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“Are You Sure, Sweetheart, That You Want to Be Well?”: The Politics of Mental Health and Long-Suffering in Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters*

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Abstract: In analyzing the woman-centered communal healing ceremony in Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters*, this article considers how these types of womb-like spaces allow female protagonists to access ancestral and spiritual histories that assist them in navigating physical illnesses and mental health crises. It employs Bell Hooks’ *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery* alongside Arthur Kleinman’s definition of illness as social and transactional to demonstrate that the recognition of illness, and the actualization of wellness, necessitates collective and communal efforts informed by spiritual and cultural modes of knowledge, including alternative healing practices and ancestral mediation.

Keywords: health; healing; ancestral mediation; illness; activism; women’s rights

Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters* (1980) opens with a seemingly simple question posed by Minnie Ransom, a healer: “Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?” Minnie returns to this question in various iterations throughout the novel in order to assist the troubled protagonist in finding her own definition of wellness within her turbulent life. *The Salt Eaters* centralizes the problem of illness and the actualization of wellness within a setting that necessitates the presence of medical caregivers, healers, the ill person, and members of their community. In doing so, Bambara creates a symbiotic model that thrives on the dynamic interface between these groups. The question of one’s agency in her own illness and wellness is one that black women writers portray as central not only to the health of the individual but also to the health of their communities;¹ this is particularly the case in *The Salt Eaters*. For Velma, the experience of living with mental illness as a black woman and coming undone psychologically becomes interwoven with certain black cultural and historical traditions and legacies—embodied in Minnie’s character as well as numerous community members that witness Velma’s healing. These legacies are rooted in slavery and cultivated by generations of black Americans for the purpose of survival. Minnie’s question, then, extends beyond Velma’s current state to a *desire* to be well in an uncertain future that is every day impacted by patriarchal and racist institutions; wellness requires continuous and purposeful action. In this way, *The Salt Eaters* exemplifies Bambara’s rich legacy of political activism and rootedness in a collective of black women writers whose work shaped the contours of 20th century African American literature. This chapter considers *The Salt Eaters* in the context of Bell Hooks’ *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery* alongside Arthur Kleinman’s definition of illness as “transactional, communicative and profoundly social” in order to explore “long-suffering” (Kleinman 1989, p. 186) as a problem that plagues black women and communal healing as a solution that manifests as a metaphorical womb in the space of the

¹ See also Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora*, Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place*, and Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*.

novel. I employ a black feminist reparative reading practice to engage specific instances in the text when other characters encounter and interact with Velma in the midst of her healing ceremony and suggest that these interactions exemplify the power (and necessity) of the communal healing space for participants and witnesses as it connects the ill or affected person to members of their community through a shared narrative of struggle related to suffering, illness, and rich cultural and historical legacies. Further, this shared space that functions like a womb empowers and centers the individual and their community as active participants in the larger project of healing and community building.

The Salt Eaters depicts the narrative of Velma Henry, wife, mother, and civil rights activist, as she sits opposite a healer in the treatment room of a local hospital after attempting to kill herself. The novel accesses Velma's memories and the memories of her family, friends, and those impacted by her illness in order to construct a sweeping portrait of Velma's steady descent into mental illness. Through several key points of view, Bambara reveals that Velma has suffered from and struggled with a series of mental breakdowns that force her to neglect caring for herself, her husband, and her son. These perspectives also reveal that those close to Velma knew or had unsettling feelings about her psychological wellbeing but ignored or were unable to come to terms with the severity of her condition until it was too late. Bambara establishes that Velma's mental breakdown is not merely the result of her inability to make sense of the world around her but part of her inheritance as a spiritual guide and healer like her godmother Sophie Heywood. Thus, the novel endeavors to reconcile what Velma cannot know in her ignorance of the spiritual world and what she must come to learn in order to survive. *The Salt Eaters* concludes with Velma still in the infirmary after Minnie safely delivers her from the abyss of her own troubled mind. Velma has identified the source of her current crisis and found a reason to step back into her life—one that anchors her to a legacy of spiritual guides and healers and helps make sense of the noise of the world around her. I reveal the imperative of individual healing in communal spaces in *The Salt Eaters* through careful consideration of the role "long-suffering" plays in affirming and sustaining a culture of unacknowledged pain in black women. This is further evidenced by Nadeen's transformation as she witnesses Velma's healing within the womb-like space created by Minnie and members of Velma's community; Nadeen's character is read as a representative of the next generation.

1. The Role of the Communal Healing Space

Bambara does well to represent existing tensions between medical practitioners and healers even as she structures the text around Velma's healing ceremony. Velma's treatment at Southwest begins with Dr. Julius Meadows caring for the self-inflicted wounds on her wrists after her failed suicide attempt. Once this physical care is administered, Minnie is called in to perform her healing ritual that centers on touch (laying on of hands), song (finding a harmonious chord that allows the patient to harmonize/vibrate in communion with others and themselves), and communal unification (via the presence and participation of the witnesses at Southwest). Given the physician–healer collaborative practice that takes place within Southwest's walls, Velma's case is not an anomaly. In fact, throughout the ceremony Minnie tells Velma about another woman she healed earlier that day. Minnie also speaks to her spirit guide Old Wife about some of the women she has worked with and Dr. Meadows recounts Minnie's patients who would be considered psychiatric cases at other hospitals. However, what is different about Velma's case is her initial resistance to Minnie's form of healing. Minnie's hands are rendered "silent and her fingertips still" as a result of Velma shutting herself off from the world (47). This causes Minnie to deviate from her standard of practice (one that is already considered unconventional), which in turn causes the medical practitioners and community to feel out of step and disjointed. Minnie's approach to healing requires a physical connection that works to recalibrate the body and transition the person from illness to "wholeness". The connection that Minnie establishes hinges on her position as a conduit through which a "healing force" can help the patient uncover and tend to illness and suffering. Typically, Minnie:

