Unquiet Twins: Yoruba Cosmology and Generational Haunting in Ayana Mathis's *The Twelve Tribes of Hattie*

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Abstract— This article examines the intersection of Yoruba cosmology and generational haunting in Ayana Mathis's The Twelve Tribes of Hattie (2012), arguing that the novel's depiction of trauma requires analytical frameworks grounded in African diasporic spiritual and cultural traditions. By situating the premature death of Hattie's twin infants, Philadelphia and Jubilee, within the context of the Yoruba concept of ibeji (twin spirits), the analysis reveals how their unresolved spiritual status disrupts the cosmological balance of the Shepherd family, initiating a cycle of intergenerational suffering. The novel's multi-vocal structure, organized around Hattie's children, formally embodies the transmission of this haunting, illustrating how ancestral trauma manifests across generations. Moving beyond Western psychological models of trauma, this study emphasizes culturally specific reading practices that acknowledge the enduring presence of Yoruba cosmological principles in African American literary expression. Ultimately, the article contends that Mathis's work not only reflects the profound impacts of historical and spiritual rupture caused by the Great Migration but also imagines pathways toward healing through the recovery and adaptation of cultural memory.

Keywords— *Yoruba cosmology, generational haunting, ibeji, Ayana Mathis, diasporic spirituality*

I. INTRODUCTION

The study of generational trauma in African American literature has often relied upon Western psychological frameworks that prioritize individual experience and diagnostic categorization (Craps, 2013; Levy-Hussen, 2016). While these approaches yield valuable insights, they frequently overlook the cultural specificity of trauma manifestations and the spiritual dimensions of healing within diasporic communities (Sharpe, 2016; Eyerman, 2001; Carter, 2007). This article argues for the critical importance of culturally grounded reading practices that acknowledge the persistence and transformation of African cosmological systems in African American literary expression. Through an analysis of Ayana Mathis's *The Twelve Tribes of Hattie* (referred to in this paper as *Twelve Tribes*), this study demonstrates how Yoruba cosmological principles, particularly those concerning twin spirits (*ibeji*) and spiritual balance (*àṣẹ*), provide a powerful framework for understanding representations of generational trauma and resilience.

Mathis's novel chronicles the multigenerational impact of early trauma through the story of Hattie Shepherd, who loses her infant twins during the Great Migration era. Rather than presenting this event as solely a psychological tragedy, the novel invites reading through the lens of Yoruba cosmology, wherein twins possess special spiritual significance and require specific ritual practices to maintain cosmic harmony (Abimbola, 2006; Lawal, 2012). The absence of these rituals creates what Yoruba tradition terms *àná* (cosmological debt), manifesting as generational haunting that affects each of Hattie's subsequent children in distinct ways (Gordon, 2008). This interpretive approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of how cultural memory persists and adapts despite historical disruption.

This article contributes to African American literary studies by challenging universalizing trauma theories and demonstrating the value of culturally specific frameworks for interpreting diasporic literature. The study begins with a review of the relevant literature on Yoruba cosmology and generational haunting. Its analysis then proceeds through

four parts. The first establishes Yoruba cosmological principles and their significance for understanding twin spirituality. The second analyzes the manifestations of spiritual disorder throughout Hattie's lineage. The third situates the novel within broader African and diasporic literary traditions through comparative analysis. The last explores the novel's potential for healing through Afrocentric spiritual frameworks rather than Western psychological models.

By centering Yoruba cosmology as an interpretive framework, this study reveals how Mathis's novel transforms conventional trauma narratives into profound explorations of spiritual inheritance and cultural resilience. The essay ultimately suggests that the lesson which the novel teaches is that healing historical wounds requires not merely psychological processing but spiritual recognition and the recovery of cultural knowledge fragmented by displacement and violence. In doing so, *Twelve Tribes* (2012) makes significant contributions to African American literary tradition by honoring the complexity of diasporic spiritual experience and offering innovative narrative forms for representing generational connection.

