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THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN ORAL TRADITION IN SELECTED WRITINGS OF ZORA NEALE HURSTON, TONI MORRISON AND ALICE WALKER

By

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ABSTRACT

THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN ORAL TRADITION IN SELECTED WRITINGS OF ZORA NEALE HURSTON, TONI MORRISON, AND ALICE WALKER

By

Eliza Marcella Young

This study investigates the African-American Oral Tradition found in selected works of three Black women writers. Focus is limited, however, to call-response and signification. Call-response and signification originated in West African ethnic communities and are surviving oral features brought to this country by the African slave.

Some critics take exception to the idea that signification comes directly from Africa. Michael Losonsky and others, as M. R. Ayers E. J. Ashworth, proponents of Locke's philosophy, suggest that signification has its origin in European culture. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. asserts that Signification (with a capital S) emanated from the African trickster figure, Esu-Elegbara. Gates, however, also implies that this "naming ritual emptied the signifier 'signification' of its received concepts and [slaves] filled this empty signified with their own concepts" (46).

The present study examines the ways that the black slaves in this country acculturated signification from their African homeland. Some characteristics of signification, such as indirection, double-voicedness, ironic and humorous

put-downs, are ripostes that were evident in the slave culture and remain a viable feature of African American culture today.

This study analyzes Signification and call-response in three African American women novelists, Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker. The study argues that these women created distinct aesthetic narratives that are culturally and literarily important to both the Anglo-American and African-American communities. The novels included in this study are Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God, Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye and Song of Solomon, and Alice Walker's The Third Life of Grange Copeland and The Color Purple.

Although other critics have studied oral features of call-response and signification separately within the literary works of these three authors, no one has explored both features within one text while examining the folk and aesthetic components that the three women writers have appropriated. This work provides such a synthesis.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Oral Tradition is the lifeblood of African American culture. Its use by significant writers has also given it legitimacy in the literary community. The origins of African-American folklore are situated in two cultures: the cultures of the West African people, such as the Yoruba, Dahomey, Bini, and Ewe, before, during, and after the Middle Passage, and the community (and some may say, subculture) of African Americans in the United States. From the African countries comes the griot, "one of the most important members of the ancient clearly defined hierarchical society" (Laye 25). The griot as a master of the language is both historian and artist, with the latter taking precedence (Laye 25). Once brought to the United States during enslavement, the griot was replaced by the roaming preacher who taught Judeo-Christian beliefs to the transplanted Africans.

Although the African slaves did not monolithically come from the same region, ethnic group, or even country, they shared many characteristics and habits. Many of the newly arrived Africans retained vestiges of their cultural habits, language, and traditions and then created new ones to accommodate their new environment. Lawrence Levine supports this contention. He points out first that

> With few exceptions--the most notable being W.E.B. Dubois and Melvin Herskovits--most scholars until very recently have assumed that because United States slavery eroded so much of the linguistic

> and institutional side of African life it necessarily wiped out almost all of the fundamental aspects of traditional African cultures. (4)

He then suggests that the enslaved Africans shared an outlook and cultural practices "which could well have constituted the basis of a sense of common identity and world view capable of withstanding the impact of slavery" (4). John W. Blassingame in The Slave Community similarly contends that "mere existence of these cultural forms [of folk tales, stories, and songs] is proof that the rigors of bondage did not crush the slave's ***creative energies***" (59) [emphasis mine]. Both Levine and Blassingame present counter arguments to critics who state that the African slave brought no cultural habits or traditions from his/her old world to the new world.

Blassingame further asserts that

> Through these means the slave could view himself as an object, hold onto fantasies about his status, engender hope and patience, and at least use rebellious language when contemplating his lot in life. The therapeutic value of this should not be dismissed lightly. Not only did these cultural forms give the slave an area of life independent of his master's control, they were important psychological devices for repressing anger and projecting aggressions in ways that contributed to mental health, involved little physical threat, and provided some form of recreation. (59)

The cultural traditions, which the Africans brought to the American shores, provided therapeutic benefits as well as aesthetic values.

Once in the new culture of America, African slaves modified their folk traditions to fit their deprived social status and enslaved existence. The Oral Tradition

encompassed almost exclusively "predominantly oral (or even oral-aural) expressions that survived from a 'lower' social level where writing is rare" (Dictionary of Folklore Mythology and Legend 828). Black oral expressions that survived slavery incorporate many categories or types of folk expressions and Black speech discourse. Among the oral types of expressiveness are

> blues; jazz; spirituals; sermons; toasts; the dozens; cautionary tales; trickster tales; legends; memorates; rural and urban speech patterns; folk beliefs such as voodoo, conjure, and "superstition"; and folk characters as Brer Rabbit, Stagolee, John Henry, the loup garou, flying African, the conjure woman, the good-time woman, and the aunt. (Byerman 2)

Literary writers, including Charles Chesnutt and Ralph Ellison, have incorporated many of the above oral forms into their novels. In the last two decades, African-American women writers, emerging as renown novelists, have incorporated oral features in their works. Two oral features that deserve additional exploration and research are call-response and signification.

Call-response is one of the most popularly used oral devices in the Black community. According to Geneva Smitherman in Talkin and Testifyin, call-response is a "spontaneous verbal and non-verbal interaction between speaker and listener" (104). This age-old tradition can be witnessed equally in church related settings and at rhythm and blues and rap concerts. It is primarily a participatory act whereby both the speaker and the listener engage in a

unifying verbal exchange. The speaker begins (calls out) the usually improvised message, and the listener answers (responds) to the message. Somin Sunkule and Okumba Miruka in Dictionary of Oral Literature for African Folk Tradition similarly define antiphony as the "call and response pattern of songs in most African songs, [i.e.,] Solo (call)-Chorus (response)" (7). Call-response is found in both African American and African folk traditions.

Verbal interaction between performer (or speaker) and the audience is a noteworthy characteristic of the call-response pattern. "In traditional Black church services, the preacher depends on the expressed reactions of the congregation to judge the direction and success of his sermon" (Byerman 7). Likewise, in secular settings the antiphonal exchange occurs when a speaker initiates the communicative process and an individual or group interactively responds to the speaker. The participants of the speech act are equally important in reaffirming each other as integral parts of a unified speech process.

In literary works, Black women writers often use the verbal exchange of call-response when characters interact with each other. The balance in the exchange illustrates the equality of the speakers: when one character initiates the exchange, the other party reciprocates verbally and/or nonverbally, thereby creating the active participatory speech process.

Signification is another oral feature that is indigenous to Black community discourse and is also found in the works of Black women writers. Smitherman identifies signification as "the verbal art of insult in which a speaker humorously puts down, talks about, needles ... the listener" (118). She further asserts in Black Talk that "signifyin" is most often performed non-maliciously by the speaker, "using quick verbal surprises and humor" (206). Signifying, in other words, incorporates one speaker "getting the best" of a listener or another speaker by humorously coming up with witty and spontaneous statements to emphasize a point.

Both oral features, call-response and signifying, are found in the works of many Black women writers, especially those who have recently emerged in the past two decades.

This study limits itself to selected works by three Black women writers: two contemporary Black women writers, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, and Walker's predecessor and mentor, Zora Neale Hurston who, sixty years ago, appropriated Black folk speech traditions in order to articulate the Black communal experience and to project the positive images of Black language.

The analysis of oral strategies in Black women's writings leads to two primary questions that this research addresses. First, to what extent have contemporary Black women writers, especially those who have achieved national attention and international fame for their literary works,

appropriated Black Oral Tradition in their works? Specifically, how have these writers appropriated two key features of this Tradition: 1) call-response and 2) signification? Second, how do these writers differ in their appropriation of call-response and signification? In answering these questions, the works explored include 1) Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937); 2) Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye (1970) and Song of Solomon (1977), and 3) Alice Walker's Third Life of Grange Copeland (1970) and The Color Purple (1982).

Hurston's novel is unique in that it was the first work by a Black woman who incorporated Black speech patterns at a time when many other Black women writers were focusing on middle class experiences of African Americans. Hurston was, in fact, signifying on "the female novel of passing," as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has pointed out (xxvii). Criticized in the 1930s for writing a novel primarily in Black dialect, Hurston "seems to be not only the first scholar to have defined the trope of Signifyin(g) but also the first to represent the ritual itself" (Gates 196). Hurston's novel appropriates both call-response, which was used by many writers, and also signification, which was infrequently used. One of Hurston's purposes at work in Their Eyes Were Watching God was to reveal to "just about everyone ... in the New Negro Renaissance that dialect not only was not limited to two stops--humor and pathos--but was fully capable of being used as a literary language even to write a

novel" (Gates 250-1). Hurston's novel is a "must" for this study, for it establishes the precedence of oral features in Black women's writing. Her work sets the tone for this research in that she uses oral features, specifically call-response and signification in her premiere novel.

Alice Walker, revisiting Zora Neale Hurston's novel, Their Eyes Were Watching God, uses some of the same oral devices that Hurston uses and appropriates these features in her contemporary novel, The Color Purple. Gates affirms that "Walker has turned to a Black antecedent text to claim literary ancestry, or mother-hood, not only for content but for structure" (255). Although Walker revisits Hurston's novel, Walker as a contemporary author uses a different posture in writing her novel and ascribes to her novel a different purpose. Walker also appropriates oral features in other novels, but her first, The Third Life of Grange Copeland, reveals a language and form, associated with call-response and signification. By focusing initially on Walker's first novel, the writer can do a comparative study to show how Walker has developed those same oral features in the later novel, The Color Purple.

Toni Morrison equally appropriates call-response and signification in her literary works, especially in The Bluest Eye and Song of Solomon. Morrison's first novel, The Bluest Eye, will be examined to show noticeable differences in Morrison's use of call-response and signification in her first work and a later one, Song of Solomon.

To amplify the historical and literary associations of the Oral Tradition, and further the dialogue on the subject, this exegetical study focuses on call-response and signification, as reflected in works by Hurston, Walker, and Morrison.

CHAPTER 2

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Karla Holloway in her resourceful, well documented 1978 Michigan State University dissertation, was one of the first writers to examine the language and linguistic structures in Zora Neale Hurston's major works, including Their Eyes Were Watching God. In her subsequent book, The Character of the Word: The Texts of Zora Neale Hurston, based on her dissertation, she investigates Hurston's use of Black dialect as a means of expressing Black culture and for examining the "novelist's use of this language ... for extended characterization/and ... psychological backdrops for characterization" (3). Holloway's criteria for analyzing Hurston's language include

> (1) dialect use in language;
> (2) aphoristic language;
> (3) metaphoric language, similes, double-descriptive or verbal nouns;
> (4) syntactic structure of language, and
> (5) standard usage in the narrative voice (95).

With these delineations, Holloway stresses the characteristics of Black dialect, with little significance given to call-response and signification.

Other critics have explored Black Oral Traditions, but have not focused on the specific linguistic or literary features of the authors I plan to explore. Madhu Dubey in Black Women Novelists and the National Aesthetic suggests that Black women authors of the "***second renaissance*** of the 1970s" affirm oral folk material and culture in their works

within the context of Black aestheticism (2). Dubey states that

> The critical balance (and, at times, ambivalence) with which 1970s Black women novelists approach folk forms is even more clearly visible in their representations of community. Many of the celebratory readings of folk material in Black women's fiction follow Black Aesthetic theory in suggesting that the use of oral forms enables these novels not only to affirm a communal vision but also to establish a continuous and participatory relationship with their readers. (7)

Although Dubey refers generally to a "participatory relationship" between writer and reader, she does not specify the terms, call-response or signification, in her critical study. She asserts that Black women authors of the 1970s incorporated Black images, Black speech, Black idioms, Black metaphorical language in their fictional works for aesthetic purposes, but she does not examine explicitly or directly any oral forms in her text. She shows that a literary explosion of Black women writings occurred during the 1970s and notes that these women writers were influenced by the Black power movement of the 1960s, but limits her focus to a historical and aesthetical approach.

Gayl Jones in her work on folk traditions shows how oral forms and conventional techniques function within the framework of poetry, short stories, and novels to produce a liberated voice:

> Oral tradition, like written tradition, provides techniques and suggests new structures for the writer. In reinventing oral tradition for use in writing, it is often necessary, however, to combine the flexibility and fluidity of voice found in oral tradition with extended character development, descriptive continuity, and more

> elaborate dramatic scene-making necessary in written presentations....
> ... Oral forms can likewise be examined and studied for their dramatic structure, conflict patterns, actions, verbal play and interplay, points of view, characterizations, transitions, tone and vigor ... imagery ... time and value. (13-14)

Jones examines oral forms in the context of traditional literary conventions of structure, conflict, action, characterization, tone, imagery, etc. She does not, however, deal to the oral features that appear in this study.

When critic Michael Awkward refers to oral expression, his primary concern is the "coterminus" relationship of Black feminist theories and contemporary literary theories to the Afro-American expressive culture:

> It is my hope that the convergence of and interplay between such perspectives provides an interpretive tapestry adequate to the explication of the aesthetically complex and ideologically challenging novels of Afro-American women. (14)

Awkward asserts that "one of the best known aspects of Black expression is the importance of call and response interaction" (49). He acknowledges that African American women writers have appropriated Black expression, yet he limits his discussion of call-response to just six pages and makes only passing references to signification.

One scholar who has done extensive research on signification is Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Gates does not concentrate his text solely on Black women novelists although he does include two women in his study on Black

literati and the trope of signification. In his seminal work, Signifying Monkey, he asserts that linguistic features are an integral and essential part of signification, a trope on which African-American literary theory rests. He designates Zora Neale Hurston as

> the first example in our tradition [to use] the "speakerly text" by which I mean a text whose rhetorical strategy is designed to represent an oral literary tradition, designed "to emulate the phonetic, grammatical, and lexical patterns of actual speech" .... I am concerned in this chapter to discuss the representation of what we might think of as the voice of the Black oral tradition. (181)

Hurston originated what Gates calls the speakerly text, which is similar to what Sterling Brown calls, "a profoundly lyrical densely metaphorical, quasi-musical privileged Black oral tradition, on the one hand, and a received but not fully appropriated standard English literary tradition on the other hand" (174). In a subsequent chapter Gates shows how Alice Walker revisits Zora Neale Hurston's signification by "rewriting ... the speakerly strategies of narration at work in Hurston's use of free indirect discourse" in her novel, The Color Purple (169). Walker has, in other words, signified upon Hurston's novel. This concept suggests that since Alice Walker revisited Zora Neale Hurston, maybe other Black women writers have revisited each other's works also.

Linguist Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, in her essay, "Signifying, loud-talking and marking," focuses her ethnographic research of a California Black community on

signifying as a tactic of "verbal dueling," and "indirect intent or metaphorical influence" in encoding messages (326). For Mitchell-Kernan signifying is a Black concept that

> incorporates essentially a folk notion that dictionary entries for words are not always sufficient for interpreting meanings and messages. Complimentary remarks may be delivered in a left-handed fashion. A particular utterance may be an insult in one context and not another. (317)

She also expounds on other linguistic tactics of "loud-talking" and "marking." "Loud-talking" requires both a speaker and an audience with the audience overhearing the message. "The loud-talker breaches norms of discretion; his [or her] strategy is to use the factor of audience to achieve some desired effect on his [or her] audience" (Mitchell-Kernan 329). "Marking" occurs as a narrative tactic with characterization:

> The marker attempts to report not only what was said, but the way it was said [with affected voice and expressions of the imitated speaker] in order to offer implicit comment on the speaker's background, personality, and intent. (332-3)

Actually all of the oral features employed by Mitchell-Kernan may be submerged under the category of signifying. Again though, Mitchell-Kernan, as other sociolinguists, limits her research to the Black community's linguistic patterns, and no literary references are used. Much of Mitchell-Kernan's work, however, can be applied to literary studies because of her descriptive techniques.

J. L. Dillard in his Lexicon of Black English suggests that his work is not really a lexicon of Black English, but rather a listing of terms and language used by many Blacks in different settings, such as church and religious situations, in love-making situations, and street hustle. Dillard does not use literary references in his work, but he makes brief and limited references to terms like "the dozens" as "supposedly a tradition of highly sophisticated inner city" speakers (134), which are invaluable when applied to literary works. His brief explanations provide some insight into signification.

Another linguist, Geneva Smitherman, approaches Oral Tradition of Black vernacular speakers in her text, Talkin and Testifyin in a distinct and empirically useful manner. Smitherman foregrounds the Oral Tradition of Black American speech into four Black modes of discourse: "call-response; signification ... tonal semantics [and] narrative sequencing" (103). She asserts that these Black modes of discourse are found "in Black people's common linguistic and cultural history" and that they emanate from "West African language background; servitude and oppression; music and 'cool talk'; traditional Black church" (43).

Although Smitherman does not focus her references and examples solely on Black women writers, she does incorporate literary examples and folk examples of women, as well as men. At the time that Smitherman's text was written in 1977

and updated in 1986, Black women novelists were just beginning the big thrust into publishing their second novels, and many writers, such as Terry McMillan and Bebe Moore Campbell, had not surfaced at all. Hence Smitherman's criteria, if applied to the African American women novelists publishing today, would make for an even more compelling study. Categories devised by Smitherman and those of other linguists and literary scholars provide the typology for analyzing Black women writers that was used in this study.

CHAPTER 3

THE AESTHETIC AND LITERARY APPEAL OF CALL-RESPONSE IN ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD

Call-response, a Black vernacular speech pattern, involves the interactive and reciprocal process between a speaker and his/her audience. It is found in different aspects of the Black community, such as at church settings, at rhythm and blues concerts of Black performers, in conversations between African Americans on the streets, at beauty and barber shops, and in other social contexts. The speaker presents his/her message and receives a spontaneous, reciprocal response from his/her audience. As Michael Awkward has stated, "[T]he pattern 'permeates' the Afro-American vernacular community and reaffirms Black culture's insistence on interactive unity" (49).

Zora Neale Hurston's vernacular masterpiece, Their Eyes Were Watching God, is a vital, dynamic work, which employs call-response. Grounded in the Black folk tradition, Hurston had to experience many intellectual and academic challenges to write this great novel. When she moved to New York City from Eatonville, Florida, she already had the background for understanding Black folklore. It was not, however, until she studied at Barnard College under the tutelage of anthropologist, Franz Boaz, that she became keenly aware that her family and her Southern townspeople had engaged in charming, amusing, Oral Literature in a definitive, unself-conscious manner. She subsequently

returned to Eatonville and collected varied folklore from her community and throughout the South. With her incorporation of folkloric elements into a literary format, she established an aesthetic tradition that was paralleled by very few writers. Robert Hemenway reaffirms her combined use of folklore and literary devices when he states that

> A trained folklorist as well as a gifted novelist, Zora Neale Hurston adapts and transforms folklore for fictional purposes to a much greater extent than any other Afro-American writer ("Are You a Flying Lark or a Setting Dove?" 131).

What emerged was an Afro-American aestheticism that was "founded on folk expression" (Hemenway "Are You a Flying Lark...?" 124). Ralph Ellison, a successor to Hurston, reiterates the aesthetic quality to be found in a combination of Black folklore and literature when he said,

> Negro folklore, evolving within a larger culture which regarded it as inferior, was an especially courageous expression. It announced the Negro's willingness to trust his own experience, his own sensibilities as to the definition of reality, rather than allow his masters to define these crucial matters for him. (173)

Hurston's pivotal novel emanated from her own experiences in Eatonville, for she, as a precursor to Ellison, recognized "the cultural significance of the Black oral tradition" within her work (Bond 205).

In the cultural context of the 1920s and 1930s, Hurston employed the "scientific conception of the Black experience" to defy the denigration of Black sharecroppers and the poor Blacks of the South (Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston 214).

Hemenway asserts that Hurston, in realizing the anthropological benefit of folklore, emphasizes humanity among Black people (214) at a time when scientists were asserting the biological and cultural inferiority of Black people. Hemenway continues

> It seems plausible that one reason Zora Neale Hurston was attracted to the scientific conceptualization of her racial experience during the late twenties and early thirties was its prima facie offering of a structure for Black folklore. That is, it offered a pattern of meaning for material that white racism consistently distorted into stereotypes. (215)

Hurston appropriated her experiential skills as an anthropological student at Barnard and her literary skills as a storyteller to write the novel, Their Eyes Were Watching God. Through this novel, Hurston revealed the complexity, humanity, and varied emotional states of plain, average, poor Black townspeople who spoke a dialect that was also considered inferior by Blacks and Whites alike. She captures the natural speech of the townspeople while infusing humanitarian and emotional states into the efforts of these people. Her characters reveal multi-dimensional facets of existence even though they reside in small, rural towns in the South. Hurston incorporated in her characters what Alice Walker calls "a sense of Black people as complete ... undiminished human beings, a sense that is lacking in so much Black writing and literature" (85). She avoided caricatures of the one-dimensional bumbling Black man or woman whose dialect distorts and reinforces the negative persona. Hurston infuses the oral feature of *call-response*

in the narrative of Their Eyes Were Watching God in such a natural, imagistic, poetic way that one can hardly disparage the characters or the speech of the characters.

At the outset of the novel, call-response frames Janie's story and allows her to give her personal narrative to her friend, Pheoby Watson. When the two long-separated friends meet, each is ready to re-establish the relationship to find out what the other has been doing. Because Janie, the highly accepted and relatively wealthy widow of the late Mayor, had left the town and has returned some two to three years later in overalls, her best friend, Pheoby, and the townspeople want to know what has happened in the intervening years. Almost immediately when the two friends meet, they establish a woman-to-woman bonding that reveals a close, unified relationship. Janie, in showing this closeness between the two, calls on her friend to serve as the respondent to the porch community and to inform them of whatever Pheoby wants to tell.

> "Ah don't mean to bother wid tellin' 'em nothin', Pheoby. Tain't worth de trouble. You can tell 'em what Ah say if you wants to. Dat's just de same as me 'cause mah tongue is in mah friend's mouf." (17)

Pheoby responds:

> "If you so desire, Ah'll tell 'em what you tell me to tell 'em." (17)

This closeness and unity of spirit between the two women is evident in this call-response sequence that begins when Janie tells her friend, Pheoby, that she can tell the community folks whatever she wants because her tongue is in

her friend's mouth to respond or say or edit whatever she desires to tell. This often quoted phrase, "my tongue is in mah friend's mouf," informs the audience that Janie has called on her friend, Pheoby, to be her respondent or spokesperson.

> [Janie and Pheoby] sat there in the fresh young darkness close together. Pheoby eager to feel and do through Janie.... Janie full of that oldest human longing-self revelation. Pheoby held her tongue for a long time, but she could't help moving her feet. So Janie spoke. (18)

Pheoby, though eager to respond orally decides not to, but does respond non-verbally by moving her feet. In doing so, she is engaging in the call-response process. As Smitherman states, call-response entails the

> spontaneous verbal and ***non-verbal*** interaction between speaker and listener in which the speaker's statements ("calls") are punctuated by expressions ("responses") from the listener.... But it is a basic organizing principle of Black American culture generally, for it enables traditional Black folk to achieve the unified state of balance and harmony. (104) [emphasis mine]

Pheoby's nonverbal action of "moving her feet" establishes a unified or intimate relationship between her and her dear friend, for moving one's feet or clapping one's hands is a common response of approval or acceptance to calls in the Black community. Toni Morrison in a 1991 taped interview affirms these similar physical and visceral aspects of one's response in the call-response process:

> "In order to get a real response because that's the other aspect, they [Black speakers] do not expect you to listen silently, in a sort of Western tradition; you must, [pause in her speech]

> something visceral is supposed to happen. You're supposed to ***tap your feet*** or say 'Amen' or jump up or dance or say what have you. [emphasis mine] But there is this connection between orator and listener." ("A Conversation with Toni Morrison")

Pheoby, awed by the sincere and profound words of her friend, does not want to interrupt the narrative mood with plain and ordinary words. So she decides not to speak. However, she cannot resist some type of response; in this context it is her feet moving. Janie meanwhile continues to talk to her "kissin' friend," and "So Janie spoke" (18) completes the first call-response sequence in Hurston's text.

Related to this call-response sequence is the shared and recognized friendship of the two women, that bespeaks of Black feminist and womanist thought. Both Black feminism and womanism encompass Black women's relationships with one another and the triple oppression of race, class, and gender. Patricia Hill Collins' comments about woman-to-woman interaction offers a comfortable, reassuring statement for Black feminist thought: "In the comfort of daily conversations, through serious conversations and humor, African-American women as sisters and friends affirm one another's humanity, specialness, and right to exist" (97). The friendship between Janie and Pheoby is confirmed through one of the two talking while the other is listening, responding, and reinforcing the relationship.

Michael Awkward's analysis also locates a call-response pattern of a nonverbal nature, but he misses this early

reference to the pattern and instead locates it in the next chapter. He analyzes "'Pheoby's hungry listening'" as a response to Janie's call to recount her autobiographical narrative (50).

> Such encouragement can be verbal or as in the case of "hungry listening," non-verbal. While the text does not indicate Pheoby's specific form of response, it does insist that she is responding, and moreover, that her response enhances Janie's performance (50).

These two passages from the novel reveal that no sharp division or line exists between the performer and audience (Smitherman 108).

John Callahan in his text, In the African-American Grain, suggests that Janie and Pheoby's relationship "is a collaborative eloquence" (94):

> Janie's extravagant figure for call and response affirms the intimate sympathetic imagination as an essential faculty for telling someone else's story truly. Because she and Pheoby are friends, Janie trusts Pheoby to be a friend to her story ... Janie proposes civility and courtesy as preconditions to storytelling. An audience earns the right to hear a story, as Pheoby has done with her acts.... No one should take for granted the right to hear someone else's story because they live in the same place, or share the same race, gender, or class.... The common values she [Hurston] and Janie discover as women, as Afro-Americans, and as storytellers inspire genuine call and response. (94-5)

Callahan asserts that as a collaborative effort call-response requires responsibility on the part of the audience. Shared values of interest and concerns, coupled with hospitable actions, give the audience the right to hear, understand, and interpret Janie's tale. Certainly Pheoby and Janie had shared with each other many happy and

difficult moments during the many years that Janie was married to Joe Starks, and this sisterly relationship had endured during the three years they had been separated. Janie knew Pheoby to be a trustworthy, "kissing" friend in contrast to the gossipy "townspeople."

According to Callahan, both Janie and Pheoby share responsibilities for recounting the tale (95), for Janie "expects her [Pheoby] to listen intimately while she tells her story" (95), and then Pheoby can, in turn, recount the story to the townswomen as a reporter or respondent. Hurston also informs the readers-audience that they too have a responsibility; "Hurston calls readers to respond to Janie Crawford's story and her novel with 'new thoughts' and 'new words'" (Callahan 88).

If one takes Callahan's comments of Hurston's call to her readers to heart, one can envision her requesting the readers-audience to respond in several ways. Maybe Hurston is calling her readers to respond or recount to others that true love can exist between a Black man and a Black woman--that Their Eyes Were Watching God is really a love story, as Hemenway purports, about two individuals who love each other. A contemporary response to Janie's story would be to assert that Black women can find totally encompassing and fulfilling love in Black men, sometimes in a younger one, who does not live on the same economic or social level as the woman. Since this novel was written as a time when many

Black women, especially of the working class, were denigrated as loose, lower-class, over-sexed Jezebels, Hurston may be calling the reader(s) to counter (respond to) these stereotypical portrayals of Black women, since Hurston and the readers-audience, no doubt, share similar ideas about these myths. Hurston's call even extends to contemporary Black women writers, for Hurston, according to Missy Dehn Kubitschek, has "issued a powerful call to which subsequent African-American women have responded in depicting the relationships of their heroines' identities and nonprint narratives" (67).

Another significant passage that reveals the call-response structure is the mule tale where mule-baiting occurs with Matt Bonner and his yellow mule. Two men folk of the community, Sam and Lige, initiate the exchange by calling out to Matt about a serious concern. The serious language of the two un-smiling men does not prepare Matt for the humorous joke about to be played on him:

> "Mighty glad you come 'long right now, Matt. Me and some others wuz jus' about tuh come hunt yuh."
>
> "What for, Sam?"
>
> "Mighty serious matter, man. Serious!!"
>
> "Yeah man," Lige would cut in, dolefully. "It needs yo' strict attention. You ought not tuh lose no time." (83)

The call-response pattern between Sam and Lige **and** Matt reveals Hurston as a true interpreter of the Black Oral Tradition. Hurston interweaves the narrative of the two townsmen and the mule owner with call-response cleverly

through juxtapositions of straight-faced men caught up in a humorous incident. Sam and Lige, two men in the town, are "edging" Matt on, with the implication that they have a serious matter they must discuss with him. Meanwhile Matt is continually asking what that serious matter is, but the reader senses the irony of the situation and knows that there is no serious matter, other than taunting Matt about his skinny, yellow mule. This dialogic, entertaining passage illustrates quite lucidly a call-response pattern in a story-telling mode.

> "Whut is it then? You oughta hurry up and tell me."
> "Reckon we better not tell yuh heah at de store...."
> "Whut's wrong, man? Ah ain't after none uh y'alls foolishness now."
> "Dat mule uh yourn, Matt. You better go see 'bout him.... "
> "Where 'bouts? Did he wade in de lake and uh alligator ketch him?"
> "Worser 'n dat. De womenfolks got yo' mule. When Ah come round de lake 'bout noontime mah wife and some others had 'im flat on de ground using his sides fuh uh wash board." (82)

At first Matt does not see the irony or verbal trap that the townsmen have led him into. The men talk (call) and respond to each other about Matt's skinny, yellow, underfed mule and then <u>call</u> on Matt to <u>respond</u> to this humorous, signifying situation also. Obviously Matt does not want to participate at this particular time in these combined signifying and call-response story-telling moments. But Sam continues with a serious, non-smiling face: "Yeah, Matt, dat mule is so skinny till de women is usin' his rib bones fuh uh rub-

board, and hangin' things out on his hock-bones tuh dry" (83). Underneath the serious facade of Sam is a humorous story of which the townspeople are aware, but Matt, the brunt" of the joke-story, is not. Thus "Serious-Sam" calls on Matt to respond to this story, and Matt is about to respond, when he recognizes the signifying account of the rub-board and the subsequent laughter.

Once he realizes that he has been tricked again, Matt becomes infuriated, and the laughter from the other men intensifies his anger (83). Again the laughter and jokes serve as a unifying and entertaining moment for the community of folks. Of course, as the centrifugal force, Matt does not see the situation in the same way as the townsmen. Whenever Matt is angry, he stammers in his speech, but he must defend himself against the accusations directed at him by the townsmen. So as he defends himself, he participates in a lengthy call-response sequence:

> "You'se uh stinkin' lie, Sam and yo' feet ain't mates. Y-y-y-you!"
> "Aw, man, 'taint no use in you gittin' mad. Yuh know yuh don't feed de mule. How he goituh git fat?." (83)

In call-response, as in signifying, light bantering is an integral part of the fun, and mean spiritedness or direct hostility is not. So the appropriation of call-response between Matt and the menfolk and the signifying on Matt and his scrawny mule continues:

> "Ah-ah-ah d-d-does feed 'im! Ah g-g-gived 'im uh full cup uh cawn every feedin'."

