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## ***Reading Black Communal Identity and Cultural Formation: A Literary Reading of Morrison and Hurston***

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### **Abstract**

This article discusses the interconnected themes of ritual, community, and cultural memory. Both authors, though separated by generations and literary movements tried to serve African American cultural legacy through narrative. Morrison's *Beloved* and *Sula*, and Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Jonah's Gourd Vine* analyze how ritual acts, spiritual, communal, and linguistic function as containers of cultural memory and resistance. The study contends that both writers construct alternative historical narratives founded in African diasporic traditions, questioning conventional discourses of history, identity, and place. Through a close analysis of their use of folklore, vernacular language, and female-centered community dynamics, the study reveals how Morrison and Hurston "write" the Black South as a space of resilience, reclamation, and cultural continuation. By prioritizing Black voices and lived experiences, the essay underlines how these authors redefine the South not as a homogenous place of oppression but as a site of tremendous cultural diversity and ancestral presence.

**Keywords:** Oral Tradition, Culture, Folklore, Community

### **Introduction**

The American South has historically played a significant role in African American literature, serving as a backdrop as well as a place where Black identity, cultural memory, and the history of slavery all come together. The literary landscapes of Black South of Toni Morrison and Zora Neale Hurston are overlaid with the materiality of memory, community living, and ritual. Their novels play the dual role of historical testament and imaginative re-creation, in which they insist on the reality of lived life by African American communities, yet such lives were usually denied or re-invented by dominant historical discourse. The South is seen by African American authors as a complicated place of oppression and tenacity, trauma and heritage. Toni Morrison and Zora Neale Hurston embody two of the foremost writers in African American literature, and each deploys culturally rich engagements with cultural memory, ritual, and community to engage with the complexities of Black life and specifically the Black South.

### **Rituals**

Hurston's folkloric and ethnographic sensibility preserves African American oral traditions and rich ritual life while Morrison preoccupies herself with the trauma of slavery, identity, and the effects of ongoing history on the Black community. Two writers of the most important authors who have shaped the literary

representation of the Black South. Both authors depict the South as a cultural setting where African American identity is created via ritual, memory, and community, despite the fact that they were written almost fifty years apart. Their writings stress resiliency, self-definition, and the reclamation of erased histories via storytelling and lived experience rather than reducing Black Southern experience to suffering alone.

A prominent member of the Harlem Renaissance and a skilled anthropologist, Zora Neale Hurston approached her literary depictions of Black Southern life from a distinctive anthropological perspective. In novels like *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), she attempts to document and elevate the cultural practices of Southern Black communities through the use of folklore, dialect, and rural Southern settings.

Similar to this, late 20th-century author Toni Morrison creates stories like *Sula* (1973) and *Beloved* (1987) that delve deeply into themes of matrilineal memory, historical trauma, and the paranormal. Ritual and group storytelling are used by both writers as literary methods as well as acts of resistance and cultural preservation.

This paper contends that by highlighting ritual behaviors, the resilience of community, especially among women, and the enduring force of cultural memory, Morrison and Hurston reinvent the Black South as a place of cultural vitality. Both authors provide counter-narratives to prevailing historical perspectives that minimize or erase Black Southern experience by re-inscribing suppressed histories and interacting with African diasporic traditions. Morrison and Hurston support cyclical, embodied modes of remembering that are anchored in Black cultural consciousness, challenging linear, Western historiography through ritualized acts, oral tradition, and communal ties.

As an anthropologist and folklorist, Hurston documents Black folkloric traditions of the South and the lived traditions that demonstrated religious beliefs, musical practices, and communal opportunities, the ritualized practices that anchor cultural identity. The ritual dimension embedded in Hurston's work draws attention to life cycle, spiritual renewal, and identity formation with a col-

lected rather than individual focus. In contrast, while there is ritual in Morrison's novels, such as in *Beloved*, the rituals exist in relationship to suffering and memory, particularly related to the reality that slavery is always lurking in the shadows. While Hurston represents ritual as cultural affirmation, Morrison, on the other hand, portrays ritual as a place where both memory and pain exist in relation to one another, and ultimately demand reckoning and regeneration.

