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.'

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.

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.” 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” - 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" 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” that make for “the special sound of Morrison’s language.”

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. Many black women novelists “employ folktalk that is metaphorical, instructive, and entertaining” 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,” a quality that she desires for her fiction so that it has the “ability to be both print and oral literature.”

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” 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.”\textsuperscript{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 \textit{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.” (\textit{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.”\textsuperscript{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 \textit{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…
> Everybody knows your name.
> 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.”

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." 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.” 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.  

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.\textsuperscript{23} Thus, “thinking heirographically, the father reveals a unique creativity that merges oral and written traditions in this cultural naming ritual.”\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{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. 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. 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.” 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.” 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” 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.”

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” 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.” 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.” 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,” 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.” 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.\textsuperscript{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 \textit{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. (\textit{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.” (\textit{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:

\begin{quote}
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. (\textit{B}, p.62)
\end{quote}
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.”  

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," 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) A 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

declared 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 [...] 

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.” 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.”

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.” 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.”

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. 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” 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.”

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.\textsuperscript{52}

In \textit{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” (\textit{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 \textit{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.”\textsuperscript{53} Consequently, in \textit{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. 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. 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.”

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,” 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. 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.

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.

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*. 
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. 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. 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. 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 re mythologizes 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.”

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.”

*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.” 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. 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. 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.”

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 disremembrance 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 wasn’t 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.” 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.” 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. 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 unnaming. 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 re 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,

[un]der 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.” 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.’” 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.” 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." 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.” 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” 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.” 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.’”
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.” 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)." 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," 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-immerses 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-immersethemselves 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.
Epigraphs:


Endnotes and References


7 Ibid.


12 Morrison’s concept of prose with oral qualities resembles Gates’ definition of the “Speakerly text” that makes use of free indirect discourse to present the text itself as a dynamic character, who is neither the novel’s protagonist nor a narrator separate from the book. See Gates, *The Signifying Monkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), XXVII, p.181.


14 Rootedness p.341


18 Ibid.
19 Eusebio Rodriguez, “Experiencing Jazz.” Modern Fiction Studies, 39.3-4 (Fall/winter 1993), p.735


27 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),


35 Ibid.


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45 Atkinson and Page, p. 99.


48 Atkinson and Page, p.100.


51 Ibid.
343

52 Ibid, p.57.


55 These repeated ‘signs’ create the effect of riffs defined by Gates as “a central component of jazz improvisation and signifying(g)” which “serves as an especially appropriate metaphor for signifying(g) and revision.” The Signifying Monkey, p.214


59 Gates, Signifying, p.85.


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/cgi/m2838/1_34/62258906/print.html, 30th Sept., 2002, 18 pages.


Ashraf Rushdy, “Daughters Signifyin(g) History” p.449.


Ibid, 7.


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)


Ibid.


LeClair, “The Language” p.28.


85 Smitherman, Talkin, p.58.

86 Page and Atkinson, p. 98.

87 Ibid.

88 Rootedness, pp.215-216.

89 Atkinson and Page, p.106.