II.   LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of twin figures (*ibeji*) within Yoruba cosmology provides a critical theoretical framework for interpreting Ayana Mathis's literary exploration of generational trauma. In Yoruba spirituality, twins are believed to share a single soul and possess profound spiritual power, a belief reflected in the veneration of deceased twins through Èrè Ìbejì figures (Leroy, 2002). The untimely death of one or both twins requires careful appeasement rituals to prevent misfortune and spiritual unrest for the family and community, as they are conceptualized as divine entities, often regarded as children of orishas such as Elegba, Ogun, and Yemaya, reflecting their profound spiritual status within Yoruba culture (Oruene, 1983). This cultural context elevates twinhood from a biological phenomenon to a cosmological signification with far-reaching implications for familial and communal stability, illustrating how twin symbolism extends from spirituality to folklore, and from lived experience to artistic refined artifacts, as demonstrated by figures like the Yoruba artist Prince Twins Seven-Seven, whose identity was rooted in the survival of multiple twin sets (Sharpe, 2016).

Such examples highlight the ways in which twinhood is conceptualized as a spiritual and cosmological reality with implications for family and community (Craps, 2013). This cultural framework provides an important lens for literary analysis, as it contextualizes representations of twins in

African and African diasporic literature, including Ayana Mathis's *Twelve Tribes* (Sharpe, 2016). Literary representations of twins powerfully explore themes of identity and trauma, yet their cultural connotations vary profoundly. Whereas Western traditions often position twins as figures of psychological disturbance and gothic anxiety, exemplifying inner conflict (Fisher, 2009; Hale, 2012), African and diasporic literature frequently draws on traditions like Yoruba cosmology, which venerates twins as spiritual blessings (Abimbola, 1976; Falola & Adebayo, 2000).

Ayana Mathis's *Twelve Tribes* aligns with this diasporic tradition by grounding its central tragedy, the death of the infant twins Philadelphia and Jubilee, in a specific cultural framework. While the novel acknowledges the sinister side of the twin experience and its resulting generational trauma (Fisher, 2009), it complicates this by framing the twins as spiritual entities. Their improper burial and unacknowledged status create not just psychological but cosmological disturbance, highlighting the intersection of trauma, spirituality, and inheritance that characterizes much African diasporic literature. Mathis thus uses the twin motif both as a metaphor for fractured subjectivity and as a catalyst for exploring how cultural rupture manifests as ongoing familial and communal haunting. By grounding the narrative of Hattie's twin infants within a culturally specific understanding of twin spirituality, the novel can be read as exploring generational trauma in ways that acknowledge both the metaphysical and communal dimensions of Yoruba cosmology (Craps, 2013; Carter, 2007).

Yoruba cosmology, with its emphasis on the interconnectedness of the yet unborn, the living and the dead, offers particularly rich insights into how spiritual practices function as mechanisms for processing and mediating intergenerational trauma (Abimbola, 1976; Falola & Adebayo, 2000). This spiritual concept provides a framework for understanding how trauma becomes embodied and transmitted across generations, not merely as psychological residue but as an active spiritual presence requiring acknowledgment and ritual engagement. Such frameworks underscore how African diasporic literature can articulate intergenerational trauma through culturally specific spiritual paradigms, offering alternative tools for analyzing inheritance, memory, and healing (Craps, 2013). Within diasporic literature, this theory provides a critical lens for analyzing the enduring impacts of forced migration, slavery, and systemic oppression, highlighting how this inherited trauma shapes identity, belonging, and family relationships within displaced communities.

This study, *Unquiet Twins: Yoruba Cosmology and Generational Haunting in Ayana Mathis's Twelve Tribes*,

addresses several significant gaps in existing literary scholarship through its integration of trauma theory with Yoruba cosmological frameworks. First, it brings together two theoretical frameworks that have not often been integrated in analyses of African American literature, namely Yoruba cosmology and trauma theory.

Second, the study contributes to emerging scholarship on spiritual hauntings as distinct from psychological trauma. Yoruba cosmology provides a framework for understanding spiritual unrest not as metaphorical device but as literal belief with concrete ritual implications (Abimbola, 1976). This perspective challenges Western psychoanalytic approaches that might reduce spiritual beliefs to psychological phenomena, instead honoring the cultural integrity of Yoruba cosmological traditions as valid epistemological frameworks for understanding and interpreting trauma and inheritance. The concept of *ànà* (spiritual debt) and the required ritual appeasement for *ibeji* offer concrete mechanisms through which generational trauma operates in spiritual terms, providing an alternative to purely psychological models of trauma transmission.

