

FOLK MODES OF NARRATION IN TONI MORRISON'S FICTION

Kevileno Sakhré




**Submitted in fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**Department of English
North-Eastern Hill University
Shillong**

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English

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DECLARATION

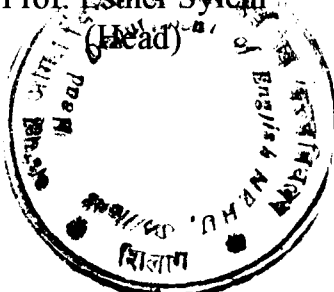
I, Kevileno Sakhrie, hereby declare that the subject matter of this thesis is the record of work done by me, and that the contents of this thesis did not form the basis for the award of any previous degree to me or, to the best of my knowledge, to anybody else, and that the thesis has not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other university/ institute.

This is being submitted to the North-Eastern Hill University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English.

Kevileno Sakhrie 9/7/08
Kevileno Sakhrie
(Candidate)

Temsula Ao 9.7.08
Prof. Temsula Ao
Dean of Humanities and Education
(Supervisor)
Professor of English
North Eastern Hill University
Shillong.

Esther Syiem 9/7/08
Prof. Esther Syiem
(Head)



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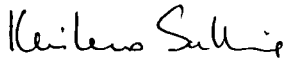
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[Kevileno Sakhrie]

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Abbreviations of Titles of Novels

The Bluest Eye---BE

Sula---S

Song of Solomon---SoS

Tar Baby---TB

Beloved---B

Jazz---J

Paradise---P

Introduction

One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

W.E.B. Du Bois•

In African-American literature, the quest for identity is a dominant motif. For writers of African descent, thematically and structurally, the journey to realize the full potential of their complex bi-cultural and bi-racial identity as African-Americans has been the focal point. In this connection, the history of African interactions with colonial forces on the continent and their inherent experiences in other lands play an essential role in the creation of the black¹ literary point of view. Identity is thus an important yet particularly elusive term in the context of black American culture, with its multiple dislocations and its long history of destabilizing social and psychological experience. It is complicated too by an awareness of W.E.B. Du Bois's famous concept of "double consciousness,"² by the recognition of the "mask" and the "performance" of the black self in response to white dominance.³ (The interchangeable use of the terms "African-American" and "black" have been explained in the Endnotes.)

Any examination of black literature must take this historical context, the attitudes engendered by this history, and the renewal

accompanying the rewriting of this history. For African-American writers of fiction, it often becomes necessary to challenge and interrogate hegemonic discourse to counter the distortions of received history, and to reconstitute the reality of their own experiences from an African and African-American viewpoint. In such a situation, the African tradition in African-American literature makes for a literary creation that “embodies many different ways in which the African American writer explores what Africa is, what it means to him or her, and what it means to the world.”⁴ Often, for these writers, this means a return to the longstanding oral tradition and its variations for creative appropriation of indigenous modes of imaginative expression and articulation of alternative perspectives.

As a writer of African descent, Toni Morrison attaches great importance to the reclamation of an identity and voice in black writing. All of her novels, from *The Bluest Eye* (1970) to *Love* (2003), testify to the multi-layered nature of black identity. As such, Morrison’s concern with the multiplicity of African-American identities and experience is indeed central to her writing. This concern is evident not only in her representation of the interface of black and white America – the racial divide that is in the foreground for so many black writers before her – but in her awareness of the multiple affiliations and points of difference within black communities as they relate to issues of class, gender, and

geographical locations. Her marked interest in historical periods of transition and the social transitions that she explores also reveal their impact on gender roles, and the separation of classes.

In response to the displacements they suffered ever since their forced transportation from their homelands to other continents, African-Americans, particularly in the American South, “embraced and deepened their cultural traditions as a means of survival and as a chosen separation from mainstream American culture.”⁵ However, as Morrison shows, the migrations to the urban North following historical and sociological events cause many of her protagonists to forget the South with all its repressive connotations and often painful memories. At the same time, the South retains a central place in communal memory and an abiding reality for those who still live there. Through its interconnections by way of the slave trade, the Middle Passage, and the colonial experience, with Africa and the Caribbean –black history is suffused with the presence of “Africanisms”⁶ that forms an ineradicable part of its culture. Consequently, Morrison’s novels feature salient African elements regarding language, worldviews, folklore, and religion on which she relies for her themes and narrative structures, images and metaphors, and artistic and ethical principles.

Toni Morrison's concern therefore, as a "black woman writer,"⁷ is to reclaim and find her place within black cultural history. An in-depth study of her novels reveal her effort at capturing "the something that defines what makes a book 'Black.'"⁸ In many other places and contexts, she has reiterated her black cultural orientation and commitment to reclaiming the oral traditions of Africa and Africa-America in her writings. Her own theories of art, developed over time, are grounded on an oral environment that is "Afrocentric," which means "literally, placing African ideals at the center of any thesis that involves African culture and behavior."⁹ As an Afrocentric writer, she seeks to articulate a cosmology that reflects her African cultural background, including its views of space, time and reality as a means of confronting hegemonic distortions projecting the experiences of African-Americans. At the same time, the qualifier, "woman" before "writer," in defining herself, constitutes her response not only to cultural nationalism, but also to the historical exclusion of black women to authorship and self-representation. This assertion can be considered as a telling shift in African-American literature.

Throughout their literary career, black women novelists have been consistently preoccupied with the imaging of the black woman as a 'whole' character or 'self.' Hazel Carby in *Reconstructing Womanhood*

implies the importance of self-definition in the tradition of black women novelists, a tradition in which they, as “published writers,” “had to confront the dominant...ideologies...of womanhood which excluded them from the definition ‘woman.’”¹⁰ All too often, the complexity and distinctiveness of the history of black women, from the legacy of their African past and slave experience to their experience with industrialization and modern corporate America, have been ignored. Like other black women novelists of the contemporary period, Morrison explores and analyses the relationship between race, gender and class assumptions afflicting black people. She is concerned with sexual politics as they affect women and shows how sexist behaviour, both within and outside the bounds of the black community, can be oppressive. However, on the subject of developing a specific black feminist model of critical enquiry, Morrison states,

there is more danger in it than fruit, because any model of criticism or evaluation that excludes males from it is as hampered as any model of criticism of *Black literature* that excludes women from it.¹¹

Although Morrison disagrees with a black feminist model of criticism, she rejects the implicit assumption that men, black or white, spoke for both genders. She has characterized her career as an attempt to explore the kinds of experience that black male writers have failed to encompass in their work. According to her, the black male voice could

articulate the experience of blackness but not femaleness. She identifies the 'place' where the female voice originates as the site for self-definition and self-love whose nourishment comes from reclamation of ancestry. Black women can reclaim their history by writing about it. The need to reclaim this past in order to define the female self in terms of inherited culture is both a feminist and racial urge. And Morrison offers a new kind of cultural positioning that is more inclusive of black women and their role in the larger racial struggle. Hence, a part of this project is to analyze some of the African influences in the writings of Toni Morrison, where they serve as metaphors of the cultural and social resistance of black women.

In returning to the traditions of orality, Morrison identifies discrete images of female identity that invoke the spirituality and strength of women in African iconography. Her work pays tribute to the women who have retained the traditional values and folk arts of their original culture and to their roles as carriers of traditions of resistance and survival. Her stories contribute towards a positive valuation of black women's "ancient properties." These "properties," as her works emphasize, are important for African-American women in order to reclaim their position in racist and sexist environments in the West. To be

a true culture bearer and community maker, black women must remember the wisdom of their ancestors.

Morrison believes that her work must transmit cultural knowledge that provides the key to survival for the black community. As mentioned earlier, for a time, African- Americans negotiated their relationships with their cultural pasts and tried to preserve their separate cultural traditions as a means of survival in the South. However, during the crucial years of their migration from the rural South to the urban North during the 1930s to 1950s, the greatest losses African-Americans suffered were their loss of roots and connection to their culture. The oral tradition of storytelling and folktales was no longer a source of strength, and another source of strength, their music, which had healed them, was largely appropriated by the white community; consequently, it no longer belonged to them exclusively. For Morrison, as Marilyn Mobley says, “the void is in the lives of those black Americans who seem to have lost the oral tradition of storytelling that once sustained a sense of community and enriched their lives.”¹² In her attempt to fill the cultural void she perceives exists in the wake of historical transition, Morrison seeks to reclaim the oral tradition through narrative fiction. Although this tradition and their variants continue to manifest themselves in oral and written literature, the transition from folk to modern culture, posed a threat to the “possible loss

of the orature and cultural history,” and this provides the impetus for her works.¹³

For Morrison, therefore, the development of black fiction is important to counteract the loss of folk traditions, such as the storytelling and music that once constituted the basic elements of African-American culture. Feeling as she does, that another form is now needed to perform those functions that music once did, Morrison suggests that the novel is what African-Americans need now, because it gives people stories that they no longer hear in the family. She writes,

We don't live in places where we can hear those stories any more; parents don't sit around and tell their children those classical mythological archetypal stories that we heard years ago. But new information has got to get out, and there are several ways to do it. One is in the novel.¹⁴

Although today the novel cannot address an exclusive and homogenous racial community, Morrison claims that it can maintain a distinctively racial identity at a generic level. This can be done by salvaging “precisely those elements of folk community whose disappearance occasions the rise of the novel.”¹⁵ In her re-conceptualization of the novel, she thus seeks to incorporate precisely those elements that this traditional genre has excluded or repressed. She considers the African oral tradition a recorder of history and preserver of folk tradition which will create and maintain a group identity. It will also guide social action, encourage

social interaction, and at the same time provide entertainment. The oral arts are equally concerned with preserving and honouring traditional values which can be of relevance to the modern world. Her writing style pays tribute to the non-literary background of black culture and places the novel at the very heart of this process. In doing so, she affirms the positive aspects of black life and culture.

An examination of the formal nature of black literature, in which an oral tradition interacts with a Western literate tradition, also benefits from such an approach. For Henry Louis Gates Jr., one of the leading critics in African-American literary criticism, black literature's vernacular tradition distinguishes it from the Western literary tradition. He states that black writers "turn to the vernacular in various formal ways to inform their creation of writing fictions," and in doing so these writers are able to ground their literary practice "outside the Western tradition."¹⁶ He further contends that the African-American literary tradition is to an important extent shaped by a theory of criticism that is already embedded in the black vernacular tradition.¹⁷ In this regard, Morrison makes liberal use of elements of African-American vernacular tradition in her works. Hence, part of the intention of this thesis is to analyze the way her narratives make use of the elements of traditional African-American vernacular as storytelling devices.

In the context of arts, the “vernacular,” which is derived from the Latin *vernaculus* (“native”), describes something “native or peculiar to a particular country.”¹⁸ According to Gates Jr., African-American vernacular tradition comprises of linguistic elements as well as musical genres.¹⁹ In the sphere of language, important parts of the vernacular comprise of the oral traditions of storytelling, the longstanding West African concept of naming or *nommo*, testifying, and Signifying practices.²⁰

The mode of storytelling that Morrison adopts in her fiction has its roots in the West African folkloric tradition in which stories are orally composed and transmitted, and created to be verbally and communally performed. As Obiechina states, “The story itself is a primary form of the oral tradition, primary as a mode of conveying culture, experience, and values and as a means of transmitting knowledge, wisdom, feelings, and attitudes in oral societies.”²¹ Hence, exploring Morrison’s narrative style for key elements of African modes of storytelling would entail looking at how she deploys these techniques as primary modes of narration that convey all of the above concepts. This aspect of her narrative style is dealt with in Chapter I, in which she goes back to African and African-American myths and folktales to adapt their purposes, structures, and themes to her fiction. At the same time, she also highlights the

implications of inscribing voice for addressing a wide range of issues, particularly those directly related to women's lives.

Another approach that Morrison takes regarding storytelling is to rework folklore into the plot and imagery of her books in order to privilege elements predominant in African/African-American folkloric paradigms. In Chapter II Morrison presents the worldview and spirituality which is pervasive in African-American folklore. An examination of the religious and artistic modes of expression that she employs reveal the nature and logic of ritual acts, motifs and symbols in an African/African-American cultural context.

The focus in Chapter III is on how Morrison tries to keep alive the tradition of African-American music by employing its principles as an integrating feature of her storytelling style. She does this by incorporating and building on African-American oral/musical forms—such as work songs, ballads, spirituals, sermons, the blues, and jazz as storytelling techniques. Hence, the chapter examines the transfer of musical properties to the novel regarding structure and content, which also reveals the power of music to constitute and facilitate communal survival.

A final aspect of Morrison's storytelling style involves the recovery and incorporation of the particular idiom and speech patterns of a community, which was mostly oral. Maintaining a verbal art tradition is

seen as being vital for the survival of African-American culture. Chapter IV deals with the ways in which Morrison tries to weave the characteristically black mode of spoken language in her texts and her attempts to achieve a language that is race-based but not racist, in order to “bear witness” to the experience of her own community through the spoken narratives. Subsequently, this will entail the consideration and explanation of other important aspects of African-American speech acts and central rhetorical practices of black vernacular English particularly, naming, testifying and Signifying that Morrison engages in her novels.

In attempting to write literature that is “irrevocably, indisputably, Black,” Morrison states her intentions to appropriate and incorporate “those recognized and verifiable principles of Black art,” which are,

Antiphony, the group nature of art, its functionality, its improvisational nature, its relationship to audience performance, its critical voice which upholds tradition and communal values...²²

Judging by the characteristics of this tradition, it is clear that literary creation in the black tradition has orality as one of its key elements. Moreover, it is a theory of art that emphasizes the communal participatory experience of oral storytelling that makes narration a shared and collective act. Morrison has often spoken of creating in her narratives “holes and spaces so that the reader can come into it.”²³ This attests her rejection of theories that privilege the author over the reader. The

relationship between the artist and the reader/community that she envisages is an Afrocentric one²⁴ – the discourse based in an African orature whose artists are both participants and representatives of the community. John Callahan in “In the American Grain: Call and Response in the 20th Century Black Literature” (1988) discusses how storytelling in Africa was an open-ended dialogue between storyteller and listeners; during the storytelling process, the audience voiced both assent and dissent which was ritually integrated into the story. This technique, called “call and response,” became a feature of African-American discourse in speech, stories, sermons, songs, blues and jazz. Call and response as a feature of black oral storytelling is of great importance in the structure of Morrison’s fiction. Used as a storytelling device, it endows her work with a dialogic relation between the author, character and the audience. This is in keeping with her avowed aims of identifying with her readers, and of achieving an intimacy with them.

Thus, the basis of Morrison’s fictional mode is African-American folklore: all her works draw on folk myth and vernacular, including folk modes of narration. In her attempt to map these oral forms into literary modes of representation, Morrison has created a body of work influenced by a distinctly black sensibility. As such, the attempt in this study is to identify those elements that highlight the positive aspects of African-

American essentialism. In her exploration of African-American culture, she engages in innovative strategies based on their oral heritage in order to give voice to a marginalized people in print and to bring to her fiction the character of an oral performance rather than a written one. Analyzing how she integrates narrative techniques that reflect her ideological and artistic aims creates a greater appreciation of the indigenous modes of narration. The strategies through which Morrison articulates new alternatives and worldviews present new perspectives of understanding a complex socio-cultural environment.

Understanding the traditions of people and how individual authors have employed them in their works has added a new dimension to the reading of such texts. Judging by the controversial reactions that Toni Morrison's writings have sometimes provoked, it is apparent that this aspect of reading a text has not yet been fully appreciated. It may be pertinent to mention here the ongoing debate among a number of African-American critics that call into question academic notions of canonical literary traditions. These debates centre round the relationship of black writing to Euro-American critical practice and the extent to which African-American writing has been marginalized within the parameters of Euro-American literary conventions. The focus has been on whether black writing "should be approached as a separatist or syncretistic

literature.”²⁵ In such a situation, several critics have pointed out that Morrison has used elements from both the European novel tradition and African-American oral and literary traditions in her works to produce a complex hybrid approach to African-American culture. Morrison’s own critical work, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) however, argues that American Africanisms, which are the negative images of African-Americans constructed by white writers, constitute a major technique employed throughout white literary history to define whiteness positively. In order to define themselves positively as “free,” “desirable,” “powerful,” “historical,” “innocent,” “a progressive fulfillment of destiny,” whites construct negative images of blacks as, “enslaved,” “repulsive,” “helpless,” “history-less,” “damned,” “a blind accident of evolution.”²⁶ An application of her theory to black literature would suggest that positive definitions of blackness in black literary history could constitute a counter argument. By defining themselves as free, desirable, powerful, historical, innocent, and a progressive fulfillment of evolution, they would be asserting an identity that clearly revises American Africanisms constructed in white literature. This view has turned Eurocentric criticism on its head and is thus worth further study.



The increasingly popular move to read Morrison's fiction through the lens of postmodernism, post structuralism or other "white" academic theory is, as Barbara Christian in *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*, (1985) states is a tactic that underestimates the crucial importance of Toni Morrison's cultural heritage. Morrison herself would prefer her readers to respond to her texts independently of any literary bias, as she has always attempted to negotiate the "obstacles imposed by the task of freeing her own story from a literary past."²⁷ At the same time, she has often expressed disappointment with critical analyses of her art and has spoken of her wish to have critics understand the traditional background that informs all her works:

Other kinds of structures are imposed on my works, and therefore they are either praised or dismissed on the basis of something that I have no interest in whatsoever, which is writing a novel according to some structure that comes out of a different culture.²⁸

In "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," she further cites the "silencing" of the "indigenous qualities" of African-American writing as a "pernicious" consequence of Eurocentric criticism.²⁹ It seems obvious that Morrison is calling for an analysis that complements her art, one that is grounded in her culture, language, worldview, and milieu. Thus, while acknowledging that her critics have drawn valuable insights from and found compelling arguments in feminist, psychoanalytic, post-modern or other readings,

this study intends to address Morrison's critical challenge by using an Afrocentric theoretical perspective to examine the folk modes of narration in her fiction in order to meet the author on her own terms. It is hoped that such an approach would enable us to see how she offers alternative cultural perspectives, which extend greater understanding of ethnic identity and rootedness.

Survey of Existing Literature on the Topic

Toni Morrison's winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993 highlighted the great prominence that African-American writing, particularly by black women, has gained in American literature in recent years. At a time when women novelists are gaining more respect in the literary world, Morrison's is an important voice. While it would be beyond the scope of this brief survey to mention all the seminal works in the growing range of Morrison scholarship, a few of the most relevant ones are noted.

One of the earliest critical works on Morrison is Bessie Jones and Audrey Vinson's *The World of Toni Morrison: Explorations in Literary Criticism* (1985), followed by Karen Holloway and Demetrakopoulos' *New Dimensions of Spirituality: A Biracial and Bicultural Reading of the Novels of Toni Morrison* (1987), Nellie McKay, ed. *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison* (1988), Harold Bloom, ed. *Modern Critical Views: Toni*

*Morrison*_(1990). Trudier Harris' *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison* (1991), Barbara Rigney's *The Voices of Toni Morrison* (1991), Marilyn Mobley's *Folk Roots and Mythic Wings in Sarah Orne Jewett and Toni Morrison: The Cultural Function of Narrative* (1991), Karen Carmean's *Toni Morrison's World of Fiction* (1993), Henry Louis Gates Jr. and K.A. Appiah, ed. *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present* (1993), Gay Wilentz' *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora* (1992), and Denise Heinze's *The Dilemma of Double Consciousness: Toni Morrison's Novels* (1993) are a few more of the most seminal works relating to the topic under study. Some of the more recent works are Jan Furman's *Toni Morrison's Fiction* (1996), Harding and Martin's *A World of Difference: An Intercultural Study of Toni Morrison's Novels* (1994), Missy Dehn Kubitschek's *Toni Morrison: A Critical Companion* (1998), Linden Peach's *Toni Morrison* (1995) Philip Page's *Dangerous Freedom: Fusion and Fragmentation in Toni Morrison's Novels* (1996).

While Trudier Harris has the most complete discussion of the use of folklore in Morrison, it refers only to her first five works. In this provocative study of Morrison's novels, she blends fictive and folkloric approaches to illuminate the depth and complexity of the African - American literary heritage. Harris argues that Morrison "transforms

historical folk materials,” to create “literary folklore”³⁰ and explores Morrison within an African-American cultural context. Karen Carmean brings forth the meaning of Morrison’s complicated themes and writing styles in simple and fluid language. Barbara Rigney analyses Morrison’s mythologizing as a view of history that is not totalizing, while Barbara Christian argues for an Afrocentric approach to her works. Marjorie Pryse and Karla Holloway give accounts of the oral, folk and African sources of conjuring, and Linden Peach unravels notions of self-representation and narrative structure while emphasizing how Morrison’s innovative form is driven by its radical content. Taylor-Guthrie, ed. *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (1994) has interviews from over the course of her career and documents her views about fiction, writing technique and the role of the novelist. Philip Page provides a strong analysis of Morrison’s first six fictional works, and an equally thorough reading of the criticism and theory. He adds new insights, and synthesizes his own ideas with those of others to provide a reading of Morrison’s style, structure, and ideology. Jannette Furman surveys six novels, a short story and a book of criticism to reconstruct the development of Morrison’s creative vision and to assess its influence on contemporary literature. Chronicling Morrison’s growth as a writer, Furman traces the recurrent characters, themes and settings that embody Morrison’s literary philosophy that the artist must engender

and interpret culture. Marilyn Mobley's discussion of Morrison's work draws on scholarship in literary folklore, myth criticism, African-American literary theory and feminist criticism. Her main concern is on the folkloristic patterns in Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*.

These critical studies on Toni Morrison have generally demonstrated her aesthetic and thematic use of black cultural traditions. In addition, there are hundreds of articles, both general and on each of her books, too numerous to mention here. That Morrison's texts encourage theoretically informed criticism in her contemporary is also borne out by recent studies of her works. The variegated critical approaches to her fiction are by no means mutually exclusive of one another, or exhaustive of all possibilities. Rather, such works lay important foundations for reading Morrison with a fuller understanding of her text's cultural distinctiveness. While some work on this has been done, particularly in articles on individual texts, more book-length studies exploring all the nuances of her texts still need to be done.

The attempt in this study is to present Morrison as an African-American woman writer who writes out of racial, gendered, and national specificity. And the focus therefore has been on the elements that distinguish black folklore within the Morrison canon comprising of *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar baby*

(1980), *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), and *Paradise* (1997). However, *Love* (2003), her latest novel, will remain outside the purview of this study. As can be seen from the survey of existing literature on Morrison, the incorporation of the influences of the oral tradition in her work is not new. Analysing her narrative techniques through these modes, as has been attempted in this study, will perhaps add a new dimension to understanding a complex writer like Toni Morrison, who challenges conventional perceptions of narrative techniques and points of view in order to address contemporary issues that confront African-American people.

Epigraph

- W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*, (1903; rpt. New York: Fawcett Publications, 1967), p.202.

Endnotes and References

- ¹ Black refers to Americans of African descent. In 1988, Jesse Jackson urged Americans to use the term African American because the term has a historical cultural base. Since then African-American and black have essentially a coequal status. There is still much controversy over which term is more appropriate. Some strongly reject the term African-American in preference for black citing that they have little connection with Africa. Others believe the term black is inaccurate because African-Americans have a variety of skin tones. (McWhorter, John H.

"Why I'm Black, Not African American", Los Angeles Times, September 8, 2004.) Cited after: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_American.

Since many African-American writers, including Toni Morrison herself, use both the terms interchangeably, this practice will also be followed in this study. Some people choose to capitalize the "B" in "Black" as a political statement; others think it more political to use the lower case.

- ² W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (1903; rpt. 1967). Du Bois' important definition of "double consciousness," "in which an individual is both representative of and immersed in two distinct ways of life," is a focal point for a range of studies of African-American writing, including Denise Heinze, *The Dilemma of Double-Consciousness in Toni Morrison's Novels* (1993) and Michael Awkward, *Inspiriting Influences: Tradition, Revision and Afro-American Women's Novels* (1989).
- ³ See in particular Houston A. Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (1984), as well as Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey* p75, p.77.
- ⁴ Samuel Olorunto, "Studying African-American Literature in the Global context," *VCCA Journal*, Volume 7.1, (Summer, 1992), p.4.
- ⁵ Yvonne Atkinson and Philip Page, "I been worried sick about you too, Macon": Toni Morrison, the South, and the Oral Tradition," *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, Vol. XXXI, 2, (Fall 1998), p.98.
- ⁶ According to Amy K. Levin, the word "Africanism" refers to African influences in the cultures of blacks of the New World (p. 5). See Amy K. Levin. *Africanism and Authenticity in African-American Women's Novels*. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), p.5.

- ⁷ Cf. Gail Caldwell in Taylor-Guthrie, ed. *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, (University Press of Mississippi, 1994) p.243.
- ⁸ Toni Morrison, "An Interview with Toni Morrison," *Contemporary Literature*, 24 (1983), p.423.
- ⁹ Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), p.6.
- ¹⁰ Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, (Oxford: University Press, New York, 1987), p. 6.
- ¹¹ Rootedness, p.344.
- ¹² Marilyn Mobley, *Folk Roots and Mythic Wings in Sarah Orne Jewett and Toni Morrison: The Cultural Function of Narrative*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), p.11.
- ¹³ Gay Wilentz, "Civilizations Underneath: African Heritage and Cultural Discourse in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," *African American Review* 26.1 (1992), p.64.
- ¹⁴ Rootedness, p. 494.
- ¹⁵ Madhu Dubey, "The Politics of Genre in *Beloved*." *Novel, Inc.*, Spring, (1999), p.190.
- ¹⁶ Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), xxii.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid*, xix,xx.
- ¹⁸ Cf. Houston Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature. A Vernacular Theory*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984. p.2.

- ¹⁹ Cf. Gates, Jr., and Nellie McKay (eds), *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, (New York: Norton 1997), p. 1
- ²⁰ To identify the concept of signifying drawn from African American oral tradition and signal its difference from the standard English usage, Gates employs a capital letter and bracketing the final consonant to distinguish black usage as 'Signifyin(g).' Since this seemingly innocent naming - assigning upper case to black, lower case to white - also implies hierarchy and pecking order, it is itself an example of Signifying. Signifyin(g), according to gates, is an important trope in African-American literature originating in the vernacular traditions to be found in African, Latin-American and Caribbean culture, especially the tales of the Signifyin(g) Monkey.
- ²¹ Emmanuel Obiechina, "Narrative Proverbs in the African Novel." (Special Issue in Memory of Josephat Bekunuru Kubanayanda) *Research in African Literatures* 24.4 (Winter 1993), p.123. 22. Toni Morrison, "Memory, Creation, and Writing," *Thought* 59.235 (1984), pp.388-389.
- ²³ Claudia Tate, "Conversation with Toni Morrison," *Black Women Writers at Work*, ed. Claudia Tate, (New York: Continuum Publishing Co., 1983), 1989, p.125
- ²⁴ Wilentz, p.109.
- ²⁵ Linden Peach, *Toni Morrison*, (St. Martin's Press, 1995), p.102-103.
- ²⁶ Cf. Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p.52.
- ²⁷ Jan Stryz, "Inscribing an Origin in Song of Solomon," *Studies in American Fiction*, 19 (1991), p.39.

- ²⁸ McKay, "An interview with Toni Morrison," (1983), p.407.
- ²⁹ Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The African American Presence in American Literature," *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Vol. 28 (Winter 1989), p.23.
- ³⁰ Cf. Trudier Harris, *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), p.7.

Chapter I

Traditional Storytelling as Narrative Technique

*I will tell you something about stories,
[...]
They aren't just for entertainment.
Don't be fooled
They are all we have, you see,
all we have to fight off illness and death.
You don't have anything
if you don't have the stories.*

Leslie Marmon Silko•

*So I told stories
As my racial responsibility
 To instil in the young
 The art of perpetuating
Existential history and essential tradition
To be passed on to the next generation.*

Temsula Ao••

The fiction of Toni Morrison is imbued with African-American folkloristic oral traditions through which she seeks to affirm black identity. This chapter explores Morrison's role as a storyteller who uses African modes of storytelling and orature as narrative technique to create what Gay Wilentz has termed, "oral literature."¹ Her folk aesthetic is grounded in the cultural resources of her people and her fiction relies on "folk processes of communication"² which give authenticity to her depiction of the black community. Storytelling is the primary folk process in Morrison's fictional world where her own personal self-discovery comes through her writing. This mode of storytelling is purely African

and therefore, an examination of Morrison's narrative style as containing key elements of African modes of storytelling becomes imperative.

In exploring the various modes of linguistic expression in songs, religious sermons, stories and folk sayings, we find the primacy of the oral tradition as the foundation of African-American cultural expression. Morrison's narrative strategy aims to encapsulate the orality of the spoken word and to present the workings of this oral tradition in her fiction. Although several critics have commented extensively on the complicated narrative structure of her novels, only a few have given attention to the influence of African and African-American oral storytelling traditions Morrison employs.³ Harding and Martin do acknowledge the importance of the black oral tradition in Morrison for the correct reception of her work. However, they feel that it is insufficient for expressing the complexity of Morrison's fiction and that examining her novels "for traces of traditional forms of storytelling" would be disappointing.⁴ Contradicting this view, this analysis holds that Morrison's role, as a black woman storyteller is unassailable: the oral traditions of the black community and the orature of her ancestors is evident both in the language and storytelling methods of all her works.

As mentioned in the Introduction, Morrison herself has detailed the principles of African-American oral tradition which have a bearing on her

folk aesthetics and determine both the content and form of her texts.⁵ Thus new meanings are created through improvisation by the teller of the tale, and his/her relationship with the listeners of the tale through antiphonal or call and response mechanisms. Consequently, too, the significance of audience participation in ensuring the functionality and meaningfulness of the tale becomes clear. Hence, in Morrison's texts, the emphasis lies not only in the content of the tale, but also, in how the storyteller involves her audience. This chapter therefore focuses on Morrison's narrative strategies as an area that has important implications for the study of ethnic fiction with its roots in folklore and storytelling traditions.

By incorporating cultural and folkloristic elements into the structure of her novels, Morrison uses the oral techniques and devices of the African storyteller, or 'griot'. Although it is difficult to find those elements that set folktales apart from written literature, still, there are certain internal stylistic qualities that are found even in the transcribed form of oral literature. Some of these stylistic elements, which contribute to the spoken quality of these tales, are repetition, parallelism, and digression. Variations of these elements form Morrison's own narrative strategy. Some of the other oral narrative techniques that she introduces in her writing are reiteration and circularity, a shifting narrative voice,

interactive participatory mechanisms, and an episodic fragmentary re-telling of the past. "Plot-construction" as such, in Morrison's novels culminates or evolves through a process of compilation of multiple points of view and varieties of interpretations of events. Thus, rather than relating the story in chronological sequence, Morrison uses a highly complex and non-linear form.

Examples of the characteristics noted above are evident in many oral stories or folktales such as the trickster tale, the tall tale, orphan tale, cycle tale and the dilemma tale, to name a few. Folktales and their manner of telling have been instrumental in shaping the African-American literary tradition. Morrison herself makes many structural uses of them in her work, such as the Dick-and-Jane tale, the flying African and tar baby tales. However, this is not to say that she simply repeats and employs black oral forms for their own sake. Traditionally, although these folktales are the common property of the community as well as the product of a joint and communal authorship, they are not static and unchanging. Oratures, like the cultures that produce them, constantly evolve and change with time for various reasons. Thus the tales are

modified, altered and enriched, as they are transmitted from one person to another, to such an extent that new types, new combinations are adopted and true development take place.⁶

Likewise, Morrison re-creates and re-employs these tales to suit her own artistic purpose and vision. The value she places on improvisation demands the constant creation and adaptation of new meanings to fit changing needs and social conditions. Like the African griot who alternates between set 'texts' and improvisation, investing a tale with his own observation or supplementing it with his own vital experience, so also Morrison invests much of herself in re-creating these stories, while keeping to the framework of poetic tradition.

For the purpose of this study, the dilemma tale and the trickster tale provide the best contexts within which to analyze Morrison's narrative technique and to reveal how these "folk processes of communication" can provide new or alternative insight into the reading of her novels. Since Morrison is also concerned in moving "African-Americans from the periphery, as dismissive others, to a centre where their experiences can be articulated and elaborated,"⁷ her adoption of narrative techniques that enable her to challenge hegemonic discourse and to contest the misrepresentation and distortion of the history and experiences of her people become important. Hence, this argument: that an analysis of Morrison's folk modes of narration within the thematic, structural, and critical frameworks of the dilemma and trickster tales would provide a potential interpretive site for reading her works.

The Dilemma Tale: Interrogative and Interpretive sites

Traditional dilemma tales serve the purpose of resolving problematic issues through collective observation, reasoning, and critical evaluation. They are distinguished by episodic structures, irresolvable conflicts confronting the main character (s), and finally, by the narrative's refusal to resolve the dilemma, leaving the conclusion indeterminate and interrogative.

According to Opoku-Agyemang and Rogers Asemphasah, there are two structural levels of narration in the dilemma tale. The first level deals with the tale or adventure proper, which may raise complex ethical, legal and moral issues about the protagonist's actions and choices.⁸ These tales are open in that they end with a dilemma posed as a question, which the listeners/readers are to debate and resolve. Some tales may have a particular correct answer; some are mathematical, while others are ethical or moral in nature. This implies that the listeners have a choice. The purpose is to prompt audience participation, to promote discussion and to develop debating skills.

Through dilemma tales, therefore, the community is presented with moral dilemmas, which they are obliged to resolve. At its core, a dilemma tale is structured to prompt audiences to participate individually, to express a stake in its outcome, engage in debate and logical reasoning,

construct arguments and judgments, and in the process acquire group identity. The design of such tales is to speak directly to the community and to prompt a direct response from it. In the work of shaping the outcome anew on each occasion of a story's telling, the audience acquires a particular group identity through its collective emotional and intellectual labour.

The second structural level is thus instigated by the question posed by the narrator, which is deployed to resolve problematic issues through collective debate, reasoning and critical judgment. The focus is now on the participants who are invited to discuss and debate the issue or issues involved. Since it involves the participation of every listening member of the community, this implies the incorporation of multiple voices and perspectives, the outcome of which is usually divergent. This only demonstrates that often there are no unconditional or totalizing narratives and answers, and that meaning-making is a communal process that involves not only the teller but also demands the active participation of the listener/reader.

The next section examines how Morrison deploys the characteristics of the dilemma tale as narrative technique and at the same time integrates the constituents of the oral vernacular tradition such as call and response, naming, witnessing and testifying, and signifying as

storytelling devices. Although all her novels provide potential interpretative sites for reading them as dilemma tales, only those novels, such as *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, and *Paradise*, which particularly illustrate the structure, purpose, and thematic preoccupation of the dilemma type tale are examined. A comparative study of Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye* and her fifth, *Beloved*, will show her continued use of the elements of the dilemma type tale and how she develops it as a unique art form. *Song of Solomon* and *Paradise* as dilemma tales differ in their emphases and articulations and therefore require separate considerations.

The Bluest Eye and *Beloved*

Morrison wrote *The Bluest Eye*, at the height of the "Black is Beautiful" era when black activists were advocating African-American cultural values. Yet, the doctrine of Black Power, which largely relied on a male-centred ideology, had little relevance for most black women like Toni Morrison. *The Bluest Eye*, was therefore, written with full reflection of black women's reality, particularly, the reality of being 'a little black girl' in white America. Morrison's cultural politics of narrative therefore, proposes a rewriting of black experience that can truly represent African-Americans, particularly women, whose "specific local bodies, histories, and cultural productions have been eradicated by commodity culture."⁹

Morrison's concern in *The Bluest Eye* thus constitutes her struggle with colonization for her characters and the black community, as well as in her own writing. In treating the theme of colonization of black female beauty by white ideals of beauty, Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* exposes how the consumer culture and white standards of beauty turn self-esteem in the black community into self-loathing. In scrutinizing the enthrallment of black Americans by the white way of life, Morrison focuses on how young black girls are particularly vulnerable to the myth of white cultural concepts of beauty resulting in racial self-hatred. This is revealed in her characterization of Pecola Breedlove who unquestioningly accepts that she is ugly because she does not have white features, and who therefore, yearns for the 'bluest' of eyes as a way of attaining beauty and love.

The one controlling thought that runs throughout the novel is that black is ugly and white beautiful. A cultural shift takes place that is prejudicial to the character's own history, culture, and experience. Morrison attempts to break the stranglehold of white culture and way of life. Consequently, *The Bluest Eye* also becomes the story of African-American folk culture in process. Morrison succeeds in making it so through her use of oral storytelling techniques developed on an elaborate structure and narrative design based on the dilemma tale form. This is in keeping with her concern with reclaiming the oral tradition as a form of

cultural intervention and with using the novel to alter perspective and transform consciousness.¹⁰ As such, a discussion of *The Bluest Eye* based on the structural and thematic preoccupations of the dilemma tale will reveal how Morrison questions the imposed values and perceptions of the dominant culture and attempts to offer alternative cultural knowledge and beliefs based on black Americans' African traditions and heritage.

With a special emphasis on call and response patterns to establish a dialogic relation between the author, character and the audience, Morrison shows the importance of incorporating this principle of 'Black art' in foregrounding the problematic of authorial intent and interpretation. For example, Claudia, right from the start, establishes herself as the narrator for Morrison's folktale.¹¹ In fact, like the traditional teller of the dilemma tale, Claudia consciously directs her narrative towards a responsive and appreciative audience. The opening lines of her narrative are important in this regard as the sentence, "Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941," (*BE*, p.3) creates a sense of intimacy between the reader and the story. With these lines, Morrison's child narrator invites the reader into a troubling community secret: the incestuous rape of her 11-year-old friend Pecola. The author's intention at this level, is to raise complex ethical and moral issues about "the secret" that is "being shared" and upon which, the listeners/readers are to

contemplate. Thus, Morrison calls on the readers to concentrate on the question Claudia wants answered—"why?" But, as Claudia says, "*since why is difficult to handle,*" the novel will attempt to analyze "how."

Valerie Smith complains that *The Bluest Eye* does not "address hard questions directly": it does not undertake to explain, for example, why black Americans aspire to unattainable standards of beauty. Further, she opines that it is not only Claudia "but the novel itself that avoids 'why' and takes refuge in 'how.'"¹² However, this is exactly the point of the dilemma tale: to interrogate a human dilemma or conflicting moral issues and not simply to explain what they mean. In the dilemma type tale, the narrator of the tale first relates the important episodes of the protagonist's adventure to a listening audience but ends the tale with a question. This is not the ending, but the beginning of the next phase of the tale—the debate or discussion that the audience engages in to resolve the puzzle, or enigma, or dilemma in question. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison deviates slightly from the traditional structural order by beginning her tale with the question usually posed at the end of the tale. Thus, the reader knows the story of Pecola's tragedy from the beginning and there is no element of surprise. Thereafter, she organizes her story around the central event of the shocking and appalling act of a father who impregnates his own daughter. What Morrison wants the reader is to acknowledge this

dreadful deed and respond to its terrible consequences. By examining Pecola's life and the role that social constructions played in her tragedy- a tragedy in which, "the reader, as part of the population of the text, is implicated" (*BE*, Afterword, p.171), the reader is led to contemplate philosophical, moral and ethical aspects of the story and to participate fully in examining the painful circumstances of her characters' lives.

In fact, much of the dialogue in the novel occurs in the shape of questions, through which Morrison achieves reader involvement, by not supplying answers. The reader does. More than this, the reader also has to sort through the families, situations, plot segments, and meanings to create a "story." By sifting through the continuous shifting points of view, the reader can re-establish the logical sequence of events and thus, better comprehend the action. The series of problems and questions that are posed in the course of the story inaugurates the beginning of a discussion in which the audience must give its own conclusion. Hence, readers must work to follow the structural disjunctions and interpret for themselves character and incident. Morrison achieves this goal by following the call and response pattern of African-American oral tradition. This also relates to an important characteristic of the form of the dilemma tale that demands the active involvement of the audience in

contemplating conflicting issues, of choosing where to lay the blame, and of finding a just response to a difficult situation.

What follows then, is the deconstruction of the tale in order to construct meaning as interrogation in *The Bluest Eye* begins with the reconstruction of the events that allowed such a despicable act as Pecola's rape to take place. In the traditional setting of the dilemma tale, this constitutes the second level of narration. Thus brought into focus is the dilemma tale as an interrogative and interpretive site as readers try to understand the many-sided issues that surround this act before making a judgment. A narrative situation arises wherein the voices of "the extended narrators or direct participants, the listeners and the community,"¹³ enter to reconstitute the experiences and subjectivities of the characters. This involves the employment of the technique of multiple points of view, a technique which Morrison makes extensive use of in all her novels.

The narrative context for the representation of multiple points of view and voices comes from several sources. The narration consists of narrative commentary from Claudia, and her reflections on the story as an adult, omniscient narration by Morrison herself, and some first person "oral" narration from Pecola's mother. In between these narrations are fragments of dialogue representing different sections of the community such as, the three whores, Geraldine, Junior, Soaphead Church, and

unidentified community gossips. There are also passages shifting between the third person omniscient and first person stream of consciousness narrator. Each of these narratives becomes a tale-within-a-tale, as it were, another characteristic of oral storytelling. Through this simultaneous release of voices, Morrison attempts to create multiple perspectives that reveal the complexity of interpretation characteristic of the dilemma type tale. The result is a layering of many narrative voices that allow for the representation of various forms of oral narration such as women's gossip, Signifying, free indirect discourse, call-and-response, testifying, and other examples of traditionally black rhetorical rituals and modes of storytelling.

The multiple perspectives reveal how most of the characters suffer different degrees of victimization at the hands of a society that confuses whiteness with virtue, including Pecola's parents. Morrison takes great pains to chart the legacy of shame, oppression, and anger that is experienced by Cholly and Pauline throughout most of their lives. By doing so, she highlights the historical and social circumstances that have led African-Americans to make difficult choices between negative alternatives, and the complex events that culminate in Cholly's dreadful act. On the structural level, the novel is framed with a deconstructive dialogue with the Dick and Jane children's books that mirror the white

family's affluence, morality, and Americanness and emphasizes its ironic discrepancy and contradiction in the light of the Breedloves' story of racial persecution. The headings, consisting of the primer text, which precede the chapters focus on each member of the Breedlove family. Hence, the title lines and chapters complement each other like the elements of call and response. Morrison shows how national narratives of the white middle-class make incomprehensible how unjust histories can shape a black family's struggling present. The narrative about the Breedlove family would never fit into the simplified space of a Dick and Jane primer. By focusing on such a narrative, Morrison adds this concomitant of the dilemma tale, thus presenting a new way of conceiving and perceiving history, and challenges master discourse.

The section entitled "SEEFATHER," articulates how Cholly Breedlove has learned that his blackness is a sign of absence and exclusion. Abandoned by his father and left on a garbage heap by his mother, he embodies in many ways, the legacy of abandonment within the African-American family. The overwhelming influence of white society has long divested him of his authority as family provider and protector, and he recognizes his own failures in Pecola's unhappiness. Cholly thus considers the choiceless choices before him, and voices the problematic of choice that the novel explores:

Why did she have to look so whipped? She was a child-unburdened—why wasn't she happy?... What could he do for her—ever? What give her? What say to her? What could a burned—out black man say to the hunched back of his eleven—year—old daughter? ...How dare she love him? Hadn't she any sense at all? What was he supposed to do about that? Return it? How? What could his calloused hands produce to make her smile? (*BE*, p.127)¹⁴

The most obvious feature here is narrative repetition in the form of rhetorical questions asked in Cholly's voice. The narrative voice repeatedly shifts back and forth, from the omniscient author's objective view to Cholly's subjective perspective to cause a fusion of the voices of the narrator and the "silent but speaking character."¹⁵ Morrison is thus able to portray the divided nature of Cholly's mind. The readers become privy to Cholly's painful awareness of his own failures, and self-hatred, and how powerless to empower, he resorts to drunkenness, and eventually to rape. This also can be seen as a demented effort to convince Pecola that she is lovable. Like the listeners of the dilemma tale, readers therefore ponder over the ethical or moral issues involved, and discover that while Cholly's crime can never be condoned, the act alone does not tell the full story.

Similarly, Morrison provides the "SEEMOTHER" section to describe Pauline's life, thoughts and feelings through an 'oral history', which, is two voiced and invites the reader to interpret their significance. Barbara Christian observes that it is important that "we hear Pauline's

story in her own sound patterns and images, for her way of perceiving the world, primarily in rural tones and images of colour, is a key to wasted life.”¹⁶ Unfortunately, Pauline’s sense of irony and humour, the folk knowledge and value system of the rural South, which privileged community over individual wealth and consumerism, are never transmitted to Pecola. Having internalized white norms of beauty, Pauline cuts Pecola off from a nurturing mother-child relationship — a crucial factor in black women’s self-definition. Her narrative thereafter, reveals her movement towards the white bourgeois values represented by the films she watches to relieve her loneliness. Hence, her distorted sense of motherhood leads her to beat, rather than comfort or sustain her abused daughter.

The Bluest Eye abounds with characters whose blackness diminishes their humanity. Most disturbing are the light-skinned blacks who distance themselves from their black heritage in an exercise of same-race hatred. Thus, Geraldine, an upper class light-skinned, educated, and wealthy woman, literally attempts to scrub the blackness from her life and that of her son. She demonstrates how an African-American can totally assimilate assumptions of white cultural superiority, and willingly discriminate against anyone who threatens her progress towards this middle-class position. When her son, Junior brings Pecola into their

home, Geraldine's reaction is one of blatant anger. At this point, the reader is left to interpret the reasons for her loss of composure here.

By juxtaposing the Breedloves with the Dick and Jane primer, Morrison not only critiques their contents, but also the school systems and families that cooperate to perpetuate racial hierarchies. In Pecola's school, schoolteachers favour Maureen Peal, "a high- yellow dream child" on whom they smile encouragingly, making Claudia and her sister feel inadequate. And Pecola, ignored and despised by her teachers and classmates alike, is the recipient of Maureen's ultimate insult: "I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos." (*BE*, p.56). When Claudia anxiously questions, "What was the secret? What did we lack? Why was it so important? And so what?" (*BE*, p.57), Morrison directs them to the reader of her dilemma tale, inviting them to consider the particular predicament of black girls in a nation that equates beauty and power with whiteness.

The ultimate manifestation of self-hatred and same-race hatred is Soaphead Church, a "cinnamon-eyed West Indian" whose relatives consistently "married 'up'" to lighten their family, and who was taught to separate himself in body, mind and spirit from all that suggested Africa. Likewise, Morrison also provides opportunities for the reader to hear snatches of conversations that give glimpses of those members of society

who live on its fringes, namely, the three “magnificent” whores, in whose company Pecola finds temporary contentment and respite. However, despite their kindness to Pecola, the three whores like other members of the society, do not assume responsibility for her life.

In the same way, the aftermath of Pecola’s pregnancy also reveals the cruelty and irresponsibility of the black community. In *The Bluest Eye*, the feminine subtext of the community women- advising, instructing, commenting, gossiping forms the textural background of the novel. Although Morrison does not directly reveal the perspectives of the community members regarding Pecola’s tragedy, the reader deduces this through storytelling devices that she employs, such as backyard conversations, gossip and information exchange sessions that take place on porches, in the backyard, in living rooms or kitchens. In this respect too, the opening sentence “Quiet as its kept” grounds the act of storytelling in a world of gossip, of talk between women, of secrets shared. The reader deduces that the community feels no compassion for Pecola and offers her no help. Instead, she is the subject of titillating gossip among the adults (which is how Claudia and Frieda glean information about Pecola’s predicament). The language of these conversations is revealing; the girls observe that there is no real sorrow for Pecola:

They were disgusted, amused, shocked, outraged, or even excited by the story. But we listened for the one who would say, "Poor little girl," or, "Poor baby," but there was only head-wagging where those words should have been. We looked for eyes creased with concern, but saw only veils. (BE, p.149)

Morrison suggests that the failure of the whole community to understand Pecola's victimization is the outcome of their earlier treatment towards other members of their community, such as Aunt Julia, whose eccentricity made her the butt of their jokes. As Jane Kuenz says, "their inability or refusal to make sense of her actions...suggests that the town has an undiagnosed and unexamined history of producing women like Pecola, that her experience—and the extremity of it—is not an isolated instance."¹⁷

Since narrative is also a kind of testimony, a verbal act of telling about what has happened, Morrison situates Claudia's narrative voice within African-American oral tradition by making her bear witness, through testifying, to Pecola's pain and the community's failings.¹⁸ Claudia 'speaks-out' her community's failings. She is unsparing in placing the responsibility for Pecola's destruction on the black community who had used Pecola to feel better about themselves. In 'speaking-out' thus, Claudia, once involved as a speaking subject, becomes not merely a witness to the tragedy but also a participant in the events she describes.¹⁹ Thus, she includes herself in her assessment of the

community's behaviour and motives, as indicated by her references to "we" and "our" (*BE*, p.163).

