Folklore in New World Black Fiction

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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Akoma, Chiji.
Folklore in New World Black Fiction: Writing and the Oral Tradition Aesthetics.
The Ohio State University Press, 2007.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/27973.
Toni Morrison is unarguably the most distinguished African American novelist and, certainly, among the select group of influential American writers of the twentieth century. As the first African American recipient of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993, Morrison’s literary stature looms large over black literary production in the United States. And for good reasons. Morrison’s first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, poignantly captures the tragedy and fallacy of an American society that privileges one race over others. Her subsequent novels remain focused on the black experience within the dominant white American society. Indeed, some critics have identified three of her novels—*Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), and *Paradise* (1998) as a trilogy charting three key historical moments in African American history, namely, slavery/reconstruction, the great northward migration, and post-civil rights eras. Nonetheless, Morrison’s eight novels are profound for their ability to weave historical relevance into highly gendered narratives. Keen as she is in charting the inseparability of white American political and cultural history from black America’s, Morrison’s focus hardly leaves the affairs of women and the men in their lives, making her novels a wide canvas of diverse female characters. Although novels such as *Tar Baby* and

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Love centers on the lives of the black upper class, most of Morrison’s novels deal with ordinary folks wrestling with demons in their past that seem to thwart their efforts at making sense of their present. In these enactments, Morrison infuses her stories with the kind of folk sensibility that grounds the works as decidedly African American.

I am particularly interested in Morrison’s construction of memory as an oral or folkloric sign that illuminates her creative imagination etched in written form. Rather than define memory as an ordinary recall of events, which in itself may be said to be either “reliable” or not, Morrison politicizes the activity of memory by using it as the medium through which black experience can be represented. This is not all; fashioning a black voice, a voice that when it is represented in writing is subjected to spoken inflections, is also important to Morrison; it is yet another way by which she attempts to recreate the dual cultural heritage of blacks in the New World.

In my reading of Song of Solomon, Jazz, and Paradise, I suggest that these works are, more than other considerations, a verbal performance celebrating the black voice in print and a testament to the durability of the spoken word and other forms of oral tradition in preserving black history through racial memory. Morrison is conscious of the act of writing as a performance, and this is why she imbues her narrators and characters with a cadence of speech that suggests an oral artist who knows that, in addition to being entertained by what she says, the audience is also interested in how well she extends the possibilities of the community’s linguistic and artistic resources.

In effect, the three novels under consideration will show that Morrison’s narrative strategies are deeply embedded in the black literary tradition, both in the manner by which she chooses to historicize the black experience in the Americas and in her ardent efforts to represent this experience with a keen sense of the spoken or “talking” roots of the African American literary tradition. Thus, when Herbert William Rice, for instance, while discussing Song of Solomon, states that “even a cursory glance at the novel demonstrates its links with mainstream American literature” (Toni Morrison 56), one must ask if the attention Morrison gives to memory, and to the validity of myth as an aspect of history, is part of the “mainstream” American narrative. This attempt to wrest Morrison’s art from its oral-black roots and neutralize its ethnic heritage by submerging it in “mainstream” literature resonates with efforts to find Western influences for her writings. No doubt, artists can be compared with their peers; such a comparison raises suspicions, however, when the goal is to suggest
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that one cannot be significant without the other. Morrison herself puts it this way: “Finding or imposing Western influences in/on Afro-American literature has value, but when its sole purpose is to place value only where that influence is located, it is pernicious” (emphasis in original). The danger, as she rightly points out, with such an approach to her work, or that of any African American, for that matter, is that it “may lead to an incipient orphanization of the work in order to issue its adoption papers” (“Unspeakable Things” 23). My reading of Morrison’s novels recognizes their full rights as offspring of a vibrant black imaginative tradition and as conveyors of the African American reality in its complexity.

In Song of Solomon, the history of the African American in the United States is one that can only be textualized through its “inscription” in the memory of the community. The oppressive role that illiteracy has played in understating, if not obliterating, the presence of the African American in American history provides the impetus for the novel’s central event, which is the retrieval of the Dead’s family genealogy from obscurity through a series of convoluted oral histories preserved in the memory of the community.

A clarification of the use of the term “memory” is necessary. Memory is part of what defines the human consciousness, and I do not wish to fetishize its presence in Morrison’s narratives. To remember or to forget, Matthew Hugh Erdelyi writes, are the two “contradicting tendencies of memory” (15). For my present purpose, though, I find the French historian Pierre Nora’s description of memory very useful, especially in the way he sets it off against history. “Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name,” he argues, then continues: “It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived.” Conversely, history “is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer” (285). The problem with history, one would surmise, is its need for exactitude (“reconstruction”), a need shunned by memory.

However, Nora complicates the difference between memory and history by arguing that in our modern times what we call memory is actually history. The kind of environment in which “real memory” operates—spontaneous and unself-conscious—has been dislodged, Nora states, “under the pressure of a fundamentally historical sensibility” (284). The emergence of several voices or groups, especially those hitherto silenced by hegemonic history, and the occurrence of radically transformative world events have created an age wherein what is remembered is not left to chance and
spontaneity. The expression, “Never again,” commonly tied to the Jewish Holocaust, for example, becomes an injunction for the group, indeed, the world, to etch this particular event in memory. What is remembered assumes orderliness and specificity that bring memory under the province of history. Thus, to use the Holocaust example, that singular historical event becomes a “lieu de mémoire,” a site of memory “where memory crystallizes and secretes itself . . . at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn—but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists” (ibid.).

The Middle Passage and plantation slavery remains a traumatic historical event, which resonates in and influences African American political and cultural consciousness. The will to remember that period, especially when the ramifications of the experience still exist, constitutes black racial memory. What Morrison does is transform that memory into a literary metaphor that best conveys the unique position and experience of the African American. In this typology, memory is not an “art,” as Frances A. Yates’s *Art of Memory* suggests, but an eruptive force that the African American writer harnesses in order to present a counter-American narrative. In fact, it is more appropriate to refer to the kind of memory present in African American narratives as “counter-memory,” which George Lipsitz defines as “look[ing] to the past for the hidden histories of those excluded from dominant narratives” (162). Morrison’s conceptualization of memory manifests in oral histories, that is, histories that her characters assume responsibility for telling, though the narratives collapse into one extended and convoluted narrative of the community. The disruptive effect of these histories on the American narrative is in part a direct consequence of their nonlinearity. In his study of social memory, Paul Connerton notes that oral histories by an oppressed group produce a different type of history that runs counter to the structure of the dominant narrative: “The oral history of subordinate groups will produce another type of history: one in which not only will most of the details be different, but in which the very construction of meaningful shapes will obey a different principle. Different details will emerge because they are inserted, as it were, into a different kind of narrative home” (19).

The narrative principle that informs Morrison’s novels is oral and the stories she tells are so composed within a different frame of memory that her coinage, “rememory,” which is featured significantly in *Beloved*, becomes a conscious attempt to distinguish her own construct. Sethe
explains it to her daughter Denver as a phenomenon that has a life of its own outside of events, places, and people:

Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it’s you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It’s never going away. Even if the whole farm—every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what’s more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. (36)

Rememory becomes a present thought of a past, solidified in an image kept alive by its capacity to be evoked or reenacted by virtually any member of the community. Sethe’s escape from Sweet Home does not exorcise the ghost of the harrowing life at the plantation—an experience that assumes a physicality by the appearance and return of Beloved. Together with Paul D, Sethe relives life at Sweet Home and rememory creates the impetus for living.

In her essay “Memory, Creation and Writing,” Morrison accentuates the act of memory as living tissue in the community’s sense of being when she asserts that “memory (the deliberate act of remembering) is a form of willed creation. It is not an effort to find out the way it really was—that is research. The point is to dwell on the way it appeared and why it appeared in that particular way” (385). The statement points toward an important aspect of her conceptualization: remembering as a conscious act. To dwell on a past that the dominant narrative has tried to erase through contrived history is both an act of resistance and a process of communal validation. Thus, Aimable Twagilimana’s statement that rememory is “an activation of the past, to the time of stories told by mothers and grandmothers, to the middle passage, and even to Africa, the land of origins” (103) proves a useful amplification of Morrison’s position. For what she does is to establish rememory as the mediation between the oral storytelling practices of the ancestral land and New World black experience.

However, this mediation is not without its problems. While communal rememory empowers members of the community to preserve what they deem important to their well-being through folkloric agencies, rememory in itself does not legitimize all practices or ideas that spring from the oral process. The three novels are important for how they showcase
Morrison’s representation of oral traditional arts in complex ways. In the novels, memory operates both as a counternarrative discourse against a dominant and literacy-biased history and as the agency through which oral forms of group identity are celebrated. But these novels also reveal Morrison’s interrogation of the politics behind the performance of oral traditional arts in the African American community.