... simply placed her left hand on the patient's spine and her right on the navel, then clearing the channels, putting herself aside, she became available to a healing force no one had yet, to

her satisfaction, captured in a name. Her eyelids closed locking out the bounce and bang of light and sound and heat, sealing in the throbbing glow that spread from the corona of light at the crown of the head that moved forward between her brows then fanned out into a petaled rainbow, fanning, pulsing, then contracting again into a single white flame [. . .] Eyes closed and the mind dropping down to the heart, bubbling in the blood then beating, fanning out, flooded and shinning, she knew each way of being in the world and could welcome them home again, open to wholeness. Eyes wide open to the swing from expand to contract, dissolve congeal, release restrict, foot tapping, throat throbbing in song to ebb and flow of renewal, she would welcome them healed into her arms. (Bambara 1980, pp. 47–48)

Bambara's description of Minnie's practice suggests a science of the mind and body that allows Minnie to see and step into her patients—a practice that Toni Morrison's healer Consolata uses to keep other characters alive in *Paradise*. Whereas Consolata utilizes this practice on characters who are near physical death, Minnie employs the practice in order to give her patients health and wholeness. By entering into the body of the patient as a force of light or energy, Minnie effectively discovers and exposes the abnormalities and disturbances to the patient. Minnie listens to the body and uses tapping, humming, and music to bring the patient back into alignment with her body: "she would lean her ear to the chest or place her hand to the base of the spine till her foot tapped and their head bobbed, till it was melodious once more" (p. 48). Minnie's healing ritual seeks to bring balance back to the patient, in Velma's case a spiritual balance, through a therapeutic mediation that occurs within the patient.

The visiting interns, nurses, and technicians observe Minnie's interaction with Velma with amusement, disbelief, or embarrassment (Bambara 1980, p. 9). Some even think Minnie is "goofing off". The goofing off to which the interns refer is Minnie asking questions of and at times touching Velma. Minnie attempts to assess Velma's openness to the healing practice by repeatedly asking her if she's sure that she wants to be well (a question some of the hospital staff think is silly) because Minnie senses that Velma is closed off to anything beyond her own confused thoughts. Minnie's line of inquiry offers Velma an opportunity to decide whether or not she wants to be well and whether or not she is willing to take on the responsibilities of enacting wellness. Further, it allows Velma the chance to finally uncover the pain and strife she has repressed. Through this type of assessment, Minnie attempts to reach Velma and prepare her for the healing, if Velma is willing to relinquish her tight hold on her a precariously pieced together reality.

Bambara acknowledges the importance of non-sexual touching as a means of healing and communicating. Recalling Farah Griffin's discussion of textual healing and Joanne Gabbins' exploration of laying on hands, touch works therapeutically and allows the healer to establish a physical and psychic connection with the affected woman.² Touch also allows Minnie to approach Velma in a way that asks her for a connection that does not take from her (at least not in a negative way). This touch also resists diagnosis as a form of medical treatment and expands rather than limits Velma's role in sustaining her health. Ann Folwell Stanford states that novels that "resist the definitions that would serve as access points for institutionalized, technological medicine" suggest that "medicine's tools are simply inappropriate or that the cure may actually be worse than the illness" (Stanford 2003, p. 16). That Velma remains as spiritually and psychologically damaged when Minnie first encounters her as she was *before* the doctors treated her is an indicator of the failure of the physician model of care to address adequately these types of ruptures. Stanford also notes that "Minnie *loans* her breath to Velma; she does not attempt to breathe for her, nor to surround or entrap her" (Stanford 1993, p. 29). Minnie positions herself in a partnership with Velma in order to assist her in recovering herself even as Minnie exists as the spiritual guide who facilitates Velma's movement towards wholeness.

While the interns view Minnie's actions as undisciplined, her methods do impact Velma far more than the treatments provided by the physicians. Velma is described as being "caught, caught up,

² See Farah Griffin's "Textual Healing" (Griffin 1996) and Joanne Gabbins' "A Laying on of Hands" (Gabbins 1990).