III.   COSMOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS: ÀṢẸ, *IBEJI*, AND RITUAL RUPTURE

Yoruba cosmology presents an intricate understanding of the universe, human existence, and the interconnectedness of all beings, with, at its foundation, the concept of *àṣẹ*, the divine energy and authority that upholds cosmic order and enables all transformation and manifestation in the universe (Abimbola, 2006). This fundamental force permeates all aspects of life, from the supreme deity *Olodumare* through the pantheon of *orishas* (divine manifestations) to the natural world and human beings. The efficacy of any action, whether spiritual or physical, depends on the proper alignment with àṣẹ (Abimbola, 2006; Olupona, 2011).

Complementing *àṣẹ* is the concept of *ori*, which represents both the physical head and the spiritual destiny or inner head that each individual chooses before incarnation (Abimbola, 2006). The *ori* encompasses one's destiny (*ayanmo*) and serves as the conduit through which *àṣẹ* flows in an individual's life. The pursuit of *iwa pele* (good character) represents the ethical dimension of Yoruba cosmology, emphasizing the importance of balanced, gentle, and morally upright character as essential to fulfilling one's destiny and maintaining harmony within the community and cosmos (Olupona, 2011). These interconnected principles of *àṣẹ, ori, and iwa pele* form the foundation upon which specific cultural practices, including those surrounding twins, are constructed. Yoruba cosmology thus provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the spiritual and ethical dimensions of existence, offering

valuable insights into the transmission of trauma and the processes of healing within diasporic contexts.

3.1 The Sacred Status of Twins (*Ibeji*) in Yoruba Tradition

Within Yoruba cosmology, twins (*ibeji*) occupy a position of exceptional spiritual significance. They are believed to share a single soul, possess extraordinary spiritual power, and are considered sacred children often associated with the orisha Shango (Lawal, 2012). This revered status means their treatment in life and death has profound implications for the entire family lineage, as they "stand between the human and the divine" (Idowu, 1994, p. 87).

Consequently, the passing of one or both twins necessitates elaborate ritual practices to ensure peaceful transition and maintain spiritual balance. According to traditional practice, parents commission a carved *ere ibeji* figure to serve as a physical vessel for the deceased twin's spirit (Drewal, 2012). This figure is not a mere memorial but a sacred object that must be washed, dressed, and fed—a ritual care that is essential to prevent the twin from becoming an "unquiet" spirit that brings misfortune. Neglect of these rituals, whether through improper burial or a failure to commission the *ere ibeji*, creates a spiritual debt (*ànà*) believed to cause ongoing illness, infertility, or spiritual disturbance across multiple generations (Abimbola, 2006; Idowu, 1994). As Olupona (2011) notes, this is "not merely a cultural preference but a cosmological necessity" (p. 134).

The theoretical works of scholars like Abimbola (2006) and Olupona (2011) provide the framework for understanding this cosmology. Crucially for reading Mathis, these traditions were transmitted to the Americas through the transatlantic trade of enslaved West Africans, resulting in both preservation and transformation (Thompson, 1984). While the specific practice of *ere ibeji* carving did not survive intact, the conceptual understanding of spiritual continuity and the potential for unresolved death to create a generational disturbance remained a potent force in African American spiritual consciousness.

3.2 The Great Migration as Spiritual Dislocation and Roots of Ritual Failure

In Ayana Mathis's *Twelve Tribes*, the protagonist's geographical and cultural displacement from the rural South to urban Philadelphia creates conditions that inhibit proper ritual response to the deaths of her twins. Hattie's migration during the Great Migration era separates her from the communal knowledge and support systems that might have provided guidance on proper mourning practices informed by African cultural retentions (Drewal, 2012; Thompson, 1984). Mathis (2012) illustrates the persistence of such communal knowledge through the character of Willie, who

performs traditional rituals like burying a child's afterbirth under a tree to keep its spirit close to home (p. 115).

