People's Democratic Republic of Algeria
Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research
University of Oran 2
Faculty of Foreign Languages
Department of English

A Thesis Submitted to the English Language Department for the Requirements of the Doctorate Degree in Sciences

The Role of Religion and Spirituality in the Re-creation of Black Female Identity in The U.S Contemporary Literature

Case Studies: Toni Morrison
Song of Solomon (1977), *Beloved* (1987)

Presented by: Faiza BOUCHRIA

Board of Examiners:

Ghania OUAHMICHE	Professor	University of Oran 2	Chairperson
Fatiha KAID-BERRAHAL	Professor	E.N.S of Oran	Supervisor
Fatima Zahra BESSEDIK	MCA	University of Oran 2	Examiner
Wafaa TALEB	MCA	University of Oran 2	Examiner
Nassima KAID	Professor	University of Sidi Bel Abbes	Examiner
Hanane RABAHI	MCA	University Centre of Maghnia	Examiner

2021/2022

D e d i c a t i o n

To my beloved parents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My journey throughout my doctoral studies encountered multiple challenges, obstacles, and significant choices. Yet, this dissertation would not have been possible without the generous encouragement and continual support of many people around me.

First of all, I wish to express my deepest thanks to my Supervisor, Prof. Fatiha Kaid-Berrahal, for her extraordinary guidance and unceasing advice without which this work would not have been accomplished. Her critical feedback and invaluable expertise have broadened the scope of my project to include new intellectual dimensions and scholarly arguments. My deepest thanks go also to the members of my dissertation committee for having accepted to read and evaluate my work.

No matter how much I write, I can never give enough thanks to my parents for their incredible and continual support, particularly my mother. I am also grateful to my sister for having always been present and willing to help whenever needed.

Abstract

The African American female experience in the United States is one that is mainly characterized as historically and psychologically complicated and intriguing experience. To reimagine such experience, Toni Morrison commits her fiction to depict the agonizing reality of this experience using religion and spirituality as literary strategies to counteract the mainstream representation of it. The current research consists of an investigation about the ways how Toni Morrison depicts the role of religious values and spiritual practices in the reconstruction of the African American female identity in her novels Song of Solomon and Beloved with regard to historical, religious, and psychological perspectives. Through the historical perspective, this study seeks to investigate Morrison's Beloved in light of her historigraphic project that focuses on the role of memory narratives in subverting and revising the metanarratives of the American history concerning its representation of slavery. The spritual perspective draws upon a discussion of the elements of religion in Morrison's Song of Solomon. This discussion emphasizes religiosity and spirituality as a dynamic entity that transgresses the conventional perception of traditions and it considers identity as an entity that is imbued with power which can both affect and be affected. The basic objective behind analyzing both novels from a psychological standpoint is that it gives the study a prolific context to offer a vivid and thorough description of the description of the black female character in both novels.

Key words: African-American, female identity, psychological, spirituality, religion

Résumé

L'expérience des femmes afro-américaines aux États-Unis est principalement caractérisée comme une expérience historiquement et psychologiquement compliquée et intrigante. Pour réimaginer une telle expérience, Toni Morrison engage sa fiction pour dépeindre la réalité angoissante de cette expérience en utilisant la religion et la spiritualité comme stratégies littéraires pour contrer la représentation dominante de celle-ci. La recherche actuelle consiste en une enquête sur la manière dont Toni Morrison dépeint le rôle des valeurs religieuses et des pratiques spirituelles dans la reconstruction de l'identité féminine afro-américaine dans ses romans *Song of Solomon* et *Beloved* en ce qui concerne les perspectives historiques, religieuses et psychologiques. À travers la perspective historique, cette étude cherche à enquêter sur *Beloved* de Morrison à la lumière de son projet historigraphique qui se concentre sur le rôle des récits de mémoire dans la subversion et la révision des métarécits de l'histoire américaine concernant sa représentation de l'esclavage. La perspective spirituelle s'appuie sur une discussion des éléments de la religion dans le Cantique des Cantiques de Morrison. Cette discussion met l'accent sur la religion et la spiritualité comme une entité dynamique qui transgresse la perception conventionnelle des traditions et considère l'identité comme une entité imprégnée d'un pouvoir qui peut à la fois affecter et être affecté. L'objectif fondamental derrière l'analyse des deux romans d'un point de vue psychologique est de donner à l'étude un contexte prolifique pour offrir une description vivante et approfondie de la description du personnage féminin noir dans les deux romans.

Mots Clés : Afro-Amériaine, identité féminine, psychologique, la spiritualité, la religion

Table of Contents

Dedication. i
Acknowledgments ii
Abstract iii
Résumé iv
Table of Contents v
General Introduction 1

CHAPTER ONE: Black Female Identity at the Cross Roads of Religion and Spirituality in Postmodern Literature

I. 1INTRODUCTION 9
I.2.Religion and Postmodernity 10
I.2.1 The Status of Religion from Modernity to Postmodernity 11
I.2.2The Postmodern Condition of Theology and Language 14
I.3 Black Female Identity at the Cross Road of Religion and Postmodernity 16
I.3.1 Black Feminine Narratives through Histories of Identity and Debate… 16
I.3.2 Religion towards the Postmodern Black Female Identity 26
I.4 Spirituality and Religion in the Black Female Identity 27
I.4.1 Background Development and Black Female Faith… 27
I.4.2 Depictions of Black Women's Spirituality 31
I.5 Conclusion… 43

CHAPTER TWO: African Myth and Spirituality in Constructing Black Female Character in *Song of Solomon*

II.1INTRODUCTION 45
II. 2Spiritual Motherhood in *Song of Solomon* 46
II.3 The Torment of Black Women and the Construction of Their Identity 53
II.4 The Return of African Ghosts 67
II.5Religion and Myth in *Song of Solomon* 87
II.6 Conclusion… 96

CHAPTER THREE: The Quest for Black Female Self in *Beloved*

III. 1INTRODUCTION 98
III.2 Post-Modernism and Blackness in Beloved 98
III.3 Female Interdependence between the Black Past and Present 118
III.4 Historical and Cultural Black Women's Experience 121
III. 5Re-memoryin Sethe's Search for Self 128
III.6 Conclusion… 143

CHAPTER Four: From Silence to Voice: The Fight for Black Self-Fulfillment in Morrison's Fiction

IV.1INTRODUCTION 145
IV.2 Experiences of the Female Character in *Beloved* 146
IV.3 Magic Transformation Through an Embodied Voice in *Song Of Solomon* 162
IV.4ReinstatingMyth and Summoning Female Voice 170
IV.5 Womanism as a Strategy for Resistance 192
IV.6 Conclusion… 212

General Conclusion 213

Bibliography 218

Appendices 225

General Introduction

Religion appealed to writers of African descent from the moment they set foot on New World soil. That attraction, held sway in African American letters well into the twentieth century. While African American male writers joined their female counterparts in expressing an attraction to religion, black women writers, beginning in the mid-twentieth century, consistently began to express doubts about the assumed altruistic nature of a religion that had been used as justification for enslaving their ancestors such as Paule Marshall, Gloria Naylor, Toni Cade Bambara, Ntozake Shange, Audre Lorde, Alice walker, Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison. It was especially after 1970 that black women writers turned their attention to other ways of knowing, other kinds of spirituality, and other ways of being in the world. Consequently, they enable their characters to find divinity within themselves or within communities of extra-natural individuals of which they are a part. Martin E. Marty, in his essay *Religion in America*, points out that: *"*Religion has a privileged place in the morals and morale, moods and motivations that go into character development*"* (303)

Employing the terms spirituality and spiritual traditions coterminously with religion, Black Americans account for the remembrance of one's ancestors and God, which have as their sacred agency practices and epistemological considerations anterior to African people's western hemispheric realities. In *A Peculiar People* Margaret Washington Creel writes:

> Traditional African spiritualism was an individual as well as collective experience. It encompassed the total well-being of the community, but each person had a role in society, guided by spiritual forces. . . . The sacred was not set apart from the temporal, individual, communal, material, or even political concerns, and religion assumed a

meaning outside of the “holy” building, a “sacred” day of the week, or a set of dogmas and creeds to be accepted at face value. (59)[1]

Black female identity, religion and spiritual elements have always been the main focused themes in Toni Morrison’s works. In the world of her novels she has created sustainable ties in the system of values: spirituality, family roots, and womanhood in the community. The significant role in her prose is ascribed to the difficulties and sacrifice of her female characters’ life choices in boundary situations. This creates the foundation of the psychological content of Morrison’s novels, in which she examines the black female identity through religion and the complexity of the Afro-Americans’ spiritual world. She creates a kind of cultural myth, which can be interpreted at the level constituent of their national identity and personal consciousness. Her works assert an active presence of the formed choice concerning the demonstration of ethnic specifics of the American population due to the linguistic and cultural differences.

All of Morrison's novels deal with a subject in process, provide a dramatic performance, demand audience participation, and exude a writerly presence. But postmodernity encompasses more than these qualities, and Morrison's fiction embodies the core of postmodern thought which was first articulated by the great German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche established that language does not merely describe the world, but those different languages construct different worlds. He assumed that knowledge is a form of discourse, which does not refer to an objectively existent world, but which creates a world that is a projection from the subject's point of view (Downing 1997). After Nietzsche, Ludwig Wittgenstein argued that knowledge is discourse-sensitive and the meaning of what we say and think cannot be determined by any

[1] Creel notes that this idea of spirituality extends to an explanation of behavior, the nature of human relationships and communality. In addition to the African influence on corporate behavior, identity and collective necessity of Black inhabitants in America.

experience of the objective, real world because there cannot be ostensive definitions. The conventions of our speech, differing from one speech community to another, determine the meanings. All knowledge, to Wittgenstein, was good knowledge as long as it was expressed by and received in a community according to the rules of language that prevail in that community (Downing 1997).

Morrison emerges by the power of language; her fiction is a postmodern discourse on race and culture, for she delves into how language is covertly racial.

As for issues of race, Morrison's subjectivity is influenced by her knowledge of American history, but reinforced by her knowledge of African culture. Morrison was raised within a community of people who *spoke* of their past, and *told* stories about friends' and ancestors' lives and deeds. These stories were intermingled with folklore and traditions which are deeply rooted in African culture. In a 1983 interview with Nellie McKay, Morrison remarked:

> Critics of my work have often left something to be desired, in my mind, because they don't always evolve out of the culture, the world, the given quality out of which I write. . . . I tend not to explain things very much, but I long for a critic who will know what I mean when I say "church," or "community," or when I say "ancestor," or "chorus." (*Conversations* 151)

Morrison's postmodern discourse on race, identity and culture goes beyond the boundaries of America, beyond the traditions of African Americans, Morrison brings a new dimension of discourse into existence. She writes out of the deep experiences of black women which extend back to Africa. Paradigms of African religious beliefs are scattered throughout Morrison's seven novels. Many of the beliefs, traditions, rituals, etc., portrayed in her works originated in various parts of Africa and are found in the everyday practices of African people.

Morrison has long been occupied with how religious beliefs inform African American lives. She explained to Thomas Le Clair in a 1981 interview her motivations in writing Song of Solomon: "I used the biblical names to show the impact of the Bible on the lives of black people, their awe of and respect for it, coupled with their ability to distort it for their own purposes" (Morrison and Taylor-Guthrie 1994, p. 126). But trying to convey to postmodern readers the significance of such faith in black communities proved challenging. She takes up these challenges explicitly, first in her novel *Song of Solomon*, published in 1977, and again in *Beloved,* published ten years later in 1987.

In Song of Solomon, Morrison deliberately employs biblical language, imagery and allusion to subvert the gender- and race-based oppression that the Bible itself sanctions. She uses irony, inversion and revision to manipulate female biblical stories and names in the novel, within the thematic context of the biblical "Song of Solomon," to redefine the relationship between gender, race and religion that emerged out of slavery. In so doing, Morrison is considered as anticipating the womanist[2] tendency and ethics that emerged in the 1980s.

Song of Solomon both contributes to and reflects the cultural milieu from which womanism emerged as it challenges the stories the Bible tells African Americans generally and African American women, in particular. In the novel, Morrison crafts a complicated frame of Biblical names through which to create a new position that places the black female spiritual role at the center of the male protagonist's life.

[2] "Womanist," as a predominantly secular concept and term, was initially coined by writer Alice Walker in 1979 in her short story, *Coming Apart* and then later developed further in her 1983 collection, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. Walker defined a "womanist" as a "black feminist or feminist of color" who is "responsible," "in charge" and "serious"; who "appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility . . . and women's strength"; and who loves, among other things, "the Spirit," "struggle," "the Folk," "herself. Regardless," as well as all others, universally.

In *Beloved* the power and position of women as spiritual and ethical leaders also remain central. It reflects Morrison's desire in describing Afro-American women's experience in returning to their roots to create the interior life of slaves. Calling upon memories and recollections, she explores and lays bare the stark reality of slavery, using a collate narrative technique of poetic prose. This resembles the process of memory, seeking to piece together the fragments of the past with its voices to form a coherent account of experiences previously denied in one way or another.

Beloved also talks about ancestry beliefs and spiritual relationships between the enslaved and the free, alive and dead, mothers and daughters. Beloved, the dead child comes back to haunt her mother in a process of healing trauma and recovery by forcing the main female character to confront and remember the past in order to create a new self-identity.

This thesis centers on black female identity subjects and the two major works under consideration are Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Beloved* (1987).

Using black feminism theory along with feminist discourse, Morrison commits her respective works to draw the trajectory of the recreation of the black female identity, socially bound because of their race and their gender roles. The female characters in question have no control over their status. However, many of the characters are torn apart due to the slave traders splitting up families and selling them as salves. By offering readings that focus on the representational discourses of female identities within these two texts, this analysis situates the negotiations of black women within a broader religious and spiritual impacts in which black women share a sense of self-identity and an urge to heal and become whole again.

Throughout the examination of topics that pertain to black female identity, religion and spiritual elements in the two literary oeuvres at work here, this work aims to answer the following interrogation: In the two works of Morrison, what are the religious beliefs and the spiritual elements leading to renew the identity of Pilate and Sethe and how did they affect the African women's quest for black female identity in the American contemporary literature? To what extent are religion and spirituality influential in the recreation of the protagonists' identity? What is the impact of religion in reforming the black female self? Is spirituality, in the case of the main female characters, an enriching experience or a damaging one in the post- modern globalized world?

What can be hypothesized at this level is that in her two novels Toni Morrison used creeds that promoted the black women who were exploited, abused and subjected to violence.
I argue The resort to spirituality; in Song of Solomon; affected the development of the protagonist Pilate, her relationships, and her emotions and more impacted on reconstructing her identity. While in Beloved, the character Sethe found her destination in religion which reinforced her desire for freedom and acceptance of her self.

The reason that sustains the choice of the present topic is the ambiguity that surrounds the black female identity in ethnic American studies, in general, and Afro-American literature, in particular. Following this line of understanding, the moot point is whether religion and spirituality take part in the recreation of the black female identity, or they are just a part of the African social system order.

Moreover, the main interest of this work is to highlight the way through which the black female identity is defined throughout in postfeminism theory of the contemporary era and its contribution to the refinement of the black female self.

This research is organized into four chapters.

Chapter one entitled “Black Female Identity at the Cross Roads of Religion and Spirituality in Postmodern Literature” is devoted to the theoretical background related to the notions of religion and spirituality. It will be dedicated to the theoretical foundations which form the basis of postmodern literature. Thus, relevant and appropriate definitions and explanations of basic concepts will be included particularly the black feminist theory, black feminist criticism, and black womanism.

Chapter two examines the theme of spirituality in *Song of Solomon.* A complicated frame of spiritual incidents is crafted through which to create a new sacred text that places black female spiritual guides at the center of the male protagonist’s figurative death and resurrection. Pilate emerges as the spiritual guide of the protagonist, Milkman Dead, to emphasize how black women, so rarely portrayed in the Bible, play pivotal roles in eventual salvation. The importance of spirituality in the construction of identity will be highlighted in which women, and black women in particular, acquire a salvific force in a vindictive and vengeful world.

Chapter three is dedicated to an examination of the black female self in *Beloved*. This chapter opens with an overall comment on the period after the civil war in America, known as the reconstruction period in which nominally slavery ended and Afro-Americans are forced to reconstruct themselves as an act of survival. Then, it shifts to focusing on the process of searching for self-identity. The protagonist has an opportunity to redefine her identity based on her cultural heritage and a new transformation from isolation into communal re-entry. Like the Sweet Home‘s tree and Paul D‘s sapling, the symbol of wholeness, Sethe finds herself an identity. Toni Morrison seems to suggest Sethe‘s contribution to merging both religion and African values. *Beloved* can be understood from a psychological or religious angle and both can offer pleasing clarifications to the role of Beloved and how Sethe can be reconciled and mythological metaphors are multifaceted and unclear and she alters the conventional male

images to the feminist-focused description which seems to give an option that is suitable for Afro-American women.

Chapter four entitled “From Silence to Voice: The Fight for Black Self Fulfillment in Morrison’s Fiction” aims at exploring the change that the female characters self-experience along Morrison’s writings. This chapter begins with a presentation of the black women characters and how they rely on African culture to form their selfhood. It will concentrate on the impact of the black community on the female character, dealing with Morrison’s focus on the use of magical realism and religious essences which sake at exploring the main features of the literary trend and pointing out some key elements of their use in her narratives. Moreover women in her novels have smothered their own identities, and their voices, by depending on men for a sense of self. Hence, the silenced voice often seeks self-destructive or otherwise hurtful forms of expression. Though some women can regain their voices as the novel progresses, one woman maintains hers all along.

CHAPTER ONE: Black Female Identity at the Cross Roads of Religion and Spirituality in Postmodern Literature

I.1 Introduction

Undoubtedly, Postmodernism designates a cultural phenomenon that developed after WWII. Yet several occurrences of the terms '*postmodern' or 'postmodernism'* can be recorded as of the late nineteenth century, implying that culture and literature had then moved beyond the practices regarded as modern by the standards of the time. Whereas the theme of identity lies at the heart of many sociological, ontological, literary as well as historical works in the postmodern age. Therefore, many writers choose literature as a venue to express their feelings of existence and selfhood that are no more discussed in the same way they used to be in the past. The postmodern black women found themselves concerned with their own identity mainly because it has become immersed in their lives attaching and rising, gradually, their original culture, beliefs, and religion to a major position.

Accordingly, this chapter seeks to provide a theoretical approach about the literary postmodern concept. It attempts to highlight the Black female's spirituality to adapt to their religion and their Identity reformation. However, it is important first to establish a context for Black female experiences with a focus on religion which is closely related to feelings of attachment and notions of identity. This chapter also devotes to the discussion of spiritual matters in the case of American black female subjects. It further portrays a brief rundown on the Black female spirituality within the Black American community.

CHAPTER ONE: Black Female Identity at the Cross Roads of Religion and Spirituality in Postmodern Literature

I. 2 Religion and Postmodernity

Postmodern has become a gregarious adjective, and can often be seen in the company of such respectable terms as literature, philosophy, architecture, art, history, science, cinema and even religious studies and theology. Typically, introductory studies of postmodernity take one of two routes: some follow its growth and trajectory in a single domain; for instance, architecture, or literature; others seek to give a theoretical account across several domains. With respect to the latter strategy, there is a further divergence: between theories that describe a process in the history of ideas, on the one hand, and socioeconomic processes, on the other.[1]

In order to avoid employing such hierarchical binary oppositions as explanations the postmodern condition can be described in either conceptual or cultural terms as something that is at once intellectual/ theoretical and cultural/practical, a condition that affects modes of thought as well as modes of embodiment. Significantly, one of the first and most important attempts to articulate the postmodern condition was François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Lyotard's report begins with an account of modern scientific knowledge in addition to the three conditions for modern knowledge: (1) the appeal to metanarratives as a foundationalist criterion of legitimacy, (2) the outgrowth of strategies of legitimation and exclusion, and (3) a desire for criteria of legitimacy in the moral as well as the epistemological domain. The key factor in Lyotard's analysis is the role of "metanarrative," a "master story" that serves as a comprehensive explanatory framework for everything else, "narratives which subordinate, organize and account for other narratives."[2] Modern discourses like science appeal to metanarratives that legitimate it by telling a story of how Enlightenment thinkers overcame

---

[1] These distinctions correspond more or less to those of Steven Connor who distinguishes postmodernity as a name for (1) developments in the arts and culture (2) the emergence of new forms of social and economic organization (3) a new theoretical discourse (see his "Postmodernism" in Michael Payne, ed., *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 428–32.

[2] Ibid., p. 30.

ignorance and superstition thanks to critical methods, or how modern science has resulted in greater health and wealth for humanity.

Lyotard defines postmodernity in terms of a loss of faith in such grand narratives: the postmodern condition is one of "incredulity toward metanarratives." In Lyotard's words: "The grand narrative has lost its credibility . . . regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation."[3] postmoderns no longer accept the story that science tells to legitimate itself, namely, that it contributes to human freedom and well-being. Postmodernity, in short, cuts metanarratives down to size and sees them for what they are: *mere narratives*.Western science loses considerable prestige when viewed in terms of "the story white Europeans tell about the natural world." The mark of the postmodern condition of
knowledge, then, is a move away from the authority of universal science toward narratives of local knowledge.

I.2.1.The Status of Religion from Modernity to Postmodernity

The Nietzschean version of postmodernism has grabbed most of the headlines and has dominated its popular reception. In this version of the philosophy of difference (*heteros*), the difference has the sense of *diversitas*, the variety of forms. Here the emphasis is placed upon the affirmation of multiplicity, a multiplication of forms, a polymorphic or 'heteromorphic' pluralism of many different kinds. This goes hand in hand with a love of novelty, of the invention of as many new kinds as possible. Philosophically, this view draws upon Nietzsche's 'perspectivalism', that is, his critique of 'truth' and the 'ascetic ideal'. Nietzsche was critical of the classical metaphysical ideal that there is a firm centre that holds, a firm and immutable foundation or principle, to which all lovers of the true or the good, of science or ethics, must

---

[3] Ibid., p. 37; Best and Kellner criticize Lyotard for his tendency to identify modernity with Enlightenment thought. Stated somewhat differently: Lyotard offers a "docetic" interpretation of modernity that fails to engage with social and material reality (*Postmodern Turn*, p. 165).

rigorously ('ascetically') hold – whether one takes that principle to be God, the laws of physics, or even the laws of grammar. When Nietzsche said that '*God* is

dead', he meant this entire metaphysical order, any notion of an absolute centre or foundation. That explains why he said we would not be rid of belief in God until we had dispelled our belief in grammar, our belief that what are for him the 'fictions' – or conventions – of Indo-European grammar somehow give voice to the very order of being. In the place of this absolutism, Nietzsche put his notion of perspectives, that every belief, including the propositions of physics, is an interpretation. For Nietzsche, the perspectives issue from the play of forces asserting themselves, each with greater or lesser strength, each expressing its own immanent life force to a greater or lesser extent. Our own 'beliefs' are the perspectives we cognitive beings impose on things to promote the flourishing of our own life, rather the way the trees in the forest struggle for light. When Nietzsche complained, 'if there were a God, what would there be left for us to create?' he pressed the view that the maximization of the invention of the perspectives required the dismantling of the idea of a *summum bonum* or *primum ens* in which every such possibility would be already realized. For Nietzsche no belief or idea enjoyed eternal or timeless validity; every such idea is invented – historically constituted – to promote the needs of life. Everything is surface, surface is what is deep; the distinction between depth and surface, the true world and apparent, being and appearing, comes undone. God is dead. The most prominent 'Nietzschean' postmodernists are Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault and nowadays, after their death, Jean Baudrillard, who uses Nietzschean presuppositions in a 'postmodern' theory of 'images'. Baudrillard represents a very important, more broadly 'cultural' dimension of postmodernism, one which forces to distinguish it from a more technical philosophical position called post-structuralism. In Baudrillard, postmodernism is the articulation of the culture of the world-wide web and 'virtual reality' upon which we have all entered, where the distinction between image and reality, surface and depth, dissolves. As his recent CD-Rom, *The Réal: Las Vegas, NV*,

illustrates very well, this is the 'postmodern' world that today interests radical theologian Mark C. Taylor.1 Feminist theologians like Sharon Welch and Rebecca Chopp have made interesting use of Foucauldian inspired 'genealogical' analyses to criticize the historically constituted constellations of power and sexuality that have been used to oppress women and minorities, inside the church and without. In still another direction, Bataille had taken up Nietzsche's notion of the overflowing of the will to power to formulate a theory of expenditure without return as the essence of the religious act. On the whole, this version of postmodernism has been greeted with hostility by a wide variety of thinkers on both the left and the right, by scientists and humanists alike. The right wing tends to think Nietzsche is the devil himself, having utterly relativized, God-Motherhood-and- Apple-Piety. But then again so does the 'old' (liberal, modernist) left, which has no interest in religion at all, as witness physicist Alan Sokal, who wants to restore the left to its pre-Nietzschean senses, on his view are ill-informed charlatans attempting to relativize the results of mathematical physics while knowing little mathematics and less physics. Even Richard Rorty is highly critical of letting Nietzsche into the workaday public sphere, with the confusion besetting the new left, as he argues in *Achieving our Country*. Philosophical theologians like Brian Ingraffia have roundly criticized Nietzsche for having a defective understanding of Christianity and on this basis have denounced any attempt to mix Christianity and postmodernism. That is an understandable reaction that this version of postmodernist thinking tends to bring down upon itself. At its best, Nietzscheanized postmodernism has opened up important genealogical investigations into the historical constitution of power clusters that can have emancipatory effects for the oppressed, and have paved the way for the new or what Allan Bloom grumpily called the 'Nietzscheanized left', a political result that would, needless to say, have profoundly saddened Nietzsche himself who was deeply antipathetic to modern democratic movements and who deeply regretted the passing of the *ancien régime* in France. At its worst, postmodernists often give the impression that they have utterly jettisoned any standard

of reason, intelligibility or argumentation; they give everyone the distinct impression that 'anything goes' just because their texts are written precisely as if anything does indeed go. They make themselves easy targets for people like Sokal who have neither the time, the training, nor the taste for trying to decode and decipher the excesses of their jargon. They write for an inside group of 'po-mo' academics, bolting from one conference on postmodernism to the next, presenting the worst but most public face of this movement.

I.2.2 The Postmodern Condition of Theology and Language

The postmodern turn from metanarrative to narrative may also be viewed as a turn from subjectivity to language. Whereas Heidegger chided modernity for forgetting the question of being, postmodern thinkers contend that what has actually been forgotten is *language*. The knowing subject of modernity assumed that reason was universal, impervious to differences of culture and language. For moderns, language was a transparent medium that enabled consciousness to grasp reality. Postmoderns find this picture of the mind–world relation incredible. Not only do we not have nonlinguistic access to the way things are, but the way we speak and think is conditioned by the particular language in which we dwell. It is simply not the case that reality informs thought and that thought informs language. "Language" refers more specifically to the system of differences – the pattern of distinctions and connections – that a given vocabulary imposes on the flux of human experience. Jacques Derrida has famously commented that "There is nothing outside the text."[4] This is not a comment about what there is in the world so much as a claim that what we know about things is linguistically, which is to say culturally and socially, constructed. Derrida elsewhere paraphrases his point by adding, "there is

[4] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 158.

nothing outside context."[5] By this Derrida means that it makes no sense to inquire into the meaning or truth of a sentence or text outside of a specific context. Moreover, every linguistic and conceptual structure is deconstructible (able to be disassembled, or undone) because, for Derrida (and for structuralists and post-structuralists in general) language is a set of arbitrary distinctions. No one language carves up the world at its joints. Once one sees that languages are social constructions, it is difficult to continue believing in their universal reliability. *The postmodern condition thus pertains to one's awareness of the deconstructability of all systems of meaning and truth.*

"Language" thus stands for the socially constructed order within which we think and move and have our being. Our speech and action are always already situated, and hence conditioned, by one vocabulary or another. Postmodernity is thus a linguistic or textual condition in which human beings "suffer" language. This linguistic condition of postmodernity is at the same time a political condition because the differences inscribed in language privilege certain forms of a social organization rather than others. Those who get to make the distinctions control the social imagination and thus hold the reins of social power. It is partially thanks to such insights that feminism may be deemed postmodern.

Given the centrality of narrative and language in accounts of the postmodern condition, it will come as no surprise to learn that some of the most important contributions to postmodern thinking have come from the domain of literary theory. Indeed, according to several French postmodern thinkers, literary theory has come virtually to displace philosophy, or, rather, philosophy has come to be seen as a species of rhetoric and literature. It was Nietzsche who denied facts in order to make room for interpretations.

Indeed, for him, it is interpretation "all the way down." To the extent that the postmodern condition is linguistic and textual, those who inhabit it are sentenced to interpretation. Just as the

[5] Derrida, "Afterword," in *Limited Inc.* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 136.

meaning of a word does not come to rest in the thing to which it refers, so the meaning of a text lacks fixity due to the changing contexts in which it is read. The postmodern condition is therefore one of the undecidable and unfinalizable interpretations.

I.3 Black Female Identity at the Cross Road of Religion and Postmodernity

I.3.1 Black Feminine Narratives through Histories of Identity and Debate

'Black' as a concept is radically unstable and is applied to various, related political positions. An attempt to trace the meanings that surround and inform this term involves an engagement with its geographical, cultural and political indeterminacies, with its reliance on context and time. As a locus of antagonisms and conflicts, Black feminism distinguishes itself from White and is at once involved in cultural or national ideologies, in ways that have become increasingly complex. The contexts of academic convention, cultural domination and cultural currency become determinate factors, in order to locate and identify Black feminism. Any analysis of an identifiable field of Black feminist criticism, or Black feminist politics, includes a keen sensitivity to the marked inscriptions of difference and specificity, of connection and visibility within the field. A major polarity in Western Black feminist thought is the terminology and politics of the United States. For the purposes of American politics, 'Black' is a notion referring to the African-American population. The current US preference for racial categorisation based on country or continent of origin or descent, hyphenated with national identity over the politicised term 'Black', as well as the retaining of the term 'Third World' for North American 'people of colour', at once blurs and begs the distinction between *national* and *cultural* identities.

The shifting meanings of 'Black' as a racial, cultural, national or political term have implications for the development and meanings of Black feminisms. The relationship between

the terms 'Black' and 'feminism' allows for a sustained critique, both of the feminist movement and identities, and Black politics.

Beginning with an anthology initially conceived in 1979, the rawness and violence of new articulations and new alliances can be traced. Moraga and Anzaldúa's *This Bridge Called My Back* (1983) shifts these alliances into a political space that allows for connections 'capable of spanning borders of nation and ethnicity'. What this means for an anthology emerging from United States feminist radicalism in the late 1970s and early 1980s is a reconfiguration of identity politics around 'Third World' immigrant women and African-American women. The internationalism of the text, its insistence that both connections and contentions with the United States will form the basis of political necessity, is one that is still, a fraught and uneasy alliance of differences.

The 'Third World' dimensions of the political arguments in this anthology, based around issues in Central and South America, in the Caribbean, and in South Africa, are primarily contained within the politics of the feminist movement. Toni Cade Bambara's Foreword points to the initial motive behind several of the pieces including a need to protest, complain or explain to white feminist would be allies that there are other ties and visions that bind. Following this, White feminism becomes secondary, even superfluous: 'the process of examining that would-be alliance awakens us to new tasks' (1983: vi).

Moraga's Preface supports Bambara's sentiments with a reference to White feminists as 'so-called sisters' (1983: xiii). The prevalent conflicts that emerge from her Introduction are reflected by other writers in the anthology and attest to the complications of both the feminist movement and cultural affiliation. Drawing attention to a continuing political thread throughout the text, Moraga launches an attack on separatism as the luxury of White feminism and the unacceptable sacrifice of feminists of colour: 'But the deepest political tragedy I have experienced is how with

such grace, such blind faith, and this commitment to women in the feminist movement grew to be exclusive and reactionary. I call my white sisters on this' (1983: xiv).

The direct challenge to White-dominated feminism and the continual calls for a more broad-based movement that allows for different cultural/racial communities and politics are significant aspects of *This Bridge Called My Back.*

However, otherness is equally not a *stable* place on which to build mutual identifications or communities of recognition. Many of the writers bear witness to misunderstandings and divisions between women of colour themselves. As a political grouping that amalgamates African-American, Asian-American, Latina and Native American women, 'Women of Colour' broaches and re-evaluates the notion of *Black* feminism and necessarily includes within itself urgent questions of cultural, racial and *social* affiliation. Brought into political visibility out of conflict with a predominantly White feminist movement, 'Women of Colour' do not become the automatic site of resolution.

These recognitions of difference and conflict within the difference in the context of feminism makes *This Bridge* an important milestone in Black feminist writing. The introduction of 'Third World' alongside African-American feminisms allows for a discussion of racial, economic *and* national issues that act as critical points of tension in defining Black feminism. The statement of Chrystos, as a Native American, that: 'I am afraid of white people' (1983: 68), a statement aimed at feminist collectives, can be read alongside Moraga's anxiety. If being a 'Woman of Colour' is not a matter *of physical* visibility, the emphasis in the text slides between cultural, economic and social issues, negotiating and questioning the limits and meanings of *racial* identities. Black American women are represented here as another ethnicity within a larger 'Third World' movement. That Black Americans are not 'Third World' peoples or new immigrants allows the text to indirectly highlight the diferences between AfricanAmerican and Black feminisms and to insist on the non-comprehensiveness of African-American feminisms for theories and politics of

race, culture or class. The repeated, 'I stand here as ... I am a ...', calls attention to a late twentieth-century preoccupation with dual or sub-national categories and with difference. Looked at from one angle the anthology bristles with conflict, with the *splintering* of feminism into disjointed and violently delineated groups.

This Bridge reveals the difficulties and complexities that accrue to both Black *and* feminist identities in the late twentieth century. In her Foreword Moraga claims that it is erupting primarily within and against mainstream feminist movement, the 1979 preoccupations did not include detailed discussion of relationships between women and men of color. Solidarity as non White women creates a focus on feminism and Black/White divisions. The differences between women of different ethnicities, and different cultural backgrounds, push to one side any concentrated discussion of families or communities. They become what is different from, excluded by, hidden behind.

The confusion of racial with class identity, both of which are revealed as indicative of each other, succeeds in assessing true Black identity as being at odds with an ambiguous, invisible identity that is, nevertheless, Black, or of color. The accepted community of Black women in other sections of the text is here disrupted with the anxiety, 'you don't belong' (1983: 108). This anguished ambiguity sits uncomfortably alongside the *Black Feminist Statement* from the 'Combahee River Collective' that very clearly and coherently sets out the agenda, meaning, genesis and beliefs of Black feminist organisation, stating that the Black feminist is what is distinguishable from and between Black liberation movements and the White left (1983: 211).

The consistently oppositional stance of the essays and ideas in the anthology, defining non-White female identity continually in terms of difference creates a volume that presents the rage and violence of identities in the process of self-definition. Placing a range of histories, familial and cultural subjectivities under the difficult banner of 'Women of Color' ushers in an assault on feminist politics from a range of positions. Feminist identification becomes a matter of

uneasy alliances, of negotiating differences, of interpreting the meaning and validity of sexuality, class, heritage, culture and even race. The spiritual visions underpinning many of the literary and political statements attest to the dedication to alternative self-definitions that the work attempts to represent.

The alternative spiritual re-definition of self emerges in the writing of Alice Walker whose contribution to Black feminist criticism and politics in the United States and beyond has been critical. Walker's rejection of the term 'feminist' for Black women in favor of 'Womanist' in her 1983 collection of essays is a response to cultural differences and the specificities of her own sense of community. With references to histories of slavery and sassiness, gardens of flowers, food and 'the Folk', Walker creates an essentially 'home-grown' vision of the Black feminist who 'Loves the Spirit' (1984: xii).

In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, is a collection that emphasises the significance of home, loyalty and roots. The South is the place of people who provide the emotional energy of the writing: 'I see the same faces, hear the same soft voices, take a nip, once in a while, of the same rich mellow corn, or wine' (1971: 138). Looking to the South for 'wholeness' (1975: 48) and 'continuity' (1976: 13), Walker's sense of herself as a 'Black revolutionary artist' (1971: 130) is linked indissolubly to her sense of origins and her sense of connection with a Southern Black community and identity: 'And when I write about the people there, in the strangest way it is as if I am not writing about them at all, but about myself. The artist then is the voice of the people, but she is also The People' (1971: 138).

This certainty about belonging, identity and speaking for a definable people contrasts Walker with the conflictual, emergent and divided subjectivities that present themselves in *This Bridge*. Walker's re-discovery and popularisation of Black Renaissance writers like Zora Neale Hurston have the logic of unearthing a family. In her title essay, *'In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*', Walker's eulogy to her mother's un-famous artistry becomes witness not only to an

American, but to a long African heritage (1974: 243). This acknowledgement of community beyond the United States and the Southern states becomes a central point of Walker's writing, and her sense of herself as the spokesperson for the community becomes a larger and more problematic claim in the context of international, or other Black feminisms.

While in the novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), Walker presents the African culture under American feminist judgement and reveals the difficulties of her position as a spokesperson for *all* Black women. Her loyal allegiance to the United States in terms of freedom and escape allows her to represent the barbarity of African practices as part of a larger state of cultural unfreedom. Africa as victim *needing* American feminisman Africa

to which Walker makes unhesitating claimpoints towards the dangers of *internationalist* Black feminism within the United States. The dimension in her previous writing of spiritual communion with her foremothers becomes a difficulty when applied over cultural and national borders.

The institutionalisation of Black feminism in the United States becomes solidified in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983) which sets out to promote Black feminism as distinct from both a White dominated feminist movement and the exclusive concerns of Black men. Barbara Smith is then able to state, in 1983, that 'we have a movement of our own' (1983: xxxi). The choice of anthology as a form for representing Black feminism is an important one, allowing, as in *This Bridge,* a range of political ideas, concerns and approaches to exist together, and giving the impression of a field *in the making.* As Barbara Smith puts it in her Introduction to *Home Girls:* 'anthologies which bring together many voices seem particularly suited to the multiplicity of issues of concern to women of color' (1983: xlix). This multiplicity of issues covers subjects such as lesbianism, Black women artists, the family, culture and feminist organisations.

CHAPTER ONE: Black Female Identity at the Cross Roads of Religion and Spirituality in Postmodern Literature

The significance of the concept of 'home' in the title-one of the concept that is central to Alice Walker's ideas lies in the longing for, or realisation of, a place from which to speak. This place of self and recognition is also a place to claim and own. It provides the possibility of being an insider*:* 'Home has always meant a lot to people who are ostracized as racial outsiders in the public sphere. It is above all a place to be ourselves' (1983: i).

The conflation of Black women with 'Third World' women in the Introduction points to a difficulty that also hovers over the language of *This Bridge.* Merging the identity of racial with national outsider and therefore identifying unproblematically with Black women confuses the theoretical positions of United States Black feminists. The identity of 'home' becomes, in this formulation, a widening and elastic metaphor of possession.

However, the final piece in the work addresses precisely this issue of home, belonging and possession. Bernice Johnson Reagon's 'Coalition Politics: Turning the Century' approaches the difficulties, dangers and necessities of the feminist coalition by continually examining the meaning of home. If it is cultural and racial *security,* the certainty of naming and defining, then coalition has nothing to do with home.

For Reagon, speaking from a background of Black Civil Rights, the idea of a feminist coalition involves the *incursion* of *different* women into feminism, and its constant re-definition through conflict and flexibility. It does not, for her, involve the comfortable embracing of similar women into a safe place: 'In a coalition you have to give, and it is different from your home. You can't stay there all the time' (1983: 359).

In 'Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Relationships Between Black and Jewish Women' (1984) Barbara Smith continues with the issue of coalition and self-examination by exploring relationships between African American and Jewish women, particularly within the feminist movement. Her clear statement: 'I am anti- Semitic' (1984: 69), does not leave her with a safe place from which to speak and allows her to discuss honestly the possibilities of alliance and

conflict even competition between Jewish and Black women. Refusing the temptation of 'ranking ... oppressions' (1984: 75), Smith's essay considers the connections as well as the mistrust between the two groups, emphasising the positive and vital nature of coalition politics. Referring to Black women as 'Third World' throughout the piece allows for a clear-cut argument between two apparently internally undifferentiated groups. The category Black, then, operates indistinctly across national and cultural boundaries.

Carole Boyce Davies's recent text *Black Women, Writing and Identity* (1994) addresses this tendency to homogenise and delimit Blackness and Black womanhood to one particular location or cultural experience. Taking the experiences of Black women migrants as her primary example, Boyce Davies insists on the continual renegotiation of Black women's identity between places and nations. In this way, Black womanhood and therefore Black feminism cannot become stratified to one particular history or set of preoccupations. Boyce Davies's emphasis on 'migratory subjectivity existing in multiple locations' (1994: 4) points also to the imperative to name, place and historicise where one is speaking from and *to* whom. Her identification of the United States as primary signifier and therefore *definer* of Black feminism through publication and cultural strength is significant: 'Thus to identify Black women's writing primarily with United States writing is to identify with US hegemony' (1994: 4).

Ama Ata Aidoo's novel, *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977 charts the experiences of a Ghanaian woman in Europe, the text acts as a locus for exploring the difficulties of dialogue between White/Western and African women. Histories of imperialism and the realities of racism and exploitation underlie Sissie's analysis of inter-continental migration and inter-racial friendship between women. The peculiarities of this text, besides its blending of poetry and prose, of letter-form, autobiographical address and third person narrative, are the simultaneous recognition of the oppression of Africa and the violence of racism, and the representation of a relationship between two women that curiously reverses the expected power structure. The merging of genres

and the shift in authorial address places attention on narrative voice and expressionon the importance of narrative control. In this way, the relationship between Sissie and Marija is related from a position of knowledge, with Sissie taking up a masculine position against Marija's emotional dependence.

The effect of this is a narrative that promotes African subjectivity to the place of observer, definer and historical judge. Reversing dominant perspectives, African female subjectivity presents European history, landscape, people and language as ethnographically strange, with Marija's German English placed at a similar expressive disadvantage as pidgin in European novels. The feminism of the text is, then, deliberately and inescapably placed within specific cultural locations, at the point of conflict between dominant and subordinate national identities. Black feminism, in relation to *Our Sister Killjoy*, is both a reevaluation of African femininity in respect of African communities and men, and a re-examination of racial and cultural differences between women.

The letter that moves towards the conclusion of the novel emphasises Sissie's 'anti-western neurosis', and her fear of the loss of African identity particularly African femininity. As a letter addressed to an African man, the text refuses a direct engagement with the politics or feminisms of 'the West' and yearns instead for the autonomy of definition 'That is why, above all, we have to have our secret language. We must create this language ... So that we shall make love with words and not fear of being overheard' (1977: 116).

However, the authenticity of origins, cultural identity and race prevail as issues within the politics of Black feminisms. Identity politics and debates over mixed race identity, forms of racism and class complicate the broad terrain of racial difference on which Blackness is identified. It is here that the impact of postmodernism on Black feminisms has been, in some ways, enabling. Its corrective against identity politics, against the authenticity of Blackness, allows for multiple Black female identities to be expressed, recognised and valorised:

CHAPTER ONE: Black Female Identity at the Cross Roads of Religion and Spirituality in Postmodern Literature

> A postmodern black feminist identity ... is not just based on racism and oppression but on recognizing the fluidity and fragmented nature ofracialized and gendered identities. In this sense we can reclaim subjectivity from the cul de sac of identity politics and reinstate it in terms of a powerful, conscious form of political agency. (Mirza 1997: 13)

Bell hooks's essay, 'Postmodern Blackness', explores the relevance of postmodernist theories for Black politics. Her recognition of the threat that postmodernism imposes on Black politics is significant and exposes the difficulties and dangers of postmodernist thinking for Black feminisms. As a critique of identity politics, potmodernism can be seen to threaten the formation and sustaining of an oppositional voice against the reality of racist society and institutions. As Pratibha Parmar claims:

> To assert an individual and collective identity as a black woman has been a necessary historical process, both empowering and strengthening. To organize self-consciously as black women was and continues to be important; that form of organization is not arbitrary, but is based on a political analysis of our common economic and cultural oppressions. (Parmar 1987: 68)

However, postmodernism's deconstruction of the subject, including the Black female subject can also be seen as liberating the diversity of Black lived experience and subjectivities: 'Such a critique allows us to affirm multiple black identities, varied black experience. It also challenges colonial imperialist paradigms of black identity which represent blackness one-dimensionally in ways that reinforce and sustain white supremacy' (hooks 1991: 28).

The autonomy of definition is a major issue within Black feminisms. However, this issue has a range of dimensions, as this narrative of Black feminisms reveals. The layering of antagonisms, of conflicts and struggles that Black feminisms have undergone, whether within the general feminist movement, within cultural/racial communities, and, finally, between continents and cultures, defies any easy definition of a politics or an identity. The insistent need for an

awareness of global inequalities and cultural difference is a difficulty and an ongoing project within and between Black feminisms.

I.3.2 Religion towards the Postmodern Black Female Identity

Even with all their diversity, feminist and womanist theologies have one thing in common: they make the liberation of women central to the theological task.[6] This is not to say that there is complete consensus concerning the ends of such liberation.

Despite these conflicts, however, feminist theologians have historically shared a general liberation hermeneutic, marked, at least in part, by commitments around identity. Rather than positioning themselves as generic "theology," these works emerged out of situations of oppression for marginalized groups that initiated critical assessments of existing social, ecclesial, and theological structures. The result has been liberative interpretive practices crafted from new combinations of the tradition and contemporary resources.[7]

Postmodernism enters this theological discourse by providing resources designed to advance such liberative ends. The primary litmus for any postmodernism will be its contribution to analyses of the complexities of gender, race, sexual, and class oppressions. What is "post" about such resources is their refusal of some of the "modern" habits in theology, but only those that inhibit exploration of these conditions of oppression. Feminist theological concerns with power, conflict, and desire dictate that certain critiques of modernism are not particularly useful. The concern with the organic, communal linguistic holism of religious identity in post liberal theologies associated with George Lindbeck is not conducive to attention to power, conflict, and desire, the inevitable ingredients in the struggles addressed by feminist theologies. The metaphors of language learning and grammar in his cultural–linguistic model are pale tools at

[6] Despite some uses, "feminist" is not generic for any theology about women. "Womanist" refers to African American women's use of Alice Walker's notion of the distinct experiences of black feminists. Postmodernism helps with these issues.