in the weave of the song Minnie was humming, of the shawl, of the threads, of the silvery tendrils that extended from the healer's neck and hands and disappeared into the sheen of the sunlight" (Bambara 1980, p. 4). Minnie is at once open and expansive, occupying space outside of her own body, and focused as she attempts enter into Velma's body to take account of what damage has been done. Bambara associates Minnie with nature as she becomes one with sunlight, and nurture as she embodies the characteristics of a grandmother with silver hair and a shawl. Minnie's presence and her actions signify a coalescence of the maternal healer with western medical practice in a way that exposes and attends to culturally specific trauma. Velma's initial response to Minnie's presence is instructive here as she considers this a "stupid damn question", wonders at how Minnie can be "blind to Velma's exasperation, her pain, her humiliation?", and finally that Minnie seems "unconcerned that any minute she might strike the very note that could shatter Velma's bones" (p. 4). Velma's reaction indicates the precarious nature of unmasking and acknowledging her own vulnerability. For Velma, masking becomes an expression of hiding the unacknowledged pain and humiliation that Minnie's intervention threatens to uncover. Minnie's presence and song reach Velma in much the same way that Celie draws a song out of Shug as Celie bathes her and combs through her hair in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Touch acts as a medium through which one woman can communicate with another in order to move her towards self-reflective practices and ultimately, healing. For Shug, Celie combing her hair in the bathtub acts as a healing balm and Shug begins to hum. Shug calls the song "Miss Celie's Blues". The power of the rhythm and the musical chord permeate Velma so deeply that she feels she must "steel herself against intrusion" (p. 5). Minnie's humming and song are able to reach Velma in ways that clinical interventions could not. While Minnie's questions provide an opening into Velma's psyche, it is the nuanced construction and delivery of Minnie's song that seems to linger even after Minnie stops singing and humming.

Even Minnie's brief laying on of hands helps to reach further into Velma in an attempt to assess whether or not she is open to healing and *desires* wellness. Bambara describes the touch as:

Minnie . . . leaning forward, the balls of three fingers pressed suddenly, warm and fragrant, against Velma's forehead, the left hand catching her in the back of her head, cupping gently the two stony portions of the temporal bone. And Velma was inhaling in gasps, and exhaling shudderingly. She felt aglow, her eyebrows drawing in toward the touch as if to ward off the invading fingers that were threatening to penetrate her skull. And the hands went away quickly, and Velma felt she was losing her eyes. (Bambara 1980, p. 6)

Here, Minnie's touch creates a tension within Velma's body as she actively resists giving in to the healing practice. Velma rejects Minnie's assessment and intervention as a result of her desire to "be sealed, and inviolate" (p. 5). The danger that Velma articulates early on about her bones shattering manifests again as gasps and the fear of temporarily losing her eyes. In this moment when she is devoid of seeing, Velma is made aware of the force and energy that is associated with Minnie's practice; a force that causes her to turn her gaze inward. This inward gaze causes Velma to search for the moment when her psyche splinters. But this process of uncovering the origin of her suffering opens Velma up to the raw experience of pain and humiliation that she believes Minnie ignores throughout the ceremony. However, Minnie's song and her initial physical contact with Velma establish the rules of the healing practice and guarantee Velma the safe space to encounter and work through her illness. Minnie commits herself to Velma and the healing practice as she expands to fill the space of the room and allow for a secure encounter with whatever is blocking Velma's flow (p. 48).

Bambara imagines that this space of healing also includes a tangible community of witnesses who act as communicative bodies in relation to the ill person, Velma. The community of witnesses creates a protective womb around Velma and Minnie, nurturing Minnie's healing forces and keeping at bay any negative energy. The space is pregnant with the possibility of healing. The individual members of this community have experienced illness and disease and function here, in part, as wounded storytellers. They come together en masse on the days that Minnie practices in order to assist someone else with their illness. Velma sits atop a stool surrounded by "The twelve, or The Master's Mind", a group who

offer their prayerful and meditative support to both Minnie and her patients (Bambara 1980, p. 11). Immediately behind this circle of twelve are lay members of the community, patients, and hospital staff. In this manifestation of womb space, Velma becomes the fetus (developing), Minnie the umbilical cord (providing the lifeline), the Twelve the amniotic sac (protecting her), and those surrounding them the uterine wall (holding her). All of the people who form the womb around Velma act as witnesses to her illness as well as her anticipated healing. They sustain her as she turns inward to begin the process of healing. In several instances, the witnesses add their voices to Minnie's to affirm what she's telling Velma. One witness states, "I been there . . . I know exactly what the good woman means" and another responds, "we all been there, one way or t'other" (p. 16). They receive Velma's illness and resistance without trepidation, affirm the reality of Velma's burden, and testify to the power and truth of Minnie's ministrations. The physical layout of the ritual prioritizes the role of the wounded storytellers and their collective of voices that rise to intermingle with Minnie's underscore the interactive and dynamic relationship that exists within Southwest. Bambara privileges their experiential knowledge so that even in the personal space of illness, one's environment and community contribute to either furthering that illness or facilitating wellness. Stanford suggests, ". . . these illnesses are out of medicine's reach and remain in domain of people and communities best equipped to understand them, those who have the wisdom and skill to facilitate a healing that is not and cannot be separate from social context" (Stanford, *Bodies*, p. 17). Velma's illness calls forth the wounded storytellers from her community and asks them to tend to the suffering she endures as a black woman on the front lines of feminist and social justice movements. Their voices serve to validate the weight of this particular illness as its impact resonates throughout the community in one way or the other (Bambara 1980, p. 16).

Minnie's centrality in the text reaffirms the potential that practical applications of cultural legacies have on black women who are suffering from physical and mental illness and their communities. In her role of healer, she impacts the corporeal body and the spiritual self, fosters a tangible community of witnesses who act as communicative bodies in relation to Velma, and creates a womb-like space that encapsulates, sustains, and helps deliver her from the depths of her illness. Velma's wellness becomes the responsibility of the spiritual healers, of her community, of the medical community, and of Velma herself.

