

Othermothers as Elders and Culture Bearers in *Daughters of the Dust* and *The Salt Eaters*

An elder's role is to guide his or her community and thus to lead others on the path to become elders and eventually ancestors. However, as Bunseki Fu-Kiau informs us, everyone does not achieve elder status, as this is not a natural progression like ageing, but an accomplishment dependent on drawing on the wisdom of the ancestors. In *The Way of the Elders: West African Spirituality & Tradition*, authors Adama and Naomi Doumbia observe, "We defer to those older than us to let them know that we appreciate their guidance and all they have to offer" (108). Elders are described as "those who look after us and who hold more responsibility" (108). It is clear from these comments that elders play an important role in the community; however, the respect given to elders is not merely based on their advanced age. In "Ancestors as Elders in Africa," Igor Kopytoff asserts that "the elders' authority is related to their close link to the ancestors. In some sense the elders are the representatives of the ancestors and the mediators between them and the kin-group" (412). In other words, elders serve as conduits of ancestral wisdom through their role as culture bearers because they pass down the wisdom of the ancestors. This close connection between elders and ancestors is particularly evident in Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* and Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*.

Although everyone may not achieve this stage, I would suggest that vigilant elders such as the othermothers in *Daughters of the Dust* and *The Salt Eaters* take up their roles in earnest when they see the

young people they are guiding faltering and in danger of not reaching elderhood. The Peazant family in *Daughters of the Dust* is at a crossroads with some members ready to turn their backs on tradition and migrate to the North. The tension regarding their migration plans is exacerbated by a rape, which threatens to tear a family apart. The situation in *The Salt Eaters* is so bleak that a community organizer turns from marching and signing petitions to attempting suicide. The young adults in these novels have their worldviews challenged and in turn they question their ability to go forward. Thus, the notion of their maturing and eventually becoming elders cannot be taken for granted by their elders—an intervention is necessary.

Although *Daughters of the Dust* is certainly one family's story, viewers also get the sense that their story is in many ways a microcosm of the African American experience. Bambara comments on the significance of the setting of the film at the turn of the century in 1902:

The Peazants and guests gather on the island at Ibo Landing for a picnic at a critical juncture in history—they are one generation away from the Garvey and the New Negro movements, a decade short of the Niagra/NAACP merger. They are in the midst of rapid changes; black people are on the move North, West, and back to Africa (the Oklahoma project, for instance). Setting the story amid oak groves, salt marshes, and a glorious beach is not for the purpose of presenting a nostalgic community in a pastoral setting. They are an imperiled group. (“Reading” 122)

Bambara's choice of “imperiled” to describe the family is particularly apt, as it becomes apparent that their way of life is endangered and the Peazant family is in disarray. As the Unborn Child narrates the film, she tells viewers, “My story begins on the eve of my family's migration north. My story begins before I was born. My great-great-grandmother, Nana Peazant, saw her family coming apart. Her flowers to bloom in a distant frontier” (Dash, *Daughters: Making* 80). Nana is concerned about the impact migration will have on her family. In “Property Rights and Possession in *Daughters of the Dust*,” Nancy Wright talks about this impact in terms of threats, “In the early-twentieth century, decades after the abolition of slavery, the Peazant family faces a different threat to their personhood: cultural dispossession. To leave the islands in 1902 threatens to dissociate those who migrate from their family, culture, and belief systems” (12). As an elder othermother, Nana cannot ignore this threat to the stability of the Peazant family.

Although many critics focus on Nana's status as an elder, this should not be separated from her related role as an othermother. In fact, Nana's maternal function is reflected in her name—she is known by her identity as nana or grandmother—her given name is eclipsed by her role as surrogate mother or othermother. Nana exhibits all of the trademarks of motherhood as identified by Nah Dove. Nana “is the bringer of life, the conduit to the spiritual regeneration of the ancestors, the bearer of culture and the center of social organization” (Dove 4). Nana's maternity is apparent in her role as Eli's great-grandmother, which implies her earlier roles of grandmother and mother to Eli's father and grandfather. Nana is clearly in communication with the ancestors, as indicated by her regular visits to the graveyard, but more significantly Dash uses the terminology “spiritual regeneration” in her stage directions in reference to Nana's preparation of the hand for family members to kiss (Dash, *Daughters: Making* 161). Nana's role as bearer of culture is apparent in her attitude toward tradition and her view of the land as sacred. For example, she tells Eli, “I'm trying to give you something to take North with you, along with all your great big dreams” (96). This is a cultural inheritance that Nana believes is essential for survival. As the elder or central figure of the family, Nana feels responsible for its continuity. “Nana struggles to keep intact that African-derived institution that has been relentlessly under attack through kidnap, enslavement, Christianization, peonage, forced labor gangs, smear campaigns, and mob murder—the family” (Bambara, “Reading” 125). However, keeping the Peasant family intact is a struggle that Nana cannot fight without the aid of the ancestors.

Viewers quickly realize that the family is in the midst of turmoil that Nana senses and that somehow the Unborn Child is aware of the situation. The film then cuts to an image of Eula and Eli in their bedroom. Eula turns toward Eli, but Eli keeps his back to her. The Unborn Child then provides some more information about the scene, “And then, there was my ma and daddy's problem. Nana prayed and the old souls guided me into the New World” (Dash, *Daughters: Making* 80). We then have our first indication that Nana called on the Unborn Child to heal this estrangement between her parents. The Unborn Child tells us that she is “traveling on a spiritual mission” (134). The Unborn Child's assistance is necessary to provide cultural healing to the Peasant family.