Matt continues:

> "Lige knows all about dat cup uh cawn. He hid round yo' barn and watch yuh.... It's uh tea cup." (83)

Matt begins his call by trying to defend himself against the accusations that he feeds the mule with cawn, and Sam, as representative of the group, responds that they know about that cup of cawn; it was actually a cup of tea. Again laughter from the group serves as a collective response to Matt's call.

> "Ah does feed 'im. He's just' too mean tuh git fat. He stay poor and rawbony jus' fuh spite. Skeered he'll fahta work some." [Matt defending his position/call]
>
> "Yeah, you feeds 'im. Feeds 'im offa `comeup' and seasons it wid raw-hide." [townsman responding]
>
> "Does feed de ornery varmint! Don't keer whut Ah do Ah can't git long wid 'im. He fights every inch in front uh de plow, and even lay back his ears tuh kick and bite when Ah go in de stall tuh feed 'im." [Matt again defending his position/call]
>
> "Git reconciled, Matt," Ligi soothed. "Us all knows he's mean. Ah seen 'im when he took after one of dem Roberts chillun in de street and woulda caught 'im and maybe trompled 'im tuh death if de wind hadn't of changed." The porch laugh and Matt gets mad again. (83-4) [townsman, Ligi, responding in agreement]

Matt has initiated this call-response sequence by affirming energetically that he does feed the ornery, mean animal. Ligi responds verbally by agreeing with Matt that the mule is mean, but doesn't discount the reality that the mule is undeniably underfed and skinny. However, the townspeople also respond to Matt's statements about the scrawny and skinny mule by their laughter and situate

themselves in the midst of this call-response sequence. As a matter of fact, the signifying statement, combined with call-response, becomes a humorous commentary on the mule, that the mule is so skinny that its sides serve as a washboard for the women (83).

This entire section on the mule tale reveals, what Dandy calls

> an emotional synergism [that is filled] with affirmation. Speakers give one another constant feedback so they can mutually assess the effectiveness of their performance. The speaker has the responsibility of issuing the call, and the listener has the obligation to respond in some overt way--by smiling, laughing, nodding, rocking side to side, hitting the desk, or saying something like "Amen" or "uh-huh" to confirm agreement or [some sort of] disagreement. (30)

This type of occurrence is precisely what happens in the above mule stories with Matt. Sam and Lige initiate the call about Matt's mule and the townsmen respond, but Matt also responds to the "supposedly" accusations; then Matt initiates the call and the townsmen respond to justify and affirm their reasons for "ribbing" Matt. In the community of Eatonville, this sort of amiable spirit permeates the town and gives it a unifying force, for each member of the town participates.

The call-response pattern continues to engage several men, primarily Sam and Ligi, in the mule episode, and they edge Matt on until he starts to stutter severely. Matt's stuttering is a sign for the men to lighten up in their teasing of Matt and reconcile with him on a limited basis. After all, there is no hostility between Matt and the

townspeople; they are simply engaging in light fun and jokes. However, the call-response pattern is not completely over until Matt, unable to respond to the joking, walks away.

> "Maybe de mule takes out after everybody," Sam said, "'cause he thinks everybody he hear coming' is Matt Bonner comin' tuh work 'im on uh empty stomach."
>
> "You stop dat right now," Walter objected. "Dat mule don't think Ah look lak no Matt Bonner. He ain't that dumb.... Matt struggled to say something but his tongue failed him so he jumped down off the porch and walked away as mad as he could be. But that never halted the mule talk. There would be more stories about how poor the brute was; his age; his evil disposition and his latest caper. Everybody indulged in mule talk. (84-5)

This lengthy passage illustrates a shift from the previous call-response participants; Matt is the responder. The townsmen initiate the call-response sequence on the mule tale to establish social interaction among the community. In a sense it is a form of entertainment which synthesizes them into a unified movement of performer and audience (Smitherman 108).

Janie in each of the episodes was a ready listener and potential respondee who wanted to engage directly in the call-response interactions of the porch people on the mule tales. However, she is forbidden by her husband, Mayor Starks, in "talking after such trashy people" (85). The mule tales are an integral part of the community and, as Hurston states, are "next to the Mayor in prominence ... and better talking" (85). The bond of the community is sealed

via the mule tales, but Janie is forbidden from participating in the social interaction with the community, especially in her engaging in folklore and Oral Traditions in the community. So she is a distant listener and "wanna-be" participant.

The call-response pattern on the mule tale is not limited to the townspeople engaging in fun and talk on the porch. Hurston is also commenting on Black culture and thus "invites her readers to respond as listeners and participants in the work of storytelling" (Callahan 118) just as the townspeople do.

The call-response pattern is evident in other parts of Hurston's novel and entails a figurative use of this oral feature. At the young age of sixteen Janie experiences a call to life, to womanhood, from nature. She observed through nature the "blossoming pear tree," the "glistening leaf-buds to snowy virginity of bloom" and the many wondrous sounds of nature (Hurston 23-4). "It [nature] had called her to come and gaze on a mystery" (23), and Janie had responded to nature's call. She heard the "'alto chant' [the response] of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her" (24). The call of nature revealed to her nature's secrets of "sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and ecstatic shiver of the tree" (Hurston 24). Nature empowered Janie to observe and feel under the pear

tree, and Janie had affirmed an "On T" response, for she acknowledged that this revelation from nature had left her "limp and languid" (Hurston 24).

Yet Janie's own personal response to nature was left unanswered. All of nature's small creatures had received responses and answers but her. She had vicariously received an answer through the bees and flowers and pollinated air but not the real thing. She "felt an answer seeking her, but where? When? How? An answer was alluding, escaping her" (Hurston 25).

Janie senses an answer-response at first in Johnny Taylor, but her grandmother intercepts this response. Amidst the voices of her granddaughter and that "trashy nigger ... Johnny Taylor," (Hurston 27) Nanny asserts her own power and voice, which is the most important voice in this novel (Callahan 128). Nanny calls to her granddaughter and indicates with no introductory comments that she is ready for marriage to Logan Killicks. Enraged by this possibility, Janie objects and is immediately slapped by Nanny. Michael Awkward suggests that Nannie's slap was a violent response to Janie's call for understanding life and nature. Nanny's slap forced Janie into a "silent obedience as opposed to active participation in the communication or development of texts" (Hurston 50).

In contrast to Awkward's interpretation, one could consider Nannie's slap, not as a violence response, but a

direct physical response to her granddaughter to avoid the hard life that she and so many other Black women have endured as "mules of the world." Nannie was endeavoring to find a life more serene and comfortable for a love-hungry sixteen year old. Nannie in her age-old wisdom knew what the world held for innocent, uninformed women, such as Janie, and placed her economic and social well-being above Janie's youthful call to nature.

As a matter of fact, the entire novel is predicated on Janie's seeking a fulfilling response to nature's call. One could easily infer that Janie's seeking a response to nature is similar to her seeking her identity. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in the essay, "Speakerly Text," points out that this novel focuses on an African American woman searching for identity and understanding (168).

> This quest for self-knowledge, which the text thematizes through the opposition between the inside and the outside of things, directs attention to itself as a central theme of the novel by certain narrative strategies. (168)

Kubitschek reiterates the questing heroine theme for this novel and inextricably links Hurston's work with Octavia Butler's science fiction novel, Kindred. Both present an African-American woman engaged in a quest in a story encompassing orality, historical knowledge, and a "growth into a self-in-community" (52). Throughout Janie's entire life, she has been seeking an answer-response from nature, which is central to her growth, self-development, and eventual understanding of the importance of her life.

Janie's growth and self-development are intertwined with the three segments of her life with three different husbands.

Immediately before her marriage to Logan, her first husband, Janie seeks a response to nature's perennial call. Maybe after all, marriage would provide the fulfilling need to her response.

> She was back and forth to the pear tree continuously wondering and thinking ... Husbands and wives always love each other, and that was what marriage meant. It was just so. Janie felt glad of the thought, for then it wouldn't seem so destructive and moldy. She wouldn't be lonely any more. (Hurston 38)

Though Janie marries Logan Killicks, she still does not find a response to the beauty and fulfillment of life that nature's "bug-bee-like creatures" experience. Disappointed with Logan Killicks, she seeks advice from her grandmother after three months of marriage. Instead of a suitable response, her grandmother offers brooding, heavy advice for the young bride:

> "Dat's de very prong all us Black women gits hung on. Dis love! Dat's just whut's got us uh pullin' and uh haulin' and sweatin' and doin' from can't see in de mornin' till can't see at night. Dat's how come de ole folks say dat bein' uh fool don't kill nobody. It jus' makes you sweat." (Hurston 41)

Janie retorts "Ah wants things sweet wid mah marriage lake when you sit under a pear tree and think. Ah ... " (Hurston 43). Nanny then censures Janie for wanting that kind of sweet response to life and her associating marriage with love, bees and pollinating air and meditation under a pear tree. Thus Janie acquiesces and realizes that her "first

dream was dead, so she became a woman" (Hurston 44) but continued to seek a response.

Upon Janie's leaving Logan and pursuing life with Joe Starks, her second husband, she thinks that maybe Joe will offer her a response to her earlier call from nature. Janie had thought that her marriage to Joe Starks would give her the "flower dust and springtime [feelings]," but such does not happen. So Janie becomes disillusioned with her marriage to Joe Starks. Furthermore, with Joe another problem in Janie's response/answer emerged. Joe forbade his wife to engage in any interaction with the townspeople. What is problematic for Janie is her desire to be a part of the community on the same level of playing ground as the people in town, but she is catapulted to a higher ground. Her position as the mayor's wife brings with it the dynamics of power and authority just like her husband. Consequently Janie is forced to maintain an aloofness toward the townspeople in their talk, tales, and folk stories on the porch of the store. "Everyone was having fun at mule-baiting. All but Janie" (Hurston 89).

Joe Starks' opposition to Janie's associating with "trashy" people could be construed as Hurston anticipating criticism from contemporary writers, such as Richard Wright and Alain Locke, about her use of Black dialect and oral tradition. Both Wright and Locke were condescendingly critical of Hurston's 1937 novel. Richard Wright writes in

his review of the novel that Hurston's "prose is cloaked in that facile sensuality that has dogged Negro expression ... [in] the tradition which was *forced* upon the Negro in the theater, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the 'white folks' laugh" (Hurston 17). Wright accuses Hurston on writing in the minstrel tradition, which conjures up images of the simplistic Negro in Black face talking in Black dialect to please the White audience, for "her novel is not addressed to the Negro, but to a White audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy" (Hurston 17). Alain Locke asserts that Hurston is a gifted writer, but her poetic phrases, folk dialect and humor "keep her flashing on the surface of her community and her characters and from diving down deep either to the inner psychology of characterization" (Hurston 18). He further implies that she is a mature novelist whose condescending writing reveals "these entertaining pseudo-primitives whom the reading public still loves to laugh with, weap over and envy" (Hurston 18). Since Hurston was one of the few novelists writing in Black dialect with no overt political agenda, she was aware of possible censure and criticism of her novel. So she selected a character like Joe Starks, who considered himself above the "trashy" working class men and women and their language, and laid open his faults. Joe Starks would laugh with them at times, but considered himself and his wife superior to those working class townspeople.

The key to call-response is the social interaction that synthesizes "speaker and listeners in a unified elaboration" (Smitherman 108). In this interactive posture there are no big I's or little's U's, but a communality of "group cohesiveness, cooperation, and the collective common good" (Smitherman 109). Yet in Janie's world there are big I's and little U's; she and her husband are the big I's and in positions of power and authority. Thus she is excluded from participating in the folk culture of the town, and her exclusion from this culture contributes to her disillusionment with Joe Starks and her marriage. Again with an unmet response, Janie, according to Hurston, sits "under a shady tree with the wind blowing through her hair and her clothes" (119). Hurston comments again on her loneliness: "She got so she received all things with the stolidness of the earth which soaks up urine and perfume with the same indifference" (119). Janie's unhappiness is quite similar to the discontented, lonely, and unemotional life she experienced with Nanny and Logan Killicks. It is only with Vergible Wood, Tea Cake, her third husband, that Janie finally receives the response she has been seeking all of her life.

> He could be a bee to a blossom--a pear tree blossom--a pear tree blossom in the spring. He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps. Spices hung about him. He was a glance from God. (Hurston 161)

God-nature had finally given Janie a response to the blossoms, bees, and pollinated air. Tea Cake became the bee to the blossom. Finally Janie can experience what the

flowers, trees, and bees experienced. She had sought an answer for twenty years and finally located a response/answer in a man much younger than she. Like nature's creatures, she "craves interaction, both with the thought picture creatures of her community and her husband" (Awkward 51). She receives an organic wholeness with nature via her relationship with Tea Cake. In Janie's interaction with Tea Cake, she becomes an active participant in the "traditions and rituals of her culture" (Awkward 52).

Hurston has elevated the call-response structure beyond the level of folk literature. The metaphorical use of call-response reinforces Hurston's effective combination of the aesthetic and literary with the folk tradition. She has employed full and chronological character development of Janie with narration, storytelling, and the oral feature of call-response. Janie responds to the call of nature by following her own faith and arrogantly defying the community's belief. Janie found her response by "going off" with a young man eighteen years her junior and remaining with him until his death. In responding as she did, Janie validates her experiences and calls to other women to find that validation in following their faith and beliefs. As Keith Byerman suggests, "In the call-response tradition ... validation comes in the form of the group's active participation in her performance" (112). Janie is also calling other women to respond for themselves to situations aberrant or strange--to seek romance and happiness in one's

life--and to seek that happiness in younger men if one so desires.

Through her characterization of Janie, Hurston validates the experiences of women and opens the door to other novelists, such as contemporary writer, Terry McMillan, to validate their experiences in their responses to her call for personal growth and happiness.

Hurston's narrative strategies are motivated by her

> desire to represent shared voice as a narrative possibility for the genre of the novel.... What Hurston does on the level of narration is to offer an example of an Afro-American pattern of verbal communication that represents collective interaction rather than individual dictation. The narrative strategies of her novel serve as a manifestation of Janie's insistence that distinct voices can be conjoined by means of emotional and psychological affinity...." (Awkward 55)

At first Janie and her community "do not share her experience and values," so says Callahan, but later in the novel Hurston appropriates a narrative structure that is "responsive to folk and literary traditions [emphasis mine] and fluid and improvisational enough to tell Janie's story and inspire a new tradition" (92). Hurston's contribution to the folk tradition is most important, for she sets a precedence by incorporating her narrative strategy with call-response. Thus Hurston establishes "a new community of values and performs a revolutionary literary act," according to Callahan, by combining storytelling and narration with call-response (92).

CHAPTER 4

THE AESTHETIC AND LITERARY APPEAL OF CALL-RESPONSE IN TONI MORRISON'S THE BLUEST EYE AND SONG OF SOLOMON

Toni Morrison envisions the novel as functioning for the cultural group or class that produced it. At one time music served as a healing art form for Black people. Music no longer serves that function any more ("Rootedness" 340).

> That music is no longer exclusively ours; we don't have a right to it.... So another form has to take that place, and it seems to me that the novel is needed by African Americans now in a way that was not needed before.... We don't live in places where we can hear those stories anymore; parents don't sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological archetypal satires we heard years ago. ("Rootedness" 340)

Morrison sees the need for a Black artistic form and expression that will explore the feelings and produce the healing essential for the Black community.

Prior to Morrison's emergence, writers of the 1960s proclaimed the need for a new literary aesthetic. Hoyt Fuller in a 1968 essay, "Towards a Black Aesthetic," contends that the urban, young writers, located in the ghetto areas, "have set out in search of a Black aesthetic, a system of isolating and evaluating the artistic works of Black people which reflect the special character and imperatives of Black experience" (9). He contends that there is a great need for racial unity, which can be interpreted as healing (9).

Amiri Baraka argued that music was the medium that Black Americans "of the so-called lower class" (193) used to

explore the Black experience successfully. His contention was that Black literature had not arrived as a genuine tour de force for acclaiming the Black Experience. Baraka proclaimed that

> There has never been an equivalent to Duke Ellington or Louis Armstrong in Negro writing, and even the best of contemporary literature written by Negroes cannot yet be compared to the fantastic beauty of the music of Charlie Parker. (191)

With the cultural awakening of the 1960s and 1970s emerged a Black aesthetic that paralleled Black music for exploring the Black experience.

Much of Black Nationalism and Black Aesthetic ideology of the 1960s focused on "race-centered" literature, but did not include women in the "race." Madhu Dubey points out that

> In the Black nationalist discourse of the 1960s, the Black woman, as an offensive reminder of the slave past, was often represented as an obstacle between Black men and their revolutionary future .... The Black woman here figures the dead, static past, tainted with white values, which the militant Black writer must destroy before he can articulate a new revolutionary Black sensibility. The Black Aesthetic figuratively trapped the Black woman in the past, and barred her from participating in any new emancipatory discourse of Blackness or femininity. (19-20)

Black women writers in the 1970s questioned the Black Nationalist discourse. Realizing the contribution of Black Nationalism to the Black racial agenda, they postulated that their notion of the Black community differed from that of Black Nationalists. Black women writers echoed in their works a relationship between the individual and community,

but in raising the woman question, they complicated this relationship.

> In these novels, Black feminist identity is invariably located within a communal frame; employing multiple points of view and structurally interweaving various narrative strands concerning different characters.... While retaining the communal frame, however, these novels split the Black community along gender lines, thus threatening the unified racial community projected in Black Aesthetic theory. (Dubey 23)

Related to the Black communal interaction was the appropriation of oral forms and specifically the Black Oral Tradition in Black women's novels. As Dubey points out, the novels by these women "establish a continuous and participatory relationship with their readers" (7). And this is precisely what many Black women writers have done.

Many cultural and literary critics do not list Morrison among the Black authors that appropriate call-response in their fiction. Morrison is acknowledged as a vivid storyteller and user of other folk forms, but rarely credited with appropriating call-response. Trudier Harris in her Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison makes no direct references to Morrison's use of call-response. As a matter of fact, she asserts that "if we expect exact or consistent parallels between her usages and folklore as it exists in historical Black communities, we will be continually surprised" (7). Harris further asserts that even though Morrison follows in the tradition of Chesnutt, Hurston, and others by adopting folklore in her works, she "has gone beyond the mere grafting of traditional

items onto her fiction.... In her literary uses of folklore, she has solved the problem of warring genres that plagued her predecessors" (7-8). Morrison produces material that encompasses both literature and folklore; to some critics, literature and folklore cannot exist in one mutual text, but are considered "two warring" genres.

However, Harris shows that Morrison "saturates" her novels with folklore and literary substance.

Harris also asserts that Morrison

> may begin with a joke or superstition or its recognizable, traditional form, but she takes fictional license in making the lore into something that has never circulated in any folk community. Or she takes the forms of tradition within African American communities and gives them fictional substance so that we recognize the outline of a story, or a joke, or a belief, but we cannot document it in any collected sources we may consult. (8)

Harris recognizes Morrison's contribution to folkloric tradition by taking to another level of literary accomplishment.

Michael Awkward too refers specifically to women fiction writers who appropriate call-response, such as Hurston and Walker, but his references omit Morrison. He lucidly points out that Morrison adapts folklore, as in The Bluest Eye, and has "merged Afro-American consciousness *only* in its strategies of narration" (58) [emphasis mine]. Even though he also observes an intertextual relationship between Morrison and Hurston based on titles and the merging of

narrative voices (92-95), he discounts Morrison's use of call-response.

Keith Byerman too excludes Morrison from the Black writers who employ call-response. He suggests in Fingering the Jagged Grain: Tradition and Form in Recent Fiction that Morrison appropriates folk figures, anti-heroes, and folk material in her novels, but he omits any references to Morrison's use of folk speech or language in her novels.

Toni Morrison herself saw call-response as vital to Black community life. In her noted essay, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Morrison asserts that

> There are things that I try to incorporate into my fiction that are directly and deliberately related to what I regard as the major characteristics of Black art, wherever it is. One of which is the ability to be both print and oral literature: to combine those two aspects so that the stories can be read in silence ... but [one can] hear them well.
>
> ... it is the affective and participatory relationship between the artist or the speaker and the audience that is of primary importance. (341)

She compares this participatory relationship to a Black preacher who requires his church congregation to interact with him and "to join him in the sermon, to behave in a certain way, to stand up and to weep and to cry and to accede or to change and to modify--to expand the sermon that is being delivered" ("Rootedness" 341).

This participatory relationship or interactive relationship between writer and audience is very definitely found in Morrison's novels. Morrison's use of call-response, as participatory interaction, however, should not

be construed in the same way that reader response theory sees the interactions between writer and reader. Although some similarities exist between the two, the differences are more pronounced.

Reader-response theory, from Wolfgang Iser's perspective, encompasses an interaction between the text and the reader, for

> in considering a literary work, one must take into account not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to that text.... The convergence of text and reader brings the literary text into existence, and this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed.... (50)

For Iser, there is a participatory relationship between the author and reader in that the "literary text must be conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader's imagination in the task of working things out for himself [and herself], for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative" (51). Since the fictional work has "unexpected twists and turns" [also known as gaps], this allows the reader to use his/her imagination in "filling in the gaps" in his/her reading (55). He continues

> These gaps have a different effect on the process of anticipation and retrospection, and thus on the "gestalt" of the virtual dimension, for they may be filled in different ways. For this reason, one text is potentially capable of several different realizations, and no [one] reading can ever exhaust the full potential, for each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way ... as he reads, he will make his own decision as how the gap is to be filled. (55)

Iser's perspective suggests that different readers may end up with different "realizations" or interpretations of a text because of their different backgrounds and life experiences.

Morrison's author-reader interaction is not dependent upon different "realizations" or interpretations of a text. Morrison is not concerned with readers feeling in the gaps because of "unexpected twists and turns." She stresses the reader's participation by "expanding" on the work that is presented. She provides the "places and spaces so that the reader can participate" ("Rootedness" 342).

Another specialist in reader-response theory, Stanley Fish, sees reading as an active "mediating presence" of what the reader "does" (70). One asks the question,

> what does this word ... chapter, novel, play, poem, <u>do?</u>; and the execution involves *an analysis of the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed one another in time*.... And by responses, I intend more than the range of feelings (what Wimsat and Beardsley call "the purely affective reports"). The category of response includes any and all of the activities provoked by a string of words: the projection of syntactical and/or lexical probabilities; their subsequent occurrence or non-occurrence; attitudes toward persons, or things, or ideas referred to; the reversal or questioning of those attitudes; and much more ... questions of genre, history, etc. (73-4)

Morrison's work does not depart from the author-reader perspective that Fish suggests, for Morrison informs the reader of the necessity of seeing the political, cultural, and literary matrix in reading. In contradistinction to

both Fish and Iser's formulations, Morrison's work emphasizes the need for author and reader to understand *her* language whether "speakerly, aural, colloquial" in comprehending the "codes embedded in Black culture" ("Unspeakable Things Unspoken" 22).

Morrison's use of call-response is different from Hurston's. Morrison uses call-response as a healing force for African Americans. Just as music served as an avenue for healing in the past, Morrison proposes that novels serve in that capacity for the contemporary African American.

Morrison appropriates call-response in a manner that encompasses a direct relationship between the speaker (narrator) and audience (reader). Her works, particularly The Bluest Eye and Song of Solomon, entail a participatory relationship between the narrator and the reader to elicit from the reader a political response. As Morrison states, "the work must be political" ("Rootedness" 344). This participatory quality reveals a call-response pattern that "evolves into a resilient literary device that persuades readers to become symbolic and then perhaps actual participants into [sic] the task of image-making, of storytelling" (Callahan 17). In this context call-response engages the writer and reader in a human situation analogous to that of performer and audience (Callahan 17). With Morrison call-response encompasses a writer-performer and reader-audience relationship with political and/or social overtones.

The concept of narrator/storyteller interacting with reader/audience is evident in The Bluest Eye, Morrison's first work. Claudia Teer, principal narrator, tells of a young eleven year old girl, Pecola, who is considered ugly and despised by many members of the community, including boys, teachers, and even her parents. Her mother at the time of her birth commented, "'But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly'" (98). Morrison opens this novel with the first-grade mock-primer story of Mother, Father, Dick and Jane who happily reside in a green and white house. Morrison sets the reader up, from the outset of the novel, to juxtapose the white family's idyllic, though unrealistic, family life with the difficult, harsh life of the eleven year old pregnant Pecola whose family life is in stark contrast to that of Dick and Jane. The juxtaposition reveals what Elliot Butler-Evans calls the contrasts "between the Dick-and Jane world and the 'real' world of the Breedloves.... The comfortable home of the Dick-and Jane myth is contrasted with the squalid living conditions of the Breedloves" (68). Amidst these contrasting life-styles and the dual narratives about the McTeer and Breedlove families is the oral feature, call-response, interwoven throughout the work.

One passage illustrates quite clearly call-response as an active participatory relationship between the writer-narrator and reader. It occurs between Blacks of two different socio-economic classes, that are distinguishable

by their funkiness. Geraldine of the middle class is anti-funk, whereas Pecola is the essence of funk. Morrison characterizes Geraldine as one of the many brown girls in the middle class

> who live in quiet Black neighborhood where everybody is gainfully employed. Where there are porch swings handing from chains.... They go to land-grant colleges, normal schools, and learn how to do the white man's work with refinement.... Here they learn the rest of the lesson begun in those soft houses with porch swings and pots of bleeding heart: how to behave. The careful development of thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners. In short, how to get rid of funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions. (The Bluest Eye 64)

Geraldine, who has contained her funkiness and who has endeavored to teach her son to imitate the white middle-class, is contrasted with Pecola. Morrison, however, pricks the audience/reader's emotion to go even further in the emerging process. Through the omniscient narrator, she calls on the audience/reader to respond emotionally to the absurdity thrust upon pitiable Pecola.

Junior, the middle-class son of Geraldine, invites Pecola to his home near their school on the pretense of showing her some kittens. Pecola hesitantly decides to go. The audience/reader senses some foreboding dread about to come to Pecola in her youthful innocence. Once inside the lovely well-furnished home, Pecola is awed by its interior with the big lamps and rugs on the floor. She savors everything by looking slowly at the beautiful furnishings (The Bluest Eye 70). Junior, a sadistic child who really

dislikes his mother's cat and probably his mother too, sees Pecola's interest in his mother's house and her cat and decidedly taunts and beats up Pecola. Then he "pushes her down, ran out the door ... and held it shut with his hands. Pecola's banging on the door increased his gasping, high-pitched laughter" (The Bluest Eye 70). Locked in the room, Pecola begins to cry until the soft wounded kitten comforts her and she it. Seeing Pecola comfort the cat, Junior gets angry, for he "had seen that expression many times as the animal responded to his mother's touch" (The Bluest Eye 71). He grabs the cat and in a frenzied moment throws the cat against the window. The cat falls onto the radiator with only the "slightest smell of singed fur" (The Bluest Eye 71).

At this point Junior's behavior provokes the reader to ask how a young boy could be so wretchedly evil. The young boy is himself an extreme case of the schizophrenic double consciousness. On the one hand, he wants to play with the other children, get dirty, and laugh. On the other hand, his mother, Geraldine, had taught him not to play with "niggers," and had explained the difference between the colored people and the niggers: "Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud" (The Bluest Eye 67). Although Junior knew the difference between the two groups, he wanted to play with the Black boys, whom his mother would call the "nigger boys":

> He wanted to feel their hardness pressing on him, smell their wild Blackness, and say 'Fuck you' with that lovely casualness. He wanted to sit with them on curbstones and compare the sharpness of jackknives, the distance and arcs of spitting. (The Bluest Eye 68)

Instead of enjoying the casual, fun life of active Black boys, he bullies girls, who cannot physically return his aggression. Junior is a classic example of what Dubois called a *Negro* trapped in double consciousness: a Black person caught between his two-ness, "an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body." Denise Heinze supports this reading of Junior when she asserts that frustration within him "turns into cruelty, and Junior, denied access to the pleasures of his own ethnicity, resorts to tormenting cats and little Black girls" (The Bluest Eye 70). Junior is going in the direction of a sick, schizophrenic youth who has no outlet for the rage simmering within him.

To Dubois, the cultural elite "are worthy of leadership because they are educated and trained, refined and civilized, disciplined and determined" (West 66). Yet as Cornel West in his essay, "Black Strivings," points out, DuBois' intellectual concept is problematic and defective because it assumes that "high brow culture is inherently humanizing and that exposure to an immersion in great works produce[s] good people" (68). This same concept, however, is operating in the minds and belief system of Junior, Geraldine, and Maureen. Because of their color and

educational background, they and their class consider themselves superior to "average" working class Blacks into which category most Blacks fit. Yet to reason that one's education and one's delight in the compositions of Brahms, Bach, and Beethoven can produce a more humanitarian person is false.

When one observes Geraldine and Maureen attacking Pecola, one conjures up images indicative of this same elitist attitude. Morrison, in the form of Claudia or the omniscient narrator, calls readers to respond to these scenes with Pecola and to censure these types of Black people for their selfishness, mean spiritedness, and inhumanity to other Blacks. Morrison via Claudia and the down-trodden Pecola is calling the reader to respond to a

> fuller understanding of the human condition [that] should lead us far beyond any notion of free-floating elites [or middle class Blacks who wanna be elites in the Black community], suspicious of the tainted masses--elites who worship at the altar of highbrow culture while ignoring the barbarity and bestiality in their own rank. (West 71)

Parallels can be seen in Black community life. Characters, like Geraldine, her son, and Maureen, in The Bluest Eye represent "elite" Blacks who try to impart a similar superior attitude, yet their political or intellectual leadership is not elitist. They should stand democratically for each person, regardless of their socio-economic level.

Perhaps Morrison is calling the reader to see and respond to Junior and also Cholly as examples of what Madonne Miner calls "male transgression and subsequent female silence" (179). Miner sees Junior as a tyrannical, unloving Black boy, similar to the Greek, Tereus (179). When Pecola first enters Junior's home, she stares and admires the furnishings inside his home. Junior throws the cat into her face, forcing her to acknowledge his presence. Miner asserts that Pecola immediately responds to this unexpected penetration by sucking in her breath; metaphorically she draws herself inward. She then attempts to flee, but just as Tereus confines Philomena behind stone walls, Junior confines Pecola behind the wall of his will. Male realms expand as those of the female suffer an almost fatal contraction (179). To Miner, this scene suggests a near rape scene, that was actualized between Pecola and Cholly. The interactions between Junior and Pecola and Pecola and Cholly, were duplicated (179) with one primary difference: the actual act of rape. However, Junior engages in a scene of almost becoming a rapist; if he persists in this kind of behavior, he could become a rapist. This concept of <u>becoming</u> is a feature that engages many of Morrison's characters, so reports Phillip Page. He suggests that Morrison's "characters have trouble developing fulfilled selves because they lack adequate relationships with one or more others, such as parents, spouse, family, [concerned] neighborhood[s], community, and/or society"

(54). Although other characters manifest this trait of becoming, it is more pronounced in the case of Junior, who exhibits a pervasive unwieldiness with his dualistic identity.