2. The Role of Long-Suffering and Questions of Wellness

Wellness, as imagined within the space of the novel, reflects Velma's inability and sometimes refusal to recognize illness in herself, as well as her family's inability or unwillingness to see/name it. This denial operates as a self-imposed tool of survival for everyone involved; each character benefits from their close proximity to socially constructed definitions of wellness. Bambara's opening sentence of *The Salt Eaters* foregrounds the significance of wellness as a literary trope and the ways in which a character's adherence to or rejection of accepted conceptualizations of wellness determines their ability to create and sustain self-reflective healing practices. Wellness, when positioned as a decision that requires critical self-examination, redirects movement from a constructed idea grossly applied to everyone, to the actuality of each character's body in their given situation. The unique history of injury and trauma carried by each character must be excavated and explored in order for them to create their own definition of wellness and understand themselves in relation to that definition. One cannot say they want to be well if there is not a clear understanding of what it means for them to be well. Bambara's placement of wellness within an era of civil rights underscores its political and social import, especially for black women. The emphasis lies on the liberatory practice of creating self-definitions of wellness that are rooted in acknowledging and affirming one's own history. Bambara writes:

So used to being unwhole and unwell, one forgot what it was to walk upright and see clearly, breathe easily, think better than was taught, be better than one was programmed to believe . . . For people sometimes believed that it was safer to live with complaints, was necessary to cooperate with grief, was all right to become an accomplice in self-ambush . . . They wore

their crippledness or blindness like a badge of honor, as though it meant they'd been singled out for some special punishment, were special . . . But way down under knowing 'special' was a lie, knowing better all along and feeling the cost of the lie, of the self-betrayal in the joints, in the lungs, in the eyes. Knew, felt the cost, but were too proud and too scared to get downright familiar with their bodies, minds, spirits to just sing . . . Took heart to flat out decide to be well and stride into the future sane and whole. (Bambara 1980, pp. 107–8)

Bambara's description calls to mind the biblical fruit of the spirit "long-suffering", defined as "having or showing patience in spite of troubles, especially those caused by other people."³ People who actively practice long-suffering work are "patient, forbearing, tolerant, uncomplaining [. . .] stoical, resigned."⁴ Bambara's particular portrait of long-suffering captures the difficulty of acknowledging and addressing illness and disease and implies that the person who is suffering is coerced into accepting their condition in order to avoid contradicting larger narratives about who and what they are. These narratives include the black male-centric leadership models forwarded during the civil rights movement that Bambara engages through Velma's political affiliations. This model exemplifies how black women were expected to embody the spirit of long-suffering so that the race could attain civil rights and equality. Black women were told to set aside their individual and collective concerns about including the health and wellness of black women within the national discourse about legal protections and civil rights for black people. They were also expected to remain silent about the ways in which their labor was being used by civil rights and black power movements with no consideration of the impact it had on their physical and spiritual health. To return to the above passage, stoicism and forbearance cause them to suffer through the many illnesses and diseases that plague their bodies. Bambara calls this "self-ambush" and "self-betrayal". Through the coercive and manipulative rhetoric of sacrificing personal desire for the uplift of the race, women like Velma became accomplices in denying their own illnesses; a practice that became so ingrained for Velma that she creates and revisits a list of grievances as a way to cope with the slights she suffers. This characterization of being unwell and unwhole in order to somehow ease one's lot in life and uphold tropes of strength in the face of overwhelming circumstances hinders the creation of self-definitions of wellness.

The issue of long-suffering overwhelms Velma as she struggles to carry the weight of her responsibilities as a wife, mother, feminist, and civil rights activist. Unlike the other women around her who are able to manage these responsibilities without ignoring their health, Velma neglects herself and ultimately succumbs to the burden of the load; she tries to kill herself. Wellness, for Velma, masquerades as productivity; as long as Velma actively engages in social justice projects and works toward the uplift of her race and community, she is well. Bambara demonstrates that this particular idea of wellness is in fact a denial of illness, and it effectively contributes to the worsening of the initial illness. Prior to her suicide attempt, Velma's character is the embodiment of the trope of the strong black woman. Many scholars have addressed this trope directly and considered its debilitating impact on the lives of black women.⁵ The trope and the biblical idea of long-suffering reward the excessive work and self-deprecation of black women through the creation of a narrative that champions these behaviors. While many members of her community recognize that Velma is unwell, her productivity and willingness to sacrifice herself for the advancement of civil rights allows them to look beyond her declining health. Like the elders that champion their scars and refuse to acknowledge what was lost in the formation of those scars, Velma holds her trials as another part of what she must endure.

³ See OED definition of long-suffering.

⁴ See OED definition of long-suffering.

⁵ See Michelle Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (Wallace 1978) an important critical work that is contemporaneous with the publication of Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*.