[7] For the liberation hermeneutical circle see Juan Segundo, SJ, *The Liberation of Theology*, trans. John Dury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1976), p. 8; Elisabeth Sch¨ussler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), pp. 43–63.

best for deciphering the disorderly social realities of oppression/ liberation. What we do find in liberation-focused feminist theologies are appropriations of philosophical forms of postmodernism, such as Foucaldian critiques of the modern subject and modern notions of power, Lacanian psychoanalytic accounts of the desiring subject, and post-structuralist deconstructionist thought, all of which articulate refusals of unified and totalizing modern accounts of reason. While those forms associated with post-structuralism and deconstruction draw criticism for being unstable, increasingly feminists have seen interesting possibilities in these destabilizations.

Three themes have emerged amongst postmodern feminist thinking that are useful to feminist theologies: (1) the instability of the subject, (2) the force of the "unsayable, the unrepresentable as it constitutes and ruptures all that is said," as one theological student of postmodernism puts it, and (3) the liberative implications of these ideas when applied to the category of gender.[8] Exploring these will produce a fuller picture of postmodernism, as well as its implications for theological discourse.

I. 4 Spirituality and Religion in the Black Female Identity

I.4.1 Background Development and Black Female Faith

Throughout the second wave of US feminism (1960s–1980s) both secular and religious feminisms depended upon a common sense notion of woman as a unified, historical subject. Since women had been ignored, rendered invisible, and marginalized throughout history, feminist work of this period was designed to correct these problems. It typically took the forms of historical retrieval, efforts at political, social and economic enfranchisement, and scrutiny of the formerly invisible domains of domesticity, sexuality, sexual violence, and reproduction. Key

[8] Graham Ward, "Postmodern Theology," in David F. Ford, ed., *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), p. 588.

to much of this thinking was recognition of the constructed nature of gender in the production of masculinity and femininity.What was taken to be liberating about the concept gender was the idea that social identity is a construction used to locate persons in relation to power; it gave feminists leverage to counter the biologistic and determinist accounts of maleness and femaleness that locate men and women naturally. If this social defining and locating was taken to be mere convention, it could be changed; insofar as it was to the disadvantage of women, it could be argued that it was morally problematic.

No sooner had this second wave begun than complaints emerged that its primary subject, woman, was modeled after a white, middle-class, heterosexual woman. Secular and religious thinkers alike, Audrey Lorde, bell hooks, Ntozake Shange, Alice Walker, Katie Cannon, and Delores Williams among others, focused attention on such issues. Important ethical–political implications resulted from these conversations, such as the discovery that when the focus is women of color, reproductive issues other than access to abortion surface, such as sterilization abuse. As a consequence, the experiences and wisdoms of African American, Latina, Asian American, lesbian, and other groups of women gradually became standard additions to feminist conversations.

Some feminist theologians of the twentieth century[9] assumed a natural biological subject, a woman, who had been erased from history, oppressed by a misogynist Christian tradition and society. Their work recovered women agents, critiqued their religious traditions, and formed constructive imaginative alternatives for liberation. These theologies were by and large about liberation from multiple forms of oppression, understood as social sin. Although often construed as the primary sin, sexism was not their only concern; racism, class exploitation, and increasingly heterosexism were key to the concerns of feminist theologies.

[9]Such as Mary Daly, Sallie McFague, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Letty Russell, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Judith Plaskow, and other of the groundbreaking feminist theologians

CHAPTER ONE: Black Female Identity at the Cross Roads of Religion and Spirituality in Postmodern Literature

Paralleling the critiques brought against non-religious feminist thinking, the works of womanist theologians, such as Delores Williams, Katie Cannon, Jacquelyne Grant, , and other non-Western and non-hetero women's theologies helped this process along by challenging the implicit universal woman assumed by feminist theologies. As a result, no feminist theologian could omit reference to the additional problems of race, class, and sexuality by the later years of the second wave, even as in most cases these problems were add-ons to gender.[10]

In addition to the multiple voices complicating secular and religious feminism, a crucial shift occurred in secular feminist thinking in the transition from the 1980s to the 1990s that has called into question the identity of most feminisms. Identity is a frame of thinking characteristic of many progressive movements. It assumes that one's identity is defined by a marker of social advantage/disadvantage. For feminist identity, the primary marker is gender. Thus difference between women is dealt with by multiplying the markers of disadvantage; "woman" is a plurality of subjects, each specified by an identity marker added on to gender.

This account is challenged by the discovery that gender is not a constant, self-identical marker. Some women, Aristotelian slaves, for example, simply had no gender, because to have the status of a "woman" in ancient Greece one had to be a free woman married to a man. Gender, then, is not one thing, but is co-constituted by other relations of power.

The shift away from gender as a stable grid of analysis is further complicated by the work of Judith Butler, among others. Pluralizing woman to account for differences is for Butler not enough. As long as the construction of gender leaves sex intact, critical analysis is incomplete. Feminism can no longer assume that sex is simply a fixed, anatomical feature of human identity, yielding the (natural) binary man and woman. Nor is sexual identity an inner truth of

[10] Whitefeminists Susan B. Thistlethwaite and SharonWelch took issues of race/gender head on. Thistlethwaite, *Sex, Race and God: Christian Feminism in Black and White* (New York: Crossroads, 1989) andWelch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, rev. edn (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000). Appeal to "women" is not outdated; it is a necessary practice. Postmodernist exploration is a new form of investigation, not the erasure of references to men and women.

subjectivity. In fact, Butler argued, a Foucaldian discursive power regime maintains a tight but constructed causal connection between sex, gender, and desire. The constant reiteration or performance of this regime and not the natural outworking of innate identity and desire reproduces heterosexual subjects. Feminist reiteration of "woman," then, effectively "others" or occludes any other subject possibilities. Just this effect leads some to reject homosexuality, based upon the argument that it is a concept that mirrors heterosexuality rather than contesting it. The result is "queer theory," a project designating alternatives to heterosexuality that are not bound to notions of fixed sexual identities.[11]

This brief account of developments in feminist theory is incomplete and oversimplified. The methods and assumptions of the great variety of feminisms, early and more recent, still circulate and overlap. However, the move to the theorization of subjects that began in the 1990s has created a distinctive set of explorations. Importantly, such efforts attempt to move feminism beyond the additive strategies of the first decades of second-wave

feminism. These theoretical explorations expose the problematic character of considering race, gender, class, sexuality, and other markers as definitional for separate identities, thereby facilitating inquiries into how race, gender, class, sexuality, etc. are co-constitutive of all subjects. No subjects, then, are simply a compilation of additive identities but are rather produced by differently configured contextual systems and practices.

These challenges to the naturally gendered subject correspond to theoretical conversations on postmodernism outside of feminism that critique the modern subject. And, while such connections still evoke for some the fear of the loss of "woman," for many feminist thinkers destabilization of the unified subject is about the advance of one of its primary concerns,

[11] EveK. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990); Kathy Rudy, *Sex and the Church: Gender, Homosexuality and the Transformation of Christian Ethics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), pp. 92–107; Laurel Schneider, "Queer Theory," in A. K. M. Adam, ed., *Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 206–12.

i.e., the connection of gender to multiple regimes of power. Thus its usefulness to liberative ventures is secured.[12]

I. 4.2 Depictions of Black Women's Spirituality

Most African Americans do not share the clarity of Paul's biblical vision, and they have countless responses to and interpretations of the Bible, including different ideas about the limits and meaning of grace. But it is still arguable that an appropriated biblical story has been the dominant source of a faith that has evolved historically with racial experience in African American culture. Voodoo faith has potentially innumerable connections to the biblical and is inseparable from it, in spite of voodoo's relative obfuscation.

The African American imagination is conceived in the individual struggle and the historical travail created by the horror of the past of slavery and racism. The core of this past is, as Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987) calls it, "unspeakable thoughts, unspoken" (198 –99). It is atrocity, pain, and suffering seared indelibly on the collective racial being by its unfathomable brutality, evil purpose and intended perpetuity. The result is that it exists minimally in language and profoundly in a region of feeling beneath language, which is where the "unspeakable thoughts, unspoken" reside in *Beloved*. African American imaginative projection is concrete and abstract. It is outwardly directed toward secular causes and solutions, and more importantly, inwardly focused on a defining vision of religious and spiritual faithfulness with regard to African American life. This vision, like the Bible, Christianity and the African worldview of voodoo that inspire it, looks beyond the limits of the secular world. Faithful vision is a powerful counterstructure in the imagination of the "unspeakable." It sees sacred, spiritual and supernatural agency that accounts for African American suffering and

---

[12] For Butler's rebuttal to the fear that post-structuralism reduces reality to language, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

oppression, that aids individual and collective survival and salvation, or that justifies what is beyond the scope of human understanding. Most broadly, faithful vision is the saving, sustaining belief that African Americans find collectively and individually in biblically based Christianity in the face of historically determined racial oppression and the hardships of an American experience directly and indirectly connected to the racial. Yet in voodoo/hoodoo culture it is the belief in African-derived gods and spirits that relate syncretically to Christianity and to oppression and life in similar direct and indirect
ways. Stated differently, faithful vision is a belief in sacred, spiritual, and supernatural agency that saves the race and furthers the purposes of individuals who adhere to this agency; it is culturally inscribed as a primal-type racial symbol diversely accessed by people in terms of gender and individuality and by religious denominations and communities that sometimes syncretize Christianity and voodoo/hoodoo[13].

Due to its importance to black people and culture, most black writers at some time substantively portray African American faithful vision and concomitant African and Western religiocosmic influences. Sometimes novels directly or indirectly explore the agency of God in life, but African American women writers often write in opposition to the patriarchal macrocosmic Christian perspective of God and locate the sacred and spiritual in the womanist
self that engages in personal, individual relationships. These depictions still portray traditional, less womanist faithful vision as the characters' or the black community's vision rather than the writer's or the text's, and the text's own critical perspective may be conflicted and ironic. In other cases, texts imply such vision because they reveal and do not negate the sacred, spiritual, and supernatural, leaving open the possibility that faith in power beyond the

[13] Theophus H. Smith's *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (1994) is a scholarly text that makes the point about voodoo/hoodoo as a serious, substantive religion that amalgamates with Christianity. (Smith distinguishes the term *voodoo* from *hoodoo*, and uses *hoodoo* and *conjure,* or *conjuration,* as parallel terms p48 – 49

mundane and the rational mind is all that there can be. Reflecting black cultural need and investment from a more controversial perspective related to African tradition, writers also construct alternative theological, spiritual, and supernatural perspectives against oppression and hardship based on the voodoo or hoodoo religion. These narratives engage Christianity in relationships of syncretism and revise the Bible and Christian theology, and voodoo/hoodoo may be a construction that opposes them. In these texts, faithful vision invests the writers in the cultural tradition that they depict, producing a variety of critical and adversarial treatments that seldom reveal the writers' ability to reject their characters' cultural belief.

The novels which are canonical and postmodern, reveal that the African American fictional tradition has turned back to affirming faithful vision after moving away from it at midcentury. In *The Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature* (1938), Benjamin Mays shows that black literature and religious expression before midcentury portray a traditional biblical God who has relevance in the social life of black people. However, recent black fiction writers have included Christianity among diverse perspectives of the sacred, spiritual, and supernatural and have greatly extended what black writers did before Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison.

It is clear that faithful vision is essential to African American culture and many black texts, and its negation or effacement can create a substantive void, even in canonical works. This void sometimes exists in the texts of earlier twentieth-century African American writers working in the realist or naturalist mode or trying to position themselves as modernists. Realism, naturalism, and modernism are obviously different, but each limited writers' exploration of the sacred, spiritual, and supernatural in black culture, in some instances precluding in-depth portrayal and artistic exploration.

Postmodern novels present an engaging overall textual perspective and an interesting cultural portrayal of faithful vision among African American characters. Textual perspectives include ironic stances toward and affirmation of Christian belief, parody and subversion of it,

and apparent affirmation of hoodoo faithful vision. The characters' beliefs within the texts range from traditional Christian faith to untraditional hoodoo faith. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and John Edgar Wideman's *The Cattle Killing* (1996) are postmodern novels that explore, among other things, the role of the biblical and religious tradition and the concept of God as they are written into black culture and thus influence the narrative about the culture. Each novel shows a different textual approach to portraying the sacred, spiritual, and supernatural in a unique community and in individual lives that all share the same general view of African American oppression and are commonly sustained by religious faith grounded in God and the Bible or African derived voodoo. *Beloved* may initially seem to have little to do with religion, but under closer scrutiny, it reveals a rich treasure of references on religious beliefs and its characters solidly base their lives in faithful belief. *Beloved*'s approach to Christianity and particularly the Bible is a subtle, powerful parody unlike any other in African American fiction. The main target of the parody is the text of the Bible itself rather the belief of the characters, which is set in the Bible and also partakes highly of folk and African sources that connect more clearly to the African American experience of oppression. It sounds like African American belief is ultimately influenced by hoodoo, but the text does not state this, leaving the final classification ambiguous. *Cattle Killing* is very much about the oppressiveness of God as inscribed in the Bible. However, unlike *Beloved,* its narrative opposition does not break free from the influence of the Bible, and the characters recourse seems to be the retention of faithful vision that binds them to an oppressive God who can still, paradoxically, reveal his saving power at the instance of greatest oppression.

Along with *Beloved*'s, *Cattle Killing*'s treatment of faithful vision is one of the most interesting in African American literature. The text that is most intentionally subversive of African American traditional belief in God and biblical and contemporary patriarchy is Alice

Walker's *The Color Purple*. It and Naylor's *Mama Day* thematize writing. *The Color Purple* does so from the perspective of achieving female voice, and *Mama Day* from the perspective of telling a story that is passed down in words and is also subconscious myth.

Thus both fall into the postmodern pattern that allows writers to innovate and to delineate the complexity of the African American imagination. Naylor's novel is perhaps less critical of the patriarchy, but both pose female spirituality as an alternative to that tradition. Walker's text presents a uniquely direct attack on God and Christianity, and also ironically formulates a counter narrative to the dominant one in which a much more traditional faithful vision is implied.

Although the text does not affirm faithful vision, it parallels its loud polemic with an understated formal and thematic structure that validates faith and the Christian tradition, which suggests the inability of the narrative perspective to separate itself from cultural belief. This is a different exposition of faithful vision that is adversarial and yet at the same time reflective of its power and centrality for African Americans. Naylor's work is a comprehensive cultural exposé of the African American sacred, spiritual, and supernatural instead of a parody of religious tradition. Its depiction of hoodoo's syncretic relationship to

Christianity is a crossover to the treatment of the greater depths of the diasporan cultural tradition in *Louisiana* and *Mumbo Jumbo*.

Brodber's *Louisiana* and Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* define African American hoodoo in terms of its conflation with the diasporan. Most consider *Mumbo Jumbo* to be an African American novel because Reed was born in America, and some may question the inclusion of Brodber's work in a study that is primarily about African American novels because she is Jamaican. *Louisiana* has its primary setting in New Orleans and defines African American hoodoo in terms of its link to the diasporic. The writers' nationalities notwithstanding, there are no substantive differences between the general subject matter of the novels as it relates to hoodoo as a diasporic religion

with qualitatively similar beliefs and practices that transcend national boundaries and typify the African American. *Mumbo Jumbo* is an African American novel that yokes the African American and Haitian, and *Louisiana* is an African American novel that joins the African American with the Jamaican. Further, it is important to include *Louisiana* because it is explicitly a strong treatment of hoodoo that compares well with Reed's novel. *Let the Lion Eat Straw* provides an example of hoodoo faithful vision, but although it is deceptively complex, does not work in a balanced comparison to *Mumbo Jumbo*.

Also, like *Mumbo Jumbo* and unlike *Mama Day*, the entire narrative of *Louisiana* is a specific, unambiguous avowal of hoodoo, which it makes clear is not a peripheral occult practice. It is a serious African American religion based in faithful vision that is similar to the Christian in *Louisiana* and dissimilar but equally strong in *Mumbo Jumbo*. Brodber's and Reed's novels describe hoodoo in representative specific instances of its almost endless variations, and continue along the lines of the broad pattern of novels with postmodern approaches that are well suited to the exploration of black culture.

Louisiana revises the biblical and Christian with a strong emphasis on the centrality of black women, which makes it generally similar to *Beloved, The Color Purple,* and *Mama Day,* and in theory this revision is embedded in the novel's postmodern narrative through a hoodoo aesthetic that accounts for the text's production. There is a corresponding hoodoo aesthetic in *Mumbo Jumbo*, which is much more oppositional to the Bible and Christianity than *Louisiana*. With the possible exception of *The Color Purple*, its faithful vision is the most radically different conception of black religious faith in the tradition, and among the novels it is probably the most oppositional to Western religious values.

Mama Day, Mumbo Jumbo, and *Louisiana* highlight how much voodoo/ hoodoo practice and belief have inflected and overridden African American Christianity, they display an African

American Christianity that is significantly different from the mainstream as a result of hoodoo influence and the characters often are unaware or refuse to notice it.

Crossing the boundaries of space, time, and history to connect and regather these fragments of the African cultural heritage, post modern black women reclaim sacred spiritual belief as transformative and transgressive power. Representing transatlantic crossings and recrossings, spiritual practices are considered as the device by which they construct alternative epistemologies and legitimate discredited forms of knowledge. It is also the mechanism by which they acknowledge a multiply located female subjectivity and countermand the negative positioning of black women in nationalist discourse.

Conjure and *hoodoo* are the terms used most frequently in the United States for African American spiritual practices in magic and folk belief in supernatural and sacred phenomena beyond established religion. They contain a sacred dimension, a supreme sphere of awe and untouchability derived from the features of spirit property, altered states of consciousness, and spirit worship. Manifested practically in the performances of healing, divination, and the casting and uncrossing of spells, conjure works through the use of curative herbs, roots, rituals, amulets, fetishes, and oral and transcribed incantation.

Conjure or spiritual practices and the folk belief of storytelling inform a good deal of contemporary black women's fiction. Betye Saar's and Faith Ringgold's art indicates that the same interrelation of spirituality and storytelling informs their visual representations as well. From her own account, Faith Ringgold's urge to tell a story other than through visual images has its roots in her family experience. She recalls that her mother, a designer and dressmaker who often cooperated with her on quilts, was also a fabulous storyteller, a woman who entertained her children and fascinated her audience of friends and neighbors on hot summer nights in Harlem. For Betye Saar, who remembers being psychic as a young child, spirituality was always an important dimension in her life and made up the subject matter of her early work. During the

sixties, Saar moved into what she calls "ethnic occult" and began to use African spiritual practices in her work. She explains her "mojo boxes" refer to Mo-jo women and they to the passage from Africa to New Orleans.

Spiritual practices and the folk belief of storytelling are also part of the personal histories of Toni Morrison and Paule Marshall. The latter explains how the storytelling in her mother's wordshop, particularly the tales of voodoo, mojo, and obeah shaped the world of her art. Toni Morrison recalls also that her family was intimate with the supernatural, that her grandmother kept a dream book by which she played the numbers; that her parents told thrillingly terrifying ghost stories.

The point where the creative power of spiritual practices synchronizes with the folk belief of storytelling is a point of resemblance for the previous black female artists. In Saar's and Ringgold's visual art and Morrison's and Marshall's fiction, the adaptation and representation of conjure, an expressive, religio-spiritual dimension of folk culture, affirmed the aesthetic of spiritualism from the critical-aesthetic context of black America during the 1960s and established and reinforced an African-connected consciousness. In rich and diverse ways, these women explore in their works the interrelation of spiritual practices and the formation of black female identity. Ultimately, conjure existed at the crossroads of history, memory, and religion, functions as the strategy by which these artists sacralize the female experience of mothering and healing to enlighten the African American woman's role in human and cultural continuity.

Spiritual practices, which originated in the African religious thought, affect the black women's identity through their works this African spiritual dimension informed the critical-aesthetic tenets of the 1960s. While Newbell Niles Puckett's *The Magic and Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (1926) and Harry Hyatt's *Hoodoo-Conjuration- Witchcraft, and Rootwork* (1970) are recognized as the first studies of these practices. In them conjure and hoodoo are regarded primarily as bizarre superstition and exotic folk custom, considered at one time to be an

intrinsic part of a stereotypic Negro character. In *Mules and Men* (1935), however, Zora Neale Hurston describes spiritual practices and folk belief as a suppressed religion and writes, "Hoodoo or voodoo . . . is burning with a flame in America, with all the intensity of a suppressed religion. It has thousands of secret adherents. It adapts itself like Christianity to its locale, reclaiming some of its borrowed characteristics to itself. Such as fire worship. . . . And the belief in the power of water to sanctify as in baptism. . . ." Hurston, as one of the first scholars to legitimate folk magic as a "suppressed religion," subverted the frames that enclosed the belief system as primitive, heathen superstition.(193)

In an early comparative study of sacred folk belief in West Africa and the United States, Henry Mitchell explains that conjure, hoodoo, and voodoo are connected to the African belief in the world of spirits, forces, or powers, a world considered strange to theWestern rational mind but which nevertheless has great influence on human welfare, Mitchell acknowledges that this spirituality is characterized by the blending of normatively defined oppositions like sacred and profane, natural and supernatural, good and evil.[14]

To situate an African-connected spiritualism as the creative wellspring of black art and to give the notion of the black aesthetic a needed spiritual reference, the critical-aesthetic formulations during the 1960s linked the power of conjure and voodoo to religion and art. Representing a collective spiritual reference, as well as the human ability to create either magic or art, the suppressed religion of conjure became a symbol for continuity with Africa not only in religious thought, but in art and culture as well.

In responding to the 1960s call to "voodoo time," Saar, Ringgold, Morrison, and Marshall produced works during the 1970s and early 1980s that affirmed this continuity, works that reclaimed and represented the spiritual and transformative power embedded in folk magic and sacred folk belief.

[14] Henry Mitchell, *Black Belief: Folk Beliefs of Blacks in America and West Africa, p*23

CHAPTER ONE: Black Female Identity at the Cross Roads of Religion and Spirituality in Postmodern Literature

Betye Saar's *Wizard* (1972) embodies power and spirit of conjure, she describes her role as artist alternately as shaman and medium, extends her personal sense of spritual and shamanistic powers to this work, which is full of religious, mystical, and ritualistic overtones. In *Wizard* Saar represents conjure with a male subject. However, conjure in specific association with women is also an aspect of her work, just as it is in the works by Morrison, Marshall, and Ringgold. The representation of female healers and practitioners of spirituality illustrates Trinh T. Minhha's notion that spiritual and priestly practices were at one point functions that belonged to women and were taken up by men at a comparatively late time.[15] That may also constitute a strategy by which these artists explore multiple aspects of female identity, as well as reverse the negative meanings imposed on the image of conjure. With such representations in their fiction, both Morrison and Marshall counteract the stereotype of the sinister, repugnant female practitioner of spirituality by reinserting conjure to its original context, representing it as an "ancient property," a special power that in traditional African cultures made women into respected and honored members of their societies.[16]

In the characterization of women like Pilate, Circe, and Marie Thereze in Morrison's fiction, and Merle, Leesy, and Aunt Cuney in Marshall's work, conjure is represented as a spiritual, creative, and transformative power that does not collapse into a form of domination; rather it becomes critical and emancipatory in that it allows the subject to locate herself in history and to critically and creatively appropriate not just the codes of her own personal and collective history but also those of others. Moreover, conjure permits the constitution of identity based on difference between corporeality and consciousness, the distinction that energizes and gives rise to the overlapping and biconceptual realities of spirituality itself. For this reason, the paradigm of inside and outside as conjunctive duality, as interactive and interpenetrating

[15] *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism, p 128*

[16] Dominique Zahan, *The Religion, Spirituality, and Thought of Traditional Africa,* 83–84.

oppositions, characterizes the literary and visual representations of conjure in the black women works. At the same time, however, the boundaries between inside and outside are continually being crisscrossed, ruptured, and reframed. Betye Saar's visual representations of conjure, the spirituality and women are distinguished by this conjunctive duality and the interplay between that boundaries.

Faith Ringgold's *Women's Liberation Talking Mask* (1973) explores and exploits the artistic and political effectiveness of the mask to destabilize the categories of woman and worries the line between inside and outside especially in relation to identity. As Marjorie Halpin notes that the mask is a symbolic locus transcending cultural particulars, represents transformation, a shift from one identity to another.

The overlapping realities of the inner and outer worlds also characterize the representation of spirituality in Marshall's fiction, where memory traverses the boundaries between past and present and reframes them. In *Praisesong for theWidow (1983),* spiritual practices, resurrected through memory, protects and ritualizes optimism. When Avey and Jay Johnson witness the Saturday morning ritual of their Halsey Street neighbors, the drunken, profligate husband and his enraged, accusing wife, the Johnsons' pursuit of material success is threatened. They are fearful that poverty and despair, the real villain who had claimed their neighbors, also stood coolly waiting for them amid the spreading blight of Halsey Street. So they make jokes. Vaudeville-like jokes which they sprinkled like juju powders around the bed to protect them. Jokes with the power of the Five Finger Grass Avey's great aunt Cuney used to hang above the door in Tatum to keep trouble away. Referenced in *Mules and Men* as an herb used to "uncross" a spell, five-fingered grass is also a recollection from Avey's childhood and represents what Karla Holloway calls "black female memory." As she defined the bedrock of racial memory that bonds black women together through their special ethnic heritage, this female memory is sustained through the telling and retelling of those things mystical to women. Generations are strengthened by the

memories of these things and by the memories of women like Avey's Aunt Cuney who preserved them. Holloway explains women like Aunt Cuney were spiritual women who embraced Christianity, but did it cautiously. Retaining links with forces primal, natural, and supernatural, they preserved and used whatever smacked of survival.[17] Preserved in memory and maintained in storytelling, spiritual practices linked generations and gained for themselves the quality of continuity.

The inside-outside paradigm as overlapping realities along with the representation of shifting identities as a strategy for image reversal informs the characterization of Vere's obeah aunt, Leesy, in Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* (1969). A representation of the religious woman as a diviner and prophetess, Leesy symboblizes a woman keenly aware of her inner, spiritual self, which is both separate from and connected to the outside world. Leesy acknowledges the inner reality of identity, which Marshall imbues with spiritual and devotional tones.

Just as Marshall's characterization of Leesy is one in which the boundaries between inside and outside are dismantled and reconstructed, Morrison's characterization of Ajax's mother in *Sula* is one in which boundaries are dissolved to challenge and reverse imposed meanings. This characterization is a brief but seminal representation of how the inside-outside paradigm functions to reverse meanings. The woman is seen as evil by the community outside, also blessed with seven children. Destabilizing the boundaries between good and evil and inside and outside is what enables Morrison to countermand the negative associations with spirituality and represent a female practitioner and healer with multiple identities.

Morrison's characterization of Pilate in *Song of Solomon,* the archetypal religious woman as realized in contemporary black women's fiction, is another one that refuses to dichotomize

[17] Holloway, K. *New Dimensions of Spirituality: A Biracial and Bicultural Reading of the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1987. 151

power as good and evil. Pilate is a woman who moves willingly outside herself to nurture and protect community and family with her spiritual powers. At the same time, she roams freely inside herself, with a mind that travels "crooked streets and aimless goat paths, arriving sometimes at profundity, other times at the revelations of a three year-old." (149)

Crossing the border between mundane reality and what she calls spiritual acts, Morrison manipulates the reader's perceptual and sensuous experience in such a way as to demand active participation. Morrison's characterization of Pilate is that of a woman who owns her own life, a woman whose authenticity and power, derived from being on intimate terms with the scary face of herself, allow her the freedom to make choices, to make her own decisions about situating herself inside, outside, or in the borderland between.

I.5Conclusion

Identity is regarded as one of the most important concepts in postmodern literature. It has been a pivotal issue in the comprehensive understanding of Black American culture and literature. The predominance of this subject is mainly due to the segregation and oppression practiced against the black race in the course of history. The absence of a designated frame of black women manifests itself in the idea of rootlessness and unbelonging, an idea that gives an authentic testimony to the black female identity crisis. Thereupon, African American women writers dedicate their achievements to promote a sense of self and deep- essence of the black female identity.

The Black women often show their identity through parading over their ancestral traditions and spiritual rituals. Through their novels they portray some potential of women to struggle against the oppressive social and political realities of black female life, and although the texts themselves often do not affirm it, they show the creative potential and effect of spirituality

in some aspect of individual characters' lives or in the life of the community as part of the struggle.

Due to the importance of religion to black people and culture, most black writers substantively portray African American religious vision and concomitant African and Western religiocosmic influences. Directly or indirectly novels explore the agency of God in life, but African American women writers often write in exposition to the religious perspective and locate the sacred and spiritual side in the womanist self identity that engages in personal, individual relationships. These depictions portray traditional, womanist religious vision as the characters' or the black community's view of the writer's or the text's. In other cases, texts imply such vision because they reveal the sacred, spiritual, and supernatural, leaving open the possibility that faith in a power beyond the mundane and the rational mind is all that there can be. Reflecting Black female cultural needs and investment from a more controversial perspective related to African tradition, Black women writers also construct alternative theological, spiritual, and supernatural perspectives against oppression and hardship based on the voodoo or hoodoo religion. In these narratives, religious vision invests the Black female writers in the cultural tradition that they depict, producing a variety of critical treatments that confess the writers' ability to comply with their characters' cultural, religious and spiritual beliefs.

CHAPTER TWO: African Myth and Spirituality in Constructing Black Female Character in *Song of Solomon*

II.1 Introduction

In her third novel, entitled *Song of Solomon*, Ton Morrison attempts to expound the importance of; as well as, the power that sprituality has in the ways the black female characters of the novel perceive and construct their sense of selfhood within their community. In this way, *Song of Solomon* represents the different experiences through which the female characters of the novel may pursue a certain connection to African traditions in order to determine themselves religiously.

Therefore, any discussion of spirituality as a key element in the construction of Morrison's *Song of Solomon* narrative must involve an awareness of the ways how the female characters of the novel come to impose themselves within their environment.

Besides that, *Song of Solomon* tackles the different processes that black women undergo as they attempt to create certain connections and engagements with some African beliefs . In this sense, spirituality represents itself as a key factor to the construction of the feminine's sense of selfhood. Furthermore, the representation and description of traditions and myths in *Song of Solomon* provide an interesting milieu to discuss the processes in which the Black female character may or may not develop what they think as an allowing sense of self and identity.

The present chapter aims at negotiating the diverse powers and influences which spirituality exerts upon the conduct of *Song of Solomon*'s characters in the context of self growth and a sense of belonging. Being of great importance for the black woman's sense of selfhood, the representation of African beliefs in the novel allows Morrison to explore its implications over the female experiences.

II. 2 Spiritual Motherhood in *Song of Solomon*

CHAPTER TWO: African Myth and Spirituality in Constructing Black Female Character in *Song of Solomon*

In each of her novels, Morrison boldly undermines the assumptions and hierarchies that historically have legitimated the oppression of people of color, women, and the poor in U.S. culture. Her prose simultaneously invokes the lyrical and the historical, the supernatural and the ideological; she seeks to show the place of enchantment for people like the ones among whom she came of age, even as she explores the complex social circumstances within which they live out their lives.

Song of Solomon was enthusiastically received and widely reviewed. Its publication catapulted Morrison into the ranks of the most revered contemporary writers.

Song of Solomon tells the story of Milkman Dead's unwitting search for identity. Milkman appears to be destined for a life of self-alienation and isolation because of his commitment to materialism and the linear conception of time that is part of the legacy he receives from his father, Macon Dead. The Deads exemplify the patriarchal, nuclear family that has traditionally been a stable and critical feature not only of American society but of Western civilization in general. The primary institution for the reproduction and maintenance of children ideally provides individuals with the means for understanding their place in the world. The degeneration of the Dead family and the destructiveness of Macon's rugged individualism symbolize the invalidity of American, indeed Western, values. Morrison's depiction of this family demonstrates the incompatibility of received assumptions with the texture and demands of life in black American communities.

However, Pilate Dead, Macon's younger sister, provides a marked contrast to her brother and his family. While Macon's love of property and money determines the nature and quality of his relationships, Pilate's sheer disregard for status, occupation, hygiene, and manners is accompanied by an ability to affirm spiritual values such as compassion, respect, loyalty, and generosity.

CHAPTER TWO: African Myth and Spirituality in Constructing Black Female Character in *Song of Solomon*

Pilate introduces a quality of enchantment into the novel. The circumstances of her birth make her a character of supernatural proportions. She delivered herself at birth and was born without a navel. Her smooth stomach isolates her from society. Moreover, her physical condition symbolizes her lack of dependence on others. Her self-sufficiency and isolation prevent her from being trapped or destroyed by the extremely decaying values that threaten
her brother's life.

Milkman's first meets his surrogate mother, Pilate Dead (his father's estranged sister), when he travels to her home with his best friend, Guitar. She is the woman that his father "had forbidden him to go near," but she holds Milkman "spellbound" immediately (36). Milkman notices her difference from the other women of his household as she at first appears "ugly, dirty, poor, and drunk" (37). He initially thinks of Pilate as just "the queer aunt whom his sixth-grade schoolmates teased him about" (37). In Milkman's adolescent mind, he does not yet grasp the role that Pilate will play in his life as his surrogate mother. Even though Pilate is "unkempt," she is not dirty or dripping with filth (38). Milkman notices a bit of undeniable and unexpected difference in the details of Aunt Pilate: "the whites of her fingernails were like ivory. And unless he knew absolutely nothing, this woman was definitely not drunk.
Of course, she was anything but pretty, yet he knew he could have watched her all day" (38). Even though he isn't aware of it, Milkman views Pilate as a son might view a mother. He cannot help but notice the details of her features that surely reflect something about her womanhood and humanity. Cleanliness, sobriety, and a captivating essence; Milkman instantly notices these characteristics in his aunt and future surrogate mother. When Pilate stands, Milkman "all but [gasps]" as he is in awe of her female and motherly presence (38).

Pilate is the polar opposite of Ruth Dead—the two Dead women "[are] so different" as individuals, and therefore also different as mothers (139). Pilate is "black" while Ruth is

"lemony;" Pilate is "buck naked under her dress" while Ruth is "corseted" (139). Pilate allows herself the freedom of feeling and expression while Ruth is altogether more conservative. Their differences contribute to the varying influence and involvement each has with Milkman. Considering his biological and surrogate mother, Milkman learns about the differences between the two: "One [was] well read but ill traveled. The other had read only a geography book, but had been from one end of the country to another. One [was] wholly dependent on money for life, the other indifferent to it" (139). The most obvious difference is that while Ruth focuses more on things and appearances because she is afraid to engage with others, Pilate focuses more on people.

Pilate's inner feelings are seen little because Milkman learns of Pilate through her actions. At Pilate and Milkman's first meeting, she shows hospitality and offers Milkman and Guitar an egg to eat and welcomes them to drink. The egg symbolizes the female reproductive system and new life. Pilate "never had a visitor to whom she did not offer food before one word of conversation" (149). She tells the young boys stories as a mother would, spending quality, focused time with them. Pilate mesmerizes Milkman, and he wants to have as much time with her as possible. He finds comfort in her home, and "her pebbly voice, the sun, and the narcotic wine smell weakened both the boys, and they sat in a pleasant semi-stupor, listening to her go on and on . . ." (40).

The protagonist possesses the best of motherly qualities. She provides reassurance to those she mothers as "she knew there was nothing to fear" in life (149). Her fearlessness allows her to do what "was considered among black people the height of rudeness" at the time: she stares (149). Pilate is unafraid to look another directly in his eyes and seek meaning behind the facial expressions. As a mother figure, she exemplifies manners because "she never made an impolite observation" (149). She is "a natural healer," and her strength may be seen throughout

the community because “among quarreling drunks and fighting women she could hold her own, and sometimes mediated a peace that lasted a good bit longer than it should have because it was administered by someone not like them” (150). Although Pilate is clearly different from most other people, she is not the distasteful village outcast her brother and countless others believe her to be. Pilate is among the best of the village mothers because of the traits that seem to come naturally to her. Milkman grows to know that Pilate’s presence in his life will quickly become significant.

Susan L. Blake comments on Pilate’s important place in the community. The beauty of Pilate’s position is that she “represents the spirit of community inherent in the folk consciousness” (78). She is observant and gains insight through experience and merely by watching the experiences of the others that try to distance themselves from her. Motherly expertise is gained this way, over time and through experience. Pilate becomes not only a mother but a “magical” guide for her nephew-son, Milkman. Her inviting and open nature is unmatched in Milkman’s life (Blake 80).

Pilate’s house provides a welcoming atmosphere for Milkman and Guitar. She tells the boys stories that showcase her love and compassion. Like a mother, she enjoys their company and fills the time with memories of her life as a younger woman. Pilate wastes no time accepting Milkman into her family life. When her granddaughter, Hagar, returns from chores, Pilate introduces Milkman as Hagar’s brother and not her cousin. In the village point of view, there is no recognizable division between brother and cousin, as they all possess the same blood line. When corrected for the mistake, Pilate questions the “difference in the way you act toward” a cousin as compared to a brother (44). She feels there should be no difference and that family should “treat them both the same” (44). Pilate cherishes extended family members as closely as she does her immediate family.

CHAPTER TWO: African Myth and Spirituality in Constructing Black Female Character in *Song of Solomon*

Milkman may want to resist the connection he feels with Pilate initially, but he cannot escape how she captivates him and makes him not want to leave her home. Milkman notices and is attracted to the "piny-winy" smell of Pilate is "narcotic" (40). Like the effect of a narcotic, the smell makes Pilate's presence alluring and addictive. From infancy, children easily identify and distinguish their mothers from other individuals by their distinct smell. Milkman experiences this aromatic connection with his surrogate mother figure.

Milkman is also drawn to Pilate by the concern for the individual person that he finds in her home. He learns that Pilate values communication and has "a deep concern for and about human relationships" (149). Brenda Marshall, in "The Gospel According to Pilate," says that, with Pilate, "the most eccentric character is the most dignified" (486). Pilate shows her son Milkman that a person can still love others and have personal freedom. When Pilate's biological daughter, Reba, thinks that her child, Hagar, has experienced hunger from lack of food, it is Pilate who sees through her grandchild's words. The wise and concerned Pilate is able to discern that her grandchild has not actually been hungry from lack of food. Milkman cannot help but notice the love and maternal instinct in Pilate's accusing household. Pilate, Reba, and Hagar "hummed together in perfect harmony" as an indication that the love of motherhood strengthens their bond to one another (49). In his initial meeting at Surrogate Mother/Aunt Pilate's, "Milkman could hardly breathe. When he thought he was going to faint from the weight of what he was feeling, "he risked a glance at his friend and saw the setting sun gilding Guitars eyes, putting into shadow a slow smile of recognition" (49). Almost immediately, Pilate becomes Milkman's surrogate mother.

Pilate also plays a major role in helping Milkman shape his family history. Mothers are a connection to the past, and as Milkman's mother figure, Pilate answers the call to duty. Gay Wilentz gives Pilate credit for participating in "the function of the African American woman in

passing on stories to future generations" (63). Pilate shares stories with Milkman even in their initial meeting. She fills the role as his female ancestor and connects Milkman to his heritage. Macon instructs his son to "look at Pilate" if ever he doubts that the family is "from Africa" (54). African American community, or village, members, like Pilate, raise children to acknowledge and celebrate their ancestry. Pilate Dead is "unmistakably Morrison's preferred storyteller" within the novel because of her role as premiere mother figure (54). Unqualified love pours from her stories. Without some understanding of the past, the present is baffling
and the future may be frightening. Pilate is Milkman's lifeline to the past; she nurtures him in the present and, hopefully, in the future.

The fact that Pilate does not have a navel should be viewed as an enhancement of her natural motherly appeal and not as a freakish feature. What was her obvious defect, "frightening and exotic as it was, was also a theatrical failure," because there was nothing overtly grotesque about Pilate as most people wanted to believe (148). The navel holds the umbilical cord and connects the mother to the baby during pregnancy. After the umbilical cord is cut, the navel is a visual reminder of the baby's birth and experience inside the mother. Pilate's own mother died in childbirth, which could explain why Pilate has no navel. Her mother-daughter connection ends before it has a chance to begin, so there is no need for the navel as a reminder of Pilate's mother. She has no biological motherly influence on her upbringing, so it may be deduced that Pilate is the supreme representation of a natural mother, a selfsustaining mother. Not having a navel, Pilate could be a Christ-figure with a supernatural birth; the saving grace for Milkman. She mothers by instinct and experience. She is able to be compassionate and intuitive to her biological daughter and granddaughter while simultaneously being able to welcome extended family like Milkman into her motherly embrace.

However, Pilate has a "navel connection" with Milkman's birth, she helps to facilitate his conception, which connects Pilate to her nephew-son even before he is born. Milkman's biological mother, Ruth, tells the story of how her sister-in-law "brought her son to life in the first place" (131). In saying this, Milkman's biological mother acknowledges the village contribution to her son's birth. In actuality, Pilate's love potion in a "greenish-gray powder" serves as an aphrodisiac for Ruth and Macon, Jr. (131). Her delicate "use of conjure in Milkman's conception" is useful in helping to "carry on the family" (Blake 78). Pilate helps create that certain "something" to help Ruth and Macon, Jr. stay together and "reinstate" their intimacy and bond with one another by helping them conceive (131). The village helps the couple to increase their family because an outsider helps to ignite their love and attraction to one another so that they can procreate. Again, Pilate works her role as the community mother, helping to start and maintain families.

What's in a name is also important to the construction of Pilate. Readers of the New Testament of the Bible recognize all the uses of biblical names within the novel. The title of the book is of course a Book of the Bible. Pilate is also the name of the Roman dignitary who orders the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, the "Christ-killing Pilate," Pontius Pilate (Morrison 19). The biblical Pilate may not have had the grace and love of Morrison's Pilate, but they both possess a certain command over those around them. Pilate's name is chosen by her father as just a "group of letters that seemed to him strong and handsome" (18).

Her name hints at Pilate becoming the strong surrogate and biological mother. When total strangers first meet her and do not want to leave her home because of she captivates them, this is noteworthy strength and power. The name Pilate is also a homonym for the word pilot, meaning a person qualified to lead or steer a vessel or fly a plane. Pilate is the leader of Milkman's

journey back through his heritage. Her maternal instinct affords her the ability to know when guidance and steering is needed with Milkman.

II. 3The Torment of Black Women and the Construction to Their Identity

Song of Solomon constitutes and relates the incidents to the quest of searching for one's roots. A man who is in search of his own identity eventually grows with the search for his family history, which culminates in solving a puzzle. It rather defines the growth into manhood of a black man, the protagonist, in Midwestern town, who is the living son of Macon Dead, the richest man in the black community. Macon Dead was born in a home that is recognized and received as dead. The family name symbolizes the Dead family's lack of identity and its spiritual death.

The family Dead is well-to-do, who ascended the social ladder, accepted by whites on economical grounds but, the low class African Americans are not associated with them (the Dead). This complete detachment has lead them to isolation, which is also reflected in Dead's home; cold, non-vibrant and lack of human values, where more importance is placed on materialistic views and pride.

Macon's only son, Milkman"s state of affairs reflects the education he had received from his parents (Macon Dead & Ruth), and also gives a strong clue of his confusion, lack of identity and connectivity with his ancestors.

The materialistic approach and the progress is the only inherited legacy Milkman has along with his name, Macon Dead. The name itself is symbolic and narrates the story of a white man who mistakenly assigned it to Milkman's grandfather in his inebriated state during the reconstruction. White man asked him the details of his birthplace and his father's name, the officer recorded it as Macon and Dead. The name reveals the state of dispossession of an

identity. The intention of the oppressor to suppress the blacks is instrumental in this incident. Similar examples of histories written by the white officer who wrongly writes the name of a black worker evidently throws light on the inner drive of the white men to demean the blacks.

Morrison aims at giving a message in a distinct way by introducing the concept of magic realism. The absorption of fantasy in the daily lives of the people while presenting a piece of work is magic realism. The aura of Magic realism began to spread in 1950s and 1960s, it was basically found in the writings of Latin American writers who were successful in merging reality and fantasy. With the aid of metaphor and symbols of imagery the writers present their magic realistic views and leave the readers in a state of indecision, oscillating between believing in the magical interpretations or the realistic. The concept of magic realism in Morrison's writings is viewed by Maggie Ann Bower as "… influenced by African American oral culture and mythology adapted from West African culture" (Bowers 55). Furthermore, Bowers states that Morrison uses elements in *Song of Solomon* that includes women with magical powers born without navels, as well as men that can fly, which gives her novel a touch of African culture" (Bowers 55). By adopting the notion of magic realism in her novels Morrison seems to have found solace for the black sufferers. The characters find refuge in the special qualities associated with myth and African culture.

Critics justify the character of Macon Dead in comparison with the patriarch Jose Arcadia Buiendia in Garcia Marquez's novel, *One hundred years of Solitude.* Both show similarity in having resemblance with their excessive thirst for material progress which leads both of them towards a futile search for gold.

Susana Vega-González while presenting the milieu of magic realism says: "Morrison like Garcia Marquez dismantles traditional oppositions such as Life/ death, material/ spiritual, reality/fantasy, good/evil in what can be described as a synthetic fusion of binary oppositions.

CHAPTER TWO: African Myth and Spirituality in Constructing Black Female Character in *Song of Solomon*

Magic realism denotes the harmonious synthesis of opposites: as Enrique Andreson Imbut suggests, magic realism is the synthesis between the real and supernatural". As it is found in other novels of Morrison, *The Song of Solomon* is equally rich in the intermingling of dead and live characters with the world of myth, folklore and the supernatural touch. Certain rudiments of the novel such as introducing characters like Pilate, a girl without a navel; the spirits of the dead like Solomon directing his daughter Pilate to perform the duties which he could not accomplish, support the idea fittingly.

The technique of magic realism is adopted in the novel by means of flashback. The baton of legacy is handed over to Pilate by her father, who inspires her to perform her duties. The instances of the conversation between the daughter and the father are presented prominently in the novel. As Susan Vega points out the characters journey into the past through memory reconstructs their personal and collective histories. Pilate Dead stands out as the bearer of ethnic and cultural values as well as the preserver of memory and storytelling; in fact she is the link between past and present, the one who recounts her personal life to Milkman and who instils in him the nourishing seeds of ancestral connection. The character of Pilate is moulded in such a way that she bears the pain and still remains as a link to the protagonist and helps him to gain his lost identity.

