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Never mind the catta, 'tis the bundle behind: Discovering the meanings behind the folklore and the language in the fiction of Toni Cade Bambara

Newton, Viola Maria, Ph.D.
The Ohio State University, 1992

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NEVER MIND THE CATTA, 'TIS THE BUNDLE BEHIND:
DISCOVERING THE MEANINGS BEHIND THE FOLKLORE AND THE
LANGUAGE IN THE FICTION OF TONI CADE BAMBARA.

DISSEETATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of the Ohio State University

By
Viola Maria Newton, A.A., B.S., M.S., M.L.S.

******

The Ohio State University
1992

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Approved by
Adviser
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Dedication

to My Children

de best Picknees in de whole world,
I love you!
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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PREFACE

Any good West Indian cook knows that to make a pot of Kalaloo serve as a healthy and digestible meal with a lasting taste, he or she must add to the pot a variety of meats and blend native seasonings and herbs to give the soup its characteristic West-Indian flavor. In addition, a good cook will be most careful not to allow any of the meats or seasonings to lose their natural taste in the cooking process, that when the Kalaloo is served, each ingredient will have its own texture and flavor different from another; however, the soup itself must have the flavor of all the meats and the seasonings. I find Toni Cade Bambara’s fiction is made like the West Indian Kalaloo; it is seasoned with a variety of elements from Black folklore and each element is distinguished in the language to give a particular quality to the work. In the story or in the novel, these elements blend to produce a flavor of Black culture.

Black American folklore, as we know, figures prominently in the works of Black writers, for as Houston A. Baker Jr. writes in Black Literature in America "literary artists from Paul Lawrence Dunbar...have made use of its values, forms, and techniques" (20). I maintain, however, that Toni Cade Bambara has a special way of structuring Black folklore to give her fiction a lasting taste; it is the ingredients which make the work spicy, tasty and digestible like the West Indian Kalaloo. The flavor comes from each element
that singularly seasons the story but also blends with each other to make the work distinctly a product of Black culture. For example, when a trickster inhabits Bambara’s stories, this traditional role is filled by a female protagonist unlike the oral stories in which the figure is usually male. Her presence overtly provides textual significance to the story through her use of folk speech which acts as a metaphor for self discovery. The trickster that emerges from this self discovery does set apart the traditional use of this folklore element from other uses in the Black literary tradition, for sometimes she combines qualities of the traditional Badman hero to further promote the role of self discovery of the protagonist.

Folklore which is expressed through language make the Kalaloo of Bambara’s fiction. A good bowl of Kalaloo manifests itself in many ways: as sustenance, it can keep a person’s belly full for three days without any other nutrition; one bowl provides enough iron for the blood in an anemic person; men with strained muscles find relief after two bowls of Kalaloo; and anyone with a fever needs only a few cups full to get the temperature down. Folklore gives expressive and precise forms to Bambara’s fiction: it heightens the reader’s awareness to Bambara’s style. The reader recognizes metaphors, irony, ambivalence and paradox within the work and with this recognition also discover feminist issues, political and social issues, racial issues; therefore, the
reader's perceptions of Black culture likes, dislikes, understanding, confusions are made. He or she is opened to the familiar or unfamiliar, the urban or the rural environment. Such is the value of the fiction.

What Bambara has done with her Kalaloo is to establish a tradition within a tradition, providing readers with a meaningful use of Black folklore, "passing it on in the relay," she says, "to produce stories that save lives" ("Salvation" 42). This means that generations of readers even those not familiar with Black folk culture, will be able to completely participate in the fiction. Their understanding of the fiction will begin with how well they absorb the flavor of it all.

It is within this framework of the writing that I assert and prove by the contents of this dissertation that Bambara's fiction is blessed with a language of its own, one that has its roots in Black folk speech and other forms of folklore. I contend that even with the appropriateness of the folklore, the language is simply what it is, ordinary folk speech represented on the printed page; it is not corrupted, though, or spoiled with stereotyped vernacular or dialect as is so often the representations of Black folk speech in the fiction by Black authors where Black dialect often is simply used to signal a Black presence rather than to define the Black experience. Furthermore, the language is not sentimental; it makes no direct reference to traditional themes
of the tragic mulatto or the perils of slavery. It does not focus on the ghosts of the slave past. Instead, it focuses on the ordering and relationships between the individual and the community but not with nostalgia which distills the logic of everyday life. Altogether, the meaty statements made in the language are not produced through any one form of speech but rather in various statements of convictions made by the narrator to show the wisdom of self-exploration that comes from the realities of daily life in a Black environment. What makes Bambara's fiction so tasty, so delightful or so troubling is how narrators state in their own fashion what they have discovered for themselves.

Self-discovery in the short fiction is made in the form of the folk tradition of "Juba", which is the process of self discovery that comes from the oral tradition of Black people. (See Baker later in this dissertation) Bambara uses this traditional element throughout her fiction. Today modern recordings of African Folk Traditions render several meanings of "Juba" or "Juber" an African word the slaves brought over from Africa, but doing Juba or being Juber was the slave's way of expressing how he/she felt especially if he/she didn't like what was being done to him/her (Step It Down 17). Today in the modern classroom, many African American children listen to recordings that tell how Juba or Juber was implemented to help develop some method of expressing feelings about the situation. They learn that dancing, humming or
speaking would help the slave to understand and to make changes inside or to
deal with the difficult situation. An example of a Juba Chant from Black
songs of 1800-1860 is written this way in an anthology of Black literature:

JUba

JUba dis and JUba dat an
JUba killed my YAllow cat, O JUba,
Juba, JUba, JUba, JUba. (Black Writers of America 234).

This JUba chant somehow brings into focus troubling elements, of the slave
who had the Juba blues; he or she is a Juber, a drummer of true feelings
inside, but outside are disguised the immediate or ambivalent feelings with
words that connotated other meanings. To understand this JUba song, the
reader must pay close attention to the way the words create a special
language, a code with references to a particular way of life. The capital "JU"
makes the reader want to emphasize the JU and give a softer sound to the ba
not in capital letters. If the reader follows the pattern, pronouncing the words
to give a specific effect, the chant somehow begins to signal an experience for
the reader, one that is emphasized in the language of the song itself.

The emphasis on the way words are placed sometimes side by side,
sometimes repeated within an individual sentence to gain the readers attention
through the way the words sound, is what Bambara does with the language of
her short fiction. In this way she captures the essence of the Juba tradition
to focus in the experience of the narrator(s).

The Juba tradition is defined in many ways by scholars who study the African survivals in American Blacks (See one discussion of Juba in other texts such as Step It Down Eds. Jones and Hawes), and this dissertation is interested in how it plays a part of Bambara’s language and folklore blend. In order to understand how Juba functions in Black literature, the reader must first comprehend its meanings in folk cultural context. According to the authors of Step It down, "the word 'Juba' is probably a variation of one of the West African day names, which were often used for girls' given names" (17).

I see elements of the tradition in Bambara’s short stories with Hazel the narrator and in her novel with each individual who strives to come to terms with life and with his/her surroundings, environment, or community. In her fiction Bambara expands the dimension of this classic brand of the folk tradition in language that shows her inventiveness, style, in short, her craftsmanship in maintaining this tradition in her work. In adapting the Juba tradition, Bambara gives spice to the context of short stories with folk ingredients of the trickster, storyteller, the badman, the preacher, and the healer, all of which enhance the flavor of Juba in traditional Black folk literature. This element of her style signifies that there is a need for Black people to get in touch with their past to understand ways of getting in touch
with oneself, to make a personal discovery in a struggle for survival.

Another important factor in this dissertation, is the way Bambara sustains the flavor of folklore in her fiction. She does this by creating an all Black community, where the language richly suggests the social and cultural conditioning of the folks. Black dialect, rhetoric, slang, various vernacular forms of Black folk speech maintain the flavor of Black presence so concentrated on the ways of Black folk as to "shut out" any other presence that will duly interfere with a solely Black experience. To establish the Black presence Bambara's narrators focus only on aspects with which they are intimately acquainted, the experiences of Black folks within the community which reflect the reality of life of their lives. In these communities many of the unresolved tensions and conflicts that surface in the fiction are identified by female protagonists, who through blending of the folklore with the language make for a cultural celebration of Black folk life.

I look in the dissertation for what I see as relevant and for the particular interplay between folklore and language in Bambara's fiction. I see Bambara cleverly using folk traditions to write against all the Black stereotypes in American society by giving the negative a focus, and then by using the negative focus to create a positive response for the narrator. This double identity of negative and positive is what flavors the language and gives
meaning to the stories and the novel. I feel Bambara's conscious manipulation of folklore and language together gives the fiction the cultural flavor needed to understand the complexity of life among the Black masses of society.
INTRODUCTION

A TRADITION WITHIN A TRADITION

I will be as black as Blackness can, the Blacker the mantle the mightier the man. W.E.B. Dubois, "The Song of the Smoke"

This Introduction examines the life of Toni Cade Bambara and explores the ongoing process of constructing a literary criticism that can incorporate the diverse, shifting and often contradictory voices of Black women writers. It offers some specific discussion of Bambara's life and works and introduces the basic ideas developed in the dissertation.

The dissertation takes a critical look at Bambara's fiction, the Black woman's experience, Black woman's language, and the Black woman writer. These concepts play a major role in understanding Bambara's culturally defined female voice and sensitivity. In this Introduction the discussion about Bambara's life and works helps to maintain the idea that assumptions made about her fiction and some critical evaluations about her writings need to be re-examined within both their historical context and the framework of current Black literary theory concerning Black language, representation, subjectivity and value. Drawing largely on Bambara's biography, her ideological position, critical commentary, and excerpts from Bambara's fiction, the discussion in
this introduction will sharpen our understanding of the ideas presented in the dissertation -- how Bambara's fiction is structured to help readers understand how Black people live within the Black community.

On Biography

This Black American writer and social activist was born Toni Cade and later added the name Bambara after discovering it as a part of a signature on a sketchboard in her grandmother's trunk. Bambara is known today as a short story writer, novelist, scriptwriter, editor, and author of children's books. According to Alice Deck, Bambara is "one of the best representatives of the group of Afro-American writers who, during the 1960s, became directly involved in the cultural and sociopolitical activities in urban communities across the country" (Dictionary of Literary Biography 108). Bambara's works have not been widely noted, but they make provocative contributions to the field of Black American literature.

Studying Bambara's fiction breaks new ground in both women studies and Black studies. Through valuable interpretations of Bambara's interviews, readers begin to learn more about the writer herself because she states precisely what her fiction is all about; therefore, readers will look closely at the fiction to learn more about the writer and her work and they start to adopt boldly innovative approaches to the fiction. Much of Bambara's short fiction
is influenced by her experiences growing up in New York City. Even though Bambara does not say anything in her interviews about her childhood, she does give some references to her youth and her life in New York where she was born. In an interview with Beverly Guy-Sheftall, "Toni Cade Bambara Speaks," Bambara discusses some women who influenced her work:

"In every neighborhood I lived in there were always two types of women that somehow pulled me and sort of got their wagons in a circle around me. I call them Miss Naomi and Miss Gladys, although I'm sure they came under various names. The Miss Naomi types...would give me advice like "when you meet a man, have a birthday, demand a present that's hockable and be careful."

The Miss Gladyses were usually the type that hung out the window in apartment 1-A leaning on the pillow, giving single-action advice on numbers or giving you advice about how to get your homework done or telling you to stay away from those cruising cars that moved through the neighborhood patrolling little girls. (Sturdy Black Bridges...230-33)

The Miss Naomi and Miss Gladys surface in Bambara's short stories, and in many ways they bring to light different psychological and cultural aspects of women issues. They are important to the development of the story--their language reflects a strong sense of Black culture and in the stories, many of the women protagonists would speak out like Miss Naomi and Miss Gladys with authority on social and feminist issues. The Miss Naomies in the Gorilla stories often are older women who tell young girls how to deal with men. Ma Drew in "The Johnson Girls," Maggie in "Maggie of the Green Bottles," Patsy's
mother in "The Basement," Miss Hazel in "Happy Birthday." In Seabirds are the Miss Gladys who by their own performance give a definition of self that often serve as a role model for young girls who observe their behavior: the women in "Christmas Eve at Johnson's Drugs N Goods," Miss Gladys in "A Girl's Story," Naomi in "The Apprentice," Dada Bibi in "Broken Field Running." In the Gorilla stories, the Miss Gladys are important to the first-person narrator, and in Seabirds the protagonist take on the "single-action" advice to help them better understand themselves.

The autobiographical voice in Sheftall's interview tells more about Bambara, who after attending Queens College in New York City and several European institutions, worked as a free-lance writer and lecturer, social investigator for the New York State Department of Welfare, and director of recreation in the psychiatry department at Metropolitan Hospital in New York City. As a writer, thinker, and lay analyst who traveled and worked among people of her own culture, Bambara placed, at that time, an ideal position on her writing. She told Guy-Sheftall in the interview that writing seemed to her "rather frivolous. . .something you did because you didn't feel like doing any work. But. . .I've come to appreciate that it is a perfectly legitimate way to participate in a struggle" (240).

Bambara never suppressed the need to strive for greatness in her
writing or to develop her interest in Black liberation and women's movements. She went on to provide a challenging model of feminist historical criticism when she edited and published an anthology in 1970, *The Black Woman*: this collection contains short stories by Bambara, poetry, short stories and essays by celebrated Black women writers. In her article, "Toni Cade Bambara," Alice Deck says this work was "a response to all the male 'experts' both black and white who had been publishing articles and conducting sociological studies on black women" (*Dictionary of Literary Biography* 108).

Bambara's fascinating biography shows she had an interest in instructing young Black youths in the ways of Black folks and in Black literature. In 1971 she developed another anthology, *Tales and Stories for Black Folks*. Bambara explains in the introduction to this short story collection that her purpose is to instruct young Blacks about "Our Great Kitchen Tradition," Bambara's term for the Black tradition of story-telling. The composition of this anthology is interesting: Part I includes works by Langston Hughes, Alice Walker, and Ernest Gaines--stories Bambara says "[she] wished she had read while growing up" (ii). Part II contains stories by students in a first year composition class Bambara was teaching at Livingston college, Rutger's University. Alice Deck in her discussion of Bambara wrote that Bambara's inclusion of professional writers and students in a single work
"shows her desire to give young writers a chance to make their talents known to a large audience" (Dictionary of Literary Biography 108). In fact, Deck notes that such a mixture "would have helped her inspire young adults to read, to think critically, and to write" (108).

With a venturesome and provocative spirit, Bambara, still writing under the name of Toni Cade, produced short stories between 1959 and 1970 that were collected in Gorilla, My Love in 1972. Bambara told Claudia Tate in an interview published in Black Women Writers at Work that when her agent suggested she assemble some old short stories for a book, she thought, "aha, I'll get the old kid stuff out and see if I can't clear some space to get into something else" (15). Gorilla, My Love remains Bambara's most widely read collection and many of the stories are part of literature texts used for composition courses today. In this pathbreaking book, Bambara offers a new perspective on the dimension of gender. Deck notes that after the publication of this collection of short stories, "major events took place in Toni Cade Bambara's life which were to have an effect on her writing" (109). Bambara did travel around the world and through her perception, readers are given textual construction that shows political deployment of women in many cultures.

An account of Bambara's travels in Black Literary Criticism is given by
the editor James P. Draper who writes this review of her activities:

Bambara traveled to Cuba in 1973 and Vietnam in 1975, meeting with both the Federation of Cuban Women and the Women's Union in Vietnam. She was impressed with both groups, particularly with the ability of the Cuban women to surpass class and color conflicts and with the Vietnamese women's resistance of their traditional place in society. Bambara moved to the South, where she became a founding member of the Southern Collective of African-American Writers. (109)

Draper maintains that Bambara's travels and her involvement with community groups like the collective, "influenced the themes and settings of The SeaBirds Are Still Alive (1977), her second collection of short stories" (109). Draper's contention is based on the fact that these stories take place in diverse geographical areas, and they center chiefly around communities instead of individuals (109).

Any discussion of Bambara's life, like the one given by Draper, shows that "Bambara has. . . remained committed to working within Black communities, and she continues to address issues of black awareness and feminism in her act" (109). Since the publication of The SaltEaters in 1980 and the writing of The Blessing Comes an unpublished novel, Bambara has turned to film. In an interview with Claudia Tate, Bambara tells it this way: "Quite frankly, I've always considered myself a film person. . .there's not too much more I want to experiment with in terms of writing. It gives me
pleasure, insight, keeps me centered, sane. But, oh, to get my hands on some movie equipment" (Black Women Writers at Work 28).

Bambara’s collections of short stories from 1959-1977 assemble a rich cache of materials that illuminates Black culture and Black women’s involvement in that culture. The SaltEaters (like Joyce’s Finnegans Wake) remains a mystery to many readers. Many reviewers find the work confusing particularly because of breaks in the story line and the use of alternating narrators. Others appreciate Bambara’s skill with dialogue and language and her "complex vision." In summarizing her approach to her work and her beliefs about what she writes and how she writes, Bambara reveals these ideas to Claudia Tate:

The trick, I suspect at this point in time in human history as we approach the period of absolute devastation and total renewal, is to maintain a loose grip, a flexible grasp on those assumptions we hold to be true, valid, real. They may not be. The world Einstein conjured or that the Fundamentalists conjure or your friendly neighborhood mystic or poet conjures may be a barrier to a genuine understanding of the real world. I once wrote a story about just that—a piece of it is in the novel. (Black Women Writers 23-4)

Black feminist critics have not shown a long-term interest in Bambara’s works. Hardly any indepth critical analysis is prolonged so as to generate speculation about the nature of the language -- which in this case, of course, is the first aspect that motivates readers to read the fiction. In fact, prominent
critics like Barbara Christian, who notes in Black Feminist Criticism the absence of significant critical analysis for Black women writers, only cites Bambara's name in her texts (although she credits her as being part of a tradition to expose feminist issues) as a contributor to Black women fiction. Some other contemporary feminist criticism by Black women throws revealing light on Bambara's women characters. Ruth Burks, Eleanor Traylor, Susan Willis, Mary Helen Washington, Alice Deck, to name a few, have given careful scrutiny to The SaltEaters and to some of the stories in the Gorilla and Seabirds collection, but not enough of a continuous pattern of criticism has been established to give a fuller understanding of Bambara's works. The following discussion incorporates all the areas of criticism to be discussed in Chapter One in the dissertation. The brief discussion that follows only highlights the nature of analyses and cultural commentary given to Bambara's fiction and to Black women writers as a whole.

On Criticism

Historically, literary critics have given little serious attention to the works of Black women writers. And in this historical sense, Barbara Christian in her book Black Women Novelists notes this neglect when she points out that studies of African-American fiction have given writing by Black women only "token respect" discussing their works in mere paragraphs or one or two pages.
Christian, in her book, also points out that critical essays on Black women writers have been entirely absent from the pages of scholarly journals. This absence of significant criticism on Black women writers is further illuminated in Barbara Smith’s article "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism." Smith makes it sharply evident that even Black male critics can act as if they do not know that Black women writers exist. Unfortunately, Toni Cade Bambara is one of these Black women writers without a significant scholarly audience; critical treatment of her fiction is extremely limited. Critics have now begun to look again at the works of Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, but Bambara’s work has not been given the same indepth critical analysis as these other Black women writers. Henry Louis Gates Jr. writes in The Signifying Monkey of"Zora Neale Hurston and the Speakerly Text." No Black critics have given such attention to Bambara’s works to show how the oral tradition of Black people influences her works and others. Houston A. Baker Jr., Hoyt Fuller and other prominent Black male critics are beginning to develop new literary theories about the work of Phillis Wheatley, Frances Harper, and again Zora Neal Hurston. Not much of this attention is focused, however, on Toni Cade Bambara’s works.

Some literary critics, in the late 1980s begin to take a closer look at the narrative strategies Bambara uses in her works, and some Black male
scholars, Elliott Butler-Evans, for example, did explore the fictive discourse in her stories and in her novel. Nevertheless, before the 1980s (specifically in the late 1970s and the very early 1980s) critical response to Bambara’s fiction was either superficial or stereotypical--given just enough attention to acknowledge it and to apply to it some generic label of cultural nationalism. For instance, her 1970 to 1987 writings and screenplays are summarily linked to the literature of social protest, which awakened during the Black Power Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. No further consideration was given to the elements of Black language that structure her stories or to the craftsmanship behind her work. What is written about her fiction during this period suggests that early critics did not acknowledge the sheer pervasiveness of the Black oral tradition in her fiction since most note only the ideas or statements in her work that raise political or social issues. In fact, early criticism completely failed to recognize Bambara’s pre-occupation with the basic structure of the Black oral tradition. These critics entirely ignored the way Bambara takes the forms of an early era to their limit, creating a cultural transition to the twentieth century; they overlooked the narrative strategies she uses in her fiction that give full significance to these forms. In writing about Bambara’s fiction, these early critics, it seems, were unaware of the highly efficient crafts-person behind the work--controlling, carefully selecting the basic elements of Black language
which give expression to the spirit of the language in Black communities, stripping it of many excrescences but never removing the artistic power and beauty of the language that is spoken in Black communities. This aspect of Bambara's fiction is indeed critical and provides the key for re-assessing the value of her work. Today, critical response to Bambara's fiction alternates from celebration to castigation. Her fiction is praised for its lively style and for the way Black life in the short stories is presented in a realistic way. Many critics write about Bambara's masterly story-telling techniques, focusing completely on the narrative perspectives of the stories collected in Gorilla, My Love and on the consequences of racism, sexism, and the issues of gender relationships boldly and convincingly drawn in order to shape the political and cultural framework of these stories. Critics of the stories collected in The Sea Birds Are Still Alive make sharply evident the variety of feminist and racial issues that are brought to bear on the stories. Elliott Butler-Evans in Race, Gender, and Desire... says of The Sea Birds "The feminist voice constantly interjects in these stories" (109). Although critics like Evans do discuss important issues in contemporary critical/literary theory when they study Bambara's short fiction, they still ignore the efficient craftsmanship behind the work.

The critics who review the novel, The Salt Eaters, are primarily women
writers, and perhaps significantly, Black women authors who have risen to prominence. Some raise very interesting questions about the psychic experience of the characters in the novel while others look at her use of the Black folk tradition (such as folklore or jazz) which embraces more dimensions in the Black community than any other Black writers who use these elements in their work. In identifying the jazz element, one critic suggests that it is basically the essence of the novel. Eleanor Traylor in "Music as Themes: The Jazz Made in the Works of Toni Cade Bambara" is especially astute as she asserts the profound role of the jazz impulse in *The Salt Eaters*. Illustrative of her insight is her statement that "the method of jazz composition informs the central themes of Bambara's fiction" (65). Such an approach to Bambara's fiction shows engaging and challenging scholarship, but it does not direct any attention completely to Bambara's technique in developing traditional music forms and adopting these into the narrative structure of her novel. Other studies of *The Salt Eaters* link the adult female protagonist in the novel with the young girl narrator in the short stories to show Bambara's incongruity with language. Ruth Elizabeth Burks in "From Baptism to Resurrection: Toni Cade Bambara and the Incongruity of Language" says, "*The Salt Eaters* does not work. Bambara's gift of language turns back on itself ..." (55). Like many of today's critics who analyze Bambara's works, Burks modifies and elaborates
on the issue of language in the novel and in the stories but never discusses the significance of the elements in the language structure.

Critics also ignore Bambara's ability to capture, through language, the broad sweep of Black life that some earlier works of Black fiction have excluded and her ability to provide a translucence of language that examines the persistence and flexibility of Black folk speech. The works of classic Black writers from the African explorer Olaudah Equiano through Phillis Wheatley and Frederick Douglass to Charles W. Chestnutt, Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, Chester Himes and Langston Hughes, have profound differences in the way language is used, which separate the works of these writers who draw on traditional Black folk literature. However, they were committed to literature that presents Black folk heritage, in tone and literary style, they seem to draw on folk speech for special effects other than language proper. Although a writer such as Zora Neale Hurston's use of Black dialect in 1937 was the first to take the focus off Black people's social status and put it on their folk heritage, it is Bambara who shows the extent to which, in all various circumstances, Black folk language can be presented as realistic psychological fiction.

Bambara's first collection of short stories is one of the seminal works in Black American short fiction because of her groundbreaking narrative
technique of telling the story, a technique she describes as "talk that talk." Each of her stories is a self-standing examination of Black folk language. The language in the stories and the novel not only touch on long established narrative techniques in the oral literary tradition but also offers another dimension of Black folk language that shows a classic brand of humor together with the biting irony of the Black situation. In essence, Bambara's fiction challenges the privileged status accorded to Black folk speech in the poetic tradition of Black discourse in the fiction of classic Black writers (and some white writers of Black dialect, too), who concentrate on using the Black dialect to pigeon hole the characters into stereotypical categories such as being black, poor and illiterate. In Bambara's fiction, the language doesn't do this pigeon holing; although the narrator may be a black girl/woman living in the ghetto or some impoverished community, her language goes beyond dramatizing ideas about her social conditions. In fact, the folk vernacular that structures the language in the stories gives power to all voices and expressions of the masses of Black people. The vernacular is structured solely from the Black oral tradition and it carries a conscious ambiguity in the folk speech, one which explores the complexity of the Black experience. Using the elements of the Black tradition, Bambara creates in her fiction a language that for almost every subject or situation is inherently dramatic precisely because it can
represent an idea that is both tragic and comic, depending on point of view. By using this form, Bambara forces readers to face their own racial biases about Black people even stereotypes based on language. This use of oral traditional forms is her way of forcing the language to accommodate itself to express the poetic sentiments of Black people. It is an important breakthrough in Black American literature, for it allows her to move from writing stereotyped forms of Black folk speech which perpetuate linguistic biases and to produce a unique pattern of acceptance that serves culture-specific purposes and sheds light on the social language of the folk. An example of how the language assumes major significance in the context of the story is given in "The Basement" where older women try to keep the young neighborhood girls from being molested by older men. Hazel the protagonist explains the advice she gets from Patsy's mother, who verbally abuses and physically attempts to harm the old man who tries to molest Hazel's friend, Patsy. Hazel gives this description:

I know how she feel about evil folks. She speaks on it every time she got a highball in her hand. Like the time she set me in her lap to explain it to me and all the while her relatives jumpin up and down sayin she crazy. And she's tellin me that there's evil in the world and evil scars and tears your soul. And if you hand God a raggedy soul he don't appreciate it much, cause it may not be in shape to give out to the next person waitin to come on in. So when you murder evil, you doin good
twice over. You savin your soul for you and the unborn as well. So it's not murder at all, it's fittin... (Gorilla 146)

What Bambara does here is to show Black folks actively engaged in relationship through language. Although the woman presents an original discussion of evil, linking her definition to God and to murder, she echoes her own sense of authority -- "so when you murder evil, you doin good twice over" -- one separate from God's. She "sets Hazel on her lap" to give her a direct relationship with a realistic social and cultural situation. The language is what alerts the reader to the significance of the advice. Bambara highlights those of speech that emphasize Black grammatical structure (see Smitherman 18-19). In giving the action of the woman, Hazel emphasizes this structure, omitting verbs "she crazy," dropping the g's from "jumpin," "sayin," "tellin," "doin," and "waitin." Changing the verb agreement to show God "don't" instead of doesn't and climaxing the description with an original moral "so it is not murder at all, it's fittin" makes the social language of Black people intricate to this story.

Some people will say, of course, that a number of Black writers confronted this same determent going way back to the early poetry of Paul Lawrence Dunbar and the early fiction of Charles Chestnutt. But more than
being an imitator of the Black dialect and more than writing to express communal love, humor, restlessness, joy and pain of Black people on the move, Bambara writes Black language to express its own kind of objectivity without repetition and imitation of voices carried in slave narratives or any of early Black fiction. Her commitment to folk speech is shown in the way she creates language that allows for a voice of character that is grounded in folk experience and not in artifact.

As this dissertation explores the elements of Black language in Bambara’s fiction, it shows the linguistic and poetic devices that characterize her fiction. By doing so, it reveals how the fiction is framed by specific elements in Black language structure and suggests that Bambara’s intention is to depart from using conventional forms of Black dialect. Furthermore, it presents her as a writer worth studying. Altogether, this dissertation argues that the fiction of Toni Cade Bambara is empowered by elements in Black language structure that form the earliest of Black oral tradition and not solely by what is determined as Black Nationalist ideology. In other words, what readers first must recognize about Bambara’s fiction are the fluctuations in the language that give clues to the character’s feeling; therefore, if her protagonist’s exterior seems to be tough and extreme, something in the language always reveals another feeling though not overtly expressed in the
dialogue. What is being said is hosted against what is really meant and that is part of the something that clues the reader about the society or the context that has formed or has shaped the protagonist. Throughout the fiction, readers find that the language serves to demonstrate peculiar differences of meaning in folk speech and that Bambara, in a really exemplary and profound way, brings to her fiction a unique heritage of Black language by employing elements of traditional folk speech and other forms of folklore to place emphasis on the importance of culture in Black literature. The reader becomes involved with the story through the speech pattern the character chooses to use to identify her own feelings. Therefore, the reader looks to the context to gain some kind of understanding of the culture or of the phenomenon the character is trying to express. In traditional folk speech this conception of what the folk say is a pervasive dominating force that creates a dichotomy between what is said and what is meant and how words are perceived by the listener. This function of Black folk speech is paramount in the language of the characters who live in a Black community in the fiction of Bambara. Thus, even though the language may be considered Black dialect, street talk, or Black urban vernacular, the way it performs to give meaning to an individual experience preserves the dignity of the culture which in the long run will have a tremendous impact on the way readers view Black American culture at large.
This dissertation illustrates not just the creative possibility of Black language in the fiction of Toni Cade Bambara, but its wider usage throughout the Black folk literary tradition.

This introduction provides a rationale for the distinctive use of the elements of Black language in Bambara's fiction and a reason to study the structure from the perspective of the Black folk tradition. It specifically points out the various theories of criticism from which Bambara's fiction is analyzed especially by modern critics. What is suggested in this introduction is that Bambara's use of language is so focused in the Black oral tradition that it gives a revolutionary spirit, on that focuses entirely on reader participation, a concept intrinsic in Black language itself and to the entire body of fiction.

Chapter One, for example, focuses is on folklore and language precisely to show how folk speech is prominent in the language of the first-person narrator. In Chapter One the discussion proceeds from Bambara's own preference for using the short story and further relates the language structure in the short fiction in Gorilla, My Love and The Seabirds Are Still Alive to the language style of communicating in traditional Black folk literature.

Because some of the basic issues that generate commentary about the fiction are largely probes into the nature of the first person narrator and by the fact that her protagonists/narrators are women who usurp the male
position in Black communities, some focus is given to criticism about this issue that critics see as the crux of the problem for Bambara's characters. This shows that the critics do not see clearly how the first-person narrators in these stories express their desires, hopes, fears, rebuttals, in their own voices, or how each individual's unit of expression is given in folk speech. Meaning depends entirely on what is said, how, when, where and why, sometimes with deliberate emphasis on verbal wit or some rhetorical strategy. To show how the folk speech works, I look first at Bambara's own disclosure of her position which she develops in the essay "Salvation is the Issue." It gives her reason for using the short story. After an examination and analysis of her position, I focus the discussion on the first-person narrator and the critical theories that cast their lights and shadows over the entire body of her fiction. This focus on the first-person narrator shows that the scholarship which defines and analyzes Bambara's work reveals no significant assessment is given to language in her fiction and shows that no one critic in particular traces the development of the Black language structure which draws upon the Black oral tradition and elucidates the significance of Black language in Black communities. Although some critics have observed that the fiction is rich in language, I examine what they say to show that no one has discussed the way Bambara's use of Black values, Black way of life and in general Black folklore
postulates the sharply dualistic reality of Black folk speech, which is distinguished first by words that deal quite consciously and in a practical way with a given situation and which connect the situation to a Black cultural tradition. Second, I focus on the first-person narrator to show that a cultural expression of self is preserved in the language through words that are culture specific, helping to give two dimensions to the language of the narrator. I show that the language of the first-person narrator in the Gorilla stories testifies to this nature of the Black oral tradition in Bambara's fiction and this adherence to Black language structure is what critics must recognize as the model for all of Bambara's works.

In Chapter One I try to show Bambara's use of folk speech is employed in many ways to reinforce and ramify her themes and her characterization. Again and again, the language in Gorilla, My Love, and The Seabirds Are Still Alive demonstrates and helps to create and to differentiate the characters and the events. When readers remember Sylvia's language in "The Lesson," they remember that it is she who tries to explore a problem fully in symbolic action and words:

Miss Moore lines us up in front of the mailbox where we started from, seem like years ago, and I got a headache for thinkin so hard and we learn all over each other so we can hold up under the draggy-ass lecture she always finishes us off with at the end
before we thank her for borin us to tears. But she just looks at us like she readin tea leaves. (Gorilla 94)

But it is Sugar who is concerned with finding the right word, who will construct an epigram in parallel language that precisely defines the theme of the story: "I think" says Sugar,"...that this is not much of a democracy if you ask me. Equal chance to pursue happiness means an equal crack at the dough don't it?" (Gorilla 95). And it is Sylvia who strains toward self-realization by posing questions about her mental condition. "I'm goin to the West End and then over to the Drive to think this day through" (96). Sylvia's speech from the most humorous to the most confused is proceeded by free association, while Sugar's speech is proceeded by logic, and it is Sugar's language that invokes a proverb as a basis of acceptance, acceptance of reality.

Chapter One will clearly show Bambara's style of establishing the oral tradition as a unique characteristic way of expressing Black thought through her fiction. Her style of using the oral tradition is a blend of many factors: her narrator's emphasis on Black traditions of the family's responsibility to the child, the emphasis on the broken word, the nurturing of the child through specific Black conventions. Her style focuses on the Black human experience, funneled through a blend of language, and folk traditions, helps her to say what she has to say, at her pace, and in her way. Through her highly original
use of the elements of the Black language structure, Bambara dramatizes the vitality and the essence of Black folk speech, hence Black language itself.

Black scholars have described the Black language as "having two dimensions" (Geneva Smitherman) and as being expressed with "double consciousness" (Dubois). It has also been (for Thomas Melone of Cameroon), a "language of Negro-African American conscience," and (for Henry Louis Gates, Jr.) "double play." Chapter One shows how elements of this structure of Black folk speech, abstracted from the earliest of Black folk literature, create a subtext in Bambara's fiction. This subtext not only evokes emotions such as humor, fear, and love, but also provides her fiction with this dual quality of the Black language. In her short stories and in her novel, this structure forms the basis for the construction of the dialects of Black folks in rural areas of the South, shapes the vernacular of the Black people in the Caribbean and in South America, and gives character to the witty and sharp idioms and slangs of the urban Black. It makes all sentiments in her fiction come alive with personality, character, and local color. This language that informs the folk narrative of Black folks from the 1800s to the 1900s gives, to use Henry Louis Gates, Jr. words, "cultural and political imperative to a race still fighting tenaciously for their most basic right" (21). Chapter One also demonstrates how Bambara, using the elements of Black folk speech,
represents both the variety of sensibilities and experiences of Black people in modern times as it unfolds within the Black literary tradition. It also demonstrates Bambara's craft, her intention, and leads to a better reassessment of her ability as a writer. In Chapter One the following questions are addressed. How has employing the oral tradition to her short fiction allowed Bambara to move the Black language from conventional and temporal status most Black language achieves in short stories by Black authors who write or have written in Black dialects? How does an analysis of the folk traditions that underline Bambara's fiction draw attention to the various ways Black people from slavery to the present century have developed a repertory of stock formulas--traditional techniques--which they have used in the structure of the folklore genres to preserve the Black oral tradition and their sense of self as Black people? To answer these questions I look at the framework of the language and the elements that structure the language as they appear in traditional folk literature. Traditional elements are in and of themselves the core of Black language that governs the production of literature by Black writers--"Something made in the United States" according to Richard Wright. Also, I discuss the communication factors and functional factors in these elements which govern the folk narratives in the Black oral tradition, and then I show how they connect to the structure of language that underlines
the folk speech in Bambara's short fiction.

Of most interest to critics of the short stories is the girl-woman narrator, Hazel, who appears in Bambara's Gorilla stories. Butler-Evans calls her "an authentic self-ethnographer" (95). He finds that "Hazel's role as narrator...particularly her use of a linguistic code...is largely a reproduction of Black working class speech [that] allows her to construct authoritatively the implied imaginary community" (95). I don't see Hazel's speech or any of the protagonists' speech patterns qualifying as merely a "reproduction" of any group's speaking forms. This language does not imitate or duplicate folk speech. That would make the language flat, static, without character, just an image of something else. In Hazel's language are correspondences to urban speech patterns which are there purposely to define the essential qualities that give double meaning to folk expression, hence a folk experience and a personal experience. With such twists on the reality of the language in Bambara's short fiction, one has to seek the focus of the Black folk narratives, with an eye on the values, forms and techniques that constitute the folk aspects in the Black literary tradition. These aspects of the Black literary tradition in Bambara's fiction give evidence of reproduction to the existence of a folk culture that nurtures her language since Bambara equips her language with two levels of understanding. By framing the language in this way, she plays on a variation
of meaning, which allows the reader to become involved in the action and at
the same time, gain a superior knowledge of the Black folk culture that is
never directly expressed. (For example, the language may sometimes both
characterize and criticize the behavior of the character.) Bambara makes use
of this aspect in Black folk narratives and so provides opportunities for the
reader to lend her fiction to the Black literary tradition in a slightly different
way -- through language. Houston A. Baker, Jr. in Black Literature in
America provides this definition of the tradition:

The black American literary tradition begins with
the "existing monuments" that constitute "an ideal
order." It begins also with a knowledge of "the
group" that provided all the "maturing and value"
for the black writer. It is black folklore that
provides our first view of the existing monuments
and tells us about the group in which the talented
black writer has his genesis. (20)

Baker in his definition, provides another avenue toward understanding
the Black literary tradition when he cites characteristic features of Black folk
speech that sets standards for the folk expression:

...the folk expression of the black American is
composed of elements from many lores that come
together to reflect a unique folk experience.
The slave experience of the black American stands
apart in history, and the urban experience of the
black American is no less unique. We thus see a
different type of folk hero, a different type of
music, and a different type of religious experience
This dissertation shows how Bambara subscribes to this tradition and uses these aspects differently from the way other black artists adopt this tradition into their works.

Chapter One of this dissertation also involves a good deal of discussion about what exactly makes the contrast between Bambara and other writers who, to borrow from Baker, "have made use of its [folklore] values, forms and techniques" (20). Chapter One also shows that Bambara does not merely duplicate these folk forms but instead keeps the ideas of Black folklore alive by her own reinvention of the folk self through the language of the narratives. Her technique is to combine the traditional oral culture of Black Americans with the most useful language of the Black person in his/her community, which may be the urban ghetto, the rural south, the Caribbean, or any place in the world that language is a part of the traditional oral culture.