2.1. *Are You Sure, Sweetheart, That You Want to Be Well?*

Bambara addresses the question of whether or not Velma desires wellness within the context of her specific life experiences and, in doing so, raises concerns about what appears to be the elusiveness of physical and mental wellness for a larger group of women who are forced to negate their own self-health for their families, communities, jobs, and race. This general inability to grasp or maintain mental and physical health becomes inextricably linked to another concern impacting black women—that of denying cultural and spiritual inheritances while negotiating and finding voice and agency within male-dominated institutions. Bell Hooks speaks about the importance of truth telling to spiritual and mental health and states: “Dissimulation makes us dysfunctional. Since it encourages us to deny what we genuinely feel and experience, we lose our capacity to know who we really are and what we need and desire” (Hooks 2005, p. 15). Velma’s downward spiral originates from her denial of the spiritual gifts that she shares with Minnie and her female ancestors, the mud mothers (women who are one with the earth and embody natural healing practices), as well as her unacknowledged self-sacrifice for the sake of her community work. The symptoms manifest as sensitivity to light and sound, paranoia, and a diminished ability to take care of herself. The outcome is that Velma attempts to kill herself by slitting her wrists and climbing into her oven. Before Velma can even answer the question of whether or not she wants to be well, she must first break through the wall she erects to keep out everyone who wants something from her. Velma “Withdraw[s] the self to a safe place where husband, lover, teacher, workers, no one could follow, probe” (Bambara 1980, p. 5). Velma’s retreat fosters a false sense of security that enables her to shield her vulnerability and pain from her family and friends who have tired of her aloofness and fits. Similar to the description of the long-suffering individuals above, Velma finds safety in the denial of her illness. Even after she experiences periodic breaks in her mental health during which she must rely on her husband Obie and sister Palma, Velma pulls away from both of them and retreats to an inner sanctum. Minnie’s initial touch and urging for Velma to free herself from the pain of the past, in which Velma describes the sensation of losing her eyes, causes her to return to that pivotal moment in the kitchen and her feelings of finally coming undone. Hooks also notes, “Our mental well-being is dependent on our capacity to face reality. We can only face reality by breaking through denial” (Hooks 2005, p. 16). Velma must confront her desire to be sealed away from the world, the desire to withdraw forever from the unending and overpowering demands of life. Part of her truth lies in this moment. She describes her return as “a telepathic visit with her former self, who seemed to be still there in the kitchen reenacting the scene like time counted for nothing” (Bambara 1980, p. 18). She watches as *that* Velma moves back and forth, opens, cuts, leans, and searches in an effort to flee from and remain “unavailable to sounds, voices, cries” (p. 19). By acting as a witness to her own unraveling, Velma can begin to see herself in relation to all of the things in jars and on the shelf that are alive but “still”, “inert”, and “arrested”, drawing a clear contrast between being alive and the act of living (p. 19).

Velma’s inability to recognize her inheritance as a spiritual guide impacts her ability to move from being alive to living with a purpose and contributes to her descent into paranoia and madness. Speaking of right livelihood, Hooks argues that contemporary black women find themselves working for money and status rather than following the example of their elders and working for and with a purpose. Hooks goes on to say that consciously working with purpose in a position that is meant for that person “enhances black female well-being” (Hooks 2005, p. 32). Velma’s work as a civil rights activist elevates her community; but, as she commits herself to this important work, she denies her own calling as a spiritual guide. From an early age, Velma flees from images of the mud mothers who appeared in caves. These images were so frightening to Velma that she sought to block them out and deny their existence. However, the mud mothers are connected to a larger narrative and plan for her life that we might call her right livelihood. Velma’s flight from her true calling contributes to her turmoil as the mud mothers haunt her at all hours. She recalls “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" (Bambara 1980, p. 255). Here, the mud mothers attempt to impart critical wisdom and knowledge to Velma, but she refuses to hear them. Velma does not allow herself to connect with what she believes are unrefined, uncivilized women. Yet the women, with yams and calabashes, embody a sweeping legacy of black womanhood. Hooks notes that "everywhere black women live in the world, we eat yam. It is a symbol of our Diasporic connections. Yams provide nourishment for the body as food yet they are also used medicinally—to heal the body" (Hooks 2005, p. 6). When we consider this particular symbol of the yam, it seems plausible that the mud mothers present to Velma with the intention of sustaining and healing one of their lost and suffering daughters. Velma's increasing estrangement from her cultural roots as she moves into the professional space of the nuclear plant and martyrs herself for civil rights movements is magnified by her inability to recognize and hear the call of the mud mothers.

Beyond the uncertainty of her inheritance, Velma cannot manage the unacknowledged "exasperation", "pain", and "humiliation" she endures from patriarchal hierarchies within the organization she co-founded and the civil rights movement that further contributes to her inner tumult. Obie talks about this as "ancient shit" that she won't let go and says:

Let me help you, Velma ... learn to let go of past pain [...] Do you have any idea, Velma, how you look when you launch into one of your anecdotes? It's got to be costing you something to hang on to old pains. Just look at you. Your eyes slit, the cords jump out of your neck, your voice trembles, I expect fire to come blasting out of your nostrils any minute. It takes something out of you, Velma, to keep all them dead moments alive. Why can't you just ... forget ... forgive ... and always it's some situation that was over and done with ten, fifteen years ago. But here you are still all fired up about it, still plotting, up to your jaws in ancient shit. (Bambara 1980, pp. 21–22)