In the novel, Pilate and Ruth are seen with active connections to their pasts in their own way but Milkman seems lost in search of his roots and anxious to be on familiar terms with the whereabouts of his predecessors. Such visionary approach is apparent in the works of Morrison which reflects a deep-rooted concern for the need of an acknowledgement and enrichment of an African American culture that has been exploited by both external and internal forces. The character's surname 'Dead' indicates the detached cord of family connection with the ancestors. Morrison expresses: "If you come from Africa your name is gone. It is particularly problematic.

Because it is not just your name but your family, your tribe. When you die, how can you connect with your ancestors if you have lost your name? That"s a huge psychological scar." (Morrison 126) Morrison is very clear and loud in her words that all the blacks suffer with the similar traumatic feeling of losing one's root and identity. Authentically Africans are known by their tribe which is at stake in the hand of the whites. It also illustrates Morrison's deep concern for African culture and their identity.

The versatility of the writer is seen in the way how the unique qualities are incorporated in a piece of work. Morrison has not left any stone unturned to gift the novel with special features. Morrison explains the flying myth that it is purely associated with black people who could fly. She affirms that flying was always a folk lore of her life and recognizes it as one of the gifts she presents to her readers. "It is everywhere people used to talk about it, it's in the spirituals and gospels. Perhaps it was wishful thinking of escape, death and all that. But support it wasn't what it might mean? tried to find out in *Song of Solomon*." (122) Pilate's song refreshes the ideas of past

" O Sugar man done fly away
Sugar man done gone
Sugar man cut across the sky
Sugar man gone home…" (23)

The usage of flying myth in her novels reaffirms her views and approach on mythical symbolism. Thus such references hint at the conventional belief of Africans on myth, folklore, culture, tradition, songs, poetry, fable, superstition and music. These lines are symbolic and refer to the roots that the family is trying to trace. The urge of Pilate to map out their roots reveals the agony of her displacement and their ancestor's trauma.

CHAPTER TWO: African Myth and Spirituality in Constructing Black Female Character in *Song of Solomon*

The novel provides a clear expression of Morrison's belief that understanding self and past is always a project of community through Milkman Dead's extraordinary journey of awakening. In this flight of materialistic love, in search of wealth and identity, the male character serves as a cause for the immeasurable pain of desertion felt by female characters like Hagar, and Ryna, whose agony at the loss of Solomon "like to kill the woman" (326) and the intensity was so very deep that "she screamed and screamed and lost her mind completely" (327). It is understood that Milkman has no room for empathy in his life. In the milieu of accumulating wealth and tracing his origin, he fails to reciprocate to the feelings of his aunt, sisters and Hagar. His uncaring and ignorant attitude is a direct cause for the oppression.

The observation divulges in putting forth the opinion that men are active and the women are depressed, deserted and completely ignored with the influence of culture. All the three women characters found in the novel disclose the fact that they bear a heavy burden of survival. "Ruth, began her days stunned into stillness by her husband"s contempt and ended them wholly animated by it." (Song of Solomon 11) Ryna, Hagar and Pilate are completely exploited by men. Ryna was left behind with her children by Solomon to escape from slavery. Both Hagar and Pilate were used by Milkman to fulfill his needs and completely pay no heed to their existence. Ruth is characterized as a small and pressed woman, " am not a strange woman. am a small one." (124) Her husband's disrespect and coldness gives an indistinct sense of purpose and antipathy to her, increasingly leading to oppression. Hagar too is exploited and silenced by men but she reacts and expresses her anguish through violence.

The novel *Song of Solomon* clearly depicts the patriarchal influence on the society and the cause of suppression on women. Through her characters Morrison shows the patriarchal upbringing and absolute conformity to patriarchal norms deprive a woman of a meaningful existence. The dominance of Milkman on all other women characters in the novel pronounce and

echo the patriarchal culture followed in the community. It rather supports the view of freedom sought by women. The wings of freedom which are ready to soar high are clipped with the patriarchal standard. The extreme exploitation by men with their male perspective of life is showcased very well by the novelist.

On her realization of being muted in life Lena (Milkman's sister Magdalene Dead) retaliates on her brother for his domination. "You've been laughing at us all your life. Corinthians. Mama. Me. Using us, ordering us, and judging us. . . . Where do you get the right to decide our lives? . . . I'll tell you where. From that hog's gut that hangs down between your legs. Well, let me tell you something, baby brother: you will need more than that. . . . don"t make roses anymore, and you have pissed your last in this house. . . . Now . . . get out of my room." (215-216) The reprisal of a sister reveals the behavior of a male member in society and at the same time she expresses her contempt on his ascendancy.

Lena finally opines that Milkman is found with all the qualities of his father as a preservation of patriarchal legacy. The same pride exposes the qualities of an oppressor towards women in his circle. The story of Hagar appends to his behavioral analysis to coin him as a man with patriarchal ideologies.

Pilate's granddaughter; Hagar ; falls in love with Milkman, the son of Macon Dead, and enters into a relationship with him for three years. Hagar waits for Milkman to marry her. Milkman views her as a private honest pot not a real or legitimate girl friend not someone he might marry. He was bored and planned to end their relationship. His decision to end his relationship with Hagar heavily disappoints her. The commitment towards him would not let her think of a life without him. The shock of losing him made her revengeful and jealous. To add on to her emotions she sights him with another woman, this makes her more anxious and tries to kill Milkman. The act of using Hagar for his own advantage then rebuffing her reveals the attitude of

Milkman. He affirms by doing so since he is a self centered man and he is responsible for the traumatic state of Hagar. She fails to kill him and starts believing that if she was more beautiful it would change the feelings of the man she loves.

Hagar then attributes the end of their relationship to her ugliness. She invested all her savings including her mother's diamond to be a new beautiful woman who cannot be ignored. "From the moment she looked into the mirror in the little pink compact she could not stop. It was as though she held her breath and could not let it go until the energy and busyness culminated in a beauty that would dazzle him." (313) The long wait to join her loved one seems imminent. Hagar tries her best to look beautiful to appease Milkman.

She equips herself with beautifying things and absolutely fails to relate to reality; the urge and the urgency to be accepted by her beloved results in tragedy. She was completely amazed by her beauty and neglects the heavy rain. She gets wet and dirty and was seriously affected by the rain and dies, her efforts to look beautiful drove her to the deathbed. Milkman failed to show concern to the lady who was shattered and rejected. All her effort to attract Milkman turns futile; he pays no attention to her after. His focus was more towards accumulating wealth and thus loses on the human warmth. He is busy in the chase and finds no time to reciprocate Hagar's love.

Morrison's creativity is valued; her works are known for diversity in love and oppression. Thus the violence in the character becomes easier to understand. African American slaves endured racism and the objectification of women made easier by patriarchy, poverty and lack of opportunities. Love and agony correspond well with the bizarre in women's lives depicted in all the novels of Morrison. The varieties of love are a sheer agony in the lives of women characters. Reba, daughter of Pilate Dead and mother of Hagar, is not a famous character in the novel. Due to distrust and ignorance she experiences the separation and loss of the family which led her to enter the state of confusion in life. Pilate is considered as peculiar and an exceptional woman

whose rule of life is different. It appears as though Morrison has made an attempt to convey the message that Reba was nurtured by a daring person like Pilate.

Pilate is compared to a majestic tree which shelters many and recognized as an eccentric and unconventional woman. She is a unique character in the novel, known for her strength and will power. Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu notes that she is considered as poor, ignorant, oppressed black woman. Her physical disability creates a curiosity in people's mind. When a man vocalized that he was not aware that there are people without a navel, it prompted an extreme reaction among the people as they connected her to the otherworld of supernatural elements and inspected her for the marks made by the witch.

"Nothin ," the woman said.

Then, „Child, where's your navel? …..

"What's it for?" she asked. The woman swallowed.

"It's for … it's for people who were born natural."

Pilate didn't understand that, but she did understand the conversation she had later with the root worker and some other women in the camp. She was to leave. They were very sorry …." (242-43)

Such queries and conversations put Pilate in a pathetic situation and become traumatic for her to realize about her physical lacuna. It is evident through the study of the novel that people were mystified to understand that a girl without a navel cannot be treated as normal human being. This bewildered reaction of people disappointed her and realized that she needs to hide the fact of not having a navel.

Pilate was self sufficient due to her hard work. Being very close to nature she was busy with fruits picking, hauling and fermenting fruit for her living she used to make wine and market it. Her smartness is gauged by the way she looks at the Sun's position and tells the time and is

also knowledgeable about animals, gardening and cooking. She is always chewing twigs, seeds, hay or something or the other. It is fascinating to know that Pilate's physical description is detailed in terms of nature. Her style represents the place she belongs to. She has berry stained lips, a gravelly sounding voice and looks like "tall black tree" (39). Her abilities are not considered by people but her inabilities are counted which is understood as a means of suppression in the society.

It is worthy to note that Pilate is unique and very humane towards others. This is very much evident in her interaction with other characters, for instance her dealings with Ruth. Macon mistakes Ruth for being very close to her father and suspects his wife for her intimacy. Pilate finds solace and helps Ruth to overcome her problem by keeping her engaged in many things. She teaches Ruth a lesson of life to beat the situation with one's own strength and inflicts superstitious beliefs to be a stable woman.

Through the narrative it is revealed that Pilate's natural attribute; of not having a navel was a cause for people to reject her. They believed and considered her to be an evil conjuring woman and forced her to work and live elsewhere. However, she is an equally strong character who moves on and joins a new group, till the same things happen again and she is kicked out which speaks of her resilience. Pilate's harsh confrontations in life and repeated rejections by the public encourage her to gain self consciousness. It also persuades her to avoid being in the lime light and marrying Reba's father for the only fear of her stomach being noticed. With all these circumstances Pilate grows offensive and realizes "what her situation in the world was and would probably always be." (149)

Besides that at a young age Pilate defends herself after her father's murder, she was different from her brother Macon in dealing with her past. She appears as a responsible to have recreated the past, her ancestors have set an example of suffering and she carried forward the

legacy of oppression. It is her nature to be good; her deeds go unnoticed in the patriarchal setting. People's rejection due to the supernatural association drives her to the state of disgust and checks her tolerance.

Most of Morrison's characters suffer from alienation. Sula, Pecola and Pilate are all alienated from the black community. In *Song of Solomon* the sense of alienation is felt by the women characters that were looked down upon. Pilate is a selfless and fearless woman; she finds satisfaction in embracing the concept of generosity. With all her good qualities, she seems to be exploited by the society and she receives sheer perils in return. Milkman is continuously protected by her and proves to be a strong lady by spreading her wings on other women in her surrounding like Reba and Hagar. The troubles encountered lay bare the state of Hagar and her subjugated state seems to be a supporting fact to the central theme of the novel *Song of Solomon*; the abandonment of women who love men.

> "No wonder‟, she said at last.
>
> 'Look at that. No wonder. No wonder…'
>
> Look at how look. look awful. No wonder he didn't want me.
>
> look terrible. 'Her voice was calm and reasonable, as though the last few days hadn't been lived through at all.
>
> ' need to get up from here and fix myself up. No wonder.'
>
> ‟ Hagar threw back the bed cover and stood up. 'Ohhh. smell too.
>
> Mama, heat me water. need bath… oh Lord, my head. Look at that.
>
> ‟ She peered into the compact mirror again.
>
> " look like a ground hog where is the comb?" (312)

CHAPTER TWO: African Myth and Spirituality in Constructing Black Female Character in *Song of Solomon*

The story line is based on the specifics of the oppression of women. More importantly it shows that Pilate not having a navel is a symbol of alienation. A critic observes that Pilate's alienation at the physical level from the class of black society is the crucial outcome of her radical change which also justifies the fact of not having a sustaining relationship with her mother. Her mother had died even before she was born and was deprived of intimacy as a child. Pilate's affliction is seen through her disillusioned reminiscences of her younger days; orphaned child, without mother from birth, lost her father at twelve.

It is worth mentioning that acts as a guide with an appreciable caliber; she speaks of being truthful and disconnects with Macon by abandoning gold near the cave. The trauma of alienation leads her to introspect about life and its needs. She goes forward with empathy towards distressed people to give support and help them.

The clear depiction of women repeatedly abandoned by men acknowledges the verity of female characters who suffer intensely in different circumstances as depicted in the novel. Morrison attempts to unfurl the tales and types of women's oppression done in many folds. Racism and women are deflated to pay the price for men's freedom. The instance of Guitar's grandmother supports the point; she had to raise Guitar and his siblings. In spite of her old age and being sick she supports them and makes them financially, intellectually, and emotionally strong in the society.

Though the novel pivots around the male protagonist, the women characters have their own roles to be presented with their heavy share of being oppressed. It is their suppressed situation which makes the readers empathetic towards experiencing the serious misery in the lives of the women characters.

The sufferings are shown and can be understood as double through the repeated restraints of women by men in the novel. The black men are considered as work horses because of their hard

work, they serve as a main support to the family. Women bear everything in life and take the stride in being responsible for themselves, their children, family and community unlike men who bear responsibility for themselves but for the physical strength they show. It is noticed very well that men run away from the place leaving the women at their mercy to bear the brunt, like Solomon in the novel.

> "O Solomon don't leave me here
>
> Cotton balls to choke me
>
> O Solomon don't leave me here ......
>
> Solomon cut across the sky,
>
> Solomon gone home.
>
> Milkman hears Shalimar children singing these lyrics,
>
> a part of Solomon�did"s song." (493)

The song connects Milkman to his family's past and provides him with crucial stories about his grandfather, Jake, and his great-grandparents, Solomon and Ryna. Solomon's song implies that when men free themselves from oppression they often leave women behind. The phrase "O Solomon don't leave me here" (488) describes Ryna's descent into desperation and madness as Solomon prepares for his flight. Although Solomon escapes slavery, his flight leaves Ryna to take care of their children while working in the cotton fields.

The theme of male liberation coming at the expense of female oppression is reflected in Milkman's relationship with Hagar, and recurs throughout Morrison's novel. Even though Solomon's flight dooms Ryna to abandonment and his children to be orphans, the song suggests that his flight is still a magnificent achievement. Solomon's song ends with a description of Solomon's flight rather than with a description of Ryna's deprivation.

CHAPTER TWO: African Myth and Spirituality in Constructing Black Female Character in *Song of Solomon*

The character Solomon cares about himself in the novel and flew to Africa fearing to suffer from slavery without informing his wife Ryna, he was also a slave. She was left alone with her twenty one children to remain in Virginia and bear the rest of her sufferings while struggling to bring up her children.

Guitar's Grandmother is another strong character who was a victim of suffering in the novel. After the death of Guitar's father in a factory accident, she raises Guitar and his siblings and despite her illness, she extends her support completely with finance, intellect and also at emotional level.

Interestingly the novel of Morrison isolates the young black girls and vividly presents the disruption of black's culture. Like Sula, Pilate leads a very unconventional life as a pariah. As an independent strong woman she finds her way to collective consciousness of her family. Pilate undergoes the trauma of alienation and overcomes the crisis with her strength and develops a compassion for troubled people.

The female characters in the novel reveal their foremost share of oppression and sufferings which reflect the existential peril. *Song of Solomon* transmits a strong message that the entire world is a product of wreck and cinders of unimaginable waste and loss, the enslavement of blacks and untold suffering.

The agony of the blacks directly or indirectly reveals the idea of black existentialism. Morrison's creative presentation of the characters like Milkman as a perverse man and his attitude towards women mirror the existential authenticity. His behavior of using women for his identity search involves and reveals the existential perils faced by women.

Morrison seems to be triumphant by creating a character like Pilate with unique traits. She is seen as a strong black woman who gives life to Milkman in the beginning by protecting

him from his father's ire and the story successfully ends with the protection of Pilate who becomes a life giver to Milkman.

In spite of bearing all oppressions in her life, Pilate displays the persona of a superwoman. She is characterized as a woman of might, who endures the perils of life. A determined black lady with the quintessence of love she caters to different people in the family and the community. Pilate's adoration towards the family and the people sets an example of different roles played by woman to endorse ones family and the bond shared by them in which she reflects as a pathfinder for many.

Pilate religiously performs her duty entrusted by her father Solomon by withstanding the agony of life This forbearance turns to be a sign of existential woes of women in the community blacks. Morrison presents this novel with different perspectives. It can be seen as a story of a black man who desperately attempts to know his past. In the struggle to locate his roots, he ventures with the present which eventually helps him to redefine his future.

The well known critics and analysts look at the novel Song of Solomon as a novel which is eulogized for its rich texture and its functionalities. The novel functions on different manifolds, revolving round many myths and beliefs, for instance the theme of flights, which contributes greatly to the intended effect:

> "When the dead doctor's daughter saw Mr Smith emerge as promptly as he had promised from behind the cupola, his wide blue silk wings curved forward around his chest, she dropped her covered peck basket, spilling red velvet rose petals. The wind blew them about, up, down, and into small mounds of snow." (5)

This flight connects with the mythical flight of Solomon,

> "O Sugarman done fly away
>
> Sugarman done one

Sugarman cut across the sky

Sugarman gone home…." (6)

The people's reactions were strange and they were filled with apprehensions and came out with different conclusions. Some brought in spiritual connectivity; whereas a few considered it as a dream and a few more thought it as a way of life.

Morrison's intentions of introducing the flying myth of Africa and its impact are well received in two-fold, one as fantasy and the other as myth. Further, it is interesting to note that the people take their own time to relate it to reality in the novel .The flights of Mr. Smith were received with apprehension, People mistook it for racial uplift and some thought it is a worship, but the golden tooth of a man brought them to reality and reacted and gave orders to protect him. Apart from these flights Morrison throws light on literal flights such as birds, pilot and its references. More so with the flight of black people's history, flight from slavery, poverty and violence to the refined status after eradication of slavery, poverty and an oppression free life.

II. 4 Song of Solomon the Return of African Ghosts

Song of Solomon initially posits a similarly split world, but this novel moves toward the attempted and ambiguous reconciliation of the divided parts. It expands the search to a quest for identity and meaning through knowledge of the ancestral and cultural past. Morrison sets up Milkman's miraculous quest for unity by chronicling the heterogeneity in his environment. His family is divided into two estranged branches, and, within his immediate family, his mother and father barely tolerate each other, and he rarely speaks to his sisters. Simultaneously, he is pulled in contrary directions by Macon, Ruth, Pilate, Hagar, and Guitar. In the first part of the narrative, Milkman's response to these pressures modulates from confusion to withdrawal and then to

resentment, and yet, particularly through his association with Pilate, there are signs of preparation for his identity-forming quest in the second one.

In Morrison's novels, characters' immediate families tend not to provide stable bases for individual fulfillment but instead are splintered by unbridgeable gaps between parents and children. In *Song of Solomon* intrafamily relations are even worse. The Bains family has been destroyed by the death of Guitar's father and the absence of his mother. The Dead family is indeed spiritually dead; Macon and Ruth's failed individual lives as well as their moribund relationship are reflected in the stagnated lives of their children and in the lack of healthy relationships among them. The household of Pilate, Reba, and Hagar, another of Morrison's female triads, has many positive qualities, but Pilate, who formed her own successful identity despite the violent break-up of her own family, is unable to transmit her strengths to her daughter or granddaughter. Both in her personal achievement and in her inability to pass on that achievement, Pilate's case further exemplifies Morrison's questioning of the power of parent/child relationships to foster individual wholeness.

Moreover, the extended Dead family seems at first irrevocably split between the two households in their two opposing parts of town. The past strongly shapes the disintegration of families and individuals, but for the Dead family the failure to know and incorporate the past is especially disabling. The family's separation from the past is revealed by its misnaming, which, like the "nigger joke" that named and created the Bottom[18], is an absurd result of racism. Without their name (Solomon) and the wisdom it implies, the Deads are ignorant of their ancestry and hence of themselves, and they are alienated from their community, each other, and themselves. Lacking his spiritual inheritance, Macon substitutes the materialistic ethos of the

[18] Christian, Barbara. *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*. p51, New York: Pergamon Press, 1985.

dominant culture and therefore supposes that his rightful inheritance is the gold. Pilate tries to retain her spiritual connections to her past, in particular to her father, but, not knowing the full story of the past, she makes the erroneous assumption that the bones she keeps are not her father's but those of the white man she and Macon killed. Milkman's task of reintegration requires him to complete Pilate's quest by connecting past and present, thereby rediscovering the family name and converting the false inheritance to a true one.

The past also influences the characters in the form of ghosts, which serve as traces of the past. In this novel, as Freddie urges Milkman, "You better believe" in ghosts (109). For everyone there is the danger of becoming spiritually dead, of becoming, like Hagar, "a restless ghost, finding peace nowhere and in nothing" (127). Guitar's life is determined by the unexorcised ghosts of his parents: the callous response of his father's employer to his father's grisly death motivates Guitar's hatred of whites, and his mother's sycophantic imitation of Aunt Jemima precipitates his mistrust of women.

Each of Milkman's closest parental figures; Ruth, Pilate, and Macon; performs a version of ancestor worship. Ruth, cut off from any meaningful present or future, lives in the memory of her infatuation with her father. "In a way jealous of death" (64), she perpetuates the ghost of her father and the ghost of time past as symbolized by the watermark on her table.

Pilate retains the spiritual values of the past, and her close-to-nature lifestyle imitates her childhood life at Lincoln's Heaven. She treasures the signs of that former life; in her earring, her bag of bones, her rocks; but alone she cannot complete her quest for understanding herself and her past.

Macon, still suffering from the trauma of his father's murder, erroneously thinks he has successfully repudiated the past: "He had not said any of this for years. Had not even reminisced much about it recently" (51). He can no longer remember his father's real name and thus has lost

his past and himself. His servile assimilationism, his accommodation to white standards, his soul-destroying materialism, and his lack of meaningful human contacts all result from his radical disassociation from his past. Having lost all the values of his upbringing in paradisiacal Lincoln's Heaven, he worships gold instead of his ancestors and has substituted material objects for people. Having lost the land, he has become a landlord. His desiccated life is a dialectical reversal; he has become the opposite of what he longed to be.

Despite the conscious repudiation of his ghosts, he ironically pursues his father's quest for material success and comfort in a white-dominated society. The persistent presence of Jake's ghost provides one meaningful link with the family's past. Three times readers are told of his reappearances after he was blown up: by Macon, Pilate and in a curious third person flashback allegedly told by Macon to Milkman.

Presumably also, Jake's ghost is the figure of a man standing by his friend that Milkman sees when he and Guitar steal Pilate's bag of bones. Jake's shallow burial, which led to the dumping of his bones in the cave, symbolizes that the past itself needs to be rediscovered and reintegrated into the present. Like Jake, the family past, as well as the African-American cultural and historical past, has been blown apart by the dominant white culture.

The past is figured in *Song of Solomon* not only in terms of the lost family name, the misdirected inheritances, and the reappearances of ghosts, but also in the novel's narrative form. Its dominant feature is the dozens of flashbacks in which almost a third of the text is narrated.

Almost all of these flashbacks are either told or remembered by the characters which suggest that they are endeavoring to regain contact with their pasts. The main characters who are trying to influence Milkman; Macon, Pilate, Guitar, and Ruth; remember episodes of their past and, more importantly, relate those episodes to him. Milkman, hearing these past stories, is initially not interested. He rejects his family's past just as he rejects responsibility for his own present and

future. Despite his disinterest, the flashbacks provide him with a fragmented sense of his family's past that unconsciously leads to his desire to recover his lost heritage.

The embedded stories about Macon and Pilate's childhood also prefigure Milkman's physical journey to Danville and Shalimar, as his quest becomes the effort to make sense of these fragments of time, place, and differing perspectives. He must learn to read correctly the palimpsest of his cultural, familial, and personal pasts. More broadly, the incorporation and transformation of myths similarly imply the need for a broad "reading" of African-American experience in terms of African cultural heritages.

The primary source of the flashbacks shifts from the other characters to Milkman as he "d[oes] his best to put it all together" (307). He recalls his childhood, his whole life, Guitar's aphorisms, and his rudeness to his family and Hagar. He tries to interpret the past through the words of the Solomon song and through the place names on road signs. His quest to find the lost gold becomes his quest for his family's past and his own undiscovered identity. It is fitting that he seeks the past in a journey to the South, for in Morrison's fiction the South always represents the past.

For most of Morrison's characters, the southern past is available only through memory, but Milkman is able to revisit the sites where his ancestors' past took place and thereby identify himself with these ancestors. As his knowledge of the past increases through the flashbacks and his own travels, his geographical journey expands, duplicating Pilate's geographical collection of rocks from the places she has visited. The stories Milkman collects are like Pilate's rocks: both are fragments of the characters' journeys, reminders of their own pasts and their cultural pasts. Just as the rocks provide the pleasure of connectedness for Pilate, the stories gradually give Milkman self-knowledge, empathy, a sense of place in the African-American culture, and a sense of belonging in the natural world.

CHAPTER TWO: African Myth and Spirituality in Constructing Black Female Character in *Song of Solomon*

The novel simultaneously moves forward and backward in time. From the moment before Robert Smith's suicide on February 18, 1931 to Milkman's leap 33 years later, it moves steadily forward, measuring its chronological movement with the stages in Milkman's life. At the same time, the novel spirals backward through the remembered and related flashbacks of the characters, through Milkman's spatial return to the sites of the past, through the evocation of characters from the past.

The linear conception of time is associated with Macon, whereas Pilate's vision of time is cyclical and expansive. Part of Milkman's task is to fuse these two forms, the first traditionally associated with the American culture and the second with African culture. This double temporal movement creates a circular form, a plurality-in-unity, as the present and past mirror each other in the parallels between Smith's leap and Milkman's, between the singing of Solomon's song at the beginning and at the end, and between Milkman's birth and Pilate's death.

Besides family divisions and the separation from the past, a third form of fragmentation in Milkman's home environment is the acute division between blacks and whites. As in *Sula,* nameless, usually powerful whites surround the black community and treat blacks with cruelty or indifference, for instance the nurse who patronizes Guitar, the bankers who dominate Macon , the drunk Yankee who misnames the Deads, and the boss of Guitar's father who dismisses Guitar's mother with forty dollars and Guitar with divinity. In *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* the vise of discrimination remains in the background and relatively peaceful, but here whites murder Jake, Emmett Till, and the four little black girls, and blacks in the Seven Days plan and execute revenge.

Like the violent divisions in American society, in the novel the black community is also radically divided. As opposed to the relative homogeneity of the black communities in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula,* the Southside is divided between Macon and Ruth's neighborhood and

Pilate's. It is divided politically between the assimilationists, like Macon, and the radical separatists, like the Seven Days. This political division is reinforced by the references to historical events of the 1960s.

The fragmentations within the novel's community thus figure the historic divisions within American culture and within African-American culture. The links between the characters' fragmentations and the fragmented society are suggested by Morrison's allusions to the murder of Emmett Till. This 1955 murder galvanized African Americans, and Milkman most deeply realizes his separation from his community when, ignorant of Till's death, he walks against the crowd and is then chastised by Guitar for his racial apathy .

The disparity between races is also suggested by the problematic question of "why." This is usually unknowable, which suggests that the causes of the racialized condition underlying the novel cannot be determined. Milkman endures the frustrations of not knowing why other characters behave as they do, why Macon forbids him to visit Pilate's house, why Macon hits Ruth, or why Guitar wants to kill him. But Guitar expresses the general principle: "Listen baby, people do funny things. Specially us. The cards are stacked against us and just trying to stay in the game, stay alive and in the game, makes us do funny things. Things we can't help. Things that make us hurt one another. We don't even know why" (88).

This principle applies to all of Morrison's novels: racial oppression leads to displacement and self-destructive behavior whose causes are inexplicable. Also, "not" articulates the racial disparities in Milkman's urban environment. The Southside community is relegated to denial—on "Not Doctor Street", near "No Mercy Hospital" to which blacks are denied admittance. The pervasive sense of denial of access, hope, rights, and privileges that dominates the black community is expressed in Railroad Tommy's bitter outburst to Milkman about all the things "he ain't going to have" (59).

CHAPTER TWO: African Myth and Spirituality in Constructing Black Female Character in *Song of Solomon*

The pernicious effects of this lack, of being the unprivileged members of a divided and hierarchical society, are apparent in the absences that Guitar lives with and that steer his life toward revenge: “Everything ever loved in my life left me” (311). Hagar also suffers from the absence of things: “a chorus of mamas, grandmamas, aunts, cousins, sisters, neighbors, Sunday school teachers, best girl friends, and what all to give her the strength life demanded of her.” The result is that she lives in a state of total absence: “Not wilderness where there was system, or the logic of lions, trees, toads, and birds, but wild wilderness where there was none” (138). Trapped in this nihilism, this dangerous freedom, and unwilling to embrace the wildness Hagar’s only recourse is to try to possess the one thing, Milkman, that she thinks she can possess, even though, as Guitar tells her, “You can’t own a human being” (311). Then, upon losing Milkman, Hagar can think only of his absence, of “the mouth Milkman was not kissing, the feet that were not running toward him, the eye that no longer beheld him, the hands that were not touching him” (127).

Collectively, the African-American community can offset the negativity of denial. Not Doctor Street and No Mercy Hospital become good in the same sense that bad can indicate its opposite. According to Roberta Rubenstein, the acceptance of the inverted names indicates the community’s resistance to the dominant society[19]. Kimberly Benston pushes this point to argue that through the names the Southsiders evade the monologic violence of the white society and protect memory as both continuity and concealment. In other words, the non-names, suggesting

[19] Roberta, Rubenstein Boundaries of the Self: Gender, Culture, Fiction. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, pp 147, 1987.

the community's subjugation and invisibility, become verbal icons for its internal unity in opposition to white authority.[20]

Through these non-texts, the residents signify upon their white oppressors and create meaningful communal identities in opposition to those oppressors. In two other cases the absence of something becomes the vehicle for positive change.

The absence of gold in the cave outside Danville is crucial in shifting Milkman from the moribund materialistic values he acquired from Macon to the spiritual ones modeled by Pilate. Similarly, Pilate's lack of a navel, after causing her anguish and alienation, leads to her self-creation of a viable self (in contrast to Sula who, marked similarly by her birthmark, is less successful in her self-creation). Pilate "began at zero" by symbolically killing her old self by cutting off her hair and then "she tackled the problem of trying to decide how she wanted to live and what was valuable to her" (149).

As a result of this self-deconstruction, she purges herself of fear, develops "compassion for troubled people" (150), acquires a deep concern for and about human relationships, becomes a natural healer, stays in close touch with the spirit of her dead father, and becomes Milkman's protector and guide. As Milkman's spiritual guide, his griot, she models for Milkman the creation of self that is both within and without the community, she precedes him in her physical journey and her symbolic journey toward love and harmony, and she teaches him the values of a spiritual, Afrocentric, nature-centered, nonlinear perspective as opposed to Macon's material one.

Even though she cannot complete her quest until Milkman provides the missing clues, she provides a template for her nephew by fusing disparate forces. As Milkman will pull

---

[20] Kimberly, Benston W. ‚*Re-Weaving the 'Ulysses Scene': Enchantment, Post-Oedipal Identity, and the Buried Text of Blackness in Ton Morrison's Song of Solomon*. Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text. Ed. Hortense J. Spillers, pp 87-109, New York: Routledge, 1991.

everything together, Pilate has deep connectedness with people, nature, community, and the past. As Benston puts it, “she asserts ... the will-toconnection against a world insistent upon definition by division and differentiation” (99). She is Morrison’s first character with a well-developed talent for fusion.

The fusion implicit in Pilate becomes explicit in Milkman. Although Sula and Nel are both fascinated by their opposite’s house, they remain identified with their irreconcilably different houses and lifestyles; there is no middle ground, no character who straddles the two. In *Song of Solomon,* however, Pilate bridges the gap between the two houses when she abets Milkman’s conception and birth, and then Milkman becomes a fully mediating character. He spends time at both houses, he develops significant relationships with characters in both houses, he appreciates the values of his father and his aunt, and he brings about the partial reconciliation of the two families. At age four having “lost all interest in himself” (9), Milkman becomes vulnerable to the uses of others, becomes the subject of a struggle for his soul between five competing characters: Macon, Ruth, Guitar, Pilate, and Hagar. He is bored with his father’s assimilationist and material version of black capitalism, he is disgusted with his mother’s necromantic fantasies, and he has no patience for Guitar’s political obsession with racial injustice.

Although Pilate’s natural wisdom and openness intrigue him, they provide no direct route for his personal development, and his affair with Pilate’s granddaughter becomes another dead end. As Ruth reflects, “he became a plain on which ... she and her husband fought” (133). All five characters place claims on him to fulfill their own unfulfilled lives, and Milkman is vulnerable to their reification of him because he lacks the will to examine himself and his life.

The influencing characters offer contrasting ideas of love. Guitar tries to convince Milkman of the Seven Days’ philosophy of unquestioning love for all African Americans, but

that love leads each cult member into the strictures of revenge against whites and pushes Robert Smith over the edge of sanity and Henry Porter to the edge. Instead of love, Guitar becomes coopted by his hate into the evil practices of the dominant social system he wishes to escape and therefore, like Macon, Guitar exemplifies the dialectical reversal. [21]

In contrast, the love of Ruth and Hagar is personal rather than political, but their version of love is equally unacceptable to Milkman. Ruth indulges herself in worshipping her father and then converts that reifying love into a passion for Milkman that denies his identity: "Her son had never been a person to her." Hagar, beset by her own problems, including Milkman's selfish treatment, allows her love for Milkman to congeal into the desire to possess him. Her love, like Beloved's love for Sethe, becomes an "anaconda love" (137) that would as soon kill Milkman as love him and that has devoured everything else within her: "she had no self left, no fears, no wants, no intelligence."

Pilate's successful effect on Milkman's spiritual growth derives from her more empathic love. She loves individuals, in particular each member of her and Macon's families, and she unselfishly loves all people: " wish I'd a knowed more people. would of loved 'em all. If I'd a knowed more, would a loved more" (340). Through that love, she achieves and conveys to Milkman the self-fulfillment that results from harmony with community and cosmos. As Milkman gradually assimilates these varieties of love, he also synthesizes the other characters' attitudes toward the past. Guitar cannot escape the past, obsessed as he is by his father's death and his bitterness toward it. As a result the earth for him is still the "stinking hole" (227) of the outhouse into which he threw his peppermint stick, and his Seven Days' philosophy is his attempt to redress those perceived wrongs. Macon tries to redress the crimes committed against

[21] Valerie, Smith, Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro- American Narrative, Havard University Press, pp 152, 1991.

his father, not by killing whites but by outdoing them materially; consequently, he has lost his own spirit and the capacity for love.

Ruth does not want to make up for the past but to preserve it, to retain her undying love for her father and to hold on to Milkman's devotion, exemplified by her prolonged nursing of him. She is therefore comforted by the watermark on her mahogany table because it reminds her of her life with her father: "she regarded it as a mooring, a checkpoint, some stable visual object that assured her that the world was still there" (11). First Corinthians provides Milkman with a preferable model when she realizes that her past has not allowed her to become a whole adult and when she exercises her new-found courage by freeing herself from the crushing lies of Miss Graham's sentimentality and the mountains of red velvet. Pilate, again, is Milkman's most helpful guide, for she best combines respect for the past and constructive action in the present.

Furthermore, Morrison uses multiple images of hunting to articulate the heterogeneous influences on Milkman. Guitar fondly remembers hunting as a boy and teaches Milkman never to hunt a doe, but Guitar's lesson is undercut when he becomes the hunter of people, first his white victims and then Milkman.

Hagar resorts to tracking Milkman every thirty days, in her comic/tragic pursuit of something to hold herself together. Milkman becomes the hunter when he trails Ruth to the cemetery, but his purpose is valid, to learn Ruth's story as a counter to Macon's. Milkman's quest to Pennsylvania and Virginia is also a hunt, but a hunt in which the initial prey, the gold, becomes transformed into a search for himself and his ancestral origins. At the climax of that search is the literal hunt for the bobcat, in which Milkman becomes the hunted as well as the hunter, has his epiphany of oneness with the cosmos, and acquires a new identity.[22]

---

[22] Marilyn Sanders, Mobley. *Folk Roots and Mythic Wings in Sarah Orne Jewett and Ton Morrison: The Cultural Functions of Narrative.* pp 124, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Uiversity Press, 1991

This pattern of differentiating various characters' orientations toward a value such as love or a mode of action such as hunting suggests the limitations of any single character's approach. Until Milkman begins to fuse the contrasting perspectives, each character tends to use love, the past, the hunt, or any other vehicle for his or her selfish purposes, which consistently fragments him or her from other characters and frequently harms everyone involved. Except for Pilate, the other characters remain trapped in their narrow, fixed, monologic approaches, which denies them the openness necessary for continuing growth.

The inadequacies of individual solutions are evident in individual characters' failures to interpret things around them. Macon widely misinterprets Pilate, thinking of her as a snake who bites the man who feeds it. Guitar wrongly concludes that Milkman's desire to go to Danville is designed to betray him and then erroneously assumes that the box Milkman helps load onto the train must contain the gold. Even Pilate, despite her sensitivity, misinterprets her father's ghost when he bids her to remember Sing, and she draws the wrong conclusion about the bones she finds in the cave.

No one version of love, of the past, of hunting, or of interpretation is adequate, but instead their plurality and their complex and ambiguous combinations are required. This novel is overtly fugal: it presents multiple lines, multiple reactions, and multiple versions of a topic or an entity, demonstrating that no single thread is adequate. It presents "a tough-minded and dynamic interplay of ideas which never come to rest in any simple resolution" but instead probe "the blues-like paradoxes and complexities of modern experience".[23]

Similarly, the narrative relies not on just one mythic tradition but fuses elements of at least three: African, classical European, and Christian. As Jane Campbell notes, proper names in

[23] Elliott, Bultter E. *Race, Gender, and Desire: Narrative Strategies in the Fiction of Ton Cade Bambara, Ton Morrison, and Alice Walker*, Pp63, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989.

the novel "span centuries and hemispheres"[24], thus integrating multiple cultures and traditions. Even the location and identity of Milkman's hometown is a vague mixture associated with Lake Superior, the Great Lakes in general, and yet with rivers. And the name of Milkman's ancestors' town in Virginia, a town not on any map, slides among several names: Shalimar, Solomon, Shalleemone, and Charlemagne. By remaining vague and essentially multiple, both towns thus become ritualized places where myth can occur.

Morrison embeds the need for pluralism by insisting on retelling the characters' stories, not only those of the major characters but also of such minor characters as Circe and Reverend Cooper and his friends. Although the novel is unified by a conventional third-person narrator, the characters retell or recall much of the novel's past. As in *The Bluest Eye,* many stories and many viewpoints are needed because no single one is sufficient. The stories gradually create a plurality-within-unity, "a crazy quilt with a sense of pattern"[25] .

Like Pilate and unlike the other characters, Milkman transcends individualism and finds himself in a grand harmony with all people and all things. Milkman's quest enables him to recapture his ancestral and cultural past by embodying the essences of his family ghosts. He reaches the womb of his family (the cave) by embracing the terrifying but guiding Circe, who models Milkman's quest by fusing Western and African-American cultural traditions, life and death, and present and past. He becomes Jake as he rediscovers the lost paradise of Lincoln's Heaven in Shalimar. He then becomes Solomon as he achieves the spiritual equivalent of flying, first in his "dreamy sleep all about flying" (302) and then in his final leap. He also accomplishes this synthesis by partially reconciling the claims of the characters who are battling for his soul.

---

[24] Jane, Campbell. *Mythic Black Fiction: The Transformation of History.* pp 146, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986

[25] Genevieve, Fabre. *Genealogical Archaeology or the Quest for Legacy in Ton Morrison's Song of Solomon. Critical Essays on Ton Morrison*, pp 111, Ed. Nellie Y. McKay. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1988.

His trip to the South begins as a response to his father's greed but becomes a repetition and extension of Pilate's previous journeys in search of community and self. His discovery of his origins, especially his solving of the mystery of Jake's bones, not only corrects Pilate's assumptions and completes her quest but also symbolically responds to his mother's preoccupation with the ghost of her father. Just as Milkman earlier bridges the gap between Pilate's and Macon's houses, so his quest unites the strengths of Pilate, Macon, and Ruth. His quest for his origins and therefore for his self answers Guitar's longing for love and racial identity as well as Hagar's need for attachment and recognition. In rejecting a present life that had proved intolerable and moribund, Milkman extends the preliminary questing gestures of not only these characters but also of Pecola, Cholly, Sula, Nel, and Ajax.

Milkman's success is most clearly conveyed through his acquiring the power to interpret correctly, to learn to read the layered meanings of texts.
His initial inattention to highway signs is transformed into his fascination with them: "He read the road signs with interest now, wondering what lay beneath the names" (333). Guth identifies his "reclamation of the past" as a process of learning a new way of reading and interpreting (579), and Mobley argues that the text creates a "mosaic of narrative" in which "the reader's task is not unlike that of Milkman Dead, who must find the meaning in his complicated life story" (*Folk* 97). In a similar vein, Krumholz develops the intriguing parallels between Milkman's initiation and the reader's ritual of initiation to develop new strategies and sensitivities of interpretation. As Milkman puts his puzzle together like Morrison, must fuse the various pieces.

The primary text that Milkman must reinterpret is the actual song about Solomon. Solving the riddle of the song requires interpreting the names of his ancestors and leads to his understanding of his own name and his place in history and the community. The song comes to Milkman, and the reader, as fragments—a blues song, a children's ring game, words and names

that suggest but do not clearly name Milkman's ancestors. Milkman's task is to fuse the fragments of the song as well as of the memories of Susan Byrd and others. As Barthold points out, the song's allusion to the biblical Song of Solomon conveys the sense of further merger, the marriage of holy bride and bridegroom.[26] The song becomes "the sacred text: a proclamation available to all, and the repository of secrets" (Fabre 113).

Like Morrison's novels, the song is appropriately multiple, open-ended, and dialogic: it is "a site of preliterate re-weavings, scène, a fabric of languages alluding to a crazy-quilt of cultures, regions, religions, and affiliations" (Benston 104). In deciphering this text and his own genealogy, Milkman reconstructs a dialectic of historical transcendence, finding his own voice in the power of the sung word, literally uniting his maternal ancestor with the song, thereby fusing native American and African-American cultures, and through this complex process synthesizing all the operative oppositions. As Mobley puts it, "As a performed ritual, the song signals a cathartic epiphany for Milkman" (*Folk* 127). Mobley also cites the song's effectiveness not only for Milkman but as a kind of cultural glue for the community and as an illustration of Morrison's folk aesthetic and mythic impulse.

Since Morrison's maternal grandfather's name was John Solomon, the song is literally the song of Morrison. It is also the song about Solomon, the song that leads Pilate, Milkman, Macon, Ruth, First Corinthians, and Lena to Solomon and thus to their rightful name and place in history. Milkman's adventure toward harmony reaches its climax when he is alone in the dark woods during the bobcat hunt. Like Milkman's decoding of the song, his earlier boredom with and antagonism toward nature is reversed when he learns in this scene to hear and understand the unspoken language of the natural world: "He tried to listen with his fingertips, to hear what, if anything, the earth had to say, and it told him quickly that someone

---

[26] Barthold, Bonnie J. *Black Time: Fiction of Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States*. pp 183, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981.

was standing behind him" (282). This power of interpretation not only saves Milkman's life but marks his integration with the underlying forces of life, establishes the solidity of his identity, and provides him with visionary wisdom. At this moment, he has put it all together, and thereafter he interprets everything with perfect accuracy: "he heard right up close the wild, wonderful sound of three baying dogs who he knew had treed a bobcat" (282) and "his sense of direction was accurate." Simultaneously, he becomes connected with the earth, no longer imagining a tilted, limping relationship: "he found himself exhilarated by simply walking the earth. Walking it like he belonged on it" (284). As a result, everything works for Milkman: he is accepted by the hunters; no longer weighted down with excessive jewelry, the
peacock soars (286); and he finds loving companionship with Sweet. Having placed himself in harmony with community and cosmos, Milkman becomes the model human being; he shares the chores with Sweet, he solves the remaining puzzles of the riddle, he feels connected, he confronts Guitar in the complete absence of fear, and he revises his attitudes toward his family and Hagar, realizing his previous self-centeredness and lack of empathy. He is transformed, in short, into a hero ready for apotheosis. Milkman's act of unifying so many disparate elements; himself, the competing claims upon him, self and community, North and South, urban and rural, and present and past; is all the more remarkable because his life and environment are fraught with counterexamples.

Rather than achieving spiritual life, many characters suffer spiritual death-in-life: Ruth, Macon, Lena, First Corinthians, and all the men in Danville, who "as boys ... began to die and were dying still" (238). Many major characters die tragically, as well as innumerable minor ones (starting with Robert Smith) and many historical figures who are mentioned (John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Emmett Till, the four Sunday school girls). In this world where "everybody wants a black man's life" (335), Milkman has cause to feel threatened and

displaced: “Who were all these people roaming the world trying to kill him?” (273). Milkman’s ability to fuse everything is also remarkable because in his world people are continually trying to cut each other apart. Several deaths occur by cutting, as when Macon kills the white man in the cave with a knife, when Guitar’s father is split in half by a saw, and when a nameless private in Georgia is killed “after his balls were cut off” (156).

More murders by cutting are attempted or threatened: Pilate holds a knife to Reba’s abuser, Hagar stalks Milkman with a butcher knife, Pilate threatens Macon in the cave with a knife, Milkman is cut with a knife in Solomon’s store and in turn cuts Saul with a broken bottle, and Guitar tries to slit Milkman’s throat with a wire.

Metaphorically, cutting is attractive to Milkman: he is exhilarated to think of Guitar in “proximity to knife-cold terror” (178) and living “on the cutting edge.” But it is also repellent: he feels that Guitar “had ripped open and was spilling blood and foolishness instead of conversation” (166). Much like the splitting in *The Bluest Eye,* the motif of cutting conveys the fragility of African-American lives and the difficulties of self-integration. The cutting motif culminates in the bobcat-skinning scene, which extends Milkman’s epiphany in the woods into his ritual rebirth. In contrast to Milkman’s alienation from the black men in the barbershop, here he is initiated into the black male community. Collectively, they skin the cat, each man taking his turn with equal adeptness, as Milkman actively participates as reader and initiate. Since the skinning and evisceration of the bobcat eerily hint at the physical horrors of lynching, castration, and mutilation suffered by black men.