I argue that Nana Peasant's intercession to heal the rift between her great-grandson, Eli, and his wife, Eula, is an example of using ancestral cultural healing. As an elder, Nana is able to facilitate this ancestral healing by calling on the ancestors to send the Unborn Child. Significantly, many members of the island community see Nana as an elder or

othermother although she may not be a blood relation. As grandmother, great-grandmother, and elder woman, Nana takes on a maternal role in relation to younger members of the island community. The first images of the film are of Nana and set the stage for all that follows. The first scene is from the 1860s and shows a young Nana with soil like dust blowing from her hands. The film then cuts to 1902 and an 88-year-old Nana rising out of the water fully dressed. According to Jacqueline Bobo, “The old woman bathing in the river symbolizes rebirth and the integral connection of the old with the new” (136). This connection between the present and past is reinforced by the opening words of the film taken from the Gnostic scriptures, “Thunder: Perfect Mind,” “I am the first and the last” (Dash, *Daughters: Making* 75). This contradictory statement alerts the viewer that perhaps time is nonlinear and as the film progresses this connection between the present and the past seems to operate in a cyclical manner. In fact, this cyclical movement is indicated by the way the camera angles tap into the counter clockwise movement of the Kongo cosmogram, a quartered circle, which symbolizes the Kongo notion of the continuity of life. Bobo observes, “In *Daughters of the Dust* references to the past are usually made through scenes in which a character travels left across the screen or looks off to the left” (148). The cosmogram depicts the counterclockwise movement of people from birth, dawn; life, noon; death, sunset; and afterlife, midnight. This along with Dash’s allusion to the cosmogram through the symbol painted on the turtle’s back suggests her very conscious incorporation of Kongo cosmology.

In the introduction, I noted that I am not arguing that the women I am discussing have direct knowledge of Kongo cosmology, but instead that there is an uncanny reflection of Kongo cosmology in their usage of elder, ancestor, and child figures. However, such a caveat is not necessary in a discussion of *Daughters of the Dust*, which Dash researched for many years. She visited the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the National Archives in Washington, DC, the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian, and the Penn Center on St. Helena Island. She also sought the advice of Gullah expert, Dr. Margaret Washington Creel (Dash, “Making” 5–7). Yet the most explicit reference to Kongo cosmology is the use of a turtle painted with a circle and a cross in one of the picnic scenes. The stage directions and notations in the screenplay make it clear that the inclusion of the turtle is not incidental. The stage directions read: “Holding the turtle. The young boys have painted an African symbol on the back of the turtle. An encoded message, an ‘S.O.S.’ to relatives across the sea, markings passed down through generations who have long since forgotten their exact meaning.” To the side of these

directions, Dash has noted, “use Ki-Kongo symbol” (Dash, *Daughters: Making* 147). Thus, it is clear that Dash is indeed aware of some aspects of Kongo cosmology and her use of elder, ancestor, and child figures are definitely informed by these beliefs.

In a passing comment regarding *Daughters of the Dust*, educator, Annette Henry, identifies Nana Peazant as both the eldest family member and the representation of the African ancestral past (184). Nana is the glue that keeps the Peazant family connected to their ancestors. However, the nature of this connection goes beyond her role of family historian. According to cultural critic, Patricia Mellencamp, Nana Peazant is “the guardian of legend and the spirits” (151). Nana’s relationship to the family’s African ancestral past is revealed through her references to herself and the Unborn Child: “Nana’s phrases, ‘the last of the old’ referring to herself, the eldest living member of the family, and ‘the first of the new’ referring to Eula’s unborn child, define the family as a continuum maintaining the relationship of the living Gullah family to their African ancestors, African culture, and their aboriginal homeland” (Wright 21–22). Although I agree with Wright’s assessment regarding the family as a continuum, it is important to note that Nana is not consistent in her use of these phrases. The first time these phrases are used, they both are directed toward herself. Early in the film as Nana watches her family prepare dinner, she reflects on the past and we hear her thoughts as a voiceover, “I’m the last of the old and the first of the new” (Dash, *Daughters: Making* 105). Then toward the end of the film, as she makes the hand to connect her migrating family to their ancestors, she says, “We are two people in one body. The last of the old, and the first of the new” (151). These statements about herself and the Unborn Child seem to reflect a belief in reincarnation as discussed by both John Mbiti and Janheinz Jahn.¹ This point is addressed further in the final chapter, but my intention here is to show the continuity of Nana as elder and ancestor in the making while also using the Unborn Child as an illustration of the close proximity between ancestors and children because children have just come from the world of the ancestors. Nana is in tune with her ancestors and is very much aware of the cyclical nature of life and she wishes to share this knowledge with her descendants so that they too will remain connected with their ancestors.

This transmission of traditions and culture is central to her role as culture bearer and elder. Although many viewers might focus on the lush imagery of the food and beach and think of the setting as merely a farewell dinner or gathering, Bambara’s reference to the event as a family council seems to be more to the point: “Nana Peazant has called a family council because values are shifting. There’s talk of migration.

The ancestral home is being rejected on the grounds of limited educational and job opportunities” (“Reading” 124). This is not merely a moment for leave taking, but a teaching moment. According to film critic Manthia Diawara, “As the oldest person in the Peasant family, her role is that of teacher” (17). Teaching is at the core of the elder’s responsibilities. Thus even though Eula married into the Peasant family, she respects her husband’s great-grandmother as her own and looks to Nana to teach her the old ways. One of these old ways is communing with the dead. Eula tells her husband’s cousin, Yellow Mary, and her friend, Trula, about her mother visiting her after she wrote her a letter and placed it under the bed with a glass of water. In amusement, Yellow Mary laughs “Eula! You’re a real back-water Geechee girl!” (Dash, *Daughters: Making* 120). Nana would not have laughed at Eula because she recognizes the importance of family bonds. On the eve of their migration north, Nana creates a “Hand” or charm that includes hair from her deceased mother as well as her own hair because “There must be a bond . . . a connection, between those that go up North, and those who across the sea. A connection!” (151). Nana, as an elder, realizes the importance of respecting one’s ancestors.