Obie is aware of the ways in which Velma's holding on to pain is contributing to her own mental and physical deterioration. Here, the relationship between dead and living things resurfaces as Velma breathes life into circumstances where she was slighted or humiliated. Unlike the sealed jars on the kitchen shelf that contain static items, Velma animates and relives the past in order to achieve some modicum of justice that was not afforded her at the time. Though Velma does not tell Minnie and the others what she witnesses herself doing in her kitchen, her thoughts reveal a woman who desperately needs to find release from too many obligations and not enough personal or spiritual development. Stanford notes that "Velma is consumed with long-standing anger, fear, and increasing alienation from her cultural and historical past, even as she works to maintain and move herself and her already progressive community beyond a narrow understanding of social justice" (Stanford 2003, p. 18). Velma's sense of frustration and desperation with her inability to effectively manage her life and reconcile the ways in which her own narrative is being overwritten by larger and more pressing ones—that of her husband, her son, the community center she co-founded, civil rights agendas and marches—is exemplified in these moments with Obie. Velma recounts two events related to this work that prevented her from caring for herself. Both involve not being prepared for her period—not being in tune with her body. The first instance occurs when Velma and other women who helped found the community collective attempt to strategically outmaneuver the men during a political campaign. Velma uses rally flyers to manage her flow because "There'd been nothing in the machines—no tampons, no napkins, no paper towels, no roll of tissue she could unravel and stuff her panties with" (p. 26). Velma silently endures the humiliation of leaking on herself in an effort to meet the expectations of the other women as they stand up for their rights within their organization. The second instance occurs when Velma's menstruation starts during a civil rights march. Again, Velma scrounges to find a means to manage the normal processes of her body. She is described as "Mounting a raggedy tampon fished from the bottom of her bag, paper unraveled, stuffing coming loose, and in a nasty bathroom with no stall doors, and in a Gulf station too, to add to the outrage. She'd been reeking of wasted blood

and rage” (p. 34). Velma’s commitment to these different political causes obscures the physical needs of her body so that her cycle becomes not only an afterthought but also a burden. She deprioritizes herself at the same time that she is deprioritized by the men in her coalition group, her job, and the larger civil rights movement.

The mud mothers reaching out to Velma in an effort to reconnect her to a rich tapestry of black women signals a re-prioritization of her body, self, and purpose—concerns that are not considered in other aspects of her life. Like Minnie, the mud mothers extend to her a lifeline so that she might embark upon her path towards self-recovery. Black women, according to Stanford, are excluded from and victimized by social, political, and medical structures that seek to gain power and status by constructing and controlling narratives and knowledge. Bambara shows how women like Velma who demonstrate strength, leadership, and a strong work ethic can devote too much of themselves to work that does not edify their bodies or serve their interests as they strive to meet and exceed the standards of these narratives.⁶ Hooks notes that black women “can easily become over-extended” in their occupations that ultimately lead to “burn-out” (Bambara 1980, p. 35). Throughout the novel, Velma is described as holding on and slipping away as the demands of life press down on her. Velma holds on to the stool in the medical facility because she feels faint. Velma also holds onto the hotel counter after a particularly exhausting protest march. However, despite her best efforts, Velma cannot hold onto herself. Her inability to manage her monthly menstrual cycle serves as yet another indicator of the ways in which she loses a grip on who she is and what she is really called to do with her life.

2.2. *I Can Feel, Sweetheart, that You’re Not Quite Ready to Dump the Shit . . .*

Velma’s illness has a profound impact on Obie, Palma, and especially Nadeen, who witnesses her healing. Inés Salazar states: “the act of healing that opens and closes the book serves as a metaphoric center for the process of bringing together community and subjects. The effort to make Velma well parallels the process of healing that Bambara envisions for the community as a whole” (Salazar 2000, p. 402). Obie, Palma, and Nadeen all encounter Velma during various stages of her journey and their experiences provide additional insight into her struggles and movement towards wholeness. Vis a vis Velma’s interaction with these other characters, Bambara reaffirms the critical role that family and community play in witnessing illness and facilitating wellness. Velma’s experience of illness as transactional and social resonates in her relationships with Obie and Palma as they witness and then account for her harrowing descent into the depths of paranoia, self-denial, and narrative incoherence. Both Obie and Palma possess information that is critical to glimpsing Velma’s torment even as Velma attempts to analyze and make sense of her own actions. Obie describes Velma as “restless, lips swollen, circles under her eyes, spellbound”, while Palma notes that she was “rigid, fearful” and “looked insane” (Bambara 1980, pp. 94, 139). Read alongside Velma’s internal dialogue, the narratives of her husband and sister enhance and help to complete Bambara’s portrait of mental illness and its particulars related to historical and cultural erasure and denial. The story of Velma’s illness emerges as a crisis at the site of her body. While this crisis is not the failing of the physical body or even an outward and explicit assault on Velma’s body, the internal turmoil and splitting of her self manifests as a heightened awareness of her spiritual isolation that leads to a desire to deny, destroy, and obliterate the self.

Obie’s intimate relationship with Velma demonstrates how illness profoundly impacts the lives of those who are ill and those who are charged to care for and live with those struggling with illness. This connection is evident as the reader learns, “He [Obie] didn’t recognize himself. He didn’t recognize her either” (Bambara 1980, p. 94). Velma’s illness changes the ways in which Obie imagines his own subjectivity as it relates to patriarchal definitions of manhood (husband, father, provider). Her transformation that involves a narrative de-evolution and movement away from intelligible, cohesive articulations of self forces Obie into a space that destabilizes traditional forms of knowledge

⁶ See also Courtney Thorsson’s *Women’s Work: Nationalism and Contemporary African American Women’s Novels* (Thorsson 2013).

