immortals. Kenan, impressed, responds by saying “Such rich etymological and cultural resonance. It’s almost as if the African lore itself is using you as a medium” (Kenan, “Interview” 500). Randall Kenan’s novels, with their angels and demons and psychics and talking pigs, contain their own deep cultural resonance in which traditional character types and folklore elements surface in his literary prose.

In some cases, mythic themes become textual foundations upon which writers build their canons, as in the Arthurian novels of T. H. White or even the Yoknapatawpha County stories of William Faulkner. Do African American authors offer something different in the ways they create fictional settings? In the works of Randall Kenan, Toni Morrison, Octavia E. Butler, and Ishmael Reed—to pick four imaginative novelists—we see distinct and shared methods, a toolkit for literary genesis which speaks to African American artistic and historical experience. Each author develops a mythology surrounding his or her created spaces, a history infused with magic and wonder of varying degrees. The Ohio town in Toni Morrison’s Sula, for instance, comes complete with a trickster origin story and a population which reads signs in the behavior of birds or turns to conjure women for home cures and remedies. Octavia E. Butler gives her reader a hyper-empathic prophet founding a new movement with a “Destiny...to take root among the stars” in Parable of the Sower (Butler, Parable 204). Ishmael Reed does not give a mythic origin for his town of Yellow Back Radio, but he shows its reshaping by a Neo-hoodoo houngan after a doomsday massacre. Randall Kenan packages his
mythology into two texts loosely connected by a common population which remains haunted by its distant and recent past.

Between these four authors—Butler, Kenan, Morrison, and Reed—common ground emerges, and the places which each author sets upon his or her ink-and-paper earth bear some striking similarities. They are mythographers, aligning an entire cosmology with the story of a single place. The town of Tims Creek in *A Visitation of Spirits* and *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* is built upon a combination of known and mythic history, with founding myths, heroes, archetypes, and subtexts. In *Wild Seed*, Butler carefully crafts a ‘hidden’ mythology, a story which directs the action of all subsequent characters in the author’s Patternist books, but which the reader understands to be incomplete because of intentional obfuscation by Butler’s *Wild Seed* protagonists, much as Kenan’s Tims Creek characters dance around the truths of their own collective history. In its isolation and eccentric characters, and the purposeful shaping of a town’s history and future, Tims’s Creek resembles Toni Morrison’s Ruby, Oklahoma, from her 1997 novel *Paradise*. The world controlled by Patternists in Butler’s books, with its roots in Africa and its destiny among the stars, could be an extension of Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* world, built upon stories of godlike people with all the petty foibles of humanity to bear. All four writers draw upon character types extracted from folklore and elevated to mythic proportions for their literary endeavors. As each author shapes his or her world, on cosmic scales ranging from tiny Tims Creek to the multi-planetary destiny of Butler’s Patternist and Earthseed characters, he or she gets to ascribe rules to that fictive universe. In each work, issues of race, class, and justice arise,
but so do issues of cosmology, origins, and fate. Why do these four authors tie ethnic identity so closely to the genesis and destiny of their characters? Why do they each lean on, and frequently explode, stock types from the vault of African American folklore to tell their stories? And why do other ethnic minorities—Hispanic, mixed-race, Native American—become so important in how these authors construct their worlds and assign their roles? In these pages, I hope to look at the building blocks of these mythographers—Reed, Morrison, Kenan, and Butler—and how their use of folklore, their emphasis on the written word, their use of violence as a creative force, their interpretation of other ‘Others,’ and their decision to make universal and personal histories intimately bound demonstrates a unity of purpose which ties these authors together.

I wish to note here that my criteria for selecting texts are extremely biased. I could very well have chosen works by Gloria Naylor or Alice Walker to examine, and perhaps this inspection is the less complete for their exclusion. Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon or Beloved both fit several of the criteria I lay out in these pages, and Octavia E. Butler’s second Earthseed novel, Parable of the Talents, makes for a simpler argument about a founding cosmology by virtue of its continuity with Parable of the Sower. After all, I do use Kenan’s companion pieces, so why not Butler’s? I do not believe my arguments, however, will be less persuasive because I narrow the scope of my inquiry, nor do I believe that my bias towards a particular set of novels inherently implies a manifest relationship between the authors or their fictive worlds. My choices here merely provide a structure: four late twentieth century African American authors, two
books per author, and each focused in some way on the founding mythos of a particular place. Other books very well might fit the bill, and it is my hope that the components of myth-making to which I devote space in these pages will enable readers to find patterns, tools, and artifacts of myth-craft in the works of other authors. The limitations I provide are for my own purposes, and reflect the blinders I have compelled myself to wear to be able to perform this literary archeology. What I may miss, I hope I do not damage, and that wiser and better scientists will come behind me and show just how little of the surface I have scratched.

**FITS FOR YOUR HEAD:**
*Prophets, houngans, Queens, and other literary loas*

Reed’s PaPa LaBas would probably frown upon my efforts to compartmentalize various folk types and point them out in these texts, as it resembles exactly the kind of pigeonholing his villain Hinckle Von Vampton so loves. Despite the Aristotelian mode of taxonomy—part of Reed’s “Wallflower Order”—I feel it is incredibly important to the discussion of world-shaping in these novels to understand that each of them draws from the wells of folklore, and then builds richly upon the stock types extracted by the individual authors. I absolutely am not implying that any character in any of these works is simply a direct lift from another story, but instead that the general categories of folkloric type can help shape how a reader understands the history and cosmology of the novelists’ created spaces. In some cases, as with Octavia E. Butler, the author has explicitly stated that characters originate within a particular piece of folklore² (Kenan, “Interview” 499-500). *Mumbo Jumbo* makes a point of revealing its mythological
forebears from the Egyptian storyteller’s storehouse. Instead of illustrating an exact
myth-to-myth equivalency, however, I will here present a set of roles deriving from
folklore motifs, and then explore how characters from these novels fit, transcend, and
buck those roles.

PaPa LaBas carries a business card with him which lists his name, his association
with the “Mumbo Jumbo Kathedral,” and then goes on to say by way of his job
description that he provides “[f]its for your head” (Reed, Mumbo 24). In the context of
the novel these “fits” are the “loa” or spirits that can take over a man or woman and
provide guidance, release, trouble, or power to him or her. Crossing contexts, however,
many characters in these novels seem to have “fits” as well, literary loas who shape and
mold the development of individual personalities and entire cosmologies as they
manifest. Characters break away from initial typing to provide world-moving change: an
empathic prophetess founds a new spiritual movement but also becomes warrior-
queen; a budding sorcerer becomes the monster, only to act as a scapegoat to his
communities; a rogue cowboy becomes a voodoo sorcerer and then an unlikely hero,
motivated by vengeance into doing good for all to fulfill selfish ends. In the
Foundationist books, we can find a number of character types, but the most illuminating
ones have a degree of flexibility and fluidity. Heroes who live at the edge of cultural
acceptance, outlaws and tricksters, can transform into “bad” men and fulfill two roles
simultaneously, as John W. Roberts describes:

A consequence of ignoring the...badman tradition is evident in folkloric
discussion of the tradition, where the is a constant emphasis on the destructive
and unproductive nature of badman heroes...Because black badman folk heroes
characteristically act within the black community, folklorists have suggested repeatedly that conditions and situations in the black community have served as the primary catalyst for folk heroic creation surrounding badmen. In the process, they have basically ignored the fact that an act of lawlessness constitutes the central event in the folklore of badmen (Roberts 174).

In Roberts’ estimation, these translated roles essentially take shape based on their contexts—the Loop Garoo Kid acts ruthlessly towards women in the book and picks on a homosexual man to the point of killing him, for example. Instead of labeling the Kid a bully, however, the reader is asked to understand his actions as a parody of heroism, a way of signifying on the ‘good-guy’ cowboy and to see the Kid as someone who, like PaPa LaBas, works with both hands, unafraid of labels like good or evil: “The practice of the Left Hand ha[s] now arisen to the level of that of the Right Hand...The rites...are not inherently good or evil; it depends on how they are used” (Reed, Mumbo 186, 213). Similarly, a town like Tims Creek can turn a shy, brilliant favorite son like Horace Cross into something grotesque, gothic, and hateful. Like the tricksters and badmen, other types manage to flourish and adapt, growing with the worlds around them. The universes of these novelists are populated by eccentric and colorful characters: prophets, conjurers, queens, heroes, tricksters, and villains, each with a certain degree of cross-pollination and each pushing beyond the boundaries of any single label.