Junior's mother, Geraldine, also exhibits a condescending attitude toward Pecola's Blackness. When Junior's mother enters the room, she sees the "funkiness" of Pecola and the deplorable images of her kind and immediately charges into her repugnantly:

> She [Geraldine] looked at Pecola. Saw the dirty torn dress, the plaits sticking out on her head, hair matted where the plaits had come undone, the muddy shoes with the wad of gum peeping out from between the cheap soles, the soiled socks, one of which had been walked down into the heel of the shoe. She saw the safety pin holding the hem of the dress up. Up over the hump of the cat's back she looked at her. She had seen this little girl all of her life. Hanging out of windows over saloons in Mobile, crawling over the porches of shotgun houses.... Hair uncombed, dresses falling apart, shoes untied and caked with dirt. (The Bluest Eye 71)

Geraldine doesn't see an individual, but a class of people, the class she and others of her kind deplore. "They were everywhere.... Like flies they hovered; like flies they settled. And this one had settled in her house. Up over the hump of the cat's back she looked" (The Bluest Eye 72).

Rather than seeing a young, frightened little Black girl, Geraldine conjures up images of squalid, lower-class Blacks who made the race look bad. In a controlled, quiet manner representative of her class, Geraldine says, "Get out.... You nasty little Black bitch. Get out of my home"

(The Bluest Eye 72). The reader observes Pecola's reaction:

> Pecola backed out of the room, staring at the pretty milk-brown lady in the pretty gold-and-green house who was talking to her through the cat's fur.... Pecola turned to find the front door and saw Jesus looking down at her with sad and unsurprised eyes ... the gay paper flowers twisted his face.
>
> Outside, the March wind blew into the rip of her dress. She held her head down against the cold. But she could not hold it low enough to avoid seeing the snowflakes falling and dying on the pavement. (The Bluest Eye 72)

In this moving, dramatic scene, Morrison is politically calling the reader/audience to respond to mistreatment of Pecola. Not only does Geraldine insist that the ragged child leave, but she calls the child horrid epithets: "nasty, Black bitch." The reader/audience, in recoiling from such disparaging language, responds with aversion, extreme distaste, and maybe even horror.

One notices also Pecola's response--her backing out of the room is reminiscent of a servant leaving a room filled with royalty. Added to this scenario is Pecola's seeing "Jesus looking down at her with sad and unsurprised eyes" (The Bluest Eye 72), again conjuring up images of a pathetic child looking up to Jesus and Jesus reciprocally responding to her plight.

Although Morrison's audience in this novel is certainly not limited to Black women or even women in general, one cannot discount Morrison's words that her "sense of the novel is that it has always functioned for the class or the group that wrote it" ("Rootedness" 341). In the context of

The Bluest Eye, the group that Morrison is calling to is the community of readers who are acquainted with experiences of classicism among Black women in the Black community. The uneducated, particularly among Black women, have no voice. If such is the case, then Patricia Hill-Collins has ascribed to Black women the concept inherent in Morrison's appropriation of call-response:

> The issue of Black women being the ones who really listen to one another is an important one, particularly given the importance of voice in Black women's lives.
> ... One can write for a nameless faceless audience, but the act of using one's voice requires a listener. For African American women the listener [audience-responder] most able to move beyond the invisibility created by objectification as the Other in order to see and hear the fully human Black woman is another Black woman. (The Bluest Eye 98)

If the Black woman is the reader/audience in The Bluest Eye, then Morrison has created a work for Black women to understand the importance of voice and Black women's consciousness. The participatory relationship consists of artist (Morrison) and audience (Black women). The rationale for the participatory interactive behavior among Black women, says Hill-Collins, is to "move women," beyond the invisibly or quiet acquiescence of acceptance of cruel behavior toward them:

> Black women writers have explored themes such as the difficulties inherent in affirming Black women in a society that denigrates African American women (Claudia's use of her relationship with her sister in searching for positive Black women's images in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye) (98)

Other passages in The Bluest Eye point to Morrison's appropriation of call-response. Again Morrison's use of call-response occurs between the narrator and the reader--where the narrator admonishes the reader to respond to her call. Maureen Peal, the new light-skinned girl who is liked by most of the students and teachers alike, buys Pecola an ice cream cone. Now Maureen initially appears to engage in this good deed simply to befriend Pecola. The reader learns quite soon, however, as does the narrator--Claudia--and her sister, Frieda, that Maureen has an ulterior motive. When Maureen wants to talk of Pecola's "naked daddy" and Pecola does not, the real Maureen emerges and disparages Pecola.

Pecola then "tucked her head in--in a funny, sad, helpless movement. A kind of hunching of the shoulders, pulling in of the neck as though she wanted to cover her eyes" (The Bluest Eye 56). Claudia comes to the defense of Pecola, but Maureen recoils with harsh epithets to all three girls reminiscent of Geraldine: "Black and ugly Blacker e mos" and she adds that she was cute (The Bluest Eye 56). The reader realizes that Maureen's insults have hurt Pecola the most. After Maureen's piercing insults, Claudia and her sister know how to respond, but Pecola doesn't. Thus Claudia appeals to the reader to respond since Pecola doesn't know how:

> Pecola stood a little apart from us, her eyes hinged in the direction in which Maureen had fled. She seemed to fold into herself, like a pleated wing. Her pain antagonized me. I wanted to open her up, crisp her edges, ram a stick down that

> punched and curving spine, force her to stand erect and spit the misery out on the streets. But she held it in.... (The Bluest Eye 57)

Claudia as narrator calls the reader-audience to respond to this situation symbolically and aurally. The cast of Pecola's image has been set.

Callahan notes in In the African-American Grain that

> Symbolically present in the literary genre of fiction, these variations of call-response summon us [the reader] to read and hear, and potentially, contribute to the still unfolding "immense story" in our lives and voices beyond the solitary, private act of reading. (21)

The reader is expected to respond to the experiences in the story of The Bluest Eye and possibly to politicize the scenes or narrative of Pecola's life for an improved Black community. "It's a call to self, to voice, to community, to nationhood," so says Callahan, "for the participating voice of critics and readers to engage in the telling of the story" (22). One could also suggest that the narrator is calling the reader to testify to the difficulties that some Black women and female children of low economical status experience at the hands of other Blacks, particularly middle class Blacks.

Just as Morrison appropriates call-response in a writer-audience interaction for political or social testimonials, she also uses call-response in a traditional manner in a scene involving two prostitutes. The type of call-response they use is reminiscent of what Smitherman calls co-signing where one speaker affirms or agrees with

another (107). In this sequence, China initiates the sequence by asking a question of Poland. Poland answers and China affirms her response with a "me too." Then the laughter between the prostitutes affirms even more the social and oral interaction between the women. This is not a complicated or symbolic use of call-response, but a direct example as frequently heard in the Black community between chatting women.

> China arranged a fingerful of hair into a bang effect.
> "Then why he left you to sell tail?"
> "Girl, when I found out I could sell it somebody would pay cold cash for it, you could have knocked me over with a feather.
> "Poland began to laugh. Soundlessly.
> "Me too. My auntie whipped me good that first time when I told her I didn't get no money. I said 'Money? For what? He didn't owe me nothin'." She said, 'The hell he didn't!'"
> They all dissolved in laughter.
> Three merry gargoyles. Three merry harridans. Amused by a long-ago time of ignorance. (The Bluest Eye 42)

China in this sequence recounts to her cohorts how she initially entered the *profession*. Poland concurs with China and reveals her aunt's anger for her engaging in a "freeby." This episode ends with all three of the prostitutes laughing. The verbal comments between China and Poland showed a call-response pattern of shared interaction and a unified connection between the prostitutes. One spoke and the other agreed in confirmation with the third. Ultimately they all laughed together to reveal a shared harmony among them.

A second novel that reveals Morrison's appropriation of call-response is Song of Solomon. This novel employs a male protagonist in search of his cultural identity. Just as Jamie in Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God learns of her social identity within the confines of that novel, so does selfish, conceited Macon "Milkman" Dead change his direction in life to learn of his cultural and familial background in Morrison's novel. Interspersed throughout this narrative though are many examples of what Morrison herself calls the "affective and participatory relationship between the artist or speaker and the audience" ("Rootedness" 341), also known as call-response.

In one conversational discourse Pilate, Milkman's aunt, and her granddaughter, Hagar, talk of Reba's great luck in winning various items. Included in the conversation, as listeners, are Macon "Milkman" Dead and his friend, Guitar.

> "Everything she win, she give away," Hagar said.
> "To a man," said Pilate.
> "She don't never keep none of it...."
> "That's what she want to win--a man ..."
> "Worse'n Santa Claus...."
> "Funny kind of luck ain't no luck at all"
> "He comes just one a year...."
> Hagar and Pilate pulled the conversation, each yanking out some thread of comment more to herself than to Milkman or Guitar. (Song of Solomon 47)

This exchange presents *two* single voices, combined to communicate one idea. One voice begins and leads into the

next voice as if each person were reading the other's mind and could complete the other's comments.

Hagar begins the sequence with the statement, "Everything she win, she give away." Her grandmother, Pilate, agrees and completes the statement with "to a man." Hagar reaffirms the completed statement with "'She don't never keep none of it.'" Then the Pilate affirms, "'That's what she want to win--a man'" with the granddaughter also affirming the same concept with the intensity of "'More'n Santa Claus.'" This passage shows the inter-connectedness between a grandmother and a granddaughter who can each anticipate and complete the other's statements. Smitherman's suggestion that call-response "enables traditional Black folk to achieve the unified state of balance or harmony which is fundamental to the traditional African world view" (104) is certainly applicable in this context. The two characters in this segment, however, share more than a state of balance or harmony. Hagar and Pilate share a spiritual or metaphysical state that even affects the other people in the room who are listening, Milkman and Guitar. They, particularly Milkman, are participants in the form of ready listeners in this verbal exchange and respond to it. To make sure the reader grasps the kindred spirit between Milkman and Guitar as listeners and Pilate and Hagar as speakers, Morrison comments,

> Milkman was five feet seven then but it was the first time, in his life that he remembered being completely happy. He was with his friend, an older boy ..., he was surrounded by women [his estranged relatives] who seemed to enjoy him and who laughed out loud. And he was in love. No wonder his father was afraid of them. (47)

This call-response pattern ends with Milkman's bonding socially with his friend and fellow listener, Guitar, and with his female relatives, whom his bourgeois father disowned. Although Pilate had been a part of Milkman's life since his inception and had been banned from his family's household for the same number of years, she offers a spirit of contentment and happiness to Milkman that he had not experienced before. Milkman and Pilate are indirectly drawn to each other in this in this particular segment and directly in other parts of the novel. Their relationship throughout the novel parallels Milkman's personal and cultural growth.

Another passage that illustrates a more traditional approach to call-response occurs at Hagar's funeral at Linden Chapel Funeral Home where Pilate and her daughter, Reba, engage in a verbal exchange. Pilate initiates the call-response exchange by asking a question, "Mercy?" of herself. Her daughter had not entered the funeral home yet, but when she does, she responds, "I hear you" to everyone's astonishment:

> "Mercy?" Now she was asking a question. "Mercy?"
>
> It was not enough. The word needed a bottom, a frame. She straightened up, held her head high, and transformed the plea into a note....

> [a]nd before the last syllable had died in the corners of the room, she was answered in a sweet soprano: "I hear you." (Song of Solomon 321)

As soon as Reba enters, the exchange begins between mother and daughter. Interestingly enough, when Reba enters the room, she starts singing almost immediately. "Pilate neither acknowledged her entrance nor missed a beat. She simply repeated the word, "'Mercy'," and Reba replied" (Song of Solomon 321). This call-response pattern occurs at a distressing time in Pilate and Reba's lives. Pilate, in seeing her granddaughter dead from disappointments in love, calls out in a questioning form, "Mercy?" In other words, is this mercy, God, or whoever you are? Who responds to Pilate's piercing cry? Her own daughter, Reba, with "I hear you." One wonders whether this is an adequate response for Pilate, who had given so much of her life for the happiness of her granddaughter.

The call-response exchange between mother and daughter continues:

> In the nighttime. [Reba]
> Mercy. [Pilate]
> In the darkness.
> Mercy.
> In the morning.
> Mercy.
> At my bedside.
> Mercy.
> On my knees now.
> Mercy. Mercy. Mercy. Mercy.
> They stopped at the same time in a high silence. (Song of Solomon 321-2)

This call-response pattern reveals not only what Evelyn Dandy calls "acknowledgment," but also a unifying catharsis

for both mother and daughter. Both are profoundly hurt by this death and do not grieve in the conventional way by screaming and shouting about the loved one being dead. They respond in a way reminiscent of a Black spiritual with one calling out to some one, probably to a Supreme Being, for help and the other simply answering with a simple two syllable word, Mercy. One can envision their pain and sorrow through this distinctive pattern, which ends with a repetitive mercy. This sequence also functions to bring closure to Hagar's death. One could associate this closure metaphorically with the death of a young adult dying for love just as Christ suffered and died for love.

Then Pilate enters into a bluesy song which again appropriates a call-response tradition. This time, though, she is calling to her dead granddaughter, Hagar, in the same tone she uses when Hagar was a child.

> Who's been botherin my sweet sugar lumpkin?
> Who's been bothering my baby?
> Who's been botherin my sweet sugar lumpkin?
> Who's been botherin my baby girl?

Then Pilate responds herself:

> Somebody's been botherin my sweet sugar lumpkin.
> Somebody's been botherin my baby.
> Somebody's been botherin my sweet sugar lumpkin.
> Somebody's been botherin my baby girl. (Song of Solomon 322)

This bluesy sequence by Pilate allows her to release some of the deep emotions of sorrow within her. Trudier Harris suggests that

> [Th]e blues are a way for people to touch their pain and that of others, to sing of what, in any given instance, is but an individualized account of collective suffering....

> If the tale of tragedy is told/sung, rehearsed and replayed, perhaps, just perhaps, the listener-reader will be touched enough to move beyond the cathartic effect into a transformation of current condition. (27)

Pilate is responding to her sorrow within a bluesy context. In encompassing a blues ideology, she engages the reader/audience to respond to her sorrow. One cannot listen to such vernacular lyrics without being touched. In this context the reader's/audience's response to Pilate's bluesy call is to viscerally open up by stopping to meditate on such a call. For Pilate her blues is a juncture in her life where she must say good-bye to the granddaughter whom she has loved and nurtured for all of her years of her existence.

Morrison appropriates many other examples of call-response in her novels. The above references are only a few that illustrate the enormous vision this Nobel Laureate uses in her fiction, particularly in The Bluest Eye and Song of Solomon.

Morrison's use of call-response encompasses "the *process* of communication" (Smitherman 105). Although the substance is important, Morrison's writing is supposed to get the reader to engage in the *process*, to respond, to move, to act in some manner or another. Although her works may be read in silence, Morrison suggests that "one should be able to hear" her works also:

> It should try deliberately to make you stand up and make you feel somewhat profoundly in the same way that a Black preacher requires his

> congregation to speak, to join him in the sermon, to behave in a certain ways, to stand up and to weep and to cry and to accede or to change and to modify. ("Rootedness" 341)

Morrison wants the reader to respond to her writings, for it is the participatory interaction between the reader and the writer, "between the artist or the speaker and the audience that is of primary importance" ("Rootedness" 341).

CHAPTER 5

THE AESTHETIC AND LITERARY APPEAL OF CALL-RESPONSE IN ALICE WALKER'S THE THIRD LIFE OF GRANGE COPELAND AND THE COLOR PURPLE

Alice Walker writes in In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens that Zora Neale Hurston "took the trouble to capture the beauty of rural Black expression. She saw poetry where other writers merely saw failure to cope with English" (261). Alice Walker and her predecessor, Hurston, captured the beauty of Black speech in their novels, and both elevated Black speech patterns in their novels to the level of aesthetic discourse.

Many literary and cultural critics have focused, however, not on the speech patterns and Oral Tradition found in Alice Walker's works, but on the themes and motifs of the repressed artistic creativity of Black women. Michael Awkward, for one, suggests that Walker examines the "spark" and "spirit" of the African-American woman "that has survived despite racist and sexist efforts to suppress it and a general devaluation of its products" (137). Other critics, such as Barbara Christian and Mary Helen Washington, take similar stances in their exegesis of Walker's novels. Literary and cultural critics have casually referred to orality in Walker's novels, but only a handful of essayists have directed their critical pens to Walker's expressive language. Although Henry Louis Gates, Jr. directs his

attention to Walker's use of signification, he does not deal with her appropriation of call-response as an expressive speech pattern. Hence this latter area is a fertile area for literary study.

In contrast to Zora Neale Hurston's or Toni Morrison's appropriation of call-response, Alice Walker's use of call-response is aligned with her "womanist ideology." *Womanism*, according to Walker refers

> to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior; also "a Black feminist, [as well as a woman who] loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values, tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. (In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens xi)

In using womanist ideology, Walker focuses on two strategies of call-response. On the one hand, she appropriates the traditional approach to call-response in which a speaker presents her message and receives a spontaneous, reciprocal "interactive" response from her audience. On the other hand, Walker applies a blues tradition to the context of call-response where a "singer objectifies, almost symbolizes, the emotional content of the song ... [and thus] places the situation in stark relief as an object for discussion" (Williams 75). The latter approach will be treated first.

Often in the context of delineating the Black woman's oppression, the audience, as a blues audience, would respond as follows:

> "Tell it like it is" rather than "Amen" or "Yes, Jesus" as a response to a particularly pungent or witty truth, for the emphasis is on the thinking. (Williams 75-76)

Such thinking was illustrative of Black women singing the blues, bespeaking and interpreting the Black woman's experiences. Daphne Duval Harrison in Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s reiterates this concept of Black female blues singers who

> brought to their lyrics and performances new meaning as they interpreted and reformulated the Black experience from their unique perspective in American society as Black females. They saw a world that did not protect the sanctity of Black womanhood.... They pointed out the pain of sexual and physical abuse and abandonment. (64)

The Black woman blues singer is the raconteur and interpreter of the Black woman's difficulties and despair, which resulted from sexual and racial oppression, particularly during the 1920s and 1930s. Additionally the "blues singer evokes, matches, and intensifies the 'blues' feeling of the listener in the act of singing the blues" (Harrison 64). The blues imagery conjures up the folk tradition of call-response for the singer and her audience/listener, particularly for the rural Black woman.

> The southern country blues women understood the impact of crop failure, oppressive farm-owners, cheating company stores, and the drudgery of working from sunup to sundown to make ends meet. They could express the hurt of women whose men left them to find work and never returned. (Harrison 68)

The blues was an avenue for revealing the tough, brutal experiences of the Black woman, especially if she resided in

the South. Although Northern Black women, especially during the 1920s and 1930s, experienced the blues, Alice Walker's concern is for the Southern rural Black woman and African American culture during these decades.

In Alice Walker's appropriation of the blues imagery, particularly in The Third Life of Grange Copeland and Color Purple, she has stated that

> all African-American language is close to music. That is what we aspire to ... to a certain directness, a direct approach to the human heart. We know music [to be] the most direct load in our writing and our poetry; I think we emulate music. (Taped interview)

Walker is emulating in her fiction not just music, but a distinct kind of music, the blues, that is indigenous to poor Blacks and reveals a shared commonality between her protagonists and her audience-readers. Walker acknowledges the tradition of Black women blues singers and even places the novelist, Zora Neale Hurston, in that category with Billie Holiday and Bessie Smith:

> In my mind, Zora Neale Hurston, Billie Holiday, and Bessie Smith form a sort of unholy trinity. Zora belongs in the tradition of Black women singers, rather than among "the literati," at least to me. There were extreme highs and lows of her life, her undaunted pursuit of adventure, passionate emotional and sexual experience, and her love of freedom. Like Billie and Bessie she followed her own road, believed in her own gods, pursued her own dreams, and refused to separate herself from "common" people. (In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens 91)

Since "the blues" can serve as a medium of expression for "common" ordinary poor Blacks, especially among Black women,

to reveal the somber, brutal highs and lows of their lives, Walker chooses the blues format to incorporate the essence of womanism into her novels.

Several key questions are directly related to understanding of Walker's application of the blues. What is the blues and its structure? How does Walker appropriate the blues in her novels? How does the blues relate to the rural and urban poor? The blues, according to Geneva Smitherman in Black Talk, is a "feeling of depression, often resulting from a love relationship that's not going right" (63). Such a definition is partially true for Walker's narratives, but much is omitted. Clarence Major in his work, Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African-American Slang, suggests that the blues emanated out "of 'Negro' work songs, hollers, and spirituals. Among Black speakers and others, 'blues' has come to mean a state of sadness or depression" (49). Major's delineation is also inadequate for Walker's use. Blyden Jackson and Louis D. Rubin, Jr. in Black Poetry in America: Two Essays in Historical Interpretation not only define the blues, but make a direct connection between the "classic blues configuration" and "call-response chant of West Africa" (55). They assert that

> [I]t is not something which the common, ordinary Negroes, who were its leading American patrons, were taught by learned men out of books. It is something which they passed down among themselves. It has a three-phase form. (55)

Hence Jackson and Rubin establish a relationship between the three-line blues and call-response, which Walker appropriates. LeRoi Jones (aka Amiri Baraka) in Blues People, several years before Jackson and Rubin defined the blues, discloses a connection between the blues and call-response. He also states that the blues consists of a "three-line verse form [that] springs from no readily apparent source" (69).

The blues form of "the three-line AAB structure" is integral to understanding the blues tradition and call-response (Jones 62). Jones was one of the first scholars to reveal a cogent interconnectedness between the blues tradition and call-response. He asserts that

> the shout [of the ex-slave field hand] as much as the African call-and-response singing dictated the form the blues took. Blues issued directly out of the shout and, of course, the spiritual. The three line structure of the blues was a feature of the shout. The first two lines of the song were repeated, it would seem, while the singer was waiting for the next line to come. Or, as was characteristic of the hollers and shouts, the single line could be repeated again and again, either because the singer especially liked it, or because he could not think of another line. (62)

Walker pursues a structural path in her novel, The Third Life of Grange Copeland, that is reminiscent of the three phase form or three line form of the blues. She focuses her major narrative on the three aspects of Grange Copeland's life with a counter-discourse of Black womanhood embedded in the major narrative. Walker sees the blues

tradition in a way that recalls Ralph Ellison's depiction of the blues:

> The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeesing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically. (Shadow and Act 78)

Walker, as blues narrator and possibly performer, appropriates both the consciousness and three part blues form of Grange Copeland's life in The Third Life of Grange Copeland and entices the audience-reader to respond to the social fabric of Copeland's bluesy life. Robert Coles, in a review of this novel, reaffirms this motif when he states that "The Third Life of Grange Copeland is concerned with the directions a suffering people can take" (7). Grange Copeland's life is indeed representative of the suffering rural farmhand.

Grange's first life, as in the format of the first line of the blues, discloses the first phase of his suffering secular life. Within this blues structure, Walker exposes the reader to the blues character of Grange and the blues themes of economic and spiritual hardships in the rural South as a sharecropping Black man tries to support his family. Instead of breaking even financially each year, Grange continually gets deeper and deeper in debt. Kalamu ya Salaam implies that characters or people like Grange Copeland embody blues people, who "manifest a blues

sensibility, a post-reconstruction expression of peoplehood culturally codified into an aesthetic" (7). These blues people, contends Salaam, display a blues aesthetic that is

> the cultural manifestation of former slaves expelled from the land, promised a new land, and ultimately and callously, turned into an easily exploitable surplus, unskilled and [or] semi-skilled, migratory, landless, politically unenfranchised labor pool. (7)

Grange Copeland, representative of the unenfranchised agrarian Black worker, worked endlessly with no possibility of ridding himself of the demands of country life, except escaping in the middle of the night to the north. In addition, he married a respectable woman whom he initially had not loved. He was not satisfied in the marriage, and so he sought comfort in extra-marital affairs. This motif of extra-marital affairs, failed marriages, and triangular love relationships is common fare for the blues. Lawrence Levine alludes to this motif when he states that "folk definitions of the blues equated them with disappointments in love.... Love was depicted as a fragile, often ambivalent human relationship between imperfect beings" (276).

Grange's consciousness consists not only of unsatisfied love relationships, but of powerlessness and impoverishment. Thus he exhibits a stern mask to practically everyone, including his own son and wife, to conceal these hurtful emotions. Keith Byerman suggests that Grange's mask "is not the strategically adopted one of the trickster but one assumed to hide the involuntary reactions of fear and

hatred" (130-1). Byerman is not totally accurate in suggesting that Grange exhibited fear and hatred in wearing a mask; rather, the true origins of Grange's mask emanated from ***disappointment*** (not fear) and powerlessness in his reactive behavior to the white men who exploited his labor on the farm and at the country store. If any fear existed, it would be fear of the physical retaliation that Grange or any Black man would receive if he rebelled or directly confronted his oppressor. Grange knew full well that such behavior was not feasible in his rural area:

> He was thirty-five but seemed much older. His face and eyes had a dispassionate vacancy and sadness, as if a great fire had been extinguished within him and was just recently missed. He seemed devoid of any emotion, while Brownfield watched him, except that of bewilderment. (The Third Life of Grange Copeland 13)

His sadness and even resignation emanate from the oppressive conditions of his life and the lives of other sharecroppers. "Disease, illness, and dehumanization underscore these destructive conditions [and such] details are presented directly by the extradiegetic narrator and invite the reader to respond" (Butler-Evans 110). Grange's hardships and lack of money could end any possible dream he might have for his son or himself:

> When Brownfield's mother had wanted him to go to school Grange had assessed the house. Knowing nothing of schools, but knowing he was broke, he had shrugged; the shrug being the end of that particular dream. It was when Margaret needed a dress and there was no way Grange could afford to buy it. He merely shrugged, never saying a word about it again. After each shrug he was more silent than before, as if each of these shrugs cut

> him off from one more topic of conversation. (The Third Life of Grange Copeland 14)

As a working man who is unable to provide even the mere necessities for his wife and son and whose family is living in shabby housing with drafty, leaky facilities, Grange emits emotion that consists of physical and symbolic shrugs. His life is representative of the many rural Black sharecroppers who were disappointed in working hard, but getting nowhere economically, and who were oppressed and exploited by the white economic system. These conditions revealed a world of Black people, whose lives were fertile material and themes for the blues.

The second line of the blues is very much like the first line, with a repetitious line-A rhyme. Grange again may be delineated as a blues character. His second life duplicates quite literally his first life. Grange is situated in an economically depressed position, except that he now lives in the North as a penniless drifter. As a suffering economically impoverished urban Black man, he is beset by suffering, hardship, and manipulation by others. Grange's life is reminiscent of the first two lines of Howling Wolf's popular blues song:

> Well I'm a po boy, long way from home.
> Well I'm a po boy, long way from home.

In this Northern atmosphere Grange, like other urban poor Blacks who migrated from the South, learns the manipulative game of survival in light of his economic difficulties.

A significant difference between his life in the South and in the North was his being by himself in the North. Aloneness is a particular aspect of the blues. Poverty plus this feature of aloneness [translate into invisibility with no one caring about his hardships or trouble] created an added dimension of misery:

> The South had made him miserable, with nerve endings raw from continued surveillance from contemptuous eyes, but they knew he was there. Their very disdain proved it. The North put him in solitary confinement where he had to manufacture his own hostile stares in order to see himself. For why were they pretending he was not there. Each day he had to say his name to himself over and over again to shut out the silence. The Third Life of Grange Copeland 145)

Grange had become a variation on a theme from Ralph Ellison's invisible man; in contrast to Ellison's invisible man who had attended college and was quite an orator, Grange was an unlettered, pathetic tenant farmer who had migrated to the North with no oratorical skills to rely on. He very often "struggled with dizziness and nausea" from his hunger pains, "tired eyes," in an "unkept appearance, [with] his bushy beard and stinking underarms and breath" (The Third Life of Grange Copeland 149). His life is reflective of the social fabric of the blues, this time the urban blues.

Even amidst his extreme hunger and coldness in New York, Grange briefly empathizes with the heartbreak of the young white pregnant woman, who is obviously being deserted by her already married young soldier-lover. Grange sees

white people for the first time as humans who could possibly cry the blues:

> Grange had watched the scene deteriorate from the peak of happiness to the bottom of despair. It was the first honestly human episode he had witnessed between white folks, when they were not putting on airs to misinform the help. His heart, ached with pity for the young woman as well as for the soldier, whose face, those last seconds, had not been without its own misery. And now the perhaps normally proud woman sat crying shamelessly--but only because she thought herself alone. There she sat, naked, her big belly her own tomb. (The Third Life of Grange Copeland 147)

Just about the time that Grange makes up his mind to talk to her, she abruptly changes her stance and stops crying, and her face becomes "one that refused to mark itself with suffering" (The Third Life of Grange Copeland 148). Here Walker distinguishes between suffering Blacks and the suffering Whites and denotes why Whites cannot sing the blues. Grange sees the young White woman change abruptly and return to a more settling, icy demeanor:

> At the same time her icy fortitude in the face of love's desertion struck him as peculiarly [W]hite American. **No blues** would ever come from such a saving of face. [emphasis mine] It showed a lack of self-pity (and Grange believed firmly that one's self was often in need of a little sympathetic pity) that also meant less sympathy for the basic tragedies that occurred in the human situation. (The Third Life of Grange Copeland 148)

Grange's monologue on the blues suggests that an open honesty about one's problems was essential to the blues. One had overtly to acknowledge one's hardships without the pretensions or hints that such difficulties never happened--by not putting on a happy face to disguise one's problems,

and one had to learn from one's pain. Grange perceives that Whites cannot follow a blues tradition, for they quickly disguise their true feelings and sympathy for the human situation. He was an empathizer who did not shed his *humane* sympathy for others, regardless of his low status in life. One might say that Grange's experience of watching the White woman ironically humanized for his return South. When Grange offered the young woman the bills that she had dropped, she became offensive. As Grange suggests,

> He hated her entire race while she stood before him, pregnant, having learned nothing from her own pain, helplessly except before someone more weak than herself, enjoying a revenge that severed all possible bonds of sympathy between them. (The Third Life of Grange Copeland 151)

From all of her own difficulties the young pregnant woman had learned nothing about humaneness and sympathy, repeatedly calling him, "nigger," and showing only despised fearlessness toward him. When she accidentally falls into the frozen pond, Grange's instinct was to save her, no matter who the person was, so he "stretched out his arm and nearly touched her" (The Third Life of Grange Copeland 152). She withdrew her hand, however, when she felt his undoubtedly calloused hands and sank in the icy water. Strangely though her last breath was "nigger." No humanity or humanness was disclosed, even at her end, although Grange consistently retained a guiltiness about her death at that moment and in subsequent years. His second life again reflected, though, a behavioral pattern of ironic

proportions. He had wanted to help, but was rejected, and yet he profited by keeping the young pregnant woman's money. He rationalized the situation by suggesting that "he had stumbled on the necessary act that Black men must commit to regain, or to manufacture their manhood, their self-respect. They must kill their oppressors" (The Third Life of Grange Copeland 153).