All the voices in the short fiction are Black voices. That means that the importance of language rings true in every instance, and the cadences of Black folk speech are maintained convincingly over the entire narrative. In every respect the language stands out but does not get in the reader's way of understanding the fiction; therefore, within this aspect, one of the reader's first response to the fiction is aesthetic. One observation about Bambara's fiction
that any reader would accept is that her characters are believable. This is demonstrated in "The Lesson" where Bambara is successful in portraying Sylvia and her friends realistically. As one examines the behavior of the children, he or she will find them "believable" as the author of the following commentary suggests that through the use of language the children are made real:

[One] characteristic of these children that makes them believable is their ability to observe, describe, and predict adult behavior (even if they can't understand it)—an uncanny ability apparently shared by all children (as anyone who has ever watched children mimic their teachers or parents can testify). This talent is demonstrated most clearly by Sylvia. She sums up Aunt Gretchen in few short sentences: "She was the main gofer in the family. You got some ole dumb shit foolishness you want somebody to go for, you send for Aunt Gretchen. (Riverside Anthology of Literature 128)

It is without question that Bambara aims at reality through language and she does so by introducing readers first to the openness of the expressions that comes in an idea and then by the main character who makes these expressions significant in her fiction. Thus, the language is dramatized and by its performance the story is made culture specific; this is her concrete way of rendering aspects of the folk tradition in her fiction.

In Chapter One what leads to clarification of Bambara's fiction is the
discussion of the folk motif in traditional literature analyzed together with the concept of an ideological environment; the discussion of the ideological environment is important to developing Bambara's use of language in the all-Black communities she creates in her short fiction because her characters do not allow "alien discourses" to interfere with their concept of self. Every aspect of response is grafted from the Black tradition, so that language is unique to the Black oral tradition itself with no resonance to any other thing. When the first-person narrator creates her dialogue, it comes specifically from her own experience within her environment or from some traditional source in her environment—a Miss Gladys or a Miss Naomi, for example. In this manner, the language of the first-person narrator reveals the concept of the ideological environment as prescribed by Bambara for maintaining the Black self.

Chapter One operates under the assumption that critics who discuss Bambara's fiction ignore how she uses language from within these specific boundaries of Black culture and Black folk speech. Critics who discuss the very properties of Black language through their analyses of the first-person narrator or some other folk tradition seemingly overlook this important function of language in Bambara's short fiction, how it develops or highlights Black people's sense of self.

In Chapter Two, the dissertation looks at Bambara's preoccupation with
the pervasive consciousness of self and the language used by Black writers from the mid 1960s to the late 1980s. Drawing largely on the political significance of Black Aesthetic discourse in Houston A. Baker Jr.'s *The Journey Back,* ..., this chapter focuses on Black Aesthetic discourse as it relates to Bambara's fiction. The political nuances in the fiction might be understood better if the fiction is analyzed from this historical/literary perspective. Bambara's fidelity to the open consciousness of her youthful narrator, her choice of strong-willed characters susceptible to shock and mystery, and her portrayal of the instability of Black folks' lives contribute to her genuine exploratory attitude of Black consciousness in the Black Aesthetic movement. A major part of this chapter is a discussion that shows that the ideological context in which Bambara's fiction is created relates directly to Richard Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Literature." In this text published in 1937, Wright wrote that:

The negro has a folklore which embodies the memories and hopes of his struggle for freedom. Not yet caught in paint or stone, and as yet but freely depicted in the poem and the novel, the negroes' most powerful images of hope and despair still remain in the fluid state of daily speech. (*The Richard Wright Reader* 41)

Other sources such as Charles Hamilton's essay "Riots, Revolts, and Relevant Responses" in *The Black Power Revolt* and Addison Gayle Jr.'s
"Toward a Black Aesthetic" show how the politics of reviving and politicizing Black culture structures and enhances Bambara's fiction. Perhaps in the main, some iconic status may be given to her use of the Black Aesthetic and to the role it plays in establishing a new tradition of Black short fiction by grafting some basic rhetorical dimensions of the Black folk tradition. The way Bambara gives an original treatment to the Black Aesthetic so familiar to writers from 1800s through the 1980s, and introduces a range of the Black Aesthetic that embraces levels of language in Black society, is attributed, at least in part, to her involvement in the quest for a Black identity—a quest to which Bambara sets her literary sights. In Chapter Two the analyses of the short fiction shows that in creating this Black identity, Bambara does not subscribe to artifacts of Black language. The folk speech in the fiction does not necessitate an immediate stereotyped representation of Black people even though the speech patterns of many of her characters chart traditions of Black folk speech. Words, dialects, idioms, signal a specific experience rather than identify a specific race of people. All characters speak the language of their own experience whether in slang, dialect or in a specific vernacular form. The quest for a new identity begins with establishing a new process of reading away the stereotypes given to Black characters in literature who all speak the same speak; Bambara's characters all "Talk that Talk" which tells a different
story each time.

Since most literary criticism has yet to take account of the ideological environment in which Bambara's Black Aesthetic discourse emerge, as a starting point for an inquiry into her fiction, Chapter Two asks the question, "How did the Black Aesthetic movement of the 1960s contribute to the political attitude of cultural nationalism that embraces the fiction of Toni Cade Bambara?" In addition to developing the theory that the Black Aesthetic ideology which affects Bambara's fiction is basically her own style of destroying the "white thing" through Black folk traditions, I look at Bambara's fashioning of persuasive discourse to see how closely it is linked to the popular theories of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the relationship between authoritative and internally persuasive discourses. He writes the following:

When someone else's ideological is internally persuasive for us and acknowledged by us, entirely different possibilities open up. Such discourse is of decisive significance in the evolution of an individual consciousness: consciousness awakens to independent ideological life precisely in a world of alien discourses surrounding it, and from which it cannot initially separate itself . . . (The Dialogic Imagination, 344-345).

Bakhtin's concept of the ideological may seem to fit into the discussion of Bambara's fiction especially since it rests on the distinction he draws between the "independent ideological life" and the "world of alien discourses." I find
that these phrases are not linked extricably to the various constructions of Black vernacular in the short stories that dominate only the Black experience because the white world is always on the periphery. Basically, the characters in the stories are empowered by the Black experience of living solely in Black communities, but that alone does not characterize and structure their sense of self. In Bambara's stories, the emphasis the characters put on only using folk speech, folk expressions or folk language style to characterize an experience, allows them to entirely separate themselves from alien discourses and the character is free to "talk that talk" which is "of decisive significance in the evolution of a [Black] consciousness," one that is free of "alien discourses." Furthermore, in the stories, any discourse that entertains racial conflict is minimal and is never an imperative in the text which means, the Black cultural experience is duly underscored and without interference from white cultural hemogeny; this is the essence of Chapter Two to show the discovery of the Black self.

I find, therefore, that in her short fiction, Bambara gives a different interpretation to the ideological environment. The so-called "alien discourses" though part of the white presence in the stories do not interrupt her discourse or at least are not all significant in terms of the characters fashioning a Black consciousness. That is because the cultural nationalist politics in the text is
so structured to produce only a Black experience, the presence of white forces are dismissed as insignificant by the protagonist and are not allowed to interfere with the culture of the environment. Many stories in *Gorilla*, for example, illustrate this. In "Gorilla, My Love," Hazel does not give any significance to the white theatre manager. She only identifies his presence but not as a threatening force. She says, "I walk right by him and sit down and tell the man about himself and that I want my money back" (17); whereas in "Raymond's Run," when Hazel's identity is threatened by the Black coach she asserts herself to show how it is significant for him to call her by her full name. "'Hazel Elizabeth Deborah Parker,' I correct him and tell him to write it on his board" (29). Other stories in *Gorilla* also show how Bambara's ideological environment is structured to ignore or to dismiss other seemingly disruptive noise.

Some stories in *Gorilla* specifically illustrate the non-importance to the narrator of white presence. In "The Lesson" Sylvia dismisses white folks who wear fur coats and stockings in warm weather only as "crazy" (89). And in "Mississippi Ham Rider" the white woman who accompanies the narrator to the South only "smiled" (55) while the old man spoke; she doesn't have a part in the conversation or share in the folk experience. In "Hammer Man" the white cops who put Manny in the squad car only jogs Hazel's memory to refute
the story-book image of cops given in her reading materials at school. She says "these cops surely didn't come out of no fifth-grade reader" (42). Her reference to them has no bearing on the way she feels about Manny falling off the roof.

One good example that shows an ideological environment unrelated to Bakhtin's thesis is given in "Playin with Punjab." Hazel herself says, "The story I want to tell is about the block, I guess, and how Miss Ruby [white social worker] found out that Punjab don't play" (71). In her story, she focuses on Punjab's vulnerability and his response to someone who doesn't keep his/her word not on the white presence of Miss Ruby.

Readers will understand that the white presence is not troublesome to the discourse of Bambara's characters since Bambara's use of language is a semiotic construction of the Black community, an idea that is implicit in the Black Aesthetic of the 1960s. As Larry Neal states in "The Black Arts Movement", "The motive behind the Black Aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of the white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world. . ." (Drama Review 29). Bambara, however, destroys the white thing, not by refuting alien discourses, but by allowing only circumstances of a Black experience to directly influence the process of self-discovery. The questions in this chapter concern the quest for Black identity, and I try to show how Bambara's use of the Black Aesthetic is directly related to her use
of Black language in her short stories, subsequently, the door to a Black identity is unlocked by the *living* language of Black folks in Black communities.

Chapter Two goes further to look at some of the areas that some women critics make crucial in their discussion of Bambara's fiction. It looks also at the possibility that modern critics (especially feminist critics) who are sometimes put off by the conventions of stereotyped criticism of women's literature, which may strike them as terribly artificial and intrusive, will develop new approaches in critical commentary; these approaches may generally be intrigued by the variety of functions women literature can perform.

In Chapter Three the discussion focuses on the elements of signifying in Black language that Bambara uses to create meaning in *The SaltEaters* and to give both an overt and implied meaning to a cultural dilemma within the Black community. In the novel, these elements of Black language are related to forms of signifying found in traditional Black folk speech and they provide the key to understanding that Black people's language varieties appropriate to each function in Black culture and that the functions themselves are almost entirely universal among Black folks in Black communities. To clearly understand, with proper certainty, the way Bambara's use of signifying has
turned the Black language in her fiction into a literary account, I analyze several theories of signifying in the Black oral tradition. These theories are developed by Roger Abrahams in *Deep Down In the Jungle*, *The Signifying Monkey* by Henry Louis Gates Jr., and *Talkin and Testifyin* by Geneva Smitherman. I look closely at her novel *The Salt Eaters* for the assimilation of linguistic elements in the speech patterns of the characters, which seem dissimilar but nevertheless, do serve to corroborate and to complement one another and to give significance to the entire picture of Black life in a disintegrating community. Finally, I show how the language in Bambara’s novel portrays both the exterior and interior world of Black folks, and I also demonstrate that the language elements in Bambara’s fiction "signify" for Blacks (because of the breadth of her vision and the incredible craftsmanship behind her work) the resolution of the Black identity problem; this discussion shows how Black language has the power to recreate Black people in self-knowledge and in love. Since the language in Bambara’s novel probes political and social issues that have pushed and pulled Black people in America for hundreds of years, the discussion in the dissertation’s first chapter is developed from the ideological position that structures her fiction. It seems that the search for truth provides the context in which Bambara articulates her opposition to the subordinate position assigned to Blacks by white
American society. In an interview with Claudia Tate, Bambara states her position:

I start with the recognition that we are at war, and that war is not simply a hot debate between the capitalist camp and the socialist camp over which economic/political/social arrangement will have beginning in the world. It's not just the battle over turf and who has the right to utilize resources for whomsoever's benefit. The war is also being fought over the truth; what is the truth about human nature, about the human potential? (17)

Her position becomes clearer as the dissertation explores various elements of Bambara's ideological stance. Her narratives are basically "truth specific" rather than "race-specific" (to use Elliot-Butler Evans' words) and Bambara provides a good description of her involvement:

My responsibility to myself, my neighbors, my family and the human family is to try to tell the truth; that ain't easy. There are so few truth-speaking traditions in this society in which the myth of "Western Civilization" has claimed the allegiance of so many. We have equipped to appreciate the fact that truth works that it releases the spirit and that is a joyous thing. (17)

Bambara overwhelms readers with the seriousness of her truth in The SaltEaters; therefore, it should come to no surprise that her sense of "truth-speaking" gives her novel at once a wealth of detail and Black cultural quality. It is interesting to note that by enlightening us to this single
perspective, Bambara essentially moves us beyond simplification to view (through her fiction) the effects of cultural biases to their consequences for Black people. Essentially concerned with Bambara's ideological position are critics like Butler-Evans who write that the ideological position Bambara holds is related to positions held by other Black writers. He describes this position with this analysis:

Toni Cade Bambara's fiction is largely over determined by an ideological position in which writings by Blacks are necessarily oppositional. As a self-described nationalist-feminist-socialist, she views her works as discourse in opposition to two modes of domination; racism, which, she argues, allows whites to define and determine the existences of Blacks; and patriarchal oppression, through which all males exercise negemonic privileges in their relationship with women. (9-10)

Of course an explication of The SaltEaters will show that Bambara's works are not based on "two [specific] modes of domination." The SaltEaters explores the value of a tradition, the impact of Black Power on the Black community, the truth about how one sees himself within the Black community, and the preservation of self in the phases of destruction within the Black community. The story is told from many points of experience and not from one that deals particularly with racism or another from patriarchal oppression.

Reflecting on Bambara's stance for truth, Butler-Evans contends that "The battle for 'truth' that Bambara would wage against racism is echoed in
her struggle against sexism" (11). None of this, perhaps, is particularly new. Nevertheless it is necessary to see the sense of reverie by and accounted for by Bambara's manipulation of her own point of view of stereotyped Black life, which is studded with telling details; she speaks with clarity and good sense to the major debates of Black women literature:

I have always opposed the stereotypical definitions of "masculine" and "feminine" because I always found that either/or implicit in those definitions antithetical to what I was all about and what revolution for self is all about. I am beginning to see...the usual notions of sexual differentiation in roles as obstacles to political consciousness, that the way those terms are generally defined and acted upon in this part of the world is a hindrance to development. ("On the Issue of Roles" 101)

How we come to understand the central ideas in Bambara's novel is through the mnemonic function of language signified in the character's language, one of the least focused upon aspect of her fiction by her critics. The fact that Bambara uses several narratives to tell the story in the *SaltEaters* often blinds critics to the extensive use of signifying in the novel. For example, conflict in the language is extremely effective in its avoidance of the predictable and its dependance on the actual; this gives the novel the essence of the Black experience.

Specifically, Chapter Three is a discussion of the language as a character
and tells the function or functions signifying does have in Bambara's fiction and shows how it is important to the development of the novel as part of the Black literary tradition. In this chapter no attempt is made to describe or define every possible traditional form of signifying, but it will be necessary to look at some specific folk narratives to reveal the natural and organic connection between Bambara's language and this Black language tradition.

The key relationship in this chapter is between Bambara's fiction and language performance (signifying). As Robert Hemenway writes in "Are You a Flying Lark or a Sitting Dove?" "The most profound and persistent aesthetic forms of Afro-American writing arise from the traditional poetic performances of black people, those acts of creative communication called folklore" (Afro-American Literature. . . 123). Folklore in Bambara's fiction is reflected principally through Black oral traditions themselves; language is treated as an elemental life force. Bambara's ability to give an account of this life force is in the way she demonstrates mastery over the folk tradition of signifying which serves to emphasize the crucial role of Black folk thoughts and behavior. Thus, it is this element that makes Bambara a Black storyteller and bequeaths to her the wisdom of the Black folk tradition which she transmits to readers through her fiction.

All of the fiction illustrates this dynamic craftsmanship of Bambara's
writing of Black folk speech. It makes her use of language an actual living experience and this element startles or delights readers. Though other Black writers employ Black folk speech in their works, Bambara's use of language differs considerably from theirs in terms of how easily readers, who are unfamiliar with Black folk speech begin on first reading to comprehend the context of language in the suggestive meanings of the words the character(s) uses.

I make this assertion based on my experience of teaching Black studies at a community college. Students who read the early works of Paul Lawrence Dunbar, those written in dialect form, often distort the meaning of poems, for example, because of their heightened awareness of the dialect itself; therefore, from the onset, they establish a distance between them and the folk experience and come away with no real relationship to the work at all. Again when I present the work of Charles Chesnutt, although the language is not nearly as much of a problem, students are often "put off" by ready-made figures whose conventional behavior, whether in verbal or non-verbal action, often predicts a social commentary from the work. Of course, this is not to say that these writers works, or other works written in folk speech, do not have both literary and social value. It is meant that often these works do not take on new meaning for the reader or they do not connect in the language experience.
Consequently, these readers end up reading the works solely for some other purpose but never sharing in the language experience of the narrator.

On the other hand, when students read the stories in Gorilla or the Seabirds, they are first attracted by the unconventional dynamics of the narrator's well-crafted convincing language. Students (although many are not familiar with idioms, colloquial expressions, slang or vernacular forms of Black folk speech) are "drawn into" the story(ies) by the texture of the language which is produced in several ways: rhythmic sounds or folk expressions, words that carry in themselves the significance of the entire discourse, words that express a disparity between what is said and what is actually revealed.

To be sure, any of the stories in Gorilla, or in Seabirds will give this illustration of language. A specific example would be the language of the narrator of "The Apprentice," a story which by its title suggests learning a skill under direct supervision of another. The apprentice, a young Black woman, the narrator of the story, is paired with Naomi a "seasoned" political activist to learn the process of organizing Black folks for political action. The reader is able to follow the apprentice through her discussion of the political activities in her neighborhood and around the community because through meta communication, her language emphasizes facial expressions, body gestures, voice inflections, and folk traditions. The folk traditions appropriate the
purpose of the apprentice's language which is blunt and concrete or often amusing or contradictory to make an incident or an individual seem terribly real. The description the apprentice gives of her mentor Naomi yields a valid and direct presentation of their relationship:

Naomi assumes everybody wakes up each morning plotting out exactly what to do to hasten the revolution. If you mention to her, for example, that you are working on a project or thinking about going somewhere or buying something, she'll listen enthusiastically waiting for you to get to the point, certain that it will soon all be revealed if she is patient. Then you finish what you had to say, and she shrugs -- "But how does that free the people?" And you wind up jumping up and down screaming about yeah, yeah that was the most important question but dammit not the only one. (Seabirds 28)

The language shows the apprentice struggling toward self-awareness (discussed in Chapter Two). Ironically she develops because of what she comes to know about this woman Naomi. More importantly are the cadences in the narration that are continued in the description:

If you weren't careful you'd find yourself spinning out one of those farmer-in-the-dell numbers: I want to buy these boots, you see; boss boots allow me to walk; walking I meet people; I am cheerful with the people cause I'm in my boots, you see. And so forth and so forth in the house that Jack built. But for all my hollerin, I love the sister... (28)

These moments of outburst develop for the apprentice a gradual movement
away from resentment and hostility toward what she does or with whom she is doing it. Her final revelation "I love the sister" restores her to her duty by sounding off the unity phrase of "sister" common to the union of Black females in the Black Power Movement.

Other passages help us to know the apprentice from the inside and the outside through her language and how she lends herself easily to the language of others. She tells how an old fella in the park, leaning on his cane "cracked me up":

It's just like church, "he was saying as I came up highstepping over the uncut grass..."Sermon's only good as the congregation make it. Preacher can't do much lessen you give him some encouragement, lend him your energy, your fuel. Let him know you with him. Specially my preacher who's old and can't half see. Got to shout a little, hum a little, sing, stomp, pray out loud. Get them fans going and rustle up a wind so he know you there. Ain't that right? "That's right," I said, prepared to shout if he called on me again. (30)

The effectiveness in the apprentice's speech is in the presentation of the language in emphasizing a method of call response, a usual expectation in the Black church. Like the previous passages the rhythm of the words is strong: "boots allow me walk, walking I meet people" has the same bouncy beat as "got to shout a little," "hum a little," "sing," "stomp," "pray out loud." Like the apprentice the reader is ready to participate "That's right." The apprentice is
a convincing character because her language is convincing and furthermore interesting because it is combined with an old folk tradition of talkin loud, (again defined and explained in Chapter Three) and the tradition of call-response and signifying. The legendary style of signifying is also part of the language make-up that gives the folk speech its texture. The reader sees that ironically the apprentice mentors her own growing process through the use of metacommunication--her own discourse about the old man's discourse--which establishes the aesthetic standards for the traditional expressions in the old man's speech. This drives home the point of the importance of language to Bambara's stories. The apprentice is able to gain through this language experience a sense of self through the double use of language through her own phrasing of the cultural expressions of the old man. The reader also participates in this process along with the rhythm of the speech although some use of the words and phrases are unfamiliar or otherwise not part of the familiar experience. Thus, the reader and the narrator are involved with both the power of the language and in the sharing of Black folk traditions.

This dissertation presents all this and more to show Bambara's focus on Black traditions is to move toward a sense of Blackness. Each chapter points the reader in this direction; language and folklore gives power and continuity to the Black literary tradition in the fiction of Toni Cade Bambara.
CHAPTER I

PRESENCE AND ABSENCE: AN INVESTIGATION OF FOLKLORE, LANGUAGE AND NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES IN THE SHORT FICTION OF TONI CADE BAMBARA.

*It got more in the mortar
beside the pestle*
West Indian Proverb

Introduction

The West Indian proverb that introduces this chapter is an excellent one to use because in its meaning is suggested the thesis of this discussion -- there is more to Bambara’s fiction than what critics write about. It seems that over the entire stretch of criticism, much of the commentary and criticism looks generally at issues of race, self-identity, Bambara’s storytelling techniques, feminist concerns and music as a theme of the stories/novel. More specifically, contemporary criticism (1980-1991) has given more attention to Bambara’s first person narrator in the Gorilla stories, the nationalist feminist ideology of the female protagonist in The Seabirds, and revolutionary aspects of textual production in The SaltEaters. Although contemporary critical responses to Bambara’s fiction are important and foremost, still I do not propose to admit that critical responses to the Gorilla and Seabirds short fiction and those given
to The SaltEaters, are full-scale analyses that show the literary merit of these works. Thus, I have to emphasize in this chapter what I find present or absent in the critical commentary given to Bambara’s short fiction. This chapter focuses on the stories in Gorilla, My Love and The SeaBirds Are Still Alive. The discussion concentrates on the development of language in the short stories, specifically how language is used by the first-person narrator in the Gorilla stories and by the protagonists of The SeaBirds. What I first do in this chapter is to identify some patterns in the Black oral tradition that dominate the language of the first-person narrator. I try to show how concepts of speaking indirectly, privately and publicly, some characteristic elements of Black folk literature, are consciously written into the language in Bambara’s short stories. The outline of this chapter is formed to present patterns, show how they give appeal to the reader’s understanding and otherwise show how they strongly serve to make the first-person narrator unique. This special use of the first-person narrator’s language in the Gorilla stories is the most important element of these stories and most contemporary critics have missed or entirely mis-interpreted the first-person narrator’s role; therefore, a follow-up discussion will involve critics’ view of the first-person narrator.

The discussion continues with the language structure of The SeaBirds. Although the source is also traditional Black folk speech, the patterns differ
in traditional form from those in *Gorilla*. The characteristic of speaking publicly/privately is slightly transformed into a translation of thought using the folk tradition as a vehicle. Thus some elements of meta communication form the basis for the reader's understanding of the folk tradition. Again, after identifying this structure, I look at the way critics miss this sense of traditional concepts that give texture to the stories of *SeaBirds*.

**Patterns of the Black Oral Tradition in the Language of Bambara's First-Person Narrator**

Present in Bambara's short fiction is the first-person narrator, whose language articulates the presence of the Black oral tradition in the stories through her continuous use of traditional oral forms of expression.

Bambara's first-person narrator in the *Gorilla, My Love* collection is female and realistic, that is, in her speaking, she avoids romantic or idealistic conventions and carefully reports the person, object, or situation as she sees it. I surmise that through the first-person narrator in the *Gorilla* stories, Bambara attempts to create an accurate impression of real life in the Black community as it appears to her narrative consciousness. I feel that in order to suit the narrator's emerging sense of realism in the Black community, Bambara establishes in her fiction what is called "free indirect discourse" (Gates 208-9) as a method for producing several patterns of folk speech from
the Black oral tradition, and she coupled these patterns with real situations that occur in Black people's lives so as to demonstrate the purpose of her stories, which she says, is for the salvation of Black people:

> Stories are important. They keep us alive. In the ships, in the camps, in the quarters, fields, prisons, on the road, on the run, underground, under siege, in the throes, on the verge -- the storyteller snatches us back from the edge to hear the next chapter. In which we are the subjects. We the hero of tales. Our lives preserved. How it was; how it be. Passing it along in the relay. That is what I work to do: to produce stories that save our lives. ("Salvation" 42)

Salvation comes from the folk tradition, and Bambara's involvement with the folk tradition is embedded in the use of folk speech throughout the entire stretch of fiction. The term "free indirect discourse," a term I take from Henry Louis Gates' description of folk speech is a "way of expression of a divided self" (Signifying Monkey 208-9). Many scholars like Gates who study the oral tradition of Black folks have used various terms to define this basic characteristic of the speech: double talk, dual voice, double conscience, to name a few. Each definition of folk speech is concerned with free responses that give a private and public expression to a situation or circumstance. In Bambara's stories the patterns of free responses are dramatized by suggestive words that perform several important functions that make the folk speech one of many things: humorous, ironical, paradoxical, or just plainly and simply
This view of Black folk speech characterizes Bambara's style in the *Gorilla* stories. The first-person narrator frequently presents free indirect language that gives various shades of meaning to the rhythm and inflections of folk speech. It is in this language that the narrator's tone of approval or disapproval is made most plain, and these shades of meaning are also revealed not only by the words and sentiments of the narrator but also by those of the people in the Black community of which the narrator is a part.

Many of Bambara's themes are conveyed in this language style. To make her themes distinct, Bambara makes the female first-person narrator a conscious choice. The dominant use of the female narrator in the fiction is important. It is Bambara's way of making the reader focus entirely on the fiction by creating a bond, a personal knowledge, so to speak, of the female narrator and with her point of view. In the *Gorilla* stories, the first-person narrator is usually an adolescent girl, whose verbal stance forms the basis for questioning or for recognizing what the narrator considers as inequities in the relationship between her individual commitment to self and those cultural values imposed on her by situations in her family or in the Black community where she lives. In the *Gorilla* stories the female narrator recounts situations and events in the style of Black traditional folk speech. This style of Black
folk speech as it appears in the traditional folk tale is demonstrated in the following example from Black folk literature: "Swapping Dreams" observes in the dialogue the dual speech of the slave. Master Jim Turner who likes to swap dreams with his slave, Ike, says to Ike one day, "I dreamed I went to Nigger Heaven last night and saw there a lot of garbage, some old torn-down houses, a few old broken down rotten fences...and a big bunch of ragged, dirty negroes walking around." Ike replied, "Ah dreamed ah went up ter de white man's paradise, an' de streets wuz all ob gol' an' silvah, and dey wuz lots o' milk an' honey dere, an putty pearly gates, but dey wuzn't uh soul in de whole place" (Black Writers of America 230-1).

The tale is built up as a contrast between slave owner Jim Turner, on one side, and the focus of poverty and miserable conditions of the slave on the other. Also expressed here but indirectly is the immorality of whites in their treatment of the Black man. Also expressed in the folk speech of the slave is the nobility and strength of Ike standing against a stronger force of Jim Turner who would destroy him. And although no malevolence is expressed in the exchange, in Ike's response, the reader is shown the natural course of things. The tale also carries a comic application which is one of the traditional concepts readers will find present in the narrator's language of Bambara's stories. In the tale, slave Ike, selects the right word(s) in order to most
expressively and economically heighten the comic effect of the narration.

Bambara's first-person narrator in the *Gorilla* stories ascribes normally to this pattern of Black traditional folk speech. She sets the situation first to show a contrast exists in the way some basic elements such as the union between a man and a woman is perceived by the women in her community. Second, she establishes a method of response that clearly outlines a direct conflict in the order of things, acknowledging first that a bad situation exists but using humor to downplay the misfortune of the situation. One example is set here in "The Johnson Girls" when Sugar, the narrator, passes on to the other young women the wisdom of having a distinct man-and-woman philosophy:

A man, no matter how messy he is, I mean even if he some straight-up basket case, can always get some good woman, two or three for that matter, to go for his shit. Right? But a woman? If her shit ain’t together, she can forget it unless she very lucky and got a Great Ma Drew working roots. If she halfway together and very cold-blooded, then maybe she can snatch some sucker and bump his head. But if she got her johnson together, is fine in her do, super bad in her work, and terrible, terrible extra with her woman thing, well...she’ll just bop along the waves forever with nobody to snatch her up, cause her thing is so tough, and it’s so crystal clear she ain’t goin for bullshit, that can’t no man pump up his boyish heart and good enough to come deal with her one on one. (*Gorilla* 172)
This passage derives its power from a number of sources. For one, it gives an actual presentation of a Black woman’s opposition to gender biases that encourage Black women to model their lives in stereotypic ways. Sugar’s unrelieved pessimism and despair (though comically rendered) concern the subordinate position a Black woman has to hold if she wants a Black man. She points out how different it is for a Black man, though, "no matter how messy he is," this man "can always get some good woman." This portrayal of social reality and a woman’s response to the values of a community that infers a Black woman cannot afford to pick and choose her mate is given in language definitive of the limited images of the Black woman. Sugar makes this clear: "If she halfway together and very cold-blooded, then maybe she can snatch some sucker and bump his head." In other words, a woman must resort to some devious means or trickery or some unethical pattern of behavior in order to get a man and even then, the man has to be "some sucker."

Like the traditional Black folktale, the language in this passage is from a speech community that is based on a shared culture. A reader who is unfamiliar with the cultural elements signified in the folk speech would not lose the meaning of the narration, for the specific repetition of words in the speech produces information which fixes the narrator as having experience in this situation and as a result readers see the narrator questioning in her
speech the value of having a man around. The ambiguity in the speech occurs almost simultaneously as it becomes apparent that the narrator's assertive verbal performance really represents a deep-rooted rejection of the masculine values she has been forced to accept by her community; in fact, by her culture. These values she identifies in cultural terms, "got a Great Ma Drew working roots," "if she got her johnson together." Each of these terms on sex-role socialization shows how central gender is to the formation of the Black woman's identity. Sugar's language skillfully conveys cultural values of the Black community that she understands and shows that she is not committed to these socially defined roles. She insists that a woman must have her "shit together" which means she must be appropriately prepared to organize herself within these concepts. She feels if the woman get her "johnson together," that is, if her actions are assertive and presented with self confidence that shows she accepts who she is, and if she is "fine in her do," (her hairstyle must be fashionable along with her clothes and outward appearance), her sexual performance is not passive or inhibited, and she shows herself as successful, and in addition, she keeps herself looking good ("fine") she wouldn't have to rely on fate or "great Ma Drew working roots," some cultural superstition or some psychic with cards or potions to help her keep a man.

Another way that the passage derives its power is in the use of cultural
terms. By emphasizing vernacular terms that actually give one connotation but means something else, the passage gains momentum. Sugar says the woman has to be "superbad in her work." Thus by a simple and ironic reversal, the word bad is intensified by super and has taken on the opposite meaning that among Blacks means the very best (see Geneva Smitherman's Talkin' and Testifyin' 59-69 for an indepth discussion of this word bad), and "terrible, terrible, extra with her woman thing," is a significant way of elevating the negative sounds of the words to give a positive but independent effect that says a Black woman must have a high level of sexual proficiency -- something perhaps a man may not choose to ignore. In fact, one of the ironies of the Black woman who traditionally is so "together" is that she cannot find a Black man who will accept her as his equal or whom she wants to accept as "together." What happens to her is what Sugar suggests. She can only "bop along the waves forever" hoping to find a man who will accept her for who she is, but what happens is, nobody "[snatches] her up, cause her "thing is so tough" she is always in control and "ain't goin for bullshit" that no man unprescribed of social values can "come deal with her one on one." As the story continues, the narrator enacts a resolution, through folk speech, for dealing with these social values in her community. More in conformity with the entire story, however, is the fact that Sylvia has her own introspective
ambivalence about the male acceptance of an assertive Black woman.

Other patterns of Black folk speech common to the first-person narrator in Bambara’s Gorilla stories include those that are committed to giving a representation of the surfaces of everyday life and show preoccupation with the individual’s relationships to dealing with problems of everyday life. This pattern is clearly established in the secular songs of the Black American folk experience. "These short stories," says one scholar, "are all female ones, almost sung by Bambara in a first-person narrative voice reminiscent of the negro spirituals with their strongly marked rhythms and highly graphic descriptions" (Ruth Burks 49). Because the topics of the short stories are more secular than religious in nature, I find that their rhythms and patterns are likened more to the secular songs of traditional folklore. Although a great deal of variations is shown in the secular songs of Black folks, I see a pattern in a song. Each verse follows the same general form: each begins with an introduction to the topic or aspect of the song and next follows a selection of details that are repeated to illustrate the issues raised in the introduction. The folk speech in which the issues are heavily represented also maintains and carries the meaning of a particularly difficult or pleasing situation for the speaker. The process of interpreting and understanding both the public and personal situation in these secular songs is a method of discovering which shows that
the songs publicly mean what they say and say privately what they mean. An analysis of this idea can be found in the "Juber" song.

Juber

Juber up and Juber down,
Juber all around de town
Juber dis and Juber dat,
And Juber roun' the simmon vat.
   Hoe corn!  hill tobacco!
   Get over double trouble, Juber boys, Juber.

Uncle Phil, he went to mill,
He suck de sow, he starve de pig,
Eat the simmon, gi' me de seed,
I told him I was not in need.
   Hoe corn!  hill tobacco!
   Get over double trouble, Juber boys, Juber.

Aunt Kate?  look on de high shelf,
Take down de husky dumplin,
I'll eat it with my simmon cake
to cure the rotten belly-ache.
   Hoe corn!  hill tobacco!
   Get over double trouble, Juber boys, Juber.

Raccoon went to Simmon town,
To choose the rotten from de soun,
Dare he sot upon a sill,
Eating of a whip-poor-will.
   Hoe corn!  hill tobacco!
   Get over double trouble, Juber boys, Juber.
   (Black Writers of America 236)

Houston Baker explains this "Juber" song as a secular song: "The secular songs of the black folk are largely concerned with the primary activity of the
folk experience—work. . . . they were either accompaniments to the work or descriptions of it" (Long Black Song 33-34). Baker also discusses briefly the folk song's existence:

Two groups of secular songs remain: the jubilee songs and more important, the blues. Jubilee songs were sung by the folk on celebration days, and the name, according to Maud Cuney-Hare, comes from the chief drummer—known as "Juba"—who pounded out the rhythms. (34)

The "Juber" song presents an extraordinary perspective on the way the singer is involved with life; there is a note of self-directed irony or mockery in the repetition of the last two lines throughout each verse of the song. Words like "suck the cow," "starve the pig," "eat the simmon," "gi' me de seed" have interesting sounds that make the tone of the song lively and amusing but also grim and a bit self-depreciating. The language of the song gives an eloquent testimony to the singer's acceptance of what he has to do to survive or to beat the system so he doesn't go hungry. Graphically he sucks the milk from the cow and he eats the pig slop and "starves the pig." This is his refusal to accept starvation in the system of chattel slavery. Impervious to fear, the singer can now taunt his audience with his new mode of self-preservation, representing as it does, the loss of hope and possibility. At the same time, conceivably, the singer is indulging himself and other slaves in ways of how to "get over double
trouble, Juber boys," and to fight for themselves in ways that illuminate the incredible capacity for self-preservation. In their discussion of "Juba" Jones and Hawes reinforce this Juba tradition of traditional food ways with this explanation: "...they would get all this kind of thing off their brains and minds. . ." (Step It Down 38). The folk speech gives a representation of the singer's understanding of his problems (what is bothering him about his own actions), and his endurance of the curious demands in his everyday life. Baker says "endurance and transcendence by lyricism are two of the most important aspects of the black folk experience. . ." (35). This aspect is illustrated in the "Juber" song.

Even though Bambara's stories do not have a synonymous relationship to the Juber songs, they are reminiscent of the spirit of rebellion of Black folks against established conventional forms of life or rather what is made to be accepted. Both in the songs and in the stories the narrators make readers become more involved in a personal experience by emphasizing the negative to make the folk expression attractive or noticeable but not suspiciously sentimental, only ironically, a celebration of personal values that contribute to self comfort while enduring the responsibility and the insistence of cultural values and established norms.

Bambara's first-person narrator dramatizes a number of oral cultural
practices most of her critics do not readily discuss. They discuss the first-person narrator's speech as open and frank, describing her self-esteem, feelings, aims, likes, annoyances and aspirations (Literature 21). Technically the folk speech of the narrator in the Gorilla stories lends itself nicely to the alternative attitudes or courses of action implied in the narrator's discourse, which often in these stories present two perspectives on life (as we see in the folk song), one public and one private. In the instance of Hazel, the narrator of "Raymond's Run," the alternatives are laid out simply and the distinction is less monumental than in some of the other Gorilla stories. Hazel refuses to be one of the dancers of the May Pole. She affirms her position in this way:

You'd think my mother'd be grateful not to have to make me a white organdy dress with a big satin sash and buy me new white baby-doll shoes that she can't be taken out of the box till the big day. You'd think she'd be glad her daughter ain't out there prancing around a May Pole getting the new clothes all dirty and sweaty and trying to act like a fairy or flower or whatever you're supposed to be when you trying to be yourself, whatever that is, which is, as far as I am concerned, a poor Black girl who really can't afford to buy shoes and a new dress you wear once a lifetime cause it won't fit next year. (Gorilla 27)

Like the Juber song, Hazel's attitude clearly reveals her own perspective on life, and it is given in a form that follows the Black folk tradition. Her
discussion follows a distinctive pattern of repetition that is used to emphasize her mode of thinking. She says with a musical, lyrical, beat "You'd think my mother'd be grateful not to have me a white organdy dres..." She details the accessories that go with the dress to give testimony to the fact that this is a needless expense. She continues with the rhythmic "you'd think she'd be glad her daughter ain't out there prancing round a May Pole." She uses words like "prancing" instead of dancing, "getting sweaty" and contrasts them with being like a "fairy or flower" to show how ridiculous the situation seems to her; like the Juber singer, the situation is also grim and a bit self-depreciating to buy "a new dress you wear once a lifetime cause it won't fit next year."

The entire discourse of "Raymond's Run" is one of endurance and transcendence as Baker suggests is part of the traditional folk songs. Hazel's own stance begins with her own insistence on the coach calling her "Hazel Elizabeth Deborah Parker" rather than "squeaky." She says, "I correct him and tell him to write it down on his board" (29), but she also speaks of herself as "a poor Black girl." The passage almost suggests self-reproaches by Hazel who seem consistently to be sympathetic to her position. Her tone suggests that the story may actually lead to rejection of social activities in the community, but this does not happen. Bambara's style of using this pattern of the oral tradition allows her to focus on the daily grind of life experienced
by Hazel. An outright rejection would not fit into the pattern of the traditional folk speech.