Prophets and conjurers excite and fascinate readers, and in these novels such spiritual and magical roles take on a mythic cast. The presence of magic very nearly becomes one of the building blocks for this particular group of writers, but I would instead argue that while these components may appear in the texts, their application
through folklore character types truly sets the novels apart. A hoodoo man like PaPa LaBas and a budding sorcerer like Horace Cross use magic in very different ways, but their magic supports the worldview of the text and rounds out the mythology of the places in which they cast their spells. Magic in each of these worlds works subtly, causing change but unleashing chaos in the process, and destabilizing the reader’s grip on the rules of the universe. Magic has its rules, of course, and its attendant hierarchies and order. Reed’s LaBas and Black Herman are hoodoo detectives, what they would describe as “houngans”—priests and shamans—as opposed to the low-rent “bokor” sorcerers peddling snake-oil magic and curses-for-hire. LaBas knows the importance of maintaining a relationship with the spirits around him, keeping a big sign above the bathroom sink which reads

REMEMBER TO FEED THE LOAS
(Reed, Mumbo 28)

This process of feeding his spirit(s) marks him as someone working on behalf of spiritual forces, helping them to construct the world around him and shape its destiny in the small ways he can manage. Black Herman also works with these spirits, and can manage them in situations where LaBas cannot, as when the wild spirit of Erzulie catches Earline. Both men incorporate their magic into a more mundane sphere of life—detective work—as they attempt to uncover the strange cosmological conspiracy which simultaneously fears and threatens the growing Jes Grew phenomenon. LaBas sums up their roles nicely when he tells Templar mastermind Hinckle Von Vampton “[W]e’re jacklegged detectives and don’t have a license from New York authorities, but we have jurisdiction in Haiti though. We are delivering you to Other Authorities” (Reed, Mumbo
The hoodoo P.I.s respond to the rules that govern the universe’s best interest, which puts them at odds with the orderly but restrictive Atonists.

The magic performed by Reed’s characters comes from extant spiritual and religious practices of the African diaspora, including hoodoo, Vodoun, obeah, Lukumi, and Espiritismo. Horace’s occult ritual in *A Visitation of Spirits* mirrors elements of those traditions, and incorporates grimoire magic as well. His role as a conjurer, however, is short-lived, as the spirit he summons is not one with whom he has a long-standing relationship—it is not one of LaBas’s loas, but a demon, after all. It may, perhaps, be the resurrected and diabolical spirit of ex-slave Pharaoh, who visits Tims Creek in many guises, taking on roles of both shape-shifter and trickster. The demon acts as a primary magical force in the Tims Creek novels, presenting Horace with a ghostly version of himself which leads the boy to a final act of suicide and adds to the stockpile of ghosts in the town. In its guise as Preacher-man, the demonic entity, which Zeke identifies as Pharaoh in his telling of the tale, the evil spirit weaves spells over the people. He enchants them and draws them in first, then begins driving them mad. Zeke describes the meetings with Preacher-man in terms that resemble the devil at a Witches’ Sabbath in medieval lore:

[T]he rumors were that these folk had had sexual congress with the Preacher-man. Said that his seed or whatever it was carried madness, and he had forced himself on them innocent youngens and animals and drove em mad...said in one sitting on Christmas Eve, he ate two whole chickens, an entire mess of greens, corn, cabbage, a whole hog, and a cake and a pie. He’d eat and they’d just keep bringing, wide-eyed and plumb put out by the site of it. Say somebody mumbled something bout gluttony and the Preacher just looked at him, mouth full of ham, just looked at him, and that man never said another mumbling word for the rest of his life. Said the Preacher kept a black snake and a big black bird. One woman
say she heard the Preacher talking to the snake and the snake talked back. She went deaf (Kenan, Dead 318-19).\(^5\)

The demonic and magical force in Tims Creek enlivens its history, but threatens its marginalized members like Horace Cross. It preys on him and despite his efforts to contain it, it consumes him.

Butler’s magical and prophetic characters are not demon-possessed, although Wild Seed’s Doro can take possession of bodies. They do not cast spells, although Anyanwu can heal in nearly miraculous ways, providing bodily medicines for both herself and others. Lauren Olamina very much denies any role as a prophet linked to some divine source, saying “I wish I could believe it was all supernatural, and that I’m getting messages from God. But then, I don’t believe in that kind of God” (Butler, Parable 72). Instead, the figures in Butler’s novels all exist in a gray space between science and the supernatural, prophetic and magical, but not seers and sorcerers in the way we might find them in texts by the other authors in this study. Butler acknowledged this in her interview with Kenan:

Most of what I do is science fiction. Some things I do are fantasy...[I]f I was told that something was science fiction I would expect to find something dealing with science in it. For instance, Wild Seed is more science fiction than most people realize. The main character [Anyanwu] is dealing with medical science, but she just doesn’t know how to talk about it (Kenan, “Interview” 495-6).

We can see, then, that roles like ‘conjurer’ and ‘prophet,’ as with the other roles examined here, fall on a sliding scale. In some cases, magic is an exact and present part of the cosmology extant to the story—Ajax’s mother works as what Reed’s LaBas would call a “bokor” in Sula, and both LaBas and the Loop Garoo kid cast spells when needed.
because their universe allows for spellcraft as a normative action. In Butler’s worlds, talents like Doro’s body-jumping possession, Anyanwu’s shapeshifting and healing, and Lauren’s hyperempathy have essentially scientific bases, but retain a hint of the mystical and uncanny. The magic of each of these authors falls on the same sliding scale, ranging from the metaphysics and science of Butler to the subtle enchanted cosmology of Morrison to the double-voiced magic of Kenan and the outright hoodoo and Neohoodooism of Reed. The authors use folk belief systems, then, to prop up their universes, and draw upon character tropes from folklore to populate them.

Heroes and villains seem simple enough concepts to understand. One stands for the good or moral, fights against overwhelming odds, struggles to do the right thing, etc. The other wears a black hat and tries to quash heroic efforts, tying damsels to train tracks and robbing banks at gunpoint. With these spaghetti-western images in our heads, let us turn to Ishamel Reed and Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down to see just how he satirizes and deconstructs the western villain and the cowboy hero through his cosmic and comic lens. Ostensibly, we have a story about the Loop Garoo Kid, an African American circus cowboy with an attitude, battling it out with the dastardly Drag Gibson, a white landowner. Aside from an obvious inversion of color in which the black cowboy represents the ‘white hat’ and a white man takes on the ‘black hat’ part, this seems like the stuff of Saturday cinema. Only, the Kid is not much of a hero, when we look a little more closely at him and what he does. His name forms a play on the French-Canadian word for werewolf, loup-garou, tying him to shape-shifting and unpredictable violence. Reed paints the Kid as more of a bokor than a houngan, and shows the slim morality of
his hero through his inversion of perspective in the story of Christ’s betrayal: “Loop had just fed thirty pieces of silver to his personal Loa, Judas Iscariot, the hero who put the finger on the devil” (Reed, Radio 57). The Loop Garoo Kid starts off as a sideshow entertainer, but becomes a sorcerer and whip-cracking badman, indiscriminate about who gets hurt in his quest for vengeance after his circus is destroyed. Roberts marks behavior like the Kid’s as definitive of the outlaw hero milieu: “In the badman folk heroic tradition, those individuals who served as a focus for folk heroic creation were not the professional criminals, but rather their victims who responded to victimization with violence” (Roberts 206). Reed clearly puts the reader in Loop’s corner, setting him up for success in his revenge, but he makes him a guerilla fighter, arms him with witchcraft and a whip, and puts him in the company of werewolves and traitors to accomplish his goals. He is a hero who behaves badly.

Bad behavior and villainy defines many of the protagonists in these novels. Whereas Reed presents a cowboy sorcerer who aligns himself with Judas, Butler presents an immortal villain in Wild Seed who retains the empathy and love of the heroic protagonist, despite Doro’s need to constantly kill and his enforced breeding program. Morrison largely gives Sula over to her wicked and emotionally cruel title character, eventually demonstrating that without her, the town which despises her falls apart. When Teapot’s mother has Sula to blame for her boy’s misfortunes, she “immersed herself in a role she had shown no inclination for: motherhood,” and after Sula’s death Teapot goes back to being a mostly ignored component of her life (Morrison, Sula 123). Randall Kenan portrays characters so fundamentally flawed it
becomes almost impossible to label any one of them as a true hero. Villains, however, Kenan hands us in spades. Horace Cross struggles with many problems in his last night on earth: his desire to escape the oppressive family environment which treats his homosexuality as betrayal, a history of unrequited love and failure to fit in, and a demon who coaxes him into an act of self-betrayal that takes his life and tears his cousin’s heart apart. Like one of Roberts’ badmen—a potential hero turned against his community—Kenan presents Horace as troubled, introducing him to us as a young boy about to perform an occult ritual of transformation, through which he hopes to become a bird and escape his familial obligations and the weight of his family name. The ritual calls for the ashes of an infant, and Horace finds himself dreaming of smothering a child after singing it a lullaby, but substituting a kitten in the actual spell. Kenan manages to pull back from absolute villainy—infanticide—and substitute a less abhorrent act, keeping Horace potentially redeemable. When the spell summons a demon but fails to protect him from the creature, Horace thinks to himself “Perhaps I should have used, instead of a kitten, a babe” (Kenan, Visitation 28). Does Kenan intend for us to see Horace as monstrous? If so, such a portrait would be consistent with the Cross family and Tims Creek view of the boy:

In A Visitation of Spirits the black, fundamentalist, and separatist community distorts and destroys Horace’s queer body by encapsulating him within gothic tropes of otherness, madness, and haunting...[the book] complicates this critique by representing the interplay between race and queerness through the gothic...using the gothic to imagine homophobia among black communities conveys not only the nightmarish quality of the behavior, but the haunting, labyrinthine nature of the ideology that leads minorities to reproduce oppression within their own group (Wester 1036).
Wester’s reading of Horace as a gothic trope of the monster unleashed on the small town underlines Kenan’s critique of Tims Creek’s inability to understand its lost son. Horace, as he struggles to find some identity—any identity—that will allow him to mesh with the world of Tims Creek, takes on a number of other roles as well. He moves from monster to lost sheep to sacrificial lamb. "Horace Cross, without knowing it, will figuratively be crucified by his community and its values. In a way he crucifies himself, sacrificing his life as a gay black man so that his community may continue to exist as it always has" (Tettenborn, “Change” 258). Horace thereby fulfills one of the central obligations of Tims Creek, living up to one's name. In Horace's case, he does not carry on the work of his fathers, but instead plays on his name via social crucification on the cross of his gay identity. His sacrifice, however, does not deliver the town into peace, but introduces a new role for Horace: the haint, or ghost. Tettenborn notes that “Horace’s suicide occupies an ambiguous place in the community he leaves behind. His death is not the source of his family's grief; Ezekiel's thoughts, for example, do not focus on him,” yet Horace “looks to his death as a way of finally finding a new way of living,” and “consider[s] death as a liberating event. He refers twice to 'life beneath the ground'” (Tettenborn, “Change” 264, 261). The lingering presence of Horace's death haunts both A Visitation of Spirits and—through Jimmy Greene—Let the Dead Bury Their Dead, and he joins the legion of the dead that still roam the town, like the little boy who appears to Ida Perry, the spirits who speak to five-year-old Clarence Pickett and reveal the town’s truths to him, or the army of the dead who rise up against the old inhabitants of Tearshirt under the leadership of Preacher-man—who may be Pharaoh reincarnated.
Horace, then, does not fit easily into any single role—villain, scapegoat, conjurer, or ghost—but wears every mask for the town’s sake, participating in its mythos while its ethos marginalizes him to death.

Addressing literary characters as types comes with the inherent problems of oversimplification that such a taxonomic reading provides. In the case of the black matriarch, a reader and a critic must tread lightly because cultural assumptions can pigeonhole well-rounded characters into extremely racist interpretations. Within this paper, I shall look at the self-empowered black woman through an already somewhat skewed lens, as I will be using the label of “queen” to apply to matriarchs in African American literature, and that reading veers very close to the problematic category of the “mammy” found in literature by and ostensibly for whites. Does Margaret Mitchell’s boisterous-but-sycophantic Mammy resemble the bold female leaders found in Morrison’s *Paradise or Sula*, for example? We have trouble imagining how Scarlett O’Hara’s story might have unfolded were she attended by a Eva Peace, a woman who burns her own son in an act of merciful love after he slips into heroin addiction.

How, then, can we define a “queen” in African American literary context without falling into the trap of “whitewashing” the character into a Mammy-type? One of the best ways to examine the African American queen comes through Jewish lore and literature, with the tale of Queen Esther. Esther’s story, with its themes of oppression, redemption, sacrifice, duty, loyalty to culture and family, and cunning, appears in several works of African American literature. The story of the Jewish queen remains central, however, less because of the self-denying components of Esther’s character—
which could easily be read through a sycophantic lens which would render her as an
elevated Mammy-type—and far more because of her cleverness in turning tables on her
oppressor, Haman. Esther acts like a survivor, someone who summons the full force of
her talents and intelligence to beat back the cultural snares which threaten to entrap
not only her, but her people:

African American women reading Queen Esther as their own wisdom literature
were continuing a tradition of transforming Biblical, particularly more Jewish Old
Testament texts of bondage, to explain and negotiate American black
experiences of enslavement and subordination. When African American women
turned to The Book of Esther, and its royal subject for wisdom, they discovered
virtually ‘a dictionary of survival techniques’ (Nero 10)7

Are there queens like Esther in the novels of Reed, Morrison, Butler, and Kenan? Are
there women creating a handbook for survival as Nero suggests? Immediately Lauren
Olamina comes to mind, with her Earthseed texts and her meticulously ordered survival
plan. She is far-thinking and considers the fate of not only her immediate group, but all
humanity. When Travis questions her maxim, “The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root
among the stars,” she acknowledges “I know it won’t be possible for a long time. Now is
a time for building foundations—Earthseed communities—focused on the Destiny. After
all, my heaven really exists, and you don’t have to die to reach it” (Butler, Parable 204).
Lauren, like Esther, instinctively acts for the benefit of her people, and all people.
Despite a significant weakness—her hyperempathy—Lauren manages to hold her small
group together, lead them to the foundation of a new life, and spawn a new spiritual
movement. Like Esther, she is young, only eighteen, but she accomplishes much
because of her faith.
We can see other queens within the texts of these authors. Eva Peace we have already mentioned, and Morrison’s _Paradise_ contains both a present matriarch in the form of Connie and a shadow queen in the form of Mother Mary Magna. The death of the latter undoes much of the former’s strength, and so we begin to see that Connie may not be a queen in her own right, although she does manage to keep the Convent functional and provide maternal care to girls and women after Mary Magna’s death. Reed’s work is almost devoid of a solid queen figure, except in the elusive form of Isis and the possessing spirit of Erzulie. Earline’s role in the Mumbo Jumbo Kathedral gives her some matriarchal qualities; however she only really takes on that role when possessed by the loa. Kenan’s work has queens fitting folkloric models of good and evil, with ancient Ruth still holding sway over her family but doling out judgment readily and willing to sacrifice Horace for the sake of family and community stability. He also has the terrifying story of Mabel Pearsall in _Let the Dead Bury Their Dead_, a woman whose righteous violence goes beyond even her own understanding as she murders an infant that cries too long and too loud. Yet both of Kenan’s matriarchs hold up poorly to the Esther model, as righteousness and judgment get called into question whenever Ruth or Mabel appears. Not every figure appears in every story, of course. We can credit each of the authors examined here with using the tool of folkloric types in their work, and with the good sense not to use every type at once. So long as we recognize the instrument of stock character at work in some way, we gain an understanding of constructive cosmology in these texts.
In the work of these four African American artists, literary texts use folkloric tropes to build up the mythic framework of their created spaces. The mythography of each place draws heavily on specific types—Reed with his conjurers, Kenan with his demons and ghosts—and some pepper texts with a variety of folktale elements—Butler’s African basis for her *Wild Seed* characters and Morrison’s inversion of heroism and villainy in her novels. Characters fall on a spectrum of intensity and signification with relation to their folkloric counterparts, and sometimes the failure to fit into any one type becomes a major aspect of character development, as it does with Horace Cross in Kenan’s work. Folklore’s mutability, however, becomes bound to the written word in a novel. These storytellers use the process of writing as one of the key tools in their repertoires, building history by writing it down and making myth out of language, as we shall see in the next section.

**BOOKS OF THE LIVING:**
**Making a Text and Writing Cosmology**

When Lauren Olamina begins envisioning life in the outside world, she also instinctively begins collecting her “Earthseed” verses. Even before her community unravels, she feels compelled to put her newfound faith and philosophy into words:

Sometimes naming a thing—giving it a name or discovering its name—helps one to begin to understand it. Knowing the name of a thing *and* knowing what that thing is for gives me even more of a handle on it.

... I’ve never felt I was making any of this up—not the name, Earthseed, not any of it. I mean, I’ve never felt that it was anything other than real: discovery rather than invention, exploration rather than creation. I wish I could believe it was all supernatural, and that I’m getting messages from God. But then, I don’t believe
in that kind of God. All I do is observe and take notes, trying to put things down in ways that are as powerful, as simple, and as direct as I feel them. I can never do that. I keep trying, but I can’t. I’m not good enough as a writer or poet or whatever it is I need to be. I don’t know what to do about that. It drives me frantic sometimes. I’m getting better, but so slowly (Butler, Parable 71-2).

Lauren must write her God down on paper, create what she calls “The Books of the Living,” so that those who follow her will have her guidance even when she is gone. This impulse, the need to express her cosmology linguistically, shapes the structure of her movement and the structure of Butler’s prose. The author starts each chapter of the text with a new Earthseed verse, sometimes one which has been referenced previously, giving it an air of authority. Butler does not allow Lauren’s role as prophet and founder go forward without challenge, however. What Lauren sees as observation and analysis of the world around her, others interpret as ‘made up.’ When Travis questions her about how she came to her conclusions, she tells him “I was looking for God...I wasn’t looking for mythology or mysticism or magic. I didn’t know whether there was a god to find, but I wanted to know” (Butler, Parable 200). Lauren makes strong claims that her god is change made manifest in the world, the only condition of natural order that remains certain as far as she can tell, yet also feels a human compulsion to transcribe her understanding into the imperfect and corruptible written word.

Language and authorship play crucial roles in the novels of the other hoodoo historians, too. Reed spends a significant portion of Mumbo Jumbo’s climax giving a jazzy rewrite to the Western world’s extant mythos and history, for example. The nature of the exact words found on the monolithic structure of the Oven form a central point of contention in Morrison’s Paradise, dividing generations, congregations, and family
relations trying to discern whether they should “Be the Furrow of His Brow” or “Beware the Furrow of His Brow.” Why does language go so neatly hand-in-glove with cosmology? Certainly mythmaking is a linguistic act as much as a cultural one, but in many of the stories an editorial process and a concern over the precision of language that borders on fussiness. In some ways, the embedded concern among black authors over language in their world-founding derives from earlier African American literary traditions:

The zealous pursuit of literacy embodied by ex-slave narrators, particularly Douglass, is an astute response to the disastrous assault on the collective cultural identities of African captives whose orally transmitted forms of knowledge brought from their various ethnic groups had been submerged, fragmented, or rendered irrelevant within a dominant bourgeois white culture (Mullen 673).

