Conclusion

*I was not speaking of a marginality one wishes to lose, to give up, or surrender as part of moving into the center, but rather as a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one’s capacity to resist. It offers the possibility of radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternative, new worlds.*

bell hooks•

The storyteller today goes by many names—preachers, healers, teachers, comedians, singers, poets, dancers, rappers, ‘liars,’ painters and historians. In her efforts to create a novel form characterized by dramatically shifting perspectives, ambiguities and paradoxes, Toni Morrison is none of these and all of them. She is involved in the creation of a new type of novel, one that seeks to represent the hopes, aspirations and historical memories of blacks and of black women in particular. Her artistic goals, stated by her in numerous works, distinguish her approach from other black writers who utilize Western or European forms and traditions. As she tells us, she is concerned with writing “village literature, fiction that is really for the village, for the tribe.”1 In “Unspeakable Things Unspoken” she calls for “the development of a theory of literature that truly accommodates Afro-American literature: one that is based on its culture, its history, and the artistic strategies the works employ to negotiate the world it inhabits.”2
In response to these observations, a substantial body of criticism has emerged which addresses the significance of African-American culture as a crucial component in the emancipation of black people, individually and collectively. Morrison has always understood that within this culture lay the alternative images, self-definitions, and strategies necessary to resist white cultural domination and to reclaim black life. Her novels are thus firmly rooted in the oral tradition of African-American folklore since this tradition "challenges modern Western sources attesting to an alternate African view of reality." Her goal, for this reason, has been to give voice to the hitherto repressed traditions of her cultural heritage and to transform it through narrative fiction. In order to do this, she draws on folk myth and vernacular, focusing on generation clans, and dealing with the burden of history.

Several critical engagements with Morrison's fiction centre on cultural ramifications and even the most recent studies on her works stress on content and themes rather than processes and artistic strategies. However, studying her work in terms of her own professed intentions also necessitates a focus on her narrative strategies as a way of discovering how she creates ethnic literature that is culturally affirmative. Since her first allegiance is to the African component of her African-American identity, her re-activation of the cultural heritage of the black community
with its references to black history and oral traditions has important implications. As such, the main thrust of this thesis has thus been to focus on Morrison’s narrative technique which contains key elements of African modes of storytelling, evident in both the language and storytelling methods of all her works.

The overall purpose of this study has been to underline how Morrison affirms her cultural beliefs through folkloristic transmission. The emphasis has been to consider the ways in which she transforms and adapts folkloric phenomena, to determine the vestiges of oral communication used by her, and to interpret her texts in the light of all the information obtained. Her concerns among many others are foregrounding and giving a voice to the marginalized within the context of a distinct community, creating characters who challenge the reader’s sense of reality. Through issues of form, narration and language, this thesis has attempted to bring into relief the dynamic range within Morrison’s writing. Attention has been drawn to the ways in which she has demonstrated a remarkable ability to appropriate historical paradigms and incorporate them into artistic forms. As such, an overview of her works will reveal how successfully she has adapted folk modes of narration to her fiction.
Morrison’s characters share a cultural history that she illuminates through a variety of ingenious narrative strategies that is derivative of black oral traditions and its storytelling methods. In this regard, the emphasis has been on how she uses the form and critical framework of the African dilemma and trickster tales to re-define culture and re-invent narrative form. An attempt has been made to analyze the method in which most of her novels use these “folk processes” which suggest the vitality of black folklore, and also provide ways through which she challenges the master narrative and addresses postcolonial and contemporary issues that confront African-American people. Some of the narrative techniques Morrison often uses are reiteration and circularity, a shifting narrative voice, interactive participatory mechanisms, non-linearity, the deployment of multiple points of view, and open-endedness. These elements in her fiction have been identified and explored as strategies that have affinities with African folklore, particularly, the traditional structure of oral narratives and also exemplify her avowed goal of bringing such elements into written forms like the novel. At the same time, her incorporation of the constituents of the oral vernacular tradition such as call and response, naming, witnessing and testifying, and Signifying as storytelling devices have also been discussed as rhetorical principles which assist her novelistic purposes of attaining orality.
It is thus apparent that Morrison’s conscious use of “the aesthetic tradition of Afro-American culture” and “its characteristic art forms” such as call and response, improvisation, and audience performance bring to light the cultural intersection between the individual and the community that is central to her storytelling style. For instance, her employment of a story structure of contrapuntal narratives provides the opportunity for characters to tell stories to one another within the framework of the ‘main’ story, with the narrator moving in and through the characters’ worlds to fill in gaps and add more to the story pattern. The resultant medley of conflicting and complementary voices reveals individual and community meaning-making. In this context Rafael Perez-Torrez has noted this aspect of Morrison’s use of story in Beloved, describing it as a “decentering impulse” that creates community by “uniting the lives of the teller, the listener, and the greater world of experience from which the story is drawn” which then produce numerous voices reflecting on “the same event, each from different perspectives, none taking precedence over the others.”