As a result of her displacement, however, Hattie is unable to access this knowledge when she confronts the death of her twins, leaving her without the ritual tools to ensure their smooth, peaceful return to the realm of spirits and protect her family from spiritual disturbance. This is starkly illustrated in the narrative. Isolated, she relies on the doctor's prescribed "small dosage of ipecac" and cautioned-against "backward country remedies like hot mustard poultices" (Mathis, 2012, p.8). Her struggle is a solitary, desperate battle against the inevitable, using whatever is at hand. The Shepherds' state of distress is made obvious as "August paid three dollars for the visit and set to making mustard poultices the minute the doctor was out the door" (Mathis, 2012, p. 8). This scene, marked by broken medicine bottles, cold water, and a neighbor's helpless prayers, is the antithesis of the prescribed Yoruba rituals for *ibeji*. It is a portrait of ritual failure born of displacement.

This ritual failure establishes the cosmological foundation for the generational haunting that permeates the novel. The unquiet spirits of Philadelphia and Jubilee become active forces that disrupt the spiritual equilibrium of the Shepherd family, manifesting in the various traumas and struggles that affect each of Hattie's subsequent children (Abimbola, 2006; Olupona, 2011). Their persistent presence represents not only psychological grief but also cosmological imbalance, reflecting a rupture in the proper order of things that requires acknowledgment and ritual healing. Mathis employs Yoruba cosmology to explore how historical disruptions, such as the Great Migration, resulted not only in geographical displacement but also in spiritual disconnection with profound consequences for African American families (Idowu, 1994; Lawal, 2012).

IV. THE GENERATIONAL MANIFESTATIONS OF *ÀNÀ*

4.1 The Initial Cosmological Crisis and Matriarchal Transformation

The death of Hattie's infant twins, Philadelphia and Jubilee, from pneumonia in 1925 represents far more than a personal tragedy; it constitutes a profound spiritual and cosmological crisis. Their lives begin filled with the hope and promise of the Great Migration, a hope encapsulated in the names Hattie chooses—"names of promise and of hope, reaching forward names, not looking back ones" (Mathis, 2012, p. 7). In that idyllic early summer, Hattie imagines them "totter[ing] around the porch like sweet bumbling old men" the following year (Mathis, 2012, p. 7). This vision of the future makes their subsequent death not just a loss, but the annihilation of a promised new beginning.

Within the framework of Yoruba cosmology, the simultaneous passing of the twins creates what Kola Abimbola (2006) identifies as a fundamental disruption in *àṣẹ*, the essential life force that maintains cosmic balance, and establishes *ànà*, a spiritual disorder or cosmological debt that manifests across generations. This crisis is profoundly exacerbated by the context of their burial. The narrative emphasizes Hattie's profound isolation and poverty; she wraps her infants in nothing more than "a single white sheet" (Mathis, 2012, p. 15), a stark image of material and spiritual desolation. Given the family's financial precarity and Hattie's dis-location from the communal knowledge of the South, it is clear the specific rites required for *ibeji* were not performed. There is no indication that ere *ibeji* figures were carved to house their spirits or that rituals were conducted to appease them. This ritual lack is catastrophic, rendering Philadelphia and Jubilee "unquiet" spirits (Lawal, 2012), entities metaphysically stranded between realms, unable to join the ancestors and perpetually disturbing the living due to unresolved spiritual debt (*ànà*).

This cosmological crisis had an immediate and transformative effect on Hattie herself, fundamentally altering her capacity for love, tenderness, and spiritual connection. The novel describes how "the loss of her firstborn children coarsens and reshapes her" (Mathis, 2012, p. 18), transforming her from a hopeful migrant into a hardened woman who raises her subsequent children "with grit and mettle and not an ounce of the tenderness they crave" (p. 224). This transformation represents more than grief or psychological trauma. It is a visceral and physical rupture of her spirit: the moment her children die, Hattie "felt their deaths like a ripping in her body" (Mathis, 2012, p. 17). That "ripping" signifies the tearing away of the tender, hopeful self she was and the creation of an emotionally scarred matriarch incapable of the proper maternal connection and the *iwa pele* (good character) essential to maintaining cosmic balance.

Hattie's response exemplifies what Afrocentric psychologists might call a survival mechanism in a world that "would not love" her children and "would not be kind" (Mathis, 2012, p. 236). However, it comes at a tremendous spiritual cost. Hattie's story reveals that she "believed in God's might, but she didn't believe in his interventions. At best, he was indifferent. God wasn't any of her business, and she wasn't any of his" (Mathis, 2012, p. 236). This spiritual alienation represents the first manifestation of the disorder triggered by the twins' death, a withdrawal of divine hope that permeates the family's existence and signifies a

fundamental break in the flow of àṣẹ. Hattie becomes the primary vessel for the *ànà*, her emotional austerity and hardened character constituting the initial, tangible evidence of the cosmological imbalance that will now ripple through her lineage.