Extending Mullen’s argument, the very acts of literacy—reading and writing—give the marginalized characters within these novels a certain amount of authority over their own lives and over the way that their histories are conveyed to others. When a slave narrative reclaims a piece of a cultural past—as it does in Mullen’s example of Douglass, as well as the works of Harriet Jacobs, Olaudah Equiano, and dozens of others—it diminishes the dominant literary class’s ability to pass by its victims as footnotes.

When characters can assert authority in a very literal sense—they are authors of their history, their present, and their destiny, hence the term ‘mythographers’ to describe them—they do tremendous things. In some cases they abuse their language and suffer the consequences of their edits—Horace’s occult rite stands out as an example here. Revision and editing sometimes correct the abuses of the past, and
sometimes excuse the conditions of the present. The origin story of the Bottom in *Sula* presents a tale in which perspective determines outcome. If the hilltop community really is the bottom of heaven, as the whites claimed it must be when they sold it to the blacks, then it makes sense that strange and magnificent events might happen there: a plague of robins, the indomitable Eva, and Sula’s strange ability to bind the community together through enmity. If, on the other hand, the whites have tricked the blacks, it becomes a story about victimization in which all the odd occurrences in the town are punishments of some kind.

Morrison’s world in *Sula* uses the concept of reading to emphasize another aspect of cosmology. In the Bottom, the entire world can be ‘read’ by signs and omens, a subtle but omnipresent language that binds everyone in the community. Upon Sula’s return to the town, Morrison spells out the methodology of her cosmology, from the perspective of the residents:

> [E]vil must be avoided, they felt, and precautions must naturally be taken to protect themselves from it. But they let it run its course, fulfill itself, and never invented ways either to alter it, to annihilate it or to prevent its happening again. So also were they with people.

What was taken by outsiders to be slackness, slovenliness or even generosity was in fact a full recognition of the legitimacy of forces other than good ones. They did not believe that doctors could heal—for them, none had ever done so. They did not believe death was accidental—life might be, but death was deliberate. They did not believe Nature was ever askew—only inconvenient. Plague and drought were as ‘natural’ as springtime. If milk could curdle, God knows robins could fall. The purpose of evil was to survive it and they determined (without ever knowing they had made up their minds to do it) to survive floods, white people, tuberculosis, famine and ignorance (Morrison, *Sula* 96).
In Morrison’s Medallion and the Bottom, the world bears a kind of inscription, an authorial hand giving guidance—even when that guidance is “inconvenient.” In Morrison’s work, the world which is ‘read’ around the main characters remains ominous or ambivalent, frequently marked by violence, and the signs presented seldom portend of good times to come.

In contrast to the starkness of Morrison’s ‘world language,’ Ishmael Reed presents a civilization with a language tied to music and laughter. Mumbo Jumbo’s PaPa LaBas, in his final confrontation with the evil Templar leader Hinckle Von Vampton, unloads the founding myths of the civilized Western world, going all the way back to Egypt. He does not, however, become mired down in incantation and recitation, but spins a very lively version of the tale of Osiris, Isis, and Set. His retelling of world history begins with an objective style, but then "alternates with contemporary vernacular styles, so that classic histories--Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and Judaic traditions" are upended and spun with anachronisms, metonymy, and slang, dizzing up the story and providing insight at the same time (Jessee 136). Language is essential to Reed’s novel, and one of Von Vampton’s chief complaints about his inability to find a “talking Android” comes from a lack of black poets willing to write dialect work for him.

Ironically, “Von Vampton, Hierophant I, and even President Harding frequently slip into black vernacular speech; while PaPa LaBas, Berbelang, Earline, and Abdul Hamid speak in formal American English” (Jessee 135). Reed very much foregrounds the tension between ‘high’ and ‘low’ language, insisting that linguistic inflexibility and rigidity signal deeper problems: an inability to accept change and adapt to circumstances, a need to
control and dominate, and insistence on dualities without shades of gray. The hard, high language of the written Bible becomes antithetical to the living, shaking, dancing text of Jes Grew. From LaBas’ perspective, “Jes Grew is life. They comfortably share a single horse like 2 knights. They will try to depress Jes Grew but it will only spring back and prosper. We will make our own future Text. A future generation of artists will accomplish this” (Reed, *Mumbo* 204). The creative, artistic process becomes its own form of divine mediumship, while the high-browed analytical and exegetical force of Biblical religion stymies and suffocates. Jes Grew comes from a place of dynamism, and functions as an expressive text:

> [T]he idea is that creative writing and other secular creativity is spiritual action that can be a form of mediation with the gods and spirits. In this context, PaPa is talking about the spirituality of the act of improvisational creation of the hoodoo text, which encompasses many individual texts that constantly change as well as a hypothetical Text that has no fixed form” (Coleman 176).

Reed uses the same improvisational style to which Coleman refers, substituting numbers for words and peppering his text with news-bulletin briefs, graphics, and onomatopoeia. High and low language barriers fall apart, and the dynamic story of Jes Grew presents an alternative to understanding diction which has been locked into two forms. In short, Reed convinces us that buying into a dualism of language marks the gateway to “Atonism.”

Reed’s satire does not sweep across history so much as hopscotch across it, touching on specific points and elements and allowing them to flower in the text. While Morrison draws upon African American folk spirituality to shape her myth-building, Reed more directly draws upon verbal folklife from African Americans to tell his story,
despite his need to tell the entire history of the world. As LaBas delivers his lyrical
mythology, he portrays Set as a stiff, stuffy sort of fellow, while his brother Osiris has all
the charm, setting up a rivalry between the siblings:

Reed’s caricature of Set...uses black verbal arts to create the comic-satiric flavor
of this 'first Atonist extraordinaire.' The description of Set in relation to his
perceived competitor, Osiris, has some of the flavor of 'toasts,' a genre of African
American folklore, or verbal art, which are 'narrative poems...involving an
extended battle between protagonists' (Jessee 132).^9

The “toasts” between Osiris and Set become a bit more than heated, however, leading
to betrayal and loss. Before Osiris is undone by Set, however, he has the foresight to get
in touch with Thoth, a scribe, and write down his music and lyrics into a sacred text,
which will become the foundation of Jes Grew during the nineteenth and twentieth
centuries. Osiris may not be out to found a religion or philosophy the way that Lauren
Olamina is, but his instinct to write everything down is the same.

The mythmaking of these writers relies heavily on words within the text, a subtle
sub-linguistic set of codes which shape how characters write or speak about the places
they inhabit. In some cases, those words are signs, handwriting on the wall of the world,
as in Morrison’s Sula. In some cases, they are literal words over which battles are fought
due to corruption and time—a concept found in Paradise and Mumbo Jumbo. Kenan’s
approach to language in his work is experimental like Reed’s. Visitation includes sections
of dramatic dialogue punctuated by stage directions and Let the Dead...is full of strange
footnotes, epistles, and interview transcriptions. In each text, however, the process of
creating the towns—or universe, in Reed’s case—requires the accommodation of some
linguistic element. Language carries significant weight for the characters, and in more
than one case a character intuitively understands his or her role is to write down what
happens. Perhaps it is an impulse of a creator that his or her creations should appreciate
the role language had in that genesis. Lauren Olamina demonstrates that impulse, as
does her creator, Octavia E. Butler. In the interview with Kenan, she describes the first
of her Earthseed books as “not a postapocalyptic book, it’s a book in which society has
undergone severe changes, but continues” and goes on to say that the biblical overtones of the
text come from a “love for words” which came “late in life” (Kenan, “Interview” 502-3).
Language, particularly writing, provides longevity for a concept like Earthseed or the Jes
Grew history of the world. Each author creates his or her Thoth to put down the magic
of creation for future generations, but each author also sacrifices the society which bore
the magic into the world. The bleakness and violence of Ruby, Oklahoma or Robledo,
California threatens to eradicate any efforts to remember these places. If longevity
does provide motivation for transcription, why do these authors all insist upon having a
doomsday waiting in the wings?