This narrative ingenuity not only heightens the dramatic impact of the cat-skinning scene but also works as call and response, integrating Milkman and the men as well as Milkman and Guitar and pulling into ambiguous juxtaposition competing ideas about life and death and violence and love. The counterpointed text of the passage and the unresolved oppositions it

raises enact the comprehensive, fluid, both/and synthesis that Milkman has attained. His mind now operates dialogically: he is absorbed in the skinning while simultaneously recapitulating his relationship with Guitar. He has achieved double-consciousness and by implication multi-consciousness. Having entered the difference, he is wise enough to allow the double voices to remain open, not to insist on final answers to Guitar's and now his own pressing questions: *"Can't love what criticize?"* and *"What else? What else? What else?"* There are no further answers to such questions because there is nothing else but love, as Pilate's dying words and Milkman's fusion intimate. One way of placing in perspective Milkman's quest, as well as Guitar's, is to turn to sociology.

Primarily from the late 1960s to the late 1970s, during the time that Morrison wrote *Song of Solomon,* many African Americans modified their "personal identity" and their "reference group orientation" from "Negro" to "Black" (Cross 39). In the preencounter stage, Milkman's sense of his race is low and he shares Macon's antipathy for other blacks. Milkman's encounter is spread over his truth-revealing conversations with Macon, Ruth, and Guitar and his initiatory experiences in Danville and Shalimar.. In contrast, Guitar's encounter stage occurs all at once at the death of his father and is accompanied by his enduring anger toward whites.

Like Macon, whose father also died violently when he was young, and like most of the other characters in Morrison's first three novels, Guitar becomes static (Butler 68–69) and rigid (V. Smith, *Self-Discovery* 152), unable to continue the process of fusion and fragmentation. Milkman's immersion takes the other direction identified by Cross, that of altruism, oneness with his people, and religious feeling (Cross 207).

As the object of his quest changes from the materialistic to the spiritual, he undergoes repeated encounter experiences that finally lead him to the immersion stage. Specifically, he immerses himself in the quest for his ancestors, in finding his familial as well as his cultural

roots, and in integrating himself with natural forces. Unlike Guitar's fixation in the immersion stage, Milkman progresses into emersion and internalization. His return to Michigan marks his leveling off from the emotional peak of immersion and his regaining of emotional and intellectual control as he develops a more substantive and textured new self, all of which characterize emersion. Pilate internalizes her new identity, as indicated by such markers as her resolution of dissonance; her pride, self-acceptance, and confidence; her inner peace; and her relationships with others.

Moreover, her flight, like Solomon's before him, is tainted with ambiguity: are they flights from or to? Solomon left behind Ryna and twenty-one children, and Pilate leaves behind dead Hagar and Old Macon. On the other hand, unlike Robert Smith, who tried to fly *away* toward a mystical union with her father and ancestors. Pilate's transformation and successful heroine's quest are miraculous. As she moves from different places, the novel shifts from realism to myth and magic. Pilate's adventure, associated with mythic parallels, can happen only in myth. Her quest works for her, as she works through her fears, creates a new identity, rediscovers her self, integrates with her community and her culture. America has been nearly driven asunder by competing individual agendas, it endured its "knife fight" in the Civil War, and in the 1960s and 1970s it passed through another test of its unity.

Song of Solomon details the perils of unquestioned unity and the necessary but arduous process of attaining a viable pluralism (as in Pilate's and Milkman's quests). Like Pilate, American culture has ghosts it tries to mourn and to recognize, riddles it tries to decipher, and a past it tries to rediscover, acknowledge, and appropriate. it is preoccupied with examining itself to find itself and with learning to love so as to conquer fear. As this novel holds together a decentered subject, a unity inclusive of oppositions, fragments, and tensions, so America tries to recognize and reconcile its disparate voices. In such quests, there can be no final answer, since

final answers mean the closure of death; therefore Pilate lives and dies, flies and falls. Similarly, as individuals and as a culture; like Claudia, Nel, and Milkman; Americans continue reading the texts in the necessarily endless process of self-discovery. Pilate's suspension in mid-transformation underscores the power of her experience, suggesting that it cannot be or need not be brought back into the realm of ordinary life. Such transcendence provides the book much of its power, but it also leaves unexplored the issue of translating the miracle into reality.

II.5 Religion and Myth in *Song of Solomon*

Morrison's work contains elements of existential philosophy through the development of the protagonists Milkman, Pilate and their quest for self identity via the trials and tribulations he encounters in doing so. *Song of Solomon* takes place in the 1950's and 60's, Morrison shares the ability to weave the actual current events of the time into her stories to make them more realistic. She employs a linear program that also extensively uses flashbacks and storytelling to advance the plot. Morrison wastes no time in capturing the reader's attention with the very first line of the story: "The North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance agent promised to fly from Mercy to the other side of Lake Superior at three o'clock" (3). Robert Smith, the insurance agent, leaps to his death from Mercy Hospital, a whites-only hospital in the segregated south. Smith, as we later learn, was a key member of the Seven Days; a group of black men formed to seek retribution for the numerous killings of southern blacks during this time. The narrator introduces the theme of flying in this brief sentence; a theme which takes several different forms throughout the novel. Morrison makes several pertinent points regarding this novel. First, she points out that the name of the insurance company is that of a prominent black-owned company handling black clients. Second, she points out that Smith's flight mimics the path from North Carolina, in the south, to Lake Superior, in the north; the same path that many blacks took to escape slavery and

oppression in the South. In this way, she connects the 1960's events with slavery and the flight from slavery. Milkman Dead also goes on a journey, seeking lost treasure and tradition by travelling from the north to the south, and in so doing, actually discovers himself. Morrison comments on the significance of the words "fly" and "mercy": "Both terms are central to the narrative: flight as escape or confrontation; mercy the unspoken wish of the novel's population" (xi).

As Smith prepares to jump, a woman sings one of several songs in the novel that refer to flying. The initial impression is that the song is biblical in nature, the assumption stemming from the title of the book. Song of Solomon, also referred to as Song of Songs, is the 22nd book of the Bible and widely attributed to the authorship of Solomon. It is a series of love poems, either between a man and a woman, or between God and people. First century scholars took the approach that the book "was an allegory for God's love for his people" (Brians 1). Early Christian scholars followed this thought process, but modified it to reflect first Christ's love for the Church, and later God's love for the Virgin Mary (Brians 1). Brians comments the woman in the poem may have been alluding to equal property rights for women or metaphorically looking to control her own body. As *Song of Solomon* unfolds, the reader sees that Morrison employs the technique of double entendre in that nothing in her work is as it first appears; *Song of Solomon* refers to both biblical allegory and to Pilate's grandfather Solomon, and the folklore of the flying Africans which will be discussed at greater length.

Names are significant in *Song of Solomon*. Black history is a critical aspect of Morrison's work, and in this instance she points out that slaves once leaving Africa not only lost their names, but their families and tribes as well, referring to this situation as cultural orphanage. Former slaves often rejected their names given while enslaved, choosing new names for themselves when freed. In fact, Morrison selects biblical names for many characters in the novel,

to show the impact of the Bible on the lives of black people, their awe of and respect for it coupled with their ability to distort it for their own purposes.

Macon "Milkman" Dead is given the unflattering nickname by Freddie, a janitor, who sees Milkman's mother nursing him at the advanced age of five. Milkman's father is the only one who did not know the origins of the nickname, but sensed that it is distasteful in some sort of way. The Dead family name was acquired in 1869, when all blacks had to register with the Freedman's Bureau after the abolition of slavery. The clerk registering Milkman's grandfather was drunk; when asked where he was born, he said Macon. He was then asked who his father was, to which Macon replied that his father was dead. The clerk filled in the form with the name of Macon Dead; a name passed down to each subsequent first born male. Barbara Christian indicates this black family retains their dreaded name, for it paradoxically embodies their vitality as well as their oppression. And they perfect it by starting their own tradition of naming by randomly selecting the first name of their children out of the Bible. One of the most significant named characters in the novel is Milkman's aunt. Pilate's mother died in childbirth, and her father could not read, so when he randomly selected Pilate's name he did so because "it seemed to him strong and handsome" (18). The midwife pointed out that Pilate was the name of Christ's killer, therefore inappropriate, but Macon said he prayed to no avail for his wife to live, so Pilate it was to be. The naming of Pilate and the circumstances of her birth are critical aspects to understanding the novel. Pilate and pilot are homophones, so Morrison ties the name back into the flying theme introduced early in the novel. Pilate has magical/mystical qualities about her; she was born without a navel, and as such, viewed as a freak and ostracized by others. Pilate also learns how important, though misleading, appearances are to people. Thus she learns to rely on inner qualities rather than outward manifestations. Yet paradoxically, her understanding of the spiritual is based on her appreciation of the land of her origins. Valerie Smith notes that Pilate

delivered herself at birth and was born without a navel. Her smooth stomach isolates her from society, since those who know of her condition shun her. Here, Morrison gives human qualities to the abstract idea of flight and spiritual freedom.

Macon had lost interest in his wife Ruth, so Pilate gives her a potion to slip to Macon; Macon's interest in his wife inexplicably returns, and Ruth gets pregnant, much to Macon's displeasure. He wants Ruth to abort the baby, but Pilate and Ruth stand up to him, and the baby, Macon "Milkman" Dead, is born. Pilate not only helps create Milkman, she saves his live as well. As the story unfolds, Pilate continues to function as Milkman's pilot, helping him to find himself and giving her life for him in the end. Pilate seems to be the exact opposite of her brother Macon; Pilate lives a primitive life close to nature, whereas Macon is fixated with the accumulation of property and wealth. In so doing, Morrison highlights the Dead family's distance from the authentic African American community and its roots. She creates an ironic twist in that it is Macon's greed in wanting to steal what he thinks is a bag of gold from Pilate that inadvertently results in Milkman's discovery of himself and his roots.

Morrison chooses the name of Ruth for Macon's wife, a somewhat sympathetic character in *Song of Solomon.* Milkman's sisters are named Magdalene, called Lena, after Mary Magdalene, mother of Jesus, and First Corinthians, called Corinthians. First Corinthians is a fascinating choice of name for Morrison to use; it refers to the seventh book of the New Testament, and is a letter written by Paul around 50 C.E. to the citizens of Corinth. Upon leaving the church that he founded there, Paul receives word that the Corinthians are reverting back to their debauched pagan ways. Corinth was a thriving seaport metropolis, containing many brothels and pagan temples. The city was composed of a few wealthy families, but most of the citizenry were freedmen and artisans. Gordon Fee's view is that these freedmen were viewed only slightly ahead of slaves in the social order. Once again, Morrison carefully selects a name

with several levels of meaning. It is also interesting to note that Corinthians tells her family that she is an amanuensis to Michael-Mary Graham, when in fact she is her maid. In the novel, Corinthians meets Henry Porter, another member of the Seven Days, and when Milkman informs his parents of their relationship, she quits her job and moves in with him. Morrison employs allusion, emplotment, and characterization to suggest the paradoxes of both post biblical and post slavery existence.

Milkman's friend Guitar Bains is another interesting choice of names. While not biblical in nature, Guitar is instrumental in developing Milkman's character and cultural awareness . Guitar, like Robert Jones and Henry Porter, is a member of the Seven Days; the connotation being that God created the world in seven days. However, Morrison leaves room to question why evil in various forms is personified in these men.

Hagar, Pilate's granddaughter and longtime love of Milkman's, is a tragic figure in the story. Hagar reflects both the bible and the legacy of slavery, as well as the subservient role of women in both instances. Milkman tires of her and breaks off the relationship. Hagar makes several feeble attempts to kill Milkman, and eventually goes mad and dies.

The choice of Hagar's name is particularly striking. Hagar is Sarai's Egyptian maid. Sara is barren, so Sara gives Hagar to her husband Abram as a second wife, in the hope that she will give him a son, which she does . Hagar goes away to the wilderness, becoming the first free slave in recorded history. Circe is another character with a most notable name, introducing Morrison's use of Western classical mythology into the novel.

In the Odyssey, Circe is a temptress who lures sailors into her clutches, turning them into swine; yet in *Song of Solomon,* Circe saves lives. Old Macon Dead, father of Macon and Pilate, is a successful farmer. He is shot dead in front of his children by the white landowner next door. Circe, who has worked for the landowner's family, hides Macon and Pilate in the very house of

the murderer at great peril to herself, saving their lives. Milkman, in his quest for the lost gold, finds Circe living in that same formerly grand house now in total disrepair, surrounded by her Weimaraners. The choice of the Weimaraner as Circe's dog companions is an interesting one. They are bird dogs, and as such, bred to retrieve killed prey, and they are German, bringing to mind Hitler and his quest to create a superior race by selectively killing off political rivals and minorities. Circe tells Milkman about his great-grandmother Sing, and the story behind his grandfather's bones being hidden in a cave. The story now comes full circle in that the bag of what was thought to be gold hanging in Pilate's house actually contains the bones of her father. Most importantly, Circe gives Milkman key information that leads him to discover his family roots.

Myth and the supernatural are also elements of *Song of Solomon.* Early in the story, Freddie tells Milkman: "You better believe boy. They're here" (109). Pilate tells Milkman of being in the woods after her father has been shot: "But papa came back one day" (40). The supernatural elements of the novel continue in the flying imagery throughout the story, blending the past with the present, making it hard for characters inside the novel and readers to differentiate the real from the unreal. As Phillip Page states that Jake's shallow burial, which led to the dumping of his bones in the cave, symbolize that the past itself needs to be rediscovered and reintegrated into the present. Once again, Morrison weaves the existential theme into the novel.

The theme of flying, omnipresent throughout the novel, surfaces again in Milkman's conversation with Susan Byrd and his discovery that Jake, his grandfather, was married to Sing Byrd. Again, we have the homophone/metaphor of bird and Byrd, singing and flying. This leads to Milkman's discovery that the children's song about Solomon that he has heard all of his life is actually a song about his grandfather Jake and his great-grandfather Solomon:

CHAPTER TWO: African Myth and Spirituality in Constructing Black Female Character in *Song of Solomon*

Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone

Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home. (303)

Susan Byrd tells Milkman of: "Some old folks" lie they tell around here. Some of those Africans they brought over here as slaves could fly. A lot of them flew back to Africa. The one around here who did was this same Solomon or Shalimar- never knew which was right." (322)

She then goes on to tell Milkman that Solomon had Jake in his arms but dropped him as he flew away, watched by Solomon's wife Ryna and several of her other 21 children. Milkman naturally assumes that Susan means flew off as in running away, and Susan says no, she means flew: "He was flying. He flew. You know, like a bird. Just stood up in the middle of the field one day, ran up some hill, spun around a couple of times, and was lifted up in the air. Went right on back to wherever it was he came from" (323). Solomon's wife was named Ryna, and she lost her mind and died after Solomon left, just as Hagar did upon losing Milkman. Once again, Morrison has history repeating itself. The children are the ones who created the song to keep the story alive. Wendy W. Walters discusses how woman and children are the unsung heroes in these tales of male heroism and self-discovery: "Since it is almost always only those slaves born in Africa who can fly, there are usually some American born slaves left behind-often children" (19). This point is underscored by Ryna's and Hagar's bitter disappointment.

Morrison herself discusses flight and the myths of flight in an interview with Thomas LeClair:

> Let me give you an example: the flying myth in *Song of Solomon.* If it means Icarus to some readers, fine: want to take credit for that. But my meaning is specific: it is about black people who could fly. That was always part of the folklore of my life; flying was one of our gifts. don't care how silly it may seem. It is everywhere-people used to talk about it, it's in the spirituals and the gospels. Perhaps it was without thinking-escape,

> death, and all that. But suppose it wasn't. What might it mean? tried to find out in Song of Solomon. (371-72)

Icarus, against his father's advice, flies too close to the sun with his wings of feathers and wax, and falls to his death; conversely, Milkman, who follows his father's advice to find the gold he thinks Pilate stole, actually finds himself and his roots in the process. This false quest leads to revelation and self discovery.

Lavolerie King looks at the myth of the flying Africans in an interesting light: The basic tale of the flying Africans-a tale of spiritual transcendence-concerns Africans victimized by New World slavery who take wing and fly back to Africa. variations of the story include accounts of Africans leaping over the sides of slave ships during the Middle passage, and tales of a group of Ibos walking back across the Atlantic to Africa. (761)

Allen Alexander observes that Morrison's fiction reflects both Christian belief African and African tradition. According to him, Morrison's fiction has four faces: the traditional Father, Son, and Holy Ghost of Western theology, but also a fourth face. He says that the fourth face is an explanation for all those things-the existence of evil, the suffering of the innocent and the just-that seem so inexplicable in the face of a religious tradition that preaches the omnipotence of a benevolent God. He goes on to describe African storytellers giving God a human face by putting him in a greater context than does traditional Western theology. Africans believe that God is more of an active participant or a willing spectator in the tragedies that befall human beings. Traditional African religions believe that tragedy happens regardless of the actions of human beings. Many Africans believe that evil not only derives its power from God but is allowed to flourish by God. Morrison effectively mixes traditional Western theology with African myths and folklore to create Pilate's story.

CHAPTER TWO: African Myth and Spirituality in Constructing Black Female Character in *Song of Solomon*

Ashley Tidey weaves Freud into the interpretive mix along with flying in an article analyzing Milkman's limp, pronounced at the beginning of the story, but which disappears towards the end. Tidey says the limp can be interpreted in two different ways:

For a Freudian reader, Milkman's lifelong limp would symbolize the difficulties the protagonist encounters in any attempt to *progress*; such a reader would argue that the hopeful image of Milkman's healed limp, occurring toward the end of the novel, is undercut by his fall-indeed, by his suicidal leap. For an Afrocentric reader, however, the miraculous healing of Milkman's limp and his transcendent flight from Solomon's Leap would signify the protagonist's spiritual rebirth and connection to his ancestral past. (50-51)

Tidley also points out that "The crucial philosophical conception in Africa of ancestor communion"-the interdependence between the living and the dead, matter and spirit, earth and heaven-is achieved through rituals ensuring their connectedness" (52). Pilate illustrates this tie to her African history in several ways; her use of potions, wearing an oversized earring that contains her name written on a piece of paper by her illiterate father, and in keeping the bones of the man she and Macon killed in self-defense when fleeing Circe's care after the murder of their father.

In *Song of Solomon,* the flight imagery is a metaphor for Pilate's journey to find herself, yet it also represents flight from the oppression of slavery and its aftermath segregation:

Inasmuch as flying is a metaphor in this folktale for death as a *freeing* of the spirit to "go back"-back to Africa and to one's roots-the folktale resonates with the African cultural tradition of connecting to ancestors as a way of "revitalizing" the spirit and collective life of a community." (Tidley 60)

Song of Solomon is anything but conclusive Pilate pieces the Song of Solomon together, realizing that it recounts her grandfather's mythical/magical flight back to Africa. Pilate and

Milkman return to Virginia to bury her father Jake's bones; in spite of her name being Pilate "she wouldn't set foot on an airplane, so he drove" (334). Guitar, believing that Milkman had found the gold and was holding out on him, inadvertently shoots Pilate as she stands back up from touching the grave. Once again, Pilate saves Milkman's life, but this time sacrificing her own life to do so. Pilate joins Ruth and Hagar in self sacrifice, a role reserved for Jesus in the Christian tradition. Pilate has become more of a mother to Milkman than his actual mother: "Now he knew why he loved her so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly" (336).

II.6 Conclusion

Spirituality is unquestionably a vital element for the analysis of Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. It situates the novel at the core of a critical focus which opens up the text to more complicated and subtle interpretations that reads *Song of Solomon* as a site of critique that gathers Morrison's central concerns about balck women and their relation with the implications of identity that African beliefs have on their lives. And, indeed, the representation of sprituality ends up being the basis for discussing the imperatives of its politics in the way it manipulates female experiences that help shape the lives of the characters.

In *Song of Solomon,* spirituality undoubtedly proves itself to be a structure of power within which the blck female characters attempt to achieve their sense of selfhood. The process of negotiating the antithetical representation in which Morrison classifies her characters as either dead but present spiritualy or alive appears to be analytically fruitful in the way it cunningly demonstrates the African myth and the great influence it has over the female experiences.

In the context of *Song of Solomon*, Morrison persistently shows the importance of the ancestors, and their impact in constructing the black woman self to be more refined and sought after the female identity in the community.

CHAPTER THREE: The Quest for Black Female Self in *Beloved*

III.1 Introduction

Ton Morrison's body of work exceeds three decades and is characterized by an evolving concern with the study of women's inner lives. She was interested in studying women that are real and not just contrived to live in a world without racism, sexism, and a society that does not up hold white ideals over blacks. Instead of creating women that fit into an ideal, she displayed realistic women who behave in particular ideals that are unrealistic. From a young age many of Morrison's women, particularly African American women, are led to self-imposing by their belief in master narratives that bring about their self-identity.

The main concern in this chapter is to present the strategies that Morrison devoted to create a vivid tale of a black woman's quest for selfhood and identity from the social constraints in her most celebrated novel *Beloved*. In creating Sethe, the protagonist of this work, Morrison had to invalidate the posdtmodern stereotypes. Here the ideology of true womanhood which places black women at the bottom of the social scale is considered.

III.2 Post Modernism and Blackness in *Beloved*

The dilemma of black literature is that a black author finds in articulating black identity, Henry Louis Gates argues that it can be usefully stated in the irony implicit in the attempt to posit a black self in the very Western languages in which blackness itself is a figure of absence, a negation. Ethnocentrism and logocentrism are profoundly interrelated in Western discourse, in which one finds one of the earliest figures of blackness, a figure of negation. Given sociohistorical conditions compelling it toward silence, African-American literary production questions not what distinguishes itself from other forms but rather how it manages to speak at all. Language at once masks and reveals the social and political structures from which it arises and

which it creates. Consequently, black writers have had to digest both Western and non-Western forms of cultural production in order to create a voice that can affirm and affix identity. Out of this process they have forged a literary discourse that transforms notions of blackness.

One area of transformation presents itself in the attempt to situate Ton Morrison's *Beloved* within a postmodern context. In *Beloved*, interpretation forms an integral strategy in creating black cultural and social identities. The fictional characters and communities; as objects of exploitation in both slave and free-market societies; transform absence into a powerful presence. A sense of self emerges from experiences of exploitation, marginalization, and denial. Analogously, Morrison's narrative, confronting a facelessness dominant American culture threatens to impose on black expression, forges out of cultural and social absences a voice and identity. *Beloved* creates an aesthetic identity by playing against and through the cultural field of postmodernism. In so doing, it challenges received notions of postmodernism and, more important, engages with the very complex critical issues out of which contemporary American cultural identity is forged.

Throughout the narrative, *Beloved* reveals a concern with linguistic expression: the evocation of both oral and written discourses, the shifting from third person narration to omniscient narration to interior monologue, the iteration and reiteration of words and phrases and passages. This linguistic and narrative variation demonstrates a concern with the production and meaning of language. The text thus spins a story woven of myth that creates a pattern of elaborate linguistic play. By crossing genres and styles and narrative perspectives, *Beloved* filters the absent or marginalized oral discourse of a precapitalist black community through the self-conscious discourse of the contemporary novel. The novel emerges, then, at an intersection where premodern and postmodern forms of literary expression cross.

The narrative in *Beloved* highlights processes of reinscription and reinterpretation. It intertwines the mythic, folkloric, and poetic threads of an oral literature with the rhetorical and

discursive trajectories of a postmodern literary field. It stands amid a cultural context in which play, allusion, quotation serve as privileged aesthetic techniques. It is not enough, however, to claim for *Beloved* the mantle of postmodernism. It and other novels that emerge from multicultural histories serve to foreground the relation between cultural text and sociohistorical context. The blackness of black literary texts, historically read to signify a lack in Western discourse, becomes in Morrison's hands an important thread tying together the complicated realms of politics and aesthetics. The "not" signified by blackness becomes for Morrison a means by which to weave her tale. A process of interpretation and reinterpretation in *Beloved* serves to form an "is" out of the "nots," which helps untie the tangled threads by which Morrison knits together her novel.[27] *Beloved* challenges to rethink the relationship between the postmodern and the marginal, to reinterpret and redeploy the decentering impulses associated with postmodernism. The novel forces the reader to retrace the distinct threads of the historically marginal as they inform the patterns and politics of postmodern culture. Thematizing the suspension between absence and presence, *Beloved* and other multicultural texts hang between being and not being a part of contemporary American culture. Absence is made tangible in *Beloved* from the first page of the novel.

Several historical and geographical facts are presented, the action is set near Cincinnati, Ohio; the year is 1873; the address of the house is 124 Bluestone Road. These concrete details do nothing to obviate the sense of loss that pervades the opening. The reader is informed that the grandmother, Baby Suggs, is dead and the sons, Howard and Buglar, have run away. Only the escaped slave Sethe, married to Baby Suggs's son Halle, and her daughter Denver remain.

[27] The notion of being between "is" and "not" proves central to the novel, dedicated as it is to the sixty million Africans who died during the Middle- Passage between freedom and slavery. In an interview with Angel Carabi, Morrison notes that with the novel she was "trying to insert this memory of the Middle Passage] that was unbearable and unspeakable into the literature. ... It was a silence within the race. So it's a kind of healing experience. There are certain things that are repressed because they are unthinkable, and the only way to come free of that is to go back and deal with them" (38). Morrison highlights the interplay between absence and presence, between silence and voicing.

Though free, they are scorned by their community and made victim to a ghostly presence, a spite that fills the house at 124 Bluestone Road. The historic and geographic specificity that opens the narrative stands opposed to the equally concrete absences evident in the story, the missing ancestor and the missing descendants. Readers are placed generationally in a space that floats somewhere between an absent past and an absent future. Into this static fictional present a ghostly past perpetually attempts to insert itself.

Absence is present through to the last page of the novel. The reader is told numerous times by the end of the narrative that Beloved's story "is not a story to pass on" (275). "Pass on" signifies both rejection and acceptance. Beloved's story cannot be repeated, the narrative warns, cannot be allowed to occur again in the world. The repeated warning also means that this is a story that cannot be forgotten, rejected or passed on. Thus the close of the novel evokes again the motif of absence and presence by ambiguously suggesting Beloved's story should neither be forgotten nor remembered.

The interplay between presence and absence, accepting and rejecting, appearing and disappearing, repeats and resurfaces throughout the course of *Beloved.* The demarcation in the text between life and death (the ultimate distinction in the modern West between existence and extinction) blurs and is erased.[28] These distinctions dissolve as Beloved, Sethe's murdered child, returns incarnate. The erasure of boundaries between self and other, life and death is a motif evident from the very first scene of the book. Though dead, Baby Suggs is from beginning to end a felt and seen presence in the narrative. We are given her image: an old crippled woman, lying in bed, hovering between the memories of an uneasy life and the certainty of a restless death. Too demoralized to care that her grandsons have run off, she is concerned only with the small satisfaction of meditating upon scraps of colored cloth: "Suspended between the emptiness

[28] Robert Broad suggests that the distinction between individual and community is likewise blurred in Beloved, In this he argues that the novel contests the veneration of individuality by Western culture.

of life and the meanness of the dead, she couldn't get interested in leaving life or living it, let alone the fright of two creeping-off boys. Her past had been like her present and since she knew death was anything but forgetfulness, she used the little energy left her for pondering color" (6). Her son Halle, who had at the old plantation Sweet Home hired himself out every Sunday for five years in order to buy her freedom, has not managed to make it north to be with his mother, wife, and daughter. Baby Suggs has had to become accustomed to absences, and in this she is not alone.

The story of slavery invoked by *Beloved* and endured by Baby Suggs is premised on the absence of power, the absence of self-determination, the absence of a homeland, the absence of a language. The action of the novel incorporates these historical conditions and draws attention to their many results. The absence of Mr. Garner, who had been a temperate force of oppression at Sweet Home, leads to the slaves' flight. The absence of her children who had escaped earlier and gone ahead of their parents drives Sethe to continue her arduous journey north to Ohio. The absence of Halle leads her to wait for his return and is one of the causes for Baby Suggs's withdrawal into her small world of colored cloth. Sethe learns the lessons of absence and refuses to turn her children over to the slave catchers who have come to take her family back to Sweet Home, only eluding capture by murdering her child. The presence of her baby's ghost as well as its eventual reincarnation serve as a constant reminder of the absence and longing that have led Sethe and Denver to take refuge in their isolated home at 124 Milestone.

Absence thus comprises the past and the present of the characters' lives in *Beloved.* These absences are due to the presence of and obsession with skin color. While "black" signifies "blank," it also signifies property. It is the insulting and violating practice of commodification that serves as the source for the many absences Baby Suggs and her people have had to learn to survive:

CHAPTER THREE: The Quest for Black Female Self in *Beloved*

> [I]n all of Baby's life, as well as Sethe's own, men and women were moved around like checkers. Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized. So Baby's eight children had six fathers. What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children. (23)

Commodity and exchange serve as the only forms of interaction between blacks and whites in *Beloved.* This exchange on its most basic level involves the marketing of human beings, but exchange also occurs in a more subtle though no less invidious manner. The white abolitionists who use Sethe's plight to further their cause turn her story into currency. Their concern is not with her as a person, but with her as a case. Her story disappears in their rush to turn her actions into abolitionist propaganda. This causes Sethe to shy away from repeating her narrative and leads her to put her story away so that it can be neither misused nor misunderstood. Only later, with Beloved's reemergence, does the story of a mother driven to
desperation and murder too reemerge. Sethe's story opens between her, Beloved, and Denver channels of exchange similar to the channels of charitable exchange evident among the black community in the novel. The novel thus posits forms of exchange that provide alternatives to modern forms of market exchange.

Morrison's narrative sketches a relation between the black community and material goods that is governed by the use value of those commodities. Her esthetic creation evokes a historical period in which the industrial has not yet infused the lives of the characters. This aspect in some measure explains why many of Morrison's works explicitly or implicitly focus on elements of rural, preindustrial life. By presenting monetary exchange only through the buying or selling of slaves, the narrative suggests a nostalgia for the premodern that implicitly focuses criticism on contemporary social organization.

CHAPTER THREE: The Quest for Black Female Self in *Beloved*

Rather than view postmodernism as a historically decontextualized field of endless play, critics have suggested that *Beloved* presents us with a different vision of historical reconstruction. The movement in the text among the modern and premodern, the reexamination of historical signification, suggests a critical engagement with history as a narrative, a construction implicated in ideology. Morrison's text suggests a complex relationship to tradition and history, one that is neither a simple reclamation of historical fact nor a fanciful reconstruction of some originary tradition. Instead, it re-members history, revises perceptions of the past and its significance in an implicit critique of contemporary social formations.

After all, the reason Baby Suggs's children are used as pieces in the slave traders' game is because of their color. Thus one begins to grasp a vague pun woven into the text: Baby Suggs's fascination with color comes as a result of her suffering a life of deprivation, a life, like her room, that is absent of color. Color becomes a metonym for the richness of life. Yet Baby Suggs's suffering is due precisely to the color of her skin. The punning on Baby Suggs's fixation with color is an appropriate verbal device for a narrative concerning and arising from a black culture. The word "color" in this context is a sign for the literal concept of hue and visual perception. The concept undergoes a literary transformation whereby color serves as a metonym for luxuriousness, comfort, pleasure. Simultaneously it serves to signal not just a racial group called "black" but also the recent sociolinguistic transformations that have replaced the terms "color" and "colored" with "black" and "African-American." The pun helps trace literal as well as historical, political, and social patterns within the weave of the narrative. The language of the text, the effect of pun and play, constructs and dissolves structures that are at once linguistic and ideological.

While Morrison's narrative shares affinities with other postmodern texts, it also suggests a connection between its narrative strategies and the sociohistorical conditions of Africans in the Americas. Gates argues that the signifying of black narratives; the linguistic playing, punning,

coding, decoding, and recoding found in African-American texts; emerges from the pressing necessity for political, social, and economic survival:

> Black people have always been masters of the figurative: saying one thing to mean something quite other has been basic to black survival in oppressive Western cultures. Misreading signs could be, and indeed often was, fatal. "Reading," in this sense, was not play; it was an essential aspect of the "literacy" training of a child. This sort of metaphorical literacy, the learning to decipher codes, is just about the blackest aspect of the black tradition.[29]

Where the term "play" might suggest freedom, innocence, rebellion, the linguistic "play" evident in *Beloved* results from deciphering codes with deadly serious implications. There is in *Beloved* no innocence, no aesthetic word play that does not simultaneously trace political, social, and cultural meanings. In this respect *Beloved* and other multicultural novels distinguish themselves from the full-blown fancy found in texts often termed postmodern.

The allusions and processes of symbolic exchange evident in *Beloved* work to reentrench the narrative in a painful social and historical reality. Late in the novel, for example, Denver goes among the community in search of food and work in order to support her mother, who has been incapacitated by the demands engendered by Beloved's return.

Denver seeks to enter the service of the Bodwins, the abolitionist family who helped settle Baby Suggs and Sethe on their arrival in Ohio. In their home she notices on the shelf the small figure of a black boy:

> His head was thrown back farther than a head could go, his hands were shoved in his pockets. Bulging like moons, two eyes were all the face he had above the gaping red mouth. His hair was a cluster of raised, widely spaced dots made of nail heads. And he

[29] Gales, Henry Louis, Jr. "*Criticism in the Jungle." Black Literature and Literary Theory, E*d. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. pp 6, New York: Methuen, 1984.

> was on his knees. His mouth wide as a cup, held the coins needed to pay for a delivery or some other small service, but could just as well have held buttons, pins, crab-apple jelly. Painted across the pedestal he knelt on were the words "At Yo Service." (255)

The image of the black boy at once suggests commercial exchange, servitude and the grotesquely twisted neck of a lynching victim. With this brief image the text exhibits a comphrehensive critique of the commercial, racist, and potentially violent nature of the dominant social order.

The image of the black figurine exemplifies the unstable processes of symbolic exchange at work in the novel. The significance of such words as "color" and "exchange" and "service" configured by the image of the subservient change cup moves toward a critique of social realities. The slipperiness of language is foregrounded in the novel as words glide from one frame of reference to another, just as characters glide from one defining identity to another, and the form of the narrative from one genre to another. This shifting is not due to the liberating practice of free linguistic play and indeterminacy. Rather, it arises from the absences left by previous literary, discursive, and social forms. As multiplicity and transformation come to form the privileged components of *Beloved,* the inadequacies of other avant-garde forms of literary expression are made present. In large part, the reason classically postmodern texts move away from connection with sociohistorical reality is their commitment to the hermetic isolation of the aesthetic object. Because of the contested histories from which they emerge, multicultural texts place in the foreground the relationship between language and power. In order to understand alterity and decentralization as historically grounded phenomena rather than reified fetish, a critical understanding of postmodernism takes into account the lessons proffered by multicultural texts. There exists a profoundly complex and critical relationship between the use of language and the exercise of power.

Morrison's narrative plays not just with language but also with the traces of ideology that leave their mark in language. At this level, the significance of linguistic play that is not simply

play makes itself manifest. Language, never innocent of power, becomes in Morrison's text a central means by which power disperses itself. The language of slavery within *Beloved* comprises signs written with whips, fires, and ropes. It is this discourse that is literally inscribed on Sethe's back by the dispassionate and evil figure of schoolteacher.

Schoolteacher appears after the death of Mr. Garner in order to help Mrs. Garner run Sweet Home. Faceless, nameless, he becomes the speaking subject of slavery's discourse. Taking advantage of his position as the possessor of language, he notes with scientific detachment the animal-like characteristics of Sweet Home's slaves. He has his nephews; studying under his tutelage; do the same: "No, no. That's not the way. told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up" (193). Sethe's identity, circumscribed by these scientific practices, is subject to the effects of schoolteacher's discourse. As often happens, the treatment she receives as an object of discourse transforms her into an object of violence. She tells Paul D, the one Sweet Home man to escape slavery alive and whole: "[T]hose boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it. told Mrs. Garner on em. . . . Them boys found out told on em. Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still" (16-17). Sethe's body is doubly violated: once when its nutriment is stolen, then again when torn open by a whip. Just like the page of schoolteacher's notebook, Sethe is divided and marked, inscribed with the discourse of slavery and violation.

Throughout the narrative, the hard language of slavery is heard: Sethe's mother is hanged; Sixo is burned alive then shot; Paul A, mutilated beyond recognition, swings from the trees of the Sweet Home farm. The bodies of these characters become the texts on which their identities are written. In a lesson brought home again and again, the power of the word is made manifest in the world. Power belongs, as schoolteacher tries to show, not to those whom words define but to those who define words.

CHAPTER THREE: The Quest for Black Female Self in *Beloved*

Yet the defined do not entirely lack power. Those who live with the absence of power reserve to themselves the persistent practice of decoding and recoding signs. The result is that the texts on which the master has inscribed one meaning reinscribe those self-same signs and make them signify something new. The master's texts become the subjects rather than the objects of language, masters of rather than slaves to discourse.

Both Sethe as a black slave and Amy Denver as a white indentured servant know the bonds of slavery and sexual violation. The two women meet as they each seek to escape their position as objects of oppressive discursive practices. For Amy; stumbling on the battered and pregnant Sethe while running away to Boston; the woman's scarred back is not a mark of her slavery. Rather she exclaims, "It's a tree. ... A chokecherry tree. See, here's the trunk—it's red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here's the parting for the branches. You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like, and dern if there ain't blossoms" (79). Both women have been marked by their position as owned property. As the signs of slavery inscribed on the one are transformed by the other into an image of fruition instead of oppression, Amy gives back to Sethe her identity as a nurturing source.

The power to rename represents a reclamation of agency when other venues that would help the characters establish a sense of subjectivity are closed. At the center of this need to name stands again the sense of absence found throughout *Beloved.* In this instance, the absence of names returns to haunt African-American life. As Ton Morrison explains,

> [A]mong blacks, we have always suffered being nameless. We didn't have names because ours are those of the master which were given to us with indifference and don't represent anything for us. It's become a common practice, among the community, to give a name to someone according to their characteristics: it's life that gives you a name, in a way.[30]

---

[30] Marie-Claire, Pasquier. *Ton Morrison: 'Dans ma famille, on racontait tout le temps des histoires*. *La Quinzaine Litteraire,*pp 11-12, Mar. 1—15,1985

CHAPTER THREE: The Quest for Black Female Self in *Beloved*

Blacks are nameless because given names cannot recover a preslave past. The community bestows names upon people, constructing through a communal act of rechristening a self meant to counteract the disempowerment of a slave past. Kimberly Benston explains that this practice of renaming represents a way of creating a historical self-identity. For the African-American, he notes that self-creating and reformation of a fragmented familial past are endlessly interwoven: naming is inevitably genealogical revisionism. All of African American literature may be seen as one vast genealogical poem that attempts to restore continuity to the ruptures or discontinuities imposed by the history of black presence in America.[31] Naming becomes, in other words, a means of bridging the violent gaps left by history.

Morrison's novel suggests that history does indeed pertain to the order of language as the novel demonstrates how history is constructed and reproduced like other narratives. Understanding history as a linguistic complication does not prevent a reclamation and restitution of human identity from history. *Beloved* suggests that this process of reclamation occurs at those points of aporia where the human and the historical do not meet. In the text lies between two cultures with differing literary values. From an American perspective, the novel invokes a lost culture and so serves an elegiac function. From an African context, the novel brings a sense of loss into existence by the power of the word. The novel then represents both a loss and a regeneration simultaneously, both an absence and a presence that point toward the absent and present cultural connections to Africa.

The moment in the novel where Sethe is mostly clearly laced with the dilemma of absence and presence occurs soon after her escape to Ohio and her reunion with her children. Sought out by slave catchers and schoolteacher, Sethe refuses to allow her children to be taken

[31] Kimberly, Benston. " Yam What Am: The Topos of Un(naming) in Afro-American Literature." *Black literature and literary Theory.* Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. pp 152, New York: Methuen, 1984.

back to the inhumanity of slavery. In the face of this threat, Sethe marks her baby with a most profound form of inscription. She draws a handsaw across her throat.

Sethe stakes her position against the injustice and violence of history by using the only language she has at hand. The power to name is the power to mark, the power to locate and identify. This is the power she assumes for herself in deciding the fate of her children. Yet this power does not emerge from nowhere: the language Sethe uses to mark her child is a language she had learned early in life and had nearly forgotten. Only in a moment of desperation does it reemerge.

The female protagonist recalls being raised, along with the rest of the slave children, by the one-armed wet nurse Nan. She was the one who took care of the children, nursed the babies, did the cooking:

> And who used different words. Words Sethe understood then but could neither recall nor repeat now. . . . The same language her ma'am spoke, and which would never come back. But the message—that was and had been there all along. . . . She told Sethe that her mother and Nan were together from the sea. Both were taken up many times by the crew. "She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never. Never. Telling you. am telling you, small girl Sethe." (62)

The only baby Sethe's mother accepted bears the name of the only man she took in her arms. The other babies she rejected. Sethe learns from Nan not the linguistic code of her African past but another code: one of absence, of silence. This language contests history by denying to it another victim of oppression. Sethe's language, like her mother's language, is one of denial and rejection.

The meaning of Sethe's refusal is, however, lost. Others appropriate her story of desperation in order to serve their own ends. Her actions and the significance of her discourse are

misconstrued in the rush to turn her story into other stories that have, ultimately, nothing to do with Sethe and her family. As the telling is altered, the story told is no longer Sethe's. First the events are circumscribed by the sensationalist newspapers of the day: "A whip of fear broke through her heart chambers as soon as you saw a Negro's face in a paper, since the face was not there because the person had a healthy baby, or outran a street mob" (155-56). After the newspapers, the abolitionists take up Sethe's cause, adding fuel to the fire of antislavery passion. Like Owen Bodwin, the man who helped Sethe and her family escape slavery, the abolitionists find in Sethe a cause and not a human being: "The Society managed to turn infanticide and the cry of savagery around, and build a further case of abolishing slavery. Good years, they were, full of spit and conviction" (260). Caught between the sensationalism of the newspapers and the inflammatory rhetoric of the abolitionists, Sethe's story disappears.

To tell her story again, to make clear the meaning of what she had done, Sethe would like every word delivered by the preacher at her baby's funeral engraved on the headstone: "Dearly Beloved. But what she got, settled for, was the one word that mattered. She thought it would be enough, rutting among the headstones with the engraver. . . . That should certainly be enough, Enough to answer one more preacher, one more abolitionist and a town full of disgust" (5). Beloved is thus twice marked: once with a handsaw and once with a chisel. The first sign brings an absence, creates a lack; the second is Sethe's attempt to fill that lack with an explanation of the emotion that prompted the first. Both are legitimate expressions of a difficult discourse, the desperate language of the oppressed, Each rushes to fill the absences left by other discourses pressed physically and psychically upon Sethe and her progeny slavery, patriarchy, commodity exchange. Together in the novel, these discourses form constellations of meaning that prove insufficient in the face of Sethe's own sense of identity.

However, asserting a self by appropriating discourse, as Sethe learns, is not a simple matter. She thought the inscription of Beloved's tomb would be enough to quiet the past. While

that single word may have been enough to answer the preacher, the abolitionist, the town full of disgust, it was not enough to answer Beloved. The future of Sethe has been solely a matter of keeping the past at bay. The past, incarnate in the form of Beloved, finally overwhelms her. Beloved becomes for Selhe a manifestation of history; a living and usurping power, one that controls and subsumes her, one for which she does not have a contesting language:

> Beloved bending over Sethe looked the mother, Sethe the teething child, for other than those times when Beloved need her, Sethe confined herself to a corner chair. The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became; the brighter Beloved's eyes, the more those eyes that used never to look away became slits of sleeplessness. Sethe no longer combed her hair or splashed her face with water. She sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur. (250)

The past mercilessly consumes Sethe. She has not found a language to counteract effectively the intolerance and violation traced by other discourses. Despite her best efforts to respond to a hopeless situation, despite her attempts to assert agency by becoming a speaking subject, Sethe finds herself subject to the tyranny of history.

Sethe finds this tyranny associated with signs and language. She becomes a text upon which her white masters inscribe a discourse of slavery. She serves as a symbol of exchange, a commodity as either a piece of property or a social cause. And she becomes a text upon which patriarchy seeks to inscribe her identity, as the actions of Paul D reveal. Not long after his arrival in Ohio, Sethe ponders why he would want her, suddenly, to bear him a child. She suspects he wants to use her body as a marker, a way of establishing a legacy for himself. By using her body to bear him a child he leaves behind a sign affirming both his manhood and his existence.

The reason Paul D wants a child, finally, is because he does not have the nerve to tell Sethe he has been having sex with Beloved as well as her. The excuse of a child might be, he

reasons, what it takes to cause a rift between Sethe and Beloved and finally drive the strange girl out. Sethe herself comes to suspect the truth as she thinks about some of the things Paul D cannot endure: "Sharing her with the girls. Hearing the three of them laughing at something he wasn't in on. The code they used among themselves that he could not break. Maybe even the time spent on their needs and not his. They were a family somehow and he was not the head of it" (132). Paul D's sense of self and power is challenged when he confronts a situation unfamiliar to him. This sense of unfamiliarity and lack of control makes itself manifest in numerous ways. The most striking and disruptive moment occurs when Sethe finally tells him about the murder of her baby.

When Paul D arrives at 124 and runs the spirit of Beloved out of the house, he thinks he has made the house safe for Sethe and Denver. He assumes he can confront and control powers that others cannot. He realizes when Sethe tells him about her baby's death that he has it all wrong:

> And because she had not [run the spirit off] before he got there her own self, he thought it was because she could not do it. That she lived with 124 in helpless, apologetic resignation because she had no choice; that minus husband, sons, mother-in-law, she and her slow-witted daughter had to live there all alone making do. The prickly, mean-eyed Sweet Home girl he knew as Halle's girl was obedient (like Halle), shy (like Halle), and workcrazy (like Halle). He was wrong. This here Sethe was new. (164)

He can only judge her by bringing prescribed models of order into play. She needs the direction of a husband, son, and mother-in-law in order to do better than make do. Sethe is measured in Paul D's eyes by how much she is like her husband, Halle, rather than like herself. Under his gaze, her identity is bounded. When he learns that her words and her actions can transgress those bounds, Paul D is both surprised and scared that this Sweet Home girl can so effectively tear down the walls of social and familial structures and draw a handsaw across her child's throat.