Thus, Philadelphia and Jubilee are active absences and Signifyin' ghosts (Gates, 1988) that continually reshape the family's present. Their unquiet spirits manifest through Morrison's (1987) concept of "rememory", which refers, not simply to remembered events but happenings that continue to exert force in the present (p. 36). The twins represent Gordon's (2008) notion of the "something-to-be-done", an unresolved spiritual obligation, or *ànà*, that haunts the living and demands resolution (p. xvi).

This active absence manifests most powerfully in the novel's structure itself, which is organized around Hattie's twelve children while centering the trauma of the first two. Their names, Philadelphia ("city of brotherly love") and Jubilee ("jubilation"), take on an ironic significance by representing both a promised land that fails to provide refuge and a celebration that never occurs. This spectral presence links the family's personal tragedy to broader historical patterns.

Hartman (2007) describes this as the "afterlife of slavery", a condition in which the legacies of enslavement continue to disrupt family and spiritual structures (p. 6). The twins' active absence aligns with the Yoruba concept of *àṣe òkú*, a spiritual force created by the dead that continues to influence the living (Abimbola, 2006, p. 178). This force manifests not as literal ghosts but as persistent patterns of misfortune and emotional constraint. It is felt most acutely in Hattie's emotional withdrawal, which represents more than psychological defense. Abraham and Torok (1994) refer to this condition as incorporation, which is the encryption of unresolved grief that cannot be processed or expressed (p. 126). This mirrors Morrison's (1987) exploration of how profound loss makes "too-thick love" impossible for those who those left behind (p. 36).

4.2 Spectral Inheritance: Multigenerational Effects of Spiritual Debt

The cosmological debt (*ànà*) created by the unresolved spiritual status of the twins manifests uniquely and catastrophically in each of Hattie's subsequent children, illustrating what Abimbola (2006) describes as the "multiple manifestations of àná" within a family system (p. 156). Each child embodies a distinct facet of this spiritual disorder, their individual struggles constituting the *ànà*'s specific expression through their lives.

In Floyd, the *ànà* encrypts itself as a psychic phantom of concealed homosexuality (Abraham & Torok, 1994), generating a "loud, internal confusion" (Mathis, 2012, p. 21)

that condemns him to furtive encounters he must "push[] from his mind" (Mathis, 2012, p. 29). His nomadic existence and musical artistry, using his trumpet to "carry him out to the edges of himself" (Mathis, 2012, p. 40), represent a failed attempt to escape this spiritual burden. His ultimate failure to defend Lafayette is not mere cowardice but the *ànà* actively ensuring its own replication through further familial rupture.

For Six, the *ànà* channels itself into a violent religious fundamentalism, a desperate and destructive attempt to impose order on inherited spiritual chaos. His story exemplifies the "search for cosmological certainty in conditions of spiritual fragmentation" (Olupona, 2011, p. 218), a search perverted by the unquiet spirits into a need for punitive control rather than healing. Cassie's schizophrenia represents the *ànà* manifesting as a state of spiritual possession without ritual containment (Drewal, 1992). Her fragmented consciousness directly mirrors and embodies the twins' own fractured spiritual presence, signifying the family's ultimate failure to integrate the metaphysical disturbance.

The *ànà*'s corruption of the maternal line is made literal in Ruthie, whose very conception during Hattie's affair marks her as a vessel of this spiritual imbalance. Her psychological fragility and eventual institutionalization demonstrate the *ànà*'s physical and mental toll on the next generation. Finally, Ella's cancer and Alice's submission to an abusive marriage both reflect what Abimbola (2006) characterizes as the "turning inward" of àṣẹ (p. 167), wherein the life force, disrupted by the primordial spiritual debt, becomes self-destructive rather than sustaining.