RAGNAROK:
Liberating Violence

In “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead,” the namesake story for Kenan’s collection of
fables about Tims Creek, the Reverend James Malachai Greene interviews Ezekiel “Zeke”
Cross about the history of the little town. Zeke and Ruth, who appear in A Visitation of
Spirts as well, engage in a playful banter as Zeke attempts to piece together a history of
a maroon society of ex-slaves in a little swamp settlement called Tearshirt, and later
Snatchit, which would finally become Tims Creek. The story moves from a plausible bit
of field folklore research in which Zeke tells the story of Pharaoh—also known as Menes and sometimes Caesar, “Sultan, King, Prince, Emperor, Lord, Caliph, Massa, Hero, Alexander”—a slave directly from Africa with a gift for root work and magic (Kenan, *Dead* 287). The entire piece forms a contrived lynchpin for the Tims Creek mythology, complete with footnotes by Reverend Jimmy Greene—the secondary protagonist of *A Visitation of Spirits* and cousin to Horace Cross—and a family history of the Crosses which links them to white ancestors as well as black ones. As Zeke’s tale reaches its climax, however, the strange character of a green-eyed Preacher-man takes center stage, coercing the population of the little village into pseudo-worship of him under the guise of Christian zealotry. Hints appear that the Preacher-man is not a force of good in the world—residents and animals go crazy and die bizarre deaths in the swamps—and the final act of diabolic betrayal takes the shape of the dead rising from their graves to slaughter all the living residents save for three survivors: a single baby stolen by Preacher-man as he rides on a black bull—“Riding? I thought he come walking out of the fire? Or was it the sky?” asks Ruth (Kenan, *Dead* 331)—and an old woman and a boy named Elihu, who would go on to found the town of Tims Creek.

Why does Kenan require such devastating, world-ending violence in his town’s history? Horace Cross commits suicide in front of his cousin, the intensely (self-) righteous Mabel Pearsall murders an infant, and the dead rise up to slaughter a group of people led astray by a haunting devil in preacher’s robes. Kenan is not alone in authoring a violent past for his fictional world. Morrison’s *Paradise* begins with armed men breaking into a house full of women to slaughter them wholesale or run them off.
Octavia E. Butler’s texts contain an immense amount of violence—rape, torture, murder, arson, and more in *Parable of the Sower*, and the repeated acts of murder by an eager Doro and an animal-embodied Anyanwu in *Wild Seed*. Reed’s spaghetti-western town of Yellow Back Radio embarks on its narrative with a massacre of children, who had themselves run the adults out of their town with violence. The violent roots of each place serve a powerful psychological function in the construction of history shaping the rise and fall of the novelists’ small empires. Donn C. Worgs sees the violence as empowering, a method of emancipation and liberation dating back to slave revolts and the collective fantasy of rebellion in early African American writing:

Although there is ample evidence of the reality of violent revolt during slavery, there are also expressions of the fantasies of the use of violence to liberate enslaved Africans. Three novels, Frederick Douglass’s *The Heroic Slave*, based on the 1841 revolt aboard the *Creole*, Martin Delaney’s *Blake, or the Huts of America*, and William Wells Brown’s *Clotelle: A Tale of the Southern States* stand out in this regard. All three depict heroes using violence to liberate themselves and/or others from slavery. Taken together, the three works reveal key aspects of how African Americans understand violent revolt. All four of the themes described above can be found in these works. All entail a justification for the use of violence. Douglass, for example, locates the slave revolt within the "American" tradition of using violence to obtain freedom as he equates the violence of the slave revolt with that of the American Revolution. Douglass’s hero, Madison Washington, justifies his deed, claiming that "We have struck for our freedom. We have done no more than that which you applaud your fathers for doing, and if we are murderers, so are they" (Worgs 27).

In some ways, the violence in the novels can be read as heroic and empowering. As discussed in the section on folkloric roles, Butler emphasizes Anyanwu’s stature as a powerful queen and conjurer when she transforms into a leopard to kill the mental rapist Lale Sachs or the murderous and pedophilic Joseph, applying her “witch” talent to
good use despite the violence it requires. Yet the violence in Butler’s books far more frequently emphasizes the brutality of existence in the world. In *Parable of the Sower*, Keith, a teenage boy and half-brother to Lauren Olamina, has his flesh carved off and cauterized as a slow, torturous execution in retaliation for what can only be a drug-related crime. Lauren and her family do not get closure or understanding about the exact nature of Keith’s death, however, and its brutality shatters the family’s bonds irreparably. While the severing of family bonds eventually will permit Lauren to strike out on her own—Worgs’ theory of emancipatory violence—Keith’s grisly death hardly fits any heroic models.

In considering violence in these novels, we also see that violence occurs at two levels: a personal one and a communal one. Personal violence—Sula’s self-mutilation to protect Nel when they are girls and the accidental murder of Chicken Little—has social consequences, of course, as the grieving women at the funeral reveal their own insecurities and selfishness rather than keening for the loss of the drowned boy. Horace’s suicide in *A Visitation of Spirits* has personal and communal ramifications, as well, which tie to his role as a monster or wraith in the town. Since the focus here is on the foundational mythology of the towns in general, however, and since the issues of violence as a “badman” trait have already been addressed elsewhere, let us turn to the broader communities and the violence they face in these books. Each of the authors deals with social constructs and violence in different ways, yet all include broadly violent events which unleash suffering on multiple victims. These are novels built upon Ragnarok.
Kenan uses the term Ragnarok as the title of one of his chapters, subtitling it with the elaboration, “The Day the Gods Die.” That particular section of *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* does not deal with the undead uprising, but rather the eulogy of a preacher mourning for the loss of his secret mistress. Yet Kenan’s inclusion of the term is incredibly prescient, because the violence which surfaces near the end of his book ends with biblical levels of destruction, tribulation, and judgment:

Then, they say, fire rained down from the sky just like the Lord sent to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and none of the wicked escaped. Said it burned for days like a furnace and didn’t spread. Just scorched. Smoke filled the heavens, they say. When it died down, won’t nothing left. Nothing. Just that mound you asked about, smoking hot. Took a year to cool off. Say it goes all the way down to hell (Kenan, *Dead* 332).

While Ragnarok is a Norse concept, the doomsday scenario to which it generally applies fits Kenan’s description of the burning of Tearshirt well. Each of the other authors include a scene of similar destruction, whether it is an orchestrated massacre as in *Paradise* and *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* or the chaotic invasion of painted, drug-addled thugs bent on rape and murder for pleasure in *Parable of the Sower*. For every community that has an origin story in these novels, there is a community that undergoes a day of judgment. Why does Ragnarok feature so prominently in the stories of these communities? If the creation of history, the forging of families, traditions, and relationships over extended periods of time, motivate the characters enough to write down their stories in ink or iron—as we saw in the previous section—why wipe those histories away with such sweeping, sudden events?
In 1972, the same year he published *Mumbo Jumbo*, Ishmael Reed penned a small poem about Ralph Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man*, and its concept of the African American in American history:

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  i am outside of
good. i wish
i had some peanuts, it
looks hungry there in
its cage
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i am inside of
history. its
hungrier than i
thot (Reed, Reader 191).
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Reed’s “hungry” history represents a common problem with American accounts of past events: when non-majority viewpoints are excluded, the story seems emaciated and anemic, lacking substance. If a minority attempts to enter the fray of history and leave a mark or make a change, however, that group can easily be devoured and its victories and successes subordinated to the majority story as a footnote or prop. Writers struggling to place minorities in the context of American history run the risk of having their stories appropriated and the minority culture devalued or turned into a sideshow. *Mumbo Jumbo* examines this problem through the lens of Hubert “Safecracker” Gould, who makes off with pieces of black culture to sell as his own work. The hungry history of Reed’s poem also lies at the root of Ragnarok in the other novels explored here. Eva Tettenborn perceives African American narrative as fundamentally melancholic, which she defines as "a continued mental attachment to and yearning for a lost object" and opposes it to the clinical problem of depression, using melancholia to represent the
ache in the African American psyche for a contiguous history with a definable black self at the center of the story (Tettenborn, “Melancholia” 103). The melancholy of black literature, she says, comes from the historical trauma inflicted upon black people in America. Clinging to that trauma, that violence, actually helps to ensure its place in the narrative history of the American people:

A number of African American cultural and artistic expressions gesture towards death, but they also foreground the lost object, that which...needs to be relinquished. Contemporary African American literature also insists on melancholia not as a disabling condition of the mind but as a way of ensuring memory outside of the dominant culture...[It] has done the seemingly impossible by portraying resistant subjects created out of losses... The experience of trauma has a disabling effect on the traumatized survivor, but it paradoxically enables the historical event to survive, often outside the official record (Tettenborn, “Melancholia” 106-7, 114).¹¹

The literature of these novelists certainly does not fall into the “official record,” instead depicting stories with fabulous components which serve as a makeshift mythology for a displaced people. Yet within those “made up” mythologies—as Butler’s Parable character Travis might call them—essential elements of black history resist assimilation and appropriation. The scars that mark Tims Creek following its Ragnarok, Lauren’s memories of Robledo after the attack by the painted fire-starters, the massacre of the circus and the children in Yellow Back Radio, and the coordinated assault on the Convent never happened, historically speaking. In the case of Morrison’s Paradise, the victims of the violence almost conspire in the erasure of the raid by disappearing into thin air after the attack. Yet each event signifies upon the events in black history which do not make it into history textbooks: towns raided and invaded by white Klan
members, the disrupted clan and family structures violated by the Triangle Trade, and the hoses turned on peaceful marchers in Southern cities during the 1960s.

For African American writers, Ragnarok functions both as a representation of history, and a method of presentation which allows modern readers to remember it. Laura C. Jarmon elucidates:

Myth is the first speech, for it gives the pattern by which the universe was created. The mind subject to mythic views of universal orders tends also to repeat the myth to preserve this order, at once preserving memory of the patterns established within this order. Not only must the order and memory of it survive, but in times of disorder [i.e. times of violence], memory works to reestablish order in that it makes available the appropriate details affected in the pattern (Jarmon 155).