However, although the younger island inhabitants may not fully understand Nana’s ways, most hold her in high regard. This is in part out of respect for wisdom associated with a long life, but also for the elder’s proximity to the ancestors. Ancestors are seen as sources of ancient wisdom, which forms the backbone of the community, as “[t]he ancestor’s life crystallizes the teachings of the family, of the ethnic group and the culture” (Ela 42). Although the ancestor is the focus of the next section, this chapter’s discussion of elders illustrates the overlap between these two stages. Part of Nana’s wisdom as an elder is drawn from her connection to the ancestors. For example, Jahn observes in *Muntu: The New African Culture*, “the wise man is ‘nearer to the dead’ and has already a ‘share in their nature’” (111). Thus, Nana’s wisdom as an elder is akin to having the ancestor’s ear. Nana recognizes the power of the ancestors and thus calls on them for aid.

Nana values the intercession of the ancestors and seeks to impart that knowledge to the young people. For example, when Eli finds Nana by her husband’s grave, she tells him: “I visit with old Peasant every day since the day he died. It’s up to the living to keep in touch with the dead, Eli. Man’s power doesn’t end with death. We just move on to a new place, a place where we watch over our living family . . .” (93). Nana exhorts Eli to respect his ancestors; however, she extends her point by associating the ancestors and the womb. Nana tells him, “Those in this grave, like those who’re across the sea, they’re with us.

They're all the same. The ancestors and the womb are one. Call on your ancestors, Eli. Let them guide you. You need their strength'" (94–95). In Chapter 5, I note the revision of *partus sequitur ventrem* implied by Nana's association of ancestors and the womb; however, because my focus here is on Nana's role of elder rather than the relationship between the ancestors and the Unborn Child I do not elaborate on that point. With these words, Nana attempts to console Eli. However, she does this by pointing to the strength of the ancestors because she realizes that the ancestors are a source of healing powers. Both Wright and McKoy comment on the significance of the graveyard for the setting of this scene. According to Wright:

the graveyard on Dawtaw Island [*sic*]² is a potent symbol of the descendant family's continuing relationship to their ancestors and to the island where they survived. Dispossession from their original culture, Nana insists, did not occur when the middle passage transported ancestors to the island, and need not happen when descendants migrate from Dawtaw Island [*sic*] to the North. (18)

Just as she communes with her deceased husband, Nana urges Eli to reach out to his deceased ancestors in order to retain a connection to his past. McKoy discusses Nana's respect for her ancestral past in terms of her understanding of limbo time:

What enables Nana to embrace her culture is her understanding of limbo time; what separates Eli from his roots is his inability to understand how his ancestors' lives impact his own. Nana literally reaches across Old Eli's grave symbolically reaching across time to show Eli that his survival is dependent upon his understanding his relationship with his ancestors. Dash uses the graveyard to figure limbo time as the blending of generational narratives across time. Having never established a link with his ancestors, Eli is situated both literally and figuratively on the other side of the grave from Nana. (219–20)

Their placement on different sides of the grave is indicative of the breach in the family—both the tension in Eli and Eula's home and the strain surrounding the planned migration. Nana attempts to comfort Eli who is concerned that the child Eula is carrying is a product of rape. She wants him to understand that he “‘won't ever have a baby that wasn't

sent to'” him (Dash, *Daughters: Making* 94). Despite Nana's attempts to comfort him and offer him counsel, Eli is too consumed with anger to take his great-grandmother's words to heart.

Eli instead mocks his great-grandmother, when he asks “were the old souls too deep in their graves to give a damn about my wife while some stranger was riding her?” (95). Eula's rape has shaken Eli's belief in his grandmother and the old ways. He tells her, “When we were children, we really believed you could work the good out of evil. We believed in the newsprint on the walls. . . . Your tree of glass jars and bottles. . . . The rice you carried in your pockets. We believed in the frizzled-haired chickens. . . . The coins, the roots and the flowers. We believed they would protect us and every little thing we owned or loved” (95–96). In her interview with bell hooks, Dash observes, “The bottle trees, positioned outside of the Peazants' shanty, were for protection—protection from malevolent or evil spirits. It's my understanding that each bottle would represent a deceased family member or ancestor. The spirits would radiate good will, protection, and luck upon the family's house” (hooks and Dash 43). Eli takes his anger out on the bottle tree by shattering the bottles as he strikes the tree again and again. Between images of Eli striking the bottle tree, we see the terrified Eula covering her ears and cowering in fear.