The point that has been made is that such a use of storytelling is pertinent to all of Morrison’s novels and is also a part of the whole fabric of black folklore that Morrison embeds and recasts in her fiction to produce new ways of conceiving African-American history and culture.
She interweaves folk tales and legend into her narratives to reflect her character's conflicts of identity and to suggest ways of producing healing and survival within family and community. In Morrison's fiction, characters must find a personal, familial, or communal voice to respond to by revisiting the historical, legendary, or imaginative moments in time through "re-memories". In novels such as *Beloved*, this process of "re-memory" is more of a collective and communal seeing rather than a response to a personal vision. In other novels, such as *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*, it is more a personal and familial vision. In all, the embeddings of black culture and "re-memories" of time are important ways of conceptualizing the shared histories of African-Americans, since one story provides the input for the next and multiply to generate layers of family history. Hence an examination of how she uses many tellers to produce interwoven tales of the same story has shown how she does not give any single character the status of assuming the central consciousness for the story.

The result of using such a narrative structure based on the aesthetic characteristics listed above is continuous re-evaluation by the reader since the presentation of multiple viewpoints demand different interpretations of the story which are also subject to change. The main endeavour of this analysis has been to see how these characteristics serve in advancing
Morrison's goal to draw the reader into the role of a collaborator in the creation of her texts. She thus re-constructs in written form, the performance dynamic that is native to African oral traditions—re-made in the American South. Her primary concern has been to transform the reader's traditional habits of reading and interpreting into a mode of engagement whose endpoint is not only the transfer of knowledge but the disclosure of how and what the reader comes to know, and how she/he makes sense of this knowledge. Consequently, this study has focused not only on the structural and formal features of African-American expressive arts, but also on the philosophical objectives underlying these structures.

The primary locus for observing the philosophical objectives that give rise to the formal and structural component of the oral tradition is African-American spirituality that informs African folklore. As such, African spiritual culture with its emphasis on the importance of the religious, supernatural, and superstitious beliefs of black lore in Morrison's novels has been examined to show how her characters gain meaning in their respective literary environments. In the process one sees that she links her narrative with the spiritual traditions of Africa, through a re-enactment of ritual acts and other cultural symbols having indigenous values and practices. The objective has been to reveal how by
incorporating these frameworks of African worldviews, she reclaims and re-integrates the African-American personality, and restores individual and communal cohesion. Thus she provides a context for African-Americans to reclaim their fractured identities by recovering their ancestral memory and individual and communal significance. Not all of her characters learn to rediscover the value and sustaining force of this authentic "black" past, and are thus resigned to a life in which they have internalized white cultural values but remain alienated from their own.

By incorporating elements of the African spiritual tradition like the supernatural, magical and fantastic to define and defend difference, Morrison's fiction has contributed to the redefinition of the marginalized position often accorded to the literature of ethnic women writers. She blurs the frontiers between the supernatural and so-called real world and draws attention to her conscious representation of ghosts, ancestral figures, conjurers and healers, thus contributing to the re-evaluation of this 'counter-culture.' The argument is that through her exploration of varied portraits of spiritual systems that exist outside of orthodox Christianity, the supernatural in her fiction becomes a space of resistance and a way of creating healing narratives for African-American women as true "metaphorical conjure women."
The present study has also sought to show how in the context of Morrison’s fiction, the reader’s collaboration with and responses to the text can take the form of musical variations on the call that are re-figured and extended to facilitate his/her progression from participant to collaborator. As reiterated earlier, this is a fundamental feature of the African storytelling traditions. Thus, the analysis of Morrison’s novels marked by the presence of music and musical patterns, bear testimony to her strategy of combining two art forms to recapture a long-lost tradition of folk storytelling where music was an integral part. Stories were passed on orally through songs, epic poems, ballads, or tales sung or chanted. Recalling how music provided the primary means of sustaining a unique culture based on the concept of a shared community now considered obsolete by the people themselves, Morrison attempts to keep this tradition alive by making room for it in her narratives. Hence, a discussion of the principles of black music as an integrating feature of her style, brings to light how she uses them in consonance with various images and motifs that serve as reflective reminders of communal values and inspirations it was designed to express.