The third line of the blues, the B-line, changes, as does Grange's life, and results in a resolution of the other two blues lines. Grange returns to the South and takes on the persona of a concerned and helpful grandfather. When his son, Brownfield, murders his wife, Grange takes in the youngest granddaughter, Ruth, whom he cuddles, spoils, teaches, and even dies for:

> Grange's plan was to teach her everything he knew. Already, he liked to boast, "Your aim's a heap better than mine!"
>
> For all that he liked to see her self-sufficient.... Believing unshakably that his granddaughter's purity and open-eyedness and humor and compassion were more important than any country, people, or place, he must prepare her to protect them. (The Third Life of Grange Copeland 214)

This time the blues line suggests hope and optimism for the characters, for Grange teaches his granddaughter about her Black history, survival skills in a racially imperfect world, and human compassion. Grange wanted his granddaughter to survive "whole," for "wholeness" is essential to Black women surviving and fighting oppression (Winchell x).

The final stage of Copeland's life is reminiscent of the third line of the blues with its resolute ending. Just as the three line blues lyrics of "Trouble in Mind Blues" connote:

> Trouble in mind, I'm blue, but I won't be blue always. Because the sun is going to shine, in my back door someday.

These bluesy lyrics illustrate what Daphne Harris articulates about some blues poetry: the lyrics may start off with despair but end with optimism: "This optimistic audacity is a clear example of blues as life, identifying the source of pain, acknowledging its effect, then taking a step to deal with it" (101). Grange's three lives produce feelings reminiscent of Harris's comments. His life starts off with despair in the rural South, but it ends with a sort of optimism. In his third life, Grange Copeland does take an acknowledged step to deal with his pain, and with the financial break he received in the North, he lives out his [third] life in rural Georgia by working emotionally, financially, historically, and psychologically to improve the life of his granddaughter. Ultimately he gives up his life for her. He wanted the sun to shine for her in her back door with her living a decent life with money, land, and knowledge to survive whole. Hortense Spillers goes so far as to state that Grange Copeland reveals to readers "a lesson in the redemption of Black American manhood" (255).

Alice Walker offers a blues perspective for understanding the lives of Black women. "As in the blues," writes Maria V. Johnson, "Walker uses 'personification' as a structural vehicle to explore a wide range of issues and experiences of struggle and conflict" [of Black women] (225). Walker personifies the lives of struggling Black women as a blues motif "to articulate the complexity of their struggles, and to expose and confront the oppressive forces facing Black women in America" (Johnson 221). Walker becomes the blues singer-performer for the women in her audience. An interaction between blues singer and audience underscores a shared communal relationship, so the interactions between a novelist and her protagonist and the reader-audience underscore the communal values of the audience, particularly of Black women. Walker calls to mind the Black woman's sexual and economic oppression by Black men in a counterdiscourse on the Black woman's narrative.

Through this counterdiscourse on Black womanhood, Walker develops her motif of womanism and locates her historical-chronological work within the Black feminist historiography of the blues ideology. Elliot Butler-Evans suggests that

> Inscriptions of the feminine in Walker's novels are marked by their difference from the racial history she invokes. Quite often, they become alternative narratives that disrupt or address directly or indirectly, the omissions of the framing historical discourse. The peremptory movement of a feminine-feminist counterdiscourse becomes the dominant textual activity. (125-6)

This novel presents Black female characters, who are weakened and/or destroyed by the Black and White male forces within their communities, in several sub-narratives in counterdiscourses. One could easily ask, as critic Barbara Christian's student in a seminar on Alice Walker at the University of California at Berkeley: "'Why is there so much pain in these books [of Alice Walker]? ... What kind of images are these to expose [one] to--(pause)? I don't want to see this, know this'" (32-33). Walker does have a rationale for exposing the pain and suffering of Southern Black women. By using the blues motif and format, she is able to delineate the hardships of Black women while using the novel as an aesthetic mode, and then, allowing the blues format, as presented through blues singers, to evoke some type of healing for Black women on an individual and group basis to make them whole. Hazel Carby asserts that

> blues were certainly a communal expression of Black experience which had developed out of call and response patterns of work songs and have been described as a "complex interweaving ..." of individual and group experience. (750)

With the blues form, Walker becomes the blues-singer and her readers the audience. Lawrence Levine invokes this concept when he asserts that:

> Within Afro-American culture, then, the relationship of performers to their audience retained many of the traditional participatory elements, the give-and-take that was so familiar to nineteenth-century Black storytellers and their audiences. (234)

Walker as blues-performer appropriates call-response as a blues form within her Black feminist writings. Levine argues that within the call-response tradition, it is the singer of the blues who responds to herself or himself (221). Walker, in contrast, directs her blues-narratives, not to herself, but to other women, both Black and White. Walker addresses this issue in In Search of our Mothers' Gardens:

> Patricia Meyer Spacks attempts to explain why her book [The Female Imagination] deals solely with women in the "Anglo-American literary tradition." (She means, of course, *white* women in the Anglo-American literary tradition.) Speaking of the books she has chosen to study, she writes: 'Almost all delineate the lives of white middle-class women.' Phyllis Chesler has remarked, 'I have no theory to offer of Third World female psychology in America.... As a white woman, I'm reluctant and unable to construct theories about experiences I haven't had.' So am I: the books I talk about *describe familiar experience, belong to a familiar cultural setting*; this particular immediacy depends partly on these facts.'" (372)

Alice Walker responds: "Spacks never lived in nineteenth century Yorkshire, so why theorize about the Brontes?" (372). Walker's response to critics, such as Spacks and others, is that since they did not live in nineteenth century England, how can they analyze exegetically the writings by the Brontes? Some discrepancy exists, according to Walker, in such comments. One would suspect that such white women critics could not respond to poor twentieth century white women's hardships and lifestyles either.

Within The Third Life of Grange Copeland Walker has written, not "sorrow" songs as suggested by DuBois, but "sorrow" narratives of Black women who bespeak Black womanhood and "womanist" tales of Black Southern women and girls. Walker's delineation of the rural Black woman moves her into the role of blues raconteur of Black women. Hence, she becomes one of the blues performers-storytellers who "improvise variations on existing songs and thereby confirm and intensify bonds of kinship and experience with their listeners" (Callahan 16).

One of the first variations of "blues-woman" in The Third Life of Grange Copeland is Margaret, Grange Copeland's first wife. Margaret is metaphorically considered a blues character because she is representative of the sexual oppression Black women experienced during the 1920s, and she is the kind of woman Bessie Smith and others often sang about.

Her story is envisioned, however, through the eyes of her son, Brownfield. Elliot Butler-Evans concurs that "[t]he narrative strategy of having events filtered through the mind of Brownfield precludes a telling of Margaret's story, yet her story remains a disturbing presence embedded within the dominant narrative" (110). Brownfield recounts that the fear, fright, and flight his mother experienced depended on his father's moods and occurred on a cyclical basis: "On Monday, suffering from a hangover and the after

effects of a violent quarrel with his wife the night before, Grange was morose.... Margaret was tense and hard, exceedingly nervous" (The Third Life of Grange Copeland 12).

By Tuesday with Grange in a quiet mood, the family relaxed. The rest of the week was uneventful until Saturday night when Grange returned home extremely drunk and threatened to kill his wife and son. Then Margaret would run into the woods with her son to prevent that from happening. This episode took place every week-end with endless fighting the result. (The blues song, "Stormy Monday" comes to mind.) Grange continued to see the "fat yellow bitch" each week-end. The problematic marriage, coupled with the extra-marital affairs, is the content of many blues songs. Blues women expressed these realities and the emotional impact of such realities in their songs. Interestingly though, Walker does not impart any moral implication within this work.

Walker as blues-singer/narrator also "evokes, matches, and intensifies the 'blues' feeling of the listener in the act of singing the blues" (Harrison 66) in Margaret's characterization. The audience-reader is moved to respond with a question of "Why does a decent, good woman like Margaret take such shit and not fight back?" The "Poor Man's Blues" or more appropriately "The Poor Woman's Blues" responds to such a question:

> Please listen to my pleading, 'cause I can't stand these hard times long.
> Please listen to my pleading, 'cause I can't stand these hard times long.
> They'll make an honest man do things you know is wrong. (Found in Black Pearls 70-71)

Margaret, as an honest woman, eventually changes; she does things she knows are wrong, and she begins to live the worldly bluesy life of what Brownfield calls, "the rituals of song and dance and drink ... every Saturday night" (The Third Life of Grange Copeland 20).

The youthful Brownfield sees the changes in his mother and blames his father. Eventually Grange deserts his wife, Margaret, and his sons and leaves for the North. When these situations confront women, they find resolution in one of several ways: nervous break-downs, faster lives of drink and song, or death. Margaret chooses the latter and kills herself and her young baby son, whose father is probably not Grange. Brownfield "found them there. She was curled up in a lonely sort of way, ... as if she had spent the last moments on her knees" (The Third Life of Grange Copeland 21). Margaret's existential ending reminds one of what Harrison reveals about the blues:

> Sometimes the ordeal of coping with an adulterous mate, poverty, and overwork proved too debilitating for a woman to retain her inner strength and determination. Thus we have a group of blues that depict the weariness, depression, disillusionment, and quiet rage that seethe below the surface when a woman has reached the end of her rope. (The Third Life of Grange Copeland 86)

Margaret's rage continued to seethe internally. Having no chance to redirect or sublimate her hurt and hostility, she committed suicide. If Margaret had had the opportunity to redirect her rage publicly, she might not have taken her life. Going "public is their [blues women's] declaration of independence. Blues of this nature communicated to women listeners that they were members of a sisterhood that did not have to tolerate mistreatment" (Harrison 89). Since Margaret did not go public, her blues-narrator, Alice Walker, does, and Walker's readers serve as the audience-listeners. This pivotal point of revealing negative relationships between Black men and women produces in women readers the need to publicly denounce males who abuse, and to band together as sisters refusing to tolerate such oppressive behavior (Harrison 89).

Walker repeats the theme of the hardships and hard times of Black women in Mem, the second of Walker's blues-women, but Mem fares even worse than Margaret.

Mem's story begins when she returns from school in Atlanta to her Aunt Josie's home. There she meets Brownfield, who falls deeply in love with her: "in his own mind he considered himself perfect for Mem, if only because he loved her" (The Third Life of Grange Copeland 47). Soon afterward, the Cinderella story of Mem and her love, Brownfield, materializes. Even though she is literate and reads extensively and he is unable to read at all, they

marry and enjoy marital bliss. He even makes wonderful promises that he won't be stuck as a tenant farmer; he makes promises of buying land and moving northward. Mem responds "with gay believing eyes, full of love" (The Third Life of Grange Copeland 49). Even after three years, they are in love. A second baby is on the way, and Brownfield is still working the same farm with no money saved:

> They were passionate and careless, he and Mem, making love in the woods after the first leaves fell, making love high in the corncrib to the clucking of hens and the blasting of cocks, making love and babies urgently and with purest fire at the shady ends of cotton rows, when she brought him water to the field and stood watching him with that look in her eyes while he drank and leaned an itching palm against the sweaty handle of her plow. As the water, cooling, life-giving, ran down his chin and neck, so did her love run down, bathing him in cool fire and oblivion. (The Third Life of Grange Copeland 49-50)

In this lengthy passage, thick with tender, sensual passion between Mem and Brownfield, Walker even intones a contemporary bluesy image: Mem's love runs down in comparison to the cool, refreshing water that runs from Brownfield's mouth.

Soon after that, Brownfield experiences heartache that starts "to hurt him, like an ache in the bones" (The Third Life of Grange Copeland 53), and so he changes. Brownfield, in seeing his life as a repetition of his father's, goes into a deep depression because of his continuing, mounting indebtedness and even considers suicide. His life becomes material for the blues:

> Lord, my worry sho' carryin' me down
> Lord, my worry sho' is carryin' me down.
> Sometimes I feel like, baby, commitin' suicide.
> (Rptd in Levine's text, Black Culture and Black Consciousness 260)

Walker does not abruptly shift Brownfield's characterization from sweet lover to evil husband, but uses a transitional explanation so that the reader-audience feels blues compassion for Brownfield. He moves from a deep love to deep depression to down-right evilness.

Brownfield beats Mem for what he knows is false, but such beatings begin the horrid oppressive behavior that destroys her. He not only beats and taunts Mem; he also begins to pursue "fat Josie" in an extramarital affair. Mem becomes his scape-goat, and the "tender woman he married he set out to destroy" (The Third Life of Grange Copeland 56). He destroys her speech, breaks her spirit, and mutilates her body. He sets out to change her, physically, emotionally, and psychically into an ugly woman.

In the blues lyrics, a Black woman initially tries to position herself for surviving comfortably. Mem takes this approach. Brownfield, however, whittles away bit by bit at Mem's spunk, until he completely subdues her and turns her into a ragged, physically worn-down hag:

> Everything about her he changed, not to suit him, for she had suited him when they were married. He changed her to something he did not want, could not want, and that made it easier for him to treat her in the way he felt she deserved. He had never had sympathy for ugly women. A fellow with an ugly wife can ignore her, he reasoned. It helped when he had to beat her too. (The Third Life 57)

(Subsequent references to novel will be abbreviated The Third Life.) Mem is clearly depicted as "the mule of the world" (In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens 237).

When Mem thinks that Brownfield still loves her, she discovers that he wants to impregnate her (this time with their last daughter) in order to force her to quit her job and thereby bring her into total submission. He succeeds in his quest, and he forces the family to return to the run-down, drafty tenant house.

Mem tries periodically to exude spunk, but such behavior is tempered or destroyed by her husband's deliberate undermining of her endeavors. Eventually Mem, the epitome of the sweet caring mother, is shot down cold-bloodedly, like an animal, by her monster-husband. Although Walker was censured extensively and severely for her depiction of Black women's physical and sexual abuse by Black men, it was absolutely necessary to "take the covers off" such deliberate and horrific acts by Black men. Walker herself asserts that

> many Black women feel that silent, uncritical loyalty is something you don't inflict on your child. In the sixties some Black women swerved out of our historical path of challenging everything that looked wrong to us to keep mum while Black men "ran the Black nation." This was psychically crippling to a generation of Black women ... and we say, Never again.... It is when we are silent that there is cause to worry." (353)

bell hooks, too, asserts that "collective unmasking," her term for "uncovering," is essential for Black women "who have

been victimized by traumatic events like incest and rape [and who must] speak openly about their experiences" (Sisters of the Yam 26). Black women often prefer to distinguish between the private shame they experience and the public persona of peace and order they exude. hooks continues,

> Many of us were raised to be believe that we should never speak publicly about our private lives, because the public world was powerful enough to use such information against us.... Telling the truth about one's life is not simply about naming the "bad" things, exposing horrors. It is also about being able to speak openly and honestly about feelings, about a variety of experiences. (27)

Mem is the epitome of the silent, private working-class woman as she struggles to keep her private and public personae separate. Then too, to whom could she possibly complain? Her only family is Josie, who cares little about her hardships. To some extent Walker has overplayed her hand in delineating characters like Mem. Such characters do not have the communal spirit of other Black women and must endure their difficult lives with no place to turn for consolation. Not only does Walker reveal the difficult sympathetic life of Margaret, but she repeats this hardship in the same novel with another female character, Mem, who experiences an even harsher life. Walker has described vividly what happens to female characters like Mem who docilely follow their men with little interrogation of their behaviors, actions, and speech. Characters, such as Mem, fall in love with high expectations of a successful

marriage, become disenchanted with their mates, have children, are abused by their mates, and yet remain in the marriage. Very little happiness or even contentment in found in the marriage. So it is with Mem. Nothing ever goes right in Mem's life, and her husband so totally epitomizes evil that one wonders if he could ever have loved Mem.

In the context of Mem's existence, Walker becomes the blues singer, who "uses song to create reflection and creates an atmosphere for analysis to take place" (Carby 750). Walker brings to the forefront the difficult lives of Black women who are oppressed by Black men and calls on women and men to modify their behavior. In her womanist ideology, Walker advocates that women respond to abuse. The docile, silent act of keeping wife abuse in the Black cultural closet is "psychically crippling to generations of Black women" and she advocates that we all respond, "Never again."

Walker's first novel also employs traditional examples of call-response. One salient example occurs in Part III when Brownfield Copeland, who had initially set out to go North to find his father, ends up in Baker County, a short distance from his home area. Ironically Brownfield walks squarely and directly into the joint of his father's old girlfriend, Josie. This first interaction between Brownfield and Josie appropriates a call-response form

called completer, where the speaker's statement, according to Smitherman (Talkin and Testifyin 107) is completed by the responder:

> Brownfield was not surprised. He had waited to know this part of his father's life.
>
> "Where you keep yourself all that time?" he asked. "I never heard nobody at home talk about no Josie."
>
> "You remember tellin' me 'bout that fat yellow bitch your mammy use to mention?"
>
> "You don mean ... " said Brownfield, still not very surprised.
>
> "Nobody else but." (The Third Life 61)

This conversational interaction between Brownfield and Josie reveals a communal friendship or type of bonding between the two characters. Brownfield initiates the sequence with "You don't mean ... " and Josie completes it "Nobody else but." At that moment both characters begin to establish an ironic, but communicative relationship that comes with learning about shared interests or pasts.

The call-response pattern continues between Josie and Brownfield and reveals other categories, which Smitherman in Talkin and Testifyin calls co-signing, where a listener agrees verbally or non-verbally with the speaker, and repetition, where the responder repeats the same words or similar words of the speaker (107).

> "Lemme tell you," she said, "Grange never would have married Margaret if he hadn't been pushed into it by his damn 'respectable' family... I were't good enough for him.... But every Saturday evening, by the clock, you could find Grange Copeland right, where you is now."
>
> "So he come here, and you took ... care of him?"

> "Yes," said Josie, proudly. "I took care of him, 'cause he was mine. I didn't pity your mammy one bit."
>
> "Mama was okay," said Brownfield...." Looked like to me at the time she knowed something I didn't."
>
> "She knowed plenty," Josie sneered. "Knowed she wouldn't do for your daddy what Fat Josie would do.... And with half the men in the country after her tail? The thought never crossed her mind! Then, when it did strike her, she forgot to charge! Shit."
>
> "Well," said Brownfield, embarrassed. (The Third Life 62)

The use of "Well," by Brownfield acknowledges that he hears and understands Josie's statements. He affirms that he is listening to her, though he may not necessarily agree with all of her comments. He affirms her comments that his father and mother often fought over his father's visits to fat Josie and her joint in town. He also affirms that the family was dirt-poor, but does not seem to totally agree with fat Josie's comments that his mother should have duplicated Josie's behavior to sell her tail to help his father get out of debt as Josie had done to build her establishment.

Repetitious comments and statements are also used in this verbal exchange between Brownfield and Josie. When Brownfield questions whether his father went to Josie for her to take care of him, Josie repeats what Brownfield says and provides a rationale for her repetitions. Yes, she took care of him because Grange was hers! Her ownership was more important than his erstwhile marriage to Margaret.

Another novel by Alice Walker that appropriates the blues tradition within a call-response pattern is her Pulitzer Prize winning The Color Purple. In The Color Purple Walker develops the blues tradition more fully. She appropriates a blues singer in the literal sense of the word to serve as a healing and supportive force for her women characters and her womanist ideology. This positive delineation of Black female blues singers is explored quite thoroughly in Walker's Black women characters who sing the blues, Shug, the strong-willed blues singer and Mary Agnes, also known as Squeak.

The blues singer's responsibility does not stop with her singing, for she catapults the characters with whom she associates to their fulfillment and calls them to respond actively to the deplorable conditions within their lives. The blues singer also calls the reader-audience to respond to the fruits of her song. Hence the blues woman projects the blues- theme motif in her singing, and also challenges the women in her physical environment to change some of the oppressive conditions in which they live. Here the word change is critical to Walker's characters, for, as she suggests, change is necessary to one's survival.

In contrast to The Third Life of Grange Copeland, where few women survive and/or succeed, in The Color Purple Walker sets up her women characters for success and healing and shows them how to effect their healing and wholeness. In The Third Life of Grange Copeland Walker merely begins the

blues-theme-motif, but does not complete the blues imagery in her women characters. In her prize winning novel, The Color Purple, Walker fully develops the blues-imagery, theme, and characterization in a thorough manner.

From the outset of The Color Purple, the first blues singer Walker introduces in the novel is one who is totally admired by the protagonist Celie. Walker almost immortalizes the blues singer in the form of Shug Avery, for Shug serves as the savior [with the small s] to Celie and her husband, Mister, and to the other characters as well.

When Shug is first introduced in the novel, she acquires a demeanor of directness, arrogance, and self-assuredness in what Walker defines as womanism. Actually Shug is even stronger than previous exemplars of blues singers. Ursa Corregidora, a sultry blues singer in Gayle Jones's novel, Corregidora, is mistreated by her husband and becomes barren; Ursa is forced to have a hysterectomy through her husband's ill handling of her and cannot continue the seed of her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. Shug, in contrast, is presented as a strong, Black, free-willed woman, whose growth includes her being sensitive and helpful to women. In a sense, Shug is presented as almost too idealistic in her adhering to the moral code of womanism: she is successful as a blues singer, she identifies with Black women and helps Black women find themselves, and, as a womanist, she is committed to survival and wholeness of women and men. Shug fits into

Walker's description of a "womanist." Maria Johnson asserts that Shug is a blues singer, "whose song is true to her own experiences and rooted in the values and beliefs of the community, [and she] empowers those who love her and effects change in those around her" (222).

Yet Shug is far from perfect in the usual sense of the word. Prior to her interaction with Celie, she had manipulated Albert and cared little or nothing at all about hurting Mister's first wife, Annie Julia:

> I went to school with Anna Julia. Shug say. She was pretty, man. Black as anything, and skin just as smooth.... And sweet too. Hell, say Shug, I like her myself. Why I hurt her so?.... She'd come and beg him [Albert] for money to buy groceries for the children. (The Color Purple 117)

She also revealed similar hurtful feelings, at first, towards Celie. Once that jealousy is removed from Shug's life, she becomes a strong, vibrant woman, who is interested in perpetuating womanist ideas and helping other women, particularly Celie. She is a gut-bucket blues singer, who mothered three children out of wedlock by a weak man who would not marry her because of parental pressure. All of these experiences helped to shape Shug.

Even after Albert marries a second time, Shug continues to associate with him blatantly, and even lives in the married man's home. Shug's behavior mirrors the blues tradition of Black female blues singers and the contradictions and paradoxes inherent in the novel. As Maria V. Johnson has suggested, Walker uses the blues

tradition to project paradoxes and contradictions that are inherent in the blues. These contradictory statements question woman-to-woman relationships, as between Shug and Celie, and women-and-men interactions, as between Shug and Albert and Celie and Albert.

Walker presents Shug Avery, the blues singer, as the catalyst who provokes action in the novel and helps to bring about change. Although she is not the protagonist, she propels the protagonist, Celie, into finding her voice and consciousness. Shug is the caller-catalyst, and Celie is the responder who listens and acts upon Shug's words and behavior. From the outset Shug is presented as the attractive, forward, aggressive woman who "does her own thing." Hazel Carby asserts that the "figure of the blues singer has become a cultural embodiment of social and sexual conflict" (756). Carby continues,

> The women blues singers occupied a privileged space; they had broken out of the boundaries of the home and taken their sensuality and sexuality out of the private into the public sphere. For these singers were gorgeous and their physical presence elevated them to being referred to as Goddesses, as the high priestesses of the blues, or like Bessie Smith, as the Empress of the blues. Their physical presence was a crucial aspect of their power; the visual display of spangled dresses, of furs, of gold teeth, of diamonds, of all the sumptuous and desirable aspects of their body reclaimed female sexuality from being an objectification of male desire to a representation of female desire. (756)

Carby seems to have Shug in mind, when she delineates the characterizations of a blues singer. The blues singer, as

does Shug, has power in the secular community and wielded that power for her material success and position.

As Carby suggests, the blues singer also places material success high in her priorities. She dresses sexually and sensually to fit the persona of the free-spirited woman who cares little about her reputation and virtuous living. Such was certainly the case with Shug. When Shug invites Celie to hear her sing at Harpo's joint, Mister says that he does not want Celie to go and states emphatically what his wife cannot do. Shug "wearing a skintight red dress [that] look like the straps made out of two pieces of thread" (74), says in her arrogant manner, "Good thing I ain't your damn wife" (The Color Purple 74). With that quick abrasive comment, Mister hushed up, and all three went to Harpo's joint. In other words, Shug, in contrast to Celie, does not take any "mess" from Mister, and she asserts her own personal views quickly and directly. Of course, her quick comments and brash actions help Celie to see what a prototyptical woman will do and say.

Walker reveals many descriptive examples where Shug gives awakening calls to Celie to respond to her voice, her physical body, and her consciousness. Shug is still the blues-singer-womanist who is calling another woman to respond to life. When Shug learns that Celie has not explored her own body or learned what enjoyment her body can experience, Shug calls on Celie to explore her body and the

pleasures her body can experience. Prior to this conversational exchange, Celie had internalized herself as ugly physically, and this concept of her physical ugliness and Blackness had consistently permeated Celie's consciousness. Early in the novel her step-father calls her ugly, and Celie responds by turning inward. When he introduces her to her future husband, he calls her ugly. Even Shug, on first meeting Celie, calls her ugly. Not only is she ugly, but she "ain't smart either," Celie's step-father states (The Color Purple 18). Thus Celie was a prime candidate for self-hatred and a low self-image. As Helen Cixous suggests, "[M]en have committed the greatest crime against women" (336). Men have taught women to hate their bodies, if the bodies are not used for the pleasures of men. "They have made women as anti-narcissist! A narcissism which loves itself only to be loved for what women haven't got! They have constructed the infamous logic of antilove" (Cixous 336). Adrienne Rich in Blood, Bread, and Poetry goes even further in revealing that women are too often depicted "as objects of sexual appetite devoid of emotional context, without individual meaning or personality--essentially as a sexual commodity to be consumed by males" (39-40). Rich further suggests in Of Women Born that "fear and hatred of our bodies had often crippled our brains" (284) and that when women begin to claim their own bodies as subjects, they begin to acknowledge their consciousness.

Then "woman-identification" becomes a "source of energy, a potential spring-head of female power" (63).

bell hooks in Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism and later in Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery goes even further in identifying the source of the Black woman's concept of her ugliness, low image of herself, and devaluation in the face of persistent bombardment of negative images and stereotyping:

> There is no mystery as to why after all these years of Black resistance to white racism, skin-color politics continue to be a negative force in our lives.
> Negative representations are fundamentally disenabling. We know that Black children [and Black women] have tremendous difficulty feeling good about their looks.... For it really does not matter how many positive images of Blackness we surround ourselves with, if deep down we continue to feel bad about dark skin and kinky hair. (Sisters of the Yam 93-94)

hooks also offers a solution to the problem of ridding oneself of negative self-images. She calls for female healing, where "we speak the truth of our lives" (19). Audre Lorde in Sister Outsider, too, suggests a type of healing in which Black women speak the truth but also "practice being gentle with each other" (120).

The practice of gentleness is the way Shug treats Celie. Shug, as a compassionate woman, encourages and calls Celie to examine her physical body, to see the beauty of her body, to reappropriate "her own body which was taken from her by men--first her brutal stepfather and then passed on

to her husband, Albert" (Ross 70). Related to Celie's intense dislike for her body is her powerlessness. "[A] patriarchy maintains power by rewriting the female body into powerlessness, thus denying the woman's ability to authorize herself" (Wall 261). Once Celie learns about her body and begins to love herself, she gains the *power* to defend herself and speak for herself.

Shug assists Celie is learning about the beauty of her body and eventually in learning to accept power over her body and her self:

> Why Miss Celie, she say, you still a virgin.
> What? I ast.
> Listen, she say, right down there in your pussy is a little button that gits real hot when you do you know what with somebody. It git hotter and hotter and then it melt. That the good part. But other parts good too, she say....
> She say, Here, take this mirror and go look at yourself down there. I bet you never seen it, have you?
> Naw....
> I stand there with the mirror. (The Color Purple 79)

In this context, Shug has taken on the maternal role of teacher, in instructing Celie about the beauty of her body and later the interconnectedness between the body and God. Daniel Ross suggests that Celie can be associated with a child who giggles as if she is learning something bad (71). Learning about sex and one's female body often is associated with doing something bad or wrong. This view, which has its origin in the thought in the eighteenth century philosopher Descartes, who advocated a division of body and mind with mind superior to body, continues even today in twentieth

century America. The concept of superiority of mind over body is discounted by the blues singer who advocates a continuity between body and mind. This is the position of Shug, who sees the beauty of both the body and the mind as equally important to one's psychical and spiritual growth.

Celie's response is one of eventual interest and beauty,

> All that hair. Then my pussy lips be Black. Then inside look like a wet rose.
>
> It a lot prettier than you thought, ain't it? she say from the door.
>
> It mine, I say. (The Color Purple 79-80)

Acknowledging her body, accepting her body as her own, and defying a patriarchal system of Black men who control her body, Celie's assertion of "It mine," is a progressive step forward in her claiming her consciousness, her selfhood, and her voice. Daniel W. Ross asserts that Celie's body, especially her hair, her lips, her rose, symbolize "an important aspect of Celie's attitude toward her body, an attitude that must change if she is ever to be free of male brutality" (11). It is through Shug's direction and guidance that Celie begins to understand her body.

Shug's concept of God also dissuades Celie from thinking of the body and its pleasures as "bad." About this same time Celie learns that dear, sweet Nettie has written numerous letters to her for many years, but none of them had reached her because they had been secretly hidden in Albert's trunk. This betrayal on Albert's part challenges

Celie's rapport with God. She ceases to write letters to God; how could such a "cruel" God allow such events to happen? Celie turns away from God and does not even acknowledge His/Her existence:

> I don't write to God no more. I write to you.
> What happen to God? ast Shug.
> Who that? I say.
> She look at me serious....
> What God do for me? I ast. (The Color Purple 175)

When further interrogated by Shug about her blasphemy, Celie responds, "Let 'im hear me, I say. If he ever listened to poor colored women the world would be a different place. I can tell you" (The Color Purple 175). This conversational exchange leads to Shug's calling on Celie to examine her concept and image of God. Celie's image encompassed a white man with "sort of bluish-gray" eyes with white lashes, "big and old and tall and graybearded and white" (The Color Purple 176). Shug helps Celie sort through the putative images, perpetuated by white people in this country and publishers of bibles which portray God as white and male. Shug then explains her rational, pantheistic God:

> I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found it....
> She say, My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. (The Color Purple 178)

Shug goes to explore why the body and all feelings, associated with the body, are good and God-like:

> God love all them feelings. That's some of the best stuff God did. And when you know God loves 'em you enjoys 'em a lot more. You can just relax, go with everything that's going, and praise God by liking what you like. (The Color Purple 178)

Shug concludes this conversational discourse with an aphoristic statement that places man, not God, in the midst of corruption, "You have to git man off your eyeball, before you can see anything a'tall" (The Color Purple 179).