**Resurrecting the Song of the Dead**

Caught between the contradicting threads of a family history as recounted by his parents, Milkman Dead comes to the realization that he must take personal responsibility for reconciling the histories through a journey back to his roots. He is aware that the circumstances of his own birth are the main cause of estrangement between his parents, hence the necessity for his journey. Though his father, Macon Dead, does not have doubts that he is Milkman’s biological father, he cannot but be suspicious of the unusual nickname, Milkman, his son acquired, which, to him, “sounded dirty, intimate, and hot” (15). His wife, Ruth, on the other hand, struggles to supplant an ambiguously incestuous relationship she had with her late father and the sexually sterile relationship with her husband by maintaining an apparently erotic breast-feeding attachment to young Milkman. Confused by a web of contending family relationships, Milkman tells his older friend Guitar, “Everybody wants something from me. . . . Something they think I got. I don’t know what it is—I mean what it is they really want.” His friend ominously replies, “They want your life, man,” and further clarifies his statement, “It is the condition our condition is in. Everybody wants the life of the black man. Everybody” (222). Later, Guitar’s words resonate in his consciousness as he watches the men in the hunting party skin and divide portions of the bobcat killed during the night’s expedition. As Luther, one of the men, begins cleaning out the animal’s entrails, Milkman asks him what he is going to do with them since they obviously have enough of the better portions of the game. Luther roundly replies, “Eat him!” (283). It is at this moment that Guitar’s words assume a physical immediacy, for just as the men appropriate every part of the animal—down to its entrails—so is his own being, his entire self, sought by opposing forces. He must break the viciousness of the quest by reconstructing his past in order to take full control of his self. It is important to stress Milkman’s journey of self-discovery; some have argued that it is his materialism represented by the search for the bag of gold at the cave.
that motivates Milkman’s journey from Michigan to the Deep South; that is indeed the immediate reason, but the novel ultimately suggests that Milkman sees the journey as an opportunity to make sense of the chaotic present through the mediation of a hitherto curious and mythic past.

In *Song of Solomon*, history is embodied in the people’s consciousness. The community’s consciousness embeds what it deems relevant through a process that defies rigid structures of documentation. This defiance erupts early in the novel at the impasse between the colored people and white council officials over the naming of a street where the city’s only black medical doctor, Milkman’s maternal grandfather, had lived. To the folks, it is “Doctor Street,” while the city government officially lists the street as “Mains Avenue”—a name that, by its striking generic character, obliterates the value of the story connected with it. The people ignore such slanting of history and take recourse to naming it “Not Doctor Street,” thereby solidifying through naming what their communal memory testifies (4). The name “Not Doctor Street” is a pithy account of both the government’s attempt to impose an identity that bears no relation to the community’s sense of historical relevance and the people’s resistance to such an imposition. In addition, the narrator makes it clear that the people’s naming preference is more powerful than all the city government’s efforts to impose its preferred name.

Apart from the people’s resolve to inscribe their folk values in the street’s name, this opening incident foregrounds Morrison’s notion of history and its construction among a marginalized group. The residents of Not Doctor Street constitute a community that must construct an alternative apparatus of history in order to validate their lives. The organs of the hegemony—the post office and the legislature—which exercise the privilege of conferring names and classifying city “landmarks” try unsuccessfully to erase the community’s memories through a pathetically pedantic written memo. Interestingly, this approach of wielding literacy as power assumes an ironic twist in another naming “war” on a smaller scale that breaks out early on as well. Macon opens his realty office on Not Doctor Street and wants to erase “Sonny’s Shop,” the name of the previous occupant of the office space, by attempting to scrape the name off the glass window and replace it with a bland “OFFICE” sign. The narrator comments on the effort thus: “Scraping the previous owner’s name was hardly worth the trouble since he couldn’t scrape it from anybody’s mind. His [Macon’s] storefront office was never called anything but Sonny’s Shop, although nobody now could remember thirty years back, when, presumably, Sonny did something or other there” (17). Macon, an entrepreneur driven by a
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materialistic passion to “own things [and things that] own other things” (55), attempts to literally paint over the community’s memory with claims to a privileged space acquired through economic affluence. However, they resist him by maintaining the old name that, hazy as the facts associated with it may be in their memory, retains a relevance to their sense of community.

Through the portraits of the principal characters in the novel, a characterization of history as a composite of different strands of narrative performance within the community emerges. Pilate, Macon’s only sister, for example, possesses mythic attributes because of having practically birthed herself and having no navel. Unlike her brother, whose obsession with wealth and desire to rub shoulders with the white propertied class alienates him from the rest of the black community, Pilate shuns materialism and is imbued with folk wisdom and knowledge of traditional healing arts. Interestingly, she secretly supplies Macon’s wife, Ruth, with herbs with which Ruth is able to conceive Milkman, making Pilate Milkman’s symbolic mother.

Although Pilate’s unorthodox lifestyle, folk wisdom, and dogged individualism are highly celebrated in the narrative, her character alone nevertheless cannot sustain the weighty task of conveying the life force of the community’s history. Her individual story overlaps with Ruth’s and Macon’s to give Milkman the full picture of his seemingly dysfunctional family. But the novel invests in Milkman’s journey toward the ultimate retrieval and solidification of group identity through folklore. By the time Milkman finally unravels the mystery of the green bag Pilate has been carrying through all her life’s journeys; the full text of the song we first heard from Pilate at the scene of insurance agent Smith’s suicide flight; and the fascinating story of Solomon, Jake, and Sing, we realize how far Pilate’s account is from a history that has been preserved in Shalimar’s communal memory. Pilate weaves a history in which she is central. Though she is the one who goes back to the cave to gather the bones she believes belong to the white man her brother killed, in obedience to her dead father’s instruction, and even though she is contrasted with her brother’s material greed and craving for social recognition and influence, the history she narrates to Ruth, her (Pilate’s) children, and her nephew remains individualistic, as individualistic as her brother’s, Ruth’s, and Guitar’s. It is no wonder that, at the end, the narrative reveals that she has been carrying the wrong bones (even if they end up being her father’s) and that she has woven an odyssey full of inconsistencies (257–58).10

On the other hand, Morrison presents history as a living construct
etched in the consciousness of a community, preserved and transmitted through a collaborative performance by the group whose existence it validates. When Milkman arrives at Danville and introduces himself to the Reverend Cooper as Macon Dead’s grandson, the clergyman replies excitedly, “I know your people!” (229; emphasis added). Milkman immediately recognizes the significance of the nominal change: “links,” he calls it. Later, a group of old men who learn of Macon Dead’s grandson’s arrival gathers in Cooper’s house, and what follows is a scene that aptly captures the novel’s representation of black oral narrative performance:

The more the old men talked—the more he [Milkman] heard about the only farm in the county that grew peaches, real peaches like they had in Georgia, the feasts they had when hunting was over, the pork kills in the winter and the work, the backbreaking work of a going farm—the more he missed something in his life. They talked about digging a well, fashioning traps, felling trees, warming orchards with fire when spring weather was bad, breaking young horses, training dogs. And in it all was his own father, the second Macon Dead, their contemporary, who was strong as an ox, could ride bareback and barefoot, who, they agreed, outran, outplowed, outshot, outpicked, outrode them all. (234)

In addition to depicting the making of history, the celebratory scene also affirms their survival as a community. The life story of Macon Dead and his son, in all its legendary proportions, is but a piece of narrative woven within the fabric of the larger history. Milkman is “the ignition that gunned their memories” (235), a catalyst that triggers the recapitulation of history for the invigoration of a dream in the community. The encomium they pour on the memory of Macon Dead reflects their own construct of a past; such a tribute is valued even more against the backdrop of the injustices perpetrated against them by the racist white majority. The story of Macon Dead, a fellow black man whose nominal identity is radically changed by his inability to read but who triumphs over the disadvantage and dies defending his property against vicious and jealous white neighbors, is no longer his history but their history, and the appropriation is represented by the conviviality of its performance. History is what is remembered and performed in verbal acts, and on each occasion of its recall it validates the lives of its performers.

*Song of Solomon* presents an American society that has politicized literacy by using it as an oppressive tool against African Americans. White slave owners strongly discouraged the slaves from learning to read and
write, and some states later would tie voting rights with literacy. A drunken Union Army soldier literally writes the elder Macon Dead out of history when he goes to register with the Freedmen’s Bureau (53). We should not ignore the irony of the event: an exercise meant to confirm his status as a freed man is the agent that obliterates his identity, and this excision acquires a stamp of permanence once it is written down.  

*Song of Solomon* challenges this paradigm by locating the history of Macon and his parents not in the written text but in living memory, communal living memory.  

