Chapter 4

Reclaiming the Ancient Power

In her article “From a Mournful Village” Sarah Orne Jewett exhibits her intimate concern with the loss of tradition thus: “People do not know what they lose when they make away with the reserve, the separateness, the sanctity of the front yard and their grandmothers. . . . We Americans had better build more fences than take away from our lives” (18). Although this loss often appears in personal and situational forms, Jewett also invites the reader to contemplate the past and to consider what might be retrieved, reclaimed and affirmed by being integrated into the present. This profound sense of loss and preoccupation with the past is very clearly expressed in the works of Morrison and Walker. Their works encode a desire to save a vanquishing way of life by preserving it in fiction. It is a journey back in time and space although it ostensibly signifies a response to loss, a return to myth, folklore and ritual. Thus, folk elements in the fiction of Morrison do not merely acknowledge the description of Pilate as a herbal priestess, but intensify the depiction of characters like Celie, Tante Rosie, Ranie Toomer and the grandfather in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*.

In her essay “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens”, Walker marvels at the way in which her female ancestors clung on to the creative spark
within them, though their souls and bodies were abused and bruised. She speaks of those ancestors who were driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the spring of creativity in them for which there was no release. She is indignant that traditional modes of literary creativity had been denied to her predecessors. Yet the creative spark found itself expressed in growing magnificent flowers like the ones Walker's own mother grew, or in cooking or in quilts of imagination and passion or like the one that Walker saw hung in the Smithsonian Institute. As a tribute to all these women who refused to let racism and sexism smother their creativity, Walker commemorates them in her work by saying that to this thread of creativity and continuity left by her predecessors, she owes her own inspiration for her literary works.

As Barbara Christian says, Walker does not merely acknowledge quilts (or the art Black women created out of "low" media) as higher art, a tendency fostered by many women who have discovered the works of their maternal ancestors. She is awestruck by the functional beauty and by the process that produced them. According to Christian, the most important aspect to be noticed is that the functional nature of heritage demands that it should be continually renewed and kept alive instead of fossilizing it as an entity of the past.

At the centre of Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon and of the story of Milkman Dead's quest for identity is the story of Pilate, who is a female
sage and conjure woman. Pilate, described as a woman who came into town "like she owned it" (172), is not only credited with making it possible for milkman's mother to conceive him by giving her "some greenish-grey grassy-looking stuff" (173) to put in her husband's food, but also, she is the one person whose songs and stories teach Milkman how to find meaning in his life. Like Celie of Walker's *The Color Purple*, Pilate is an example of a female cultural archetype—the priestess figure—a woman equally adept in the natural and spiritual worlds, whose deeds and stories bring healing and knowledge to her community. As *The Color Purple* opens, the story teller is a fourteen-year-old girl who lacks a formal education and who writes her letters and the novel in the colloquial English of Southern Blacks. Walker seems to be saying that Celie's ability to write her story is a precondition for her own ability as a novelist.

If there is magic involved in Walker's perception of herself as a "medium", it is women's magic, the origins of which are as old as women themselves — and which, in the Black community, has often taken other forms but has also long included literary expression. Black folk and community life gives Walker her context in *The Color Purple*, and she, like Morrison, sees folk magic as art, and fiction as a form of conjuring. Morrison and Walker purposely gather together all the creative force of their Black and female forerunners. By acting as "medium" for Celie,
Walker gives them voice as well. Exploring the apparent anomaly of connection within a heritage of separation, Morrison and Walker challenge the authenticity and accuracy of an American history that failed to record their voices and a literary history that has compounded the error of that neglect. They have become metaphorical conjure women who make it possible for their readers and for each other to recognise their common literary ancestors — gardeners, quilt makers, grandmothers, root workers and women who wrote autobiographies — and to name each other as a community of inheritors. These writers enlarge our conventional assumptions about the nature and function of literary tradition by their combined recognition and mutual naming, based on magic, oral inheritance and the need to struggle against oppression. As Majorie Pryse remarks:

Focussing on connection rather than separation, transforming silence into speech, and giving back power to the culturally disenfranchised, Black women writers affirm the wholeness and endurance of a vision, that, once articulated, can be shared — though its heritage, roots, survival, and intimate possession belong to Black women alone. (5)

Zora Neale Hurston — Walker’s godmother, planned the garden, but it would take Walker to plant it. Although there are other sources of
influence on her writing, it is to Hurston herself that Walker claims her deepest literary kinship. Like Hurston, Walker also finds “magic” in combining folk and female material, transforming the power of the root-doctor’s conjure. Walker allows her Black characters to take folk and female magic into their lives and to “grow” first by listening to each other.