Hurston's ethnographic labor, presented in her fictional writing, documents the Black cultural heritage of the South through story-telling and folklore, which replicates the narrative voice of a cultural experience that exceeds the dominant narratives of history that erase, diminish or omit the Black experience. Through her work, Morrison, on the other hand, explicitly responds to the inscription of the trauma of slavery and its aftermath. While cultural memory is again encoded in spectral figures and storytelling in *Beloved*, Morrison forces a confrontation with the painful truths about the past and the ways in which those truths imbed themselves into identities in the present.

Where Hurston interrogates a narrow set of narratives available as public memory, Morrison overtly interrogates official narratives (including the literary canon) according to black perspectives which include trauma, pain and loss but not limited to those processes and she must situate this process of remembering in resistance to remembering what history would prefer to forget. Morrison's narrative opens up a space that is a labour of memory that is simultaneously labour of remembering, recovering, and repairing. Morrison's heroines, specifically Sethe, from *Beloved*, and Sula, from *Sula*, also reject the identities imposed on them by the community and embody resistance to the patriarchal structure and racial oppression, while celebrating agency individually and collectively, built within a history of silencing and violence.

In African American literature, the American South is portrayed as a culturally embedded place where history, memory, and identity come together, rather than just a physical location. The South is more than just a location for Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison; it is a spiritual and symbolic landscape that bears the burden of ancestry and the

hope of cultural revival. The Black South appears as a living archive where the past is never really past and memory serves as an active, generating force rather than a passive recall in novels like Morrison's *Beloved* and *Sula*, Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and *Jonah's Gourd Vine*.

Cultural affirmation is the foundation of Zora Neale Hurston's image of the South. She locates Eatonville, Florida, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, not just as a setting but also as a representation of Black cultural self-determination and sovereignty. Eatonville, the United States first incorporated all-Black town, is a tangible and symbolic representation of cultural autonomy. "So, they cleared a forty-acre tract and opened up a town. They named it Eatonville and set out to live and live well" (*TEWWG* 34). A broader initiative of self-definition and cultural reclamation is reflected in this act of land clearing and naming. Hurston views the Black South as an active place where African Americans build their reality via language, community, and cultural practices rather than a passive region imposed by Jim Crow laws or slavery.

The South is a site of both historical memory and severe trauma in Morrison's *Beloved*. Despite not being physically located in the Deep South, Sethe's house at 124 Bluestone Road in Cincinnati serves as a mental extension of the plantation South. The mansion itself is haunted by the heritage of slavery and its unsaid horrors in addition to the ghost of Sethe's deceased daughter: "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children" (*Beloved* 3). Morrison turns the house in the South into a ghostly memory bank. The actual location takes on the characteristics of a character living, resisting, and remembering. The story breaks down temporal boundaries through Sethe's memories, implying that memory in the South is cyclical rather than linear, resurfacing through bodies and spaces.

### **Cultural Memory**

Morrison's theorization of "rememory," a term she used in *Beloved* to refer to the involuntary, embodied return of the past, is among her most significant breakthroughs. As said by Sethe: "Some

things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory... I mean, it's not a story to pass on" (*Beloved* 43). "Not a story to pass on" is a paradox that highlights the tense connection between cultural memory and painful past. Morrison claims that even though certain histories are unimaginable, they nevertheless exist and must be acknowledged. By doing this, she reinterprets the South as a place of cultural continuity and recollection in addition to suffering.