The scene then dissolves to the Unborn Child running along the beach. In a voiceover, viewers hear: “Nana prayed for help. I got there just in time” (Dash, *Daughters: Making* 99). Nana can feel the child in the wind. In another voiceover, Nana says, “Come, child, come!” (99). Thus Nana and the Unborn Child communicate through this exchange of voiceovers, as if engaging in an ancestral call and response. The elder Nana called and the Unborn Child echoes the ancestors' response. As an elder, Nana calls on the ancestors for assistance and they respond via the Unborn Child. According to Somé, “Elders become involved with a new life practically from the moment of conception because the unborn child has just come from the place they are going to” (*Of Water* 20). Nana is not the only one to call on the ancestors. Eula reaches out to her deceased mother, ostensibly to get counsel regarding her situation with Eli. She tells Yellow Mary and Trula, “My Ma came to me last night, you know. She took me by the hand” (Dash, *Daughters: Making* 119). Eula's mother has been dead a long time, but as she explains: “I needed to see my Ma. I need to talk to her. So I wrote her a letter, put it beneath the bed with a glass of water, and I waited. I waited, and my Ma came to me. She came to me right away” (119). Although Eula is not an elder, she has absorbed Nana's teachings, and looks to Nana to teach her the old ways such as communicating with the dead

to receive their guidance. Nana reflects on this connection, “Eula said I was the bridge that they crossed over on. I was the tie between then and now. Between the past and the story that was to come” (107). Nana’s goal throughout the film seems to be getting the younger generation to recognize the power of the ancestors as a resource for survival, especially in light of the mounting lynching activity and the planned migration. Thus, Nana is not the source of cultural healing, but instead points the way to the ancestors as a source of strength and survival.

This notion of ancestors as a resource for survival is reflected in Dash’s treatment of the Ibo legend. The Unborn Child leads Eli and Eula to the graveyard for a private moment to commune with the spirits. According to Foluke Ogunleye, “Eli goes into a trance-like experience in which he interacts in his spirit with his ancestors and his unborn child. Through this, he achieves an epiphanic understanding, which helps him to realize that there is a life beyond the physical. He consequently understands, in a personal way, all that his grandmother had been striving to pass across to him” (165). Nana had told Eli, “‘Call on those old Africans, Eli. They’ll come to you when you least expect them. They’ll hug you up quick and soft like the warm sweet wind. Let those old souls come into your heart, Eli. Let them touch you with the hands of time. Let them feed your head with wisdom that ain’t from this day and time’” (97). This seems to be what both Eli and Eula do, as reflected in their acting out of the Ibo legend. Eula’s reciting of the legend and Eli’s mimicking of the Ibo’s actions indicates their acceptance of the lessons of their ancestors—they are showing their willingness to turn to their ancestors for guidance. In “Souls at the Crossroads, Africans on the Water,” Sara Clarke Kaplan notes that it is “immediately after both she and Eli have been embraced by these spirits that Eula recounts to her unborn child the first version of the legend of the Ibo: how, when brought to shore, these ‘last Africans’ looked around them and saw ‘all that had come before and all that was yet to come’ . . . and walked back over the water, home to Africa” (518). While Eula is reciting the legend to the Unborn Child, Eli is actually walking on the water, as the Ibo before him. Eli and Eula have come full circle, as their Unborn Child has led them to reconnect with their ancestors.

The film ends with Eli and Eula deciding to stay behind with Yellow Mary and Nana Peazant, rather than going north with the other members of the family. According to Joel Brouwer, “Their decision is an implicit confirmation of ‘the old ways’: the religion of ancestor veneration, the acute awareness of the spirits of the dead and their connection with the living and the not-yet-born, and the valuing of community above the individual” (8). Nana has successfully impressed upon Eli, Eula,

and Yellow Mary the importance of honoring their ancestors. However, I would argue that Nana also makes an impression on those who still choose to leave. During the farewell ceremony in which Nana prepares a hand using her mother's hair and a bible, she imparts a message regarding the importance of their family bond with each other and with their ancestors. Wright argues that Nana "wishes to transfer this understanding of their relationship to one another and to Dawtaw Island [*sic*] as an inheritance or 'estate' to take with them when they migrate to the North" (20). Bambara has a similar reading of the gesture of kissing the hand as "a vow to struggle against amnesia, to resist the lures and bribes up North that may cause them to betray their individual and collective integrity" ("Reading" 125). Kissing the hand acts as an inoculation against cultural amnesia. This moment creates a great deal of consternation for some members of the family because they realize a clean break with the past is not possible. For example, in Bobo's reading of the film she notes how Viola begins to come undone with disheveled clothes and unruly hair as the time for departure nears and she understands that she will be leaving her grandmother and her home. However, for Bobo, Viola's discomfort is resolved when she "realizes the value of her grandmother's traditions and folk beliefs" and "kisses the 'hand' that her grandmother has fixed as a gesture of reconciliation of her past with her future" (155–56). Hagar, however, refuses to indulge in what she calls, "Hoodoo mess!" (Dash, *Daughters: Making* 161). The elder's reach is not perfect, but Nana is able to impart her message to several members of the younger generation. The Unborn Child closes the film with a voiceover, "We remained behind, growing older, wiser, stronger" (164). Surely this strength and wisdom is not possible without the guidance of elders and the intercession of ancestors.

Just as Nana is concerned about the younger generation turning their backs on the ancestors and the old ways with all of their talk of migration, the elder othermothers of Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* are concerned that the younger generation is ailing as a result of their disconnection from their ancestors. *The Salt Eaters* is replete with both elder and ancestral othermothers. Minnie Ransom and Sophie Heywood both serve as othermothers for Velma, while Karen Wilder was an othermother for Minnie and Sophie—thus creating concentric circles of motherly concern. Susan Willis argues that "[t]he desire to formulate a feminist perspective on history accounts for the centrality of mother figures in Bambara's writing. Her radicalism is to suggest how mothering, which in the nuclear family is necessary and acceptable to male-dominated society, might be extended into the community and transformed" (157). Yet, I would argue that this is not particularly

radical within African American circles as Patricia Hill Collins has noted the prevalence of othermothering within African American communities (119). Thus I would counter that the centrality of mother figures is due to the importance of motherhood within African American culture. In her essay, "An Angle of Seeing: Motherhood in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* and Alice Walker's *Meridian*," Barbara Christian asserts that "[t]he concept of motherhood is of central importance in both the philosophy of African and Afro-American peoples . . ." (213). Using the work of African philosopher Cheikh Anta Diop, African writer, Ayi Kwei Armah, and African theologian John Mbiti, Christian illustrates the respect given to mothers in African societies (213–24). In extending her argument to the African American community, Christian notes the contradictions and contrasts between white and black motherhood associated with slavery; however she suggests, "The centrality of motherhood in Afro-American culture probably has its roots in African culture" (220). Christian also points to a recurring concern with motherhood in African American literature from as early as *Clotel* (1850) to more recent writers such as Sarah Wright, Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, and Alice Walker (224–26).