In the words of Eleanor Branch, the novel “becomes an affirmation of tribal genealogy, a way to celebrate origins and connection, a way to immortalize those already dead” (53). The flight of Solomon and his wife Ryna’s eternal sobbing in the woods find a repository in the community’s folk song.

A number of critics have questioned the significance of Solomon’s flight in the novel, suggesting that it entrenches a sexist notion of the dominance of the African American male. But how far can these charges be sustained within the vernacular of the novel? To indict Solomon and, by extension, Milkman on the basis of their gender and the fate of Solomon’s family left behind is to ignore the powerful cultural significance Morrison invests in capturing the flight itself. Milkman is not the only one to benefit from the unraveling of the song; Pilate’s life journey acquires new meaning after Milkman returns with the full story about her ancestors.

The flight belongs to the grand scheme of the novel: to affirm the tradition from which the feat emanates. *Song of Shalimar* (Solomon) is the history of Solomon and his progeny, a history preserved and communicated to succeeding generations through a nonwritten medium in order to maintain its mythic value and its relevance to the community. It is also a demonstration of the community’s active participation in the production and preservation of the black oral arts. The mock-heroic suicidal flight of Smith at the beginning of the novel contrasts with the heroic flight of Solomon, who regains his freedom by returning to Africa.  

It is also through this song that families and communities spanning north to south of the country are able to trace their roots and consequently share a sense of connectedness. In this context, Gayl Jones’s characterization of Solomon’s flight as a “tall tale” misses Morrison’s conceptualization of history and memory (174). Similarly, the flight should not be construed as a variant of the Western classical myth of Icarus and his father Daedalus, as some scholars have suggested.  

Morrison herself debunks such thinking by stating categorically that she tries “to stay out of Western mythology” (Interview 461). Concerning her use of the flying African narrative, she
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says, “I’d always heard that black people could fly before they came to this country . . . and I decided not to treat [it] as some Western form of escape, and something more positive than escape. Suppose in a more dangerous element called air, learning how to trust, and knowing that much about one’s self to the air, to surrender and control, both of those things. That’s what that myth meant to me” (ibid. 463). Milkman’s character portrait demonstrates the meaning that Morrison gleans from the story that African Americans often recount as actual incidents. He steps out from the debilitating emotional environment that is his father’s house and soars with the knowledge he acquires from his journey back to the South. There he unlearns everything he had learnt through association with his acquisitive father and his vengeful friend, Guitar. The apparent motion of flight that Milkman performs as he leaps toward Guitar firmly establishes it as a life-affirming (f)act (331). His heroism in the face of death and his self-sacrificing leap is a fitting alternative to Robert Smith’s suicidal leap off the roof of Mercy Hospital.

The politics of written history, and its unreliability in representing the history of a marginalized people, forms the thesis of the novel. That is why, when finally the complete text of the song that has been appearing in broken forms in the novel, and which the reader now recognizes as the history of the Deads, is heard at the end of Milkman’s journey, it resists the danger of being inert and unread in a written format. Milkman is compelled to commit it to memory, its sole legitimate agent of transmission.

Furthermore, what is at issue is not fact or fantasy but the purpose and reason for its appropriation. As Milkman leaves the reluctant informant Susan Byrd, he contemplates what he has heard and what his dead father’s ghost may have been trying to tell him at the cave: “Here he was walking around in the middle of the twentieth century trying to explain what a ghost had done. But why not? he thought. One fact was certain: Pilate did not have a navel. Since that was true, anything could be, and why not ghosts as well?” (294; emphasis added). The strength of Morrison’s argument is that a novel that documents such known events and people as the Emmett Till murder and the rising national profile of Malcolm X is also capable of documenting the flight of an African slave back to Africa and the survival of the slave’s children in a still racially stratified American society. Both the original leap by the ancestor Solomon and Milkman’s fit Alejo Carpentier’s definition of the marvelous as they demonstrate “an amplification of the scale and categories of reality, perceived with particular intensity by virtue of an exaltation of the spirit that leads it to a
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kind of extreme state” (86). Song of Solomon both recaptures the African American folktale tradition in writing and interrogates the hegemony of written linear history with its claims to factuality in accounting for the experience of African Americans. Song of Solomon evokes an alternative that eliminates the power of literacy over group identity by locating the latter squarely in the realm of myth preserved in communal living memory.

It is important to emphasize the value of oral narrative forms in Song of Solomon. Certainly, as Morrison’s longest narrative to date, it spans a significant time frame and pursues a number of themes including black patriarchy, domestic abuse, and love. But as the title suggests, these themes are subsumed in the riddle of the song heard first at the beginning of the novel: Who is Sugarman? Where is home? Who is singing of flying Sugarman? Milkman’s journey from Michigan to Pennsylvania helps solve the riddle, leading to the next question: why “Song”? Song indicates tribute, but more significantly, it draws attention to orality. In a wider sense the song is, to borrow Nora’s term, a site of memory.

Morrison’s lengthy narrative is a song (an epic?) performed in honor of the legend of the flying African ancestor. The tribute works on two levels: first, by relying on memory and folklore, Solomon’s descendants circumvent the tyranny of the written word that has denied them equal access to the American national narrative and affirm their own history on their own terms. Solomon/Shalima/Sugarman, the African slave, did fly back to Africa. And as Macon tells Milkman about their ancestry, “If you ever doubt we from Africa, look at Pilate. She look just like Papa and he looked like all them pictures you ever see of Africans” (54). Second, the plurality of sources required to solve the riddle represents Morrison’s firm recognition of history or group identity formation as communal. All the major informants—Macon Dead, Circe, Pilate, Susan Byrd—possess only partial claims to the full story. In typical oral narrative tradition, there is no individual authorship of the story; its continuity is dependent on the constant performance of the separate strands by the community as dictated by circumstance.

Contesting Memory, Interpreting Lettered Signs

In her seventh novel, Paradise, Morrison returns to the function of memory and oral tradition in defining black history and identity. Just as Song of Solomon portrays an African American family retrieving and preserving its genealogical tree through memory and active performance in the form of
song, \textit{Paradise} presents a community of African American migrants fashioning the history of their eventual settlement through memory and narrative. However, whereas the earlier novel focuses on the significance of the means by which the community preserves its identity, that is, memory and communally performed history, \textit{Paradise} interrogates the neutrality of memory in fashioning the narrative of the community’s past, especially when what is remembered serves to perpetuate a patriarchal order. In some ways, \textit{Paradise} is a demonstration of Morrison’s awareness of the complex nature of the African American historical experience, an experience that she is reluctant to represent in simple binarist or absolutist terms. Let me suggest that the novel is a logical progression on the kind of “aesthetic ideology” on which novels such as \textit{Jazz} and \textit{Song of Solomon} are based. That is, whereas these earlier novels seem to draw their “truth” from the extent to which the characters and authorial voices relate to black oral traditions, \textit{Paradise} steps back to examine the uses of these oral agents of group identity. The novel presents a conflict between one group’s “duty-memory” (Nora 292), that is, the group’s resolve to remember their past in a certain way as a matter of duty, and another group’s determination to experience that past in a liberating manner. This conflict between the older men and their children runs alongside the novel’s focus on the lives of the women at the Convent in the present. Unlike the absence of a single version relating the founding of Haven and Ruby (even though the Morgans insist there is one), the reader is privy to the circumstances of the women’s arrival at the Convent. From Mavis, who runs away from a threatening domestic space, to Gigi, who searches for (and later abandons) an elusive rendezvous with her jailed boyfriend, the narrator focuses on the process of the women’s acceptance of each other under the tutelage of Consolata. It is almost as if their lives, accounted for in the present, repudiate the fetish the men have made of their communal memory.

\textit{Paradise} is an imaginative discourse on the oral-written interface in African American culture. In earlier novels such as \textit{Song of Solomon} and \textit{Beloved}, memory is the interpretive sign. In \textit{Paradise}, however, memory is interrogated as Morrison presents a slice of African American experience centered on the (ab)use of memory. This interrogation focuses on a community’s response to oral and written history. Driving the narrative is a performer interested in representing the lore of her community’s history, playing to the strengths of that community but also critical of certain aspects of that history. Morrison operates within the African American folkloric medium and invests the historical contents of her narratives with a mythic dimension.\textsuperscript{18} The implication is clear: the resistance to empiricism and
linearity, which defines mythic “truth,” is coupled with the representation of African American reality. As Morrison explains elsewhere, black reality involves “the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time with neither taking precedence over the other” (“Rootedness” 342). The result of this coupling is a dynamic narrative vision capable of depicting black history without a betrayal of the deep oral roots of that history. *Paradise*, I would suggest, marks Morrison’s clearest delineation of the uses of memory in representing the black experience in America, as an alternative to both the privileged medium of writing and the hegemonic power conferred on written and lineal history. The novel goes beyond celebrating the centrality of memory to black consciousness evidenced in *Beloved*; it delves into the very process of narrating what is remembered to reveal the myriad of interests that shape this narrative. At the end, the notion of a communal narrative generated by a common response to a past is seen as the catalyst for the various narrative performances that compete for acceptance in the text.