However, Morrison also moves beyond her characters and the text itself to implicate the reader in this assessment. Keith Byerman conveys this idea succinctly:

Pecola may be the central character, but she is far from the only victim of the blue eyes. "We" individually and collectively are both victimizer and victim, and, while the roles vary with each character, it is also the case that the role of victimizer results from that character's own victimization by a larger society."²⁰

Through Claudia's use of the inclusive "we," we relive our own sense of familiar experiences. In this way, like the listeners of the dilemma tales, we become part of the unified community who must engage in debate and logical reasoning, and express an opinion. The final section of the novel thus emphasizes reader's participation as towards the end of the story, Claudia directly addresses the reader:

And Pecola is somewhere in that little brown house she and her mother moved to on the edge of town, where you can see her even now, once in a while. (emphasis mine, *BE*, p.162)

Like the protagonists of each subplot who participate in Pecola's persecution, the readers too are called on to interrogate themselves. They are thus forced to reflect on the fact that there are always victims like Pecola in every society- those who make us feel better about ourselves- the outcasts and pariahs who live "on the edge of town" rejected and

avoided by the rest of the community. Although it may be too late for Pecola and the community that failed her, the reader wonders whether things had to turn out this way. Could Pecola's tragedy have been averted? Was the community's mistreatment of Pecola inevitable? Morrison does not answer these questions, but shows instead, a reflection of a world that cannot call itself right or moral.

The purpose of the dilemma tale is not merely to explain what the tale means or to assign blame, but rather to provide a contemplative space for the audience to discuss and debate, to interrogate and interpret the dilemma or moral issue. The unresolved questions that remain are to be resolved together by the community. It is the nature of the issues involved in *The Bluest Eye*, not so much the question itself, that call for different interpretations which may have moral or ethical value. In retrospect, Morrison says that she was not fully successful in leading readers to "an interrogation of themselves" in respect of Pecola's experience, but instead allows us "the comfort of pitying her" (*BE*, Afterword, p.172). The issues that remain at the close of the novel, however, force us to focus on the choices before us. In the oral tradition, witnessing and testifying go hand in hand; one who witnesses has an obligation to testify. Claudia, in recalling her friend's plight, is jolted into recognizing the connected underpinnings of family and community. And in listening to Claudia's

testimony, the reader becomes both a witness (we are allowed to see and hear this testimony through the written word) and a testifier (we are called to respond). Claudia's narrative forces us to understand why, for the sake of family and community, this story must be repeatedly told.

For Morrison, black history is the core of black identity. In *Beloved*, she attempts to reclaim this history by presenting us with the unwritten history of African-Americans. In fact, *Beloved* is indicative of a historic shift away from the usual discussion of the anti-bellum period, the Civil War, and the generational-long racial conflict. Morrison's novel of black life does not mention these commonly known historical facts of national life. Instead, she has effectively re-shaped the storytelling of this national conflict by re-imagining the African-American community during and after slavery to retrieve the moments, which destroyed their authentic selves in order to restore them. Although the novel takes as its frame historically documented events in black lives, Morrison's concern, however, is a corrective one: to "fill in the blanks that the traditional slave narrative left."²¹ Like *The Bluest Eye* in which she attempts to rearticulate African-American history and identity by concentrating on the interior lives of her characters, in *Beloved*, she seeks to find and expose a truth about the inner realities and interpersonal relationships of people who did not get the opportunity to write it.

In order to turn the things unsaid or even unsayable into a narrated possibility, Morrison engages narrative strategies based on traditional forms of imaginative expression to give us an intimation of “unspeakable thoughts” of characters deprived of their past, and who have to face their own painful process of self-reconstruction. Throughout, the text highlights the various processes by which the characters tell or remember their stories, which both empower them as well as contest the distorted versions of hegemonic narratives. Morrison’s technique in *Beloved*, developed on the narrative characteristics of the dilemma tale provides an alternative perspective within which to read her text. Although she employs multiple points of view in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison was not fully successful in making all the voices of the participants heard. Moreover, Pecola’s case does not really specify the dilemma that confronts the main character in dilemma tales because of her portrayal as an innocent and convenient victim of her community’s frustration, anger, ignorance, and shame. Therefore, there is no incisive definition of the problematic of choice, an essential component of such tales. In *Beloved*, Morrison deploys these features of the dilemma tale form to much greater advantage and effect.

An escaped slave mother’s decision to kill her infant daughter rather than let the oppressive slave system take her back is the most

important event in *Beloved*. This chilling and horrifying act of infanticide dominates all the other events in the novel. What led to this act is not told in chronological fashion, but is narrated in a highly complex and non-linear form. The “plot” of *Beloved* may seem confusing to readers because it functions as a kind of puzzle, with bits and pieces of the story gradually unfolding as different characters remember and share their experiences. Many of these memories or “rememories” as Morrison calls them, have long been suppressed and uncovering them is a slow painful process and hence, does not always follow a linear nature. The disorientation that Morrison’s narrative causes by the sudden shifts and changes that her readers must negotiate performs a positive function. Firstly, it gives them something of the flavour of the experience of the original slaves, snatched from their homes in Africa and then transported suddenly into slavery in America.²² Secondly, it gives the narrative the appearance of being “oral, meandering, effortless, spoken,”²³ an aspect of the oral style and improvisational quality that is central to African-American storytelling. Finally, in keeping with the purpose of dilemma tales, the reader is co-opted “into both the creative process and the more complex interpretive exercise”²⁴ in the struggle to understand the *how* and *why* of the tale.

With this unique style, Morrison presents us with glimpses of the past which creep through the cracks in Sethe's memory and the 'plot' of the novel, revealing a horrific act of violence that is paradoxically an act of love. Schoolteacher's "project," in which he measures Sethe's body for anthropological reasons, and scolds his pupil for improperly categorizing her human and animal characteristics symbolizes the idea of slavery's terrible brutality as being the death of one's humanity. Through the chinks in Sethe's memory, the reader learns of the appropriation of her milk—a crucial factor in determining her desperate act of violence. In her exploration of the moral ambiguity of horrific love through such scenes, Morrison breaks down the polarities of right and wrong making it extremely difficult for the reader to judge Sethe's decision of choosing to kill her children rather than "having them die" under the inhuman slave system. Morrison has explored the same theme of violent mothers in her earlier works. In *Sula*, Eva Peace first demonstrates horrific love when she mutilates herself in order to acquire economic security for her children, and later, when she kills her junkie son Plum in a profound act of love to save him from a prolonged and emasculated suffering.

The moral question of Morrison's fiction is one that has caused much controversy and discussion amongst critics and readers alike. How we are ultimately to judge Eva's action—as euthanasia or murder—is the

ethical issue in question in *Sula*. In *Beloved*, the central question that the novel poses then is whether Sethe was right or wrong to do what she did. Morrison compounds the problem by stating that Sethe did what was right although she did not have the right to do it.²⁵ By presenting this dilemma for the readers to consider, Morrison demonstrates the most defining quality of the dilemma tale in presenting a situation where the protagonist must choose between two hateful alternatives, and then, shifting the moral and ethical burden onto the reader.

To put things in perspective for the reader, Morrison presents a dialogue between a principal character like Paul D and Sethe in which she tries to explain why she killed her baby: “It ain’t my job to know what’s worse. It’s my job to know what is and keep them from what I know is terrible. I did that” (*B*, p.165). The moral issue enters when Morrison allows Paul D to say accusingly:

“What you did was wrong, Sethe.”

“There could have been a way. Some other way.” (*B*, p.165)

The dilemma to be debated by the audience is hence, predicated on Sethe’s agonized question, “What way?” This ends the novel’s first level of narration within the dilemma tale framework. The question, was there some other way that Sethe could have taken— invites the audience to look at the cold reality of the situation and judge for themselves. In doing

so, the reader is drawn into confrontation with the unspeakable to the very heart of the slave experience.

The second stage of the story's narration makes space for the interrogation of the dilemma presented above, a crucial process that the dilemma tale engages in. Here, the audience engages actively in debate and reasoning, in argument and counter argument, in order to conclude meaningfully for the whole community. Morrison tries to answer the questions she raises in *Beloved*, by deploying multiple points of view to provide many different interpretations of the central dilemma confronting the protagonist. Thus, she gives priority to the call-and-response technique to "draw on the voice of the community,"²⁶ thereby underscoring the shared nature of art and the importance of perspective.

Structured on these principles, *Beloved* presents a new conception of history, one, which unlike master narratives does not assert an authoritative version, but rather offers several contradictory, yet complementary versions which exist side by side. Morrison uses a layering of different voices and perspectives and an ever-switching point of view. Every character, even the dead ones, tell parts of the tale as Morrison moves in and out of the participant's thoughts, allowing each one in turn to share with the reader their perceptions of the events. No one telling takes precedence over the other, but instead adds information

through the telling. This multiple narrative viewpoint enables her to give substance to a fictional past arrived at from many angles. The various voices act as chorus and witness to Sethe's experiences. Each account of suffering has the haunting of 124 Bluestone Road at its centre, while the events, which caused it, are explained in ever-widening detail, embracing the composite experience of slavery. The diversity of the point of view creates a tapestry of people who interact— individuals joined by the past or present into a community. Such interaction between different levels creates a sense of community, a wholeness of the disparate views of the same event. In this respect, Morrison's evocation of a community voice, a collective telling through multiple voices, is a strategy of the dilemma tale that *Beloved* manifests.

The multiple voiced narrations regarding Sethe's infanticide reconstitutes and interrogates the truth of "what really happened." The retelling involves improvisation, and a shifting point of view, as different tellers centre on and circle around Sethe's act. The statements of the individual characters shape the 'call' to which other characters offer a 'response' by sharing their version of the episode in question. Each related story is unfinished however, leaving the rest to the reader's imagination and thereby, embodying Morrison's goal of creating a "truly aural novel" that "provides places and spaces for the readers to work and

participate,” to “fulfill” characterizations in a “humanizing” way.²⁷

Besides Sethe’s version, three other versions of the unbearably shocking events are told from different perspectives.

After readers struggle to piece together the traumatic memories of Sethe, Paul D, and Denver earlier given in fragmentary, circular, and revisionary bits, they experience a jarring shift from African-American point of view to those of white slave masters. In the section that recounts the events of Sethe’s infanticide from the viewpoint of Schoolteacher, his nephew, and sheriff, Morrison’s omniscience allows the readers to enter their psyches shocking them with the pure racist ideology stated with rational certainty. From the slave-catcher’s brutal, dehumanizing point of view, Stamp paid is reduced to “a crazy old nigger” (*B*, p.149), while Schoolteacher is the disappointed property owner who sees right away that, “there was nothing to claim.” (*B*, p.149) His views of slaves as ruined livestock leads him to regard Sethe as a creature who has gone wild “due to the mishandling of the nephew who had over beat her and made her cut and run.”(*B*, p.150) This choice of narrator gives the reader an experience of master psychology and increases the horrific aspect of the passage, while simultaneously validating Sethe’s response to the system that Schoolteacher represents. Although in the process of

narrating, the narrator's direct evaluation is withheld, it is obvious that schoolteacher's perception though articulated is not endorsed.

Both Baby Suggs's and Stamp Paid's versions of Sethe's actions on that hot day, recall the feast the day before, and the subsequent withdrawal of the black community. Baby Suggs's reaction to the killing of her grandchild (we later deduce) is to abandon all hope of life and to resign herself to death because, despite her belief in God and her freedom, the white men nevertheless intruded into her private familial space, her "yard," and because she could not approve or condemn Sethe's "rough choice." (*B*, p.180) The first part brings up the ambiguity of her freedom, the second cause develops the theme of moral ambiguity even further—both of the choices open to Sethe on that day would have resulted in loss.

Stamp Paid's version of the same story returns to the same feast that Baby Suggs referred to and the resulting aftermath. This is another illustration of the dialogic nature of Morrison's narrative style. He retells from his viewpoint, what Baby Suggs has already recounted earlier. When he tries to explain to Paul D the events that took place by showing him a newspaper cutting with Sethe's picture, Paul D refuses to believe that the picture was Sethe's. Thus, Stamp Paid's story is unfinished and he even wonders whether the event really took place. However, the reader

“hears” his version and in this way, Stamp adds his voice to the chorus of voices.

Thus, by letting different people speak and not reconcile contradictory explanations and claims where they arise, the novel allows the reader—particularly in the absence of history and context—to empathize with most, if not all of its characters.

Sethe’s story is different from the other versions. When she tries to tell Paul D her account of the events, she finds herself circling around the subject. She tries to explain her motivation for killing her infant by talking about her memories of life at Sweet home. Her escape from the home had given her freedom to love and the conviction that her children must never live as she had. By trying to kill them she had foiled schoolteacher’s plans and put them “where they’d be safe.” (164) This brings us back to the dialogue that occurs between herself and Paul D referred to earlier. Maggie Sale argues that each of these elements involved in Sethe’s act “constitutes only a part of the whole, each needing to be balanced by a consideration of all the others” and therefore, urges the readers not to rest on any single element but to “move among positions and inhabit multiple perspectives.”²⁸

The significance of Sethe’s action, which the audience must examine, runs much deeper than it appears on surface. It is the dilemma

tale's principal domain to look beneath the surface to reconstruct events and unearth the hidden meanings. Sethe's action raises many ethical and moral issues about the consequences of slavery's brutality, the question of motherhood, the issue of ownership, and of freedom. In *Beloved*, woman's maternal role is central, but paradoxically, black slave women were rarely able to fulfill this role as the exigencies of slave life actively prevented them from doing so. Sethe's intolerable situation is no different from that of many black characters in the novel. The difference lies in her response and view of motherhood. For instance, Baby Suggs, who suffered repeatedly from a system that steals a mother's children from her, accepts the fact that her children are to be pawns in a game instigated, controlled, and played by white people. Sethe, however, rebels against these conditions and indulges in a love "too thick" which, Paul D recognizes as being "risky", given the precarious nature of slave existence (*B*, p.45).

For Sethe, killing her children was an act of protection, of putting her babies to safety, but paradoxically, it proves to be an act of destruction, lending gruesome irony to the phrase, "mother love was a killer" (*B*, p.132). Thus, on the one hand, Sethe's goal is to prevent her children from bearing a psychological scar of childhood like the one she herself bears. On the other hand, she sees her children as her property;

each one is a “life she had made;” each had “all parts of her” (*B*, p.163). Through a dialogic layering of points of view, the text questions Sethe’s action. Her argument with Paul D demonstrates the ambiguity of morality and of maternal love. Thus perceived, Sethe’s actions become more complex forcing us to ask, does a mother have the right to take the life of her child? The “monstrous potential of love” that embodies Sethe’s dilemma is also the readers’ as Morrison invites them to respond to the issues thus presented. The question is also external to the text and yet related, in that the issue of mother love and the implicit questioning of a mother’s right to kill her child is itself topical in a moment in which many countries are torn by their reactions to abortions.

The effect of re-telling Sethe’s act of infanticide from different perspectives gives the readers a fuller picture and sense of “what really happened.” Morrison also invites the reader’s perception in creating the ethical meaning of the text. By giving the readers access to multiple perspectives and interpretations, Morrison reveals that the issue is by no means simple. The dialogic style and structure of the text resists a single interpretation. Just as Ella listened for the “holes” (*B*, p.92) in Sethe’s story, the reader too has to wait for explanations and remember previously narrated bits to piece the stories together. In doing so, the

reader is forced to experience the same difficulty as the characters, and hence too, the difficulty to make moral judgments.

In presenting the memories and experiences of African-Americans of racism through storytelling techniques manifested in the dilemma tale form, Morrison challenges our own standards of morality. In the light of the damage, slavery had done to Sethe's psyche; any judgment on our part would appear trite. If Sethe's murderous act is condemned, Morrison also calls for our judgment of the system that can provoke such an action. Nevertheless, Sethe is not left off the hook, as she is not only imprisoned, but abandoned by Paul D, and held accountable by the community, by Denver, Beloved and ultimately, by herself. But the essential conflict presented in the novel, resists a single interpretation as borne out by the text, with its call-and-response patterns, the multiple points of view, and its open-endedness—all characteristics of the dilemma story.

In *Beloved*, not only is the ending inconclusive, Morrison also leaves many stories in the text unfinished or unexplained, thereby inviting the reader to respond, to think it over. A case in point is the mystery surrounding the appearance and disappearance of Beloved and her symbolic or other meanings in the text. We do not really know whether she is really Sethe's daughter, a ghost come to life, a refugee, or all of these. Thus, *Beloved* is full of these gaps underlining the impossibility of

a totalized narrative. By writing into her narrative “these places and spaces” Morrison expects the reader to be active in creating with her, the meaning of the text. At the same time, by leaving her narrative open, she also demonstrates that there are other possibilities of looking at the history of her people. *Beloved* is only one version of the many possible versions of that history.

An analysis of both *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* as novels using the form and techniques of the dilemma tale reveals how Morrison in the latter novel, is able to define better, the dilemma or ethical choice that confronts the main character. She handles the manipulation of multiple viewpoints or perspectives more deftly in this novel. Both novels call for the reader’s active participation in constructing the meaning of the text, but while *The Bluest Eye* seems to emphasize on the factor of witnessing and testifying, *Beloved* stresses on the moral and ethical ambiguity of the problem presented, and on the impossibility of a totalized narrative or unitary viewpoint.

Song of Solomon

Another novel, *Song of Solomon* is structured on the vernacular folk myth of the Flying African and once again exemplifies Morrison’s call for literary expression based on the folk and cultural heritage. The African oral aesthetics in which the discourse of the dilemma tale is

predominant anchors the novel's primary mythic and critical understructure. *Song of Solomon* deploys all the familiar, more explicit aspects of this fundamental Yoruba narrative structure. But the purpose here is to examine the less familiar features implicit in this folktale form. By doing so, other aspects of Morrison's narrative style and strategy that have not yet been mentioned are included. Like the accomplished storyteller of tradition, her storytelling reflects in writing, the griot's mastery of the complex verbal, musical, and memory skills. Just as the professional bard requires highly specialized skills and powers to perform meaningfully, so also Morrison, as storyteller, uses the techniques of oral folk stories to tell her stories more effectively. *Song of Solomon* contains many stories, but what is significant in Morrison is not the symbolic reproduction of particular oral accounts, but her awareness of the way oral cultures tell these tales.

As pointed out by Philip Page in "Circularity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*,"²⁹ the African folklore scholar, Harold Scheub in his studies of the Xhosa Nstomi, or the fanciful tale, refers to the vast stock of "core-clichés," stock episodes, characters and images that are variedly used to suit the needs and interests of particular audiences or occasions. Thus, many African folk narratives build upon repetition of words, phrases, motifs, and images, used in overlapping or interlocking patterns to

generate a story. Such a use of story pattern is pertinent to *Song of Solomon*, in which the narrative develops through overlapping and inter-related themes such as naming and flight, flight and repeated abandonment, identity and heritage, singing and storytelling, natural phenomenon vs. the unnatural and so on. At the same time these story patterns explain the various elements of Morrison's narrative strategy: a shifting narrative voice, repetition and circulation, episodic fragmentary retelling of the past, non-linearity and call-and-response motifs.

Of these ingenious narrative strategies employed by Morrison in her fiction, her story structure of contrapuntal narratives in which characters tell stories to one another and to themselves within the framework of the larger story is relevant to a discussion of the techniques of the dilemma tale. In the dilemma tale, the extended narrators, or direct participants, the listeners and the community interrogate the 'master narrative' in this situation. The narrator adds to this story pattern by moving in and through the characters' stories filling in the gaps. Thus, in *Song of Solomon*, Morrison makes use of the old folktale (of which many versions exist) that tells of a group of slaves who escaped slavery by acquiring wings and flying back to Africa. In Morrison's story, the tale is converted into the song of Solomon, which, sung at various points becomes the key to the protagonist's quest to understand his own identity.

Milkman must learn the names and the personal histories of his ancestors in order to understand better his own place in the world. Since for Morrison, identity is “a collective identity rather than individual construct,”³⁰ Milkman must reconnect with history through language, community and family stories as well as the words of Solomon’s song.

Milkman solves his dilemma of place, past and identity through oral discourse and the words of Solomon’s song. The success of his southbound journey depends on his decoding this children’s song turned into a blues song by his aunt Pilate, which reveals his ancestry. This song, as Gay Wilentz points out, “illustrates the function of the African-American woman in passing on the stories of her culture’s painful yet courageous past.”³¹ Thus, by opening up the theme of “generational continuities” in the telling of the tale, Morrison adds another dimension to the tradition of storytelling. The idea of women fulfilling the role of tale-teller and instructor, of transmitting cultural history and values through the generations is thus, ingeniously embedded into the narrative structure of the text.

The resulting medley of voices contributes to the revelation of individual and community making, which is the desired goal of such storytelling. The narration in *Song of Solomon* suggests that no one person can have enough information to narrate the entire story of a

character or a community. Thus, Milkman learns that it is not enough to tell a single story, rather, many stories must be told in the hope that they might consequently illuminate one another. Characters in the text, as well as the readers, can only seek meaning and understanding through shared memories, interpretations, and imaginings that combine as stories. This fits the description of the novel as a dilemma tale, which privileges multiple points of view. In *Song of Solomon*, as also in all her novels, Morrison uses many tellers whose stories are either variants of the same story or else, so interwoven into the fabric of the main story that they cannot be separated. This makes for continual re-evaluation by the reader since each version of the story is different in perspective, motive, and interpretation.

The function of such re-evaluation within the critical framework of the dilemma tale is that it helps “the participants and the entire community to cope with the world around them and improve their understanding.”³² In *Song of Solomon*, in the telling of the relationship between Milkman’s parents, the narrator tells one story, Macon Dead tells another, and Ruth Dead tells her own version. Presented with different perceptual categories, it becomes problematic for Milkman; he has no idea which version to believe since his knowledge of his parents corroborates both accounts. His own views, as well as the reader’s, have

to be revised, because the listener/reader is “forced into a kind of retrospective analysis that acknowledges the subjective and constitutive nature of truth: (he is) compelled to acknowledge the relative truth inherent in each narrative construction.”³³ Thus, these contrapuntal narratives produce tension and interplay of ideas through multiple perspectives or “voices.” They complicate the reader’s interpretation of the issues and make it difficult, if not impossible, for an authoritative response.

Morrison’s design of stories as contrapuntal narratives creates a network of cultural storytelling in which one story loops into the stories of inner stories, generating layers of meaning. Thus, all the stories in *Song of Solomon* ultimately belong to the same network of relations as the different tellers produce variants of the same story. The teller joined to the listener is in turn, joined to the tellers and listeners of the other stories together building a community of tellers, listeners, and shared stories. This is the ultimate aim of all types of storytelling. Milkman must learn to listen to the stories of other people and understand the significance of shared history through shared stories and traditions, before he can communicate his own story. Through the heard testimony of Reverend Cooper, the fragments of the past provided by Macon Jr., Pilate, Circe and Susan Byrd and finally the singing children of Shalimar,

Milkman can transform himself from a man alienated from his culture into one who embraces it.

The importance of the endless iterations of these stories to black storytelling is that they enable characters to share knowledge and to open up aspects of texts that make for new ending possibilities, new interpretations, and narrative perspectives. Moreover, since the growth and identity of the ethnic character and cultural knowledge are related, storytelling plays an all-important role in imparting this crucial knowledge. In this connection dilemma tales have been called “teaching stories”³⁴ which played an integral part in the moral and ethical training in many traditional African societies, where basic training in a particular culture’s oral arts and skills is an essential part of children’s traditional education. In fact, as Gay Wilentz proclaims, “the telling of the tale is paramount to the survival of the culture.”³⁵

In *Song of Solomon*, the narrative develops through iteration and re-iteration of episodes, imagery, symbols, and motifs. For instance, the folksong of Sugarman who “done fly away” is an oft repeated motif in Milkman’s life. The song is a means of maintaining a link to a forgotten family history. In this regard, Marilyn Mobley draws our attention not only to “the song in the story” but also to “the story in the song.”³⁶ Pilate first sings this song and later, the children of Shalimar sing another

version of it. The story in the song records the clues to Milkman's heritage and inspires him to research the details of his family roots. Each time Milkman hears the song, he alters it through a series of interpretations, until, he finally constructs a version of it that fits his idea of what he believes is, the truth about his ancestral origins. By assembling and connecting the fragments of folk stories told to him by Pilate, Circe and Susan Byrd, Milkman tries to decode the 'riddle' in the song. In this way too, he learns how to be creative as a storyteller. In the end, he becomes the "improvising bluesman"³⁷ paying tribute to the dying Pilate through his own improvisatory extension of her old Sugarman blues. However, as the novel's ambiguous ending shows, this new story of Milkman's life is only one of the numerous possible stories that can be considered alongside the other stories.

Song of Solomon has many oral qualities drawn from black culture, not least of which is the technique of "digression." Since folktales are performed live by a griot, the opportunity poses itself to meander away from the story at hand. Sometimes digression may be a means of explaining events that some listeners may not understand. An important part of this tradition would therefore be the improvisational quality suggested by "meandering" about ready-made stories. *Song of Solomon* demonstrates such a technique in the way Morrison lets the omniscient

narrator “meander” in the leisurely pursuit of stray details. The narrative simply starts and goes on unfolding and meandering in various directions all at once. The very opening of *Song of Solomon* illustrates this technique.

The novel opens with the dramatic event of an insurance agent apparently about to undertake a suicidal jump from the top of the local hospital called Mercy. Yet Morrison keeps the perspective away from him as the narrator goes on instead, to give a long explanation on how the street called “Not Doctor Street” got its name. Our attention is then drawn to the crowd which has gathered below Robert Smith, the suicidal insurance agent, and then allowed to slowly zoom in on a certain pregnant lady, who, at that moment drops her basket of red velvet rose petals. In the ensuing scramble, Smith is forgotten as our attention is drawn to another woman in the crowd “who suddenly burst out into song” (*SoS*, p.5). Her song, which is in the vernacular, is intriguing, but at this point, we cannot understand its import or function in the narration. In fact, there is no time to dwell on it, as the narrator next goes on to describe the reaction of the ‘hospital people’ to the happenings. By the end of the section, Robert Smith has leapt from the building, yet the reader has no clue as to why he had attempted to “fly away.” Morrison’s narrative strategy here is to drop an unexplained fact on the reader, only

to veer away into other matters, and then return with more information about the initial fact, then change direction again and so on. In this way, Morrison imbues the narrative with an improvisational quality, which is imitative of oral literature, and we experience the feeling of hearing a story being told.

The non-linear movements that Morrison's narratives thus follow are an aspect of the oral style. Although *Song of Solomon* traces the life of Milkman Dead from birth to "death," the narrative does not follow a straightforward progression. Instead, the narrative doubles backwards and forward in time in a circling motion. The narrative flashbacks and shifts in subject repeatedly interrupt the storyline as the narrator backtracks through time to account for the present. This stems from the fact that in the novel, the depiction of time is not a linear progression, but an interweaving of past and present events in an ever-widening circle. Morrison draws from this West African concept of cyclical time that view the world as living—"subject to the law of becoming, of old age and death."³⁸ Thus, this reinforces the notion that a sense of one's self is never possible until one accepts the past since the past and present exist in dynamic relationship with each other. Since an important part of Milkman's quest is self-discovery, he can only do this by looking

backwards to discover the linkages that will bring his past into relation with his present.

We can infer that Morrison's meandering narrative strategy imitates the telling of folktales. For instance, since the dilemma tale is a platform that allows the representation of many voices and ideas, there are bound to be digressions, deviations, and detours in such a narrative situation. Moreover, the plethora of names, the shifting chronology, the excessive dialogue, and the layers of individual and personal histories create a mosaic of narrative that makes meaning seem elusive. In fact, the reader's task is similar to that of the protagonist, who must find the meaning in his complicated life story.

Morrison's recognition of the twin roles of author and reader in the creation of literary works and their interpretation raises a question. What stand shall a reader take when the author encourages audience participation? We have already identified how in her works, the narrator refrains from taking any character's stance or letting any character's judgment control the narrative. In the narration of a story, each character participates with different bits of the same story, and in this process, the call-and-response structure of narrative also invites the audience's participation in creating the whole story. The multiple versions of Ruth and her father's deathbed scene and the several possible meanings to the

ending of *Song of Solomon* are but two outstanding examples, which illustrate the complexity of the relationship between author, reader, and text. The reader's perceptions are always changing as the text moves us in and out of different points of view. Thus, the reader finds it difficult to take a fixed stance in the book.

Such a situation has led many critics to aver that Morrison's fiction provides more questions than answers. Yet, Morrison's employment of these narrative strategies based on the themes, structure, and function of dilemma tales oblige the audience to participate individually in order to acquire group identity. She thus shifts the burden of interpretation, judgment, and resolution onto the reader. The reader can only be guided towards a narrative judgment or interpretation that is influenced by the permeation of black oral traditions that make the narrative value laden. At the conclusion of *Song of Solomon*, Morrison finally shifts out of the third-person narrative and opts for the second-person voice:

For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If **you** surrendered to the air, **you** could ride it. (emphasis mine, *SoS*, p.337)

Here, Morrison interrupts the third-person narrative to address the audience directly. The result is a blurring of distinctions among speaker, character, and reader in which the reader is encouraged to identify with Milkman. The intimacy that transpires between author and reader adds to the orality of the text, of the reader being involved in an intimate

conversation with the author. The reader is drawn as it were, personally into the world of Milkman: a situation is created wherein the reader must draw conclusions from the story not only as an observer, but also as a participator in the events.

The inconclusive and controversial ending of *Song of Solomon* is an example of Morrison's resistance to closure in the Western sense. Unlike Western folktales in which all end up living "happily ever after," African folktales, Morrison reminds us, "are told in such a way that whoever is listening is in it and can shape it and figure it out. It's not over just because it stops."³⁹ Morrison allows us the freedom of interpretation depending upon what we believe takes place after the novel ends, and on how strongly we believe the folktales on which the novel is based. Thus, in the words of Gay Wilentz, "the question the reader should ponder in this dilemma tale is not whether Milkman lives or dies; rather this dilemma tale is whether Milkman lives or flies! Which perception of reality are we to believe?"⁴⁰

Paradise

Paradise illustrates the fullest example of how the dilemma tale type may serve as an interpretive frame for explicating Morrison's narrative techniques as originating from the oral tradition. At the same time, the reasons for her conscious appropriation of these traditions in her

work in the larger context of postcolonial theory and history is also emphasized.

Paradise completes a trilogy of historical novels that began with *Beloved* and *Jazz* in which Morrison is concerned with “re-membering” the historical past. Morrison’s position in these novels is to revise and reclaim the narratives of African-American history, particularly from a female point of view, by dwelling on a past that the dominant narrative has tried to erase. African-American separateness has often emphasized the absolute importance of African roots in the formation of an African-American ethnic identity as counterpoised to that of the white majority. However, unlike her earlier works in which she has focused on a reclaimed African heritage as the basis for a different and separate identity, *Paradise* examines the way African-Americans are engaged in the construction of a national identity based on an historical master narrative. Morrison is particularly concerned with how certain versions of history become master narratives, and in this context, the novel offers a critique of the traditional American paradigm of nationhood and identity formation with roots in Puritanism that has been the foundational principles of the United States.⁴¹

Chiji Akoma in “The ‘Trick’ of Narratives: Memory, and Performance in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*,”⁴² states that Morrison

operates within the African American folkloric medium and invests the historical contents of her narrative with a mythic dimension. Others have also emphasized how *Paradise* specifically explores the relationship of history and myth and the means by which national history itself becomes inscribed as mythic history, as well as the practices of exclusion that have characterized notions of America as paradise.⁴³ It is a well known fact that Morrison predominantly draws from the black oral tradition to redress the limited perspectives of mainstream American history. Although for her, using the oral tradition in this manner “is both an act of resistance and a process of communal validation,” in *Paradise*, she “refuses to accept the affirming value of orality at face value”⁴⁴ in spite of its significance in the African-American aesthetic. She applies to oral history the same critical examination to which written history has been subjected by illustrating the subjectivity, distortions, and abuses of power to which oral history is also vulnerable. Morrison implies that the oral transmission and preservation of a community’s history can also have many shortcomings. Thus, the novel suggests the limits of any critical position that overly celebrates the capacities of the oral to convey truth. In this context, Morrison once again demonstrates a crucial aspect of her aesthetic – the African-American oral mode— in her deployment of the dilemma type tale to structure her narrative. Fundamental to *Paradise* is

the ascertaining of truth through wrestling with the multiplicity of perspectives and open-ended interpretations that the novel opens up for author, characters and readers alike. Like the dilemma tales, which set out to resolve problematic issues through collective observation, reasoning and critical evaluation, the novel provides a contemplative space for readers to debate the issues raised and to solve the dilemmas on their own.

In *Paradise*, the structure of the dilemma tale allows Morrison to organize her narrative around the thematic concerns she began in the earlier works, that of history, place, and community. Her use of storytelling as historiography in the novel comes to the fore as she examines the making of an oral community narrative. In this process, memory plays a crucial role. Broadly speaking, *Paradise* interrogates how memory shapes the narrative of a community's past, and particularly, how it serves to perpetuate a patriarchal order. The novel, at its core, presents a conflict between one "group's resolve to remember the past in a certain way as a matter of duty, and another group's determination to experience their past in a liberating manner."⁴⁵ By employing storytelling to highlight the subjective aspect of memory that relies upon omission in some details to preserve others, Morrison refigures these omissions as sites of counter-memories of alternative

fragmented, subjugated narratives that oppose the notion of a totalizing master narrative. Thus, Morrison's representation of multiple points of view and voices, which not only challenge a unitary viewpoint, but also provides space for previously unheard of stories and viewpoints form an important narrative technique of the dilemma tale.

In *Paradise*, Morrison creates a microcosm of America in the utopian all-black community of Ruby, Oklahoma. On the first level of narration based on the structural architecture of the dilemma tale, *Paradise* first narrates the founding of the all-black town of Haven in 1890 by former free black citizens. The founders, referred to by the community as the "Old Fathers," had fled the white racism of the South, only to be rejected by fellow African-Americans at "Fairly"—a settlement of light skinned blacks— because of their darker skin colour. This rebuff, known as the "Disallowing," provides the impetus for a westward migration to Haven, where they establish their own community. The descendants of its founding fathers — the 8-rocks, so called because of their impeccable dark skin — led by the Morgan twins, Steward and Deacon, attempt to reconstruct "exactly" the founding of Haven in Ruby (*P*, p.113). The Disallowing establishes the historical reasons for Ruby's defensiveness and intolerance for "anybody but themselves" (*P*, p.13).

In pursuing their ideals in freedom, the fathers of Ruby must enforce their own contemporary disallowings in order to keep the past relevant and to maintain a patriarchal authority rooted in the past. Thus, Ruby is an isolated town, cut off from the cultural, political and economic events of the rest of America. Named for a sister and mother who died, apparently because of the arduous trek, the town is defined by a conservative ideal of womanhood and by an unspoken “blood rule” that forbids its inhabitants to marry light-skinned people: transgression of this “blood rule” would result in rejection and loss of their 8-rock status. For this reason too, the Morgan twins, whose families have kept their purity intact, form the oligarchy. Not only do they control every essential aspect of the town, they are also firmly insistent on preserving the narrative of Ruby’s history. This narrative is plainly oral, kept alive in the memory of the older generation, particularly, the twins, Steward and Deacon Morgan who between them

remember the details of everything that ever happened—
things they witnessed and things they have not. (*P*, p.13)

Patricia Storace rightly observes that the elders of Ruby want “the perpetual overarching authority of the creator at the moment of creation.”⁴⁶ For, in utilizing their oral recounting to construct a master narrative the Morgan twins also intend to establish moral authority. Thus, Ruby’s communal history, not only becomes a tightly controlled version,

but also a text that cannot be rewritten or reinterpreted. Morrison, however, questions such a dogmatic approach to history. Hence, like the dilemma story where the issue of dilemma is essential, the novel initiates arguments about what the inhabitants of Ruby are to make of their historical legacy. The motivations of the town elders in preserving the principals and beliefs on which their community is founded is called into question as the events that follow reveal how the moral basis for this belief has eroded. When the younger generation begins to question the values, behaviour and mythmaking of their elders' communal historiography, the 8-rock leaders are opposed to changing the extant narrative. Thus, as in the dilemma tale structure, the novel at this point, juxtaposes a number of dichotomies to be debated by the audience. This allows for the interrogation and reconstitution of history by providing a variety of perspectives that call upon the reader to examine critically.

The second narrative level of the dilemma tale begins with the moral debate around the theme of tradition and change. In *Paradise*, the conflict between the younger generation and their fathers over the correct words inscribed on the Oven—a centrepiece carried from the original site of Haven to Ruby, which had functioned as the communal hearth, initiates the debate. The debate surrounding the Oven's motto, resulting over a missing word, involves the question of authority and authorship.

The problem is not only how to interpret the text but also how to determine what the text is. The ruling generation's declaration that the motto is "Beware the Furrow of His Brow," demand a strict adherence to the old order since it justifies their retention of power and unchallenged authority. In contrast, Misner and the younger sons want a greater participation in the creation of new myths and new freedoms. For them history is open and progressive. Their claim is that the motto is "Be the Furrow" and by changing it later to "We are the Furrow" (p.298), transforms what is a warning into a self-assertive statement.

The dispute over whether the Oven's words should be "Beware the Furrow of His Brow," "Be the Furrow of His Brow," "We are the Furrow of Her Brow," or "We are the Furrow of His Brow," proves that there is not one but several possible mottos. Moreover, like the dilemma tale they continually create meanings that require the active participation of both characters and readers alike. What needs to be remembered here is how in traditional, patriarchal societies, respect for one's fathers and ancestors is sacred. At the same time, the problem for the community in Ruby was that the older generation had frozen their history: they had "nothing to say about themselves. Nothing to pass on"⁴⁷ In addition, they also disallow the younger generation to participate in the creation of their own history,

thereby denying to them the call-and-response mode of communication that is so vital to the oral tradition.

The multiplicity of the mottos proves that there is no reliable way of determining which is the correct or authoritative one.⁴⁸ Like the dilemma tale which conveys the ‘truth’ of many truths, the various interpretations of the mottos carry moral and ethical value that can improve understanding. But at this point, the elders of Ruby are not ready to tolerate divergent interpretations of the town’s past. They summon the sole surviving member of the original Haven settlers, Esther, to corroborate their interpretation of the missing word in the Oven’s motto. However, since she is unable to read, her testimony is based on only “finger memory” a fact that is not acceptable to the young people. Morrison further problematizes the matter by interrogating the permanence of the written word by having the written words on the oven’s lip disappear. At the same time, she highlights the vulnerability of oral histories when it is used to suppress dialogue and dissent, or used for narrow political or selfish ends. Because of the ruling fathers’ attempt to freeze a remembered past into repressive dogma, new divisions and rifts will emerge among Ruby’s inhabitants culminating in the murderous assault on the Convent, an ‘open house’ sheltering a group of unconventional women. As the novel reveals, Morrison is concerned not

only with one dilemma, but also with several. Like the tale-within-a-tale pattern of oral storytelling, what we find here is a similar pattern of a dilemma-within-a-dilemma.

As in all her other novels, Morrison makes extensive use of another fundamental characteristic of the dilemma tale—the technique of multiple points of view, in order to reconstruct the experiences and perspectives of the characters to resolve a dilemma. For example, in the chapter titled “Divine,” the novel’s characters argue over the meanings of the cross in relation to love and divinity. Not only do the ministers of the Church disagree in their views regarding the meaning of the cross, but also, as Morrison shows by moving the narrative perspective around the room, so does the congregation. Thus, following the structural and thematic preoccupation of the dilemma tale, Morrison tries to provide a literary space that throws up answers instead of nailing them down to a single definition. In privileging multiple perspectives, she invites readers to reimagine and reexamine the ideas embodied on the cross itself as a symbol of multiplicity that involves the making of difficult choices about conflicting moral values.

The central dispute over the Oven’s words also reveals how the conservative approach of the men to history is a gendered one in which their women apparently play no role. However, Morrison provides room

for the women's competing versions of Ruby's history, although they remain hidden. Thus, throughout the novel, women's statements form a succession of explanations that reveal the distorted viewpoint of the men. A critical look at the perspectives of the women in the text will provide the various counter narratives to the men's: both structurally and practically, the women's stories disrupt and correct Ruby's official narrative. The multiplicity of interpretations of these alternative narratives is itself constructed on the difficulty of choice or moral debate that is at the core of dilemma stories.

The individual chapter headings of *Paradise* are named after different women characters: these include women against whom the tale is structured even if they appear only briefly. The accounts of each of the convent women suggest that the novel's true story is to be related through women's stories. Their stories, personalities, names, and actions reinforce the men's convictions that the women are evil. Like other female characters from Morrison's canon who are seen as pariahs, these women are scapegoats like Pecola on whom the men of Ruby can pass on their own ugliness; like Poland, China and Miss Marie they are whores; like Sula and Pilate they are sorceresses; like Sethe they are murderesses; like Violet they are crazy and dangerous.

The most radical of these female counter narratives of patriarchal history in the novel is the one Patricia Best is documenting in the section “Patricia.” Although she is the daughter of one of the founding members of Ruby, Patricia is also, the only surviving light-skinned resident and the object of the town’s disapproval: her father, Roger, had broken the unspoken ‘blood rule’ by marrying “a wife of racial tampering” (p. 197). From her position as an outsider and a woman, Patricia attempts to assemble a counter narrative of Ruby’s rigidly controlled patriarchal ancestral narrative based on written evidence. However, when the town’s residents object to her prying questions and shut “invisible doors” on her, Patricia’s efforts take a turn towards the personal. At this point, Morrison deploys another fundamental characteristic of the dilemma tale –the politics of interpretation and how they are embedded in interpretation.⁴⁹

Patricia’s narrative efforts reflect the struggle over meaning and interpretation that dilemma tales engender. When she comes across gaps and, according to her, willful omissions of known facts by the town’s citizens whom she attempts to interview, she abandons any pretenses to “objective comment.” Openly seeking a fresh viewpoint, she interprets the facts “freely and insightfully” believing that “she alone had the required emotional distance” (p.188). Her interest in the absences and silences left by the patriarchal version of history leads her to contemplate

the names blotted out in family Bibles. Ultimately, what is worth noting in Pat's genealogy is not Zachariah's founding of Haven but rather his brother's absence at the event, underlined by her observation of the erasure of his name in the family Bible. The story is one of several fragmented narratives that have been repressed in the "town's official story" in order to provide for a mythical, unified, patriarchal vision. Some of these fragmented narratives include those of the women. These women, as Patricia notices are referred to only by their first or generalized last name, and include women like her mother, Delia, whom Ruby's community allows to die at childbirth rather than let a white doctor into the community to save her, but whose story never forms a part of the official narrative. In addition, Patricia's genealogy reveals many cases of incestuous marriages that took place in order to comply with the unspoken "blood rule," and which perhaps explains events such "four damaged infants" being born in one family. In this way, the novel provides space for several unacknowledged, multivoiced stories that compete with the official story of Ruby's past and present history. In this way too, not only is the reader's interpretation of the issues made more complicated, it also underlines the politics of interpretation that dilemma tales engender.

As the novel suggests, Pat's genealogy has the power to disrupt and expose the authorized story of Ruby, and the novel at times seem to support the claims and speculations that she makes. In fact, as some critics have noted, her role parallels that of both author and reader.⁵⁰ In her role as compiler of charts and writer of notes, Patricia is similar to the author writing the novel, but in her efforts to interpret and determine what is happening, she parallels the reader's act of interpreting the novel's text. Through Pat's active responses to the events in the novel, Morrison implicitly invites readers to engage with the text and the events. However, as convincing her analysis is, the novel does not allow the reader to endorse any single perspective or meaning. Moreover, although her genealogy uncovers several discredited stories, they remain hidden, silenced narratives, furtively stored only in the memory of the women. Their silence as well as the other residents' silences about the absences in Ruby's history only serves to "support" the "official story." In this, Pat herself is guilty of complicity in the perpetuation of practices of racial and gender exclusion: in a debate about historicism engaged with Richard Misner, she snubs Misner as an outsider, thereby replicating 8-rock behaviour.

Thus, in what is one of the text's most enigmatic gestures, Morrison makes Patricia burn all her research, charts and notes of her

town's history project. Now she has no textual proof for her claims and her act undermines her position as a textual historiographer of Ruby. In a sense, Pat's act underscores the limits of oral and written histories, and the potential of counterhistory. As is exemplified in the debate over the Oven's inscription, "*Paradise* affirms neither written nor oral culture, however, showing instead the inherent unreliability of all human communication."⁵¹ And once again, one of most essential characteristics of the dilemma tale, which is to pose questions or problems for the listeners to resolve, is called into play here as the reader is invited to ponder over the reasons for and implications of Pat's impulsive act. Morrison seems to be suggesting that no single text, version or interpretation is adequate to account for the whole truth, or provide an understanding of the families and power structures in Ruby. As such, despite her role as model for author and reader, Morrison questions Patricia's methods as being too closed and deterministic. Between the monologic version of Ruby's "official" oral history and Patricia's conscientious but cold and calculating written account, the whole truth of Ruby's history remains unaccounted for. Morrison suggests there is something "more profound"—something only the spiritual Lone DuPres recognizes, "the 'trick' of life and its 'reason'"(p.272) that challenges a view of history as objective and scientific. The novel seeks to reveal that

historical knowledge is always “ruled by motive and wish, a choice of one way, one interpretation, one possibility, out of many”⁵² and hence, there are often no totalizing accounts and answers. This important function of the dilemma tale is revealed here.

A major event that is also subject to such open-ended, multiple interpretations is the brutal massacre at the Convent. Employing the strategy of pastiche, or “repetition and variation,” which she often uses,⁵³ Morrison calls attention to this multiplicity by narrating the episode twice. The first telling gives only the bare threads of this central event with many missing details. In retelling the story of the raid a second time, Morrison supplies more details, but still leaves many questions unanswered. The strategy of repetition and variation that she employs emphasizes her point that there is always more than one version, and therefore, more than one interpretation of any story. Such a strategy insists on the reader’s continual and multiple reworking of the novel’s contents, particularly on issues of interpretation.

To make matters even more complex, Morrison employs a nonlinear, open-ended approach that does away with the order of chronology as the story ambles along with details provided by association, one event recalling another, circling back to another, to present a piece of isolated history. Her technique of jumping from one

scene or perspective to another leaving the readers suspended with unexplained bits of information is a familiar one. Nevertheless, in *Paradise* Morrison more than usual confronts readers with puzzling questions that are answered only many pages later and sometimes never. In using this technique, Morrison deliberately co-opts the readers into the active process of meaning-making as a communal enterprise: meaning is both a creative process and interpretative exercise to be engaged in by both the author and readers. Instead of allowing the reader to arrive at some kind of “truth” as might be systematically revealed at the end of the book, the novel instead follows the example of the dilemma tale, which strives to convey to the community the meaningful ‘truth’ of many truths. In doing so, the reader gains a better understanding of the complexities that underlie human affairs.

In *Paradise*, Morrison does not only place heavy interpretive demands on readers, the novel’s characters too, continually struggle with interpretations of their realities and each other. Following the men’s brutal attack on the Convent, the citizens of Ruby try to make sense of the event. Just as there are two narrations of the same event, there are also “two official editions of the original story” (*P*, p.296). Besides these “official” versions, there are at least three more versions postulated by Patricia Best, which are completely different from the men’s versions.

The coexistence of different stories calling on and responding to each other stresses Morrison's point of indeterminacy.

Trying to sort through the various versions to get at the truth is an unsatisfying experience for Richard Misner, who had been away when the raid occurred:

Other than Deacon Morgan, who had nothing to say, every one of the assaulting men had a different tale and their families and friends... supported them, recasting, inventing misinformation." (*P*, p.297)

Thus, he turns to Lone DuPres, a presumed seer with spiritual powers, to fill in the missing details. Lone, as her name suggests, is the lone character who understands both the circumstances and troubled lives of the Convent women, and the real reason behind the men's attack on these women. But Morrison resists privileging Lone's version above the others by not allowing her account to appear credible in the eyes of many Rubyites. Thus, the people of Ruby as well as the readers must contend with the uncertainty of truth illustrated by differing accounts and interpretations. In doing so, they must also recognize the limitless possibilities that exist in any endeavor that looks at a people's history.

Similarly, no one in the novel is able to explain with complete authority, the strange disappearance of the Convent women nor does Morrison explain to the reader their later reappearance in another-earthly realm. Morrison requires that the readers use their imagination to see

beyond the visible, “to see the unseen signs of historical, psychological, spiritual, and economic forces.”⁵⁴ Since she places such heavy interpretive demands on the reader, Morrison also guides her readers by suggesting an alternative approach through the examples of Lone and Consolata. These two women, as the novel reveals, have access to supernatural ways of knowing, interpreting and healing, including the art of reviving the dead that challenge logical or rational beliefs. For Lone, this is “stepping in,” while for Consolata it is “seeing in” (*P*, p.245; p.247) to another person in an act of total empathy. This gives readers a clue to the extent that they must go in order to achieve complete understanding. Similarly, Morrison suggests the possibility of new interpretations through Anna Flood’s vision of a window and Misner’s, of a door at the site of the Convent. Thus, although Ruby’s redemption is never definitive, she still offers consolation, in Deacon Morgan’s change of heart, and in Lone’s pronouncement that “God has given Ruby a second chance” (*P*, p. 297).

At the novel’s ending, Morrison evokes enigmatic images of the women of the Convent lying on a beach gleaming with refuse, making it difficult to tell whether they are angels or martyrs. Like all the difficult choices she earlier confronts the readers with, Morrison’s view of a paradisiacal community is also open to debate. In reimagining paradise as

a place not on some transcendent plane, but “down here” on earth, and by suggesting that it is a condition not yet fully achieved (*P*, p.318), she calls for an interrogation of the idea of paradise itself.⁵⁵ In examining both mainstream American and the traditional African-American conception of race, history, and nation, and in critiquing the idea of American exceptionalism present in African-American discourse,⁵⁶ Morrison encourages her readers to reimagine a more inclusive and accepting community by constructing an earthly paradise made up of individuals representing different racial, ethnic, and national backgrounds.