The basic theme of "Raymond's Run," hence, is forecasted in the folk tradition; it is that the imposition of some Black cultural norms on everyday life upon the individual may produce frustration, dissatisfaction or resignation. Hazel's refusal to participate in the May Pole dance brings out this theme and also builds on it. Later on in the story a different Hazel shows unwillingness to break these cultural norms and only finds ways to endure them.

Combining in the narrative process the elements of traditional folk speech with the cultural situations of the individual in a Black community is what readers will find as most effective in the language of the first person narrator of the Gorilla stories. How then does the first-person narrator effectively make Bambara's language style revolutionary? The language of the narrator is effective because it revolutionizes the basic patterns of Black folk speech -- taking the ordinary or familiar idioms of the vernacular and identifying them with other elements of the Black oral tradition to make them a part of modern oral tradition. This process revives other patterns also, which involve the folk tradition of double-talk to produce double meanings. In the folktale and in the folksong, double meanings are incorporated in every expression. The reader follows this pattern of language in the Gorilla stories.
The rhythmic and lyrical flow of words and sounds also give the Gorilla stories the tradition and the texture of oral storytelling. The reader's understanding of this double talk is two-fold. An understanding is first developed from the texture and details of the entire narrative. Language is not developed by allusions to black talk but by actual use of traditional components of language that from the outset of the stories are apparent in the mode of life of the narrator and that of the Black community. This is important to understanding the stories. Looking at how deeply involved the narrator's language is with her environment helps the reader to see the contrast between the consciousness of the narrator of the folk traditions that have defined her life and the conflicting dynamics of asserting her own Black identity. Because Bambara's own life is informed by traditional folk precepts -- she grew up in urban America and worked and lived in urban environments, only such an experienced life could write stories, using dehumanizing and artificial stereotypes of Black people, with such candor as to celebrate the uniqueness of Black life. Language is the paramount source that contributes to the stereotypes, but it works profoundly in the stories to change a stereotype to an understanding of a human circumstance. The language is real and so are the lives of those who speak it.

The key aspect of the first-person narrator in the Gorilla stories is the
traditional pattern of double talk; its most practical use is to serve the speaker (as it did in traditional literature) in a manner that is public and private. That pattern of public/private speaking allows the reader to deal with the narrator one on one, deciphering or linking phrases to other words in the context in order to relate her public speech to her private thoughts. The first story of *Gorilla* conveys how this language works: Hazel the adult woman protagonist decides to dance with blind man Bovanne who is being ignored by everyone at a fund raiser for the political groups in which her children are involved. She describes her behavior:

So I'm pressed up close and we touch talkin' with the hum.
And here come my daughter cuttin' her eye at me like she do when she tell me about my "apolitical" self like I got hoof and mouf disease and their ain't no hope at all. And I don't pay her no mind just look up in Bovanne shadow face and tell him his stomach like a drum and he laugh. Laugh real loud. And here come my youngest, Task with a tap on my elbow like he the third grade monitor and I'm cuttin' up on the line to assembly. "I was just talkin' on the drums," I explained when they hauled me into the kitchen. . . "Just drummin' that's all." (Gorilla 5)

Language serves two purposes in the story. The first is to get reader involvement through Hazel's public point of view; the second is to give strong emphasis to the privacy of her statement. In getting the reader involved, Bambara first creates an image of Hazel, one that is culturally based. She uses a variety of folk traditions not to confound readers but to achieve the
effects of rhythm, emphasis, and freshness in the text to bring about a change in attitude toward Black people by dealing with their circumstances one on one. In the passage quoted from "My Man Bovanne" Bambara constructs statements that stress key ideas about who is speaking and about whom the person is speaking, so that language serves to give separate meanings but still focuses on one main idea. The main idea in this story is the "generation gap." To show this, Bambara spices the story not with modernisms but with traditional figures of folk speech "cutting her eye at me" which denotes for Hazel a disrespect for one's elders, but it also shows the daughter using a traditional non-verbal response to rebuke her mother for behaving in a traditional way. Hazel takes stock of the situation and likens it to "Houf and mouf disease" a disease that prevents a person from walking or talking, which ironically reminds her of how useless like Bovanne she will become to her children if she can't walk, talk, and dress the way she wants to or chooses to define herself. But Hazel retrospectively calls on the old tradition of the drums; she moves to the sounds of drums -- her own thoughts and the communal rhythms of the past.

Whatever view readers take of this story, most will agree that Bambara is superb in handling language that first gives one interpretation of meaning and then within the context of the text, another meaning is given; the reader
has to look at the folk expression of the woman narrator as such that gives the
texture to the story; this is one of the most enduring ways Bambara has
advocated to get more attention to the context in which the language is
performed. Really, it is not the kind of folklore, folk language, or folk
traditions that separate Bambara’s fiction from the fiction of writers who use
folk speech in their works, but the use of the folk expressions that
distinguishes the language from other forms of human expression. Her
presentation of this language is direct and conversational enough to give concreteness to the narrator’s involvement in the story.

Bambara also uses patterns of folk speech in the language of the first-
person narrator to satirize cultural norms in the Black community, those that
create confusion or attitudes of distrust for the individual. In doing so, she
allows the language to perform the double function of narrating the narrator’s
sense of self and will in opposition to the values of the community.

In the first-person narrator’s folk speech, many elements of the Black
oral tradition develop the humor of a situation. As in the Black folktale, the
comic antics of the dialect are set side by side with a troubling situation to
maintain the double meaning of the folktale. Readers will find that Bambara’s
first-person narrator is reminiscent of the characteristics of the storyteller, but
she is revolutionary in the fact that she is mostly celebrating the traditional
use of language through her comic disdain and haughtiness that reach the most concentrated expressions of Black urban folk speech.

Bambara is also superb in her reviving of specific figures of folk literature. In the Gorilla stories, references to the legendary Black folk hero are personified with overt expressions by the first-person narrator who describes and raises the specter of negative characteristics but at the same time celebrates the tradition of the folk hero. Discussing these references will show that critics have focused their discussion only on the obvious and have missed the most important elements of Black folklore that characterize her stories.

Critics who examine these Gorilla stories ignore this use of the folk tradition in the language of the first-person narrator. None has explored the way(s) Bambara exhibits in the first-person narrator an astonishing ability to bring Black folk traditions vividly alive in the language. I feel that Bambara's approach to language, from a traditional construct, does more than impale the pretentiousness of conventional uses of Black dialect in fiction by Black writers; the combination of folk traditions with an urban vernacular suggests a moving alternative, a positive use of Black language that responds to dimensions of Black folks lives with appropriate symbols that signal the proper respect for the Black oral tradition.
The First-Person Narrator in The Gorilla Stories

What do critics find effective or not effective in Bambara's use of the first-person narrator? Contemporary criticism has offered a variety of approaches to reading or understanding the role of the first-person narrator in Gorilla, My Love. One critic addresses the first-person narrator in the Gorilla stories as having a "privileged position":

The privileged position of the narrator in Gorilla, is reinforced by Hazel, the young Black girl, who is the first-person narrator of most of the stories in the collection. Her authenticity is underlined by her total cultural identification with the community she describes. (Butler-Evans 94)

If by calling the first-person narrator, Hazel, privileged means that she extends readers insight to see how the valuable knowledge of one's culture serves to enhance a person's sense of self, then Hazel's position is indeed a privileged one. However, Hazel's "authenticity" is "underlined" not only by her "cultural identification" but also by patterns that embody a deeply effective metaphor in her language that relate directly to a Black traditional past, which is structured to create a situational parallel in the language. Hazel begins "Gorilla, My Love" this way:

That was the year Hunca Bubba changed his name. Not a change up, but a change back, since Jefferson Winston Vale was the name in the first place. Which was news to me cause he'd been my Hunca Bubba my whole lifetime,
since I couldn't manage Uncle to save my life. So as far as I was concerned it was a change completely to something soundin' very geographical weatherlike to me, like somethin' you'd find in a almanac. (Gorilla 13)

The situational parallel is a pattern of the oral tradition that is maintained in her language "not a change up, but a change back" is the traditional imperative in her speech that is part of the storytelling technique we observe in Black folktales. It stems from the tension of what is happening to the narrator, on the one hand, and the realism of everyday life on the other. In this specific instance, for Hazel, it is the change of a name. The folktale "God Struck Me Dead" holds this traditional imperative. The narrator begins her testimonial to emphasize the situational parallel: "I have always been a sheep. I was never a goat." I was created and cut out and born in the world for heaven. Even before God freed my soul and told me to go I never was hell-scared. I just never did feel that my soul was made to burn in hell" (Black Literature in America 38). The theme of the story is introduced in these first lines. God becomes a force to reckon with for the spirit of the narrator wants to "go" her own way rather than to have God determine how her life should be. She says, "I didn't want to be a hypocrite and go around hollering and not knowing what I was talking and shouting about. I told God this is my prayer. . ." (40). The theme of independence provides a base for the story and the
focus of the tension between God and the narrator marks the same storytelling techniques that structure the *Gorilla* stories.

In all the *Gorilla* stories, the tension is introduced by the first-person narrator in the very first lines of each story, so that the theme of each story is introduced: in "Gorilla, My Love," the theme deals with the subject of the relationship between the adult and the child and the spoken word as bond. Hazel recounts various situations to illustrate this theme, or as she cleverly puts it, to show "I'm really furious cause I get so tired grownups messin over kids just cause they little and can't take em to court" (17). Hazel develops a narrative that describes various situations that bring to light situational parallels in her language.

One might make the case as Evans does that what Hazel says in her narration is to offer "realistic insights" (94) of the Black culture. Since Hazel herself is the constant focus of attention in the narration, readers are forced to rely on whatever opposites the language creates to give two meanings from the point of view and from which the situation is made. Hazel herself explains her dilemma:

> It wasn't like Hunca Bubba had gone back on his word or anything. Just that he was thinkin bout getting married and was using his real name now. Which ain't the way I saw it at all. (18)
The aspect of commitment suggested by the naming metaphor is important to the concept of a Black identity. "My name is Hazel and what I mean is you said you were going to marry me when I grew up. You were going to wait. That's what I mean, my dear Uncle Jefferson" (19). The marriage metaphor shows Hazel's awareness that the name is the means by which the family (or the race) continues itself. The extended metaphor is that of responsibility to one's word. Hazel shows how she shoulders this responsibility: "My word is my bond. So don't nobody get away with nothin far as I'm concerned" (18).

The seriousness of Hazel's responsibility is offset by the humor in the story. I draw on the following folktale to show how both humor and seriousness provide meanings that shift explicitly from one to the other to give a serious/comic effect and to show how important it is to link this pattern in the folk tradition to Hazel's role as first-person narrator.

In "Lias' Revelation" we are told that Lias Jones was a "praying slave" who would stop whatever he was doing to pray at twelve o'clock noon. He had a special prayer for this hour: "Ok Lawd won't yuh please gib us ouah freedom? Lawd, won't yuh please gib us ouah freedom?" When Lias was sent to clean the Big House one day, he started in on the parlor. When the gong went off, he knelt down immediately to his prayer. The story is recorded this way:
When Lias got up, it happened that he was standing just opposite a life size mirror in the parlor, which reflected his image in it. Since the slaves had no looking-glasses, Lias had never seen one before, and now he was amazed to see a Black man gazing from the glass. The only thing he could think of in connection with the image was that God had come down in answer to his prayers; so he said, looking at the image in the mirror, "ah decla' Gawd, ah didn't know yuh wuz black. Ah thought yuh wuz uh white man. If yuh is Black, ah's gwine make yuh gib us ouah freedom." (Black Writers of America 231)

The image of Lias in the mirror, a powerful symbol depicting the traditionally unnatural treatment of slaves, is as meaningful and as comic as the way Lias says, "Ah's gwine make yuh gib us ouah freedom." This is an implied threat; however, the threat seems to be a joke rather than an actual decision because the light-heartedness throughout the story makes the threat carry a double meaning which includes an image of the slave's sterile and constricted life placed alongside the comic antics of a praying slave.

Making the stories simultaneously have both a comic and serious effect is the central and most fully revealed characteristic of the first-person narrator's language in the Gorilla stories. This characteristic of the language is essential, for Bambara uses it to transfer the totality of the first-person narrator's responses, attitudes and thoughts from the stories to the mind of the reader. The process of narration in "The Lesson" is also specific in this way although generalizations arise out of the concreteness of the language. In "The
Lesson" the patterns of the folk tale of comic/serious shows how Bambara develops unforgettable characters especially the character of Sylvia, the first-person narrator, by framing the language with this comic/serious effect. Even though in this story the narrator is an older person when she is actually telling the story, she is perceptive, successfully transmitting her feelings of anger and indignation against Miss Moore, the school teacher, who ventures to take the neighborhood kids to the F.A.O. Schwartz department store on downtown Fifth Avenue, New York city. The narrator, Sylvia, provides this comic/serious description of her own surroundings which shape her attitude toward Miss Moore:

Back in the days when everyone was old and stupid or young and foolish and me and Sugar were the only ones just right, this lady moved on our block with nappy hair and proper speech and no make up. And quite naturally we laughed at her, laughed the way we did at the junk man who went about his business like he was some big-time president and his sorry-ass horse his secretary. And we kinda hated her too, hated the way we did the winos who cluttered up our parks and pissed on our handball walls and stank up our hallways and stairs so you couldn't halfway play hide-and-seek without a god-damn gas mask. Miss Moore was her name. The only woman on the block with no first name. And she was black as hell, cept for her feet, which were fish-white and spooky. And she was always planning these boring-ass things for us to do. . .(Gorilla 87)

Sylvia's language is simultaneously comic and troubling. Like the language in
the folktale "Lias' Revelation," it gives a fascinating image-picture in which the circumstances of poor Black folks are graphically rendered in the diction. The description of Miss Moore "nappy hair" "Black as hell," "fish-white and spooky feet" is a straight-forward focus on the culture which forms the biases of people within a culture. These descriptions make an ironic comment on the negative aspects that are used to suggest particular definitions of an unattractive Black woman in terms of her physical appearance. These descriptions are also meant to signify that people are specifically characterized by their relationship to the social structure of the community. "Naturally," says Sylvia, "we laughed at her the way we did "the junk man" and "the winos;" these are people who live outside the norm, outcasts within the community. Miss Moore however was a force to reckon with, for she was "the only woman on the block with no first name." While Sylvia's language states clearly her likes and dislikes, it also implies rather than states directly that all these people are closely related to the way she feels about herself. It skillfully conveys the sad situation of urban life from the vantage point of a mature adult who can look back on the experience with amusement and no small sense of gratification at her youthful behavior. The awesomeness of the urban situation from the perspective of a confused young girl is comically conveyed by the mature speaker through the graphic characterizations of these people. Indeed the value of the folk
tradition is that its folk speech, being so real itself, lends naturally a general acceptance by the reader of degrees of reality as represented by the language. "The Lesson" is typical of Bambara's stories in Gorilla, concentrating as it does upon the elements of the folk tradition that give a verbal rendering of the order of things. This verbal display conjures a comic illustration of the situation which is paralleled by the seriousness of the condition in which the characters of the folktale and the narrators of the stories find themselves.

For more specific reasons than are cited by Evans, the first-person narrator in Bambara's stories is privileged and convincing. Her narration is prompted by a conscious language style designed to create double effects. In each of the short stories in Gorilla the narrator's language establishes a strong connection between readers and the story. On one hand, it works as a character sketch of the narrator; it explores her defensiveness, guilt, rationalizations, irritation, or anger. On the other hand, the language may give an exploration of circumstances or of the dynamics of a situation.

Some critics who analyze the language of the first-person narrator in Bambara's stories strongly identify it as "cultural codes" that make the narrator the center of attention and the ethnic bearer of the Black cultural environment. Butler-Evans sees Hazel's ethnicity as an important construct in developing the position of the first-person narrator. Here language emerges
in his discussion as "cultural codes" that allow Hazel to control the social realm within the environment. Thus, he provides this explanation:

> With her mastery of the restructured linguistic code of Black urban life and her ability to evoke both the verbal and nonverbal signs of that culture, she speaks from within that world and becomes a self-ethnographer of the imaginary Black community. (94)

Looking at the first-person narrator in this collection of stories, Butler-Evans places the stories in broad context focusing on the larger systems of nineteenth and early twentieth Black literature in which Black culture distinctions emerge and obtain recognition. "Gorilla," says Evans, "draws on cultural practices that are rather common place in Afro-American literature" (96). I disagree with Evans because he points to a tradition in Black writers’ works that highlights the so-called Black experience which of course are prescribed codes and conventions frequently used in Black writings to give emphasis toward a shared sense of Black culture. He doesn't show, however, how Bambara specializes in these forms and makes the language in these forms memorable. I find that Bambara's first-person narrator in the Gorilla collection retains her cultural independence not specifically through codes but through a sensibility to the experience rather than to those "existing monuments," to use Houston Baker's words, (Black Literature in America 20) in Black culture. The narrator invests her language with penetrating insights
about the Black community itself. The theme of the responsibility to the family and to the community and the commitment to a given word is not transformed solely through "cultural codes." Emphasis is on language patterns from the Black oral tradition that are shaped to relate an experience through double language. As Bambara's narrator relates an experience, her techniques are more absorbed in a paradigm, one similar to an account given by Audrey T. McCluskey when she speaks about Lucille Clifton's poems. McCluskey says that the Black experience "depicted" in Mrs. Clifton's poems is "not by proclamation but through a nurtured sensibility that is rendered in language, substance, and feeling" (Black Women Writers. . . 143). Hazel as protagonist in the Gorilla stories, illustrates these elements of Black experience. In "Raymond's Run" Hazel's brother Raymond is handicapped, but to her "Raymond would make a fine runner" (31). Manny in "The Hammer Man" has emotional problems and as Hazel shoots hoops with him, she observes that he looks "pitiful waiting there with his hands in a time out and there being no one to stop the clock" (41); the narrator in "My Man Bovanne," the adult Miss Hazel, is concerned for the old man "cause he blind and old and don't nobody there need they skates no more" (9); in "Happy Birthday" the young girl narrator reflects on the loneliness of the orphaned child who "should never have a birthday in the summertime. . .cause nobody's around to wish you
happy birthday or give you a party" (65). In fact, the greatest strength of Bambara's first-person narrator is in the manner in which the language is interwoven with the experience to provide a clear and persuasive interpretation of an event. The young girl narrator in "Talking About Sonny" says that Sonny kills his wife; "something," he says, "came over me" (74); "The Lesson" focuses on the feelings of Sugar and Sylvia when Sugar discovers "equal chance to pursue happiness means an equal crack at the dough" (95), and at the same time Sylvia feels that within her mind "something weird is going on" (95). In placing the first-person narrator in an austere position, Bambara allows the reader a lucid survey of Black language as it expresses the consciousness of the individual in a wide range of situations and experiences.

In Gorilla, My Love the commanding position of the first-person narrator conjures the reader into dimensions of Black folk life. Often events are recounted by the protagonist in such double use of language and action that the reader has to focus on several events all at the same time. Take for example, the performance of the language in "Gorilla, My Love" in which every sentence is backed up by a specific personal experience or sensitivity to the situation:

So the movie come on and right away it's this churchy
music and clearly not about no gorilla. Bout Jesus, 
and I am ready to kill not cause I got anything against 
Jesus. Just that when you fixed to watch a gorilla 
picture you don't wanna get messed around with Sunday 
School stuff. So I am mad. Besides we see this raggedy 
old brown film King of Kings every year and enough's 
enough. Grown ups figure they can treat you just anyhow. 
Which burns me up. (15)

The focus is on what Hazel, the narrator, sees as a deception. But her language structure captures the reader's attention completely. The music when the movie begins lets her know it's not a gorilla movie "Bout Jesus"; she explains her situation and says "I'm mad"; the behavior she receives from adults, she says "burns me up." The lyrical structure of the words creates a refrain which gives the texture to the language. Hazel's own discussion within herself provides the refrain, the private side of her thoughts to a public event--which gives the folk characteristic to her language. The reader has to accept the honesty expressed in Hazel's perceptions of adult behavior as the language focuses on themes that relate to a child's world and what children find as acceptable when they are denied a basic right to the truth. Bambara's art is invested in the narrator's language, and she succeeds in making the language the pivotal element of Hazel's behavior which she describes in language that is very active:

There I am, my feet up and my Havemore potato chips really salty and crispy and two jaw breakers in my lap and the money
safe in my shoe from the big boys, and here comes the Jesus stuff. 
So we all go wild. Yellen, booin, stompin and carryin on. 
Really to wake the man in the booth up there who musta went to 
sleep and put on the wrong reels. But no cause he holler down 
to shut up and then he turn the sound up so loud we really gotta 
holler like crazy to even hear ourselves. (15)

In essence, the language in this story brings together (in a humorous 
way) a Black child’s experience, but shows a sophisticated understanding of the 
meaning of one’s commitment to a given word. This child, according to Ruth 
Burks, "is mature enough to recognize that words must be put into action" 
(Black Women Writers 52). And readers will find the action is precisely in the 
language as it performs to give different accounts of grown ups and the events 
and thoughts that shape Hazel’s behavior. In my experience teaching this 
story, some present-day students often do not think that the narrator’s 
language is very funny; they sometimes find her condescending. I point out 
that the story is primarily about language and how it works to build the 
narrator’s character, so that the reader can feel strongly about her emotionally. 
I underscore the idea that Hazel is a bright, articulate witty storyteller who 
uses language self-consciously and with great precision and who refuses to 
label her childhood joyless. She remembers those encounters that were 
painful, but she also remembers what fun it is to be a high-spirited irreverent 
youngster who enjoy mocking the adult world. However, Hazel’s story is not
given from an adult perspective, but rather from a child's view of an adult world. What is important is that Bambara's humorous treatment of a serious subject is consistent with her philosophy of writing. She explains to Claudia Tate: "If I'm not laughing while I work, I conclude that I'm not communicating nourishment, since laughter is the most sure-fire healant I know" (Black Women Writers. .30). Bambara never interrupts the story with commentary, so the reader has no direct guidance of her attitude toward the young Hazel. But the way the language structures the story suggests that Bambara is somewhat amused by the ability of Hazel to "get ovuh."

Critics do not see how in the Gorilla stories the language has free reign -- a far-reaching scope since no critic discusses the various ways it offers a good deal of useful information on the subject of what is called the Black experience as it documents a host of cultural practices and explores the concept of community; this gives substance to the language of the first-person narrator in the Gorilla stories and shows Black folk speech in a new light. Butler-Evans says, however, that these "references to the cultural practices of Black life, all grounded in specific semiotic structures, evoke for the reader familiar with that culture a recognizable world and transmit 'realistic' information to those outside it" (Race, Gender, and Desire... 95). Evans' study, engaging and challenging as it may seem, does not look beyond the carefree
and sensitive young girl narrator and the later mature woman protagonist (Hazel) who develops the language structure in *Gorilla* because his discussion presents, on one hand, a defense and celebration of the narrator, and at the same time his discussion centers attention only on "the exclusive deployment of an alternative code, one that attempts to reduce the nuances of Black urban speech and diverges significantly from the linguistic forms of the dominant culture" (95); he finds also that "Hazel's role as narrator... particularly her use of a linguistic code that is largely a reproduction of Black working class speech, allows her to construct authoritatively the implied imaginary black community or neighborhood" (95). Evans' major criticism is that the folk tradition is esoteric; he points out:

> Recognition of the inner world of that community by readers is thereby contingent on their acceptance of Hazel's credibility and their ability to decode the body of signs evoked in the story. (95-96)

I find that in his discussion of Hazel's role as first-person narrator, Evans ignores that Hazel's explicit and direct speech patterns that either reject or accept adult behavior are critical to developing the context of the story, and it is to the context that readers look for meaning. While on one hand Hazel's speech is framed by devices characteristic of Black folk speech, these coded words are inserted by Bambara through a deliberate appropriation of the
structural features of Black folk speech to give double meanings that set up Hazel's language, so that it requires the active involvement of the reader, with the context of the story, to understand what is being said.

Furthermore, Evans' study serves to remind us that Bambara's work needs to be reassessed. For she has produced a body of work with a language structure that is accessible in range, depth to any sophisticated probes into Black folk life. Basically all scholars who review the stories in Gorilla should look at the language to determine how it affects the reader's understanding, to find out also how effective is Bambara's use of folk speech. In the first place, using folk speech is perfectly appropriate to the character of Hazel and is part of Bambara's success in portraying Hazel realistic. Her use of traditional folk speech is maintained convincingly over the entire work, but it does not once get in the way of the reader's understanding of Hazel's character. Hazel is a multi-dimensional character; therefore, her words and actions change from moment to moment. Sometimes there is a strength in her language that shows her determination; she does not intend to lose: "Like my Mama say in one of them situations when I won't back down, okay Badbird, you right. . .not that Badbird my name, just what she say when she tired arguin and know I'm right" (Gorilla 18). At other times, Hazel's language is particularly keen to show differences in her feelings: "You a lyin dawg," I say,
when I mean to say treacherous dog, but just couldn't get hold of the word. It slipped away from me and I'm cryin and crumplin down in the seat and just don't care" (20). In fact, Hazel's ability to observe, describe, and predict adult behavior (even if she can't understand it) is not all given in coded language as Butler Evans suggests: Her speech patterns, though they include individual words or phrases that work to produce specific effects, demonstrate her comic view of life but at the same time force the reader to re-examine his or her assumptions about Black life because the reader has to view Hazel's life from her point of view. Coded language alone cannot produce the effects that readers get from this story. In this story, Bambara gives Hazel the sharp vision of a child and does not invest her with language or vision beyond her years. Even in what seems to Butler Evans to be coded language, Bambara reminds us that Hazel is still a child who feels "grown ups playin change-up and turnin you around every which way so bad... don't even say they sorry" (20). The counterpoint to Evans' study is that there's more going on here with this language that structures Bambara's work. She doesn't merely reproduce the way Black people talk; she builds an understanding of Black folks ways which becomes significantly an understanding of Black folks heritage based on an everyday use of folk speech.

Because the language in Gorilla is so focused on the traditional structure
of double meanings, some critics like Ruth Burks give an interpretation to the language that shows "words are only barriers to communicating" (Black Women Writers. . .49). Burks explains what she sees as the language structure of the first person narrator:

Standard English is not so much put aside as displaced by constant repetition, a repetition bringing to mind the speech habits of a child who is just learning language constantly repeats himself, not fully convinced that language alone can communicate those needs and feelings so recently and so effectively expressed in tears and smiles. (49)

The repetitious devices Burks observes in the speech patterns of the young girl narrator are there as mnemonic devices to guide the reader through the context of the stories. As in the Black folk literature, especially the folk songs (I discussed earlier in this chapter) repetition also gives emphasis to an idea and even a specific understanding of the folk speech.

When Burks examines the social language context of Bambara’s first-person narrator to show the following, "while Bambara uses language to capture the speech patterns of the characters she idiomatically places in their time and space, Bambara eschews language, words, rhetoric, as the modus operandi for the people to attain freedom" (49), she focuses only on what seems to be the "incongruity" of language in Bambara’s stories, which is what I define as the double use of the language throughout this chapter - a specific structure
of Black folk speech. As she examines the social position of the first-person narrator, Burks finds that Bambara's works "juxtapose the inadequacy of language and the powers of the spirit which needs no words to spread its light among the masses" (49). Burks also argues:

Language takes on a dichotomous function, revealing both the education and alienation of its more sophisticated users whose greater fluency in the English language make them less intelligible to the people whom they most need to relate. (53)

She provides a close examination of her theory by citing passages from "Gorilla, My Love" and "My Man Bovanne," two stories she finds that deal with a "generation gap" or a "communication gap" (50). From every standpoint, Burks' discussion of Bambara's first-person narrator ignores the major elements of language in these stories, so that her exploration leads to this conclusion:

Success and failure for Bambara is directly proportional to one's ability to almost extrasensorily communicate to another the emotion one feels. The winners in her tales all know how to "speak the speak" and to ensure that their actions speak louder than words. (51)

Action does not speak louder than words in Bambara's fiction. Every feeling, every thought, every outcome is a result of language, a basic language structure that involves traditional ways of sounding and letting the words perform for themselves. The narrator does not "extrasensorily communicate
to another" rather words present certain insights that link the experience of the narrator to her audience.

Burks' discussion does not provide illuminating propositions in regard to the relationship of Bambara's first-person narrator with the language of the text, especially when she offers this idea that "where language should serve as a means of bringing people closer, it is too often used to force them apart" (50). Burks is presenting a weak message alongside Bambara's own testimony that says, "what I enjoy most in my work is the laughter and the outrage and the attention to language" ("Salvation" 45). In Burks' case, her critical commentary remains a one-sided view of the first-person narrator in Bambara's short stories in the Gorilla, My Love collection. I think it is important to keep in mind that the language in Bambara's stories is made more powerful since it deals with problems of human relations in the Black community, but it does so in a special highly comic and revolutionary way -- that it is an expressive part of Black folk literature informed by a revised conception of this genre. Bambara's use of language is not always apparently clear as Burks suggests. I find that what makes the language seem incongruous comes from the way the narrator often seems to burrow underneath the stereotyped surface of the Black experience to give a positive vision to balance her painful insights. The language has verbal wit, so it is
often comical, but that comic element contains tremendous ambiguity that shows the traditions of Black folks sometimes as tragic experiences in the life of the narrator or sometimes these traditions seem a blessing in the experience of the narrator. In "The Lesson" for example, the pre-Miss Moore Sylvia was a happy child who was contented with her lot in life because she didn’t know that she had other options. When Miss Moore tells the children they are impoverished, Sylvia disagrees: "and then she gets to the part about we all poor and live in the slums, which I don’t feature" (Gorilla 92). But Miss Moore refuses to leave Sylvia in blissful ignorance. She forces Sylvia to ask herself, "who are these people who spend that much for performing clowns and $1000.00 for toy sailboats?" what kinda work they do and how come we ain’t in on it?” (94). Miss Moore teaches Sylvia a hard truth: "where we are is who we are. . .but it don’t necessarily have to be that way. . ." (94). Bambara is successful in showing the genuine unsettled relations of her first-person narrator. Not only is it shown in "The Lesson" with Sylvia, the narrator but also in the young Hazel in "Gorilla, My Love" and the adult Hazel in "My Man Bovanne." When Sylvia responds to Miss Moore’s lesson with keen observations, it may seem to Burks as if Bambara argues for confrontation and insults in a situation that the narrator finds acutely uncomfortable. Instead Bambara’s interest in folk speech suggests language as a consolation for
tragedy or crisis. Sylvia's response to the costly items in the store is comical but for her troubling feelings, she gets relief through her language:

I'm thinkin about this tricky toy I saw in the store. A clown that somersaults on a bar then does chin-ups just cause you yank lightly at his leg. Cost $35. I could see me askin my mother for a $35 birthday clown. "You wanna who that cost what?" she'd say, cocking her head to the side to get a better view of the hole in my head. Thirty-five dollars could buy new bunkbeds for Junior and Gretchen's boy. Thirty-five dollars and the whole household could go visit Grandaddy Nelson in the country. Thirty-five dollars would pay for the rent and the piano bill too. (94)

Though she is deeply disturbed by what she sees and by what Miss Moore's lesson suggests, Sylvia finds how best $35 could serve her family in a traditional way. Language doesn't fail the narrator in Bambara's stories, instead, it helps her to find whatever seems to be missing, and it helps the reader to find the reality behind external appearances and stereotypes.

Bambara is not one of those Black writers whose revolutionary virtue is keeping readers alive by making them struggle to make sense of relations that defy their conscious analysis. Her emphasis on the ordinary experiences in Black people's lives makes her stories some of the most accessible that have been written and structured by a Black language style. Just as Burks suggests "success and failure for Bambara is directly proportional to one's ability to
almost extransensorily communicate to another the emotion one feels" Bambara suggests that a part of her first-person narrator's language involves a keen awareness of the links between apparently contrary things: history and the present, suffering and joy, to name a few. The language embodies a traditional structure where such contraries meet to give the narrator a personal accomplishment.

By using the oral tradition of storytelling in the folktale, Bambara contributes a revolutionary narrative technique of free indirect discourse to produce double meaning or give double talk in the Gorilla stories. This narrative technique has been entirely ignored or dismissed from serious scholarly review of this short story collection. In fact, no evaluation of the Gorilla stories has taken into account that Bambara has sought to revive the tradition of language (found specifically in folk literature) in the short stories. In an interview with Claudia Tate, Bambara, herself, gives her commitment to telling stories through this medium.

I prefer the short story genre because it is quick, it makes a modest appeal for attention, it can creep up on your blind side. The reader comes to the short story with a mind set different than that which he approaches the big book, and a different set of controls operating, which is why I think the short story is far more effective in terms of teaching us lesson. (Black Women Writers 25)
Bambara succeeds in the *Gorilla* stories with making the short story closer to the folk tale. Her modern stories share the richness of Black folk heritage, but at the same time they examine realities that influence the verbal expressions of Black people in the urban ghetto. Many 1970s critics who wrote about Bambara's *Gorilla* stories do not make a substantial contribution to an understanding of the first person narrator's language. General comments from some of these critics make distinctions about the child narrator who is verbal and communicative in response to an adult world. In discussing the concepts of storytelling fashioned in the *Gorilla* stories, Margo Jefferson in her 1977 essay in *Newsweek* states "the stories start and stop like rapid-fire conversations conducted in rhythmic Black inflected, sweet-and-sour language" (76). Although what Jefferson writes about Bambara's stories does not make any critical, interpretive or analytic point about the language, what she says points to relevantly placing the language in a specific time and place to show how the writer's sensibilities to the Black environment gives meaning to the subtle but extremely significant revision of the folk tradition. In reviewing *Gorilla, My Love*, Jefferson explains what is incorporated in these stories:

> In... *Gorilla, My Love*, Bambara directs her vigorous sense and sensibility to black neighborhoods in big cities, with occasional trips to small southern towns. Her people are edgy adolescents, fast-talking the adult world into manageable proportions. . . (76)
Jefferson's early review of *Gorilla, My Love* asserts that early critics did not write significant scholarship that may have helped Bambara's works occupy a commanding position in the growing canon of Black literary studies. For this and other reasons, contemporary scholars with a serious interest in the reviving of traditions should pay closer attention to the way Bambara presents Black language in her fiction. Every aspect of the language relates in some particular way to an overall formulaic structure that gives the language of the first person narrator a poetic quality. Her own words say her work is from some "basic" dimensions:

> What informs my work as I read it...are the basic givens from which I proceed. One, we are at war. Two, the natural response to oppression, ignorance, evil, and mystification is wide awake resistance. Three, the natural response to stress and crises is not breakdown and capitulation, but transformation and renewal. . .("Salvation" 47)

The ordering of and relationships between words within phrases and sentences revives in the stories her revolutionary approach to language. Language is what makes the important correspondence and parallels between the *Gorilla* stories and traditional folk literature. The "givens" from which Bambara structures her *Gorilla* stories provide an insight to the way Black language achieve an everyday normalcy and wholeness. These "givens" that she defines as "natural responses" are reflected in the sensibilities of the first-person
narrator.

In "Mississippi Ham Rider", for example, the young woman narrator demonstrates how the language in *Gorilla* is consistently drawn from two separate, though compatible foundations of Black folk culture. The young black narrator accompanies her white companion to rural Mississippi to try to convince Ham Rider, an old Blues singer to come to New York to record some of his songs. The narrator's response to the Blues singer creates the double meaning of the language, so that the language itself performs several functions for the reader.

At first, the narrator responds to the Blues singer by referring to him as a "salty stud" (47). Her deliberate use of the phrase suggests the verbal skill that finds expression in the oral tradition of naming the character from a fairly neutral rhetorical stance, a name that is not directed at celebrating the character as such. The aim is to only convey an image of something preserved. Bambara builds another image of the Blues singer by referring to some unique features of the Blues singer:

He's quite a sketch--jackboots, the original War-One bespoke overcoat, razor scar, gravel voice and personality to match and -- you ready? -- he'll be damned if he's going North. Says he was badly mistreated up there. Froze his behind off one winter in Chicago. And in New York, the Negro artists had to use a drafty freight elevator to get to the recording studio. (*Gorilla* 50)
This narration presents a factual and candid image of the southern Blues singer: "He wasn't an artist here. I think the best thing to do is just tape him here and let him sign whatever releases one signs" (50). Ironically, as she looks to the mystification of this old Blues singer, the young black narrator's language creates additional implications and meanings essentially by deepening and extending her thoughts about him going up North:

And what was the solitary old blues singer going to do after he had run the coffee-house circuit and scared the living shit out of college kids? It was grotesque no matter how you cut it. . .I wished I was in film. Ole Ham Rider besieged by well-dressed coffee drinkers wanting his opinion on Miles Davis and Malcolm X was worth a few feet of film. And the quaint introduction by some bearded fool in tight across-the-groin pants would justify more footage. No amount of drunken thinking could convince me that Mr. Lyons could groom this character for popular hootnanies. On the other hand, if the militant civil liberties unions got hold of him, Mr. Charlie was a dead man. (54)

What is revived in this story is the popular image of the Blues singer, not the one within the Black community, but the one outsiders hold of him. The narrator says, "He had already taken on a legendary air and was simply not of these times" (56). The narrator's discussion of the Blues singer operates on one hand to underscore the idea that a natural like Ole Mississippi Ham could not function outside of the cultural environment without the difficulty of acceptance. On the other hand the discussion uses the figure of Ole Ham to
explore ideas about legendary artifacts and to show how they exist in the cultural environment that had created them.

"Playin with Punjab" also shows the way the legendary Black character is revived in Bambara's *Gorilla* stories. The story's opening gives a description of the character that places him in the category of the legendary Badman of Black folk ballads -- such characters as Stackolee, Railroad Bill, John Hardy, to name a few. The narrator's opening statements signals this character Punjab as a Badman.