Set in mid-1976, amid the national trauma following the Vietnam War, *Paradise* presents the gradual death of Ruby, a community of fiercely proud black people, due to the refusal of its patriarchs to excise the cyst of an isolationism related to the circumstances of Ruby’s founding. Around 1889, nine freed African American men, their families, and some strays from Mississippi and Louisiana band together in search of a settlement site in the Oklahoma Territory. They reach a town called Fairly, a settlement of fellow African Americans, and appeal to be allowed to join them. The request is rejected; the citizens of Fairly provide the migrants with victuals and ask them to move on. The migrants are quick to identify the cause of the rejection, later to be known as the Disallowing, as color. While the people of Fairly are lighter skinned, the migrants and their families are darker. Stung by this rejection, they travel without stopping until they find their own community, which they call Haven. Haven thrives for decades but later suffers from post–World War II depression. Descendants of the founders embark on another migration to a better land and Ruby, named for the woman who apparently died as a result of the hectic trek, is founded.

Ruby, an isolated town, “ninety miles from the nearest O for operator and ninety miles from the nearest badge” (13), is incidentally about seventeen miles from an old and obscure building housing a Catholic institution, Christ the King School for Native Girls, which the citizens of Ruby simply refer to as the Convent, despite the bold sign announcing its official name. Now in disrepair and no longer a schoolhouse, the Convent is inhabited
and governed by the Mother Superior and her ward, Consolata (Connie), an orphan from South America, whom the nun had adopted. The Mother Superior dies at the beginning of the novel. Devastated by her death, Connie allows the Convent to sink further into ruins while turning it into a haven for women with various troubled histories. The persons and events in the Convent intersect to form the narrative of *Paradise*.

As leaders of the community, the men of Ruby maintain cohesion amid the growing dissent of the younger ones and the women by insisting on a particular narrative about the founding of the community and its predecessor, Haven. This narrative, incidentally, is far from written; it is a history kept alive in the memory of the older members, especially as remembered by the twins Deacon and Steward Morgan. Not only are the brothers the grandsons of Zechariah Morgan, known in Ruby’s lore as Big Papa, the legendary leader of the first settlement at Haven, but they are also the most prosperous members of Ruby. “The twins,” the narrator comments, “have powerful memories. Between them they remember the details of everything that ever happened—things they witnessed and things they have not. . . . And they have never forgotten the message or the specifics of any story, especially the *controlling* one told them by their grandfather” (13; emphasis added). Deacon is also described as possessing a “total memory” (107).

While the twins’ recall capacity during oral recounting of Ruby’s history follows the trajectory of remembering “things they witnessed and things they have not,” the narrator nevertheless notes their insistence on a controlling narrative. Despite the disruptive or nonlinear dynamic of memory, especially in an oral performance medium, the Morgans’ position points to a harnessing of what is remembered into what is literally a master narrative. The implication is that what is remembered and at the core of Ruby’s “nationalism” is a narrative of a bruised male ego and a vengeful determination to reclaim it. There is also a class factor involved. The enormous economic power and social influence wielded by Steward and Deacon Morgan lead to a process of consciously choosing what they remember, and what they compel their fellow citizens to remember, about the principles and beliefs on which their community is founded.

In *Paradise*, the Oven symbolizes the strategy of harnessing what is otherwise a transgressive narrative medium for a coherent and “conservative” one. As Steward remembers the event, Big Papa prompted the men of Haven to build a cook oven. This facility not only served as a “community ‘kitchen’” but was in fact a gesture of the men’s pride “that none of their women had ever worked in a whiteman’s kitchen or nursed a white
child." Steward clearly favors this lofty reasoning for his grandfather’s act even though Steward equally contemplates that “[m]aybe Zechariah never wanted to eat another stick-roasted rabbit, or cold buffalo meat” (99). The obvious appeal to the male ego that informs the making of the oven assumes an emblematic distinction when the twins and thirteen other families begin a fresh journey from Haven to Ruby, carrying the Oven with them. Once reassembled on the new site, it becomes the community’s meeting place, and the men from the leading families confer on it the status of a totem.

However, a conflict between the younger sons of Ruby and their fathers arises over the correct missing words Big Papa had inscribed on the iron lids of the Oven. Were they “Be the Furrow of His Brow” or “Beware the Furrow of His Brow”? During its transport from Haven to Ruby, the letters of the first word in the meaning-laden statement had fallen off the Oven, leaving a gap that the two generations would contend to fill. The conflict over the missing word is at the center of a three-sided dialectic among controlled memory, the written word, and an unfettered “true memory.” Although both sides understand the pronoun “His” to refer to God, the disagreement concerns the relationship of this powerful and fearsome God to His people, the black people of Ruby. The fathers vehemently declare that the statement is an order, hence the word is “Beware,” for “God’s justice is His alone.” The younger generation, on the other hand, sees the message on the lid as a motto challenging the people to be “His instrument, His justice” (87).

The unspoken ideological argument is that the older generation of the Morgans, who insist on retaining the isolationist and patriarchal order instituted by the original freed men, desire to use the Oven as an instrument of social cohesion. The power and reverence to God that they argue the words on the lid represent are a ruse for the unchallenged authority they demand. The interpretation by Harper Jury, the son of one of the founders of Haven, reflects this unspoken bias: “It says, ‘Beware.’ Not ‘Be.’ Beware means ‘Look out. The power is mine. Get used to it’” (87). Deacon Morgan says categorically, “Nobody, I mean nobody, is going to change the Oven or call it something strange. Nobody is going to mess with a thing our grandfathers built” (85). His brother Steward also wonders what the founders “would think of those puppies who wanted to alter words of beaten iron” (99). For the older men, the Oven is a solidification of a remembered past.

There is an irony in the disagreement that divides Ruby in two, and it does not lie in the elliptical life of the words on the Oven. The irony is
that the critically ambiguous words of the patriarch, which have become “worn letters” (6) on the Oven, betray one primary virtue of writing—permanence, an ability to “preserve the word from vanishing” (Biakolo 88). In contrast to Walter Ong’s assertion that the written word has the “potential of being lifted and placed on different places, or being resurrected” (*Interfaces of the Word* 156), the written words on the lid of the Oven disappear, creating a rift among Ruby’s inhabitants. The irony deepens when, in order to prove their own version of the missing word, the twins and the other men call on Esther, the eighty-year-old sole surviving member of the Haven settlers, to tell the community what she remembers about the word on the Oven. The young people ridicule what they call Esther’s “finger memory,” peeved “at the notion of remembering invisible words you couldn’t even read by tracing letters you couldn’t pronounce”:19

“Did you see them?” asked the sons.
“Better than that!” shouted the fathers. “She felt them, touched them, and put her fingers on them!”
“If she was blind, Sir, we could believe her. That’d be like braille. But some five-year-old kid who couldn’t read her own tombstone if she climbed out of her grave and stood in front of it?” (83)

In the heated debate, the fathers invoke the authority of a living witness to authenticate their interpretation of a text that not even the testimony of a witness can validate. Like the elder Macon Dead in *Song of Solomon*, who is betrayed by the power of literacy, Esther’s memory and belief in the infallibility of the written word is vitiated by her inability to read. Whatever she thinks she remembers, contrary to the thinking of the men who depend on her testimony, cannot be so easily traced on the impersonal contours of the engraved words—a point the sons emphasize.

The misalignment between what is remembered, traced, and felt on the fingers marks a paradigm shift that *Paradise* problematizes. The missing letters constitute a nebulous space in which Morrison interrogates the permanence or durability of the written word or documented history. Yet she points to the potential of oral histories, even when recounted by someone who “felt them, touched them, put her fingers on them,” to be channeled toward a political end. In *Song of Solomon*, there is no obvious special interest within the black community in preserving the story of Shalimar in a particular way (even though the village belle, Sweet, would sarcastically ask Milkman, concerning his great-grandfather’s flight, “who’d he
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leave behind?” [328]). What is embedded in the communal consciousness in the earlier novel is both the affirmation of the story of the ancestor and the presence of dissenting or disinterested voices, like Susan Byrd’s and Sweet’s, who are at liberty to question the usefulness of the Shalimar narrative. In Paradise, the men are determined to submerge the compositeness of communal memory—the missing letters on the iron lid of the Oven—in favor of an orchestrated narrative that kills the creative force of the community represented by the imperative verb, “Be.”