The ambiguous ending of *Paradise*, has provoked various readings and interpretations. This is exactly what Morrison wants since open-endedness is a final characteristic of the dilemma tale that leaves its conclusion unresolved. By leaving the narrative open, she engages the reader beyond the text to continue with the interrogation that she has initiated, to respond to her call of participating in an interactive dialogue that is ongoing.

Trickster Narratives: Redefining Culture, Reinventing Narrative form

The trickster tale and character are two other important components of the African –American folk tradition. The trickster is a familiar figure in many other ethnic culture myths as well, as the escapades of the Winnebago trickster Wakdjunkaga, Loki, a trickster god

of the Norse sagas, Hermes, the Greek trickster god, and the Monkey King of Chinese myths illustrate. The trickster figure has materialized diversely as Coyote, Nanabozho, Anansi, and Bre'er Rabbit (to name a few). The prevalence of tricksters in virtually all cultures emphasizes the centrality of this archetype to the imaginative self-perception of all societies. As such, his resurgence in the works of recent ethnic writers suggests the importance of this figure in combating racial and gender oppression and for affirming cultural and personal identity. Although the trickster's archetypal status, his relation to gender and to ethnicity, and his post-modern transformation remain contentious issues, the basic cultural work he performs is not in doubt. In African storytelling traditions, for instance, the exploits of the West African trickster-god, Esu-Elegbara (or his variations throughout the African Diaspora), and how he outwitted physically or socially stronger opponents, find extensive representation. African-American writing often displays a folkloristic conception of humankind, an ambivalent consciousness arising from bicultural-identity, which focuses on survival and the politics of language.

In recent times, the trickster has appeared as a key figure in many novels, particularly by contemporary ethnic women writers, such as in Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey* (1987), and Louise

Erdrich's *The Bingo Palace* (1994). Toni Morrison too, situates the trickster as a central character in her examination of culture, gender, and identity. In several of her novels, she expands on and refigures the traditional African-American trickster, and presents us with conflicting versions of female tricksters, which both challenge racial and gender stereotypes and offer new alternatives. However, the emphasis at this point is on how Morrison evokes trickster strategies to revise oral traditions and creates new trickster tales that have important implications for the novel form itself. Like the dilemma tale, the trickster tale may also serve as an interpretive frame to explain Morrison's narrative strategies, since she "shows us the process by which folklore is created, transforming historic folk materials into a new folk-based literature."⁵⁷

An analysis of the narrative form in the works of Toni Morrison must necessarily account for her cultural context, the disruptions and breaks, spaces, and multiple voices or perspectives in her narratives. Examining the trickster narrative to identify its defining characteristics will reveal that it shares similar features with the dilemma stories, particularly in their potential to redefine culture and reinvent narrative form. For instance, Morrison's familiar technique of employing multiple perspectives and rejecting a clear authorial stance in telling her stories can be explained as drawing on the trickster's ability to put on various

masks and to embody multiple perspectives. The trickster's multivalence and elusiveness suggest that no single point of view alone is substantial: meaning is created through the incorporation of all views and perspectives, including those of the author and reader. In continually shifting from one perspective to another, her narrative is like the trickster who represents different levels of meaning within a given text. Hence, like the dilemma tale form, her trickster narratives also emphasize a recursive, non-linear structure.

The social and collective nature of storytelling accounts for yet another important characteristic of the trickster tale that it shares with the dilemma tale. Since the story's meaning is embedded in the telling, storytelling is a profoundly interactive process. The cultural intersection that the social process of storytelling provides between the individual and the community, initiates an open-ended dialogue between storyteller and listeners. A concomitant of this is the fact that tricksters are accomplished storytellers whose mastery over words enables them to exercise power over their listeners. Similarly, Morrison as trickster writer herself uses storytelling to shape her novels, to foster and create cultural identity, to connect the individual to a shared culture, and to set up dialogue among characters and readers. Just as the dilemma tale also provided an arena that promoted discussions that tested the verbal wits of both participants

and audience, the trickster novel too, emphasizes the reader's crucial role in recreating the story. Morrison, as usual, not only invites, but even demands reader involvement. By becoming involved in the interpretive work, and engaging in dialogue with the text, the readers are compelled to constantly revise their views.

Another relevant characteristic of the trickster tale is that there is no formal closure. The dialogue that is set up among the characters and reader never concludes as is the case in the trickster narrative. The author leaves things open-ended or ambiguous, forcing the reader to play a more active role in the construction of meaning. In this connection, the gaps and ellipses that are found in the trickster narratives of Kingston, Morrison and other writers of dual ethnic or cultural backgrounds, take on greater meaning. Recalling the trickster's place at the crossroads, the indeterminate borderlands between two worlds, the gap is a reminder of the boundaries of their dual worlds that have continually to be mediated. Thus, in her novels' lack of closure, and privileging of different perspectives and voices to emphasize dialogue, community, and the social process of storytelling, Morrison's trickster strategies replicate the structural techniques of dilemma tales. However, there are also major differences between the two forms.

A significant difference is that the trickster is not only an actual character in the novel but is also a linguistic and stylistic principle.⁵⁸ His transformation in the literary context is effected through the medium of language. In this connection, Henry Gates Jr. locates the black vernacular roots of the African-American literary tradition in the Signifying Monkey, a descendent of Esu-Elegbara, whose power and identity lie in his verbal artistry. Thus, the “Signifying Monkey’ is an important trope of the African Trickster and, according to Gates Jr., “dwells at the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever troping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language.”⁵⁹ Since, as Gates says, the monkey is not only a master of technique, but is himself “technique or style, or the literariness of literary language, he is the great Signifier.”⁶⁰ The trickster’s linguistic world operates on rules that he/she devises, and which are made precisely to be broken to keep signification evolving and essential. In Morrison’s novels, “the trickster operates on a structural and linguistic level...embodying her wandering, multidimensional point of view and her use of masking and signifying to disrupt and create meaning.”⁶¹ Viewing the trickster as a rhetorical agent provide a useful framework for an appropriate understanding of Morrison’s narrative technique.

Another important aspect of the trickster tale is that tricksters are personifications of disruption and disorder, and as such, they question,

manipulate and disrupt society's rules. They are "both folk heroes and wanderers on the edges of the community, at once marginal and central to the culture. Tricksters challenge the status quo and disrupt perceived boundaries."⁶² Their trickiness is revealed not so much by their pranks, but in their agility and elusiveness. They are defined by their mobility, freedom, autonomy, and ability to survive virtually anything. The traditional trickster is one who "possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being."⁶³

The central paradox embodied in the trickster figure is their rule breaking, transgressive nature which creates a conflicting relationship with community, but which at the same time defines and maintains culture. This clarifies both the thematic concerns and the structure of Morrison's works. She disrupts expectations, challenges the status quo, but also reaffirms communal values just a trickster figure does. Her most prominent narrative techniques of using a meandering, shifting narrative voice, her incorporation of multiple points of view and voices, and her ability to engage her readers in meaning-making dialogue, are all part of her "trickster aesthetics."⁶⁴ Her innovative use of this modern incarnation of the trickster highlights his/her relevance to the African-American cultural world, a world in which boundaries have continually to be

mediated and assumptions challenged. Like the trickster who shifts and disguises the boundaries, undoes and redraws the traditional connections, Morrison, through trickster strategies, blurs the boundaries between self and other, male and female, the real and fantastic, and even between story and audience. The characteristics of the trickster, according to Gates, Jr., are his

individuality, satire, parody, irony, magic, indeterminacy, open endedness, ambiguity, sexuality, chance, uncertainty, disruption and reconciliation, betrayal and loyalty, closure and disclosure, encasement and rupture.⁶⁵

This also describes Morrison herself, who as “trickster author” invents trickster like narrative forms to challenge, provoke, and engage her audience in strengthening and renewing culture and community.

Based on the characteristics of the trickster narrative identified above, it is possible to reread Morrison’s novels in this context in order to find new insight into understanding the complexity of the issues and worldview she deals with. Her novels are suffused with trickster figures, but the immediate concern here is to identify and interpret some of the characteristics of the trickster narrative as employed by her, to emphasize her conception of communal art that relates to African storytelling traditions. Whether all her novels demonstrate the qualities of this particular genre is debatable, but *Sula* and *Tar Baby* without doubt, explicitly evoke the trickster tale’s most recognizable motifs, and

incorporate its thematic, structural, and functional concerns. In both these novels, Morrison is preoccupied with trickster characters that embody a central paradox in her work: that of maintaining and fostering ancestry and cultural identity in a changing historical situation, and at the same time, to rebel against the limitations and constraints set by conventions. “In her novels, the trickster—as character and as part of novel form—helps to preserve, define and defend community while constantly violating its confines.”⁶⁶

Sula: Paradoxical Tricksterism

In *Sula*, Morrison takes a common folk anecdote and weaves this into a novel that is centrally concerned with black communities struggling to define themselves against racism and institutionalized prejudice in post-bellum America. Familiar features of the traditional trickster folktales can be discovered in the structural use of the “nigger joke” tale in this novel. Like many folk stories that explain a cause, origin or reason for something -the story in *Sula*, gives an etiological explanation of how black Bottomites came to be at the “bottom of heaven” (*S*, p.6).

The nigger joke in *Sula* explains why the black neighbourhood, located on a hill overlooking the white town of Medallion, is called “the Bottom.” Bottom is actually founded on the hopes and aspirations of former slaves to regard America as their ‘homeland’ and thereby to create

a new African-American national identity. In that it stands for the power of dreams and a change from their oppressed and impoverished conditions of slavery, the "Bottom" lends itself more easily to the folkloristic tradition. Like the folktales of the oral tradition, the Bottom myth becomes the common property of the Black community, rather than the white; it is the product of a joint and communal authorship. And in conjunction with the spirit of this tradition, Morrison lends her voice to this collective authorship by transmitting to us her interpretation of the story, modified and altered, to enrich our understanding of the black community in *Sula*.

The Bottom thus begins, as "just a nigger joke," a way for the white man to cheat the black man. But beyond the joke, the myth inscribes a historical explanation for real-life socio-economic relationship of the two communities. Bottom represents a vision of reality that reveals white society's failed promises by racist politics, greed and semantic trickery in the way language is manipulated to maintain social control. However, the Bottom myth can be interpreted in different ways depending on whose perspective is being privileged. In fact, Morrison complicates the issue by playing on the idea that black people have the higher ground as long as they hold the higher moral ground. She



combines the affirmative influence of folklore with the subversive capacity of laughter and critique to suggest a form for cultural survival.

Of the joke, Morrison writes, it is “the kind coloured folks tell on themselves when the rain doesn’t come, or comes for weeks, and they’re looking for a little comfort somehow” (*S*, pp.4-5). Here, she illustrates the peculiar irony in black existence: by joking about lived indignities and fears, they extract laughter from their miserable experience and thereby find comfort somehow. This particular black brand of humour is not a laughing away of troubles, but an ability to see the ironic underside of something as well. Community jokers thus, express and diffuse the tension of living with existential pain, and the laughter is both self-deprecating and self-healing. This is an aspect of tricksterism that is both a conscious artistic technique and the result of an oppressive environment.

The double –edged irony inherent in the “nigger joke” lampoons both white oppressor and black jokester. On one level, Morrison revises the traditional folklore in *Sula*, by making the trickster in her text not the black man (as was usually the case), but the white man who dupes and deceives the black slave using ambiguous language. Thus, the “nigger joke” is a joke played on “niggers,” but it is also a joke played by “niggers” on the white man. Black Bottomites use humour not only to

withstand white people and misfortune but also to achieve some measure of respite from the base condition they have ended up in. Their “refusal to be de-humanized by the ‘nigger joke’ creates the ironic realization of the joker’s language.”⁶⁷ The joke, when interpreted from their cultural viewpoint, is really a joke on their oppressors. By signifying on the white man’s invented “joke” through their own semantic trickery, the Black community celebrate themselves as culturally viable people, rather than as the downtrodden victims of racism and its discourses. This form of signifying is used by Morrison to constitute a discourse of resistance, which disrupts expectations and challenges the status quo, and at the same time affirms communal values.

In a novel of contrasts, ironic reversals, and mirror images reflected in the fates of her characters and their community, Bottom and Medallion, as top and bottom, generate an opposition that frames the story in *Sula*. The geography emphasizes the contending ideologies of the two communities: Medallion represents commerce, whereas Bottom, excluded from the economic benefits of the valley town, focuses on family and community. However, Bottom residents and valley people look to each other for the missing pieces of their respective lives. To the materialistically weary valley people, the Bottom community represents laughter, music and the simple joys of life. The longing of the valley

people blinds them to the pain of the Bottom residents, who struggle simply to survive: as outsiders to the Bottom, they cannot see the pain behind the laughter. Having no choice in their setting and divorced from the mainstream, the people of Bottom must create an identity and a purpose that involves a necessary identification with a culture that shuns them and a heritage that threatens to be erased. Thus, Morrison calls attention to the dividing line between insiders and outsiders and the importance of perspective and experience in informing what we know of the insider's world.⁶⁸ Through a trickster perspective that incorporates multiple perspectives, Morrison seeks to undermine absolute perspectives and fundamental definitions.

Thus, in *Sula*, the "valley man" would see the stereotypical colourfulness of the black community; hear the seemingly carefree music or enjoy the lively dancing, but would probably miss the "adult pain" that is in the subtext of the black experience. This emphasis on insider versus outsider knowledge and language is a component of the African-American vernacular tradition. The practice stems in part from a need in slavery times for slaves to put on a "face" or "mask" before the master to hide their pain behind a smile of smiles, to hide plans for insurrection behind a mask of subservience, or to use common speech as code words that mean other things that "outsiders" could not interpret. Music and

dance, humour and other folk survival mechanisms were just some of the ingenious methods black folks used to cope with the pain of men without work and of families living on the frayed edges of the prosperous white town below. “The ability to maintain culture at any level in the face of negation and erasure requires the trickster’s masking, maneuvering, signifying skills.”⁶⁹ Signifying is thus, “the language of trickery” that Gates identifies as the linguistic embodiment of the mask.⁷⁰ Through structural and linguistic use of signifying as mask, Morrison examines the ironic truths inherent in the “nigger joke” that privilege illogicality, incongruities, inconsistencies, and multiple points of view.

Morrison underlines the idea of the Bottom community as a character in search of an identity when she describes how the residents must understand “what they themselves were all about, tuck up there in the Bottom” (*S*, p.6). As she sees it, black life is artificial and pretentious when it tries to imitate social and cultural values that are different from their own. Through her Bottom/ Top (Medallion) concept of opposition, she demonstrates the different ideologies that characterize black and white life, and shows what happens when white social and cultural qualities are adopted by blacks. Thus, the twist in the “nigger joke” is further executed when the white community of Medallion now set their sights on the Bottom, and the black Bottomites influenced by the same

value system that generated Medallion, embrace a tunnel project as their way out of poverty but are symbolically and literally crushed by it. This calamity initiates the death of a community that eventually assimilates into Medallion. And Bottom and the valley, rather than melding and resolving the dialectic of their inhabitants' lives, simply switch places in a circular fashion. Using the trickster's masking techniques, Morrison is able "to define the position from which [she] views life, as well as the position from which [she] makes that life public."⁷¹

Morrison appropriates tricksterlike strategies for communicating the importance of community not only as theme but also as a means for structuring the narrative in *Sula*. In the novel, the racial barriers erected by the dominant group determine the outer boundary of the black community, and this is true of all Morrison's fictional communities. To withstand the constant social pressures coming from outside, the black community must create a world within a world. The community provides a context for the story and a dwelling –place for the characters. In this mode, communities function in different and seemingly contradictory ways: negatively as models of conformity and positively as nurturing spaces which allow liberation. In this way, the community both supports and disparages the self-assertion of its members. In Morrison's novels, the survival of the individual can take place only within the community.

Thus in *Sula*, no single individual is projected as the main character, not even Sula, after whom the novel is named. At the same time, Morrison provides the reader with specific details of the residents of Bottom, portraying them as highly individual personalities who acquire their individualism through interrelation with each other rather than through opposition to the group. Even Sula's relevance to the novel's structure is revealed only on the levels on which her behaviour and existence directly impinge on the community's life. Her multiple trickster identity is "a reflection of community identity; when she absents herself from that community for 10 years, she ceases to exist within the text itself."⁷² When she dies, the novel does not end, but carries on for two chapters and more.

At the same time, community is a cultural and social structure, which provides economic freedom for Sula to go out into the world. Her inheritance of Eva's house leaves her with a place to call home no matter how far she travels. However, she must return to the community to complete her self-development. When she returns, Sula is critical of Nel for having become too conventional. A central paradox in Morrison's work, that of maintaining cultural and community traditions while also wanting to break out of its confinements, is embodied here. The contextual role of community is the endorsement of models of conformity and for black women who transgress, the result is isolation. Sula rebels

and effectively indicts the negative impact of conformity on black women. Incidentally, the black community which demands conformity still does not reject its wayward members: exemplifying the trickster's paradoxical, ambivalent relationship to the community. Despite their fear and judgment of Sula's "evil," they "let it run its course..." (*S*, pp.89-90) Even as a pariah, Sula performs an essential community role and contributes in upholding the community's structure, just as a trickster does in the various tales. Her "evil" changed the women of the community in "accountable yet mysterious ways." They began to treat their children better and cherish their husbands more, and in general, started behaving better than they had before. Thus, by violating societal norms, Sula paradoxically helps to define the Bottom community and to give them a secure sense of their own identities.

When Sula dies, the community regards it as a good omen: at first, her passing seems to herald good things. However, tricksterlike, once again things are not what they at first seem to be. Soon they begin to suffer in a number of ways, most of all in their moral resolve to live harmoniously to counter her 'evil' influence. Without her binding presence, "the tension was gone and so was the reason for the effort they had made. Without her mockery, affection for others sank into flaccid disrepair" (*S*, p.155). Her death becomes the prelude to the collapse of

Bottom and the death of a community that had defined itself against her iconoclasm.

In a novel where one seldom gets what one expects, it is appropriate that Morrison's presentation of the moral categories of good and evil should challenge our conventional expectations. The townsfolk of Bottom categorize Sula as a villainess, a witch, a devil and a manifestation of the fourth face of God. But Sula is also paradoxically, a source of blessing, a catalyst for good in the society, "a heroine who has indirectly rendered some service to the community."⁷³ Labels of 'good' and 'evil' become confused because as Morrison tells us, "one can never define good and evil. It depends on what uses you put it to. Evil is as useful as good is."⁷⁴ Thus, in *Sula* she questions the categories of good and evil by dramatizing the inadequacy of such categorizations.

As the novel reveals, *Sula* is centrally concerned with community and community making, with questions of right and wrong in human relationships in general, and bonds of friendships in particular, such as the one depicted between Sula and Nel. Morrison's ambiguous treatment of constructed dichotomies between man and woman, black and white, good and bad, virgin and whore, creates a community that is at once a place of judgment and enforcer of conformity as well as a nurturing space for liberation and growth. The community in *Sula*, is therefore a character

to be interacted with, not a force to overcome. Like a character in a tale, it is subject to development and even redemption. Such redemption can occur even after more than 20 years of anger as Nel's epiphany at the end shows.

In such an ambiguous and uncertain situation, even the dialogue that is set up among the characters is not a resolved one. A telling example is given in the sickbed scene in which the two estranged friends, Nel and Sula, finally meet and converse. Nel, who has always thought of herself as being a "good woman," feels morally superior to Sula, who she feels has betrayed her. But when Sula asks a leaving Nel, "How you know... About who was good. How you know it was you? [...] I mean maybe it wasn't you, maybe it was me." (*S*, p.146), Nel has no reply. Sula's signifying on accepted meanings of "good" allows her to question and destabilize Nel's absolute and essentializing definition of herself.

On several levels, Morrison's story seems to present more questions than answers and make the greatest demands on our interpretive and judging capabilities. By providing several competing perspectives, Morrison's tricksterlike narrative strategy undermines the stability or authority of any single perspective. Rosier Smith asserts that the reader of trickster novels "is anything but a passive, detached observer."⁷⁵ Readers are forced to question their own readings, to hold their judgment in check,

and to continually revise it. They must negotiate each crossroad that they come upon, and make their choices according to their own illumination.

Sula ends in a circle that suggests endless repetition rather than closure:

It was a fine cry—loud and long—but it had no bottom and no top, just circles and circles of sorrow.”(S, p.174)

Morrison’s open-ended or ambiguous ending, forces the reader to play a more active role in the construction of meaning. The ambiguity created by gaps and lack of closures allows the reader tricksterlike freedom to maneuver meaning and to interpret from different perspectives. In this regard, it would be more helpful to see the book within the context of African literary traditions, where Morrison’s trickster strategies replicate the structural techniques of trickster tales.

Tar Baby: Competing Trickster Strategies

Like *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby* exemplifies Toni Morrison’s transformations of old folktales into entire novels that interpret the present African-American reality. The tar baby myth, on which the novel is based, is deeply entrenched in the African American trickster tradition. Like most African-American oral narratives, the tar baby myths originated in Africa as part of a cycle of trickster tales associated with Anaanu or Anansi, the cunning spider-man. These tales metamorphosed

into American-Negro fables told by the slaves in the Deep South and became part of the American vernacular tales of Brer Rabbit, (better known in African folktales as Hare, the animal trickster). The Brer Rabbit stories are a classic example of Trickster tales in which the trickster rabbit who gets the better of bigger and stronger animals becomes a metaphor for the Negro slave outwitting slave masters. The tar baby tale was included in folklorist Joel Chandler Harris's *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings*- an adaptation of a series of plantation tales.⁷⁶

Different versions of the tar baby tale exist, although the plot elements remain essentially the same. In the Uncle Remus version, Brer Fox sets up a tar baby doll to catch Brer Rabbit while he watches from the bushes. The rabbit's efforts to get the tar baby to respond to his queries get no result. Angry at the tar baby's "stuck up" attitude, Brer Rabbit takes a swipe at it and ends up becoming stuck. In *Tar Baby*, Son Greene tells of white farmers and not Brer Fox, who place the tar baby on the road to entrap the rabbit. This version ends with Brer Rabbit escaping by outsmarting his captors—begging them to punish him in anyway except throw him into the briar patch, which the farmers do, not knowing that it is his home. Thus, the rabbit escapes.⁷⁷

However, Morrison's *Tar baby* is more than just a new rendition of Harris's tale, which in any case, does not work as a completely consistent

analogue, despite some correspondences between the two. This is because Morrison's intention is to get as close as possible to the original African myth without being influenced by Harris's tale or any other "Westernized version of the story."⁷⁸ Instead, she prefers to depend on her own memory to recollect the "told story" of her childhood. This verbal emphasis on the telling of the story is Morrison's response to what Madilyn Jablon describes as 'the ethnological perspective embodied in Joel Chandler Harris' approach to it,' and to signify on Harris' attempts to establish the reliability of his own research over those based on the direct, personal experiences of the natives.⁷⁹ In contrast, Morrison employing trickster strategies displaces Harris' crediting of accuracy and objectivity to achieve authorial control, by emphasizing the crucial importance of improvisation in African-American storytelling traditions. She also challenges his attempts to privilege his version above others by incorporating different versions of the same tale, and by employing multiple perspectives and voices, as also by refusing to mediate with a clear authorial stance. Her approach, thus "suggests a view of the folktale as a dynamic, living entity, which responds to but is never fully controlled in the hands of its storytellers."⁸⁰

Hence, like the storytellers of the oral traditions whose storytelling performances reflect their particular style, improvisational powers and

interpretive nuances, Morrison too, reconstructs and improvises, interprets and alters the “told story” of her childhood to suit her purpose. The novel offers a multiplicity of possible interpretations and Morrison’s treatment of the tar baby folktale motif is essentially multi-referential. What is important is not the replication of the tale but her revisional and reconstructive purpose in using the tale as an organizing principle for issues that are close to her heart. One of the most important of these issues is the problem of ancestry and cultural identity and the resulting conflicts within the black community. As a repository of cultural values, the tar baby folktale takes on great significance for Morrison as she examines ancestral relationships with folk culture as something that is both necessary and extremely problematic in a changing historical situation. As a trickster novel, *Tar Baby* expresses the contemporary condition of the African American community: the split she sees in this community is conveyed through the splitting of her trickster protagonists in the novel. The conflict between Son and Jadine takes on cultural and gender significance when viewed through their associations with the qualities of tar and the tar baby motif. Hence, it is crucial to view these trickster characters as rhetorical and structural principles that shape her narrative structure in this novel. At the same time, by employing trickster strategies, Morrison’s revisionist mythmaking paves the way for the

reinvention of new narrative forms that can challenge prescribed gender roles and transform culture.

By incorporating the story of the trickster Rabbit, Morrison reveals an important factor in African American cultural identity. As Jeanne Rosier Smith explains, "Because the American slave system involved living with whites in daily power-based relationships, African American *trickster tales strongly reflect the necessity for the trickster's subversive, masking, signifying skills.*"⁸¹ Despite his controversial reputation in black folklore, as being sneaky and cunning, Br'er Rabbit's wit, ingenuity, and resourcefulness that aid him in surviving any situation, account for his universal appeal. Linden Peach argues that in Westernized versions like Joel Chandler Harris's, Br'er Rabbit is "drained of his guile and the story itself becomes an example of how white culture identified Negroes with animals, in turn reconciling the inhuman treatment of black people with the 'whites' apparent Christian and democratic principles."⁸² For Morrison, the value of this trickster lies in his paradoxical role as a breaker of social taboos, and transgressor of boundaries, yet defining culture and teaching survival.

In *Tar Baby*, Toni Morrison restores Br'er Rabbit to his place as a black cultural hero in the person of Son, who is both trickster and survivor like the fabled rabbit. "Anarchic, wandering" (*TB*, p.143), one of

Morrison's free men, Son has several identities and alibis, and we are never sure of his real name. "He is Ulysees waylaid on his way home by the water lady (*TB*, p.2-3), who, as Circe, Aphrodite, and Erzulie all in one, leads him to the Isle de Chevaliers to fulfill his role as mythic horseman."⁸³ His presence in the Valerian household is disruptive and disturbing. He literally and metaphorically becomes the proverbial skeleton in the Street's closet, forcing each of the major characters to reveal and confront his or her crimes and deceptions. In this regard, Morrison's comment that the tar baby tale is also about masks holds true: "Not masks as covering what is hidden, but how masks come to life, take life over, exercise tensions between itself and what it covers."⁸⁴ All the major characters are shown to be living the masks they have assumed through most of their lives. Son, as the lowly outsider is, however, powerful enough to transform and reconstitute the inside because, as Morrison says, his "most effective mask, is none."⁸⁵ Assuming the perspective of a masking trickster, Son precipitates the unmasking of all the characters, particularly, Valerian and Jadine, a point that draws attention to Morrison's trickster masking techniques as narrative strategy.

For this purpose, Morrison replaces Harris's narrator, Uncle Remus, who is a mere stereotype of the obedient and faithful Negro slave. Her narrator tells the story in a voice that is not stereotyped in any way—

a contemporary African-American voice speaking to a contemporary audience. At times, it assumes the voice of an omniscient, god-like being that can see into people's dreams and tell what the trees, birds, and rivers think and say. Son, who as trickster embodies the trickster perspective, approximates "the narrator's fluid, constantly shifting perspective with his free and easy movement among the worlds of all the other characters..."⁸⁶ Through Son's signifying skills, Morrison is able to appropriate tricksterlike freedom to signify on accepted meanings and perspectives.

In *Tar Baby*, Morrison uses the myth's paradoxical inferences to explore the relationship of Jadine Childs, a Sorbonne educated, light-skinned African-American model and Son Greene, a dark-skinned fugitive on the run for killing his wife. It is not difficult to see why many critics endorse Jadine as the Europeanized decoy fashioned by the white oppressor Valerian Street(who pays for her education and influences her values and lifestyle) in order to trap the innocent Son who is representative of the black race. On one level, Son appears to be the Brer Rabbit figure of the myth, a trickster who lives by his wits and steals food (Valerian's) to survive like his fabled counterpart. Jadine, the "tar baby side-of-the-road whore tramp" (*TB*, p.189), who tries to supplant the cultural pride he is rooted in with alien white views and values, endangers

Son. At first, Son believes he can change her, that he can tear “her mind away from that blinding awe” of Valerian’s world (*TB*, p.189). He attempts “to breathe into her the smell of tar and its shiny consistency” (*TB*, p.102), and to bring her back to Eloë and the history it stands for. But like the tar baby of Harris’s account, she resists his efforts to do so. Instead, Son’s attempts to establish a relationship with Jadine lead to his extreme frustration: he even hits her once like Brer Rabbit who hit the tar baby only to become stuck to it. Similarly, the more entangled Son gets with Jadine, the more he risks being destroyed. Finally, he finds himself surrendering his dreams of Eloë with its welcoming women and ladies minding the pie table and is, instead, willing to settle for “whatever she (Jadine) wants” (*TB*, p. 275).

However, the situation in *Tar Baby* is a much trickier and complicated one than the above account suggests, for Morrison’s ultimate aim is to illustrate the trickster’s community and culture-shaping capacity. She draws on the interplay between the oppositional characterization of Jadine and Son and the multiple interpretations that the roles of the tricksters, the tar baby and the victim offer to deconstruct and subvert the racial and gender stereotyping of both men and women. Through her variations of the tar baby story in the novel Son and Jadine exchange the mythical roles. Son is not the only trickster, Jadine is one

too, and both of them are each other's tar babies. As one critic comments, "The Tar Baby tale as a metaphor of entrapment has one meaning for Jadine and another for Son."⁸⁷ While Jadine is in her element in New York, Son feels depressed and entrapped. Similarly, Son's hometown of Eloe, which functions as his briar patch, is boring and stifling to Jadine. Although Son tries to make Jadine acknowledge her colour and her folk roots in the South, Jadine refuses to accept the role of minding the pie table in the church basement. Likewise, Son resists all Jadine's efforts to reform him so that they can have a life together on her terms.

The conflict is between assimilation and cultural nationalism, between ethnicity and feminism. Morrison explores the implications of black women's objections to community, and societal roles traditionally expected of them, while at the same time foregrounding issues of cultural preservation and rootedness. Her focus on trickster strategies thus stems from a central paradox in Morrison's work—her preoccupation with combating racial and sexual oppression while affirming cultural identity and tradition. The value of the trickster is his/her variability and rule breaking, which define and maintain culture. Her two main trickster protagonists in the novel represent this dilemma between tradition (represented by Son, the 'swamp women,' and 'night women') and the

urge to rebel against its restrictions (represented by Jadine). She defines the dilemma thus:

“One had a past, the other had a future and each one bore the culture to save the race in his hands. Mama-spoiled black man, will you mature with me? Culture-bearing black woman. Whose culture are you bearing?” (*TB* p.232)

Although Morrison gives credence to both perspectives, she offers no easy solution to bridge the gap. Her standpoint is that the ideological or social conflicts embodied in the Son/Jadine relationship cannot be solved by applying a formulaic value to folklore. As in the dilemma tale, she only presents the conflicts, and the limits of each opposing perspectives, leaving the rest for her readers to resolve. At the same time, she questions arbitrarily chosen, totalizing views, which are exclusionary and which simplify reality.

Morrison’s differentiation of what the tar baby means in the westernized versions, and what it means in the original African context further complicates her approach to the tar baby myth. Her examination of tar and its connotations in relation to Jadine enables her to project Jadine as both tar baby and trickster. She explains that Jadine’s tragedy “was not that she *was* a Tar Baby, but that she wasn’t.”⁸⁸ Referring to her discovery of a “tar lady in African mythology,”⁸⁹ Morrison, tricksterlike, attributes a new meaning to the term “tar” as having sacred qualities. Karen Baker-Fletcher cites the symbolism of the tar as a “shiny,

powerful,” and holy substance with the ability to hold things together, and hence, the term functions as a metaphor of black women’s cohesive power.⁹⁰ In this sense, Jadine does not belong to this group of black women symbolically represented in the novel by the mythical tree women.

In a key scene, Jadine literally falls into the tar pit. Her struggle to escape from the suffocating confines of the sticky tar symbolically reflects her identity crisis regarding racial identification and gender roles. This draws attention to the fact that tar’s positive culture-binding properties are lost on Jadine. Instead, her struggles to escape evoke tar’s negative, restrictive limitations on the trickster’s freedom of movement. In this, she embodies the newly emerging feminism in black women who value their own subjectivity over fixed definitions of womanhood. Although, Morrison holds tar’s sacred values of cohesiveness and culture-building qualities in high esteem, she also respects Jadine’s urge to escape and reinvent herself. Thus, in a crucial revision of the traditional tar baby tale, she is not rescued by the rabbit (Son), or by the white farmer (Valerian). Instead, she drags herself out. From this moment, she embodies not just the tar baby but also the trickster who can escape from virtually any situation. Crucial too, is our recognition of the tricksterlike technique that Morrison executes here to achieve this feat by signifying

on the word 'tar.' "By radically questioning [the] restrictive view of the tar baby, and by complicating the meaning of tar itself, Morrison makes an essentialized view of Jadine, or any character, extremely difficult."⁹¹

Jadine's turning point is her rejection of Son's dreams of Eloë, in which she distinguishes an attitude of suppression towards women. Son Greene as trickster is the symbol of cultural survival, but at the same time, Morrison questions the sexism of her male tricksters. In this regard, *Tar Baby* critiques the choices available to black American women. Jadine's surrogate mother, Ondine, belatedly tries to teach Jadine lessons of daughterhood by telling her,

A girl has got to be a daughter first... If she never learns how to be a daughter, she can't never learn how to be a woman.... You don't need your own natural mother to be a daughter... A daughter is a woman that care about where she come from and takes care of them that took care of her. (*TB*, p.283)

But Jadine rejects the role of mother, and daughter in the traditional mould, and voices a counter perspective to this role:

There are other ways to be a woman... Your way is one, I guess.... But it's not my way.... I don't want to learn to be the kind of woman you're talking about because I don't want to be that kind of woman. (*TB*, p.284)

She recognizes the trap of Eloë, so chooses Europe and the making of herself. She does not have her "ancient properties," but she is determined to survive on her own terms. The tricksterlike survival quality that she

embodies has usually been granted to male tricksters, but not to women, which explains why, as Trudier Harris says, it is “easy to be unsympathetic to Jadine.”

African American folk culture has not prepared us well for a female outlaw, or for a beauty queen with traits of an outlaw...: Women who dare assert individualistic values over communal ones are summarily put in their places. Men who follow individualistic paths are deemed heroic.⁹²

Morrison allows Jadine the black male’s freedom to take flight, literally and metaphorically. In doing so, she critiques the stereotyping of racial and gender roles and the different standards applied to male and female tricksters: by refusing to be a victim Jadine forfeits the sympathy victims usually elicit, thus refuting stereotyping. But as Morrison often stresses, freedom goes with the necessity of being responsible for one’s choices. “Men and women, this trickster text argues, are equally free to experiment with personal identity and equally responsible for preserving culture.”⁹³

To offset the limitedness of such perceptions toward her female tricksters as represented by Jadine, Morrison introduces another female trickster in the character of the blind Therese, an ancestral figure on the Isle de Chevaliers who is gifted with second sight. Therese is also associated with the tar women by virtue of her “magic breasts” and as such, exemplifies a different aspect of trickster behaviour available to

women. Although Morrison also indicts Therese's willed blindness to whites as a form of limitation, she nevertheless validates the "discredited knowledge" of folklore and myth that Therese represents⁹⁴ Therese knows that Jadine is lost, having forgotten her "ancient properties" (*TB*, p.263). Her role, as trickster, is to present to Son, whom she identifies as one of the blind horsemen, a choice of joining the mythic horsemen or to go back to Jadine. Reminding us of the trickster's ability to dwell at crossroads and thresholds, Therese has access to the mythic world. Her final trick of landing Son on the far side of the island leaves him with a choice and "changes what seemed a prescribed, choiceless situation to produce dialogue, ambiguity, and chance."⁹⁵

Son appears to embark on a journey that is a rebirth of sorts, but as is often the case in Morrison's novels, considerable doubt exists as to whether or not Son will be able to reacquaint himself with his "ancient properties. Does the sound of the blind horsemen or of the rabbit's, "Lickity-Split," signify Son's freedom in the end, or is his survival possible only in the realms of myth. And as for Jadine, has she given up the soul of a black folk culture she never knew, one, which Son romanticized, to survive?⁹⁶ Ultimately for her, "the same sixteen answers to the question What went wrong? kicked like a chorus line. Having sixteen answers meant having none. So none it was. Zero." (*TB*, p.250)

Unlike the other chapters of the book, the last one is unnumbered, suggesting both the absence of answers and their multiplicity.

The novel's ending is a testimony to Morrison's success as the ultimate trickster. By ending so ambiguously, she recalls the trickster's multivalence and elusiveness. Readers' expectations are disrupted and unsettled but they remain involved because of her trickster's emphasis on participation and transaction. The blank page at the beginning of the chapter is an invitation that gives the reader the freedom to enter the book and become part of the creative process of the story. Her incorporation of different and alternative worldviews and perspectives, including author, narrator, characters, and readers, reveal an awareness of multiple levels of reality, of 'other' worlds, that undermine the plausibility of any single point of view. Following the narrator's wandering, meandering viewpoint, the reader travels back and forth between fragmented segments, and is thus forced to negotiate with all perspectives to establish connections. Morrison's point is that given a more complete perspective of alternative realities, individuals can release themselves from their own limited vision and open up to creative solutions. She provides her characters and readers with that missing information by way of the supernatural, although their ability to interpret it adequately is open to debate. In keeping with the trickster tale tradition in which tales are

always “to be continued,”⁹⁷ Morrison sets up her readers to ponder over their crucial roles in recreating the story and constructing meanings in a multifaceted world of ever shifting meanings, boundaries and perspectives.

Epigraphs:

- Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Viking, 1977), p.2.
- Temsula Ao, “The Old Story-teller” from *Songs From The Other Life* (Grasswork Books: Grasswork Development Services, Pune, 2007), p.12.

Endnotes

- ¹ Gay Wilentz in *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and in the Diaspora* defines “oral literature” as “written creative works which retain elements of the orature that informed them.” (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), xvii.
- ² Robert Skerret Jr. “Recitation to the Griot: Storytelling and Learning in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*.” in *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and Literary Tradition*, ed. Pryse and Spillers (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985), p.199.
- ³ A few of the critics who have examined Morrison’s employment of the folktale and other aspects of African and African-American rhetorical strategies are Vashti, “African Tradition in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*,” in Braxton and McLaughlin, *Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afro-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance*, (London: Serpent’s

- Tail, 1990); Wilentz, *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and in the Diaspora* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); Davies, "Self, Society and Myth in Toni Morrison's Fiction," in *Toni Morrison: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Linden Peach, (Macmillan Press Ltd, London.1998); and Okonkwo, "A Critical Divination: Reading *Sula* as Ogbanje-Abiku," *African American Review*, vol. 38, (2004).
- ⁴ Harding and Martin in *A World of Difference: An Intercultural Study of Toni Morrison*, 1991: p.154.
- ⁵ Toni Morrison, "Memory, Creation, and Writing," *Thought* 59.235 (1984), pp.388-389.
- ⁶ Isadore Okpewho, *African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character, and Continuity*. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), p.166.
- ⁷ Opoku-Agyemang & Rogers Asempasah, "Theorising the ambiguous space: The narrative architecture of the dilemma tale as an interpretive frame for reading Morrison's *Beloved*" Dept of English, University of Cape Coast, Ghana, (2005), p.166. www.gsaa.uni-halle.de
- ⁸ Opoku-Agyemang & Asempasah, p.169.
- ⁹ Jane Kuenz, "*The Bluest Eye*: Notes on History, Community, and Black Female Subjectivity," *African American Review*, Vol. 27.3, (1993), p.421.
- ¹⁰ Marilyn Sanders Mobley, *Folk Roots and Mythic Wings in Sara Orne Jewett and Toni Morrison* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), p.26.
- ¹¹ Morrison intentionally kept Pecola from any first person narration of the story because she wanted to "try show a little girl as a total and complete victim of whatever was around her," (Bakerman, p.59). Also, such a

character would be an unreliable narrator, unwilling (or unable) to tell the actual circumstances of that year. (Stepito, p.479)

- ¹² Valerie Smith, *Self Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), p.124.
- ¹³ Opoku-Agyemang & Asempasah, p.170.
- ¹⁴ Henceforth, *The Bluest Eye* will be cited parenthetically as *BE*, *Sula* as *S*, *Song of Solomon* as *SoS*, *Beloved* as *B*, *Tar Baby* as *TB*, *Jazz* as *J*, and *Paradise* as *P*.
- ¹⁵ Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African- American Literary Criticism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p.210.
- ¹⁶ Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985), p.66.
- ¹⁷ Kuenz, p.429.
- ¹⁸ Cf. Cat Moses, "The Blues Aesthetic in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," in *African American Review* Vol.33.4 (1999, Winter), pp.623-636. Cited after: http://www.findarticles.com/cf0/m2838/4n10_v33/59024884/print.jhtml 30th of June 2002. 11 of 18 pages.
- ¹⁹ In *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* (1977), linguist Geneva Smitherman defines this oral tradition as "a ritualized form of black communication in which the speaker gives verbal witness to the efficacy, truth and power of some experience in which all blacks have shared" (p.58). She further states that to testify is "to tell the truth through story" (p.150). Claudia's testimony is thus not only a commentary but also a "communal re-enactment of her feelings and experiences" (p.150).
- ²⁰ Keith Byerman, *Fingering the Jagged Grain: Tradition and Form in Recent Black Fiction*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), p.186.

- ²¹ Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The African American Presence in American Literature." *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Vol. 28 (Winter 1989), p.228.
- ²² Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation." *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*, ed. Mari Evans (Doubleday, 1984), p.341.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Opoku-Agyemang & Asempasah, p.176
- ²⁵ Cf. Morrison, "Interview with Charlene Hunter Gault," *MacNeil/Lehrer News & WorldReport*.
- ²⁶ Opoku-Agyemang & Asempasah, p. 169.
- ²⁷ Morrison, "Conversations with Toni Morrison" ed. Taylor Guthrie, (University Press of Mississippi, 1994), pp.108-109.
- ²⁸ Maggie Sale, "Call and Response as Critical Method: African-American Oral Tradition in *Beloved*." *African American Review*, Vol. 26 (1992), p.47.
- ²⁹ See Philip Page, "Circularity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," *African American Review*, Vol. 26 (1992), p.31.
- ³⁰ Valerie Smith, p.136,
- ³¹ Wilentz, p.84.
- ³² Opoku-Agyemang & Asempasah, p. 170
- ³³ Gael Bryant, "'Every Goodbye Ain't Gone': The Semiotics of Death, Mourning, and Closural Practice in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*" *MELUS*, (Fall, 1999).

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- ³⁴ Opuku-Agyemang & Asempasah, p. 170
- ³⁵ Wilentz, 1992. xxxii.
- ³⁶ Mobley, 1991. p.133.
- ³⁷ Skerrett Jr., p.201.
- ³⁸ Mercea Elliade, Reprint 1954 *The Myth of the Eternal Return or, Cosmos and History* trans. Willard R. Trask. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p.45.
- ³⁹ Darling, "In the Realm of Responsibility: A Conversation with Toni Morrison." *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. Taylor-Guthrie. (Jackson: Mississippi University Press, 1994), p.253.
- ⁴⁰ Wilentz, p.98.
- ⁴¹ See Katherine Dalsgaard's essay, "The One All-Black Town Worth the Pain: (African) American Exceptionalism, historical Narration, and the Critique of Nationhood in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*." *African American Review*, Vol. 35 (2001), pp. 233-249.
- ⁴² Chiji Akoma in "The 'Trick' of Narratives: Memory, and Performance in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*," *Oral Tradition* Vol. 15.1 (Loyola University, Chicago, 2000), p. 3.
- ⁴³ See, for instance, Emory Elliott, ed. *Puritan Influences in American Literature*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979); and Charles Berryman, *From Wilderness to Wasteland: Trial of the Puritan God in the American imagination*, (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1979).
- ⁴⁴ Akoma, p.7

- ⁴⁵ Ibid.
- ⁴⁶ Patricia Storage, "The Scripture of Utopia." *New York Review of Books* (11 June, 1998), p.66.
- ⁴⁷ Cf. A.J. Verdelle. "Paradise Found: A Talk with Toni Morrison about Her New Novel," in: *Essence*, February 1998. Cited after: http://www.findarticles.com/cf_0/m1264/n10_v28/20187690/print.jhtml 10th August 2003. 2 of 3 pages.
- ⁴⁸ Philip Page, "Furrowing all the Brows: Interpretation and the Transcendent in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*." *African American Review*, Vol.35 (2001), p.641.
- ⁴⁹ Opuku-Agyemang and Asempasah. 2005, p.171.
- ⁵⁰ See Philip Page, "Furrowing," p.646.
- ⁵¹ Dehn Kubitschek, *Toni Morrison: A Critical Companion*, (Greenwood Press, Westport, 1998), p.185.
- ⁵² Akoma, p.176.
- ⁵³ See Rafael Perrez-Torres, "Knitting and knotting the Narrative Thread—*Beloved* as a Postmodern Novel," in *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol.39.3&4, (Fall/Winter 1993), p.704-705.
- ⁵⁴ Linda Krumholz in "Reading and Insight in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*," *African American Review* , Vol.36 no.1 (Spring 2002), p.31.
- ⁵⁵ Cf. A.J. Verdelle, 3.
- ⁵⁶ Katherine Dalsgaard, (2001), p. 234.
- ⁵⁷ Cf. Trudier Harris, *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), p.6.

- ⁵⁸ Rosier Smith, *Writing Tricksters. Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Literature*. (Berkeley et al.: University of California Press, 1997), p.14.
- ⁵⁹ Gates Jr., *Signifying*, (1984), p.52.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p.54.
- ⁶¹ Rosier Smith, p. 115.
- ⁶² *Ibid*, p.3.
- ⁶³ Paul Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*, (London: Routledge, 1956), xxiii.
- ⁶⁴ Rosier Smith, p.14.
- ⁶⁵ Gates, *Signifying*, p.6.
- ⁶⁶ Rosier Smith, p.112.
- ⁶⁷ Byerman, p.193.
- ⁶⁸ Toni Morrison often speaks of the “other” in a way suggesting that the outsider can have at best limited access to her books. She has proclaimed, “From my perspective, there are only black people,” and “I write ... for my people” (LeClair, p.124, and p.120). However, in *Sula*, she chose to make the preface a “door” through which she could lead the (white) “valley Man” into the African-American world of the hillside Bottom. Morrison would later, “despise” this application of the strategy, (“Unspeakable,” p.24) that she had hitherto objected in the writings of black male writers such as Richard Wright and James Baldwin who wrote to explain and justify the black life.
- ⁶⁹ Rosier Smith, p. 143.
- ⁷⁰ Cf. *Signifying Monkey*, p.54.
- ⁷¹ Rosier Smith, p. 144.

- ⁷² Rigney, *The Voices of Toni Morrison*, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991), p.55.
- ⁷³ Chikwenye Ogunyemi, "Sula: 'A Nigger Joke.'" *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol.13 (1979), p.131.
- ⁷⁴ Stepto, "Intimate Things in Place: A Conversation with Toni Morrison." *Massachusetts Review* Vol.18 (1977), rpt. in *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. Gates, Jr., and K.A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993), p.476.
- ⁷⁵ Cf. Rosier Smith, p.24.
- ⁷⁶ Joel Chandler Harris, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings*, (1880, rpt. New York: Penguin, 1982).
- ⁷⁷ For a fuller discussion of the various versions of this tale, see Harris's *Folklore and Fiction*.
- ⁷⁸ Cf. Morrison, *Memory*, (1984), p.389.
- ⁷⁹ Cf. Jablon, *Black Meta-Fiction—Self-consciousness in African American Literature*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997), pp. 98-99.
- ⁸⁰ Rosier Smith, p. 127.
- ⁸¹ Ibid, p.113
- ⁸² Peach, *Toni Morrison*, p.80.
- ⁸³ Sandra Pouchet Paquet, "The Ancestor as Foundation in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Tar Baby*," *Callaloo*, Vol. 13 (1990), p.509.
- ⁸⁴ Cf. Morrison, "Unspeakable," p.30.
- ⁸⁵ Ibid.
- ⁸⁶ Rosier Smith, p. 145.
- ⁸⁷ Sandra Pouchet Paquet, (1990), p.513.

- ⁸⁸ Cf. Charles Ruas, "Toni Morrison" *Conversations with American Writers*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), p.102.
- ⁸⁹ See Thomas LeClair, "The Language Must Not Sweat," p.122.
- ⁹⁰ Karen Baker-Fletcher, "Tar Baby and Womanist Theology." Cited after:<http://weblications.com/cf/theologytoday/apr1993/v50-1articles.html>, 5 of 9 pages.
- ⁹¹ Rosier Smith, p. 133.
- ⁹² Trudier Harris, p. 128.
- ⁹³ Rosier Smith, p.115.
- ⁹⁴ Morrison, "Rootedness" p.342.
- ⁹⁵ Rosier Smith, p.140.
- ⁹⁶ In an interview with Nellie Mckay, Morrison says that maybe Eloe "wasn't real anyway...He did not live in that world either. Maybe there was just a little bit of fraud in his thinking as he did [sic] since he was away. So you can't really trust all that he says." (p.405).
- ⁹⁷ Roger Abrahams, *Afro-American Folk Tales*, (New York: Pantheon, 1985), p.3.