Thus Bambara's othermothers are part of a larger conversation regarding motherhood; however, I am particularly interested in the way in which these mother figures are used to transmit culture. Yet, if we would like to agree with Willis that Bambara is being radical in her use of othermothers, I would say that her radicalism comes in extending this realm beyond the grave. In discussing the pervasiveness of ghosts in women's texts, Kathleen Brogan observes that ghosts provide "a metaphor for how women's more restrictively defined roles as bearers of culture might be reconceived" (15). According to Brogan, "the shift from metaphors of blood descent to ghostly inheritances reframes cultural transmission" (15). We definitely see this at play here as Old Wife, a non-blood relation, participates in the transmission of culture through her role in the healing session, which ultimately leads to Velma's acceptance of her gift, which can be read as the acceptance of her cultural inheritance.

I see this gift as an inheritance of sorts because Sophie, Velma's godmother and the midwife who delivered her, had actually sensed Velma's gift at the moment of her birth and had later seen the signs of Velma's visions and rejections of her gift (Bambara, *Salt* 293–94). Bambara's use of the word "gift" and its presence from the moment of Velma's birth suggest that this gift is inherited or passed down to Velma by her ancestors. I say ancestors rather than mother because Velma's "blood mother," Mama Mae (11–12) is such a nebulous presence. The

emphasis is not on Velma's biological mother, but on the community of othermothers in her life. Thus, although Sophie is described as being at every major event in Velma's life, she is not a substitute for Mama Mae, but an additional source of maternal wisdom over the years. In *Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature*, Trudier Harris notes that Minnie "becomes 'mother' to Velma during the healing process, for Velma's godmother, M'Dear Sophie, leaves the healing room, and her biological mother, Mama Mae, is on a church retreat when Velma tries to kill herself" (80). The nurturing role that Minnie plays with regard to Velma is not unlike that played years before by Karen for Minnie and Sophie and other children of the community. This point is reiterated by Willis' assessment that "[t]he most central of the novel's mother figures is, of course, Minnie Ransom. . . . Minnie is aided in her curing by another maternal figure, one whose relationship to myth and the folk tradition are much deeper. This is 'Old Wife,' Minnie's spirit guide . . ." (155-56). The fact that Minnie and Old Wife work together to heal Velma suggests that the healing session is a communal act. In "Mechanisms of Disease: African-American Women Writers, Social Pathologies, and the Limits of Medicine," Ann Folwell Stanford notes, "individuals are healed within community and restored to the community when well. . . ." (32). In fact, in the introduction I observe that the circular structure of the healing session is indicative of the communal nature of the healing session. However, Willis makes a related point regarding women's communities in reference to the pairing of Old Wife and Minnie. According to Willis, "In doubling the figure of the maternal healer, Bambara creates a link between present and past cultural practice and she suggests the incipient basis for sisterhood. The unity of purpose and the supportive interaction, as well as the lively banter and respectful rivalry, are all characteristics that would define a larger collectivity of women" (156). This is not to say that men are not integral to the text as represented by such characters as Obie and Serge, but there does seem to be an emphasis on maternal networks of mothers and othermothers. Old Wife or Karen Wilder is an othermother who served as an elder while living and is now in the realm of the ancestors, which illustrates my earlier point about elders being ancestors in the making.

Minnie Ransom is both healer and elder in *The Salt Eaters*, which opens and closes with a healing session for Velma, after her attempted suicide. According to literary critic, Derek Alwes, Minnie is "clearly the voice of greatest authority in the novel" (355). However, the authority Minnie has seems to be related to her own connection to her ancestor and spiritual guide, Old Wife. When the healing session proves to

be more difficult than she had anticipated, Minnie consults with Old Wife, “‘What’s ailing the Henry gal so, Old Wife? Not that I’m sure I can match her frequency anyway. She’s draining me’” (Bambara, *Salt* 42). Minnie doesn’t understand what has happened to the young girls, “‘What is wrong, Old Wife? What is happening to the daughters of the yam? Seem like they just don’t know how to draw up the powers from the deep like before. Not full sunned and sweet anymore’” (44). Old Wife responds that they are acting more like Irish potatoes than yams; in other words, these younger girls are losing touch with their culture. The potato imagery works particularly well because the notion of faded Irish potatoes versus golden yams suggests the white washing of their cultural identity while also calling attention to the possibility of drawing upon one’s roots or the “powers from the deep.” These women need not be like Irish potatoes, but at some point they lost their connection to their cultural roots. This conversation between Old Wife and Minnie supports David Ikard’s contention:

that the inability of blacks to usefully access or utilize their ancestral powers is inextricably linked to their acceptance of white-centered cultural values and consciousness. That is, blacks do not seek cultural-specific answers to their social and political queries because they have been conditioned to venerate the dominant culture’s notions of self and reality and treat their African history and ancestry with suspicion and shame. (81)

Although Minnie understands the problem, she is not quite sure how to fix it and turns to Old Wife for advice: “‘We got a problem here. I can’t quite reach this chile and you keep acting like you dumb as me stead of telling me what to do’” (Bambara, *Salt* 50). As Minnie reminisces with Old Wife the “woman friend who’d been with her for most of her life, one way and then another,” it becomes clear that for Minnie health and wholeness involve being in tune with one’s elders and ancestors.