First of all, you don't play with Punjab. The man's got no sense of humor. On top of that, he's six-feet-something and solid hard, and not only that, he has an incredible memory and keeps believably straight books. And he figures, I guess, that there ain't no sense of you dying from malnutrition when you can die so beautifully from a million and one things and make the *Daily News* centerfold besides. So when Jackson from the projects put it this way: "Punjab, baby, I got this chick in a trick, and her mother's got my ass in a bind and I gots to live --" Punjab peeled off three or four bills off the top with a dry finger (which is his way, dry) and told Jackson what the rates was. (69)

In the Punjab character, Bambara revives all the characteristics of the legendary Badman in the Black community. According to Bruce Jackson in "Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me"..., "The Ultimate Badman, the one who fears or respects nothing, is dangerous to his own community, but he still has a certain value and that value is not minor" (31). The narrator of
the story makes this clear:

I'll say this for Punjab: I've seen a whole lot of piercing scenes go in his name, but he was never close with the money. Like the time he brung this great pot of ribs and potato salad, followed up by a pan of hoppin' john and a gallon of Gallo... (73)

Other definitions of the Badman surface in Bambara's first-person narrator's discussion of the Punjab story. She relates how Punjab is taken in or is infatuated with Miss Ruby, a white social worker who he feels may help him win an election in his community. When she names other residents for the position, Punjab destroys the community center and ends Miss Ruby's career in that part of town. Roger Abrahams defines the Badman type that clearly relates to the narrator's description of Punjab:

His is a world of overt rebellion. He commits acts against taboos and moves in full knowledge of what he is doing. In fact, he glories in this knowledge of revolt. He is consciously and sincerely immoral. As a social entity he is rebelling against white man's laws. As a male he is revolting against the woman's attempt to emasculate him. As a poor man he is reacting against his perpetual poverty. (Deep Down in the Jungle... 69-70)

Legendary figures like Punjab and Ole Ham Rider are part of the traditional references that occupy a place in the Gorilla stories. They are every bit the elements that contribute to the theme and meaning of these revived folk stories.
As she frequently does in the Gorilla stories, Bambara emphasizes in the language, the folk tradition of signifying, thus allowing the first-person narrator to point out the central event and its outcomes. I observe the definition of signifying from that given by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in The Signifying Monkey. He defines the term as "the figure of the double-voiced" ("Introduction" xxv). In discussing the first-person narrator in the Gorilla stories, Butler-Evans argues that "Bambara relies on signifying for its traditional function: to mark the text as race specific and to conflate the oral and written modes of textual production" (Race, Gender, Desire. . .97). Since Bambara uses only female narrators in the Gorilla stories, Evans feels "the myth of the autonomous woman is produced here and is strengthened by the use of chant and response and signifying practices" (97). However, Evans' recent study of narrative strategies in the fiction of Bambara suggests the breadth and detail required for a more accurate understanding of signifying methods in Bambara's Gorilla stories. Evans concludes with this idea:

Central to the representations of Black adolescent girls are the traits of rebelliousness, assertiveness, and, at times, physical aggressiveness. Taken collectively, these traits signify a rejection of society's stereotypes of females as fragile and vulnerable and the construction of alternative selves that oppose and negate the ideology that structures the girls' community. (98)

But there is more to the cultural practice of signifying in these stories than
simply the system Butler-Evans describes. While it would falsify the stories to ignore the dimension of feminist or social issues implicit in the sole use of the female narrator, it would also falsify the stories to focus exclusively on this one aspect of signifying. For this would limit the female narrator to a one-dimensional character and in the Gorilla stories this certainly "ain't" true. Furthermore, what Butler-Evans describes as the verbal discourse that characterizes the signification of the Gorilla narrators does not fit every circumstance of the folk tradition in Gorilla. In his discussion, Bambara appropriates "signifying" the somewhat crude banter that occurs between Blacks (usually men and boys) in working class Afro American communities. Central to this practice is the use of hyperbolic and scatological tropes as strategies for criticizing and disparaging an opponent. (96)

Evans really simplifies and misdirects the meaning of signifying as it relates to Black verbal and non verbal behavior; it is, as a dynamic expression, more sophisticated and complex (see Chapter Three of this dissertation for a complete discussion of the term). In fact, Bambara's female narrators signify, in particular, Bambara's commitment to the genre of Black women writing autobiographical narratives. "For the black woman" says Joanne M. Braxton, "there is a veil within a veil, a realm of shared knowledge communicated from generation to generation, both through literature and the oral tradition" (Black Women Writing Autobiography 3). What I propose is
that the practice of signifying in the *Gorilla* stories is Bambara's way of reviving the traditional styles of language that shape the autobiographical narratives of Black women who were slaves and former slaves. These narratives whether oral or written observe some special elements of signifying.

Braxton describes these thusly:

> The female slave (or former slave) . . . her tools of liberation include sass and invective as well as biblical invocation; language is her first line of defense. Her strength and protection come from both within and without. (16)

When Bambara's female narrators signify in their narratives, some do so with sass, others narrate in a plain narrative style, or in language that is enlivened by urban slang, idioms or obscenity -- any expression that allows the story to obtain what Braxton calls the parallel development of "autobiography, biography" (73) and what I relate to the "double-voiced" element of signifying.

Braxton explains the tradition of "autobiography, biography":

> Neither Harriet Tubman nor Sojourner Truth would acquire the gift of literacy. Both women had to rely on others to transform their spoken narratives into written words and to structure this symbolic language into a version of the self if their desire were to be partly satisfied. . . "to tell a free story." (72)

Bambara's attentiveness to this tradition draws on specific forms of signifying that help to "tell a free story." Her narrators in *Gorilla*, some who are young
girls, have strong assertive personalities and like the narrators of slave narratives, these female first-person narrators of Gorilla are rebellious, and they face any circumstance with a strength of character that is revealed only in their language. Because the narrator's language is often aggressive, the experience that is revealed is not committed to any moral position in the matter of the theme of the story. The aggressive tone in the language is there to signify first the strength of the character and second the bitter reality of the situation; this then is the double-voiced element of signifying that is present in the slave narratives and is revised in the Gorilla stories. Slave women who survived hard work and cruel treatment signify their strength of character by using language as a means of survival. Whether they narrate stories of seduction, rape, concubinage, childhood or work, the exactness of their language serves a number of functions. Most importantly the language reminds us that the intensely personal quest of the slave was to be in firm control of herself. In the following narratives this is exemplified:

When I was 13 years old my ol' mistress put me wid a doctor who learned me how to be a midwife. Dat was 'cause so many women on de plantation was catchin' babies. I stayed wid dat doctor, Dr. McGill his name was, for 5 years I got to be good. Got so he'd sit down an' I'd do all de work. When I come home, I made a lot o'money for old Miss. Lots of times, didn't sleep regular or git my meals on time for three-four days. Cause when dey call, I always went.
Brought as many white as culled children. It's brought lots of 'em an' I ain't never lost a case. You know why. It's cause I used my haid. When I'd go in, I'd take a look at de woman, an' if it was beyond me, I'd say "Dis is a doctor case. Dis ain't no case for a midwife. You get a doctor" an' dey'd have to get one. I'd jes' stan' before de lookin' glass, an I wouldn't budge. Dey couldn't make me. (We Are Your Sisters 17)

This autobiographical narrative provides the opportunity to examine the methods of signifying -- particularly language -- used to create self awareness. The narrative is told as reminiscence of an earlier time by a slave who even at a young age understood the components of her experiences. The language signifying that the narrator is well aware of her self-will, prepares the reader for what turns out to be a rather classic statement of an assertive woman "dey couldn't make me."

As in the slave narratives the same independence of will is evident in the first-person narrator of the Gorilla stories. This is depicted in several ways: In "Raymond's Run" Hazel depicts her strong-willed personality with talk of physical aggression when she faces two girls who are her competitors in the May-Day races:

So, they are steady coming up Broadway and I see right away that it's going to be one of those Dodge City scenes cause the street ain't that big and they're close to the buildings just as we are. . .but as they get to me they
slow down. I'm ready to fight, cause like I said I don't feature a whole lot of chit chat. I much prefer to just knock you down right off from the jump and save everybody a lotta precious time. (Gorilla 25)

Rebellion is also implicit in autobiographical and biographical narratives of slave women. The narratives which focus on the plight of women as sex objects, show how women who were strong found ways to rebel against this kind of action. In the following episode, the dialogue emphasizes the responsibility these women took in transmitting this knowledge to others:

She used to cook for Miss Sara Ann, but ole Marsh was always tryin' to make Sukie his gal. One day Sukie was in the kitchen making soap. Had three gra' big pots. O'Lye jus' comin' to a bite when Ole Marsa come in. He tell Sukie to take off her dress. She tole him no. Den he grabbed her an' pull it down off n her shoulders an' try to pull her down on de flo'. Den dat black gal got mad. She took an' punch ole Marsa an' made him break loose an' den she gave him a shove an' push his hindparts down in de hot pot o' soup. It burnt him near to death. He ran from de kitchen, not darin' to yell, 'cause he didn't want Miss Sarah Ann to know 'bout it. Well, few days later he took Sukie off 'an sol her to de nigger traders. De traders' 'jammed her an' pinched her an' din dey open her mouf, an' stuck dey fingers in to see how her teeth was. Den Sukie got awful mad, and she pult up her dress an' tole old nigger traders to look an' see if dey could fin' any teef down there. (We Are Your Sisters 26-7)

The characteristic that make Sukie comic also links her to the rebellious figure of signifying. Sukie's most comic and rebellious feature is the inflexible
consistency of her outrage. Bambara's first-person narrator in "Maggie of the Green Bottles," looks to an older woman, Maggie, who through her language of "sass" shows her rebellious and independent spirit to Hazel who narrates Maggie's toughness:

It is to Maggie's guts that I bow forehead to the floor and kiss her hand because she'd tackle the lot of them right there in the yard, blood kin or by marriage, and neighbors or no. And anybody who'd stand up to my father, gross Neanderthal that he was, simply had to be some kind of weird combination of David Aries, and lunatic. (152)

Like Sukie the slave woman, Maggie in the story refuses to change. She reacts with toughness to any kind of domination and especially with sparkling wit and vivacity:

It began with the cooking usually, especially the pots of things Maggie concocted. Witchcraft, he called it. Home-cooking, she'd counter. Then he'd come over to the stove, lift a lid with an incredible face, and comment about cesspools and fertilizers. But she'd remind him of his favorite dish, chitlins, addressing the bread box, though... then he'd say something about free-loading relatives... and she'd whisper to the kettles there wasn't no sense in begging from a beggar. (153-4)

What is so important about these women who write or narrate slave narratives, or Bambara who develops first-person narrators with signifying practices in their language? Joanne M. Braxton says, "The autobiographical writings of Black women in nineteenth century America bear witness to the
continuity and vitality of Black women asserting images of self in many forms" (Black Women Writing Autobiography 16). Bambara revives this tradition in Gorilla; asserting images of self is one of the characteristics of the first person narrator.

The first-person narrator which marks the development of the stories in Gorilla, My Love has to be viewed against a legacy of Black folk literature. Despite the short-sightedness of scholarly reviews of this collection, I find folk literature has immensely contributed to the shaping of the narrators in all of Bambara's fiction. An important point of reference for developing any scholarly review should be the charting of the ambiguous relationship in the folk speech and the patterns of revision that form the language traits of the first-person narrator in the Gorilla, My Love stories.

The Female Protagonists of The Seabirds Are Still Alive

One can observe how, as it relates to Black cultural nationalism, the discussion of the female protagonists remains constant in scholarly reviews of The Seabirds Are Still Alive. Bambara's short stories that were published five years after the Gorilla collection. Some scholars themselves admit that these stories "have rarely been the object of indepth critical attention" (Butler-Evans 91). Nevertheless, most critics center their discussions on the protagonists of these stories who they identify as political activists, or more specifically, they
elaborate on the feminist issues generated in the ambivalence portrayed by these women protagonists as they become involved in community activities. In doing so, critics have levied many traditional stereotypes on the protagonists of *The Seabirds*. I submit, therefore, that the female protagonists of Bambara's *Seabirds* as a direct corollary to the themes of cultural nationalism, further expose the traditional stereotypes of Black women not to negate them in their own lives, but to create a positive approach to developing their own self image and a Black woman identity; the process of rejection or acceptance of these stereotypes is easily validated in the language of these protagonists, who take a better advantage of their "living" language to "tell a story" that shows us the true nature of their lives.

The title of Bambara's collection itself, *The Seabirds Are Still Alive* proposes a sense of solidity and empowerment among the woman protagonists in the stories. In fact, what readers see in the social, political activists is a revision in the image and the role of Black women in the Black community by bringing to the surface their relationships with the community that commit them to stereotypical roles. These women in *The Seabirds* are committed to the politics of cultural nationalism and are physically and spiritually a part of the political struggle. To assure control over their image, they take possession of the language as each becomes engaged in the struggle for liberation. The
struggle is one against stereotypes, and in challenging these stereotypes Bambara exposes the traditional role of the Black woman as caretaker or "mothering," as it is depicted in the Black community. Bambara gives power to the image of the Black woman; in the language of the protagonists in Seabirds, is first projected what is ascribed to them as a negative image, and then through self-discovery these women emulate a larger positive image, all inclusive of Black culture.

I see, nevertheless, that ambivalence marks with the fervent description of life as each protagonist examines the components of family structure in terms of distinct Black cultural norms which emphasize the Black woman's role; she mediates these norms that stigmatize her role, and this is what has so profound an influence on how she views her social position. Bambara's documentation of the existence of these norms is illuminated in the conflicts and dualities that surface in the language of the protagonists.

"The Organizer's Wife," Bambara's first story of the collection shows the protagonist, Virginia, trying to deal with her role as wife and mother and with the responsibility of solving the problem Revun Michaels had created by selling the church land. But before Virginia could act on any of these problems, she must first give voice to the stereotypes that plague her social position:

Virginia clamped her jaw tight and tried to go blank.
Tried to blot out all feelings and things—the form, the co-op sheds, the long gas pump, a shoe left in the road, the posters prompting victory over troubles. She never wanted these pictures called up on some future hot, dry day in some other place. She squinted her eyes even, less the pictures cling to her eyes, store in the brain, to roll out later and crush her future with the weight of this place and its troubles. (Seabirds 9)

Virginia's language has a great element of style, one that is fostered in the Black folk tradition of individual units of expression; she concentrates on making images for the reader to understand her plight. Geneva Smitherman in Talkin' and Testifyin' defines this traditional concept of Black folk speech as "Image-Making--An important criterion of Black talk--is the use of images, metaphors. . .ideas trivial or small expressed in creative ways" (90). Virginia in "The Organizer's Wife" creates two images in her language. One shows the co-op community and the other builds her involvement with the community. Physically she is distressed by the situation. She "clamped her jaw tight and tried to go blank," "squinted her eyes" to store [pictures] in her brain" to "roll out later and crush her future with the weight of the place." The image-making technique in her language provides the reader with a metaphor for identification with Virginia's relationship to the Black community and to herself. The conflict that exists with Virginia is that of resolving in herself how much she admits to the stereotype of caretaker of the co-op. From her
mediation comes a strong sense of identity, independence, and responsibility. Virginia likes who she is and now knows what she has to do with this new rebirth of self-pride, she goes off to reckon with Revun Michaels:

The ruler came down on the stiff of his arm and broke. Michaels draped between two rickety chairs that came apart on top of him. The baby cried, the woman shushed, as much to quiet the woman that was her. Calm now, she watched the man try to get up, groping the chairs the chairs... Her shoe caught him at the side of his head and he went under. (19)

Bambara creates another image of the Black woman by giving her an identification with the woman of a traditional past whose literature reveals a need to strike a balance between public and private needs. Bambara, in "The Organizer's Wife" revitalizes the mythical dimensions of the Black woman as caretaker, but also adds to this image, a thinking woman whose stay stands as a life-giving image for Black people.

Once the conflicts are resolved within the protagonists in these Seabirds stories, being a revolutionary becomes a meaningful venture. Butler-Evans says that "the cultural nationalists politics of the text dictates that these women move from questioning to accepting their roles in the political struggle" (111). Fundamental to the proposal that these women must come to terms with stereotypical roles is what Evans refers to as "questioning." I find that
figures of folklore in the language of these protagonists suggest more than questioning. They infer the archetypal stereotypes of the Black woman's role and the conflicting values and norms of the Black community. They account for the attitudes, behaviors, and interpersonal relationships that signify their rejection of a variety of these factors, including the harsh realities of their environment. They come to terms with these realities by examining their thoughts in free-indirect discourse. For example in "The Organizer's Wife" the narrator tells how the protagonist Virginia tries to solve her own dilemma by accepting certain concepts about her life.

She recalled the last visiting time trying to speak on what was happening to her coming through the shell. But had trouble stringing her feelings about so many things together, words to drape around him, to smother all those other things, things she had said, hurled unstrung, flung out with tantrum heat at a time when she thought there would be time enough to coolly take them back, be woman warm in some elsewhere place and make those hurtful words forgettable. (Seabirds 20-21)

In the tradition of autobiography - biography described earlier in this chapter by Braxton, the narrator tells the story of the Organizer's Wife. This story operates within the constructed perimeters of the oral tradition, for it creates a relationship that speaks to the folk experience of Black women. Even though the language style does not imply the folk rhetoric of the Gorilla stories, the definition the narrator creates about the protagonist is given in
language that creates within the context an image of solidity and empowerment. The narrator tells of Virginia "coming through the shell" which is her own term for breaking an image of closure and confinement; "stringing her feelings" adds to her portrait of consistently striving to come to grips with emotional turmoil; "words to drape around him" is virtually her own basis for building a relationship with her husband. Other important aspects of her the protagonist's experience are revealed by the narrator in words that give the greatest total effect of Virginia's experience. "Smother all those things," "hurled unstrung," "with tantrum heat," "cooly take...back;" all these words reveal that in some ways Virginia's experience has made her an outsider caught up in a cultural whirl of expectations, but now she was going to be "woman warm in some elsewhere place." The narrator shows how Virginia "organized" her way of life and thoughts to provide meaning for her life.

Bambara highlights all the women of The Seabirds in the same manner as she does Virginia, through language that emphasizes many oral and non-verbal speech patterns that inform the cultural behavior of the Black community. In doing so, Bambara incorporates various folk traditions especially the tradition of oral storytelling and the music tradition of the Blues. These traditions add the folk texture to the language and allows the reader to focus entirely on the protagonist more so than on the nationalist feminist
ideology in *Seabirds* as some critics have generated as the sole characteristic of these stories. The tradition of oral storytelling in *Seabirds* informs the language in two ways: first it involves an element of biography/autobiography where the narrator tells how the protagonist focuses her feelings to participate in the politics of her community. Second it involves a first person narration that focuses on the narrator's impressions that come from some traditional source in the culture which helps to shape the narrator's sense of self. In "The Organizer's Wife" the context of the story is made significant by the active participation of the narrator who heralds Virginia's attempts to secure co-op land from being sold by Revun Michaels. In "The Apprentice," though, the tradition of oral storytelling takes another form. The narrator incorporates in her language, the speech patterns which include the verbal and nonverbal patterns of others in the community to enhance the narrative structure of her story. Through meta communication the texture of the story is produced. Butler-Evans who observe responses in the storytelling finds, however, that the "major thrust of [this] collection is the awakening of cultural nationalist and feminist consciousness" (121). Evans points out this concept to show:

The cultural nationalist politics of the text dictates that these women move from questioning to accepting their roles in the political struggle. Self-realization is achieved only in terms of group racial identity. Significantly, each woman is represented as voluntarily attached to a community of lovers,
friends, spouses, and children. (111)

The emphasis in the text is not cultural nationalists politics. The strategies Bambara uses to highlight the folk traditions in the language suggest that the focus is on the protagonist's involvement with her own identity. What Bambara does in *The Seabirds* is to draw on the many types of situations that inhabit the world of the Black woman—situations from which she cannot escape. Her commitment to herself is coupled with the anxiety of dealing with these situations which may be defined as politics in the community, as in "The Apprentice" or in "The Organizer's Wife"; commitment to family and friends as in "Christmas Eve at Johnson's Drugs N Goods"; commitment to Black culture as in "Broken Field Running"; commitment to a career as in "Witch Bird." In all these stories (as in the others I will discuss later in this chapter) the oral storytelling techniques of the narrator or the traditional forms such as jazz or the Blues that complement the language structure, suggest a greater focus on the oral traditions of Black culture rather than a complete focus on nationalist or feminist ideology of *Seabirds*. In his discussion of the political Black woman in *Seabirds*, Evans defines her as "committed." He says, "she is characterized as totally committed to political enterprise, indeed, she sees herself as a model to emulate" (110). He finds that "at the same time, she establishes links with the larger community" (111).
Pointing specifically to Naomi in "The Apprentice" Evans underlines the concept of her involvement as caretaker:

Naomi is depicted as having the entire community under her care: Young Blacks who are victims of police harassment, older Blacks alienated and isolated by age, and the Black masses in general. (112)

Aisha, the young Black woman in "A Tender Man," Evans defines as "having the same level of commitment, combined with tenderness and compassion" (112), to demonstrate that her "commitment remains focused on [creating] a Utopian community of Black sisterhood and brotherhood" (113). Viewing commitment as a key to understanding the protagonists of Seabirds is important. It is not however as Butler-Evans describes, a commitment to creating a Utopia in the Black community. It becomes for the protagonist inscriptions of conflict that she must deal with in order to create her own identity out of the same environment that fosters her anxiety to self preservation. The language structure becomes the medium through which she creates levels of meaning that will best communicate her anxiety and hence her resolution.

The Blueswoman makes up the other category of the political Black women in Evans' study. She, he states, "signifies rebellion on the personal level" (113) since "her primary action involves a movement away from the
socially determined roles of 'a lady' and toward full acceptance of her womanhood" (113). He cites as an example, Sweet Rea, a beautician and manicurist, a single parent, who works to support herself and her daughter. Evans stresses that "eroticism is central to her mode of life. . . yet her submission, sensuality and eroticism does not blind her to absurdity of male rituals. . ." (113-114). Evans concentrates on these Black women's sensual and economic oppression to categorize them as Blueswoman but neglects to show how much their spirit of eroticism reference the portrayal of these women to what Lenore Bennett describes as a life geared to "the spirit. . ., a relaxed and noncompetitive approach to being, a complex acceptance of the contradictions of life" (The Negro Mood 88). Evans also does not stress that the critical development marked by this spirit is best typified in the way the women "talk" and "testify" to the circumstances that have shaped their experiences which are seriously articulated in the "blues" vernacular tradition of Black folk speech.

Perhaps this is why in this same category of the Blueswoman, Evans places Honey, the Vocalist in "WitchBird" because she is "burdened by caring for her manager's discarded women and seemingly relegated to the role of an asexual matriarchal figure" (114). Evans is convinced that something essential is brought together as cultural politics to foster their considerable strength and
independence. He finds "behind their. . .laughter, sensuality, and rebellious social conduct lies a nascent feminist consciousness that runs as a subtext throughout the narrative competing with the cultural nationalist ideology that informs it" (115). Rather than competing, however, I find the narrative provides examples for the reader, of the increasingly prevalent and disturbing situations that reinforce the conflict these women have with maintaining an identity outside of any traditional or cultural view of themselves. In these examples, Bambara touches in some serious cultural issues, but they are quickly dismissed amongst the humor that set a quick, light pace to the protagonists' language. A most gripping and convincing example is Honey, the vocalist in "Witchbird" whose descriptions of her conflict with wanting to be a successful Blues singer and having to care for her manager's "discarded" women are often given in brief anecdotes that soothes the pain of Honey's story:

Heywood [the Manager] spot him a large, singing, easygoing type woman, so he dumps his girlfriends on me. . .right. I'd settle for some privacy. Had such other plans for my time. . . Bunch of books my nephew sent untouched. Stacks of Variety unread under the kitchen table. The new sheet music gathering dust on the piano. Been wanting to go over the old songs, the ole Bessie numbers. Ma Rainey, Trixie Smith, early Lena. So many women in them songs waiting to be released into the air again, freed to roam. Good time to be getting my repertoire together too instead of rushing into my clothes and slapping my
face not just because Laney can't bear walking the streets alone after dark and Gayle too scared to stay in the place by herself. Not that Heywood puts a gun to my head, but it's hard to say no to a sister with no place to go. So they wind up here, expecting me to absorb their blues and transform them maybe into songs. Been over a year since I've written any new songs. Absorbing, absorbing, bout to turn to mush rather than crystalize, sparkling.  
(Seabirds 169-70)

In this piece of personal experience and observation, Honey is not trying to predict the future or proposing any long-term solutions. Honey is acknowledging that Black women are often victims of their own kindness, some of it perpetuated by greater expectations of themselves. Honey takes pains to point out that she is not being forced into her position, Heywood doesn't put a "gun" to her head. But she considers her mothering of his women her calling to "absorb their blues and transform them into songs." By using the word transform in this context, Honey gives this otherwise grim situation a fresh connotation. Usually it suggests a complete change but here Honey helps us to understand that in a culture where women have a stereotyped identity, to transform means to gain an understanding, wisdom of oneself. Singing the Blues is virtually one way of transforming or liberating oneself from anxiety or conflict. In Bambara's stories in Seabirds Blues is a verbal strategy in the language transformed from the musical standardized structure to allow the language to function much as the same way Blues forms function in the
traditional Blues of Black oral culture. For the protagonists in "Medley" "A Tender Man" and "Witch Bird" the verbal structure of the Blues is most appropriate for the way each creates meaning for her life. For each creates an episode in her life for the reader to follow. In "Medley" Sweet Pea tells of "the kind of friend who bleeds at the eyes with your pain" (105) and the "wind up of...repertoire" between Larry her lover and her. The verbal movement of the language structure is one transferred from the Blues but shaped to give the reader the same sense of the function of this oral tradition in "A Tender Man." Aisha the young Black woman describes her emotions that structures her relationship with an abusive man; "just don't be like your daddy," she tells her young daughter, "A Tender Man" (151). And in "Witch Bird" Honey's Blues is coupled with her desire to be a Blues singer and taking care of her manager's mistresses. The language of the Blues serve to give value and meaning to these womens stories.

Evans' study does not unmask through the explication of the stories in Seabirds, the quality of the verbal structure of the Blues in the language of the protagonists. Instead, Evans feels "the text becomes the site of conflict and tension in which the needs and desires of the individual black woman contend with those of the projected black nation" (109). In his treatment of the black female protagonist as activist, or Blues woman, Evans not only ignores her
attempts toward her fashioning of an identity but also compiles years of vintage stereotypes upon the role of black women in literature. Barbara Christian in Black Feminist Criticism identifies these stereotypes:

She is there as cook, housekeeper, nursemaid, seamstress, always nurturing and caring for her folk. But unlike the white southern image of nanny, she is cunning, prone to poisoning her master, and not at all contend with her lot. (5)

"Stereotypes" Christian says, "can be comforting as well as denigrating and to go beyond set images can be painful" (28). And Christian chronicles in unrelenting detail throughout her book that writers like Toni Cade Bambara.

"Whether they weave fantasies or tend toward social realism, whether they are experimental or traditional in style, they leave us with the diversity of the black woman's experience in America, what she has made of it and how she is transforming it" (28). Christian's commentary on Afro-American women writers extends Black feminist criticism and its underlying epistemology to inquire into the nature of the black woman's experience. Looking at a diverse set of texts (including Bambara's stories) she places the subject of female roles in historical and dynamic contexts focusing on the larger problems within which male and female distinctions emerge and obtain recognition. She says

This fiction in the early 1970's represents a second phase, one in which the black community itself becomes a major threat to survival and empowerment of women, one in which
women must struggle against the definitions of gender.
(178-179)

Christian's discussion demonstrates her grasp of the deep epistemological significance of the twentieth-century revolution in the writings of Afro-American women writers where language works in the text as exposition of key insights into specific political relations. Christian's comments are thus:

The language of this fiction therefore becomes a language of protest, as Afro-American women writers vividly depict the victimization of their protagonists. Morrison, Walker, Gayl Jones, and Toni Cade Bambara all expose sexism and sexist violence in their own communities. (179)

The treatment given to Seabirds by Evans in his study of the nationalist feminist ideology in the text, leads him to this king of narrow conclusion about the themes and values expressed in Seabirds:

Seabirds identifies itself with the emergent feminist movement even in its dedication. The women in these stories possess a keen political awareness; the young girls have expanded their political consciousness. . . tensions between nationalists and feminists are concretely presented in Seabirds, and the interderminancy of the text is in the foreground. (122)

What other critics like Evans define as nationalist ideology in Seabirds is more of a descriptive study of the vicissitudes in the daily life of black women in urban society. Bonnie Thornton Dill says in "The Diabetics of Black Womanhood," that "black women must be studied within a dynamic and
contradictory framework to understand the complexities of their relations to all aspects of society" (Black Women in America 74). What Dill writes is compelling; her observations are poignantly true because the language of Seabirds looks at one of the oldest of Black archetypes that concern Black women and the question of commitment to self or to image.

The language is effective because it dramatizes the feelings of the protagonists in their construction of an identity and their own form of cultural nationalism that is based on the values of the Black culture in their community. The language performs two functions: First, it illuminates the relationship between the image of the protagonist as a Black archetypal woman and that of a cultural activist with a selfless commitment to the needs of her community. Second, the language directs the reader's attention to the conversion of will that characterizes the protagonists' behavior in each story in her attempt to either extol or deemphasize the impact of the archetype on her life. The archetypal image that surrounds the protagonist in Seabirds is that representation of the powerful mother or caretaker symbol. Although each protagonist in The Seabirds is committed in a different way to cultural nationalism, each shares the same problem of having the responsibility to make the self discovery of who she is. For example in "The Apprentice" the protagonist's language is structured to show the doubleness of the vision she
has about herself in contrast with Naomi, the older woman with whom she is "teamed" to do community work. The young woman searches for an image of herself implicit on her cultural environment therefore she calls on the verbal and non-verbal patterns of Naomi to help her reach her own identity:

Easy for Naomi -- hell, she'd been to countries where ordinary folk had done it, had stood up and flex their knees, and in that simple gesture toppled the whole johnson built on their backs, feeding off their backs, breaking their backs for generation after generation. What I have seen but junkies nodden in the alley, dudes steppin in my window to rip me off, folks that'd kill God for a quarter. (Seabirds 33)

This same attitude however that provokes questions about her commitment to folks who threaten her existence helps her to come to an understanding of herself and of her commitment to her own form of cultural nationalism. At the end of a seemingly tiring day, the young woman resolves, "I figure I'm doing my part keeping the folks going" (42). The interpretation of language in "The Apprentice" rests on the distinctions the protagonist draws between what is expected of her in terms of Naomi her role model and what she can give -- the doubleness of meaning is set up, first by the cultural environment and the values it establishes and then by the reader's expectations set against the protagonist's choice. This I see as Bambara's attempt to show the protagonist is creating an identity that is shaped inside the Black community, one that
comes through direct involvement in the cultural environment.

In *Seabirds* this relationship to community is especially the vulnerable element that makes the connections between the archetypal image of the protagonists and that of a political activist. In many of the stories, the image is stereotypical since it is based entirely on occupations that characterize the protagonist in certain socially determined roles. Bambara revises these images by again engaging in the traditional use of double talk. The double talk involves the protagonists' own view of her craft, her occupation or herself in curious opposition to the social role that informs her acceptance in the community. In "Medley," "Witchbird," and "Christmas Eve at Johnson's Drugs N Goods" the language of the women carry an interpretation of them that is unflattering because the way they choose to celebrate life makes them not "lady like" in the definition of their culture: they drink, smoke, engage in loud talk that is earthy and open about their sexual activities and otherwise private lives, and instead of a husband, they each have a lover with whom they center their attentions on enjoying the sensual pleasures of their lives. For example: Sweet Pea in "Medley" salutes her naturalness of response to showering with her lover Larry Landers who she says was "baad in the shower":

He'd soap me up and down with them great fine hands, doing a deep brass walking in the back of his mouth. And I'd just have to sing, though I can't sing to
save my life. But we'd have one hellafying musical
time in the shower, lemme tell you. "Green Dolphin
Street" never sounded like nuthin till Larry hopped
out them changes and actually made me sound good.
(Seabirds 105)

The naturalness in the way Sweet Pea embraces life gives her a measure of
control over revising her self image and releases her from feelings that before
prohibited her a free sense of participation in some aspect of her culture that
would enhance her spirit of cultural nationalism. Even Sweet Pea's language
which is her verbal rendition of the Blues gives a double meaning to what she
says. Although her conversation is focused on Larry's playing the bass guitar,
her expressions give some strong connotative sexual meanings. And in all of
this double talk of sensuality, Sweet Pea defines herself.

Got so we spent a helluva lotta time in the shower.
Just as well, cause didn't nobody call Larry for
gigs. He a nice man, considerate, generous, baad
in the shower, and good taste in music. But he
just wasn't nobody's bass player. Knew all the
stances, though, the postures, the facial expressions,
had the choreography down. And right in the middle
of supper he'd get some Ron Carter thing going in
his head and hop up from the kitchen table to go
get the bass. Haul that sucker right in the kitchen
and do a number in dumb show, all the playing in
his throat, the acting with his hands. (Seabirds 106)

The reader has to notice Sweet Pea's play on words -- "baad" meaning good,
"knew all the stances" which implies his sexual techniques. The ultimate
vision of the man who is good in bed is in these words: "had the choreography down." In giving attention to herself she compares her own act to that of Blues singer Betty Carter: "The arms crooked just so, the fingers popping, the body working." Her song however is focused for she says, "I am a mother, though I'm only just getting it together. And too, I'm an A-1 manicurist" (106). The freeness of her language shows how content she is with her cultural self and her pleasures of life.

Honey, the Blues singer in "Witchbird," reaffirms her status of caring for her manager's wife while he philanders with other women. She's ready to write her song, her own Blues song that will give her the cultural identity she seeks, but first she wants to fulfill her desires:

I hear folks calling to me. Calling from the box. Mammy pleasant, was it? Tubman, slave woman, bundlers, voodoo queens, maroon guerrillas, combatant ladies in the Seminole nation, calls from the swamps, the tunnels, the classrooms, the studies, the factories, the roofs, from the doorways hushed or a dress too short, but it don't mean nuthin' heavy enough to have to explain... But then the wagon comes and they all rounded up caged in the Bitch-whore-mouth mannequin with the dead eyes and the mothball breath, never to be heard from again. I want to sing a Harriet song and play a pleasant role and bring them all center stage. (173)

Honey's references to "Tubman, slave woman" makes the conception of the strength of the Black woman integral to the meaning of the language and of
course to the story itself. The dual consciousness that is present, through retrospect, the social image of Honey as caretaker of her manager's women, historically reviews the position of the Black woman in the urban environment who seeks a life. That the lives of historical figures are combined in her song clearly establishes her commitment to cultural nationalism.

The women in "Christmas Eve at Johnson's Drugs N Goods" also underscore in their language the naturalness of their earthy life, and in their "rebellious social conduct" their image of the Ghetto women is formed. In their language, however, this image is transformed to show they are committed to being who they are, thus establishing the relationship between the urban Black woman's image and the social reality of her identity. The narrator of the story comments on the women's behavior:

The women grab each other by the coat shoulders and jump each other up and down. And I look toward the back cause I know Mrs. J got to be hearing all this carrying on, and on payday if Mrs. J. ain't handing out the checks, she's going to give us some long lecture about decorum and what it means to be on board at Johnson's Drugs N Goods. I wheel over to the glass jars and punch bowls, wanting alibi distance just in case. And also to warn Madeen about Sampson gaining on her. He's ducking down behind the coffeepots, walking squat and shameless. (192)

The narrator of "Christmas Eve at Johnson's Drugs N Goods" is a young girl; she gets an eyeful and earful of the women's behavior as she cleans the store.
She compares their behavior with the "decorum" that is proposed by Mrs. J. "I got to feeling like a nomad with the cleaning cart, trekking across the sands with no end in sight, wandering" (188). But she admits "I'm fascinated by the women" (189).

What fascinates this young girl is the way the women accept themselves despite the opposition of Mrs. J., they insist on having a wonderful Christmas Eve, "even if [they] do got to work for old lady Johnson, who don't give you no slack whatever the holiday" (189). The language is full of action "the women grab each other," "I look toward the back," "I wheel over," "He's ducking," "walking squat." All this action in the language signifies involvement of the narrator with her environment direct relationship that is necessary to shape anyone's sense of commitment to culture or to one's self. Bambara provides in The Seabirds Are Still Alive a clear and enlightening illustration of how the language of folk speech can be used to generate ideas about a culture, instead of simply recording them. The Seabirds is a collection of ideas about Black women in Black communities who struggle to succeed and live with opposing social forces. The qualities of these women cited in their own language are those of being daring and resourceful (qualities that come out of a tradition of slave women) in terms of character not of personality. Though much of the language in Seabirds emphasizes the ambivalence of the protagonists'
acceptance of cultural norms or values, the folk tradition of storytelling and
musical form that underline the dialogue of a seemingly grim situation,
broaden the parallels between traditional folk speech and that of the
protagonists' in *The Seabirds Are Still Alive* and make this collection
inescapably a modern reading of Black folk literature. The women in *The
Seabirds* are self-sufficient, relying on the traditional culture of Black folks to
resist the accommodations of definitions which for years have been assigned
to them:

Sapphire. Mammy. Tragic mulatto wench. Workhorse,
can swing an ax, lift a load, pick cotton with any
man. A wonderful housekeeper. Excellent with
mother. A great little singer and dancer and a
devoted teacher and social worker. She always had
more opportunities than the Black man because she
was no threat to the white man so he made it easy
for her. Curiously enough, she frequently ends up
on welfare. Not beautiful, rather hard-looking
unless she has white blood but then very beautiful.
The black ones are exotic though, great in bed,
tigers. And very fertile. If she is middle class,
she tends to be uptight about sex, prudish. She
is unsupportive of Black men, domineering, castra-
ting. Very strong. Sorrow rolls right off her
brow like so much rain. Tough un-feminine.
Opposed to women's rights movements, considers
herself already liberated. (Michelle Wallace 175)

Reading the stories in *Seabirds* gives a different perception of the Black
woman's role in her community from what readers often get in the classic works of Black writers. These definitions of "Mammy," "Workhorse," "not beautiful" and others named by Wallace do not dominate the character of Seabirds women. In fact, the protagonist in Seabirds gives her own definition of self from where she stands in her community. Everything about her self definition is culturally shaped and self is transformed through her language. The image of the Black woman then is not as critics of the Seabirds suggests one that is caretaker of creating a Utopia in the Black community. It is an image of a cultural woman who defines herself not who the community defines. Still the community/culture plays an important part in that self definition, but she channels and shapes it herself. In Seabirds the protagonist shapes and forms herself through her own verbal strategies that she creates from the Black oral tradition. The verbal strategies of the protagonists in Seabirds offer a view of the way Bambara structures these stories for Black folks (her stories are written for Black people) raise sensitive points about Black women in language that recalls vivid and significant moments in the protagonists' lives. A perceptive reader will probably see, too, that each narrative seems designed to reveal the ironic situation of Black women in Black communities. This irony is given great weight by being placed in the ambiguous form of language to show the pride of race depends on how far one person goes to accept who he
or she is. This concept is clearly stated in the verbal response of the narrator in "The Long Night." The woman, a victim of police brutality, would not divulge the hiding place of her fellow revolutionaries. In her mediation she focuses on the way it would be in a "Utopian" community of Black sisterhood and brotherhood:

They would look at each other as if for the first time and wonder, who is this one and that one. And she would join the circle gathered around the ancient stains in the street. And someone would whisper, and who are you? And who are you? And who are we? And they would tell each other in a language that had evolved, not by magic, in the caves. (Seabirds 102)

Here again the reader sees language that actively engages an attention to self. The narrator's movement toward knowing who she is: "and who are you?" "and who are we?" will be given "in a language that had evolved not by magic."

That attention to language and its evolution is what readers remember about the women of The Seabirds.