Shug has initiated the first step in Celie's awakening of her consciousness through her accepting her body, and explains that God wants us to enjoy our bodies and pleasures associated with them. Now, Celie must learn and respond to the next level of her selfhood, to claim her own voice and mind. Celie is still fragmented after her existential interaction with Shug. Although her understanding of her body begins her change, she is still voiceless and writes no letters to God. When Celie first confronts Albert about Nettie's letters, Celie is ready to cut Mister's throat, but Shug intercedes and suggests that Celie's unusual behavior emanates from a fever. Celie responds,

> I don't sleep. I don't cry. I don't do nothing. I'm cold too. Pretty soon I think maybe I'm dead.
>
> Shug hold me close to her and sometimes talk.... I don't even want to say nothing. Where I'm at it peaceful. It calm. No Albert there. No Shug.
>
> Nothing.... I don't know nothing. I think. And glad of it. (The Color Purple 115-117)

Celie's behavior is reminiscent of Nietzsche's nothingness or Derrida's concept of "presence." Colin Falck in Myth, Truth, and Literature suggests that

> Among the conditions for our being able to have self-conscious experience is that we should be able to be aware of our own existence as intentional agents within (rather than merely as passive observers of) the world through an apprehension of other bodily presences around us with which our own agency interacts.... To experience such "external" presences or objects consciously we do indeed (as Kant, Saussure, Wittgenstein and Derrida would all concur) require conceptual language. (21)

Celie's consciousness begins to emerge as she moves from passive writer to active speaker. Her deadly silence and her feelings of nothingness allow her to ignore the facile environment, the talk of people around her, including Shug, so that she can emerge with a voice. One could say that this was the incubatory or dead-like period until she is resurrected in life again and able to speak of the difficult, oppressive existence she had lived with Albert. In a sense Celie, in a short period of several days, reflects on much that has occurred in her life and thus begins an internal growth that soon reveals her external growth as well. The resurrected "whole" self then emerged at the dinner table with all of her family there.

It is in this context that she experiences "the ontological priority of speech over writing" (Falck 21), and her consciousness and selfhood begin to blossom. Celie opens up and bespeaks her voice at the dinner table when

Grady indicates that he and Shug must leave "[s]uch good peoples, that's the truth. The salt of the earth ..." (The Color Purple 181). Then Shug posits that Celie is going to accompany them to Memphis. When Mister states, "Over my dead body," Celie's response at the table is anything but quiet, for she startles not only Mister, but everyone there as well:

> You a lowdown dog is what's wrong, I say. It's time to leave you and enter into Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need.
>
> Say what? he ast. Shock.
>
> All around the table folkses mouths be dropping open. (The Color Purple 181)

Celie then voices rather emphatically that Mister had taken her sister away from her and then retorts with

> But Nettie and my children coming home soon, I say. And when she do, all us together gon whup your ass....
>
> I got children, I say. Being brought up in Africa. Good schools, lots of fresh air and exercise. Turning out a heap better than the fools you didn't even try to raise....
>
> Oh, hold on hell, I say. If you hadn't tried to rule over Sofia the white folks never would have caught her. (The Color Purple 181)

Celie has finally assumed a voice, and everyone at the table is equally surprised at Celie's assertiveness and language. "It like a voice speaking from the grave" (The Color Purple 182). Celie's physical body, her voice, and her mind are finally united. Wendy Wall concurs that Celie, first of all, had to acknowledge her body, which was "the ground which allows her to change" (268). Wall continues

> For she initially had been fragmented by an external force, by rape; but when she takes

> control of that fragmentation--solidifying the rupture by displacing part of herself into her letters--she is able to reunify herself. As she shifts her conception of her body (from ugliness to beauty, from stability to malleability), she similarly learns that she can reinscribe the confinements that had silenced her. (268)

The public and private selves, the external and internal selves are resolved into one totalizing self. Celie responds to Shug, who is the blues singer, the womanist, the catalyst, her caller. Shug is the blues singer who maintains her beauty and physical presence and lays open her private and public lives for all to see. She is the womanist who encourages other women, especially the protagonist, Celie, to develop into her own self. She is the catalyst who helps other women find their own voices and selves. Walker suggests that Black women must also respond to Shug's call to rectify the fragmented self, the private and public selves, the external and internal selves into one totalizing Black body.

Thus Walker appropriates call-response as a blues motif with Shug, a female blues singer, serving as a catalyst to call Celie and women readers to respond to shattered oppressive conditions in their lives. Through Shug, Walker is calling, not only Celie, but Black women, generally, to overtly discuss and publicly renounce the masculine threat and the sexual oppression of women if healing and consequent change are to occur. In some ways the novel, The Color Purple, concludes with a fantasy, fairy tale ending with the totalizing character, Celie, addressing her last letter to

the pantheistic God: "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples, Dear Everything, Dear God" (The Color Purple 249). Celie is settled in a large home, economically stable, surrounded by family and friends.

Alice Walker in The Color Purple also appropriates call-response in a traditional way. In one scene, rather early in the book, Celie and Albert's twenty-five year old sister, Kate, purchase some material for making Celie a new dress. Celie says

> I can't remember being the first one in my own dress. Now to have one made just for me. I try to tell Kate what it mean. I git hot in the face and stutter.
>
> She say. It's all right, Celie. You deserve more than this.
>
> Maybe so. I think. (28)

This conversational discourse, though short, reveals what Smitherman calls, "co-signing." In this context Kate assures Celie that she deserves a new dress and much more. She calls Celie's attention to this deserving need, and Celie responds, though hesitantly, that maybe Kate is right. Celie is agreeing with Kate and is "affirming, agreeing with [the] speaker" (Smitherman Talkin and Testifyin 107).

Other examples of the conventional approach to call-response can be found in Walker's novel. Another pertinent example occurs when Celie finally receives a voice to speak overtly and directly to her husband, just before she leaves with Shug for Memphis. In this setting Celie confronts her

husband, Albert, about his hiding Nettie's letters all these years. Albert begins the conversational exchange with

> ... What wrong now?
> You a lowdown dog is what's wrong, I say. It's time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need.
> Say what? he ast. Shock.
> All round the table folkses mouths be dropping open. (The Color Purple 181)

This exchange contains several categories of call-response. One category in particular is repetition. When Albert wants to know what is wrong, he is appropriating a question to serve as an opening for a response from Celie. She in turn repeats part of his question in her answer to denote her response to his non-thinking, idiotic question. This exchange is continued when the family members respond non-verbally to Celie's answers with dropped mouths. This exchange incorporates a chain reaction with Albert initiating the call-response sequence and Celie responding with a strong, assertive voice. In turn Celie's response, in surprising the family members, becomes a call and the family members respond in a non-verbal way by their mouths "dropping open." In subsequent lines, the reader sees several individual member's responses to Celie's assertive call. Sophie responds by just stopping and not chewing for ten minutes. Harpo tries to defend his siblings' behavior. Mister is about to slap Celie, but she jabs a knife in his hand. Celie's attaining her voice and asserting her

consciousness is aligned with her call to self-hood and the family's response to Celie's call.

Walker appropriates call-response in this novel, The Color Purple, as in The Third Life of Grange Copeland. Her use of this traditional form has disclosed her as an electrifying writer who catapulted oral tradition to a literary height.

CHAPTER 6

SIGNIFICATION IN ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD

An oral feature, well known in one form or another to African Americans, is signifying. One hears it, uses it, and often reads of it in the context of African American culture. The use of signification also implies a large number of meanings and interpretations. Geneva Smitherman in Black Talk defines signifying as

> The verbal art of ritualized insult, in which the speaker puts down, needles, talks about (signifies on) someone, to make a point or sometimes just for fun. It exploits the unexpected, using quick verbal surprises and humor, and it is generally characterized by nonmalicious and principled criticism. (206)

Smitherman provides in another text, Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black Speech, a detailed description of the characteristics of this popular mode of Black discourse:

> -indirection [and] circumlocution;
> -metaphorical-imagistic (but images rooted in the everyday, real world;
> -humorous, ironic [language];
> -rhythmic fluency and sound;
> -teachy but not preachy [language];
> -directed at person or persons usually present in the situational context (siggers do not talk behind yo back);
> -punning, play on words;
> -introduction of the semantically or logically unexpected. (121)

Similarly as with Smitherman, Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, in her research on urban dwellers, examines signifying in her text, Language Behavior in a Black Urban Community. Mitchell-Kernan focuses on a contrast between signifying's

apparent meaning and its metaphorical meaning. The "apparent meaning of the sentence signifies its actual meaning" (325).

Evelyn B. Dandy in Black Communications: Breaking Down the Barriers does not use the word signification or any of its derivatives, but she calls attention to a specific kind "stylized talk" that is used primarily among African American males. Her categories of verbal strategies incorporate rappin', woofin' and playing the dozens (30). These terms suggest signification to this writer. Dandy asserts that her purpose in examining the verbal strategies of Black males is pedagogical in nature: to "sensitize teachers to the ways many Black males use words," particularly stylized talk, as an asset in motivating learning (30).

Cultural critic, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in his text, The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Theory, puts forth Signifying (with a capital S) as a Black vernacular tradition that inscribes a literary theory of Black writings:

> Free of the white person's gaze, Black people created their own unique vernacular structures and relished in the double play that these forms bore to white forms. Repetition and revision are fundamental to Black artistic forms, from painting and sculpture to music and language use. I decided to analyze the nature and function of Signifyin(g) precisely because it is repetition and revision, or repetition with a signal difference. Whatever is Black about Black American literature is to be found in this identifiable Black Signifyin(g) difference (xxiv).

Gates explicates the concept of Signifyin(g) by initially summarizing different linguists' and anthropologists' definitions of signifying and suggests that these definitions primarily stress indirection "as the most salient feature" of Signifyin(g) (103). He contends that revision and pastiche, more than indirection, are integral to Signification.

Although Gates' text is pivotal to understanding signification, particularly as a literary theory of African American writers, this writer initially prefers to take a different posture on signification, more akin to Smitherman's or Mitchell-Kernan's. Of Smitherman's detailed listing of characteristics of signifying, one feature stands out, indirection. That same feature of indirection is examined in Mitchell-Kernan. Since both Smitherman and Mitchell-Kernan incorporate similar meanings of signification whereby one speaker ***indirectly*** gets the better of his opponent, their references to verbal games or conversational exchange will be used, especially since Black women writers employ indirection in their novels.

One category of signifying that the linguists or writers on signification excluded is what one calls the verbal paradox, a statement which implies two contradictory positions. Verbal paradox is often spoken by one speaker in conversational exchange to confuse, befuddle, when giving two contradictory answers to another speaker. This type of

signifying is found in a limited way in Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God. However, it is particularly evident in the 1990s type of signifying on rap tapes and in urban environments; it is also found in Kweisi Mfume's 1996 autobiographical work, No Free Ride: From the mean streets to the mainstream. Mfume recounts that when he returned to his old neighborhood as a U. S. Congressman and chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus to film his roots for "60 Minutes," he came upon a group of young brothers who saw him as a part of the Establishment. Without any cameras or crew, he approached them and, after a short conversation, asked them if they were in school. The reply given by one of the gang members implied he was signifying on Mfume:

> "Some of us is, and some of us ain't. I was to graduate last May. So I guess that I is, and I guess that I ain't."
>
> His crew broke out in uncontrollable laughter, dishing out high fives to let me know that I had been chumped. I didn't react one way or another, but continued my spiel. (5)

Although Mfume's intent was simply to encourage young men to seek some type of goal in life as he had been encouraged by Congressman Parren Mitchell twenty or more years back, he ended up being signified upon by the young brothers. In the Mfume incident, the act of signification encompassed the contradictory statement of "Some of us is, and some of us ain't" and "I guess that I is, and I guess that I ain't." One can determine that the signifying statements are successful by the response of the primary listeners: "uncontrollable

laughter" and "high fives." These responses suggest that the young speaker, who undoubtedly was unemployed or underemployed, had cleverly outwitted his middle-class, out-of-the-hood visitor.

Signifying as a verbal paradox, which incorporates a speaker's use of contradictory statements, will be added to the definitions of Smitherman and others, and will be used in this paper.

Many African American writers have appropriated signification within their literary texts. Uppermost among African American women writers is Zora Neale Hurston, who incorporated signification in her novel, Their Eyes Were Watching God. Key questions one could ask are: How does Hurston inscribe signification in her novel? What types of signification does she appropriate? Does signification have authentic and aesthetic appeal? Has Hurston appropriated Black vernacular discourse to record or transcribe signification?

Hurston appropriates signifying, as she did with call-response, to elevate African American speech culture from the minstrelsy to high art. She rids Black folkloric traditions of its "low-life" status and imbues in these traditions, such as signifying, acknowledged aesthetic phenomena. Robert Hemenway in "Are You a Flying lark or a Setting Dove?" hypothesizes that "folklore brings to literature aesthetic dynamics that the artist incorporates

because they serve his or her artistic purposes" (130). Hurston appropriates the aesthetic dynamics, assures Hemenway, as a "trained folklorist as well as a gifted novelist" (131).

Through Hurston's characters, she evinces not the stereotypic traits of a bumbling, inarticulate Black person, but a wholesome, complex character that Sherley Anne Williams and other Black women critics could identify with:

> In the speech of her characters I heard my own country voice and saw the heroine something of my own country self. And this last was most wonderful because it was more rare. Black women had been portrayed as characters in numerous novels by Blacks and nonBlacks. But these portraits were limited by the stereotypical images of, on the one hand, the ham-fisted matriarch, strong and loyal in the define of the white family she serves ..., and on the other, the amoral, instinctual slut. Between these two stereotypes stood the tragic mulatto ...." (98)

Certainly Williams and others do not identify with the limited, bumbling stereotypical Black women characters, too frequently portrayed by Black and nonBlack writers.

Zora Neale Hurston in Their Eyes Were Watching God uses signification as folklore to espouse the clever speech of Black people. Her novel abounds with example after example of signification in varied shapes and sizes and often employs indirection, as a political tactic.

Deborah Plant implies that a political posture is appropriated in Hurston's signifying. She suggests that Hurston uses signifying "as a narrative device and

illuminates one aspect of her attempt to free herself from race..., sex and class domination" (85). Plant continues

> Enslaved Africans maintained this predilection for indirect expression, which manifests itself in African American traditions such as masking.... the enslaved could not articulate themselves explicitly without penalty. It was necessary to cloak one's express point of view. (86)

Hurston identified with these "bookless" people, so asserts Plant, as seen in her use of indirection in folk expression (86). Very often this indirection is evident in Hurston's rejection of patriarchal and classist behavior. "Signifying acts in Hurston's texts often serve to vent her anger against and frustration with authoritarians and elitists" (Plant 85).

One place in Their Eyes Were Watching God, where Hurston imbues a political agenda with signifying, occurs near the beginning of the novel when the protagonist is encouraged and then practically forced by her grandmother to marry Logan Killicks. Although Janie's grandmother is not elitist, she is authoritarian and forces her views on her granddaughter. Janie, who saw Logan Killicks as "some ole skull-head in de grave yard" (28), is reproached by her grandmother:

> "So you don't want to marry off decent like, do yuh? You just wants to hug and kiss and feel around with first one man and then another, huh? You wants to make me suck de same sorrow yo' mama did, eh? Mah old head ain't gray enough. Mah back ain't bowed enough to suit yuh!"
>
> The vision of Logan Killicks was desecrating the pear tree, but Janie didn't know how to tell

> Nanny that. She merely hunched over and pouted at the floor (Hurston 28).

Not only does the grandmother criticize her ward severely, but she also slaps "the girl's face violently" in contempt for the young girl's actions (Hurston 28). With such domineering behavior directed against the innocent sixteen year old protagonist, Janie marries old "skull-head" and settles down in marriage to Logan. Although the grandmother's political agenda was to get Janie married to a wealthy man in the community, regardless of Janie's feelings, she used her authority to force Janie into submission. Janie, out of respect and her own innocence, does not rebel against the grandmother until after her grandmother's death.

Signification with political overtones also occurs when Janie initially endeavors to talk to her husband about her feeling of dissatisfaction and incompletion in her marriage. Her husband, though, continues to empower himself and belittle Janie. True to indirection as a form of signifying, Janie broaches the subject and hints of possibly leaving him:

> "Sposin' Ah wuz to run off and leave yuh some-time."
> There! Janie had put words to his held-in fears.... (Hurston 51)

Logan responds indifferently:

> " ... Tain't too many mens would trust yuh, knowin' yo' folks lak dey do."

Janie continues indirectly telling Logan of a possibility:

> "Ah might take and find somebody dat did trust me and leav yuh." (Hurston 51)

Logan, not wanting to show his frustration upon hearing this, recounts:

> 'Shucks! 'Tain't no mo' fools lak me. A whole lot of mens will grin in yo' face, but dey ain't gwine tuh work and feed yuh. You won't git far and you won't be long, when dat big gut reach over and grab dat little one, you'll be too glad to come back then."
>
> "You don't take nothin' to count but sow-belly and corn-bread." (Hurston 52)

Janie doesn't come right out and tell her quasi-unconcerned husband that night in bed that she wants to leave him, but indirectly broaches the subject. She is undoubtedly seeking reassurance that he loves her and wouldn't want her to leave under any circumstances. She is conveying a message of her discomfort and unfulfillment with him. He doesn't catch the hint or doesn't want to reveal his true feelings. How does he respond? His response is harsh and abrupt, that no man will help her and feed her but him with her poor family tree. Then too, he continues, when a man's big gut reaches for her little thing, she'll really want to return to him. Janie then rebuts her husband by telling him that nothing is important to him but "sow-belly and corn-bread." This latter statement has two interpretations: a direct or literal meaning and a figurative, signifying meaning. A direct or literal interpretation suggests that her husband is concerned more for his victuals of pork and corn-bread

than with love and concern for his mate. On the other hand, since Janie is responding to her husband's comments, she is indirectly attacking him by suggesting that he doesn't think about anything except the female's lower parts, pork belly and corn-bread, translated into sex and food. Janie was, in other words, retorting with "a smart statement" to put down her husband or disparage him for his offensive words. Since she has already implied that she might leave him, his acid response seems to justify her leaving him.

Although he was hurt by her comments, he responds as if it hadn't hurt him. "He flopped over resentful in his agony .... He hoped that he had hurt as she had hurt him" (Hurston 52). From the outset of the couple's conversation, Janie was initially trying to awaken some positive response from her husband or to give him some insight into her unhappiness, but he belittled her and attacked her self-esteem. So she then retorted by signifying on him to counteract Logan's hurtful comments. She was talking to him indirectly to get some modification of his behavior or to get him to think about his continuous hurtful, yet unromantic behavior toward her, but Logan doesn't acknowledge her query, and simply sulks and goes to sleep. Janie's behavior is reminiscent of what Celeste Nichols in her unpublished dissertation on the Black Church calls "the verbal art of insult ... that is intended to modify

behavior, or is presented so that the hearer will at least think about such a modification" (83).

Janie's signifying that night then was a verbal attack on her husband in response to his indifference and subsequent attack on her. Her husband considered himself the "man" in control of his household, including his wife. After all, he was considered economically well off in the small town, and Janie had nothing, not even parents or relatives. As a matter of fact, Logan considered himself a "good catch" as did the grandmother. Since Janie realizes that she has little to no power with which to combat her husband, she uses her voice to try to maintain some sort of balance with him.

Some critics might call Janie a woman with an ego who is taking "no shit" or mess from a man. Hurston must first introduce rational underpinnings for the reader to understand why Janie can logically leave her hard-working husband. She cannot be construed as flighty or mercurial in her actions. David Headon asserts that Hurston was cocky and thus imbued her protagonist in Their Eyes Were Watching God with those same attributes (Plant 36). Plant, in differing with Headon's portrayal of Hurston as a "cocky" woman, asserts that

> The charge of "cockiness" is also characteristic of the critical judgment leveled against Hurston when her politics are [is, sic] considered unpalatable or "individual and eccentric." ... "Cock," a vulgar term for "penis," also refers to "a chief person," "a leader." And in a patriarchal

> society, her egotistical self-assertion is out of place. She cannot be a figure of authority, a pundit.... In a woman, even a sassy one, too much ego is unseemly. (124)

Certainly Hurston has placed within her protagonist, Janie, a sassy persona, but Hurston undercuts that sassiness and does not allow her protagonist to come across directly unsuitably or inappropriately aggressive. She allows Janie to underscore her dislike of and discontent with her husband in a signifying context.

The next morning, instead of showing some kind of affection, Logan persists in his attack on his wife, Janie. This time he threatens her physically by directing her to help him before sunrise, and even before breakfast, to move the manure pile quickly, "Git uh move on yuh and dat quick" (Hurston 52). Although he does not really need her help, he is endeavoring to berate her and force her into submission. He then tells her to quit back-talking him, or he'll take "dat ax and come in dere and kill" her. "God damn yo' hide!" (Hurston 53). After that diatribe, Janie realizes what she must do. Logan did not respond to her hint, her indirect statement about leaving him. So she calmly completed the cooking of his breakfast without giving her husband any hint of her impending behavior and "hurried out the front gate and turned south" with a "feeling of sudden newness and change" (Hurston 54).

On another level, Hurston is also signifying on the mistreatment of Black women by authoritarian figures,

generally males. As Deborah Plant states, "Signifying acts in Hurston's texts often serve to vent her anger against and frustration with authoritarians and elitists who represent patriarchal and classist repression" (85). Since Hurston did not confront the men who were her antagonists, she attacked them indirectly, often by signifying against these men. Consequently she conflated issues of race with sex and race with classism as "an attack against the men who represented both" (85). Plant also employs Filomina Chioma Steady's insightful comments to suggest that African women also used the "art" or "game" of scapegoating or ridicule as an "institutionalized mechanism" to vent their dissatisfactions and discontent with African males (85).

Since there were some subjects that were considered too controversial to explore without offending others, "Hurston used storytelling, joking, and *signifying* to broach these controversial, 'unarticulated' subjects" on Black men's treatment of Black women (Plant 87). Hence Hurston is engaging in a political ploy indirectly to reveal her approach to oppressive behavior directed against some Black women. Plant sums up this point when she states

> Even as Hurston *signifies* upon sexist and elitist Race Leaders and the idea of race, she expects that the jesting quality of the *signifying* act will pacify the confusion and disturbance created. She laughs off the notions of race in order to create racial and social harmony and to free herself from racial and social constraints. (91)

Although Hurston is not stressing the political agenda, she is, nevertheless, using the political agenda to appropriate Black folklore "as a source of individual and collective power" of Black women (Plant 82). She is noting the triple oppression of race, class, and gender of Black women

When Janie completes her signifying against her husband, she leaves him. In a sense she is also signifying against her deceased grandmother who as an authority figure forces Janie to submit to her demands and to those of her husband, Logan Killicks, who represents both oppressive conduits of race and sex to Janie. Love to the grandmother is not important, nor are the buzzing bees and the pear tree imagery.

Janie leaves Logan for the first man who approaches her humanely and decently, Joe Starks. If one takes Plant's view of signifying as an indirect attack against authoritarian forces, then Janie cannot attack her grandmother who is now deceased, but indirectly attacks her husband, another authoritarian, by leaving him and disappearing from his life. This is Janie's means of striking back--leaving the farm of forty acres and the two mules, which her grandmother thought freed her from exploitation of men.

Hurston also employs signifying within the frame of naming rituals. Walter Ong in Orality and Literacy suggests that oral communities, within which the Black community falls, saw naming as a means of showing some degree of

control over their lives. Sigrid King, in reiterating a similar approach to Ong, states that naming and names have

> always been an important issue in the Afro-American tradition because of its link to the exercise of power. From their earliest experiences in America, Afro-Americans have been made aware that those who name also control, and those who are named are subjugated. (683)

Anyone who has ever resided in a predominantly Black community is acutely aware of the importance of naming within Black culture. Hurston appropriates naming rituals of African Americans to reveal their own power within their communities, and also to signify on names of Western origin. To African Americans, names serve as symbols of descriptive identity and power. Michael Foucault asks a relevant question on power, which is also applicable to African Americans: "What constitutes the specific nature of power?" in an essay on "The Subject and Power." Foucault answers the question by stating that

> The exercise of power is not simply a relationship between partners, individual or collective; it is a way in which certain actions modify others.... Power exists only when it is put into action, even if, of course, it is integrated into a disparate field of possibilities brought to bear upon permanent structures. This also means that power is not a function of consent. In itself it is not a renunciation of freedom, a transference of rights.... (788)

Thus, African Americans "have historically 'unnamed' or renamed themselves" in order to gain some sense of power and "break away from this sense of powerlessness" (King 684). Thus naming in the African American community serves as a

signifying device to assert power and control over something that whites cannot master and control. Hurston appropriates this device well. She is aware that when one names oneself, one controls.

One of the first characters to engage in the naming ritual is the protagonist, Janie. When she is but a child of six, she is confronted with her first look at her identity. She has been surrounded with white children all her life, and she doesn't even know that she is not white either.

> "Ah was wid dem white chillun so much till Ah didn't know Ah wuzn't white till Ah was round six years old. Wouldn't have found it out then, but a man come long takin' pictures and without askin' anybody, Shelby, dat was the oldest boy, he told him to take us...." (Hurston 21)

When the Washburn family and Janie look at the photograph, she cannot identify herself, and thus cannot ***name*** herself. She had always been known as Alphabet "'cause so many people had done named ... [her] different names'" (Hurston 21). Janie continues

> So when we looked at de picture and everybody got pointed out there was nobody left except a real dark little girl with long hair standing by Eleanor. Dat's where Ah wuz s'posed to be, but Ah couldn't recognize dat dark chile as me. So Ah ast, 'where is me? Ah don't see me'. (Hurston 21)

Janie, the dark child with long hair, self-consciously learns her identity, first through physical appearance in the photograph and later as a school child, through the taunting of her classmates. There in the school setting

Janie is verbally attacked by the other children, especially Mayrella, because of the place in which she lived--in the backyard of white folks--and her birth origins as a result of a rape. In this early part of the novel, Hurston is signifying on Janie's lack of knowing herself and her identity and sets the tone for Janie to seek and learn about her identity throughout the novel.

The naming ritual is pronounced in other parts of the novel, particularly among the "muck," migrant Black people. By naming themselves, the African American migrants who have little or no power or control over their lives or workplaces can assert control over their names; thus naming serves as a sort of signifying on the Anglo-American culture.

Many of the muck people have names that denote physical actions or characteristics. There is Motor Boat, a sleek, cherubic looking young man who is quick with dice and money. Tea Cake, himself, is named after a sweet cake; to Janie, he is her sweet cake. Muck Boy epitomizes the ***every man*** in the muck tradition, one who sings, dances, ***signifies***, and just enjoys life amidst the rough living as a migrant farmer. He signifies

> Yo' mama don't wear no ***Draws***
> Ah seen her when she took 'em ***Off***
> She soaked 'em in alco***hol***
> She sold 'em tuh de Santy ***Claus***
> He told her 'twas aginst de ***Law***
> To wear dem dirty ***Draws***. (Hurston 233)

But Muck-Boy doesn't stop with signifying; he "went crazy through the feet and danced himself and everybody else

crazy" (233). Once he was through dancing and clowning, he "went to sleep again" (Hurston 233). Muck-Boy's behavior typifies the muck tradition: work heartily, play heartily, then sleep.

The naming ritual is also evident in the name of Motor Boat who excelled at cards and dice. Since he and Tea Cake had played dice all night, Motor Boat did not want to leave the next morning to seek higher ground from the raging waters and flood because he was sleepy. When Tea Cake tries to encourage Motor Boat to leave for higher water and safety from the monstrous Okechobee, Motor Boat responds quite resolutely and sleepily: "Tea Cake Ah got tuh have mah sleep. Definitely" (Hurston 242). One can readily see where Motor Boat's priorities lie. Interestingly enough, Motor Boat survives the rising water and the flood: he slept through most of the disaster. As Tea Cake notes, "De Son of a gun laid up in dat house and slept and de lake come moved de house way off somewhere and Motor didn't know nothin' 'bout it till de storm was 'bout over" (256). An irony of ironies, another component of signifying.

Other muck people had descriptive names which connoted their personalities, such as Sop-de-Bottom, Beef Stew, Coodemay, Bootyny. Hence, Hurston employs a folk tradition of the naming rituals as a valid means of giving some significance to folk names and to defy the Anglo-American tradition to assigning lofty names of statesmen or presidents to children. With such folksy names, the

characters on the "muck" all retain a degree of respectability within the cultural communities in which they reside.

One of the strongest examples of the name ritual and its signifying effects is noted in Joe Starks and his use of I-god. Almost as soon as he buys the fifty acres to establish a township with a post office, a store, roads, and lamplight, Joe takes on the persona, not just of a mayor, but of the dictator of the town, who governs it exclusively. Joe would walk around the town with cigar and beam without saying a word (Hurston 92). Then he would use the I-god as a sort of swear-word, but its implications were linguistically tied to him and his power.

Three illustrations, in particular, show how Joe's power is aligned with his use of I-god and that he considers himself the power broker. In one context Joe Starks places women, children, chickens and cows in the same category of "non-thinkers," so someone must think for them: "I god, they sho don't think non theirselves" (Hurston 110). A second illustration occurs on the porch when Joe is baiting Mrs. Robbins. He and Janie had had a disagreement the night before with Joe showing his anger by slapping her, so now Joe wanted peace between them, "but on his own terms." (Hurston 113). Joe, though he is talking to Mrs. Robbins, is indirectly talking to his wife, "' I god, Mrs. Robbins, whut you come heah and worry me when you see Ah'm reading

mah newspaper?'" Mayer Starks lowered the paper in a pretended annoyance" (Hurston 113). In another situation, Joe Starks criticizes his wife, Janie, overtly for cutting a piece of tobacco across the grain, "'I god amighty! A woman stay round uh store till she get old as Methusalem and still can't cut a little thing like a plug of tobacco'" (Hurston 121). In each of these examples, Joe has taken on dictator-oppressor type position against his wife; he has omitted the verb of being--***am*** and has also not substituted ***be*** either, as is noted in Black English or Ebonics. He is asserting himself as god with a little ***g***, meaning he ***is*** god in total control or wanting to be in total control of those he is addressing. Hurston sneeringly places the "I-god" of Joe Starks with "god almighty" as Joe's persona is compared to a god's mighty strengh and power.

Hurston in her mastery of folk language also appropriates other traditional types of signification, what Smitherman calls "witty one-liners" (121). However, Smitherman posits that these one-liners are found in "a series of loosely related statements," in which two speakers interact with each other in a signified mode of talk and response. In Hurston's conversational exchanges, she also appropriates many one-liners that are complete in and of themselves. These figural expressions are often indirect statements which unexpectedly catch the listener off guard or even make a point. One such expression occurs when Tea

Cake, who is suffering from the rabid bite of a wild dog, refuses to go to a hospital as Janie suggests: "Ah ain't goin' tuh no hospital no where. Put dat in yo' pipe and smoke it" (Hurston 269). Or another time when Tea Cake says, "And if Mis' Turner's lap-legged brother come prowlin' by heah you kin tell 'im Ah got him stopped wid four wheel brakes" (Hurston 268).