Chapter II

Folk Motifs, Folk Figures, and Rituals in Storytelling

In day-to-day life, I worship the Earth as God – representing everything — and Nature as its Spirit.

Alice Walker•

Could it be, he wondered, that there was some truth in the story that Man, Spirit and Tiger were once brothers and were some men therefore so driven to recapture their fraternity by the only avenue now open to them?

Easterine Iralu••

Houston Baker Jr., in *Long Black Song* states the importance of “black folklore to the foundation of the black literary tradition.” As he emphasizes, one must first come to terms with this foundation to genuinely recognize the black literary tradition.¹ The folklore of a group of people consists of two essential characteristics: what this group traditionally says (songs, tales, and proverbs) and what they traditionally do (weaving, dancing, rituals). Nigel Thomas defines folklore as,

the dramatization of the psychic essences that bind people. It is therefore the sum total of the rituals, practices, and behaviours undertaken with community sanction to reinforce the beliefs, the values and the attitudes of a community. Thus, all culturally recognizable codes constitute a part of the culture’s folklore. The more homogenous a culture is, the more effective its folklore.²

In this context, African-American folkloristic influences are seen in Morrison’s subject matter, themes and motifs, characters and symbols, value system and language, and in her writing style. She has often

affirmed her commitment to exploring black American reality through an integration of folk traditions in her fiction.³ The questions— what is valuable in black folklore and what techniques or materials are there in the folk forms that can be incorporated into fiction—provide the framework for analyzing Morrison's attempts to incorporate folklore into fiction and also give a clearer understanding of the role that folklore plays in African-American survival.

Morrison's intentions to take African-American folklore to new levels and forms leads her to imbue her fiction with religious and artistic modes of expression through which cultural heritage and identity are transmitted and preserved. Thus, besides the incorporation of folktales, folksongs and legend, (discussed in the first chapter) the chief strategy in her exploration of African-American cultural myths is to incorporate the spiritual traditions of Africa, which allow characters to gain meaning in their respective literary environments. The attempt here is to specify how Morrison uses these cultural symbols in terms of African conceptions and how she approaches the creative play of imagination in ritual acts, in oral histories, and in folk characters and motifs in her exploration of African-American spirituality that informs African folklore.

An examination of the African spiritual culture in Morrison's novels reveals an emphasis on the importance of the religious, supernatural, and superstitious beliefs of black lore, which is a reflection of her racial and cultural origins. She has often proclaimed her intentions of using "the magic and superstitious part" of black folklore in her writings because as she says, "Black people believe in magic.... It's part of our heritage."⁴ For her then, fantasy is an essential component of the real world, and in her fictional world, supernatural elements are often fused with the natural. Her novels thus clearly epitomize the blurring of boundaries between the material and the spiritual worlds. As such, many critics link her fiction with "magic realism," as it suggests many of the features and concerns of this genre.⁵ Some of the characteristic features of this kind of writing are the mingling and juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic, the use of dreams, vision, myth, folklore and fairy stories, the supernatural and the inexplicable, surrealistic descriptions and skillful time shifts and breaks in narrative linearity. Many, if not all, of these features of magic realism is found in Morrison's works, although she herself (at first) objected to such a categorization.⁶

In using magic and the supernatural in her fiction, Morrison reveals her ability to syncretize paradoxical dimensions of life and death, reality and fantasy, good and evil. Although this is a fundamental aspect of

magic realism, in Morrison's hands, this device takes an unexpected turn to emerge as a means of creating an African worldview. That black people possess a culture and worldview that is different from white people is Morrison's assumption in her writing. Hence, her unconventional techniques uncover what to her is a deeper and truer reality. Her contribution to the redefinition of the marginal position often accorded to the literature of ethnic women writers lies in how she uses the supernatural, magical and fantastic to define and defend difference.

Since an understanding of the African worldview is necessary in order to see clearly African spirituality at work in Morrison, it is important to identify and interpret some underlying concepts such as ancestor and ancestral memory, nature, ghosts, the idea of evil and African representations of time as used in her novels. The blurring of boundaries between the material and the spiritual worlds present in African cosmology is transferred to the written text of the novel, where the dualistic vision of reality typical of the Western world is rejected. Binary opposites such as natural/supernatural, science/spirituality, and good/evil give way to a more symbiotic approach. In Morrison's works, there is instead, a paradoxical fusion of opposites, in which the binary opposite of each term complements the other to make up a whole.

Myth, Ritual and Iconography

An exploration of the nature and logic of cultural symbols in Morrison's fiction will provide the means to understand how she links her narrative with the spiritual traditions of Africa. Her artistic intentions to include black beliefs and worldviews in her fiction consequently influence not only the content but also the form of her novels. Ritual acts, and other indigenous values and practices are employed in order to re-integrate the African-American personality, and restore individual and communal cohesion. Within the broad framework of African worldviews embedded in her stories, she reclaims and reintegrates African-American identity by establishing their links with "the sacred cosmos of beliefs and their ritual participation."⁷

One of Morrison's predominant concerns is to adapt myths and rituals that will restore community cohesion in a time of conflict and disintegration illustrating her commitment towards recovering and renewing the mythic and ritualistic constituents of black life. Frederick Bird defines ritual as "Culturally transmitted symbolic codes which are stylized, regularly repeated, dramatically structured, authoritatively designated and intrinsically valued."⁸ According to Nigel Thomas, it "refers to those forms of behaviour devised by people over long periods of time to reinforce the key values of their culture and to promote social

harmony and individual and group confidence.”⁹ This corresponds to the notion that through the enactment of rites and rituals, individual behaviour is made meaningful by reference to a community’s belief systems and myths. In Morrison’s fiction, African-centred rites of passage mark the transitional or critical periods in an individual’s life, such as birth, initiation, marriage, and death. The ultimate goal of such rituals is to ensure the individual’s bonding with the community and the cosmos. Morrison’s incorporations of African-American rituals vary according to the value encoded the ritual in question.

In Morrison’s fictional world, ritual is a way of ordering the chaos of African-American life. In *The Bluest Eye*, she reconsiders the power of ritual to counter the myths of the infallibility of white standards of beauty. Claudia rebels against “the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals” (*BE*, p.149) by enacting a ritual dismemberment of the blue-eyed dolls she receives for Christmas, “to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me.” (*BE*, p.14) Claudia and her sister perform a more significant ritual in the planting of the marigold seeds in order to counter the self-negating sentiments regarding Pecola’s perceived ugliness, to save her unborn baby, and to eliminate the gossip surrounding it:

Quiet as its kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow. (BE, p.3)

In attempting to connect the baby's development to the cycles of nature, they reveal their "belief in signs and the principle of causality relative to the natural world."¹⁰ By linking the notions of conception and birth with the seasonal cycle, with magic and ritual language, the two girls indicate their knowledge of the correlation between moral codes and natural happenings as well as the spiritual potency of saying "the right words." (BE, p.3) Although the girls' performance of magic rites fails to counter the negative impact of white cultural myths on Pecola's life, it reflects their concept of African values that are supposed to ensure their own survival.

The need to order and focus experience is also a major concern in *Sula*, as many of the main characters struggle to extract an ordered meaning from the events in their lives. Rituals that affirm community values, social purpose, and group experience are evidenced in the novel. Examples that come to mind are the involvement of the whole community at Nel's marriage and Chicken Little's funeral ceremony. Marriage and death represent important aspects of life's cycle. In African society, the collective enacting of these rituals concerning marriage or

death, render individual actions meaningful. Regarding the rite of marriage, John Mbiti states:

It is the point where all the members of a given community meet: the departed, the living and those yet to be born. All the dimensions of time meet here, and the whole drama of history is repeated, renewed and revitalized. Marriage is a drama in which everyone becomes an actor or actress and not just a spectator. Therefore, marriage is a duty, a requirement from the corporate society, and a rhythm of life in which everyone must participate.¹¹

At Nel's wedding, the involvement of the whole community is thus taken for granted, something unusual in a western celebration of a similar event:

No invitations were sent. There was no need for that formality. Folks just came, bringing a gift if they had one, none if they didn't. (*S*, p.80)

In the total participation of all of its members, communal cohesion is achieved:

Old people were dancing with little children. Young boys with their sisters, and the church women who frowned on any bodily expression of joy (except when the hand of God commanded it) tapped their feet. (*S*, p.79)

Moreover, the celebration becomes an occasion where even Nel's mother, Helen Wright, reins in her personal idiosyncrasies for the benefit of the group.

In spite of enslavement and the suppression of African culture, many African-Americans have maintained distinctly African funeral

traditions based on the African belief that death is not the end of life, but a transition into a spirit life.¹² Scholars refer to the West African burial ritual as one of the most powerful unifying elements of African religion. Sterling Stuckey believes that this is because almost every element of African religion, which survived and benefited African-American self-definition, was associated with this single ceremony. The basic goal of the burial was to enable “the soul to go to God”¹³ reflecting the belief that death is a gateway to the domain of spirits. Stuckey also associates other forms of artistic expression, which had positive self-defining characteristics with the burial ritual, particularly dance and music. Dance functioned as a form of worship and means of achieving union with God. In *Sula*, Morrison incorporates these aspects of the burial ritual in her description of the mourning scene of Chicken Little’s funeral in which there is much lamentation but also exultation as the community comes to terms with the tragic event of his drowning:

They spoke, for they were full and needed to say. They swayed, for the rivulets of grief or of ecstasy must be rocked. And when they thought of all that life and death locked into that little closed coffin they danced and screamed, not to protest God’s will but to acknowledge it and confirm once more their conviction that the only way to avoid the Hand of God is to get in it. (*S*, pp.65-66)

Another aspect of ritualized mourning is found in the celebratory party, the joyful music and exuberant dancing which follows the funeral

rites. The funeral banquet following Aunt Jimmy's burial in *The Bluest Eye*, is described as "a peal of joy after the thunderous beauty of the funeral." (*BE*, p.111) Just as there was "the restoration of order in nature at the graveyard" (*BE*, p.114) ritual celebration restores cohesion to the community after the disorder brought by death:

Thus, the banquet was the exultation, the harmony, the acceptance of physical frailty, joy in the termination of misery. Laughter, relief, a steep hunger for food. (*BE*, p.114)

In *Sula*, Shadrack, whose war experiences have destroyed his sense of reality, develops the need to order his own existence and finally hits upon the idea of devoting one day in a year to death in order to "exorcise all thoughts of it for the rest of the year." (*S*, p.14) Thus, National Suicide Day is born. The initial fear and suspicion of the Bottom residents and their inability to understand Shadrack reflect their losing touch with their African selves.¹⁴ Vashti Lewis points out that in traditional African ontology the spirit of people who lay unconscious for many days (as had Shadrack in his shell shocked condition), left the body, and entered the ancestral world.¹⁵ As such, the mad Shadrack would have been treated with respect and awe in traditional African culture; instead, he is viewed with fear and distrust. However, the villagers of Medallion show that they still have a lingering sense of their African selves by coming to accept Shadrack's Suicide Day as a part of their physical and spiritual lives. In

traditional African practices, invoking the spirits of the dead usually resulted in their appearance and Shadrack's ritual of Suicide Day involves invoking these spirits. The narrator of *Sula* attests to the response of the spirits,

Someone said to a friend, "You sure was a long time delivering that baby. How long was you in labor? And the friend answered, "bout three days. The pains started on Suicide Day and kept up till the following Sunday." (*S*, p.15-16)

Then, "somebody's grandmother said her hens always started a laying of double yolks right after Suicide Day." And weddings do not take place on Suicide Day for fear of it being disrupted, by the spirits. Since coincidence is an alien concept to African people, these happenings are attributed to National Suicide Day. The very nature and name of the day places it in the realm of the supernatural and anything that happened on that day would thus have superstitious value.

Through the creative incorporation of its rituals, the author explores what they imply about the hopes, beliefs, and daily reality of black existence. Among the functions that regulate individual life and communal coexistence are those that deal "with natural processes centering on the body – nourishing, healing, conjuring—and a second [triad] that operates on the plane of representation—joking, storytelling and singing."¹⁶ In fact, characters attain social identity through the functions they perform on behalf of the community. Unlike "the Western

notion of contractual exchange regulating profit and merit in society,” the ideal African-American community is “based on interactive exchange contributing to both individual and collective well-being.”¹⁷ As with the ritual of mourning, whether it is that of telling a story, or singing a song, or providing nourishment, performance matters.

Regarding the concept of nurturance, characters are assessed according to their ability to provide physical as well as spiritual nourishment to others. The emphasis on nurturance in Morrison’s fiction, is at the heart of the concept of generational continuities, and traditionally regarded as a woman’s domain. For example, in *Sula*, unlike the “oppressive neatness” of Nels’s house, Sula lives in “a woolly house, where a pot of something was always cooking on the stove; [...] where all sorts of people dropped in; [...] and where a one-legged grandmother named Eva handed you Goobers from deep inside her pockets or read you a dream.” (*S*, p.29) In other words, whereas Nel’s house imitates white middle-class standards, Sula’s household is more in keeping with the cultural ethos of black communities where visitors are always welcome, where food is always available and where neatness is secondary to the time spent in interactive storytelling and joking with one’s communal members.

In *Song of Solomon*, Pilate manifests her powers of nurturing at her very first meeting with Milkman, when she conducts a theory-cum-practical lesson, a ritual performance of how to make a perfect soft-boiled egg. In the making of this food item, and in passing on the technique of its making, Pilate preserves cultural history. Her house is filled with the smell of fruits, wine, and the forest—a pungent “piny-winy smell,” which “is a symbol of the widespread and pervasive dispersion of her nurturing power.”¹⁸ Just as the messiness of Sula’s house is an endless source of fascination for Nel, “Milkman is initially fascinated with [Pilate’s] matriarchal household because of its difference from his patriarchal one. Here stories are told, food is tasty and plentiful, and none of the rigidity of his own home is present.”¹⁹ Similarly, Consolata in *Paradise* is a provider of food, shelter, and herbal remedies to the women who find their way to the Convent. The food and herbs are the products of agricultural processes based on a symbiotic relationship between the land and the women’s nurturing powers. Meals at the Convent are carefully and lovingly prepared, particularly by Consolata, and shared by the inmates. Here the nurturing function is elevated to ritual status, ensuring harmony, and satisfying not only physical needs but also psychic ones as well. Even Ruby’s women seek out the convent women for the special foods and herbal remedies available there, and for the caring, inclusive

kindness proffered by them demonstrating how intertwined physical and psychic healing are.

Central to the concept of nurturing and nourishing in Morrison's communities, is their function to foster group cohesion. "If conducted in the right way, the sharing of food promotes both the social and physical well-being of the group."²⁰ Nevertheless, food that is offered for selfish individual gratification, such as Ruth Dead's extended breastfeeding of Milkman, as also her badly prepared meals; unwholesome foods like Valerian's candy or the sugary substitutes that Joe and Dorcas feed on, cannot promote the well-being of either the individual or group. Further, food that is withheld, such as Pauline Breedlove's blueberry cobbler, or food that is offered in excess, such as Baby Suggs's feast, "can cause strife."²¹

Closely allied to the nourishing principle is the practice of healing by combining spiritual and natural remedies. Morrison's re-inscription of the concept of the female healer in her novels illustrates how "traditional Black female activities of root working, herbal medicine, conjure, and midwifery"²² find their way into the fabric of her stories. It also paves the way for discussing how she links the narrative to ritual as a way of restoring balance in both the physical and spiritual realms. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison gives us the example of M'Dear, as a medicine woman

connected to the spiritual arts of healing. Everything about M'Dear, including her physical description, identifies her as a woman who has maintained indigenous knowledge of healing through spiritual insight and communication with the ancestral world.²³ Her ability to communicate with the spiritual codes of her ancestors is evidenced in her gestures (tapping her hickory stick), ritual postures, and in her diagnosis of the root cause of Aunt Jimmy's sickness. The other community women aid M'Dear in her healing ritual, by carrying out her prescription for Aunt Jimmy to "drink only pot liquor and nothing else." (*BE*, p.137) Consequently, they busy themselves with procuring the right kind of food:

That evening the women brought bowls of pot liquor from black-eyed peas, from mustards, from cabbage, from kale, from collards, from turnips, from beets, from green beans. Even the juice from a boiling hog jowl." (*BE*, p.137)

Kokahvah Zauditu-Sellasié notes that plants are like straws, "which harness the energy from the earth and contain the vital essences of life."²⁴ Energy from the spiritual plane is transferred to the physical plane using "gateways," such as the circle of old women tending to Aunt Jimmy. These gateways function as the meeting point of the physical and spiritual realms.

Although most of Morrison's healers are female, Son Greene in *Tar Baby* can be included as one of her healers. From the beginning, he is

closely associated with nature as with “food, survival, and the support of a nurturant female force.”²⁵ His entry into the fictional world of the novel is via the sea, assisted and guided by “the water lily lady,” and his departure likewise, is through water escorted by the blind Therese. His natural primitivism is suggested in the “savannahs in his face” (*TB*, p.205), in his smile which is “like a sudden rustling of wind” (*TB*, p.181), in his “woody” voice (*TB*, p.181) and earthy “animal” smell. (*TB*, p.123) And as the novel’s ending shows, Son apparently becomes one with nature, and the past. His nurturing powers are illustrated in the way he applies banana leaves onto Ondine’s sore feet to heal them. (*TB*, p.138) His magical fingers also restore plants and cause them to bloom. (*TB*, p.127)

Morrison gives us another example of an effective rootworker, healer, and midwife in the character of Pilate. Pilate’s performance of Milkman’s pre-birth rites prepares him for other rituals that will initiate him into becoming a mature, responsible, and active member of his community. In her role as spiritual midwife and of “mothering” in the African and African-American sense, Pilate helps Milkman to reunite with the stories of his ancestors, to reconnect with his past and with his dead and living relatives, thus, delivering him from his spiritual dilemma. Her “othermothering” role relates to the concept of “Aje,” which is more

than giving physical or biological birth. Teresa Washington explains that Aje is a Yoruba word and concept that describes a spiritual force that is thought to be inherent in ‘Africana women;’ additionally, spiritually empowered humans are called Aje.²⁶

Another female healer and conjuror in the mould of Pilate is *Tar Baby*’s Marie Therèse Foucault. A descendent of one of the mythical blind horsemen and a swamp woman, Therèse “demonstrates the power of interacting with the natural, non-human world, and the agency of spiritual return.”²⁷ Although her employers dismiss her as an “illiterate” washwoman and indifferently call her “Mary,” she steadily gains stature in the novel through her association with Son. The first to detect his presence on the island, having met him in a dream, Therèse provides him physical nourishment by giving him access to an endless supply of chocolates. But more significantly, she is perceptive to Son’s inner needs and gives the spiritual guidance that releases him from the tar baby trap and the chance to re-invent his identity. Assisted by her, he is transformed into a legendary male, one of the island’s blind horsemen, who gains the spiritual insight necessary to restore order to the natural world.

Stanlie James asserts that the historical practices of “othermothering and community othermothering have been critical to the survival of Black communities” in America.²⁸ Othermothering has

functioned as a survival mechanism to withstand the displacement and disruption of African-American families and communities following slavery, migration, and racism. Nurturing and care giving activities, usually associated with biological mothering, are thus, extended to all members of the community. In *Jazz*, Morrison employs reciprocal mothering acts related to the powers of nurturing and healing through Violet Trace and Alice Manfred. Although both women are not physically mothers, through the reciprocal dimension of their burgeoning relationship, Morrison suggests an alternative way of constructing new possibilities to articulate their deepest thoughts and individual circumstances. While Violet motivates and maneuvers Alice's self-interrogation and self-discovery, Alice recognizes Violet's broken spirit reflected in her frayed and worn clothes. As a seamstress, Alice works at putting things back together, stitching up fallen hems and loose seams, "Her stitches were invisible to the eye." (*J*, p.111) According to Kokahvah Zauditu-Sellasié, Morrison employs the Yoruba *Oshun's* symbol, the needle, one of whose spiritual functions is binding and sewing society together.²⁹ In mending Violet's torn sleeve and coat lining, Alice helps to heal Violet's fractured sense of self. Their shared experience sews both their lives together exemplifying Morrison's

intentions of using the needle as a cultural symbol that can “repair the cultural breaches of African people rent asunder in North America.”³⁰

Morrison also incorporates a number of ritual acts in *Paradise* to enable women characters to reconstruct their lives. For instance, the Convent provides a space for validating ordinary women and “their small stories” (*P*, p.212) that ensures survival. Within the framework of this community, survival requires a mutual, cooperative nurturing in both physical and psychic sense. Connie considers the connection between mothers and daughters to be as essential as the connection between body and spirit. This becomes clear in her healing ritual, where she talks about loving the flesh and forbids the women from breaking them in two: ‘Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary’s mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve’ (*P*, p.263). An important part of the ritual Connie uses to heal the women is called ‘loud dreaming’ (*P*, p.264), in which the women lie “unspeaking” and unmoving within the painted outlines of their bodies. These iconographic depictions are “sacred ideograms representative of their spiritual personalities”³¹ and the means by which they externalize and confront their wounded physical selves. That Morrison adopts the ritual from indigenous sources is further attested to by Newbell Niles Puckett’s comments of how Southern black “women cure pain by drawing mystical symbols on the ground.”³²

As the ritual of storytelling in *Paradise* illustrates, Morrison's characters deploy storytelling as a means of coping with their painful existence, expressing it for the benefit of others. Storytelling rituals employ the concept of "rememory," a word that Morrison coins to combine memory, remembrance and the idea of repetition that is involved in recreating what is essentially a reciprocal community function. In all her novels, most of the characters have a story, but not all are storytellers in the folkloric sense of the term. In *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia attempts to tell Pecola's story, but not having access to the whole truth, she cannot account for the "why" surrounding the central action of the story. Consequently, her storytelling becomes more or less a conceptualized account of her own life story. Nevertheless, in a ritual enactment of testifying and witnessing to her community about Pecola's pain, she is able to create a community of listeners, at least among readers. In *Tar Baby*, although each of the characters has a story, there are no willing listeners. Characters cling to their private, personal myths hindering mutual understanding. Without listeners, the stories of each character remain in the realm of the incommunicable. Even the history and legends surrounding the island seem to be not related to the world of men. Hence, "In the Street household, we find rituals bereft of mythic content, and on

the mythic island, we sense the presence of deities cut off from the consideration of men.”³³

In *Song of Solomon*, the storytelling act itself plays an important function in the novel. Moreover, it serves to illustrate Morrison’s style of creating stories that carry elements of generational lessons, cultural beliefs, and wisdom. On one level, Milkman’s quest to find himself is really about finding a story to tell. The history of the Dead family is transmitted through traditional storytelling that includes local legends and stories of close family friends and through the Sugarman blues song that is sung by Pilate. At first, Milkman’s story consists of his isolation from other people; even his own parents are for him, mere characters in someone else’s “story.” In this regard, he is not alone. His parent’s stories, and his friend, Guitar’s story, all share the tendency of being too enclosed and fixed. Each of these characters, like those in *Tar Baby*, is locked within the confines of their own stories, resulting in isolation and estrangement from other people and their stories.³⁴ But Morrison believes in the capacity of storytelling to present a way out of this impasse by asserting the relationship between teller and listener. Milkman must learn to listen to the stories of other people and understand the significance of shared history through shared stories and traditions, before he can communicate his own story. The notion of teller and listener sharing a

common background of beliefs is illustrated as the stories Milkman gathers from Rev. Cooper, Circe, Susan Byrd and others, tell him the collective story of his ancestors. Milkman now begins to understand himself in relation to other people through these stories and thereby acquires a communal sense of identity. In this, Pilate, whose song ritually chants the names of her ancestor, Solomon, and recreates his original flight, assists Milkman in reconnecting him with the stories of his ancestors.

Storytelling in *Beloved* is one of the functions defining community and reveals the importance that Morrison places on this African-American traditional activity. As in *Song of Solomon*, storytelling in *Beloved* is a recurring motif: it bridges the gap between the past and present. Throughout, the text highlights the various processes by which stories that have been repressed, are told, or remembered through the consciousness of the characters. Paul D, Sethe and Denver are stunted and unable to realize and incorporate themselves into the present world because they have repressed their past. The atrocities of slavery have left each of them physically and emotionally battered. Paul D has buried his past in the “rusted tobacco tin” of his heart (*B*, p.); Sethe remains outside society unable to think or speak about her past; Denver exists without a community, without a past and without her own story. The nature of each

character's repression allows them to live only partially. Yet Morrison's stance is that they must remember and pass on their stories, however terrible and painful, they must find the language, rituals, and codes of conduct originating from the oral tradition that hold the answers to their healing.

The character Beloved, as the manifestation of the repressed past, instigates release by forcing confrontation. Her direct and relentless questioning sparks Sethe to remember and to tell things she once was unable to do. Her presence also prompts Paul D to reveal for the first time his 18-year struggle, his endless running and hiding. Hence, up to a point, Beloved's presence is a healing one since it incites Paul D and Sethe to rediscover the past together and allows them to form a cohesive narration of past events by filling the gaps of each other's stories. For Denver too, the advent of Beloved is a catalyst for her escape from the enslaving existence of 124 Bluestone Road. In the deadlock of love in which Sethe and Beloved finally become involved, Denver realizes that her mother is in danger. She plucks up the courage to leave the house and to step out to tell the community the story of Sethe and Beloved. The novel thus demonstrates how stories are put together and put to rest.³⁵

African Cosmology, Religion, and Spirituality

Morrison's spiritual landscape is permeated with references to African cosmology and religion, sacred symbols of nature, knowledge of traditional belief structures, signs, and omens in an African context. Through her fiction, Morrison mediates between African belief systems and the realities of African-Americans in the western world by employing symbolic, temporal, and cultural codes reflective of traditional African religions and indigenous value.³⁶ By transporting the spiritual culture of Africa to America in her literary figurations, she provides a context for African-Americans to reclaim their fractured identities by recovering their ancestral memory and individual and communal significance.

One of the main elements of western religions is the split between a spiritual and material world, in which matter and spirit belong to different realms rather than existing as two components of the physical world. In contrast, the folklore tradition as represented in Morrison's fiction highlights an African worldview in which there is no dichotomy between the visible and non-visible world. Mbiti reminds us that traditional African philosophy "emphasized that the spiritual universe is a unit with the physical, and that these two intermingle and dovetail into each other so much that it is not easy, or even necessary, at times to draw the distinctions or separate them."³⁷ In African-American cultural tradition,

the “soul signifies the moral and emotional fibers of the black man”³⁸ and spirituality refers to “spiritual beings, to that which gives life, form, and meaning to physical realities. It is the breadth of life.”³⁹ Drawing upon such notions of spirituality, Morrison’s fiction proposes a spirituality that is compatible with the real world and can exist in the physical one. The inference is that the spiritual is part of the physical world but is to be differentiated from the merely material. *Song of Solomon* explores the ways in which African-Americans themselves have contributed to the marginalization or negation by white America of African-American traditions and belief systems about spirituality. Yet as Morrison demonstrates in the novel, the repressed system of beliefs confront the dominant ideology not only through rationally unexplainable elements such as Solomon’s flight or Pilate’s conjuring powers, but also through a depiction of spiritual emptiness experienced, for instance, by Milkman. Initially, Milkman’s quest is a material one, a search for the mythic treasure at his materialistic father’s instigation.

The journey that Milkman undertakes involves leaving the community and at the same time he hopes to discover a sense of self, or some spiritual insight lacking in his empty life. What he finds at the end of his quest is his family’s story and the myth of the flying African. But ironically, he also discovers how in participating in and not distancing

himself from the community's life would have been enough to provide him with spiritual insights. Instead of the complicated journey to the south that Milkman undertakes, a simple trip to the other side of the town he lived in would have probably revealed to him as much about the spirituality he was seeking. He only had to notice how Pilate and her family functioned to realize that the spiritual being is a result of the connections among humans in the physical world. He only had to look at Pilate to see how it was possible to fly without ever leaving the ground. The perspective that he eventually adopts is that of an individual who gains understanding of himself and meaning in his life in the network of relationships to which he belongs, and thus gain a sense of the spiritual. The spiritual value of Solomon's flight was not his mythical flight itself, but the remembrance of it by those who were left behind who create a communal bond out of this myth.

Religious references and allusions, from both Western and African traditions, abound in Morrison's fiction. In many of her novels, Morrison often depicts the African-American Christian church as a place of communal support within a uniquely African-American cultural specificity. In tandem, she also critiques normative Christianity as being hypocritical, narrow-minded, and powerless to solve misfortune and self-hatred. The intention here, however, is not to expand on this topic but to

highlight the importance that African spirituality including its supernatural and magic components has in Morrison's fiction, and to account for her rejection of a dualistic philosophical framework, the either/ or requirement that underlies much of Western systems of thought. In this regard, Lauren Lepow directs attention to Morrison's critique of dualistic thinking referring particularly to Christianity with its dichotomy of good and evil, body and soul, flesh and spirit.⁴⁰

Sugiyama Naoko in her paper, "'Blessed Malelessness' as Womanist Critique?: Toni Morrison's Representation of Goddess in *Paradise*"⁴¹ refers to the relationship between Christianity and African-American women writers. In an insightful exploration of this relationship, she cites the fictional works of many notable African-American women authors, in which the cultural and spiritual survival of African-Americans are symbolized by non-Christian religions and the use of African-American spiritual resources that originated in Africa. Of these writers, Alice Walker is one, who emphasizes an African-American feminist religious view, and who develops this religious view to form a syncretism of ancestor worship, goddess worship, and Christianity. However, as Sugiyama argues, "Toni Morrison, on the other hand, seems to emphasize the African-American characteristics within Christian tradition by using

Biblical words and images to support African-American survival and self-affirmation.”⁴²

Christianity does indeed inform all of Morrison’s writing. Besides the examples of Baby Suggs’ speech in *Beloved*, and the funeral scene in *Song of Solomon* that Sugiyama refers to, numerous other examples of the profound presence of an Africanized Christian theology can be found.⁴³ In addition to the many and obvious Biblical allusions and analogies that abound in all her novels, a number of her characters, such as Sethe, Baby Suggs, Consolata, and even Sula and Pecola to name a few, also embody Christ like qualities. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, Morrison’s novels depict scenes that reflect the church as a centre of community, and particularly, as places where people gather together in order to mourn the dead and console the grieving. At the same time, however, Morrison also fills her fictional world with supernatural events and women who “practice,” with supernatural events and with people who accept them as part of everyday life.

Revisiting Baby Suggs’ speech in the Clearing, the reader will find elements of African animism incorporated into the Christian faith. Although it is a concretized improvisation of traditional Christian sermonizing, Morrison rewrites the sermon with a challenging redefinition of the way to worship the Creator. While the traditional black

sermon stressed the power, might, and beauty of God, Baby Suggs questions the racial inferiority implied by slavery, which denies the benevolence of the Creator. Preaching for a re-evaluation of their black physical selves, her sermon does not advocate a heaven delayed until after death, but a promise of a better life on earth, but which must come from the people themselves. The African animism of pre-Christian worship in her congregations' bare-footed contact with the earth emphasizes her message that the material and the spiritual cannot be separated, but can only flourish when together.

Another way in which Morrison uses religious allusions, both African and Western, is to use Western theological notions to portray how her characters are "misled by dualistic images of the Christian God."⁴⁴ Religious references and allusions to God abound in *The Bluest Eye*. In the novel, a young Cholly Breedlove watching a father of a family lift a watermelon over his head to break it open on the ground discovers the inadequacy of the white conception of God to account for the underlying religious and ritualistic purpose of communal partaking of food. The father's god-like stance does not fit the image of God in Cholly's mind:

"God was a nice old white man, with long white hair, flowing white beard, and little blue eyes that looked sad when people died and mean when they were bad. It must be the devil who looks like that—" (*BE*, p.106)

On the other hand, Pauline Breedlove adopts Western theological traditions of dualistic thinking, and builds her religion on a rigid demarcation between good and evil, righteous and unrighteous. The adoption of such a narrow-minded interpretation of Christian morality leads her to condemn her alcoholic and out-of-work husband as being “beyond redemption.” (*BE*, p.37) Worse still, the either-or approach of her belief system leads her to judge Pecola from a moralistic standpoint that contributes to her daughter’s psychological breakdown.

Morrison’s fictional representation of God includes other aspects and characteristics that are different from the traditional Christian notion of the Trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. In *Sula*, she introduces the concept of the fourth face of God derived from African religious traditions, in which God “is brought into the picture primarily as an attempt to explain what is otherwise difficult for the human mind.”⁴⁵ The Bottom community, who sees Sula as the source of their misfortunes explains her existence thus:

In their world, aberrations were as much a part of nature as grace. It was not for them to expel or annihilate it. They would no more run Sula out of town than they would kill the robins that brought her back, for in their secret awareness if Him, He was not the God of three faces they sang about. They knew well that He had four, and that fourth explained Sula. (*S*, p.118)

As Allen Alexander says, “God possesses a fourth face, one that is an explanation for all those things- the existence of evil, the suffering of the innocent and just- that seems so inexplicable in the face of religious tradition that preaches the omnipotence of a benevolent God.”⁴⁶

An example given earlier illustrates how at a church picnic Cholly watches a man smash a watermelon, and rejects the image of the white God for a more vibrant and exciting concept, something more in line with the image of the devil. “The image that Cholly relishes is one that embraces the fourth face, one that portrays God as much more than the pallid, antiseptic God envisioned by white society.”⁴⁷ In *Sula*, as Sula violates one convention after another, she is perceived as the evil agent, the fourth face of God, who is responsible for the incomprehensible events that cause pain and suffering in the community. In this way, “a folklore is created that includes both tales of her evil actions and interpretations of ‘signs’ associated with her.”⁴⁸

Most scholars of African religions argue that African religions usually associate evil with God in some way and tend not to divorce God from the problem of evil.⁴⁹ Again, as Alexander explains, “Within the belief system of many African peoples God’s kinship to evil surpasses that of a source of origin. Evil not only derives its power from God but is

allowed to flourish by God.”⁵⁰ Morrison’s own comments on her use of evil in *Sula* are illuminating:

It never occurs to the people of Medallion to kill Sula. Black people never annihilate evil. They do not run it out of their neighbourhoods, chop it up or burn it up: they don’t have witch hangings. They accept it, almost like a fourth dimension in their lives. They try to protect themselves from evil, of course, but they do not have that puritanical thing which says if you see a witch, then burn it, or if you see something then kill it.⁵¹

This is the attitude that the people of Medallion adopt towards Sula, which is an attitude similar to the ones held by the mourners at Aunt Jimmy and Chicken Little’s funerals that reflects their African heritage that views evil as a natural aspect of life itself. Nevertheless, acceptance does not mean that they did not struggle to overcome it. In *Sula*, we see how the Bottom residents work together to mitigate its influence, not by trying to destroy it but by trying to survive it by actively engaging with it: “The presence of evil was something to be first recognized, then dealt with, survived, outwitted, triumphed over...” (*S*, p.118) But as Morrison seems to suggest, African-American characters, such as Pauline, Pecola, and Soaphead Church, who are disconnected from an African sensitivity and heritage are incapable of recognizing God’s fourth face, and therefore fail to overcome their circumstances.

It is in depicting the community’s perception of illness and death and of evil that Morrison most reveals her awareness of the African

Spiritual traditions. She sums up the folk philosophy of the black community of Bottom in these words:

They did not believe doctors could heal-for them, none ever had done so. They did not believe death was accidental-life might be, but death was deliberate. They did not believe Nature was ever askew-only inconvenient. Plague and draught was as “natural” as springtime. If milk could curdle, God knows robins could fall. The purpose of evil was to survive it and they determined ...to survive floods, white people, tuberculosis, famine and ignorance. They knew anger well *but not despair, and they didn't commit suicide-it was beneath them.*” (S, p.90)

Their notions of illness and death, of natural catastrophes and evil in general, are strongly derivative of their African heritage. African people believe in a force behind the visible events and experiences that take place in people's lives. Thus, things do not just happen and there is no such thing as coincidence within this framework of belief; the normal possibility of ‘natural death’ is practically a contradiction in terms.⁵² Such a concept is found in *Sula*. Illness and death in the novel are rarely accidental or natural. Violent deaths abound as in almost every chapter someone dies and that too, horribly. There is ambiguity surrounding the “accidental” deaths of Chicken Little, Hannah, Plum Peace, and the collective “suicide” of the Bottom residents. The black community in *Sula* seeks supernatural explanations rather than naturalistic reasons for these deaths, mostly linking them with Sula.

The superstitious character of the Bottom people is also revealed through their belief in signs and omens. Eva Peace is a woman who knows things. She is one of those who believe in the power of signs and is therefore upset that she failed to identify the signs that prefigured Hannah's death. In Eva's reconstruction of the signs presaging Hannah's terrible death by fire, the emphasis is about importance of the events and not a chronological sequencing of the events. For instance, strange events such as Hannah's dream of a red bridal gown, and her asking Eva if she had ever loved her children (a question that should never have been asked, in Eva's opinion), is first recounted, although the event of a fierce wind that had swept through the town had occurred first. The order of Eva's reconstruction of the events—the second sign recounted before the first—is significant from the point of an African cyclical time-frame, in which there is no beginning or end, and hence must be understood in relation to events.⁵³ These unusual events imply that there is an order behind what appears to be random disorder.

Religion and spirituality are also central concerns in *Paradise*. In this novel, Morrison uses a multiplicity of religious beliefs in innovative ways to enact a cultural healing and transformation. While the Christian faith is the foundation of Ruby and the main streets are named after the gospels, the women in the Convent practice mystical religions and

communicate with spirits. The kind of spirituality that the Convent women practice is all-inclusive and non-denominational, unlike the exclusions of institutionalized Christianity. In *Ruby*, there are three separate Christian denominations, of which Misner's Baptist Church is the largest and most powerful. But the religious structure is itself deeply patriarchal as is illustrated in the meeting called by Richard Misner to bring together the various parties involved in the Arnette/ K.D. affair. The glaring absence of Arnette herself, her mother, or any other woman in the negotiations, serves to reinforce the fact that the text also criticizes normative Christian traditions for contributing to the subjugation of women. It is therefore no surprise that despite the "irreconcilable differences" that exists among themselves, members from all these three churches "merged solidly on the necessity of" killing the Convent women. (*P*, p.9)

In *Paradise*, Morrison continues her criticism of normative Christianity for constructing dualisms that split its practitioners from their bodies and the world they live in. Lone DuPres, Ruby's root worker and midwife, disagrees with Consolata when the latter tells her that Church and everything holy forbid the knowledge and practice of magic, and that faith in Christianity is all that she needs. In Consolata's view, humans should not "interfere with natural consequences." (*P*, p.244) Lone's ideas

are different, and the dualisms found in Consolata's Christian beliefs that separate the spiritual and material, humans and nature give way to a more balanced and composite worldview. As she tells Consolata,

You need what we all need: earth, air, water. Don't separate God from His elements. He created it all. You stuck on dividing Him from His works. Don't unbalance His world.
(*P*, p.244)

The African cosmological concept of a spiritually unified universe influences Lone's ideas. Geoffrey Parinder in *African Mythology* describes a pyramidal relationship of God, man and the forces of nature in which humans reside in the middle of all these forces and must try to keep in balance with all of them.⁵⁴ That Consolata finally comes to accept Lone's teaching and her magical powers of healing reveals Morrison's endorsement of a more connected view of the earth.

Describing her new beliefs to the women residents at the Convent, Consolata tells them, "Eve is Mary's mother, Mary is the daughter of Eve" (*P*, p.263) invoking "the matriarchal heritage of Biblical feminine authority."⁵⁵ Her emphasis on the interconnections of both body and spirit, rather than the privileging of one over the other criticizes traditional Christian and patriarchal definitions of who and what is Good and Evil, which women are Mary, which are Eve. Consolata's teachings propagates a more accepting form of religion that is inclusive of a multiplicity of beliefs, including Catholic principles, African-American

female traditions of root working and conjuring, and Candomblè—a Brazilian religion combining African spirit worship and Roman Catholicism. Drawing on the worship of the “water goddess,” the *orisha* Yemanji or Yemanjá of Yoruba tradition, or Mama Oxum in the Brazilian context, Consolata introduces the concept of Goddess worship through the image of Piedade in *Paradise*.⁵⁶ The goddess’s association with the life giving powers of water, and with the maternal, has important significance in the context of the novel.⁵⁷ Firstly, water is a recurring image in the stories Consolata tells of Piedade, in the new myths she creates to instigate the post-traumatic recovery of the Convent women. Secondly, by taking on the role of mother-healer, Consolata brings about their healing through the magic ritual of cleansing water.

Piedade is thus the amalgamation of various religious images and exemplifies Morrison’s strategy of drawing from specifically African origins to empower African-American women in a racist and sexist environment. However, her “radical representation of the female divine is never totally apart from Christianity and its American and African-American religious tradition.”⁵⁸ In the Brazilian context, Yemanji is associated with the Virgin Mary of the Catholic faith. In addition, Piedade’s “ruined” fingers are associated with the hard manual labor enforced on the Brazilian working class, particularly Third-World female

workers and with the red-black swollen fingers of the peppers grown at the Convent, symbolizing the five women gathered there.⁵⁹

Candomblé, then, is a system of ideas that represents a radical departure from the rules that have guided the life of the protagonist to this point: this religious system encourages not sacrifice in hopes of attaining everlasting life in the afterlife but wholeness and completion in this life. In *Paradise*, through her presentation of magic, Christianity and Goddess worship, Morrison challenges readers to reconsider religious faith, “its images and practices” by exploring the issue of the power of religion and black women’s civil empowerment.⁶⁰

Ghosts and the Ancestor

The use of the supernatural as an African component of the African-American tradition by Morrison witnesses the entry of ghosts and haunting in her writing. Ghosts and ghostly forces inhabit the internal and external lives of Morrison’s characters, and function as emblems and symbols. In African cosmology, ghosts occupy a liminal position between the world of the living and the world of the dead, what Mbiti calls, the now or “sasa” where the living and the dead whose name is still remembered inhabit.⁶¹ Contrary to haunting scenes as depicted in Western literature, the circumstances under which ghosts appear in Morrison’s novels seem “more mundane than otherworldly, and they are tolerated

rather than feared.”⁶² For instance, the presence of Pilate’s dead father is a source of comfort to her, and Sethe and Denver are reconciled to living with the spiteful ghost that haunts them at 124 Bluestone Road. Often, these spirits or ghosts are dead members of a family who take on the role of ancestors. In African culture, elders of the community are greatly respected because they have lived the longest and have acquired the most knowledge. Once an elder crosses over to into the realm of the spirits through death, they become ancestors. An ancestor in the realm of the spirit has access to knowledge to which no living being is privy. The importance of ancestors in this regard is that they can provide, to those who seek them out, information of things and forces unseen.

In “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” Toni Morrison identifies a link between folklore as a repository of ancestral wisdom and values and use of an ancestral figure as an indicator of cultural integrity. As she explains:

These ancestors are not just parents; they are a sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain wisdom.⁶³

The supernatural occurrences in *Song of Solomon* are explicit aspects of African cultural heritage and “attest to an alternative reality presented in Morrison’s cultural discourse.”⁶⁴ When Macon tells Milkman, “Pilate can’t teach you a thing you can use in this world. Maybe the next, but not

this one” (*SoS*, p.55), he is making a sharp division between the material and spiritual world in consonance with Western culture which equates the ‘real’ with the visible.’ However, as pointed out by Gay Wilentz, the characters, (mostly women) that are deeply rooted in the black tradition in the novel have a more integrated worldview, one that includes “an African perspective in which there is dialogue with the ancestors.”⁶⁵

Pilate can also be seen as a keeper of African cultural ways, “a culture bearer in touch with her ancestry.”⁶⁶ Like many traditional societies in Africa, there is a long tradition of women as keepers of the spiritual culture. In *Song of Solomon*, consulting the spirits of the dead is a recurrent theme in the life of Pilate and Ruth as with African culture. Both Pilate and Ruth have close posthumous communications with their fathers. But it is Pilate who receives information and instructions from the spirit world that give her certain supernatural powers. As she tells Ruth,

“I see him still. He’s helpful to me, real helpful. Tells me things I need to know.”

“What things?”

“All kinds of things, It’s a good feeling to know he’s around. I tell you he’s a person I can always rely on. I tell you something else. He’s the *only* one.” (*SoS*, p.141)

Though not told explicitly what kind of teaching she receives from her contact with her dead father, the reader can assume that this knowledge is part of the “discredited knowledge” to which Morrison often refers. With

the knowledge she gains, Pilate is able to unravel the family history and to pass on this information to the next generation through Milkman.

In *Beloved*, Morrison makes liberal use of mysticism and magic to accentuate their intricacies as well as to highlight their manifold presence in African-American culture. Their multifaceted qualities are present throughout the text and visible in everything from the use of folk medicine, to supernatural and folk belief. Moreover, the boundaries between myth and reality, between the physical and spiritual worlds not only disappear in the novel, but also, through the character Beloved, are violated to explore the possible existence of other levels of reality and to offer an alternative to the established one.

Trudier Harris writes that, in *Beloved*, Morrison attempts to challenge Western beliefs about ghosts, that "the demise of the body is the end of being in this realm." She also comments that Morrison treats ghosts as "a probable occurrence" and that readers must therefore "suspend disbelief long enough to see where she takes us with the possibility."⁶⁷ However, the worldview out of which Morrison writes is one that accepts ghosts not as "probable" occurrences but as actual occurrences. *Beloved* is firmly rooted in the African worldview that death is the threshold to a parallel existence and that spirits continue to exist and interact with living people. It is not difficult to believe, as the

characters in the novel come to believe, that Beloved is the reincarnated daughter of Sethe, and the one she killed to prevent re-enslavement. The novel gives many instances and signs that indicate this idea. In fact, Morrison in *Beloved* exploits the abiku/ogbanje phenomenon that addresses reincarnated children who return to torment their parents. Beloved is the "marked" child in African-American culture who is affected, in vitro, by the horrors the mother witnessed. She is also the abiku child of the Yoruba—the one born-to-die—who is slashed and scarred to prevent return, but re-enters, from the spirit realm, the traumatized womb for rebirth and perhaps a chance at terrestrial longevity.⁶⁸

The concept of abiku embraces various beliefs about predestination, reincarnation and the relationship between the real world and that of spirits. Ogbanje/abiku are names for a spirit child or spirit children who are said to die early only to be born again and again to the same mother⁶⁹ At the core is a deadly parent-child struggle for power. In *Beloved*, Sethe's murdered daughter returns incarnated as Beloved to torment Sethe. Overwhelmed by feelings of guilt, Sethe allows Beloved to blackmail her into serving her every whim:

She took the best of everything—first. The best chair, the biggest piece, the prettiest plate, the brightest ribbon for her hair, and the more she took, the more Sethe began to talk, explain, describe how much she had suffered, been through,

for her children, [...] None of which made the impression it was supposed to. Beloved accused her of leaving her behind. Of not being nice to her, not smiling at her. (*B*, p.241)

Finally, it takes Ella and the community women of Cincinnati to perform the singing and chanting ritual necessary to expel the ogbanje.

Morrison's *Beloved* defies categorization. "Like a true spirit, this character remains elusive, embodying certain ideas and functions, embodying not just herself literally, but also metaphorically, and always ambiguously."⁷⁰ Whether as a person or as a spirit, *Beloved's* function is to bridge "the gap between Africa and Afro- America and the gap between the living and the dead and the gap between the past and the present."⁷¹ As an embodiment of the "ghost" of slavery, she symbolizes all the ancestors, "the Sixty Million and more" who had perished under slavery and the infamous Middle Passage, illustrating Morrison's ultimate tribute to the ancestors.

Morrison's novels highlight one of the main qualities that apparitional figures can offer. As an alternative to established reality, they provide the opportunity for discussing often-avoided spheres of knowledge. The ability of the ghost to speak from the past in the present moment, and to be present while being absent, calls for openness towards a sphere that demands a new ordering of knowledge and of knowledge production. At the same time, the recurrent journeys into the past through

ancestral characters and ghosts entail the breaking of a linear narrative common to Western literary practices. In *Beloved*, for instance, Morrison's employment of circularity, episodic fragmented re-telling of the past and use of narrative flashbacks and shifts in subject as narrative techniques accounts for the constant leaps between the past and present made by the characters and readers, via the ghost of the child Beloved.

Like other novels of black women novelists, such as Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), Morrison's ancestral figures are central to her fictional communities because of their connection to racial memory. In this sense, she has often focused on the dominant role of the ancestral female as culture bearer. In her novels, the struggle to attain a firm sense of self often implies a search for connectedness with the past, in particular the "ancestral past" of African-American history, folklore, and music. Her characters must learn to rediscover the value and sustaining force of this authentic "black" past, or else resign themselves to a life in which they have internalized white cultural values but find themselves unhappy and alienated at heart. In *Tar Baby* for instance, the need to preserve links with the ancestor and to reconnect with black people's "ancient properties" is realized through emblematic female figures such as the "swamp women," and the "night women." These figures serve as reminders of the African cultural heritage and Afrocentric

values which Jadine has rejected in pursuit of all things Eurocentric. These female figures are in varying degrees, symbolic of all the things that Jadine is not—the “authentic” black person. And although she is haunted by them, Jadine is so cut off from her roots, she cannot see “the original self” that Morrison says, “is always there.”⁷² Representing the African-American qualities of personal and racial nurturing, these figures provide the link for reconciliation with the ancestral mothers and ethnic self, thus functioning as positive forces. But Jadine responds to them with dread, revealing a Western habit of thinking, by viewing these ghostly apparitions as intrusive and traumatizing.

