Chapter 7
Afrodemia:
The Interior Essence of African American Literature as Manifested in the Black Institution

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the unique relationship between African American literature and the historically black institution, arguing that the cultural geographies that permeate the Black literary landscape comprise an academy of its own. This academy emerges in the afterlife of both African American literature and the historically black institution, enabling both to culminate their power through their interior essence. This chapter calls this interior essence Afrodemia—a physical space where learning and self-reflection proves a constant despite not constituting a static place. Afrodemia builds on Derrick Bell's short story "Afrolantica," particularly, the "liberation of place not of mind" that a mass of land that solely grants access to African Americans engenders (Bell).The author examines Toni Morrison's novels Beloved and Paradise as evidencing Afrodemia in their depiction of griot figures who transform geographical space into a place of mental elevation and their challenge to the idea of paradise, fictional matrices that emerge as fact in the Black institution.

AFRODEMIA, AN INTRODUCTION

Beyond the colonial remnants of the ivory tower is an academy that few speak about. This academy departs from a once homogenous student body groomed for prominence in the social reproduction of racial mythos. Instead, this academy takes shape in the literature of a once adjected people who employed fiction to challenge what the conventional academy perpetuated as fact. To Eleanor Traylor, this academy takes form in "The Academy of the Seven Acts" in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*. Calling the academy "a cross-disciplinary, cross-cultural institution," Traylor contends that Bambara's academy embodies the "imagined or reimaged curriculum" that results from "the resonance of a remote humanistic past" (Traylor 2009, 163). For Joshua Myers, intellection beyond colonial influence takes form in imagining "an otherwise." This otherwise, though not an academy *per se*, examines what it means "to be against the ways in which Western knowledge has influenced how reality—particularly the reality that has applied to Black life—has been presented to us" (10). In *Of Black Study*, a book that also offers a meditation on Bambara, Myers calls for a "space created for the purposes of intellectual transformation and human liberation rather than mere representation and recognition within what already is" and "a beyond" (Myers 2023, 12; 13). This space is African American literary fiction. Toni Morrison, in a literary catalog that re-presents reality as beyond the white gaze, engages the power of the humanities by pairing literature and Black studies to cultivate cognitive geographies through the cultural spaces that house the critical ponderance born from the cultural specificity of her work. Morrison, Traylor, and Meyer appoint African American literature and Black studies as vessels to imagine scholarly spaces beyond the grasp of colonial affect, referencing intellection as superseding the limitations of physical space. This chapter aligns what Morrison, Traylor, and Myers involve the humanities to depict as assuming tangible form in the historically black institution. The author contends that though a formal institution, the historically black institution, like African American Literature (and the humanities in general), culminates its potential through its interiority. The author introduces the term Afrodemia, an academy, or interior institution, that actualizes the intellection and insight that both Traylor and Meyer outline.

My use of interiority builds on DuBois's phrasing "souls of Black folk," and the "design and spirit" that foments The Academy of the Seven Arts' success (despite its ultimate failure).[1] Interiority, therefore, references what lies beneath; but more pertinently, it references the fecund portion of self-unsullied by the dominant culture. Its nuance and insight promise to carry readers past the toxic desire to socially reproduce what engenders Pecola's wish for blue eyes in *The Bluest Eye*, what casts Amy Denver as hero in *Beloved*, what perpetuates revenge as reaction like Guitar in *Song of Solomon,* and what affords the hbi its deserving reverie only

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