Chapter 5

Conclusion

Different myths and folklore inform the fiction of Walker and Morrison. These writers sought not only to reclaim cultural resources but also to create the foundation upon which we construct our sense of reality. Through the matrix of myth and folklore, they tell the stories we have not heard, the ones we need to hear again. As Morrison says of her own fiction, it is both “print and oral literature” (“Rootedness” 341). Ultimately, these writers’ use of the oral tradition evokes the same reciprocal relationship between the teller and the listener as the African tradition of call and response and the Greek tradition of the choral commentary. On their individual literary journeys, both writers sought to create this reciprocal relationship between their fiction and their readers. In the tradition of feminist readers, each writer hopes that the other women will recognise themselves in their story and join in the struggle to transform culture. The achievement of Morrison and Walker is that their folk aesthetic and mythic impulse affirm the value of the narrative for making such transformations possible. Telling the stories of women across generations, their fiction not only offers the reader roots to know African-American history, but also wings to press on it.
These writers share a complex response to loss and change in American culture which manifests itself in similar ways. They perceive a loss directly related to ideological, economic and political changes in American life and culture brought on by historical transition. Walker refers to this transition as the destroying left hand of progress that altered late nineteenth century America by shifting the focus of experience away from rural agrarian areas to the rapidly expanding urban industrial centres. For Morrison, the crucial years of transition were from 1930 to 1950, the period when vast numbers of Black-Americans migrated from the rural South to the cities of the North. Because Morrison began writing in the 1960s, she was also influenced by the turbulence and uneasiness about the loss of roots that came along with integration during that period. Therefore, in the fiction of Walker and Morrison there is an ambivalence towards the changes that the larger culture viewed as progress.

One of the most striking characteristics of Morrison's and Walker's responses to this change is that though they approve of progress in a general sense, they attempt to reclaim and affirm for fiction, parts of their cultural heritage that society had begun to discard as irrelevant or marginal to the dominant rational experience. Their efforts resemble a similar effort on the part of the nineteenth century New England poets who according to Jay Martin:
... helped to continue the past they could still remember into a future, which, to most Americans was as yet dim. They refused to threaten their culture with the new in literature, since Americans were, as they believed ... too distracted by the new in life. Their values and aspirations, in a middle class American tradition, were consciously conserving, though not necessarily conservative. They were radical enough to be traditional in an age that has spattered tradition with the thin points of wealth, technology and science. They were conservators of culture. (144)

Because these writers perceive themselves as cultural archivists, they focus on small villages and towns, isolated regional settings or rural areas and the folk who inhabit them. Of her own fiction, Morrison explains:

I write what I have recently begun to call village literature, fiction that is really for the village, for the tribe. Peasant literature for my people, which is necessary and legitimate but which also allows me to get in touch with all sorts of people. (26)

Both writers not only select village settings but also the attendant mores, customs, beliefs and language that characterize these settings.
Central to each of their fictional projects was the desire to give voice to the unheard through their own oral traditions and narrative discourse.

Walker and Morrison consciously reclaim the folklore that their respective cultures had either lost or were about to lose in the wake of dramatic historical change. Their folk knowledge and sensibility to their artistic vision and narrative intention form their folk aesthetic. As cultural archivists, Morrison and Walker write from a folk aesthetic that is much like the one which states Ralph Ellison’s theoretical assertion that folklore is the basis of all great literature:

For us (Black-Americans) the question should be, what are the specific forms of that humanity, and what in our background is worth preserving or abandoning. The clue to this can be found in folklore, which offers the first drawings of any group’s character. It preserves mainly those situations which have repeated themselves again and again in the history of any given group. It describes those rites, manners, customs and so forth, which insure the good life, or destroy it; and it describes those boundaries of feeling, thought and action which that particular group has found to be the limitation of the human condition. It projects this wisdom in symbols which express the group’s will to survive... These drawings may be crude but they are nonetheless profound in
that they represent the group's attempt to humanize the world. It's no accident that great literature — the products of individual artists, is erected upon this humble base. (172)

Although Ellison is specifically referring to the folk base of Black Literature, his statement captures the general essence of the folk elements that determine both the substance and structure of the narrative texts of Morrison and Walker:

The fictional writings of Morrison and Walker reveal that they both seek to challenge the assumptions of culture inscribed in the binary oppositions of rural versus urban people, of old versus young, of the values and traditions of the past versus those of the present, and of male versus female roles and experiences. The goal of their art is not to deny the importance of progress altogether but to challenge those who, in its name, would negate the values embodied in their folk aesthetic. They aim to redeem or transform their cultures through narrative fiction. Thus they become "redemptive scribes"—a term that Richard Cary coined to describe Sarah Orne Jewett's determination to correct the misimpression that native Mainers conformed in type to the caricatures of Yankee of fiction.

Audre Lorde, however, reminds us in her article "Open Letter to Mary Daly" that Black and White women must struggle openly and painfully, as Ondine and Margaret, Meridian and Lynne have done, to
appreciate the differences as well as the similarities in their common lives. The majority of the novels written by the White and the Black women describing an inter-racial female friendship oppose American racism. Only Tar Baby and Meridian establish the open confrontation of racial stereotypes as the necessary basis for an inter-racial friendship. Perceived stereotypically, the women in Tar Baby and Meridian do not respond stereotypically; they make it apparent that when the effects of racism and sexism can be identified and acknowledged, then forgiveness is possible, then hope is possible, for then change is possible. Unafraid to explore the psychological wilderness of racism, sexism and humanity, they have created in their fiction models of interracial friendships that endure not in memory, but in reality; not in fantasy, but in our common lives.

The implication of Tar Baby, the only one of her novels in which Morrison describes the White and the Black people in sustained inter-relationship, is that racial power plays cannot go unchallenged. If the White and the Black women in Tar Baby move toward a friendship towards the conclusion of the novel, it is because they have confronted head-on the stereotypes and emotions generated by racism.

Meridian can be read as an attempt to mend the ruptures and reconstruct American artefacts. The novel, in other words, conducts a historical search in that it tries to recontextualise the past. In so doing, Walker treats narrative as archaeology and one reads Meridian's life as
though it were inscribed on the archaeological site of her body. It also reveals the role of maternal history in the definition of self. The first half of the book moves not only through Meridian's personal history and the history of her parents and grandparents but also through the history of her land and folklore. It almost moves in an archaeological manner, unearthing and re-explaining. The novel is also a lesson in the power of language, the power to retain as well as to distort, to affect as well as to deny.

Walker concentrates, more than any other novelists of the period, on delineating that the essential African wisdom is still alive in the New World Black communities. Quite consciously she links African rhythm, dance and style to a unicaely Afro-American woman culture which is at the core and connects it to the style and rhythm of other Third World American women.

The emphasis on the culture of women as a means of self-understanding and growth is not only treated thematically in this fiction, but it is also organic to the form of the writer. The language and forms of Black women’s fiction are increasingly derived from women’s experiences as well as from Afro-American culture. Walker’s *The Color Purple* is written entirely as letters, a form which along with diaries was the only one which allowed women to record their everyday lives and feelings, their “history”. Walker also explores the richness and clarity of Black folk English in such a way that the reader understands that the inner core of a
person cannot be truly known except through her own language. Like Walker, Morrison consciously uses a potpourri of forms primarily associated with women: recipes, potions, letters, as well as poetry and dance rhythms to construct her novel. In *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*, she continues to explore Afro-American folktales and folklore, the oral tradition of Black people. They also use dream, ritual and hallucination, using the metaphors of women’s experience in composing the ritualistic process of their novels. This exploration of new forms based on the Black woman’s culture and her story has revitalized the American novel and opened up new avenues of expression, indelibly altering our sense of novelistic process.

Thematically and stylistically, the tone of the fiction of the early eighties communicate the sense that women of colour can no longer be perceived as marginal to the empowerment of all American women and that an understanding of their reality and imagination is essential to the process of change that the entire society must undergo in order to transform itself.