and expertise—forms that allow him to know himself. Velma's illness process shuts him out at the same time that it requires him to participate in and witness these processes. Obie is at once excluded from understanding the sharp dimensions of Velma's torment related to the mud mothers and included in Velma's care. Obie offers two instances that are especially instructive when thinking through how Velma's illness is social and transactional. First, Obie witnesses Velma "Walking jags, talking jags, grabbing his arm suddenly and swirling her eyes around the room, or collapsing in the big chair, her head bent over. He'd grown afraid *for her*." (Emphasis mine, p. 162). Velma presents to Obie as restless and at times deranged. Her behavior causes him to worry about her well-being. The passage continues, "She talked on the surface, holding him off, shutting herself off from herself too, it seemed. And at night, holding her, he felt as though he were holding on to the earth in a quake, the ground opening up, the trees toppling, the mountains crumbling, burying him. Then he'd grown afraid *of her*" (Emphasis mine, p. 162). Here Velma retreats inwardly with such force that Obie feels movement when he holds her. This frightening pulling away signals, for him, a massive destruction of their world. Velma's illness ultimately prevents Obie from connecting with her in a way that helps him visualize a path towards wellness. This is partly due to his fear of and for Velma as well as his inability to connect with the very nature of her illness (as detailed above with the mud mothers). This inability to connect is painfully evident when Obie misrecognizes and misreads Velma's fear and attempts to be physically intimate with her rather than provide a compassionate embrace. After characterizing Velma as being "like a brick, a stone, a boulder that would not be moved," Obie laments that he no longer knows how to reach Velma (p. 163). According to Obie, Velma needs constant visual confirmation that nothing and no one is hiding under the clothes on their bedroom chair or in their bedroom closet. Obie's account of Velma's turn inward that shuts him out and her own description of the same reaffirm his disconnection from her needs and desires. However, this does not preclude Obie from having sex with Velma, even in these moments when she is overcome with fear of the mud mothers whose presence she feels. Obie "coming back toward the bed looking at her twisting in the covers or climbing on the pillows, he would stare at her opening glistening and wet, inviting, misleading. He would gather her up again, but inside she was dry and her muscled clenched before he could enter deep, clench and shut him out. 'Let go, Velma,' groaning into her neck. 'Don't let go, Obie,' trembling in his arms" (p. 163). Velma's cry to Obie asks that he hold on to her. Velma has already demonstrated an inability to hold on to herself. Throughout the story she threatens to slip away, yet in this moment with Obie she pleads for him to help her hold on. However, Obie cannot tend to Velma's spiritual lack and her body rejects what he can offer her physically.

Ultimately, Obie wonders whether or not Velma's mental slippages are connected to physical loss—the loss of their baby. The reader learns that "Ever since he'd demanded more of a home life, she'd been in a stew, threatening to boil over and crack the pot all right. Or maybe the cracking had begun years earlier when the womb had bled, when the walls had dropped away and the baby was flushed out" (Bambara 1980, p. 94). Obie comes to this detail about their baby more than once in the novel, each time acknowledging the miscarriage as a major site of loss and here suggesting that it contributes to cracking the pot known as Velma. Hooks states that "being 'used to pain' does not mean that we will know how to process it so that we are not overwhelmed or destroyed by grief" (Hooks 2005, p. 78). Certainly, the type of long-suffering that Bambara details early in the novel includes the physical and psychological pain of enduring a miscarriage. Bambara challenges the idea of cooperating with grief for the sake of keeping one's life intact and argues instead that grief must be dealt with directly in order to be well or whole. Hooks also notes the importance of women speaking with one another about grief as "bottled-in grief can erupt into illness" (Hooks 2005, p. 79). Obie gives voice to the trauma this type of physical and personal loss creates as well as the danger of ignoring it only after Velma's illness takes hold of her. In all of the ways that Obie attempts to help Velma recover herself, he unwittingly advances a patriarchal construction of illness and healing that attempts to diagnose and cure her illness. This construction contributes to her inward spiral and in the end can only offer a remote rendering of Velma's illness.

Palma also notices and becomes unsettled by her sister's steady descent into madness, but, unlike Obie, Palma ultimately understands that Velma's illness extends beyond western notions of illness and wellness. Palma's connection to a collective of women that represent black women throughout the diaspora engenders the community that Hooks argues is necessary for recovery of self and community. After Palma comes across a picture of Velma that was taken immediately before she started her mental decline, Palma becomes convinced that something has happened to Velma. In the picture Velma has "her arms turned out so that the unsunned and exposed insides showed childlike and vulnerable, as if waiting for the shock of the alcoholized cotton and the sting of the needle" (Bambara 1980, p. 139). Velma's posture here, open and demonstrative, informs the larger narrative that Palma witnesses in her interactions with her sister and signals her current state at Southwest Infirmary. Though Palma is unaware of Velma's attempted suicide, the picture creates anxiety at the site of Velma's body and forces her to go find her sister. Over the course of her illness, Palma finds Velma physically stiff and tense, unable to create cohesive or coherent conversation, and detached from the reality of what was happening around her. At her worst, Palma notes that Velma bit through a glass. Palma's vivid accounts of Velma during this precarious time parallel Velma's early description of the mud mothers; images of wild, uncontained women with unruly hair, clothes, and speech. Like Obie, Palma admits to feeling scared for Velma, but her fear does not prevent her from caring for Velma's needs, which includes therapeutic, non-sexual touch.