The leading men of Ruby nurture and retain memory of their humiliation by fellow black men, albeit of a lighter complexion; not content to found a place of their own, they build one that resists any dissent and any form of freedom not made in their own image. In this way, the novel raises a pertinent issue on the limits of the use of the memories of the past. Is what is remembered to be a furrow, an impediment to the creative conscious of the present, or a catalytic agent capable of transforming the present? The Methodist priest Richard Misner, a non-native and the rallying point for the younger people, perceives the trouble with Ruby’s sense of its past:

Over and over and with the least provocation, they [Ruby citizens] pulled from their stock of stories tales about the old folks, their grands and greatgrands; their fathers and mothers. Dangerous confrontations, clever maneuvers. Testimonies to endurance, wit, skill and strength. Tales of luck and outrage. But why were there no stories to tell of themselves? About their own lives they shut up. Had nothing to say, pass on. As though past heroism was enough of a future to live by. As though, rather than children, they wanted duplicates. (161)

It is not that the older men do not have stories of themselves to tell; they have fought as American soldiers in foreign lands, and their courageous decision to move away from Haven to a new land could well translate to stories of heroism. The reason for their silence about themselves is that the Morgans and the other men who share their vision of a community recognize the power of the oral tradition, the political and religious power that a mythic narrative of the past has for coercing conformity.

Yet Paradise is far from presenting a single narrative about Ruby. Events—past and present—constitute keenly agonistic spaces for narrative performance by the key characters. Three main levels of narration operate in the novel: the twins’ recollections provide one layer of account; the voices of Patricia Best, Dovey and Soane Morgan (the two sisters who
are married to the twins), Consolata, and Lone DuPres make up varying degrees of a counternarrative to that of the twins; and, finally, an authorial voice acts as the reader’s interpreter. Among the three perspectives, the authorial voice constantly redirects the reader to composite narratives. This practice enables the reader to witness the partial or even dubious manipulation of a received tradition by the performing characters. As readers we are in the presence of story-making, but like the characters in the novel we are denied the privilege of omniscience. Nobody knows. Thus, the narrative structure effectively exposes the impracticability of the kind of narrative that the Morgans and the men want to foist on Ruby.

Different narrative moods distinguish the men’s narrative from the women’s. The Morgan twins’ recollections are evoked with a masculine sense of infallibility; they have no reason to doubt the stories their father, Rector, handed down to them. Besides, some of their claims of authority rest on their personal recollection of events. More significantly, the brothers promote their personal memory as synonymous with the community’s. A rhetorical forcefulness characterizes such an enormous leap from the private to the public. One striking example of the twins’ controlling performance occurs at the same venue where Esther’s “finger memory” is ridiculed. Irked by the young people’s boldness in questioning their elders’ reverence of the Oven, Deacon responds with characteristic specificity, calling on his colleagues to bear witness:

They [the founding fathers] dug the clay—not you. They carried the hod—not you. . . . They mixed the mortar—not a one of you. They made good strong brick for that oven when their own shelter was sticks and sod. You understand what I’m telling you? And we respected what they had gone through to do it. Nothing was handled more gently than the bricks those men—men, hear me? not slaves, ex or otherwise—the bricks those men made. Tell them, Sargeant, how delicate was the separation, how careful we were, how we wrapped them, each and every one. Tell them, Fleet. You, Seawright, you, Harper, you tell him if I’m lying. Me and my brother lifted that iron. The two of us. (85–86; emphasis added)

While Deacon recounts what is evidently a communal lore, the institution of the Oven, we observe a gradual shift from representing the efforts of the patriarchs (“they”), to courting the solidarity of his fellow men (“we”), and finally to resting the weight of his entire speech on the action of him and his brother Steward. Deacon does not make a distinction between received tradition and his own personal narrative; for example, he was not at the
oven-making ceremony to know the specifics of the construction—digging the clay, carrying the hod, and so forth. But the reference is necessary in order to reinforce the events in which he is a participant and, now, the narrator. This performance strategy is not lost on Royal Beauchamp (Roy), one of the leading speakers for the youths, who retorts on charges that his peers want to kill the Oven’s value in this way: “It’s our history too, sir. Not just yours” (86). Deacon’s act is a powerful appropriation of communal narrative that relies on realigning the key parts of that repertoire to serve the speaker’s purpose.

The founding of Haven is remembered and narrated in mythic proportions. This is not surprising; the narration is from the subject position of Steward, who “remembered every detail of the story his father and grandfather told” (95). After the Disallowing, and in righteous anger, Big Papa, who is lame, urges the people on an uninterrupted trek. On the third night, while the other trekkers are resting, Zechariah takes his only son, Rector, far into the woods to pray. In a scene reminiscent of Christ’s intense emotional torment in the Garden of Gethsemane, Zechariah remains on his knees, “hum[ming] the sweetest, saddest sounds” in prayer (96), while Rector, like Christ’s disciples, cannot keep up and apparently falls asleep. Big Papa’s reported opening words of prayer are striking: “My Father, Zechariah here.” It echoes the intimacy with God that such biblical figures as Abraham, Moses, Samuel, and Christ experienced. In Gethsemane, angels minister to Christ to strengthen him for the journey to the cross. As for Big Papa and Rector, they hear thundering footsteps and then, “A small man, seemlike, too small for the sound of his steps,” wearing a “glistening white” shirt appears (97). Zechariah’s bad foot is miraculously restored, and from that point the small man, seen by only Zechariah, leads the families for twenty-nine days until he brings them to the appointed place, preceded by a supernatural sign. Like the ancient Israelites who were led through the desert by fire in the night and cloud by day, Zechariah follows behind the loud footsteps of the unidentified man.

The Disallowing is Ruby’s unifying narrative: “Afterwards the people were no longer nine families and some more. They became a tight band of wayfarers bound by the enormity of what had happened to them” (189). Further on, the narrator remarks, “Everything anybody wanted to know about the citizens of Haven or Ruby lay in the ramifications of that one rebuff out of many.” The unspoken rule not to have any dealings with white people or with blacks with lighter skin emerges from this encounter: “Their horror of whites was convulsive but abstract. They saved the clarity of their hatred for the men who had insulted them in ways too
confounding for language: first by excluding them, then by offering them staples to exist in that very exclusion” (189). The deep-seated hatred for persons of mixed race, however, creates a rupture in an otherwise morally persuasive narrative, in that the hatred accounts for the efforts by the leading families to tactfully erase some details of the original persons who began the journey to Haven and, later, to Ruby.

The men of Ruby nurture and retain the memory of their humiliation. They give the incident a name of epic dimensions—the Disallowing—which they use as an instrument for silencing or ostracizing members of the community who are not as dark as members of the founding families. Patricia Best, the counternarrative performer in the novel, aptly calls the core families “8-R. An abbreviation for eight-rock, a deep deep level in the coal mines” (193). Memories of images of their ideal black women also cast a long shadow over their standards of what is acceptable conduct for women. This shadow is the instigator for the mid-July 1976 attack on the women living in the Convent. The five women there not only live an uncensored life but also are free of male control: “The whole house [the Convent] felt permeated with a blessed malelessness, like a protected domain, free of hunters but exciting too” (177). The xenophobic attitude of the men and their repulsion at the women in the Convent are projected as justified because of the twins’ biased rendering of a communal narrative.

Set against the endorsed oral and remembered history of Haven and Ruby is a counter (documented) text being assembled by Patricia Best, a schoolteacher and daughter of Roger Best, one of the nine cofounders of Ruby. The community treats father and daughter, as well as Patricia’s daughter, Billie Delia, as outsiders and morally tainted persons because Roger broke the unspoken code by “marrying a wife with no last name, a wife without people, a wife of sunlight skin, a wife of racial tampering” (197). From her forced position as an outsider among her own people, and given her limited influence as a woman in Ruby’s patriarchal society, Patricia initiates an unraveling of the common ancestral narrative as peddled by the powerful male authority in Ruby. Rather than rely on the remembered accounts—known in detail only by the men and performed by the children in place of the nativity story—Patricia chooses to assemble a counternarrative based on written evidence:

The town’s official story, elaborated from pulpits, in Sunday school classes and ceremonial speeches, had a sturdy public life. Any footnotes, crevices or questions to be put took keen imagination and the persistence of a mind uncomfortable with oral histories. Pat had wanted proof in
documents where possible to match the stories, and where proof was not available she interpreted—freely but, she thought, insightfully because she alone had the required emotional distance. She alone could figure out why a line was drawn through Ethan Blackhorse’s name in the Blackhorse Bible and what the heavy ink blot hid next to Zechariah’s name in the Morgan Bible. (188)

The written records sought by Patricia present another instance of the novel’s parodying of the written text. As the instrument of state power, the written word is the preferred medium for the preservation or execution of authority in the public domain. It is retrievable, “citable,” and carefully composed with an eye to its relevance to and applicability in the future.