_The Color Purple_ stands as yet another monument to Hurston, and to the tradition of Black women novelists. Walker’s use of folk material has evolved considerably over the course of her career as a fiction writer. In “The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff”, a story from _In Love and Trouble_, Walker uses the conjure woman, Tante Rosie, as a weapon against oppression. In this story, Hannah goes to Tante Rosie for a spell that will achieve her revenge on a White woman, who, more than thirty years earlier, had publicly humiliated Hannah, refusing her request for food on the welfare line because Hannah had worn her best clothes for the occasion. Hannah traces her decline and the decline of her family to this moment. Tante Rosie promises Hannah Kemhuff that Sarah Sadler, the “little moppet” of the welfare line, will not outlive her by more than six months.

This happens. But Walker uses conjure in her story not merely to “kill off” her White character but also to revive Hannah Kemhuff’s sense of pride. Walker has thus transformed the nature of Black magic. The story defines conjure as the power to reassert the self and one’s heritage in the face of overwhelming injustice.
In other stories from *In Love and Trouble* such as "Strong Horse Tea" and "Everyday Use" and in the novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Walker continues to use folk materials and to explore the ways in which folk heritage can define human relationships. The actual conjure does not always have to work in order to make the root worker’s point. In "Strong Horse Tea" the baby dies before his mother returns with the still-warm horse urine old Sarah has told her to collect. And in "Everyday Use", the narrator must deny one daughter the quilts she wants to hang as art in recognition of the heritage in order to preserve them for the other daughter who plans to put them to everyday use. In both these stories, the mother Rannie Toomer and the older daughter Dee suffer the consequences of having earlier rejected Black folk life. Rannie held out too long for a "real" White doctor; and Dee rejected the quilts for her own use when she went away to college because they were "old-fashioned, out of style" (73). "Everyday Use" makes the point that mere stylishness does not conjure up the genuine power of the folk tradition. In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, the grandfather in his latter life becomes a root worker of a different kind, telling his grand-daughter Ruth the old stories but reinterpreting them within the context of the sixties and the Civil Rights Movement.

In *The Color Purple* Walker moves folk heritage further forward, into a context in which loving women become the most successful conjure
of all. And she does so by simultaneously moving backwards, taking for
her narrator a woman whose incorrect spelling and broken syntax place
her firmly within the nineteenth-century tradition of Black women for
whom, reading men and nations was more important than mere literacy.
At the point in The Color Purple at which Celie stops writing her letters to
God and begins writing to her sister, Walker uses the change in Celie’s
form of address to mark her radical internal transformation. Celie moves
from being a terrorized, silenced victim of rape. “You better not never tell
nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy” (3) who looks for a miracle, “a
sign letting me know what is happening to me” (3) and writes letters to
God, to a woman who draws her strength and her authority both to live
her life and to tell others about it from her love for a human woman, Shug
Avery. In the process she stops writing “God” altogether, rediscovers her
lost sister, begins writing to and for that sister, and manages to redefine
her own concept of “God as stars, trees, peoples, sky, everything” (242).
Her final letter, addressed to this new “God”, celebrates all of the changes
that culminate in Celie’s family reunion and in her own reintegration.
They hold their family party on July fourth, a day on which “White
people busy celebrating their independence from England . . . so most
Black folks don’t have to work. Us can spend the day celebrating each
other” (243).
Celie doesn't see herself as an artist whether she is quilting, making pants, or writing the letters that become Walker's novel, but her author implies that the tradition of Black women’s fiction finds its flowering and simultaneously begins again in the original development of Celie's self-consciousness. Celie becomes another genius of the South, finding authority and authorship in folk experience. Celie is not writing an epistolary novel. She has simply found the form in which she can express and share her deepest feeling, which is love for other Black women and men like Albert who accept her newly discovered autonomy. By the end of the novel, Albert joins Celie and Shug as the new porch sitters. As Walker writes in *The Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, "Understanding among women is not a threat to anyone who intends to treat women fairly" (273). Albert is allowed to join in Celie's transformation.