Although many examples of this type of signifying occur in the text, the two above examples illustrate one line witticisms that convey messages with figurative indirection. In each of the one-liners cited, Tea Cake is asserting his independent spirit with an arbitrariness and singular power even though he is deathly ill. On the one hand, he will not go to the hospital, and that's it; accept it or not, he's not moving. "Put that in your pipe and smoke it" reemphasizes his position of his ***not bulging*** no matter how many times you ask him. On the other hand, Tea Cake is talking about stopping a man with the strength of four wheel brakes. In both these contexts, Tea Cake is a weak and emaciated man who ironically has little strength and power, but he ***verbally*** wants to assert the power he once possessed before his sick days.

Still another example occurs in the early days of the town of Eatonville when Joe Starks as mayor personally buys the town street lights. In preparation for the street lighting ceremony, Hurston remarks, "The women got together

the sweets and the men looked after the meats" (72). Another related example occurs when Joe says, "Us poor weak humans can't do nothin' tuh hurry it up nor to slow it down." (Hurston 73). Each of these figural sayings connotes a folksy message from the community. The first statement suggests what the chores of the women are to be in the forthcoming ceremony in contrast to the chores of the men. Hurston sets this statement in the form of internal rhyme as if to say to the reader, "I want you to pay attention to this dividing of jobs," as dictated by Joe Starks. The women prepare the desserts and vegetables while the men prepare the wood and coals and meat. The second saying, stated by Joe Starks, is an understatement that humans are a powerless people and cannot alter the sun or make the sun go down more quickly to start the ceremony and feasting. Joe Starks can demand certain behavior of the townspeople, but he cannot control the movement of the sun or moon.

Hurston also employs what the writer of this study calls, verbal paradox, a contradictory statement which states both the pro side and the con side in one statement or context with no definite answer given. This type of statement is particularly used in contemporary settings in urban areas. Janie, in talking to Tea Cake, says to him, "And when yuh don't know, yuh just don't know" (Hurston 240). This paradoxical statement contends that no definite answer can be found. It is indicative of Kweisi Mfume's statements in his autobiographical text, No Free Ride, that

was previously quoted in this paper. Although Hurston has employed practically every kind of signifying, she presciences the type of signifying that is popularly used in urban areas. This type of signification suggests Hurston's mastery of and insightful look at signification.

Zora Neale Hurston's prototypical novel is filled with numerous other examples of signifying, as many writers attest. However, one cannot end the discussion of Hurston's use of signifying without pointing to one vivid passage when Janie signifies on her husband's ***put-downs*** of her. Joe, in commenting that Janie is looking old, states, "T'aint no use in gettin' all mad, Janie, 'cause Ah mention you ain't no young gal no mo'. Nobody in heah ain't lookin' for no wife outa yuh. Old as you is." (Hurston 122). Janie responds resolutely with the following:

> "Naw, Ah ain't no young gal no mo' but den Ah ain't no old woman neither. Ah reckon Ah looks mah age too. But Ah'm uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it. Dat's uh whole lot more'n you kin say. You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but 'taint nothin' to it but yo' big voice. Humph! Talkin' 'bout me lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life." (Hurston 122-3)

This is a classic example of signifying, and the passage represents Hurston at her best. Not only does she restate the problem presented by the first speaker, she gives her female protagonist confidence, strength, irony, and quickness of thought. Janie asserts that every inch of her is a woman physically and that she looks good for her age in

contrast to the out-of-shape, big-bellied men who criticize women's bodies. She implies that talk, in other words, is cheap although she has shown her mastery of speech. Furthermore, Joe looks worse than his age; he looks like the change of life--an old man. What makes this signifying complete is the response of the audience, in this case the men on the porch listening. Sam Watson responds, "Y'all really playin' de dozenz tuhnight" (Hurston 123). Others equally respond to Janie's signifying, which really upsets Joe. Janie has shown her cleverness by verbally responding to her husband's "digs," and the responses of the men of the town affirm her verbal success over a man, in this case, her husband.

> Then Joe Starks realized all the meanings and his vanity bled like a flood. Janie had robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish, which was terrible. (Hurston 123)

Janie had robbed the man of his manhood in one quick statement. In this verbal dueling, Janie had gotten the best (i.e., control) of the Man-I god. She had shown her ability to think quickly and logically and rebound with the alacrity of words.

That Hurston is a master of folkloric traditions cannot be denied. That she is a master of signification is a statement that must be touted as well.

CHAPTER 7

SIGNIFYING IN TONI MORRISON'S THE BLUEST EYE AND SONG OF SOLOMON

Toni Morrison is another Black novelist who incorporates Black oral features, specifically signification, in her works. Signification as used by Morrison encompasses both the folkloric tradition and the literary component. When Morrison conflates signification with the literary-aestheticism, she incorporates a political component which asserts that an artistic work should combine political overtones with aesthetic beauty: "It seems to me that the best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time" ("Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" 345). With Morrison's use of folklore, specifically signification, artistic elements, and political overtones in her novels, she is able to comment on the "dangers" inherent in the Black community.

Morrison, who asserts that political agendas enter all literary works, is interested is provoking interest in the issues and problems in the Black community; however, she does not intend to provide the solutions to the problems. These problems must be formulated by the Black community. Related to solving problems of African Americans is a healing/cathartic process that the community must experience.

To Morrison, the novel should suggest "what the conflicts are, what the problems are. But it need not solve those problems because it is not a case study, ... a recipe" (341).

In two of Morrison's novels, The Bluest Eye and Song of Solomon, she appropriates conflicts and problems found in the Black community. Rather than providing solutions or cook-book recipes for eliminating these problems or calling attention to the relevant issues, Morrison appropriates a stylistic form, an oral tradition form that indirectly introduces her readers, her participants, to the "real thing" as Gwendolyn Brooks calls it. This oral traditional form is signifying, which serves as a means for Morrison to impart her political view of the cultural values of both African Americans and Americans in general. Signifying, as appropriated by Morrison, includes the traditional meanings and delineations, which include the "the verbal art of insult in which a speaker humorously puts down, talks about, needles--that is, signifies--on the listener" (Smitherman 118) and verbal games in which one speaker indirectly gets the best of his/her opponent. Signifying, on the other hand, for Morrison incorporates much more. Another approach to signifying for Morrison is akin to Henry Louis Gates' delineation of Signifying.

Gates suggests that Signifying is a literary theory that is embedded in African American writings.

> Writers Signify upon each other's texts by rewriting the received textual tradition. This

> can be accomplished by the revision of tropes. This sort of Signifyin(g) revision serves, if successful, to create a space for the revising text. It also alters fundamentally the way we read the tradition, by defining the relation of the text at hand to the tradition. The revising text is written in the language of the tradition, employing its tropes, its rhetorical strategies, and its ostensible subject matter, the so-called Black Experience. This mode of revision, of Signifyin(g), is the most striking aspect of Afro-American literary history. (124)

Gates suggests that an integral aspect of Signifyin(g) is the parodying and revising strategy "which involves a positioning or a critiquing both of received literary conventions and of the subject matter representative in canonical texts of the tradition" (113). Gates's definition does not exclude indirection, that was included in many linguists' definitions. He just prefers to incorporate the terms parodying and revising as inclusive to signifying. In other words, Gates' appropriation of Signifyin(g) includes Black authors, who intertexually read the works of other Black writers and then who revise their works in order to position or critique a literary convention, concept or value found in our tradition or culture (124).

Gates, in other words, bases his theory on Signifyin(g) on Black authors who parody and then intertextually revise each other's works. When Gates foregrounds parodying as an aspect of revising, he observes that in parodying, "one writer repeats another's structure by one of several means, including a fairly exact repetition of a given narrative or rhetorical structure, filled incongruously with a ludicrous

or incongruent context." (103). Gates further reveals that repetition is not of an imitative sort, but serves a useful purpose of calling attention to both the original structure and the revised structure. In contrast to Gates' perspective on Black authors parodying and revising each other, Morrison does not parody and then revise another Black author's text. As noted in a previous chapter, Morrison signifies on, i.e., revises a first grade primer which was popularly used by both Black and White children several decades back.

Morrison begins her novel with an epigraph of the perfect, happy idyllic White American family with its pretty green-and-white house, with which all Americans, Black and White, identify.

> Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in a green-and-white-house. They are very happy. [in smaller print] Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family.... (The Bluest Eye 1)

Morrison is repeating here the text of a first grade primer, popularly used throughout this country for both Black and White young children and therefore parodying this text for a definite purpose. Morrison is signifying--meaning parodying and revising--the mythical element of this happy, idyllic family, by which many children have measured their family's happiness. At a tender young age, young Black and White youths are introduced to a myth that pervades their lives

and will continue, no doubt, until their deaths, unless they learn to critique or challenge these American myths. This is a fallacy that is quite hurtful, when young five and six year olds do not see their families or environments lived in a similar way.

Barbara Christian in her text, Black Women Writers, adds that this romantic concept of beauty and happiness, as depicted in the Dick and Jane primer, is pervasive of the middle-income American family, and yet no such family exists.

> Where do Dick and Jane exist? Probably only on the pages of that primer. But young children are led to believe that others are happy because they are white and perhaps because they are pretty, are not too noisy, or are living an orderly life.... The more confusing, different, poverty-ridden or depressed that a child's life is, the more she will yearn for the norm the dominant society says provides beauty and happiness. (142)

Since this mythical, idealized family does not exist, Morrison foregrounds this idealized family of four--a father, a mother, and one boy (Dick) and one girl (Jane)--with an imperfect, unhappy family of four--a father, a mother, a boy (Sammy) and a girl (Pecola). In other words, she juxtaposes the unreal with the real, idealization with reality, White with Black. The former family encompasses idealized values of goodness, happiness, wholesomeness, **prettiness**. The latter family, on the other hand, encompasses unhappiness, discontent, and most of all, **ugliness**. One is reminded here of binary oppositions, either-or, happy/unhappy, pretty/ugly, White/Black

dualities. Nelly Furman in her essay, "The Politics of Language," asserts that

> Thinking in terms of binary opposition always implies the subordination of the second element to the first, and reversing the order of the pairing only repeats the system which was at work in the initial opposition. By opposing man to woman or woman to man, whatever the order of the privilege accorded to the terms, one is still caught in the system of western philosophical logic whereby one is obliged to search for a truth that is a single, non-equivocal answer. (75)

In this context, Morrison is neither privileging one binary over the other, but calling attention to both oppositional lifestyles--of the mythical idealism of the perfect family and the imperfect, hard lives of the other.

Morrison's signifying on the perfect American family occurs through her novel with her deliberate use of repetition and parody. One can see these literary strategies through her exact repetition of the language of the primer and variations of this same narrative theme in one form or another. Morrison restates the first grade primer's Dick and Jane story three times in the epigraph of the novel. She later repeats aspects of the Dick and Jane story three times in two-line segments throughout the novel. Jane Campbell in Mythic Black Fiction suggests that Black writers often employ myths as expressions of hope, delivery, and of power (x). She continues

> This myth-making, a process evident throughout Afro-American historical fiction, constitutes a radical act, inviting the audience to subvert the racist mythology that thwarts and defeats Afro-America and to replace it with a new mythology rooted in the Black perspective. This tendency

> has manifested itself in fiction from Brown's era to contemporary times. (x)

If one accepts Jane Campbell's hypothesis, then Morrison is subverting the myth of the idyllic white family depicted in the Dick and Jane narratives and replacing that myth with a non-functioning African American one. Actually, Morrison is more concerned with opening up to her readers the myths, stories, and narratives of both cultures to reveal that no totalizing ideal state or a totalizing imperfect state exists in our experience. One would suspect that one's "real" existence is found somewhere between the two extremes.

When Morrison uses the first grade primer's Dick and Jane narrative repetitiously three times in descending smaller print in the epigraph, she juxtaposes this section almost immediately on the next several pages with the Black families in Lorrain, Ohio: families, such as the McTeer family, living in "old, cold, and green" houses, where the children catch and keep colds throughout the autumn and winter, where little happiness occurs in the dreary lifestyles of Black families.

Then Morrison begins three different sections of her novel with two epigrammatic lines of the original narrative for parodying--signifying--purposes. In the first two-line epigraph, "HEREISTHEHOUSEITISGREENANDWHITEITHASAREDDOORITIS VERYPRETTYITISVERYPRETTYPRETTYPRETTYTYP," Morrison focuses on a contrast in living quarters and conditions between two

sets of cultural opposites--the idyllic, pretty green and white house of Dick and Jane's family with the peeling gray storefront of two rooms and a small kitchen at the back of the living quarters of the Breedlove family. Although emphasis lies on the living conditions of the contrasting families, Morrison's work implies much more. She is indirectly commenting about the communal values and totalizing influences and traditions inherent in the cultures and subcultures in this Western society. Relative to this same idea, Denise Heinze, in support of this concept, reiterates that

> Morrison Signifies upon the wholesome acceptance of the aesthetic or idealized beauty, one of the most dangerous of society constructs because, by placing value on a very limited set of physical criteria, it can reduce human beings on sight to objects. (15)

To a great extent, the two families both are reduced to objectified existences, which are based on <u>where</u> they live.

The second two-line epigraph, "HEREISTHEFAMILYMOTHER FATHERDICKANDJANETHEYLIVEINTHEGREENANDWHITEHOUSETHEYARE VERYH" points to a contrast between the two families in structural composition--between the Dick and Jane family of four who live in a green and white house and the Breedlove family of four who live in the "anonymous misery of their storefront" amidst the dreams of wealth and ***vengeance***. Here Morrison presents the idealized family of two children (Dick and Jane) and a mother and father, living happily in their pretty home in contrast to the Breedlove family of two

children (Sammie and Pecola) with a mother and father in their poverty and their ugliness. In the first full paragraph following the epigraph, Morrison repetitiously calls the Breedloves ugly ***nine*** times, a point that the reader can hardly ignore. This contrast in presence is another way Morrison shows opposites between the two families. Throughout this section, the Breedloves are named and described, but given no voice or power. In a sense Morrison is signifying upon an absence or lack of something --as love, companionship, familial ties--in the Breedlove family, even though this family is physically present throughout this section. Mrs. Breedlove lacks articulation as a mother or wife; she is an actor, speaking on behalf of a role she imagines. Sammy, the son, lacks true humanness, so he causes "others pain." Pecola lacks a face or even any decent kind of existence; hence she lives behind a mask, "[c]oncealed, veiled, eclipsed--peeping behind the shroud very seldom" (The Bluest Eye 25). The father's presence is totally lacking in this segment, for Morrison has absented him from the family. Very little description is given here as she describes the Breedlove family. When he is seen with the family, he is too often drunk and lacking any kind of direction or fatherly presence. The reversal is implied with the Dick and Jane sequence; they are happy and objectified as something unattainable for the Breedloves.

The third epigraph, "SEETHECATSITGOESMEOWMEOWCOME ANDPLAYCOMEPLAYWITHJANETHEKITTENWILLNOTPLAYPLAYPLAYPLA,"

sets up a contrast between cats--Dick and Jane's cat with Geraldine's cat. Geraldine is a middle-class, college educated Black woman who attentively and meticulously cares for her cat. Even with the cats, Morrison is setting up binary oppositions: child verses adult, love verses hate. The cat in the Dick and Jane episode epitomizes the idealized family with pets, as integral to the picture-perfect American saga. Interestingly enough though, the kitten in the Dick and Jane narrative will not play. The cat in the middle-class Black family in Morrison's novel plays only with its owner, the adult Geraldine. Similarly the Black middle-class characters in this segment of Morrison's novel play with and relate to no one but their own bourgeois friends; they live "funkless" existences, representative of Dubois's double consciousness. Michael Awkward, in concurring with this concept on double consciousness, asserts that "Morrison's double-voiced narration in The Bluest Eye encodes ... her employment and refiguration of this Black cultural code" (12). Awkward suggests that Zora Neale Hurston in Their Eyes Were Watching God "not only refigures the dual consciousness code defined by DuBois, but also delineates strategies that lead to a unity between the 'selves' of its protagonist" (12). In contrast, Morrison's characters in The Bluest Eye do not receive any unity of spirit between their warring selves, for Morrison has two sets of characters on either side of the continuum--the Teers or the Breedloves on the lower

side, representative of the lower, working class of Black people, who experience funk and hard times and the Geraldines' on the upper side, who intensely dislike the lower class with their funk.

> Geraldine and her kind consistently tried to get rid of funk: Whenever it erupts, this Funk, they wipe it away; where it crusts, they dissolve it; wherever it drips, flowers, or clings, they find it and fight it until it dies. They fight this battle all the way to the grave.... when they wear lipstick, they never cover the entire mouth for fear of lips too thick, and they worry, worry, worry about the edges of their hair. (Morrison The Bluest Eye 64).

[All subsequent references to The Bluest Eye will be made with the author's name, Morrison, and the page numbers]. Geraldine, as representative of her kind, occasionally lets a cat engage her emotions: "[a] cat, perhaps, who will love her order, precision, and constancy; who will be as clean and quiet as she is" (Morrison 66). Morrison does not directly say that Geraldine and her cat are almost interchangeable in behavior and actions, but implies this concept in her description of Geraldine and the cat. Geraldine is personified as a living, objectified thing, just as her cat is delineated as a living, objectified thing.

In a sense Geraldine is "out-whiting the whites" with her clean living, high morals, **one** child instead of two, imitation of Whites' living, and intense dislike of Blacks, different from her. She also does not allow her son, Junior, to play with the lower class children, whom she called **niggers**. These people were easily identifiable with

their loudness, dirtiness and sloven ways. Again Morrison is setting up binary oppositions: clean verses unclean, good verses bad, slovenly verses laziness, lower-class verses middle-class. She even reveals a dichotomy between **light**-colored negroes verses **dark** skinned Blacks, but as revealed in the color-coding, these oppositions occur within the ranks of Black people.

Here Morrison is signifying on the Black families like Geraldine's, who appropriated their pets as children and who placed their cats above their children in affection, love, and attention. Instead of this pet serving as a companion for the child, Morrison has reversed the situation with the pet serving as a child for the mother, Geraldine. "The cat will always know that he is first in her affection. Even after she bears a child" (Morrison 67). Hence Junior, the son, grows up bitterly hating the cat and his mother:

> Geraldine did not talk to him, coo to him, or indulge him in kissing bouts, but she saw that every other desire was fulfilled. It was not long before the child discovered the difference in his mother's behavior to himself and the cat. As he grew older, he learned how to direct his hatred of his mother to the cat, and spent some happy moments watching it suffer. (Morrison 67)

This passage discloses another ironic twist in signification. Junior finds happiness in tormenting the cat of his mother since he cannot torment his mother. He redirects his hatred toward the object of his mother's affections. Morrison's re-direction of Junior's anger contrasts with the playful attitude of the Dick and Jane

sequence. By repeating and reversing the "cat" motif, Morrison has exposed not only a reversal of the pet and child situation, but also signified on an aspect of Black middle-class existence. Morrison has re-defined Black representation of the Black middle class in terms of Geraldine's relationship with her son. The "good guys," according to Morrison, are not the ones closest to White middle class living, as Geraldine and her family. The "good people" are the ones with funk and soul; they are the true representatives of Black life; they are the ones who can affect a healing within the Black community and Black life.

In each of Morrison's contrasts, she juxtaposes not only the cultural values, but the lifestyles, living arrangements, family and community interactions of the two racially and economically different families.

Another aspect of Morrison's signifying in The Bluest Eye is evident in the title. Although the signification of the title is obvious to most readers, it is essential that the writer of this study comment on this structure. The title of the novel suggests a problem in this society that Morrison wants to address: a standardized concept of beauty that privileges blue eyes and blond hair in such a multi-cultured world that is more than seventy-five per cent colored. Denise Heinze questions the Westernized concept of beauty when she states that

> The controlling metaphor for this state of affairs is in the title, the bluest eye--the transparent eyeball gone mad--that becomes a synecdoche for western beauty, for schopophilia and

> objectification, appropriation and commodification, acquiescence and insanity. The point of view in the novel is not Pecola's or Claudia's or Pauline's or Cholly's but the bluest eye, which orchestrates, obliterates, or ultimately determines all other points of view. (25)

If the controlling metaphor is the bluest eyes, then Morrison is signifying on one important aspect of Western culture, its depiction of beauty as a societal construct.

Signifying in this context is aligned with Claudia Mitchell-Kernan's definition as

> a way of encoding messages or meanings which involves, in most cases, an element of indirection. This kind of ***signifying*** might be best viewed as an alternative message form, selected for its artistic merit, and may occur embedded in a variety of discourse. ("Signifying" 311)

Morrison does not overtly provide a message nor does she explicitly critique this cultural standard of beauty, but indirectly discloses its destructive effect, primarily on an eleven year old girl, and on her community at large. Denise Heinze comments that Morrison's attack on this social disease with emphasis on Westernized standard of beauty "reveals the universally destructive power of textbook beauty. No human being is capable of physical perfection; thus, all are doomed to varying degrees of self-hatred" (24).

Although all women are affected by this social construct of Westernized concept of beauty, African American women seem most affected. There is the natural or maybe "unnatural" tendency of African American women to

internalize a concept of beauty that does not include their Black looks. This tendency is most obvious with Pecola Breedlove in The Bluest Eye. Patricia Hill Collins asserts that

> Pecola Breedlove, an unloved, eleven-year-old Black girl in Toni Morrison's novel, The Bluest Eye (1970), internalizes the denigrated images of African-American women and believes that the absence of blue eyes is central to her "ugliness." Pecola cannot value her Blackness--she longs to be white so that she can escape the pain of being Black, female, poor, and a child. (83)

If Morrison is signifying on the Western social construction of beauty, then what indirect message is she imparting? Quite obviously she is suggesting that a healing is necessary for women, particularly African American women, to find their own standard of internal and external beauty, to heal from the pain and despair associated with deleterious effect of wanting to be someone other than their own natural selves. As stated previously, Morrison sees in the art form of the novel a means of healing for Black people ("Rootedness" 340). In the context of The Bluest Eye this novel can be healing for both African American women and men, if both sets of people examine the real issues behind the problem and endeavor to heal.

Morrison appropriates a number of other aspects of signifying in her first novel. These "verbal quips," are often found in conversations between two or three individuals and is also evident in a conversation between the three prostitutes, China, Poland, and Maginot Line,

known as Marie. Keith Byerman calls these three women "the primary folk figures in the novel" (189) because each expresses a folk art, which enables "them to transcend the private obsessions of other characters" (190). The one character that is adept in the verbal art of signifying is China although both China and Marie signify on each other:

> "You mean that's when **you** got old," China said.
> "I ain't never got old. Just fat." [Marie]
> "Same thing."
> "You think 'cause you skinny, folks think you young? You'd make a haint buy a girdle."
> "And you look like the north side of a southbound mule." (The Bluest Eye 39)

These signifying statements, first by Marie, and then by China, reveal what Smitherman calls, one-liners, "a series of loosely related statements" (121). In this context, Marie quips that China thinks she is young-looking because of her skinny size. However, Marie's signifying tactic goes further and implies that China is not only big enough to wear and need a girdle, but she would make a ghost buy one also. The signifier, Marie, is juxtaposing two terms not usually paired together, a haint (a folk expression for a ghost) and a woman's girdle. Claudia Mitchell-Kernan suggests that pairing two terms not typically put together "evokes more humor by the dissonant note it strikes" ("Signifying" 320). What results is a verbal game of fun and humor in which both participants see it a non-serious game. China's retort is equally humorous, for she appropriates an ironic simile in comparing Marie to a mule that is southbound with a north side. Although this simile

is actually metaphorical non-sense, what gives it the humorous put-down is the lexical unequivalents of southbound-north side and a mule.

Other examples of signification in light conversations occur between the three women. Marie initiates the signifying when she states:

> "Well, I was little and cute then. No more than ninety pounds, soaking wet."
> "You ain't never been soaking wet," China said.
> "Well, you ain't never been dry." (The Bluest Eye 40)

In this conversational exchange Marie signifies on China's reference to her never being wet. Marie, in other words, is initially talking about her physical size, but the conversation turns to sexual innuendos. When Marie states that China has never been dry, she is implying that China has consistently been on the "go" in her sexual environments and has not had the time to "dry up" away from her men customers. This type of signifying is what, Mitchell-Kernan calls, **information-dropping**, for "this kind of **signifying** is felt to have a highly malicious intent, because it drops information which is likely to involve negative consequences for the addressee" ("Signifying" 320-1). Marie is not talking in order to hurt China maliciously; she is simply dropping or imparting information to get the best of China in the conversation.

The novel, The Bluest Eye, also appropriates the naming ritual as a form of signifying and is replete with many references. In some ways the naming ritual is

intertextually related to Zora Neale Hurston. One such example encompasses Morrison's signifying on Pecola's name, for Morrison appears to be signifying on Fannie Hurst's protagonist, Peola, in her novel, Imitation of Life. Peola with her blue eyes wants to be white, while Pecola with her brown eyes wants blue ones. This unlikely wish on both their parts leads to a demoralizing ending.

Other examples could include Sammy's name being short for Sambo, the stereotyped young boy who is depicted as "Black and ugly." Even the name of Breedlove could be construed as reversals with breed, reconfigured as bred with love, the opposite of the way the Breedloves respond to each other.

Morrison also uses signification in Song of Solomon, published in 1977. One of the most ironic uses of signification is observed in the naming ritual in this novel. The family's name, Dead, evokes a family dead of the conventional, family belief system and is "life-denying," as Keith Byerman calls them. The family ironically receives its name decades before from a drunken soldier during the Civil War who mistakenly writes down Macon's father's name, as Dead. Each member of the family, though, elicits a zombie-like existence, from the materialistic, exploitative father to the thoughtless, narcissistic Milkman, from the virginal thirty-something sisters to the past-embracing mother. The family, as Milkman recounts about his

grandfather mid-way in the novel, "was already Dead" (Song of Solomon 89).

In a conversation among Guitar, Milkman, and Pilot, one observes this ironic use of dead as emblematic of a family that is dead. Milkman, a young twelve year old youth, is visiting for the first time his Aunt Pilot's residence with his friend, Guitar.

> Again, Guitar spoke up. "You his daddy's sister?"
> "The only one he got. Ain't but three Deads alive."
> Milkman, who had been unable to get one word out of his mouth after the foolish, "HI," heard himself shouting: "I'm a Dead! My mother's a Dead! My sisters. You and him ain't the only ones!" (Song of Solomon 38)

Pilate's delineation of the Deads and Milkman's delineation of his Dead family were totally different. Pilate's three members consisted of family members that had, at one time or another, exuded life or would exhibit a life-like existence later, even though they were currently Dead: 1) her brother and her images of his saving her life as a youngster, 2) Milkman to whom she had an affinity because she helped in his conception and his survival, and 3) herself. In contrast, Milkman considered his entire family, including his mother and sisters, as Deads. Pilate, as narrator for Morrison, considers Ruth and her daughters, metaphorically dead. In other words, the female characters in Macon Dead's immediate family are subsumed in narrow, almost prison-like confines in a large twelve room house. The system has relegated these women to a class of useless, metaphorically

dead beings who are unable to perform even the more basic tasks. They are almost female eunuchs, powerless to pursue any dream, interest, or love, except for one of the sisters, later in life. In this context, Morrison's appropriation of signifying fits into Smitherman's definition of signifying for its metaphorical, ironic use. The Dead family, though physically alive, is metaphorically-ironically dead.

Morrison as narrator not only calls attention to the ironic depiction of the Dead family, but she re-writes/revises the concept of the dead in the persona of middle-class Black America. Morrison's literary antecedents, including Jessie Redmon Fauset and Nella Larsen, focused on refinement and polished sophistication in middle-class Black Americans. Their heroines are cast as epitomes of ideal Black Americans in the 1920s and 1930s or the group that lower class Blacks should follow or emulate. These were the educated Black women who were materially successful or married well to be materially happy. They were consistently comparing themselves with whites in terms of high moral standards, good college trained educational mates, good food and entertainment, active social events. The women and men in this class were called by Dubois the talented tenth, the leaders who were to lead other Negroes into better existences. Morrison undoubtedly had problems with these issues and literary and social leaders, particularly her women predecessors, such as Larsen or Fauset, and signified not only on the futile, innocuous

lives of middle-class Black Americans, but on these Black women novelists also. Barbara Christian in Black Women Novelists asserts that Fauset's "novels insist that the upper-middle class Negro has the same values as the upper-class white" (41). Fauset's female characters are light-skinned or "fair" complexioned women who marry well off into a material value system. These women exude a refined lifestyle of culture and high ideals. Fauset's characters, in other words, parallel Morrison's Dead women, for they share a commonality in culture, physical appearance, and ideology.

It is in this context that Morrison uses signifying to parody and pastiche the Black middle-class heroines of Fauset and Larsen. Morrison has, according to Henry Louis Gates, created a new and different narrative space. She has inverted the Black middle-class heroines by making them refined, but sterile and useless in their cultured refinement. Morrison's constant references to dead, lifeless, formless, death, in the context of the Dead women, undermine the middle-class tradition that is usually associated with sophistication, refined manners and culture, good living, and material success.

Morrison's signifying also engages "formal revision," for Morrison is making "tacit commentary about the shape and status of [the] received tradition" (Gates 172). She has rewritten (revised) the original narrative, form, or literary device in order to represent a social or political

condition that needs changing. Instead of Morrison engaging in a "more explicit mode ... of literary criticism," (Gates 172) or an open debate, she frames her criticism within her narrative technique and character development. Morrison then is the signifier and her Black women literary predecessors, Fauset or Larsen, the signified.

The naming ritual in signifying is also evident in Morrison, as she again signifies on the names of characters in the novel. Many of the characters have Biblical names, and naming "children out of the Bible," says Richard Heyman, "is supposed to show reverence for Christianity" (387). Yet the reversal occurs with Morrison's naming. Pilate is named after a "Christ-killing" leader. The mid-wife retorts to Pilot's father: "You don't want to give this motherless child the name of the name that killed Jesus, do you?" and "You can't get much worse than that for a name. And a baby girl at that" (Song of Solomon 19). Here is a situation in which a baby girl is ironically named after a man who is historically known for killing Christ; this is an awful name for a girl. Yet Pilate is just the opposite--one who brings peace and calmness to those around her. She is not like Pilate in the Bible, and will not even kill a moth or insect. Even her brother, Macon, who dislikes her for her low life finds tranquility in walking near her house. He had worked past Pilate's home once, but returned and walked slowly to her house again. There he heard the three of them singing with Pilate taking the lead.

> Surrendering to the sound, Macon moved closer. He wanted no conversation, no witness, only to listen and perhaps to see the three of them, the source of that music that made him think of fields and wild turkey and calico. Treading as lightly as he could, he crept up to the side window where the candlelight flickered lowest, and peeped in.... Near the window, hidden by the dark, he felt the irritability of the day drain from him and relished in the effortless beauty of the women singing in the candlelight.
>
> As Macon felt himself softening under the weight of memory and music, the song died down. The air was quiet and yet Macon Dead could not leave. He liked looking at them freely this way. They simply stopped singing.... (Song of Solomon 29-30)

Singing--an oral tradition among African Americans--re-ignited Macon's past temporarily, which he had wiped out since he moved to Michigan, and gave him temporary peace. In contrast, Pilate manifested peace and tranquility in her life consistently in that she had never disconnected herself from her past. From the bones in the bag in her home to the earring which contained her name on a slip of paper, she maintained ties to her past. She even continues the family ritual of naming a child from the Bible: Reba of Rebecca and Hagar, both women in the Bible.

