**PREFACE**

By any standard of literary evaluation, Toni Morrison is a 'phenomenon' in the classic sense of a once-in-a-life-time rarity, the literary equivalent of Paul Robeson, Michael Jordan, Wayne Gretzky, Chris Evert, or Martina Navratilova, the superstar whose touch upon her profession, makes us wonder if we shall ever see her like again.

(Trudier Harris, 1999: 9)

Toni Morrison may well be the most formally sophisticated novelist in the history of African American literature. Indeed her signal accomplishment as a writer is that she has managed, uncannily, to invent her own mode of literary representation. As Toni Morrison established her place within the American literary canon, her writing has been for the most part well received both by critics writing for popular culture and those writing for academe. The numerous accolades and awards honouring Morrison for her contribution testify to her importance as one of the most prolific and talented writers of the twentieth and twenty first centuries. Critical responses to Morrison's work focus on her audience, stylistic technique, and major themes, and explore the role she plays as a precursor to new voices in American literature, especially African American women's literature, given her instrumental influence on the Black Women Writers' Renaissance in the last decades of the twentieth century. The critical response is also informed by the critics' need to categorize Morrison as a black woman writer, African American writer, American writer, woman writer, and critic. Whether in fiction or non-fiction, Morrison focuses her writing on a variety of topics including the intersections of race, class and gender, questions of home and place, the connection between the individual and the community, self-definition, and the importance of cultural, familial and individual history or rememory, and the connections between, and nurturing roles of African American folk culture and black cultural beliefs across the diaspora. Throughout her work, Toni Morrison examines a number of themes including justice, love, power, death, and betrayal. Morrison's commentary on her own work, in essays such as "Home" (1997) and "Rootedness: the Ancestor as Foundation" (1984) and numerous interviews with the popular press and academics, informs much critical response. In "Home" Morrison describes her overall writing project by stating that her novels explore "impenetrable, race-inflected, race-clotted topics" (1997: 9).

In addition to foregrounding race and racism, she emphasizes the construction of identity and how identity is not only racialized but gendered as well. In "Rootedness: the Ancestor as Foundation," Morrison lays the groundwork for critics examining her writing by noting that her work is always political, always explores the conflict between the public and private aspects of one's life, and is always rooted in African American culture. To say her work is rooted in African American
culture does not mean that individuals outside of the culture cannot relate to the themes addressed in her work. As evidence of her universal appeal, scholars such as Karla Holloway and Stepahine Demetrakopoulos provide a bicultural reading of Morrison’s novels in New Dimensions of Spirituality: A Biracial and Bicultural Reading on the Novels of Toni Morrison (1987). Morrison’s writing comes from a very personal/private space designed for the reading public both within and outside the academy.

The Nobel Committee of the Swedish Academy, stated that Ms. Morrison “gives life to an essential aspect of American reality” in novels “characterized by visionary force and poetic import.” Calling Ms. Morrison “a literary artist of the first rank,” the academy statement went on to say: “She delves into the language itself, a language she wants to liberate from the fetters of race. And she addresses us with the luster of poetry.”

Henry Louis Gates Jr., the Chairman of the Afro-American Studies Department at Harvard University opines that, “She got the Nobel Prize for two books, essentially, Beloved and Jazz. Imagine combining Ellington, Faulkner and Maria Callas. That’s the voice that emerges. She’s a masterful craftsperson, which people tend to overlook. She is as great as and as innovative as Faulkner and Garcia Marquez and Woolf. That’s why she deserved the Nobel Prize.” “Just two centuries ago, the African-American literary tradition was born in slave narratives,” he said, “Now our greatest writer has won the Nobel Prize” (1993).

Morrison’s overarching thematic concern throughout her oeuvre is with issues of African American female identity in the contemporary world. Her novels offer complex examinations of problems within the African-American community, power dynamics between men and women, and issues of racism in relations between black and white America. Her fictions are self-consciously concerned with myth, legend, storytelling and the oral tradition, as well as with memory, history and historiography, and have thus been recognized as postmodern meta-narratives. Morrison’s stories are conscious of African cultural heritage as well as African-American history, thus demonstrating the importance of the past to the struggles of contemporary African Americans. She employs strong elements of Black English in her dialogue and narration to express the importance of language in the formation of identity. Her novels often employ elements of magic, fantasy, and the supernatural, such as the characters in Song of Solomon who can fly, or the ghost of a dead child who appears in Beloved.