Throughout Seabirds The descriptive details of Black women in the Black community, particularly in "Christmas Eve" move the image of the Black women ahead and recreate special joy and pride in the way they accept who they are. This is why I contend that Bambara's use of language focus her intent on writing for Black people. Mercer Cook and Stephen E. Henderson in The Militant Black Writer. . .say, [Black Writers] "write about their
Blackness, and out of their Blackness, rejecting anyone and anything that stand in the way of self-knowledge and self-celebration. They know that to assert blackness in America is to be 'militant,' to be dangerous, to be subversive, to be revolutionary" (65). By examining the language of the protagonist in The Seabirds, I see what critics miss in their own analyses of the stories. A view of a Black community of cultural women who take control of their own identity. I find Bambara affecting in her ability to construct in double language the personal visions and interpretations of the protagonists in The Seabirds Are Still Alive.

In her Gorilla and Seabird stories Bambara sharply questions the role of the individual and the relationship to the family to the Black community and to the self and she does so by creating language that is structured from the Black oral tradition. This concept is not, however, given the recognition it deserves in critical commentary, for critics discuss other elements of literature that do not necessarily show Bambara's craftsmanship. Perhaps the reason they do so comes from reasons Alice Walker gives about the treatment given to the Black woman writer:

There are two reasons why the black woman writer is not taken as seriously as the black male writer. One is that she's a woman. Critics seem unusually ill-equipped to intelligently discuss and analyze the works of black women. Generally, they do not even make the attempt; they prefer, rather to
talk about the lives of black women writers, not about what they write. And since black women are not--it would seem--very likable--until recently they were the least willing worshippers of male supremacy--comments about them tend to be cruel. (Interviews with Black Writers 201)

But there is some hope for writings by Black women. Faith Pullin in "Landscapes of Reality: The Fiction of Contemporary Afro-American Women" says: "The confident experimentation, technical accomplishments and original content of writing by Black women in America today lends to great hope for the future" (Black Fiction 202). The virtuosity, therefore, of Black women writers is seen in the way, to use Pullin's words, "contemporary women writers have seen the necessity for speaking for themselves and developing innovator techniques with which to do so; their work is not merely informative but is extending the bounds of literary possibilities in many new directions" (20).

Any consideration of Bambara's short fiction must address two related ideas, language and folklore. This chapter shows how these two aspects work to give meaning and structure to the short fiction. In this chapter I looked at language and folklore as structured in the Gorilla, My Love collection with the use of the first-person narrator; in The Seabirds Are Still Alive, cultural politics and folk traditions shape the language of the women protagonists who tell the stories.
CHAPTER II

Toni Cade Bambara and the Language of Self

But I am one of God's Black children who believes in doing her own talking (Lucy Mae Turner The Flaming Sword)

Introduction

There can be no doubt that cultural and racial awareness in the fiction of Toni Cade Bambara is linked closely to the Black Aesthetic movement of the 1960s. Such is the impression one gets from those lines spoken by one of Bambara’s principal characters, Hazel, in "My Man Bovanne" as she identifies who she is and what she represents:

Grass roots you see. Me and Sister Taylor and the woman who does heads at Mamies and the man from the barber shop, we all there on account of we grass roots. And I ain’t never been souther than Brooklyn Battery and no more country than the window box on my fire escape. And just yesterday my kids tellin me to take them countrified rags off my head and be cool. And now, we ain’t got black enough to suit them.

(4)

The burgeoning perception of self that Hazel defines is amplified within the contexts of Black cultural nationalism that extends as far back as the Harlem Renaissance. Several critics of the fiction have thus based their interpretations of the fiction on the notion that this nationalist ideology drapes
the entire body of work. But these interpretations prompt us to look more closely at what is revealed in the language. Hazel's rhetoric is enraptured by the possibility of obliterating the line between language and consciousness, and she believes that her words will enable her to change the way her children feel and think about her culture -- her way of life. This view of self cannot be separated from culture as Houston A. Baker shows in "One View of Black American Culture." He states the following: "...culture itself is a more inclusive concept that accurately denotes 'a whole way of life'" (Long Black Song 1). Hazel's view of self is gravely affected by the cultural control of the Black community. In actuality, the impact of the culture on her interpretation of self relates directly to Baker's assertion that "one does not worship, display or teach culture; one acknowledges it as a whole way of life grounded in the past, and one necessarily lives a culture" (1). Bambara's fiction underlines this sentiment; therefore, the concern of this chapter is to inquire whether, and in what ways, Bambara has anchored the cultural reworkings of Black folk experiences within the fiction in such a way as to indelibly infuse the Black Aesthetic Discourse of the mid 1960s.

In the short fiction, Bambara heightens the reality of Black culture and gives a sense of the living history in which Black people participate. Using the elements of the Black Aesthetic Discourse is her deliberate attempt to ennoble
Black people by promoting in the fiction unpopular images of speech, life style and Black cultural traits which are alluring in Black culture. When readers look at the protagonists in *Seabirds*, for example, they see all these women are tied to some obligation that makes their lives uncomfortable. But they are "singing the Blues" in an attempt to make their feelings climax to an understanding of who they are. There is no pity, no self-sacrifice, and no sympathy is released on these women. The reader likes them, enjoys their sensualities. As readers become engaged in their language, either rhythmically or just enraptured by their words, they feel their rebirth and in a sense their own since they are "forced" to think about what they just read. This I feel is what makes the language of the fiction of Toni Cade Bambara lend itself to the Black Aesthetic Discourse one that finds its format and flavor in the words of Alain Locke who says:

> Reason and realism have cured us of sentimentality; instead of the wail and appeal, there is challenge and indictment. Satire is just beneath the surface of our latest prose, and tonic irony has come into our poetic wells. These are good medicine for the common mind. And so the social promise of our recent art is as great as the artistic. It has brought with it, first of all, that wholesome, welcomed virtue of finding beauty in oneself. *(The Black Aesthetic)*

Bambara grasps the value of this Black Aesthetic not solely to politicize Black concerns but to make more recognizable folk traditions that endorse the
realities of Black culture and affirm the dignity of Black people.

What I attempt in this chapter is to show how Bambara uses Black folklore as her vehicle for promoting the Black Aesthetic Movement to create a notion of self, a Black identity, in her short fiction. I argue that throughout the fiction the organizing metaphors of the plot derive from a language style that is linked to the earliest of the Black oral tradition—"grass roots"—that begin with the slave experience extended through the concepts of the Black Aesthetic.

Bambara's language style is a combination of oral genres from Black folklore recounted in the fiction to create a self image which is rooted in oral expression and self image. The oral tradition that shapes the folktale of the trickster, the hero, the religious lore, the Blues, methods of signifying, preaching, singing and testifying, serves as the central thematic and plot device of Bambara's fiction. Thus, all verbal techniques and methods Bambara uses to convey meaning and non-meaning are grounded in this language style that has Black culture at its source. The hallmark of Bambara's language style is that it operates with any form of Black speech, Black dialect, straight talk, standard English--, but whatever form it takes, the image of the Black culture remains.

Using this language style allows Bambara to structure her fiction from
the principles of the Black Aesthetic Movement. The mission of this literary movement is formulated in the stories and novel to give a much rounded picture of the issues that affect all Black people in Black communities who inexorably are moving towards a definition of self. In the *Gorilla* stories, the language style functions, often with irony and humor, to highlight basic issues of poverty, politics, religion, family values, self, racism, feminism, violence, sex, adolescence, the spoken word, and the generation gap. The language style of *The SeaBirds* gives virile renderings of Black cultural behavior in order to break stereotypes of the Black woman. To show how the language style operates within the short fiction, to create a consciousness of self, this chapter explores these three topics: (1) the Black Aesthetic Movement; (2) the ideological environment; (3) Black folklore and the fashioning of self.

**The Black Aesthetic Movement**

When trying to assess the significance of self in the fiction of Toni Cade Bambara, I must begin with the emergence of the Black Aesthetic Movement and the development of its ideology in her work, to show how its principles validate a notion of Black identity. The more fundamental question is how Black self-consciousness is signified in the stories through Black Aesthetic discourse. The ideological implications of this question are found by just giving some attention to definitions cited by Black scholars who address topics on the
Black Aesthetic Movement. Many books, essays, articles and collections illuminate readers with a remarkable range of references and insights to the Black Aesthetic Movement. The study of this period in Black literary history explores the interconnections between artistic and political representation of Black culture. Houston A. Baker in *The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism* calls the Black Aesthetic Movement "the journey back." Baker's phrase is meant to show that "it is only in recent years...that Black writers as an extensive and articulate group have been able to travel all the way back to origins and record their insights in distinctive forms designed for a Black audience" ("Sightings" 53). What allows the Black writer to participate in this journey back is his/her participation in a series of steps: "The resistance to white hegemony, the preservation of unique meanings in the Black semantic domain, the seizure of language as a weapon of liberation and being, the employment of distinctive literary strategies that led to unique verbal structures" (53). Baker feels "all of these have resulted in works of art that allow one to chart the way back" (53). Baker identifies the period of this Black Aesthetic Movement to show "it was in essence the socially and politically motivated encounters with the facts governing these steps that engaged the Black writer's attention in the years between 1954 and 1976" (53-55). Although Bambara's fiction is significantly affected by the Black Aesthetic
Movement, her fiction moves beyond being just oppositional concepts to displace white hegemony. Because self-representation is often characterized in her fiction by specific concepts of Black folklore, I feel Bambara is attempting to promote Black consciousness as text out of which Black culture grows. She uses the concepts of the trickster, Badman, and other folk traditions to provide insights for the reader, insights generally called epiphanies, that revitalizes or bring to the reader's knowledge an essence of Black folk culture. In the short stories, Bambara creates a text at whose center is the folk culture of Black folks; by doing so she participates in the Black Aesthetic Movement. The various forms of Black folklore that are reenacted by the characters in the stories are necessary for the reader to understand the character's sense of self to their Black identity and to their identity in a Black community.

Proponents of the Black Aesthetic Movement during the period cited by Baker formulated and created various constructions of the Black Aesthetic to distinctly present individual views on the subject of culture specific literature. Each view is accompanied by at least one suggestion that emphasizes the Black writer's use of a particularly literary technique that gives value to some representation of Black culture. This Black culture was to represent a way of life "distinct and separate" from American White culture. In acknowledging
a distinct Black American culture, the proponents of the Black Aesthetic used
the idea of symbolic inversion, an idea related to Bakhtin's view of ideological
conflict which says

Any current curse word can become a word of praise, any
current truth must inevitably sound to many other people
as the greatest lie" (Marxism and the Philosophy of
Language 23)

One explanation of symbolic inversion includes Barbara A. Babcock's definition
in The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society. Babcock
relates the process as "any act of expressive behavior which inverts,
contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly
held cultural codes, values, and norms be they linguistic, literary or artistic,
religious, or social and political" ("Introduction" 14). Babcock's definition lays
out the ideas behind what is likely the most important aspect of The Black
Aesthetic Movement. And Elliot-Butler Evans seems to have struck exactly
the same balance, for he contributes to the definition by stating "the major
thrust of Black Aesthetic narratives as oppositional or alternative text was the
production of alternative representations of Black life, positing significant self-
reconstruction and definition, and the deconstruction of the ideological
assumptions underpinning Western constructions of reality" (Race, Gender,
Desire 26-27). In exploring a variety of sources and discussions of The Black
Aesthetic, Butler-Evans offers an extended systematic critical discussion of the movement itself (19-35) and a historical survey of its critical reception, including an account of the principal lines of approach and areas of controversy. A crucial factor Butler-Evans notes is that in their strategies of symbolic inversion, the authors of Black Aesthetic texts emphasized the relationships of their narratives to other discourses that constituted the ideological environment. In the essay ""Toward a Black Aesthetic" in Addison Gayle's The Black Aesthetic, Hoyt Fuller explores the political atmosphere that accompanied Black consciousness with art in general and literature in particular. Fuller speaks as Baker does of a journey toward a Black Aesthetic:

Just as Black intellectuals have rejected the NAACP, on the one hand, the other two major political parties, on the other, and gone off in search of new and more effective means and methods of seizing power, so revolutionary Black writers have turned their backs on the old "certainties" and struck out in new, if uncharted directions. They have begun a journey toward a Black Aesthetic. (3)

Bambara's own strategies for employing the Black Aesthetic include Black language structure, her tool for creating a fictional Black world peculiar to her reader's experience. Black language is her province and examining Black language as structure in the fiction will show how it conveys the aesthetic of Black culture in a traditional mode. No proponent of the Black Aesthetic who study Bambara's works analyzes exactly how this use of traditional folk-
language structure is conveyed in the fiction. By focusing on the language structure as an underlying structure for self-representation and identity, Bambara fills a gap in the current theories and concepts of the Black Aesthetic. She brings the reader closer to experiencing the Aesthetic of Black culture.

Of course no discussion of the strategies of inversion in Black Aesthetic text would be complete without referring the contributions made by Addison Gayle, and Larry Neal. These major figures of the movement saw "Western Aesthetics as transhistorical cultural hegemonic practices implicated in both the cultural and political oppression of Blacks" (Butler-Evans 27). Gayle's discussion of the Black Aesthetic offers this conception:

The question for the Black critic today is not how beautiful is a melody, a play, a poem, or a novel, but how much more beautiful has the poem, melody, play, or novel made the life of a single Black man? The Black Aesthetic, then, as conceived by this writer, is a corrective--a means of helping Black people out of the polluted mainstream of Americanism, and offering logical, reasoned, arguments as to why he [sic] should not desire to join the ranks of a Norman Mailer or a William Styron. (272)

Gayle's argument for symbolic inversion is rounded to show:

The distinction between whiteness as beautiful (good) and blackness as ugly (evil) appears very early in literature of the Middle Ages--in the Morality Plays of England. Heavily influenced by Platonism and
Christianity, these plays set forth the distinctions which exist today. To be white was to be pure, good, universal, and beautiful; to be black was to be impure, evil, parochial, and ugly. (40)

Gayle’s perceptions of the Black Aesthetic is at the center of Larry Neal’s position, who argues this idea:

The motive behind the Black Aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world. The new Aesthetic is mostly predicated on ethics which asks the question: Whose vision of the world is finally more meaningful, ours or the white oppressors? What is truth? Or more precisely, whose truth shall we express, that of the oppressed or of the oppressors? ("The Black Arts Movement" 29-30)

Neal’s discussion of the Black Arts Movement offers a comprehensive presentation of the Black Aesthetic. His critical introduction to the essay "The Black Arts Movement" encompasses all aspects and explores subjects ranging from "corrective narration" (Evans 28) to Black Americans and Third World people united in a common struggle (28). Thus as Neal sees it:

The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. Black art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. (Drama Review 29)

The discussion of Neal’s Black Arts Movement is based on several well-noted needs of the time. What he proposes, Baker says is "grounded in afterimages"
According to Baker "'Desire,' 'proposes,' 'perform,' 'radical reordering.' . . .communicate Neal's desire to alter existing structures to accord with the wishes of Black America" (135). What we know from Neal's opening remarks in his essay "The Black Arts Movement" is that

The Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of Western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology. The Black arts and the Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American's desire for self, determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic. One is concerned with the relationship between art and politics; the other with the art of politics.  
(Drama Review 29-30)

Butler-Evans suggests "It was not solely its opposition to Western representations and cultural production in general that structured Black Aesthetic Discourse. A necessary concomitant to this challenging, displacement, and desired destruction of the white aesthetic was the construction of a Black reality marked by difference" (Race, Gender, Desire. . . . 28). In fact we can summarize the discussion of the Black Aesthetic as presented in this chapter by citing with Evans' idea: "The project became one of constructing new definitions of Blackness, creating narratives that would serve as counterdiscourses to hegemonic narratives, and generating alternative paradigm's of representations of Black life" (28).

One discussion of the movement defines its cultural nationalism that
characterizes the struggles of Black Americans during the 1960s. Carol McAlpine Watson in Prologue: The Novels of Black American Women, 1895-1965 states that during this period, "in the literary, visual, and performing arts, professional artists and thousands of amateurs produced works explicitly aimed at fostering the political and cultural survival of black people" ("Preface"i). Watson's discussion clearly identifies who in particular were responsible for developing the ideas of the movement: "Leading proponents of the Black Arts Movement developed a race-centered theory of criticism, the Black Aesthetic, in which they defined new criteria for Afro-American Art" (i). Although Watson's book looks at women writers who preceded this movement and those who were involved directly with it, her opening discussion shows how cognizant she is of the mission of this literary movement. Thus she writes that "underlying the Black Aesthetic was an ethical position requiring that the creations of black artists be centered in the Afro-American cultural heritage and that they foster the black American's social and political goals" (i). This cultural adaptation Watson cites as an essence of Black American thought for, "Black American literature was greatly influenced in the sixties by this expression of black power in the arts" (i). Watson shares with other scholars the idea of cultural nationalism in the Black Aesthetic Movement and its resurgence in the works of contemporary
Black women writers.

This summary of the Black Aesthetic ideas is given so that I can show how near or how far Bambara is involved with the Black Aesthetic Movement of the 1960s. Bambara's desire to see Black people move toward a sense of Black identity is not grounded in concepts of oppositional narratives; instead, the foundations of cultural myths and stereotypes about Black people are the bases for her literature. Bambara does not revise or discard these myths or stereotypes. She highlights them, making her characters real through the one element all Black people share, a language structure with its double meanings. Using the language structure as a metaphor, Bambara is able to communicate a Black experience and to ascertain its meaning. Bambara moved away from confronting white hemogeny by focusing only on the language of Black folklore. To write oppositional literature means to confront white hemogeny and then the focus is maintained on the confrontation rather than the literature itself. Meaning then is clouded with ambiguity and is lost. This Bambara avoids in her fiction. Her politics are engaged in promoting reality often through ambivalence in the language. Thus a situation that generally evokes sentimentality for the character is contradicted in the way the character's language becomes one of self preservation. Using folk traditions to promote this sense of identity is the significant way Bambara participates in the Black
Aesthetic Movement.

However, in showing the transformation of cultural nationalism in the narratives of Black women writers, Elliot Butler-Evans identifies narratives grounded in the ideologies of the movement as "focused on the semiotic mediations of Black 'reality' by Black artists and critics" (Race, Gender, and Desire, . . 20). He insists upon three objectives that characterize or are central to their works:

1. Through elaborate self-representation, architects of the Black Aesthetic Movement attempted to produce a counter-discourse, generally identified as Black consciousness, to displace the dominant Western mode of representing Black "reality."

2. Through semiotic mediation, particularly the appropriation of the experiences that undergirded ordinary Black life, they attempted to construct narratives of a mythical Black nation.

3. Seeking to deconstruct the art-politics opposition, they challenged "literary" texts particularly the novel, and argued for the development of cultural forms that more readily lent themselves to oral production. . . (20).

A reading of even a few of Bambara's stories in Gorilla and The SeaBirds reveal different aspects of cultural nationalism as described by Watson and Butler-Evans. Since it is the language of the characters in these stories that alerts us to Bambara's commitment to cultural nationalism. By using language that reflects the history of legendary black people, and myths that for centuries have encouraged black people to model their behavior in cultural ways, Bambara helps to establish a context for self because the
context of the language makes a connection with Black culture.

Bambara's involvement with cultural nationalism takes different approaches. Although cultural nationalism is capitalized to emphasize the fact that it is a complex idea that is often understood to mean improvement and historical change in the Black community in her fiction, Bambara is referring apparently to the increasingly complex life in Black communities which make Black people totally dependent and in fact helpless when the community fails. The irony of this usage of cultural nationalism is this that cultural nationalism it seems is a movement not toward betterment but toward self-preservation.

In the *Gorilla* stories, cultural nationalism is compared and contrasted in the views of the first-person narrator, who in all the stories focus on the values of family life that seem to want to destroy her self-esteem. When the narrator focuses on home as the setting, she makes light of ghetto life and the tenements and the dirty streets to show her concern is more with the people in the immediate environment. In the *Seabirds*, the women build on this theme of self-preservation in the ghetto and in *The SaltEaters*, the community is decaying, a modern world is closing in, people have to survive from within to live on the outside. The total context of cultural nationalism on which Bambara is drawing is then related to the natural happenings of Black folks in the Black communities. To make the meaning clear, cultural nationalism
is objectified in the language and in the cultural attitudes and folk traditions passively selected to add spice to the story and to give the idea of cultural nationalism a historical perspective. She incorporates social myths in the language to develop some basic themes and cultural concepts. This approach asserts that although social myths are characterized as "make believe" they do symbolize some dominant traditional beliefs. The myths Bambara incorporates in the language are synchronized with real identifiable conditions in Black folks' lives! These social myths make sense since they provide interpretation of beliefs that are consistent within modern culture. Bambara's stories present a powerful source for communicating ideas that have deeply influenced Black people's understanding of themselves and the society they live in; consequently, the element of myth in Bambara's stories focus on gender politics as in "A Girl's Story" where Bambara illustrates a young girl's fears of her on coming menstrual cycle, which shows some of the socially learned behaviors and expectations associated with this female phenomena. In her book Thinking About Women, Margaret L. Andersen discusses menstruation to show "it takes on different meanings in different cultures" (59). Andersen explains that "in many cultures menstruation is symbolic of the strength of women, and elaborate rituals and writes of passage symbolize that power" (59). She cites that in "contemporary American culture, menstruation is depicted as secretive
and invisible" (59).

The protagonist Rae Ann in "A Girl's Story" highlights the meanings of menstruation in the Black community:

Rae Ann swept through her head again for other possible remedies to her situation. For a nosebleed, you put your head way back and stuffed tissues up your nostrils. Well, she'd tried ice cubes on the neck, on the stomach, on the thighs. Had stuffed herself with tissue. Had put her hips atop a pile of sofa cushions and still she was bleeding. (Seabirds 152-3)

Rae Ann's menstruation becomes a difficult social and psychological experience for her. Of this Andersen says that menstruation is "imbued with fear and repulsion in this culture" (59). Rae Ann's cultural beliefs force her to associate menstruation with bad smells, dark blood stains, sickness and death. In her anxiety, she lets herself participate in the beliefs projected by her own fears:

She sat there hugging herself, trying to ease the chattering of her teeth. She leaned over to yank her washcloth off the hook. And then the smell gripped her. That smell was in everything. In her bed, her clothes, her breath. The smell of death. A dry, rank graveyard smell. The smell of her mother's sickroom years ago, so long ago all the memory that had survived was the smell and the off-yellow color from the lamp, a color she'd never ever seen again anywhere. (Seabirds 158)

Rae Ann's behavior is particularly constrained and influenced by her
grandmother's accusations that Rae Ann may have had an abortion and by her brother's continual ridiculing of the illness. Butler-Evans in his discussions of The Seabirds points to this story to show its mythological value and its link to cultural nationalism. He notes the young girl's biological change as this:

In the context of [her] musings, Rae Ann's menstruation, as a sign of specific biological change assumes the symbolic status of myth as an indication of physical and emotional change, it points to her initiation into the world of women. . . The biological change thereby becomes the medium through which the narrative presents the child's transcendence of innocence and initiation in a world in which the politics of race and gender occupies a dominant position. (Race, Gender, Desire . . . 116)

Having anxieties and myths about menstruation have traditionally been a part of women's lives; in fact, it is so traditional in modern culture that it is tempting to dismiss it as a biological change or merely as conventional in this story. The association of smells and death probably is one more convention of this tradition, but in this story it gives the focus of self enormous power. Bambara makes fresh contribution to this tradition with "the smell of death." Her rich evocation of the smell "a dry, rank graveyard smell," and the emotional intensity with which the narrator absorbs the smell, "The smell of her mother's sickroom years ago" contribute to the story's deeper resonance of
Rae Ann's excursion as a journey into the self. If Rae Ann recalls these smells and similarly guards her chastity, that is her innocence, she also resembles those heroines of myths and folklore who must go to some symbolic heights in quest of wisdom, or who must suffer, and that involves mastering their fear (in this case of menstruation) and reintegrating their identities in order to cope with it. Without her masterful use of the language that surrounds Rae Ann's menstruation, "A Girl's Story" would be a lifeless tale with a preformulated theme. The myth of death that surrounds Rae Ann is uniformly associated with mother nature until she ventures to think for herself about who she is and what happening to her.

"A Girl's Story" directly addresses many questions about the social role of women, but in its conclusion is an interplay between self-knowledge and social restraints. Margaret Andersen says that "self-fulfilling beliefs have a great deal to do with how menstruation is experienced by women" (Thinking About Women 59). Rae Ann achieves some autonomy of self fulfillment when she comes to an understanding of her pain. "She wasn't convinced she was really dying, but there was something righteous in the pain that came with thinking it" (Seabirds 164). Rae Ann, in gaining self knowledge uses expressive language to maintain some self-control. She decided "she had to think methodically and stop all this crying and confusion. . .then everything
would be like before" (165). Bambara's artistry marks her handling of this subject of menstruation in *The SaltEaters*. Velma Henry, the protagonist in search for self discovery, after a suicide attempt, remembers the crumbling or the death of The Movement and at the same time conjures up the image of her menstruation as part of the decay. The myth of an unbroken cultural tradition holds an appeal to the political demonstration in which Velma is involved and like Rae Ann, Velma begins an earnest search for a new order in her life:

She remembered that the boycott had been still in effect. . . They'd marched all morning, all afternoon and most of early evening to get there. Shot at, spit on, nearly run down by a cement mixer, murder mouthed, lobbed with everything from stones to eggs. . . But when they got to the Park, renamed People's Park for the occasion, the host group hadn't set up yet. The banners were still drooping, missing a string in one corner, the PA system only just arriving and two cables split, the bathrooms locked and boarded up and no food, no food. Just one lone pot of field peas and chicken backs a couple from the country had hauled up there in their pickup to feed the multitudes. . . The children crying from fatigue. The students singing off-key, ragged. The elders on the ground massaging knots in their legs. And Velma clenching her thighs tight, aware that a syrupy clot was oozing down her left leg. (*SaltEaters* 34)

Velma (as I will discuss in detail in Chapter Three) cannot find her self in the political struggle in which she is engaged--her language says so. Like Rae Ann in "A Girl's Story" death and decay around her, contradictions of expectations from her community faces her. The healing of Velma comes from the very
disdainful circumstance of menstruation. In the midst of chaos, the body cleanses itself. So Velma must come to her own realizations of self. The language style is set up to focus on one segment of cultural activity that defines the protagonist's experience so that it builds on the social myth. The outcome is important for the language involves the reader in "shot at," "spit on," "banners drooping," "bathrooms locked," "peas and chicken backs," "children crying" "elders. . .massaging knots in their legs" and then the unexpected "Velma clenching her thighs tight from the "clot." The myth is a metaphor for the Black woman's experience; it structures the healing process which involves first claiming the myth by retelling her social position and then returning to it to cleanse or heal herself. All this is done through the language that is the very structure of the narratives.

In both stories Bambara focuses on the element of myth-making for an understanding of self coupled with the folk tradition of producing double meanings in the language that give voice to an experience. The imagery of death given in the narratives comes from Bambara's ability to elicit in her language specific meanings of menstruation transformed by both women to fit their own needs.

Much that is necessary to understand the historical dynamics of Black women's fiction in contemporary society is in her fiction, which is also a part
of the notion of Black Cultural Nationalism that has been an iconoclastic perception of the Black woman writer since the middle of the 19th century. The structure of cultural nationalism in Bambara’s stories is not complex for she balances in the narratives, specific examples with ideology of Black cultural nationalism. But how does she identify with the number of Black women writers who throughout history have written under the umbrella of cultural nationalism? I find that Bambara’s stories and the novel incorporate traditions from earlier written stories and novels and from oral narratives. Hers reflects the influence of these narratives in their emphasis on self-exploration. From the inception of Harriet Wilson’s Our Nig, the first novel published by a Black American in the United States in 1859, novels by Black women writers that appeared in the 1890s evoked response to some social or religious phenomena that concerned Black women. Carole McAlpine Watson documents this essence of Black women’s involvement when she writes, "In these early novels, ideas of self-help find expression in themes of race, loyalty, race uplift and protest" (Prologue 10). Bambara’s involvement in this tradition is by no means reinterpretation of this form of social consciousness. Her many stories and the novel are written in a language style that helps the reader to understand the historical and sociological validations of Black culture. Examinations of the works of Black women writers between 1891 and 1920
show "most of the stories either posit or assume a direct relationship between
the widespread practice of Christianity and the social and political uplift of
American blacks" (Watson 10). Bambara's works do show a shift from this
form of writing; her language style affords her the opportunity to stringently
emphasize the here and now of the Black woman's experience. Although her
themes focus on creating a Black identity and many of the ideas give
retrospective alliance with the Black historical past, Bambara affirms enfolding
the Black identity through language experience.

If readers look closely at the fiction produced by Black women between
1921 and 1945, they find as Watson states, that the fiction is "characterized
by its moral seriousness, race, consciousness, values, and didactic intent" (33).
This means that Bambara's fiction is not to be viewed as the fiction of Black
novelists who were greatly influenced by the cultural nationalism of the new
Negro period. Watson says, "the cultural nationalism of the period served to
reinforce in their writing a commitment to the principle of a politically
motivated and prescriptive fiction" (33). In her summary of the novels and
stories of Black American women from 1891-1965, Watson clearly defines the
nationalistic sentiment that has influenced the writings of these Black women:

From the outset, however, Black women [writers] embraced
issues for deeper than those which concerned the Afro-American
social, economic, or political status. . . .their recognition
of the race's inner needs had a potent effect on the content of the [writings] which, while it was directed outward to a larger society as protest and propaganda, was aimed inward to the black community and was meant to be redemptive. (116).

Not all Black women writers simply wanted "to serve as witness" (to use Watson's words) for a specific brand of cultural nationalism. The fiction of women writers, some after the second world war gave universal meaning to their works. Black women writers before this period include the works of Zora Neale Hurston and Lucy Mae Turner. Of course Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is the first novel authored by a Black American woman which adequately conveys the rich complexity of race in the life of the Black individual; as Watson shows, this novel "signaled the black female novelists' concern with universal, as well as group-minded values" (116).

Many fundamental differences exist between Black women writers who appropriate cultural nationalism in their fiction. Perhaps it is that the critical development of self which mocks their works has to be viewed against a legacy of traditional criticism of racism and sexism which tended/tends to operate within American society. Barbara Christian in her essay "Trajectories of Self-Definition: Placing Contemporary Afro-American Women's Fiction" argues this point:

The development of Afro-American women's fiction is in many instances a mirror image of the intensity of
the relationship between sexism and racism in this country and while many of us may grasp this fact in terms of economics or social status, we often forget the toll it takes in terms of self-expression and therefore self-empowerment. (Black Feminist Criticism, . . . 172)

Self expression though it evolves through questions and controversies that surround the Black woman is unique to Bambara’s narratives in that it opens up barriers between an individual’s consciousness of self, racism "social status" and therefore gives not a distortion of self but leads to "self-empowerment."

In Bambara’s narratives the language style provides this transformation, for it sets up the traditional formation of a strong inner self to resist destruction by seeking meaning in self expression in language of a public and private world.

In summary, I find the politics of self voiced most eloquently and strongly in Bambara’s fiction through traditional language style identifies ideological formulations of Black Cultural Nationalism which have guided the thoughts of Black women for decades in literature and in criticism, each separate and distinct but each clearly relating to concept of self expression.

The ideological environment

One of the various permutations that is treated in the definition of the Black Aesthetic Movement is the idea of the ideological environment. This
theory is discussed by M.M. Bakhtin in *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*. Bakhtin and his co-author Medvedev describe the development of human consciousness in an ideal environment as this:

Social man is surrounded by ideological phenomena, by object-signs of various types and categories: by words in their multifarious forms of their realizations...by scientific statements, religious symbols and beliefs, works of art and so on. All of these things in their totality comprise the ideological environment, which forms a solid ring around man and man's consciousness lives and develops in this environment. Human consciousness is formed through the medium of the surrounding world. (14)

Bakhtin's theory of ideological phenomena has been adapted to various works as critical analyses for developing an understanding of consciousness within a particular environment. Although this theory seems to fit into the structure of Bambara's fiction, it does not relate entirely to the fashioning of self where Black women in the fiction break through ideological stereotypes. Mary Helen Washington in *Black Eyed Susans* explains why writing about Black women in the Black community is so important to the Black woman writer:

[Black women] authors have broken through the old myths and fantasies about Black women. Their stories are considered classics because in probing the Black woman's experiences with integrity and skill, they offer a vision of Black
women that has dimension and complexity as well as fidelity to history. (Introduction xxxi)

Probing the Black woman’s experience within the Black community remains constant in Bambara’s fiction and an impetus to the Black Aesthetic Movement in its commitment to the Black oral tradition, Richard Wright in his 1937 essay "Blue Print for Negro Writing," proposes some distinct factors that also like Bakhtin’s ideological seem to determine the treatment of literature by Bambara. In her fiction is presented some elements of what Richard Wright proposed:

Blues, spirituals, and folktales recounted from mouth to mouth; the whispered words of a Black mother to her Black daughter of the ways of men; the confidential wisdom of a Black father to his Black son; the swapping of sex experiences on street corners from bay to bay in the deepest vernacular; work songs sung under the blazing suns—all these form the channel through which racial wisdom followed. (Richard Wright Reader 40)

At the heart of Bambara’s stories is only the image of Wright’s Black Aesthetic one which gives voice to an idea through language that fuses several Black oral traditions that illustrate and promote various concepts that surround the image of the Black woman in the Black environment. Wright’s commitment to the oral tradition still does not fit entirely the theory of an ideological environment as it applies to Bambara’s work anymore than
Bakhtin's proposition does. In Wright's early expression of a Black Aesthetic Movement he signals how folklore could be made political if it is used to narrate a Black reality. Bakhtin seems to suggest also that the ideological environment is linked to human consciousness in politics. The distinction I make between Bambara's ideological environment and the others, even those of the authors of Black Aesthetic texts is that there is not emphasis on the oppositional. Readers embrace Bambara's characters based solely on the narrator's or protagonist's definition of self conversely emphasized in the language. This definition of self is not informed by difference only through the elements of folk culture. The concept of self that the reader understands from the narrator's or protagonist's point of view is not something to be transcended; it is only to be experienced. The stories in Gorilla, My Love rely on the oral tradition for enriching the language and the cultural image it presents about the Black woman. In each story, the Black woman's experience has significant autonomy; it is connected and transformed in the language almost simultaneously to show what Bambara portrays as "ideological" because the women in Bambara's fiction are the cultural bearers of tradition. They pass on to others what is important. They establish the connections between the oral tradition of Black folk and certain ideas that are inseparable in contemporary culture. In The Study of Folklore, Alan Dundes shows the
importance of this oral tradition; he writes the following:

One must remember that in most of the cultures of the world, all the information culturally defined as important is passed on orally. In some cultures, special individuals are selected, formally or informally, to be the repositories of oral tradition. In others, individuals simply assume the responsibility on their own. (217)

Bambara's active bearers of tradition, the women in her fiction, draw on fundamental principles of the Black oral tradition to spur their experiences to the hardest kind of knowledge, which is self-knowledge.

One strategy Bambara uses for passing on knowledge is allowing young girls to narrate their experiences with older women. In the story "The Johnson Girls" Bambara shows how young girls get a lesson from the older women about the way to deal with men. In cultural language, the narrator gives her relationship with an older woman in the community:

"See now, when I was comin up," she say, bammin the cards down, "the older women would gather together to train you young girls in the ways of menfolks" . . "and you learn what to do when mens get raffish or start gazin too long a spell into empty space. And you learn about charms and things and how to read the signs so. . ." (Gorilla 165)

Ma Drew's language has a lively beat in which special words play an important role--"You learn what to do when mens get raffish or start gazin too long." The opening "see now" frames the direction she follows to create words (her own
improvisation) that will give precise and lasting attention to what she’s saying.

The portrait of Great Ma Drew that is drawn by the narrator’s descriptive language is emphatic to show the role of the old woman as the traditional seer and local administrator who uses the cards to predict the behavior of menfolk:

The old lady easin herself back in the chair and spreading the cards out. She crook a finger to me to come over and study the cards with her. Jack o’diamonds is on the floor. Jack o’diamonds is always on the floor when Great Ma Drew do the cards for Inez: and I’m waiting for her to lean over and say, "looker there, the good man done got away" and then complain about her arthritis. (165)

The language in this story relates to the Black aesthetic, for it sketches the exact portrayals of urban speech that rely heavily on oral tradition of Black people called the "language of soul." The language of soul gathers its meaning from the way the words sound. Sounds may come from a group of words with no verb so that what the reader hears is an arrangement of words that are almost lyrical: "the old lady easin herself back in the chair," "she crooked a finger." Other sounds are made through repetition of a phrase to give emphasis to what is being said and emphasis is also given to the construction of a phrase so that the reader does not forget its usage or improprieties, for example, "looker there, the good man done got away." Soulful language always has a memorable exit line "and then complain about her arthritis." In fact, the
narrator gives her own soulful rendition of a folk tradition, "passing on in the relay" says Bambara, and the narrator passes on to readers a tradition that was passed down to her. But in doing so, the narrator also tells about herself and her culture without making difference to any other phenomena. This is Bambara's unique focus on the Black Aesthetic.

Claude Brown in his essay "The Language of Soul" says this language might also be called "Spoken Soul" or "Colored English" for it is "simply an honest vocal portrayal of Black America. The roots of it are more than three hundred years old" (Rappin' and Stylin' Out 136). The women in "The Johnson Girls" interpret themselves and the people of the Black community through more "Spoken Soul" which Brown defines in these words:

It can be asserted that "Spoken Soul" is more a sound than a language. It generally possesses a pronounced lyrical quality which is frequently incompatible to any music other than that ceaseless and relentlessly driving rhythm that flows from poignantly lives. Spoken Soul has a way of coming out metered without the intention of the speaker to invoke it. (136)

But in Bambara's stories the spoken soul is more than a sound; it is a language of special words that help to create the "pronounced lyrical quality of soul." For example, Bambara's narrator in "The Johnson Girls' engage intentionally in appropriating this traditional language in the form of phonetic traits for when Ma Drew speaks to the young girl narrator she uses specific
communicative and meaningful word forms to create the language, for example, "You ain't but a teen-ager and think you grown cause you in college and got a story in some magazine and had some silly boys in your bed, but you unprepared. Young gal like you out there in the wilderness with no proper training, like a babe going into a dynamite shaft" (Gorilla 166). The sounds Ma Drew evokes as she speaks are those words that are made noticable within the context by distinctly being either mispronounced, grammatically incorrect or foreign with the white cultural norm. Mixing these words and phrases with a vernacular pattern makes them standout with specific attention to how they sound in the sentence, and mixing the words or phrases within the context of a serious phenomena is what she does to give emphasis or a "soulful meaning" to what she says. For example, "ain't" gives a strong sound of disregard, "gal" strikes a note on the unconventional use of the word (in Black folk speech girl is more commonly used). Earlier Ma Drew tells about men gettin "raffish"; this needs a definition, but still it sounds like a call to action. Her attention to the "good man done got away" emphasizes the focus on "done" to give more strength to the idea of the man not being caught, escaping a permanent relationship. Ma Drew's spoken soul to Sugar is released through particular words that sound different from other words within the context, and they contrast dramatically with the way other words in a sentence are made to
sound. Spoken Soul, as Brown distinguishes it from slang, does not lend itself to conventional English, in fact, it is "diametrically opposed to adaptations within the realm of conventional English" (Rappin' and Stylin' Out 136). The language of soul considered in Bambara's text not only gives accounts of the purely private experience of the narrator but it offers a powerful literary strategy for exploring the Black woman's self-conception in an ideological environment. To illustrate this dynamic, Bambara concentrates on another folk tradition that evolved in earliest beginnings of the Black church.