Each child's narrative thus represents not merely individual psychological struggle but the precise mechanism by which the *ànà*, as Gordon (2008) would argue, makes its "seething presence" known. The unquiet twins actively shape each sibling's destiny through these varied distortions. Furthermore, the spiritual disorder also generates what Weheliye (2014) terms a hematological line of trauma. The illness that killed the twins, pneumonia, reemerges when Hattie's granddaughter Sala develops asthma, materializing the unresolved past in the present body. The struggles of Hattie's children therefore represent more than isolated misfortunes; they are the inevitable outcomes of a cosmological imbalance that has not been ritually repaired. Until this disorder is acknowledged, the twins remain active absences whose unquiet spirits disturb the àṣẹ of each generation until the *ànà* is resolved.

V. DIASPORIC LITERARY AND THEORETICAL CONTEXTS

5.1 Literary Dialogues: Intertextual Hauntings from Morrison, Okri, and Danticat

Ayana Mathis's exploration of generational haunting places *Twelve Tribes* in direct conversation with a rich tradition of African and diasporic literature that seeks to articulate trauma through spiritual and cosmological frameworks. The novel's engagement with these works reveals both shared thematic concerns and crucial distinctions that highlight the specificity of Mathis's Yoruba informed approach. The novel's structural haunting enters into a direct dialogue with Toni Morrison's oeuvre, particularly her novel *Beloved* (1987), in which the disturbing and vengeful ghost of Sethe's baby killed in slavery resurfaces to wreak havoc in the life of the whole family.

Both authors explore how improperly mourned deaths generate cyclical suffering, suggesting that, as Morrison (1987) shows that the life of the living is dependent upon the appropriate acknowledgement of the departed and the collective past traumas. However, a critical distinction emerges in the mechanism of this haunting. While Morrison's ghosts often operate through psychological haunting and rememory, Mathis's twins function through a spiritual imbalance rooted in the specific Yoruba cosmological principles of ibeji neglect and *àná*.

This distinction is critical because it fundamentally reorients the narrative's proposed solution from psychological reckoning with the past to ritual action meant to restore balance (Abimbola, 2006; Lawal, 2012). It reflects a nuanced difference between a broader Afro spiritual sensibility and a culturally precise cosmological trauma, transforming ghosts from metaphors of historical violence into manifestations of a concrete spiritual disorder that demands ritual resolution.

While Morrison provides a domestic American context, Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991) offers a foundational West African intertext for understanding Mathis's engagement with spirit child traditions. Okri's protagonist Azaro, an *abiku* or spirit child bound to cycle between the spiritual and physical worlds, finds a compelling diasporic echo in Mathis's twins. Drawing on the work of Ato Quayson (1997), Philadelphia and Jubilee can be read as "refused *abiku*", spirit beings denied the ritual recognition required to resolve their cyclical passage. This connection frames Hattie's story as a cultural narrative emblematic of the broader African American experience of rupture, where the knowledge to appease such powerful spiritual entities has been fragmented. The key divergence lies in context and form. Okri situates the *abiku* within the magical realist turbulence of postcolonial Nigerian politics, while Mathis transposes the *ibeji* concept onto the

psychological realism of the Great Migration, rendering the haunting through emotional austerity and familial fracture rather than a blurred spiritual material realm.

A final instructive comparison can be drawn with Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994), which shares Mathis's intense focus on matrilineal trauma and diasporic identity. Both authors foreground mother daughter relationships fractured by migration and historical violence, and both pointedly resist Western psychological models in favor of culturally specific epistemologies, Danticat through Vodoun concepts of ancestral memory and Mathis through Yoruba cosmology. A central convergence is their exploration of how trauma becomes embodied across generations.

Danticat represents this through the practice of *testing*, a bodily invasion that inscribes maternal trauma onto the daughter, while Mathis depicts it through the recurrence of illness, such as the pneumonia that killed the twins reappearing as asthma in her granddaughter Sala. This creates what Alexander Weheliye (2014) terms a *hematological line* of trauma, materializing the unresolved past in the present body. Furthermore, both novels complicate the North as salvation narrative of migration, showing how northern urban settings can exacerbate spiritual disintegration, and both imagine healing not through a return to a pure origin but through the syncretic adaptation of spiritual practices in a new world.