Storytelling is historiography in Morrison’s fiction, and in each novel she carefully examines the role of narrative in the reconstruction of both the individual self and society at large. In an entry on Toni Morrison for the book Post-modernism: Key Figures, Thomas B. Hove, observed that Morrison’s use of multiple narrative voices in many of her fictions is a key element of her work. Hove
noted that “Morrison’s fiction repeatedly challenges cultural traditions defined by patriarchal, assimilationist, and totalizing standards. Ever since her first novel, she has set herself in opposition to the European-American white mainstream by portraying and celebrating unique, powerful voices of marginalised women from American history and contemporary American life” (2002: 254). Indeed her single accomplishment as a writer is that she has managed, uncannily, to invest her own mode of literary representation.

Indeed, Morrison has not only participated in the evolving canon of Black American Literature but has done much to influence, expand, and solidify the place created by its vanguard, including Phyllis Wheatley, Frederick Douglass, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison, to name a few.

Morrison once stated that “trying to breathe life into characters, allow them space, make them people whom I care about is hard. I only have twenty-six letters of the alphabet, I don’t have colours or music. I must use my craft to make the reader see the colours and hear the sounds” (1983: 120). Yet, above all, she has been lauded for her wide range of expression. She can be exuberant, patient, and delicate, and her talent is often described as formidable. Magical and musical are adjectives commonly used to describe her narrative. As Jean Strouse rightly put it, Morrison “lures you in, locks the doors and encloses you in a special, very particular universe” (1981: 52). Even critics who question the moral “and physical horror” of the world Morrison creates acknowledge the “wonderful richness and vitality” of her language.

Morrison’s spellbinding prose/poetry “Sifting daylight dissolves the memory, turns it into dust notes floating in the light” Beloved (264),” coupled with mysticism, black folklore, and mythology woven into her fictional worlds have led many critics to append the label “Black magic” to her craftsmanship. Beginning with her first novel, she has captivated audiences with such conjured worlds as Medallion and the Bottom, Darling and Not Doctor Streets, Isle des Chevaliers, and 124 Bluestone Road; places where black blackbirds appear unexpectedly, family remains are kept indoors unburied, warrior spirits gallop on horseback, and ghosts becomes flesh and blood. Even the names of her characters work like charms: Pecola and Cholly Breedlove, Eva and Sethe, Paul D, Stamp Paid, Baby Suggs, and Beloved. More important than Morrison’s captivating style, however, is her sophisticated exploration of communal black life, specifically that in midwestern towns. Generally through her main characters, in particular black women, Morrison reveals the dynamic blacks who live in such towns, coming to grips with their search for selfhood in the empty, meaningless world, whether urban or agrarian, to which they belong.
Through her heroes and heroines Morrison forces readers to see the value of a life that is authentic because the individual assumes responsibility for self. They express either an effort of the will or a freedom of the will. Although she does not suggest that one can avoid life with others, she continually reminds us of the importance of “flying without ever leaving the ground” (Song of Solomon, 340), of accepting and performing the existential act of self-creation, and, consequently, of knowing what one must know “in order to become a complete, fully aware human being” (1978: 48). Consequently, Morrison’s protagonists are usually characters in transition, journeying through mysterious circumstances and personal histories to the innermost psyche, often to a triumphant discovery of self-hood. Conceptually and thematically, an assessment of Morrison’s work is grounded in the premise that her fictional characters are marginal (liminal) personalities who lack social, spiritual, psychological, historical, geographical, or genealogical place or centre. Their betwixt-and-betweenness necessarily involve them in a quest for personal and/or communal wholeness and fulfilment.

Since the publication of Beloved, Toni Morrison has become the name around which debates of considerable significance in American literature, culture, and ideology have amassed—these include debates about multicultural curricula; about the relation of slavery to Freedom; about the degree of determinism and/or freewill African Americans might experience; about the possibility of creating literature that is both aesthetically beautiful and politically engaging; about the interlocking relation to racism, sexism, and classism; about the ability to construct meaningful dialogues across entrenched differences; about the possibility of laying claim to lives and imaginations from within a post-modern, capitalist society. In a 1989 interview with Bonnie Angelo for Time, Morrison’s role as spokesperson for the black community became widely visible, for perhaps the first time.