A classic study on the Black church, "stylin' outta the Black pulpit" by Grace Sims Holt in Thomas Kochman's Rappin' and Stylin' Out shows how traditional forms were likely to become standard in Black literature and hence become the emphatic ingenuity of the Black Aesthetic Movement. Holt contends that "the primary functions of the church was to develop a will to survive" (190) and "a language code emerged to facilitate in group communication and conceal Black aspirations from the dominant white society" (190). Holt explains that "what developed as a necessary mode of communication has become an integral part of the language system of Blacks" (190). That language system I explore as another strategy Bambara uses to illustrate how Black women exist in a culturally defined environment.

Holts' discussion of the traditional rites, roles, and strategies of the
service in the Black church and of the performance given by the Black preacher, provides helpful insights for outlining contending elements that structure the oral tradition influencing the fiction of Toni Cade Bambara. Holt gives this description of the preacher's behavior:

The ritual begins with the preacher "stylin' out" which the audience eagerly awaits. ("stylin' out" means he's going to perform certain acts, say certain things with flourish and finesse). . . The preacher's beginning is slow-moving (funky) to get the audience physically involved. The preacher walks, body swaying from side to side, slightly bent from one side of the pulpit to the other, or from one end of the platform to the other. He waits until he gets to one side, stands up straight, and makes a statement about sin. If a husband "ain't acting right," if he's running around with another woman, or gambling, and not bringing his money home to his wife and children, the preacher must "get on his case" with a strong use of melody and rhythm. (191)

Holt's description shows that the greatest strength of Black language is in the way it is performed. She gives a hardcore example of dialogue between members of the congregation and the preacher:

PREACHER: Husbands getting money and ain't comin' home wit it. . .Hunh?

AUDIENCE: (usually female response here. Men will begin to fidget, shift arm positions, stare straight ahead, lean forward slightly or lower the head): Yes? Let's go alright now!

PREACHER: Gettin' Hogs (Cadillacs), booze, etc. Can I get a witness? Ya'll know what I mean?
AUDIENCE: You know it is. You got a witness. Oh yes!
Yes, Jesus.
PREACHER: Dressin’ it up when they children don’t have
shoes to wear and decent clothes.
AUDIENCE: *Females will react with anger and glee in
responding* Keep goin’, go on, you tellin’
it, Preach! Lord, yes!
PREACHER: To make the man do right—what would God have
you do? Let the church answer A-men.
AUDIENCE: A-men
PREACHER: To make the man do right you got to do your part.
Do I hear a witness?
AUDIENCE: Tell the truth! Tell it! Talk! (190-193)

Wonderfully created in "The Johnson Girls" is this element of the oral
tradition. Three women "style out" to show their views about men. The
church plays an important role in the lives of Black women. Houston Baker
says, "The church has played a singular role in the development of Black
American culture" (Black Literature in America 20-21). I find similarities in
the way the women "style out," in Bambara’s short fiction, of course in their
own distinctive verbal way, shows how this traditional element is part of their
cultural environment that inhabit their sense of cultural identity. Getting a
"good" Black man is the target of these girls’ story:

"Tell it all, Sister Sugar," say Gail.
"First, you gotta have you a . . . man, a cat that
can get down between the sheets without a whole lotta
bullshit about "This is a spiritual union’ or women
are always rippin off my body’ or . . ."
"Amen," say Marcy.
"Course, he usually look like hell and got no I.Q. atall," say Sugar. "So you gots to have you a go-around man, a dude that can put in a good appearance so you won't be shame to take him round your friends, case he insist on opening his big mouth."

(Gorilla 167-8)

The oral tradition of stylin out is alive in the language of the Johnson girls in this story. It is preserved first in the dynamics of rap, boastful talk, verbal put downs that give the texture to the language. As Geneva Smitherman puts it, "a dude can be properly put to rest with words" (Talkin' and Testifyin' 82). In the example of the preacher and audience readers see how the preacher raps to men and women of his flock. He calls attention to their idling ways of neglect for each other: "Husbands getting money and ain't coming home," he points this remark to the men. To the women he says, "To make the man do right, you got to do your part." This sermonizing style is part of what gives the rich texture of the oral tradition to Bambara's story and it follows the format of the traditional Black church service, "an emotion-packed blend of sacred and secular concerns" (Smitherman 87). Bambara's story dramatizes the church rap "to demonstrate the importance of the Black church in the culture and verbal style of Black people" (88). In "The Johnson Girls" Bambara creates the church rap effect mainly through the use of the young woman narrator, Sugar, who raps the truth about men from a common view that is shared by all the
other women. Their inner views are also revealed as they specify the kind of men they want: a man who performs well in bed "a cat that can get down between the sheets." Of course lots of slang terms and street vernacular structure Sugar's description. "Get down" "a cat" are definitely street talk. The "go around" man is a "dude" who does not embarrass the woman by saying things that are out of place. However, in making fun of these types of men, the girls are also voicing their female concerns of finding the right man. The ambiguity in their language reflects the uncertainty of any future with a "good" Black man, but Sugar and the other girls' readiness to embrace this negative phenomena represents a major step forward in their own process of self-discovery and identity.

Examining the dialogue in this story shows the significance of the oral tradition in the Black text. It is as Butler Evans describes

The reproduction of the rhythms and cadences of oral cultural practices links this [dialogue] to the urban Black subculture. It is also linked to oral and performance texts of Afro-American culture by the verbal exchange between the women, which reproduce the chant-response ritual characteristic of similar exchanges between fundamental ministers and their congregations. (96)

Bambara's story retains the passionate quality for which Black language is so well noted. Elliot Butler-Evans categorizes this story along with the others in
the *Gorilla* collection to show "Beneath the surface realism that marks *Gorilla, My Love* as a race-specific celebration of Black life on the block; then, is a submerged text informed by an awakening feminine and proto-feminist consciousness" (*Race, Gender, Desire* 108). Evans is not giving full play to the ideological consciousness in the language that forms the dialogue among the three women in "The Johnson Girls." The language gives a resonant performance of Black folk speech; it responds to the needs of these Black women who make use of traditional forms to give their conversation various effects. Even a cursory glance at this dialogue shows Bambara's style of the Black Aesthetic at work as the language embraces all the conventions of the Black oral tradition savored in the texture and the context of this narration:

"Course, the go-round man ain't about you, he about his rap and his wardrobe and his imported deodorant stick with the foreign ingredients listed there at the bottom in some unknown tongue. Which means you gots to have a gofor."

"Like when you crazy with pain and totally messed around and won't nobody on earth go for your... you send for the gofor cause he go for it whatever it is."

"Rah-rah for the gofors" say Marcy. . .

"You gots to have your money man, that goes without saying. And most importantly, you got to have you a tender man."

"I loves me a tender man," sigh Marcy. . .
"A tender man who can tend to your tenderest needs. Maybe it means painting your bedroom a dumb shade of orange, cause just so happens you need that dumb shade in your life right now. . ."

"Speak on it, Dame Sugar," say Gail. (Gorilla 168-9)

The language of these young women displays humor to motivate the audience, and their goal as tradition bearers or communicators is to stress the example that Black women seek resolution in the real world of language that is formed entirely from their experiences of Black life. James Emanuel in his article" Blackness Can: A Quest for Aesthetics" says "The Black Aesthetic, having at least a name, consequently has a past" (Black Fire 221). As Houston A. Baker explains, "The Black Aesthetic is not bound by a name" (The Journey Back . . .142). He shows it is "more than a simple, rhetorical strategy motivated by idealism" (142). In fact, Baker proposes that "the phrase has served as a poetic construct, and as an artistic slogan raising substantive issues in aesthetics" (142). Baker believes that "an utterance of the phrase signals the black artist's awareness of a new role--a new mode of being for himself [herself] and his [her] works of art" (142). Bambara in the Gorilla collection makes "The Journey Back" (to use Baker's title) with the influence of the Black Aesthetic in these stories. Besides using the traditional forms that give significance to the language performance, she also involves a "complex of issues
in Aesthetic brought to public view by the conative utterance *Black Aesthetic* [which] provided the constitutive conditions for [her stories] and signaled (without equivocation) the context that gives them force" (Baker 142-3).

Central to Baker's discussion of the Black Aesthetic is the significant concept of Black folklore which Richard Wright connected with political consciousness. He wrote in his "Blueprint":

> Here are those vital beginnings of a recognition of value in life as it is lived, a recognition that marks the emergence of a new culture in the shell of the old. (Richard Wright Reader 41)

Significantly, Black culture, the core of Bambara's *Gorilla* stories, is not a reclothing of the ideas in Wright's interpretation of folklore as a signifier of repressed political desire. Butler-Evans says Wright's "political content of folklore, particularly his suggestion that the body of signs constituting its form might be reconstructed as a larger myth of Black identity" (Race, Gender, Desire 26). Evans feels that Wright's statement "was the earliest expression of the Black Aesthetic Movement" (26). Although that Wright's poetics may have exerted a definite influence on Bambara's fiction, she triumphs in the stories through language performance that not only highlights the traditional folk impulse of the ideological environment but moves away from the destruction of the white thing through oppositional or political literature. Her
focus on traditional concepts help Bambara to create her own concepts of the Black Aesthetic.

**Black Folklore and the Fashioning of Self**

Houston Baker says in his essay "Black Folklore and the Black American Literary Tradition" that "at the foundation of the Black American literary tradition stands Black folklore" ([Long Black Song](#) 18). He explains this statement to mean "it is...Black folklore that rests at the foundation of the Black American race (of the group in which the talented Black writer has his genesis) are clearly and simply reflected in folklore" (19). I noted previously that in Bambara's collection of stories [Gorilla, My Love](#) the language alerts us to the presence of Black folklore in each story: A reader can identify various forms of animal tales, the trickster slave, folk songs, testimonials and ballads. To make this identification, the reader looks at the language, with its traditional structure that serves to develop the notion of self for the characters in these stories. The process of traditional structure is given in many forms. One is developed by Grace Sims Holt in "Inversion' in Black Communities." Holt looks at historical factors in Black culture to define the use and the process of inversion:

> The phenomenon of inversion is a practical necessity for people in subordinate positions. The sociohistorical progression of slavery went from physical restraint to
legal restraint, followed by a defacto restraint and succeeded by a psychological restraint. Superordinate language was designed to maintain, reinforce, and perpetuate the enumerated existing restraints. (Rappin' and Stylin' Out 153)

Like Babcock's thesis on the inversion process mentioned earlier on page 134 in this dissertation, we see the inversion process involves both inversion of an opposition to whites or inversion by Blacks themselves, an example is the use of the term "nigger" used as "an in-group term. . .invented by Blacks. . .a semantic device allowing survival with dignity" (Holt 157). In Bambara's stories this inversion process by Blacks on themselves is called into attention with the different "shades of meaning" (Smitherman 59) of such words as "bad" which suggests the positive.

Inversion in Bambara's stories, primarily involves the roles of women and the way their language takes on a traditional concept to include the folklore of Black culture. They dramatize in the speech the "bad" which for them is positive or rather brings them to a positive fashioning of self. The concept of self-fashioning is the role of the women in these Gorilla stories. Self-fashioning takes many forms in the verbal discourse of these women: "drummin" as Miss Hazel calls it in "My Man Bovanne" or "way down" like Sweet Pea in "Medley," or not letting "nobody. . .beat me at nuthin" as Sylvia
Desires of Black women in Bambara’s Gorilla stories are significantly brought to surface through the inversion mechanism and elements of folklore, both aspects are strongly crystallized in connotative forms of Black speech and in "the traditional process of inversion. . .based on the concept that you can’t disguise black skin but you can disguise speech which permits you to verbally "turn the tables" on an unacknowledged opponent" (Grace Sims Holt 154). In Bambara’s stories in Gorilla the women are resilient and self-sufficient individuals rather than victims of their cultural environment. Since there is no dominant focus in these stories on racial issues, the focus is significantly on the issues of desires where women struggle for cultural sensitivity. Of course in these stories, the women characters take control of the language that identifies their experiences; their rhythmic and almost poetic language makes use of portraiture and folk humor, revealing the presence of Black folklore. All in all, the women in Bambara’s Gorilla stories turn away from the restrictions and limitations of Black culture and extend their quest for a Black identity to include a search for personal fulfillment and self-realization by using an inversion technique to create a positive image of themselves.

Inversion in Bambara’s stories means that the language will feature a folk element rather than concentrate on the circumstances of the narrator.
The purpose is to directly "disguise" the image of the narrator to make her image look positive, so to speak, in order to "turn the tables" on those stereotypes that for years have followed the Black female from adolescence to woman. The reader's response to Hazel's language in "Gorilla, My Love" or to Sugar's stylin out in "The Johnson's Girls" or to Maggie in "Maggie of The Green Bottles" is cultivated through language that is straight forward, candid, assertive and definitive. The language style is linked to that of the folk tradition that allowed a slave to present an image of self far removed from the one held by his chattel condition. Whereas to the Master the slave appeared subdued and subordinate, the oral response to a situation showed the slave confident and strong. In folksongs, folktales, the spirituals and the Blues, the language turns the tables on subordination to show a fashioning of self.

The following discussion looks particularly at the young girl narrator in the Gorilla stories and characterizes her behavior to pin point elements of folklore and inversion. I begin with the idea that Hazel, the young protagonist speaks to the archetypal idea of gender as a culture. I define archetype as Catherine Juanita Starke does in Black Portraiture In American Fiction: Stock Characters, Archetypes and Individuals. Starke's definition states archetype as "the dominant embodiment of an idea or kind of person that rises in literature, attracts conscientious responses, recurs as thematic motif in
subsequent manifestations, and acquires mythic dimensions as demanded by cultural needs" (88).

Many violations of the Black woman's image are motivated by black archetypes of the Black woman in American fiction. One of Bambara's inversion techniques in the Gorilla stories is to suspend these archetypal patterns from the text in order to promote a pretext for self-fashioning in the lives of Black women. Catherine Andersen in Thinking About Women says, "In different ways and for a variety of reasons, all cultures use gender as a primary category of social relations. The differences we observe between men and women can be attributed largely to these cultural patterns" (88). In the Gorilla stories, Bambara inverts the Black archetypes that Starke says "cluster in five major configurational patterns" (88). Starke lists these Black archetypes in these categories:

As tragic mulatto or visible symbol of lust and what culture deemed, pejoratively, miscegenation; as sacrifice symbol or vicion of environmental determinism; as beloved mammy or black, hence inferior, representative of the powerful mother symbol; as natural primitive or symbol of freedom from cultural taboo; as alter-ego symbol or the affirmation of brotherhood. (89)

These archetypal patterns are easily traceable in the very early works of Black writers (see Starke's discussion in "Archetypal Patterns" 89-166). And as Starke concludes, "all are designed to probe consciences and to channel
emotions in particular ways" (88). In Bambara's stories, archetypal patterns of the Black woman are suspended because of the continuous focus on the elements of traditional literature that dominates the narrator's language.

Using the oral tradition of the slave experience in Black folklore makes the language in the stories particularly significant and realistic. From the trickster animal tale background comes the "etiological" or "explanatory component" of the animal-tale. Houston Baker in Black Literature in America explains "Within the 'trickster' animal-tale genre. . .we not only have the etiological, or explanatory component, but also a certain psychial component. The trickster animal comes to represent the slave himself and his wish-fulfillment victories over that 'peculiar institution' which nourished black Americans" (20). Baker sees three traits in Black animal tales and I believe that many of these forms are imbued in Bambara's Gorilla stories. The traits are characterized to show (1) Brer Rabbit as an entertaining and cunning figure, who had much to impart to the Black folk; (2) the hero's employment of disguises; (3) the ambivalent attitude toward the trickster as cunning and successful or as a blunderer (Long Black Song 22-3). The central point Baker makes in his illustration of Black folklore characteristics is provided in this summary:

Black animal tales thus contain both the universal
aspects of the animal tale genre and certain
characteristic aspects that mark them as the product
of the Black American folk experiences. The common
traits of the trickster are present, but his
identification with the slave experience makes the
tale unique. (23)

Bambara's story "Gorilla, My Love" introduces these traits in the plot as
natural and necessary for the reader's understanding of the folk experience,
and also they serve the language of the story. The trickster element in the
Gorilla story is important to the understanding of the fashioning of self.
Family plays an important role in the young narrator's life. From the family's
control over Hazel in "Gorilla, My Love" readers see her reflecting many traits
of the trickster. Roger Abraham explains these traits:

The trickster provides a full escape for those Negroes
who have been offered no opportunity to feel a control
over their own lives, no method for developing their
egos through a specific action. As such the trickster
may reflect the real childlike state of a severely
stunted ego, or a veiled revolt against authority in
the only terms available. At the same time, the
performer and audience are enabled to express some of
their aggressive impulses in this acceptable form.
(Deep Down in the Jungle...69-70)

In "The Hammer Man," Hazel, the young girl protagonist is possessed of an
instinctive skill for living by her wits when she feels it necessary to do so.
Hazel sets the mood of the story in her own "explanatory" or "etiological" way.
Her speaking voice, with rhythmic repetition and personification imagery gives this passage an essence of the trickster in Black folklore; one who teases and provokes others for some gain.

I was glad to hear that Manny had fallen off the roof. I had put out the tale that I was down with yellow fever, but nobody paid me no mind, least of all Dirty Red who stomped right in to announce that Manny had fallen off the roof and that I could come out of hiding now. (Gorilla 35)

There is no pretentious language in this passage -- clearly Hazel in jest and with concentrated efforts promotes herself by repeating "I" to show how resourceful she is to get out of a predicament with Manny. She continues to show her cleverness however much aware of the consequences:

Manny was supposed to be crazy. That was his story. To say you were bad put some people off. But to say you were crazy, well, you were officially not to be messed with. So that was his story. (35)

What Hazel sets up here is a competition between two opposing forces to outwit or outsmart the other. She says how she got over:

On the other hand, after I called him what I called him and said a few choice things about his mother, his face did go through some piercing changes. And I didn't wait to find out. I got in the wind. And then he waited for me on my stoop all day and all night... (35)

Included in Hazel's discussion of her antics with Manny are so many
traditional elements, traditional as in coming out of an historical culture (the trickster element) and by using the signifying practices of name calling and insulting one's mother. Within Hazel's discussion is the tradition of "the stoop" where everything important in the urban environment is told:

And then he waited for me on the stoop all day and all night, not hardly speaking to people going in and out. And he was there all day Saturday, with his sister bring him peanut-butter sandwiches and cream sodas. He must've gone to the bathroom right there cause everytime I looked out the kitchen window, there he was. And Sunday, too. I got to thinking the boy was mad. (36)

The folk expressions in "The Hammer Man" not only develop a forceful case for the oral tradition in Bambara's stories, they make subtle allusion to figures in Black folklore as an assertion of significance in the development of cultural elements in the fashioning of self.

In the "Gorilla" story, the strength of the folk tradition is also brought out in Hazel's language that underline the story's theme of betrayal -- in one case by family; in the other, the betrayal is by powerful forces in the community that she can't control,

So we walk up Amsterdam Avenue to the Washington and Gorilla, My Love playin. . . So the movie come on and right away it's this churchy music and clearly not about no gorilla. Bout Jesus. . .which is not so simple as it is stupid. Cause I realize that just about anybody in my family is better than this god
they always talkin about. (14-15)

The language of Hazel's narration is pushed close to the language of the Black tradition of the trickster who exhibits assertiveness. Her story like the tale of the trickster shows her as a person who wants the opportunity to take charge of her own life. If the reader is unfamiliar or familiar with the dialect, he or she still achieves the full visual effects of this passage by knowing that Hazel's guile and banter reflect the way her family has control over the way she thinks about herself:

My daddy wouldn't stand for nobody treatin any of us that way. My mama specially. And I can just see it now, Big Brood up there on the cross talkin bout forgive them Daddy cause they don't know what they doin. And my mama say get on down from there you big fool, whatcha think this is, playtime? And my Daddy yellin to Grandaddy to get him a ladder cause Big Brood actin the fool, his mother side of the family showin up. And my mama and her sister Daisy jumpin on them Romans beatin them with they pocketbooks. And Hunca Bubba tellin them folks on they knees they better get out the way and go get some help or they goin to get trampled on! (Gorilla 15-16)

The trickster element in Black folklore is worth pointing out here as Hazel confronts the theatre manager. Here she adopts "role playing" to show, how, like the members of her family, she can take control. Although Hazel's behavior represents some traits of the archetypal badman in Black folklore, her passion to take control and her adherence to "role playing" make her motives
come closer to that of the trickster element fused with those of the badman.  These compelling series of assertiveness make Hazel both trickster and badman as shown in the following passage:

So I kick the door open wider and just walk right by him and sit down and tell the man about myself and that I want my money back and that goes for Baby Jason and Big Brood too. And he still trying to shuffle me out the door even though I'm sitting which shows him for the fool he is... So I was forced to leave, takin the matches from under his ashtray, and set a fire under the candy stand, which closed the raggedy ole Washington down for a week. (17)

The zest with which Hazel puts her case and the rhythmic insistence of her language enhance the force of the protest. The protest element in her narration is part of an authorial intention, but it is also emphatically part of the narrative strategies Bambara uses to infuse the text with traditional elements representing the trickster and the Badman in Black folklore. Role reversals of folk heroes and folk traditions are placed in the image of this young girl narrator who assumes all the responsibility of making the community aware of self fashioning. For Bambara it begins with the family and its obligations to each family member. The trickster in Black folklore often assumed these roles of "raising the consciousness" of those involved by using specific words and ideas that would embrace the thoughts of those
involved with her own assertiveness. In the story "Gorilla, My Love" readers see Hazel’s role as a trickster and as a Badman when she finds her uncle is getting married and will break a promise he has made to her sometime earlier. Her "sense of self-importance is disrupted" (Willis 146) by Hunca Bubba’s announcement. Susan Willis explains,

Very often the child's task will be to raise the consciousness of family members, as in "Gorilla, My Love," one of Bambara's most engaging stories. Its poignancy derives from the way the individual's relationship to the family is defined against the influence of larger social forces that penetrate and corrupt the family community. Told again from the child Hazel's point of view, the story exposes the lived experience of domination in a curious blend of insight and naivete. (145)

Willis, of course, concentrates on a larger cultural issue. She defines in her study of "Gorilla" as obligations to family and society. She does not explain that Hazel's ability to "raise the consciousness of family members" comes from Hazel's own consciousness of self that she develops solely from the positive way she controls her own language. Butler-Evans also tries to explain Hazel's position in the story:

Central to the representations of Black adolescent girls are the traits of rebelliousness, assertiveness, and, at times, physical aggressiveness. Taken collectively, these traits signify a rejection of society's stereotypes of females as fragile and vulnerable and the construction of alternative selves that oppose and negate the ideology that structures the girls' community. In the representation of Hazel, the protagonist whose voice permeates the narratives, autonomy
and self-definition are asserted forcefully. (Race, Gender
Desire...98)

What Butler explains, however, are not particularly the traits of a trickster,
but those of the Badman where the "arrogance and disdain" (Abrahams 70)
serve his purpose. In the passages quoted from the "Gorilla" story is Hazel's
rebellion against the socially accepted behavior of a young girl, but there is
ambivalence by the reader for the results of Hazel's behavior: First the reader
recognizes the galor of independence and assertiveness demonstrated by her
actions and at the same time, the reader assumes a not-so-condoning attitude
towards Hazel's burning of the theatre. Still, as Baker notes: "The trickster
of Black folklore...fights impressive battles and accomplishes impressive feats,
given the nature of the environment" (Long Black Song 26). In essence, then,
because Hazel's language has certain stylistic elements which stem from the
Black oral tradition, the reader sees in Bambara's "Gorilla" story a long oral
Black tradition of storytelling; it is the style of storytelling which makes the
distinction between Bambara and other Black writers who use Black folklore
in their fiction.

The traditional component of the badman hero is clearly revealed in
other stories in Gorilla; there is an element of this folk tradition in the
toughness and independence of the badman hero. This hero has been
canonized in the folk ballads of Black people. Baker cites "Stackalee" and "John Henry" to show "we have in them more than the typical badman hero. We also have the hero of lower echelon, black urban existence, the man willing to use any means necessary to obtain his ends" (Black Literature in America 20). Hazel's toughness and independence are expressed through several sets of relationships in the stories. In this story Hazel confronts two of her opponents who will compete against her in the annual May Day races:

So, they are steady coming up Broadway and I see right away that it's going to be one of those Dodge City scenes cause the street ain't that big and they're close to the buildings just as we are. But as they get to me they slow down. I'm ready to fight, cause like I said I don't feature a whole lot of chit chat. I much prefer to just knock you down right from the jump and save everybody a lotta precious time. (25)

Here Hazel is "playing the role" of the Badman. According to Bruce Jackson, "playing the role means one offers one face only in spite of the realities of the situation" (92). Nevertheless, though Hazel admits to being tough, and her character is strong, she is patient and caring without prompts, although, her language remains laced with strong rhythms that set an arrogant tone in the narration, and with her language being very comic, it is almost difficult to find emphasis in the intense seriousness of the emotions she feels for her handicapped brother Raymond, in "Raymond's Run":

I'm standing on the corner admiring the weather and about to take a stroll down Broadway so I can practice my breathing exercises, and I've got Raymond walking on the inside close to buildings, cause he's subject to fits of fantasy and starts thinking he's a circus performer and that the curb is a tightrope strung high in the air. And sometimes after a rain he likes to step down off his tight rope right into the gutter and slosh around getting his shoes and cuffs wet. Then I get hit when I get home. (Gorilla 24)

Hazel communicates her sense of responsibility for Raymond when she acts favorably toward him while she describes the seriousness of his handicap with much levity in her language, she still shows how she must sometimes exhibit traits of a trickster and sometimes those a Badman if others are to take her self fashioning seriously:

Or sometimes if you don't watch him he'll dash across the traffic to the island in the middle of Broadway and give the pigeons a fit. Then I have to go behind him apologizing to all the old people sitting around trying to get some sun and getting all upset with the pigeons fluttering around them, scattering their newspapers and upsetting the waxpaper lunches in their laps. So I keep Raymond on the inside of me, and he plays like he's driving a stage coach which is o.k. by me so long as he doesn't run me over or interrupt my breathing exercises, which I have to do on account of I'm serious about my running, and I don't care who knows it. (24)

The evolution of the portrayal of Hazel from the largely negative image of a street fighter to the self-assertive, self-assured, responsible young woman must be studied from a folklore perspective. She sings Raymond's ballad and her
quest is to see him survive.

At the end of the story, Hazel continues to show her aggressiveness and toughness as she celebrates her winning the race; still, as she indulges in the victory, she creates an emphasis of self in her language by slowing down the rhythm of her speech and thereby thrusting the ideas of genuine relationships between her opponents to also include Raymond's future:

So I stand there with my new plans, laughing out loud by this time as Raymond jumps down from the fence and runs over with his teeth showing and his arms down to the side, which no one before him has quite mastered as a running style. And by the time he comes over I'm jumping up and down to see him—my brother Raymond, a great new runner in the family tradition. (32)

Without romanticizing Raymond's handicap, Hazel shows how the roles of Black girls and Black women are changing in the Black community. Although her ethic of caring for him is associated with the traditional roles of girls and women, her ethic of justice, traditionally assigned to boys and men, now becomes a part of the ever-changing views of the responsibility of women. For Hazel, it is not about biological sex; it is "you know...like being people" (32). In "Raymond's Run" Hazel's character does not at all respond to expectations of the community. In characterizing her behavior, Susan Willis looks at Hazel this way:

"Raymond's Run" focuses on Hazel, the eight-year-old,
fifty-yard dash specialist. As she puts it, "I am Miss Quicksilver herself." "I always win cause I'm the best." (Specifying 143)

According to Willis, "Such sentiments expressive of the child's self-pride might, in an adult political leader, produce blind spots and hinder alliances" (143). The reader sees, however, Hazel's language takes her beyond what Willis calls "sentiments." Her self fashioning as trickster or Badman is her way of establishing her relationship to the family, hence the community.

How Hazel identifies herself is important an aspect to this story. She does not adhere to the pressures to adopt sex-appropriate behavior of her community. Anderson in "Socialization as Social Control" explains that "the socialization process controls us in several ways. First, it gives us a definition of ourselves. Second it defines the external world and our place within it. Third, it provides our definition of others and our relationships with them. And the socialization process encourages and discourages the question of certain skills by gender" (Thinking About Women 77). Bambara shows Hazel's working against this kind of socialization process. And although in an attempt to establish her own identity she tells her parents "I do not dance on my toes, I run. That is what I am all about" (Gorilla 26). She affirms herself the same way she does in "Hammer Man" with the declamatory "I," the same way she does in "Gorilla, My Love." In "Raymond's Run" she insists on "I am" to
underscore her self fashioning.

Bambara's other stories in Gorilla with the youthful narrator Hazel, touch on many areas of traditional folklore. In "Sweet Town" the narration of the story is highly dependent on the elementals of the Black testimonial for its language structure and self fashioning. In the eulogy delivered by Reverend Olson at Maggie's funeral in "Maggie of the Green Bottles" readers see evidence of the fabliaux or the humorous tale about the preacher. Many signs of superstition, ghosts and magic heighten the stories along with social phenomena of giving birth, in "The Survivor" and sexual molestation of young girls in "The Basement." Death and murder in "Talking About Sonny," and mental disease in "The Hammer Man." There's the element of the blues in "Mississippi Ham Rider" and hero worship for Punjab, the hero "on the block."

In his essay "Black Cultural Nationalism" in The Black Aesthetic, Ron Karenga submits to the idea "Black art, like everything else in the black community, must respond positively to the reality of revolution" (32). Bambara responds by making traditionally valid the problems of the Black woman, in the Black community as she grows from child to woman. "All materials is mute," says Karenga, "until the artist gives it a message, and that message must be a message of revolution" (34). Bambara's stories for the revolution begin with the Gorilla collection in which she seeks to use as a "means of
educating [Black] people, and being educated by them, so it is a mutual exchange rather than a one-way communication" (35). Today, when many Americans read the works of Toni Cade Bambara, they find among the laughter and the language, a people susceptible to all the problems of culture and social phenomena inherent in any group regardless of race or ethnic orientation. Faith Pullin in "Landscapes of Reality: The Fiction of Contemporary Afro-American Women" sums up what Black women writers like Bambara discuss: "It's psychological freedom. . .; the freedom to reject 'the recognition that one is regarded as a worthless human being', always at the base of the white man/black man/white woman/black woman power structure" (Black Fiction 180). Pullin is strong in her response to the revolutionary cultural nationalism of Zora Neale Hurston, but supports wholeheartedly the idea that "the whole spectrum of black women's experience, sexual, economic, religious, has been delineated for the first time by [writers] like Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison and Gayle Jones" (181).

In all the stories in Gorilla Bambara's fashioning of self is a re-naming of things. She begins by re-naming, giving new meaning to the traditional figures of folklore. In her story "Gorilla, My Love" she gives meaning to the individual's relationship to family by telling the story from the child's (not the adult's) point of view. Self fashioning Bambara seems to be saying, begins
with the child's own sense of responsibility. Using Black traditional folklore to develop this theme makes Bambara's stories in the *Gorilla* collection unique and exciting.

In summary, in Bambara's stories the emphasis on folk literature helps Bambara to explore the elements of Black folk speech. What Barbara Christian writes in "Contemporary Afro-American Women's Fiction" about Alice Walker is readily applied to what Bambara does, which is "explores the richness and clarity of Black folk [speech] in such a way that the reader understands that the inner core of a person cannot be truly known except through her [his] own language" (*Black Feminist Criticism* 185). Readers see Bambara using a variety of Black speech forms throughout the stories from standard English to dialect to set the tone of each story. Christian notes this emphasis on language as the emphasis on the [Black] culture of [Black] women as a means to self-understanding and growth" (184-185). She adds to this the idea that "increasingly, the language and forms of black women's fiction are derived from women's experiences as well as from Afro-American culture" (185). The use of language in Bambara's stories present many themes that deal with the circumstance of being black and woman in America, and it also calls to attention some larger themes of victimization of the black woman by family, the black community, and by society as a whole. Bambara's application
of her style of the Black Aesthetic to her fiction allows the Black reader to "journey back" to the past in order to survive in the present and set the stage for the future.
CHAPTER III

Signifyin(g) in The SaltEaters: The double-voiced discourse of Velma Henry

She lay, skin on the moist dirt,
the canebreak rustling
with the whispers of leaves, and
loud longing of hounds and
the ransack of hunters crackling the near
branches.

She muttered, lifting her head a nod toward
freedom
I shall not, I shall not be moved....

Maya Angelou
I Shall Not Be Moved

Introduction: Looking at Folk Traditions in The SaltEaters

Anyone who comes to The SaltEaters from a direction other than that of Black language properties is likely to share the opinion of scholars that the novel "represents the attempt to link the spirit of black activism generated during the sixties to the very different political and social situation defined by the eighties" (Susan Willis 129). It is not the concern of this chapter to grapple with the critical studies that advocate "a broader understanding of the inscription and production of schizophrenic discourse in the text (Elliot Butler-Evans 176). I do look at the language in The SaltEaters because it is so rich and suggestive with words and phrases that are intentionally assigned
to express meanings that are different from what at first they seem. The language achieves this effect, for it employs some basic elements of signifying related to Black discourse. Applying signification to *The SaltEaters* as an organizing principle of language makes the entire novel an extended metaphor representing one thing in the guise of another.

I have tried to show in this dissertation how Black language operates in Bambara's collections of stories, so this element of signifying in *The SaltEaters* may not appear to be much different from the other forms of oral tradition that underline the language of the short stories. I see this story as Bambara's attempt to dramatize the complex question of culture and its importance to the individual's sense of self; the intimate recollection of people, places, and things in Velma Henry's memory underlines their assertion. This chapter brings together all the ideas about creating an identity that were developed in Chapter One and in Chapter Two. In Chapter One the concept is brought forward with the focus on the first-person narrator and the protagonists in the stories. Self-realization is based on language that reveals both a private and public self. A number of folk traditions give texture to the language to make the context a cultural source. In Chapter Two the concept of a Black identity comes out of the focus of national theories of Black Aesthetic. This chapter's discussion moves toward a precept that Black folklore creates the ideological
self. Black folklore when used in literature for maintaining a Black identity pushes the reader to recognizing the value of the Black Aesthetic.

_The SaltEaters_ has been the only work of Bambara that has been given any form of indepth criticism. Criticism by Daryl Cumber-Dance in "Go Eena Kumbla: A comparison of Erna Brodber's Jane and _Louisa Will Soon Come Home_ and Toni Cade Bambara's _The SaltEaters_ offers Dance's own insights into the structure of the language itself:

> For both works, words, phrases, snippets of conversations, bits of scenes are introduced and dropped, only to be echoed and expanded at varied subsequent points throughout the novels; repetitions of certain phrases that begin paragraphs and sections build and build to a resounding crescendo. (181)

Dance, however, looks specifically at various leitmotifs that develop the folk traditions of the novel. I find her attempt to isolate various folk traditions prevents her from closely identifying the language that revitalizes the other folk traditions. Modernity is important to Bambara. She says in "The Great White Hope" that modernity is "a vision of society substantially better than the existing one. . .[and it] combines a sense of history and a sense of immediate relevance. . .[to] reappraise the past, re-evaluate where we've been, clarify where we are, and predict or anticipate where we are headed" (The Black Woman: An Anthology 237-38). This study by Daryl Cumber-Dance invites
the reader to reassess old and fundamental questions about Black folklore and
the role of Black culture in modern society.

The attention to folk traditions in the novel is given in various ways. For example Eleanor Traylor gives meaning to Bambara's use of folk traditions by pointing out the jazz element in the novel. The improvisational quality of jazz, its rhythmic structure is all a part of the process Traylor uses to develop her discussion of folk communication in *The SaltEaters*. Eleanor Traylor concentrates on jazz: "By leave of our own spontaneous response to an irresistible call (the mode of the jazz composes), we enter the not-so-make believe world of *The SaltEaters* (*Black Women Writers* 59). Traylor's focus on jazz leads her to conclude that it structures the novel. The review of *The SaltEaters* by Eleanor Traylor is important since jazz in itself is related to folk traditions in the Blues, the secular and religious folksongs and also to various forms of traditional folk music expressions. Traylor's study does not develop in any way, the parallels of Black folk speech with that of the jazz element in the novel, which I feel give added dimensions to the language of *The SaltEaters*.

Traylor's continuous focus in the jazz mode gives an evaluation of the novel that serves as anecdote to the primarily interpretative and inconological approach given to jazz themes that surface in the fiction and poetry of Black
American writers (see The Militant Black Writer 103-107). Often critical commentary such as what Traylor gives to document the use of the jazz impulse in The SaltEaters refers to its presence as parody, where she manipulates the elements of jazz to give critical foundation to the text. The result is Traylor does not provide illuminating propositions of Bambara's use of jazz as she illustrates its presence in the novel as this musical archetype descends on the story. In her summation of The SaltEaters Traylor says, "The SaltEaters is a rite of transformation quite like a jam session. The familiar tune is played, reviewed, and restated in a new form" (Black Women Writers 69). But in Bambara's own words it is "the crucial assembling of history jigsaw" (Black Woman Writer . . .241). The concept of jazz Traylor defines and explores in her discussion of The SaltEaters speaks only to one of the particular interest given to the fiction of Toni Cade Bambara by critics, but as other themes that surface in critical commentary, it does not provoke any new responses to the fiction itself.

The SaltEaters has been maimed with other criticism far removed from the language of folk traditions as a vehicle that moves the reader toward a greater understanding of Black culture. The protagonists in The SaltEaters see decay in the Black environment, disruptions that cause significant changes in their own concept of self. They must, however, survive. To do so, they must
restructure their lives by calling on traditional sources of language from which therapy begins. The fashioning of self is made in *The SaltEaters* through various elements of this traditional trope. Everyone who is important to the development of the novel (including the author) adheres to some principle of signifying. I argue this chapter for a concept of Black language that will define and develop issues brought out by critics. I argue for signifying as the structuring device.