Mythic narrative speaks a language that can cope with Ragnarok and integrate history with fiction. Slave narratives do provide a more direct and accurate in-road to the trauma experienced by black people over several centuries of American history, but such work can sometimes be devoured by Reed’s hungry history, becoming classroom material rather than an account of someone’s actual life. Octavia E. Butler recognized the value of fiction in transmitting the themes of violence and trauma to readers:

BUTLER: [O]ne of the things I realized when I was reading the slave narrative [research for her novel, Kindred]...was that I was not going to be able to come anywhere near presenting slavery as it was. I was going to have to do a somewhat cleaned-up version of slavery, or no one would be willing to read it. I think that’s what most fiction writers do. They almost have to (Kenan, “Interview” 496-7).

Butler drew upon historical events, real trauma and loss, to create her alternative histories and mythologies. Tellingly, Butler’s character Lauren in Parable of the Sower
not only experiences her own pain, but the pain of anyone around her through her hyperempathy. Violence at the communal level becomes constructive in the hands of these authors, a means for building a place and a people, of binding them together through traumatic historical memory. Yet even with collective destinies and shared trauma, not every character shares bonds on these novels. Just as a story needs a good villain, every Other needs an Other to form a Self.

LEARN TO FORGET:
Embracing Diversity and Avoiding Destruction

In an essay on Indian-African American relations in Toni Morrison’s work, Virginia Kennedy notes the similarities between the plight of Paradise’s founding families, the “8-rock” group, and the displaced Plains Indian tribes. Both groups are run out of their home territories, either by a need to escape persecution or a quest for a permanent home or a combination of the two motivations. The groups meet with resistance from dominant powers, and are forced to build themselves up in a new home. Kennedy writes of how “Indians are frequently intertwined with the journeys of Ruby’s founders and the lives of the convent women. Most often, indigenous peoples provide aid to the midnight-black people” and trade government-allotted land for work so that the black families can carve out a niche for themselves in the community of Haven (Kennedy 211-12). Yet even the aid of the Native Americans does not lead to a long-term mutual trust. By the time the 8-rock descendants have moved and transformed Haven into Ruby—a point which Kennedy notes equates with the transmutation of the spiritual into the visceral, noting the name Ruby resembles the
color of blood—the Morgan brothers are taking away the home of Menus Jury as a punishment for marrying a Native “redbone” woman (Morrison, Paradise 278; Kennedy 212). The difficult relationships between American Indian and African American characters in Morrison’s book illustrate another key tool of the mythbuilders’ craft: an emphasis on diversity and a keen awareness of minority-on-minority conflict.

Lauren Olamina writes in her Earthseed notebooks:

Embrace diversity.
Unite—
Or be divided,
robbed,
rulled,
killed
By those who see you as prey.
Embrace diversity
Or be destroyed (Butler, Parable 181).

Olamina, a girl with a Latina stepmother and mixed-race step-siblings, who expends a tremendous amount of energy protecting an interracial couple and their child on an open road in a world where murder, rape, and cannibalism happen every day, seems a likely candidate to promote diversity. Her Earthseed philosophy requires a degree of genetic diversity, to ensure that when the Earthseed do “take root among the stars,” they will have a strong gene pool from which to draw. Lauren is not completely blind to the problems faced by interracial couples, however, nor does she idealize their social position. She very quickly notes “mixed couples catch hell” in the world outside of Robledo (Butler, Parable 157). She poses as a man so that she and Zahra can pretend to be a single-race couple travelling with a white man, Harry, as they make their way north,
because people in Butler’s world more readily believe their eyes when a woman masks her gender within a homogenous racial relationship than they would believe the sight of a white man travelling with two black women. Lauren even plots for Harry to eventually tan enough to pass as a distant relative, further emphasizing visual homogeneity. Why does the prophet of Earthseed, who makes a central tenant of her philosophy “embrace diversity,” also so readily accommodate the difficulties posed by multiculturalism, particularly when it comes to sexual relationships?

In both Morrison’s and Butler’s work, we can see a tension developing. The long-term need in Lauren Olamina’s world requires racial mixing and heterogeneous development. Butler emphasizes the mixing of races in *Wild Seed* as well, as Doro breeds race to race in his growing town of “witch-people,” Wheatley. His presence—and later the presence of Anyanwu—provide a degree of protection for his group, which remains relatively unmolested by anyone but Doro himself. In Morrison’s *Paradise*, the tension between the races has to do with short-term and long-term goals as well, although the balance of time flips. In the short-term, the 8-rock families accept the help and land-acquisition conditions of the Native peoples, but as time goes on the racial isolationism becomes stronger and stronger on the part of the men. While an element of grudge could be argued to linger in their collective minds, as Morrison notes they were “[t]urned away by rich Choctaw and poor whites,” thus enduring humiliation at the hands of other Native tribes, the author writes that “they were nevertheless unprepared for the aggressive discouragement they received from Negro towns already being built” (*Morrison, Paradise* 13). Perhaps it is harder to turn on one’s own race after
rejection, but the author does not indicate that the humiliations were stored up for later venting upon a single target like the Indians. Instead, she develops a tension based on paranoia and gender friction which leads to the attack on the Convent, linking the violent ‘removal’ of the women to the historical removal of the Natives. When introducing the Convent and Connie, the Native presence already seems like a haunting or a memory, a foreshadowing of what will happen both to the women and the families of Haven and Ruby, describing it as “a schoolroom, where stilled Arapaho girls once sat and learned to forget” (Morrison, Paradise 4). She notes that the Indian girls were gone when the 8-rock families arrived, and speaks of “wind that once lifted streams of Cheyenne/Arapaho hair” in that place (Morrison, Paradise 138). The ghostly presence of the Natives haunts Paradise and Ruby, and the resistance to diversity dooms the Convent women to the same disappearance and phantasmagoric legacy.

Ishmael Reed takes a glib tone when dealing with Natives in his Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down, although he also gleefully attributes some of the hero’s success to his Native ally, Chief Showcase. Showcase’s name, a play on Cochise, his tech-savvy, slick-and-smooth demeanor, and his ability to literally fly above it all in his homemade helicopter provide a degree of aesthetic distance in Reed’s book. Showcase, described as “the only surviving injun” in the area around Yellow Back Radio, becomes a saving angel for the Loop Garoo Kid (Reed, Radio 19). Chief Showcase rescues the Kid from Bo Schmo and his “neo-social realist” band of avant-garde desperados after the bandits condemn Loop to an “Arab Death” of burial in sand and being eaten by desert wildlife. When the Kid first sees Showcase, he describes the Native man as “a plainclothes
Indian,” in contrast to the kids of Yellow Back Radio, who all wore costume Indian garb (Reed, *Radio* 30). Showcase’s double-agency in the text also provides him with a degree of distance, and an ability to avoid committing to anyone’s cause but his own. Reed exhibits a free hand when playing with race and cultural identity in his book, describing circus headmistress Zozo Labrique as a black woman wearing a “full skirt and a bandana on her head” who “read the children’s palms and told their fortunes,” giving her at least a superficial resemblance to a stereotypical Gypsy traveler (Reed, *Radio* 9, 21). Villain Drag Gibson’s “Chinaboy!” servant fits the Old West tropes and demonstrates Gibson’s racially oppressive attitudes. Flush Gooseman intentionally sells Indians defective weapons to put them at a disadvantage in combat, and eases Gibson’s conquest of the territory. Why does Reed create such a strong racial mix, while at the same time painting with such broad brushstrokes as to slap most characters with a stereotype?

To understand *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down’s* racial attitudes, we can look to the equally outlandish *Mumbo Jumbo* for some guidance. Critic Sharon A. Jessee cites Reed’s humor as a smokescreen for much more serious critiques: “[I]t is also important to remember that the humor and satire one discovers in *Mumbo Jumbo* have some very serious objectives. For one thing, this work re-orientes and re-educates its readers on many points of history, politics, art, and the sciences” (Jessee 138). *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* also endeavors to re-educate and re-orient the reader. The children in their Plains Indians garb describe a childish attitude towards Native peoples—that their costume defines them, or that putting on the trappings of a culture somehow results in intrinsic understanding. Loop’s perspective on Natives gets swept from under him by
Chief Showcase’s “plainclothes” attire, and Reed gives his reader an Indian Chief that frequently fails to conform to stereotypes. Even Drag’s Chinese attaché gets away with backtalk, albeit a racist patois of “Take that, you solly looking sleep!” (Reed, Radio 50).

For his part, Drag’s bigotry is universal:

[L]et all the little yellow infidels sass you. I run a democratic household, all the oppressed people, those carrying trays, hog sloppers, cow milkers, fruit pickers and miners are allowed to insult me—like the celebrated nigger dwarf Zip of Barnum Bailey fame. Little minority thought he owned the sideshow and had hired everybody in it. Nobody let him know any better. Longest freak show to run in the history of the circus (Reed, Radio 51).