Critics like Marianne Hirsch, Trudier Harris and Marilyn Sanders Mobley offer a perspective in their criticism that challenges claims about the usefulness of Morrison’s work and its intellectual achievement. Hirsch explores the connection between feminism and motherhood or the rejection of the maternal as illustrated by Morrison in Sula, Tar Baby and Beloved. Harris examines how images of slavery in Beloved illustrate the difference between ownership and possession, whether one focuses on the slave-holder’s claim to the black slave as property, the slave’s attempts to claim ownership of his or her own body, or the slave woman claiming her children as her own. Smith illustrates how Morrison explores the relationship between literature and history and raises questions about the representation of the experiences and history of African Americans. Mobley argues that Morrison revises the slave narrative through her use of memory as a trope, and as a result the slave experience becomes more accessible to contemporary readers.
Morrison's project of remembering must be appreciated in the context of the privatization of individual memory. As Michael Roth notes, “memory in modernity is seen less as a public, collective function than as a private, psychological faculty: It is imagined by philosophers and doctors from the eighteenth century on as being internal to each of us, at the core of the psychological self. We are what we remember... But the psychologization of memory makes it extremely difficult for people to share the past, for them to have confidence that they have a collective connection to what has gone before” (1995: 10). In Morrison's novels memory “becomes a locus of struggle over the boundary between the individual and the collective” (1995: 11). The novels explore the idiosyncratic compositions of individual memory, the unique particularities of personal reminiscence, only to re-collect them in the frame of a larger, unfolding history.

The aim of this study, then, is to examine how Morrison's trilogy is concerned with fictive cultural documentaries that recall and record America’s past using African American historiography—cultural “truths” heretofore encoded and preserved orally in personal and communal recollections, reminories, fables, folktales, music, gossip, humour, and lore—narratives that place the black past at the centre of the American chronicle and perhaps negate those mainstream histories and fictions that marginalize, trivialize, or exclude the African American from their accounts.

Though critical evaluation of Morrison's novels Beloved, Jazz and Paradise has been copious, there has been a curious critical silence concerning what the author herself has described as a trilogy. Inspite of the author's indication that her editors imposed the break-up of her original project for Beloved, insisting that it was too long, certain critics have argued that the relationship among the resulting works is tenuous and that most readers are interested only in each individual novel—again in descending order. This fact notwithstanding, there are many valid reasons for considering these three novels as a whole artistic endeavour.

The most obvious links among the three novels concern the relationship between the temporal and spatial locus of each, what Mikhail Bhaktin would call the ‘chronotope’ (1986: 68). Beloved is set during the 1870s in the rural area outside of Cincinnati, Ohio, with flashbacks to plantations in Kentucky and (probably) Carolina, and a chain gang in Alfred, Georgia, during slavery. The emphasis on the rural is exchanged for the urban beat of “The City” in 1920s in Jazz, while the flashbacks are centered on the Reconstruction Era of the 1870s. Paradise moves the locus forward to the 1970s to a small-town setting in Ruby, but the memories that constantly surface concern the “Founding Fathers” of Haven in the 1870s after the political failure of Reconstruction, and the second migration during the 1920s to the “perfect” all-black town of Ruby in Oklahoma. The time frame thus set out spans one hundred years of black life in United States, and the interrelated settings encompass black experience
in the rural South, the urban North and the small-town (Southern) Mid-West. Moreover, the immediate back-drop to each of these narratives is a major war, whose import mightily affected African Americans: the Civil War, with its short-lived promise of freedom and citizenship for the enslaved Africans; World War I, in which black soldiers had “proved” with their valour their right to full citizenship and had returned with the hope of acceptance, only to have their hopes and expectations dashed with intensified racism; and Vietnam War, on whose memorial in Washington, DC, fully sixty percent of the names were African American, and whose legacy of lies and deception physically and psychologically took its toll on the families of Ruby.

Thematically it is also viable to establish intimate links among these three quiet different novels. John N. Duvall proposes that in the trilogy Morrison writes as a postmodern, understanding the term in Linda Hutcheon’s definition as “historiographic metafiction,” blending the reflexivity of metafiction with the post-structuralist recognition that “all attempts to construe the past are interpretive” (2000:17). Beyond this question, however, lies a common thematic foundation to these narratives precisely arising from the concern with historiographic metafiction; that is, the underlying question of the relationship of history, memory, and story, both with each other and with their role in the survival of African Americans in the United States. Yet with each novel, the focus changes to a different component of this tightly drawn triangle. No one reasonably doubts the crucial role of memory in Beloved nor the emphasis on storytelling in Jazz, or even the challenges of establishing “true” history in Paradise; but memory and story become mutually dependent, and history must be nurtured in both.