Cultural memory plays a major role. Much like a storehouse or repository, cultural memory contains traditions, values, and lived experiences in order to connect characters, and readers, to a sense of their cultural origins, while contributing to narratives of 'who' they are based on their social and historical situations. Their foundational identity is in the preservation of folk traditions, language, and community-level ceremonies related to the Black Southern experience. Hurston's novels echo and celebrate oral telling traditions, community gathering, and vernacular culture, and she employs these practices to reinforce the ties of community, as well as a collective sense of identity that arises out of resilience and cultural sustainability.

Conversely, Morrison's novels often highlight the traumatic nature of cultural memory such as narratives about slavery, experiences of cultural and systemic oppression, and the disabling effects of trauma as experiences that distort forms of identity, and where memory can take the form of remembrance, mourning, or reclaiming these narratives of cultural disintegration and loss. In these novels, cultural memory is important in the process of forging identity that entrenches individuals in their histories and cultural contexts, creating a pathway to deal with the notion of self, community, and legacy. Cultural memory preserves traditions and gives citizens a structure for understanding and responding to sociocultural issues and transitions.

The community of Medallion, Ohio, in *Sula*, is influenced by Southern Black immigration and retains the region's cultural legacies despite not being located in the traditional South. Morrison shows how geography is inextricably linked to racism irony and social inversion by clearly mapping the Bottom, a Black enclave paradoxically located on hilltops: "It was called the Bottom be-

cause white people told the blacks that the valley land was rich and fertile, and the hills the Bottom were barren” (*Sula* 5). Here, Morrison shows how Black communities provide Black places purpose, memory, and dignity while also criticizing the systemic devaluation of Black space.

### **Oral Tradition**

Oral storytelling, accent, and tradition abound in Hurston's South. The rural Southern environment of *Jonah's Gourd Vine* is a place where culture is spoken, lived, and acted. The characters' spiritual and intergenerational ties to the land are based on Middle Passage-survivable African customs. For instance, John Pearson's sermons are as much about cultural memory and performance as they are about religion: “You got tuh have the power and the glory and the motion of the ocean and the spirit of the Lord!” (*JGV* 81). This is cultural ritual that echoes the beats of diasporic worship and Black vernacular, not only Christian speech. Hurston creates a cartography of Black identity based on performance and oral history by mapping the South using music, rhythm, and ancestral voice.

Henry Louis Gates Jr., comments as, “Hurston’s storytelling is rooted in the call-and-response patterns of the Black South; she writes with the ear of an ethnographer and the heart of a griot.” The South is not a monolith, according to both writers. It is the site of brutality and cultural renewal, of loss and love, of enslavement and resistance. Their main characters Sethe, *Sula*, Janie, and John are profoundly influenced by the environments they live in, which serve as archives of culture, history, and community. The South is portrayed as a character that recalls, transforms, and reflects the lives that are lived there, rather than just as background.

Morrison and Hurston restore the South as an essential and nuanced location in the Black literary imagination with their intricately detailed portrayals. It is a place where ritual, memory, and community give voice to a people's past and shed light on their continuous fight for identity and cultural sovereignty. It is a geography of trauma, sure, but also of power. Ritual is portrayed in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as a communal and individual act of healing and memory. *Beloved's* eerie presence acts as a ghostly reminder of suppressed historical

memory, while Sethe, the main character, represents the anguish of slavery.

Black women gather to chant, pray, and sing during the community's culminating exorcism ceremony, which represents a potent reclamation of the holy. Morrison illustrates how spiritual traditions with African roots may be used to heal past traumas, free the mind, and strengthen group cohesion via this ceremony. The ceremony repositions African-derived spirituality as a place of strength and healing, acting as a protest against the dehumanisation caused by slavery.

### **Conclusion**

Together, Morrison and Hurston enact the South as an archive of trauma, but also as an archive of cultural survival. They characterize memory as a form of resistance, assert communal rituals and/or ceremonies as a way to connect the past with the present. By positioning their narratives in the tension of individual stories and shared heritage, Morrison and Hurston move fiction into something productive that can preserve culture and create resistance to dominant narratives, affirm political identities, and pave the way for the imagined and collective future of African American communities.

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