Joanne Braxton in her essay, “The Outraged Mother,” examines the ancestral presence of the outraged mother as a primary archetype in the narratives of contemporary Blacks writers.⁷³ Often, the ancestor figure is an outraged mother who embodies the values of sacrifice, nurturance, personal courage, and spiritual strength, whether Christian or derived from African belief and Braxton identifies Pilate as one of them. In *Song of Solomon*, the presence of the ancestor is felt through the enactment of Pilate’s outrage when one of Reba’s male friends quarrels with her and beats her in Pilate’s backyard. Holding a knife to his heart, Pilate “overwhelmed the man and spoke to him in the language of the outraged mother, a language of the heart”⁷⁴ telling him that although a woman

lacks the strength of men, she does the best she can, even if she must jeopardize her own safety to protect the ones she loves. Similarly, the image of “terrible mother” is presented through the character of Sethe as well. Upon seeing the slave catchers, Sethe’s instinctive action is to protect her children and prevent their returning to slavery:

And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe.” (*B*, p.163)

The theme of the great mother, as nurturant and nursing figure is linked to the ‘matrifocal’ kinship system in African society, in which the role of mother or female members of the clan is central in passing down the cultural mores and values of their society- particularly through and to the children.⁷⁵ An example of the ancestor as mother figure in *Sula*, who presents another facet of the outraged mother, will explain Morrison’s comments on the usage of such figures. Sula’s is a multigenerational household run by unconventional women. Heading this matriarchal community is Eva Peace, “creator and sovereign” (*S*, p.30) of her household. Her matriarchal powers include the power of naming, and of giving and taking away life.⁷⁶ When Sula commits Eva to a nursing home, she rejects all that Eva stands for, and does what Morrison warns against, “In killing the ancestor, you kill yourself.”⁷⁷ From that point on,

Sula's life, although lived as she wants to, is a gradual downward spiral, leading to her lonely death at the young age of thirty.

However, if Sula fails to acknowledge her indebtedness to her mothers, Eva as ancestor, does not fail her progeny even after Sula dies. Her ancestral knowledge is validated when she becomes "the agent through which the legacy of Sula's personality can be understood, absorbed, and appreciated by Nel, a full two decades after Sula's death."⁷⁸ In the context of black cultural values, Eva, as ancestral matriarch, leads Nel to open her eyes to the truth about her own life. With regard to Nel's involvement in the death of Chicken Little, Eva's statement, "Me, I never would've watched" (*S*, p.168) becomes a message of culture transmitted to a younger generation. Her sharp and direct tongue is the verbal mother wit that characterizes black women of the oral tradition. In this way, Morrison "fundamentally creates a matriarchal community in which the ancestor becomes the source of vitality and truth telling that in the end, permits her progeny to prevail."⁷⁹ In giving us the image of Eva, aging and senile, yet compelling still in her ability to voice the deepest truths with courage and conviction—the hallmark of the ancestor—Morrison affirms those folk processes that give coherence to black people as a community at a time when that community most needs it.

Conjuring and Witchcraft

The female conjurer in folklore and literature represents a throwback to the oral tradition and her placement there is most often symbolic of the major themes of the novel. In terms of folklore, the African-American conjure woman is a key supernatural force who has the power to manipulate and change, to make things grow or die, and to utilize nature to her advantage. Besides these characteristics, Morrison incorporates spiritual elements to the conjure-women she draws up, illustrating her themes on a completely different level. Barbara Christian in her work *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition 1892-1976* (1980), discusses the figure of the conjure-woman in antebellum literature in the United States. According to her, the conjure woman image incorporates the signs of traditional African religions that the southern gentry pointed to as dark and evil, heathen forces. On the other hand, the image of the conjurer was, in southern literature, treated with some measure of respect and awe, as if the dark, incomprehensible forces did exist and had some power to affect the fortunes of men.⁸⁰

In *Sula*, a text that is replete with representations of the supernatural, Morrison offers the mother of Ajax, one of Sula's lovers, as "an evil conjure woman, blessed with seven adoring children." (*S*, p.126) In fact, she "was as stubborn in her pursuits of the occult as the women of

Greater Saint Matthew's were in the search for redeeming grace." (*S*, p.127) Communal ideas neither of propriety, nor of conformity with black societal ideals of motherhood, interfered with her way of conducting her life as she wills, or of providing a supportive, loving upbringing for her family: she "inspired thoughtfulness and generosity in all of her sons." (*S*, p.126) While the people of the Bottom marginalize Ajax's mother, they respect her to a certain degree: she is able to earn a living due to her knowledge of "the weather, omens, the living, the dead, dreams and all illnesses." (*S*, p.126) They therefore, implicitly acknowledge that she possesses a certain knowledge that they do not.

Another conjurer in the same novel who is given a more significant treatment is Sula. In the works of many ethnic women writers, the female conjurer is represented as the embodiment of the connecting counter-culture of spirituality and the supernatural, and the paradigm of duality and hybridity since she is in between the natural and the supernatural worlds. As a conjurer, Sula transcends race and gender and straddles the line between the physical world and the spiritual realm. Her physical description is seemingly ordinary with the exception of an unusual birthmark "that spread from the middle of the lid toward the eyebrow, shaped something like a stemmed rose." (*S*, p.52) Although this birthmark is in itself simply a mark of difference, it also functions as a

physical sign that compliments her eccentric nature and the bizarre happenings that are associated with her. In fact, Christopher Okonkwo suggests that this birthmark, along with her outlandish behavior, implicates Sula as *ogbanje/abiku*, the Nigerian/West African spirit children.⁸¹ As he notes:

In Sula's overarching eccentricity-for which the Bottom designates her evil and which subsumes and refracts her other ascertained *ogbanje-abiku* signs, namely her birthmark, insinuated supernaturality Sula collates intrinsically and manifests the features of the spirit child.⁸²

This highlights Sula's supernatural and spiritual connections and the effect of her relationships with her family and the Bottom community. Regarding the incident of Hannah's death by fire, Eva recalls at the hospital that she had seen Sula standing on the back porch just looking. Similar to the Chicken Little incident, Sula does nothing to help and Eva remained convinced that Sula had watched Hannah burn not because she was stunned, but because she was "interested." (*S*, p.78) Eva symbolically lays the blame for Hannah's death on Sula. In doing so, she "adds the personalistic or evil agent element...that Sula must be possessed of an evil spirit to watch her mother burn."⁸³ By assigning an unnatural label to Sula's motionless and emotionless reaction to her mother's burning plight, Eva demonstrates Sula's 'abnormality.' In the years to come, the community of Bottom will do the same thing.

Sula's return to Bottom is connected with all kinds of ominous events that bolster the community's belief that she was indeed "evil." As the tally of her social infractions mounts, the community responds by casting her in the role of the public witch. She is blamed for Teapot's fall, Mr. Finley's death, and for the sty on Desire's eye. Her ever-youthful appearance, the absence of childhood illnesses or of bodily scars is taken to be evil manifestations of her power. In this way, traditional African conjuring or witchcraft finds its place in *Sula*, as the townspeople gather evidence of Sula's alleged witchcraft and evil. The "plague of robins" that accompany her return to the Bottom, become an evil omen, and the birthmark over her eye, read in different ways by different observers, is read by the community as ashes, symbolizing "her association with hellish forces."⁸⁴

In the inverted world of the Bottom, Morrison defines a specifically nonwestern cosmology, of which Sula, as conjurer, forms a vital part. Her "evil" ways actually make the community stronger, as they unite against her as pariah. While they are afraid of her, the community acknowledges that they are better when she is there and thus will not push her away. Rather than embodying evil in the traditional religious sense, Sula exists outside of a dichotomized good and evil, a manifestation of the fourth face of God. (*S*, p.118)

Even Sula's death questions the boundaries of life and suggests the continuation of her spiritual self:

[S]he *noticed* that she was not breathing, that her heart had stopped completely. Then she realized, or rather she sensed, that there was not going to be any pain. She was not breathing because she didn't have to. Her body did not need oxygen. She was dead. Sula felt her face smiling. 'Well I'll be damned, she *thought*, 'it didn't even hurt. Wait'll I tell Nel.' (S, p.149, emphasis added)

When she dies, the few who were not afraid to witness the burial of a witch came just to verify her being put away (S, p.150). However, even her death has a profound effect on the Bottom suggesting that Sula's spirit is still present. Her presence is acknowledged in the physical changes in the weather and condition of Medallion. (S, p.151) At first, her passing seems to be a good omen, but soon, it becomes clear that her death also signifies the death of the community itself: "A falling away, a dislocation was taking place." (S, p.153) Such dislocation would lead to the ultimate disintegration of the community on, ironically, the National Suicide Day.

Morrison in *Song of Solomon* also associates with Pilate all the ideal qualities of African values and culture not only in just a physical way but also in the way she practiced its spiritual aspects as a conjurer. Pilate is "believed to have the power to step out of her skin, set a bush afire from yards, and turn a man into a ripe rutabaga—all on account of

the fact that she had no navel.” (*SoS*, p.94) This distinguishing feature of being born without a navel sets her apart from the rest of the community and indicates her supernatural and transformative power. As one who had birthed herself, Pilate has special access to the spiritual world and its sacred powers. Despite the fact that this alienates her from the community, her role as conjurer is communally centred nonetheless. Although like Sula, her relationship with the community is unconventional, unlike Sula, she is a culture bearer who values motherhood, and her conjuring abilities cater to the comprehensive well-being of members of the community. The mythic use of conjuring also centres on natural processes like nurturing and healing, and “depends on objective appraisal of the fears, desires, and needs of the individuals involved.”⁸⁵ Conjure-women, also called “healers,” “obeah women” or “midwives” among other names, are the ones who dealt with cases of both physical and spiritual illness, using mainly herbs, plants, and roots and resorting to healing rituals.

As a skilled rootworker, Pilate facilitates Milkman’s conception by giving Ruth a greenish-grey powder to put in Macon’s food, prepared through knowledge gained from what seems, another world source. In many African societies, pregnant women are kept in the care of a spiritual person (usually a woman) and a midwife whose work is to make sure that

the child is nurtured correctly, and to ensure that no harm, either physical or spiritual, comes to the child. Pilate serves the purpose of being both, physical and spiritual midwife. When Macon, through several crude attempts, tries to cause Ruth to abort the child she is carrying, Pilate instructs Ruth on what she must do and even prescribes for her a diet that would have her eat what the baby craved. She also reminds Macon of her obeah powers. As spiritual midwife, Pilate protects the yet unborn Milkman, by putting a male doll with a painted chicken bone stuck between its legs in his office. The strength of her spiritual powers is seen by the fact that it took Macon “nine separate burnings before the fire got down to the straw and cotton ticking of its insides.”(*SoS*, p.132) This was a definite warning to Macon from his sister to leave Ruth and the baby alone, which he did.⁸⁶

One aspect of African spiritual culture, often associated with witchcraft, is the belief that certain people, mostly women, have the ability to change themselves into other forms. In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman and Guitar thinking that it held gold steal Pilate’s green sack. When they are held and questioned at the police station about what they have in their possession, Pilate appears and weaves a “sambo” story to save them. More amazing is her physical metamorphosis before the police officers. In Milkman’s memory,

Pilate had been shorter. As she stood there in the receiving room of the jail, she didn't even come up to the sergeant's shoulder-and the sergeant's head barely reached Milkman's own. But Pilate was as tall as he was." (S, p.208)

Short. Whining, and with trembling hands she was very different from the tall statuesque woman with the booming voice he had known all these years. As soon as they were out of danger, "Pilate was tall again.....And her own voice was back" (S, p.209).

Similarly, the representation of the supernatural in *Paradise* links witchcraft with conjuring practices by female characters. Therese Higgins in *Religiosity, Cosmology and Folklore* alludes to the mystical presences that exist within the Convent.⁸⁷ The most mystical of these presences is Consolata, who can undoubtedly be likened to a conjure woman. The people of Ruby usually avoid the Convent, unless they need something. Famous for their peppers and other plants, people often come in search of food, cure, or treatment, concocted by Consolata. Her expertise with herbs is at odds with what the Ruby townsfolk would consider normal, conventional medical practices. In addition, she is also a conjure woman with powers "beyond the normal," and magical control of natural energy. Through her psychic abilities of "seeing in," she is able to cure illnesses, prolong life (Mary Magna's), and even raise the dead as in the case of Scout Morgan's accident. Her conjuring extends into the lives of the women who live with her. Acting as mother-healer in the Convent,

Consolata initiates the post-traumatic recovery of the women through new rituals that combine magic, Christianity and Goddess worship.

However, Consolata is not the only woman in *Paradise* who is identified as having magical powers. In fact, Lone Dupres is the woman who leads her to discover and to accept the gift of “in sight.” “Something God made free to anyone who wanted to develop it.” (*P*, p.247) Lone, a skilled midwife and root worker from Ruby has the power of reading people’s minds. Although marginalized by the people of Ruby, who after her delivery of the Fleetwood’s disabled babies, refuse her services as a midwife as if “she had *made* the babies, not simply delivered them” (*P*, p.271), Lone plays an important role in Consolata’s change, successfully instructing her to face and accept her magical powers. Like Pilate who guides Milkman “home” and Baby Suggs who teaches her people how to love themselves, Lone also represents the strength and knowledge of African-American women.⁸⁸ Functioning as Consolata’s ancestral mother, Lone moulds her into becoming in turn, another mother-healer to the women who seek her help. Through these two powerful conjure women, Morrison is able to turn the marginality of conjuring into a space of resistance to patriarchy and a source of individual and communal empowerment.

In *Paradise*, the awareness among the members of Ruby of Consolata's conjuring abilities, and of the newly acquired spirituality of the women inside the Convent, makes it easier to label them as "witches," in the Western sense. After the attack on the Convent in which all the inmates are killed, Morrison continues with her exploration of the supernatural in this novel by portraying their complete physical disappearance. The magical final scene of the novel moves them beyond the normal boundaries of representation into "another realm." Although not geographically specified, the "paradise" the women reappear on is at once spiritual and material, not the transcendent realm of normative Christian tradition: "Now they will rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in Paradise." (*P*, p.318) Morrison here seems to suggest the idea that they, like Sula, and Pilate before them, are still alive in their deaths. The last three lines of the epigraph in *Paradise*: "And they will find me there, / and they will live, / and they will not die again" support such a reading.

Morrison draws on African folklore and spirituality by creating these conjure women as a way to pay homage to the folklore tradition and to turn the marginality of conjuring into a source of identity and power. However, her inclusion of fantasy is "not to foreground the supernatural as a unique expression of the black community, but as way to Signify the

difference between culturally imposed ways of seeing.”⁸⁹ As she states in an interview, “what distinguishes the colonized from the colonist was viewing what is rational and what is not.”⁹⁰ The implication is that there is not just one single reality but also several, not just on truth but several truths:

Morrison’s ultimate purpose in using the supernatural in art is not to prove its existence-her novels intentionally represent it ambiguously- but to create this ongoing dialectic between the seen and the unseen, the knowable and the unknowable, the signified and the Signified- the supernatural as a trope on reality.⁹¹

Through her presentation of varied portraits of spiritual systems that exist outside of orthodox Christianity, the supernatural in Morrison’s fiction becomes a space of resistance. By consciously choosing marginal, alternative, and oppositional positions, she advocates the legitimacy of the marginal, and challenges Western concept of reality and literary realism. By making us question that which is considered ‘real’ or ‘normal,’ Morrison succeeds in showing us how necessary it is to open up to other ways of seeing and knowing, to alternative worldviews and realities in order to generate future social change and the well-being of not only the African-American community, but of all human in general.

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- ² Nigel Thomas, *From Folklore to Fiction: A Study of Folk Heroes and Rituals in the Black American Novel*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), Introduction.
- ³ Claudia Tate, “Conversation with Toni Morrison,” *Black Women Writers at Work*, ed. Claudia Tate, (New York: Continuum Publishing Co., 1983), pp.11, 18, 84, 129-130.
- ⁴ Mel Watkins, “Talk with Toni Morrison,” *New York Times Book Review*, (11 Sept. 1977), p.50.
- ⁵ Traditionally, magic realism has been associated with contemporary Latin American fiction, particularly the writing of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Alejo Carpentier, but it is also found in the work of other ethnic writers from the Caribbean, Nigeria, and India.
- ⁶ This is partly because of the negative connotations that the term “magic” has had in the Western world, and partly, because the label “magic realism” overlooks the ultimate origins of her writings “and leads us to underestimate the cultural paradigm in which she works as

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- ⁵⁴ Geoffrey Parinder, *African Mythology*, (New York: Peter Bedrock Books, 1982), p.13.
- ⁵⁵ Sugiyama, p.182.
- ⁵⁶ The *orixás* or *orishas* are the gods and goddesses of creation, according to practitioners of the Brazilian form of the Yoruba religion known as candomblé. Oxum is the goddess of sweet waters such as rivers and lakes, who symbolizes love, harmony, and beauty. Iemanjá is the mother of all creation, the goddess of the oceans.
- Cited after: Macumba @ <http://www.stirlinglaw.com/ea/macumba.html>.
- ⁵⁷ Lindasay Hale, "Mama Oxum: Reflections of gender and Sexuality in Brazilian Umbanda." *Osun Across the Waters: A Yoruba Goddess in Africa and the Americas*, ed. and intro. Joseph M. Murphy and Mei-Mei Sanford, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), pp.213-214. The orixás of candomblé are images of the archetypal mother. They are the manifestation of the mother archetype that emerges in Brazilian culture.
- ⁵⁸ Sugiyama, p.181.
- ⁵⁹ Udono Erika, "Toni Morrison and Tradition of Christianity," *Nanzan Review of American Studies*, Volume 29 (2007), p.190.
- ⁶⁰ Sugiyama, p.184.
- ⁶¹ Mbiti, p.21-23.
- ⁶² Harding and Martin, p.38.

- ⁶³ Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation." *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*, ed. Mari Evans, (Doubleday, 1884), p. 343.
- ⁶⁴ Gay Wilentz, *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p.90.
- ⁶⁵ Wilentz, p.91.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid, p.88.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid, p.92.
- ⁶⁸ Trudier Harris, *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), p.171.
- ⁶⁹ See Theresa Washington, "The mother-daughter Aje relationship in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," (*African American Review*, 2005).
- ⁷⁰ Christopher Okonkwo, "A Critical Divination: Reading *Sula* as Ogbanje-Abiku," *African American Review*, 38:4 (2004), p.653.
- ⁷¹ Karen Carmean, *Toni Morrison's World of Fiction*, (Troy, New York: Whitson Publishing Company, 1993), p.85.
- ⁷² Marsha Darling, "In the Realm of Responsibility: A Conversation with Toni Morrison," ed. Taylor-Guthrie, (Jackson: Mississippi University Press, 1994), p.246.
- ⁷³ Nellie McKay, 'An interview with Toni Morrison,' *Contemporary Literature*, 24 (1983), p.422.
- ⁷⁴ Joanne Braxton, "The Outraged Mother," Double Issue: 3.3 & 4.1, *The Scholar & Feminist XXX: Past Controversies, Present Challenges, Future Feminisms*. 13 pages. Available at www.bamard.edu/sfonline.
- ⁷⁵ Braxton, "Outraged," 7.

- ⁷⁶ Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*, (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985), p.159.
- ⁷⁷ Rootedness, p.344.
- ⁷⁸ Janice Sokoloff, "Intimations of Matriarchal Age: Notes on the Mythical Eva in Toni Morrison's *Sula*," *Journal of Black Studies*, 16 (1986), p.433.
- ⁷⁹ Sokoloff, p.434.
- ⁸⁰ Barbara Christian, pp.16-17.
- ⁸¹ Christopher Okonkwo, p.651.
- ⁸² Ibid, p.652.
- ⁸³ Denise Heinze, *The Dilemma of "Double Consciousness": Toni Morrison's Novels*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), p.162.
- ⁸⁴ Byerman, p.199.
- ⁸⁵ Harding and Martin, p.95.
- ⁸⁶ Nigel Thomas explains that conjuring is not to be confused with Voodoo even though the Hoodoo priest is frequently a conjurer. Conjuring is intended to be a deadly art and is related to sorcery, as opposed to Voodhoism. In most West African communities sorcerers who cast spells, if caught, were severely punished. Voodhoism emphasizes the spiritual wholeness of the community, and the "obeah" in many parts of Africa is related to communal morality (From Folklore, 40).
- ⁸⁷ Therese Higgins, *Religiosity, Cosmology, and Folklore: The African Influence in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, (New York: Routledge, 2001), p.131.

⁸⁸ Ibid, p.196.

⁸⁹ Denise Heinze, p.159.

⁹⁰ Bessie W. Jones and Audrey Vinson, *The World of Toni Morrison: Explorations in Literary Criticism*, (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt, 1985), p.181.

⁹¹ Heinze, p.160.

Chapter III

Music and Storytelling

Me, I want to explain myself so bad. I want to have myself understood. And the music, it can do that. The music, it's my whole story.

Sidney Bechet•

What ya think music is, whatchu think the blues be, & them happy church musics is all about, but talking wit the unreal what's mo' real than most folks ever gonna know.

Ntozake Shange••

All of Morrison's novels draw on African-American oral tradition and in listening to the language and stories of her people, she hears the music through which her ancestors expressed their emotions. Morrison has often discussed the power of music and the way it functions in culture while talking about her craft. She argues that traditionally, music has been the primary art form of healing for black people, but because of the changing place of black music in white American culture, it can no longer do this work alone:

There has to be a mode to do what the music did for blacks, what we used to be able to do with each other in private and in that civilization that existed underneath the white civilization....The music kept us alive, but it's not enough anymore. My people are being devoured.¹

She sees the novel as another form that can mirror what happens with black music and perhaps take that work further. Thus, she aligns her fictional craft with that of the musician:

I don't want them (the novels) to be unsatisfying, and some people do find it wholly unsatisfying, but I think that's the habit, the literary habit, of having certain kinds of endings. Although we don't expect a poem to end that way, you know, or even music doesn't end that way, certain kinds of music. There's always something tasty in your mouth when you hear blues, there's always something left over with jazz, because it's on edge, and you're never satisfied, you're always a little hungry.²

Morrison's equation of novel writing with both music and storytelling suggests that readers must approach her work with some information based on forms arising from the oral tradition, in which song and story link together and are often inseparable. Her appreciation of the oral tradition is indicated in a variety of ways in her work, and she has often recognized the centrality of black music to her whole body of work:

...a novel written a certain way can do precisely what the spirituals used to do. It can do exactly what the blues or jazz or gossip or stories or myths or folklore did- that stuff which was a common wellspring of ideas.³

Morrison draws upon black music as a structuring and symbolic principle for her narrative, and her complex prose style combining the oral with the written, make for a polyphonic narrative style. Music as a critical tool can illuminate some of the elements of her fiction viewed by some readers as critical problems, such as her ambiguity, her loose, "fragmented" narrative structure, her endless repetition of themes, images, and whole stories. Viewing Morrison's fiction through the

contexts of spirituals, gospels, blues, and jazz in combination with the precepts of the oral tradition of performance from which they derive would be rewarding. In creating her works, Morrison attends to the participatory nature of music- the way it makes listeners respond through singing or dancing. She aims for her fiction to touch those same nerves, to make readers not only speak back to the text, but also recognize their responses as part of the text.⁴ Considering the discipline it takes to make improvisational music appear to be effortless, Morrison aims to mirror in her writing this seamless stitching together of information.

Morrison's concern for the need now to make fiction do what the music used to do, will be the basis of discussing how her novels do not just narrate but also sing the folklore and traditions of blacks in America. The intention is to demonstrate how this music is woven into the fabric of her fiction, both in content and in structure, and how it serves to clarify old and new values as well as indicate emotional states. The following section deals with the transfer of musical properties to the novels as thematic and structural devices. The technique Morrison uses to achieve this fusion of the musical and literary forms is a composite articulation of the infinite variety of the oral tradition. Hence, the important elements of the African-American vernacular, such as call and response, witnessing and testifying, and signifying is discussed in conjunction with rhythmical

and musical patterns, such as themes, variations and recurrent riffs as they occur in the novels. The purpose is to show how Morrison attempts an improvisory piece on aspects of African-American history and experience, and how in encoding aural and oral traditions in her writing she paves the way for the novel to replace the music (now largely appropriated by white culture) in its function of encouraging black communication.

The intertwining of music and storytelling in symbiotic unity make for a unique cultural style that has been utilized by many black authors from Gayl Jones, Ishmael Reed, and Alice Walker to Toni Morrison. Understanding the relationship between slave spirituals, blues, and jazz, would help in better appreciating Morrison's appropriation of their techniques into their narrative equivalents. The history and cultural breadth of black music illustrate how slave spirituals were the earliest forms of artistic self-expressions available to African-Americans. "They were not sung solely or even primarily in churches or praise houses but were used as rowing songs, field songs, work songs, and social songs."⁵ They provided the birthing ground for the blues, which according to Lawrence Levine is "the most highly personalized" genre of African-American music.⁶ Blues evolved in the United States in the communities of former African slaves, from spirituals, praise songs, field hollers,

shouts, and chants into a wide variety of styles and genres, with regional variations across the United States and, later, Europe and Africa. By the early 20th century, the blues had emerged as a dynamic and powerful addition to black American music. Jazz too, developed among African slaves and Negro freedmen in the United States, from sacred spirituals, and from secular work songs and “field hollers.”

As Paul Oliver comments, “the influence of the blues on jazz was a musical one, eventually to be developed in a purely musical non-vocal form of expression.”⁷ If the blues emphasized vocal content, jazz stresses on the instrumental. This reflects the different character of their environment for, as Inger-Anne Softing notes, “Jazz is an urban mode of expression and it is harder and crueller than blues.”⁸ We can say that the fundamental nature of jazz comes from the weary lament of the blues, but the improvising, and the variation of riffs, creates the transition from blues to jazz.

The relevance of these genres in a discussion of folk modes of narration in Toni Morrison’s fiction is to illustrate how Morrison uses all these musical elements to shape her storytelling style. Although all her novels reveal the deployment of musical properties to tell stories, not all illustrate equally her narrative intentions of fusing these two disparate

forms. Hence, the following analysis is limited to only *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*.

The Transfer of Musical Properties to Structure and Theme

The Bluest Eye: The Bluest 'I'

The Bluest Eye is similar to the structure and feel of blues music. In fact, it is Morrison's earliest effort "to do what the music did for blacks."⁹ Although Pecola is the focus of the story's tragic outcome, she herself does not tell her story, does not sing her blues. Claudia who delves into the painful misfortunes of her friend's life and in the process tells her own story as well, does this. In giving voice to Pecola's blues, Claudia becomes the blues singer¹⁰ whose storytelling mode corresponds to Ralph Ellison's definition of the 'blues impulse.' Ellison famously defines the blues as "an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by consolation of philosophy, but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism."¹¹ Through Claudia, we come to know Pecola's story, as well as the McTeer and Breedlove families, and the community of the past and present. The story that is told brings tragedy, comedy and a host of feelings that combine to create a blues feeling in the novel. Like the blues, the narrative structure of *The Bluest Eye* follows a movement from an initial emphasis on loss to a sense of

resolution. Despite the depressing feeling of the text as a whole, there are moments of comedy and laughter as well as beauty that are squeezed from hardship. Whereas the blues provides an outlet for the musician to deal with adversity and tragedy, Morrison's novel also attempts to find a way of coping with the "why" of Pecola's tragedy, and the damaging effects of racism.

The musical quality of Morrison's writing is present in her applying the forms of black music to the novel. The cipher epithet: 'HEREISTHEHOUSEITISGREEN' (*BE*, p.24) and its variations, at the beginning of each narrative section, evokes the call and response pattern fundamental to black music. This is the Dick-and-Jane story at the beginning of the novel, which captures another aspect of blues music and jazz. We can also term this kind of structure as a "counterpoint narrative." This means that each of the sections overlaps with and repeats characters, actions and ideas present in the other sections as though there is one larger theme at work. From a musical viewpoint, particularly that of jazz, each section, like the instruments in a jazz band, has its own story to tell and its own way of doing it. The narrative could then be described as a kind of long, complicated jazz piece coming from the swirling counterpoints between the 'words' of the cipher and the instrument's interpretation of the meaning of these 'words'. The contrast between the

ideal white world and the reality of the black experience is presented by breaking the story into several head notes for the sections. Each section of the narrative functions, in call and response manner, both as a means of furthering the story and as a counterpoint to some other section. At the same time, it is also synonymous to blues musicians repeating a familiar phrase in a song. Just as a blues musician, repeating a phrase or line throughout the song will remind the audience of the root of his blues, so also, the reader is reminded of the contrast between the ideal white world and actual black world conveyed in the chapter.

The transformation of the Dick-and-Jane text is also comparable to the steady increase of intensity and feeling in a blues song, where the singer may sing his lyrics with abandoned wildness and rawness that displays his depth of feelings. In the sections containing the cipher epithets, the text, which becomes increasingly inarticulate and unintelligent, corresponds to the confusion and ambiguity of young blacks who are subjected to the concept of a white ideal life that is foreign and inaccessible to them. In addition, the novel reveals the destructive potential of a standard of beauty that places value on the way people look rather than on their intrinsic worth. This condition is manifested in the character of Pecola Breedlove, who longs for blue eyes in pursuit of the white ideal of beauty and love. "Blue" is a metaphor for

the anguish that the musician is feeling due to the adversities of life. Blues music has created numerous connotations for the word “blue,” but its essential meaning as W. C. Handy says, comes “from farthest down. The blues come from nothingness, from want, from desire.”¹² It is a stroke of genius on Morrison’s part to show that what Pecola yearns for most, the bluest of eyes, is the source of her most painful blues, her ‘bluest I’. Her desire for the impossible is exacerbated by her mother’s own belief in the ugliness of her family, while her drunken father’s twisted attempts at loving his daughter turns to rape. The community watches but does nothing even as Pecola lapses into an insanity, which is the direct outcome of her pursuit of the bluest eyes.

The Bluest Eye is full of characters whose humanity is diminished because of their blackness, a signifier of lack to white society, their own community, and even to themselves. Most troubling in the novel are the light-skinned blacks who distance themselves from their black heritage. But Morrison also presents ways of surviving in a world suffused with psychic pain and suffering. The counterpoint to the story of Pecola and her family is the MacTeer family who, in a similar situation has not abandoned its humanity. Mrs. MacTeer’s life is marked by poverty, which sometimes lead her to treat her children harshly; her ‘misery [is] ‘colored by the greens and blues in [her] voice’ (*BE*, p.18). But love, not

money, is the motivating force in this household, and it is that which sustains them. We see this counterpoint at work in some of the songs she sings. Her “fussing soliloquies” in which she vents her frustrations and anxieties and indirectly insults the world and everyone in it, are “extremely painful” to the listening Claudia and her sister. However, her “singing moods” comprised of singing about “hard times, bad times, and somebody-done-and-left-me-times” (*BE*, pp.17-18). An adult Claudia recalls the sad, melancholy of the thing her mother sings about:

But her voice was so sweet and her singing-eyes so melty I found myself longing for those hard times, yearning to be grown without “a thin di-i-me to my name.” I looked forward to the delicious time when “my man” would leave me, when I would “hate to see that evening sun go down...” ‘cause then I would know “my man has left this town.” Misery colored by the greens and blues in my mother’s voice took all the grief out of the words and left me with a conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet. (*BE*, p.18)

The dual nature of blues/jazz is evident here: on the one hand, the music counterpoints and drains the words of their grief thereby making life endurable by making the pain sweet; on the other, there is also the suggestion of “longing” for pain. Or at least its “sweet” after-taste, which goes along with enjoying the status of being a victim, of refusing to find ways out of situations which render one a victim, of refusing to take responsibility for oneself.

This double counterpoint is apparent in most of the characters in the novel who suffer different degrees of victimization at the hands of a society that confuses whiteness with virtue. The prime example of the tendency of blacks to identify against themselves is Polly and Cholly Breedlove. The narrator describes this tendency in terms of the “ugliness” of the people who live in abject poverty. Cholly’s ugliness is the “result of despair, dissipation, and violence directed toward petty things and weak people” (*BE*, p.28); Pauline uses hers as a “prop”, for the “articulation of character, for the support of a role she frequently imagined was hers- martyrdom” (*BE*, p.29). The narrator suggests that they are more than complicit in their own fate: that they wore their “cloak of ugliness “with the same desire for melancholy that Claudia’s mother sings into her songs. The violent arguments they engage in reveals this willingness to embrace their desperate situation. This shows that their own belief that they are “ugly” produces a sweet pain of its own, one that is difficult to let go. What breaks this counterpoint-prevents it from singing the pain into sweet melancholy and relief- is the “incest-rape” of Pecola by Cholly. No song will account for this, and everyone, including her mother, casts out the victim. Because Pecola cannot sing this pain away, cannot articulate her grief, she goes mad, and finishes up wandering in the dumps at the edge of town.

The structure, lyrics and chords of blues music often combine to form a cycle in which the end echoes the beginning through the repetition of a musical lick. This circular motion is also present in *The Bluest Eye* where the end mimics the beginning in Morrison's use of the adult Claudia who echoes the nine-year old Claudia, creating the image of a flashback. The adult Claudia has the insight that a child could never have, and thus tries to articulate this insight at the end of her narrative. Her conclusion that love is a prison for the beloved, that love sings sweetness into its pain, that love is a mask behind which hides wickedness, violence and stupidity, is a story already told in the "preface," the section that immediately follows the triple-epithets, which counterpoint each other. It is told in Claudia's adult voice to which she returns at the end of the narrative. By telling us this story, Claudia is, in a sense, doing what her mother does- singing the sweet pain of melancholy into her experiences.

As in her other novels, here too, Morrison deliberately structures the story to ensure an interactive and creative relationship between author and reader. This relationship is similar to the one between the musician and the audience in the blues or jazz. The interaction that is deliberately inculcated within Morrison's style is not readily apparent, it requires some thinking, or perhaps even experiences in one's life that can parallel

or relate in some way to the events of the novel. On the subject of the blues, Bernard Bell says:

When performed for nonmembers of the ethnic group or those with little or no intimacy with the music, it is generally considered mere entertainment; but when performed among black Americans, especially members of the working class, it is a social ritual: a ceremonial residual oral form whose recurring performance reinforces a sense of order in life and preserves the shared wisdom of the group.¹³

Just as the blues can be interpreted in different ways by different people, so can Morrison's novel. Just as the blues is obviously, more meaningful and crucial to African- American culture than to any other culture, the meaning of *The Bluest Eye* is most valid and applicable to black Americans. Karla Holloway argues that this novel "is a journey into Black memory" where the memories belong to "Black readers."¹⁴

The novel itself puts forward the idea that the characters should seek alternative forms of cultural knowledge and wisdom that are embodied in the community traditions which include music. For instance, Pecola is not privy to the "shared wisdom of the group" (which would have included warnings against unsavoury members of the community, such as Soaphead Church and the three whores), and therefore she becomes Soaphead's victim. The system of folk values and knowledge that Claudia absorbs because of listening to her mother's blues singing eases her entry into adulthood in a way denied to Pecola.

As a novel that portrays the blues about growing up poor, black and female in a male dominated society, one that equates whiteness with beauty, *The Bluest Eye* will obviously evoke a different response from someone who has experienced the injustices of institutionalized and societal racism and prejudice than from someone who has not. Thus, both the blues and *The Bluest Eye* contain some profound connection with the African-American sensibility that in some ways can never be experienced outside of the community or culture. Still, there are many aspects of the novel that every reader can respond to, particularly, Morrison's emphasis on resiliency, assertion of ownership and control of one's bodies, and the call to be brutally honest regarding one's dealings with others and with one's community that are all central tenets of traditional blues wisdom.¹⁵

Song of Solomon: The Song in Story, the Story in the Song

An overriding theme in *Song of Solomon* is that of music- particularly, blues, spirituals, and gospel songs- as an integral force in the creation and survival of African-American culture. Solomon's song introduces us to the intrinsic role that religious and secular songs, in the form of spirituals and the blues play in defining and transmitting African-American culture.

The motif of music - with its emphasis on the blues- resonates throughout *Song of Solomon*. Joyce Wegs says, "Morrison provides

several clues that the black music she emulates in this novel is the blues and not, for instance, jazz.”¹⁶ Although no writer has written a blues novel that can provide an unequivocal example of how the blues in written form should mimic the blues in oral form, still, elements of the blues can be taken and transposed into the novel form in various ways. An examination of the motif of music in *Song of Solomon* reveals how Morrison, by using linguistic patterns that are characteristic of the blues, relates the blues to structure, theme and character. The elements of call-and response, repetition and variation, redundancy, as well as the improvisational nature of the blues that have been implemented within the novel, pave the way for a discussion of Morrison’s text as a blues tale.

Readers of *Song of Solomon* will not fail to notice the numerous references and allusions to music, particularly, blues music, including references to musical instruments (drums, guitars, trumpets, pianos), and to musical terms (notes, keys, scales). As pointed out by Wegs, “Morrison’s naming often contains clear links to the blues. For instance, her protagonist’s best friend, his “main man” is named Guitar, which is a principal blues instrument” (*SoS*, p.212). The references to several great names in blues and jazz such as Blind Lemon Jefferson, Fats Waller, B.B. King, Muddy Waters, Jelly Roll Morton, Leadbelly, Bo Diddley, T-Bone Walker, Son House, Tampa Red and others, underscores the relationship

of the blues with its cultural associations and draws attention to the interweaving of blues and storytelling in the novel. The blues genre thus offers the reader a way in which to approach his/her participation in the text.

The first chapter of *Song of Solomon* introduces us to the main characters and the novel's unique structure, in which Morrison intermixes the past, present and future and presents numerous stories from various characters' perspectives. In the novel, because the narrator functions often as a detached observer who simply reports things as they happen, the characters tell their own stories and the community comments on or respond to these characters' actions. In music, a call and response is a succession of two distinct phrases usually played by different musicians, where the second phrase is heard as a direct commentary on or response to the first.¹⁷ It corresponds to the call-and-response pattern in human communication. This call-and-response pattern between the characters' individual voices and the community's collective voice resonates throughout Morrison's novel.¹⁸ The structure of the novel itself reflects the pattern of the blues call-and-response pattern. Part I corresponds to the "call" given to Milkman to find his own identity in relation to his own community. So far, he has been alienated from himself and estranged from his family, his community, and his historical and cultural roots. Part

II then corresponds to his “response,” as he embarks on a physical and spiritual journey with the help of Pilate and Guitar that enables him to reconnect with his past and realize his self-worth.

Early in the novel, the twin themes of flying and singing are prefigured in the attempted suicide flight of Robert Smith, which takes place in the presence of Ruth Dead who is pregnant with the protagonist, Milkman Dead, and “a singing woman who introduces the blues leitmotif of the novel.”¹⁹The singing woman is Pilate, Milkman’s aunt (and later, his spiritual advisor) who foresees that “a little bird will be here with the morning” (*SoS*, p.9). By referring to Milkman as a bird, Morrison already situates him as being the only one in his family who has the potential to *fly*, an act that symbolizes movement from the material world to a better, more spiritual and free existence. Pilate’s words also imply that eventually Milkman will transcend the arbitrary limits placed on black people. However, that time is long in coming, for when four-year-old Milkman realizes that “only birds and airplanes could fly-he lost all interest in himself” (*SoS*, p.9). This awareness of social reality illustrates the dilemma of many blacks in white America, who learn that opportunities for social, economic and political successes are limited for coloured people.

The connection between blues and storytelling is emphasized in the “Sugarman” blues song often sung by Pilate, which serves as the model for Solomon’s “song,” the song that will reveal Milkman’s past and cultural heritage:

O Sugarman don’t leave me here
 Cotton balls to choke me
 O Sugarman don’t leave me here
 Buckra’s arms to yoke me...
 Sugarman done fly away
 Sugarman done gone
 Sugarman cut across the sky
 Sugarman gone home. (*SoS*, p.49)

As Robert Skerrett comments, “the song itself is a verse and chorus with a classic blues feeling.”²⁰ The blues song and the atmosphere connected to its singing, unify the novel. Pilate sings this song to Robert Smith as he prepares to fly off the hospital roof: apparently, she is the only one among the spectators to decode the meaning of his bizarre gesture, and therefore, no one sings in response to her. Her song is a kind of serenade sung in support of him because she can read the signifying relationship between Robert Smith’s “flight” and the legendary Solomon (Sugarman) who flew to escape slavery.

Pilate also sings the same song with Reba and Hagar to a hidden, but listening Macon. This time, not only do the three women call and respond to each other, but also their song elicits a response from him in spite of himself: it “...pulled him like a carpet tack under the influence of

a magnet (*SoS*, p.29). The song serves to underline his disconnection with the nurturing, oral culture of the South that he left behind when he moved North. Pilate sings this song for the third time, again with Reba and Hagar, to the visiting Milkman and Guitar. This time it is sung in response to Hagar's confession of a "hunger" her mothers cannot alleviate: "...When the two women got to the chorus, Hagar raised her head and sang too" (*SoS*, p.49). Skerret says, "It thus functions as the blues, allowing Reba, and Hagar to finger the jagged edge of their unhappiness as a way of mastering it."²¹

Similarly, at Hagar's funeral, Reba joins Pilate in her mournful plea for mercy, singing "I hear you." (*SoS*, p.317) Together they perform a call-and response, through which they articulate their grief and pain of loss. Their performance compels a response from the congregation, who with the readers, become the witnesses to the two women's testimony of love. Morrison's use of antiphony forms a part of blues music. For the blues also mean a progression from loss to resolution. As accomplished blues singers, Pilate and Reba blend the two oral forms of testifying and witnessing and resolve their inner grief, their blues, through a shared communal experience.

However, as Marilyn Mobley points out, the song in the story is not the only significant aspect of *Song of Solomon*; there is also a story in

the song.²² Embedded in the song is the story of Solomon, which is also the story of an entire race. Understanding the significance of this song is a key to understanding the novel since it holds the secrets of Milkman's past. In order for Milkman to fulfill his mission and decode the meaning of Solomon's song, he must first learn to listen and to relinquish his sole reliance on external cues such as road maps and written records as the primary sources of information. In short, Milkman must learn to focus on orality rather than literacy. For instance, listening to the children of Shalimar singing their song, "Jay the only son of Solomon," he at first, does not understand its significance to his own heritage. Only later, as he becomes aware of the importance of orality, does he realize that Pilate's old blues song is a variant of the children's' game song. As he listens to the children singing Solomon's song, Milkman comes to understand his mother's blues, her "sad sad song (*SoS*, p.165), and can now sympathize with her forced twenty-year celibacy. Similarly, he gains an insight into his father's materialism seeing it now as "homage" to Macon's own father Jake. More importantly, he is now ashamed of his treatment of Pilate and Hagar.

Nevertheless, even at this stage of his spiritual growth, Milkman is not still aware of the cost of his quest, nor does he understand the meaning behind Sweet's question after he tells her the story of his

ancestor Solomon's flight back to Africa- "Who'd he leave behind?" (*SoS*, p.328). A common subject of blues songs was the theme of women's desertion by the men in their lives: while men are given agency and movement, women are contained, confined, or left behind. A repeated theme in *Song of Solomon* is that of men's abandonment of women, and the image of men who "fly away and leave their women to sing the blues."²³ Milkman experiences a yearning to escape- at least temporarily- the demands placed on him by his family and friends. Thus, Milkman flees the confines of his of dull existence in Michigan leaving Hagar to die of unrequited love. Morrison links this subject to another of the main themes of blues lyrics: the conflict that occurs because of the different ways in which men and women cope with crisis. A blues song called "Victim of the Blues" sung by "Ma" Rainey makes the point clear:

My man left this morning, jest about half past four, (*twice*)
 He left a note on his pillow, sayin' he couldn't use me no
 more²⁴

This almost exactly replicates Milkman's treatment of Hagar when he wrote her a cold and cruel letter informing her of his intentions to end their relationship.

On Morrison's treatment of the subject of women's blues with regard to mobility, an examination of Pilate's life offers another aspect. Pilate, unlike most of the other women in the novel, is widely traveled:

she “had been from one end of the country to another.” (*SoS*, p.139) She is representative of women blues singers with whom freedom of mobility is often associated. And like these women who, although they have greater participation in movement, struggle to negotiate the various exploitative conditions they encountered, Pilate experiences alienation and struggles to find acceptance. Her “traveling blues” tell of how she is hounded out of each place because people fear her navel-less belly. However, this empowers her and enables her to channel her blues into a more creative, constructive outlet- namely, living.

Pilate demonstrates the characteristics of the blues singer who,

like the poet, turned his eyes on the inner soul within and recorded his impressions and reactions to the world without. His art was introverted...As if aware of the dangers implicit in these declarations of his inner self, the blues singer was as brutally self-examining as the true philosopher, recounting his desires, acknowledging his faults, stating his thoughts with almost frightening honesty.²⁵

She is like the blues singer who takes a hard look at herself and “when she realized what her situation in the world was and would probably always be she threw away every assumption she had learned and began at zero” (*SoS*, p.149). In naming her blues, and acknowledging however painful, her limitations, Pilate becomes a blues subject who shows a resiliency that enables her to ameliorate her blues and reclaim ownership of herself.

Like the blues, which functioned not merely as a mechanism for individual catharsis but also as a vehicle for passing on group knowledge,²⁶ personal relationships are important to Pilate and she always responds to other people's problems with unconditional support:

She gave up, apparently, all interest in table manners or hygiene, but acquired a deep concern for and about human relationships, [...] She was a natural healer, and among quarreling drunks and fighting women she could hold her own. (*SoS*, p.150)

Moreover, like the blues artist who in singing for himself, also sang for others, Pilate "means her stories- and her life- to benefit those around her, the people she loves."²⁷ By telling her story to Ruth, Pilate offers her an alternative, a way to get over her own blues. Her storytelling mode is a blues mode in its honesty, lack of sentimentality, and communicability. Moreover, it is an oral performance in the tradition of the African griot, and includes a strong spiritual and ethical dimension. Here, it is not so much the product or content that counts as the performance itself. Not only is her song of Sugarman the key to Milkman's quest, it is also a remnant of an oral culture which illustrates the function of the African woman in transmitting existing messages of culture to the children. The song ensures that the "fathers may soar/And the children may know their names." (*SoS*, epigraph) Pilate's blues resonates throughout the novel

demonstrating both the power of song and the ability of the blues singer to be mediators of cultural legacy.

Not until he returns home and learns his final lesson of love from Pilate is Milkman able to understand that his freedom (like Solomon's) has come at the expense of the people he left behind- namely, Hagar. Now he understands Pilate's adherence to her father's philosophy: "You just can't fly on off and leave a body" (*SoS*, p.208). Consequently, his challenge is not only to reclaim the gift of flight but also to break the legacy established by Solomon and followed by Macon and other men who abandon those who love them. Thus, Milkman learns from Pilate, valuable lessons of folk wisdom and cultural values that have always been central to the blues. He finally realizes, "that a genuine bluesman does not fly solo since he is connected musically to the other musicians, to their shared pasts; only as each bluesman adds his personal history to that shared past may he be said to launch into a solo flight."²⁸ The dying Pilate asks him to sing for her; he *speaks*, rather than sings, the song he has learnt from her, the only one that he knows- her Sugarman blues. By following a pattern closer to a rhythmic talk than to a melody, Milkman is still being true to the original lyrical form of the "talking blues"²⁹ and in adding his own improvisational twist, he becomes a true bluesman.

The ending of *Song of Solomon* “reiterates the themes of flight, song, community, heritage, and the blues.”³⁰ The two expressions of flight, at the beginning and the end signify on each other by repeating and revising the myth of flight. Robert Smith’s “flight” parallels Solomon’s mythical flight from bondage as well as Milkman’s leap, but the message signified by each flight is different. Milkman’s role is to decode his Aunt Pilate’s “Sugarman” blues song and his own ancestry in order to gain an understanding of his own identity. For Morrison, this identity is “a collective rather than an individual construct.”³¹ By learning the names and putting the pieces of his ancestry back together Milkman begins to understand his own place in the world. But in Morrison’s revision of the myth of Solomon, it is Pilate’s rendition of this myth, which helps Milkman grow. For when the fathers soar off, there must be someone left to teach the children their names: these are the women left behind to sing the blues but also to tell the tale to the children for posterity. Thus, it is evident, as Wilentz argues that it is the children’s song, turned into women’s blues by Pilate, is what leads Milkman to the legacy of his great-grandfather and the Flying Africans.³²

Just as there is no closure in the blues, there is no resolution in *Song of Solomon* in the usual sense, and the novel’s ending is finally ambiguous. The improvisational nature of the blues is illustrated in the

way Morrison creates gaps and spaces in the narrative to be filled in by the reader. Consequently, it is up to each reader to fill the spaces of the narrative concerning Milkman's fate. Given that, Milkman has inherited Pilate's and Solomon's gift of flight, perhaps his ultimate fate is secondary to the fate of those who are left behind to sing the tale. Thus, like blues lyrics, *Song of Solomon* as a blues narrative, does not end on a closed note but allows Morrison to create an improvisational piece with endless possibilities. By virtue of the fact that "folklore can also contain myths that reactivate themselves endlessly through providers- the people who repeat, reshape, reconstitute and interpret them,"³³ the reader, together with the author, can become a part of a transformative mode that makes the past meaningful for the future. In writing this novel, Morrison, as blues singer, adds her own song to the blues singers before her. As an individual artist who gives creative expression to the history of her people through the sound of the blues as a mode of storytelling, she helps to articulate and strengthen their collective cultural identity as well.