Shug Avery is no conjure woman but she teaches Celie new meaning for the term. She tells Celie:

"Man corrupt and everything. . . . He on your box of grits, in your head, and all over the radio. He tries to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain't. Whenever, you, trying to pray, and men plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to git loss, say Shug. Conjure up flowers, wind, water, a big rock". Celie finds this land and writes, in her first letter addressed
not to God but to Nettie, “Every time I conjure up a rock, I thrown it”. (168)

Getting man out of her head changes her form of address, and it changes the direction of Black women’s fiction. The novel begins with the patriarchal model (Celie writing for a sign from God), turns to “speaking in tongues” and conjuring women — love to “git man off Celie’s eyeball” and ends when Celie writes in her last letter “By now my heart is in my mouth” (242). Thus in The Color Purple, Black history becomes firmly rooted in the network of female friendship. And wherever we find interest in folklore in novels by Black women, we also find stages in the tradition’s emerging perception that women have the ability to reclaim their “ancient power”.

Like Snow White, Celie is psychologically poisoned by her evil stepfather with the result that she becomes a dumb and mute mule by the time she reaches her early teens. But like Cindrella, though she is the ugly and abused daughter at the beginning of the story, Celie ultimately becomes the princess. Like Sleeping Beauty, she is awakened from her death-in-life existence by the kiss of a beloved, in this case, her husband’s lover, the Blues singer Shug Avery.

The history of White women who are unable to hear Black women’s words, or to maintain dialogue with us is long and discouraging. But for me to assume that you will not hear
me represents not only history, but an old pattern of relating, sometimes protective and sometimes dysfunctional which we, as women shaping our future, are in the process of shattering. I believe in your good faith toward all women, in your vision of a future within which we can all flourish and in your commitment to the hard and often painful work necessary to effect change. In this spirit I invite you to a joint clarification of some of the differences which lie between us as a Black and a White woman. (Fiedler 115)

According to Morrison, historical changes such as Black migration to urban areas, assimilation into the middle class, and acculturation to western values have threatened the old values that once gave cultural coherence to Black people's lives. She feels that her novels can address these changes. In “Language Must Not Sweat”, she summarises:

I think long and carefully about what my novels ought to do. They should clarify the roles that have become obscured; they ought to identify those things in the past that are useful and those things that are not; and they ought to give nourishment . . . tells about the city values, the urban values. Now my people, we “peasant” have come to the city, that is to say, we live with its values. There is a confrontation between old values of the tribes and new urban values. It's
confusing . . . I am not explaining anything to anybody. My work bears witness and suggests who the outlaws were, who survived under what circumstances and why, what was legal in the community as opposed to what was outside it. (16)

Morrison's fiction, therefore is a response to the loss of tradition, ways of knowing, and ways of perceiving oneself and the world. Her works incorporate mythology to provide what the culture did. Thus *Beloved* is a beautiful narrative about the survival of the heritage of slavery, on the power of ceremony, and the collective memories kept alive through oral tradition. It is also the story of the genesis of a culture and of a people, who, living on the edge of life and death, have managed to create that culture and to keep their history alive. She seeks to celebrate the legends of Black women like Baby Suggs and Sethe and weave their dreams into myths that allow us to recover their past.

Walker’s writing presents a continually dichotomous world. The problem is one of reconciling the individual and the tradition which means both finding a tradition and breaking with one, for tradition as it has been handed down, is the tradition of an enslaved or oppressed people who have led many direct connections to their native rituals, beliefs and languages ruptured by violent racial and economic oppression. Under such circumstances, Walker has pondered:
How was the creativity of the Black woman kept alive . . . when for most of the years Black people have in America, it was a punishable crime for a Black person to read or write? And the freedom to paint, to sculpt, to expand the mind with action did not exist? (Garden, 234)

Walker concludes that this creativity often manifested itself anonymously, in folk arts and domestic activities. It is not surprising, therefore, that in the fictional world Walker presents, Blacks often suppress their desires and sublimate their frustrations in ways that enable them to accept the status quo and even adopt their oppressor’s values.