Here Reed does with Drag what Jessee notes him doing in Mumbo Jumbo: re-educating his reader on politics and history. Oppression might not be the outright denial of a place to settle as it is in Paradise or the ominous presence of violence towards interracial couples as it is in Parable of the Sower. Racism as condescension and a failure to take a minority voice seriously—treating minorities like children as Drag does, and slaughtering them with the same impunity he shows the children of Yellow Back Radio—cuts just as deeply into racial consciousness. Reed seldom relies on subtlety to sustain his entire message, however, and Chief Showcase has many opportunities to riff on white greed and the nature of American empire when it comes to Indian relations. For all of his intensely sensitive articulation of the multi-cultural West and its raucous problems, Reed does treat one minority with a surprising degree of flippancy and disdain. Whereas Ishmael Reed gives his reader a Drag Gibson who is a vision of homosexuality at once cruel, perverse, and inhuman, Kenan takes up the slack and presents a complicated and troubling picture of homosexuality as a minority status.
When Horace Cross faces his family down over a newly-acquired earring, the content of the conversation becomes metonym for his long-standing confusion and conflicts with them. His aunts, believers in a law higher than social norms, advise him after a schoolyard fight with a white boy that “if he must fight, he must fight and damn the consequences, for to not fight would hold graver, more shameful consequences than any punishment the principal could ever dole out” (Kenan, Visitation 93). When he is assigned to work a project with Gideon Stone, a flamboyant and ostensibly homosexual boy in his class, he tries to convince his father that he should be excused from the work because Gideon’s father is a notorious bootlegger—and perhaps his son’s sexuality presents moral problems of its own. Horace’s father, however, advises him that while there may be a place for judgment in some cases, Horace should not “feel [him]self better than nobody round here in Tims Creek...Nobody, nowhere. White nor black” (Kenan, Visitation 147). So when Horace finally presents himself to his family with a symbol of his independence and potentially ambiguous sexuality—a single shining earring—and begins spending more time with white boys than others of his own race, is it any wonder that their vehemently negative reaction splits him down the middle? We have already seen how Horace views himself with a shifting lens, at once monstrosity, villain, sacrificial lamb, and specter, but how does Tims Creek view their lost and wayward son, last of the Cross line? Maisha Wester uses the difficult confessional moments shared by Horace and Jimmy to discover some perspective: “As Jimmy observes, Horace’s homosexuality, though unacceptable, is merely a 'simple, normal deviation' among the community. However such 'deviation' becomes an unforgivable
'flaw' when compounded by Horace's refusal to align himself with their racially essentialist ideologies and behavior" (Wester 1046). Being black in Tims Creek is important to the people there, despite what Horace's father told him after the childhood scrape. Being gay, openly or surreptitiously, can be managed—if not outright accepted on some rather dubious terms in the case of Gideon Stone—so long as other ties are maintained. With too many pieces in play, however, the structure falls apart. Uzze T. Cannon writes of Tims Creek that its "community has served as the foundation for its individual members in establishing a sense of Self, [but] it has not always tolerated those various Selves" (Cannon 105). Horace receives too many mixed signals to ever internalize a unified and diverse identity.

Kenan's Tims Creek creates minorities out of minorities. The social codes guiding behavior lead to aberrant behavior and a veritable Peyton Place full of secret lives. It takes a speaking pig and a five-year-old boy with a knack for communicating with the dead to reveal the deeply buried truths of the town. Deviance divides into subcategories—the sexually amoral, like Aaron and Jamonica in their incestuous entwine or the philandering Reverend Barden; the infanticide of Mabel Pearsall; or the familial crimes which lead to Rose's de facto banishment and Horace's suicide. Jimmy laments the town's continual grind against its black sheep, saying,

That's what finally got to Horace, isn't it? I keep asking myself. He, just like me, had been created by this society. He was a son of the community, more than most...he didn't quite know who he was. That, I don't fully understand, for they had told him, taught him from cradle on. I guess they didn't reckon the world they were sending him into was different from the world they had conquered, a world peopled with new and hateful monsters that exacted a different price (Kenan, Visitation 188).
Jimmy sees that Tims Creek needs its enemies, its “monsters” as he calls them. He is uniquely aware of the ways in which the town steers the person, especially since so many of his roles are roles of authority and guidance—preacher, principal, and town historian—but even he is at the end of a rope called conformity, hanging on as best he can. Cannon notes, "In Let the Dead Bury Their Dead, Kenan shows how the situation for not only homosexuals but also others ostracized from the community 'has not gotten that much better.'...[and] defamiliarizes the lives and inhabitants of Tims Creek as a way to point to the false sense of community that it constructs for its inhabitants" (Cannon 103). Yet pockets of change and growth remain, as when Maggie Williams comes to terms with her gay grandson’s death and his boyfriend’s presence in her life in Let the Dead Bury Their Dead. Maggie later finds herself in the unusual predicament of “a black woman defending a white man against a black minister,” and discovers that “all the laws and rules...she would have to begin again, to learn” (Kenan, Dead 71-2). While critics like Cannon see Tims Creek as intolerant and self-destructive, enclaves of potential become pivotal reckoning points in Kenan’s text. The deviant minorities have a place, and Kenan gives them voices in his text. He does not entirely excuse the incestuous relationship of Jamonica and Aaron, but instead asks for understanding and empathy. He allows Jimmy to attempt to understand both Horace and Tims Creek through the character’s writings over the course of a fictional lifetime. He grants Maggie an opportunity to follow her own, internal moral compass rather than be bullied by a preacher known to the reader as someone lacking moral rectitude. He also allows the reader to see that preacher’s aching for adulterous love which ruins his relationship with his son.
Empathy guides and binds minorities across these novels. In some cases, the minority is a racial one like the Indians of Morrison and Reed or the mixed coupling of Butler. In Kenan’s case, sexual identity and social conformity become the tags tied to minority status in Tims Creek. In every case, however, the authors present their minority characters with an awareness of the dangers present for anyone displaced or outcast. Sometimes, humor helps steer the reader’s understanding of ingrained stereotypes, as happens with “plainclothes” Chief Showcase in Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down. In other cases, the compassion comes from a utilitarian standpoint, as it does in Doro’s case—and to some degree in the case of Lauren Olamina’s Earthseed and its overarching destiny. Morrison uses a minority’s absence to haunt the pages of her work and to act as a lingering warning against the greed which threatens to undue Ruby, Oklahoma. In every example, however, the authors introduce minority characters and insist on raising them from two dimensions into fully formed empathic subjects. We are now at a place where we can ask why these authors include compassionate points of view. Why do we trace communal mythologies through their treatment of their ‘others,’ their doomsday scenarios, their holy words, and their stock cast of characters in these novels?

WHAT A LIVING WORLD WILL DEMAND OF YOU
Planning a Universe and the Rule of Compassion

Why do communal histories so frequently come down to personal ones? Why does the mythology of a place depend so heavily on particular individuals, people who are memorable enough in stature, accomplishments, or nefariousness to engrain themselves in a reader’s memory? In each of the novels we have examined, with
perhaps two exceptions, a single town has been at the center of the story. In the two exceptions, *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Parable of the Sower*, identifiable communities substitute for towns. In Butler’s work, perhaps, we could even argue that Robledo is the town in question, although for the purposes of this examination I have focused far more on the community formed by the Earthseed fellowship by the end of the novel. Reed’s fast and far-reaching work does, at its heart, stick very close to New York City, but that hardly qualifies for a ‘town’ in the way Ruby, Oklahoma or Tims Creek, North Carolina do. Instead, Reed performs the act of mythography for the whole of humanity in his novel, but isolates the action to relatively few characters. The ‘town’ of *Mumbo Jumbo* could well be the community in Egypt which PaPa LaBas describes as he sets off on his epic tale of Isis, Set, and Osiris:

A certain young prince who was allergic to thrones attended a university at Nysa, a town in Arabia Felix (now Yemen). It was a land of dates coffee goats sheep wheat barley corn and livestock. Across the Red Sea were Ethiopia and the Sudan where the young man would commute bringing his knowledge of agriculture and comparing notes with the agriculturalists of these lands (Reed, *Mumbo* 161) [Emphasis mine].

Here we have a story that begins in a quiet ‘college’ town, with a short commute on a ferry across the Red Sea to the ‘home’ town. The focus of the story, at least in its inception, remains localized, and the characters are deeply personal, idiosyncratic, and human. PaPa LaBas’s retelling of world history begins with an objective style, but then “alternates with contemporary vernacular styles, so that classic histories--Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and Judaic traditions” are upended and spun with anachronisms, metonymy, and slang, dizzying up the story and the telling at the same time (Jessee
136). The mythology of so many cultures becomes a footnote to a hometown tale, something Zora Neale Hurston might call a “lie.” The big, epic detachment from gods and angels which marks the mythologies Jessee cites disappears in the easy, off-kilter prose pouring from LaBas’s mouth in front of a room full of people. In any case, Reed’s work perhaps most stretches the localized nature of the myth crafter’s art which I have laid out in the preceding pages, but *Mumbo Jumbo* still retains the core characteristics of the cosmologist’s novel: a rich cast drawn from folkloric sources and types, a preoccupation with holy text, the threat of apocalypse, and the empathic portrayal of the Other.