Beloved : Slave Song, Redemption Song

Musically, different critics have read *Beloved* in different ways. For instance, Eusebio Rodriguez calls the novel a blues-song and states that Morrison's musical style introduces "blue notes of loneliness and injustice and despair, generating, at the end, meanings that hit her

listeners in the heart, that region below the intellect where knowledge deepens into understanding.”³⁴ Paul D, for example, clearly embodies the tradition of the blues. On the other hand, Alan J. Rice prefers to examine the musical elements in *Beloved* from a jazz vantage point noting particularly, Morrison’s use of the musical device of “cutting back” through which “characters continually cut back to the pivotal incident, the central riff, and sing their own song of it.”³⁵ Besides blues and jazz, we can identify other genres of the black musical tradition in this novel such as folksongs in the form of slave songs and spirituals, which are woven seamlessly into a narrative fabric, proving thereby its efficacy as a vehicle for projecting the humanity of the slaves.

The African-American slave song is just one of many forms, which offers a distinctive cultural voice to their oral tradition. Since the composers of these folk songs were unknown, they can be considered as genuine folk music. Often, slaves would find it more bearable to sing their beliefs and sorrows in order to escape the ordeals of slavery, and the spiritual offered a medium for this. These spirituals reflected essentially Christian ideals and beliefs in the form of a bittersweet harmony. Sacred music or spirituals often dealt with Biblical themes and conveyed double meanings of the wish to escape slavery. Moreover, using spirituals to name the dynamics of escape has a long African-American history, and

songs were significantly used as mediums of passing on encoded messages.³⁶ In *Beloved*, prior to the botched attempt to escape Sweet Home, Halle announces to the others the “sign” for their departure by transforming it into a song: “Hush, hush. Somebody’s calling my name. O my Lord, O my Lord, what shall I do?” (*B*, p.224).

Morrison associates Baby Suggs with the precepts of the oral tradition of performance as is illustrated in the physicality and expressiveness of her call, which evokes the call-and-response patterns of black American singing and preaching. Baby Suggs’s sermonizing could perhaps be termed a kind of spiritual, which was an important aspect of the slave song. Blacks taken as slaves from Africa and brought on the slave ships to America were soon converted to Christianity and forced to abandon their African religions; yet, they managed to merge African beliefs and customs with their newfound religion. The slaves incorporated dance movements involving traditional African moves with strong beats with the spirituals they sang. Because they were often not allowed to sing these spirituals on the plantations, slaves were often forced to find a place where they could seek solace and sing of freedom and deliverance.

Similar aspects of these conditions can be seen in *Beloved* in the example of Baby Suggs’s meetings in the Clearing, where she also “danced in the sunlight”(*B*, pp.86-89). Her song-sermon follows the oral

aesthetic aspects of antiphony, improvisation and audience related performances, and incorporate singing, shouting, crying and dancing. Thus, it is a dramatized and concretized improvisation of traditional Christian sermonizing, a form that black congregation would recognize as stemming primarily from their oral tradition in which the transition from verbal to musical expression is a fluid one. Her “Call” as she calls it, is a call to freedom, which is reminiscent of Bob Marley’s plaintive spiritual “Redemption Song.”³⁷ In this song, Marley sings in the first person, taking on the role of a slave “singing the songs of freedom”:

Old Pirates yes they rob I Sold I to the merchant ships
 Minutes after they took I from the Bottomless pit But my
 hand was made strong By the hand of the Almighty We
 forward in this generation triumphantly All I ever had was
 songs of freedom Won't you help sing these songs of
 freedom ...Emancipate yourself from mental slavery None
 but ourselves can free our mind...³⁸

Baby Suggs says as much to her audience:

She told them that the only grace they could have was the
 grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they
 would not have it. (*B*, p.88).

Baby Suggs uses the language of the African -American oral tradition- Black English, in which meaning, nuance, tone, and gesture acquire added meaning and expression using a rhythmic structure and sounds that are closely allied to music:

[I]n this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh
 that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Yonder they do not

love your flesh. They despise it... No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flat it. And O my people they do not love your hands...Love your hands! Love them....Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. *You got to love it, you!* (B, p.88)

This 'performance talk' as it were, fuses with dance and music in the most natural way as Baby Suggs stands up to dance to the singing of her congregation as they participate and interact with each other. Mbiti describes the function of music and dance during communal worship as a way of dissolving barriers between each person's mind, body, and spirit: "Through music, singing, and dancing, people are able to participate emotionally and physically in the act of worship. The music and dancing penetrate into the very being of the worshipping individuals."³⁹ This is illustrated clearly in the dance Baby Suggs initiates, which becomes a religious ritual, a communal celebration of each individual's loveliness.

Morrison establishes song as imperative to her characters' survival in *Beloved*. A telling example which shows the power of song to combat even the most dehumanizing despair is conveyed in the telling of Paul D's experiences at prison camp in Alfred, Georgia. As one of the forty-six men who worked in a chain gang, Paul D uses song to defend his humanity when it was most denied. The men did not speak to each other, at least, not with words; they learnt alternative ways of speaking. They read each other's eyes; spoke to each other through songs. During the

day, they worked together, singing as they swung their sledge hammers. The importance of music as an expression of emotions is summed up by Morrison's evocation of the chain gangs. Their songs are encoded so only they understand the import of what they sing: "They sang it out and beat it up, garbling the words so they could not be understood; tricking the words so their syllables yielded up other meanings" (*B*, p.108). Their sledge hammers keep time to beat out their anguish and their helplessness. The interactive rhythm of the collective that is intrinsic to black music is harnessed to provide an alternative text. The men communicate via the chain itself, thus transforming what imprisons them into a vehicle for communication: "They talked through the chain like Sam Morse..." (*B*, p.110). The rhythmic hammering of the chains and sledge hammers, evoke the elements of call and response, communal improvisation, witnessing and testifying, and Signifying.⁴⁰

Of all the characters in *Beloved*, Paul D is most representative of the singing, traveling bluesman. Paul Oliver makes the observation that folk music generally "reflects the environment of the people who create it, and when their background is a constantly varying one it is scarcely surprising that the images that are mirrored in the blues have much to do with the movement of the black worker."⁴¹ This is certainly true of Paul D. His experiences in the Civil War, travel to the North, time spent at the

prison camp, and also with a weaver woman in Delaware, all speak of the restless wandering typical of the blues character. The tunes he sings, hums or improvises upon, are “old pieces of songs he’d learned on the prison farm or in the War afterward. Nothing like what they sang at Sweet Home, where yearning fashioned every note” (*B*, p.40). In the compelling rhythms of the work songs that he sings that evoke the physical hardships enforced in reconstruction, we can also hear a blues lament of the sense of roots denied by the system of slavery:

Lay my head on the railroad line,
Train come along, pacify my mind. (*B*, p.40)

Moreover, Paul D is also representative of the blues character who bridges a paradoxical state of existence. Even when he is no longer enslaved, he lived in a world that still bound him with social, psychological and political oppression. It was a world of arrested transition in which he was freed but not free:

After Delaware and before that Alfred, Georgia, where he slept underground and crawled into sunlight for the sole purpose of breaking rock, walking off when he got ready was the only way he could convince himself that he would no longer have to sleep, pee, eat or swing a sledge hammer in chains. (*B*, p.40)

More significantly, it is only in his blues that Paul D is able to express his traumatic past. His dehumanizing experiences with Schoolteacher is so gruesome, he has “never have talked about it. Not to a soul.” (*B*, p.71).

Paul D never told another human being about his brutal experiences, but he “sang it sometimes” (*B*, p.71). Morrison emphasizes here, the significance of song and its empowering qualities. Despite his dreadful experiences, Paul D can make meaning of them.

However, musical expression is not the only privilege given to blacks in *Beloved*. The text makes space for the song of Amy Denver, the white girl who aids Sethe in childbirth and during her flight. Their transcultural encounter is epitomised by Amy’s three stanza song, which is a quotation of the first, second and fourth stanzas of a poem called “Lady Button Eyes” by Eugene Field, a white American poet.⁴² Amy’s song is totally different from the other examples of music already referred to, particularly in language and musical rhythm. The stylized Standard English of Amy’s song-poem obviously collides with the Black Vernacular English of the blues and work songs sung by Paul D, for example. But Morrison, is perhaps symbolically acknowledging that the black musical arts manifested in the Afro-Christian traditions of sermonizing and singing and in the blues and field hollers have always negotiated with European musical traditions, and with the English language as well. By acknowledging the fact that the black musical tradition adapted and adjusted western forms to serve its own ends,

Morrison paves the way for a discussion of *Beloved* from a jazz vantage point of view, since jazz music is the outcome of transcultural influences.

Alan J. Rice in his essay, "Jazzing it Up A Storm: The Execution and meaning of Toni Morrison's Jazzy Prose Style" also cautions against isolating *Jazz* as Morrison's only jazz-influenced work as "all her works have been informed by the rhythms and cadences of a black musical tradition."⁴³ Clearly marked references to jazz musical material and styles abound in *Beloved* and this is reflected in Morrison's play with repetition, both as a literary and musical device, by repeating memories and images recreating the thought processes of her characters. Alan J. Rice comments on how Morrison applies the technique of the riff to construct a "jazzthetic" narrative style.⁴⁴ Conversations are thus arranged like a piece of music, such as the one between Paul D and Sethe on the subject of Halle having witnessed schoolteacher's nephews stealing her milk. Their questions and answers, repeated in their entirety, or varied only by a pronoun or a negative, form a counterpoint. The repetitions of "Slowly' slowly" and "carefully, carefully" are in contrast to Sethe's frantic questioning, "He saw? He saw? He saw?" (*B*, p.61)

Similarly, another illustration of Morrison's technique of repetition to foreground the musicality of her text is provided in the section in which Sethe recollects her first sexual encounter with Halle, in a

cornfield. The voyeurism in which the other men engage while watching the moving corn, is reflected by a lingering and repetitive description of the way they prepare the damaged corn to eat that evening. Here, as Paul D lies beside her in bed, Sethe and Paul D's memories blend and fuse together. No speech is reported, yet their thoughts coincide and overlap, and emphasized by the choral repetitions of a key-phrase – “How loose the silk” (*B*, p.27), which is repeated four times with only one variation. Here, Sethe and Paul D display a combination of self-absorption and awareness of each other that is the trademark of jazz musicians. This is seen in the way they take thematic and imagistic cues from one another and in how they repeat motifs- eyes, faces, corn- on different instruments.⁴⁵ Thus, a close examination of this passage reveals a process of interchange that takes place that is very musical in form, the theme-and-variation sort of movement so central to the art of jazz.

The technique of cutting back to the central riff, referred to by Rice is used by Morrison to return to an earlier event just as the black musician returns again and again to an old theme. The narrative sequence regarding Sethe's killing of her baby is told through the flashbacks of many characters, who “play on what they discover, in their own ways with their own voices, creating jazzy solos which contain...repetition and rifting.”⁴⁶ In this way, different versions of the same event are created much like the

jazz musicians who improvise on the original tune to bring something of their individual selves into it.

In *Beloved*, the 'poetic' section revealing the thoughts of the three main female protagonists exemplifies Morrison's attempts to do what jazz musicians achieve in music. The opening lines of each section pursue a fundamental riff or theme: "Beloved. She is mine." This core theme is varied, rephrased and explored in the solo flights of Sethe, Denver and Beloved, each woman improvising on the same theme. After this, the voices integrate once again and the same variations are revisited, this time in call-and-response fashion.

The three female voices join in a polyphonic, collective chorus. The use of a chorus, a musical device, is a tribute to the importance of music for black heritage. The chorus here is beautifully constructed and the interaction of the speakers/singers is very similar to that of jazz musicians in a jam session in which the individual soloists draw on the performances that precede theirs. The session usually culminates in an ensemble performance with the musicians meshing their solo efforts in a complex convergence of sound, yet even within the collective chorus, the individual voices retain their distinctive qualities: "Beloved/You are my sister/You are my daughter/You are my face; you are me.../You are mine /You are mine/ You are mine." (*B*, p.216, p.217)

Morrison also demonstrates what happens in the absence of song in the novel. Song functions differently in expressing Sethe's alienation from the community. Whereas Paul D, and even Sixo, uses song to express their personhood under slavery, with Sethe, it defines her isolation from her own people. After killing her daughter, she walks through "a throng of black faces" but without "the cape of sound to hold and steady her on her way." The crucial absence of song is significant. It highlights how Sethe's own people believe her to be inhuman, a fact that is not helped by her own proud silence and apparent aloofness. It also signifies her formal banishment from the community. Further, her unrepentant condition is expressed by her refusal to join "in the hymns the others sang with all their hearts" (*B*, p.171) at Baby Suggs's funeral.

On the other hand, Morrison uses the prevalence of song at the end of the novel to re-establish Sethe's humanity. A significant "musical" moment is found when after a twenty-year policy of banishment from the community, the women, inspired by Ella, undergo a change in their attitude towards Sethe. Morrison reinstates song here to reflect the change as the community's women gather at 124 Bluestone Road to rescue Sethe from the haunting child-woman Beloved. In a revision of the Scripture, the women go back to the beginning of sound:

In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what the sound sounded like.
(*B*, p.259)

“Building voice upon voice upon voice,” the sound they create is so harmonious and powerful that it “br[eaks] the back of words.”(*B*, p.261)

Musically speaking, this passage refers to the significance of music and musical expression, sound, in the African-American world. The sound that exists before language refers to the sound patterns of music that originated in African culture, and thus, is older than the English word. For Morrison, African-American writing fundamentally relies on the sounds and rhythms of black music and her own aesthetic shows an awareness of the musicality of black language and speech.

The musical quality of Morrison’s text is apparent through her appropriation of the rhythms of blues, spirituals and jazz, which are firmly rooted in the oral tradition. Her musical texts (particularly spirituals, song-sermons and blues) not only create a distinctive folk-based genre, but through the participatory nature of this music, Morrison invites the reader to take part in the creative process and thereby, in the oral tradition itself.

Jazz (Part 1): Storytelling and the jazz paradigm

Jazz music pervades the whole of Morrison’s *Jazz* and provides not only the subject and theme but also the literary technique for the novel.

The relation between music and storytelling is exemplified through the fact that just as in jazz, the music, the musician and the performance are one, so also in *Jazz*, theme, structure, style and language blend together to highlight the problems confronting African-Americans and to suggest solutions that are needed for their survival in an era of discord and fragmentation. Consequently, *Jazz* is a novel not only set in the jazz-era but also one that develops a jazz aesthetic of its own. In *Jazz*, Morrison incorporates many elements of jazz, leading her readers to explore the extent to which it manifests itself in this novel and to speculate about its overall significance.

The title of Morrison's novel draws attention to the particular type of music created by African-Americans in the 1920s as well as to the book's jazz-like narrative structure and themes. Jazz is the best-known artistic creation of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, also called the Jazz Age by Scott Fitzgerald. Considering Morrison's concern throughout her fiction with notions of loss resulting from Black Americans' historical, cultural, and aesthetic dislocation and its ramifications, *Jazz* is a novel in which she attempts to reclaim a uniquely African-American tradition and to reconceptualize the Jazz Age, in black terms. She does this by undercutting Fitzgerald's popularized version about this age in the glamorous and lavish lifestyle and settings of the rich as portrayed in, for

instance, *The Great Gatsby*,⁴⁷ as well as the postwar euphoria that is found in white history. In contrast, Morrison's focus is on the places and the lived reality of the people that made jazz possible- "the poor black ghetto in the Harlem."⁴⁸ The music of the 1920s thus situate the narrative in a specific cultural and historical moment, when a black aesthetic style was gaining ground in cities like New Orleans and New York. Harlem, during the Harlem Renaissance/New Negro era,⁴⁹ is a setting that produced notable 1920s jazz musicians such as Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet, Coleman Hawkins, and Duke Ellington. However, Morrison does not mention any of these famous names- instead, she foregrounds the more 'anonymous' street musicians of the City and their music which fill the streets, day and night.

Thus, firstly and most crucially, Morrison affirms and acknowledges the African American heritage of *Jazz*, by putting the focus on ordinary people, who collectively create and reflect community. By shifting the emphasis to the black community of the New York of this age, Morrison calls attention to the indigenous original context of jazz music and to the evolutionary changes that represents more than mere matters of fashion. She traces the emergence of the era of the "New Negro" culture through the stories of characters like Joe Trace, a member of the working class whose status is very different from the glamorous

position of writers and musicians patronized by the whites, and through the music that expressed this culture. The novel explores how blacks struggled to reconcile the conflicting experiences of hope and disillusionment, excitement and boredom, novelty and misery that they found in the cities of the North. Through a textual record of Joe and Violet Trace's migratory experiences, Morrison reveals the course of evolving cultural and personal identities as they undergo the transformation that accompanies migration. The change that confronted these migrants forced them to reformulate their values and way of life. This change is embodied by the sounds of jazz which, by virtue of its defining characteristics as a fast-paced, chaotic, unpredictable music well reflects the "uncertainty and unpredictability of people's lives in the 1920s."⁵⁰ Thus, in *Jazz*, Morrison uses jazz as a metaphor for emerging cultural values of the city.

The fact that the novel has grown out of an oral tradition of storytelling means that it does not have a linear plot. Instead, as a collection of story segments, which go backward and forward in time, it unfolds in a manner that is not chronological. Using the meandering technique she often employs, Morrison allows the story to develop through several digressions and sub-plots. Such a pattern of storytelling, while having its roots in the oral communicative tradition, also fits in

with the structural composition of a piece of jazz music. In jazz music too, the initial melody introduced is subsequently unraveled, commented upon, and further embellished. The jazzman improvises on the same piece by changing the music's direction and even creating a disconnection from the original piece.

In Morrison's novel, we can see this kind of improvisation in the way she establishes the narrative line with an oral recapitulation of a love story, a triangular one involving a middle-aged couple Joe and Violet Trace and Joe's 18-year-old lover, Dorcas. The very first paragraph of the novel reveals how Joe kills Dorcas and how Violet "went to the funeral to see the girl and to cut her dead face" (*J*, p.4). Thereafter, like the performers in a jazz band who take turns to improvise upon the musical theme, the rest of the novel replays this initial 'basic theme' in different ways, with varying explanations and versions told by the characters. Each time a new player repeats a jazz riff,⁵¹ a new surprising and distinct rendering of the theme emerges. Likewise, a new story segment in the novel will unfold an unexpected outcome of the Violet-Joe-Dorcas theme.

Fragmented storytelling is a characteristic of the oral narrative used by Morrison to redefine the structure of her novels. Each of these episodic fragments shed more light on the main theme since they are in fact, extensions of it, and connected to it, in jazz terminology, by the

same connected riff. The link between some of these episodes with the main theme is not difficult to recognize, such as, for example, the story of Dorcas and her troubled childhood in New York, or Joe Trace's past in Vienna, Virginia. Others, however, present initial difficulties, as they seem to take off in a completely different direction. A significant example is the telling of the story of Golden Gray, which at first seems unrelated to the main plotlines. In between these versions are the solo statements by the unnamed narrator.

Fragmentation is seen as an aspect of jazz music, which Morrison applies to *Jazz* with regard to the blank spaces between the untitled, subdivided portions of the sections. Each blank space can be seen to mirror the improvisation technique of jazz music: each narrative monologue (chapter) functions as instrumental solos, a different tale about a different character linked by the riff of the narrative voice. The breaks between the chapters (like the blank spaces and pages) punctuate the structure, and like the improvising musician who alters the music, Morrison pushes the narrative in a slightly different direction. In both cases, this creates a disjunction from the original piece/theme. In *Jazz*, each of the sections of the novel relates a different tale about a different character's life and thoughts. Consequently, each chapter can be read as a solo played by a different instrument. Each time that Morrison hands the narrative over to

a character, it is as though she is giving him or her a solo over the background form of the story, as if the novel were itself a piece of jazz music. However, the first sentence of the next chapter picks up on an idea, word, or phrase from the last sentence of the preceding chapter providing a continuing link between them. We observe, for example, that section four ends with "...in a hat in the morning" (*J*, p.87) and the next section starts with "...the hat pushed back" (*J*, p.89). By employing such a linkage between her chapters, Morrison, as Rodriguez points out, also provides the reader with a "rhythmic flow" or "transitional slurs"⁵² that urge the reader to read the book without a pause after finishing a chapter.

In *Jazz*, "the central characters take part in telling the story, even the dead girl Dorcas."⁵³ Besides the human protagonists in the story, there are also non-human characters, such as the City, which is frequently personified. In addition, there is the narrative Voice her/him/itself- a hybrid, androgynous creature, half artifact, and half-human whose point of view is as important as those of the other characters, for a single musician never "dominates the whole performance."⁵⁴ Thus, the novel is filled with contesting, complementary, and competing voices that is similar to what takes place in a jam session. The various stories and voices that the narrator evokes reflect this kind of performance in which each musician adds his own attitude, perspective, and tone. In this way,

Jazz becomes a text with a polyphonic narrative structure similar to the telling of the same story from different perspectives or the cross connecting of different storylines found in Morrison's previous novels. As a result, the relation between music and storytelling becomes clearer when we equate jazz improvisations to storytelling.

Jazz also manifests itself in Morrison's novel through stylistic techniques such as repetition, which according to Alan Rice "foregrounds the musicality of her novels and makes them resemble the involved, convoluted, non-linear, and improvisatory solos of the African-American musicians she values so much."⁵⁵ Through the technique of the riff, Morrison uses repeated words, phrases, and motifs in the novel to create the effect of riffs, which provide a stable infrastructure within an otherwise meandering narrative. A sophisticated system of repeated motifs is at work in all her novels, some motifs functioning merely as ornaments- while others carry thematic content.

The characteristic riffs of repeated phrases and repetition of even whole sentences are found throughout the novel. The moments before Joe Trace shoots Dorcas at a party illustrates this technique. Even while dancing with Acton, her new boyfriend, Dorcas knows at the back of her mind that Joe is coming for her. Her repeated words "He is coming for me" fulfill her role as the "prey" that Joe Trace is stalking. Other phrases

such as “I know,” “Maybe tonight” and “I know the words by heart,” sound like riffs which support a solo. This element of repetition that appears in jazz is utilized to draw attention to a line, phrase, or particular chord that drives the song and serves to underline the importance of the song that is being played. For instance, in *Jazz*, the oft-repeated theme of orphaned children, of familial and personal fragmentation is the driving force that causes each of the characters, Violet, Joe, Dorcas, to act and interact as they do.

Like a jazz pianist who can, in the deftest, most subtle ways, give a new theme, new harmonies or a different ambience, Morrison incorporates the illusion of one of jazz’s most characteristic elements, improvisation. The most important aspect of Morrison’s storytelling style that is particularly jazz-like is the narrative voice she employs. Several critics have pointed out that the narrator is a jazz soloist who improvises on the basic theme and thereafter invents, elaborates and explores new motifs and ideas.⁵⁶ Moreover, the oral and aural quality of Morrison’s writing is manifested in the use of ‘whispering’ and gossipy narrators to tell the Violet-Joe-Dorcas story. The conversational tone of their storytelling gives the story not only the quality of hearsay but also indicates the cultural context of her novel. The opening word/sound “Sth”⁵⁷ read as the sound of sucking teeth, often made in judgment on

some person or event in African-American communities, sets off the narrative of an impatient and familiar storyteller:

Sth, I know that woman. [...] I know her husband, too. He fell for an eighteen-year-old girl with one of those deepdown, spooky loves that made him so sad and happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going. When the woman, her name is Violet, went to the funeral to see the girl and cut her dead face they threw her to the floor and out of the church. (J, p.3)

Morrison, commenting on the improvisational nature of jazz, says that in jazz “the performance is open to change and the other musicians have to respond quickly to that change.”⁵⁸ Consequently, in *Jazz*, she creates a narrator who is not sure where the story is going. She recreates the unpredictability of jazz with the use of an unreliable narrator who constantly sends the reader on false tracks. Just like the melody in jazz compositions, which tends to dissolve away before returning, Morrison’s narrator cannot foresee the development of the action in the novel. It does have expectations, however. It expects the outcome of the Felice-Joe-Violet triangle to be the same as the earlier triangle of Dorcas- Joe-Violet. When the story is set up in the same way, however, the song plays differently. Joe, Violet, and Felice “put their lives together” in ways that the speaking voice of the text does not anticipate:

It infuriates me to discover again how unreliable I am. [...] I had thought I knew them and wasn’t worried that they didn’t really know about me. Now it’s clear why they contradicted me at every turn: they knew me all along. (J, p.220)

As Morrison says, “when the question becomes whether the narrator was right in his or her expectations of exactly what the story was, that is the ‘melody’ being taken away.”⁵⁹ She suggests here that the direction of the book does not depend only on her own will, but that the characters themselves, as well as external factors play a role in the story’s unpredictability.

Moreover, since the narrative voice is engaged in the creative process of storytelling, it reacts against and responds to other voices, picks up new motifs on the way, corrects and even contradicts itself. A telling example of this is seen in the structural revision of the narrator’s presentation of the Golden Gray story in the manner of revising involved in jazz improvisation. The narrator, who gives two versions of Golden Gray’s arrival at the cabin of the man he believes to be his father, improvises on this recounting. The second recounting that begins with “I like to think of him that way,” soon changes to “What was I thinking of? How could I have imagined him so poorly?” (*J*, p.178, p.190) Thereafter, a third version of the same story reveals a more understanding and accommodating narrator.

Hence, Morrison’s challenging concept of an unreliable narrator, who, like jazz, changes its position and face so often forces the reader to come into the text to make judgments or draw conclusions for

him/herself. The implied meaning is that instead of relying on such an unreliable narrator for a true and accurate account, readers must create their own meanings from what they have understood is the story. As an art form that arises from the oral African-American tradition, Morrison makes provision here for the presentation of multiple voices, each one distinctive and original, needed to assemble the entire story. Similarly, as an improvised creation, jazz relies on the interaction between the members of the band themselves, as also between the performers and the audiences. Morrison's novel, structurally replete with sequences of call-and-response patterns throughout, makes the final call to the reader:

If I were able I'd say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now." (*J*, p.229)

The calls-and-responses, which echo throughout *Jazz*, in the storyline, in the telling of the story, in the characters, and in the music, culminate in the novel's final call to the reader/ listener to participate in the "performance," an integral element not only in jazz but also in Morrison's own storytelling style. Morrison's insistence upon the reader as "part of the creative process" is one more link to the oral tradition and its manifestation in jazz. Just as a jazz audience may influence the performance by its response, so are our readings of her works shaped by what we bring to it. Thus, its plea for a response to its call: "If I were able

I'd say it. Say make me, remake me" (*J*, p.229), demands that the reader be active, in the same way that jazz music demands its listeners to be active.

In *Jazz*, "we are listening to the voice of Toni Morrison as the griot, the storyteller of the African Diaspora, whose function is to act as a skilled mediator of his/her community's (hi) story, as the voice of the blues men and women or of the jazz horn players. It is the voice of the whole African -American community."⁶⁰ Yet, the spaces opened up by the narrator calls to all readers, whatever their ethnic background, to participate in the making of the story. Since jazz is about the people who play it, it is therefore, a music of, for, and by the people. In this way, the jazz paradigm that Morrison appropriates generates a unique model of democracy, demonstrating its capacity to be inclusive and interactive while at the same time respecting difference.

Thus, particularly, for dispossessed people and communities struggling for self-repossession, the call to 'make and remake' themselves through improvisation, represents "a healing act of self-repossession, which heals the pain, chases the blues away."⁶¹ The greatest contribution jazz, can make to such an act is its intimacy, its personal scale. For, not only does it happen to be the toughest music around, jazz is also the most human. By implication, the same could be said of novel writing, and the

risks Morrison takes with language, narrative construction, and most of the contrivances of literary convention in order to communicate the most profound secrets of the human heart:

“That I have loved only you, surrendered my whole self reckless to you and nobody else. That I wanted you to love me back and show it to me. That I love the way you hold me, how close you let me be to you. I like your fingers on and on, lifting, turning. I have watched your face for a long time now, and missed your eyes when you went away from me. Talking to you and hearing you answer- that’s the kick. (J, p.229)

Jazz (Part 2): Singing a Blues theme

Although, most critics of *Jazz* have accounted for the role of jazz in the novel, few have commented on Morrison’s complex interweaving of the tropes of the blues, jazz and Harlem itself. In considering this aspect, Roberta Rubenstein in her essay, “Singing the blues/reclaiming jazz: Toni Morrison and Cultural Mourning,” calls attention to the ways in which Morrison thematically “sings the blues” of black experience while using a literary technique that is blues based and a narrative structure that mirrors the characteristics of a jazz performance.⁶² Thus, although *Jazz* is set in an era of emerging cultural optimism for African Americans and this optimism is sounded early on in the narrator’s celebrations of city life, beneath the surface of the characters’ lives plays “a blues theme of “complicated anger”(59) interwoven with strands of

danger, sorrow, and loss.”⁶³ In *Jazz*, Morrison captures these complex relationships between these two forms of the same music through a storytelling technique that uses the style and structure of blues and jazz including its emotional moods and contents.

In *Jazz*, as Inger–Anne Softing observes, “All the characters and episodes convey the blues and its medium is the ‘I.’ The blues is to the ‘I’ an almost gothic experience; dark, horrible, mysterious, and yet strangely sensual, and the story he tells is a tragic love story that ends in bloodshed.”⁶⁴ In traditional blues songs, the singer is usually the subject, the “I” who tells her/his own story or experience. In *Jazz*, however, an unidentified narrator tells the story of each character in the story. It seems to thrive on pain and on the lyrical laments of all the voices telling their painful stories: “Pain. I seem to have affection, a kind of sweettooth for it” (*J*, p.219). And pain is, both a fundamental concern of *Jazz* and a vital theme of the blues. The interplay between music and storytelling is most apparent here, as music seems to function as a substitute for the narrative voice illustrating what Morrison calls “the voice of the talking book.”⁶⁵

Morrison underscores her representations of loss of memory through the related themes of motherhood and orphan hood in *Jazz*. When applying the concept of turning oral blues into written blues she formulates a complex strategy that is an adaptation of blues and jazz

techniques. Besides Call and Response patterns, she utilizes repetition and redundancy to draw attention to a line, phrase, or particular chord that drives the storyline. As such, the theme of motherless children is the driving force that causes Dorcas, Violet and Joe to interact with one another as they do. The destructive influence of racism and oppression on the black family is manifested in *Jazz* by the almost-total absence of the black family. Morrison's mothers previously incomparable in their strength and endurance, succumb to the social, economic, and political forces of history in *Jazz*. Joe, Violet, and Dorcas lose their mothers to insanity, suicide, and murder. In the same way that each of these characters have lost their parents, Morrison makes the argument that the African-American community as a whole experienced a sort of "orphanhood" during this turbulent period.

The absence of a strong parental presence in *Jazz* ties together many of Morrison's characters and connect their shared sadness to one cause. Raised by aunts, grandparents and adoptive parents, Violet, Joe and Dorcas all experience feelings of displacement and loneliness, and their struggle to find solace from their blues is the central concern of the novel. For instance, Violet is the main character through whom Morrison articulates her negotiation of the concept of romantic love, jealousy, and community as well as domestic violence that was integral to the blues. As

an orphan deserted by her father during adolescence, and abandoned by her mother who commits suicide by jumping into a well, Violet grew up convinced that she never wanted children of her own. In 1906, Joe and Violet take a train to New York, joining a steady migration of black Southerners. Excited and challenged by the rigours of “citylife,” the couple decides that they did not want children and Violet’s three miscarriages “were more inconvenience than loss.” By the time she was forty, however, Violet’s “mother-hunger” had become “a panting, unmanageable craving.” Plainly, Violet “has the blues”: she is the silent, lonely woman craving the child she once aborted, who sleeps with dolls and even tries to steal a child. Her response to the news of her husband’s affair is a jealous rage that propels her to cut up the face of her husband’s dead girlfriend at her funeral.

Violet’s blues lament is clearly the stuff of the “classic blues,” the urban form popularized by African-American women blues singers like Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith and Mamie Smith. Following the women’s classic blues tradition of identifying the relation between sexuality and violence, and the blues theme of violent revenge,⁶⁶ women arming themselves with knives, is an important image in *Jazz*. In *Jazz*, as Alice Manfred considers the newspaper headlines detailing murders, betrayals, rapes and suicides, she thinks about the violence that seems to

characterize the era. She maligns Violet as “a brutal woman black as soot known to carry a knife... the star of her niece’s funeral.” (*J*, p.75) “Women with knives” becomes a species of women in which Alice includes anonymous, historic women who attacked men and “left the razor where it lodged,” (*J*, p.77) and encoded in many a blues is the rage of women against male infidelity and desertion. In a passage that employs call-and-response techniques that is reminiscent of the blues as well as traditional congregational participatory practices, the narrator poses a series of questions and answers concerning the “unarmed women” who did not retaliate like the “armed” ones:

Who were the unarmed ones? Those who found protection in church and the judging, angry God whose wrath in their behalf was too terrible to bear contemplation. He was not just on His way, coming, coming to right the wrongs done to them. He was here. Already. See? See? What the world had done to them it was now doing to itself. Did the world mess over them? Yes but look where the mess originated. Were they berated and cursed? Oh yes but look how the world cursed and berated itself. (*J*, pp.77-78)

But despite herself, Alice, whose own husband had cheated on her with another woman, shares Violet’s desire for vengeance as her vision of a horse trampling her husband’s lover to death illustrates.

However, fundamental to the blues form is also the transmission of cultural knowledge and values. Embedded in traditional blues lyrics is a system of folk knowledge and cultural values that can lead to easing pain

or grief. Although blues verses are viewed from the personal angle of the singer, they also have within them, advice, and counsel for others that stem from the singer's experience.⁶⁷ Thus, when Violet wonders whether she should stay with Joe or leave him, Alice is able to advise Violet to reclaim herself: "Nobody's asking you to take it. I'm sayin make it, make it!" (*J*, p.113)

When the two women talk in Alice's apartment, "something opened up." (*J*, p.83) This suggests the possibility of recognizing each other's subjectivity. Violet must first see herself as a subject; she must have a consciousness of herself not as an appendage of the male but as a power in her own right. It follows then, that women must first recognize each other as subjects. Significantly, too, they share laughter. When Alice accidentally burns a hole in the shirt that she was ironing, the laughter they share is therapeutic. Violet is freed from the female blues narrative of revenge to which she had been clinging:

Crumpled over, shoulders shaking, Violet thought about how she must have looked at the funeral, at what her mission was. The sight of herself trying to do something bluesy, something hep, fumbling with the knife, too late anyway...She laughed till she coughed [...] (*J*, p.114)

Standing at the blues crossroads,⁶⁸ she is able to achieve the necessary distance from the lack and loss expressed earlier in her blues narrative. This is nothing but assertion of ownership and control of one's bodies,

that is the underlying tenet of blues wisdom, which stems from being able to be brutally and painfully honest with oneself.

In *Jazz*, while the “blues” of black experience reveals the painful realities of the divisions fracturing African-American society, Morrison restructures the blues into jazz, by transforming blues materials into something that can provide alternative possibilities. By grounding her novel in the traditions of jazz music Morrison seeks to use it as a vehicle to heal the characters in her novel that are afflicted with the blues. Hence, the reconciliation of Joe and Violet becomes possible. By the end of the novel, the healing triangle of Joe-Violet-Felice replaces the wounded love triangle of Joe-Violet-Dorcas. Felice’s entry into the Trace apartment reestablishes the exchange of stories that bring the Trace couple together again. In the end, one of their necessary rituals for the night is a whispered dialogue “under the covers” as they reach “for something beyond... underneath the tissue” (*J*, p.228). Felice also reestablishes laughter, sustenance and music in the Trace household. Her entrance with an “Okeh record”⁶⁹ and a butcher’s parcel of “stewmeat” are followed by a Victrola, additional records and a bird.

They are eating again and dancing, and Felice becomes a witness and participant to the healing process of Joe and Violet, who overcome their pain and connect through the music on a level that changes the

situation, a change that is embodied by the protean sounds of jazz. This music represents an original African-American response to the need for community cohesion. Like storytelling, black music making is collective, improvisational and was a source of cultural unification. Morrison attempts to recreate the unity that jazz had once engendered and nourished, by transposing into fiction not only its techniques, but also the spirit of jazz itself. In that jazz consists in expressing and emphasizing difference in collectivity, or what Houston Baker terms, “identity within difference,”⁷⁰ it is always open to response and change by the community. In this sense, the experience of reading *Jazz* will also at once be the same and different for every reader of Morrison’s reading community.

Paradise: Salvatory Music

Music in *Paradise* differs from that in Morrison’s other novels. One of the most obvious references to music in the novel is “radio music” or songs played on the radio. This music functions primarily as a means of escape, of pushing aside the past. Mavis fleeing from the fear of her family’s revenge after the accidental deaths of her two babies in the car, tries to escape her dreadful memories and guilty feelings by listening to the music droning on her car radio. Listening also to the voice of Bennie, one of the hitchhikers she picks up on the way carries her through the long journey. Bennie’s songs of “true love, false love, redemption; songs

of unreasonable joy” (*P*, p.35) help to channel her locked-up grief and ease the pain she feels:

Mile after mile rolled by urged and eased by the gorgeous ache in Bennie’s voice.” (*P*, p.35)

At the Convent where Mavis finds temporary refuge, the absence of a radio or any other means of music-making makes it difficult for her to concentrate on anything. Sitting in the Convent’s peaceful kitchen, Mavis finds it difficult to bear the silence without the sound of music to keep her going:

Now the radio was across the field, down one road, then another. Off. In the space where its sound ought to be was...nothing. Just an absence, which she did not think she could occupy properly without the framing bliss of the radio. From the table where she sat admiring her busy hands, the radio absence spread out.” (*P*, p.42)

For Mavis, who is in a state of denial, music is the only way to drown the unbearable sounds of laughing and singing children, of “imagining baby’s singing.” (*P*, p.42) On the road, after Bennie has left her, she too sings along with the radio, “mourning” her own “inferior rendition” (*P*, p.35), rather than the deaths of her children.

Radio music also functions as means to effect reconciliation between the women at the Convent. The communal caring the women who land up there receives, does not homogenize them. They remain distinct from each other and at times even demonstrate unconcealed

dislike for each other, particularly Mavis and Gigi, who from the first, never got along. Their aversion for each other culminates in a brawl in which they exchange blows, “their bodies roiling in the dust and crushing weeds.” (*P*, p.168) However, music, in conjunction with food, offers a possibility for psychic healing to take place. The preparation and sharing of meals, described with concrete, sensual details, function in the novel as an instance of a kind of community that is firmly grounded in the material realm. After the physical fight between Mavis and Gigi, all of the women unite over food: “The fear, the bickering, the nausea, the awful dirt fight, the tears in the dark—all of the day’s unruly drama dissipated in the pleasure of chewing food” together. (*P*, p.179) And when Gigi finds the station she is looking for on her wide-band radio, and starts dancing to the soothing sounds of “Killing me Softly,” (the ironical title notwithstanding) the others “all followed suit. Even Mavis. First apart, imagining partners. Then partnered, imagining each other.” (*P*, p.179) Antagonisms and hierarchies dissipate through the process of caring for their bodies and psyches communally.

In many cultures, music and dance are often seen as empowering activities, offering a forum for individual self-expression, or acting like a religious ritual that binds the community and renews the individual spiritually. In African culture, inherent in the act of music and dancing

are, in varying degrees, self-affirmation, spiritual renewal, and communal bonding, suggesting music and dance's ability to heal the mind/body split. As John S. Mbiti indicates, music, singing, and dance together are used "in all activities of African life: in cultivating the fields, fishing, herding, performing ceremonies, praising rulers and warriors, hushing babies to sleep..."⁷¹ Mbiti testifies to dance celebrations as also dissolving barriers between individuals: "The dancing and rejoicing strengthen community solidarity and emphasize the corporateness of the whole group."⁷²

In *Paradise*, although the Convent women take an important step towards forming a caring communal space through the agencies of food, music, and dance, the relief they experience is only temporary. They have still not dealt with the root causes of their problems and the memories of their tortured pasts are but momentarily silenced. Morrison makes a distinction between passive listening to music and the active creation of music. The women's reactions to "radio music, record music—music already dead" (P, p.111) is not empowering enough for self-discovery, and self-acceptance, necessary to achieve the spiritual renewal and communal bonding they are each in quest of. Morrison suggests that they must first learn to create their own music, affective music that is therapeutic and life giving before they can be truly empowered. For, although the girls continue to listen to radio music, they remain detached

and isolated from each other, until Consolata tired of listening to their indulgent self-deceptive dreams, takes control to alter the situation.

Music in Ruby consists mostly of religious hymns and choral pieces, as all other music in their eyes, is “filthy music” that is equivalent to “[w]ickedness in the streets, theft in the night, murder in the morning. Liquor for lunch and dope for dinner.” (*P*, p.274) The communal and individually affirming elements of song and dance for participants and spectators alike in most communities are not witnessed in Ruby’s dogmatic and puritanical society. Even at the wedding ceremony of K.D. and Arnette, what should have been an occasion for individual and communal rejoicing and strengthening of ties, becomes an event for airing individual world-views and denominational beliefs. What is revealed are the differences that exist between the most powerful men living in Ruby, focusing attention on a town and structure that privilege men and fathers as well as a religious structure that is itself deeply patriarchal. As hitherto hidden resentments and emotions build up and threaten to erupt, the music played by Kate Golightly, on the Church’s organ provides a much-needed emotional outlet for the tension generated. As the music begins, “Soane cried. Partly at the sad bright smiles of the bride and groom, partly in dread of the malice, set roaming now, and on its way to her house.” (*P*, p.155) Thereafter, the congregation takes

refuge in their members singing “duets” or choruses. Nevertheless, the original salvatory intentions of these sacred hymns are emptied of their significance and power, as they only serve to cover up awkwardness and tenseness of the situation.

Morrison provides for the seemingly peaceful religious music of Ruby to come into conflict with the “raucous music” blaring from the radio played by the young people near the site of the Oven. The screaming sound of Otis Redding “obliterate[ed] the hymns quiet plea. Inside, outside on down the road the beat and the heat were ruthless.” (*P*, p.157) The different types of music symbolize the gap between the generations in Ruby, evidenced in the disparity in musical tastes. The confrontation between the two generations and the conflict between the Convent women and the town’s inhabitants is figured in the contest between the loud modern music from the radio and traditional Church music. The patriarchs of Ruby regard the playing of this kind of music as open rebellion. Earlier, Deacon Morgan voices the older generation’s disapproval of their youths’ new tastes and habits, including the listening of radio music at the Oven’s site, which is profane in his opinion:

The Oven whose every brick had live chords praising His name was now subject to radio music—music already dead when it filtered through a black wire trailing from Anna’s store to the Oven like a snake.” (*P*, p.111)

The reference to “snake” obviously reflects his equation of this type of music to “devil music” often associated with blues and pop music. Just as the elders deny the younger generation a place in the town’s history by the silencing of their voices, so too are they denied the right to listen to or make music of their own choice. No wonder, they are a deadened and detached lot condemned to listening to “music already dead.” (*P*, p.111)

Through the metaphors of song and dance, Morrison depicts the Convent women’s quest for identity and self-expression and the results of this quest, including spiritual renewal, self-acceptance, and newly defined identities. Consolata initiates the communal healing ritual that will free the women to redefine and be themselves. She begins with ritualistic storytelling telling the women lying on the cold cellar floor of her experiences with Piedade and the magical Brazilian city of the same name, “a place where white sidewalks met the sea and fish the color of plums swam alongside children.[...] She told them of a woman who always sang but never said a word.” (*P*, p.263-264) Her narration unleashes the stories of the other women as through “loud dreaming” they each begin to recount their personal blues, testified to and witnessed by the others. The healing of the Convent women is accomplished through the cleansing ritual of water, dance, and music in symbiotic relationship. These women in quest of themselves can now understand and express

their multiple selves by letting go of their traumatic past. This is described through their dance in the rain. As the novel states:

There are great rivers in the world and on their banks and the edges of oceans children thrill to water. In places where the rain is light the thrill is almost erotic. But those sensations bow to the rapture of the holy women dancing in hot sweet rain." (*P*, p.283)

Mbiti states that the borderlands between the human world and the spirit world also merge in the dancing or religious mediums -- often women -- who communicate with spirits or are possessed by them.⁷³ In *Paradise*, almost like a cathartic religious ritual, dance helps the women shake off despair and isolation by enabling them to communicate more effectively with each other and with their private selves. Through the language of music and dance, Morrison signifies her character's self-discoveries, self-expression, and self-endorsement. Thus, she poetically presents the women celebrating their kinship and support of each other as they dance the blues of race and gender:

Seneca embraced and finally let go of a dark morning in state housing. Grace witnessed the successful cleansing of a white that never should have been stained. Mavis moved in the shudder of Sharon petals tickling her skin. Pallas, delivered of a delicate son, held him close while the rain rinsed away a scary woman on an escalator and all fear of black water. Consolata, fully housed by the god who sought her out in the garden was the most furious dancer, Mavis the most elegant. Seneca and Grace danced together, then parted to skip through fresh mud. Pallas, smoothing raindrops from her baby's head, swayed like a frond. (*P*, p.283)

The women celebrate their newfound freedom by listening to more stories of “the singing woman who never spoke.” (*P*, p.285) Consolata’s storytelling is suffused with images of water, food, and song:

We walked on the shore walk. She bathed me in the emerald water. Her voice made proud women weep in the streets. Coins fell from the fingers of artists and policemen and the country’s greatest chefs begged us to eat their food. Piedade had songs that could still a wave, make it pause in its curl listening to language it had not heard since the sea opened. Shepherd with colored birds on their shoulders came down from mountains to remember their lives in her songs. Travelers refused to board homebound ships while she sang. At night she took stars out of her hair and wrapped me in its wool. Her breath smelled of pineapple and cashews. (*P*, p.284-285)

Soon after, the women at the Convent are killed, but the novel suggests that they have experienced the salvatory quality of music that is associated with the divine. Through their empowering renditions of their personal blues, they are able to create their own music and transform it into a song fit for paradise. Morrison ends the novel with a presentation of the hereafter in which “a woman black as firewood is singing. Next to her is a younger woman whose head rests on the singing woman’s lap.” (*P*, p.318) In this paradise, however, the “solace” of Piedade’s song can exist side by side with sound of the “small dead radio play[ing] the quiet surf.” (*P*, p.318)

As an African-American woman writer who has found her own voice, Toni Morrison uses themes and metaphors of storytelling, song and

dance, and evokes the African belief in the power of all three mediums to dissipate boundaries. Moreover, the musical and dance rhythms that pervade her prose, frees the text from traditional language, structures, and genres. Through the combination of music and storytelling, she recreates new means to fuse the written and oral words, incorporating them into a hybrid form that transcends them both.

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- Ntozake Shange, *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo*, (New York: St. Martin's 1982), p.27.

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- ⁶ Ibid, p.221.
- ⁷ Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell this Morning*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.10.
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- ⁹ LeClair, p.371.
- ¹⁰ Cat Moses, in her article, "The Blues Aesthetic in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*" discusses the novel as a blues narrative and posits Claudia as the narrative's blues subject and representative blues figure who testifies to Pecola's pain and 'songs' the community's blues. See "The Blues Aesthetic in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," in *African American Review* 33:4 (1999, Winter). pp.623-636. Cited after: http://findarticles.com/cf_0/m2838/4_33?59024884/print.jhtml, 30th June 2002. 1 of 18 pages.
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¹⁷ For a more detailed study of call and response patterns, see Maggie Sale, "Call and Response as Critical Method: Afro-American oral Tradition and *Beloved*," *African American Review* vol. 26.1 (1992), and K.O'Shaughnessy, "Life Life Life Life: the Community as Chorus in *Song of Solomon*," *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*. (1988).

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¹⁹ Joseph Skerrett, "Recitation to the Griot: Storytelling and Learning in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*." in *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and Literary Tradition*, ed. Pryse and Spillers (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p.199.

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²² Wegs, p.212.

²³ Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell this Morning*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.90.

²⁴ Ibid, p.278.

²⁵ Levine, p.278.

²⁶ Skerrett, p.198.

²⁷ Wegs, p.219.

- ²⁸ The Talking blues was a style of rhythmic speech or near-speech where the melody is free but the rhythm is strict. The music genre or technique developed in the blues in the early 20th century from influences including African music, British folk song, and the music-hall stage. (van der Merwe 1989:146–148).
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- ³² Cf: <http://atilf.atilf.fr/dendien/scripts/fast.exe?mot=blues>
- ³³ Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The African American Presence in American Literature,” *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 28 (Winter 1989), p.30.
- ³⁴ Eusebio L. Rodriguez, “The Telling of *Beloved*,” *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 21.2 (1991), pp.153-169.
- ³⁵ Alan J. Rice, “Jazzing It Up A Storm: The Execution and Meaning of Toni Morrison’s Jazzy Prose Style.” *The Journal of American Studies* 28 (1994), p.430.
- ³⁶ Cf. Levine, pp.51-52.
- ³⁷ Bob Marley, one of the greatest Reggae artists, who innovatively combined sounds and ideas from religious slave spirituals with his own unique Jamaican music to form a legendary musical genre.
- ³⁸ www.lyricsfreak.com/b/bob+marley/redemption+song_20021829.html
- ³⁹ John S Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (London: Heinemann, 1975), p.61.