Ruth and Macon also maintained the family ritual of naming children from Biblical persona, especially their two daughters. Here, however, Morrison inverts and parodies the names of the Dead daughters. Corinthians is named after Paul's letter to the Corinthians, but she is bereft of the traits one associates with the Corinthians--faith, hope and love. She is faithless, hopeless, and loveless, although in her mid-life she does find love. Similarly Magdalene called

Lena is named after a Biblical woman who turns from prostitution to genuine love for Christ, i.e., a woman one who is emotionally and profoundly bound to Christ. However, Magdalene called Lena is really a human "lemon" who is useless and who throughout her life is as lifeless as the velvet petals she makes as a young teen.

Just as with Macon, Milkman's father, found serenity and peacefulness near his sister's Pilate's home, so did Milkman. A kind of tranquility overtook Milkman when he visited Pilate's unpretentious house. As he listened to the call-response interaction between Pilate and her granddaughter, Milkman experienced for

> the first time in his life that he remembered being completely happy. He was with his friend--an older boy--wise and kind and fearless. He was sitting comfortably in the notorious wine house; he was surrounded by women who seemed to enjoy him and who laughed out loud. And he was in love. No wonder his father was afraid of them. (Song of Solomon 47)

This kind of contentment was not possible at his own home. Pilate offered Milkman and his father, Macon, not just the silence from their own home, but also peacefulness and contentment and happiness that was found there. Pilate in Morrison's novel was a study in opposites; on the one hand, she was an unemployed woman who barely eked out a living and did not worry about having money. On the other hand, here was a woman with an inner peacefulness that spread out to those near or around her. She can be contrasted to the Biblical Pilate in that he was known for disruption and

death, while Morrison's Pilate bestowed a pacific calmness around those she encountered.

Morrison has parodied the middle-class refined heroines of previous Black writers in the form of Ruth Foster Dead who is basically dead. Morrison identifies Ruth in the early pages of the novel as "the dead doctor's daughter" although she is married and about to have another child. Ruth's position as a mature and responsible adult about to have a third child is curtailed and de-emphasized in the context of daughter and a dead man's daughter as well. In other words, Ruth is consistently portrayed as a middle-class immature woman who is emotionally and psychially dead. Rooted in middle-class life, she is materially useless, unable to cook or perform simple, worthwhile chores. She directs her interests/energies unto her son, Milkman, while he is quite young and well beyond his infant years until the father discerns an unusual relationship between the two.

Consistently demoralized, Ruth accepts her husband's harsh acrimonious criticism as a part of her wifely duties. Her husband is repulsed by her and hates her psychically, physically, and emotionally. In a concrete way her cooking is indicative of his relationship with her: "Your chicken is red at the bone. And there is probably a potato dish that is supposed to have lumps in it. Mashed ain't the dish" (Song of Solomon 12). In that particular passage, Macon is signifying on his wife--she is considered a "red-boned" woman because of her fair features, yet in this

context the use of "red" and "bone" is negatively portrayed. Macon thinks of her "red to the bone" chicken in the same way he looks at his "red-boned" wife: both repulsive to the taste.

Morrison's signifying on Ruth Dead goes even farther. Her culture, her minuteness to details as sweet-smelling flowers on her table each day, her father's instilling in her a dislike for the sweaty, working poor, are not enough to validate her as a person. She therefore validates her existence through others: at first her father, then her husband, and later her son, Milkman. "Rejected by father, husband, son, Ruth remains unauthentic, empty, isolated, because she has no independent self on which to stand" (Song of Solomon 58). Ruth represents, according to Willis, a woman deformed and repressed (Song of Solomon 215). Morrison is here signifying on previously published, popular Black women writers, more specifically those writers who pre-dated her in novelistic form, and were her precursors to fictional writing. Ruth's voicelessness and powerlessness suggests an absence, a lack of something. Hence Morrison is signifying on characters as Ruth, as well as her middle-class unworking daughters, who are powerless to act or respond to anything in their environment. They are, for all practical purposes, useless. So Ruth visits a cemetery to talk to her father. She is powerless to speak to anyone, except the dead. Through the narrative sequence on Ruth, Morrison is appropriating representation of the middle-class

characters in a new and novel way--as absent, metaphorically dead, unthinking, unloving, within a living physical body.

Ruth's daughters are equally invalidated. Their lives are resigned to insignificance and hollowness, except when Corinthians engages in her first affair at the age of forty-two. Her sister, Magdalene called Lena, is "doomed to spinsterhood by her father's pretensions and her own resignation ..." (Brenner 120). Depoliticized and subservient to the men in the family, she accepts her fate except for the one brave moment when she confronts her brother, Milkman, for his selfish unthinking behavior:

> "You're been laughing at us all your life. Corinthians. Mama. Me. Using us, ordering us, and judging us ... everything in the house stopped for you. You have yet to wash your underwear, spread a bed, wipe the ring from your tub, or move a flect of your dirt from one place to another." "... Where do you have the <u>right</u> to decide out lives?
> ... I'll tell you where. From that hog's gut that hangs down between your legs.... you will need more than that." (<u>Song of Solomon</u> 217)

For once, Magdalene called Lena has stood up to and signified on her brother and his physical parts because of his tell-tale reporting to his stern father about the "goings-on" of his older sister in her forties. Here is Corinthians who has finally broken out of her cultural shell to date a man, who is lower on the socioeconomic ladder than she. In this context, Magdalene called Lena appropriates verbal insult to call attention to her brother's actions; this was the one time when his sister, Corinthians, is

seeking some degree of happiness, and Milkman was trying to bring an end to that.

Morrison also parodies Corinthians' uselessness as a Bryn Mawr graduate with no skills or even ability to get work; she was "unfit ... for eighty per cent of the useful work in the world" (190). The only job Corinthians gets with her learned and expensive education is one as a maid to a lesser educated white woman. However, it is as a maid, though, that Corinthians finally receives some degree of fulfillment. Here is a clear example of signifying through parodying, for Corinthians, who is rendered useless as a functioning middle-class woman, is awakened in her forties to a need for self-aggrandizement and physical pleasure, ironically in the lowest type of work for a college graduate of an elite women's college in the East.

Another aspect of signifying by Morrison could be seen in the imagery surrounding the three strange women: Pilate, Reba, and Hagar. Morrison could be signifying on the holy trinity and inferring that the unholy trinity consists of three women instead of three male beings: father, son and holy ghost. In Morrison's novel the trinity would consist of three generations of women: grandmother (Pilate), daughter (Reba for Rebecca) and granddaughter (Hagar).

Morrison appropriates other aspects of parodying as a form of signifying in Song of Solomon. In presenting the militant group, Seven Days, Morrison is signifying on revolutionary groups during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The one group that comes almost immediately to mind is the Black Panthers, that worked out of major metropolitan cities in our country. Ironically the Seven Days is a revenge group that takes the life of a White when a Black life has been taken. The Black Panthers, in contrast, though known to some as a revolutionary group, endeavored to help urban, "ghetto" youth with after school care and food. Morrison is undoubtedly revealing some political intertexual relationship between the two groups. She is bringing a heightened awareness to a revolutionary group, such as the Panthers, through her literary reference to them. However, the mystery of their presence, the intense fanaticism of its leaders, their mission, and their need for money lead to their demise.

Morrison avoids the typical stereotypes of militant Black men, in Black clothing, informing others of their works. The secretive nature of this militant group transfixes it as a hidden polemic, to be reckoned with. Gates, in restating Bakhtin's concept of the hidden polemic, suggests that the author's written discourse provides a "polemical attack" on another work or discourse with the same topic. Although one text or work or discourse clashes with the other, the key idea is that "it is understood only in its import" (Bakhtin rephrased in Gates' Signifying Monkey 111). Thus Morrison and the revolutionary Seven Days provide a model of a non-conforming group that is out to change the world in some non-traditional manner. Although

there is a clash between the positions of both, [since one is overtly expressing its ideas and ideology, whereas the other is secretive], both further justice in one form or another. Morrison may be suggesting, nevertheless, that survival can exist only if covert approach occurs and then if the group maintains a detachment to their goals.

Guitar sums up the ideology of the Seven Days, when he stated that the society comprises a small group of seven men "who don't initiate anything" (Morrison 151). They act on the principle that killing begets killing: if a Negro child, woman, or man is murdered by a white and no justice is served, then a similar type of killing takes place. "This society selects a similar victim at random and they execute him or her in a similar manner. They call themselves Seven Days" (Morrison 155).

One begins to question which character is voicing Morrison's position on Seven Days, whether the non-thinking Milkman, at this part of the novel, or it is Guitar? Has Morrison disguised her political voice in Guitar's character?

This clash of discourses is further evident in the ideological clashes between Guitar of Seven Days and Milkman, the materialist. Ralph Story in "An Excursion into the Black World: The 'Seven Days' in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon" asserts that "[i]n creating the Seven Days, Morrison reaches into the historical Black community and its contemporary equivalent to reveal a dissonance which has

always characterized the Afro-American world" (150). This dissonance or double-voicedness, as depicted by Gates, is aligned with two camps: the integrationist and the separatist advocacy found in the Black community. This ideological conflict was evident four decades ago in the differences between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Dubois, and persists today in the ideological caps of Malcolm X and Martin L. King, Jr. (Story 150). Morrison has presented two different voices in the persona of Guitar and Milkman. Both present two different ideological strategies found in the Black community. Since neither camp actually succeeds, maybe Morrison is suggesting that neither strategy is ideally suited for the Black community. Perhaps we need to compromise for the Black community to succeed.

Morrison has appropriated numerous examples of signifying in her texts, The Bluest Eye and Song of Solomon. She uses signification as a means of questioning much of America's life styles from idealized standards of families, whether Black and White, to bland, useless misplaced priorities of middle-class Black Americans.

Morrison is undoubtedly critical of the Black middle class not so much because of its movement to a suburban or exurban area, but because these people have too often lost their ancestral ties of Oral Tradition in the Black community. When the Black middle class assimilates into the dominant culture, it has too often lost its tenacity, its drive to survive amidst difficult situations. Then the

Black parents wonder why their children are suffering from mental breakdowns and committing suicide. Morrison stresses to the Black middle class that with the isolation that comes from separation from one's community comes empty vacuous men and women. Characters like the Dead sisters, Corinthians or Magdalene, or Macon "Milkman" Dead character, are products of that assimilation; those characters are overly concerned with material items of clothes, cars, social status, and women. She does suggest an alternative, as she does with Milkman. Although he went South to find his "pot of gold," he found his heritage, his ancestral rights in his journey to his Southern home. He learned from the old servant, Circe, about the importance of life, hard work, and the ever enduring spirit of "keep a-going." Here was an old women, "Healer, deliverer, in another world she would have been the head nurse at Mercy" (Song of Solomon 248). When Milkman offered Circe money, she responded, "You think I don't know how to walk when I want to walk? Put your money back in your pocket" (Song of Solomon 248). Yet Milkman continues to question Circe on why she remains in the old unkempt house even after the old white woman killed herself. She again responds to Milkman:

> "You don't listen to people. Your ear is on your head, but it's not connected to your brain. I said he killed herself rather than do the work I'd been doing all my life!" Circe stood up and the dogs too.
> "Do you hear me? She saw the work I did was so hateful to her she killed herself to keep from

> having to do it, and you think I stay on here because I loved her, then you have about as much sense as a fart!"

Circe signifies on Milkman several times in this passage. When she states that he doesn't listen, she means more than his hearing the words that she has spoken. One wonders how many times this statement has been made to young teens and young adults, "You are not listening." Circe goes even further to state that his ears are not connected to his brain. She suggests here that one has to listen and understand the implications of the message. Morrison is commenting in part on the "drive" that the older people instilled in the young. Circe remains in the smelly, unkempt house because she knows how to survive on hard work.

Morrison is also making a statement about preserving important tenets of the African American culture. With the assimilation of many Black people into the larger community, many young African American youth in Generation X and maybe some in the Baby Boom generation may be uninformed about the rich Oral Tradition that is found in their Black culture. The verbal tenacity that is found in signification is lost to many in Generation X. Morrison is profoundly aware of signifying that once dwelled so strongly in the Black community in the South.

To Morrison, signification has its staying power in the novel, and she uses the novel to pass on that oral feature. One could probably produce a complete text to examine more fully the signifying elements in all of her works. However,

she is a master story-teller, and she has used her skill as narrative writer to pass on the oral feature of signifying.

CHAPTER 8

SIGNIFYING IN ALICE WALKER'S THE THIRD LIFE OF GRANGE COPELAND AND THE COLOR PURPLE

Alice Walker is noted for her 1982 novel and film, The Color Purple. Much has been disclosed and analyzed about her Pulitzer Prize winning epistolary novel and its appropriation of the Oral Tradition. However, less has been written on Walker's use of oral tradition in her other novels, particularly The Third Life of Grange Copeland or Meridian. This chapter focuses on signification in two of Walker's novels, The Third Life of Grange Copeland and Color Purple and shows Walker's emergence as a womanist-signifier, who calls attention to women's issues.

Walker uses signification in two ways: as an indirect and humorous put-down and as a revisionist-parody.

On the one hand, Walker uses signification as a verbal strategy that is a humorous put-down of a listener. This meaning is similar to Smitherman's definition of signifyin' or siggin as a folk expression, which is a "culturally approved" ritual of needling or putting down another; this indirect method of talking about a person is used with no malicious intent.

> Since the signifier employs humor, it makes the put-down easier to swallow and gives the recipient a socially acceptable way out. That is, if they can't come back with no bad signification of they own, they can just laugh along with the group. (119)

On the other hand, Walker uses signifying as an extended metaphor to reveal her womanist ideology and to explore signifying as revision and parody. Alice Walker as a feminist writer has repeatedly defined and redefined her womanist ideology in essays, in her novels, and in written and audio interviews. Her womanist ideology reveals that her primary concern is the heart and soul of Black American women. According to Mary Helen Washington, Walker serves as an "apologist and spokeswoman for Black women, by understanding the motivation" (134) of these women, and hence Walker's "identifying mark of her writing is her concern of the lives of Black women" (133). In order to explore the lives of Black women and call just attention to the issues relevant to Black women, Walker has employed oral features of her mentor and predecessor, Zora Neale Hurston.

In Walker's first novel, The Third Life of Grange Copeland, she employs signifying in a conventional manner of making a point indirectly. One manifest example of signifying occurs in the early part of the novel when Margaret and Grange are residing together under the same roof, but live different lives on Saturday nights. For fifteen years Margaret had waited patiently in her crisp, clean clothes on Saturday afternoons for guests, who never came, while Grange went into town without her to indulge himself. Then Margaret, tired of this sedate, incomplete life, changed her personality and "went with her new painted good looks and new fragrance of beds, of store-bought

perfume and of gin" (The Third Life 16). Within this setting, Margaret often signified on her "absent" husband, when he was in town. Once when Margaret arrived home by way of the big truck, she noticed that Grange had not gotten home yet and signified:

> "I see he ain't back yet," she said.
> Brownfield lounged in the doorway, hoping his job as baby-sitter was over.
> "Said he wouldn't be back no more," his mother said, pulling her dress over her head and shaking it out. She chuckled spitefully. "How many times I done heard that. You'd think he'd be satisfied, me feeding him and her fucking him!" (The Third Life 16)

Margaret's message, though indirect, is not difficult to decode, but it does require the reader to think through additional steps in decoding Margaret's social message. Margaret is certainly aware that Grange is not home, so she is implying much more in her comments. Margaret suggests that since Grange is not home, he must still be with "that fat yellow bitch," whom one later finds out is "fat Josie."

To understand the relevance of Margaret's comments, one must be aware of the long-term relationship that Grange has had with Josie. The reader finds out much later in the novel what Margaret and Josie already know. Josie and Grange had dated prior to his marriage to Margaret, but Grange's family objected to Grange marrying such a low class woman as Josie. After marriage, Grange returns to his old flame and re-establishes a long-term love affair. Margaret, in her resentment of this long term relationship, is signifying on her husband, Grange, and his repeated absence,

even though only she and Brownfield are present. Margaret's comments, "I see he ain't back yet," implies that (A) Grange is again with that other woman, (B) he has repeatedly been with her every Saturday, (C) he said he wasn't ever going to come back to her. This comment implies that Grange is probably going to leave Margaret and live with fat Josie. However, her comments also suggest that she is expecting him to return any minute, "He ain't back yet." The yet conveys the added message of an impending return.

Margaret ends this signifying discourse on Grange with "You'd think he'd be satisfied, me feeding him and her fucking him!" Again her anger over her husband's paramour is absolutely necessary to understanding this latter statement; Grange's extra-marital relationship has gone on for more than fifteen years and has resulted in a changed Margaret. Yet Margaret is doomed to hardship and an unfaithful husband in this relationship no matter what she does, even in trying to out-match him with her extra-marital affairs and her changed persona.

The signification Margaret employs here may be characterized as one-line witticisms of metaphorical, everyday images (Smitherman 121). Margaret in her alliterative f pun suggests that she is providing the food for Grange and son while fat Josie is providing sex for him. With the exploitative help of two different women--one the wife and the other the female friend--for two different purposes, Grange ought to be happy. Margaret is obviously

looking superficially at Grange's possible happiness and satisfaction and not at the oppressiveness Grange receives from the white dominated world. Margaret could have challenged Grange with a direct statement of where he was and with whom, but such an open confrontation would have resulted in a physical battle with Margaret undoubtedly losing. With her signifying on Grange in his absence, Margaret avoids direct confrontation and vents her anger against her innocent listener-son.

Another example of signifying occurs much later in the novel during Grange's third life when he is challenging his granddaughter to use standard English and avoid the use of "hit" for "it."

> "And don't say you hit because I say hit 'cause I don't know no better. I mean, I know hit ain't correct, but I can't always remember what to replace hit with."
>
> "A perfect score of hits!" Ruth shouted, clapping her hands. You ain't-aren't- supposed to say 'hit' for 'it,' neither. 'It' ain't got no h in 'hit.'" She giggled. (The Third Life 179)

Ruth has signified on her grandfather by using a one-line pun. She has taken her grandfather's use of "hit" for "it" and turned it into a score, as found in a baseball game. Ruth is consistently accused of being saucy or sassy by her grandfather. She responds indirectly in this instance to his use of "hit" with a cleverly disguised pun, "a perfect score of hits." Her grandfather responds with "I just wanted to check if you was noticing." In this kind of interaction, both speaker and listener are important for a successful exchange, and such was the case within this

conversational discourse. Ruth is not directly attacking her grandfather for his use of "hits" for "its," but has acknowledged his use of language forms, which she is not to imitate, through her sassy baseball pun.

Walker directs much of her signifying toward the difficulties of women, but she also signifies on the oppressive behavior of Whites toward Blacks by her use of indirect, ironic statements. Instead of overtly criticizing the actions of Whites, she signifies in much the same way that South African Blacks signified on the remarkably astute physical tricks that South African Blacks performed from narrow-windowed, ten story buildings. Such behavior was impossible to perform. In The Third Life of Grange Copeland Walker too presents what she calls the "neat nigger trick" incidents that are literal impossibilities for Blacks to perform. In one episode Grange and Ruth, his granddaughter, are talking as the news reports of Huntley and Brinkley occur. Grange informs Ruth of his drinking buddy's, murder the previous day. When Ruth inquires as to who did it, Grange responds:

> "Them as has the last word say he done it hisself"
> Ruth was stunned.
> "Course, wasn't no gun nowhere near the ditch," said Grange.
> "How did he manage to shoot half his head off without a gun?" she asked.
> "A neat nigger trick," said Grange.
> He stared into the fireplace for ten minutes without speaking. "I once seed a woman," he said, "had been strung up, slit open and burned just about up." He thought for five more minutes, Ruth waiting impatiently for him to speak. "They said she was one of them people bent on suicide. Kill

> herself three ways.... Said she was <u>one</u> nigger with determination." (233-4)

This lengthy passage contains two narrative accounts of a "neat nigger trick." The first account suggests an impossible situation that Fred Hill could kill himself by shooting half his head off without a gun. The second account discloses an equally impossible task of a woman who not only hanged herself, but slit herself open and then burned herself in trying to kill herself three ways. Both narratives imply racial killings of Blacks by Whites. These deaths are marked by a verbal analogue of silence among the Blacks. Sensing that little will be done to avenge these deaths, the Blacks remain in silent resentment. The Blacks hear the explanations of the Whites for the deaths and criticize indirectly since overt criticism of the Whites could result in more deaths of Blacks. The Whites, in offering senseless responses for the deaths, are indifferent and unconcerned for rational or lucid explanations.

The signifying statements suggest that the signifier, Grange, is aware of the falseness of the statements. This tactic of signifying is what Claudia Mitchell-Kernan calls "information-dropping":

> Another tactic of the signifier is to allude to something which somehow has humor value or negative import for the hearer in a casual fashion--information-dropping.... If [a statement of 'who was that fox you were with last night'] said in the presence of the addressee's wife this kind of <u>signifying</u> is felt to have a highly malicious intent, because it drops information which is likely to involve negative consequences for the addressee. (321)

Grange's narrative accounts have negative consequences for other Blacks. His rationale is undoubtedly to warn his kin of the gruesome murders and inhumane treatment of Whites toward Blacks so that she too can be wary of them.

Lawrence Levine in Black Culture and Black Consciousness takes the concept of Black people's response to racial violence a step further. He asserts that jokes and humorous comments

> about lynching and other forms of racial violence illustrate still one more function of humor, referred to by Freud as "the triumph of narcissism." Humor, according to this view, is not resigned; it is rebellious and signifies the victory of the ego which refuses to be hurt by the arrows of adversity and instead attempts to become impervious to the wounds dealt it by the outside world. (343)

Although Grange's response to the neat nigger tricks that Blacks perpetrate on themselves is not humor, per se, he does make his statement with a "tongue-in-cheek" slyness. Grange was aware that he had to "mute" his response to the racial crimes against his friends and neighbors, and hence he appropriated signification as a response.

Alice Walker also uses parody and pastiche as another form of signification to discuss folk figures in her first novel through the characters of both Grange and Brownfield. Pastiche is recapitulation or renaming of a tradition, "the announcement of ostensibly concealed revision" (Gates 124). He continues:

> Rhetorical naming by indirection is central to our notions of figurations, troping, and of the parody of forms, or pastiche, in evidence when one writer

> repeats another's structure by one of several means, including a fairly exact repetition of a given narrative or rhetorical structure, filled incongruously with a ludicrous or incongruent context. (103)

In other words, pastiche encompasses the "act of literary 'Naming'" while parody entails the repetition "of a form and then inversion of the same through a process of variation" (Gates 104, 124).

Both characters, Brownfield and Grange, in his first two lives, are depicted as mean-spirited and evil men in much of this novel. Keith Byerman suggests that Brownfield "lives out the selfish, violent, malevolent existence with which his father begins" (129)

> In addition to being sexually promiscuous, he mistreats his wife and ultimately kills her, and he puts his newborn albino son outside on a winter night so that he will freeze to death. When his wife goes against his wishes in trying to create a more decent life for the family, he patiently and coldly calculates his revenge; he succeeds in returning the family to the barely human conditions from which they sought to rise. In all this, his attitudes resemble those of the bad man of Black legend: the Great McDaddy, Billy Dupree, Stagolee. (129)

In Walker's parody of Brownfield as an evil folk figure in Black mythology, she has also depicted his father in his third life in the opposite light as a concerned grandfather, who desires a good, solid life for Ruth, his granddaughter. Brownfield defies social conventions as does his dad, so in a real sense, these two men are similar, but display opposite approaches to dealing with the oppressive conditions in which they live.

What Walker has done with the two Black "bad" folk characters is signify on them. As Henry Louis Gates states in Signifying Monkey, an important component of Signifying is repetition and revision. Just as with jazz, one sees repetition of a particular form and then an inversion of that same form through variation, so it is with films and narration (104, 108-9).

Alice Walker does the same with the two male characters, father and son, Grange and Brownfield. Both men are evil, malevolent characters, who as young men mistreat their wives, one leaving a wife who eventually kills herself and the other kills his struggling hard-working wife. Now what Walker does is to rewrite (revise) the character of Grange as he returns to the South in his third life. Grange still harbors an intense dislike for Whites and the oppressive actions of them toward Blacks, but his life is more humane and loving. He is a changed man who condemns his previous two lives. In contrast, Brownfield's intensity toward his father and life in general grows even more malevolent and hostile. He places the blame for his depressed life, hardships, bad breaks on the oppressive system of whites and his father.

The reader, as well as his youngest daughter, Ruth, easily see through his distorted view of life:

> The past rose up between them like a movie on a screen. The last dilapidated, freezing house which he had forced on them, the sickness of Daphne, her strange fits of which Brownfield had taken no notice, the waywardness of Ornette, whose

> every act was done to make someone notice her. The murder of Mem.
>
> "You think I don't remember," said Ruth. "The trouble is I can't forget!"
>
> "You don't remember nothing," he said. "You been fed on all the hatred you have for me since the time you was this high!.... You don't know what it like for a man to live down here. You don't know what I been through." (The Third Life 218-9)

Even when Brownfield is endeavoring to elicit pity from Ruth and the readers, she and the readers sense his insincerity: "Considering the past, the word was false, a bribe, meaningless" (The Third Life 219). Brownfield's past actions had clearly revealed the dogged, mean-spirited nature of him to everyone around him.

Even Grange tries to enlighten his son, Brownfield, on blaming others for one's misfortunes. In his confession to his son, he recounts such an opinion:

> "By George, I know the danger of putting all the blame on somebody else for the mess you make out of your life. I fell into the trap myself! And I'm bound to believe that that's the way white folks can corrupt you even when you done held up before. 'Cause when they got you thinking they're to blame for everything they have you thinking they's some kind of gods!" (The Third Life 207)

When one shifts the blame to someone else, he/she is abdicating his/her responsibility and places the control of one's life in the hands of another. Thus one is giving the control of one's life to human gods, for nobody is "as powerful as we make them out to be. We got our own souls" (The Third Life 207). Walker and cultural critics, such as Cornel West, are suggesting that one can have some control

over one's life; when difficulties enter one's life, one can choose to honor that difficulty or be slain by it.

Walker is thus signifying on "bad" Black folk characters through her parallelism in the mean-spirited behavior of (a) the young Grange and (b) the young Brownfield, his son. Then Walker revised the old Grange into loving grandfather while the contrasted son, Brownfield remains the tired, vile folk character. Grange realizes, though, that in order to move forward and progress, one needs, first, to admit one's guilt and then to accept one's responsibility:

> "All I'm saying, Brownfield," said Grange, his voice sinking to a whisper, "is that one day I had to look back on my life and see where ***I*** went wrong, and when I did look back I found out your ma'd be alive today if I hadn't just as good as shot her to death, same as you done your wife. We ***guilty***, Brownfield, and neither one of us is going to move a step in the right direction until we admit it." (The Third Life 208-9)

Grange realizes that the first step in changing one's life lies in ***one's admission of being guilty*** of mistreating family members, such as one's wife and family, and next one must ***actually change*** to become a more humane and loving being. Grange undergoes that process: he admits his faults and then changes his behavior. Brownfield, in contrast, remains constant, as the "big, mean" folk character who stubbornly will not change or admit any wrong doing.

While Brownfield does not modify his behavior and grows more evil and selfish by the day, Walker inverts Grange's life by converting him into a concerned human. Walker in

her signification is pursuing what one might consider "implicit formal criticism." In a signifying sense Brownfield can be compared to Wright's Bigger Thomas who has no voice or power to act except through deceptive and conniving exploitation of others. Of course, Bigger did not have the chance to exploit other people, other than a few women, whereas Walker's Brownfield exploited any person that served his purpose, including Josie and the Judge. However, even in Brownfield's exploitation, he had no voice or power even at the end of his life, in contrast to his father whose ameliorative behavior exudes a presence and power to change the direction of things--he doesn't want his granddaughter to live with her father as prescribed by the law, so he deletes Ruth's father from the scene by murdering him. Thus Walker's signification on the presence of both characters, as representations of Black folk characters, reveals the ***question/issue*** of Black women's oppression by Black men and one possible ***answer*** to Black women's oppression.

In a real sense Walker is not disclosing a hatred of Black men because of her depiction of the father/son in the novel as she has so often been accused of. Walker in The Same River Twice states that the hardest charge to tolerate was that she hated Black men: "From infancy I have relied on the fiercely sweet spirits of Black men; and this is abundantly clear in my work" (23). Thus if one looks at The Third Life of Grange Copeland, one sees that Walker has distinctly exposed the hardships of Black women through the

exploitative oppression of Black men who can be considered folk characters, but she also reveals a changed spirit of Black men through her signifying comment on Grange Copeland.

Another feature on which Alice Walker signifies in The Third Life of Grange Copeland is the image that the North is the saving ground for Black people, especially those Southern Blacks who yearn for going "up Norse." She takes an image of the Southern Black who looks to the North for prosperity and revises (repeats it with a ludicrous conclusion) it to show that conditions in the North may even be worst, as Grange learns. In the South a Black man, at least, has friends who share their meager food or dilapidated housing. In the North no one, whether Black or White, cares or shows compassion.

Walker is also signifying on the Black Northerners who come South in fancy cars and clothes only to live in sub-standard housing in the North. This view erupts in the home of Grange Copeland when Margaret Copeland responds to her son, Brownfield, who is thinking about his Northern relatives and wishing secretly that he was up North:

> "What you thinkin' about them for? I ain't heard from Marilyn since Silas was killed. Just think, tryin' to rob a liquor store in broad daylight! Marilyn always had a lot to say about her new icebox and clothes and her children's fancy learnin', but never did she breathe one word about Silas being on dope. All the time coming down here in they fancy cars and makin' out like we so out of fashion--I bet the Norse is just as much a mess as down here." (The Third Life 17)

Walker again shows a disdain for the North when Brownfield sets out to go North to Chicago or New York after the

suicidal death of his mother and the overt desertion of his father. As Brownfield walks and walks, he reflects on his mother's thoughts to him about the North:

> He stopped chewing a moment to think about what his mother had said about up Norse; and he remembered that his cousins said that up Norse was cold and people never spoke to one another on the street or anything. His father had once said that being up Norse ruined Uncle Silas and Aunt Marily, being so cold and unfeeling and full of concrete, but even while Grange said this his eyes had shown a fascination with the idea of going there himself. (The Third Life 29-30)

Grange, who did go up North to New York, discovers that the North was not paved with silver and gold. He too followed the gaze of his ancestors to go North, but found only poverty and coldness and loneliness. The great Black migration of the 1920s and 1940s from the South to the North had resulted in little social progress for Blacks. Ironically few Blacks discovered that until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Through the disruptive difficult life of Grange in the second phase of his life, Walker demonstrates the falseness of this attitude. Grange found not only job problems, but the harsh cold attitude of Blacks toward Blacks. Consequently Grange returns to the South for the salvation of himself and his granddaughter. Walker's signification on the North implies that maybe the South is the place one may find some satisfaction and happiness if one is willing to fight for an improved life.