Karla Holloway observes, “In Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters*, the plight of ‘the daughters of the yam’—the set adrift, groundless black American women whose primal ground is Africa’s is bemoaned by the ancestor who hovers over the events” (105). The ancestor, Old Wife, is disturbed that women such as Velma who should be blossoming into elders are in danger of becoming stunted ancestors. As I discussed in the introduction, everyone is not able to achieve elder status; however, the source of Old Wife, Minnie, and even Sophie’s frustration seems to be Velma’s

willingness to turn her back on her gift and essentially her past and her potential. Yet, Minnie and Old Wife's relationship also reminds us that resistance to the unknown is not uncommon. "The women in this novel who possess the gift do so with trepidation because of the frightening and powerful images that accompany it, and the fact that it simply defies logic. Harnessing it requires years of training and discipline" (Harrison 693). Thus, Velma's fear of the unknown is understandable and to some degree resistance is to be expected, but Velma goes too far when she attempts suicide rather than accept her gift. Sophie wishes she could admonish Velma for her actions, but she has taken a vow of silence and can only criticize Velma in her thoughts, "And did you think your life is yours alone to do with as you please? That I, your folks, your family, and all who care for you have no say-so in the matter?" (Bambara, *Salt* 148). Thus, for Sophie, Velma's rejection of her gift and suicide attempt is essentially a slap in the face of her community, which is probably why she imagines slapping Velma as she thinks these thoughts. But for Velma her resistance to the visions of the mud mothers was about self-preservation.

She began seeing the images as a child and tried to avoid them as best she could:

In the attic they came in the mirror once. Ten or more women with mud hair, storing yams in gourds and pebbles in cracked calabash. And tucking babies in hairy hides. They came like a Polaroid. Stepping out of the mouth of the cave, they tried to climb out of the speckled glass, talk to her, tell her what must be done all over again, all over again, all over again. But she hung an old velvet drape over the mirror and smothered them. They were not going to run her off her own place. Not the attic. (255)

This clearly illustrates Daryl Cumber Dance's contention that Velma is initially not "ready for the ancient wisdom born into her unconscious mind from the experiences of her foremothers, those mud mothers whose many earlier calls to her she had never heeded" (178). Velma's resistance to the ancestral call is not unlike Avey's resistance in *Praisesong*, which will be addressed in the next chapter. Both women have a similar response because they have become distanced from their cultural roots. The notion of communing with the ancestors, which Nana finds normal and comforting in *Daughters of the Dust* seems disruptive and frightening to those like Avey and Velma who are unfamiliar with the African tradition of honoring one's ancestors. Thus, Velma's visions of

the mud mothers had her worried that she too would begin doing crazy things like Minnie and begin eating dirt. After all, people have already begun to whisper that Velma is a “crackpot” (Bambara 94). Harris reflects on Minnie’s initial difficulties with being selected for special powers and the concern her actions generated for her family and neighbors, but notes that she is guided “through the transition of being chosen” by Karen Wilder” (*Saints* 82–83). Minnie is able to get through this difficult period in her life with the assistance of an elder.

Karen Wilder or Old Wife had been Minnie’s elder before she transitioned to the realm of ancestors; however, Minnie realizes that “[n]othing much had changed since she passed” (51). Minnie and Old Wife continue to have the same type of relationship in which Old Wife provides Minnie with guidance. In fact, it was Old Wife who foretold the unfolding of Minnie’s gift. The women telepathically communicate with each other as they reminisce about the past and consider the future. Minnie seems impatient to learn more from Old Wife, whom she believes must be privy to even greater knowledge now that she is deceased: “‘Seems to me Old Wife, that by now you should so well know all these things, you’d have things to tell me. You been dead long enough?’” (56). Minnie’s question reveals a craving for knowledge and an expectation that as an ancestor, Old Wife is privy to privileged information. However, Old Wife’s comments suggest that Minnie was not as respectful as a child. In response to Minnie’s assertion, “‘When I was a young girl I thought you were the wisest,’” Old Wife counters, “‘You thought I was crazy as a loon’” (56). Minnie then acknowledges that Old Wife was “crazy as could be,” but she says “‘I knew you were special’” (56). This bantering goes back and forth with Old Wife reminding Minnie that she said that she smelled and that they called her a witch, but Minnie insisting that Old Wife “‘had a way of teaching us kids things’” (57). Minnie has the last word as she reminds her about how she, Sophie, Serge, and Cleotus used to hang around her candy stand, “‘We used to like to hear you and Wilder talking over the old days and things like that. I know you know that or you wouldn’t’ve been telling us kids things to do and think about and read and check out and reach for. We couldn’t’ve grown up without you, Old Wife. None of us’” (57). This conversation is illustrative of the guiding force of elders even if the immediate effect is not apparent. However, what is particularly significant is that the other children that Minnie mentions all grow up to have some kind of special power or nontraditional knowledge. Minnie becomes a healer, while Sophie and Serge are also associated with the Southwest Community Infirmary. Sophie is described as clairvoyant, whereas Serge seems like a trickster; however, he does

seem to be aware of Velma's gift as he recognizes when she is ready for training, which implies that he too may have some degree of clairvoyance. Cleotus is never actually present in the text, but is sought out as someone for others to study with, which suggests that he is seen as having some kind of specialized knowledge. Their knowledge or power seems to be related to the knowledge they gained from their elders, Karen and Wilder.