In fact, each of these novels is built around an enigma that is never solved: Who is Beloved? Who is the narrator? And who is “the white girl”? And each of these enigmas foregrounds a different problematic of central concern to the postmoderns in the latter part of the twentieth century: in Beloved, the question of ontology – what is real? And, how do we know it is real?; in Jazz, the “linguistic turn” and the crucial role of language in any construction of “reality,” historical or otherwise; in Paradise, the meanings of race and gender in the face of overt challenges to essentialism, and indeed the social construction of their value, beyond simple description in any kind of personal understanding and interaction. Moreover, both the structure and technique of each novel reinforce these themes. Each text is constructed over the “ghost text” of a popular fictional form, whose conventions Morrison uses initially, only to subvert the readers’ expectations.

All of Morrison’s novels are, in a real sense, “historical novels,” quasi documentaries that bear historical witness. Her characters are both subjects of and subjects to history, events in “real” time, that succession of antagonistic movements that includes slavery, Reconstruction, Depression, and
yet she is also concerned with the interaction of history with art, theory and even fantasy, for, in her terms, history itself may be no more than a brutal fantasy, a nightmare half-remembered, in which fact and symbol become indistinguishable. Toni Morrison reinscribes a history that is less individual than racial and national; hers is also a psychic and a mythic history, a feminine subtext, the kind Cixous and Clement describe in *The Newly Born Women* as "a history, taken from what is lost within us of oral tradition, of legends and myths—a history arranged the way tale-telling woman tell it" (1986: 6).

The way Morrison renders poverty in *The Bluest Eye* is a historical fact, documented by the necessity to gather coal along railroad tracks, by the "fired, edgy voices of adults, by the persistance of mice and roaches, and by the hellish orange glow of steel mills in Lorain, Ohio" (12). *Sula*, too, is a historical novel, its events are carefully recorded with the context of specific years that are significant because they either denote or, even more powerfully, suggest the reality of World War-I. While the characters of *Sula*, like those in other of Morrison's novels, are victims of history, they are not, somehow, prisoners of time, for they live simultaneously in memory and dreams and in the sense of a future. *Tar Baby*, is set in a contemporary world, and its focus is historic and its goal the rediscovery of an African past, lost through slavery and perhaps irretrievable except through myth, and then only at the risk of life and sanity. Morrison herself romanticizes the African past in *Beloved* as in other novels, inscribing it as myth and reclaiming it as part of African American identity, although her ethical position in regard to a lost Africa is always one of ironic qualification; the myth of the African Great Mother, for example, is used, not as an ideal of redemption, but as a reminder that history is the antagonist which has silenced myth, subverted nature, and dispossessed the African American of the crucial link with Africa. In *Jazz*, Morrison is using the subject of jazz music in her novel as a metaphor for the ever-changing conditions of African-American life in the 1920s and as a reflection of the perpetual human struggle between right and wrong—a struggle magnified in the historical, socio-cultural specificity of black experience during this time. When Violet and Joe “train-dance” (36) into the City for the first time, for instance, as their movement from country to city and from South to North draws nearer and becomes more real, the high-spirited, chaotic sounds of jazz take the fore and help to reinforce the atmosphere of change, hope, and anxiety that envelopes the characters and the narrative as a whole. *Paradise* takes place during another significant historical period for African American people. Set primarily in Oklahoma during and immediately after the Civil Rights struggles of the 1960s, *Paradise*, as the title indicates, interrogates the concept of utopian societies, playing race and gender against each other in an exploration of the constitution of oppression. *Love* explores the losses that went with the gains brought about by the Civil Rights era. Morrison intentionally reunites
the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement as a crucial chapter in African American history in order to foreground the contrast between the period before and after de-segregation. A Mercy explores the African American experiences of slavery and freedom. But in A Mercy, Morrison’s handling of those issues is more multifaceted than in her previous novels. She goes back to the beginning of slavery in America, in the late seventeenth century, a period during which America was far more diverse and complex than is generally imagined today. The novel includes Portuguese, Dutch, English, Native American, African, and mixed-race characters, all vying for a place in this new world.

