

"YOU TOOK A NAME THAT MADE YOU AMIABLE TO THE MUSIC":  
 TONI CADE BAMBARA'S THE SALT EATERS

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Of course there is a Hazel in Toni Cade Bambara's first novel, The Salt Eaters (1980). There has been a Hazel in each of her other books. The name recurs throughout her three volumes of short stories as a sort of trademark. One critic, Eleanor Traylor, has even called the author herself: "Miss Hazel." Hazel seems to be "the central consciousness in the whole Bambara canon."

Toni Cade Bambara's interpretation of the name Hazel is instructive as far as her own naming practices are concerned:

The first time I heard those sounds 'hazel' my mother was stretching out on the couch, putting witch hazel pads on her eyes, and I thought, 'Hmmm, witch hazel.' I was fond of witches, still am, the groovy kind. I once had a belt made out of shel-

lacked hazel nuts. But the combination---  
witch hazel---I was off and running. It's  
a powerful word, 'hazel,' a seven, and the  
glyph we call 'zee' is ancient and powerful.<sup>1</sup>

First, both witch hazel and hazel nuts come from shrubs,  
or small trees. Toni Cade Bambara respects trees so much  
that she names her most favored characters after trees.  
One of the most lyrical passages in her first novel is about  
the planting of a tree in 1871 by white-robed elders. It  
is in the bark of that magnificent tree that the loa re-  
side. In her first version of the book, the holy tree  
itself narrated that passage.

The second thing to notice is that the color yellow  
predominates in the book. The witch hazel also happens to  
have yellow flowers. The circle of twelve elders who wit-  
ness the healing are all dressed in yellow. The health  
food restaurant where the Seven Sisters assemble, where  
Campbell is a waiter, where the six nuclear engineers  
play their mordant games, and where Jan and Ruby discuss  
policy, is decorated in yellow and white. Furthermore, its

name, The Avocado Pit, promises a majestic tree.

The third thing to notice is the numerology. It is a "powerful" word because it adds up to seven. It is Fred Holt, the busdriver, whose last name, Holt, is derived from the German "holtz" which means copse of trees, or wood, or timber, who meditates both on Miss Hazel, and on the significance of numbers:

He'd heard the old musicians talking when he was a kid and used to sit there in the hall of Miss Hazel's boardinghouse, hugging his knees, that naming was no miscellaneous matter. You took a name and gave your ax a name that made you both amiable to the music. They made it sound like this music was a person who could be called over and made to work for you.. He had been told that he was a four, and fours were builders, but lots of fours never got around to doing what they were put on earth to do cause they was so busy feeling boxed in by them four sides of

their nature that they didn't have the sense to look up and appreciate all that space they could build into... And another thing, the Negro people were fours and so long as they paid more attention to folks trying to pen them in, hem them in, box them in on all four sides thinking they had them in prison than to the work at hand, why then they would never get a spare moment to look up at the sun and build (77).

Poor Fred, both of whose names are fours, is penned in all day by the four sides of the bus he drives, and at night his second wife, Marge (whose name means marking the boundaries, setting the limits, defining the margins), adamantly turns her blue-flanneled back to him.

Throughout the novel, Fred mourns for his friend Porter whose literate conversation had opened up the world for him. Just before his untimely death, Porter had planned to study with Cleotus Brown, the Hermit,

who lived in the woods, where all of Toni Cade Bambara's sanctified characters live. Porter means "one employed to carry burdens," the traditional fate of Blacks in America. They bear the weight, as Cora Rider says. Porter, who has borne this heavy destiny, becomes a kind of Christ figure. He suffered from a wasting disease that began in 1955 at Yucca Flats when he was exposed to atomic test blasts (80). It is he who warns the others about the trains with sealed boxcars of radioactive waste emerging from the Transchemical Company. It was Porter who educated Fred's limited perceptions. Where Fred saw only a bunch of birds, Porter "pointed out what there was to see, what was escaping his eye," and made poetry out of how they rode sheer sunlight (68). Porter longed to be an albatross soaring over the Antarctic just, for once before he died, to see the earth from that view. He is married to peace. His wife, Irene, is in Canada with his kids; Irene is from the Greek "eirene"

meaning "conciliatory, pacific, peaceful." At the climax of the novel, Porter is granted his Second Coming, and Fred is given a vision. Through the hospital window he glimpses the luminous figure of Porter emerging from the Shiloh Baptist Church (279).