Morrison’s and Walker’s works have been singled out for a variety of creative characteristics — narrative experimentation in the great Faulkenerian modernist tradition, the successful absorption of the lessons of Latin American “magical realism”, the masterful presentation of Black women of all ages and conditions, as figures capable of imagination. But they are complex writers too and part of their complexity is that while they are literary, contemporary and experimental, they are at the same time solidly grounded in the culture of the Black-American community. If their protagonists are always the single, separate persons of American individualism, then the community from which they have become isolated and alienated is always the community of shared beliefs, practices, stories and histories that is the folk heritage of Afro-Americans.
Toni Morrison is an inheritor as well as an innovator. Her predecessors — especially Zora Neale Hurston and Ralph Ellison — actively sought to bring the rich resources of the folk heritage under the transforming hands of the novelist. The lessons of these masters have not been lost on Morrison and Walker.

Therefore, whatever their differences, the novels of Morrison and Walker tell the stories of their mothers, perhaps not specifically their mothers, but certainly of the women who came before them. Their novels are the literary counterparts of the oral traditions of their communities. The history of these communities, seldom related in text books, are incorporated into tales that emphasize the marvellous, sometimes the outrageous, as a means of teaching a lesson. In concert with their African ancestors, these story tellers, both oral and literary, transform gossip, happenings etc. into composites of factual events, images, fantasies and fables.

However, these novelists are not merely retelling stories, they are genuinely creating fiction. Rather, they tell their mothers’ stories through their crafted articulation of the particular imaginative style, their respective communities used to manifest their experience. Nor are these stories and fables mere glorifications of the community. They are critical not only of an individual but of the entire social fabric. Yet the style, the merging of images and events, constitute a particular value system.
The world of their first novels is the network of persons whose communities vary according to their age, location, size and past. The particular community in each work has its own unique style, legends and rituals, although it also contains basic elements that it shares with other Black communities. Instead of defining itself in context to White culture, it emphasizes its own past, its own forms. Whites are usually presented as emblems rather than fully developed characters, for they are important to the community as role figures rather than individuals.

The style of each of these writers reflects certain qualities of the community in their novels as well as their personal vision. The allegorical approach is especially strong in the novels of Morrison, where nature and human beings converse and where the images of the stories dance to create their own structures, their own parables. In her novels, the process of naming, of capturing the spirit through the word is paramount. Walker’s theme is the pursuit of major dilemma of Black Southerners, the relationship between one’s responsibility for one’s life and the restrictions of sexism and racism. By revealing the fantasies, myths and dreams of her characters, she attempts to penetrate what she calls the historical subconscious of their communities.

On final reading, The Bluest Eye and the Third Life of Grange Copeland are novels about trials and tribulations. But they are also the stories of their communities, as they recreate themselves. In attempting self-
definition Pecola and Ruth must necessarily ask their respective communities what is expected of them. The response reveals much about each community’s sense of womanhood and adulthood, as well as about the natural process of growth.

In the novels of Morrison and Walker, the stories told by the characters are inevitably related to the life of their communities. Their protagonists give the meaning of their stories back to the community. For example, Grange Copeland gives Ruth the sum of his people’s wisdom to help her to continue with life, and Claudia tells the readers that the cause of Pecola’s tragedy is the land of her town. These novels emphasize the major psychic connection of the major character to her natal community, as well as their desire to articulate her mother’s stories as a metaphor for human existence. Their emphasis on their communities, then while seeming to be narrow, is more complex, perhaps even broader than many works in which the White World is prominent.

I see a greater and greater commitment among Black women writers to understand self, multiplied in terms of the community, the community multiplied in terms of the world. You have to understand what your place as individual is and the place of the person who is close to you. You have to understand the space between you before you can understand more complex or larger groups. (47)
In this straightforward statement, Alexis De Veau alludes to a dominant theme in African-American women's fiction of the last decade, as well as to the historical tension from which that theme has emerged. The development of African-American women's fiction is, in many instances, a mirror image of the intensity of the relationship between sexism and racism in the country. They began to consciously view their communities as the group to which they were writing. Black communities are clearly one of the many audiences to which Morrison and Walker addressed their first novels, for both criticise those communities and insist that they have deeply internalised racist stereotypes that radically affect their definitions of women and men. In both novels, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *The Bluest Eye*, the community is directly responsible for the tragedies of the major characters — for the madness of Pecola Breedlove, for the suicide of Margaret Copeland, and for the murder of Mem Copeland by her husband. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison emphasizes the women's view of themselves. In *Grange Copeland*, Walker stresses man's view of himself. In these novels, it is not only that an individual heroine accepts the sexist and racist definitions of herself, but that the entire Black community, men and women, accept this construct resulting in the deconstruction of many Black women.