Patricia’s historiographical credo, on the other hand, depends on the minute acts of intimacy conferred upon the otherwise impersonal written word. Far from the public space where the patriarchal narrative holds sway, the personal names on books—those blotted or crossed out, and the individual histories of their families that Patricia’s young students produce—are the narrative strands that she uses to question and undermine the master narrative. Moreover, her historiography provides a space for “de-inking” the blotted names for a more expansive and embracing narrative of the founding of Haven and Ruby, a narrative in which the lives and contributions of other citizens excluded from the “official story” are included.

Of those disadvantaged persons, the most visible (by their invisibility) are the women, known by their first names and by their affiliation through marriage to the 8-rock families. Patricia, contemplating the fate of her mother, Delia, and other women who had died, wonders: “Who were these women who, like her mother, had only one name? Celeste, Olive, Sorrow, Ivlin, Pansy. Who were these women with generalized last names? Brown, Smith, Rivers, Stone, Jones. Women whose identity rested on the men they married—if marriage applied: a Morgan, a Flood, a Blackhorse, a Poole, a Fleetwood” (187–88). It is significant that in representing the history of her own family in the project, the third-person point of view disappears, giving way to Patricia’s first-person journal entry as she addresses her parents (196–202). This is the only place in the novel where first-person narration ensues, highlighting Patricia’s manipulation of the individualistic act of writing in drawing meaning out of the experiences of her parents.

Patricia’s genealogical tree therefore restores the several branches pruned to feed a sexist vision. For example, the blotted name beside Zechariah’s in the Morgan family Bible belongs to Tea, Zechariah’s twin brother, and Zechariah’s name at birth was Coffee (302). Tea’s name erasure is an
external act in the process of obliterating his memory as the one who “quite reasonably” complies with the command of two drunk and gun-tot-
ing white men to dance. Zechariah had refused and was shot in the foot for his disobedience.26 Ashamed of his twin brother’s ready compliance, Zechariah invited two other men and together they gathered other fami-
lies for the trek that led them to Haven, leaving Tea behind. Tea’s name is blotted out because his action of obliging the white men with a dance is antithetical to the 8-rock’s narrative that they have never bowed to any white person. Nor have their wives. Moreover, it enhances the process of mythologizing Zechariah as a combined Moses and Christ figure. Similarly, Patricia’s performance reveals the lie in the men’s aversion to whiteness; they had no problems in using Delia’s light complexion to gain access to places from which they otherwise would have been barred (200).

The unraveling of such repressed histories as the identity of Zechariah’s twin brother does not compare with the greater significance that the resurrection of the women’s names has for the understanding of the major sources of conflict in the novel. Women in Paradise are the wise silent observers of the men and their puny emotional outbursts. The women see through the hypocrisy and shallowness of the men’s thinking, thereby pro-
jecting visions of another world, another black world, where the benefits of emancipation and the civil rights movement have not been stillborn or thwarted by the foolishness, the acrid hatred, and meanness of their men. While the male founders of Ruby fight doggedly to protect their narcissistic sentiments about their community, and in the process suppress dynamic social forces, the women are perceptive enough to discern the conflicts and dismiss them as mere egotistical sallies.

Consider Dovey, Steward’s wife. Alone and thinking about the meeting of the older men and their children over the original words on the iron lids of the Oven, she ponders with Christian philosophical flair: “‘Beware the Furrow of His Brow?’ ‘Be the Furrow of His Brow?’ Her own opinion was that ‘Furrow of His Brow’ alone was enough for any age or generation. Specifying it, particularizing it, nailing its meaning down, was futile. The only nailing needing to be done had already taken place. On the Cross” (93). Dovey’s meditation articulates the novel’s larger argument. At first appearing passive, her words are remarkably postmodernist and radical in their resistance to specificity. They are calls for each generation to interpret its past in the manner relevant to it, rather than be slaves to the past. Besides, she expounds on the dynamic nature of narratives, the idea that context, audience, and individual temperament of the performer determine the contents of the narrative.
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Except for advocating Dovey’s opinion, there is no clear indication about the veracity of the source of the conflict. In Patricia’s version, the words are a “conundrum” deliberately wrought by Zechariah with utmost linguistic ambiguity:

“Beware the Furrow of His Brow,” in which the “You” (understood), vocative case, was not a command to the believers but a threat to those who had disallowed them. It must have taken him months to think up those words—just so—to have multiple meanings: to appear stern, urging obedience to God, but slyly not identifying the understood proper noun or specifying what the Furrow might cause to happen or to whom. So the teenagers Misner organized who wanted to change it to “Be the Furrow of His Brow” were more insightful than they knew. (195)

Impressive as Patricia’s semantic analysis is, the novel does not allow the reader to surrender to any single perspective for meaning. In the case of the vexatious words, earlier on in the novel, one of the unidentified men who attack the Convent expresses doubts about the source of the words attributed to Zechariah Morgan: “It is still not clear where the words came from. Something he heard, invented, or something whispered to him while he slept curled over his tools in a wagon bed. His name was Morgan and who knew if he invented or stole the half-dozen or so words he forged” (7). It is clear that the entire community—not even among the men who accompany the twins to the assault on the Convent women—does not completely share whatever greatness Zechariah’s children and grandchildren attribute to him.

In Ruby, the past remembered by a select few has degenerated into a cold, oppressive ideology of intolerance. Delia Best, Patricia’s mother, dies in childbirth because her 8-rock neighbors would rather watch her bleed to death than invite a white doctor into the community to save her. Worse still, her death would mean the elimination of what they consider a blot on Ruby—a light complexion. Concealed within the genealogies of many of the leading families are cases of incest committed in order to avoid marrying into a non-8-rock bloodline (196). Following the attack on the women at the Convent, and the consequent communal shock and embarrassment at the incident, the closed world of Ruby falls apart. The young people represent this anomie by attacking the words on the Oven: “No longer were they calling themselves Be the Furrow of His Brow. The graffiti on the hood of the Oven now was ‘We are the Furrow of His Brow’” (298). It is a tragic epitaph for a grand nationalist design, which in its attempt to express the
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dignity of a community exchanges that vision for a narrow and constricted one.

It is perhaps in Lone DuPres that Morrison imbues the most penetrating understanding of the hollowness of the men’s thinking. She is one of Ruby’s oldest citizens, the only midwife and a reputed seer who actually “practices.” Like Patricia, Lone is part of the community and yet lives as an outsider who in her ruminations perceives the rapid changes occurring in Ruby. Fairy DuPres, a teenage member of the original pilgrims, had rescued Lone as a little child. Fairy had found her sitting alone by the doorpost of a hut, half-starved with her mother dead and lying in the hut. Against the urging of the men who felt they did not have enough food to feed another hungry mouth, Fairy refused to abandon the baby and named her Lone because of the circumstance of her rescue.

Although it appears that Lone’s interventions at critical situations in the novel are merely coincidental, there is a strong suggestion that she is like the biblical lone “voice of one crying in the wilderness.” She appears to be the only person in Ruby who understands the troubled lives of the women who eventually wander into the Convent. She alone understands the haven the women find there. On the night of the nine men’s predawn attack on the Convent, Lone stumbles into their conspiracy and rushes to tell the women at the Convent about the plot. Unfortunately, they do not believe her, and, desperately, she drives back to wake up her fellow villagers to dissuade the men from carrying out their plan. As she drives from the Convent back to Ruby in her worn single-headlight Oldsmobile, she thinks about the significance of the road:

it was women who walked this road. Only women. Never men. For more than twenty years Lone had watched them. Back and forth, back and forth: crying women, staring women, scowling, lip-biting women or women just plain lost . . . women dragged their sorrow up and down the road between Ruby and the Convent. They were the only pedestrians. . . . But the men never walked the road; they drove it, although sometimes their destination was the same as the women’s. (270)

It is this accurate understanding of the fate of the women in her male-dominated society that compels her to try, though unsuccessfully, to stop the men.

More significantly, Lone is the only character who divines the real reason behind the men’s attack. At their nocturnal meeting, the men allege that the Convent women are polluting the moral atmosphere of Ruby by
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their apparent amorous or amoral lifestyle. It does not matter that, unbeknownst to all the men but Steward, Deacon Morgan had in the past had a passionate affair with Consolata. The men accuse the women of infanticide, mass murders, and the seduction of Ruby’s young ones. Lone reverses this grievous narrative by helping the reader make connections with incidents narrated earlier that expose the falsehood of the men’s allegations. That the nine men choose to act from sheer ignorance and pigheadedness is one of the high points of this novel; what is frightening is the dangerously sexist underpinning of this misconception. The men consider their impending aggression against the women as a moral necessity (“these here sluts out there by themselves never step foot in Church and I bet you a dollar to a fat nickel that they ain’t thinking about one either… They meddle. Drawing folks out there like flies to shit and everybody who goes near them is maimed somehow and the mess is seeping back into our homes, our families” [276]). Lone rightly understands that the men’s actual grudge is that the Convent is a “house full of women. Not women locked safely away from men; but worse, women who chose themselves for company” (276).