CHAPTER THREE: The Quest for Black Female Self in *Beloved*

The tension between Sethe and Paul D; and the intractable relationship between Sethe and history; moves toward resolution as Paul D returns to visit Sethe near the close of the narrative. Beloved has been run off. Sethe feels deserted, dissociated from that which was her best part, which she strove so hard to protect, and which has been lost to her once again. The loss of the past, her daughter, and her ability to name and so claim these threatens to destroy Sethe. Beneath Paul D's hands washing her, her body feels as if it will crumble away. She does not know whether she can withstand the touch of contact: "Nothing left to bathe, assuming he even knows how. Will he do it in sections? First her face, then her hands, her thighs, her feet, her back? Ending with her exhausted breasts? And if he bathes her in sections, will the parts hold? She opens her eyes, knowing the danger of looking at him. She looks at him" (272). The narrative marks a moment of commitment on Sethe's part. She realizes the need to connect with and to rely upon another.

For his part, Paul D does not know what to think of Sethe lying on Baby Suggs's bed seemingly; like the old woman before her; waiting only for death: "There are too many things to feel about this woman. His head hurts. Suddenly he remembers Sixo trying to describe what he felt about the Thirty-Mile Woman. 'She is a friend of mine. She gather me man. The pieces am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order. It's good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind'" (272). Like the Thirty-Mile Woman of Sixo's affections, Sethe helps form the syntax of Paul D's life. Because of this, "he wants to put his story next to hers" (273). Together they might form a story different from the suffering of Beloved's story and from the tyranny of history that her story represents.

It is this tyranny to which Paul D refers when he tells Sethe, "[Me] and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow" (273). He tries to move Sethe away from the destructive past toward a new beginning. Suggesting a movement beyond the structures of patriarchy and the violence of slavery, Paul D realizes the need to rename and reidentify what

their past was. As a consequence of putting together previously disparate stories and histories, they can begin to articulate what a future may be. Paul D wants to put his story next to hers, to rewrite and so reroute the course of their narrative.

After all, Beloved's story "is not a story to pass on" (275). The ambiguity of this phrase reveals the ambiguity of the relation between history and the dispossessed. On the one hand, history is eternally reinvoked and reinforced: *Beloved* is a story that cannot be ignored. On the other hand, history must be contested and refused: *Beloved* is a story that cannot be passed down.

The drawing together of stories signals a primary strategy in Morrison's text. Here at the level of narrative performance lies the resistant and critical postmodern qualities of the novel. The play of the novel is not simply a pastiche of various narrative forms. Rather, it is a conjoining of different discourses, a tracing of their different social significances. The construction of the text serves to voice mixed forms, to articulate the mestizaje[32] of contemporary multicultural literary production. This is the presentation of a new and heretofore absent expression in an attempt to speak a missing aspect of history. The novel works to weave together into one narrative stories seemingly as dissimilar as those by Sethe and Paul D. Throughout, the text highlights the various processes by which stories, both traditional and contemporary, oral and written, historical and fictional, are told. The tale of Sethe's escape and Denver's birth, the infanticide and the aftermath, all are told by or remembered through the consciousness of various characters; Denver, Sethe, Beloved; as well as through the contemporary narrator whose voice frames the entire narrative. From the first page of the novel, this voice creates a tension between the fictional past and the present moment of narration. The narrator explains that the site of the novel, 124 Bluestone Road, "didn't have a number then, because Cincinnat didn't stretch that far. In fact, Ohio had been calling itself a state only seventy

[32] Mestizaje means 'mixing' and refers to the mixing of ethnic and cultural groups, the concept is a fluid one, ever changing in its relation to social, political, and philosophical ideas about the nation and national identity.

years" (36). The narrative brings to the fore the temporal disjuncture between the narrative present and the fictional past characteristic of the novel form. *Beloved* also focuses on how stories are told by one person to another as a means of articulating the accumulated wisdom of communal thought and of hearing the dead through the voices of the living. The novel thus evokes numerous forms of narrative; and numerous forms of telling history; as it forms a critical postmodern pastiche.

Pastiche is of course quite a loaded term within discussions of postmodernism. One position, as articulated by Fredric Jameson, asserts that pastiche is a neutral practice of parody, "without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter. . . . Pasticheis thus blank parody".[33]. On the other hand, David Antin, discussing postmodern poetry, argues that the weaker logical relations between the assembled objects of pastiche allow a greater degree of uncertainty of interpretation or, more specifically, more degrees of freedom in the reading of the sign-objects and their ensemble relations.[34] In *Beloved,* the pastiche suggests that each narrative form evoked by the novel; novelistic, modernistic, oral, preliterate, journalistic, and, most significantly, historical; becomes a metanarrative at play in the field of the narrative. The novel evokes a narrative that has been decentered by history, the communal voice articulating African American experiences. It places this voice within the same discursive space as a central narrative form, an aesthetically decentered but culturally privileged modernism. By juxtaposing these against the historical configuration of slavery and its aftermath, *Beloved* takes quite literally the decentering impulse that informs postmodern culture. The novel places into play an aesthetically decenlered novel with a historically dispossessed constituency to reenvision the relationship between storytelling and power. The novel deploys a narrative pastiche in order to contest history as a master narrative.

---

[33] Fredric, Jameson. *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. New Left Review* 146, pp 65, 1984.
[34] David, Antin. *Modernism and Postmodernism: Approaching the Present in American Poetry. Boundary 21,* no. I, pp 21, (Fall 1972).

CHAPTER THREE: The Quest for Black Female Self in *Beloved*

The importance of historically decentered narratives in all of Morrison's works cannot be overestimated. In an interview with Nellie McKay, Morrison talks about the evocation of a community voice in her novels:

> The fact is that the stories look as though they come from people who are not even authors. No author tells these stories, they are just told—meanderingly —as though they are going in several directions at the same time.... am not experimental, am simply trying to recreate something of an old art form in my books—the something that defines what makes a book "black." And that has nothing to do with whether the people in the book are black or not. The open-ended quality that is sometimes a problematic in the novel form reminds me of the uses to which stories are put in the black community. The stories are constantly being retold, constantly being imagined within a framework. [35]

Morrison's explanation suggests a reliance upon collective thinking and impersonal memory, the telling and interpretation of stories through multiple voices. Her work does not engage with the infinite progress of aesthetic experimentation. If nothing else, postmodernism has at the very least allowed us to see the links between a drive for aesthetic avant-gardism and the mind-set of technological modernization. The need for endless aesthetic invention can no longer effectively drive contemporary culture. It is worth emphasizing here: evident in Morrison's text is a break with the ideology of progress overtly and covertly evident in modernist texts. Morrison's novel and the work of other multicultural writers represent a strategic break. Her novel revisits history neither for sheer aesthetic play nor as a neoconservative call upon staid forms of tradition. Rather, her text offers a radical revisioning and recounting of history. This seeks to highlight the erasure enacted on those who have often paid the dearest price in the race for economic and technological progress. Rather than make her art new.

---

[35]Nellie, McKay. An Interview with Ton Morrison. *Contemporary Literature* 14, no. 4, pp 427, 1983

CHAPTER THREE: The Quest for Black Female Self in *Beloved*

III.3 Female Interdependence between the Black Past and Present

African American artists have insistently based a large part of their aesthetic ideal on precisely remembering the past. As Morrison has said, "[I]f we don't keep in touch with the ancestor . . . we are, in fact, lost. Keeping in touch with the ancestor is the work of a reconstructive memory which is a form of willed creation. It is not an effort to find out the way it really was—that is research. The point is to dwell on the way it appeared and why it appeared in that particular way." This concern with the appearance, with the ideology of transmission, is, though, only part of the overall trajectory of her revisionary project. Eventually her work, she states, must bear witness and identify that which is useful from the past and that which ought to be discarded. It must, that is, signify on the past and make it palatable for a present politic; eschewing that part of the past which has been constructed out of a denigrative ideology and reconstructing that part which will serve the present.

Morrison is both participant and theorist of this black aesthetic of remembering, and she has recently set out some of the mandates for establishing a form of literary theory that will truly accommodate African American literature; a theory based on an inherited culture, an inherited history, and the understanding of the ways that any given artistic work negotiates between those cultural/historical worlds it inhabits.

By taking a historical personage; a daughter of a faintly famous African American victim of racist ideology; and constructing her as a hopeful presence in a contemporary setting, Morrison offers an introjections into the fields of revisionist historiography and fiction. She makes articulate a victim of a patriarchal order in order to criticize that order. Yet she portrays an unrelenting hopefulness in that critique. She does not inherit the orthodoxy of victimage. She, like Ralph Ellison, returns to history not to find claims for reparation or reasons for despair, but to find something subjective, willful, and complexly and compellingly human.

CHAPTER THREE: The Quest for Black Female Self in *Beloved*

Morrison's sense of ambivalence, of wishing to forget and remember at the same time, is enacted in her attitude toward the story and its characters. Speaking about the writing of *Beloved,* she declares her wish to invoke all those people who are unburied, or at least unceremoniously buried, and go about properly, artistically, burying them. However, this burial's purpose, it would appear, is to bring them back into living life. This tension between needing to bury the past and needing to revive it, between a necessary remembering and an equally necessary forgetting, exists in both the author and her narrative. We might better understand that tension by attending to the author's construction of the scenes of inspiration leading her to write this novel.

The idea of *Beloved* was inspired by two or three little fragments of stories that she had heard from different places. The first was the story of Margaret Garner, a slave who in January 1856 escaped from her owner Archibald K. Gaines of Kentucky, crossed the Ohio River, and attempted to find refuge in Cincinnati. She was pursued by Gaines and a posse of officers. They surrounded the house where she, her husband Robert, and their four children were harbored. When the posse battered down the door and rushed in, Robert shot at them and wounded one of the officers before being overpowered. Margaret chose death for both herself and her most beloved rather than accept being forced to return to slavery and have her children suffer an institutionalized dehumanization. The story of Margaret was eventually to become the historical analogue of the plot of *Beloved.*

The story of Garner stayed with Morrison, representing something about feminine selflessness. It took another story to clarify more precisely what Margaret and her story meant.

Morrison found that story in Camille Billops's *The Harlem Book of the Dead*; an album featuring James Van Der Zee's photographs of Harlem funerals. These were photographs, Morrison has said, that had a narrative quality. When Van provided that next story, Morrison saw clearly what she'd glimpsed through a darker glass: "Now what made those stories connect, can't explain, but do know that, in both instances, something seemed clear to me. A woman

loved something other than herself so much. She had placed all of the value of her life in something outside herself. That the woman who killed her children loved her children so much; they were the best part of her and she would not see them sullied" ("Conversation" 585).

Beloved is the product of and a contribution to a historical moment in which African-American historiography is in a state of fervid revision. The debate currently rages between those who argue that slavery led to the infantilization of adult Africans because the most significant relationship in any slave's life was that between the slave and the master, and those who argue that slaves formed viable internal communities, family structures, and protective personae that allowed them to live rich, coherent lives within their own system of values.
The novel both remembers the victimization of the ex-slaves who are its protagonists and asserts the healing and wholeness that those protagonists carry with them in their communal lives.

The novelist has on more than one occasion asserted that she writes from a double perspective of accusation and hope, of criticizing the past and caring for the future. She claims that this double perspective is the perspective of a black woman writer, that is, "one who look[s] at things in an unforgiving/ loving way . . . , writing to repossess, re-name, re-own. In *Beloved,* this perspective is described as "the glare of an outside thing that embraces while it accuses" (271). It is on precisely this issue of a dual vision that she marks the distinction between black men's writing and black women's: "[W]hat found so lacking in most black writing by men that seems to be present in a lot of black women's writing is a sense of joy, in addition to oppression and being women or black or whatever."[36]

A dual perspective is used in order to re-possess by remembering the ancestor, not only an aesthetic act but also an act of historical recovery: "[R]oots are less a matter of geography than sense of shared history; less to do with place, than with inner space." Each act of writing a

---

[36] Robert B. Stepto, "'Intimate Things in Place': A Conversation with Ton Morrison," in *Chant of Saints: A Gathering of Afro-American Literature, Art, and Scholarship,* ed. Michael S. Harper and Robert B. Stepto, Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1979.

novel is for her an act of discovering deep within herself some relationship to a collective memory. Memory itself is for African Americans an instrument of survival. It is an instrument, writes Morrison, that can be traced back to an African heritage: "[I]t's true what Africans say: The Ancestor lives as long as there are those who remember."[37] In the novel this truth is expressed by Sethe's mother-in-law. Baby Suggs knows that "death was anything but forgetfulness" (4). That remembering is both a resurrection and a pain is testified to by Amy Denver, who assisted in the birthing of Sethe's daughter: "Anything dead corning back to life hurts." The daughter Amy delivered testifies to that: "A truth for all times, thought Denver" (35). All the double perspectives of this black woman writer in the novel are
expressed; remembering and forgetting, accusing and embracing, burying and reviving, joy and oppression.

III. 4 Historical and Cultural Black Women's Experience

Narrative structures have been consciously manipulated through a complicated interplay between the implicit orature of recovered and remembered events and the explicit structures of literature in *Beloved*. The reclamation and revision of history function as both a thematic emphasis and textual methodology. The persistence of this revision is the significant strategic device of the narrative structures of the novel.

The mythological dimensions of her story, those that recall her earlier texts, that rediscover the altered universe of the black diaspora, that challenge the Western valuations of time and event are those that, in various quantities in other black women writers and in sustained quantities in Morrison's works, allow a critical theory of text to emerge.

[37] Claudia, Tate. "Ton Morrison [An Interview]," in *Black Women Writers at Work,* ed. Claudia Tate New York: Continuum, pp 130-131, 1984.

CHAPTER THREE: The Quest for Black Female Self in *Beloved*

Morrison revisions a history both spoken and written, felt and submerged. It is in the coalescence of the known and unknown elements of slavery; the events, minuscule in significance to the captors but major disruptions of black folks' experience in nurturing and loving and being; where Morrison's reconstruction of the historical text of slavery occurs.

The novelist’s reformulation propels a backlog of memories headlong into a postemancipation community that has been nearly spiritually incapacitated by the trauma of slavery. For Morrison's novel, what complicates the physical and psychic anguish is the reality that slavery itself defies traditional historiography. The victim's own chronicles of these events were systematically submerged, ignored, mistrusted, or superceded by historians of the era. This novel positions the consequences of black invisibility in both the records of slavery and the record-keeping as a situation of primary spiritual significance. Thus, the ghostly/historical presence that intrudes itself into this novel serves to belie the reportage that passes for historical records of this era as well as to reconstruct those lives into the spiritual ways that constituted the dimensions of their living.

Because slavery etfectively placed black women outside of a historical universe governed by a traditional consideration of time, the aspect of their being becomes a more appropriate measure of their reality. In black women's writing, deperiodization is more fully articulated because of the propensity of this literature to strategically place a detemporalized universe into the centers of their texts.

It is perhaps the insistence of this alternative perspective in regards to black women's experiences that explains some dimension of the strident element in the critical response to *Beloved.* In *The New Republic,* Stanley Crouch notes that "[i]t seems to have been written in order to enter American slavery into the big-time martyr ratings contest". Morrison wrote *Beloved* precisely because:

It was not a story to pass on.

They forget her like a bad dream.

After they made up their tales, shaped

and decorated them ... in the end,

they forgot her too. Remembering seemed

unwise. . . .

It was not a story to pass on. . . .

This is not a story to pass on. (274, 275)

Like the litany of repetition that is a consistent narrative device in black women's literature, these closing phrases of the novel echo between the seeming contradiction of the initial "it was/this is not . . ." and the final words "pass on." The phrase becomes a directive. Its message reveals that this was not a story to die. Morrison revisions "Pass on," inverting it to

mean go on through , continue and tell. She privileges the consequences of the sustained echo and in this way forces the sounds of these words to contradict the appearance of the visual text. Morrison has "passed on" this story in defiance of those who would diminish the experience she voices back into presence.

The closing sentences in the novel, where these lines appear, illustrate the interplay between structures that are implicitly orate but explicitly literate in black women's writing. This contrapuntal structure dominates the novel and appears as a device that mediates speech and narrative, the visual and the cognitive, and time and space.

Mediation such as the contrapuntal interplay sustains the text and rescues it from formlessness. Even when the narrative structure dissolves into the eddying recollection of Beloved's memory, the text survives and the reader, almost drowning in the sheer weight of her overwhelmingly tactile recollection, survives this immersion into text because of Morrison's comforting mediation. Morrison explained that one of her goals for this work was to

acknowledge the reader's presence and participation in what she admitted was a difficult and painful story. Her strategy was in part an assurance of her mediative narrative presence.

The signals of telling as a survival strategy; dialect, narrative recursion, suspension of time and place; are all in this text, especially in the compact and powerful passages where Sethe's, Denver's, and Beloved's voices are prosopopeic rememory. Morrison introduces this section with a particularly beautiful and haunting recollection of the elements of speech and the devices of narrative that black women writers have used so effectively. Morrison's blending of voice and text privileges neither. Instead, they both collapse into the other and emerge as an introspective that enfolds the dimensions of both the mind and history in a visually rich and dazzling projection of a revisioned time and space. The narrative streams that remember and chronicle these events are prefigured in an episode when Denver, Sethe, and Beloved are ice-skating in a place where the "sky above them was another country. Winter stars, close enough to lick, had come out before sunset" (174). It is at this moment that Beloved sings the song that fulfills her mother's intimation that this is indeed the spirit of her dead daughter. At that time, Morrison writes, "Outside, snow solidified itself into graceful forms. The peace of winter stars seemed permanent" (176). In this way of removing hours from their reality and placing them into a seasonal metaphor, the text prepares itself, the reader, and these three women for its temporal lapse. The chapter just prior to Sethe's discursive monologue ends in:

> When Sethe locked the door, the women inside were free at last to be what they liked, see whatever they saw and say whatever was on their minds. Almost. Mixed in with the voices surrounding the house . . . were the thoughts of the women of 124, unspeakable thoughts, unspoken. (235)

But they are spoken, for the next voice is Sethe's. And her first statement is in dialect—a sign that the text is about to embrace recursion and signify upon itself: "Beloved, she my daughter. She mine" (236)

Sethe's version of her awareness of Beloved, and each of the three passages that follows hers are indeed versions of the same story with a different narrator. This is not particularly structurally ambiguous even though it is instead crowded with information that makes any attention to time or place simply inappropriate.

At this space in *Beloved,* Morrison cannot entrust this story to the single, individual discourse of any of the three women who are implicated in the myth. Instead, it is their collective telling that accomplishes the creative process of their task to tell, remember, and validate their own narratives and to place them, full-bodied and spoken, into the space they share. Each of their voices is distinct, examples of the different kind of discourse, even though the three women are in the same dissolved space of Beloved's ephemeral presence.

Sethe's discourse is dense; interwoven with dialect and poetry and complicated with the smells and touches and colors that are left to frame her reality.

> Think what the spring will be for us! I'll plant carrots just so she can see them, and turnips . . . white and purple with a tender tail and a hard head. Feels good when you hold it in your hand and smells like the creek when it floods . . . we'll smell them together. (201)

Hers is a discourse vibrant and redolent; almost as if the vitality of her description would defy the dying and killing she acknowledges with her wintry declaration that, "Beloved, she my daughter."

Denver's discourse, in the same space as Sethe's, for she too uses her "unspeakable thoughts" to acknowledge Beloved, is the different engagement. Morrison highlights this difference with the technique of repetition that functions as a recursion strategy; a means of accessing memory and enabling its domination of the text. Denver's first words, "Beloved is my sister," take the reader back to Sethe's. Her discourse also recollects her first memories and then propels her into her current dilemma. It remembers her sister's death from a variety of

perspectives; what she did (went to her secret house in the woods), what she tasted (her mother's milk along with her sister's blood), what she was told (by Grandma Baby). But it is the final repetition of her opening claim of Beloved as "my sister" that encircles her narrative discourse and encloses it within the safety of kinship acknowledged;" She's mine, Beloved. She's mine."

Beloved's discourse is the Derridean trace element; the one that dislocates the other two by challenging; disrupting what semblance of narrative structure or sense there had been in Sethe's or Denver's thinking. But her discourse also supports the narrative because her dialogue accomplishes the same kind of disruption that her presence actualized. It was she who denied them their space in a secure and memoryless present. So her discourse opens with an elliptical " am Beloved and she is mine." That opening pronouncement is the last structure syntactically marked as a sentence. The rest evidences a fully divested text. Western time is obliterated, space is not even relevant because Beloved's presence is debatable, and the nature of her being is a nonissue because her belonging has been established by her mother and sister.

> am not dead am not there is a house
> there is what she whispered to me am where
> she told me the sun closes my eyes when I
> open them see the face lost. (252)

Emptied of the values that mark and specify dimension in a Western tradition, Morrison's narrative belongs to itself; the text claims its text. Voice is the only certain locus that remains. Her next chapter verifies the creation of this oracular space. It collapses all their voices into a tightened poetic chant. Finally the identity of the speaker is absolutely unclear and singularly irrelevant. Sethe's, Denver's, and Beloved's voices blend and merge as text and lose the distinction of discourse as they narrate:

> You are my face; am you.
> Why did you lave me who am you?

will never leave you again

Don't ever leave me again

You went in the water

drank your blood

brought your milk . . .

waited for you

You are mine

You are mine

You are mine. (255, 256)

When Zora Neale Hurston described dialect as the urge to adorn; an oral hieroglyph; she probably was not prefiguring the dimensions that Morrison has brought to the glyph of black language. However, Hurston certainly recognized the potential in black language to dissolve the artificial constructs of time that confine it to a tradition that belies its origin. What Morrison does with language is an act of liberation. The consequence of this freedom is that the text, which seems to be literate, is revealed as an oracular event. Morrison texts are a constant exchange between an implicit mythic voice, one that struggles against the wall of history to assert itself and an explicit narrator, one that is inextricably bound to its spoken counterpoint.

The structures within African and African-American novels consistently defy the collected eventualities of time :past, present, and future, and in consequence a consideration of aspect may be a more appropriate frame through which to consider the chronicle of events in this story. Temporal time represents a narrow specific moment of occurrence. The relatively limited idea of time as being in either the past, the present, or the future is inadequate for a text like *Beloved,* where the pattern of events crisscrosses through these dimensions and enlarges the spaces that they suggest. This novel immediately makes it clear that a traditional valuation of time is not definitive of the experience it remembers; instead it is an intrusion on a universe that

has existed seemingly without its mediation. Weeks, months, and years become irrelevant to the spite of 124; the house that Beloved's spirit inhabits. Baby Suggs, Morrison writes, was "suspended between the nastiness of life and the meanness of the dead" (4). This suspension was shared by more than Baby Suggs. Living itself is suspended in this story because of the simultaneous presence of the past.

III. 5 Re-memory in Sethe's Search for Self

Rememory seems as something that possesses one rather than something that one possesses. It is, in fact, that which makes the past part of one's present. Yet, despite her best efforts to "[beat] back the past," in Beloved the protagonist Sethe remains, in her words, "full of it." "Every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost" (58). She "suffers the incubus of the past; a surfeit of history compounded by, or reflected in, a pervasive fear of the future.

Thus, unable to contrive a meaningful or appropriate configuration for her memories, Sethe finds herself tyrannized by unconfigured and literally disfiguring images. As a consequence of an attempted escape, she receives a savage beating, which leaves her back "a clump of scars." The scars function as signs of ownership inscribing her as property, while the mutilation signifies her diminishment to a less-than-human status. Traces of the past that Sethe represses have been gouged into her back by the master's whip and bear the potential burden of feretory. Like the inscription of Beloved and the pictorial images of the past, the scars function as an archaeological site or memory trace.

If the master has inscribed the master's code on Sethe's back, a white woman and a black man offer her alternative readings of it. Although initially "struck dumb" at the sight of Sethe's scars, Amy, a runaway white girl who saves the fugitive's life and midwifes the delivery of her second daughter, sees Sethe's back as a "chokecherry tree":

> See, here's the trunk—it's red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here's the parting for the branches. . . . Leaves, too, look like, and dern if these ain't blossoms. Tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white. Your back got a whole tree on it. In bloom. (79)

Amy describes an image that prompts her to wonder "what God have in mind." In her reverie, Sethe's back remains the trace of an event whose meaning, motivation, and consequence are largely unreadable. Alternative readings are provided by Baby Suggs and by Paul D, the last survivor of the men from Sweet Home, the Kentucky plantation where he and Sethe had met before the war. Baby Suggs perceives her daughter-in-law's back as a pattern of "roses of blood," stenciled onto the bedsheet and blanket. Paul D, who arrives after the open wounds have healed, remarks on "the sculpture [Sethe's] back had become, like the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display." The distance between these suggestively gendered readings; the chokecherry tree and blood roses, on the one hand, and the wrought-iron maze, on the other; signifies the distance between so-called natural and culturally inscribed meanings attributed to the sign.

It is the white man who inscribes; the white woman, the black man, and the black woman may variously read but not write. Because it is her back that is marked, Sethe has only been able to read herself through the gaze of others. Her challenge is to learn to read herself; that is, to configure the history of her body's text. If the past survives by leaving its trace, then Sethe must learn how to link these traces to the construction of a personal and historical discourse. Her dilemma is that, as an illiterate female slave, she finds herself the written object of a white male discourse and the spoken subject of a black male and white female discourse. Significantly, Baby Suggs does not speak of the wounds on Sethe's back. Instead, she concentrates on the ritual of healing: "[W]ordlessly, the older woman greased the flowering back and pinned a double thickness of cloth to the inside of the newly stitched dress" (93). The presumption is, of course, that black women have no voice, no text, and consequently no history. They can be written and

written upon precisely because they exist as the ultimate other, whose absence or being only serves to define the being or presence of the white or male subject. The black woman, symbolizing a kind of double negativity, becomes a tabula rasa[38] upon which the racial/sexual identity of the others can be positively inscribed.

Sethe's back is numb, signifying her attempts to repress the past. For Sethe, these scars constitute traces of past deeds too horrible and violent either to forget or to remember, a situation that Morrison describes elsewhere as a perfect dilemma. The brutal whipping she receives as punishment for her attempt to run away is only part of a cluster of events that Sethe vainly seeks to forget.

If Morrison formalizes and thematizes the operation of imaginative construction, she also dramatizes, in the character of schoolteacher, the consequences of an alternative approach. The scenes with schoolteacher offer a paradigm for reading the methodology of the white male as scholar and master. Arriving at Sweet Home after the death of its previous owner, schoolteacher announces himself with a big hat and spectacles and a coach full of paper and begins to watch his subjects. His methodology; based on numbering, weighing, dividing; suggests the role of the cultural historian who is concerned with sizes, densities, details, appearances, externalities, and visible properties. Schoolteacher possesses the master's text, and as a data collector, cataloger, classifier, and taxonomist concerned with matters of materiality and empiricism, he divides or dismembers the indivisibility of the slaves' humanity to reconstruct the slave in his text. His physical measurements recall those of Hawthorne's Custom's House Surveyor, whose careful and accurate measurements disclose little except that "each limb [of the letter A] proved to be precisely three inches and a quarter in length." In both cases, putatively scientific techniques prove altogether inadequate. Yet unlike Hawthorne's Surveyor, who discovers himself

[38] A tabula rasa is defined as a person whose character is not fixed, and who can develop in different ways.

confronted with a "riddle which . . . [he] sees little hope of resolving," Morrison's historical investigator remains hopelessly unconscious "of his own infirmity." Sethe tells us,

> He was talking to one of his pupils and heard him say, "Which one are you doing?" And one of the boys said, "Sethe." That's when stopped because heard my name, and then took a few steps to where could see what they were doing. Schoolteacher was standing over one of them with one hand behind his back. He licked a forefinger a couple of times and turned a few pages. Slow. was about to turn around and keep on my way. . . . when heard him say, "No, no. That's not the way. told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up." (193)

Schoolteacher's historiography encodes the notion and forms of wildness and animality. This notion is a culturally self-authenticating device intended to confirm the value of the dialectical antithesis between civilization and humanity. Morrison's schoolteacher espouses a concept of otherness as a form of subhumanity that serves, through a process of negative self-identification, to confirm his own sense of superiority. Sethe's savagery confirms schoolteacher's civilization; her bestiality assures his humanity. Schoolteacher's sense of history is defined by the struggle between culture and nature, and questions of meaning and interpretation turn upon this opposition.

The dismemberment of schoolteacher's method is the discursive analog to the dismemberment of slavery. Just as his pupils measure and divide Sethe according to schoolteacher's instructions, so schoolteacher himself, speaking with the slave catchers, reveals to Paul D his worth. Overhearing the men talking, Paul D, “who has always known, or believed he did, his value—as a hand, a laborer who could make profit on a farm . . . now [discovers] his worth, which is to say he learns his price. The dollar value of his weight, his strength, his heart, his brain, and his future" (226). As both slaveholder and scholar, schoolteacher is involved with the dismembering of slaves from their families, their labor, their selves. Against these forms of

physical, social, and scholarly dismemberment, the act of rememory initiates a reconstitutive process in the novel.

The scenes of Paul D's figurative dismemberment both refigure the earlier scene of schoolteacher's anatomical dismemberment of Sethe and prefigure a later scene that Sethe vainly attempts to forget: " am full God damn it of two boys with mossy teeth, one sucking on my breast the other holding me down, their book-reading teacher watching and writing it up" (70). Like Paul D, who is forced to go around with a horse's bit in his mouth, Sethe is forced to submit to the bovinelike humiliation of being milked.

Schoolteacher's association with the prison-house of language, figured not only in his private ledger but in the public slave codes as well, refigures the New Testament's personification of the Decalogue. St. Paul tells the churches that the law was their schoolmaster, or they were held prisoners by the law. It is this white/male construction of the law according to the authority of the master discourse that Sethe must first dismantle in order to construct her own story.

For schoolteacher, history is a confining activity; for Sethe, it must become a liberating one. She must free retrospectively, certain possibilities that were not actualized in the historical past and detect possibilities buried in the past, just as Morrison does by historicizing fiction. As historian, Sethe must liberate her present from the burden of the past constructed in history. She must learn to remap the past so that it becomes a blueprint for the future. Her job is to reconstitute the past through personal narrative, or storytelling. Like Morrison, Sethe uses the memory of personal experience as a means of re-membering a dis-membered past, dis-membered family, and community.

Morrison moves from image to text, Sethe, too, begins with the image and shapes rememories of the past, endowing them with form, drama, and meaning through a process of narrativization described as configuration and emplotment. Narrativization enables Sethe to

construct a meaningful life-story from a cluster of images, to transform separate and disparate events into a whole and coherent story.

For Sethe, the past has the power to make her either captive or free. Her feelings, hopes, desires, perceptions; all colored by past incidents and events; culminate in what remain for her unspeakable acts and actions: physical violation and infanticide. "Freeing yourself was one thing," Sethe thinks, "claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (95). Her preoccupation with the past makes it impossible for her to process new experiences except through the distant lens of the particular events in question.

Certain events remain unconfigured, others are overly and inappropriately configured. Thus, an alternative reading of Sethe's dilemma might be that she has overemplotted the events of her past; she has charged them with a meaning so intense that they continue to shape both her perceptions and her responses to the world long after they should have become past history. The problem for Sethe, then, is to configure or emplot, on the one hand, and to reconfigure or reemplot on the other. She must imaginatively reconstitute, or re-member, her history in such a way as to change the meaning of those events for her and their significance for the economy of the whole set of events that make up her life.

Memory is materialized in Beloved's reappearance, it is maternalized in Sethe's reconfiguration. Sethe gives birth to her past and to her future: first to the baby with no name whose sad and angry spirit comes back to haunt 124 Bluestone Road and later to the incarnate Beloved, the young woman with flawless skin and feet and hands soft and new. The return of Beloved, therefore, becomes not only a spiritual projection but also a physical manifestation. Her rebirth represents, as it were, the uncanny return of the dead to haunt the living, the return of the past to shadow the present.

Yet it is the notion of self-distanciation that intrigues Morrison in this as in other works. What interests her is not only the nobility and generosity of these actions but also that such love

"is . . . the thing that makes us [as women] sabotage ourselves, sabotage in the sense [of perceiving] that our life ['the best part of ourselves'] is not as worthy." Her method of characterization is intended to suggest this process of displacement; "to project the self not into the way we say yourself but to put a space between those words, as though the self were really a *twin* or a thirst or a friend or something that sits right next to you and watches you." Morrison has "[projected] the dead out into the earth" in the character of Beloved, so that Beloved becomes the twin self or mirror of Sethe and other women in the novel.[39] The author's critical reflections, however, point to another dimension of Sethe's dilemma, which combines private and public functions of rememory. The individual is defined as a conduit of communal consciousness, then the events of Sethe's life can be emplotted through historiography; conversely, if the community is defined as a conduit of individual consciousness, then the events of Sethe's psychic life can be encoded in psychoanalytic discourse.

At the point of this intersection between the personal and the social, the psychic and the historical begin to merge. Social subjectivity emplotted by historiography can also be figured in terms of psychic subjectivity and represented in the discourse of psychoanalysis.

The link between history and psychoanalysis, then, permits the events in Sethe's life to be encoded in an alternate plot structure. The sources of her complex or dis-ease manifest themselves in her endless efforts to avoid the past and avert the future. The events in her past; namely, her own violation and the ensuing decision to take her daughter's life; have become sources of both repression and obsession. Sethe must conjure up her past and confront it as an antagonist. Sethe learns to regard her problematic past as an enemy worthy of her mettle, a piece of her personality, which has solid ground for its existence and out of which things of value for her future life have to be derived. Her communication with Beloved; and the events of the past

[39] Naylor and Morrison, "A Conversation", 585.

that Beloved both symbolizes and evokes; affords her the opportunity to become conversant with this resistance over which she has become acquainted, to work through it, to overcome it, by continuing, in defiance of it, the analytic work. Thus, the psychoanalytic process becomes the means by which Sethe must free herself from the burden of her past and from the burden of the story.

In fact psychoanalysis is itself based on the theme that dominates Morrison's novel: the return of the repressed. This mechanism is linked to a certain conception of time and memory, according to which consciousness is both the deceptive mask and the operative trace of events that organize the present. If the past is repressed, it returns in the present from which it was excluded. The figuration of this detour-return and its consequences in the lives of individual characters, as well as the community as a whole, structures Morrison's novel.

In the poetic chapters of the novel the full implications of Beloved for Sethe are sensed. The connection of Sethe's present with her past is embodied in her relationship to Beloved, while the connection with her future is embodied in her relationship with Denver.

The family thus becomes the site at which to explore notions of time and being. As a historical field, it represents the complex and intimate interdependence of past, present, and future; as an ontological field, it represents the complexity of the relation between self and other. The family, in other words, becomes a historically constituted social site where individual subjectivity is constructed.

Further, Beloved symbolizes women in both the contemporaneous and historical black communities. She represents the unsuccessfully repressed other of Sethe as well as other women in and associated with the community: Ella, whose "puberty was spent in a house where she was abused by a father and son"; Vashti, who was forced into concubinage by her young master; and the girl reportedly locked up by a whiteman who had used her to his own purpose since she was a pup. Beyond this, however, Beloved is associated with her maternal and paternal grandmothers

and the generation of slave women who failed to survive the Middle Passage. As trace of the disremembered and unaccounted for, Beloved's symbolic function of otherness connects the individual to repressed aspects of the self, as well as to contemporaneous and historical others. In fact, Beloved's implication in the lives of the collectivity of women makes it necessary that all the women in the community later participate in the ritual to exorcise her.

The reconstitution of self and other through rememory in the act of storytelling is central to Morrison's vision. It is an act that imposes sequence and meaning on the welter of images that shape and define one's sense of self. Yet, Sethe must not only narrativize her life in White's sense of formulating her past into a coherent story; she must also be able to continue the process of metamorphosis by metaphorizing her experiences within narrative. Morrison uses the metaphor of maternity to establish an alternative to the metaphor of paternity common in white/male historical discourse. This recurrent structuring metaphor complements and amplifies the images of the female body encoded in the text. Morrison provides a cognitive metaphor for representing her reconstructive methods as a novelist. The images of interiority that she privileges are specifically female, associated with the interior rather than the exterior life, with the personal rather than the public representation of experience. Ultimately, such a metaphor suggests that the object of our understanding is inside rather than outside and can be reached only by what Morrison describes as literary archeology.

Moreover, Sethe's birthing of the past and future appropriately figures Morrison's use of depictive metaphor. The act of birthing represents Sethe's life-story in a metaphor of maternity, then the womb functions as an image of corporeal interiority, the counterpart to Sethe's psychic interiority and Morrison's diagetic interiority. As a narrative metaphor, maternity privileges interiority and marks Sethe's entry into subjectivity. For instance this function is found in the scene describing Sethe's reaction upon seeing the incarnate Beloved for the first time:

> [F]or some reason she could not immediately account for, the moment she got close enough to see [Beloved's face], Sethe's bladder filled to capacity. . . . She never made the outhouse. Right in front of its door she had to lift her skirts, and the water she voided was endless. Like a horse, she thought, but as it went on and on she thought, No, more like flooding the boat when Denver was born. So much water Amy said, "Hold on ... You going to sink us keep that up." But there was no stopping water breaking from a breaking womb and there was no stopping now. (51)

Significantly, Sethe, on second thought, rejects the equine metaphor. In a radical reconception of history and culture, her ritual of birthing figures motherhood as a primary metaphor of history and culture. The postdiluvian connotation of "breaking of the water" historicizes the event and, at the same time, signifies a maternal delivery that becomes a means of deliverance from the dominant conception of history as a white paternal metaphor. Morrison seems to depict here a second immaculate conception, as it were, in which black motherhood becomes self-generative; a process that reconstitutes black womanhood. By shifting the dominant metaphor from white to black and from paternity to maternity, Morrison has shifted meaning and value. Through this process of destructuring and restructuring, of decoding and receding, the author redefines notions of genesis and meaning as they have constituted black womanhood in the dominant discourse.

The images of motherhood function heuristically to explain or trace Sethe's history and that of the community along motherlines. Her past, birthed from a womblike matrix, is read back through motherlines tracked through four generations of marked slave women. Beloved's thirst for these stories gives her mother an unexpected pleasure in speaking things that she and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so were unspeakable. In speaking, that is, in storytelling, Sethe is able to construct an alternate text of black womanhood. This power to fashion a counternarrative, thereby rejecting the definitions imposed by the dominant others, finally provides Sethe with a self—a past, present, and future.

CHAPTER THREE: The Quest for Black Female Self in *Beloved*

Beloved's persistent questions enable Sethe to remember long-forgotten traces of her own mother, traces carried through memory as well as through the body. Sethe remembers that her own mother bore a mark, a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin on her rib. It was the mark of ownership by the master who had as much as written property under her breast. Yet like Sethe, her mother had transformed a mark of mutilation, a sign of diminished humanity,
into a sign of recognition and identity. Sethe recalls her mother's words: "This is your ma'am . . . am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark" (61). Indeed, her own markings help
her to decode the meaning of her mother's remarks. Sethe tells her own daughters, Denver and Beloved, " didn't understand it then. Not till had a mark of my own."

Constructed and metaphorized along motherlines, Sethe's retelling of her childhood story also enables her to decipher and pass on to her own daughter meaning encoded in a long-forgotten mother tongue. Although Sethe knows that the language her ma'am would never come back, she begins to recognize the message that was and had been there all along, and she begins picking meaning out of a code she no longer understood. Like the historian who seeks to configure a probable story out of a plethora of documents, Sethe seeks to reconfigure events based on "words. Words Sethe understood then but could neither recall nor repeat now" (62). Remembering the story told her by Nan— "the one she knew best, who was around all day, who nursed babies, cooked, had one good arm and half of another"—Nan, who spoke "the same language her ma'am spoke," Sethe is able to reconstruct her own story:

> Nighttime. Nan holding her with her good arm, waving the stump of the other in the air. "Telling you. am telling you, small girl Sethe," and she did that. She told Sethe that her mother and Nan were together from the sea. Both were taken up many times by the crew. "She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You

> she gave the name of a black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never. Never. Telling you. am telling you, small girl Sethe." (62)

The story about her own mother that she hears as a child from Nan, another mutilated mother, ironically prefigures Sethe's own actions but at the same time challenges her to some accountability. It is a story that enables Sethe to reread or reemplot her own experiences in the context of sacrifice, resistance, and mother-love. For although Beloved, like Sethe and her mother, bears a mark of mutilation, the scar across Beloved's throat is the mark of Sethe's own hand. And it is the fingerprints on Beloved's forehead as well as the scar under her chin that enables Sethe to recognize her daughter returned from the other side.

In light of her recognition Sethe reconstitutes a family story of infanticide, a story of repetition but with a marked difference. Her story of mother-love seems to overwrite a story of rejection, and her task as historian is to find a narrative form that speaks to that difference. But it is her mother's story that refamiliarizes her own story. Sethe receives from her mother that which she had hoped to discover with Paul D: "Her story was bearable; not because it was Paul D's, but her mother's; to tell, to refine and tell again" (99). The maternal discourse becomes a testimonial for Sethe. Mother and daughter share protection of their own children, the one by saving a life and the other by taking a life.

But there are competing configurations as well. The first full representation of the events surrounding the infanticide comes from a collective white male perspective, represented by schoolteacher and the sheriff:

> Inside [the shed], two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other. She did not kill them; she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time . . . Right off it was clear, to schoolteacher especially, that there was nothing there to claim. The three (now four—because she'd had the one

> coming when she cut) pickaninnies they had hoped were alive and well enough to take back to Kentucky, take back and raise properly to do the work Sweet Home desperately needed, were not. . . . He could claim the baby struggling in the arms of the mewing old man, but who'd tend her? Because the woman—something was wrong with her. She was looking at him now, and if his other nephew could see that look he would learn the lesson for sure: you just can't mishandle *creatures* and expect success. (149—50)

In schoolteacher's narrative, Sethe is "the woman [who] . . . made fine ink, damn good soup, pressed his collars the way he liked besides having at least ten breeding years left." In his words, "[S]he's gone wild, due to mishandling of the nephew" (149). The white sheriff reads these events as a cautionary tale on "the results of a little so-called freedom imposed on people who needed every care and guidance in the world to keep them from the cannibal life they preferred" (151). Granting authority to the white newspaper's account, Stamp Paid concludes that "while he and Baby Suggs were looking the wrong way, a pretty little slavegirl had recognized [her former master's hat], and split to the woodshed to kill her children" (158). Paul D, who suddenly "saw what Stamp Paid wanted him to see," summarizes events by insisting, "You got two feet, Sethe, not four" (164-65).

Sethe must compete with the dominant metaphors of the master's narrative; wildness, cannibalism, animality, destructiveness. In radical opposition to these, constructions is Sethe's reconceptualized metaphor of self based on motherhood, motherlines, and mother-love; a love described by Paul D as too thick. Convinced that "the best thing she was, was her children," Sethe wants simply to stop schoolteacher:

Because the truth was . . . [s]imple: she was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher's hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she

had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. (163)

" took and put my babies where they'd be safe," she tells Paul D (164). And in this way, she explains to Beloved, "[N]o one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter's characteristics on the animal side of the paper" (251).

In effect, Sethe creates a counter-narrative that reconstitutes her humanity and demonstrates the requirements of mother-love. By shifting the dominant white male metaphor to a black maternal metaphor for self and history, Sethe changes the plot and meaning of the story; and, finally, the story itself. A story of oppression becomes a story of liberation; a story of inhumanity has been overwritten as a story of higher humanity.

This process of destructuring and restructuring the dominant discourse and its organizing tropes enables Sethe to subvert the master code of the master's text. By privileging specifically female tropes in her narrative, Sethe is able to reconstitute herself and heretory within the context of intergenerational black women's experiences as represented in memory and in narrative. By placing her life history within a maternal family history and, by implication, placing her family history within a broader tradition of racial history, Morrison demonstrates both the strength of motherlines in the slave community and the ways in which

ontogeny followed black female phylogeny.

Sethe is able to re-enact or re-think a critical moment from the past and is consequently able to demonstrate her possession of rather than by the past and to alter her own life history. Sethe's actions, moreover, show that the present is bound to the past and the past to the future, and it is precisely the reconfiguration of the past that enables her to refigure the future.

The bonds of the past are broken in a climactic scene in which thirty neighborhood women, unable to countenance the possibility of sin moving on in the house, perform a ritual of exorcism, which frees Sethe from the burden of her past:

> Instantly the kneelers and the slanders joined [Sethe]. They stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like. (259)

In effect Sethe re-enacts the original event remembering, repeating, and working-through the primal scene in a process that emblematizes the psychoanalytic process. This time, however, Sethe directs her response to the threatening other rather than to "her best thing" her children.

Yet it is not only Sethe but the community itself that re-enacts the earlier scene. Because the community had failed to send warning of the slave captors' approach the first time, its sin of omission makes it no less responsible for Beloved's death than Sethe's sin of commission. In a scene of collective re-enactment, the women of the community intervene at a critical juncture, to save not Beloved but Sethe. Thus, by revising her actions, Sethe is able to preserve the community, and the community, in turn, is able to protect one of its own.

Accordingly, prefiguration denotes the temporality of the world of human action; configuration, the world of the narrative emplotment of these events; and refiguration, the moment at which these two worlds interact and affect each other. Sethe's actions constitute the prefigurative aspect; her storytelling, the configurative aspect; and re-enactment, the refigurative aspect. Moreover, Morrison enables the reader to connect with the otherness of these past generations; especially as it relates to the experiences of the slave women; in a process made possible by the intersection of the world of the text with the world of the reader.

Characteristically, Morrison draws out the paradoxes and ambiguities of a perfect dilemma that she neither condemns nor condones but rather delivers her protagonist. For Sethe achieves redemption through possession by the spirit as well as exorcism of the spirit. Significantly, for Morrison, it is not through the law but the spirit that the individual achieves deliverance from the sins of the past. *Beloved,* then, re-inscribes the conditions of the promise in the New Testament. What is important for Morrison, however, is the mediation between

remembering and forgetting. It is the process of working through that the author finally affirms. Morrison focuses less on "what" and "why" and more on "how", she privileges the journey rather than the destination, the means rather than the end; a process that enables Sethe to achieve redemption by creating a cohesive psychoanalytical and historical narrative.