Walker writes thus about her thematic concerns in *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*:

I’m pre-occupied with the spiritual survival, the survival whole of my people. . . . But beyond that, I’m committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties and
the triumphs of Black women. . . For me Black women are the most fascinating creations in the world. . . (29)

In the novels of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, we come across racial heroines who rebel against the restrictive social codes. These novelists have brought out brilliant portraits of women, iridescent with inner strength. What these characters rebel for is life: their right to their own lives. These heroines not only rebel against the accepted social norms, but also attempt to be true to themselves. The very indomitable spirit of Black women artists is reflected in the creation of their heroines and in their progression from being into becoming.

In her essay “Alice Walker’s Women: In Search of Some Peace of Mind”, Bettye J. Parker-Smith remarks:

For her (Alice Walker) the south provides a spiritual balance and an ideological base from which to construct her characters. . . . As a student at Spelman college, active in the Civil Rights Movement, she was awed by natural rhythm of the south. The South, like hills and water, is therapeutic for her. It restores and generates her eligible creative spirit. While at Spelman, she remembers that “springtime turned the air green. I’ve never known this to happen any place I have been . . . not even in Uganda, where green or hills, plants, trees, begins to dominate the imagination”. (87)
Morrison is a redemptive scribe, for she too takes on a mission to correct a cultural misimpression. As she explains in *Black Women Writers*:

Critics generally don’t associate Black people with ideas. They see marginal people; they just see another story about Black folks. They regard the whole thing as sociologically interesting perhaps but very parochial. There’s a notion out in the land that there are human beings one writes about, and then there are Black people or Indians or some other marginal group. If you write about the world from that point of view, somehow it is considered lesser. It’s racist of course. . . . We are people, not aliens. We live, we love and we die. (121)

Morrison and Walker attempted to fill the cultural void which existed in the wake of historical transition. For Walker, the void was in the lives of those Americans who did not appreciate the cultural wealth to be found in her native New England. For Morrison, the void was in the lives of those Black-Americans who seem to have lost the oral tradition of story telling that once sustained a sense of community and enriched their lives. They attempt to endow commonplace people, places and stories with the mythic grandeur and significance of archetypal narrative and ritual to redeem neglected literary material and the cultural values on which it is based. This mythic impulse encompasses but is not limited to allusions to classical myth, fairytale and supernatural. It incorporates myth as the
“shifting reality” that Claude Lévi-Strauss and J.J. Bachofen remind us it is, but it nevertheless seems to converge around the concept of myth as a collection of stories or beliefs that orient audiences between their “natural” world and the “preternatural” world of possibility. These writers attempt to make narrative a dynamic vehicle for preserving, transmitting and reshaping the culture in affirmative ways that celebrate the past, that give continuity with the present and that offer faith in human potential.

Traditionally, a narrative is a storytelling event in which the narrator recounts a set of happenings. But a narrative as story telling is also a remembering, repeating and working through. The narrator is also moving forward into new modes of constructing experience. As the Reader-Response criticism reveals, the audience as the reader or listener is also transformed in the story telling event. Thus Morrison and Walker remind us of the significant roles that oral narratives once played in the human story and they offer their fiction as a means of filling the void and of perpetuating the continuity of human communication.

The narrative can thus transform both the listener and the teller. As Henry Louis Gates asserts: “The story we tell ourselves and our children functions to order our world, serving to create both a foundation upon which each of us constructs our sense of reality and a filter through which we process each event that confronts us everyday” (17). The novels of
Morrison and Walker tell the stories of their ancestors. Their novels are the literary counterparts of the oral traditions of their communities. Like their African ancestors, these story tellers, both oral and literary, transform gossip and happenings into composites of factual events, images, fantasies and fables. The style of each of these writers reflects certain qualities of the community in their novels as well as in their own personal vision. The allegorical approach is especially strong in the novels of Morrison, where nature and human beings converse and where the images of the stories create their own structures, their own parables. The process of naming, of capturing the spirit through the word is paramount in her novels. Walker's theme is the pursuit of personal and societal wholeness, as she analyses the major dilemma of Black-Southerners, the relationship between one's responsibility for one's life and the restrictions of sexism and racism. By revealing the fantasies, myths and dreams of her characters, she attempts to penetrate the historical subconscious of their communities.