Minnie's reflections on the impact of Old Wife and Wilder are echoed by Velma's memories of her interactions with Sophie and Daddy Dolphy. For example, Velma recalls a time when a snake in the woods bit Daddy Dolphy and Sophie quickly places a salt poultice in his wound; however, Sophie's gathering basket often gets overlooked in discussions of this incident. Sophie and Daddy Dolphy had taken Velma into the woods to teach her how to gather useful plants and flowers—she was likely being indoctrinated into traditional medicinal arts. For critic Eleanor Traylor, characters such as Minnie Ransom, Old Wife, Daddy Dolphy (and I would add Sophie) represent “the ancestral best commenting on the worst values and traditions and *ethos* of the race as it evolves and meets the challenges of time, present and future” (67). Traylor asserts, “The meaning of ancestry, and consequently, the meaning of modernity is the primary focus of the Bambara narrator. . . . But ancestry . . . is no mere equivalent of the past. Rather, ancestry is the sum of the accumulated wisdom of the race through time, as it manifests itself in the living, in the *e'gungun*, and in the yet unborn” (65–66).³ This notion of ancestry reinforces my argument regarding the triad of life stages; however, rather than looking at the living broadly I focus specifically on the elder. The *e'gungun* or ancestors occupy the next stage, while the child figure—the born and unborn—occupy the final stage. Yet, each of these stages reveal the touch of the ancestor as elders are on the way to becoming ancestors and children have just come from the realm of the ancestors. Velma's difficulty, however, is her initial resistance to the call of the ancestors, whether it comes directly from the ancestral mud mothers or is delivered via her elders.

Thus Velma, like other members of the younger generation, has resisted the lessons of her elders. Minnie complains to Old Wife that “‘the children are spoiling,’” but Old Wife reminds her that the children are still their responsibility (Alwes 359). Alwes notes that “if the children are ‘spoiling,’ if they are forgetting the values of the community, it is because the elders have not sufficiently indoctrinated them in the communal wisdom and values, have not kept alive the historical and cultural realities that distinguish them from other people, other races” (359). We find a similar argument coming from an unexpected source—Eliza-

beth Harrison, registered nurse and a professor of nursing. In her essay, "Intolerable Human Suffering and the Role of the Ancestor: Literary Criticism as a Means of Analysis," Harrison asserts, "For Velma, suffering becomes intolerable because she loses touch with the ancestor" (692). Although Harrison is using literary theory and drawing on Toni Morrison's view of the ancestor, the purpose of her essay published in the *Journal of Advanced Nursing* is to aid nurses. Harrison argues, "Nurses must learn to recognize intolerable human suffering, to identify the patient's ancestral system, and to work within that system to keep suffering patients from harm" (689). As I do in the introduction, Harrison draws on Morrison's "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," in which she describes ancestors as "timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, protective and they provide a certain kind of wisdom" (343). However, Harrison extends Morrison's notion of the ancestor to include traditions. Thus, Harrison blames Velma's pain on her violation of cultural traditions, which is essentially a rejection of her ancestral system. For instance Harrison argues, "In the process of building her career, Velma had distanced herself from a fundamental ethic (interconnectedness) of her people, and as a result, her suffering increased exponentially until her only recourse was to end her life" (693). A similar point is made by Stanford, Velma "has many friends and belongs to collectives and political organizations, but her sense of connectedness to her past and to those with whom she lives and those she seeks to serve, is weakened by her excessive reliance on herself" (33). In other words, Velma's self-reliance is not conducive to the communal perspective one might expect of an elder responsible for maintaining communal stability. In fact, if she had this communal perspective, she would realize that suicide is the ultimate selfish act. According to Willis, "Velma Henry's attempted suicide is a figural device for asking, in an agonizing way, what will be the terms of the individual's relationship to loved ones and community, to past tradition and future society. Suicide represents the individual's renunciation of any connection with society; it is the individual's ultimate statement of autonomy" (153). It is this excessive autonomy and total disregard for others that leads Sophie to consider hitting Velma in order to knock some sense into her. Velma seems to have no sense of responsibility towards her family and others who care for her, as her decision to commit suicide does not take them into account.

In fact, it is a sense of responsibility that Old Wife uses to inspire Minnie during the difficult healing session. She tells Minnie, "love won't let you let'm go" (Bambara, *Salt* 61). Minnie reaffirms this by acknowledging, "the chirren are our glory" (62). Prior to this,

Minnie had been stalling because the healing session had proven to be more challenging than usual. This was no routine healing session—Velma is among this generation of spoiling children and thus is in need of ancestral cultural healing. However, Minnie is only ready to proceed with this difficult healing session after she has sought guidance from her ancestor—Old Wife.

With Old Wife's assistance, Minnie finally connects with Velma. Nadeen was one of the first to notice the break through as she "saw something drop away from Mrs. Henry's face" (101). Later, as Nadeen sees Velma's wrists heal before her eyes she acknowledges that this is a real healing session, unlike the revival healings she had been to before. According to Harris, "Nadeen's function here is not simply to serve as a validating witness to the current action, but also to validate the traditions from which Minnie is drawing to heal Velma" (*Saints* 82). Gloria T. Hull asserts that "Bambara's handling of this healing stems from the fact that she believes in 'the spiritual arts'—that is, all those avenues of knowing/being which are opposed to the 'rational,' 'Western,' 'scientific' mode . . ." (220). Hull's assessment is supported by Bambara's comments in her interview with Zala Chandler, in which she notes the difficulty of validating the psychic and spiritual existence in our lives, "As a result, those of us who are adept, who have dormant powers, have to expend a great deal of time and energy denying it and suppressing it—to the detriment of the individual and the entire community" (Chandler 348). In her conversation with Chandler, Bambara repeatedly notes our preference to pretend we are not clairvoyant or telepathic and to deny one's powers. She insists, "reality is also psychic. That is to say, in addition to all the other things, for example, the political, we live in a system guided by a spiritual order" (347). For Bambara, wholeness involves the political, psychic, spiritual, cultural, intellectual, aesthetic, physical, and economic. According to Bambara, "[t]here is a responsibility to self and to history that is developed once you are 'whole,' once you are well, once you acknowledge your powers" (348). Thus, the necessity of uniting the political and the spiritual is essential for Velma's healing.