The bulk of Bambara's only published novel is readily accessible to the ordinary reader; dialogue provides immediacy, and by recording many points of view, Bambara manages to show to the reader, the protagonist, Velma, in all her complexity. Bambara carries out her purpose in *The SaltEaters*, to tell a story. In an interview with Claudia Tate, she describes her writing process of the novel:

> The writing of *The SaltEaters* was bizarre... I began with such a simple story line -- to investigate possible ways to bring our guerrillas together. A Mardi Gras society elects to re-enact an old slave insurrection in a town torn by Wildcat strikes, social service cutbacks, etc. All hell breaks loose. I'm sliding along the paper writing about some old Willie Bobo on the box and next thing I know my characters are talking in tongues, the street signs are changing on me. (Black Women Writers at Work 31)

Bambara goes on to say that her language becomes multi-dimensional, and she
acknowledges the sources in her tradition that "thus give me the boldness to go head on with my bad self" (30).

It is rather challenging to incorporate any criticism about The SaltEaters into a discussion about folk language in the text, for the complicated structure of the novel itself has encouraged many critics to isolate their critical commentary on concepts far removed from the language that gives meaning to the presence of the protagonists in the novel. From the first words of the novel, the reader gets a sense of a cultural happening. The healing process at the clinic is an event that has been important to the inhabitants of Claybourne for a long time. It is worthwhile, then, for critics to pay attention to the many devices that structure the healing process in this novel. For example the statements of Minnie Ransom the famed healer, who says to Velma, "the source of health is never outside, sweetheart. What will you do when you are well?" is a central idea of the novel. Throughout the entire novel the "well" metaphor is extended to include the healing of the community itself. Healing of course involves all types: the bus driver, Fred Holt, whose healing process is formed when he crashes the bus into the swamp. Or Minnie Ransom who gives constant allusions to the wisdom of knowing folk traditions when she says, "Folks come in here moaning and carrying on and say they want to be healed. But like the wisdom warns, 'Doan
letcha mouf gitcha in what ya backbone cain't stand’ (8). Critics avoid the extended analogy healing in the title, *The SaltEaters*: people need salt to survive, salt also cures, but too much salt is not healthy. Who are the SaltEaters in the novel? This question, in many ways, shapes the analysis of the novel. Even the tone or the point of view from which the story is given is lost in the critical analysis of *The SaltEaters* given by many critics. No attention is given to the implication of death and rebirth provided in the scenes at the Southwest Community Infirmary; the images of death and being tombed in there influence the design and structure of the novel because this is the place where Velma comes for her rebirth. The language that provokes these images is set in this description:

> When the scaffolding went up in the Spring of 1871, the stone masons mounted the face of the Infirmary to chip free from the chosen stones all manner of messages responsible might read to their charge. (121)

The "scaffolding," "stone masons," "messages responsible" evoke the image of death and burial. How important are these to the meaning of the novel? And throughout the novel, references to "stories, songs, and riddles" (121) and to "community sage" (121), also belong to those informing principles that influence the idea of death and rebirth. From my standpoint, I feel that any critic who looks at structure or language, style or tone, or characterization of
the novel in its entirety, must consider those elements that may be regarded as the celebration of rebirth of *The SaltEaters*.

Rather than absorbing the language as the key that promotes various themes for the novel, many critics prefer to see the development of the novel through theories of the Black nationalist movement. For some critics a phase of the movement in the novel serves as metaphor. Velma’s initiation into the movement forms the foundation of their criticism. In characterizing Bambara’s fiction, Susan Willis links the novel directly to a nationalist movement. "Toni Cade Bambara’s novel *The SaltEaters* represents the attempt to link the spirit of black activism generated during the sixties to the very different political and social situation defined by the eighties" (Specifying 129). It seems, says Willis, that in reading the novel "revolution is only pages away" (129). Her conclusion is "but for all its yearning and insight, the novel fails to culminate in revolution, fails even to suggest how social change might be produced" (129). In addition, many reasons have led Willis to conclude, "Bambara’s novel ponders the shortcomings of minority political movements as it describes the futility felt by black community leaders in their attempt to renew the links with [certain political] groups" (129).

Earlier in this dissertation I discussed the Nationalist Movement as it applied to *The Seabirds*, Bambara’s second collection of short stories. I linked
the movement to a movement of self-knowledge gained from an involvement with the political or social issues which surfaced in the story of the protagonist.

In *The SaltEaters* I find the Nationalist Movement is in the presentation of background material, those events which occurred before Velma's attempted suicide and those which are relevant to an understanding of the healing process and the novel itself. The reader is not told exactly what is the cause of Velma's "illness" but in Velma's monologue, the reader learns of Velma's disenchantment with the Movement, her problems with Obie in her marriage, perhaps something in her relationship with Sophie. The Nationalist Movement blend as naturally as possible into the sequence of events which promote the meaning behind the suicide attempt because these events develop the political vision that embraces the concept of revolution in the novel.

Willis' discussion of the novel's opening scene is linked to her idea of revolution:

*The SaltEaters* swells with a cacophony of voices and stories. It is as if we were inside of Velma Henry's numbed consciousness, beginning to awaken from a gas-induced stupor, and only mildly aware of the many witnesses to her healing... the jumble of voices encircling Velma and her healer, representing a varies collection of individuals whose present observations intersect with remembered bits from their separate parts, produces a highly fragmented narrative context. (130)

Again we find even in Willis' own words the clues to the folk tradition that
makes the story so real: "voices and stories." Willis ignores her own notations that "individuals whose present observations intersect with remembered bits." This ability to intersect should be the focus of Willis' discussion and that focus will show that what seems as "a highly fragmented narrative context" is a well organized and fully developed structure of text that brings together the folk ideas that structure the novel.

Part of the difficulty for Willis is Velma Henry's behavior that seems bizarre and complex, which often suggests multiple associations and interpretations. Against Velma's personality the story is enacted and as Willis sees it "we are brought finally to grasp the personal as manifestation of the political" (130). Whether or not one supports Willis' evaluation of Bambara's novel, one must agree that Willis seems, on first reading, to concern herself only with Velma Henry's politics. But we must remember that everything Velma says or does ultimately reveals something to us about living in the Black community itself; furthermore, Velma's attempted suicide moves the story forward to include other voices that give the novel its folk quality.

Although the introductory chapters of The SaltEaters present as Willis states, "The metaphor of the individual's relationship to community..." (131). Velma Henry is part of almost every aspect of that community and this is brought forth in the images she creates in her self healing process. Therefore
her presence should be given more prominence than what Willis says: "If Velma Henry embodies the revolutionary leader, alone and in crisis, then the cacophony is the community, or rather it is the narrative jumble that would be reshaped in a meaningful way if the community were strong, supportive, and cohesive" (131). This analysis is not one I support for it is too narrowly focused on the political. Indigenous to almost all of Bambara's stories and in fact to a study of *The SaltEaters* in general is the concept of individual versus community. And for many critics, behind the formulation of this concept lies this idea that Bambara holds a "commitment to an ideological discourse of cultural nationalism" (Elliot-Butler Evans 177). Therefore, for many critics a basis for the actions of Bambara's characters would be the concept of rebellion. In relating this concept to Bambara's stories and to the novel, Willis finds it to be a relative value--it might be true for one moment but not true for the next. She says, "*The SaltEaters* depicts moments when class alliances are not discernible for the lack of political polarization" (133). Furthermore she expresses the idea that "this sets the novel dramatically apart from Bambara's earlier writing, influenced by the clear-cut politics of the late sixties and early seventies" (133). This attitude leads Willis to illustrate how "Bambara's recent writing is the focus on a moment in black politics when sexually defined roles in political practice were sharply drawn" (134). I argue that because the
dialogue in the opening scene of the novel is a short statement "are you sure sweetheart, that you want to be well?" (3), one that is perceptible to everyone who is present, a great deal of emphasis must be placed on Velma's character transformation and motivation. The introduction of Velma, the humming of Minnie Ransom, at this opening scene will help readers to measure or to understand how much Velma has been transformed. Transformation of self is the key to understanding the revolutionary aspects of the novel. To seem psychologically plausible, the character transformation of Velma is revealed through a series of dialogue, some taking place around her and some inside her head. This process which characterizes Velma's transformation is relatively complex for much of the dialogue in the novel is produced in this way.

Revolution in The SaltEaters as I see it is not overt involvement with political struggle but rather an attempt designed to expose the need for a sense of balance among all the voices that inhabit the community of Claybourne.

I note in this discussion of folk traditions that one of the extraordinary instances in which the appeal of Bambara's fiction has been recognized is in the comparison (the West Indian Jamaican novel with Bambara's SaltEaters) that gives a transcultural expression to the Black woman's oppression. As may be seen, however, Bambara has not been entirely ignored during the latter part of the twentieth century. Contemporary scholars, whether in agreement
or disagreement with Bambara, will find in her writing an engaging intellectual challenge which cannot be ignored. Critical studies of The SaltEaters have looked at its feminist content, and have focused primarily on the structure of the novel, and its cultural and historical references connecting it to other discourses that attempt to reproduce Afro-American culture (Butler-Evans 171). His evaluation of the many approaches to The SaltEaters shows readings that place the work as "a complex cultural and political novel grounded in the ideology of Black liberation; its feminist inscriptions are only secondary considerations" (172). Another approach Butler-Evans acknowledges, "situates the novel within the broad spectrum of Afro-American cultural practices" (173). He also highlights another approach that focuses on "the language and the ideological issues related to Black cultural nationalism" (173); his rendering this approach shows the critic's "response to the novel's apparently elliptical and disjointed structure is to view it as an aesthetic disaster and the universe it depicts as an epistemological failure" (173). His summary of these approaches to The SaltEaters is, "Each critic's interpretative strategy resists the apparent epistemological disorder that pervades the novel and retrieves a single unifying element" (174). Therefore, Butler-Evans argues that "the narrative's form and its representational strategies generate additional issues that open the novel to alternative
210 readings" (175). He focuses in his discussion of *The SaltEaters* on the idea that "metaphorical emplotment and the intensification of schizophrenia, as a textual dominant, as well as the substantive rewriting of the feminist discourses of Bambara's short stories, are some factors in the novel's production of ideology" (175).

Bambara speaks on her own concerns about *The SaltEaters*. It is easier for the reader to gain an independent approach to *The SaltEaters* by understanding some of the details about the origin of the work. While she was in the process of finishing the novel, Bambara cites these ideas:

I gave myself an assignment based on observation: there is a split between the spiritual, psychic, and political forces in my community. Not since the maroon experiment of Toussaint's era have psychic technicians and spiritual folk (medicine people) and guerrillas (warriors) merged. It is a wasteful and dangerous split. The novel grew out of my attempt to fuse the seemingly separate frames of references of the camps; it grew out of an interest in identifying bridges; it grew out of a compulsion to understand how the energies of this period will manifest themselves in the next decade. (*The Writer on Her Work* 165)

Bambara's story *The SaltEaters* clearly establishes her point of view. The political actions of Velma Henry as she rallies or marches are fused with her reactions to the folk traditions or folk behavior that either offset or inhibit the political struggle. This and other behavior of the protagonists points to the "dangerous spirit" which Bambara highlights in the novel through characters
with a double-voice that calls attention to the "split" between the spiritual, psychic and political forces" in the Black community.

Because various approaches to *The SaltEaters* show problematic readings of the text, and since no scholar has specifically pointed to Black folklore as a frame for the novel, I argue for an approach that marks the entire structure of the novel to show its value. In my study of *The SaltEaters*, I look at the oldest, most traditional element of Black speech, signifying, that punctuates or dictates Bambara's theme of the relationship between the community and the individual self. I find this element of signifying throughout the stories in *Gorilla* with the young girl-narrator Hazel; I also see it in *The Seabirds* in the political activism of the women protagonists. I see it in *The SaltEaters* as the structuring device that solely helps the reader to grasp what Bambara--a language conscious writer--is communicating.

**Concepts and Meanings of Signifyin(g)**

The word Signifying carries various connotations and meanings. Henry Louis Gates Jr. in *The Signifying Monkey* observes that "Scholars have for some time commented on the peculiar use of the word Signifyin(g) in black discourse. Though sharing some connotations with the Standard English-language word "Gates notes, "Signifyin(g) has rather unique definitions in black discourse" (53). One of these definitions by Roger D.
Abrahams in *Deep Down in The Jungle* gives specific uses of this trope:

Signifying seems to be a Negro term, in use if not in origin. It can mean any number of things; in the case of the toast about the signifying monkey, it certainly refers to the trickster's ability to talk with great innuendo, to carp, cajole, needle, and lie. It can mean in other instances the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point. It can mean making fun of a person or situation. Also it can denote speaking with the hands and eyes, and in this respect encompasses a whole complex of expressions and gestures . . . (51-52)

This definition of signifying by Abrahams is extremely useful to this dissertation as an introduction and guide to *The SaltEaters*, for it structures and guides several basic details in the language of the protagonists with "the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point." Velma's monologue takes the reader around various subjects and her musings are filled with stories of riveting trials that illustrate key aspects of Black social and cultural life. In the same way, signifying in the novel responds to "speaking with the hands and eyes"; references to "cutting eye" as a cultural expression and "sucking teeth" are part of this definition of signifying in *The SaltEaters* that paints a full and compelling use of this traditional trope.

I find it convenient in this chapter to discuss other uses of signifying in *The SaltEaters*. The brilliant scholarship of Henry Louis Gates Jr. in *The Signifying Monkey* lists some other definitions that relate directly to my purpose which is to show that the language of *The SaltEaters* is intentionally
designed to signify, that is, to express meanings that are different from what at first they seem. In this chapter my purpose is also to examine signifying devices which touch upon elements of ambiguity and overstatement (hyperbole) that help to characterize the signifying elements in the language of the novel. Applying concepts of signifying to the analysis of The SaltEaters means beginning to answer any substantial questioning presented by documentary approaches, biographical, historical, or psychological used by critics to interpret the characters in the novel.

Approaching The SaltEaters by exploring the relation of Signifyin(g) to the text gives a cultural expression to the folk conditions set forth in the novel; it also provides through its artful rendering of the language, the bridge through which the novel gains access to a relevant past. Further, by using aspects of Signifyin(g) to chart Velma Henry’s recollections of a painful past, something unexpected is revealed to the reader, that the problems Velma faces may have similar meanings for the reader. Universality of theme in Bambara’s novel has not been thoroughly approached. It starts, however, with the various methods of Signifyin(g).

Whomever has defined or written about signifying or Signifyin(g) (Gates distinguishes the spelling to denote white and black terms), Henry Louis Gates has chronicled in his book The Signifying Monkey. He defines the term first
by Standard English language definitions and also by its connotative Black language use:

The process of semantic appropriation in evidence in relation of Signification has been aptly described by Mikhail Bakhtin as a double-voiced word, that is, a word utterance, in this context, decolonized for the Black's purposes "by inserting a new semantic orientation into a word which already has--and retains--its own orientation" (50).

Although Bakhtin's definition highlights the double voice concept of signifying, Bambara poses a more sophisticated and accessible application of this theory by the way she uses signifying to develop the reader's perception of Black culture. Through her use of signifying, which examines specific details of Black culture and the impact it has on the individual, the protagonists of The SaltEaters play a leading role in shaping principles of individual freedom that have been a cornerstone of Black culture and the way Black people conceive of personal liberty. Signifying in The SaltEaters must mean more to the reader than a definition that relates to "semantic orientation." Bambara's focus on the concept keeps readers from overlooking details that are relevant to understanding Black culture; developing readers' perception is the key to signifying. This focus on the traditional language form prevents readers from seeing something that isn't there or from missing something that is there. The language of signifying in The SaltEaters allows readers to tolerate a little
ambiguity. Because readers have powerful unconscious expectations or limiting expectations, signifying helps them to truly think with an open mind, for they have to look closely at details. Bakhtin's definition of signifying as it applies to Black culture does not clearly state this attention to reader-response.

Gates' handling of other explanations of the double-voiced discourse is continued by his illustration of this "notion" by Gary Saul Morson's "evaluations" on Bakhtin's concepts:

The audience of the double-voiced word is therefore meant to hear both a version of the original utterance as the embodiment of its speaker's evaluation of that utterance from a different point of view. I find it helpful to picture a double-voiced word as a special palimpsest in which the uppermost inscription is a commentary on the one beneath it, which the reader (or audience) can know only by reading through the commentary that obscures the very process of evaluating. (50)

I find in *The Salt Eaters* the double voice embodies more than "a different point of view." The characters place it in broader perspectives when they evoke images of the past to come to terms with the present. In Minnie Ransom, the double-voice says "'got to give it all up, the pain, the hurt, the anger and make room for lovely things to rush in and fill you full. Nature abhors a so-called vacuum don't you know?'" (16). The double-voice of Velma is given in images she fuses together to make sense of the past. For example she recalls her political actions as she marches in protest and at the same time has to suffer
the degradation of cleaning up her menstruation in a dirty bathroom: "And no soap. No towels. No tissues. No machine. Just a spout then a trickle of rusty water in the clogged sink then no water at all. And like a cat she'd had to lick herself clean of grit, salt, blood and rage" (36). Other characters show the dual function of voice in *The SaltEaters*, but it is in Velma's monologue readers see it demonstrated best when she gives a long description of how "she might have died" (271-276). Through the concept of death and rebirth, conflating her cultural life as a trope for self-examination, Velma seeks to revise historical arguments about life in the Black community. In her monologue, the double-voice of Velma's self-discovery is her own act of signifying.

Gates says, "Signifyin(g) is black double-voicedness; because it always entails formal revision and an intertextual relation . . . it [is] an ideal metaphor for black literary criticism, for the formal manner in which texts seem concerned to address their antecedents" (51). No formal criticism has been given, however, to address signifying in Bambara's *SaltEaters*.

A review of Gate's discussion shows several other ideas about Signifyin(g):

Signifyin(g) is so fundamentally black, that it is such a familiar rhetorical practice, that one encounters the great resistance of inertia when writing about it. By inertia I am thinking here of the difficulty of rendering the implications of a concept that is so shared in one's subculture as to have long ago become second
nature to its users. (64)

The language of blackness encodes and names its sense of independence through a rhetorical process that we might think of as the Signifyin(g) black difference. As early as the eighteenth century, commentators recorded black usage of Signification. (66)

[Gates] cites early references to motivated language use only to emphasize that Black people have been Signifyin(g), without explicitly calling it that, since slavery . . . (68)

Each definition cited here explores an important boundary between signifying and Black culture for The Signifying Monkey describes how this language structure took root in Black American language, but it does not explore signifying in the way Bambara does to show how fiction can contribute to the reader's sense of this element of Black culture. Each definition (and those listed here are only part of many given in The Signifying Monkey) traces the use of signification to show its existence in Black culture. The definitions provide knowledge central to modern fiction in terms of establishing important boundaries between uses of signification by different groups of people. The definitions are not informed, as I see them, by human understanding. Gates' definitions do not provide the kind of masterful insights and evaluative prowess that enriches the reader's understanding of the concept of signifying in the fiction of Black writers. The SaltEaters with its focus on the double-voicedness of its principal characters and the fascinatingly complex use of
Black language, provides a splendid analysis of signifying and the impact it has on Black culture. Definitions of signifying must show its intimate relationship to Black people in the past, present and future.

Other definitions of signifying continue to show its historical reference:

We can gain some appreciation of the complexity of Signifyin(g) by examining various [dictionary] definitions [and those cited in glossaries and introductions to autobiographies] of the concept. (68)

Gates does show that signifying is important to scholars but not in a way that illustrates its significance in the writing of Black fiction:

There is much confusion and disagreement among linguists about the names and functions of the classical black tropes . . . Signification is a complex rhetorical device that has elicited various, even contradictory, definitions from linguists . . . (86, 88)

Gates compels attention by citing several of other formal definitions and by making comparisons and contrasts among them. These definitions of signifying, however much their surfaces differ, appear to repeat essentially many of the same patterns, suggesting that there are collective patterns common to this mode of language use. The definitions given by Roger Abrahams on the concept of signifying in Deep Down in The Jungle and in Talking Black specifies that "signifying is an adult ritual which Black people learn as adolescents." In The SaltEaters this concept of signifying is brought to life in the monologue of Velma Henry as she looks at her adolescent life
through adult behavior. What Abrahams emphasizes and what is meaningful is that signifying is a rhetorical strategy. Gates renames the ritual to show its blackness; however, he also shows that the emphasis on the rhetorical strategy of signifying is echoed also by Claudia Mitchell-Kernan (75).

In *Rappin and Stylin Out*, Claudia Mitchell-Kernan is concerned with particular and universal aspects of Black people who signify:

> The Black concept of signifying incorporates essentially a folk notion that dictionary entries for words are not always sufficient for interpreting meanings or messages, or that meaning, goes beyond such interpretations. (317)

As this discussion of signifying suggests, the term applied in this way, usually involves some conception of language and the conception will vary with different situations: "Complimentary remarks may be delivered in a left-handed fashion. A particular utterance may be an insult in one context and not another. What pretends to be informative may intend to be persuasive. The hearer is thus constrained to attend to all potential meaning—carrying symbolic systems in speed events—the total universe of discourse" (317). The proposition Claudia Mitchell-Kernan works out in her definition of signifying is not entirely so subtle. For her, the integrity of signifying depends not simply upon devices of verbal exchange or traditional elements that constitute the tropes of signifying; it also depends upon the
situation suggested in exchange. The meaning and implication of signification are clarified only if readers are able to see what this situation is. Thus, I find that Mitchell-Kernan's definition serves to provide us with this function of the black concept of signifying:

The context embeddedness of meaning is attested to by both our reliance on the given context, and most important, by our inclination to construct additional context from our background knowledge of the world. (317)

Throughout The SaltEaters Bambara applies this concept of signifying. Getting meaning from Velma's monologue or Minnie Ransom's proverbs or Fred Holt's dillusions is predicated on the context itself and from our own knowledge that folk traditions are operating alongside the character's verbal responses. In studying specific figures of signification, Claudia suggests that readers are compelled to examine ideas and situation as fused together to provide meaning. In this process readers consciousness is thoroughly engaged and their close attention to details is required. Even if they fail to grasp every device contained or suggested by the figure of signification, the very fact of their serious involvement provides readers with a valuable experience. Readers are likely, in fact, to understand more than they may realize at the time. Challenging is the idea, for as Claudia Mitchell-Kernan insists, knowing the principal characteristics of signifying means readers should apply to their
knowledge of signifying the following ideas:

Facial expressions and tone of voice serve to orient us to one kind of interpretation rather than another. Situational context helps us to narrow meaning. Personal background knowledge about the speaker points us in different directions. Expectations based on role or status criteria enter into the sorting process. In fact, we seem to process all manner of information against a background of assumptions. (317)

As I will show as I explicate sections of the novel, signifying controls the objectives and outcomes of the reader's perception of Black culture in *The SaltEaters*. Readers adhere to what Kernan cites as "expectations" and "assumptions." As I stated earlier, expectations and assumptions are carried through signifying in the novel.

Bambara uses signification in a particular way. She combines elements of Bakhtin's theory of the double-voice, Abraham's concept of the child-adult ritual and Kernan's theories of expectations and assumptions and this method provides the reader with an understanding of the protagonist(s) and often determines the outcomes of the experience.

An example of what Bambara does is shown, for example, in the kindred spirit of Nadeen, the young woman whose concept of self sustains all those definitions of signifying:

Nadeen knew she was not the stupid girl her teachers thought she was, or the silly child the nurses thought she was. . . She could argue now with folks at the clinic. How come she
was old enough to sign the papers giving consent for the baby to be taken care of when it came, but wasn't old enough to sign for herself, had to have her aunt and the social worker give consent? It was always the same -- too old to do this, too young to do that. No more. Nadeen moved closer and would have moved right up to the two stools to join hands with the healer and the woman, if the prayer group weren't there around the two like a gate. She was a woman. Or at least, she wrinkled her nose to herself at too big a jump, she was womanish. (SaltEaters 105-6)

The double-voicedness of Nadeen's monologue focuses on her concept of self as "stupid girl" whose responses to her own evolution came from "teachers," "nurses," but who now could "argue. . .with folks at the clinic." Her life structured by her "aunt" and the "social worker" filled her with indirection: "Too old to do this, too young to do that." The child's contempt for the adult world (as shown in Gorilla) is basic to the rhetorical strategy that allows the individual to move toward self-realization. Nadeen confirms this with "no more." Nadeen involves herself in a cultural ritual of healing "to join hands with the healer and [Velma]." The reader understands this move from the way Nadeen signifies her position from child to "woman" which she herself clarifies to not fully be "woman" but "womanish." The reader's expectations and assumptions are clarified to show a cultural phenomenon to show the Black concept of signifying incorporates essentially a folk nation that goes beyond dictionary interpretations (Keman 317).
I want to consider in this chapter, Mitchell-Kernan's definition of
signifying and its appropriateness to The SaltEaters, for it helps to create
and/or establish the contents of the novel in a wider perspective essentially by
deepening and extending what is said in the text. The definition is entirely
plausible, and is artistically and thematically important to the novel. Nadeen
is initiated into womanhood "A barrier falling away between adulthood and
child" (SaltEaters 104), is significantly unexpected from the way the story
begins. Beginning a story with a woman tied up in a medical gown, sitting on
a stool, listening to a spinster "humming lazily up and down the scales,"
(SaltEaters 3) is, of course, a radical distortion of normal order. Spinsters are
somewhat taboo in that their lives are not representative of "normal women
lives." Somehow though, the presence of the spinster, healing and giving
advice, signifies a radical change in the normal order of things. We might
want to ask ourselves, as readers, why Bambara chooses to begin the novel in
this way and why this first chapter places such an emphasis on "a community
[that] is the site of an uncertainty and a disintegration where heterogeneous,
as well as dissonant and contradictory, desires surface" (Butler-Evans 177).
We might also ask ourselves why Bambara chooses to narrate the novel from
Velma's point of view and from her attempt to commit suicide.
These are essential questions about Bambara's craft, but they lead beyond craftsmanship into questions of meaning. What do these things mean? (Signifying?) The questions will give us a brilliant instance of ambiguity; for example, why does Velma's life require such a lengthy, carefully written narrative? Velma's life "was off, out of whack, the relentless logic she'd lived by sprung" (SaltEaters 5). Does Bambara wish to persuade us that Velma's life indicates otherwise? According to Elliot Butler-Evans, Velma's life has significant functions in the novel:

"Velma Henry" serves a dual function as character and sign in the novel. Her disintegration and fragmentation reflect the "madness of the community as a whole, and her attempt to move from illness to health (fragmentation to wholeness) represents both a personal process and one in which the larger community is engaged. Her character, then, assumes a complex representational form. In addition to an individual personal narrative, Velma Henry is a metaphor for a larger story than the novel addresses: the dissonance and discord, discontinuities and rupture, of the Black community (180).

I say Velma's life serves the structure of the novel to acquaint the reader with the different forms of signifying. Mitchell-Kernan says that signifying operates on two levels. "One of those levels is that the speaker and his audience realize that signifying is occurring" (317). The other level Kernan identifies as "shared knowledge" (319). The knowledge or the experience the reader shares with the protagonist is part of the folk tradition of storytelling where details
provide the audience with meaning. In *The SaltEaters* "the apparent significance of the message [which creates the double-voice] differs from its real significance. The apparent meaning of the [language] signifies its actual meaning" (Kernan 325).

I call these apparent meanings assumptions and expectations that are brought to the text by the reader. The element of signifying provokes the reader into close reading of the text that often builds an understanding of Black culture.

If we accept what Du Bois says that the African-American is gifted with double consciousness of himself as a Black and an American, then we can further develop the idea that Velma's probing into the past signifies that the way Black people conform to a standard variety of forms depends on family background, regional origin, educational level, political and social beliefs, and so on. The different varieties of people that result are socially acceptable only so long as they appropriate to standards set by the community. The control the community has over the individual is part of the consciousness that develops the Black identity -- this double consciousness of self is described then in Velma's language and in the language of others in that community; therefore, it would be impossible to assess and appreciate *The SaltEaters* without grasping the essential role of Velma Henry, the principal signifier of
Emphasis on indirection as an element of signifying shows the vital issue of signifying in *The SaltEaters*, and Henry Louis Gates' attention to this strategy points to this fact: "In the literature of Signifyin(g) . . . linguists stress indirection as the most salient feature of this rhetorical strategy" (The Signifying Monkey 103). *The SaltEaters* employs from the very opening of the novel, the rhetorical function of signifying by using indirection. The role of Minnie Ransom in the novel is signified by many factors—one factor is the manner in which she chooses to wear certain kinds of clothes:

Minnie Ransom herself, the fabled healer of the district, her bright-red flouncy dress drawn in at the waist with two different strips of Kenti cloth, up to her elbows in a minor fortune of gold, brass and silver bangles, the silken fringe of the shawl shimmying at her armpits. Her head, wrapped in some juicy hot-pink gelee, was tucked way back into her neck, eyes peering down her nose at Velma as though old-timey spectacles perched there was slipping down. (3-4)

Specific and prominent details of this passage lead the reader to look at the situation of Minnie Ransom and to ask questions such as, what meaning is being described or what basic suggestions may be employed by Minnie's character itself? Butler-Evans suggests Minnie's attire has a particular meaning:
The novel’s feminist discourse is further developed through its depiction of Minnie Ransom, "the fabled faith healer of the district." Even her mode of attire—the dress made of Kenti cloth, the gelee a specifically African headwear popular among Black women who identify with cultural nationalism—semiotically addresses her cultural and political significance. She is the embodiment of Black women's culture. (171)

The presence of Minnie Ransom goes beyond "political significance" in the novel. As I will show in the process of healing, that Minnie's character embodies all meanings of signifying that I presented earlier: Minnie's use of folk methods, her traditional dress, her relationship to the community in general gives focus to the process of self-realization that informs the theme of cultural identity that inhabits The SaltEaters.

To Susan Willis, Minnie Ransom is just "the healer, whose hands and urgent pleas attempt to pull Velma Henry back into life's flow" (Specifying 130). Here however, indirection, as a part of the signifying element appropriates to Bambara's intended effect to portray Minnie Ransom's character as a larger force in the meaning of the novel. I say that Minnie's dress signifies her liberated spirit. What she wears draws a parallel between her life as a spinister-healer who is rooted in her spiritual development which comes from freedom and self-acceptance of who she is. Minnie, however, appears not to be liberated of the mind because she dresses and looks eccentric. Minnie involves the reader in the story in two ways: the way she
looks and what she does. The questions she asks "can you afford to be whole?" not only involves the reader in the story (since Minnie herself appears not to be whole) but also emphasizes Bambara's own self-questioning (at least to signify her commitment to cultural nationalism), the influence is to being "wholly" committed to the cultural values of the Black community.

Bambara uses various of Henry Louis Gates' "figures of Signification" as traditional elements in narrating the most apparent and not apparent meaning of the text. To illustrate how meaning in the text unfolds from several figures of signification, she structures these distinct framing devices: the Southwest Community Infirmary, the Black bus driver, the Seven Sisters Theatre troupe at the Sidewalk Café. In giving voice to the idea of death and rebirth and healing in the novel, Bambara uses signifying and signifiers that speak to the readers expectations and assumptions. Velma Henry's interior monologue in which she reflects on "how she might have died" is significant for developing the novel. Also important is Minnie Ransom's character which shows her traditional role as culturally significant. The element of indirection (defined by Claudia Mitchell-Kernan and Henry Louis Gates Jr.) is "embedded" in the discourse of these women and is used as a framing device to provide for the reader an access to Bambara's theme of the community and its relation to the breaking and the making of the Black person's identity, hence a black notion
of self. Meaning in the novel results principally from the linking or juxtaposition of seemingly subtle realities that, from the circumstance, are not immediately apparent. The levels of language are implicit in this discussion for "the jumble of voices encircling Velma and her healer, represent a varied collection of individuals whose present observations intersect with remembered bits from their separate pasts . . ." (Willis 130). The presence of each framing device (the infirmary, the Bus driver, and the Seven Sisters Theatre troupe) is to convey to readers realities about Black life they may have had in their assumptions and expectations. The various definitions of signifying structure the story to affect readers perception of Black life when they read the novel.

The Southwest Community Infirmary

It is natural to heal Velma at the Infirmary; life in Claybourne is here:

So the Southwest Community Infirmary, Established 1871 by the Free Coloreds of Claybourne, went up on its spot and none other at the base of Gaylord Hill directly facing the Masons' Lodge, later the Friendship Hall where the elders of the district arbitrated affairs and now the Academy where the performing arts, the martial arts, the medical arts, the scientific arts, and the arts and humanities were taught without credit and drew from the ranks of workers, dropouts, students, housewives, ex-cons, vets, church folk, professionals, an alarming number of change agents, as they insisted on calling themselves. (SaltEaters 120).
The hidden life of the Southwest Community Infirmary is suggested in the way the details of its history is given in the text. Readers must look through the details of the description, one long sentence, to gain access to its meaning. The structure of this language signifies that within this strategy lies a double-voice. First is the one voice that gives the infirmary an historical basis; the other not apparent, is enclosed in words that say "went up on its and none other" to suggest that its location "facing the Mason's Lodge, later the Friendship Hall" is particularly acute since it was not preceded by "none other" buildings. It's an original, and had not changed its correspondences with the cultural myths and legends that characterized its structure. Bambara uses the infirmary to give status to the healing process that happens there.

Minnie Ransom's voice is present in the room at The Southwest Community Infirmary where she begins her healing of Velma Henry. She puts forth her philosophy loud enough for anyone within an earshot to hear:

"As I said, Folks come in here moaning and carrying on and say they want to be healed. But like the wisdom warns, "Doan letcha mouf getcha in what you backbone caint stand""

Minnie's statement expresses less than what is actually her role at the Infirmary. It leads the reader to become involved in the entire healing process and to understand the greater metaphor that is extended with the details that
surround the setting at The Infirmary. It begins, however, with Minnie's role which Butler-Evans describes as the maternal-spiritual synthesis the novel addresses. Significantly, however, Butler feels "Minnie represents a triumph of folk wisdom over scientific knowledge, of women's culture over patriarchal dominance. She symbolizes the valorization of a specific Black women's culture . . ." (Race, Gender, Desire . . . 182). Of course, as I have stated, Minnie's position far exceeds what Butler sees.

Minnie Ransom's words express some of the fundamental concepts of signifying found in the Black tradition of double-talk. Her statement does make the point that liberation requires the painful journey of self-exploration in order to get self-acceptance; she makes this point simply by quoting the proverb to show the folly of trying to regulate the mind by thinking about one's own thinking and then talking about it without backing up one's statement with specific action (this is a memorable idea in Zen writings. Thinking about thinking is like asking a knife to turn around cut its own blade); nevertheless, what Bambara does with Minnie Ransom here at the Southwest Infirmary is to invoke the idea of liberation of the mind. Both the Infirmary and Minnie Ransom complement more than contradict each other.

It is appropriate that the basis of Minnie Ransom's fervor is in healing Black people at the Southwest Community Infirmary. Bambara's carefully
detailed scrutiny of the place, with all its apparent vivacity, serves only to reveal its singleness of purpose—for folks who say "they want to be healed" (SaltEaters 9). The purpose of the Infirmary contrasts sharply with the visitors, nurses, staff who are triggered by Velma Henry's suicide attempt, and whose curiosities and vulnerabilities are heightened by Minnie Ransom's healing process:

The Infirmary staff, lounging in the rear of the treatment room, leaned away from the walls to grunt approval, though many privately thought this was one helluva way to conduct a healing. Others, who witnessed the miracle of Minnie Ransom's laying on the hands over the years, were worried. It wasn't like her to be talking on and on, taking so long a time to get started. But then the whole day's program that Doc Serge had arranged for the visitors had been slapdash and sloppy. (SaltEaters 9)

This folk process of healing is part of that spiritual realm Bambara refers to when she talks about the "split" in the psychic and spiritual forces in the Black community. People are used to a certain way of life a certain order of things: "It wasn't like her to be talking on and on, taking so long a time to get started." This notion of difference, an obvious change, is part of the disillusionment and confusion that enraptures the people of Claybourne. The healing process begins with the probing of circumstances that cause the "split."

The people at the Infirmary exemplify a literal representation of traditional life. Their existence is dramatized as more psychologically complex
than that of Velma Henry's breakdown. Susan Willis explains how indirection is signified by the People at the Infirmary:

The metaphor of the individual's relationship to community could not be more explicit. If Velma Henry embodies the revolutionary leader, alone and in crisis, then the cacophony is the community; or rather, it is the narrative jumble that would be reshaped in a meaningful way if the community were serving, supportive, and cohesive (Specifying 131).

Like Butler, Willis ignores the significance of the infirmary itself. The cacophony she describes is emblematic of people in a confrontation with an archetypal figure of signification. Minnie Ransom, almost a fixture in the Infirmary, is the agent through whom the staff becomes aware of their own frailty and through the healing of Velma will experience the possibility of rebirth and self discovery. The Infirmary, then, becomes the exciting, ambivalent emblem of a fragmented and confused community. The description of the staff, the triviality, transience, and emptiness of what passes in Claybourne for life, is given in a series of representations of the people present at the Infirmary for Velma Henry's healing:

The staff asprawl behind the visitors on chairs, carts, table corners, swinging their legs and doing maneuvers with the edges of matchbooks, seemed to be content to watch the show for hours. But less than fifteen minutes ago they'd actually been on the front steps making bets, actually making cash bets with patients and various passers-by that the healing session would take no more than five or ten minutes. (10)
The Infirmary itself functions as a principal signifier in the novel. It is presented as a character because of the effective role it plays in the interaction of the people who come there to be healed; regulars are visitors, staff workers, Minnie Ransom and patients like Velma Henry, whose completed healing helps to establish the overall dynamics of the place.

"Can you afford to be whole?" Minnie was singsonging it, the words, the notes ricocheting around the room. Mr. Daniels picked out one note and matched it, then dug under it, then climbed over it. His brother from the opposite side of the circle glided into harmony with him while the rest of the group continued working to pry Velma Henry loose from the gripping power of the disease and free her totally into Minnie Ransom's hand certain of total cure there. (106)

All the unusual events that go on around and inside the Infirmary seem believable. I say, in fact, that in the treatment of these events, Bambara creates verisimilitude which gives the appearance or likeness of what is actual at the Infirmary and what is actual about the Infirmary. At the same time, Bambara also makes readers aware of the Infirmary's particularity, cultural and universal significance. The details in the following passage, even apparently insignificant ones, are weighted to convey more than mere surface observations about the Infirmary, yet every word contributes to the circumstance of this place:

This was what it was supposed to be. A clean, freshly painted, quiet music room with lots of sunlight. People standing about wishing Mrs. Henry well and knowing Miss Ransom would do
what she said she would do. Miss Ransom known to calm fretful babies with a smile or a pinch of the thigh, known to cool out nervous wives who bled all the time and couldn't stand still, known to dissolve hard lumps in the body that the doctors at the county hospital called cancers. This was the real thing. (113)

The atmosphere of the room is presented in two different ways: "clean, freshly painted" to suggest a sense of order. The atmosphere seemingly is enhanced with "lots of sunlight" gives all the appearance of normal order of things. Amidst this is Minnie Ransom whose knowledge of folk medicine triumphs over all that is modern. She uses a "smile" or "pinch" for calming infants, has her own methods for healing women diseases--"nervous wives who bled all the time" and could do what modern medicine couldn't do:" dissolve "cancer" lumps. This was the "real" thing. The importance of the folk tradition is therefore signified in this way.