Cora Rider, who is the most articulate member of the prayer circle, is the final name derived from the hazel nut, of the genus *Corylus*. She is as small, as hard, as pale brown as the hazel nut. Her favorite expression is that ancient proverb, "What goes round comes round." David Bradley, in Incident at Chaneyville, defines this stance as that which differentiates white thinking from Black thought. When deciding on a course of action a white man will lay plans, while a Black man will fatalistically wait it out. Toni Morrison, Ms. Barbara's friend and editor, spelled out this attitude at length in Sula. Black folks don't fight against evil; they ride it out. Thus Rider becomes Cora's last name. When the call is "weight" she responds with her "burdens" (10). When it is "misery," she

testifies "I been there" (16). "Too much to bear, but she held on, and never lost her faith" (110). She kept the faith because of her assurance "that she would be rewarded when things turned right side round again. What goes round, comes round" (111). So she stuck out her bony chest, and continued her good works, riding out the injustices. The most telling of Cora Rider's comments is her final one. It condenses the associations of her name with her pious faith, and memorializes the instant of conversion when the suicidal woman for whom they have been praying is turned back toward life. At that moment there is a bolt of thunder. Cora Rider says, "That was the kind of thunderbolt that knocked Saul off his steed and turned him into Paul" (278). The patient later remembered that instant as the moment she started back toward life, "the moment when the healer's hand had touched some vital spot" (278).

Beside Cora in the circle is her best friend Anna Banks who intermittently moans "Oh Lawd, Cora, Lawd"

(109, 277). Cora rolls her eyes at this taking of God's name in vain; but in the instant of the boom of thunder, she clutches Anna Banks, moaning "Oh my Lawd" before Anna Banks could say it. When they see the pregnant teenager between them, about to go into labor, they release each other, so that Anna Banks can "brace her" (278). She enacts her name, becoming a shore, an embankment to lean against, a steadying force. She "banks" the girl.

These characters not only enact their names, but also possess a multiplicity of names. Some of these are diminutives reserved to intimates, some of these are public names assumed for performance purposes, some are official designations of role or status, some are nicknames conferred by the communities in which they move, some are titles. But the most special are the magical names pointing up the initiates possessed of mysterious force and power.

The legendary spinster, Minnie Ransom, who "spins out her healing songs" humming of love, enacts all of her

names. Minnie is the minion of Karen Wilder, whom she calls "Old Wife" or "spirit guide," who counsels her about which song to use in her ministry. "Minna" is the Old High German word for "love," and the fabled fourteenth-century Minnesingers were the troubadours whose legendary love songs Wagner used in Die Meistersinger. Minnie sings the ebbing life force of her patients into renewed flowing. She knows which chants will release congealed lymph or constricted blood, which melodies will free the discord and stridency into melodious harmony. Minnie's last name, Ransom, has both a secular and a theological meaning. It means both to "pay a stipulated price for the release of a person" and to "redeem, or deliver from the consequences of sin." Minnie Ransom uses the gift she neither wished for, nor feels she deserved, in the service of those who have lost their way. In the second chapter of The Salt Eaters, she consults with her teacher, because she fears she lacks the energy to restore her patient. Old Wife reminds her of how fierce her love is for the "chirren"

and of what she would risk to ransom them from burning. Minnie Ransom's response, which inspires her with the strength to complete her task, is a vision of what she would do to save the "chirren who are our glory." Imagining this challenge, she says: "I'd throw that blanket over them chirren's head like a kidnap snatching sack and throw'm on the ground and roll'm in the dirt and jump all over them to smother out the flames till fire turn 'em loose and they can live" (62).

The theme of The Salt Eaters is that the rift in the Black community must be bridged. The warriors (civil rights militants) and the spiritualists (mystic nationalists) must open a dialogue. The activists and the psychic adepts must begin to talk to each other. The initial merging of these two disparate frames of reference begins in the Southwest Community Infirmary. On the periphery are visiting interns, technicians, nurses in their starched white jackets, all watching in mingled skepticism, embarrassment or cynical disbelief. Minnie resorts to such ancient wisdoms as

"Doan letcha mouf gitcha in what ya backbone caint stand" (9).<sup>1</sup> And as the staff stares at the patient's slashed wrists, her scars turn from black to maroon to pink to flesh, and they are stunned still, "forced to acknowledge something more powerful than skepticism" (86).