The basis of this analysis has been that Morrison achieves a fusion of musical and literary forms to recreate in her novels the orality of African culture. She combines the powers of music and language to bring
her characters to a better understanding of reality. By doing this, the involvement of the reader is projected as being essential in re-creating music's cathartic aspect, the "healing power" that has been lost to the whites, thus redefining the relationship between the reader and the text.

The most striking quality about Morrison's writing is the language, which is specifically, the "black" language of her people. She has spoken repeatedly about the aesthetics of black art and the character of black language that she wants her readers to hear in her novels. In her efforts to restore the discarded knowledge of the oral community and preserve its language use, she tries to reinstate the oral performance and the information it contains. Orality for her is thus both a cultural value to be transmitted and also a technique to create an unmediated text. Morrison uses unconventional techniques to capture the specific "sound" of the characteristically black mode of spoken language for her texts. In order to retain the spontaneity and variability of language, she attempts to create a text that paradoxically speaks—and produces meaning in interaction with the reader/listener. The technique which she uses is modelled on the sermon tradition that forms the basis of the formal and structural components of the oral tradition, with its "performance dynamic ... multigeneric composition ... multifunctionality, and ... improvisational aspect." 7
Morrison's cultural project and pedagogical outlook are centred in language, both written as well as oral. She writes to resist Eurocentric cultural domination by reinverting dominant language tropes. This is seen, for instance, in the inclusion of nonverbal communication that is unique to black communities. Her employment of the rhetorical tropes from the black vernacular oral tradition brings the rich, aural Southern legacy of storytelling, mythmaking, and community participation to literary texts and helps to create a literary form that captures the cultural realities of the life of African-Americans. Her novels illustrate how "forms of language and forms of world view [are] inseparable from each other." In her fiction, the characters that retain or re-acquire a healthy sense of their cultural pasts are those who return to their oral tradition, whereas characters that are morally and spiritually adrift are those cut off from this tradition. Thus, an examination of how Morrison strategically subverts the power of the master narrative through her use of oral rituals such as Signifying, Witnessing/Testifying, will reveal her understanding of the psychology embedded in the oral tradition. By privileging orality, she shows her own rootedness to the cultural, oral, communal structures of the oral tradition.

In summing up, we can say that Morrison has created highly structured designs of stories with folklore embeddings which have always
been an integral aspect of black imagination. Though she has produced novels of uncommon realism using surrealistic settings filled with characters having psychic and spiritual perceptions, her strong sense of place and rootedness are prominent. In her novels, she has celebrated the rich folk heritage, language and traditional values of the black community threatened by a predominantly white society. She has been particularly attentive to the ancestral female as culture-bearer and the restless male as cultural pathfinder. Her folk-aesthetic reconstructs the folk community through the oral traditions of storytelling and her inconclusive endings draw readers into the participatory experience of communal storytelling. In utilizing the linguistic-cultural heritage of African-Americans, she reveals a love of language and language play, and a capacity to use it creatively. The written style of storytelling that she creates mirrors how the spoken word was passed down from generation to generation. In these ways, she establishes the distinctiveness of her writing and sets it apart as black literature. But at the same time she endeavours to re-define the African-American experience not as marginal or peripheral, but as American.

Although Morrison is firmly grounded in the cultural heritage and social concerns of black experience, her work transcends narrowly prescribed conceptions of ethnic literature. Much to the concern of the
non-African-American reader, she often speaks of the “Other” in such a way that suggests that the outsider can have at best, limited access to her meanings. Her avowals of writing primarily about blacks and for blacks notwithstanding, she undoubtedly impacts on non-black readers as well. A closer look at her published interviews reveals that her concept of the “other” is complex: this “othering,” no doubt refers to those outside the black community but there are instances in her fiction where she considers the participation of the “other” as vital to the literary process. In *Sula* (1973), Morrison chose to make the preface a “door” through which she could lead the (white) “valley man” into the African-American world of the hillside Bottom—a concession she later regretted. But in *Jazz* (1992), she encodes the ethnicity and gender of her narrator in such a deliberately ambiguous manner in the text that even readers from other cultural backgrounds cannot but feel impelled to respond to her call to join in the creative process of ‘writing’ the novel.