- ⁴⁰ In “trick[ing] the words so that their syllables yield up other meanings” (*B*, p.108), the prisoners also signify on their masters by manipulating meaning.
- ⁴¹ Paul Oliver, “*Blues Fell*,” pp.43-44.
- ⁴² Eugene Field, Lullaby land. Songs of Childhood. <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/lady-button-eyes/> as retrieved on 2 Apr. 2008.
- ⁴³ Rice, p.423.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid, p.425.
- ⁴⁵ Cheryl Hall, “Beyond the ‘literary habit’: Oral Tradition and Jazz in ‘*Beloved*.’” Spec. Issue of *Varieties of Ethnic Criticism, MELUS*, (Spring, 1994).
- ⁴⁶ Rice, p.430.
- ⁴⁷ N. Pici, “Trading Meanings: The Breadth of Music in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*.” *Connotations*, 7.3 (1997-98), p.393.
- ⁴⁸ Inger-Anne Softing, “Carnival and Black American Music as Counterculture in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and *Jazz*,” *American Studies in Scandinavia*, 27.2 (1995), p.94.
- ⁴⁹ The term “Harlem Renaissance” (1917-35), refers to the flowering of African-American cultural production that occurred in New York in the 1920s and early 1930s. It also marks the rise of the “New Negro” (a phrase coined by Alain Locke, the first black Rhodes scholar), an articulate, sophisticated bourgeois class of black intellectuals immersed in cultural and aesthetic pursuits. As Harlem Renaissance artists articulated individual and collective visions of black identity, they were plagued by conflicting demands that they use their art either to

distance themselves from or bind themselves to white American culture. The formation of subjectivity of the Negro and that of his identity was the dynamic force of the Jazz Age.

- ⁵⁰ Linden Peach, *Toni Morrison*, (St. Martin's Press, 1995), p.116.
- ⁵¹ Repetition, both in jazz and in Morrison's storytelling, occurs as riffs—short melodic or harmonic phrases repeated in given intervals throughout the song.
- ⁵² Rodriguez, "Experiencing Jazz," *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 39.3-4 (Fall/winter 1993), p.740.
- ⁵³ Softing, p.94.
- ⁵⁴ Cf. Hackney "I Come from People Who Sang All the Time." Interview. *Humanities* 17.1 (March/April 1996) p.6.
- ⁵⁵ Rice, p.424.
- ⁵⁶ For instance, see Rubenstein "Singing the blues/reclaiming jazz: Toni Morrison and Cultural Mourning," *Mosaic*, (Winnipeg) 31.2 (1998), pp.152-55; Paquet-Deyris, "Toni Morrison's Jazz and the City," *African American Review*, 35.2 (Summer 2001), pp.221-23; Paula Gallant Eckard in "The inter-play of Music, Language, and Narrative in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*." *CLA Journal* 38.1 (1994), contends that the novel's narrative voice is that of jazz itself (pp.16-17); Jan Furman in *Toni Morrison's Fiction*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), reads the voice of the book as "the author incarnate[ed]" (p.100), Rodriguez identifies it with "the voice of the city" (p.148).
- ⁵⁷ Rodriguez likens it to "the muted soundsplash of a brush against a snare drum" p.733; Pici recalls the sound of a ride cymbal—the principal cymbal of jazz drum rhythms. p.388]

- ⁵⁸ Cf. Angels Carabi, "Interview with Toni Morrison," *Belles Lettres* 10.2 (1995) pp. 41-42
- ⁵⁹ Cf. Sheldon Hackney, p.7.
- ⁶⁰ Veronique Lesoinne, "Answer Jazz's in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*." In: *MELUS*. 22-3 (1997) p.195.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid*, p.164.
- ⁶² Cf. Roberta Rubenstein, "Singing the blues/reclaiming jazz: Toni Morrison and Cultural Mourning," *Mosaic*, (Winnipeg) 31.2 (1998), p.148.
- ⁶³ *Ibid* p.151.
- ⁶⁴ *Softing*, p.95.
- ⁶⁵ Carabi p.42.
- ⁶⁶ Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday*, (New York: Random House, Inc., 1998), p.21, p.34.
- ⁶⁷ Paul Oliver, p.80.
- ⁶⁸ The crossroads—and the decisions made and entities met there—are a common theme in literature, pushing readers to examine the choices and encounters that shape life experience. The theme has also been explored in blues music, most famously by Robert Johnson, who, according to bluesman Son House, must have "sold his soul to play like that." Author Ed Morales has claimed that Yoruba mythology played a part in early blues, citing Robert Johnson's "Cross Road Blues" as a "thinly veiled reference to Eleggua, the orisha in charge of the crossroads" ("The Latin Beat" 2003, p.277). The Crossroads is an important part of Congo and Yoruba theology and refers to the space

where the mundane and the sacred meet. Crossroads theology survived in southern mythology and folk knowledge and was recorded by the blues.

- ⁶⁹ General Phonographic Corporation's Okeh labels was among the pioneers to make early blues recordings of Mamie Smith and later, Bessie Smith, during the brief boom for the blues in the 20s and 30s, when the 'race' record, industry (discs specifically for sale to non-Caucasians) found a market for its 'race' labels.
- ⁷⁰ Houston A, Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A theory of Literature*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984), p.198.
- ⁷¹ John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, (London: Heinemann, 1975), p.8.
- ⁷² Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy* (Garden City, New Jersey: Anchor/Doubleday, 1970), p.182.
- ⁷³ Mbiti, *Introduction*, p.157.

Chapter IV

The Language of the Storyteller

So we can say that the white man thinks in written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics.

Zora Neale Hurston•

*The word is total:
it cuts, excoriates
forms, modulates
perturbs, maddens
cures, or directly kills
amplifies or reduces
According to intention
It excites or calms souls.*

Praise song of a bard of the Bambara Komo society••

In her address on receiving the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993, Toni Morrison relates the story of an elderly blind woman, famed for her wisdom, which some children attempt to challenge, by presenting her with a bird. They ask her whether it is alive or dead. She answers by telling them that it is in their hands. Morrison goes on to interpret this story as an analogy of a writer and the language she uses. What she says illustrates how fully she appreciates the power inherent in language as both a medium and an instrument. She acknowledges its complex properties and its capacity as a tool for and agent of oppression, but concludes by celebrating the creative, inclusive, and illuminating aspects of language. Similarly in the Preface to her critical work, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* she comments on her

awareness that ‘language can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony and dismissive “othering” of people and language.’¹

Hence, one of Morrison’s fundamental concerns regarding her writing is with language itself, which is the distinguishing mark of her fiction. This language is specifically the “black” language of her community. For her, language is

the thing that black people love so much- the saying of words, holding them on the tongue, experimenting with them, playing with them.... Its function is like a preacher’s: to make you stand up out of your seat, make you lose yourself and hear yourself. The worst of all possible things that could happen would be to lose that language.²

Morrison’s concerns in representing cultural trends that have been marginalized by the dominant constructions of American literary canon urge her to protect the “language of one’s culture”- the folk idiom “that she fears will be lost or surrendered with the move from vernacular racial community to the literate sphere.”³ This chapter accordingly, focuses on Morrison’s language by first drawing attention to her desire for her prose to recreate black speech, “to restore the language that black people spoke to its original power”⁴ - the *nommo* or power that exists in language. Hence, she deliberately strives for the characteristic black mode of spoken language in her prose. This implies firstly, that the desire to give voice to the unheard through the oral traditions is central to her

storytelling scheme. Secondly, it implies that her aim to write what she calls “aural literature” is part of her strategy to recapture the oralism of ‘Black English’⁵ and preserve its language use. Orality, in this context, is both a cultural value transmitted and a technique to create an intimate, unmediated text.

An opinion that she has repeatedly made is her desire to use fiction to provide a primary means of sustaining a unique culture. The distinctiveness of this culture, which is now under threat of disappearing, was earlier communicated through various means, particularly through music. But cultural distinctions, even in black music, are being constantly lost to the processes of assimilation in today’s commercially driven world. Morrison aims to keep this tradition alive by integrating the principles of black music in her fiction as an integrating feature of her style. The musical qualities that Morrison adapts to her writing have been discussed in the previous chapter. What needs to be recalled is “the expressive ranges, rhythmic patterns, spontaneity, and intimacy”⁶ that make for “the special sound of Morrison’s language.”⁷

It is in the spoken language of the black community where Morrison discovers black modes of expression, not just in the use of vernacular English, but also in its distinct irony and playfulness. As she says in an interview, “the way black people talk is not so much the use of

non-standard grammar as it is the manipulation of metaphor.⁸ Many black women novelists “employ folktalk that is metaphorical, instructive, and entertaining”⁹ and Morrison is one of them. She has spoken about her attempt to achieve “an effortlessness and an artlessness... a non- book quality, so that they would have a sound.” This sound is “spoken and more oral and less print,”¹⁰ a quality that she desires for her fiction so that it has the “ability to be both print and oral literature.”¹¹

An attempt at restoring the way black people talk, and of preserving it in the development of the black vernacular tradition presents certain problems, since language, particularly colloquial language, is in constant flux. In its written form, the spontaneity and variability of the vernacular would be lost. The answer to this problem appears to be partly solved by the paradoxical creation of a text that speaks- and produces meaning in interaction with the reader/ listener. Gates’s characterization of the class of novels which he calls “speakerly texts,” or the text whose rhetorical strategies are designed to “create the illusion of narration”¹² is particularly relevant. Morrison exemplifies these qualities of “speakerliness” familiar as an idiom to the black community.

Morrison’s prose has the quality of speech; she deliberately strives for this effect, which she calls “aural literature.” She hears her prose as she writes, and during the revision process, she cuts phrasings that sound

literary or written rather than spoken. As Morrison says in an interview with McKay, “That oral quality is deliberate. It is not unique to my writing, but it is a sound that I try to catch.”¹³ In trying to lend her texts this specific “sound,” Morrison seeks the help of the readers’ response to the work. The mode of reception intended is modeled on oral forms such as sermons and folktales, in which the listener participates by interjecting phrases or by showing emotion:

It should try deliberately to make you standup and make you feel something profoundly in the same way that a black preacher requires his congregation to speak, to join him in the sermon, to behave in a certain way, to stand up and to weep and cry and accede or to change and to modify- to expand on the sermon that is being delivered.”¹⁴

An example of her encouraging reader participation is to cut down on description and to construct dialogues so that they leave spaces for the reader to fill in. Qualifying adverbs to describe characters’ speeches are avoided leaving the reader to recognize the speaker’s emotion from the writing. Hence, dialogues, in the form of gossipy conversations, are used to relate vital information about the characters to the reader. In this way, she encourages the reader to ‘feel’ the narration rather than noticing its written character.

Breaking the back of words

In order to insert the oral quality of language, to say things beyond words themselves, Morrison uses its evocative powers. Since meaning is

expressed in the very sound of the word, listening and hearing, become important in conjuring feelings and sensations associated with the word. Morrison's writing process involves reinserting the oral quality, where sound, intonation, volume, and gesture are vital.

The process through which she recaptures the oralism of Black English would reveal the rhetorical contrivances that often serve as narrative strategies. Such systems include the rules of oral discourse, which is attendant on the "unique rituals, codes of conduct, pedagogy, and rhetoric" of Black English "that shape and define those who speak it and their place in the world."¹⁵ This implies that there are certain philosophical objectives underlying these systems since, as Judylyn Ryan says, "the primary goal of African oral traditions is to teach the habit of exercising interpretive agency."¹⁶ In this respect, not just speech but also meaning, nuance, tone, and gesture are important. Further, the listener's collaboration with, and response to, the storyteller (or musician, or preacher) depends on the listener's knowledge and understanding of these modes of communication. Hence, in the call-and-response dynamics that structures all oral discourse, to be able to speak well is important, but to listen well is even more so because in the oral tradition, listeners and speakers are equally involved participants in the discourse.

Call-and- response structures “generate a mode of epistemology that interprets words, gestures, tone, and timbre.”¹⁷ To these can be added, ways of looking, sitting, or standing that are as significant in communicating as the words themselves. Children learn the rules of oral discourse by watching and observing adult behaviour and speech and through practice. In *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia, for example, describes an adult conversation overheard by her sister and herself- as a kind of beautiful dance, one that little girls cannot fully understand, so instead, they “watch their(the women’s) hands, their feet, and listen for truth in timbre.” (*BE*, pp.9-10) This demonstrates that truth is learnt not so much through what is actually said. Rather, as Morrison suggests, “an epistemology [that is] equally attentive to words, gestures, tone, and timbre is more comprehensive and effectual.”¹⁸ She thus links the importance of Claudia’s developing identity as a black woman to her mastering of these non-verbal modes of communication and rituals by reading correctly the pitch and timbre of her community’s sounds. So also, Milkman, in *Song of Solomon*, learns the ways of understanding the character of his cultural heritage by first learning how to listen. It is during the hunting episode, that Milkman comes to realize the importance of orality. He discerns the hunting dogs’ different barking sounds and the

hunters' responses to them. Morrison characterizes this orally symbiotic relationship as primal, existing *before* language:

“No, it was not language; it was what there was before language. Before things were written down. Language in the time when men and animals did talk to one another [...].”
(*SoS*, p.278).

The epigraph of *Jazz*, the quotation from The Nag Hammadi, “I am the name of the sound/ And the sound of the name/ I am the sign of the letter/ And the designation of the division” shows Morrison’s concern for the aural power of words. More than words, the reader is asked to assess the character of sound. In fact, the opening word of the novel, the sound “Sth” that sets off the narrative, characterizes the participant-narrator as a familiar storyteller in the African-American mode. This directs us back to the oral tradition in which storytelling relied not only on words but also on sounds, rhythms, and gestures as well.

Using unusual punctuation, syncopation, call-and-response techniques, onomatopoeia and mimetic sounds, Morrison recreates orality. The hunting scene in *Song of Solomon* once again provides another example of how she appropriates a medium close to that of music:

All those shrieks, those rapid tumbling barks, the long sustained yells, the tuba sounds, the drumbeat sounds, the low liquid *howm howm*, the reedy whistles, the thin *eeeees* of a cornet, the *unh unh unh unh* bass chords. It was all language. (*SoS*, p.278)

The ending of *Tar Baby* emphasizes on the onomatopoeic sounds of Son's rabbit like footsteps, which echo the voices of the African-American storytellers and the music of the "hundred blind cavaliers": "Lickety-split. Lickety-split. Looking neither to the left nor to the right. Lickety-split. Lickety-split. Lickety-split. Lickety-split." (*TB*, P.264) In addition, *Jazz* offers examples of how Morrison makes her language rhythmical on all scales from single phrases to entire passages as in the narrator's lyrical jazz description of

Blind men thrum and hum in the soft air as they inch steadily
down the walk...
Blues man. Black and bluesman. Blacktherefore blue man.
Everybody knows your name.
Where-did-she-go-and-why man. So-lonesome-I-could-die
man.
Everybody knows your name. (*J*, p.119)

Her deliberate use of alliteration and repetition of words "to speed tempo" and commas generate "staccatos" that accelerate the beat that together "recreate the impact of jazz."¹⁹ Syncopation occurs through the author's combination of different word-bits that produce uneven percussive sounds to evoke the sound of things beyond language.

In *Beloved*, the sections that represent the interior monologues of Sethe, Denver and Beloved overheard by Stamp Paid, are new, strange, undecipherable, unsounded sounds, combined in unusual word orders and rhythms to convey the "thoughts of the women of 124, unspeakable

thoughts, unspoken" (*B*, p.199). To Stamp Paid, the language is incomprehensible. Hence, the narrator offers another approximation of these "sounds":

[It was] like the interior sounds a woman makes when she believes she is alone and unobserved at her work; a sth when she misses the needle's eye; a soft moan when she sees another chip in her one good platter; (*B*, P.172)

The language here exemplifies Morrison's notion of the "stirring, memorializing language," a "seductive, mutant language" that she identifies with women's "own unsayable, transgressive words."²⁰ And in *Paradise*, the women at the Convent engage in a healing ritual that involves the women telling each other their stories in the form of "loud dreaming," which is described as "no different from a shriek." (*P*, p.264) The collective healing ritual embodies a "space where one is able to redeem and reclaim the past, legacies of pain, suffering, and triumph in ways that transform present reality" and that "move us into a different mode of articulation."²¹ Despite their differences and antagonisms, the women willingly share and experience each other's dreams and histories, and in shrieking their stories achieve a catharsis whereby "accusations directed at the dead and long gone are undone by murmurs of love." (*P*, p.264)

The supreme example of how Morrison uses the evocative power of words to "break the back of words" is found in the scene in where the

community women in *Beloved*, in response to Denver's call, exorcise Beloved. They evoke a "beginning" in which "there were no words." (*B*, p.259) As the women conduct the praying, the ritualistic dimension of Baby Suggs's healing ritual in the Clearing is recalled as,

the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash (*B*, p.261).

The play upon words of the sound sounding, is followed by the references to the pods of chestnut trees which throws the reader back to Sethe's memories of it in the Clearing (*B*, p.94, p.164). As the other women respond to Ella's "holler," spirit and kinesis join sound to 'break the back of words.' The sound is pre-language; it breaks the bars of language that enslaves, paving the way for new story to be told in meaningful language.²²

In incorporating sounds in her books, Morrison places herself at the intersection between two traditions—that of the formal criteria of the white literary tradition and the oral art forms typical of the African heritage. The naming ritual surrounding Pilate's naming marks the change from a mainly oral culture to a more literate one. Her illiterate father Jake, takes her name from the Bible by pointing his finger to a word – not for the meaning, but because he is attracted to its graphic

resemblance to a group of trees whose protective power he invokes to be passed on to the bearer of the name. This reveals a mode of thinking that is in keeping with oral culture. Zora Neale Hurston identifies thinking in images, “in hieroglyphics” as a feature common to black vernacular English.²³ Thus, “thinking hieroglyphically, the father reveals a unique creativity that merges oral and written traditions in this cultural naming ritual.”²⁴ When the midwife disapproves of his choice of the name keeping in mind the Biblical context from which the name was taken, Macon draws attention to the pun on “Pilate.” In order to understand the pun, the reader must listen to the sound of the word.

The naming ritual of Pilate is essentially an oral one, but in order to preserve the name, the father has to recur to writing: he laboriously copies the letters that spell his daughter’s chosen name. Here, Morrison demonstrates a shift from oral culture to a literate one, but in the course of the narrative both the written and spoken form of the word will take on different meanings. In fact, Pilate is the one character (besides Milkman) who grows beyond the branding of her name. Although graphically her name remains the same throughout the story, the interpretive function of the name changes. Her biblical name, “freighted with irony, becomes appropriate as a pun. She will pilot Milkman to his true heritage.”²⁵

Similarly, Milkman, towards the end of his quest can perceive language as a shifting structure and not as a fixed code. For instance, Charlemagne becomes Shalimar pronounced Shallemon, like Solomon, the original Sugarman of Pilate's song. Similarly, the Jay of the children's song is Jake, his grandfather, whose father is Solomon, the Flying African. By exploring the vital link between sounds and meanings of words and by focusing on the sounds of the spoken word rather than on the spelling of the written word, Morrison emphasizes the primacy of the black vernacular and oral tradition over written language and Standard English as they relate to the transfer of black culture. By using suppressed popular communicative forms that derive from the black oral tradition, she creates a text, which seeks to re-articulate the concept of black American experience.

Oral Tutelage

Morrison is also aware of the limitations and inadequacy of language to convey experiences, particularly the inadequacy of male-centred language to convey female experiences. A stylistic study of Morrison's language with its lack of punctuation, its non-standard syntax, and flowing, musical rhythms corresponds to French Feminist ideas of feminine writing.²⁶ This has led to suggestions that Morrison's frequent violation of traditional literary decorum is subversive of patriarchal

authority. The emphasis here however, is on Morrison's writings not merely as reactions to male-centred, stereotyped assumptions and languages, but rather, as attempts to undo those damaging traditional cultural myths that frequently represent black women. She does this by introducing new forms and ways of verbal communication to express the many dimensions and strengths of these women hitherto ignored.

In Morrison's fiction, the mother figure participates in a largely oral culture. Gay Wilentz notes that in African culture, women mostly fulfill the process of oral transmission of cultural values and education.²⁷ Morrison portrays women as maintaining the legacy of African-American men and women through the strength and creative potential of the word. Hence, a related topic that is central to black women's fiction is that of "oral tutelage," particularly between mothers and daughters. In Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, the generational conflict between mother and daughter is epitomised through scenes in which the rhetorical impact is great. In Morrison's novels too, the powerful primary orality of the mother is represented in scenes of instruction, of education, and ritual enactments of these highly rhetorical exchanges. Like *Brown Girl*, *The Bluest Eye* is structured by a layering of voices, that of the mother, the daughter, and a mediating narrator. The mother's voice, however, is dominant as the daughter is usually silent, overwhelmed by the occasion.

In this way, Morrison illustrates how Claudia's views and expectations of life are coloured by the values and attitudes of her mother implicit in the songs she sings, and the "fussing soliloquies" that are actually instructive messages. She and her sister grow up understanding how by listening, they are also participating in these rituals which reinforces their relationship with the community.

In contrast is Pauline Breedlove whose monologue is one of the significant instances of direct speech in *The Bluest Eye*, one that demonstrates a form of traditional oral narration. The syntax and rhythm of the rural black dialect is evident in her speech made more effective by the presence of "humour and pathos characteristic of black folk culture."²⁸ Unfortunately, Pauline's connection with the oral culture of the black community is short-lived. Her sense of irony and humour, the folk knowledge and value system of the rural South, which privileged community over individual wealth and consumerism, are never transmitted to Pecola. Moreover, Pauline fails to teach her daughter the creative and sustaining aspect of language that is crucial to her survival. Pecola thus remains a particularly inarticulate character: her silence reflects her motherlessness.

Karla Holloway states, "Women's real strength lies in real speech"- and *Nommo* can be "destructive or sustaining."²⁹ Pauline Breedlove

becomes progressively, more and more inarticulate, since Cholly refuses to engage her in verbal battles. Her words, when she utters them, only have the power to hurt. The destructiveness of her words, “hotter and darker than the smoking berries” (*BE*, p.85), are felt by Pecola who accidentally spills “a deep-dish cobbler” on the Fisher’s kitchen floor. But Pauline loses more because she has forgotten the imaginative, inspiring, and sustaining qualities of language the oral tradition embodies.

In Song of Solomon, Pilate as aunt and mothering member begins her role as Milkman’s “language –giver”³⁰ at their very first meeting when she teaches him and Guitar how to talk properly. She instructs Milkman about multiple meanings that language can have: “There’re five or six kinds of black. Some silky, some woolly. Some just empty. Some like fingers.” (*SoS*, p.40) Similarly, the storytelling session which follows, in which she tells her life story to the two boys “is not intended to amuse” them, “but to educate them.”³¹

Song of Solomon also exemplifies how women have smothered their own identities and their voices, by depending on men for a sense of self. Consequently, the silenced voice seeks self-destruction or other hurtful ways of expression. Ruth Dead “began her days stunned into silence by her husband’s contempt and ended them wholly animated by it.” (*SoS*, p.10) From childhood, Lena and her sister have been silenced

by a father who had “choked the lilt out of what should have been girlish voices.” (*SoS*, p.10) Ruth’s lack of knowledge of the black “women’s daily struggle to communicate, converse and pass on values to their own and other children, and to one another”³² is a major reason why Ruth has allowed herself to be “pressed small” by the men in her life. She has no tales to tell her children, no songs to sing to them. There are no scenes of ‘oral tutelage,’ of instruction from mother to daughters. Hence, Lena and Corinthians have no experience of ‘generational continuity’- for them, there is no looking back through their mothers. With no elder, grandmother, or significant other to turn to, their family exemplifies the total breakdown of oral bonding in the extended family and exposes their own vulnerability and isolation from their heritage and community.

Sula, on the other hand, gives examples of daughters who do not listen to their mother’s voices. As Marianne Hirsch points out, “maternal speech is sparse in this novel: mothers and daughters never quite succeed in addressing each other directly; mothers fail to communicate the stories they wish to tell.”³³ A pattern of missed communication can be detected in the novel. One of them occurs in the exchange between Hannah and Eva that revolves around the question of maternal love. On asking Eva whether she had ever loved her children, Eva’s verbal rhetoric about how hard she has worked to build a life for her children illustrates the

toughness of articulating motherlove. Eva's response is not the one Hannah wants to hear, and so she dismisses her mother's stories claiming to have heard it "a million times" and becomes preoccupied with planning supper instead. Hannah's inability to listen to "the truth in timbre," of this speech, to understand the hidden meanings behind the rituals of her mother's monologue, is perhaps why she and Sula have never engaged in any meaningful conversation. Hannah lacks Eva's rhetorical skills, her acid tongue, and firm control over things; she "never scolded or gave directions." (S, p.29) In other words, she has never been a mother to Sula in the way that Eva has been to her. Ironically, the only time she mentions Sula's name is also the moment of Sula's alienation from her.

Lucille Fultz refers to the existence of a Black Southern ethic that is basically, a survivalist protocol, articulated "in lectures from one's elders or the signifying comments from the community."³⁴ *Sula* for instance, reviews moments when this protocol is breached. After her ten-year absence from the Bottom, Sula returns, intellectually and emotionally distanced from the town and community life. This is apparent in the language and tone she adopts not only towards Nel, but also towards her grandmother. On Sula's sudden appearance at her house after a long absence, Eva's immediate query is, "Where's your coat?" to

which Sula counters by commenting on Eva's "manners"— "Don't you say hello to nobody when you ain't seen them for ten years?" Eva counteracts this challenge by retorting, "If folks let somebody know where they is and when they coming, then other folks can get ready for them. If they don't—if they just pop in all sudden like—then they got to take whatever mood they find." (*S*, pp.91-92) Not only is this exchange a "mutual challenge about the proper behavior each owes the other,"³⁵ it is also an indication of Sula's readiness to challenge the status quo.

Morrison creates in Jadine another character who calls into question the old ways of those "down home" blacks. Jadine, in *Tar Baby*, continuously tries to deny her African lineage, which includes "the way black people talk." As Barbara Rigney points out, her conversation is "too white, too superficial, too removed from the mother tongue."³⁶ Although, at one point in the novel, she tries to talk like the women in Eloe, and like Nanadine, she cannot sound like them because she has lost the structure and sense of black folktalk. Since she does not have an inherent sense of herself as a Black woman, Jadine cannot understand Ondine's attempts to make her see her matrilineal connections, or responsibilities of parenting her elders. She angrily refuses to see the link, and her part in this link, because she has not yet learned how "to be a daughter." (*TB*, p.281)

However, Morrison believes that Black women carry the voice of the mother, and thus carry wisdom—mother wit.³⁷ Hence, another woman in the same novel is chosen to embody this role. Marie Therese is a woman, who, unlike Jadine, knows her “ancient properties,” who retains the ancient language, and whose voice reminds Son of his own legacy, and thus teaches him survival.

In *Beloved*, Sethe is haunted by the memory of a language long forgotten that her mother and other women spoke. She has little memory of her own mother, recognising her only by the cloth hat she wore while working and the mark she wore on her ribs. (*B*, p.61) The tragic effects of the exigencies of slave life that resulted in the mother-child bond being broken, is seen in Beloved’s need for oral gratification, her insatiable appetite for Sethe’s stories about her life. Telling her story to Beloved forces Sethe to remember another oral community between her grandmother and herself—to remember “something she forgot she knew.” (*B*, p.61) Sethe remembers Nan telling her of her mother killing those children fathered by whites and how she [Sethe] was the only child that her mother claimed as her own:

What Nan had told her she had forgotten, along with the language she told it in...But the message—that was and had been there all along. (*B*, p.62)

As a mother now with two daughters of her own, Sethe comes to understand her mother's act and her grandmother's code. Thus, in *Beloved*, storytelling is used to establish a communal narrative represented by the oral linguistic community of mothers, daughters, and grandmothers. "By situating herself within a communal narrative of grandmother-mother-daughter relationships, Sethe is able to understand herself. The code is unlocked and becomes available for her hearing."³⁸

The bodies of the protagonists in *Beloved*, also convey a language of their own. Sethe, her mother, and Beloved all bear scars that 'write' their slavery. The novel explores the way in which black women's bodies bear a series of visible markings, mutilations, distortions and violations, which reveal stories of the past that were ignored in male narratives. These multilayered markings of the Black female body create their own independent textualities, and Sethe's scars form one of the most powerful texts. In *Beloved* then, the transfer of the mark from Sethe's mother to Sethe and then to Sethe's daughter is transformed from a brand of ownership and infamy into a text that records the survival of a people under slavery and oppression. Through the language of scars, Morrison shows that when written/oral language can many times not be trusted, physical characteristics provide another more certain form of communication, one that is not biased and cannot be altered.

Further, as Jean Wyatt notes, *Beloved* places a great deal of emphasis on forms of experience normally excluded from “Western cultural narratives,” including the experiences of childbirth and nursing. This “causes a breakdown of and restructuring of linguistic forms”³⁹ resulting in lack of punctuation, nonstandard syntax, and fusion of pronoun positions in the three- women monologues of Beloved, Sethe and Denver. Thus *Beloved*’s disjointed narrative composed of phrases with no punctuation, calls for attention to the visual spaces on a page- a metaphor for the gaps in the storytelling, as has been pointed out by more than one critic. Through the technique of stream of consciousness, we “overhear” these conversations and make a sense of the horror of slavery through the mental torment of the characters.

The absence of any sustaining mother-daughter relationships in *Jazz* is seen as the outcome of the trauma and experience of loss in individuals who suffer separation from parents, children, spouses through racial violence and its consequences, through denial, dispossession, and abandonment. But the novel illustrates another example of women-bonding through the Violet-Alice relationship. When Alice lets Violet into her living room, “something opened up.” (*J*, p.83) An excerpt of the conversations between them reveals Morrison’s preoccupation with

mimetic sounds and onomatopoeia linking it to the singing styles of blues singers who

declaimed and hollered the words in anger or protest, moaned them soft and low in sadness and sorrow. Sometimes the words assumed their shape as they emerged from seemingly formless murmurings; sometimes they were nailed with vocal hammer-blows half-shouted, half-sung to the beat of the music. There were times when words were dispensed with altogether [...]⁴⁰

Alice is at first scared, then angry and puzzled. Alternately exasperated, amused, and nettled, she is made to smile, shout and laugh by Violet's answers and comments. With Violet, Alice is "*Sudden. Frugal.* No apology or courtesy seemed required or necessary between them," (*J*, p.83) and yet they speak with a clarity and candour they do not find elsewhere. Alice learns from Violet how to be herself, to speak out with more openness and even to express her pent up anger: "Alice *slammed* the pressing iron down. 'You don't know what loss is,' she said, and *listened* as closely to what she was saying as did the woman sitting by her ironing board in a hat in the morning" (*J*, p.87). Here, as Dorothea Mbalia observes, "Alice learns not only from Violet's teachings, but also from her own voice."⁴¹ At other times, there would be *complete silence* between them: "Alice ironed and Violet watched. From time to time one *murmured something- to herself or to the other.*" (*J*, p.112, emphasis added) Finally, Alice, distracted by Violet's questions, accidentally burns

a shirt, “Shit!” Alice *shouted*. “Oh, shit!” (*J*, p.113) By sharing with each other portions of their stories, they recognize each other’s sorrow, and the historical, social, and psychological circumstances they both have in common: “Eating starch, choosing when to trade yolk, *sewing, picking, cooking, chopping*”-(*J*, p.112; emphasis added) these are the travails all black women share and sing about.

Thus, the shared experience of both women sews their lives together. In stitching Violet’s poorly kept coat, Alice helps to put Violet back in shape, restoring her dignity and sense of self. Through the language of women’s domestic tasks—sewing, ironing, hairdressing—Morrison suggests that women’s conversations—“conversations articulated through motion—are indicators of a world of inquiry, of thoughts being unfolded, re-folded, mended, stitched, pressed.”⁴²

Paradise uncovers yet another method of verbal communication, which belongs to the maternal realm. Consolata is a woman of mixed descent brought to the United States by American Catholic nuns from Brazil. She also experiences hybridity in relation to language: “The first to go were the rudiments of her first language. Every now and then she found herself speaking and thinking in that place, the valley between the regulations of the first language and the vocabulary of the second.” (*P*, p.242) In conjunction with her loss of her mother tongue, is her oblivion

to her past and cultural background. However, through a discovery of her past, Consolata is able to recognize and accept her hybrid identity as well as her magical powers as an integral part of her individuality. Her change from “Connie” into an energetic, “revised Reverend Mother” (*P*, p.265) conjoins her modification of the codes of language into a more injunctive form consistent with her spiritual identity.

In her role as spiritual leader, Consolata initiates the post-traumatic recovery of the Convent women by creating a bond between the spiritual and corporeal worlds. Linking this act to African belief systems, Kokahvah Zauditu-Selassie says, “As ritual leader she [Consolata] employs *so dayi*, which the Dogon call the *language of knowing*.”⁴³ Through the ritual of “loud dreaming,” represented both graphically and linguistically, Consolata guides the women through a purging and purification process from which they emerge healed.

Through such multiple and intersecting explorations of language, Morrison articulates and celebrates the power of voice, “giving language the stature it deserves in terms of its connection to a generative force.”⁴⁴

Rhetorical practices: Signifying, Naming, Witnessing, and Testifying

Morrison’s novels often emphasize the historical losses of African-American life, culture, and dignity not only during slavery times but also in the following periods right up to the present. In all her works, she

centres language and theme on the rediscovered imaginative life of black people that connects with the realities of African-American experience. However, through language that bears marks of *nommo*, the power of the word, Morrison resurrects African cultural memory traditionally preserved and passed down orally through the generations. A point earlier mentioned is how African-Americans struggled to retain the cultural forms of their Southern past, their language forms and world-view in the white-dominated North.⁴⁵ As an author who is deeply concerned with the conservation of Black communal values, folk wisdom, and language usage, Morrison permeates her fiction with rhetorical practices from the Southern oral tradition such as signifying, naming, call-and-response, witnessing and testifying. Just as she artfully employs African-American vernacular and folklore to foreground her resistance to dominant narrative structure, Morrison does the same with language itself. By placing the locus of African-American culture in the South, she invents a “home” of the language systems and patterns of this tradition. Thus, she demonstrates her “discursive authority and power”⁴⁶ that capture the cultural realities of African-Americans.

Morrison’s texts are characterized by their play with duplicity, multiplicity and the power to make invisible things visible, the power to speak the unspeakable, and the ability to uncover hidden meanings by

deconstructive processes within the dominant discourse. This section explores the linguistic strategy of her novels to illustrate the role that language plays in the construction of African-American identity. Through the ritual scenes, comic verbal exchanges, “abusive” language, irony, double-voicedness, and multiple interpretations inherent in the rhetorical practices of the black community, Morrison attempts to reformulate the elements of African-American oral traditions. Firstly, by employing language, that is “heteroglossic”—simultaneously producing multiple meanings, she establishes an inter-racial dialogue that challenges white America’s view and ordering of the world. Secondly, through these “disruptive” methods, she gives voice to an intra-racial dialogue, which confronts privileged black middle-class materialism with the vernacular discourse of the black folk community.

Signifying: survival strategies

One of the most important elements of the oral tradition referred to above is the concept of Signifying, which is rooted in the signifying monkey poems based on myths and forms of performance that were transmitted to the New World from West Africa. The Signifying Monkey is the figure drawn by Louis Gates Jr., to evoke the chain of Signifiers that articulate a black literary heritage. Signifying contains manifold language games that characterise the rhetorical techniques used by the

black communities to construct their own identities. In Morrison's novels, it takes place on several levels and forms an extremely important part of her linguistic world. Her characters not only signify upon each other, she herself signifies upon the readers by confronting them with a rhetorical strategy that requires them to have double vision in order to make sense of the black worldview. At the same time, such a strategy also challenges them to adopt a new mode of reading, one that deconstructs the western practice of reading.

Signifying traditions represent a unique cultural response to difficult historical and socio-economic experiences of black Americans. In black culture, verbal artistry is developed in childhood through sidewalk songs and rhymes, which later develop into more expressive and creative forms such as "jiving," "rapping" and "the dozens." Such type of Signifying is characterized by aggressive wit and indirect verbal assault that defines community and those who belong to it. Thus, it is an in-group activity, which demands access to communal knowledge in order to understand its indirect meanings.⁴⁷

In *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia's mother performs as an inner member of the group in the way she "fusses" about the difficult situation in her home:

Three quarts of milk. That's what was *in* that icebox yesterday. Three whole quarts. Now they ain't none. Not a

drop. I don't mind folks coming in and getting what they want, but three quarts of milk! What the devil does *anybody* need *three* quarts of milk... I don't know what I'm supposed to be running here, a charity ward, I guess. Time for me to get out of the *giving* line and get in the *getting* line. (*BE*, p.16-17).

Her soliloquies are, as Claudia tells us, “interminable, insulting, and although indirect (Mama never named anybody-just talked about *some* people), and extremely painful in their thrust” (16). Claudia knows however, that the speeches are indirectly aimed at Frieda, Pecola and herself. It is also directed at the reader. As Atkinson and Page clarify, “The reader is given the chance to participate in the signifying act by recognizing the signifying and relating it to knowledge of others who are participators in this ritual.”⁴⁸ Mrs. MacTeer is rehearsing her anxieties—the fear of feeding an extra mouth, of going to the poorhouse, of not being appreciated by her husband and her family. Her talking to herself affords her relief and refuge in the struggle to hold her family together, in enduring the worst part of prejudice and in running her own household-activities in which black women are instrumental. But even while she harps on life's painful lessons, the implicit message she imparts is that spite of everything the community must take care of its members.

Other examples of signifying in this text are found in the “breezy and rough” stories and conversations exchanged by the three whores. If Poland is “forever ironing, forever singing” the blues, then China and

Marie are constantly engaged in the verbal contest of signifying. Their verbal dueling involves indirect insults with sexual innuendos aimed at putting down one another. These contests highlight their ready wit, sharp tongue, and tongue-in-cheek humour and reveal how the very act of storytelling is intertwined with the lives of these women. The three whores are outcasts, despised by the community at large. However, they are fully in touch with their community's oral traditions: their mode of communication and expression is rooted in a black cultural identity, and their sense of irony and humour and mastery of language make up for lack of social power and status. Moreover, as Keith Byerman points out, "folk arts" and "folk wisdom" teach them "life is a matter of adaptation and survival rather than resignation and death."⁴⁹

Although Pecola listens to Poland's singing and to China's signifying, she lacks the cultural knowledge that is necessary to understand the significance of these acts. Even among her own peers, she cannot participate in the rituals of rhetorical practices such as the child's version of "the dozens." When a group of boys torments her by chanting,

Black e mo Black e mo Ya daddy sleeps nekked-(*BE*, p.50)

Pecola can only break down and cry because she lacks the spontaneous ability to manipulate words. In contrast, Claudia and Frieda have learned this lore, which enable them to defy the boys and stand up to them. Thus,

Morrison is able to imply that Pecola's poverty of imagination and lack of verbal skill prevent her from "being in the game." This points to a childhood devoid of any kind of cultural nurturing from folk knowledge and wisdom, thus hampering her survival as a whole and complete person within the black community.

However, Signifying is not only a mere playground activity or a coping mechanism. It is also the use of language or discourse to affirm cultural identity and community in the face of the imposition of cultural dominance and oppression. As such, it is an attitude or stance "toward life itself," a strategy for survival. Because signifying is so deeply embedded in the everyday lives of African-American people, its use by Morrison draws on and defines black cultural identity.

Song of Solomon affords the best example of how this rhetorical strategy can affirm cultural identity and community, and at the same time, function as a narrative device that emphasizes orality. In this regard, Marilyn Mobley points out that the "signifying voice" in this novel is important to the process of Milkman's introduction to oral culture in that it reveals "Milkman's alienation from his own voice and his inability to hear the language of others."⁵⁰ This voice is also important because it exemplifies the "double-voiced mode of discourse" that is distinctively African-American.⁵¹ To illustrate, the scene that takes place in Railroad

Tommy's Barbershop regarding the murder of Emmett Till in 1956 provides Morrison with an opportunity to bear witness to the oral tradition of signifying and at the same time revealing Milkman's inability to speak in the signifying voice, thereby proving that Signifying can take place on several levels. She firstly, signifies on the term "news," revealing how the print media, which is controlled by the whites, distorts language to reduce blacks. Secondly, she illustrates how it gives definition to the cultural identity of black males in *Song of Solomon* through the practices of name-calling, repetition, exchange of insults, and "trad[ing] tales." Morrison uses this incident to signify further on Milkman's 'outsider' position, for although he tries to follow the crisscrossed nature of the dialogue, he remains silent throughout the discussion emphasizing his marginal position among his own peers.

However, she affords him another opportunity in Shalimar, to participate in another cultural ritual known as "the dozens," to show the degree of his development towards achieving a black identity. This time, however, he proves himself a worthy contestant, indicating his ability to relate to black men and to reconnect with the heart and soul of the black community. In these exchanges between the male representatives of the black community in Southside and Shalimar, Morrison gives voice to "black vernacular speech, to difference of opinions, to communal

knowledge of how racism and sexism operate in America, to communal speculation, to collective memories, and to historical realities within the community.”⁵²

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison also illustrates how the black residents of the town defy the establishment by using the word-of-mouth method thereby introducing the concept of language as a powerful tool for transmitting information and manipulating reality. A telling example is the renaming of “Doctor Street” (named after the first black doctor who lived there). The city legislators’ notice proclaim Mains Avenue as the new, official name of the former Doctor Street. Without rejecting the name of Mains Avenue, and thus seeming to acquiesce, the community continues to refer to it as “Not Doctor Street” (*SoS*, p.4). In complying with the letter rather than the spirit of the law, the community effectively resists the city’s racist power structure without confronting it directly.

The linguistic freedom that Signifying affords is used to notable effect in *Tar Baby*. The techniques Morrison uses to signify on accepted meanings in order to reveal deeper truths is best described in her own words: “The most valuable point of entry into the question of cultural (or racial) distinction, the one most fraught, is its language—its unpoliced, seditious, confrontational, manipulative, inventive, disruptive, masked and unmasking language.”⁵³ Consequently, in *Tar Baby*, Son Green who

embodies the narrative perspective is given the linguistic freedom to question and disrupt limiting worldviews and controlling ideologies.

Through *Son*, Morrison dismantles oppressive language and perspectives by juxtaposing the two contesting versions regarding the disputed origin of the island's name, *Isle des Chevaliers*. In the cataclysmic Christmas dinner in Valerian's house, she paves the way for the tyrant, "the man who respected industry" and his challenger, "the man who prized fraternity" to come into open conflict over a question of stolen apples. Valerian is confident of his right to dismiss Gideon and Therese for stealing his apples because in the back of his mind is the image of conquering French chevaliers, who continue to abide by the Napoleonic code. (*TB*, p.297) Similarly, *Son* challenges Valerian's decision because in the back of his mind is the image of African horsemen

[who] knew the rain forest when it was a rain forest...
[who] knew all there was to know about the island..." (*TB*,
p.207)

From *Son*'s perspective, it is the descendents of these slaves who own the land and not the Valerians of the world. By allowing *Son* to subvert and challenge Valerian's authority, Morrison uses him as a catalyst for change, and to summon the Street household to a different way of seeing and experiencing the world. Through his signifying skills, he shows how

Valerian's moral outrage over the apples stolen by Gideon and Therese is misplaced. Valerian had merely paid for the fruit. He had not "row[ed] eighteen miles to bring them here. They did." (*TB*, p.206)

Jazz-like significations are found throughout *Jazz* that also function as injunctions to readers to make intra-textual connections. The sophisticated system of repeated words, phrases, and motifs operating in the novel provides analogues to jazz riffs. For instance, much of Joe Trace's history is a "trace," a word that has several significant connotations in the novel.⁵⁴ After being told his parents "disappeared without a trace" (*J*, p.124), Joe believes the "trace" they disappeared without is him, that his last name is "Trace." More significantly, his memory is only a "trace," and he can only gather traces of his mother's identity by tracing this "trace" in Dorcas' path. These jazz-like significations on the name "Trace" riffs on and recalls the remains from which a completely new Joe Trace must be reconstructed. To further illustrate, the many references to "train-tracks" and "trails" become multiplied and extended, and are given new meanings through the process of signification.⁵⁵ The apartment that Joe first shares with Violet is "a railroad flat" (*J*, p.127); later, his search for Dorcas turns country trails into railroads, then into city pavement "tracks," which in turn become record grooves. The analogy between record grooves, the city's streets,

railroad tracks, and country trails, foreground issues integral to the process of identity, perhaps indicating “one’s goal or destination of life or even man’s destiny.”⁵⁶

Morrison also applies this strategy to obtain substantial results in *Paradise* by using key tropes and signifiers. The two opposing sets of communities that she contra-poses—Ruby and the Convent—signify on each other, and are continually engaged in interpreting each other. The Convent, as representative of an alternative open community, functions in many ways as Ruby’s opposite, particularly in its open invitation to all to join its diverse, nonjudgmental, non-hierarchical, non-patriarchal community. Begun as an embezzler’s mansion, the Convent later became a Catholic boarding school for Indian girls and then graduated to its present status as a secular place of retreat and rejuvenation of women. However, the “malelessness” of the Convent community invites a different reading from Ruby’s patriarchs who interpret it in demonic terms, in terms of a witches’ ‘coven.’ (*P*, p.276) This extreme interpretation results in Ruby’s efforts to “erase...this new and obscene breed of females.” (*P*, p.276) Thus the novel establishes a “slippery relationship between the Convent’s signifier and signified,”⁵⁷ through the word-play between “covenant,” “Convent,” and “coven.” In Morrison’s account of Ruby’s self-narrative, the fear of the feminine appears to be

connected to the fear of racial impurity. In presenting Ruby as a community that defends its imagined purity and image of womanhood, which lays all its problems on the five unconventional women living in the Convent, Morrison critiques Puritanism. By drawing attention to the dehumanizing and demonizing of the convent women, she alludes to the Salem witch trials.⁵⁸ By Signifying on this sordid episode of American history as parallel to the Puritanical rage prevailing in Ruby, Morrison creates a powerful metaphor for racism and sexism in contemporary America.

Through her play on related keywords and ideas in the novels, Morrison signifies on the erasures and distortions of dominant discourse and at the same time asserts the values of black culture. The multilayered signification of her writing makes for unpredictability and ambivalence that requires a new form of decoding and reading. In this sense, indeterminacy of meaning in Morrison's novels is disorienting, but at the same time, affords new interpretation of oppressive meanings.

Intertextual Signifying and Revision through Signifying

Since Signifying involves double-voicedness and revision, intertextuality plays a key role in giving known texts a new meaning. Gates Jr. identifies Signifying in relation to black writing referring to the African-American features of punning, linguistic playfulness, coding,

decoding, and recoding.⁵⁹ By Signifying, he means the way one text “plays upon” another, usually repeating it but making significant changes or inverting it. In this regard, Michael Awkward notes that Morrison appears to have little interest in comparisons of her work to that of white authors and rejects a (white) Western ancestry, unlike Ellison, for an exclusively Afro-American one.⁶⁰

It is through the Signifying voice that Morrison initiates a dialogue with earlier texts, particularly with Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. In her critique of Ellison as literary ancestor, Morrison makes use of the signifying relation developed by Gates. For instance, *The Bluest Eye* serves as a revisionary reading of the Trueblood episode of *Invisible Man*, in her foregrounding the effects of incest for female victims in direct response to Ellison’s refusal to do so. In *Song of Solomon* too, she creates resonances that replicate and extend Ellison’s intertextual strategies.⁶¹ Through intricate and playful re-negotiations, Morrison questions and responds to Ellison’s metaphors of cultural alienation, exile, and dislocation in this novel. Similarly, critics have commented on the influence of the discursive practices initiated by Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* that Morrison revises and reissues, particularly, in *The Bluest Eye* and *Tar Baby*.⁶²

Morrison's later novels revoice or revise her earlier ones. Hence, an intertextual reading between *Jazz* and *The Bluest Eye*, for example, shows her signifying on the meanings of female beauty and on the musical motifs of her first novel.⁶³ In addition, intertextual readings between *Jazz* and *Beloved* offer a reading of the presence of Beloved in *Jazz* not simply as a metaphor, but as an actual physical presence in the character, Wild.⁶⁴ Intertextual readings with other texts also reveal the wide scope of *Jazz*'s signifying. In addition, its signifying on musical works provides useful ways of understanding specific characters.⁶⁵ The point of such intertextual readings is to show how the process of signification reveals the flexibility of language and the extent of Morrison's imaginative worlds. This affects reading practices as the reader is forced to reexamine his/her interpretations of the text(s).

The intertextuality with other non-Black works in each of Morrison's novels is so wide ranging that a discussion on this aspect cannot be adequately done here. Nevertheless, the important point is that Morrison rewrites American history from a black perspective, thereby affirming an identity earlier exploited or denied. Non-Black texts display the power of pedagogues to control what defines identity, perpetuating hegemonic ideologies of oppression through the educational system and institutions. Morrison deals with this topic in several of her novels. In

each case, she addresses the “distortions” of blacks and their experiences by white culture, and redefines and remythologizes them on her own terms through her Signifying techniques.