The wider scope of the present study is to offer specific analyses of the trilogy with a sense of the possibilities that they offer for reading and interpretation. The thesis is in five chapters. The introductory chapter brings together the literary biography and the ideological predilections of one of the most important Afro-American women writers very much influenced by Faulkner, Woolf and Garcia Marquez. It offers an overview of her writing in order to place the novels discussed in the subsequent chapters in the right context of value and meaning. The chapter also attempts a brief study of the various influences that have shaped her imagination, her art, and her credo as a writer, defining at the same time the parameters within which she has chosen to work, given her Afro-American identity.

Morrison’s novels offer a full range of African American realities that define authentic Africentric interpretations of humanity, culture, and history. Interestingly, the narratives neither dignify nor argue the mainstream’s exclusive, often contradictory or inconsistent assertions of hegemony. Morrison’s narrative vision is decisive: African Americans are indeniably “human” and undeniably “American”. She casts them, therefore as vital subjects of and actors in the “American” stories that constitute her oeuvre. Her fictions celebrate the authenticity of Black people’s “lived lives” by recording their experiences in, perceptions of, and reactions to American daily life against the backdrop of evolving history and culture.

Morrison’s Africentric narrative vision is transcendent; the novels provide cultural interpretation of reality that are enabling and authenticating for America’s otherwise despised and ignored Black Children. Among other things her narrative permutations proscribe the use of “American” or “Southerner” as signifiers of whiteness. Likewise, they deny that America or the South are referents for geographical identity reserved only for Anglo-Americans. Like the white farmer who jokes in Sula, Morrison employs linguistic tropes that reflect culturally specific significations that in turn denote cultural hegemony. For example, The Bluest Eye, Sula, and Song of Solomon call for the Africentred home to be conceived as something more inclusive and egalitarian than the domestic patriarchy venerated by the canonical Dick - and - Jane reader. Tar Baby, Beloved, Jazz, and
Paradise, ask that the South be esteemed as something more intimate and meaningful than the region’s traditions of racial hostility, violence, and dehumanization belie. Africentrism’s ideology of home reasons: if “home” is construed spiritually, that is, as the embodiment and wellspring of African American cosmology, epistemology, and culture, then, it can never be lost, stolen, or left behind. Similarly if the South” can be recalled holistically, that is, if the larger Black community can be considered “kin” and the broad expanse of Nature can be considered “home,” then history’s alleged “orphans” – African American dispossessed of Africa by slavery, and displaced from the South by Reconstruction, the great migration and de jure integration—can now (re) claim the South as the American “home” and “homeland” of Black people.

Morrison’s mythic and symbolic revisioning of the South offers new and useful insights into America’s national memory. Morrison’s works not only reinvent the meaning of and significance of the African American’s cultural “home” in America, particularly in the South, but also makes it accessible to Black people everywhere. The Middle Passage and plantation slavery remains a traumatic historical event, which resonates in and influences African American political and cultural consciousness. The will to remember that period, especially ramifications of the experiences still exist, constitutes black racial memory. What Morrison does is to transform that memory into a literary metaphor that best conveys that unique position and experience of the African American. In fact, it is more appropriate to refer to the kind of memory present in African American narratives as “counter-memory,” which George Lipsitz defines as ‘look(ing)’ to the past for the hidden histories of those excluded from dominant narratives” (1989:162). Morrison’s conceptualization of memory manifests itself in oral histories, that is, histories that her characters assume responsibility for telling, though the narratives collapse into one extended and convoluted narrative of the community.

To consider fully the significance of Morrison’s revisionary troping of the South, one must first interrogate the why and how of Morrison’s imaginative revision. It may seem odd that Morrison, a Midwesterner, who knows full well that atrocities imposed upon Black people by a racist South would choose such a place – one that has been historically inhospitable and pernicious to its Black sons and daughters – to signify the physical, spiritual and geographic roots, the memorial “home,” of many of her characters. But, welcoming or not, the South was “home” to nine out of every ten blacks prior to 1900, and eight out of every ten by 1940. Therefore, it would be absurd and impractical for Americans of African descent – in reality or in memory, in fact or in fiction – to forfeit their “home” and “homeland” once more, to the same cultural nemesis – Anglocentric culture and its servicing discourses of mastery. Seemingly, most of Morrison’s conceptual revisions take place before she begins to write. The novels reflect a paradigm shift to the Africentric field of vision and system of
analysis from the traditional Anglo centered mode. Thus, they do not declare incontrovertibly that the South is the domain of the African American; instead, they simply record the stories of African Americans who live in the South, who leave the South for destinations in the North and Midwest, or their progeny, who were born after their parents migrated from the South.