Three of the elders who serve as mediators are "Doc" Serge, Sophie Heywood, and Cleotus Brown. Since they function both as wisdom figures and as conciliators of the embattled factions, they have many titles. The administrator of the Infirmary is B. Talifero Serge (282). When he ran a gambling joint, he had been known as "Faro" (131). He had also had a few other names in his day, like "Candy Man" and "Sweet Bear" when he ran the houses. His name Serge, meaning an imported worsted, represents his expensive three piece suits. "Doc Serge always dressed like a first-class gangster in a foreign movie" (135). He is impeccably groomed, and as fragrant as if he had just stepped out of a barbershop. He is the apostle of self-love, telling himself, "I am one beautiful and powerful son of a bitch" (136). It is

because he loves his own "fabulous brilliance" that the name Faro is so appropriate. Faro is a card game in which gamblers lay bets on the top card of the dealer's pack. The name Faro is a variant of Pharaoh, the god-king of ancient Egypt, whose portrait is supposed to be the king of hearts. It is his gift of rap which accounts for his power. To all visitors he gives a slide show and talk about "the fusion of Western medicine and the traditional arts" (106) and the "courage and resourcefulness of the old bonesetters, the grannies, the midwives, the root men, the conjure women, the obeah folk" (107).

Doc had grown up with Cleotus Brown, also known as "The Hermit" and "The Man in Green," and the Magician from the Tarot deck. The name Cleotus is derived from the Greek "kleio" meaning "teller," and is the same root from which Clio, the Muse of History, comes. An encounter with Cleotus results in a transformation. Porter, having met him once, quoted him forever after, changed his shift to nights so that he could study with

him, began drinking tea with honey. That is what Jan and Ruby are sipping when he transfixes them like a "scroll from a pharaoh's tomb" (196) and they remember him as "one of Doc Serge's cut buddies" (197) and they recall hearing "something about a man in green giving the signal for things to start" (197).

A Mardi Gras Krewe has designed a float for Sophie Heywood to ride. They were going to reenact an old slave insurrection in which Sophie's ancestor had participated. She is Velma Henry's godmother, had been present at her birth, at her baptism, her wedding, and now she is waiting for her godchild to be summoned back to life. Much of the novel is related through her meditations in Doc Serge's office. He and Cleotus had been her childhood friends. Minnie had designed the glyphs on her curtains (227), in whose secrets Sophie had instructed her godchild. Some of the old-timers wonder why a woman who had been "chapter president of the Women's Auxiliary of the Sleeping Car Porters for two decades running would even cross the street for the

likes of Velma Henry" (12).

Sophie is Greek for "wisdom." She always instructed her students that "every event is preceded by a sign" (13), and taught them how to be clairvoyant. She taught them how to gather sassafras, and eucalyptus, and healing roots (18). Her surname, Heywood, is appropriate for one so at home in the woods. It is she who explains the book's title by saying, "You never really know a person until you've eaten salt together" (147). She had once saved her husband's life by feeding him salt to neutralize the venom, packing a salt-poultice into the shoulder stung by the serpent (257-8). Sophie sees that her godchild has ossified, like Lot's wife, no longer able to distinguish "between eating salt as an antidote to snakebite and turning into salt, succumbing to the serpent" (8). She was called "M'Dear" by everyone, as in "Maa Deear, everybody's good ole boardinghouse grandma" (189), the matriarch who reigns over Claybourne, Georgia, and whose soul travels the cosmos.

James Lee Henry, who runs the Academy of the Seven

Arts, wanted a coalition of people of color, but instead there are factions. The tensions and the intrigues tighten his muscles, turn him into rock. Ahiro, his Korean masseur, complains that his back is "like a granite slab" (164), and advises him to have "a good cry, man" so that his body can throw off its excess salt. Called Obie by his followers, and James Obie by his wife, and Obeah by his brothers, his nickname is orientalized into "Obo" by the Korean. He had joked with the baby they had adopted: "I orient myself. I deoccident myself" (119), and had given him his old name "Lil James" when he assumed his new one. "Obi" means conjuror or sorceror, or "one who bewitches or puts under a spell." In the theatrical world it has another connotation, also appropriate for this charming man. It is an award given annually to the best actor. Since Toni Cade Bambara is a playwright as well, this secondary meaning is quite fitting.