Like Sethe, Morrison herself seeks to achieve some mediation between resurrecting the past and burying it. Expressing her desire to provide a proper, artistic burial for the historical ancestors figured by *Beloved,* Morrison says:

> There's a lot of danger for me in writing. . . . The effort, the responsibility as well as the effort, the effort of being worth it. ... The responsibility that feel for . . . all of these people; these unburied, or at least unceremoniously buried, people made literate in art. But the inner tension, the artistic inner tension those people create in me, the fear of not properly, artistically, burying them, is extraordinary. (A Conversation 585)

III.6 Conclusion

In *Beloved* Morrison transforms black identity in a language in which blackness is a figure of absence into a powerful presence by converting the shame her oppressed characters suffer from into self-awareness. She creates this aesthetic identity; by playing against and through the cultural minefield of postmodernism; challenging received notions of postmodernism and engaging some of the very complex issues that make up African American female identity.

From the perspective of the novel’s contribution to the African-American literary tradition Morrison explores the development of relationships of understanding between Sethe and the other characters as they discover themselves within a communal framework. Sethe

begins to heal only after she accepts her action and takes responsibility for it by recognizing why it happened and by understanding it in a framework larger than one of individual concern.

Morrison faces the challenge of transforming Sethe's "rememories" of a dreadful past into a discourse shaped by her own narrativity. At the center of the novel is Sethe's burden, a past dominated by an oppressive master text. With no discourse of her own, she needs to create her fragmented images into a sequential, meaningful narrative of her own.

As a black woman, with no voice or text, she has no history. She must find a way to gain control of her story, her body, her progeny, and all that belongs to her by dismantling the authority of the master discourse and constructing her own.

Thus, Morrison, like many other African and African-American writers, often defies the boundaries separating past, present, and future time. This allows her to free *Beloved* from the dominance of a history that would deny the merits of slave stories. As Morrison's creation, Beloved is not only Sethe's dead child but the faces of all those black lost women in slavery, carrying in her the history of the "sixty million and more."

CHAPTER Four: From Silence to Voice: The Fight for Black Self Fulfillment in Morrison's Fiction

IV.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the change that the female characters experience along Morrison's writings. will argue that the women characters rely on African culture to form their selfhood. Thus, it is interesting to examine the impact of the black community on the female character. It starts with scrutinizing Sethe's character in *Beloved* as an accessible site of authority and resistance. will explain the way the novel rejects the restrictive sense of female selfhood and calls for a more inclusive selfhood merged in collective experience.

Dealing with Ton Morrison focus on the use of magical realism in her novel *Song of Solomon*. It aims at exploring the main features of the literary trend and pointing out some key elements of their use in the novel. Thus, will explain that the women in her novel have smothered their own identities, their voices, by depending on men for a sense of self. As a result, the silenced voice often seeks self-destructive or otherwise hurtful forms of expression. Though some women are able to regain their voices as the novel progresses, one woman maintains hers all along.

This chapter considers how the African American womanline itself is fractured by historical trauma, in particular slavery, migration, assimilation, and oppression. In which Morrison's female characters exist in a world defined by its blackness and by the surrounding white society that both violates and denies it. The destructive effect of the white society can take the form of outright physical violence, but oppression in Morrison's world is more often psychic violence. She rarely depicts white characters, for the brutality here is less a single act than the systematic denial of the reality of black lives.

IV.2 Experiences of the Female Character in *Beloved*

CHAPTER Four: From Silence to Voice: The Fight for Black Self Fulfillment in Morrison's Fiction

The sense of overlapping past, present, and future temporalities Morrison presents in Beloved accords with posthumanist notions of liminality. Posthuman theory provides a useful framework through which to read Morrison's novel and other historical narratives by African American writers, despite the seeming anachronism of studying black history and the black family through a theory that, in its name, focuses on that which is "post" human[40]. According to posthuman theory, the subject exists within networks of knowledge, discourse, and power that continuously shape and are shaped by the subject. More than simply interconnected with the surrounding world, the posthuman being moves "across and among" the dividing lines that separate the individual from the governments, economies, technologies, communities, and people with which he or she interacts (Halberstam and Livingston 14). The problems and promise of posthuman culture stem from the multiplicity, fragmentation, and liminality of the temporalities, bodies, and subjectivities contained within issues that, although new in terms of their relation to the posthuman subject's existence in contemporary technoculture, have been addressed by African American writers and theorists for more than a century (Eshun, "Further Considerations" 301; Yaszek, "Afrofuturism" 41–60; Gilroy 178). If, as Kalí Tal argues, "the struggle of African Americans is precisely the struggle to integrate identity and multiplicity," then Morrison's Beloved, a novel that shares both stories from black history and dreams of black futurity, presents through its own multiplicities evidence of the struggle of; and the promise born from; projections of post female liminality.[41]

In Beloved, Morrison blurs boundaries of time and subjectivity by having her protagonist revisit her childhood, which allows Sethe not only to reframe and revise her traumatic history but

---

[40] The post in posthuman evoke Kwame Anthony Appiah's discussion of the *post* in postmodernism and postcolonialism. Appiah argues that the prefix *post* most often functions as a "space-clearing gesture" that moves a theory beyond what preceded it (348).

[41] Ruth Mayer argues that Afrofuturist artists do the work of "interlinking historiographical and mythical rhetoric and imagery, not so much in order to reconstruct a lost history […], but to dismantle the established one and give scope to altogether different, highly fantastic scenarios instead, which are as much of the future as they are of the past" (566).

also position her past experiences as future-focused. Although often studied as a mother, Sethe must also be understood as a daughter who struggles with feelings of abandonment concerning the maternal care of which she never received quite enough. Sethe's return to the position of child; a position rooted in the past yet future-oriented because of the child's continuous existence in a state of becoming; opens her to new possibilities, identities, and connections from which she can access and exercise greater agency. The liminal subjectivities expressed in Morrison's novel reveal that black power need not be rooted solely in the past: the future can serve as an accessible repository for authority and resistance as well.

Posthumanist understandings of temporality and subjectivity allow for a new reading of Beloved. In the novel, Sethe's past infiltrates her present, a temporal shift many critics have understood as immediately stifling but ultimately empowering. Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu, Missy Dehn Kubitschek, Andrea O'Reilly, and Caroline Rody find that although Sethe's history at the Sweet Home plantation plagues her present life, her "painful reacquaintance with the past" allows her to develop more meaningful relationships with others (and with herself) in the present (Beaulieu 71). Sethe does not simply reimagine or rewrite her past, as many critics assert. Nor does she return to the past to lay it to rest. Instead, Sethe understands her past, like her present and future, as existing in a state of continual development. Sethe brings her past; specifically, her childhood and her mother; into her present and future, and she also brings her future into the past in order to take power from the liminal subjectivity these temporal shifts engender.

The power of posthuman liminality manifests itself most clearly in Sethe's relationships with her mother and children. Although critics typically conceive of the character Beloved as the return of Sethe's daughter who was killed eighteen years prior to the action in the novel's opening, Beloved's identity extends beyond this single time and this single child: she embodies the "Sixty Million and more" captive Africans who died before they reached the shores of

America (Clemons 75) as well as those who survived the Middle Passage to join the generations of the enslaved (O'Reilly 87; Horwitz 157; Bouson 152). In the realm of Morrison's novel, Sethe's mother, a woman who died a violent death on the plantation where she was enslaved, must be included in this number, which means that Beloved represents not only the unnamed millions who suffered because of slavery but, for Sethe, both child and mother. Sethe thus uses her relationship with the mysterious Beloved to resuscitate her role as a mother and her identity as a daughter. Through her return to the position of daughter, Sethe discovers a strength and forward-looking vision that allow her to begin building a future.

Posthuman theorists have situated the posthuman being in a state of constant development that suggests the intimacy of past, present, and future temporalities as well as self and other identities:

> Unlike the human subject-to-be (Lacan's "l'hommelette"), who sees his own mirror image and fixed gender identity discrete and sovereign before him in a way that will forever exceed him, the posthuman becoming-subject vibrates across and among an assemblage of semi-autonomous collectivities it knows it can never either be coextensive with nor altogether separate from. The posthuman body is not driven, in the last instance, by a teleological desire for domination, death or stasis; or to become coherent and unitary; or even to explode into more disjointed multiplicities. Driven instead by the double impossibility and prerequisite to become other and to become itself, the posthuman body intrigues rather than desires […]. (14)

Halberstam and Livingston's description indicates that the posthuman being engages in a type of development that "produces nothing other than itself" (Deleuze and Guattar 262) that is, the connections continually made between self and other are always already a part of the posthuman becoming-subject, a temporal paradox that elucidates the posthuman being's simultaneous

existence in the past, present, and future. Posthuman theory helps articulate Sethe's dual positioning as mother and daughter as well as the potentiality of her nonlinear development. When read through posthumanism, Sethe's multiple identities take form as part of the posthuman "impossibility and prerequisite to become other and to become itself" (Halberstam and Livingston 14). By developing a dual self and mother identity, Sethe gains the ability to incorporate her dreams for the future into her understanding of her past.

The physical and emotional bonds shared by Sethe and her children evidence the liminal identities characteristic of and the liminal temporalities inhabited by posthuman becoming-subjects. Sethe's intense connection with her children blurs the boundaries that exist between self and other, past and future. Jean Wyatt draws on Lacan's theorizing of the imaginary and symbolic orders in order to argue that rather than allowing Sethe's children to transition from the realm of imagined wholeness with the mother's body to the symbolic order of absence and loss, Morrison creates a system that, "like Lacan's symbolic, locates subjects in relation to other subjects" but, unlike Lacan's symbolic, refuses the paternalistic mandate for physical distance between mother and child (475). According to Wyatt, Morrison replaces Lacan's understanding of the symbolic as a "move away from bodies touching to the compensations of abstract signifiers" with her view of a "maternal symbolic" that "makes physical contact the necessary support for Sethe's full acceptance of the separate subjectivity" (484). In other words, the lasting bonds between mothers and children in Morrison's novel reveal that subjectivity depends on communal connections rather than separations. The notion of the individual developing through the community; the self forming alongside and even in conjunction with the other; corresponds with the paradox of the posthuman becoming-subject. The becoming-subject exists yet has not fully come into being, given its impossible journey both "to become other and to become itself"

(Halberstam and Livingston 14). This constant development defines posthuman subjectivity, which makes the becoming-subject an apt figure through which to study Morrison's characters.

Reading Sethe as a becoming-subject additionally requires an understanding of her dual identity as daughter and mother. Sethe not only intertwines her sense of self with the identities of her children; her real and imagined relationships with her mother additionally shape her past, present, and future. By mothering others, Sethe attempts to bring into her present reality the physically and emotionally fulfilling mother–child relationship she never experienced during her early life because of slavery. Sethe remembers her biological mother as a stranger she saw "a few times out in the fields and once when she [Ma'am] was working indigo" (Morrison 60). When telling Beloved and Denver stories of her childhood, Sethe foregrounds her physical estrangement from her mother, stating, "She didn't even sleep in the same cabin most nights remember" (60–61). Although she believes her mother must have nursed her for "two or three weeks" or at least "a week or two" during her infancy (60, 203), Sethe cannot recall receiving sustenance or comfort from her biological mother. She knows only that Nan, the woman who nursed her after Ma'am returned to the fields, nursed many children and "never had enough [milk] for all" (203). The deprivation of mother's milk stands as a symbol of the maternal losses that shape Sethe's childhood and inspire her in her adult life to mother others, including Beloved. Sethe communicates her physical and emotional estrangement from her mother by stating that, as a child, she had "no nursing milk to call [her] own" (Morrison 200). However, as a mother, Sethe takes pride in her ability to care for her children, proclaiming that she has "milk enough for all"(100). When Sethe arrives at 124 Bluestone Road, her body enables her to nurse her children and also provide for their physical and emotional comfort. Sethe celebrates the feat of surviving her escape from Sweet Home by encircling all of her children with her arms: " was big, Paul D, and deep and wide and when stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. was

that wide" (162). Wyatt argues that Sethe's body takes on "mythic dimensions": her "monumental body and abundant milk give and sustain life" (476). The fantastical expansion Sethe envisions occurring in her body and maternal capabilities allows her to physically join with her children (they move "in between" her arms) and blur the boundaries that differentiate self and other.

Significantly, Sethe's mythic mothering moves from giving and physically sustaining life to fulfilling her children's emotional needs. Morrison again presents Sethe's devoted mothering in stark contrast to Ma'am's maternal absence, a juxtaposition that highlights the permeable boundaries that exist in Beloved not only between self and other but also among past, present, and future. Whereas Ma'am lived apart from Sethe and "never fixed [her] hair nor nothing" (60), Sethe commits herself to meeting each of Beloved's demands. Sethe feeds, clothes, and entertains Beloved by cooking and sewing with her, and she demonstrates her affection for Beloved by playing with "Beloved's hair, braiding, puffing, tying, oiling it until it made Denver nervous to watch her" (239–40). Sethe's strategy of satisfying *Beloved*'s physical and emotional desires by attending to her body; specifically, sating her hunger with breast milk when she is an infant and fulfilling her emotional desires by playing with her hair when she is a young adult; emphasizes the lasting impact of the physical relationship that exists between mother and child. In temporal terms, Sethe's negative past experiences with her mother shape her own mothering choices in the present. Ma'am's absence and Sethe's subsequent suffering inspire Sethe to protect her children from the same fate by fully devoting her body to her offspring.

While Sethe's maternal body provides for her children, her own daughterly body still suffers from a want of care because of her mother's absence. Sethe attempts through her mothering to heal her past and present daughterly suffering and ward off any future pain she or

her children might experience. She dedicates her body to fulfilling Beloved's needs, transferring her body's power and mythic dimensions to Beloved:

> The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became; the brighter Beloved's eyes, the more those eyes that used never to look away became slits of sleeplessness. Sethe no longer combed her hair or splashed her face with water. She sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur. (Morrison 250)

Sethe seeks through her mothering to strengthen her children's bodies in order to protect them; and their family link; from being appropriated by the white owner or, on a larger level, white culture. O'Reilly argues that Sethe's mothering works to counter "the commodification of African Americans under slavery and the resulting disruption of the African American motherline," the tradition of nurturance that unites black mothers and children (139). In positioning Sethe's mothering as a political act that empowers Sethe through the reconstitution of her motherline, O'Reilly departs from those critics who argue that Sethe's mothering reflects her willingness to efface her individual subjectivity in favor of a relational identity. Indeed, Sethe's mothering need not be read as self-sacrificing; instead, her desire to care for others and her contentment with her relational identity can be understood to develop out of her personal need fornurturance.

Sethe seeks to assuage the pain of her past by assuming both the mother's and child's positions in her relationship with Beloved. Morrison situates Sethe and Beloved in a mother–daughter relationship beginning the moment the childlike Beloved appears on the stump outside of 124 and Sethe feels the overwhelming urge to relieve herself, which she later understands as her water breaking (Morrison 51, 202). However, as their bond develops, Sethe begins to assume a daughterly role in relation to the maternal Beloved. Observing Beloved and her mother

together, Denver notes, "Beloved bending over Sethe looked the mother, Sethe the teething child" (250). In addition to appearance, Sethe and Beloved's behavior evidences a transformation in their relationship. Although Sethe repeatedly asserts that she believes her deceased daughter has returned in the form of Beloved, she relates to Beloved as if the young woman were a reincarnation of her mother, not her daughter. Sethe compares her relationship with Beloved to her relationship with her mother, stating that Beloved "came right on back like a good girl, like a daughter which is what wanted to be and would have been if my ma'am had been able to get out of the rice long enough before they hanged her and let me be one" (203). While Sethe initially views Beloved's actions as a daughter's departure from and subsequent return to her mother, as she continues to consider their situation, she focuses on maternal (rather than daughterly) absences: " wonder what they [her mother and the other women] was doing when they was caught. Running, you think? No. Not that. Because she was my ma'am and nobody's ma'am would run off and leave her daughter, would she?" (203). Sethe's turn toward memories of her mother's absence suggests that Beloved becomes a stand-in not for the devoted daughter who returns to the mother but the good mother who refuses to abandon (and, hence, returns to) her daughter.

The interior monologues Morrison presents in part two of her novel support my reading of Beloved as Sethe's mother and reinforce the existence of circular or liminal temporalities in Beloved. In Beloved's monologue, readers bear witness to the movement of the past into the present and future (and vice versa) through Beloved's descriptions of the mother's return to the daughter and the daughter's return to the mother during the Middle Passage. Morrison first introduces Sethe's mother's Middle Passage experience through Nan, who tells Sethe during her childhood that "her mother and Nan were together from the sea" (62). In her interior monologue, Beloved reveals additional details about the Middle Passage, particularly as it relates to the mother–daughter experience during slavery. Like Sethe, who throughout Morrison's novel

returns again and again to her memory of her lost mother, Beloved centers her monologue on a particular figure: the woman with "the face that is mine" (211). Beloved describes the woman multiple times, focusing on her desire to be seen by the woman and her need to "join" with her in some way (213): " am not separate from her there is no place where stop her face is my own and want to be there in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too" (210). Beloved's insistence on her bodily connection to the woman as well as the very nature of her expression indicate that the woman Beloved references is her mother, and the two exist in the realm of intense mother–child connection known as the imaginary or semiotic chora. Reading Beloved's monologue through Julia Kristeva's theory of the child's pre-oedipal union with the mother, Claudine Raynaud argues that Beloved's narrative "hints at a desire for fusion, for a world where mother and daughter can be together, reunited in an embrace that reproduces the oneness of pregnancy" (76). As Raynaud's assessment of the Middle Passage scene suggests, Beloved joins Sethe in seeking the comfort of the mother–child connection, and this yearning only intensifies when the woman, her mother, "goes in the water" (presumably, she commits suicide), taking their shared face with her (Morrison 212).

The loss of her mother results for Beloved in the loss of her own identity, until the mother returns. If Sethe mothers others in order to make up for the maternal absences she suffered as a child, this pattern of behavior can be understood to begin with her own mother. In her interior monologue, Beloved indicates that she reconnects to her mother by giving birth to Sethe, through whom she can once again "see her face which is mine" (Morrison 212). Upon Sethe's birth, which Beloved understands as the rebirth of her own mother, Beloved revises history by giving a name to the woman on the ship; she states definitively, "Sethe went into the sea. She went there" (214). Beloved expresses her maternal devotion to her daughter Sethe as well as her daughterly desire for the mother's return: "the sun closes my eyes when open them see the face lost Sethe's is the face that left me Sethe sees me see her and see the smile her smiling face is the

place for me it is the face lost she is my face smiling at me doing it at last" (213). Just as Sethe mothers Beloved in the present in the hopes of reconnecting to her own mother in the future, Beloved mothers Sethe in an effort to finally "join" with the mother she lost during the Middle Passage, to both see and be the face she was so fond of in the past.

By reading Beloved and Sethe as women who mother in order to make up for the daughterly deprivations they suffered in their youth, view them as participating, traditionally and nontraditionally, in the reproduction of mothering. According to Nancy Chodorow, social systems in which the mother is the primary parent produce female children who, as adults, desire to mother as a means of recreating a "relational triangle":

> As a result of being parented by a woman and growing up heterosexual, women have different and more complex relational needs in which an exclusive relationship with a man is not enough. [… T]his is because women situate themselves psychologically as part of a relational triangle in which their father and men are emotionally secondary or, at most, equal to their mother and women. (199)

Chodorow asserts that because of her relational identity, a woman cannot be emotionally fulfilled through a relationship with a man, but she can have her emotional needs met by having a child (200–01). Becoming a mother completes a woman's triangular relational needs because the woman relates to her child as both a mother and a daughter (204). A woman with a child identifies with her mother, feeling a sense of responsibility to her child as well as a desire to either recreate positive pre-oedipal experiences or "get back at her mother for (fantasied) injuries done by her mother to her" (90, 204). Additionally, this woman experiences an "empathetic identification" with her child—that is, she sees herself in or as her child—due to her "unconscious investment in reactivating" her pre-oedipal relationship with her mother (204).

Beloved and other texts in which mother–child bonds are broken at a young age cannot easily be read according to Chodorow's theory of the relational triangle, which assumes the

mother's presence in her child's early life.[42] O'Reilly asks, "If the ability to mother is developmentally built into the daughter's personality through the mother–daughter bond—she acquires a relational self, which in turn becomes a maternal self—what happens when that crucial bond is denied, damaged, or destroyed as it was in slavery?" (88). In Morrison's novel, slavery disrupts Sethe's relationship with her mother and prevents her from forming affective bonds with her other caretakers. However, Sethe can still be understood to perceive the mother–child relationship as one in which mother and child are united as one through which she can become self and other. Psychoanalytic theorist Jessica Benjamin asserts that the "vision of perfect oneness" associated with the early mother–child relationship "is an ideal—a symbolic expression of our longing—that we project onto the past" (173). Unlike Chodorow, who fails to consider "the sociohistorical displacement of the mother– child relationship" in her theory of relational identification (O'Reilly 88), Benjamin suggests that broken mother–child bonds facilitate the child's fantasy of connection to the mother: "This ideal [of mother–child unity] becomes enlarged in reaction to the experience of helplessness; in the face of circumstance, powerlessness, death; but also by the distance from mother's help that repudiation of her [following the oedipal crisis] enforces" (173). Benjamin argues that the imagined connection between mother and child ensures the child "the possibility of regaining"; or, as Morrison's novel suggests, gaining for the first time; "the satisfactions of dependency," including the confidence that the child's needs can and will be fulfilled (174).

Posthuman theory further explicates how the child might perceive a connection between self and mother despite the absence of evidence. While in their theorizing of the posthuman subject Halberstam and Livingston reject psychoanalytic metaphors of mother–child connection and triangular family structures, they assert that the posthuman being is necessarily linked to the

[42] For more on the disruption of relational triangles in *Beloved,* see Marianne Hirsch's "The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism", Indiana University Press, 1989.

surrounding world: "The dependence or interdependence of bodies on the material and discursive networks through which they operate means that the umbilical cords that supply us (without which we would die) are always multiple" (17). Rather than questioning the subject's reliance on surrounding networks and beings, we must, Halberstam and Livingston argue, refuse to "distinguish absolutely or categorically between bodies and their material extensions" (17). Moved by the desire both "to become other and to become itself," the posthuman being must be understood to embody multiple links to others.

Reading Beloved through the lens of posthumanism reveals that Sethe participates in the reproduction of mothering not because of a relational identity established during her infancy but rather because of the fantasy of mother–child unity; the expression of her desire to become self and other; that develops during her childhood, adolescence, and adult life.[43] Sethe believes that she has a profound connection with her biological mother, even if she did not recognize this connection during her early years. As Sethe makes her escape from Sweet Home, the movement of her child in her womb evokes her memory of men and women on the plantation where she was born dancing "the antelope": "They shifted shapes and became something other. Some unchained, demanding other whose feet knew her pulse better than she did. Just like the one in her stomach" (Morrison 31). Sethe associates the movements of the child in her womb with her mother's dancing. Creating this liminal temporality allows her to see the family as united and mothering as a means by which she communes with her daughter as well as her mother.

Morrison further portrays liminal notions of temporality and subjectivity through Sethe's imaginings of her mother's unique love for her, a love Ma'am refused to share with the children who, unlike Sethe, were born out of the many sexual assaults she suffered (62, 201). Although Sethe never had the opportunity to match her mother's love with her own, she believes that she

---

[43] O'Reilly similarly suggests that "the daughter's eventual maternal subjectivity is determined less by the way she was mothered and more by how she perceived her own mothering" (89). However, rather than seeing the reproduction of mothering as making Sethe's becoming-subjectivity possible, O'Reilly, like Barbara Schapiro, finds that Sethe learns from her mother not to understand herself as an independent subject (O'Reilly 90; Schapiro 197).

would have been a devoted daughter: " would have tended my own mother if she needed me. If they had let her out of the rice field, because was the one she didn't throw away. couldn't have done more for [Mrs. Garner] than would my own ma'am if she was to take sick and need me and I'd have stayed with her till she got well or died. And would have stayed after that except Nan snatched me back" (200–01). While Sethe associates her relationship with Nan, the community caregiver, as one rooted in the past; Sethe perceives Nan as snatching her back, taking her from a future-oriented position where she has the potential to develop a relationship with her mother to the position of loss she has experienced in the past; she views her connection with her mother as one that persists beyond death: she states that her plan to protect her children and herself from schoolteacher "was to take [them] all to the other side where [her] own ma'am is" (203). Not only was she willing as a child to tend to her mother's dead body, but as an adult Sethe desires to unite her mother and her children in the afterlife.

Although scholars have investigated how the women of Beloved draw on their experiences as "loved daughter[s]" in order to gain access to "empowering female models" (Kubitschek 172), these scholars typically situate the power Morrison's mothers provide as historical. Kubitschek argues that the black women Morrison features in her novel draw on "historical strength imaged as a mother" (177). According to Rody, this understanding of the mother– child bond as one through which women access historical power extends across the larger body of African American women's texts: "In the heroines of this literature, female desire stages a rendezvous with the hazard of history itself, daring to be overcome with history, to experience the self as the juncture of historical forces, to realize daughterhood in a kind of historical sublime" (16). Although the focus on the past promoted in much of the existing scholarship concerning African American women authors and their texts productively recovers previously unwritten histories of diasporic families and communities, understanding the mother–child bond as past-, present-, and future-oriented allows diasporic daughters such as Sethe to

connect not only to empowering histories but also energizing new futures from which they can gain personal and political power. Sethe's past; namely, her connection to a historical and cultural motherline; may give her strength to reimagine her life and, as Kubitschek argues, emerge from the horrors she suffered (170). Yet this past, much like Sethe's present and projected future, must be understood as mutable and, more importantly, contingent upon Sethe's current and coming experiences. As a becoming-subject, Sethe lives within a nonlinear temporality, where her future changes her past in the same way her past shapes her future.

Certainly, reading Sethe's state of daughterly development, her becoming-subjectivity, as advantageous can be difficult, considering the bodily toll this type of existence takes: Sethe nearly loses herself to Beloved's destructive mothering. Lisa Yaszek points out that building a posthuman identity always involves loss. She asserts that "subjects cannot expect to decolonize themselves and construct new forms of agency without widespread and sometimes unexpectedly painful results" (Yaszek, The Self Wired 93). In Beloved, Sethe's return to the position of daughter causes her to experience the pain Yaszek references, but Sethe also finds power in her new identity. Sethe's rebirth; her existence as someone free from the confines of a repeating past in which she has no agency; allows her to blossom in ways she could not before. Specifically, her return to a childlike state enables her to see the world in a new light, both literally and figuratively. Before Beloved returned and Sethe reproduced herself as a child, Sethe found herself paralyzed by her past: "[H]er brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day" (Morrison 70). Yet once Sethe perceives the return of her mother in the form of Beloved, she grants herself permission to relive her childhood and experience a relationship with her mother. As she goes through this rebirth, Sethe imagines signs of regeneration in the world that surrounds her:

> Now can look at things again because she's here to see them too. After the shed, stopped. Now, in the morning, when light the fire mean to look out the window to see

> what the sun is doing to the day. Does it hit the pump handle first or the spigot? See if the grass is gray-green or brown or what. [: : :] Think what spring will be for us! I'll plant carrots just so she see them, and turnips. Have you ever seen one, baby? A prettier thing God never made. White and purple with a tender tail and a hard head. Feels good when you hold it in your hand and smells like the creek when it floods, bitter but happy. We'll smell them together, Beloved. Beloved. (201)

Sethe rewrites her history by imagining a future with her daughter/mother. The pleasure Sethe takes in the present from remembering experiences she had in the past and projecting the experiences she and Beloved will share in the coming spring reveals how temporality shifts when Sethe feels empowered or, alternatively, how Sethe gains power from temporal shifts. Sethe's desire to shape her life reconfigures her existence as an embodied subject: both she and Beloved exist in the past, present, and future as daughter and mother.

Although Sethe embraces her daughterly role and enjoys the possibility her future holds, Beloved's mothering becomes threatening to her. Accordingly, the other mother figures who surround Sethe must help her navigate her new childhood and create a better past, present, and future. Denver, who early in the novel joins Sethe in participating in the reproduction of mothering by caring for Beloved, continues her maternal role in her relation to Sethe. Denver provides for her mother by working outside of the home and returning to 124 with food. Denver also reunites her mother with a community of women who can help fulfill Sethe's need for nurturance.

With the aid of Denver and the women she calls to action, Sethe gains the opportunity to reenact a specific moment from her past and reconcile that experience with her new understanding of herself as both a daughter and a mother. When Sethe mistakes Edward Bodwin for schoolteacher, she feels the fear and rage she felt when schoolteacher arrived eighteen years earlier. However, Sethe changes her behavior. Rather than repeating her past actions and turning

the ice pick in her hand against Beloved, Sethe runs at Bodwin/schoolteacher. While the change in Sethe's action is significant; it suggests Sethe has embraced her movement toward the future and can imagine different outcomes to schoolteacher's arrival, thus attempting to recreate the past; even more important is the community's reaction to Sethe. Denver and the women outside of the house on Bluestone Road act as protective mothers to Sethe, giving her the type of care she desired from her biological mother and which she provides for her children. Although Sethe does not willingly refrain from attacking Bodwin, the community forces her to submit to their mothering: they stop her from killing Bodwin by physically directing her focus away from her history and toward the present group of mothers gathered in her yard. Accordingly, Beloved disappears, and Sethe finds herself surrounded by multiple other mothers who can continue ushering her into a new future.

Morrison further evidences Sethe's shift from being preoccupied by an unchanging past to showing concern for the coming future through her depiction of Sethe's relationship with Paul D. Paul D joins Denver and the women who protect Sethe outside of 124 in acting as a mother to the childlike Sethe. He facilitates her development by attending to her bodily needs (offering to rub her feet) and emotional health (encouraging her to continue living after Beloved's disappearance) (Morrison 271–72;Wyatt 484). As Wyatt argues, Paul D occupies the "restorative maternal role"; the role of physical and spiritual healer; "once occupied by Baby Suggs" (Wyatt 484; Morrison 87–89, 93, 98).[44] Paul D does not simply fulfill Sethe's needs, but, like Baby Suggs who teaches those in the Clearing to love themselves, he shows Sethe how to exercise her own subjectivity so that she can develop personal strength. With Paul D's help, particularly his insistence that Sethe's life is valuable and she is her own "best thing" (Morrison 273), Sethe begins the process of recovering from her oppressive history. Moreover, Paul D aids Sethe in

[44] Baby Suggs's name emphasizes the mother's role as a daughter ("Baby") in Beloved (Rody 92). Additionally, the name evokes the sense of blurred temporalities and identities (past, present, and future selves coming together) in posthuman culture.

continuing her nonlinear development by urging her not only to rebuild her past but to simultaneously construct a future. His assertion that he and Sethe "got more yesterday than anybody" and "need some kind of tomorrow" suggests that the direction Sethe's new life takes need not be determined by her earlier existence (273). Through the return to the position of child, Sethe connects to her past but moves forward, taking power in the potentiality of her future.

A posthumanist reading of the bonds that join mother and child together in Morrison's novel suggests a new way of conceiving the past, present, and future in African American literature: as linked temporalities through which agency can be accessed and empowered identities and communities can be created. Beloved ends, fittingly, with Sethe in a state of becoming: she has just begun to recognize herself as a person with value. The various readings available for her final spoken words, "Me? Me?," speak to the possibility inherent in her new attitude. The repetition of "me," significantly stated two times, can be understood to reference Sethe's liminal or multiple identity: she is both daughter and mother, self and other. By forging these links across time and personhood, Sethe begins the work of healing from her past pains and creating a better present and future life.

IV.3 Magic Transformation through an Embodied Voice in *Song of Solomon*

The term 'magic realism' was coined by the German art critic Franz Roh in 1925, but he employed it to refer to a painting style which he believed was a distinct form of surrealism. His theories had an impact on European and Latin American literature and the term eventually found its way into literature in the 1950s. We can basically distinguish between two types of magic realism: the scholarly surrealistic type which is mainly found in European writing and the mythic or folkloric type mainly cultivated by the Latin American masters.

Maggie Ann Bowers argues that "… writers currently in conditions of oppression in the

United States, such as Native American, Chicano and African Americans, have also adopted magic realism as a means to write against dominant American culture"[45]. Furthermore she holds that "Ton Morrison writes magic realist narratives that draw from her cross cultural context as an African American. Her narratives are influenced by African American oral culture and mythology adapted from West African culture"[46]. It is this peculiar African American element which Morrison instills into the trend that has enriched magic realism and makes for her distinctive mark.

Whether European, Latin American or American, magic realist novels are written by writers devoid of political power who gain strength through the power of words. These novels portray complex historical narratives from subaltern points of view, "… magic realism has become associated with fictions that tell the tales of those on the margins of political power and influential society"[47]. Hence, their ability to tell their own version of history through fiction becomes in itself their empowering tool. This feature of magical realist writing is in keeping with Morrison's belief that good novels are undoubtedly 'political as well as very beautiful'. Belonging to the Afro-American community, Morrison has made use of magical realism to challenge the versions of documented history. She has shown particular interest in unearthing the dusted and forlorn pages of history.

In trying to determine magical realism, scholars of the literary trend capture as the essence of it the mixture of fantastical and real events. Stuart Sim holds that "… magic realism is a form founded on the juxtaposition of two modes of representation which normally exist in opposition: realism and the fantastic. Magical realists create narratives in which the realistic elements of the

[45] Maggie Ann Bowers. Magic(al) Realism. New York: Routledge, 2004. p. 46.

[46] Ibid. p. 55.

[47] Ibid. p. 31

text are continually being undercut by the intrusion of impossible or inexplicable events"[48]. Whereas J. A. Cuddon maintains that "some key features of this kind of fiction are the mingling and juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic or bizarre, skillful time shifts, convoluted and even labyrinthine narratives and plots, miscellaneous use of dreams, myths and fairy stories, expressionistic and even surrealistic description, arcane erudition, the element of surprise or abrupt shock, the horrific and the inexplicable"[49]. Chris Baldick highlights that "the term has also been extended to works from different cultures, designating a tendency of the modern novel to reach beyond the confines of realism and draw upon the energies of fable, folktale and myth while retaining a strong contemporary social relevance"[50]. It is well known that 'the inexplicable events' which are usually incorporated in magical realist novels are flight, levitation, telepathy and telekinesis. Some of these striking elements of magical realism are present in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, especially the myth of the flying African, strange and unexplainable events and labyrinthine narrative structure.

Song of Solomon portrays the saga of the Dead family. The novel is set in an unnamed city in Michigan and in the second part the setting shifts to the rural villages of Danville in Pennsylvania and Shalimar in Virginia. It has been regarded as a novel which features the coming of age of Macon (Milkman) Dead, his quest for the Golden Fleece which ends in his recovery of the family roots.

At the heart of *Song of Solomon* is the myth of the Flying African. However, it has been easy for many critics and scholars to associate Milkman's desire to fly to the Icarus myth of ancient Greece. Useful as Greek Icarus myth might seem to scholars studying the novel, it does not

---

48 Stuart Sim (ed.). The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism. New York: Routledge, 2001. p. 310.

49 Cuddon J. A. The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory. 4th edition, London: Penguin Books 1998. p. 488.

50 Chris Baldick. The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms. Ox- ford: Oxford University Press, 1990. p. 128.

entirely account for all the actions of the character. On the "flying myth" in *Song of Solomon* Morrison has stated that: "If it means Icarus to some readers, fine; want to take credit for that. But my meaning is specific: it is about black people who could fly. That was always part of the folklore of my life; flying was one of our gifts. don't care how silly it may seem. It is everywhere – people used to talk about it, it's in the spirituals and gospels"[51]. It is a statement which clearly expresses the author's unhappiness that some readers and scholars fail to understand the gist of the myth underlying the novel and her subtle intertwining of the Western Icarus myth with the African American one. Milkman's flight evokes a traditional Gullah folk tale about slaves who overcome subjugation in Southern cotton plantations by flying back to Africa. Thus, by alluding to two great literary narratives Morrison endows the flight to freedom with an epic quality. The desire to escape slavery has been a constant and powerful force in the history of humanity.

However, what clearly distinguishes the two myths is the use of wings. In the Daedalus and Icarus myth, father and son use wax wings to fly from the labyrinth where king Minos of Crete imprisoned them. However, Icarus flew too close to the sun, his wings melted and he fell into the sea. Song of Solomon begins with Robert Smith's suicidal flight using silk wings from the top of Mercy Hospital. His flight ends in death just like Icarus. Morrison's myth is, as she herself has put it "about black people who could fly"; who take off from the ground without the use of wings. Milkman's great-grandfather flew away from slavery back home to Africa. He needed no wings for that. This is perplexing for Milkman who asks "When you say 'flew off' you mean he ran away, don't you? Escaped?" and Susan replies "No, mean flew. Oh, it's just foolishness, you know, but according to the story he wasn't running away. He was flying. He flew. You know,

[51] Thomas Le Clair. Language Must Not Sweat: A Conversation with Ton Morrison. The New Republic, 184 (March 1981). p. 26–27.

like a bird"[52]. Although what unites the two myths is the main characters' desire for freedom, even at this point, Morrison adds the African American element of the pain which this flight to freedom leaves behind for the abandoned wife and children, an element that she clearly emphasizes in the epigraph of the novel which reads "that fathers may soar and children to know their names." No action, however glorious it may seem, comes without some negative repercussions.

Another element which pushes the novel in the realm of magical realism is the fact that the black community believes that flight of black people is not a myth, they think it is possible and natural. The observers of Robert Smith's flight encourage him rather than rush to prevent his leap, implying that they do not see his flight as a suicide attempt. Instead, the onlookers behave as though Smith's flight might be possible. For the long period of time during which Milkman doubts the possibility of human flight, he remains abnormal in the eyes of his community. Only when he begins to believe in the reality of flight does he cease to feel alienated. This magical realist feature is used by the author to add to the Western Icarus myth the African American dimension.

One other important element is that the novel reverberates of not just one western myth, it evokes Jason's myth and his quest for the Golden Fleece as well as Odysseus's returning home. The novel includes Biblical allusions such as Lazarus's cave or the female characters' names are all taken from the Bible. Be it Western myths or Biblical allusions, Morrison masterfully subverts them.

In the same fashion, Morrison makes use of the subversive quality of language, mainly through the use of names. The story of the name of the street inhabited by the black community is highly symbolic and similar to Morrison's own use of her fictional language which aims at

---

[52] Ton Morrison. Song of Solomon. London: Vintage, 1998. p. 322–323.

'bearing witness' and subverting the dominant culture. The post office and the city authorities only recognize it as Mains Avenue, but the local black residents know it as Doctor Street, because the only black doctor they could visit used to live in that street. Letters addressed to residents living in that street caused confusion for the post office employees who "returned [them] … or passed them on to the Dead Letter Office"[53]. The street "acquired a quas official status" only when black people were being drafted for the army in 1918. Not without sarcasm, Morrison writes: "Some city legislators, whose concern for appropriate names and the maintenance of the city's landmarks was the principal part of their political life, saw to it that "Doctor Street" was never used in any official capacity"[54]. They prepare a public notice to inform the residents of that street that it "had always been and would always be known as known as Mains Avenue and not Doctor Street". However, the city legislators' attempt to clarify the matter of the name contrasts sharply with the residents' way of giving names. "It was a genuinely clarifying public notice because it gave the Southside residents a way to keep their memories alive and please the city legislators as well. They called it Not Doctor Street…"[55] What makes this episode so striking is the author's ability to juxtapose the two different ways of providing names: for the city legislators sticking to the official version is very important whereas for the black community it is a very pragmatic matter. The name they have for the street is clearly associated with the only black doctor where they could cure their diseases and upon his death they started calling the street Not Doctor Street. The residents follow the same logic with Mercy Hospital which they call No Mercy Hospital.

The family's surname is also very metaphorical. Dead was the surname given to Macon and Pilate's father by a drunken Yankee soldier at the Freedmen Bureau. The soldier was drunk and

---

[53] Ibid. p. 4.

[54] Ibid. p. 4.

[55] Ibid. p. 4.

he wrote all the information which their illiterate father was saying to him into the wrong box. Written by a soldier the episode is a clear allusion of the way African American history has been written in the official documents. Although for three generations the Deads have continued to use that surname, the time has come for Milkman to embark on his quest to find out the truth about his family's origin. The truth lies hidden in a cave in a remote village in Virginia and in a children's song.

During his journey to find the 'cave of gold' Milkman goes to the dilapidated mansion of the Butlers, the white people who killed his grand- father, where to his great surprise he finds Circe, the Butlers' black maid and the person who sheltered his father and aunt. Milkman's encounter with Circe is also a vested with magic. She is full of classical reverberations and is portrayed as the classical Circe of the Greek mythology. "Milkman struggled for a clear thought, so hard to come by in a dream: Perhaps this woman is Circe. But Circe is dead. This woman is alive. That was as far as he got, because although the woman was talking to him, she might in any case still be dead – as a matter of fact she had to be dead"[56]. Morrison subverts even Circe myth as we find it in *The Odyssey*. The classical Circe lived in the island of Aeaea and turned people into beasts. She became a hinderer not a helper in Odysseus journey. Circe in *Song of Solomon* lives with a host of Weimaraner dogs who seem to have "the eyes of children"[57]and to Milkman she seems like a ghost. However, she was a helper for Macon and Pilate, and she also helps Milkman with correct guidelines how to find 'the cave of gold'.

There are also many other strange and unexplainable events which further push *Song of Solomon* into magical realism. Milkman's conception and birth is surrounded by a shroud of magic. Trudier Harris interprets the event in this way: "There is magic in Pilate giving Ruth a portion to administer in Macon Dead's food in order to ensure Milkman's conception, and there

[56] Morrison. Song of Solomon. London: Vintage, 1998. p. 240.

[57] Ibid. P. xxx.

is the added trauma of Macon trying to force an abortion once he learns that his four-day renewed sexual attraction to his wife has led to her pregnancy"[58]. It is Pilate who prophecies, arranges and watches over Milkman's birth. "She gave me funny things to do. And some greenish-gray grassy-looking staff to put in his food"[59]. She also scares Macon through black magic and fends off his attempts to end his wife's pregnancy. "Pilate put a small doll on Macon's chair in the office. A male doll with a small painted chicken bone struck between its legs and a round red circle painted on its belly. […] he left Ruth alone after that"[60].

She becomes Milkman's mentor and guides him in his journey to recover the forgotten past of their family.

Pilate's birth is also considered a magical event as she was born without a navel. "After their mother died, she had come struggling out of the womb without help from throbbing muscles or the pressure of swift womb water. As a result, for all the years he knew her, her stomach was as smooth and sturdy as her back, at no place interrupted by a navel. It was the absence of a navel that convinced people that she had not come into this world through normal channels"[61]. The navel is the connection of the child to his mother, by the same token to her community. Pilate, who was brought into the world by a dead mother and given a "Christ-killing name" by her father embarks on her mission to help in the conception, birth and upbringing of Milkman, her Christ-like nephew.

Pilate has a companion which further pushes the novel in the realm of magical realism, her father's ghost. "She paid close attention to her men- tor – the father who appeared before her sometimes and told her things. After Reba was born, he no longer came to her dressed as he had

[58] Trudier Harris. Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Ton Morrison. Knoxville, The University of Tennessee Press, 1991. p. 85.
[59] Ton Morrison. Song of Solomon. London: Vintage, 1998. p. 125.

[60] Ibid. p. 132.

[61] Ibid. p. 27–28.

been on the woods' edge and in the cave, when she and Macon had left Circe's house. Then he had worn the coveralls and heavy shoes he was shot in. now he came in a white shirt, a blue collar, and a brown peaked cap'"[62]. Moreover, as it turns out by the end of the novel, the sack that Pilate carries everywhere she goes does not contain the bones of the white person that Macon and she erroneously believe they murdered in the cave. The sack is filled with the skeletal bones of their father.

There are also strong metafictional elements in *Song of Solomon* which are mainly to be found in the stories that Pilate and her brother, Macon, narrate to Milkman. However there is an essential difference in their respective narrations. Macon, who has adopted the qualities of white people, only tells part of the story when forced by his son, whereas Pilate seems an innate storyteller, one that follows the griot tradition of oral storytelling. Both their stories focus on their family history and their murdered father but Milkman's attraction to Pilate's house and her storytelling is clear throughout the novel.

IV.4 Reinstating Myth and Summoning Female Voice:

The constant censorship of and intrusion on black life from the surrounding society is emphasized not by specific events so much as by a consistent pattern of misnaming. Power for Morrison is largely the power to name, to define reality and perception. *The Bluest Eye* opens with a primer description of a typical American family: "Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house (The Bluest Eye, p. 1). Portions of that description reappear as chapter headings for the story of black lives, all removed in various degrees from the textbook

[62] Morrison. Song of Solomon. London: Vintage, 1998. P. 150.

"reality."[63] *Sula* begins with a description of the black neighborhood "called the Bottom in spite of the fact that it was up in the hills" (Sula, p. 4): another misnamed, even reversed situation, in this case the result of a white man's greedy joke. The same pattern is extended in *Song of Solomon*: the first pages describe "Not Doctor Street, a name the post office did not recognize," and "No Mercy Hospital" (Song of Solomon, p. 3-4). Both names are unofficial; the black experience they represent is denied by the city fathers who named Mains Avenue and Mercy Hospital. And *Song of Solomon* is full of characters with ludicrous, multiple, or lost names, like the first Macon Dead, who received "this heavy name scrawled in perfect thoughtlessness by a drunken Yankee in the Union Army" (Song of Solomon, p. 18). In all these cases, the misnaming does not eliminate the reality of the black world; invisibility is not non-existence. But it does reflect a distortion. Blacks are visible to white culture only insofar as they fit its frame of reference and serve its needs. Thus they are consistently reduced and reified, losing their independent reality. Mrs. Breedlove in The Bluest Eye has a nickname, "Polly," that only whites use; it reduces her dignity and identifies her as "the ideal servant" (The Bluest Eye, p. 99). When the elegant Helene Wright becomes just "gal" to a white conductor, she and her daughter Nel feel that she is "flawed," "really custard" under the elegant exterior (Sula, pp. 17-19).