Collectively, these intertextual dialogues demonstrate how African diasporic literature operates as a ritual space for negotiating spiritual identity. Reading Mathis alongside Morrison, Okri, and Danticat advances critical theoretical interventions. It resists universalizing PTSD models by insisting on culturally grounded frameworks, remaps the Black Atlantic by foregrounding spiritual syncretism, and engages in a feminist reclamation of mythology to explore the specific burdens and resilience of women. This comparative reading underscores the necessity of approaching this literature through its distinct cultural and cosmological contexts. It reveals haunting not as Gothic ornamentation but as a profound meditation on history, memory, and the enduring search for balance, a search that in Mathis's framework requires ritual action rather than solely psychological processing (Abimbola, 2006; Olupona, 2011).

5.2 Toward a New Critical Framework: Implications for the Field

Collectively, these intertextual dialogues with Morrison, Okri, and Danticat demonstrate how Mathis's novel advances critical theoretical interventions for African Diasporic literary studies. First, it powerfully resists universalizing Western PTSD models by insisting on

culturally grounded frameworks. By situating trauma within the specific tenets of Yoruba cosmology, the novel challenges the individualistic, diagnostic focus of Western theory, arguing instead for an understanding of suffering as a collective, spiritual imbalance.

Second, these works facilitate a re mapping of the Black Atlantic by foregrounding spiritual syncretism. They illustrate how characters navigate multiple cosmological frameworks, from the Yoruba concepts in *Hattie* to the Vodoun influences in Danticat's work. This is seen in how Hattie's descendants, for example, adapt Christianity into a diasporic reinterpretation of ancestral veneration. This contestation of monolithic portrayals of Black trauma highlights the multiplicity and resilience of African spiritual retentions.

Finally, these authors collectively engage in a feminist reclamation of mythology. They center the experiences of women and matrilineal lines as the primary vessels through which cultural memory, trauma, and ultimately healing are processed and transmitted. Their works depict African diasporic literature itself as a ritual space for negotiating spiritual identity, offering narrative forms that can contain and process historical grief.

This comparative reading reveals haunting not as Gothic ornamentation but as a profound meditation on history, memory, and the enduring search for balance, positioning novels like *Twelve Tribes* as essential contributions to understanding the spiritual dimensions of the African diasporic experience.

Sala, Hattie's granddaughter raised as her youngest child, emerges as a potential figure of spiritual resolution within the novel's Afrocentric framework. Her generation represents what Hartman (2007) might term the "afterlife of slavery" becoming conscious of itself, the point at which inherited trauma might be transformed through awareness and deliberate intervention (p. 6). Sala's turn toward born-again Christianity can be read not as a rejection of African spiritual traditions but as what Olupona (2011) identifies as characteristic African diasporic syncretism, the adaptation of traditional spiritual practices within new religious contexts (p. 245).

Unlike Hattie, who represents the generation that experienced direct rupture from cultural traditions through the Great Migration, Sala seeks spiritual solutions to the family's inherited suffering. Her religious conversion represents what some scholars characterize as a distinctly African American spiritual practice that integrates Christian forms with African-derived concerns with ancestral reverence and communal healing (Douglas, 1999; Paris, 1995). Through Sala, Mathis suggests the possibility of what Danticat (2010) terms "creating dangerously," finding

innovative spiritual responses to historical trauma that honor cultural traditions while adapting to contemporary circumstances (p. 10). Sala's character illustrates what might be possible when generations born into displacement nevertheless seek spiritual frameworks to address inherited suffering.

The novel's conclusion offers a complex, cautiously hopeful vision of healing that operates within Afrocentric spiritual frameworks rather than Western psychological models. Mathis resists simplistic resolution, acknowledging the profound and lasting impacts of historical and personal trauma. However, she also suggests possibilities for incommensurate healing, forms of recovery that do not conform to Western therapeutic expectations but nevertheless facilitate meaningful transformation (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 241).

The ending emphasizes communal rather than individual resolution, reflecting African diasporic values of collective well-being over individual cure (Turner, 2006). Hattie's recognition of her children's "vibrating souls" (Mathis, 2012, p. 243) can be interpreted as a form of ancestral acknowledgment, a crucial step in Yoruba tradition toward addressing spiritual imbalance (Abimbola, 2006). This moment reflects the necessary recognition and response to haunting that allows for movement beyond repetitive suffering (Gordon, 2008, p. xvi).