Lil James is seen by every other character in the book as he crosses town on his bike, delivering

newspapers. Some remark on how grownup he is for twelve; others comment on the size of his sneakers as he stops to tie his shoelaces. His mother, Velma, says, "Lil James is sure getting independent, buying his own clothes, thinking about renaming himself" (230). By the time Campbell sees him straining uphill on his bike, Lil James is calling himself Jabari (173). Campbell tips an imaginary hat in acknowledgment of such effort. Jabari embodies the community's hopes, rising upward like a Mardi Gras kite with a message to God inscribed on it (174).

Named in honor of a Black poet, James Edwin Campbell (1867-95), who had been head of the West Virginia Colored Institute and then became a journalist in Chicago, Campbell is of heroic stature, exuberantly alive. He has the savor of one of the exemplary people of Matthew 5:13, "the salt of the earth," as he comes in "salt-stiff" from jogging (172). Three hours a day he works as a waiter at the Avocado Pit Cafe, then teaches the writer's workshop at Obie's Academy, then

takes a late class with Sophie Heywood. He is also a reporter for the Claybourne Call for which he was doing a series on nuclear energy (209), and had covered the Coral Gables high-energy conference where he alone had understood the allusions to Mulla Nasrudin (mulla is the title of a Muslim religious teacher). He understood the correspondences between thermodynamics, voodoo, alchemy, and Sufi mysticism; he could discuss fission in terms of billiards (210). He had invented a board game, "Disposal," to educate the public about environmental contamination and irritate them into joining the antinuclear movement. Each afternoon he picked up tips from the six nuclear engineers who played games of "Fix" and "Fail-Safe Phooey" to determine who will pay for their drinks before they return to work at Transchemical. That its reactor has finally exploded is his first terrified thought when the cataclysmic thunderclap seems to split the earth. His second thought is -- Damballah. The African deity is summoning them back to biblical wisdom through his premonitory roar. "Legba stood at the gate" (246). In

Haitian mythology Legba is the intermediary between man and the Loas. He guards the crossroads where human and divine can meet through his intervention. He opens the barriers. Mankind is called to regeneration on which the fate of the earth depends. Campbell hears the shout of Ogun (248).<sup>2</sup>

In a flashforward, we learn that Campbell's courtship of Janice on the afternoon of the thunderstorm has resulted in their marriage (262). An astrologer and reader of the Tarot deck, she tells Sophie and Doc that Pluto had moved into Scorpio indicating "annihilation and transformation." Janice, named for the two-headed god Janus, depicted by the Romans as the deity of gates and doorways, looking both forward and backward, is an appropriate figure to express the momentous choice to be made now that Pluto, "the planet of immense power," governs (282). Pluto is king of the realm of the dead in Roman myth. As a sculptress and teacher of ceramics, Janice interprets the need for clay to be centered on the potter's wheel. It is she who analogizes

the healer's hands on Velma's body, trying to shape her into rising, "but a lump in the beat, the rhythm wobbly" (116), to the masseur who was trying to smooth out the rocks in Obi's body. It is Jan, also, who escapes the apotropaic response to snakes. What first attracted Campbell to her were the brilliant tie-dyed scarves she wound around her braids, "like snakes on her head" (195).

Ruby, who shares Jan's salad and prints Obi's newsletter, recalls how she washed Velma's bleeding feet after their civil rights marches. Her "red" name is associated with blood and with her radical political past. As she longs for her musician husband who is on the road, we note that a literary compliment has been paid: his name, Nathan Hardge, echoes the thanks on the dedication page to Loretta Hardge "who typed this manuscript." Ruby, mourning all the dead leaders, the "movement splintered, enclaves unconnected" (193), longs for someone to pull the folks together again. So poignant is their longing for a new King, a new Malcolm,

that this is the very argument that Doc uses with her cousin Buster who has gotten fifteen year old Nadeen pregnant. "Does it occur to you that the baby you are considering aborting might be the very one who will deliver us?" (133).