In The Color Purple, Walker uses a variety of signifying patterns. She appropriates signifying as

indirect, metaphorical images and as pastiche and parody in revising other narratives or stories by other writers.

Signification as an indirect metaphorical image can be located in several sections of the novel. In one lengthy passage, Shug is "schooling" Mary Agnes, who is also known as Squeaky, on how to perform as a forceful, show-stopping singer. Embedded in this "schooling" is what Claudia Mitchell-Kernan calls "encoded messages or meanings" (311). Harpo, Mary Agnes's live-in friend, objects to her singing in a night club, but Shug responds to both Harpo and her male friend, Grady, with a signified, encoded response:

> I don't know if I want her to sing, say Harpo.
>
> How come? ast Shug. That woman you got singing now can't git her ass <u>out</u> of the church. Folks don't know whether to dance or creep to the mourner's bench. Plus, you dress Mary Agnes up the right way and you'll make piss pots of money. Yellow like she is, stringy hair and cloudy eyes, the men'll be crazy bout her. Ain't that right, Grady, she say.
>
> Grady look little sheepish. Grin. Mama you don't miss a thing, he say.
>
> And don't you forgit it, say Shug. (111)

Shug initially signifies on the current blues singer at Harpo's club, as a cross between a blues singer and a religious singer, for the woman can't decide whether she wants to get "her ass out the church." Shug's encoded message is loud and clear to persons familiar with the cultural dichotomy of church music and secular music. She acknowledges that a forceful, successful blues singer cannot straddle the fence in deciding to sing--you have got to either sing in the church <u>or</u> in the club. To be a good

blues singer, Shug suggests that one has to combine "singing and dancing and fucking together.... That's the reason they call what us sing the devil's music" (111). Shug then adds that Mary Agnes's high yellow looks with straight hair and gray eyes will serve as an added incentive for men to "be crazy about her." When Shug asks Grady if he agrees with her assessment of Mary Agnes and the fascination of Black men have with high yellow women, such as Mary Agnes, Grady concurs with "Mama you don't miss a thing." Although Shug is a successful blues singer who has a dark complexion, she is acutely aware of the favored position of light skinned women.

The gaze of Black men has consistently been toward the light skinned woman as a substitute for the White woman. Black women were taught to hate themselves because of their dark skin and kinky hair. As previously discussed, Toni Morrison dedicated an entire novel, The Bluest Eye, to the myth that surrounds this image. Thus as Shug signifies on this concept, she is informing the reader that she and other Black women and men know that no matter no successful a Black woman might be, she is still beset by the images of high yellow woman as prettier than those with Black skin color. Grady's response that Shug does not miss a beat simply affirms that both he and Shug know the reality of the situation.

Shug is implying something else in her closing comments, "And don't you forgit it." Many Black men pursue

light-skinned Black women covertly even as they profess love for a dark skinned woman. So Grady had better not forget that she (Shug) knows the score and Grady should not try to pursue Mary Agnes behind her back.

Shug has signified on several fronts. She has signified on the image of Black women who are high yellow and become successful based on their skin color. She also has signified on the concept that Black men pursue those high yellows behind other Black women's backs. Just as she is teaching Mary Agnes how to be successful, Shug knows that her eyes are open to the emotional and verbal games men play with women of both hues. So Shug's signifying is stated to provide a clear point both to Mary Agnes and to Grady.

Walker also uses parody (as a signifier) on the position of Celie's step-father as a god. Since one associates GOD with the use of capital pronoun H in He, Walker does the same with the characterization of her step-father, as depicted by Celie: "Mr. _____ finally come out an ast for Nettie hand in marriage. But He won't let her go" (The Color Purple 16) [emphasis mine]. Walker uses the capital H in He to call attention to Celie's thinking of her step-father as the controlling force in her life, the I-god character. In this context, Mr. _____ is again seeking the hand of Nettie for his wife. Celie's step-father acknowledges that Mr.____ cannot marry Nettie: "Well, He say, real slow, I can't let you have Nettie. She too young" (The Color Purple 17). In these two contexts Walker has

deliberately capitalized the H in He as a verbal put-down, for Celie's step-father is the opposite of a god. Fonso is the embodiment of control of oppressed, rural, poorly educated Black women--he determines their fate, their actions, their livelihood. Walker is also revisiting, through signifying, Hurston's use of I-god for Joe Starks in Their Eyes Were Watching God. Although Fonso and Joe Starks exude total control over Celie and Jamie, respectively, their control is short-lived. Both Walker and Hurston invert the male power by the end of their novels to give both men mere vestiges of their previous control, while the women become the real powers. Ultimately Celie in The Color Purple and Jamie in Their Eyes Were Watching God both have control over their lives and the economical and social power that comes from that control.

Walker also revisits Hurston in the metaphorical images of Black women as mules of the world. In The Color Purple Celie is depicted as an animal, "no stranger to hard work.... You can do everything just like you want to and she ain't gonna make you feed it or clothe it" (18). Celie as Mr. ____'s wife also toils in the fields all day, "chopping and plowing," and is often physically beaten by her husband even when the children aren't.

In Their Eyes Were Watching God, Hurston refers to Black women as the mules of the world:

> So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because

> he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. (29)

The Black men were assigned the tedious task, but they passed that task onto the Black womenfolks. Hence in The Color Purple Walker revises Hurston's passage, by depicting Celie in speech and behavior as a mule of the world. Walker has mimetically rewritten Celie as a descriptive example of the mule who is dominated totally by men. Throughout much of the novel, Walker has presented Celie as a grass mat who is walked upon, abused, and oppressed by different men, from the sexual and physical abuse of her step-father and husband, to the mean-spiritedness of her step-son, Harpo. Although Celie is presented as a mule of the world, Walker does not leave Celie in this predicament. In revising the character of Celie, Walker rewrites her to eventually realize her potential as a Black Womanist. Through encouragement and support of Black women in the novel, particularly Shug, Celie develops both her private and public self.

Through the private sexual relationship between Shug and Celie, Walker is signifying--revisiting--her concept of "womanism" as a "woman who loves other women sexually and/or nonsexually" (In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens xi). In the privacy of Shug's bedroom, Celie learns about her body and the pleasure of its parts. As one guards the door, the other examines her private parts for the first time in her life. This private examination leads to a sexual pleasure

not recognized by Celie. This personal pleasure leads also to Celie's self-worth and consciousness as a Black woman. Celie's angle of vision resituates her to enjoy another woman's love without condemnation or condescension by others. Juxtaposed with Celie's private growth is her public growth, where Celie eventually becomes an economic success with her small business and property ownership. Through Shug's relationship, Celie becomes a wholesome developed character. Barbara Christian even contends that Walker has portrayed the "Black lesbian relationship as natural sand freeing" (139).

Another kind of signifying, which Walker uses in The Color Purple, is pastiche and parody, which involves revision. To Gates parody and pastiche are two forms of Signifying, which encompasses a rewriting or renaming of the literary tradition. "Writers Signify upon each other's texts by rewriting the received textual tradition" (124). Within this framework, Gates presents Alice Walker's The Color Purple as a signified rewriting of Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God.

In Signification, according to Gates, both the signified text and the original text both share a common traditional feature although the revised text may offer some inversion of the original.

> Walker Signifies upon Hurston by troping the concept of voice that unfolds in Their Eyes Were Watching God. Whereas Janie's movement from object to subject begins with her failure to recognize an image of her colored self in a

> photograph..., Celie's ultimate movement of self-negation is her self-description in her first letter to God.... Celie, like Janie, is an absence, an erased presence, an empty set. (243)

Gates emphasizes that both Celie and Jamie are both characterized initially by an absence of presence, but both emerge as self-conscious women at some point in their narratives. However, one problematic dynamic of Gates is his inclusion of Walker's form of epistolary narrative as Signified revision of Hurston's rhetorical strategy. Gates has pushed this Signifying strategy a bit far. The narrative discourse of Walker in its letter format and Hurston's narrative component with its third person and first person format are not similar. Their strategies inform two different approaches to narrative writing. Celie in The Color Purple is the first person narrator who recounts what has happened to her over a period of some fifty years. Each action is colored by her perceptions of the event. In contrast Hurston has some parts of her premier novel in first person, but much of it is recounted in third person limited reported style. Both protagonists come into their own voices, but in distinctly different modes: Celie through her contact with Shug Avery learns the importance of self-love and eventually stands up to her husband. Janie, in contrast, has a voice, from the early times when she was sixteen years of age and living with her grandmother. She also reveals her voice with her first toad of a husband, Logan Killicks, but quickly disguises her voice and at times silences her voice to keep her husband at

bay. With her second husband, Joe Starks, she again keeps silent until she is unable to remain quiet and speaks up, signifying on her husband's size and shape. Soon after that the I-god figure of Joe Starks begins to disintegrate into nothingness, and he eventually dies, leaving Janie a rich widow. There are no observable similarities in voice other than the fact that both are battered Black women that are abused by Black men. Analysis of similarities in voice and rhetorical strategies is a forced endeavor.

This writer does believe that Walker has signified upon Hurston, but in different areas, such as revision and pastiche. One of Gates's parallelisms between Walker's text and Hurston's text in a Signifying context occurs in the self-awareness narratives of Janie and Celie:

> Whereas Janie's sign of self-awareness is represented as her ability to tell Pheoby her own version of events, Walker matches this gesture by having Celie first write her own texts, discover her sister's purloined letters, arrange them with Shug in "some kind of order," as Shug says to Celie, then read them so that a second narrative.... But Nettie's discovered letters are The Color Purple's structural revision of Janie's bracketed tale. (251)

This similarity of Walker's rewriting of Janie's tale, especially with her retelling Pheoby, is analogous to Celie's telling Shug of her narrative. Both narratives refigure women retelling women their tales of woe and happiness, yet both stories contain some revised differences that are quite obvious to the reader.

If one uses Gates' definition of signifying as a revisiting or revising of a formal literary tradition, one finds that either definition reveals that Walker signified upon a historical event that occurred over a hundred years ago in Memphis, Tennessee. Walker's antecedent in her novel is not a previously published writer, but a true account that occurred in 1892.

> The lynchings of March 9, 1892, were the climax of ugly events in Memphis. From the time the three Black men had gone into business for themselves, their People's Grocery, as it was called, had been the target of White resentment. The store ... represented, after all, a desire for economic independence. (Giddings 17)

When the three Black businessmen established a grocery store for Blacks, they were competing with the White store owner.

> For Whites the most galling thing about the People's Grocery was that it took away business from a White store owner who had long been used to a monopoly of Black trade. The White proprietor initiated against the Black businessmen a series of provocations that culminated in an attack of armed thugs sent to raze the grocery. (17)

Blacks likewise defended themselves against the "armed thugs" and in the ensuing battle three White men were shot, but not killed. "Moss, McDowell, and Stewart were arrested along with one hundred other Blacks charged with conspiracy" (Giddings 18). Some time later the three men, Moss, McDowell, and Stewart, were brutally lynched by a white mob, their store was destroyed by whites, and then the remainder was auctioned off by creditors (Giddings 18).

Alice Walker's account, more succinctly written, emphasizes the brutal destruction of three Black men by a

riotous White mob. Samuel, a missionary stationed in Africa, recounted the incident to Nettie, Celie's sister, in the form of a fable:

> Once upon a time, there was a well-to-do farmer who owned his own property near town. Our town, Celie, and as he did so well in farming ..., he decided to open a store, and try his luck selling dry goods as well. Well, his store did so well that he talked two of his brothers into helping him run it.... Then the white merchants began to get together and complain that this store was taking all the Black business away from them. This would not do. (159)

Obvious parallels can be observed between the two narratives-both encompass three Black businessmen whose grocery store was so successful that the White store owner(s) resented the Black grocers "taking" their Black customers. In this context Walker has rewritten the same historical story with few, if any changes. Samuel continues

> And so, one night, the man's store was burned down, his smithy destroyed, and the man and two brothers dragged out of their homes in the middle of the night and hanged.... When the neighbors brought her husband's body home, it had been mutilated and burnt. (160-161)

Walker's recounting of the incident frames the story to enhance Celie's social and economic standing. In both situations, a heinous racial crime occurred because of Black economic success. By revising the narrative, Walker calls attention to this racial crime. In both situations, three men were brutally taken by mobs and hanged. But then the two narratives depart company. In the 1892 tragedy the three men were hanged. According to Ida B. Wells, a Memphis reporter at the time, their lynching served as a political

and social rallying cry of a condemnation against the lynching of Black men. Wells advised Blacks to save their money and leave town. Many Black citizens of Memphis did indeed leave that city.

Walker's fictional revision of that historical event resulted in a different conclusion. In Walker's account Celie is placed at the center of the happenings. Since it was Celie's and Nettie's father who was lynched, Celie's awakening revealed to her that the sexually oppressive behavior against her was not perpetrated by her real father, but by her evil step-father. Through Celie's reclaiming her father's land and store, she was able to become an independent businesswoman. Thus Walker has inverted the historical narrative to add a womanist perspective to her text.

bell hooks in her article, "Reading and Resistance: The Color Purple," suggests that one should take a different position on Celie. hooks points out that Celie represents "masculine otherness" with her business of making pants, a masculine symbol of malehood. hooks argues that Walker is parodying the traditional roles of womanhood and manhood and inverting these roles through role reversal. A reversal of male and female roles occurs with Celie taking on the dominant role of controller and Albert, in contrast, taking on a feminine presence (289). Although hooks asserts that "the phallocentric social order which exists outside the domain of private relationships remains intact," (290) one

could easily disagree with that assertion. In terms of private and public discourse Celie's changed persona does assert a masculine presence in the decision-making process of her business. She delegated the running of the store to the White man Alphonso had hired and also to Sophia. Meanwhile Celie continues to make pants.

bell hooks suggests that "Celie never reflects critically on the changes in her status" even as an entrepreneur, shop owner and land owner and does not exude power "via symbolic phallic representation" (291). What hooks has omitted is that depression can result in unmotivated behavior. Although Celie does not call herself depressed, it is precisely what she is experiencing: "I sit here in this big house by myself trying to sew, but what good is sewing gon do? What good is anything? Being alive begin to seem like a awful strain" (The Color Purple 225). When one is depressed, one hardly feels like pursuing any task. Yet Celie continues feebly to cut and sew her pants. Although the writer agrees then with hooks about Celie's uncritical stance in her new status, hooks omits the rationale behind Celie's behavior. She thinks her beloved sister is dead and has no motivation to continue to develop or grow or live.

With Walker, Womanism does not preclude a woman from being successful and does not suggest that a woman who loves another woman must be masculine. Walker has incorporated into this novel a revised definition of womanhood and male

hood; she has written of a womanist ideology that places womanhood in a feminist persona, but as one who stands up for herself. Even Albert notes this new category of womanhood:

> You know Shug will fight, he say. Just like Sofia.
> She bound to live her life and be herself no matter what.
> Mr._____ think all this is stuff men do. But Harpo not like this, I tell him. You not like this. What Shug got is womanly it seem like to me. Specially since she and Sofia the ones got it.
> You mean they not you or me.
> They hold they own, he say. And it's different. What I love best bout Shug is what she been through, I say. (The Color Purple 89)

This conversational exchange between Celie and Albert suggests that true communication is taking place between the two. Within this exchange one notes that Shug is placed in another category--with womanly ideas and demeanor, yet an uprightness, straight forwardness that is not associated with women. So she is placed in a special category of womanism--

> a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility..., and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.... Traditionally universalist. (In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens xi)

Walker's definition of Womanism bespeaks of Shug Avery; she has been placed in that special category by her lovers, Celie and Albert, for she exudes the varied meanings of womanism as depicted by Walker. Some critics have even inferred that Shug is the spokesperson for Walker and is

Walker's alter ego. Regardless, Shug Avery is personified as the woman who touches all of the characters in the novel, particularly Celie and Albert--brings Celie out of her shell and forces Albert to re-examine himself and his relationship to Celie. Yet with all of Shug's help, she was not presented by Walker as a total success, for she had failed as a mother.

Many other examples and signifying references can be found in Walker's The Color Purple. When the African tribe, the Olinkas recount their creation narrative, Walker is offering "an alternative to the Judeo-Christian account of Adam" on original sin (Selzer 69). Thus one could say that Walker is signifying on the Adam story and the Judeo-Christian concept of original sin. The Olinkas have heard a creation myth that the missionaries brought to them. However, to the Olinka people, the first people on earth, even before Adam, were Black. When White babies were born to these Black women, they had them killed. So Adam was not the first white man, but he "was just the first one the people didn't kill" (The Color Purple 239). With the questioning of the Biblical creation myth and even the questioning of Celie's fatherly looking white God, Walker makes these religious descriptions problematic. She is signifying on the creation myth as depicted by the missionaries in Africa and calling into question the Adam myth and the fall of man.

Another feature Walker might be signifying on in this segment is that of the social construction of racial differences and inferiority and kinship along racial lines. Linda Selzer asserts that Walker has historically situated racial inferiority and transcended kinship within two family groupings: Doris Baines, the English missionary who has adopted an African child and Sofia and the young mistress, Miss Eleanor Jane (70). If Walker is signifying on racial groupings, then what type of signifying is she troping? On the one hand, Walker has rewritten a familiar story in the South with an inverted strategy. In terms of Sofia, one finds that the cook is not Sofia, but the white mistress, Miss Eleanor Jane. What an inversion! Since Sofia is working as a clerk in Celie's store, she has someone to look in on Henrietta when she gets sick or needs to eat; that someone is Miss Eleanor Jane:

> Miss Eleanor Jane gon look in on Henrietta and every other day promise to cook her something she'll eat. You know white people have a look of machinery in they kitchen. She whip up stuff with yams you'd never believe. Last week she went and made yam ice cream. (The Color Purple 246)

So here is Miss Eleanor Jane cooking for her former Black maid's child. When asked how her white relatives like it, Sofia stated that they dislike it immensely:

> Do her peoples know? I ast.
> They know, say Sofia. They carrying on just like you know they would. Whoever heard of a white woman working for niggers, they rave. She tell them. Whoever hard of somebody like Sofia working for trash. (The Color Purple 246)

By Walker inverting the role of cook from Black woman to White woman, she is also commenting on race relations in this country. In this novel a White woman is portrayed as a compassionate person, less concerned with what others say and yet what is best for all concerned. Linda Selzer suggests that "the specific integrated domestic groupings serve to expose and to critique the larger pattern of racial integration found in their respective countries" (70).

Many other lucid examples of signifying can be found in this novel, but a last one will suffice to bring home the fact that the novel, The Color Purple abounds in signification. bell hooks in "Reading and Resistance" suggests that this novel "parodies those primary texts of autobiographical writing ... 'the slave narrative'" (291). hooks' point is that slave narratives endeavor to present historical accounts "as accurately as possible ... as experienced and interpreted by slaves without apology or exaggeration" (291). She then places Walker's The Color Purple in the category of historical novel without an adherence to accuracy and dates. hooks concludes that Walker is mocking the historical truth by subordinating such to myth, for "myth has far more impact on consciousness" (292).

If one takes Gates' definition of parody as a form of signification, then one can also see that Walker's novel is a signifying work on slave narratives. Although many slave narrative documents could be used, such as the diary,

journal, letter, legal documents, Walker chose a form, the letter, as structure for her novel. She has focused on the theme of slave narratives as individual women and men sought freedom. Walker has inverted historical truthfulness and facts and made them subordinate to her narrative tale. Celie in this novel resigns herself to oppression until she sees a ray of hope through Shug. Then she is ready to experience freedom and leaves her home to accompany Shug to Memphis. In a real sense Walker has subordinated the historical accounts "to teach the reader history not as it was but as it should be" (hooks 292). Although this writer does not agree totally with hooks' concept, she is accurate when she suggests that historical accuracy has been altered to present the story of what it should be.

Chapter 9

CONCLUSION

Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker have emerged as noted African American women writers during the last two decades. They project a multi-dimensional approach to Black Aestheticism and the Black literary tradition. Zora Neale Hurston's work was produced more than sixty years ago, but her work has been re-introduced as a literary forerunner of contemporary Black women writers. Hurston, Morrison, and Walker have appropriated the African American Oral Tradition in their narratives of the troubled, defining lives of African American women and men. Though distinct and different in narrative strategies, they infused literary aestheticism with the African American Folk Tradition of call-response and signification.

Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God appropriated Black dialect patterns of the rural African American. She infused that dialect with folk traditions of storytelling and imbued her narratives with positive images of Blacks. Bernard Bell asserts that the language of Their Eyes Were Watching God

> is poetic without being folksy, its structure loose without being disjointed, its characters stylized without being exotic, and its theme of personal wholeness centered on egalitarianism in living and loving, especially in heterosexual relationships. (121)

Hurston also appropriates "the power of the word" in the Oral Tradition, particularly in call-response and

signifying. Hurston uses the folk language "to protect her world and to caution those who would shatter her images to maintain a certain distance" (Plant 80). In giving power to the word of African Americans, Hurston calls attention to concerns and polemical "issues that are controversial and are usually allowed to remain unarticulated" (Plant 87). Rather than directly attacking the issues that apply to Black Americans, she uses indirection to criticize these concerns. Hurston stressed the idea that Black people are not one-dimensional, brain-limited people, but are complex people who love, hate, envy, smile, cry. The characters in Their Eyes Were Watching God are not dysfunctional, but whole-some people who are planted in the Black folk ethos and tradition.

Hurston also

> saw folk culture--her own culture--as the source of renewed Black national dignity and pride. She saw in it the foundations of African American self-determination and independence and foundation of resistance to European cultural domination. And she saw herself as the herald and harbinger of this new consciousness." (Plant 64)

Contemporaries of Hurston's folk people today would be the "fast-talking kids with their four-dimensional surrealist patter" (Mezzrow 136). They would be the

> razor-witted doctors without M.D.'s, lawyers who never had a shingle to hang out, financiers without penny one in their pokes, political leaders without a party, diploma-less professors and scientists minus a laboratory. They held their office-hours and made their speeches on The Corner. (Mezzrow 143)

Hurston recorded a tradition that subsequent writers validated, for they "were the genius of their people" with their language "a declaration of independence" (Mezzrow 143). Hurston has provided a legacy on the power and forcefulness of the language of Black Americans.

Hurston's appropriation of call-response extends metaphorically to her calling out to contemporary Black women writers today to validate their experiences for personal happiness and development, to record those experiences for other women to experience and explore. Some contemporary African American women writers have responded to her call by writing of Black protagonists who value romantic love and happiness over society's condemnation of their behavior. As Missy Dehn Kubitschek suggests many contemporary writers, both male and female, have responded to Hurston's call. Such writers as Ernest Gaines, Paule Marshall, Gayl Jones, and Octavia Butler are "kissing friends" to Hurston (68):

> Hurston has had such a powerful effect on subsequent African-American novels that occasionally a writer responds to a structural element as opposed to a character.... From the shout of Their Eyes Were Watching God,--even from its echoes--come responsive, calling figurations of African-American women's historical experiences and identities. (68)

Hurston appropriated signification to reveal the witty, clever speech of quick thinking Black people. To appropriate signifying requires the speaker to think "standing up on one's feet." Hurston, in giving voice to

Janie in Their Eyes, shows that the protagonist can outwit her Mayor-husband in quick, one-liner insults to which he cannot respond.

Hurston's use of signification extends to parody. Just as Gates called signifying language "the object of and mechanism of parody" (92), Mezzrow brings home a clear illumination of the relationship between parody and the Oral Traditions of call-response and signification.

> As a final touch, his [the Negro's] language is also a parody, a satire on the conventional ofay's gift of gab and gibberish. A lot of it consists of flowery ofay phrases and puffed-up cliches that are purposely twisted around to show how corny and funky they are, like a man's features are twisted in a caricature to show how simply he is inside. I never once saw those kids [in Northern areas] get dead serious and all swole up with pompous airs. It inspired me to realize that these hip cats were half-conscious comic artists, playing with words. Their lingo was ... jammed with a fine sense of the ridiculous that had behind it some solid social criticism. (144)

Toni Morrison as a writer who appropriates the Oral Tradition is interested in provoking a dialogue within the black community, just as she provokes a dialogue between the novel and the reader, between the narrator of her novel and their audience. Her dialogue entails her use of call-response and signification to illustrate her respect for the cultural traditions of Black Americans. This respect is threaded throughout The Bluest Eye and Song of Solomon. Embedded in the two oral features is the need for a communal spirit of Black people. In migrating to the North, Black Americans lost the community spirit that inspired psychial

growth and survival and turned toward an individualistic approach to life.

When Black people become disconnected from their communities, they experience damaging psychological lifestyles. They too often feel they don't belong. Morrison states that she never "felt like an American or an Ohioan or even a Lorainite." (Stepto 10). In the Black communities, there was a cohesiveness and a responsibility that permeated the village or neighborhood or town. "If they [people] were sick, other people took care of them; if they were old, other people took care of them; if they were mad, other people provided a small space for them...." (Stepto 11). This healthy sense of community prevails in Black life by providing "coping ability, strength, endurance, trickeration capacity, and power of [B]lack people" (Smitherman 156). Morrison realizes this power and metaphorically calls her readers to acknowledge this power and support it.

Morrison asks the reader to respond to her novels "in the same way that a Black preacher requires his congregation" or in "the same way that a musician's music is enhanced when there is a response from an audience" (341). Once the novel is closed, the reader or audience continues in his/her interaction with the novel.

Although Morrison does not provide a recipe for how to respond, she leaves it up to the reader or audience to

decide on that response. With her stating overtly the political nature of a text, she suggests that the reader or audience do something to change the situations as revealed in her novels. It's as if she states the following: "I wrote this bizarre work to call attention to the problems inherent in it, now what are you as reader or audience going to do about it?" She realizes that many of us are absorbed and even obsessed with society's material values that need to be revised or changed, and hence she encourages us to alter our values or positions and move toward some type of change. After all, a work must be political, according to Morrison.

Morrison employs signification to show the clever use of language of Black Americans, who migrated to the urban North. Most interesting about the Black Americans who signify is that they are low-income Blacks retained what she calls their "funkiness" and who have not acquired middle-class taste. In The Bluest Eye it is Mrs. McTeer who signifies about Pecola as a visitor to her home drinking too much milk. In Song of Solomon it is Circe, an old servant in the small town of Shalimar, who signifies on the middle-class Milkman or his poor, wine-making aunt, Pilate. These three characters and others signify by insulting indirectly the persons to whom they are addressing.

Of the three writers under discussion, only Alice Walker incorporates a "womanist" ideology with the Black Oral Traditions of call-response and signification as she

focuses on Black women's concerns. She has embedded these Black folk speech traditions in her The Third Life of Grange Copeland and The Color Purple.

The concept of womanism is initially introduced in her first novel, The Third Life of Grange Copeland through Ruth, Grange's granddaughter, but is completely developed in the novel, The Color Purple. Within the latter novel, Walker has advanced the ideology thoroughly through black woman to black woman interaction and growth. To Celie, the black nappy-headed woman, Shug is beautiful; as a matter of fact, Celie thinks that she is 10,000 times more beautiful than she is. Walker apotheosizes "womanism" with the tenets of 1) Black women calling out to other Black women to engage in sexual as well as non-sexual relationships for health and healing, 2) Black women, not just surviving, but growing energetically and creatively through an interaction with other Black women, and 3) Black women preserving and strengthening the Black tradition. It is as if Walker has devised a mental blueprint to show how womanism can be presented in a novelistic form through call-response and signification.

What is most significant about Walker's writing is that she sacrifices neither literariness nor Oral Tradition to appropriate her womanist ideology. In Walker's illumination of "ordinary" Black women in the South, she has provided characters like Ruth in The Third Life of Grange Copeland and Celie in The Color Purple with rich oral features. Ruth

is consistently engaging in call-response with her grandfather, for he is her support and nurturing base. Grange calls on her to "perpetuate his values" of black history, individualism, and self-sufficiency (Byerman 136). Grange endeavors "to make her independent by passing on folk wisdom he has accumulated, giving special emphasis to the trickster tales, which he hopes will instill in her a profound distrust of whites" (Byerman 136). Ruth is an excellent student who ***responds*** well to her grandfather's call/teaching. Within the context of her grandfather she also learns signification and uses it dialogically with him.

Walker's The Color Purple also employs the two oral features of call-response and signification. Shug, a blues singer, calls Celie to respond to her feminized life and to physical arousal in her body, to develop her own determination to respond to difficult situations. In other words, Shug "brings love and creativity" to Celie (Byerman 168). In turn, Celie eventually responds by learning to speak, not just to God, but to others as well. She asserts a speaking voice by signifying on Mister and others when appropriate. This speaking voice leads to a liberation of Celie's mental and physical self. Celie eventually emerges as a strong Womanist figure who has appropriated the folk expressions of call-response and significations.

The three women writers discussed in this study are aware that the Oral Traditions of Black people have survived hundreds of years. They are cognizant of the need to

preserve the verbal traditions of the Black Vernacular. With the use of computers and other technological advances of the last several decades, men and women have become more individualistic and less community-oriented. Even in the urban areas, many African Americans are less communal in neighborhoods and families. The question that immediately emerges is: How can Black Americans, who are so much a part of the technological market economy preserve the oral features indigenous to their traditions? Further, with the emphasis on Blacks appropriating standard English usage, will the orality of call-response and signification continue in the Black community? Will Morrison and Walker continue to incorporate oral features in their literary works and expound on those features for generations of Blacks to come?

Toni Morrison and Alice Walker are unifying influences in the perpetuation of literary works of Black women writers. Alice Walker has repeatedly paid tribute and revealed her symbiotic debt to Zora Neale Hurston. In her intertexual relationship with Hurston, Walker has expanded on the language and folk traditions of Hurston to establish a distinct, narrative style with emphasis on womanist ideology. Walker will, no doubt, continue to grow and modify her ideology as she continues to write and change as a novelist. Toni Morrison also has established a definitive style that other women have and will emulate. She has repeatedly offered explanations of the need for retaining the Black language, particularly irony, that is associated with signification:

> I think that's a Black style. I can't really explain what makes irony of Black people different from anybody else's, and maybe there isn't any, but in trying to write what I call Black literature ... there seems to be something distinctive about it ... I can simply recognize it as authentic. Any irony is the mainstay [emphasis mine]. Other people call it humor. It's not really that. It's not sort of laughing away one's troubles.... [H]aving a psychological attitude about duress is part of what made us stay alive and fairly coherent, and irony is a part of that--being able to see the underside of something ... and a kind of mother wit as well as a certain kind of cosmology about how Black people during that time apprehended life simply because they didn't trust anybody else's version of it. (Jones and Vinson 175-6)

Although Morrison does not use the word, signification, she calls attention to one aspect of it--irony. She has employed that form of signification and other types of signification in her works and no doubt will continue in that it is she sees it as integral part of the Black speech and language.

Walker, Morrison, and Hurston have created an African American literary system in their narratives that encompass the Black Oral Tradition as well.

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