To some extent this problem is an inescapable ontological experience. As Sartre has pointed out, human relations revolve around the experience of "the Look," for being "seen" by another both confirms one's reality and threatens one's sense of freedom:" grasp the Other's look at the very center of my act as the solidification and alienation of my own possibilities."A lone, can see myself as pure consciousness in a world of possible projects; the other's look makes me see myself as an object in another perception. "The other as a look is only that- my

[63] Phyllis R. Klotman, "Dick-and-Jane and the Shirley Temple Sensibility in The Bluest Eye," Black American Literature Forum, 8, 4 (Winter 1979), 123-25.

transcendence transcended."[64] The result is a cycle of conflicting and shifting subject-object relationships in which both sides try simultaneously to remain in control of the relationship and to use the Other's look to confirm identity. The difficulty of such an attempt tempts human beings to Bad Faith, "a vacillation between transcendence and facticity which refuses to recognize either one for what it really is or to synthesize them" (Sarter 546) . What that means can be seen in the many Morrison characters who try to define themselves through the eyes of others. Jude Greene marries Nel so that he can "see himself taking shape in her eyes" (Sula, p. 71); and Milkman Dead finds that only when Guitar Bains shares his dream can he feel "a self inside himself emerge, a clean-lined definite self" (Song of Solomon, p. 184). Such characters are in Bad Faith not because they recognize other viewers, but because they use others to escape their own responsibility to define themselves. The woman who, like Mrs. Breedlove, feels most powerful when most submerged in flesh, most like a thing, similarly falls into Bad Faith: ". .. know that my flesh is all that be on his mind. That he couldn't stop if he had to. . . . feel a power. be strong, be pretty, be young" (The Bluest Eye, p. 101). Milkman complains that he feels "used. Somehow everybody was using him for something or as something" (Song of Solomon, p. 165). Many of Morrison's characters learn to like being used and using in return. They collaborate in their own reification so that they can feel that it is chosen.

Such characters can fall into Bad Faith not only by dependence on one other, but also by internalizing the look of the majority culture. The novels are full of characters who try to live up to an external image-Dick and Jane's family, or cosmopolitan society, or big business. This conformity is not just a disguise, but an attempt to gain power and control. There is always the hope that if one fits the prescribed pattern, one will be seen as human. Helene Wright puts on her velvet dress in hopes that it, with "her manner and her bearing," will be "protection" against the reductive gaze of the white other (Sula, p. 17). Light-skinned women, already closer to white

[64] Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Citadel Press, 1966), p. 239.

models, aspire to a genteel ideal: green-eyed Frieda "enchanted the entire school," and "sugar-brown Mobile girls" like Geraldine "go to landgrant colleges, normal schools, and learn how to do the white man's work with refinement." The problem with such internalization is not that it is ambitious, but that it is life-denying, eliminating "The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions" (The Bluest Eye, p. 48, 64). One who really accepts the external definition of the self gives up spontaneous feeling and choice.

Morrison makes it clear that this ontological problem is vastly complicated in the context of a society based on coercive power relations. The individual contest for transcendence allows, in theory, for mutually satisfying resolutions, as Beauvoir points out: "It is possible to rise above this conflict if each individual freely recognizes the other, each regarding himself and the other simultaneously as object and as subject in a reciprocal manner."[65] But that relation is unbalanced by social divisions of power. Helene cannot defy the white conductor; on at least the level of overt speech and action, his look is unchallengeable. Thus she tries to accept the look, and his power to give it, by becoming a more perfect object for his gaze: she gives him a "dazzling smile" (Sula, p. 19). The temptation to Bad Faith is immensely greater in a society that forcibly assigns subject-power, the power to look and define, to one person over another. In such a context, even willed or spontaneous choices can be distorted to serve the powerful. Mrs. Breedlove's channeling of her own need for order into the duties of "the ideal servant" is a milder version of what happens to Cholly Breedlove, forced to turn his spontaneous copulation into performance before the flashlights of white hunters (The Bluest Eye, p. 114-17). Most perversely, even the attempt at rebellion can be shaped by the surrounding culture. The change from "Doctor Street" to "Not Doctor Street," shows a lingering reluctance to accept white naming, but also a recognition of the loss of the original power to name. More profoundly, "the

[65] Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Press, 1974), p. 158.

Days," who take revenge for white violence, are also reactive, still achieving secondhand identity and initiative:

> . . when a Negro child, Negro woman, or Negro man is killed by whites and nothing is done about it by their law and their courts, this society selects a similar victim at random, and they execute him or her in a similar manner if they can. If the Negro was hanged, they hang; if a Negro was burnt, they burn; raped and murdered, they rape and murder. (Song of Solomon, p. 155)

The adoption of a rigid role, the withdrawal from life, is for Morrison as for Sartre a failure; but her condemnation is tempered by the recognition of the unnatural position of blacks in a racist society. Power relations can have a similar effect on the community as a whole. The Look of white society, supported by all kinds of material domination, not only freezes the black individual but also classifies all blacks as alike, freezing the group. They become a "we-object" before the gaze of a "third":

It is only when feel myself become an object along with someone else under the look of such a "third" that experience my being as a "we-object"; for then, in our mutual interdependency in our shame and rage, our beings are somehow mingled in the eyes of the onlooker, for whom we are both somehow" the same": two representatives of a class or a species, two anonymous types of something. ..[66]

Again, the basic problem may be ontological, but the institutionalization of the relation, the coercive power of the Third, exacerbates it. This is the reason for all the misnaming: a whole group of people have been denied the right to create a recognizable public self-as individuals or as community. Given that combination of personal and communal vulnerability, it is hardly

[66] Frederic Jameson, Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), p. 249.

surprising that many characters choose the way of the least agony and the fewest surprises: they choose their status as objects, even fiercely defend it. Helene and Geraldine increasingly become perfect images rather than free selves. In this retreat from life they are abetted by a community so dominated by white society as the Third that order and stability are its primary values. In The Bluest Eye, narrator Claudia comments that the worst fear is of being "outdoors": "Being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weaknesses and hang on, or to creep singly up into the major folds of the garment" (The Bluest Eye, p. 11). Any excess that might challenge the powerful look and increase their isolation is terrifying. And so the images that caused the alienation, excluded them from the real world, are paradoxically received and imitated as confirmations of life.

Claudia is very conscious of the perversity of this position and of its roots in racist society. As a child, she says, she hated Shirley Temple, "Not because she was cute, but because she danced with Bojangles, who was my friend, my uncle, my daddy, and who ought to have been soft-shoeing it and chuckling with me" (The Bluest Eye, p. 13). She recognized the diversion of feeling from her self and world into white values, emphasized by repeated references to white dolls, babies, and movie stars. She was fascinated by those images because they were lovable to everyone but her. She tried to dissect them, to discover or possess the "magic they weaved on others," but finally learned "shame" at her lack of feeling. Claudia knew, even as a child, the force of alien cultural images. She knew that white "ideals" denied her reality by forcing it into strange forms of appearance and experience. Her first reaction was appropriate: she could feel only "disinterested violence" for what, without relevance to her life, still regulated it (The Bluest Eye, p. 15-16).

The child Claudia learns false love rather than cut herself off from the only model of lovableness she is offered. But Claudia the adult narrator sees that Shirley Temple cannot really be loved or imitated because she is just a doll, an image without a self behind it. The crime of the

racist society is not only the theft of black reality; it is the substitution of dead, external classifications for free self-definition. A society based entirely on the look, on the absolute reification of the other, reifies itself. If blacks are defined as slaves, whites are defined as masters; the Third is not a person at all, only an abstraction. There is finally a look with no one behind it, because the freedom to define the self is denied. The movie stars and pinup girls of the white culture are not models of selfhood. The message they carry is that human life is being and appearance, not choice. To model oneself on them is to lose one's responsibility to create oneself in a world of others; to love them is to deny the equal freedom of others.

Life in this depthless world of images is constantly threatened; the problem of bad Faith is that one must evade the knowledge of what one has done, to keep the illusion of freedom without the risk. This means that one must somehow justify, even collaborate with, the look of the other or the third. Sartre says that one way to handle the gaze of the Third is to "ally myself to the Third so as to look at the other who is then transformed into our object" (Sarter 392). The internalization of white values is one such act. The choice of a scapegoat goes further, displacing onto the other all that is feared in the self, and so remaining free. So the genteel ladies escape funkiness in others, as in themselves, of disorder or aberration. Geraldine rejects in Pecola the "waste" that will "settle" in her house (The Bluest Eye, p. 72). Helene Wright tries to reshape her daughter's nose; Milkman Dead casts off the clinging Hagar.

That displacement is parallel to the white attribution of rejected qualities to blacks. But the position of the black woman is doubly difficult. Black women in Morrison's fictions discover "that they [are] neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph [are] forbidden to them" (Sula, p. 44). Womanhood, like blackness, is other in this society, and the dilemma of woman in a patriarchal society is parallel to that of blacks in a racist one: they are made to feel most real when seen. Thus the adolescent Sula and Nel, parading before young males who label them "pig meat," are "thrilled" by the association of voyeurism with sexuality. But their role as image is

complicated by their blackness. They are not just women in a society that reduces women to such cold and infantile images that Corinthians Dead can think that "She didn't know any grown-up women. Every woman she knew was a doll baby" (Song of Solomon, p. 197). They are also black women in a society whose female ideal is a white "doll baby," blonde and blue-eyed Shirley Temple. Even if they accept their reification they will always be inadequate; the black woman is "the antithesis of American beauty."[67] No efforts at disguise will make them into the images they learn to admire. Defined as the Other, made to be looked at, they can never satisfy the gaze of society.

Because they are doubly defined as failures and outsiders, they are natural scapegoats for those seeking symbols of displaced emotions. Morrison shows the Look taking on monstrous proportions as the humiliated black male allies himself with the Third by making the black woman the object of his displaced fury. So Cholly Breedlove, in his sexual humiliation, looks not at his tormentors, but at his partner, with hatred:

> Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. . . . For now, he hated the one who had created the situation, the one who bore witness to his failure, his impotence. The one whom he had not been able to protect, to spare, to cover from the round moon glow of the flashlight. (The Bluest Eye, p. 118)

Prevented from looking outward at the oppressor, he displaces blame onto the Other who "saw." That she too is image in the white man's eye is so much worse, for he had counted on her existing only for him, seeing him as he wanted her to, being his object and his subject. The desire to "protect" her was the desire to create himself as her protector. All he can do to restore his selfhood is to deny hers further. In the recurring scene of black male resentment at black

---

[67] William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, Black Rage, New York: Bantam, 1968, p. 33. Despite their overvaluation of female "narcissism," Grier and Cobbs offer a useful analysis of the image problem, and also of the difficulties in mother-daughter relations that Morrison shows.

women's submission to oppression, Morrison shows the displacement of male humiliation onto the only person left that a black man can "own"-the black woman. Beauvoir remarks that woman in a patriarchal society is "the inessential who never goes back to being the essential, . . . the absolute Other, without reciprocity."[68] The black woman-doubly Other is the perfect scapegoat.

It is not only men who look for scapegoats. Barbara Smith points out that not only "the politics of sex" but also "the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers."[69] Morrison shows the subject-object pair and the triad created by the Third operating within a society so dependent on exclusion and reification that it creates "interlocking" systems to define individuals in multiple ways. So even black women can find scapegoats. The prime example is Pecola, black and young and ugly.

Claudia says,

> All of us - all who knew her - felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. . . . And she let us, and thereby deserved our contempt. We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength. (The Bluest Eye, p. 163)

Pecola is the epitome of the victim in a world that reduces persons to objects and then makes them feel inferior as objects. In this world, light-skinned women can feel superior to dark ones, married women to whores, and on and on. The temptations to Bad Faith are enormously increased, since one's own reification can be "escaped" in the interlocking hierarchies that allow most to feel superior to someone. Only the very unlucky, or the truly free, are outside this system.

Pecola is so far outside the center of the system-excluded from reality by race, gender, class, age, and personal history , that she goes mad, fantasizing that her eyes have turned blue

---

[68] Beauvoir, p. 159.

[69] Barbara Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," Women's Studies International Quarterly, 2, 1979, 185.

and so fitted her for the world. But not all outsiders go mad or otherwise surrender. There are Morrison characters who refuse to become images, to submerge themselves in a role. These characters are clearly existential heroes, free in the Sartrean sense of being their own creators. But Morrison's treatment and development of this type in the social context she has staked out raise important questions about the nature of heroism and the place of external definitions in it.

The characters who are outdoors, cut off from reassuring connection and definition, are profoundly frightening to the community, especially to a community dispossessed and peripheral; it responds by treating the free person as another kind of scapegoat, using that excess to define its own life. Sula's neighbors fear and condemn her refusal to fit a conventional role, but her shapelessness gives them shape:

> Their conviction of Sula's evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways. Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love one another. They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst. (Sula, p. 102)

Displacing their fear and anger onto Sula, as onto Pecola, they can define themselves as better. Sula, unlike Pecola, can bear that role, having chosen to be outside; it is then tempting to argue that this kind of hero is a catalyst for good in the society. But Morrison has clear reservations about this situation. In a sick and power-obsessed society, even freedom can become distorted. For one thing, these characters are freed by traumatic experiences. Cholly goes through abandonment, sexual humiliation, desertion and rejection: "Abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose. He was alone with his own perceptions and appetites, and they alone interested him" (The Bluest Eye, p. 126). Similarly, Sula is freed by her mother's expressed dislike of her and her own part in Chicken Little's drowning: ". . . hers was an experimental life - ever since her mother's remarks sent her

flying up those stairs, ever since her one major feeling of responsibility had been exorcised on the bank of a river with a closed place in the middle" (Sula, p. 102). The whores in The Bluest Eye are also freed by exclusion from society; Morrison's suggestion that such freedom is more deprivation than fulfillment helps to explain their link with Pecola.[70]

Further, their isolation makes such free characters so unable to connect with others that they often act cruelly, out of cold detachment or fleeting impulse. Sula humiliates others "because she want[s] to see the person's face change rapidly" or watches her mother burn becauses he is "thrilled"(Sula, p. 103, 127). Cholly rapesh is daughter because he feels no "stable connection between himself and [his] children. .... he reacted to them, and his reactions were based on what he felt at the moment" (The Bluest Eye, p. 127). Claudia says of Cholly's act, "the love of a free man is never safe. There is no gift for the beloved.

The lover alone possesses his gift of love. The loved one is shorn, neutralized, frozen in the glare of the lover's inward eye" (The Bluest Eye, p. 163). That is, total freedom is another version of the look; the hero transcends others. This conception of freedom bears some resemblance to Sartre's heroes, who commit outrageous acts in rejection of social prescriptions; but the cruelty of these heroes forces remembrance of the other side of freedom, which they neglect, the recognition of their own "facticity," their existence in the world of consequences. Morrison says that Sula has "no ego" (Sula, p. 103); that is, she is not able to imagine herself as created by her choices. She simply defines herself as transcendence. Similarly, Milkman wrenches free from those "using" him, and sees this as self-assertion: "Either am to live in this world on my terms or will die out of it" (Song, p. 129). But to achieve heroism in these terms is to accept the white-male model of heroism as conquest, to make oneself a subject by freezing the Other, to perfect one's image by forcing others to see it. Transcendence on those terms is related to the flight into

---

[70] Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, "Order and Disorder in Ton Morrison's The Bluest Eye," Critique, 19, 1 (1977), 119.

facticity that Sula sees all around her. The interdependence of the two kinds of Bad Faith, the relation between the transcendent hero and the reified victim, is suggested by the fact that both Sula and Mrs. Breedlove love the "power" of the "position of surrender" in sex (Sula, p. 106). It also explains the collapse of the order Sula makes possible in her town; the community falls into a self-destructive orgy on Suicide Day after she dies. A hero defined solely by exclusion from the community reinforces Bad Faith by showing not a clear choosing self, but a lack of self. That is why Sula finally says, " never meant anything" (Sula, p. 127).

When Sula meets another free person, Ajax, she is unable to sustain the relation; she lapses into the possessiveness she scorned in Nel. But when she recognizes her failure, she sees it as rooted not in Nel's conformism but in her own isolation: " didn't even know his name," she thinks: "It's just as well he left. Soon would have torn the flesh from his face just to see if was right ... and nobody would have understood that kind of curiosity" (Sula, p. 117). The subject as detached self that can only dissect is what Claudia as a child feared to become: "When learned how repulsive this disinterested violence was, that it was repulsive because it was disinterested, my shame floundered about for refuge. The best hiding place was love" (The Bluest Eye, p. 15-16). Claudia first thought the only alternative was to become the object, to "love" and emulate received images. But she learns another way. She is not fully heroic: her attempts to act on her feeling are thwarted by an "unyielding" world; and as an adult, she can only tell Pecola's story, "too late" to change it (The Bluest Eye, p. 164). But she does meet her responsibility to see, to grasp the existence of herself and others without the evasions of Bad Faith, and she acts on what she sees. Freedom defined as total transcendence lacks the intention and significance that can come from commitment;" freedom," as Sartre comments, "is meaningful only as engaged by its free choice of ends" (Sarter 549).

Milkman Dead, in Morrison's third novel, finally completes the heroic mission. Morrison makes his status clear by depicting him in clearly mythic terms. Milkman's life follows the

pattern of the classic hero, from miraculous birth (he is the first black baby born in Mercy Hospital, on a day marked by song, rose petals in the snow, and human "flight") through quest-journey to final reunion with his double. And Milkman largely resolves the conflict between freedom and connection. At first the familiar cold hero, he comes to ask the cost of the heroic quest -"Who'd he leave behind?" (Song of Solomon, p. 336). He learns not only that the hero serves a function for society, the exploration of limits it cannot reach, but also that it serves him: his great-grandfather Shalimar left his children, but "it was the children who sang about it and kept the story of his leaving alive" (Song of Solomon, p. 336). More, he finds that his quest is his culture's; he can only discover what he is by discovering what his family is. By undertaking the quest, he combines subjective freedom with objective fact and defines himself in both spheres. Sartre says that one may respond to the gaze of the Third not by scapegoating and identifying with the Third, but by "solidarity" with the Other, which can allow for common transcendence of the outside definition (Sarter 394). By conceiving himself as both free individual and member of the social group, the hero unites his free and factitious natures and becomes part of the historical process by which the struggle for self-definition is both complicated and fulfilled. Thus at the end of *Song of Solomon*, Milkman has restored the names of his family, recovered their song; and he can "fly." But he does not fly away; he flies toward Guitar, his wounded "brother": "For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it" (Song of Solomon, p. 341). Only in the recognition of his condition can he act in it, only in commitment is he free.

Roger Rosenblatt has remarked that much Afro-American fiction tends toward myth because of its "acknowledgment of external limitation and the anticipation of it."[71] Morrison has always offered mythic possibilities in her emphasis on natural cycle, bizarre events, and narrative echoes. The mythic sensibility does seem to fit her view of the difficulties of freedom. But there

---

[71] Roger Rosenblatt, Black Fiction , Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1974, p. 9.

are dangers in the use of myth that are especially acute for writers trying to combine the mythic sense of meaning with the concrete situation of the oppressed. Susan L. Blake has pointed out some of those problems in Ralph Ellison's combination of myth with black folklore. She suggests that the myth and the social situation described in the folklore "do not have compatible meanings," that in fact the correlation to "universal" Western myth "transforms acceptance of blackness as identity into acceptance of blackness as limitation. It substitutes the white culture's definition of blackness for the self-definition of folklore."[72] This question is obviously crucial for Morrison, whose fictions try to combine existential concerns compatible with a mythic presentation with an analysis of American society. But her work resolves some of the problems Blake sees in Ellison's use of myth.

First, Morrison's almost total exclusion of white characters from the books allows her to treat white culture as necessity without either mythicizing specific acts of oppression or positing present necessity as eternal. Blake suggests that Ellison's ritualization of white brutality in the adolescent Battle Royal-suggests a reading -adolescent rites of passage-that contradicts the social reality and almost justifies the event.(Blake 122) Morrison avoids such a situation by exclusion of whites. White brutality and insensitivity are part of the environment the black characters must struggle with, but they are most often conditions, institutionalized and often anonymous, rather than events with ritualistic overtones. This allows Morrison to focus attention not on the white characters' forcing of mythic rites- as if they were gods - but on the black characters' choices within the context of oppression. In fact, when coercion is exercised by whites in these works, it is depicted as anti-mythic. It does not force boys into manhood, or cause a tragic hero's cathartic recognition. It destroys the myth and denies characters entrance into it: it forces Cholly to dissociate himself from his own acts; it prevents Jude from growing into manhood and denies

[72] Susan L. Blake, "Ritual and Rationalization: Black Folklore in the Works of Ralph Ellison," PMLA, 94 (1979), 123-126.

Nel the identity with her mother essential to a female myth;[73] it destroys the links between generations that are the foundation of a mythos. The finding of a myth in these novels is a choice that is made in spite of a dominating culture that would deny it. Morrison's allusions to traditional Western myth, then, correct it by showing how far the dominant culture has come from its roots, and emphasize the denial of responsibility in the faceless anti-myth.

But showing the myth coming from inside the black culture is not enough to correct it. Its very form must be adapted to reflect the new sense of reality, the new definition of heroism. Morrison's version of the Icarus story shows her approach. The Icarus tale offers a tempting pattern for a black writer interested in myth and folklore, since it ties in with folk tales of blacks flying back to the homeland; but its limitation, as Blake points out, is that it seems to carry a "moral" incompatible with the concrete situation of blacks, suggesting the failure of the son to be the result of hubris rather than oppression (Blake 124).Morrison plays variations on the story that correct that perspective. One version of it has Shalimar flying away and trying to take his son, as did Daedalus. But Shalimar's son is a baby, and Shalimar drops him, unable to soar with him. That version emphasizes, first, that the son's "fall" is the result of a situation beyond his control; second, that the father's desire for freedom and his family ties are in conflict. That second aspect is central to Morrison's analysis and reconstruction of the myth. In the Icarus tale, freedom is available to the characters-they can fly. If they fail, it is because they want an impossible kind of freedom. To transfer that pattern to the black situation would be to suggest that blacks must accept an inferior social position. Morrison's version of the tale shifts the emphasis to divided loyalties. Shalimar is free to return to Africa - totally free. But that kind of freedom is problematic, not because in itself it is wrong, but because in the particular context he is in – family and children-it involves denial of social and personal bonds. He does not destroy himself

[73] Susan Gubar, "Mother, Maiden, and the Marriage of Death: Women Writers and an Ancient Myth," Women's Studies, 6 , 1979, 307-308.

by soaring, but he wounds others because not everyone can take that way. The conflict is not between hubris and common sense, but between absolute freedom and social responsibility. Milkman resolves the conflict when he leaps, flying toward his "brother," finding freedom in surrender to the air- not in acceptance of his situation as right or as eternal, but in acceptance of it as real. Morrison rewrites myth so that it carries the power of natural ties and psychic meaning but also speaks to a necessity in the social order.

She is therefore very concerned with the sources of myth, with mythos and personal myth. All the novels try to show the machinery of myth, the ways that meaning can modify experience. Morrison distinguishes between false myths that simply reduce, misinterpret, and distort reality-from Shirley Temple to the view of Sula as evil, from Smith's failed attempt at flight to Macon Dead's obsession with Pilate's hoard and true myths that spring from and illuminate reality. She insistently raises questions about mythic or symbolic readings of life, often showing even the best-intentioned attempts at meaning going astray. She shifts point of view so often in her fictions that the limitation of the individual view is obvious, and the attempt to make one view into the myth, one person into the hero, is seen for the reductive act that it is.[74] Milkman's early view of himself as the hero besieged by users is partly confirmed by the possessiveness of others; his mother realizes that "Her son had never been a person to her, a separate real person. He had always been a passion" (Song of Solomon, p. 131). But her need is explained by her personal history, and closely parallels Milkman's own selfishness. Thus the multiple perspectives not only qualify the myth by showing that any specific situation may be a different myth for each of the characters involved, since each sees himself at the center of it; they also make the myth's relevance clear by showing the same problems manifested in many cases, so that Milkman's solution is for all. As the myth emerges from the multiplicity of daily lives,

---

[74] Barbara Lounsberry and Grace Ann Hovet, "Principles of Perception in Ton Morrison's Sula," Black American Literature Forum, 8, 4 Winter 1979, 129.

finally the mythic hero's estimate of his own significance is confirmed both by his centrality in other views and by his parallels to other lives. Morrison sees quite clearly the danger of myth as existentialist tract abstracted from real situations, and she adapts the myth to the black historical context, reconciling freedom with facticity on both individual and collective levels. But there is another area in which she does not adapt the myth so completely-the area of gender. She is quite able to show black women as victims, as understanding narrators, or even as free in the sense of disconnection. But when the time comes to fulfill the myth, to show a hero who goes beyond the independence to engagement, she creates a male hero. Her own emphasis on the effect of particulars on meaning raises questions about that choice.

The use of a male hero does not, of course, necessarily imply the subjugation of women, and Morrison has the tools to correct the male slant. Her use of multiple perspectives has always allowed her to show a number of subjects as comments and variations on the central character. And her early alternation between male and female versions of the free character shows that she does not exclude women from subjective life or choice. She even offers explicit commentaries on Milkman's sexism - from his sister Lena, for example (Song of Solomon, p. 213-18)-and parallels to women characters that make his quest a surrogate for theirs. That might seem sufficient: this is Milkman's story, so the other characters, male and female, are secondary. He is everyone's surrogate. To some extent, women are displaced because of the problem Morrison has studied all along central versus peripheral perceptions and she makes it clear that concentration on his life is not a denial of others'. But, as with the racial question, mere admission of multiple perspectives does not correct the mythic bias: the structure of the male-centered myth carries certain implications about gender that Morrison could disarm only by changing the story. Because she does not, her version of the hero-tale seems to allow only men as potential heroes. Thus Milkman is a surrogate for women in a very different way than for men.

CHAPTER Four: From Silence to Voice: The Fight for Black Self Fulfillment in Morrison's Fiction

The epigraph to Song of Solomon is, "The fathers may soar and the children may know their names," and the heroic quest is as male as those words imply. Milkman seeks his forefathers; other than his mother, his female ancestors are nearly irrelevant. Even his grandmother Sing is barely defined, and her role in self-definition is questionable: she convinced the first Macon Dead to keep his grotesquely mistaken name, and her family changed their Indian names to "white" ones (Song of Solomon, p. 246-326). Milkman "proves" himself in struggle with other men, from his father and Guitar to the male community at Shalimar. They reward him by telling him about the heroes who are his ancestors and models, by taking him on an all-male hunting trip, by giving him the name of a compliant woman. And he ends in the heroic leap toward his male alter ego, Guitar. From first to last, women exist for Milkman, and in the plot development, as functions: mother, wife, lover, sister. That narrative concentration in itself weakens Morrison's careful multiple perspectives: we understand Hagar, for example, as a subject in the sense that we see her point of view, but ultimately her story is subsumed in Milkman's search for male models.

Indeed, all the models available to Milkman are male-all the characters, however flawed, who assert independence and become inspirations to the community. Milkman learns what both Macon Deads "say" to observers with their lives:

> See what you can do? Never mind you can't tell one letter from another, never mind you born a slave, never mind you lose your name, never mind your daddy dead, never mind nothing. Here, this here, is what a man can do if he puts his mind to it and his back in it. (Song of Solomon, p. 237)

There are no women who so focus individual and social awareness in Morrison. Most of the women are the "doll babies" of a dead culture. Those who learn to be free are led to the decision by a man, as Corinthians Dead is by Porter. The myth of heroism traced through the male line allows women to benefit but not to originate.

Milkman does have a female guide figure, his aunt Pilate, and she might further disarm the androcentric myth. She balances in her character the freedom and connection that Milkman must learn:

> ... when she realized what her situation in the world was and would probably always be she threw away every assumption she had learned and began at zero. . . . Then she tackled the problem of trying to decide how she wanted to live and what was valuable to her. . . . she knew there was nothing to fear. That plus her alien's compassion for troubled people ripened her and ... kept her just barely within the boundaries of the elaborately socialized world of black people. (Song of Solomon, p. 149-50)

Further, Pilate performs a social function by recognizing the same balance in others. At Hagar's funeral, Pilate sings and speaks to each mourner, "identifying Hagar, selecting her away from everybody else in the world who had died" (Song of Solomon, p. 322). She pulls the individual into the group and recognizes individuality at the same time. Later, she forces Milkman to face his responsibility for Hagar's death. Her own dying words are, " wish I'd a knowed more people. would of loved 'em all. If I'd a knowed more, would a loved more." That free commitment to others is just what Milkman learns; it is no wonder that he answers by wishing for a mate like Pilate, saying, "There's got to be at least one more woman like you" (Song of Solomon, p. 340).

In these ways, Pilate too is like the hero, and the importance of her role should not be underestimated. But the terms of her life keep her from really fitting the heroic mold. It is important to the mythic conception that the hero understand what he is, and Pilate does not quite reach that point. She does have the independence and compassion of the hero, but her sense of mission is oddly garbled. She misinterprets her dead father's messages, mistakes his bones for someone else's, cannot complete her "quest" without Milkman's explanation. She does the right thing, but from intuitive rather than conscious

knowledge. Thus, while she embodies Morrison's values, she is not the complete hero that Milkman is, for she lacks his recognition of meaning. By contrast to his final state, she seems intuitive, personal,
and rather passive.

This distinction is bothersome because it comes so close to the old active-man/passive-woman stereotype. It is quite clearly rooted in the myth structure. It seems fitting that Pilate dies and Milkman is left only with his imagination of a woman like her, for in the myth, woman gets meaning from or gives meaning to man; she does not both live and know the meaning as he does. Ton Morrison commented that *Song of Solomon* is about "dominion," and about "the way in which men do things or see things and relate to one another."[75] What the novel shows is that the "universal" myth of Western culture is just such a male story; and the parallels and discrepancies between Milkman and Pilate further show the difficulty of the heroic mode for a woman. By living out the myth, Milkman both finds his own identity- chooses and corrects the myth by free participation in it - and finds a connection to society, an "image" he can be to others that leads and inspires them, that is rooted both symbolically and historically in his community. Former heroes aid that combination of social role and selfhood by becoming suggestive but not confining models.

Thus Milkman attains a "definition" of the self that explodes the flat alienating images of the anti-mythic white society. But the woman seems to lack the possibilities available to the man. As a woman, Pilate cannot model herself totally on the male line, though all her meaning derives from it; and she has no true female line, only vague references to women defined by their mates. She acts out her duty to her father but she will never become him, as Milkman can, and so understand him from within. Beauvoir says that women "still dream through the dreams of

[75] Jane Bakerman, "The Seams Can't Show: An Interview with Ton Morrison," Black American Literature Forum, 7, 2 Summer 1978, 60.

men"[76]; that problem is illustrated perfectly in Pilate, the strong and independent woman who still waits in dreams for messages from her dead father, messages she misreads until corrected by his male descendant.

Morrison often shows women denying their mothers, in the matrophobia[77] Adrienne Rich as described as a rebellion against the imposed female image, an attempt to be "individuated and free."The problem with such a rejection is that it is a "splitting of the self,"[78] a denial of facticity that can produce a centerless hero like Sula. Milkman's break from his father is a parallel rebellion; but Milkman is finally reconciled with his forefathers, understanding their intent as well as their actions, grasping the mythic experience from inside and out, and he can do so because of the historical reconstruction that puts their acts in context. That sense of history is not available to women, and without it they have neither the models nor the contextual information to make themselves whole. Until women like Pilate recover their heroic female line, they cannot replace false images with true ones, and they will be left in a world, as Morrison shows, where mothers and daughters reject one another, female friendships are difficult to sustain, the dominating models of female selfhood are baby dolls and pinups, and even heroic women like Pilate cannot pass on their values to their children and grandchildren. Morrison's women can free themselves, like Sula, and be self-defined and disconnected; they can come close to a heroic life. But to serve the heroic integrative function, they need a new myth, in which women too are central, in which it is as important to know why Sing lived her life as why Macon did, and in which Sing's legacy to her descendants is also traced. Morrison has, quite consciously, depicted the male mode of heroism in Song of Solomon; it will be interesting to see whether and how she conceives of the female mode.

---

[76] Beauvoir, p. 161

[77] As Rich definition is the fear not of one's mother or of motherhood but of becoming one's mother.

[78] Adrienne Rich, Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and as Institution, New York: Bantam, 1977, p. 238.

CHAPTER Four: From Silence to Voice: The Fight for Black Self Fulfillment in Morrison's Fiction

Morrison's use of mythic structure, more and more overtly as her work develops, is central to her existentialist analysis. The heroic quest for identity achieved by conquest in and of the outer world embodies the human need for transcendence and self-definition; at the same time, the mythic sense of fate and necessity corresponds to the experience of facticity, both as irrevocable consequence and as concrete conditions for choice. Between those two poles; free heroism and determined role; move Morrison's characters. Further, mythic patterns are especially appropriate to her social concerns, since the mythic hero by his nature both embodies and transcends the values of his culture. These connections would be significant in most presentations of existential themes, but the special situations with which Morrison is concerned further complicate her use of myth. On the one hand, traditional myths claim to represent universal values and experiences; on the other, they clearly exclude or distort minority experiences by offering inappropriate or impossible models. This contradiction produces the special treatment of myth that Chester J. Fontenot, Jr., sees in black American fiction, turning on "the tension between the universal order and that produced by mankind for Black people." The myth of what may seem the "universal cosmos" in the majority view is so patently untrue to the black experience that from that perspective it is not mythic, but "linear", demanding denial of past and present reality in favor of "an obscure vision of some distant future"[79]. Meanwhile, the mythic consciousness adequate to the minority experience is in danger of becoming an imprisoning view of oppression as fated. Morrison, then, must capture universal aspirations without denying concrete reality, construct a myth that affirms community identity without accepting oppressive definitions.

IV.5 Womanism as a Strategy for Resistance

[79] Chester J. Fontenot, Jr., "Black Fiction: Apollo or Dionysus?" Twentieth Century Literature, 25, 1 (Spring 1979), 75-76.

CHAPTER Four: From Silence to Voice: The Fight for Black Self Fulfillment in Morrison's Fiction

Black women, in the task of cultural bearing, pass on to each successive generation the teachings of the womanline, in particular the values of the funk and the ancient proprieties. Individual women may become disconnected from the African American womanline and disavow the values it represents as a result of interpellation in specific hegemonic gender beliefs. Migration, assimilation, and slavery seriously impaired black women's ability to perform their female function as cultural bearer and hence weakened the womanline in two significant ways. Assimilation, the first theme considered, often results in black families, particularly among the middle class, seeking to emulate the hegemonic script of family relations in which the husband is dominant and the woman subservient and submissive. When African American women assume the traditional role of wife they forsake the funk and in particular the ancient properties of traditional black womanhood because women cannot be both ship and harbor in a patriarchal marriage that assumes women are inferior to men and assigns them exclusively to home and the reproductive realm. through a consideration of the character Ruth in *Song of Solomon,* it is explored how Ruth, schooled in the ways of assimilation, is socialized to be a traditional wife in a patriarchal marriage and how this in turn brings about the loss of the ancient properties and funk and results in Ruth's disempowerment. Consequently, Ruth cannot convey the teachings of the African American womanline.

Migration, the second theme considered, also causes a weakening or more specifically dissolution of the African American womanline. Migration to the urban cities of the North geographically separated women from the rural folk of the South; the place wherein the values of the African American motherline originated and where they are most fully and fastidiously sustained. While cultural bearing, the passing on of the teachings of the womanline, may take place in other times and places, Morrison's fiction attests to the difficulty of such a task, as is made evident with Hagar from *Song of Solomon*. Pilate performs cultural bearing with her nephew, the adult Milkman and, in so doing, becomes a mender of broken womanlines and

healer of those wounded by such breakages. Pilate seeks to impart the teachings of the womanline to her granddaughter, Hagar, but she cannot save Hagar as she did Milkman. In the North, the womanline has been worn thin, stretched across time and distance.

Slavery, the final historical event considered, ruptured, as did migration, the African American womanline by separating families through sale. As is made apparent in *Beloved,* slavery, more than any other cultural institution or historical event, damaged the African American womanline by denying African people their humanity and history. In her fifth novel Morrison seeks to symbolize this loss in the character of Beloved and to render it psychologically manifest through the character of Sethe. Morrison's aim here, as with the themes of migration and assimilation, is to render explicit the historical causes of womanline rupture and disruption and to portray the devastating consequence of such for African American people.

Michael Awkward argues that "[Morrison] dissects, deconstructs, if you will, the bourgeois myths of ideal family life. Through her deconstruction, she exposes each individual element of the myth as not only deceptively inaccurate in general, but also wholly inapplicable to Afro-American life" (McKay 1988: 59). But Morrison does more than document the harm that comes with measuring oneself against an ideal you cannot achieve; she also shows the ideal to be an illusion: all is not happy in that green and white house of the primer in *The Bluest Eye*.

Awkward argues that the "emotional estrangement of the primer family members implies that theirs is solely a surface contentment. . . . [The family is] . . . made up of rigid, emotionless figures incapable of deep feeling" (59). Indeed, no one will play with Jane, not the mother, father, nor the cat or dog. Jane must go outside this so-called perfect family to find companionship in a friend who, significantly, is not named. Neither the mother nor the father speaks to Jane when the request to play is made to them. Although the text says they are "very happy," the grammatical imperative that instructs the mother, "Laugh, Mother, laugh," and the father, "Smile, Father, smile," undermines the assertion of happiness. The house is introduced

before the family, suggesting that property is more important than relationships. As Shelly Wong observes, with the exception of Jane, all the characters "maintain [themselves] in a self-enclosed unity. . . . The short, clipped sentences accentuate their differences." Wong continues, "the child's first lesson in cultural literacy teaches the primacy of the singular and the discrete. The lesson works against memory and history" (471–72).

Morrison deconstructs what Wong calls "the metaphysics of isolate unity" through her manipulation of the grammar and structure of the primer. Thus, Morrison does more than critique the bourgeois myth of the ideal family as inappropriate for and inapplicable to African Americans; she also deconstructs the ideal itself to show that it is fraudulent. The Dick and Jane family are not as happy as the primer purports them to be.

A central theme in Morrison's fiction is the emotional barrenness that results when African Americans attempt to realize the illusionary white bourgeois family. In *The Bluest Eye* Geraldine represents those who model themselves on the white family:

> They go to land-grant colleges, normal schools, and learn how to do the white man's work with refinement: home economics to prepare his food; teacher education to instruct black children in obedience; music to soothe the weary master and entertain his blunted soul. Here they learn the rest of the lesson begun in those soft houses with porch swings and bleeding hearts: how to behave. The careful development of thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners. In short, how to get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions. (68)

Funkiness, as Elliot Butler-Evans comments, "signifies not merely some primal African-American essence but the feminine ('nature,' 'passion,' and 'human emotions'). These traits are encoded in our society as within the domain of the feminine, and represent what is being repressed" (71). As the text describes how Geraldine represses this funk it effaces the character

of Geraldine herself. Geraldine is seen from a male point of view: "Certain men watch them [these type of women]." The woman is thus, as Butler-Evans notes, "erased from the text, or is alternately present and absent" (72). This strategy of representation signifies the self-erasure that happens when black women forsake the funk and structure feminine subjectivity on the white model.

As noted by many critics, Geraldine signifies a denial of blackness. In *Crimes of Innocence in the Fiction of Ton Morrison* (1989), Terry Otten writes, "[Geraldine] represents the sexless, pure, acceptable 'colored' woman who deny their blackness in order to maintain her place in society" (15). Funkiness signifies in Morrison's writing traditional black cultural identity and in particular the ancient properties of traditional black womanhood. Geraldine's "get[ting] rid of the funkiness" (68) thus achieves the repression of both her femaleness and blackness.

Butler-Evans argues that Geraldine's story of the suppression of the sexual/ sensual self is part of a larger textual narrative of feminine desire. According to Butler-Evans, the central theme of the novel, namely the conflict between the dominant ideology as represented by the primer, and the lived experiences of the Breedloves, is continuously decentered by what may be called the discourse of feminine desire. He writes: "These dominant narrative themes . . . are subverted by embedded narratives that contribute to the overall effect of the book and simultaneously indicate a departure from the novel's primary focus. . . . [The embedded narratives] disrupt the textual dominant emphasis by introducing the problem of feminine desire" (68). Butler-Evans suggests that feminine desire originates not from outside the competing cultural discourses as disruption/ subversion, but originates from inside it. Feminine desire is structured and negotiated from *within* that ideological struggle.

According to Susan Willis, Morrison "translates the loss of history and culture into sexual terms and demonstrates the connection between bourgeois society and repression" (Gates 1984:

266). In Morrison's work, women such as Geraldine, who are more or less successfully assimilated into the dominant bourgeois culture, are the most alienated from their sexual selves. Pauline comes to lose the colors of her rainbow, her funkiness, when she takes on the identity of the Fishers' domestic and becomes their Polly. Funkiness is lost when girls are socialized into the dominant patriarchal white supremist culture, when they seek to become "male" and "white" identified women. The narrative of desire Butler-Evans identifies in the text is thus woven from the larger script of the white bourgeois family as exemplified in the primer. To be the wife described in the primer, women— whether white or black—must fulfill the ideological role requirements of the wife. The egalitarian marriages that researchers argue black women have traditionally experienced are disrupted when the black couple attempts to emulate the male dominance of white nuclear family structure. In Morrison's writing, funkiness exists only in female households or in egalitarian marriages. In female households and egalitarian marriages, black women, not being solely wives, are able to be the women of funk and the ancient properties, and perform the important female function of cultural bearing.

More than any other character in Morrison's fiction, Ruth Dead in *Song of Solomon* presents an account of how girls, schooled in the ways of assimilation, are prepared for patriarchal wifedom and prevented from being the culture bearers of the African American womanline. Ruth, rendered susceptible to patriarchal socialization because of her motherless status, is programmed to be a wife through the specific socialization practices of what theorist Miriam Johnson has termed the subject identity of "Daddy's Girl." In *Strong Mothers, Weak Wives* (1990) Johnson argues that women's secondary status originates from their heterosexual identity as wives of men. "It is the wife role," writes Johnson, "and not
the mother's role that organizes women's secondary status" (6). The relationship of father and daughter, Johnson asserts, "trains daughters to be wives who are expected to be secondary to their husbands" (8). Johnson argues that fathers often romanticize the father-daughter

relationship and interact with their daughter as a lover would. Fathers feminize their daughters: daddies teach their girls to be passive, pleasing, and pretty for men. In Johnson's words, "[The father-daughter relationship] reproduce[s] in daughters a disposition to please men in a relationship in which the male dominates" (184). In other words, "daddy's girls are in training to be wives" (184). Because daddy's girls are trained and rewarded for pleasing and playing up to men, they grow up to be male-defined and male-orientated women. In most so-called normal, that is, male-dominant families, what is experienced is psychological incest. Johnson writes: "The incest . . . is psychological, not overtly sexual. The father takes his daughter over. She looks up to him because he is her father. He is the king and she is the princess. It is all OK because the male is dominant in 'normal' adult heterosexual relations" (173).

Ruth describes herself as "certainly my daddy's daughter" (67) and Dr. Foster's recollections suggest, in Johnson's terms, that their relationship was, at the very least, psychologically incestuous:

> Fond as he [Dr. Foster] was of his only child, useful as she was in his house since his wife had died, lately he had begun to chafe under her devotion. Her steady beam of love was unsettling, and she had never dropped those expressions of affection that had been so lovable in her childhood. The good-night kiss was itself a masterpiece of slow-wittedness on her part and discomfort on his. At sixteen, she still insisted on having him come to her at night, sit on her bed, exchange a few pleasantries, and plant a kiss on her lips. Perhaps it was the loud silence of his dead wife, perhaps it was Ruth's disturbing resemblance to her mother. More probably it was the ecstasy that always seemed to be shining in Ruth's face when he bent to kiss her—an ecstasy he felt inappropriate to the occasion. (23)

Macon is convinced that Ruth and Dr. Foster's relationship had a sexual element to it, but the text is unclear on that point. However, Ruth's love for her father and his love for her expressed itself in a highly romanticized narrative. Ruth tells her son: " didn't think I'd ever need a friend

because had him. was small, but he was big. The only person who ever really cared whether lived or died" (124). Ruth, as Jill Matus observes, "takes her identity entirely from her position in relation to a powerful and respected father. . . . [She] is bred to service and dependency" (82). Ruth, in the words of the text, is "pressed small" by her father (124). Having been "pressed small" by her father, Ruth is well prepared to assume a subordinate wife role in her marriage to Macon.

Dr. Foster is a man who "didn't give a damn about [Negroes]" and when he delivered his own daughter's children "all he was interested in was the color of their skin" (71). Ruth is raised, as were Geraldine in *The Bluest Eye* and Helen in *Sula,* to embrace the values of the dominant bourgeois culture. Such assimilation causes a rupture of the womanline and the loss of the ancient properties and funk. This, compounded with her socialization as a daddy's girl, prepares Ruth for her subordinate position as wife in a patriarchal family structure. The wife role in turn, because it precludes black women's traditional role
of cultural bearer, further augments assimilation and the loss of the funk and the ancient properties.

Ruth, like most of Morrison's women characters, is motherless. The frequency of maternal deaths in Morrison, functions as a metaphor to symbolize the prevalence of womanline disconnections and disruptions and their damaging consequences, particularly for women. At the level of the individual character, being motherless means that the daughter is far more vulnerable to the hurts of a racist and sexist culture, because she has not received the cultural bearing that would give her a strong and proud selfhood. Pauline and certainly Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* are rendered more susceptible to the seductions of the beauty myth because they do not have a mother's love or a motherline to shield them; likewise the novel *Jazz* suggests that Violet would not have been so captivated by the tales of Golden Boy or held hostage by "the tricky blond boy inside her head" (211) had her mother lived. This vulnerability is particularly acute for

daughters, such as Ruth, who are not only motherless but who, as a result, are raised as daddy's girls and socialized to be wives.