The working title of this novel had been The Seven Sisters. Toni Cade Bambara had been working for a coalition of women of color.<sup>3</sup> In the novel, a multi-ethnic group of artists who travel to conferences and festivals giving multi-media performances call themselves, after the Pleiades, the Seven Sisters. They return from the Non Nukes rally in Barnswell on Fred Holt's bus, repairing their equipment and discussing their scripts, thus linking the artistic and the technological. They exchange gifts to symbolize their sisterhood. Cecile, the Jamaican, trades her straw hat for Nilda's black felt Andes one with its tall feather. Chezia, from the island of Tupercuin, gives her pendant to the Chinese girl, Mai. On a leather thong is an emblem of Kashisk, god of wind and rain; on the back is

Uraeus (223). This is the sacred serpent depicted on the headdress of the ancient Egyptian god-kings as an emblem of sovereignty. The present is offered in the same cafe where Campbell, at that moment, had thought of Damballah, the voodoo deity associated with rain, thunder and serpents. What completes the association is the memory of phosphorescent rabbits who had burrowed into the radioactive soil at Barnwell, and the knowledge that the rain "meant contamination leaching inches ever closer to the water table, spelling the ruin of the Savannah River and all who lived in it, on it, by it, from it" (225).

Several of the "seven sisters" are invested with nurturant, earth-mother names. Palma, a painter who is Velma's sister, is called "sister of the yam." Iris is "sister of the plantain," Inez is "of the corn" and Mai is "of the rice." These names reflect the only hope that there is in such coalitions. What is valorized in Palma's tree-like name is not only the sheltering branches but also the secure roots. Each of these "daughters of the

crops" (214) is deeply rooted in her own culture and, being so centered, is able to share. It is on such generosity that co-existence depends.

The character who aligns himself with this generosity is Dr. Julius Meadows. A predisposition toward these values is predicted in his name. That he has been called a synonym of pasture, of green fields, of growing grass, disrupts our expectations when we discover his inability to call things by their proper names. This is particularly so in a novel where the heroine's recovery is pictured by her running down the street jubilantly naming things, "racing toward resurrection" in 6/8 time, calling out the names of everything there is in the world. (268).

Ambivalent about his own identity, Dr. Meadows perceives ambiguities in L's aimless wandering through Claybourne. Like him, the town "hadn't settled on its identity yet... broken-down stoops that looked like city and leaning porches that looked like country" (181). Studying the glyphs that masons had carved on the Infirm-

ary, he saw pink shining through the white, like an unmilked udder, and frowned, "that's my country self talking" (122). Conscious of his step-father's nickname for him, "putty-colored," he recalled the time he had been told he could only play Crispus Attucks if he applied burnt cork because "he was too light" for the part. Daydreaming, he inadvertently steps on the toes of a tough-looking man seated in a doorway, who threatens, "Watchit, honky!" (185). A hostile crowd gathers, examining him suspiciously. His only negroid features, his flattened nostrils, save his life. "You got a name, bruthuh?" (187). He misunderstands their names as "Emwahn" and "Thirsty" and says he's boarding with "Nadir." They straighten him out: "You mean M'Dear... My name's Thurston, as in need for a beer. This is Hull as in Walnut, called M1 as in rifle" (189). This was the moment Meadows called his conversion, when he found himself. The black dudes sling their arms around his shoulder, joshing him, "You somp'n. Callin people out of their name. Didn't yo mama teach you nuthin?"

Dr. Julius Meadows found his domain, listening to M1 and Thurston talk about the health hazards at Trans-chemical. He joined the rally they were organizing, and settled in Claybourne to continue the fight against "industrial arrogance and heedless technology" (281). The reputation he earned later for protecting the public had begun for him that afternoon of the thunder when he sat on the stoop with these buddies and "vowed to give the Hippocratic oath some political meaning" (281). It is significant in this context that his mentor, Thurston, was named for Thor, god of thunder. His friend Hull relates back to the tough shell of the hazel nut which is the emblem of the Bambara canon.