More significant is the fact that Morrison touches readers of the so-called Third World countries, such as India, in the way she emphasizes on the need to reassess oneself and to reclaim one’s own heritage and culture. As such, her novels are critiques of being and suggest strategies for survival, particularly for the many ethnic minority groups of North-East India whose experiences of political, economic and socio-cultural
marginalization often make them the “other” of the dominant groups in the country. In such a situation, the oral traditions of this region assume added importance in defining identities. As a repository of history, social customs, religion and worldviews, indigenous knowledge systems and literature, the oral tradition has always been vital to such communities.

However, many factors of change had led to the loss and undermining of this tradition, not least the advent of Christianity, and ‘liberal education’ based on Western systems. The negative impact of these factors on the oral tradition can be seen in how the ‘educated’ younger generation had become indifferent to, and alienated from, the age-old ways and knowledge embodied in this tradition. On one level, this is nothing but the “cultural bomb” that the African novelist, Ngugi Wa Thiongo identified as the “biggest weapon” of colonialism. The effect of a cultural bomb, he argues, is to

annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance with other people’s languages rather than their own...The intended results are despair, despondency and a collective deathwish.

It is perhaps safe to say that most oral societies of the Northeast are experiencing such cultural hegemonisation, at some stage or the other.
Hence, the “decolonization” of mind involves the recovery of these lost attributes.

Morrison’s feelings of loss regarding the oral tradition of storytelling and folktales, the concept of community, the connection to the past and to culture, are therefore all extremely relevant to those who are members of oral tribal societies. In such a situation, her narrative strategies have important implications for the study of ethnic fiction which is rooted in folklore and storytelling traditions. For instance, Morrison’s use of traditional storytelling methods to shape her novels, to foster and create cultural identity, to connect the individual to a shared culture, and to set up dialogue among characters and readers, are strategies that merit serious consideration. Although attempts have been made at exploring certain aspects of the traditional life and lore of this region, not much scholarly research about the techniques of narration inherent in the storytelling traditions has been undertaken. For example, the trope of the African trickster occurs in many ethnic culture myths of the region. A closer look at Morrison’s trickster aesthetics and the way she weaves together current critical discourses on marginality, ethnicity, feminism and folklore in the figure of the trickster, can suggest a mode for personal and cultural survival.
Morrison’s attempt to oralize print and to write “village literature” is another talking point which has important significance for marginalized societies, in defining, and forging group and personal identities based on their common condition as people in transition from an oral to a literate culture. In an age where literacy and the written word often displace orality, the oral tradition of any community finds itself increasingly marginalized. Particularly relevant is the idea of cultural and generational continuity. Oral communities are in constant need of new storytellers to articulate the experiences of those hidden hi (stories), storytellers who, in the telling of the stories of a culture, will pass on the tradition from one generation to the next and with it the wisdom of experience. In her novels Morrison demonstrates the different ways in which a literary text can enter the oral tradition to create new folkloric forms that derive from an oral performance instead of a written one. In her attempts to incorporate aspects and elements of the oral art forms typical of the African heritage into the structure of the contemporary novel, Morrison pushes her written texts toward orality.

In spite of the fact that the core of her fiction is entirely African-American in form and spirit, Morrison has managed to transform the “marginal” into the canon of American literature. Her concern with the revision of previously unquestioned labels and boundaries, and the task
she assumes of redefining the concepts of reality and history are in the tradition of all great writing. Morrison shows that what matters in literary history is the knowledge it makes accessible, the experience to which it gives expression and shape that enable new generations to comprehend themselves and their world. In the power of the storyteller to articulate both for and in the voice of the ‘other’ lies its validation. With her narrative emphasis also on opening up to other ways of knowing and to alternative worldviews, she pays homage to her own ethnicity and culture, showing the way for us to do the same with our own cultures. As she has shown, through her proposal to rewrite black experience that would truly represent African-Americans as people who have shaped the choices, the language and the culture of America, the marginal can be turned into a vital source of identity and power.

Thus, when we consider the importance of oral traditions to cultural and individual survival and the multi-vocal calling to an alternative perspective in Morrison’s fiction, we understand how it might be possible to reach a new understanding of ourselves through such strategies. The way in which Morrison has taken African themes, techniques and motifs as inspiration to evolve her own creative narrative style is a challenge for the many who are “outside readers” of her novels of black culture. Such an approach might facilitate aspiring writers of this
region to undertake the task of retrieving the positive values of the oral traditions and create "new written literature" which will no longer remain in the margin only.

Epigraph:


Endnotes and References


4 See the interviews with Bakeman, LeClair, McKay, and Watkins, as well as Morrison’s essay “Rootedness.”