Based on her interview with Bambara, Chandler asserts that in addition to linking the political and spiritual, Bambara believes that successful movements "must rely upon the people of ancient and current yesterdays who remain spiritually in Black people's lives as they move forward" (343). Bambara's concern for the ancestral presence is reflected in her comments to Chandler regarding those Africans lost in the ocean during the Middle Passage, "All those African bones in the briny deep. All those people who said 'no' and jumped ship. All those

people who tried to figure out a way to steer, to navigate amongst the sharks. We don't call upon that power. We don't call upon those spirits. We don't celebrate those ancestors" (348). Bambara's concern regarding forgotten ancestors seems to echo Holloway's observation in reference to Old Wife's worry about Velma's seeming disconnection from her roots and her ancestors—Bambara is essentially bemoaning African Americans who do not recognize the power of their ancestors. Velma is not an isolated case, but an example of the cultural disconnection within the younger generation. The fact that the novel focuses on Velma is indicative of not only her central role in the community, but of her position as the community's representative. Harris asserts, "Velma is a microcosmic representation of various ills in her community, those physical and emotional . . . as well as those spiritual and political; if she can be saved, then she in turn can save her community" (*Saints* 81). As Velma goes, so goes Claybourne. Thus, Velma's healing will effect the entire community.

Minnie eventually reaches Velma; although, it takes longer than usual. Although some of the onlookers became restless and check their watches, others realized it "[t]ook heart to flat out decide to be well and stride into the future sane and whole. And it took time. So the old-timers and the circle concentrated on their work, for of course patients argued, fought, resisted. Just as Mrs. Velma Henry was fighting still what was her birthright" (108). They, like Minnie, realize that health must be a conscious choice: Velma must choose to be well. Although before Velma can choose health, she must stop resisting her birthright—her gift. Harrison argues that in rejecting the gift, an integral part of Velma's ancestral system "was unavailable to sustain her and the result was profound alienation and suffering" (693). The exact nature of this gift is not specified, but it is connected to her visions of the mud mothers. It is this connection to her foremothers, her ancestors, which establishes Velma's gift as ancestral in nature: "The gift is part of Velma's ancestral system because it is a source of wisdom (increases self-knowledge), it is timeless (includes time-honoured practices), instructive (offers direction), and it bestows protection (re-focuses attention on tradition)" (693). However, Velma cannot benefit from this gift until she is willing to relinquish absolute self-sufficiency and accept guidance from the ancestors. It is during the healing session that "Velma comes to discover, as she embarks on a journey of memory and recollection, that those mud mothers call her to a deeper understanding of who she is within the historical and social community from which she comes" (Stanford 33). With Minnie's help, Velma can be open to the wisdom of her foremothers—wisdom she had glimpsed, but refused to absorb. For

example, she remembers thinking one morning in front of the mirror that something crucial was missing “and the answer had almost come tumbling out of the mirror naked and tattooed with serrated teeth and hair alive, birds and insects peeping out at her from the mud-heavy hanks of the ancient mothers’ hair. And she had fled feverish and agitated from the room . . .” (Bambara, *Salt* 259). Although Velma has been advocating for her community through a variety of organizations, it is during the healing session that it becomes clear that the spiritual is “the missing element in the progressive political movements of the 1960s. . . . [T]o achieve the goals of sixties’ idealism and to respond to the new challenges of the last quarter of the twentieth century, . . . people of color need to recuperate the subjugated knowledge of their foremothers” (Wall 31). Thus Velma can only achieve health when she is willing to accept wholeness, which means accepting her ancestors.

Thus Minnie began the healing session by asking, “Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?” (3). According to literary scholar, Margot Anne Kelley, “Minnie Ransom is one of the characters consistently aware that she can make choices, that she can change the trajectory of the system—and she wants to convey this power to her patients . . .” (489). Minnie not only makes Velma aware of her choices, but that her choices have consequences. So it is not just whether she wants to be well, but also “[c]an [she] afford to be whole?” (Bambara, *Salt* 106). Eventually, Velma answers in the affirmative by stating, “Health is my right” (119). This, however, is not the end of the healing session; Velma must now decide what to do with her wholeness.

The weightiness of this decision threatens to disrupt the healing session. Velma looks out the window only to be called back by Minnie, “The source of health is never outside, sweetheart. What will you do when you are well?” (220). The pressure of the choice sends Velma off as she mentally removes herself from the healing session and imagines herself running “through passageways in search of a particular chamber that might not be sealed off if she hurries and doesn’t think too much on limitations” (250). The healing is then brought back on track as Velma acknowledges that she might have died. The onlookers to the healing session could see the change in Velma. Doc smiles as he watches Velma “come alive in a new way and ready for training . . .” (269). This training will be a form of enculturation and it is this enculturation, which will lead to social change.

The significance of Velma’s healing is marked by an earthquake, which occurs during the session. “Velma would remember it as the moment she started back toward life, the moment when the healer’s hand had touched some vital spot and she was still trying to resist . . . (278).