Dr. Meadows had initially left healing in search of "the essential self," intending to stroll in the woods. That his equivocation was resolved on LaSalle Street in Claybourne, leading him to apply to Doc Serge for work in the Infirmary, brings this ouroboric novel full circle. Both the litany of self-love, and the name Claybourne, probably derive from Cassius Marcellus Clay, whose

struggle against overwhelming odds Toni Cade Bambara  
celebrates.<sup>4</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Mary F. Berry and John W. Blassingame, "Africa, Slavery, and the Roots of Contemporary Black Culture," in Chant of Saints, ed. Michael S. Harper and Robert B. Stepto, University of Illinois Press, 1979, pp. 241-56. The folklore of their slave ancestors supplied survival wisdom. One mode of defense was to use African names with their own people, and "anglicized names in their dealings with whites" (246). Another was their reliance on proverbs. The Yoruba call the proverb "the horse of conversation," because it carries the meanings. "West Africans used proverbs as greetings, played them on drums, included them in songs, and applied them as nicknames." In Liberia, proverbs "served as precedents in reaching legal decisions" (246). Because the slaves were banned from literacy, they remained an oral people, and resorted to proverbs to teach their children.

One of these authentic sayings brought from Africa to the plantations is quoted on p. 247: "Don't say more with your mouth than your back can stand."

<sup>2</sup>Melvin Dixon, "Toward a World Black Literature and Community," in Chant of Saints, pp. 175-94, explains the sacred language of Voodoo which is derived from Dahomey, Nigeria and the Congo, fusing an African mythology with Christianity. Roumain's Masters of the Dew is based on these Haitian folk beliefs. Legba is the spiritual guardian of the crossroads, "where human and divine axes meet, and contact with the divinities takes place" (188). "Legba, in Haitian mythology, is the interpreter of the gods, who translates the requests and prayers of men into their language. In Haiti he has the function of opening the barrier that separates men from the Loas" (188). Ogun is "the fearful Loa, god of the blacksmiths and god of killers who rules over death" (190).

<sup>3</sup>Toni Cade Bambara, "What It Is I Think I'm Doing  
Anyhow," in The Writer on Her Work, ed. Janet Sternburg,  
New York: W. W. Norton, 1980, p. 165. "I'm trying to  
link the double helix of the Pleiades constellation  
(duplicated in the DNA molecule) with one of the central  
characters -- a swampy healer -- and with a traveling  
troupe of seven women." In another interview she elaborated:  
"I'm staying with a group of women from my novel,  
the Seven Sisters -- a group of performing artists from  
the African-American, Asian-American, Chicano, Puerto-  
riquena, and Native-American communities -- also in  
hopes that sisters of the yam, the rice, the corn and  
the plantain might find the work to be too thin a soup  
and get on out there and cook it right." Black Women  
Writers at Work, ed. Claudia Tate, New York: Continuum  
Publishing Company, 1983, p. 24. According to Greek  
mythology, the seven daughters of Atlas: Maia, Electra,  
Celaeno, Taygeta, Merope, Alcyone, and Sterope, were  
transformed into stars. The Pleiades is an immense

constellation, of which six stars are visible to the naked eye. Toni Cade Bambara preserved the name of one of these, Mai, and slightly altered the name of a second, Cecile (an approximation of Celaeno). She named the others as representative of ancient mother cultures: Inez, Nilda, Iris, Chezia, Palma.

<sup>4</sup>She admires the "championship tradition" exemplified by Cassius Marcellus Clay, who calls himself Mohammed Ali. She said that "Ali, in his autobiography I Am the Greatest, defines a champion as one who takes the telling blow on the chin and hits the canvas hard, can't possibly rally, arms shot, energy spent, the very weight of the body too heavy a burden for the legs to raise, can't possibly get up. So you do, and you keep getting up" (P. 163 in "What It Is"). A short story, "Broken Field Running," in The Seabirds are Still Alive (1977), concludes with such a fall into the snow. The Salt Eaters (1980) ends with Obie Henry rushing to his wife, who has

just stirred back to life in the Infirmary. At the thunderclap, which shakes the ground as if an earthquake, he falls. "'Get on up, Brother.' A command at his back... And he couldn't. His legs shot, his ankle sprained, his knee bleeding, his elbows sore, the breath knocked out of him in the fall, he couldn't get up and so he did get up" (292).