Again things that signify one meaning and have another are brought forth in this description of the Infirmary especially in the image of the place that is suggested in its folk history:

It was said though in the stories, songs, jokes and riddles of the district... More than one community sage, on foggy nights upon hearing the groan as the Infirmary switched to its own generators, power from the main line dwindling, would nudge a kid and point toward the top of the hill and explain, "Their world-wide program, their destiny, youngblood, is to drain the juices and to put out the lights. And don't you forget it." (SaltEaters 121)
Other examples such as the ex-pimp and dope dealer Doc Serge, the administrator, add to the ambiguous status of the Infirmary and to the idea of being made "well" and the real thing. Real in what sense? (I think that means real as in accepting what is.) Real life is given in the basic situations and occasions of daily experiences.

Each realm of Black life in Claybourne has some specific forum that associates it with the Infirmary. These forums are signified as occasions or situations where someone could become involved, make a statement or otherwise carry his or her interest forward. Several of these occasions point to special features of the Infirmary such as Doc Serge's talk:

Many of the strollers-in, Lily cups in hand, passes or prescription slips flapping and rustling, were as eager for Doc Serge's talk as the visitors, particularly the part about how the workers of old held steadfast against the so-called setting of standards, the licensure laws, the qualifying exams, the charges of quackery or charlatanism or backwardness, the attempt to take over the medical arts by the spiritual and material capitalists. Things always got right lively then. (107)

Situations in the Infirmary are signified with realistic details and with fantastic details of folk culture; the storyteller Doc Serge is also a part of the mixture. Side by side with his flights of oral storytelling, readers see some of his surprisingly ambiguous character. "Doc" Serge, Administrator of the Infirmary shades into the irony of the text with his double identity as man of
science and a storyteller of folk heroes, medicines and cures. This former gangster and pimp, who now runs the infirmary, signifies an intended discrepancy between what is said and what is meant by the Infirmary. At the same time his character, whether as a man of science or as a folk medicine man is therapeutic for the people who come to the Infirmary. For example, we learn "it was almost as pleasurable [for the people at the Infirmary to hear] Doc Serge knock down all the visitors' arguments as it was to hear about the courage and resourcefulness of the old bonesetters, the old medicine show people, the grannies and women, the Obeah folks, and the medicine people of the Yamassee and Yamacrow who'd helped the Southwest Community Infirmary defend itself and build itself through the years" (107). Thus, signifying with events and situations makes it possible for Bambara to work out many effects and themes of the novel by setting the healing process at the Infirmary.

Humorous situations signify absurd and unexpected incongruities at the Infirmary. One case in point involves one little old woman, who wanted to have her say about Minnie Ransom's healing process, which seemed, at that time, unusually slow. The old woman was "silenced by an elbow in her side pocket and folks were cutting their eyes at her" (10). Significantly "cutting eye" is giving a negative response to an unfavorable phenomenon. It is ironic
though that this act which is done to trap others into respective positions of subordination, is performed at a healing that asks for expression of free spirit. It is humorous because it conjures up a cultural image of a familiar nonverbal folk tradition. In another sense, it underscores the impatience of the woman who wants the healing to be over and done with, which is not the way it is supposed to be.

In his article "Non-verbal Communication Among Afro-Americans: An Initial Classification" Benjamin G. Cooke explains how this non-verbal technique works. He calls it a "silent rap" that "can be used effectively across the distance of a room; this is actually one of its best features. In addition, it can be utilized when there are a great deal of noise and a great many people in the environment that would interrupt the flow of a verbal rap" (Rappin' and Stylin' Out 48). This tradition is strong throughout the non-verbal action of the people at the Infirmary.

Throughout The SaltEaters, Bambara reinforces and extends the focus of the Infirmary as a framing device for the story by images and figures of speech that create verbal and situational irony that signify and give indirect reference to the people of Claybourne. At the Infirmary readers see the healing of Velma Henry. According to Elliot Butler-Evans, "Velma's collapse can be read as a serious questioning of the wisdom of self-negation in the
interest of a totalizing ideology and a rebellion against it" (Race, Gender, and Desire 181); however, in her selection of language and detail Bambara signifies the importance of Velma’s presence at the Infirmary with a selection of anecdotal evidence that helps to create an ominous sense of and catastrophe. Butler-Evans nevertheless infers that what was wrong with Velma is a woman thing:

Confronted with the demands and contradictions of the movement in the public arena and the discord in her marriage to Obie at the personal level, Velma is driven to madness and attempted suicide. (181)

Fortunately, Bambara provides a sense of what such madness and such human responses are like when Velma tells her own story. To that end, Bambara employs signifying, so readers act as witnesses to this illness. Throughout the narrative, Bambara pulls the readers in with strong images of Velma, marching, having her period, having sex with strange men, traveling all over, in fact being a liberated woman. The reader also follows Velma through her marriage and through its deterioration. The way Bambara chooses words, gives ambiguity to the way the meaning is put together in a sentence emphasizes the idea that Velma is reduced to being a possession. The essence of Velma’s illness, however, is best signified in the profound wisdom of Sophie Heywood:
You never really know a person until you’ve eaten salt together, she’d told herself. But she’d gone through many a better experience with Velma, and still she was baffled. What had gone wrong? What did it mean?... In time Velma would find her way back to the roots of life. And in doing so, be a model... But somehow maybe the act of trying to sever a vein or climbing into the oven was like going into the caves, a beginning...

Sophie Heywood is Velma’s godmother — who signifies responsibility for the growth of the child into adulthood. Her hardest test of all, she said, was wanting to speak to her godchild to tell her, "Your life is yours to do with as you please.... "I, your folks, your family, an all who care for you have no say-so in the matter...." (148). In mixing the active process of Velma’s healing with Velma’s subjective monologue, Bambara incorporates a wide range of figures of Signification, tropes (as named by Henry Louis Gates Jr.) of information—historical, political, statistical, personal, and anecdotal—that inject irony into Velma Henry’s handling of incidents. What the reader knows and what Velma learns about herself inform the themes of The SaltEaters.

Velma’s presence at the Infirmary is a popular consideration of critics who evaluate the novel. Susan Willis believes” Velma Henry’s attempted suicide is a figural device for asking in an agonizing way, what will be the terms of the individual’s relationship to loved ones and community, to past tradition and future society” (Specifying 153). Other critics see Velma as an older,
disillusioned Naomi from "The Apprentice" who has worked and worked only
to see the struggle lose its impetus and things she fought so hard to achieve,
their significance (Ruth Elizabeth Burks 56). Burks looks at how ironically
language fails to help Velma. She describes Velma's attempt to take her life
and her direct responses to becoming well:

[Velma] both slits her wrists and sticks her head into an oven to
make sure that it will be enough. But... her double attempt at
suicide fails. She is miraculously saved from physical death, but
lost in a spiritual emptiness that must be filled before she can be
whole. Her "insanity," the emptiness of inside of her, must be
replaced with a spirituality which eventually derives its strength
and power from within. (56)

Other critics who interpret Velma's interior monologue, place her and the
Infirmary in an extending metaphor that says "The SaltEaters attempts to find
a social alternative where the individual would be defined by neither extreme--
... the individual's possibility for achieving absolute autonomy against its
antithesis, the dissolution of self within the group" (Susan Willis 153).
Purposely signified in the title are the maxims and proverbs of salt. "One
must eat salt to be healed. One must eat salt to live." Ahiro speaks to Obie,
Velma's husband, about the importance of salt. "Too little salt and wounds
can't heal. Remember Napoleon's army? Those frogs were dropping dead from
scratches because their bodies were deprived of salt" (The SaltEaters 164).
These critics undoubtedly do not explore the assets of signifying in the novel
such as the focus of the people at the Infirmary so ubiquitous that they fail to acknowledge their special value. No criticism given to the novel will be complete if it offers only a resilient discussion of the folk traditions in the novel. Looking at signifying as it structures the novel will provide for many critics an excellent assessment of the cultural status of Black people in Black communities. The SaltEaters are at the Infirmary, which in its own historical and physical image have been burdened with too much salt. The healing process which is one of the mutual interest at the infirmary illuminates the ways in which a community may respond to its cultural heritage. The image of the Infirmary where Velma is "made well" causes readers to look again and perhaps rethink Bambara's theme of the coming together of the Black community with the individual, as a unit, so readers may begin to analyze more carefully assumptions and expectations of identity, and thus to come to a new insight.

The Bus Driver

"And the bus wasn't going to wait. The driver had made that quite plain. He would be pulling in at 3:08 from his regular run, taking a dinner break, then pulling out sharply with the charter bus at 5:30" (The SaltEaters 9). This is not a traditional bus driver or even an understanding or sympathetic one. He is just frustrated, for he wants things to be well. The
key to understanding this character and his place in the novel is to relate verbal signifying "loud-talking" to his language. Claudia Mitchell-Keman uses the term to say: "Loud-talking often has the effect of unequivocally signaling the intent of the speaker from the perspective of the addressee. That is to say, it assures that intent will be imputed beyond the surface function of the utterance, which might be to seek information, make a request, make an observation, or furnish a reply to any of these" (Rappin' and Stylin' Out 329). To find full meaning of loud-talking in The SaltEaters readers must look at how its various devices help to interpret its paradoxical meaning. Mitchell-Keman says "Loud-talking serves as a key to the interpretation of ends" (330).

In The SaltEaters Bambara applies the odd strategy of loud-talking to Fred Holt, the bus driver, to show the antagonistic posture he figures as he passes through urban environments:

Stores gutted, car shells overturned, a playground of rust and twisted steel. Mounds of broken green bottle glass, rusted bedsprings, bald tires, doors off their hinges leaning in the wind, flower pot shards and new looking brick and lumber strewn about but not haphazardly, as if a crew had brushed them off with profit in mind. Panes of glass against a half-wall for pickup later, looked like. A project not long ago put up was now this pile of rubble, and in the middle of it all a crater. He specially did not want to look at that. Not in all this heat. Not with his stomach churning up the lousy lunch. (SaltEaters 71-72).
Being Black and living in a Black community is an important part of Fred Holt’s life. Wanting to live there and wanting to escape it plagues his existence. What Bambara does for the reader is to allow the reader to listen to what Fred Holt says or to how he addresses himself. Fred Holt is the addresser and the addressee. In order for him to cope with his life he must do some loud-talkin: therefore, readers follow him through the process that allows him to testify to his own terms of endearment. Susan Willis finds that Holt, the bus driver, is a “critical onlooker” (138) who is “not committed to bring the future through painstaking . . . community work. Instead the bus driver . . . escapes into fantasies, envisioning himself a gun-toting revolutionary. More than a “critical onlooker” Fred Holt is participating in his own healing process. He must eat some salt and find the bitterness of life among “stores gutted,” “a playground of rust and twisted steel,” and things he specially did not want to look at.” Significant in the process of addressing himself is the hope for a better life, some change. The bus driver turns to his imagination to create fantasies as a possible way to talk himself through his predicament. In the bus driver’s fantasy we see evidence of loud-talking:

Same old number he thought, rumbling over the tracks. Redevelopment, Progress. The master plan. Cut back in services, declare blight, run back from the suburbs and take over. There’d be no Hoover towns sprouting up here. There’d be highrises and boutiques next time
Mitchell-Kernan explains what this means as loud-talking. "To loud-talk is to assume an antagonistic posture toward the addressee. When it is used to censure, it reveals not only that the loud-talker has been aggrieved in some way, it also indicates by virtue of making the defect public, that the speaker is not concerned about the possibility of permanently antagonizing the addressee (331). From his fantasy experience this Black bus driver develops this dominant attitude when he addresses himself. He uses both verbal and nonverbal language to talk to himself:

[The bus driver] sucked his teeth. Niggers. Compliant movable Niggers forever going for the Oakie doke. He dropped his eyes into his lap and the light and the blue shadows there fed his mind's adventures. (72)

Besides outwardly and publically showing his disgust for his job, the bus driver uses this traditional gesture of sucking his teeth to show his displeasure with himself. In this gesture, sucking his teeth is an affirmative to what he is thinking. When directed at someone, a gesture of sucking the teeth could mean dismissal of what the person says to imply "I don't care." In my own culture, an audible suck teeth would bear serious consequences on the child who does it for it is referred to as chuspe (explained in the appendix). What is signified by the bus driver sucking his teeth and then his retortion "Niggers"
is that he has given his introspective analysis a conclusion about the Black people amongst who he dwells. Using the sucked teeth non-verbal behavior shows how these traditional methods of signifying behavior helps the reader to understand what it means to search for self-identity in the Black community. Talkin to oneself is healthy but it appears unnatural. It is a part of the double-voiced readers find in other of characters in The SaltEaters who signify to create an identity for themselves. Using loud-talking to structure the character of the bus driver reveals some of the ironies of the novel: the juxtaposition of the efficient bus driver who is concerned about delays but whose concern for the deteriorating Black urban community is met only through appropriation of signifying to himself in order to allow his Black consciousness to assert itself:

Speeding past the marshes, Fred Holt was brimming over with rage and pain and loss. He watched the upcoming rush of rails with such intensity, could see the bushes down to the depths, it etched an imprint that became magnetized, drawing substance to it, sucking plasma from the underbrush creatures, draining colors from the trees and shrubs, snatching sound from birds, crickets and from Fred Holt's lungs, pulling life to it for manifestation in a tangible form. (80-81)

The traditional function of loud-talking is how Bambara marks the text as culture specific. This element of signifying is important to the Fred Holt who wants to reject the stereotypes heaped on him by being Black and by
being in the traditional role of the niggers he condemns as he addresses himself. Loud-talkin marks him as tough and independent and allows him to successfully rebel against stereotypes and to assert forcefully his own autonomy and self-definition in the Black community.

Another element of loud-talking is conjuring up images. The interchange between Fred Holt and Porter, after Holt crashed the bus, focuses on specific images as the strategy Fred uses to endure what he feels is an impending death. Fred, before losing consciousness, sees the already dead Porter in the swamp:

Fred Holt at the bottom of the marshes with the steering wheel off and in his hands, trying to comprehend it like an amoeba, swarming around it, surrounding it, absorbing it. Then Porter appearing in hip boots like he'd been fishing on a Sunday morning, hailing him, "How you faring, brotherman?" and him saying "Fair to middling. And you?" And Porter looking up through the green and grinning, "The toss was boss, but the pitch was a bitch. A sunken bus! Can a nigger live?" (103)

Can a nigger live?" is presumably Porter's comment on the status of the Black community, and also on his drug life as a drug addict. But the reader will naturally apply it to Fred Holt. Here is the old irony applied with new force. The characteristics of the language and the context in which it occurs develop the irony of this passage. "Porter in hip boots" and asking Fred Holt, "How you faring brotherman?" and Fred Holt's reply "fair to middling" marks the
verbal art of signifying indirectly to suggest "can a nigger live?" The entire scene conjures up the idea of how can someone live when there's death and decay around him. The irony is that Porter is dead and Holt lives. Holt must loud-talk himself into living.

This irony is further developed with this Black bus driver's own racist attitude toward some of his "colored" passengers: "He was driving an unsafe bus with drunken white folks, severe, righteous Whiteys looking just like the ones in the lynch mob pictures, a pack of strange talking women with troublemaking skirts, and a retarded looking farm kid with a basket of snakes. "Beat me Jesus he muttered, beat me all in my chest. Snakes. Can you imagine that?" (78). Loud-talking in The SaltEaters brings voices from the past to fuse with those of the present to show the different groups of people from the urban setting that contrast with the people of Claybourne: a group of white musicians, practitioners of Black music, and finally "two fat ladies," whose race, class, and culture seem to have been absorbed by the amorphous category of housewife, each make up the population of Fred Holt's bus. The red-neck musicians in the bus demonstrate that cultural interest need not coincide. The bus driver's attitude undercuts the assumption of Black solidarity with the Third World. Fred Holt's attitude and repulsion toward the urban settings and the multiracial groups that ride his bus provide a
juxtaposition of the two images. Like Velma, both "images inscribe representations of [Fred Holt's] body in an arena of strife" (Butler-Evans 179). Significantly, instead of strife loud-talking presents resolutions of conflicts for the bus driver. And it signifies a profound insight for him. His images brought on the crisis that caused him to crash the bus, followed by a moment of awareness that his best friend Porter was dead and Fred had to live. Porter wasn't there in the swamp with Fred. For Fred "There'd be no one to pick up the cue anymore. . .[or] to ask "Can you live? Can a Nigger live?" (78). These moments of insight carry in themselves the significance of the entire novel. Like Velma, the bus driver, Fred Holt, struggles toward self-awareness. Both develop in the novel according to what he and she come to understand about themselves. In The SaltEaters readers come to know the characters from the inside and from the outside and from what they say and by how they "signify" to get their meaning across.

The Seven Sisters Theatre Troupe

The section that narrates the seven sisters theatre troupe may be viewed as having two dimensions for it becomes largely a vehicle through which Bambara advances her theme of cultural identity. The ability to maintain a cultural focus amidst the changing environment is more emphasized than what critics see as a "utopia" or a solidarity of the movement for political
consciousness. The scene at the Sidwalk Cafe introduces a number of tropes that are worked out in the novel, but in highly striking ways. I identify these tropes (figures of signification) in the bits of conversation that force the figurative associations of the novel's language. Here at the Cafe, Bambara uses call-response to sell her theme of the focus on culture to sustain a Black identity. Geneva Smitherman in *Talkin' and Testifyin'* defines the process of call-response as: "spontaneous verbal and non-verbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all of the speaker's statements, ("calls") are punctuated by expressions ("responses") from the listener" (104). The cafe scene in *The SaltEaters* shows the influence of the tradition call-response mode of signifying. Susan Willis describes this scene to show its political significance to the novel:

> Here the Seven Sisters Theatre Troupe assembles for lunch, tables away from a group of engineers from the local pollution-producing and highly exploitative chemical plant, tables away from two Black women radicals. While the theatre troupe plots its antinuke offering, the engineers play their version of global annihilation, and the radical women discuss the nuts and bolts of community organizing. For the most part, the tables define separate islands of conversations and political allegiance, except during fleeting moments when the Japanese "Sister of the Rice" shares suggestive glances with the Japanese chemical engineer (a gesture intended as an ironic device underscoring the error of assuming a shared politics on a purely ethnic basis). (Susan Willis 132)
The scene which is narrated in the novel by Campbell the waiter moves beyond the boundaries of "political allegiance." The women share stories about their lives thereby creating a sense of self that creates a response from each other to tell about herself. Each woman is representative of a woman of color and each participates in an oral response that is culturally specific. The varieties of women represented in the troupe is a call for commitment to identity and not to any idealization of self. The coming together of the sisters group emphasizes the strength of the Black woman throughout the fiction of Toni Cade Bambara. The arguable dominant of this coming together is not as Butler-Evans describes: "the celebration of an image of united womanhood herald[ing] the eruption of feminist consciousness" (185).

The people who sit at the cafe and listen to the sisters tell stories about themselves represent the changing focus of the Black community. But the emphasis is on the storytelling and that underlines the importance of what Campbell sees. It is more than Willis suggests, "a shared politics"; it is a call to be oneself and a response to maintain that identity no matter where or how or when - that is the folk tradition of self assertion.

The Cafe scene is also important for it is the basis for shared communication among others, the first attempt in the novel for the process of communication to take place in a non-cultural specific environment. What is
significant here is the potpourri of people who assemble at the Cafe: Asians, Black Americans, West Indians, Africans, males, females engaging in verbal and nonverbal communication. Smitherman lists some call-responses that constitute a nonverbal communication:

Looking from side to side moving around (sometimes in a dance-like fashion, sometimes when seated, turning to the person next to you or in back of you) nodding head (also shaking head) clapping hands jumping up and down (out of your seat). (107)

The movement at the cafe suggests this nonverbal response as part of the call-response signifier in The SaltEaters at the Cafe. In the crowd Smitherman shows how this operates:

Some calls from the speaker might elicit a co-signing response from one person, an encouraging type of response from someone else, a complete response from still another listener. Whatever is being said at a particular moment will affect different listeners in different ways. (108)

Self-representation is made in this type of call-response for each person must first make an attempt to "affect different listeners in different way." This is what Bambara aims for in perception of readers. A system that moves from a sense of self to being a part of a whole. The individual must first know himself or herself in order to survive differences within a group. Calls from individuals--calls that narrate a cultural identity--further develops the cultural
project of the novel by representing the embodiment of culture within the individual. This method of call response is best written by Geneva Smitherman in *Talkin' and Testifyin'*. She explains it this way:

This interactive system embodies communality rather than individuality. Emphasis on group cohesiveness, cooperation, and the collective good... The fact that communication proceeds by the issuing of calls from individuals to the group underscores the importance of individual roles. (109)

Call-response in *The SaltEaters* is typical of Bambara's treatment of this method of signifying: In *The SaltEaters* the "call" is the "coming together" of groups, whether randomly or by choice—they meet at the Cafe. The "response" is first, the acknowledgement the importance of "individual roles" within the group. In the novel, Campbell gives the description of all these groups. He identifies that central to the representation of the groups were the Six:

They always spun to see who'd pay for each round of drinks. There were six of them, five white Americans and one Japanese who kept his own liquor supply in one of the bar's lockers—plum wine, sake, and a Mason jar that looked like corn liquor to Campbell. They always sat under the awning and usually at one of the two large round tables on his station. They always tipped well and always drank a lot. (*SaltEaters* 204-205)

The focus Bambara gives to Campbell's response to the Six of them is fulfilling one of her own imperatives for the novel, to question the paradigms of the Black community. This is accomplished through signifying, and at the Cafe
Campbell's relationship to the groups produces the double voice I discussed earlier in the chapter:

Campbell had names for all of them: Sudsy Sam, who always ordered a pitcher of beer and a frosted stein; Rising Sun, who never wore white shirts and ties like the rest but bronze-colored shirts with kimono collars; Piltdown Pete, who seemed too dumb to be a nuclear engineer, was no doubt some sort of lower-echelon technician they allowed into their august company because, perhaps, he was so totally out of their league he usually would end up paying the checks; Krupp's Kreep, in Orlon shirts and hats that were too small, forever lecturing about the necessity of beating out the Ruskys; The Grim Reaper, a name they themselves came up with, for he was constantly spoiling the fun by calling attention to the latest studies that threatened the expansion of nuclear power plant production; and The Whiner, who had kids with braces, an overwhelming mortgage, problem-prone in-laws and a frigid wife, all of which he managed to bring into discussion whatever the topic. (SaltEaters 205)

The double-voice is produced from Campbell's own selective focus of giving names to each of the six to establish his own method of identity, "all of which he managed to bring into discussion whatever the topic." The challenge for the reader then is to explore the manner in which the double-voice operates here. The reader has to begin with the image Campbell presents about the six, which shows that Campbell himself has not begun to move toward understanding himself if the strategy he employs involves seeing others through superficial means. Campbell never attempts to learn who they are.
The reader response goes further to the larger issue of culture and ethnic acceptance is subtly introduced in this cafe scene. The communication that proceeds (as Smitherman suggests) from individuals to the group must underscore the importance of individual roles (109). Therefore Bambara has uniquely signified for the reader the focus of culture in establishing and maintaining an identity. When Elliot Butler-Evans describes what he thinks Bambara is doing with the Cafe scene he misses the way a reader participates in the rhetorical strategy that involves signifying an individual role in a diverse community:

The utopian construct that constitutes a trajectory of desire is the material-spiritual synthesis earlier discussed by Bambara. It is reiterated in the novel through observations made by Campbell and the Seven Sisters. In The SaltEaters this utopia is presented as accessible and partially realized. The difference that the medical community gives to Minnie Ransom in her role as faith healer. . .the academy as the site which "teachers. . .were steadily realigning cultural and political loyalties. . .and the representation of the Seven Sisters as projections of possible "Third World" or "women-of-color" unity all encode a possible realization and activation of the utopian project. (Race, Gender, Desire. . .177-8)

I think what Bambara aims for is clear: the ability of Black folks to maintain a Black identity within a changing world to call upon the folk traditions that help the individual to obtain a concept of self. The Seven Sisters at the Cafe
remains one of the most enigmatic and elusive description of *The SaltEaters*. It sustains the values and language and promotes the idea of unity among others that is established in cafe scenes. People at the cafe are evaluated by their peers for their abilities to function within society as is demonstrated by the bestowing of names by Campbell on the Six men. The idea of culture specific that was raised in the short stories is still dominant here. For at the Cafe, the "call-response" is the signifying principle that allows each person to value himself and to be valued by others. Representative of this sentiment is the following example. By unifying the various groups together, people of different races, sexual orientations, women and men, Bambara is signifying a call for bringing not a Black community but a multifaceted community where everyone can be together but maintain his or her identity. Like the West Indian Kalaloo, each person would signify as ingredients, by his or her individual presence but at the same time add to the flavor of the community as a whole:

But Jan didn't hear, she had turned round again. Daughters of the Crops. Sisters of the Fruit. Jan pursed her lips, on the half-chance that memory cells in her mouth had better storage and retrieval faculties than her brain. Palma's friends. The Asian sister had done a song about the pig-iron furnaces of China. There was a long piece they'd ended with, a colored sister solidarity piece, operatic almost, a fuguelike interweaving of the voices, the histories, the lore of Caribbean, African, Native
American—"Seven Sisters! Remembers?" But Ruby was still not facing her way and Jan felt a bit silly, exclaiming aloud. She turned back toward the large table, hoping to catch one of the sisters' eyes, but they were buried in their menus, and the dark-skinned sister in the black felt hat was talking very rapidly, as if reciting the words of song they all had to put the memory right away. (SaltEaters 214)

In Specifying, Susan Willis like Butler-Evans concludes the community never comes together: In all the novel's metaphor for society, the infirmary, the bus, the sidewalk cafe, "Bambara defines focal points in the larger social context that might one day be defined by community. Such a community would not assume race as its primary factor, but would draw on allegiance between racially defined groups and the nascent politics of anti nuclear and cultural movements. These will provide the glue that will bring together the community of action" (132). A focus on the individual's determination for self preservation will change Willis' opinion.

Being different, but being culturally specific promotes the ambiguity and the double-consciousness of the novel. Within these boundaries lies the individual and his/her ability to question the paradigms of the society or of his/her community.

Bambara weaves many strands of meaning into The SaltEaters. These give it cultural appeal; some call it feminist ideology. The story's cultural
appeal comes from its examination of traditional elements of signifying that structure devices in the novel to mean on one hand different things to different people, but on the other hand they can mean all things to different people. The conflict that exists between people's responsibility to their society (or the society's responsibility to the individual) and their personal desires, and the conflict that occurs between tradition and change, have universal applications in The SaltEaters.

Conclusion

As readers of The SaltEaters, we learn more about the structure of Black language, possibly, how it determines the way Black people relate to others and to themselves. The double-voice of Velma Henry in The SaltEaters helps to express this view, for from her own self-examination comes the focus of narration in the novel which represents all the voices of the people in the Black community of Claybourne. Readers learn to attend to and perceive these voices only through the idea that the language is under the control of the central ability of all the characters to signify. Signifying guides their double-voice, not only in their production but also in their perception of themselves. The Whorf hypothesis that deals with the personal context of language, though out of date, has some significance, for it gives a point of view that I associate with the double-voice of Velma Henry. This hypothesis which has attracted
considerable attention among linguists, psychologists, and anthropologists is associated with Edward Sapir and his student Benjamin Lee Whorf (Contents of Language 71). Sapir explains his hypothesis to mean:

Human beings are very much at the mercy of a particular language, their language habits predisposing them to make certain choices of interpretation, and also that it [is] difficult to see what casual relationship could be expected to subsist between particular experiences and the manner in which a society expresses its experiences. (71)

Because the focus of The SaltEaters is on the Black folk tradition of Signifying, the double-voice connotation that structures the language of the characters, I feel, figures prominently into the strongest statement of the Whorf hypothesis which is that "Language structure determines thought completely and controls the way a speaker views the world; consequently, different languages produce different 'world views' in their speakers" (71). Bambara's commitment to the double-voice of Velma, hence all others in The SaltEaters, would lead the reader to assume then that Velma's language "acts as a kind of filter for reality" (71). The discussion of Velma Henry's double-voice, is therefore, concerned with interpretation of that reality. Examples of the double-voice in the context illustrates this point.

In the first example the overflow of feelings that come from Velma, signifies oppressive situations in her life from which she wishes to escape. At
the same time an alternative narrative is centered on the life of evasion that is part of poor Black people:

She tried to withdraw as she'd been doing for weeks. Withdraw the self to a safer place where husband, lover, teacher, workers, no one could follow, probe. Withdraw herself and prop up a borderguard to negotiate with would-be intruders. She'd been a borderguard all her childhood, so she knew something about it. She was the one sent to the front door to stand off the landlord, the insurance man, the green-grocer, the fish-peddler, to insure Mama Mae one more bit of peace. And at her godmother's, it was Smitty who sent her to the front door to misdirect the posse. No, no one of that name lived here. No, this was not where the note from the principal should be delivered. (SaltEaters 5)

Thus, as she sits on the stool, Velma's recollections of the past, her role as a borderguard, childhood oppressions, all mingle to present a view of reality—a reality of life for a group of people and a single reality of the Black woman. The double language structure of signifying helps to produce both those realities. Velma struggles to find out who she is by raising her consciousness of events that help to characterize her childhood experiences that linked her to the adult world. This was her "safer place" for gaining understanding of a culture that thought her to survive through deception to the "landlord, the insurance man, the green-grocer" in fact Velma has to make herself understand how necessary it was to "insure Mama Mae one more bit of peace."
"How can a nigger live?" How does a Black person live in a decaying environment? How does one live with too much salt? One has to learn like Velma did, how to "misdirect the posse" and lie about one's own name and place of residence. Velma must deal with, rather come to understand the reality of living in the Black environment in order for her to be "well."

The entire descriptions of Velma Henry, her precarious activities as a child is developed in passages of self-examination by Sophie Heywood. Sophie's self representation not only gives voice to Velma's character but also to her own. The entire passage asserts that the ordinary undistinguished Sophie Heywood is unique and worthy of admiration and respect. The language signifies Sophie's feelings but at the same time gives the reader an elliptical view of Velma as she is received in her community as shown in this passage:

Sophie Heywood had been in attendance at every other major event in Velma Henry's life. No one could say for sure if Sophie had been there when Velma had tried to do herself in, that part of the girl's story hadn't been put together yet. But she'd been there at the beginning with her baby-catching hands. There again urging "pretty please" on Velma's behalf while Mama Mae, the blood mother, plaited switches to tear up some behind. Calling herself running away to China to seek her fortune like some character she'd read about in a book, young Velma had dug a hole in the landfill, then tunneled her way through a drain pipe that led to the highway connector past
the marshes before sister Palma could catch up with her and bring her back. (11-12)

Written in the passage is the mixture of folk traditions in Sophie's language that place another interpretation on Velma's life as a young girl a variation of Velma's own perception. The folk traditions of the godmother, being at the birth with her "baby catching hands." The godmother being responsible for heeding off punishment with the traditional "plaited peach switches" used to give children a whipping. Sophie tells the antics of running away that Velma (and she makes the point) read about in some book" which distinguishes her folk culture from other traditions. Most of all she outlines that Velma has always been the topic of gossip, for "that part of the girl's story hadn't been put together yet" (12).

The representation of herself that Sophie gives details her caring for Velma in specific folk vernacular: She'd "turn a warm eye on the child's triumphs, a glass eye on everything else." Sophie also tells how old folks in the community saw Velma "breaking her bonds and casting away the cord." In fact, Velma "was steady making her bed hard" (12). From these sayings is implied in Sophie Heywood's language an element of folk superstition which is that the unruly child (wayward child) often ends up with a distressful, tragic life if he/she disrespects his/her elders. The ambiguous reality is that Velma
was "taught" this kind of behavior in her attempts to help Mama Mae ward off creditors; this behavior, unfortunately is accepted as a necessity behavior in the Black community. Although, in Sophie Heywood's case, she "has" to protect Velma, for her cultural conditioning as a godmother demands her to do so. This is why she questions that curious position in which she is placed:

For those old timers that walked the chalk, why a woman such as Sophie Heywood, chapter president of the Women's Auxilliary of the Sleeping Car Porters for two decades running would even cross the street for the likes of Velma Henry was a mystery anyway. But there it was, so must it be--the godmother ever ready to turn the lamp down low on the godchild's indiscretions. (12)

So much is said about the Black culture in these passages; so much is said about Black language and how it figures permanently in the lives of Black people who participate in this "living" language. The key to understanding the element of signifying in the double-voice of Velma is to see how the language performs as each person's character is given in series of events and in relationships. When readers hear the double-voice, they have to decide if Bambara herself is signifying: Is she "turning a warm eye" on the culture or "a glass eye on everything else." Is she, through the double-voice of Velma Henry, "ever ready to turn the lamp down low" on the perceptions Black people get of themselves when the culture itself dictates them to be who they are? I conclude that studying the double-voice of Velma Henry in The SaltEaters
has brought to light the importance of folklore and language in the fiction of Toni Cade Bambara and that readers gain a largely cultural view of Black life in the fiction of Toni Cade Bambara.
WORKS CITED (INTRODUCTION)


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WORKS CITED (CHAPTER ONE)


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WORKS CITED (CHAPTER TWO)


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APPENDIX A

WHAT I'M THINKING NOW

I was thinking throughout the dissertation process that I should have done a study on Virgin Islands people and their folklore since folktales, legends, superstitions, folk medicine, folk songs, food in particular, the shape of the land, the hurricanes and things among things make for the total identity of the Virgin Islander. Why so? Because Virgin Islanders are made that way. "Nobody," I said to myself, would be interested in people who are trained not to depart from the Virgin-Islands' way of life. I suppose it would have made a reader of my dissertation say, "so what?" when I wrote that we never call attention to an important idea by using a person's name. Instead, we use the dog, cat, cow, horse, monkey, to make a point; if one needed to be heeded about talking too much, he or she would be told not to "tell cow Howdy." When a strong personality matched with another strong personality, we learned to say "Two congos (eels) can't live in one hole." In fact, animals are so significant in giving meanings to the language, that a Virgin Islander cannot complete a conversation with saying such things as "monkey know what tree to climb on" or "cockroach don't go in fowl house."

The meaning behind these phrases has a stronger effect on the receiver than a physical blow to the head; for the speaker, complete satisfaction and a
sense of fulfillment is achieved. The most used phrase, however, is the one I borrowed for the title of this dissertation: "Never mind the catta, 'tis the bundle behind." It means that the catta, though significant for balancing a heavy load on the head, is not the most valuable; what's inside the bundle of goods that's being balanced has the value.

Virgin Island stories are lively tales and adventures of Jumbies and werewolves, carnivals and hurricanes. Books are written and read through one's own experience. So when I read the fiction of Toni Cade Bambara, I knew I would be a vicarious participant especially when I discovered phrases such as "sucking teeth" (our own "chuspe") "cutting eye," "turn the lamp down low." These called out to me so strongly, I knew that there was more in the bundle behind.

_Gorilla, My Love_

This collection of stories is the first I read of Toni Cade Bambara's works. I bought it at an English Department book sale in Denney Hall at the Ohio State University. I couldn't believe what I was reading -- the people were "real." I was delighted with the young girl narrator; her spunk, her rebelliousness, her entire behavior was what I called assertive, for I identified with her completely. I found I could fold myself into the language and live the scenes on Amsterdam Avenue. I traded in my mind the names of places for
similar ones in Frederiksted, St. Croix where I grew up. Amsterdam Avenue became Kronprinsden Gade or Kongens Gade. I gasped when Hazel talked about the May Pole and the new dress and new shoes she would have to wear. I remembered my days platting the pole and being rejected as a participant because I never could keep up with the configurations that braided and unbraided the pole. One year, for example, I caused one girl to go under instead of over and we knotted the entire top section, so all the streamers were tangled. In my own patois, I said the phrases; translated or spoken from the text, they sounded the same.

In the classroom I read to my students these delightful stories; many asked for copies of the stories or wanted to know where they could buy the book. I found whenever I was tired, lonely, depressed, or just pensive in mood, I could read only a few selections of the collection and my heart would thrill at the language, each word fulfilling, humor more funny than funny. This was my aesthetic find.

The Seabirds Are Still Alive

I looked for this book, that is, I wanted to read more of Bambara's works, so I went hunting for it. I bought a copy for $1.50 at the SBX Book Store on North High Street in Columbus, Ohio. I didn't like it at first. Everything made me sad. The women reminded me of women I knew when
I taught in the South Bronx in New York City. I always felt these women were so badly cheated: living in cramped housing, hustling or having four or five men to support them. I read only "A Tender Man" and "The Seabirds Are Still Alive" (which I didn't understand). I put the book down. When I went back to it, I started to read from the back to the front. I picked "Christmas Eve at Johnson's Drug N Goods" and the women in this story perked me up. Their worldly and earthy behavior, and their language, was one of contentment. I immediately made a connection between these women and others I had met in the housing projects in Brooklyn Heights in Brooklyn, New York. In one of my Women's Studies classes at OSU, I wrote journal entries on these women. I compared them to images of Black women in literature. My main contention was these women lacked pretentiousness and each had a solid cultural identity of who she was.

The SaltEaters

I have read The SaltEaters at least seven times. I got the book for free from one of those book representatives who visits college and university campuses. I thought at first reading that this was a radical departure from the short story collections not only in form but also in its narrative style. Somebody else was telling the story and each speaker would enlist my attention in an unusual way. It was like trying to patch a skirt or something.
I would read a section, mark it, read another, mark it and then try to put both parts together. I felt as if I was listening to someone testifying but doing so at different times only that each burst of testimony was given without warning. It was like trying to read a history book where I would have to keep looking back to find the relationship between people, time, and dates. Yes, The SaltEaters was a puzzle, but not for long. When I began to pay close attention to the narration, I began to see some patterns that were consistent in the language. Things, however, were never clear to me (some still are not) until I began to write about the novel.

What I like about each of the fiction is that they all hold some kind of a familiar experience for me. Not just a sense of "that's familiar" but a sense of participation in the experience of the narrative voice.

I was thinking the other day how my students would respond to The SaltEaters. I know how they would respond to the Gorilla stories. I have a notion of how they will write and ask questions about The Seabirds stories. I have no idea how The SaltEaters would affect their thinking. The best opportunity I will have, though, is that I will be able to continue to study these works, perhaps do a comparative study with the stories in Gorilla with the stories from the Virgin Islands. Who knows. Somewhere in the bundle are more meanings behind the folklore and the language in the fiction of Toni Cade
Bambara.

I'm also thinking that I would like to tell stories the same way Bambara does. I want to let the folk traditions do the talking, make the language come alive. I like to "talk that talk" too. I always use the traditional folk speech (creole) of the Virgin Islands to say what I have to say and to give emphasis to my feelings. I know that when I use my own dialect to converse with friends or colleagues, I attract attention and people always seem to have an interest in the way I combine folk sayings in my dialogue. Finding a way to write what I tell or what I know, to preserve a culture in story is what I think I want to do, to "produce stories that save lives."