2.3. *Choose Your Cure, Sweetheart. Decide What You Want to Do with Wholeness*

For those who witness Velma's healing at Southwest, the social implications of illness are more profound because of their immediate access to a visual representation of emergent wellness. This is especially the case for Nadeen, a pregnant teenager who watches the ceremony hoping to see "the real thing" after witnessing too many fake healings (Bambara 1980, p. 105). Velma's public healing occurs in a space that is accessible to the community. It fosters a sense of shared responsibility and commonality for Nadeen who is able to occupy part of the room behind the tight circle that surrounds Velma. Nadeen reflects: "This was what it was supposed to be. A clean, freshly painted, quiet music room with lots of sunlight. People standing about wishing Mrs. Henry well and knowing Miss Ransom would do what she said she would do" (p. 113). Another character, Fred, reports a similar sentiment, saying: "Meanwhile, it felt okay to just be there. The longer he looked at the two women, especially the classy old broad, the better he felt. [...] There was no one who looked like agitators or troublemakers to him" (p. 271). Both Nadeen and Fred express the feeling of being amongst people who are invested in the project of wellness. They describe the room and the environment as nurturing, healthy, and optimistic. They are on the outermost layer of the circle that surrounds Velma. Nadeen's experience differs from those in the circle who actively participate in the healing. She searches for an aspect of spiritual truth in the interaction between Minnie and Velma as well as assurances that illness (in any form) can be healed; that wholeness is possible. Velma's illness and healing serve as an entry point for Nadeen into a larger conversation that engages wellness as an action. The ceremony that Nadeen identifies as the real thing also introduces her to a starkly different depiction of black womanhood, one in which strength emerges from vulnerability and a willingness to be open. Nadeen can see Velma in her current state of undress and unresponsiveness and understand the price of unacknowledged suffering. Nadeen's pregnancy does more than signal new possibilities for intergenerational and spiritual connectedness to a younger generation of black women. Standing on the margins of the healing ceremony behind the wounded storytellers, Velma emerges as a reminder of what has always been at stake for black women and their communities: maintaining one's overall health while uplifting the race in a nation intent on crushing both.

Velma's willingness to enter into the healing ceremony with Minnie allows Nadeen to undergo her own healing of sorts that results in her proclamation of being "womanish" (Bambara 1980, p. 106). The potential of collective healing emerges in Nadeen as she renames herself and reaffirms her place in the world; Nadeen "... felt special, felt smart like she'd never felt at home or at school" and part of

something important (p. 104). This collective space of healing rewards Nadeen's desire to know more about herself and life than she has been taught. As Nadeen witnesses Velma heal, she sees "something drop away from Mrs. Henry's face", after which Velma becomes more beautiful and unharried (p. 101). Velma is uncovered or, to borrow Hooks' terminology, "unmasked" in front of the group gathered to help usher her into wellness. Hooks claims that "collective unmasking is an important act of resistance" for black people because it allows them to walk in the truth of their identities and histories (Hooks 2005, pp. 16–17). When Velma's mask falls away and Nadeen sees her wrists heal, she understands that anything is possible. Here, Velma's unmasking releases her from the weight of denying her spiritual inheritance and permits Nadeen to envision and embrace a new, empowered idea of black womanhood that allows her to be womanish, vulnerable, and courageous.

3. Conclusion: "Now You Just Hold that Thought . . . "

Bambara's act of writing a novel that hinges on one particular black woman's descent into mental illness and struggle towards a functional state of wellness is, I argue, not only an assertion of black women's selfhood and vulnerability, but ultimately a demonstration of power in spaces where these three things are vehemently denied. Hooks claims that "Black female self-recovery, like all black self-recovery, is an expression of a liberatory political practice [. . .] choosing 'wellness' is an act of political resistance" (Hooks 2005, p. 7). Velma affirms this notion when she proclaims towards the end of the healing ceremony that "Health is my right" (Bambara p. 119). Velma, as an activist at the front lines of insanity and an inheritor of spiritual giftedness, embodies the danger of cultural estrangement and the power of individual and collective awareness. One initial conclusion that emerges from reading *The Salt Eaters* alongside Hooks' *Sisters of the Yam* and Kleinman's definition of illness is that understanding Velma's illness within the broader context of social movements and community is vital to contemporary discussions of health and wellness for black women who, like Velma, also give themselves to social justice movements that fail to recognize or prioritize their subject positions. This neglect continues to place black women in precarious situations, as their labor is increasingly rendered invisible and the sacrifices they make at times contradict their own best interests and personal health. However, black women already have what they need to sustain themselves and one another: a legacy of stories and touch that heal. Hooks recalls the following:

This morning as I went for walking meditation, I felt as though the world around me—the birds, the flowers, the newly cut green grass—was all a soothing balm, the kind Big Mama would spread on various parts of our body for any little old ailment. We thought her homemade salves had magical healing powers when we were children. Now, I am convinced that the magic, that the power to heal, resided in her warm, loving brown hands—hands that knew how to touch us and make us whole, how to make the hurt go away. (Hooks 2005, p. 1)

Wholeness, the sense of being complete and intact even in the face of physical fragmentation, is accessible through connections to other black women who carry within them the strength and legacies of their Diasporic foremothers. Questions of wellness that emerge within the novel find their answers in histories that thrive outside westernized modes of knowledge. To be well and sane as a black woman requires both honest introspection and collective re-affirmation. In order to answer Minnie's question in the affirmative, Velma (and by extension black women) must re-affirm healthy relationships with one another that create and sustain pathways towards wholeness and reprioritize black women's health in the larger domain of social justice movements.

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