Major characters in these novels like *Sula* and *Meridian* are women who have for a time left the confines of their communities and returned to
them. Each is deepened although wounded in a particular way. Sula has learned that men may be lovers but not friends. Meridian has given away her child to escape her mother's fate only to find that she feels she has betrayed her maternal ancestors. Each has paid a price for her acquisition of knowledge and each seeks wholeness. Not surprisingly, much of their conflict with themselves or with the world, has to do with the concept of motherhood and how that defines them as women.

These women return to the communities they left because they have nowhere else to go and also because they love their homes. But it is an agonized love that they feel, for their communities are too restricted in their commitment to mere survival. Thus Sula challenges her community's definition of a woman. Since that definition is intrinsic to their philosophy of life, they turn her into a witch. Her insistence on living for herself is unimaginable to a community that stresses continuity and survival rather than creativity and experiment. Morrison's novels criticise the conservatism of the communities of her characters, which use the strong, deep tradition they possess, to restrict rather than to free individuals. Yet she insists on the importance of the community without which the creative imagination cannot survive, for it has no framework in which to structure its tremendous energy.

Meridian is similar to Sula in that, she too refuses to be a mother. But her choice is more complicated than Sula's, for her rejection of
motherhood is based on her strong belief in the tradition of motherhood that her maternal ancestors held to and her inability to live up to their standards. There is however a great difference between Sula's and Meridian's perspectives. Not only is Meridian too much involved with her community's history to dismiss it, her self-awareness also takes place with the context of the struggle for social change. Although Sula's choice is primarily a personal one based on her own experiences, Meridian's acts of rebellion, her continued non-violent resistances, are based on personal and political awareness.

Meridian and Sula thus regenerate themselves through their communities even as they rebel against them. These communities do not see Time as chronology, and events are presented as moments of impact. In *Meridian*, Walker's presentation of time as circular and progressive structures her theme that social change can last only if it is connected to the songs, the communal creations of the people and the link between them and nature.

What is particularly interesting about these novelists' use of African elements in relation to the concept of women is their sense of concreteness rather than abstraction. All of the major characters have moved from one place to another and have encountered other worlds distinctly different from their own. Mobility of Black women is a new quality in these books for Black women. In much of the previous
literature, they were restricted in space by their condition. This mobility is not cosmetic. It means that there is increased interaction between Black women from the United States, the Caribbean, and Africa as well as other women of colour. And often, it is the movement of the major characters from one place to another (Tar Baby's Jadine from Paris to the Caribbean to the United States, Color Purple's Nettie from the U.S. to the South of Africa) that enlarges and sharpens their vision.

Walker's heritage and history provide a vehicle for understanding the modern world in which her characters live. Though her dominant themes (spiritual survival and individual identity, as well as freedom, power and community) link her to the literary heritages of both Southern and Black writers, her structures and forms address most clearly the uniqueness of her particular vision within these traditions. She aims to rid the world of all false, stereotypical images of Blacks, especially men and to recover the past, rectify its misrepresentations and preserve the truth for future generations. By acknowledging ancestors, she acknowledges that she is part of a Black tradition of artists, particularly that strain stemming from Southern slave narrator, folk tellers of tales and literary artists.

I gathered up the historical and psychological threads of the life my ancestors lived, and in the writing . . . I felt joy and strength and my own continuity. I had that wonderful feeling that writers get sometimes . . . of being with a great
many people, ancient spirits, all very happy to see me consulting and acknowledging them, and eager to let me know through the joy of their presence, that indeed, I am not alone. (Saving the Life 157)

Black folk culture is used by Morrison and Walker in a very broad sense to mean both the history of the Black masses and the primarily oral forms of expression — jazz, spirituals, sermons, toasts, the dozens, cautionary tales, trickster tales, legends, rural and urban speech patterns, folk beliefs such as voodoo, conjure woman, the good-time woman, and the aunt. These writers have mined this vein of cultural material not merely to give colour to their narratives, but also to create the very shapes of their writing. Folk culture gives them access to their racial history, not only as a content of struggles for freedom, literacy and dignity, but also as a form of dialectical experience, practice and belief. Black folk forms also generally have a call-and-response structure that related performer and audience; corresponding to this structure is a thematics of individual and community, oppression and freedom, Black and White, silence and voice, trickster and tricked, order and chaos. The folklore presents a complex of strategies for living with such polarities, which can be powerfully creative.