Women's lack of autonomy, according to Johnson, originates from the daughter's psychological dependency on her father as a male-oriented daddy's girl. "If daddy's girls are to gain their independence," Johnson writes, "they need to construct an identity as the daughters of strong mothers as well" (184). Johnson contends that the mother-daughter relationship is the key to overcoming women's psychological inauthenticity as daddy's girls, and by implication women's social oppression in patriarchy. Thus, the daughter achieves strong selfhood as a woman not through greater involvement with the father, but through a heightened identification with the mother.[80] This identification empowers the daughter in two ways: first, it allows her to step outside her oppressive daddy's girl role; and second, it allows her to identify with an adult woman's strength rather than her weakness. In Johnson's view, women are strong as mothers but made weak as wives. In identifying with her mother as mother the daughter may construct a strong female identity outside of the passive heterosexual one prepared for her by her father and society at large.

Johnson's insights here have particular relevance for motherless daughters in Morrison. While maternal identification is beneficial for all daughters; allowing, as it does, daughters to withstand daddy's girl socialization and hence attain autonomy and authenticity as women; it is crucial for African American daughters. Cultural bearing from the womanline in Morrison is the way by which the ancient properties and the funk; that which empowers black women; are passed on generationally. And it is precisely the ancient properties and the funk, acquired through womanline teachings, that immunizes black women from the disempowerment of the

[80] Johnson writes: In my view the first step might be for women to rethink their relationship with their own mothers. Until women can understand and respect themselves as women without men, bringing men in, still unreconstructed, can hardly be of help. The question of women's own self-definition seems logically prior to the further inclusion of men. (66)

wife role. Ruth, because she is motherless and her womanline is severed, is at risk and easy prey for daddy's girl socialization and "wifely" subservience.

Samuels and Hudson Weems write of Ruth: "The fundamental bond between mother and daughter that Morrison in her work insists is necessary is lacking here. She has not had the luxury of blossoming with her mother's milk; her growth is thus artificial. . . . Although she receives love from her father, Ruth appears psychologically damaged and incomplete" (55). Ruth is thus one of the many motherless daughters in Morrison's fiction who are psychologically scarred by the loss of the mother and are disconnected from their motherline. With Ruth the father does not, as Pilate's father did, take on a nurturing maternal role; rather, Dr. Foster, as the text tells us, is "fond" of his daughter, whom he describes as "useful . . . in the house" (23). The father and daughter relationship of Ruth and Dr. Foster is also, as we have seen, highly problematic in its rendering of the daughter as a daddy's-girl soon to be submissive-wife. Johnson emphasizes that a positive daughter-mother identification is the foundation for a strong female-defined identity and the key to overcoming women's psychological inauthenticity as daddy's girls and women's social oppression in patriarchy. Had Ruth had a mother she may have been able to develop a strong female-defined self which would have, in turn, empowered her to resist her socialization as a daddy's-girl soon to be submissive-wife. However, Ruth is offered a surrogate mother with Pilate; a woman who embodies the very funk and ancient properties that would bestow upon Ruth the empowering ancient proprieties and funk denied to her in the wife role. While Ruth does allow Pilate to midwife the conception and birth of her son, she does not allow the same for her own rebirth. Forbidden by her husband to see Pilate, Ruth ultimately disavows Pilate's othermothering and disclaims the values of the ancient properties and funk that Pilate offers to her. This repudiation is symbolically marked by Ruth's refusal to take the peach that Pilate offers her on two separate occasions (132, 139). The peach, with its juice and seed, signifies both the feminine and the masculine, the traditional construct of black womanhood as

both ship and harbor. Pilate's offering of the fruit and Ruth's rejection metaphorically represents Pilate's connection to her womanline and Ruth's separation from it.

Pilate and Ruth, as many critics have observed, function as foils of one another. In one instance the narrator comments,

> They were so different, these two women. One black, the other lemony. One corseted, the other buck naked under her dress. One well read but ill traveled. The other had read only a geography book, but had been from one end of the country to another. One wholly dependent on money for life, the other indifferent to it. (139)

Ruth describes herself as a "small woman" (123) while her son Milkman characterizes her "as a frail woman content to do tiny things; to grow and cultivate small life that would not hurt her if it died" (64). Later, contemplating his feelings for his mother, he remarks that "[s]he was too insubstantial, too shadowy for love. But it was her vaporishness that made her more needful of defense" (75). Pilate, in contrast, is described by Milkman when he first meets her as "sitting wide legged. . . . [S]he was all angles . . . knees, mostly, and elbows. One foot pointed east, and one pointed west" (36). And later, when Pilate stood up, Milkman, the text tells us, "all but gasped. She was as tall as his father, head and shoulders taller than himself " (38). Critic Karen Carmean elaborates:

> In direct contrast to Pilate, a fully independent woman by the time she becomes sixteen, Ruth remains a child. Ruth's helplessness, domestic ineptitude, and blandness develop to protect her from the men in her life, who consider her only in terms of her usefulness to them. Throughout the novel, Ruth remains a nebulous figure, largely content to assert her individuality in apparently insignificant ways as opposed to Pilate's gigantic presence. (57)

The dissimilarity in the women's presence and stature is further articulated in their contrasting propensities of voice and in particular laughter. Pilate is remembered as a singing woman; Ruth

as a silent one. Less acknowledged, however, are their differences with respect to laughter. Milkman, describing "the first time in his life he remembered being completely happy" reflects: "he was surrounded by women who seemed to enjoy him and who laughed out loud" (47). Later, speaking to Guitar about the dream he had about his mother, he says, "I've never in my whole life heard my mother laugh. She smiles sometimes, even makes a little sound. But don't believe she has ever laughed out loud" (194). "Laughter," Morrison has remarked, "is a way of taking the reins into your own hands" (Ross 1995: C1). Violet in *Jazz,* reflecting upon the comfort and insight she obtained through laughter comments, "[She] learned then what she had forgotten until this moment: that laughter is serious. More complicated, more serious than tears" (113).

These differences in voice, presence, and stature originate from and signify the women's opposing life views or philosophies. Pilate is a woman who fully and completely embraces the ancestral memory, ancient properties, and funk of the womanline while Ruth, disconnected from her womanline and schooled as a daddy's girl in the ways of assimilation, has disavowed the traditions of her forebears. Their contrasting life values give rise to and are represented in opposing womanhood practices and philosophies.

Womanhood, according to Morrison's female philosophy, means to assort in the ways of assimilation; while womaning, for Morrison, signifies womanin by way of the values; funk, ancient properties, and ancestral memory; of the womanline. *Song of Solomon* presents Pilate as an outlaw of the institution of womanhood. Pilate, like Hannah and Eva in *Sula,* resists the feminine script of womanhood that demands women mother children in a nuclear family in which the mother is subservient/inferior to the husband; economically, psychologically, and so forth. Pilate also, as did Eva and Hannah, refuses the patriarchal dictates of "good" womanhood, namely, that women are to be respectable, moral, chaste, passive, obedient, controlled, altruistic, selfless, and domestic. In defiance of these patriarchal imperatives, Pilate assorts in accordance with the values of the funk and the ancient properties (29). Later, Ruth describes Pilate's house

as "a haven . . . an inn, a safe harbor" (135); a particularly revealing image given the centrality of the concepts of inn and harbor in Morrison' s femele standpoint theory of the ancient proprieties.

Macon's description of the "effortless beauty of the women singing in the candlelight" (30) is contrasted to his own Dead household, "his wife's narrow unyielding back; his daughters, boiled dry from years of yearning; his son to who he could speak only if his words held some command or criticism. . . .There was no music there" (28–29).

In contrast to Pilate, Ruth is characterized as the "good" woman of feminine ideology. And while she may lack the requisite culinary ability of good motherhood, Ruth, in every other way, performs the quiet, obedient, passive, motherhood role well. Ruth is also, though such is seldom acknowledged by critics, a battered wife who is abused by her husband in every manner possible: sexually, emotionally, and physically. The text tells us that "his wife, Ruth, began her days stunned into stillness by her husband's contempt and ended them wholly animated by it" (10–11). Milkman knocked his father "into the radiator" to stop him, in the words of the text "[from] smash[ing] his fist into [his mother's] jaw" (67). As the hegemonic script of female womanhood requires the subservience Ruth enacts and normalizes the violence she experiences. Ruth's love for her son is described as a "possessive love" (79) and later when Pilate interrupts Ruth and Hagar's quarrelling about Milkman she says, "[You] talkin 'bout a man like he was a house or needed one. He ain't a house, he's a man, and whatever he need, don't none of you got it" (138). In contrast to Ruth's possessive love, Pilate's mothering is presented as expansive and emancipatory.

Pilate engages in the African American custom of womaning. "Nurturing children in black extended family networks," writes Patricia Hill Collins, "stimulates a more generalized ethics of caring and personal accountability among African-American women who often feel accountable to all the Black

community's children" (1991: 129). The potion Pilate prepares enables Ruth to become pregnant with Milkman, and Pilate's voodoo practices and warning to Macon keep Milkman alive in the womb. Ruth's labor begins outside of Mercy Hospital where Pilate is singing the Song of Solomon; and Pilate refers to Milkman as Hagar's brother. Pilate is also, as her name phonetically signifies, the pilot of Milkman's quest. Like Connie in *Paradise,* Pilate is a healer. Her healing, however, is not only physical or emotional; it is most powerfully a spiritual healing. Finally, Pilate engages in what was described in the introduction as communal mothering; a concern and caring for people who are spiritually troubled. Pilate heals Milkman by returning him to his community and history. Trudier Harris writes: "Pilate can do for Milkman what no one in *The Bluest Eye* could do for Pecola Breedlove and Lorain, Ohio. Not only does she sing the lore of her culture, she lives it as well" (115). And upon her death, Pilate's only regret is that " wished I'd a knowed more people. would of loved 'em all. If I'd a knowed more, would a loved more" (340).

Through the character Pilate, *Song of Solomon* celebrates the redemptive powers of womaning from the womanline or mothering against motherhood. In particular, Pilate, in imparting the teachings of the womanline to her nephew Milkman, mends broken womanlines and heals those wounded by such breakages. However, as various critics have pointed out, the power of such restorative love is qualified or at the very least problematized by Pilate's inability to save her own granddaughter from the destructiveness of the consumerist culture in which she lives. Wendy Harding and Jacky Martin write of Pilate's household: "Although it offers an attractive option to the oppressiveness and sterility of conventional models, Pilate's way of life does not represent a lasting alternative" (73). Pilate, they continue "protects her family as a big tree protects small ones, but she allows them to remain weak" (74). Stephanie Demetrakopoulos writes: "[M]issing in her life are male relatives to help build her animus" (1987: 97). Hagar, she continues "has been terribly 'over-mothered'" (98). Samuels and Hudson-Weems also argue that

"[t]o some degree . . . they are responsible for Hagar's inability to accept Milkman's rejection. She was not accustomed to being told no. . . . We may," they write, "conclude in the end that such untrammelled maternal love is as destructive as Macon's blind materialism" (75).

These critics argue that too much womaning is what occasions Hagar's vulnerability to Milkman. This interpretation resembles the woman-blaming stance found in many of the psychoanalytic approaches to Morrison's literature. However, the text refuses this reading:

> Neither Pilate nor Reba knew that Hagar was not like them. Not strong enough, like Pilate, nor simple enough, like Reba, to make up her life as they had. She needed what most colored girls needed: *a chorus of mamas, grandmamas, aunts, cousins, sisters, neighbours, Sundays school teachers, best girl friends,* and what all to give her the strength life demanded of her—and the humor with which to live it. (311, emphasis added)

Here it was not male absence but a scarcity of womaning that rendered Hagar susceptible to the hegemonic discourses of romantic love and female beauty. "Modern urban and industrialized life," writes Ao Mori, relegate "black women to the margin. Since only those women who can locate the basis of their strength in their foremothers can pass on the knowledge of survival to daughters, the absence of mothers unavoidably brings about a weakening of the next generation" (104). This absence of othermothers, which limits and weakens the cultural bearing function, is a consequence of migration to a Northern urban environment.

Terry Otten writes that *Song of Solomon* shifts from a rural setting, emphasizing the pronounced racial dislocation of blacks transported from a nature-bound community to the more materialistic dominance of white urban culture" (45). Had Hagar grown to maturity in a rural village, she would indeed have been raised among a community of black women who would have instilled in her pride for her black female self. In the rural South, Hagar would have been less susceptible to what Susan Willis calls, in " Shop Therefore Am," "the mutila[tion] [of]

black personhood [through] commodity consumption" (179). Pilate, Reba, and Hagar, as Karla Holloway observes, "gain strength from each other" and "fiercely protect their solidarity." "Insulated in Pilate's fertile home," Holloway continues, "their strength is intact." Only one person is able, in Holloway's words, "to break . . . their unit" (1987: 111). That person is, of course, Milkman. Holloway argues that Milkman was able to gain entry into their circle because of his "feminine potentia," the result of his being breastfed so long. If blame is to be laid it must rest principally with Milkman and the consumerist culture in which Hagar lived.

Morrison has commented that the writing of *Song of Solomon* had much to do with the death of her father: "For the first time was writing a book in which the central stage was occupied by men, and which had something to do with my loss . . . of a man (my father) and the world that disappeared with him." (1987: 123). This explains Morrison's preoccupation in the novel with men. In this text, unlike any of her others, Morrison stresses the importance of fathers for the psychological well-being of children. But in *Song of Solomon* fathers are not scripted as the saviors of daughters, rescuing them from the mother. Rather, fathers are seen as an integral part of the larger nurturant community. Their role is that of a communal othermother. In an interview with Samuels and Hudson-Weems, Morrison commented on the importance of Pilate's father in her upbringing: "Pilate had 12 years with her father and a meaningful relationship with brother and father. Her daughter had less, thedaughter's daughter had none. So her relationship to men was curious and destructive, possessive . . . the stuff that Pilate has is not transmitted by DNA" (75). For Morrison, as Hudson-Weems and Samuels argue, "there must be shared responsibility, for the child to begin to approach wholeness" (75). Morrison goes on to emphasize:

> [Pilate's intimate relationship with her father and brother during those twelve years] gave her a ferocity and some complete quality. Hagar had even less and was even more frail. It's that world of women without men. But in fact a woman is strongest when some of her

> sensibilities are formed by men at an early, certainly at an important age. It's absolutely necessary that it be there, and the farther away you get from that, the possibility of distortion is greater. By the same token, Milkman is in a male macho world and can't fly, isn't human, isn't complete until he realizes the impact that women have made on his life. It's really a balance between classical male and female forces that produces, perhaps, a kind of complete person. (106–107)

In her interview with Nellie McKay (1983), Morrison explained that

> Hagar does not have what Pilate had, which was a dozen years of a nurturing, good relationship with men. Pilate had a father, and a she had a brother, who loved her very much, and she could use that knowledge of that love for her life. Her daughter Reba had less of that, but she certainly has at least perfunctory adoration or love of men which she does not put to very good use. Hagar has even less because of the absence of any relationships with men in her life. She is weaker. . . . Strength of character is not something one can give another. It is not genetically transferred. (Taylor- Guthrie 1994: 144)

Rather, Morrison is speaking from a specific African American belief best summed up in the African proverb: "It takes a village to raise a child." Communal or surrogate womaning is central both to African

American culture and Morrison's own views on the best way to parent children.

Thus, while Pilate's mother died in childbirth, Pilate was not an unmothered daughter, as was Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*. Unlike Ruth, Pilate was nurtured by a loving and devoted father. Pilate also loved and was loved by the farm animals, and thus experienced nurturance and learned how to nurture (150). Throughout the text, Pilate is described as smelling like a forest and looking like a tree. "Pilate is," as Samuels and Hudson-Weems observe, "literally the daughter of Nature: motherless, she was nurtured by the forest during her childhood" (62). The

text also links Pilate to Singing Bird, the mother who died before she herself was born. Sing is the name of Pilate's mother, and by singing people know Pilate. The mother's last name was Bird and when Pilate dies we are told that birds are awakened by Milkman's song and "[t]wo of the birds circled round them. One dived into the new grave and scooped something shiny in its beak before it flew away" (340). In contrast, the nurtured self of Macon dies when his own father is killed. Just as Cholly became dangerously free when he was rejected by his father, so Macon becomes obsessively materialistic when his father is killed defending his property. Macon Sr. was, Valerie Smith writes, "an American Adam, a farmer who loved the land and worked it profitably. Moving North cost
Macon, Jr. some of the talent he had inherited from his father: still able to manipulate cold cash, he lost his father's organic connection to the soil" (282). Both Cholly and Macon lose their fathers at the onset of adolescence when they are assuming a masculine identity; their loss causes them to sever their connection
to their own womanline.

Hagar's death must then be attributed to a rupture of the womanline as a result of the family's migration to the North. Moreover, once North there are not enough othermothers; women and men; to pass on the teachings of the womanline to the next generation, in particular the values of the funk, ancestral memory, and the ancient properties. While Pilate does her best, she cannot mend the womanline for her granddaughter or heal the vulnerabilities occasioned by the breakage. Pilate, as Philip Page observes, "[while she was able to] form her own successful identity, despite the violent break-up of her own family, she is unable to transmit her strengths to her daughter and granddaughter" (85). Consequently, Hagar, having no womanline and othermothers to immunize her, is rendered susceptible to the ills of assimilation.

Beloved, a novel of slavery and its aftermath, shows that slavery, more than any other cultural institution, severed the African American womanline by separating families through sale

and by commodifying African Americans as property, robbing them of their subjectivity and history. With the characters Ruth and Hagar in *Song of Solomon,* Morrison details how assimilation, in the instance of Ruth, and migration, in the case of Hagar, rupture the womanline. While her first four novels may be read as sociological exposés of the causes and consequences for individual women, with *Beloved* Morrison reflects upon the representation of this loss and considers how this loss, in turn, becomes psychologically manifest. The historical trauma of womanline loss is represented through the character of Beloved while the psychological trauma of this loss is conveyed through the character Sethe.

The characterization of Beloved as a flesh and blood personification of womanhood, or more appropriately, given that she is a spirit, a "beyond-the grave" reincarnation of it, is developed and sustained throughout the text. However, the metaphorical dimension of the Beloved character has been largely missed by readers of the text. Beloved is analyzed as if she were a real character rather than the ghost or the metaphor that she is. Beloved's relationship with her mother, in turn, is analyzed as an actual mother-daughter relationship. Consequently, most critics read this relationship as highly problematic if not pathological.[81] According to psychoanalytic interpretation, Sethe and Beloved are trapped in the pre-Oedipal mother-daughter symbiosis where differentiation between self and other is not possible: Sethe overidentifies with her daughter and does not allow her psychic individuation.

The portrayal of Sethe and Beloved's relationship in the final section of the novel seems to support the psychoanalytic conclusion that the mother-daughter bond is indeed dangerous, devouring, and destructive. Beloved says: " am not separate from her there is no place where

[81] Barbara Offutt Mathieson "The Bonds of Love and the Boundaries of Self in Ton Morrison's *Beloved*"; Jean Wyatt, "Giving Body to the Word: The Maternal Symbolic in Ton Morrison's *Beloved*"; Jennifer Fitzgerald, "Selfhood and Community: Psychoanalysis and Discourse in *Beloved,*" in *Ton Morrison,* ed. Linden Peach (New York: St. Martins, 1995), 110–27; Jean Walton, "Re-Placing Race in (White) Psychoanalytic Discourse: Founding Narratives of Feminism."

stop" (210), and Sethe: "You are my face; am you" (216). The mother and daughter are, as the text tells us, "locked in a love that wore everybody out" (243).

The psychoanalytic approach posits too literal a reading of Sethe and Beloved's relationship. Beloved is not a "real" human being but the ghostly reincarnation of Sethe's murdered baby girl and more importantly a symbolic representation of the broken womanline the "sixty-million and more" to whom the book is dedicated. She is the flesh and blood embodiment of the African American womanline, signifying both its rupture and its healing.

In a reversal of roles, the daughter, Beloved, engages the mother, Sethe, in rememory, a journey into self and back through time. Beloved prompts Sethe to remember all that she was resolved to forget. Similar to Milkman in *Song of Solomon,* who recovers his history and discovers his identity through a spiritual return home to the place of his ancestors, Sethe, in *Beloved,* learns to live with the past and to accept herself through a psychic journey of remembering. And it is the daughter who enables the mother to remember, accept, and forgive. Thus, the mother-daughter relationship both represents and achieves an identification with, and an acceptance of, the past. Thus, in and through her relationship with Beloved, the embodiment of the African American womanhood, Sethe finds her own lost womanine.

The female heritage metaphorically represented by Beloved is a radical reclamation of the mother and daughter bond that was denied and severed under slavery. Reconnecting Sethe to her own mother, and embodying the murdered baby, the one of the future, and the "sixty million and more," those of the past, Beloved emerges as Morrison's most powerful representation of the African American womanline.

As Beloved represents the African American womanhood; both its historical rupture in slavery and its repair through mother-daughter connection; the character Sethe represents the psychological trauma of womanline rupture. In her study of matrilineal heritage in African American women's writing, Missy Dehn Kubitschek explores the duality of Sethe's subjectivity.

Sethe is both mother and daughter: she occupies that "double position" of mother-daughter described by Marianne Hirsch.[82] Kubitschek emphasizes that Sethe's female identity is inseparable from her identity as daughter. Significantly, Sethe identifies and articulates this longing to be a daughter in communication with her own daughter, Beloved:

> My plan was to take us all to the other side where my own ma'am is. They stopped me from getting us there, but they didn't stop you from getting here. Ha ha. You came right on back like a good girl, like a daughter which is what wanted to be and would have been if my ma'am had been able to get out of the rice long enough before they hanged her and let me be one. (203)

This yearning to be a daughter originates from Sethe's own displaced identity. Her self has no familial or ancestral grounding. Sethe longs to have a historical and communal identity, to fulfil the role of daughter described in *Tar Baby:* "I'm just saying what a daughter is. A daughter is a woman that cares about where she come from and takes care of them that took care of her" (281). Kubitschek emphasizes that it is "this unsatisfied hunger in Sethe [which] conditions her own extremely possessive definition of womahood" (171).

Sethe realizes that mothers bequeath more than practical advice to their daughters. In loving her daughter, the mother enables the daughter to love when she herself becomes a mother; motherlove fosters self-love. Mothering is thus essential for the emotional well-being of children. To be a loving mother, a woman must first be loved as a daughter. As Kubitschek concludes: "Only by remembering one's history as a loved daughter . . . and excavating history for empowering female role models can one become a complete woman" (170).

IV.6 Conclusion

[82] hooks bell, "Homeplace: A Site of Resistance." *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, Boston: South End, 1990, p.41–49.

CHAPTER Four: From Silence to Voice: The Fight for Black Self Fulfillment in Morrison's Fiction

Mostly black female characters in Morrison's fiction experience humiliation and suffer an acute isolation in a white racist society that has marginalized them. They are considered outcasts who do not enjoy any class and racial privilege and are often silenced by the hostile gaze of others. Morrison defines female self as one in process that is not restricted and imprisoned by rigid social and cultural boundaries but constantly becoming. In Beloved Morrison critiques the ways language has been used to justify violence against black women. She destroys different stereotypes and creates various black female characters that reject conventional and self-hating ways of being. Similarly she rewrites and explores the hidden stories of pain and degradation. She creates the strong black female characters that reject the dominant racist standards of being.

The aspects of the myth in Song of Solomon cause the female characters to change for the better. Morrison uses the myth and African traditions as an embodiment of the past that female characters must face in order to grow. By learning of and connecting to their pasts through these magic means, the female characters are able to understand who they are and the importance of their pasts. An understanding of their heritage is vital to these women's identity and their ability to function in their communities. Myth allows the black women to become spiritually connected their heritage, which allows them to become a member of their communities and move past their painful memories.

General Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have studied the black identities of African women in the United States a, through the selection of two novels by the contemporary African American writer Toni Morrison. My study has attempted to demonstrate the effect of religion and spirituality that African American women deployed to assert their rootedness and belonging in African and American cultural and literary landscapes. My examination has taken the black feminist approach which asserts that black women are inherently valuable.

I have argued that Black women often show their identity through parading over their ancestral traditions and spiritual rituals. Through their novels they portray some potential of women to struggle against the oppressive social and political realities of black female life, and although the texts themselves often do not affirm it, they show the creative potential and effect of spirituality in some aspect of individual characters' lives or the life of the community as part of the struggle. Due to the importance of religion to black people and culture, most black writers substantively portray African American religious vision and concomitant African and Western religiocosmic influences. Directly or indirectly novels explore the agency of God in life, but African American women writers often write in exposition to the religious perspective and locate the sacred and spiritual side in the womanist self identity that engages in personal, individual relationships. These depictions portray traditional, womanist religious vision as the characters' or the black community's view of the writer's or the text's. In other cases, texts imply such vision because they reveal the sacred, spiritual, and supernatural, leaving open the possibility that faith in a power beyond the mundane and the rational mind is all that there can be. Reflecting Black female cultural needs and investment from a more controversial perspective related to African tradition, Black women writers also construct alternative theological, spiritual, and supernatural perspectives against oppression and racism. In these narratives, religious vision invests the Black

female writers in the cultural tradition that they depict, producing a variety of critical treatments that confess the writers' ability to comply their characters' cultural, religious and spiritual belief.

Thus, in *Song of Solomon,* spirituality undoubtedly proves itself to be a structure of power within which the black female characters attempt to achieve their sense of selfhood. The process of negotiating the antithetical representation in which Morrison classifies her characters as either dead but present spiritual or alive appears to be analytically fruitful in the way it cunningly demonstrates the African myth and the great influence it has over the female experiences.

Morrison's *Song of Solomon* presents a rich examination of the strength of the black female character Pilate who maintains a distinctive identity all along, expressing herself. Pilate keeps her own literal and figurative voice for two reasons. First, she has a sense of personal identity that does not depend on men or society for validation. Second, like most African Americans of her era, Pilate lacks a documented, societally recognized history; so she chronicles her own history instead. As she journeys around the country, she collects talismans to carry with her rocks, thread, a geography book (144–145). Most importantly, she always wears her name. Written on a scrap of paper by her father, it travels with her inside her earring, which itself is a small brass snuffbox belonging to her mother (168). This tangible reminder of personal history gives her strength. When Pilate finds that she is "isolated" from others, especially from men, because of her missing navel (149); her mystifying lack of a biological history; she learns to give birth to herself, so to speak. She isolated from the dominant culture by her color and from African American communities by her peculiar anatomy, has to forge her own identity. She doesn't depend on men because she knows her own worth. This woman lives life as she thinks best, unswayed by pressure to conform to an appropriate female role or to accept the subservient existence delineated for her by white society. Nourished by her own history, Pilate's identity is

tough and resilient. She has articulated a personal history and a sense of self, and thus can express her opinions and emotions.

But Pilate's voice depends on something more: her spirituality. Her dead father, speaking to her from the spirit world, first tells her to "Sing" (148). Pilate has a deep connection with this realm, as shown by her friendly communication with her father's spirit, as well as her use of spiritual song to mark important life events. At her granddaughter's death, she sings a spiritual and then begins to speak to the assembled congregation. Naming Hagar as her "baby girl," [c]onversationally she spoke, identifying her away from everybody else in the world who had died. . . . Suddenly, like an elephant who has just found his anger and lifts his trunk over the heads of the little men who want his teeth or his hide or his flesh or his amazing strength, Pilate trumped for the sky itself to hear, 'And she was *loved*!' (322–323)

This relationship between Pilate's voice and spirituality is reciprocal. Pilate can sing because she is spiritually rooted, and the act of singing reinforces this spiritual connection. Her spirituality is both the base and the product of a secure identity. Whether it sounds like "little round pebbles that [bump] up against each other" (Morrison 40), or like the trumpet of an elephant, Pilate's voice reverberates throughout *Song of Solomon*.

Meanwhile, depicting flashbacks to past tragedies and deeply symbolic delineations of continued emotional and psychological suffering, the novel explores the hardships endured by a former slave woman and her family during the reconstruction era. *Beloved* depicts superitual elements which pretend to be a presence of an invisible being inside the house. This seems to the baby's ghost whom Sethe had earlier murdered. Beloved had to be the reincarnate of Sethe's dead child. Almost all the main characters such as Baby Suggs, Sethe, Denver and Paul D believe in the presence of the ghost when the present residence. Baby Suggs asserts: "we lucky

this ghost in a baby. My husband's spirit was to come back here? Of yours?" (6). It's clear that superstitions are embedded in a specific nature. According to Baby Suggs death is a normal thing for the black people. The majority of black people and their relatives were killed during that time. The first place depicted to be haunted by ghost in the novel is 124, Bluestone Road. Sethe's two sons Howard and Buglar cannot stand the terror caused by the ghost, so they flee. Toni Morrison has depicted a scene in which two tiny handprints appear on a cake but with an absence of a child. Further all the things in the house move by themselves. It is apparent from the text that the ghost wants to punish her. The ghost doesn't want to be forgotten by anyone, so it reappears, as expressed by Sethe: "Some things go. Pass on. Some things just say. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forged" (35). Furthermore, the novel has religious allusions to *The Bible* as on the first page of *Beloved* the reader comes across this optimistic prophetic epigraph from Romans9:25, which seems to forecast an improved further of the black slaves: "I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, who was not beloved."(1) With these allusions to both *The Bible* and the African values Morrison seems to suggest Sethe's contribution to merge both African values and religion. *Beloved* can be understood from spiritual or religious angles and both can offer pleasing clarifications to the role of Beloved and how Sethe can be reconciled and forgiven. Morrison's allusions to Biblical mythological metaphors are multifaceted and unclear and she alters the conventional male images to feminist-focused descriptions which seem to give an option that is suitable for African American women.

Through the writing process of this dissertation, I have found that Morrison is using her own voice and adds it to the voices of African-American women before her, joining the mothers humming lullabies, the field hands with their subversive chants, the blues singers, the gospel choirs, the poets and writers and storytellers. Through their expression, these women chronicle a

history not only for themselves but for their culture. They realize that the act of exquisite expression recreates and nourishes the identity from which it springs. Often, such a personal identity; as an artist, as an African American woman; helps articulate and strengthen the collective cultural identity as well.

Bibliography

Ahad, Badia Sahar. *Freud Upside down: African American Literature and Psychoanalytic Culture*. University of Illinois Press, 2010.

Anderson, Melanie R. *Spectrality in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. The Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2013.

Andrews, William L & Nellie Y. McKay. *Toni Morrison's Beloved: A Casebook.* Oxford University Press: New York, 1999.

Auerbach, Nina. *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction*. Harvard UP, 1978.

Bakerman, Jane. "Failures of Love: Female Initiation in the Novels of Toni Morrison." American Literature, vol.52,no.4, pp. 541-63, 1981.

Bathmaker, Ann-Marie and Penelope Harnett. *Exploring Learning, Identity & Power Through Life History & Narrative Research*, UK: Routledge, 2010.

Baumgardner, Jennifer and Amy Richards. *Manifesta*:*Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012.

Beasley, Chris. *Gender and Sexuality: Critical Theories, Critical Thinkers*. Sage Publications,2005.

Beaulieu, Elizabeth Ann. *The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia.* The United States of America: Greenwood Press, 2003.

---. *Writing African American Women :An Encyclopaedia of Literature by and about Women of Color.* USA: Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data, 2006.

Bhabha, Homi. "The Other Question…Homi K Bhabha Reconsiders the Stereotype of Colonial Discourse", Vol 24, 1983.

Bloom, Harold, ed. *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Toni Morrison*. Chelsea House Publishers, 2005.

---. *Bloom's Guides Comprehensive Reasearch & Study Guide: Toni Morrison's Beloved*. Chelsea House Publishers, 2004.

---. *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations : Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon- New Edition.* The United States of America: Library of Congress Cataloging-in- Publication Data, 2009.

Bomarito, Jessica & Jeffrey W. Hunter,eds. *Feminism in Literature: A Gale Critical Companion*. Tomson Gale: London, 2005.

Bouson, J. Brooks. *Quiet as it's Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. USA: State University of New York Press, 2000.

Brogan, Jaqueline Vaught. "The Hurston/ Walker/ Vaughn Connection:*Feminist Strategies in American Fiction*." Women's Studies,vol. 28,no.2, pp. 185, 1999.

Brooker, Peter and Peter Widdowson. *A Practical Reader in Contemporary Literary Theory*. 2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN: Routledge, 2013.

Bryant, Cedric Gael. "The Orderliness Of Disorder: Madness And Evil In Toni Morrison's Sula." *Black American Literature Forum,* vol.24,no.4, 1990,pp. 731- 45.*Literary Reference Center*. Web. 10 Mar. 2014.

Carby, Hazel V. *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro American Woman Novelist*. Oxford University Press, 1987.

Castro –Borrego, Silvia Pillar. *The Search for Wholeness and Diaspora Literacy in Contemporary African American Literature.* UK :Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011.

Christian, Barbara. *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspective on Black Women Writers.* Pergamon Press, 1985.

---. *New Black Feminist Criticism, 1985-2000,* edited by Gloria Bowles, M. Giulia Fabi, and Arlene R. Keizer. University of Illinois Press, 2007.

Claire Smith, Lindsey. *Indians, Environment, and Identity on the Borders of American literature: From Faulkner and Morrison to Walker and Silko.* New York: Palgrave Mcmillan, 2008.

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment,* 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2000.

---. *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism.* Temple University Press, 2006.

Christ, Carol P. *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on a Spiritual Quest.* Beacon, 1980.

Cox, Timothy J. *Postmodern Tales of Slavery in the Americas: From Alejo Carpentier to Charles Johnson.* USA: Routledge, 2013.

Davies, Carole Boyce. *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migration of the Subject. USA:* Routledge, 1994.

Davies, Carole Boyce. *Black women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*. USA: Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2003.

Detweiler, Robert and David Jasper. *Religion and Literature : A Reader.* Kentucky: Westminister John Knox Press, 2000.

Dobbs, Cynthia. "Toni Morrison' Beloved: Bodies Returned, Modernism Revisited", African American Review, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Winter, 1998), pp. 563-578, Indiana State University.

Duerk, Judith. *Circle of Stones: Woman's Journey to Herself*. Innisfree, 1999.
Eagleton, Mary, ed. *Feminist Literary Criticism*. Longman, 1991.

---. *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999.

Duvall, John N. *Productive Postmodernism: Consuming Histories and Cultural Studies.* USA: State University of New York Press, 2002.

Erikson, Kai. "Notes on Trauma and Community." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory,* edited by Cathy Caruth, ,pp.183-199, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.

Ferguson, Rebecca Hope. *Rewriting Black Identities: Transition and Exchange in the Novels of Toni Morrison.* P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2007.

Ferguson, Kathy E. *Self, Society and Womankind, the Dialectic of Liberation.* Greenwood, 1980.

Fisch, Audrey. *The Cambridge Companion to the American Slave Narrative,* Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Fisher, Jeryilyn and Ellen S. Sibler, eds. *Women in Literature: Reading Through the Lens of Gender*. Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003.

Furman, Jan. *Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon : A Casebook*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Gamble, Sarah, ed. *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Post Feminism.* Routledge Taylor & Francis Group,1998.

Gates, Henry Louis and Anthony Appiah. *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. USA: University of Michigan, 1993.

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism.* Oxford UP, 1989.

Gillespie, Diane and Missy Dehn Kubitschek. "Who cares? Women-centered Psychology in *Sula*." *Understanding Toni Morrison's Beloved and Sula: Selected Essays and Criticisms of the Works by the Nobel Prize-winning Author*, edited by Solomon O. Iyasere & Marla W. Iyasere, , pp.19-48, Whitston, 2000.

Gordon, Avery. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. The United States of America: the Regents of the University of Minnesota, the University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

Graham, Maryemma. *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel.* NY: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Guy-Sheftall, Beverly. “Black Feminism in the United States.” *Essays on African- American History, Culture and Society*, edited by William R. Scott and William G. Shade. Branch for the Study of the United States, pp. 294–309, 2005.

Henry Louis Gates Jr. and K.A. Appiah. *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present.* Amistad, 1993.

Herman, David et al. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Postmodern Narrative.* London:Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2004.

Higgins, Therese E. *Religiosity, Cosmology and Folklore: The African Influence in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. New York: Routledge, 2010.

Hine, Darlene Clark. *A Shining Thread of Hope: The History of Black Women in America*. Broadway Books, 1998.

Hogue, W. Lawrence. *Race, Modernity, Postmodernity: A Look at the History and the Literatures of People of Color Since the 1960s.* Albany: University of New York Press, 1996.

hooks,bell. *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism.* Pluto Press, 1982.

---. *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. South End Press,1989.

---. *Feminism and Black Women's Studies.* Sage Publication, 1989.

Hopkins, Dwight N and Sheila Greeve Davaney. *Changing Conversations: Religious Reflection & Cultural Analysis.* NY: Routledge, 1996.

Hudson-Weems, Clenora. *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*. Bedford, 1998.

Humm, Maggie. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Feminist Literary Criticism*. Simon & Schuster International Group, 1994.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction.* London: Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2004.

Keizer, Arlene R. “Black Feminist Criticism”. *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism*, edited by Gill Plain and Susan Sellers, pp. 154- 165, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Lerner, Gerda. *Black Women in White America.* New York: Routledge, 1972.

Lister, Rachel. *Reading Toni Morrison*. Greenwood Press, 2009.

Lillvis, Kristen. *Posthuman Blackness and the Black Female Imagination.* The University of Georgia Press*, 2017.*

Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition : A Report on Knowledge.* USA: The University of Minnesota, 1984.

Marks, Kathleen. *Toni Morrison's Beloved and the Apotropaic Imagination*, The Curators of the University of Missouri, University of Missouri Press, Columbia, Missouri, 65201, the United States of America, 2002.

Marty, Martin. "Religion in America," *Making America The Society and Culture of the United States*. Washington, D.C: United States Information Agency, pp 302- 314, 1987.

Matus, Jill L. *Toni Morrison: Contemporary World Writers*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998.

McDowell, Deborah E. "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism". *Black American Literature Forum,* vol.14, no. 4, pp. 154, 1986.

Michener, Ronald T. *Engaging Deconstructive Theology.* UK: MPG Books Ltd, 2006.

Middleton, David L. *Toni Morrison's Fiction: Contemporary Criticism*. NY: Garland Publishing Inc, 2000.

Morris, Pan. *Literature and Feminism: An Introduction.* Blackwell Publishers, 1993.

Morrison, Toni. "Memory, Creation, and Writing." *Thought,*vol.59, no. 235, pp.385-390, December 1984.

---. *Beloved*. Vintage International, 2016.

---. *Song of Solomon*. Vintage International, 2016.

Neil Orr, Elaine. *Subject to Negotiation: Reading Feminist Criticism and American Women's Fiction.* USA: The University Press of Virginia, 1997.

Nnaemeka, Obioma. "Introduction: Imag(in)ing Knowledge, Power, and Subversion in the Margins." *The Politics of Mothering: Womanhood, Identity, and Resistance in African Literature*, edited by Obioma Nnaemeka. pp.1-25, USA: Routledge, 1997.

Plain, Gill and Susan Sellers, eds. *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism.* Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Pramaggiore, Maria. *Irish and African American CINEMA: Identifying Others and Performing Identities, 1980-2000.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007.

Rarastese, Zita. *Love and Motherhood in Toni Morrison's Beloved.* USA: Library of Congress, 2011.

Razak, Arisika. "Response." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion,* vol. 22,no. 1, pp. 99-107, 2006.

Rubenstein, Roberta. "Pariahs and Community". *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and K.A. Appiah. Amistad, pp. 126-158, 1993.

Samuels, Wilfred D. and Clenora Hudson-Weems. *Toni Morrison*. Twayne, 1990.

Sandoval, Chela. "U.S. Third World Feminism. The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World." *Genders* 10, pp. 1–24, Spring, 1991.

Selassie, Zauditu K. *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. University Press of Florida, 2008.

Sherry, Ruth. *Studying Women's Writing: An Introduction.* Edward Arnold,1988.

Smith, Barbara. "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism", *Conditions:Two. Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader,* edited by Mary Eagleton, pp. 77- 80, Basil Blackwell, 1986.

Stephens, John and Robyn McCallum. *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture: Traditional Story and Metanarratives in Children's Literature.* USA: Library of Congress Cataloging –in-Publication Data, 1998.

Tally, Justine, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison.* Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Van Dyke, Annette. *The Search for a Woman- Centered Spirituality.* New York University Press, 1992.

Walter, Roland. *Narrative Identities: (Inter) Cultural In-Betweeness in the Americas*. NY: Peter Lang, 2003.

Ward, Robyn R. & Diane Price Herndl, eds. *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Rutgers University Press, 1997.

Waugh, Patricia. *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern.* Routledge, 1989.

West, Traci C. *Wound of the Spirit: Black Women, Violence, and Resistance Ethics*. New York University Press, 1999.

Appendices

Appendix I

The Biography of Toni Morrison

Toni Morrison was born on February 18, 1931in Lorain, Ohio, U.S., her birth name was Chloe Anthony Wofford, African American writer noted for her examination of the Black female experience within the Black community. She received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. Morrison grew up in the American Midwest in a family that possessed an intense love of and appreciation for Black culture. Storytelling, songs, and folktales were a deeply formative part of her childhood. She attended Howard University (B.A., 1953) and Cornell University (M.A., 1955). After teaching at Texas Southern University for two years, she taught at Howard from 1957 to 1964. In 1965 Morrison became a fiction editor at Random House, where she worked for a number of years. In 1984 she began teaching writing at the State University of New York at Albany, which she left in 1989 to join the faculty of Princeton University; she retired in 2006.Morrison once said that she wanted to help create a canon of Black work, noting that Black writers too often have to pander to a white audience when they should be able to concentrate on the business of writing instead. Many readers believe Morrison's novels go a long way toward the establishment of her envisioned tradition. The poetic, elegant style of her writing in *Beloved* panders to no one. Morrison challenges and requires the reader to accept her on her own terms. The central theme of Morrison's novels is the Black American experience; in an unjust society, her characters struggle to find themselves and their cultural identity. Her use of fantasy, her sinuous poetic style, and her rich interweaving of the mythic gave her stories great strength and texture. Among her best-known novels are *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, *Jazz*, *Love* and *A Mercy*. Morrison earned a plethora of book-world accolades and honorary degrees, also receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2012. She died on August 5, 2019 in Bronx, New York.

Appendix II

Synopsis of *Song of Solomon*

The story begins with an arresting scene; a man on a roof threatening to jump, a woman standing on the ground, singing, and another woman entering labor. The child born of that labor is Macon "Milkman" Dead III; *Song of Solomon* is the epic story of his life-time journey toward an understanding of his own identity and ancestry. Milkman is born burdened with the materialistic values of his father and the weight of a racist society; over the course of his odyssey he reconnects to his deeper family values and history, rids himself of the burden of his father's expectations and society's limitations, and literally learns to fly.

When the novel opens, Milkman is clearly a man with little or no concern for others. Like his father, he is driven only by his immediate sensual needs; he is spoiled and self-centered and pursues money and sexual gratification at all costs. The novel centers around his search for a lost bag of gold that was allegedly taken from a man involved in his grandfather's murder and then abandoned by his Aunt Pilate. The search for gold takes Milkman and his friend Guitar, a young black militant, to Shalimar, a town named for his great-grandfather Solomon, who according to local legend escaped slavery by taking the flight back to Africa on the wind. On his journey, under the influence of his Aunt Pilate, a strong, fearless, natural woman whose values are the opposite of Milkman's father's, Milkman begins to come to terms with his family history, his role as a man, and the possibilities of his life apart from a cycle of physical lust and satisfaction.

Appendix III

Synopsis of *Beloved*

The story is about a woman slave Sethe who ran from Sweet Home, the farm of the demons of her past. Sethe's longing to be with her children in Ohio led her to escape by herself in the last stages of her pregnancy. Sethe's children were with her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs who was legally free. Having arrived in Cincinnat with her newborn baby born en route, it took only 28 days for the slave master from Sweet Home to find Sethe. She knew what her children's future would be like in slavery under the control of the evil schoolteacher.

Sethe's only answer to survival at that moment was to kill her children. She believed being dead was better than being a victim of the torture of slavery. In the shed, Sethe killed her un-named baby girl and attempted to kill the other three. No longer valuable to him, the schoolteacher retreated leaving Sethe in the blood of her victims. Years later, the dead girl's ghost was chased away only to return in human form as the now grown daughter named Beloved.

دور الدين والروحانية في إعادة خلق هوية الأنثى السوداء
في الأدب الأمريكي المعاصر

دراسات الحالة: توني موريسون
أغنية سولومون (1977) محبوبتي (1987)

الملخص:

تتميز تجربة المرأة الأمريكية من أصل أفريقي في الولايات المتحدة في المقام الأول بأنها تجربة معقدة ومثيرة للاهتمام من الناحية التاريخية والنفسية. لإعادة تخيل مثل هذه التجربة ، قامت توني موريسون بتصوير الواقع المؤلم لهذه التجربة باستخدام الدين والروحانية كاستراتيجيات أدبية لمواجهة الصورة السائدة لها. يتكون البحث الحالي من تحقيق حول إظهارتوني موريسون لدور القيم الدينية والممارسات الروحية في إعادة بناء الهوية النسائية الأمريكية الأفريقية في رواياتها أغنية سولومون و محبوبتي فيما يتعلق بالمنظورات التاريخية والدينية والنفسية. من خلال المنظور التاريخي ، تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى التحقيق في رواية محبوبتي في ضوء مشروعها التاريخي الذي يركز على دورسرد الذاكرة في تغيير ومراجعة السرديات الكبرى للتاريخ الأمريكي فيما يتعلق بتصويرها للعبودية. يقوم المنظور الروحي على مناقشة عناصر الدين في رواية أغنية سولومون. تؤكد هذه المناقشة على الدين والروحانية ككيان ديناميكي ينتهك التصور التقليدي لممارسات التقاليد وينظر للهوية ككيان مشبع بالقوة التي يمكن أن تؤثر وتتأثر. الهدف الأساسي من تحليل كلتا الروايتين من المنظور النفسي هوإعطاء الدراسة سياقًا غزير الإنتاج لتقديم تصوير حي ومعمق للشخصية الأنثوية السوداء في الروايتين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأمريكيون من أصل افريقي , الهوية الأنثوية , النفسي , الروحانية , الدين