The three main chapters which constitute the bulk of the thesis focus on a “distinct phase” in Morrison’s writing, what the author herself has described as a trilogy—Beloved (1987), Jazz (1992) and Paradise (1988). There are many valid reasons for considering these three novels as a whole. The present study intends to point the ways in which critical inquiry might be expanded in considering Morrison’s employment of storytelling to redefine history and culture and to legitimize personal and collective memory. The idea of the collective experience of history and the telling of history is important for Morrison and bears further thought. How the collective body functions in the literature of slavery and the revisionist literature of slavery as in Beloved, is interesting. The slave self is a self that is always engaged in a kind of collective corporeal condition that makes it impossible to speak of the self solely as an individual. And this has profound implications for the writing of history, some of which the present study has tried to explore. In imagining the historical details and interior life of the enslaved, Morrison draws on black oral tradition, folklore, myths, and legends that black people have collectively preserved and passed on. The African American’s perceptions of, contributions to, and investments in this nation are, in a Morrisonian Universe matters of fact—facts that do not warrant defense or concession, only articulation. Morrison’s (African) American narratives enable and ennable their Black subjects (as well as their readers) by recording historic moments and memories from an Africentric cultural perspective. Consequently, they neither chronicle the time-honored myth of Black helplessness and victimization—a tragic story of genocide, enslavement, betrayal, dispossession, and oppression—nor do they venerate the Euro-American’s reputed industry, bravery, idealism, and power. Instead the narratives celebrate Black agency and power in fables about African Americans who survive, transcend, and create amidst environmental hostilities and socially imposed liabilities. To remake the myth of the South, to exorcise its historically inferiorizing, disfranchising, self-nagating power over American blacks, Morrison reconceives discursively the African American’s memory of, relationship with, and disposition toward this country and the South.

Beloved, Morrison’s most complex fictional achievement to date presents the construction of the relation of present to past. Crafted as a fable of the dynamics of memory, it dramatizes the intersection of two warring impulses towards the past, the imperative to remember and the desperate need to forget, and encodes them in a tale where one woman’s attempt to defy, forget the encroachment on the past culminates in a truly symbiotic bond between the present, imaged as a
haunted mother, and the past represented in the form of her murdered and resurrected child. On the most immediate level, *Beloved* clearly presents itself as a novel of remembering. Through a stream-of-consciousness technique that provides fragmented and frightening hints, the narrative meanders through the minds of various characters to slowly reconstruct a portrait of the past, both individual and communal. It finally closes in on the day of the killing, remembered consecutively by three different people, and then moves out again from there to draw the resurrected Beloved, Sethe and Sethe's long-dead mother into a closed circle of violence and loss manifested in the scars that mark each one.

The third chapter deals with *Jazz* (1992) which deals directly with Southerners who travel north—Morrison provides the opportunity for a generational examination of three southern Black women whose lives are shaped and complicated by their racialized and genderized historical circumstances in the South. In *Jazz* Morrison offers literary portraits of southern Black women during three significant historical moments of American history—American slavery, Reconstruction, and the Great Migration. Eusebio Rodrigues observes in his article "Experiencing Jazz" that the novel "jazzifies the history of a people by giving us rapid vivid glimpses of their life in the rural South after emancipation" (742). As a cultural and historical conservator, Morrison inscribes her three southern women characters—True Belle, Rose Dear, and Violet—as the texts of their respective historical moment, American slavery, Reconstruction, and the Great Migration. By revealing how their particularized histories inform their lives, Morrison augments her reader's understanding so that they too will "know that woman." Morrison creates a narrative strategy that combines the movement of music and the structure of tragedy; more specifically, she uses the improvisational quality of music to deconstruct the form of tragedy, allowing a reconstruction of identity to emerge that is not determined, but fluid and improvisational. *Jazz* is improvisational; that is to say, unanticipated things can happen while the performance is going on, and the musicians have to be alert constantly. Morrison describes jazz music as egalitarian, in that a single musician never "dominates the whole performance"; this is "exactly" why in her novel, Morrison employs multiple voices and viewpoints to narrate the story: "No voice is the correct one, the dominant one" (*Jazz*, 6).