The authors discussed here have built not only their towns, but entire universes to fit those towns. The rules which govern *Sula* require mental flexibility, a willingness to understand signs and omens and to value evil even as one avoids it. The underground allegiance of a gender preserves a community on the brink of holocaust in *Paradise*. Octavia E. Butler presents communities ruled by immortals and prophets—one despotic and one empathic. Destiny motivates one community to survive, while another comes apart despite centuries of careful planning. Reed provides us with worlds populated by anachronistic people, magic, and spiritual forces both beyond and within our control. Tims Creek, with its Southern Gothic flavor, gives us ghosts and monsters, demons and even an angel or two. Using a few remarkable literary tools, each of these four authors manages to build a plausible cosmos, to speak some truth at a mythic level and a personal one. Every story relies on deeply personal experiences, letting us ride along like
a loa with a protagonist as we experience the diverse, unorthodox universes in these eight novels.

The racial component of these books seldom disappears into the background, but neither does it domi- nate the ‘rules’ of the universe. In fact, despite opportunities to empower black characters in a universe where they control some of the magic, these authors frequently shy away from giving anyone too much power. Instead, they spend time with their characters, pushing them beyond the shapes and shells extracted from folklore. They create sacred texts for their characters, books or words or even inscriptions to hold on to, a love of language which runs from author to world. They are not afraid to endanger their characters, to put them in harm’s way, because they know the rules of their world are distinctly not to anyone’s advantage. Despite such disadvantages, however, they also imbue characters—or perspectives, in the case of some of Kenan’s stories—with high degrees of empathy. Compassion goes a long way in these universes, and that is the greatest uniting force between them. Does that say something in particular about the African American experience as distilled through literature? Yes, although reading compassion and acting it may be miles apart in our own universe. Still, we can hope. As it is written in the Books of the Living: “Kindness eases change” (Butler, Parable 153).
NOTES

1 From the book jacket: "Randall Kenan is a genius; our black Marquez. He weaves myth, folktales, magic, and reality like no one else I know, and doesn't miss a beat" — Terry McMillan

2 From the Callaloo interview:

KENAN: You have mentioned the African myths and lore that you used in Wild Seed. Can you talk more about that? I didn't realize you had gone to such pains.

BUTLER: I used in particular, the myth of Atagbusi, who was an Onitsha Ibo woman. She was a shape-shifter who benefited her people while she was alive and when she died a market-gate was named after her, a gate at the Onitsha market. It was believed that whoever used this market-gate was under her protection...

Doro comes from an adolescent fantasy of mine to live forever and breed people. And when I began to get a little more sense, I guess you could say, and started to work with Doro, I decided that he was going to be a Nubian, because I wanted him to be somehow associated with ancient Egypt. And by then his name was already Doro, and it would have been very difficult to change it. So I went to the library and got this poor, dog-eared, ragged Nubian-English dictionary. I looked up the word Doro, and the word existed and it meant: the direction from which the sun comes; the east.

That was perfect, especially since I had pretty much gotten Emma Daniels, who came before the name Anyanwu, but I had been looking through names for her, Igbo names, and I found a myth having to do with the sun and the moon. Anyway the problem with that is: I lost it. I didn't write it down and I never found it again and all I had was one of the names: Anyanwu, meaning the sun. That worked out perfectly with Doro, the East. So I wound up putting them together.

KENAN: Such rich etymological and cultural resonance. It's almost as if the African lore itself is using you as a medium" (Kenan, “Interview” 499-500)

3 As the purpose of this paper is not to explore the sociological or anthropological facts and practices of these spiritual systems, I would direct anyone curious about them to the following works:


5 Compare with this description, from the Compendium Maleficarum, a medieval witch-hunter’s manual by Francesco Guazzo (translated by Montague Summers):

A woman in the Diocese of Sabina practiced this diabolic art, and her husband becoming suspicious repeatedly questioned her, but she always denied the charge. But the husband retained his suspicions and anxiously sought to know the truth, and contrived so cunningly that one night he saw her anointing herself with some ointment, after which she flew away quickly as a bird. He followed to see where she was going, but lost sight of her; and going to the door of the house he found it shut, which caused him great surprise. On the following day he again asked his wife what he so eagerly wished to know, and she firmly denied all knowledge; until, so that she could no longer plead ignorance, he openly told her all that he had seen her do the night before, and then soundly thrashed her, since it is wisely said that an obstinate heart is broken by the rod; and he threatened to beat her even more severely unless she told the truth, promising her a full pardon if she would freely confess. The woman, seeing that she could no longer hide it, told the truth and asked pardon of her husband, which he granted on condition that she would take him to the Sabbat. To obtain forgiveness she readily promised this, and, with the permission of Satan, fulfilled her word. The husband was taken to the place of the Sabbat and saw the games and dances and everything else, and finally sat down with the rest at the tables to eat; but finding the food insipid, he asked for salt and, although there was none on the table, kept asking again and again for it, but was not given any until after much importunity and long waiting (42-3).

Kenan’s Preacher-man engages in many witch-meeting acts: gluttony, debauchery, and causing harm to those around him through magical methods. This could raise the question of signifying on the medieval text, but in this case I think Kenan relies on the tradition of Sabbatic accounts to highlight the diabolism of Preacher-man.

6 Many African American writers have drawn upon parallels between Jewish lore and culture and Black identity. Zora Neale Hurston, for example, explored the idea of a Black Moses in Moses, Man of the Mountain. Ishmael Reed makes extensive use—and actively subverts—Jewish folk history in Mumbo Jumbo when he retells the story of Moses and Jethro. Beyond the fictive identification with Jewish lore, social and political parallels have been drawn by African
American authors for a long time, as you can see here in this excerpt from David Walker's *Appeal to Coloured Citizens of the World, in Four Articles* (1829):

I would only mention that the Egyptians, were Africans or coloured people, such as we are—some of them yellow and others dark—a mixture of Ethiopians and the natives of Egypt—about the same as you see the coloured people of the United States at present day.—I say, I call your attention then, to the children of Jacob, while I pout out particularly to you his son Joseph...as he existed within the heathen nation...I ask those people who treat us so well, Oh! I ask them, where is the most barren spot of land which they have given unto us?...Oh! that the coloured people were long since of Moses’ excellent disposition, instead of courting favour with, and telling news and lies to our *natural enemies*, against each other—aiding them to keep their hellish chains of slavery upon us [author’s italics] [Walker 183, 184-5].

Walker uses the Jewish tales, which would have been well-known to a Bible-reading audience in the nineteenth century, to point out the white hypocrisy of perpetuating enslavement of a people who might even look like the ancient Hebrews. It is no surprise, then, that strong Jewish characters like Queen Esther become the foundations for black characters in later works.

7 Nero references the work of Sidnie Ann White in this passage: White, Sidnie Ann. ““Esther: A Feminine Model for Jewish Diapora.” In Peggy L. Day (ed.), *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1989. Nero’s work on transgendered speech in Booker T. Washington’s Atlanta address uses the example of Esther extensively, and he makes a very good case for why the Jewish queen has remained a role model for black women and men throughout history.

8 This idea resembles the concept of “spirit writing” outlined in the essay “African Signs & Spirit Writing,” by Harryette Mullen, found in the Works Cited section. *Sula’s worldview contains many examples of how outside signs can be interpreted with internal meanings, similar to the concept presented in Mullen’s essay:

"If it can be demonstrated that aspects of African religious practice, such as spirit possession, survive in contemporary worship in many black churches [footnote to Wahlman, whom Mullen has just finished citing], then it may not be too great a stretch to suppose that similar spiritual values, including even a 'miniaturization' of spirit possession, might also survive in a comparable tradition of visionary writing. The ability to produce knowledge through 'readings' of signs offered by the natural world, as well as the freedom African-American visionaries have found in submission to a spiritual force experienced as the interiorization of an external self-validating power certainly have resonance" (Mullen 681).

The ‘miniaturized’ possession that Mullen mentions does not appear in *Sula*, but it does show up in other work by Morrison, such as *Beloved*, as in the preaching scenes in the wilderness with Baby Suggs and the later near-possession of Sethe in the same location.


11 To support her points on trauma as a form of memory and history, Tettenborn draws upon Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, & History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.

12 I suspect but have been unable to concretely determine whether Wheatley is named after the African American poet Phyllis Wheatley, perhaps as a nod to both the time period in which Doro founds his settlement and the implied presence of an authorial hand in its shaping. If the latter in particular is true, this lends additional credence to the importance of text and authorship within the work of mythographers like Octavia E. Butler, as explored earlier in this paper.

13 To some extent, Horace's racial betrayal is captured in his performance of the demon-raising ritual:

> Horace practices occult rituals, which are influenced by reading white texts that are not part of his community's tradition, to exorcise himself of the demon of homosexuality. At the end, the biblical, the religious, and the related faith that have been the traditional mooring remain central from the textual perspective and ironically even to Horace, the tragic consequences notwithstanding (Coleman 181).

Coleman goes on to connect this to the “mysterious history” that Reed provides in *Mumbo Jumbo* as well. Thus both the authorship of Self and the authorship of the places in these novels can be complicated by historical written traditions, as we saw earlier in the section “Books of the Living.” Even using the wrong text to tell one’s story, it seems, is an act of racial violence.
WORKS CITED