If learning a language means having to deal with its cultural bias and encoded value system, then Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* demonstrates how socio-cultural influences can permeate a text resulting in the exclusion of other traditions and values. To present how white images of beauty, middleclass affluence, and success are instilled as early as childhood through the educational system, she uses the English primer, a particularly insidious element of the dominant culture. The “epithets” present an idealized fairytale story about a family- mother, father, Dick and Jane, which stands in stark contrast to Pecola’s life. Morrison’s story is “retold” in the novel in the context of African-American life and experience. Her objective is to show how a text can shape and mould thinking and perception. She rewrites the text in two other formats: one without any punctuation or capitalization, and the other without any capitalization, punctuation, or spaces between the words. In the novel’s context, the third section suggests that language itself is a problem: it does not clearly reflect the complexities of family life bordering on madness.

Thus, Morrison dissects the English primer so that it progresses into unreadability or chaos. In other words, the text breaks down. In this way, she also shows how language and its hidden power structures can be overturned. The meaning is not inherent in words and sentences and by presenting the same words in other formats, she renders language as unreliable, causing confusion and uncertainty. As linguistic forms falter, so do encoded values and ideas. The ironic interplay of difference brings a particular perspective to the nature of whiteness and its inappropriateness to determine the contours of black culture and experience. Further, through her revisions of the white voice of the primer, Morrison signifies on the earlier convention of the white voice of authority introducing the black text in African-American slave narratives. By manipulating the prefatory primer, she demonstrates her refusal to “allow the white voice and perception of the primer to authorize or authenticate the supremely self-conscious example of Black art that is *The Bluest Eye*.”⁶⁶

The interplay between the formal criteria of the white literary tradition and the oral art forms typical of the African heritage is at the heart of the quest for identity present in most of Morrison’s novels. In *Song of Solomon*, she demonstrates the meaningfulness of an African-American cultural literacy based on the “discredited knowledge” of their

oral tradition. In order for Milkman to make sense of the meaning of Solomon's song, he must unlearn the methods of white pedagogical practices and learn to focus on *orality* (sound and pronunciation) rather than *literacy* (spelling and definition). His task is to discover the link between the power of naming and the articulation of history, identity, and spiritual healing. By acquiring the vernacular, spirit, and culture of black urban males, he is spiritually reborn and "discursively" reinserted into a history from which he and his family had been estranged.

Pedagogical issues are also deep-seated in *Tar Baby*. In this novel, Morrison presents Jadine's Europeanised education as something that teaches her to reject her blackness. She uses a Caribbean island to typify the social structures of colonisation for not only the literally colonised but also the psychologically colonised. As such, the novel directs attention to the question of the spiritual and practical ramifications that capitalism has had upon African-Americans. Although Jadine is not part of the European-descended ruling class, she is symbolic of a position within the African community, called by Mbalia, "the African petty bourgeois."⁶⁷

Tar Baby "critiques a European materialist vision without using the clichéd words, images and plots that are conventionally employed for any analysis of capitalist exploitation and class hierarchies."⁶⁸ Instead, Morrison employs the technique of multi-reference in her treatment of the

tar baby folktale motif to highlight the gaps that exist between a Black-American heritage and a Black-African one, and the negotiations that characters must conduct in order to achieve a sense of wholeness. She examines and reconstructs the tar baby story to present what it may mean to be a tar baby according to the original “tar lady in African mythology,” combining it with the historic sacredness of the tar pit, and tar’s building and preserving properties.⁶⁹ In her view, black women like Jadine who neglect the ancient properties of black womanhood cannot be regarded as true tar babies. Hence, Morrison’s redefinition of the tar baby myth demystifies the authority of the plantation version. In addition, she signifies on the derogatory use of the term when applied to black girls by white society, and thus overturns this distortion of blacks in myths as well as in real life.

However, true to the Signifying tradition, Morrison’s satirical intent is not to question white society’s retelling and reshaping of her people’s history in order to vindicate an alternative position alone. She also comments on the sexual entrapment inherent in the myths of black women by emphasizing on tar’s negative aspects through the play on the word itself. The association of the swamp’s tar with the island’s slave past imbues the tar imagery with entrapping and restrictive connotations. In playing off both the positive and negative connotations of tar,

embodied in Son and Jadine's opposed perspectives on African-American values, Morrison exposes their inadequate understanding of each other's perspectives. Hence, through competing cultural values associated with tar, Morrison undercuts or subverts any monologic message in the tale.

Rafael Perez-Torres notes how the "absence" of the exploitation and denial of black cultural identity is perpetuated in the narrative of American cultural history. This is turned into "a powerful presence" by Morrison in *Beloved*.⁷⁰ Thus, her Signifying on the received texts of black history, and re-visioning of it is one of the most important aspects of this novel. Morrison's concern however, is not what history has recorded in the slave narratives which were authentic, first person accounts of their experience of slavery and escape from it, but what it has not. Significantly, she also foregrounds the female slave's experience, whose story was usually told by the black male narrator who was primarily concerned on focusing upon his own experiences. Even when her voice is heard, as in the case of Harriet Jacobs ("Linda Brent"), she must hide her identity under an assumed name, besides being forced to limit the revelation of all the details of her experience that might appear too subjective. *Beloved* signifies on these earlier practices by giving voice to the "unspeakable thoughts, unspoken" of the black female slave, resulting in the reclamation of the history of slavery. In the words of Ashraf

Rushdy, “In articulating a reconstructive—critical and hopeful—feminist voice within the fields of revisionist historiography and contemporary fiction, what Morrison does is create daughters Signifyin(g) history.”⁷¹

The character Beloved is both absent and present throughout the novel. Crucially absent from the text is any explanation by the author as to why Beloved appears, where she goes after her disappearance or whether she really disappears. The novel presents the reaction of others to her presence, but by the epilogue, she is forgotten. Not one of the characters can remember anything that she said: she only said and thought what they themselves were thinking. (*B*, p.274) As the embodiment of America’s past of slavery, Beloved’s name includes not only those who are remembered but also the “[d]isremembered and unaccounted for” (*B*, p.274)—those who are unnamed. The disremembering of Beloved is an affirmation of the future—a seeing past the Sixty million. “It was not a story to pass on,” reads the final motif. It should not be passed on, partly because the story is too painful, and partly because it summons the past. However, by signifying on the double meaning inherent in “pass on,” as also meaning, “to retell,” Morrison passes the story on in the form of the novel itself.

Morrison further signifies on the disrememberance of Beloved:

By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is
not only the footprints but the water too and what it is

down there. The rest is weather. Not a breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for, but wind in the eaves...certainly no clamor for a kiss. *Beloved*. (*B*, pp.274-275)

By lamenting that, the story of the slave passage is mostly unremembered, Morrison signifies on the forgetting of history, and the banishing of such memories “to the margins of consciousness and culture.”⁷² Disremembering is not the same as erasing. Hence, *Beloved* as an embodiment of historical memory and the sixty million African ancestors (forgotten by present African-Americans), is still present “in the midst of supposed absence, dismissed as wind.”⁷³

In *Beloved*, Morrison also shows how through the language of science and other ideological discourses, slavery was justified by official white society. Schoolteacher represents the power of pedagogy to remove black personhood: the notebooks in which he records his observations about slave behaviour serve as a central image of his domination of slaves. He himself is well aware that his control of language and its “proper” use is the key to his control of the slaves on Sweet Home farm. Consequently, he does not allow the slaves to voice their own opinions or to learn to read and write, but silences their voices with an iron bit. Morrison signifies on Schoolteacher’s “scientific” use of language as an instrument of domination and degradation through Sethe’s infanticide which is presented on one level, as a desperate act of protection from

such devastating dehumanizing: “It was’nt the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them.” (B, p.198) Her act is a physical form of Signifying on the dehumanizing devastation caused by such degrading use of language. Consequently, the warning that Morrison issues in her Nobel Prize lecture is about the dangers of language abuse and misuse. Her own attempts at creating literature that is “Black,” “affirms the integrity of black storytelling against the presence of linguistic terrorism.”⁷⁴ Through the emancipatory, transformative language of personal narration, Morrison subverts the derisive and exclusive use of Schoolteacher’s “language of surveillance.”

Naming

In many African societies, names and naming have great significance unlike anything in the West. In the longstanding West African concept of *nommo*, the act of naming is imbued with generative power. Debra Walker King defines *nommo* as the “spiritual-physical energy... that conjures being through naming... the seed of word, water and life that brings to the body its vital human force.”⁷⁵ The concept of *nommo* thus reflects the unique importance of names and naming to traditional African ways of knowing and being. Thus, a name is not a mere static label, but rather, the spiritual force that shapes and informs it.

The significance that black tradition attaches to the process of naming therefore makes it a crucial factor for those whose ancestors were rendered nameless during institutionalized slavery. By being denied the use of their own names they thus became, “unnamed.” In order to reclaim their identity, many enslaved Africans often sought to regain autonomous self-ownership through the process of self-naming.

Morrison chooses to engage names actively as dynamic components of the structure of the narrative itself. In her novels, names function to not only order and arrange the key elements of the text, but also to comment upon them.⁷⁶ Her application of naming plays an effective role in identity shaping including the deconstruction and reconstruction of identity. Namelessness, the loss of name, or the silencing of a name represents unnamings. By interpreting the significance of certain character names, the reader becomes aware of these unspoken themes existing beneath the surface of the narrative.

In *Song of Solomon*, finding and naming his ancestry leads Milkman to resurrect his family’s history, a history that was wiped out when his grandfather accepted the name of Macon Dead from a drunken Yankee soldier at the Freedman’s Bureau. Thus, Macon Dead Sr.’s real name that had been silenced for future generations is an example of

unnaming since it blurs his past from the view of his descendents.

Milkman will however, finally come to understand that,

[u]nder the recorded names were other names, just as 'Macon Dead,' recorded for all time in some dusty file, hiding from view the real names of people, places and things. Names that had meaning." (*SoS*, p.329)

To look beneath the surface for the real and important meaning is what he himself must learn to do. Only when Milkman learns to look at names as "bearing witness," (*SoS*, p.330) as being important in themselves, will he be able to look at his own name in a positive way. To know one's name is to know one's past, and for Milkman—history, identity, and spiritual healing are linked to the power of naming and the discursive formulas of the African-American vernacular into which he is ultimately integrated.

In Morrison's fiction, the close relation between the power of the word and names shows that whoever knows a name has power over that person. But, as Barbara Rigney says, "the power greater than knowing a name is bestowing it, for the act of naming another reflects a desire to regulate and therefore control."⁷⁷ *Beloved* illustrates how white people have the power to define the slaves who work for them. The processes of creation and naming are paralleled when Paul D, wearing the bit, his plans for escape awry, sees a rooster strutting at liberty and is struck by their relative positions. The rooster, ironically, is called 'Mister,' an appellation that Paul D was ever unlikely to bear. Moreover, 'even if you

cooked him, you'd still be cooking a rooster named Mister.' (B, p.72)

Both schoolteacher and Garner believe that the men who work for them are possessions, unformed substances that, with the right treatment, can be 'made' into men, or well-behaved beasts. For them, being a man and attaining manliness for the black could only be conferred through their agency. Thus, Paul D contemplates on the power of language and naming in relation to his manhood:

Garner called and announced them men- but only on Sweet Home, and by his leave. Was he naming what he saw, or creating what he did not?... Did a whiteman saying it make it so? (B,p.220)

He wonders whether he would cease to be a man if Garner stops calling him one. This linguistic relationship between giver and receiver, the namer and the named, reflects the power-relationship between the white owner and his black slaves. The unimaginative and dehumanizing names that Garner gives the three half-brothers— Paul A, Paul D, and Paul F, with a letter and nothing more to distinguish them, exemplifies such a relationship.

In Morrison's novels, matriarchal power often includes the power to name, and a principal example of this is Eva in *Sula*. Her own name signifies on the Biblical Eve, named by Adam as "the mother of all living." (Genesis 3:20) Morrison's Eva appropriates Adam's power by naming her own children and others as well, thus exercising power over

them. The characters she names literally “become” their names fulfilling the intention of their namer. Even before she kills her son, “she has already emasculated and rendered him infantile by calling him ‘Sweet Plum.’”⁷⁸ In the case of the three boys she looks after each of whom she names “dewey,” the boys gradually loses all distinctiveness becoming a ‘trinity with a plural name.’” (*S*, p.33) Eva’s careless naming of these boys is crippling as it determines their fate: they remain childlike and unindividuated throughout their lives.

On the other hand, the choosing of one’s own name can also reflect negatively as representing a rejection of race and culture and Helen Wright in *Sula*, exemplifies this. The daughter of Rochelle, a Creole prostitute from New Orleans from whom she wants to get away as far as possible, Helen changes her surname from Sabat to Wright with its associations of ‘rightness’ and ‘whiteness’ to distance herself from her true racial identity. Moreover, the fear of her mother’s legacy pushes her to repress any spark of the wildness and independence that characterized Rochelle that might have been passed on to her daughter Nel. Thus, Nel is merely an extension of her mother as even her name suggests; she has no personality of her own except as the bland and obedient daughter of an iron-fisted matriarch. In *The Bluest Eye*, the further Pauline moves away from her Southern roots, the nearer she is to white bourgeois values. The

result of such cultural alienation is to become a literal stranger to her own family, where even her husband and children address her as “Mrs. Breedlove.” The diminutive name, “Polly,” given to her by the white family she works for is appropriate because “Pauline has diminished herself through her obsequious dedication to whiteness just as surely as little Pecola is diminished in her desire for blue eyes.”⁷⁹ In a similar vein, in *Tar Baby*, names reveal a character’s ambiguity. Jadine, so called by her aunt and uncle, prefers the more exotic “Jade,” which however, indicates a fragmented self-image. Her dilemma of being unable to readjust to her African-American heritage is further reflected in her surname Childs, an ironical reference to her literal and metaphorical orphan status.

In *Jazz*, several of the characters’ names become ironic in the course of the story. Golden Gray’s name takes on ironical implications when he discovers his father’s identity: the name “Gray” reflects his place between the irresolute grey produced by the combined black and white worlds of his mother and father, as well as the grey of indecision, of gloom, as his hopes are diminished. In the same novel, the name Henry is a ubiquitous name and the last name that this character chooses for himself after slavery, is distorted as LesTory, Lestroy, and *Lestory*. The others never remember him as Henry but only as “Hunters Hunter,” a

name that binds his identity to the white hunter for whom he had been a huntsman. The doubling of names thus draws attention to the multiple identities a person can have and mirrors the psychic violence done to an oppressed people whose identities are superimposed by their owners.'

However, Morrison shows how self-love can come from a discarding of labels imposed by whites on black people and from a self-definition previously denied to them. As she asserts, "The best thing you can do is to take another name which is yours because it reflects something about you or your own choice"⁸⁰ In *Beloved*, through renaming, the disempowerment of a slave past is counteracted as Stamp Paid rejects the name of Joshua, and rechristens himself as an assertion of self-worth and self-ownership. The name he chooses, "Stamp Paid" symbolically indicates his celebration of freedom from any debt. Similarly, Sethe's mother gives her the name of the only man she ever accepted. By doing so, she commemorates her right to choose children and husband, in the same way that she exercises that right by throwing away the nameless children of the crewmembers who violated her. Baby Suggs opts for the surname of the one man she regards as a husband, although six have fathered her children, and she keeps the pet name that he called her for a first name. Sixo's woman, Patsy, is rebaptised as the Thirty-Mile Woman because of the distance Sixo has to walk to meet her.

The man, whose name derives from a number, triumphs in spite of his capture and succeeds in the continuation of his lifeline, shouting ‘Seven-O!’ to signify to Paul D the escape of his unborn child and simultaneously names the child after himself. With this one word, Sixo binds himself to his woman, his child, his world and his friend with links that are stronger than the white man’s ropes.

The special import that Morrison gives to names in her texts reflects the pivotal significance of names and naming in African cultures and the cultural and spiritual ramifications that “unnaming” has had for the black community. The issue of naming illustrates her fundamental worries about language. Just as language can be manipulated according to the codes of the user and the reader, so also, names can be appropriated and used to impose ideologies and identities. As Morrison says in her acceptance speech, if language is “the measure of our lives,” it must not be a language that oppresses or manipulates, “the policing languages of mastery,” but one that can “limn the actual, imagined and possible lives of the speaker, readers, writers.”⁸¹ As such, it must be free of the arrogance of absolute definition. Hence, in a discussion of Morrison’s use of language, the applicability of the black oral tradition of naming as a means to power becomes important, particularly the methods she employs to unsettle the arrogant, imperial domain of language use.

Call/Response, Witnessing/Testifying

Call and Response, and Witnessing and Testifying are also well-known attributes of the black oral tradition. Their importance as features of black oral storytelling that Morrison adapts to the structure of her fiction, particularly in relation to music, has been referred to earlier. However, as communicative acts, they also play important roles in the construction of African-American identity with regard to the language systems and patterns of the tradition. Hence, a discussion of how Morrison uses these rhetorical practices to capture African-American cultural realities in order to conserve their communal values, folk wisdom, and language usage, is warranted. Further, the particular significances of the acts of naming, calling, hearing, and testifying in black linguistic practices contribute to the claim that her novels are “speakerly texts” or “talking books” that unite form and content using storytelling materials. Through the call and response technique, she tries to lessen the distancing nature of the written text and allows the reader to make connections with the characters. Similarly, witnessing and testifying are also acts of communication, used as a metaphor for unity: to witness is to affirm, certify, validate, and observe.

Morrison often combines the language of call and response with witnessing and testifying to stir memories and to unite all who are

present. An inspiring and moving example of this form of communication takes place in *Song of Solomon* at Hagar's funeral. The emotional force of this scene is the combination of the patterns of call and response and testifying. In the antiphonal patterns of sound that emerge, many voices come together in an interactive process of communal participation that is faithful to the black oral aesthetics. The inference is that after witnessing, each listener will testify by retelling this story to others just as the narrator has done. This includes the reader who must also do the same and thereby become a participant in the discourse of the community. Similarly, in *Beloved*, the thoughts of the three women of 124 Bluestone Road are conveyed in one of the most powerful scenes that incorporate *the oral tradition of call and response, witnessing and testifying.*

Geneva Smitherman states that to testify is "to tell the truth through story"⁸² and in *The Bluest Eye*, we find this to be especially true. Claudia, as a witness of Pecola's tragedy, "testifies" to her community's actions of assigning to Pecola their own negative feelings about themselves and making her a kind of scapegoat:

All of us- all who knew her- felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness (*BE*, p.163).

As an adult, Claudia judges the plot and states its significance: the story emphasizes her own and the reader's participation. In *Beloved*, narration

is a communal act in which the narrative voice is not a single, authoritative voice, but is evocative of a community voice that is multiple voiced to include different points of view. This is illustrated in Baby Suggs's healing rituals in the Clearing in which the ritualistic and spiritual dimension of language as a communal and participatory mechanism is depicted.

In *Jazz*, Morrison presents another aspect of testifying and witnessing. In giving us the story of Golden Gray, which resonates as a blues lament, she considers the pain of all characters, regardless of gender or race. Golden's search for his father and his encounter with the pregnant and unconscious "wild woman" as he arrives at his father's cabin, forces him to question his own identity. Like Joe Trace, Golden finds that he has built his identity out of a half-solved puzzle. Living without a father has been like being one-armed:

Now I feel the surgery. The crunch of the bone when it is sundered, the sliced flesh and the tubes of blood cut through, shocking the bloodrun and disturbing the nerves. They dangle and writhe. Singing pain...Let the dangle and the writhe see what is missing; let the pain sing to the dirt... (*J*, p.158)

Through his "singing" pain, Golden's lament illustrates an aspect of the blues, which is also about getting through the blues. In naming his lack and loss, and transforming his grief into lyrical catharsis, he is able to reclaim himself as a black man's son.

Morrison in *Jazz* seems to indicate that Gray chooses to give up his 'white' identity and instead follows Wild into the woods. But the novel also reveals that while Golden Gray has had to revision himself and his affiliation with the black community— that same community has still not learnt to accept him as one of its members. Angela Burton points out that the readers are called to be 'witnesses' to Gray's identity crisis; "we - the readers - are called upon to 'see' our own complicity in generating the abjection of the figure of mixed-race origins."⁸³ As a blues writer, Morrison takes up the position of the testifier who "tells the truth through story." Speaking as a member of the community, she addresses the issue of the mixed-race figure and its place in the representation of contemporary African-American ethnic identity. Morrison even implicates her non-Black readers as contributing to the making of mixed-race figures as cultural anomalies and pariah figures in our own societies through the narrator's improvisational re-readings of Golden's story, by showing how the narrator's perspectives and interpretations equal the reader's own. The novel's ending places the reader in a call-and-response dialectic with the narrative of *Jazz*, which "compels us to 'remake' ourselves as a community of 'readers' in which the mixed-race subject has a 'right to be.'"⁸⁴

Through these communicative acts of naming, calling, and testifying, Morrison seeks to give “verbal witness to the efficacy, truth, and power of some experience in which all blacks have shared.”⁸⁵ One of these experiences is the danger of losing their cultural memories and roots. As mentioned earlier, her mythic and symbolic revisioning of the South includes a re-immersion in the oral tradition, whether physically or spiritually, and to engage in its language systems. In Morrison, the degree of a character’s grounding in that tradition often measures their psychic wholeness. For instance, Pauline Breedlove’s ‘oral monologue’ about her early life with Cholly captures the diction, grammar, and rhythm of Black-American English. In the fragments concerning her girlhood in the rural south and her early life with Cholly, Pauline still shows some connections to a community where she could participate in the group activities. The Alabama home she recalls is a place where she could imagine herself as “whole.” However, as she and Cholly move to Ohio, in the North, she loses this connection and her oral narration is replaced by a more distanced authorial voice. As she begins to equate “physical beauty with virtue,” she judges her own daughter by these newly learnt standards, forgetting and neglecting the fundamental cultural beliefs she had learned in the South.

In Morrison's novels, the individual has to mediate the oral knowledge of the black community with the knowledge necessary to live in the modern, white world. Sometimes, "this mediation involves physical journeys from South to North or vice versa, journeys that become defining moments, (Nel, Golden Gray) mythic quests, (Milkman, Pilate) failed returns, (Son, Jadine) or heroic accomplishments (Sethe)." ⁸⁶ *Song of Solomon*, for instance, illustrates how in the South, Milkman revisits the sites associated with his ancestors thereby identifying himself with them. By singing to the dying Pilate, testifying to her the "self-knowledge, empathy and a sense of place in the African-American culture," ⁸⁷ he demonstrates his achievement in his native tradition.

In *Beloved*, the act of 'naming' the past compels each character to exorcise their own ghosts and to re-immense themselves in the oral tradition. Sethe's and Paul D's encounters with the brutality of slavery have resulted in an internal silencing which locks them out of the therapeutic and nurturing aspects of the oral community. They must recover their connections to this tradition, and find within this tradition, the language, rituals, and codes of conduct that will lead to their healing. Denver too, makes her difficult re-entry into the world outside 124 Bluestone Road to tell her mother's story, by learning the discourse of the black oral tradition. In doing so, she discovers the reciprocal nurturing

nature of this tradition. Unlike the community in *The Bluest Eye* who fail to come to Pecola's rescue, the community in *Beloved* responds positively to Denver's attestations. By naming the presence that they must oppose, the women lay the past to rest, and pave the way for Paul D and Sethe to later "create some kind of tomorrow" (*B*, p.273) within the African-American, oral-based community and culture.

A final example of characters that "return" spiritually to the South and are reoriented and meaningfully renewed is found in *Jazz*. "Citylife" for Violet begins to unravel in chaos as she fails to remember and preserve her Southern cultural beliefs and practices. Her distant and fading memory of her childhood is reflected in her frustrated attempt to kidnap a child, her violence against Dorcas, and her being locked in silence. However, through her budding relationship with Dorcas' aunt, Alice Manfred, Violet finds her way back to re-enter the tradition that she had been a part of in the South. When she at last, gathers the courage to look unflinchingly at herself, she is able to see "that other Violet," the one who knows things and does things that this Violet has forgotten how. Her self-realization comes in her unspoken declaration: "that Violet is me!" Similarly, as Alice gains an increasing ability to interpret her own and other people's actions, she takes the responsibility for making mistakes in parenting Dorcas. Through an enactment of the rituals of

storytelling and nurturing, of naming, witnessing/ testifying that defines community making, Violet and Alice assist each other in naming essential areas of their lives in order to regain control and to re-immense themselves in the oral tradition.

In these ways then, Morrison seeks to “transfigure the complexity and wealth of Black American culture into a language worthy of the culture”⁸⁸ and to produce a rootedness for her own sense of her community. Through the communicative acts of Signifying, Call and Response, Naming, Witnessing and Testifying, she mirrors the oral tradition of passing on history, stories, and cultural understandings about her community, using it also as “a way to bring the reader into the style, meaning, and function of the African-Americans’ literary texts.”⁸⁹ Further, through these rhetorical tropes, she also explores the consequences of characters that disconnect themselves from the oral tradition and the efforts of those who retain, or re-acquire a sound sense of this tradition, to become authentically reoriented and spiritually renewed. By bringing to literary texts, the concept of communal participation, Morrison, in all her novels, invites the reader to join in the community of those who are still immersed in the oral tradition.

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- ⁵¹ Ibid.

- ⁵² Ibid, p.57.
- ⁵³ Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The African American Presence in American Literature." *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Vol. 28 (Winter 1989), p.21.
- ⁵⁴ Philip Page discusses *Jazz's* affinities with Derridean concepts of difference, the trace, and the breach in "Traces of Derrida in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*." *African American Review* 29.1 (1995), pp.55-66.
- ⁵⁵ These repeated 'signs' create the effect of riffs defined by Gates as "a central component of jazz improvisation and signifyin(g)" which "serves as an especially appropriate metaphor for signifyin(g) and revision." *The Signifying Monkey*, p.214
- ⁵⁶ Usha Shourie, "The Morrison Music: Narrative Style in *Jazz*." *Indian Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 23, 2 (Summer 1993), p.72.
- ⁵⁷ Katherine Dalsgaard, "The One All-Black Town Worth the Pain: (African) American Exceptionalism, historical Narration, and the Critique of nationhood in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*." *African American Review*, 35 (2001), p.243.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid, p.233.
- ⁵⁹ Gates, *Signifying*, p.85.
- ⁶⁰ Michael Awkward, "The Evil of Fulfillment": Scapegoating and Narration in *The Bluest Eye*," in *Toni Morrison: Perspectives Past and Present*, eds. Gates, Henry Louis, and K.A. Appiah, (Amistad Literary Series. New York: Amistad, 1993), p.181.
- ⁶¹ See Melvin Dixon's "Like an Eagle in the Air: Toni Morrison." In *Toni Morrison*, ed. Harold Bloom, (Chelsea House Publishers, New York and Philadelphia, 1990), pp.115-142

- ⁶² See Michael Awkward, “The Evil of Fulfillment”: Scapegoating and narration in *The Bluest Eye*,” pp.202-p.207; Sandra Pouchet Paquet, “The Ancestor as Foundation in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Tar Baby*,” *Callaloo*, Vol. 13 (1990), pp.499-515.
- ⁶³ See Malin Walther Pereira, “Periodizing Toni Morrison’s work from ‘The Bluest Eye’ to ‘Jazz’: The Importance of ‘Tar Baby.’” *MELUS*. Volume: 22. 3. (1997), pp. 71+.
- ⁶⁴ Martha J. Cutter argues that both texts provide several textual details that can function as “signs” of Beloved’s presence in *Jazz* that should create rereading. See “The Story Must Go On and On: The Fantastic, Narration, and Intertextuality in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and *Jazz*.” *African American Review*, (Spring, 2000). Cited after: http://www.findarticles.com/cf_0/m2838/1_34/62258906/print.jhtml, 30th Sept., 2002, 18 pages.
- ⁶⁵ See Judylyn S Ryan and Estella Conwill Májozo for a detailed account of *Jazz*’s sampling of musical works in “Jazz...On ‘The Site of Memory,’” in *Studies in the Literary Imagination* Vol.31.2, (Fall, 1998) pp.125-132.
- ⁶⁶ Awkward, “The Evil of Fulfillment,” p.181.
- ⁶⁷ Mbalia, “Women who Run with Wild,” p.71.
- ⁶⁸ Judylyn S. Ryan, “Contested visions/double vision in *Tar Baby*,” p. 598.
- ⁶⁹ Karen Baker-Fletcher, “*Tar Baby* and the Womanist Theology,” Cited after: http://weblications.com/cf_/theologytoday/apr1993/v50-1/articles.html, 4 of 9 pages.
- ⁷⁰ Rafael Perez Torres, “Knitting and knotting the Narrative Thread—*Beloved* as a Postmodern Novel,” (1993), p.692.

- ⁷¹ Ashraf Rushdy, "Daughters Signifyin(g) History" p.449.
- ⁷² Karen Baker-Fletcher, "*Tar Baby* and the Womanist Theology." 6.
- ⁷³ Ibid, 7.
- ⁷⁴ Anne-Janine Morey, "Margaret Atwood and Toni Morrison: Reflections on Postmodernism and the Study of Religion and Literature." In *Toni Morrison's Fiction: Contemporary Criticism*, ed. David Middleton (New York & London: Garland Publishing), p.247.
- ⁷⁵ Debra Walker King, *Deep Talk: Reading African American Literary Names*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), p.37; Jahn Janheinz defines *nommo* as "a unity of spiritual physical fluidity, giving life to everything, penetrating wverything, causing everything." See Janheinz, Jahn, *Muntu: An Outline of the new African Culture*, trans. Marorie Grene, (New York: Grove, 1961), p. 124.
- ⁷⁶ According to Debra Walker King, names and acts of naming in literature offer the "active reader," a level of "deep talk" that only enhances the surface story, but tell a story of its own. Literary names can thus revise and comment upon the surface action of the novel by giving voice to unspoken themes and events, a process known as "deep talk." (p. 4)
- ⁷⁷ Rigney, (1991), p.61.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid.
- ⁷⁹ Rigney, (1991), p.60.
- ⁸⁰ LeClair, "The Language" p.28.
- ⁸¹ Morrison, "Nobel," p.7.
- ⁸² Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin_and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986), p.150.

⁸³ Angela Burton, "Signifyin(g) Abjection: Narrative Strategies in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*," in *Toni Morrison: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Linden Peach, (Macmillan Press Ltd, London.1998), p.185.

⁸⁴ Ibid, p.187.

⁸⁵ Smitherman, *Talkin*, p.58.

⁸⁶ Page and Atkinson, p. 98.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Rootedness, pp.215-216.

⁸⁹ Atkinson and Page, p.106.

Conclusion

I was not speaking of a marginality one wishes to lose, to give up, or surrender as part of moving into the center, but rather as a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist. It offers the possibility of radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternative, new worlds.

bell hooks•

The storyteller today goes by many names- preachers, healers, teachers, comedians, singers, poets, dancers, rappers, 'liars,' painters and historians. In her efforts to create a novel form characterized by dramatically shifting perspectives, ambiguities and paradoxes, Toni Morrison is none of these and all of them. She is involved in the creation of a new type of novel, one that seeks to represent the hopes, aspirations and historical memories of blacks and of black women in particular. Her artistic goals, stated by her in numerous works, distinguish her approach from other black writers who utilize Western or European forms and traditions. As she tells us, she is concerned with writing "village literature, fiction that is really for the village, for the tribe."¹ In "Unspeakable Things Unspoken" she calls for "the development of a theory of literature that truly accommodates Afro-American literature: one that is based on its culture, its history, and the artistic strategies the works employ to negotiate the world it inhabits."²

In response to these observations, a substantial body of criticism has emerged which addresses the significance of African-American culture as a crucial component in the emancipation of black people, individually and collectively. Morrison has always understood that within this culture lay the alternative images, self-definitions, and strategies necessary to resist white cultural domination and to reclaim black life. Her novels are thus firmly rooted in the oral tradition of African-American folklore since this tradition “challenges modern Western sources attesting to an alternate African view of reality.”³ Her goal, for this reason, has been to give voice to the hitherto repressed traditions of her cultural heritage and to transform it through narrative fiction. In order to do this, she draws on folk myth and vernacular, focusing on generation clans, and dealing with the burden of history.

Several critical engagements with Morrison’s fiction centre on cultural ramifications and even the most recent studies on her works stress on content and themes rather than processes and artistic strategies. However, studying her work in terms of her own professed intentions also necessitates a focus on her narrative strategies as a way of discovering how she creates ethnic literature that is culturally affirmative. Since her first allegiance is to the African component of her African-American identity, her re-activation of the cultural heritage of the black community

with its references to black history and oral traditions has important implications. As such, the main thrust of this thesis has thus been to focus on Morrison's narrative technique which contains key elements of African modes of storytelling, evident in both the language and storytelling methods of all her works.

The overall purpose of this study has been to underline how Morrison affirms her cultural beliefs through folkloristic transmission. The emphasis has been to consider the ways in which she transforms and adapts folkloric phenomena, to determine the vestiges of oral communication used by her, and to interpret her texts in the light of all the information obtained. Her concerns among many others are foregrounding and giving a voice to the marginalized within the context of a distinct community, creating characters who challenge the reader's sense of reality. Through issues of form, narration and language, this thesis has attempted to bring into relief the dynamic range within Morrison's writing. Attention has been drawn to the ways in which she has demonstrated a remarkable ability to appropriate historical paradigms and incorporate them into artistic forms. As such, an overview of her works will reveal how successfully she has adapted folk modes of narration to her fiction.

Morrison's characters share a cultural history that she illuminates through a variety of ingenious narrative strategies that is derivative of black oral traditions and its storytelling methods. In this regard, the emphasis has been on how she uses the form and critical framework of the African dilemma and trickster tales to re-define culture and re-invent narrative form. An attempt has been made to analyze the method in which most of her novels use these "folk processes" which suggest the vitality of black folklore, and also provide ways through which she challenges the master narrative and addresses postcolonial and contemporary issues that confront African-American people. Some of the narrative techniques Morrison often uses are reiteration and circularity, a shifting narrative voice, interactive participatory mechanisms, non-linearity, the deployment of multiple points of view, and open-endedness. These elements in her fiction have been identified and explored as strategies that have affinities with African folklore, particularly, the traditional structure of oral narratives and also exemplify her avowed goal of bringing such elements into written forms like the novel.⁴ At the same time, her incorporation of the constituents of the oral vernacular tradition such as call and response, naming, witnessing and testifying, and Signifying as storytelling devices have also been discussed as rhetorical principles which assist her novelistic purposes of attaining orality.

It is thus apparent that Morrison's conscious use of "the aesthetic tradition of Afro-American culture" and "its characteristic art forms" such as call and response, improvisation, and audience performance bring to light the cultural intersection between the individual and the community that is central to her storytelling style. For instance, her employment of a story structure of contrapuntal narratives provides the opportunity for characters to tell stories to one another within the framework of the 'main' story, with the narrator moving in and through the characters' worlds to fill in gaps and add more to the story pattern. The resultant medley of conflicting and complementary voices reveals individual and community meaning-making. In this context Rafael Perez-Torrez has noted this aspect of Morrison's use of story in *Beloved*, describing it as a "decentering impulse" that creates community by "uniting the lives of the teller, the listener, and the greater world of experience from which the story is drawn" which then produce numerous voices reflecting on "the same event, each from different perspectives, none taking precedence over the others."⁵

The point that has been made is that such a use of storytelling is pertinent to all of Morrison's novels and is also a part of the whole fabric of black folklore that Morrison embeds and recasts in her fiction to produce new ways of conceiving African-American history and culture.

She interweaves folk tales and legend into her narratives to reflect her character's conflicts of identity and to suggest ways of producing healing and survival within family and community. In Morrison's fiction, characters must find a personal, familial, or communal voice to respond to by revisiting the historical, legendary, or imaginative moments in time through "re-memories". In novels such as *Beloved*, this process of "re-memory" is more of a collective and communal seeing rather than a response to a personal vision. In other novels, such as *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*, it is more a personal and familial vision. In all, the embeddings of black culture and "re-memories" of time are important ways of conceptualizing the shared histories of African-Americans, since one story provides the input for the next and multiply to generate layers of family history. Hence an examination of how she uses many tellers to produce interwoven tales of the same story has shown how she does not give any single character the status of assuming the central consciousness for the story.

The result of using such a narrative structure based on the aesthetic characteristics listed above is continuous re-evaluation by the reader since the presentation of multiple viewpoints demand different interpretations of the story which are also subject to change. The main endeavour of this analysis has been to see how these characteristics serve in advancing

Morrison's goal to draw the reader into the role of a collaborator in the creation of her texts. She thus re-constructs in written form, the performance dynamic that is native to African oral traditions— re-made in the American South. Her primary concern has been to transform the reader's traditional habits of reading and interpreting into a mode of engagement whose endpoint is not only the transfer of knowledge but the disclosure of how and what the reader comes to know, and how she/he makes sense of this knowledge. Consequently, this study has focused not only on the structural and formal features of African-American expressive arts, but also on the philosophical objectives underlying these structures.

The primary locus for observing the philosophical objectives that give rise to the formal and structural component of the oral tradition is African-American spirituality that informs African folklore. As such, African spiritual culture with its emphasis on the importance of the religious, supernatural, and superstitious beliefs of black lore in Morrison's novels has been examined to show how her characters gain meaning in their respective literary environments. In the process one sees that she links her narrative with the spiritual traditions of Africa, through a re-enactment of ritual acts and other cultural symbols having indigenous values and practices. The objective has been to reveal how by

incorporating these frameworks of African worldviews, she reclaims and re-integrates the African-American personality, and restores individual and communal cohesion. Thus she provides a context for African-Americans to reclaim their fractured identities by recovering their ancestral memory and individual and communal significance. Not all of her characters learn to rediscover the value and sustaining force of this authentic "black" past, and are thus resigned to a life in which they have internalized white cultural values but remain alienated from their own.

By incorporating elements of the African spiritual tradition like the supernatural, magical and fantastic to define and defend difference, Morrison's fiction has contributed to the redefinition of the marginalized position often accorded to the literature of ethnic women writers. She blurs the frontiers between the supernatural and so-called real world and draws attention to her conscious representation of ghosts, ancestral figures, conjurers and healers, thus contributing to the re-evaluation of this 'counter- culture.' The argument is that through her exploration of varied portraits of spiritual systems that exist outside of orthodox Christianity, the supernatural in her fiction becomes a space of resistance and a way of creating healing narratives for African-American women as true "metaphorical conjure women."⁶

The present study has also sought to show how in the context of Morrison's fiction, the reader's collaboration with and responses to the text can take the form of musical variations on the call that are re-figured and extended to facilitate his/her progression from participant to collaborator. As reiterated earlier, this is a fundamental feature of the African storytelling traditions. Thus, the analysis of Morrison's novels marked by the presence of music and musical patterns, bear testimony to her strategy of combining two art forms to recapture a long-lost tradition of folk storytelling where music was an integral part. Stories were passed on orally through songs, epic poems, ballads, or tales sung or chanted. Recalling how music provided the primary means of sustaining a unique culture based on the concept of a shared community now considered obsolete by the people themselves, Morrison attempts to keep this tradition alive by making room for it in her narratives. Hence, a discussion of the principles of black music as an integrating feature of her style, brings to light how she uses them in consonance with various images and motifs that serve as reflective reminders of communal values and inspirations it was designed to express.

The basis of this analysis has been that Morrison achieves a fusion of musical and literary forms to recreate in her novels the orality of African culture. She combines the powers of music and language to bring

her characters to a better understanding of reality. By doing this, the involvement of the reader is projected as being essential in re-creating music's cathartic aspect, the "healing power" that has been lost to the whites, thus redefining the relationship between the reader and the text.

The most striking quality about Morrison's writing is the language, which is specifically, the "black" language of her people. She has spoken repeatedly about the aesthetics of black art and the character of black language that she wants her readers to hear in her novels. In her efforts to restore the discarded knowledge of the oral community and preserve its language use, she tries to reinstate the oral performance and the information it contains. Orality for her is thus both a cultural value to be transmitted and also a technique to create an unmediated text. Morrison uses unconventional techniques to capture the specific "sound" of the characteristically black mode of spoken language for her texts. In order to retain the spontaneity and variability of language, she attempts to create a text that paradoxically speaks—and produces meaning in interaction with the reader/listener. The technique which she uses is modelled on the sermon tradition that forms the basis of the formal and structural components of the oral tradition, with its "performance dynamic ... multigeneric composition ... multifunctionality, and ... improvisational aspect." ⁷

Morrison's cultural project and pedagogical outlook are centred in language, both written as well as oral. She writes to resist Eurocentric cultural domination by reinverting dominant language tropes. This is seen, for instance, in the inclusion of nonverbal communication that is unique to black communities. Her employment of the rhetorical tropes from the black vernacular oral tradition brings the rich, aural Southern legacy of storytelling, mythmaking, and community participation to literary texts and helps to create a literary form that captures the cultural realities of the life of African-Americans. Her novels illustrate how "forms of language and forms of world view [are] inseparable from each other."⁸ In her fiction, the characters that retain or re-acquire a healthy sense of their cultural pasts are those who return to their oral tradition, whereas characters that are morally and spiritually adrift are those cut off from this tradition. Thus, an examination of how Morrison strategically subverts the power of the master narrative through her use of oral rituals such as Signifying, Witnessing/Testifying, will reveal her understanding of the psychology embedded in the oral tradition. By privileging orality, she shows her own rootedness to the cultural, oral, communal structures of the oral tradition.

In summing up, we can say that Morrison has created highly structured designs of stories with folklore embeddings which have always

been an integral aspect of black imagination. Though she has produced novels of uncommon realism using surrealistic settings filled with characters having psychic and spiritual perceptions, her strong sense of place and rootedness are prominent. In her novels, she has celebrated the rich folk heritage, language and traditional values of the black community threatened by a predominantly white society. She has been particularly attentive to the ancestral female as culture-bearer and the restless male as cultural pathfinder. Her folk-aesthetic reconstructs the folk community through the oral traditions of storytelling and her inconclusive endings draw readers into the participatory experience of communal storytelling. In utilizing the linguistic-cultural heritage of African-Americans, she reveals a love of language and language play, and a capacity to use it creatively. The written style of storytelling that she creates mirrors how the spoken word was passed down from generation to generation. In these ways, she establishes the distinctiveness of her writing and sets it apart as black literature. But at the same time she endeavours to re-define the African-American experience not as marginal or peripheral, but as American.

Although Morrison is firmly grounded in the cultural heritage and social concerns of black experience, her work transcends narrowly prescribed conceptions of ethnic literature. Much to the concern of the

non-African-American reader, she often speaks of the “Other” in such a way that suggests that the outsider can have at best, limited access to her meanings. Her avowals of writing primarily about blacks and for blacks notwithstanding, she undoubtedly impacts on non-black readers as well. A closer look at her published interviews reveals that her concept of the “other” is complex: this “othering,” no doubt refers to those outside the black community but there are instances in her fiction where she considers the participation of the “other” as vital to the literary process. In *Sula* (1973), Morrison chose to make the preface a “door” through which she could lead the (white) “valley man” into the African-American world of the hillside Bottom—a concession she later regretted. But in *Jazz* (1992), she encodes the ethnicity and gender of her narrator in such a deliberately ambiguous manner in the text that even readers from other cultural backgrounds cannot but feel impelled to respond to her call to join in the creative process of ‘writing’ the novel.

More significant is the fact that Morrison touches readers of the so-called Third World countries, such as India, in the way she emphasizes on the need to reassess oneself and to reclaim one’s own heritage and culture. As such, her novels are critiques of being and suggest strategies for survival, particularly for the many ethnic minority groups of North-East India whose experiences of political, economic and socio-cultural

marginalization often make them the “other” of the dominant groups in the country. In such a situation, the oral traditions of this region assume added importance in defining identities. As a repository of history, social customs, religion and worldviews, indigenous knowledge systems and literature, the oral tradition has always been vital to such communities.

However, many factors of change had led to the loss and undermining of this tradition, not least the advent of Christianity, and ‘liberal education’ based on Western systems. The negative impact of these factors on the oral tradition can be seen in how the ‘educated’ younger generation had become indifferent to, and alienated from, the age-old ways and knowledge embodied in this tradition.⁹ On one level, this is nothing but the “cultural bomb” that the African novelist, Ngugi Wa Thiongo identified as the “biggest weapon” of colonialism. The effect of a cultural bomb, he argues, is to

annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance with other people’s languages rather than their own...The intended results are despair, despondency and a collective deathwish.¹⁰

It is perhaps safe to say that most oral societies of the Northeast are experiencing such cultural hegemonisation, at some stage or the other.

Hence, the “decolonization” of mind involves the recovery of these lost attributes.

Morrison’s feelings of loss regarding the oral tradition of storytelling and folktales, the concept of community, the connection to the past and to culture, are therefore all extremely relevant to those who are members of oral tribal societies. In such a situation, her narrative strategies have important implications for the study of ethnic fiction which is rooted in folklore and storytelling traditions. For instance, Morrison’s use of traditional storytelling methods to shape her novels, to foster and create cultural identity, to connect the individual to a shared culture, and to set up dialogue among characters and readers, are strategies that merit serious consideration. Although attempts have been made at exploring certain aspects of the traditional life and lore of this region, not much scholarly research about the techniques of narration inherent in the storytelling traditions has been undertaken. For example, the trope of the African trickster occurs in many ethnic culture myths of the region. A closer look at Morrison’s trickster aesthetics and the way she weaves together current critical discourses on marginality, ethnicity, feminism and folklore in the figure of the trickster, can suggest a mode for personal and cultural survival.

Morrison's attempt to *oralize* print and to write "village literature" is another talking point which has important significance for marginalized societies, in defining, and forging group and personal identities based on their common condition as people in transition from an oral to a literate culture. In an age where literacy and the written word often displace orality, the oral tradition of any community finds itself increasingly marginalized. Particularly relevant is the idea of cultural and generational continuity. Oral communities are in constant need of new storytellers to articulate the experiences of those hidden histories, storytellers who, in the telling of the stories of a culture, will pass on the tradition from one generation to the next and with it the wisdom of experience. In her novels Morrison demonstrates the different ways in which a literary text can enter the oral tradition to create new folkloric forms that derive from an oral performance instead of a written one. In her attempts to incorporate aspects and elements of the oral art forms typical of the African heritage into the structure of the contemporary novel, Morrison pushes her written texts toward orality.

In spite of the fact that the core of her fiction is entirely African-American in form and spirit, Morrison has managed to transform the "marginal" into the canon of American literature. Her concern with the revision of previously unquestioned labels and boundaries, and the task

she assumes of redefining the concepts of reality and history are in the tradition of all great writing. Morrison shows that what matters in literary history is the knowledge it makes accessible, the experience to which it gives expression and shape that enable new generations to comprehend themselves and their world. In the power of the storyteller to articulate both for and in the voice of the 'other' lies its validation. With her narrative emphasis also on opening up to other ways of knowing and to alternative worldviews, she pays homage to her own ethnicity and culture, showing the way for us to do the same with our own cultures. As she has shown, through her proposal to rewrite black experience that would truly represent African-Americans as people who have shaped the choices, the language and the culture of America, the marginal can be turned into a vital source of identity and power.

Thus, when we consider the importance of oral traditions to cultural and individual survival and the multi-vocal calling to an alternative perspective in Morrison's fiction, we understand how it might be possible to reach a new understanding of ourselves through such strategies. The way in which Morrison has taken African themes, techniques and motifs as inspiration to evolve her own creative narrative style is a challenge for the many who are "outside readers" of her novels of black culture. Such an approach might facilitate aspiring writers of this

region to undertake the task of retrieving the positive values of the oral traditions and create “new written literature”¹¹ which will no longer remain in the margin only.

Epigraph:

- bell hooks, “Marginality as Site of Resistance,” *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture*, ed. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West. (New York: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990), p.341.

Endnotes and References

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- ³ Gay Wilentz, *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p.96.
- ⁴ See the interviews with Bakerman, LeClair, McKay, and Watkins, as well as Morrison’s essay “Rootedness.”
- ⁵ Perez-Torrez, “Knitting and Knotting the Narrative Thread —*Beloved* as a Postmodern Novel,” in *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol.39.3&4, (Fall/Winter 1993), pp.703-704.

- ⁶ Marjorie Pryse, "Introduction." *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, ed. Pryse and Spillers (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p.5.
- ⁷ Judylyn Ryan and Estaella Májozo, *Jazz...On "The Site of Memory"* in *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, Vol. 31.2, (Fall 1998), p.127.
- ⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin, "Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse," *Modern Criticism and Theory*, ed. David Lodge, (New York: Longman, 1988), p.155.
- ⁹ Cf. Temsula Ao, *The Ao-Naga Oral Traditon*, (Bhasha Publications: Baroda, 1999), pp. 175- 177.
- ¹⁰ Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. (London: Heinemann, 1986), p.3.
- ¹¹ Temsula Ao, p.180.

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BIO-DATA

Name: **KEVILENO SAKHRIE**

Husband's name: Nilasieto Sakhrie

Community: Angami (Naga)

Nationality: Indian

Postal Address: C/o. Department of English
Kohima Government College
Kohima, Nagaland

Permanent Address: Kohima Village, Kohima, Nagaland

Academic Qualification: M.A.

Present Status: Lecturer