As Lone eavesdrops on the men’s secret meeting, she comments on the narrative the men have chosen to believe to justify their invasion: “Here, when the men spoke of a ruination that was upon them—how Ruby was changing in intolerable ways—they did not think to fix it by extending a hand in fellowship or love. They mapped defense instead and honed evidence for its need, till each piece fit an already polished groove” (275). Lone’s observation touches on the central argument of the novel. The men refuse to see the unwinding threads of Ruby’s society and fixate instead on the sentimental value of a controlled memory of their past. They are determined, as they rampage the Convent, “[t]hat nothing inside or out rots the one all-black town worth the pain” (5). In their misguided representation of themselves as defenders of their society’s ideals, the novel portrays them as dangerous zealots who cripple the promise of an otherwise lofty enterprise.

Unlike most of Morrison’s previous novels, in which she focuses on individuals and their relationship to the community, *Paradise* is a narrative on Ruby. The conflicts in the novel relate to the charting of Ruby’s destiny based on how the people perceive or are led to perceive their past and its relationship to their well-being. The novel pits the “total” domineering memory of the Morgans against the cold and guided written document of Patricia Best. However, the presence of Lone DuPres suggests that Morrison refrains from offering a straight-laced binary depiction of this African
American society. Lone, the rejected midwife, feared because of her spiritual powers, is the one character who “know[s] something more profound than Morgan memory or Pat Best’s history book. She knew what neither memory nor history can say or record: the ‘trick’ of life and its ‘reason’” (272).

*Paradise* is perhaps Morrison’s clearest articulation of the fallacy in attributing any form of narrative—oral or written—to either the oppressed or the oppressor. What she suggests is that these positions (subject and form) are not permanent. Between the blacks in Fairly who turn away their darker-skinned freed men and women, and the men of Haven who try to erase the presence of the Bests because of their color, there is no difference. What unites them is power. The oppressive role oral narrative plays in *Paradise* confirms Kerwin Lee Klein’s argument in his critique of Lyotard’s conceptualization of the terms “master narrative” and “local stories.” According to Klein, “No special way of telling can guarantee that today’s local narrative will not become tomorrow’s narrative master. Virtually overnight, the chanting of subaltern protest may modulate into the crack of the historical whip” (297).

The men’s fossilization of Ruby’s history through their selective memory recall is rejected because it delegitimizes parallel narratives in the rapidly changing fortunes of Ruby. Significant as orality is in the African American aesthetic, *Paradise* rejects this particular performance by the men by revealing how dangerously malleable the spoken text can be. After the attack on the women, several versions—or “editions,” as Patricia Best calls them—of what happened emerge. Again, it is Lone who is “unhinged by the way the story was being retold; how people were changing it to make themselves look good.” She sees how relatives of the men involved, with their varying exculpatory versions, “supported them [the versions], enhancing, recasting, inventing misinformation” (297). This is one place where Morrison, with an unflinching gaze, shows us the making of an oral narrative and the challenges it poses to a Grand Story. No one in Ruby is able to explain the mysterious disappearance of the Convent women, both the murdered and the survivors; and Morrison does not assist the reader, either.

Like the oral tale whose first teller or “author” can hardly be identified, the truth about the fate of the women will never be verified. The narrator consciously leaves the women’s disappearance and their later “manifestations” on the mythic plane. Lone refers to the various versions of the Convent attack as “altered truth,” but reading the uses the men have made of the event’s mystery solidifies the novel’s argument about the capacity
of the spoken word to authenticate power. Conversely, the incomplete endorsement of the alternative represented by Patricia Best’s genealogical tree project is based on its similar inability to account for the whole truth. Conscientious as she is in accounting for every person in Ruby, she cannot avoid the trappings of individuality that writing fosters, as she adopts a more intimate perspective in representing the lives of her parents. No wonder that, in a strange twist of events, Patricia throws the entire project into a fire, thus extinguishing the existence of her written countertext. Morrison directs her artistic vision to the unknown quantity in African American experience, the “trick” of life that defies any unitary narrative.

Dissonant Notes and Narrative Authority

*Paradise* suggests that Morrison resists a compartmentalization of both her artistic and ideological positions. The “trick of life” to which the seer Lone refers encapsulates the philosophy that guides the novelist’s works. Rather than the pursuit of simple themes with tidy endings and solutions, Morrison situates her novels in spaces of surprise. The surprise element is an acknowledgment of the unpredictability that characterizes social interactions and events at large. There is a twofold manifestation of this principle in *Jazz*. The first is the novel as a discourse on interpersonal relationships, and the other is the novel as a discourse on narrative voice. In both areas, Morrison focuses on “the ‘trick’ of life and its ‘reason’” as a way of displacing her audience since life’s major trace is this uncertainty.

My discussion of *Song of Solomon* and *Paradise* highlights Morrison’s close attachment to history as the defining agent of African American life. The African American worldview she presents is informed by the peculiar history she explores in her novel. *Jazz* focuses on the African American Great Migration narrative. While Violet, the major female character, and the other women play a crucial role in defining the nature and significance of relationships in the novel, Morrison portrays them along the unwinding thread of 1920s African American history and the representation of that history by the artist (the narrator). As demonstrated in *Paradise*, the success of the black community rests on its use of history.

In *Jazz*, there is a continued gaze on African American history; but it is a shifting or playful gaze that suggests Morrison’s subtle resistance to a simplification of that history. In her essay “Following the Traces of Female Desire in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz,*” Elizabeth Cannon argues that the novel is “theorizing the nature of desire, particularly African-American female
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desire, and its effect on narrative” (235). Perhaps it is more correct to assert
that the novel theorizes the nature of narrative, written narrative to be
precise. The narrative of the 1920s Great Migration from the South is an
important one in the life and history of African Americans. The narrative
posture adopted by Morrison in this novel captures one of the “tricky”
aspects of this epoch. Morrison has noted that one of the attributes of Afri-
can American art is “the ability to be both print and oral literature” (“Root-
edness” 341). This may be regarded as a reiteration of W. E. B. DuBois’s
notion of “double-consciousness” (8), but in the novel, it plays out as the
celebratory voice of an artist combining the improvisational dynamic of an
oral performance with the controlled exercise of a written medium.

The narrator in Jazz is united with an imagined immediate audience. It
is not an audience of strangers; the narrator assumes the audience to be
composed of persons familiar to her, readers to whom she can relate. The
narrative “I” in the novel erupts with casual unpredictability. Here the “I” is
conversational, as in the novel’s opening statement, “I know that woman,”
and, throughout, the narrator addresses an implied listening/observing/
reading audience. By positioning the narrator in this way, Morrison creates
a written voice and a space akin to the artistic and social exchange between
the artist and audience in an oral performance context.

The communality of the performance space is further demonstrated by
the multiple narrative voices. At various points in the novel, each character
speaks in first person. It is as if the characters are making a direct appeal to
the audience, asking to be understood, asking for a space to speak and not
be spoken about by a self-conscious narrator. For example, as the narrator
who claims to know Joe Trace “too well” (119) proffers her explanation for
the middle-aged man’s short-lived romance with teenage Dorcas, which
ends with Joe killing the woman, the narrator concludes: “No wonder it
ended the way it did.” Then she continues, “But it didn’t have to, and if
he had stopped trailing that little fast thing all over town long enough to
tell Stuck or Gistan or some neighbor who might be interested, who knows
how it would go?” (121). Joe’s “defense” in his own voice begins at this
point: “It is not a thing you tell another man,” he says, inviting the reader
to be his confessor. In other words, he does not leave the reader wondering
about the outcome or about his real motivation for doing what he has
done, as the narrator does. This is a narrative framing that reveals the
compositeness of truth. A similar compositeness of narrative perspective is
attained in the sections where Violet speaks (89–101). Dorcas, in her death
throes, is able to see the final moments of her life and narrate it in her
own voice as well (189–93).
The interaction between the narrator and the (other) characters further exemplifies the communal narrative performance. The constant shifts from an omniscient point of view to a first-person singular where the narrator directly breaks into the consciousness of the characters recall a similar device in oral performance. A raconteur not only tells a tale; sometimes s/he also questions the action of the characters. In dramatic scenarios, it is possible for the narrator to enter into dialogue with the characters or interweave the ongoing story with his or her own “personal” narrative. Such an interaction is prevalent in Jazz. One instance of interlocking narrative occurs where the narrator has finished recounting how Dorcas was spurned at a party by some “brothers” because of her looks. The incident is narrated to explain why she entertained Joe’s courting, and it is presented in third person:

So by the time Joe Trace whispered to her through the crack of a closing door her life had become almost unbearable. Almost. The flesh, heavily despised by the brothers, held secret the love appetite soaring inside it. I’ve seen swollen fish, serenely blind, floating in the sky. Without eyes, but somehow directed, these airships swim below cloud foam and nobody can be turned away from the sight of them because it’s like watching a private dream. That was what her hunger was like: mesmerizing, directed, floating like a public secret just under the cloud cover. (67; emphasis added)

The “I” interjection at this point in the narrative creates a dual viewpoint by suggesting that the “I” is a mediator between the reader and a third-person omniscient narrator. In addition, even though the highlighted portion is intrusive, it is a useful amplification of the emotional condition of Dorcas, as effective as a Homeric simile. Sometimes, though, the interruptions are no more than unsolicited opinions and quips from a busybody gossip. Consider, for example, the following narration:

From Malvonne [Violet] learned [Dorcas’s] address and whose child she was. From the legally licensed beauticians she found out what kind of lip rouge the girl wore; the marcelling iron they used on her (though I suspect that girl didn’t need to straighten her hair); the band the girl liked best (Slim Bates’ Ebony Keys which is pretty good except for his vocalist who must be his woman since why else would he let her insult his band). (5)

A narrator who surreptitiously watches the unfolding drama of the charac-
ters’ lives provides the parenthetical remarks for the benefit of the reader. They are not as relevant to the characters’ psychological development as they are indicative of a folksy narrator, a member of the community, idle perhaps, who trades on minding other people’s business: “I always believed that girl [Dorcas] was a pack of lies. I could tell by her walk her underclothes were beyond her years, even if her dress wasn’t” (72).

The question may be asked, how can a narrator like the one in Jazz execute the “serious” task of revisiting a people’s experience with credibility? The answer lies in, again, grasping Morrison’s notion of narratives in relation to a people’s understanding of themselves. Morrison refuses to set an unbending philosophical framework for her use or representation of African American life; instead, she reflects on each movement in black experience with a measure of “specificity.” The result is that her representation of African American life through the experiences of characters in her novels is a complex one, unpossessed of simple notions. The narrator embodies the complexity. In addition to delineating African American characters who embody aspects of black experience in the United States, Jazz “performs” the narrative of a narrator whose very personality is the problem with our understanding of the myriad experiences that constitute African American culture and tradition.

There is a remarkable superficiality to the narrator’s character judgments. She describes herself as “curious, inventive and well-informed” (137), and about Joe Trace she says, “I know him so well” (119). Seeing the complicated relationship joining the characters—from Wild to Golden Gray to Dorcas to Joe to Felice to Violet—from the narrator’s presumptuous eyes evokes a picture of angst, of abject despair without hope. The emotionally tortuous relationship between Joe and Violet, following Joe’s murder of Dorcas and Violet’s attack on the dead woman, surprisingly heals “under a sweetheart weather” (195). Surprising, because as the narrator concedes in the final segment of the novel, which could be described as a narratological self-critique, “I was sure one would kill the other . . . I was so sure” (220).

The same mistaken assumption is identifiable in the parallel-running story of Golden Gray. The narrator interprets every gesture the young man makes from the moment he decides to help the half-dead naked woman to his eventual encounter with Henry, “Hunters Hunter,” with hardly concealed spite and bitterness. She calls the biracial character a “hypocrite” (154) and a “vain and hincty pinch-nose” who “insult[s] . . . his race” (143) through his uppity conduct. The narrator’s opinion is stock and predictable and shows no effort to understand the situation from Golden Gray’s position. Unbeknownst to him, while growing up far away from the plantation

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where his mother had been forced into exile, Golden Gray is a product of a forbidden sexual relationship between Vera Louise, daughter of a white plantation owner, and Henry, a black field hand. Devastated by the discovery that his father is a black laborer, Golden Gray is urged by True Belle, his mother’s servant and Violet’s grandmother, to go back and find his father, for as she says, “It don’t matter if you do find him or not; it’s the going that counts” (159). This is the crux of the story, the anxiety of racial reconciliation that cannot be accomplished by the cynical attitude of the narrator to the inquirer.

From his genteel and pampered world, Golden Gray descends to the foggy and muddy precipice of his origins and gets drenched in the pain and humiliation of the enterprise. Golden Gray is the presence in African American, indeed, American history that cannot be erased or brushed aside by the caustic observations of the self-righteous narrator of Jazz. The narrator expresses her sentiments about him based on the superficial polarities of white and black. Golden Gray, for instance, learns that his revealed identity changes his prior shallow idea of blackness: “He had always thought there was only one kind—True Belle’s kind. Black and nothing. Like Henry LesTroy . . . But there was another kind—like himself” (149). Similarly, when father and son finally meet, Hunters Hunter exhibits neither bitterness nor joy at the encounter. He is more concerned about the daily struggles of living than analyzing color and accepting the young man simply on that basis. He tells Golden Gray, with the impatience of a father, “Be what you want—White or black. Choose. But if you choose black, you got to act black, meaning draw your manhood up—quicklike, and don’t bring me no whiteboy sass” (173). In other words, blackness, or for that matter, whiteness, goes beyond appearance or even blood; one “acquires” identity through what one makes of one’s peculiar history.

For Golden Gray, the search for roots is not without anxiety. Contrary to the impression created by the narrator that he is a brat more concerned about his clothing than about helping Wild, his words reflect the trauma he faces as he waits for the return of Hunters Hunter. He likens his previous ignorance of who his father is to a missing arm and wonders, “When I find it, will it wave to me? Gesture, beckon to me to come along? Or will it even know who or what I am?” (159). There are no easy answers to these questions, as the encounter between the two men reveals. However, this is a critical search that must be undertaken because, as Golden Gray puts it concerning the lost arm, he must “locate it so the severed part can remember the snatch, the slice of its disfigurement” (159). We must thank the direct speech of the character for offering a rounded perspective on
the conflict. By implication, Morrison challenges the reader to interrogate the received information of the narrator and not take the narrator’s point of view as necessarily reliable or truthful.30

Since the publication of the novel, there has been a heated debate about the connection of its title with jazz.31 It is not surprising that arguments have arisen, considering that the novel is set in the 1920s, a period that, in addition to being the era of the Great Migration northward, was also the golden age of jazz; thus the contemporaneous emergence of both phenomena makes the comparison of the novel with that musical form very attractive. Besides, the informal and extemporaneous remarks of the narrator may be compared to the improvisational nature of jazz. Yet to take the analysis only to the point where these similarities exist is to miss a more fundamental aesthetic paradigm at play in the novel. The last segment of the novel, in which the narrator is unmasked,32 is the ultimate demonstration of Morrison’s “tricks.”33 Just as the presumptions of the narrator on the responses of the characters and their outcome end up being unfounded, the novel calls into question some aspects of African American history that have become received wisdom: more specifically, the wisdom peddled by the populist ideologues whom the narrator in Jazz represents.

The open-endedness of Morrison’s narratives and, by extension, her construction of (black) experience are based on the riddle idiom. As Richard Bauman rightly states, “Riddles and related enigmatic genres turn, characteristically, on ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning” (“Three Guesses” 62). This is true of Morrison’s novels. In Jazz, it is in the form of representing the complexity of narrativity by looking at the unpredictability of the narrative temperament.

The common signifier in the three novels examined is Morrison’s investment in exploring the dimensions of the black narrative. Writing from a tradition that draws heavily from folklore and oral traditional arts, the novels show Morrison’s critical gaze on the relevance and usefulness of these forms to carry the weight of African Americans’ complex experience in the New World. Black history, that is, the ways blacks construct history, features prominently in these narratives. But it is equally fair to say that Morrison is as interested in recapturing the varied forms of African American history as she is in pushing the boundaries of oral narrative arts in light of the written tradition. In an interview with Nellie McKay, Morrison talks about her interest in recapturing the African griot tradition and recreating “something out of an old art form in [her] books” that includes an “open-ended quality” more realizable in oral performance than in the novel form (408–9).
Chapter Four

The viability of social or communal memory as alternative to hegemonic written history exists alongside its interrogation vis-à-vis class and gender tensions within the black community. The result is that one finds in Morrison’s art a narrative credo that champions continued performance of that narrative in order to represent the various interests. The malleability of the spoken word, the flexibility of the text to suit audience and circumstance, and the direct involvement of the audience in the production of the “final” text in a performance are all aspects of oral narrative aesthetics that Morrison taps into in the performance of her stories.