In its work of understanding and integrating the dissonance of the past, *Jazz* continues the project of *Beloved*. While *Beloved* explicates the experience of slavery and its aftermath, *Jazz* spans the period from 1855 to 1926. Both narratives submit to a repetition compulsion in order to heal the collective body stricken by memory that has been worked through. In both the novels the deadly determinings of the past are deterred in the present by an act of understanding. The story begins with the fracturing of human psyches, souls, and bodies in slavery. This fracture causes one to devalue the
self, to displace the self and to locate the best of the self in an “other”: the beloved. In Jazz, Morrison symbolizes this fracture in Violet’s cracks and Joe’s traces. The narrator of Jazz brings these cracks and traces together in the centre piece of the novel – the story of golden Gray and the Wild. This story, this myth of the primordial parents which Joe and Violet share but do not share reveals essential aspects of each of their characters and of Morrison’s narrative strategy in the novel.

In Paradise, dealt with in the fourth chapter, Morrison employs storytelling to problematize memory and narrative as legitimate acts of cultural recovery. She continually foregrounds the subjective aspect of memory that relies upon omission of some details to preserve others. By representing forgetting as memory’s dark shadow, Morrison builds a tension between oral and written histories and adroitly illustrates the complex evolution of oral history into myth, and consequent power of myth to determine reality. By illustrating the subjectivity and distortions to which oral history is subject and the abuses of power for which it can be used, Morrison applies the critical examination to which writer’s history has been particularly subject in recent decades to oral history. Her treatment of the relationship between history and myth reveals both oral and written histories to be subsumed as part of American mythic history – that narrative of national identity which partially gained currency in the popular imagination. For the African-American community that Morrison imagines, the sustenance of communal myth is a strategy of survival against a violent and destructive dominant culture. Yet the same culturally – constructed myths that function as means of resistance also become the means by which the marginalized community of Ruby weakens, disintegrates, and ultimately imitates the very culture it struggles to oppose and stand against. Patricia Storace suggests that Morrison’s novel functions as both a serious work of fiction and a parable and argues that, “Paradise is a novel about pioneers laying claim to a country, and less explicitly, about the ways in which possession of this country has been extended and justified through stories, stories kneaded strongly into the image of the country itself, so that the story of its claiming almost irresistibly evokes images of white founding fathers” (1998: 64-65).

The last chapter offers a comprehensive look at Morrison’s oeuvre considered as a whole, including Morrison’s attention to narrative structure and methods and her use of language as the central force furthering the vision of the author. The chapter brings together the major narrative devices that inform her thematic concerns, as also her contribution to the very mode of writing. It also suggests that Morrison’s purpose is never simply to recapture the texture of a world gone by, to document its details or recreate an idealized portrait for purpose of nostalgia. Rather, the impetus of her work is to explore and dramatize the complex interaction between a present in search of itself and a past that appears sometimes as nurturing cultural foundations, sometimes as a restrictive tradition.
to be fought of, and sometimes—as a frightening nightmare that imposes itself between the present and a future of freedom and renewal. Morrison is aware of “both the burdens and the blessings of the past” (Mckay 413).

Morrison in fact tries to imagine “a world in which race does not matter” (her essay “Home” confirms many of her observations), and the metaphor she comes up with is a “home” rather than a “house.” She likes the term “home” because it helps her “domesticate” the racial issue and turns the utopian project into “a manageable, doable, modern human activity.” Morrison has no delusions about “agency,” “sovereignty,” or “authority,” or, to express this in the terminology of postcolonial theory: Morrison does not want to “write back” to the colonizing discourse and then find herself victimized by a theory that locates, once again, the colonizer at the centre of an inverted map! It is crucial to understand that Toni Morrison avoids this gesture of active negation. This is why “home” is more important than “theory.” Morrison reminds us of the tradition of the pragmatist philosopher and cognitive psychologist, William James, who insists that theory cannot match experience. William James warns of “intellectualism” as “viscious,” stating that a cognitive model is human, conversational, but not limited to logic: “Reality, life, experience, concreteness, immediacy, use what word you will, exceeds our logic, overflows and surrounds it” (1909: 99). Tracing experience, language is used and at the same time overcome: “I want to inhabit, walk around, a site clear of racist detritus, a place where race both matters and is rendered impotent” – this is her vision of a social space that is psychically and physically safe. And, most important this “new space” is “formed by the inwardness of the outside, the interiority of the ‘othered,’ the personal that is always embedded in the public.” “The peace I am thinking of is the dance of an open mind when it engages another equally open one” – this is at the core of Morrison's concerns.

*****

xiii