Mathis ultimately presents healing not as eradication of pain but as "walking with the spirits," learning to incorporate historical suffering into contemporary identity without being destroyed by it (Danticat, 2010, p. 15). The novel suggests that for African Americans whose connection to specific African traditions has been fragmented by historical violence, healing may emerge through innovative spiritual practices that honor the past while creatively adapting to the present. This resolution acknowledges the profound losses of diaspora while affirming the resilience and creativity of cultural memory as it manifests through successive generations.

VI. CONCLUSION

This examination has established that Ayana Mathis's *Twelve Tribes* represents a significant literary innovation through its integration of Yoruba cosmological principles with the narrative of generational trauma. The analysis demonstrates how the premature death of Hattie's twin infants, Philadelphia and Jubilee, functions not merely as personal tragedy but as a cosmological crisis within Yoruba spiritual traditions. Their improper ritual passage creates a state of àná, or spiritual debt, that manifests across generations of the Shepherd family (Abimbola, 2006). The novel challenges Western trauma models by presenting

suffering and resilience through specifically African diasporic spiritual frameworks, suggesting that healing requires not only psychological intervention but also spiritual recognition and ritual repair (Lawal, 2012). Through its structural organization around Hattie's twelve children while centering the unresolved trauma of the first two, the novel embodies the persistent presence of absence that characterizes generational haunting (Gordon, 2008).

This study makes several significant contributions to African American literary studies. First, it expands the critical vocabulary available for interpreting African American literature beyond Western theoretical frameworks, demonstrating the value of culturally specific reading practices grounded in African cosmological systems (Asante, 2003). Second, it illuminates how the Great Migration involved not only geographical displacement but also spiritual dislocation, as communities lost access to the cultural knowledge and ritual practices that had previously provided frameworks for understanding and addressing suffering (Wilkerson, 2010). Third, it contributes to ongoing scholarly efforts to recover and honor African cultural retentions that persist within African American communities despite centuries of violent disruption (Thompson, 1984). Finally, it positions Mathis's work within a broader literary tradition that includes Toni Morrison, Ben Okri, and Edwidge Danticat, authors who similarly explore the intersections of spiritual traditions and historical trauma through innovative narrative forms.

The interpretive approach developed here has significant implications for reading other diasporic texts. It suggests that critics should attend to the specific cultural and spiritual frameworks that inform literary representations of trauma and healing, rather than defaulting to universalizing Western psychological models (Brown, 1995). This approach could be applied productively to texts such as Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, which explores themes of spiritual inheritance and generational haunting through specifically Southern African American cultural frameworks. It also provides a model for reading beyond metaphor in texts that incorporate spiritual elements, recognizing that authors often draw on specific cultural traditions with particular cosmological implications (Drewal, 2012). Furthermore, this approach highlights the importance of "cultural memory in the flesh," or the embodied transmission of historical consciousness that operates outside Western logocentric traditions (Dillard, 2012, p. 87). This perspective invites scholars to attend to ways diasporic texts encode knowledge through non-textual means, including spiritual practices, bodily disciplines, and ritual behaviors.

Ultimately, *Twelve Tribes* offers a profound meditation on the relationship between cultural knowledge, spiritual balance, and historical recovery. The novel suggests that for African American communities whose connection to specific African traditions has been fragmented by the violence of slavery and subsequent displacements, healing may require both recovery of cultural knowledge and creative adaptation of spiritual practices to contemporary circumstances (Olupona, 2011). Mathis does not present a romanticized vision of prelaps African purity but acknowledges the creative syncretism that has characterized African American spiritual life throughout its history (Paris, 1995).

The novel's cautious hopefulness resides in figures like Sala, who represents the possibility of new generations finding innovative ways to address old wounds while honoring the resilience of those who came before. Mathis ultimately suggests that spiritual balance requires more than recognizing the presence of the past, as encapsulated by Morrison's concept of *rememory* (Morrison, 1987). It demands active ritual engagement to address the spiritual disorder, moving forward with the creative work of building future possibilities through restorative cultural practices (Abimbola, 2006; Lawal, 2012). In this way, *Twelve Tribes* (2012) makes its most significant contribution. It offers not just a story of suffering but a vision of how cultural knowledge and spiritual awareness can provide pathways through historical trauma toward greater wholeness.

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