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“CLAIMING OWNERSHIP OF THAT FREED SELF?”

TONI MORRISON’S AMERICAN COUNTER-NARRATIVE

by

CARYL MCFARLANE

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and approved by

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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By CARYL MCFARLANE

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This dissertation lends its voice to the works of those scholars who have used Morrison’s numerous interviews, essays, and other works of non-fiction to navigate their reading of her prose. Focusing specifically on the similarity of historiographic approaches between *The Black Book*, Morrison’s one historical project, and her fiction, I assert that all of Morrison’s novels can be read as historical texts. *The Black Book* is comprised of variegated pieces of memorabilia, gathered by the authors from collectors, “people who had the original raw material documenting our life” (“Rediscovering” 15). It is, therefore, a (re)collection of pieces of memory, documented and undocumented. Although Morrison’s first four novels, do not conform to the traditional definition of the historical novel in “recall[ing] a life which no longer exists,” they are based on the same method of historical (re)collection employed in *The Black Book*, each incorporating documented and undocumented pieces of memory and memorabilia (Christian 328). Based on the aforementioned methodological similarity, I read Morrison’s works in historical chronology rather than publication sequence to excavate her multi-layered narrative approach that she lays bare through the process of time.

While each of the novels discussed are comprised of various layers of interwoven individual narratives they unfold against the backdrop of a larger American narrative, the National Narrative. Reformulating Morrison's usage of the event based "national narrative" in her Simpson analysis, I argue that the *National Narrative* is the cohesion of two constructed narratives, white domination and black subjugation ("Official Story" 16). Although each protagonist, with the exception of Sethe in *Beloved*, has corporeal freedom, all are spiritually bound by difficult past histories, and by the Narrative impact in their present circumstances. Yet, the narrative of the protagonist's life serves as a counter-narrative to the National Narrative's constructions as he/she journeys towards spiritual recrudescence. However, none of Morrison's novels proceeds or concludes in a linearly definitive manner. Contrary to narratological convention, each novel includes fragmented time sequences and concludes with numerous questions unanswered encouraging the reader to participate in the textual conversation Morrison elicits with each opening sentence.

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## Introduction

My first introduction to the novels of Toni Morrison was effectuated through one of my sisters. Returning home from school during the Christmas break of 1988, she brought, as a gift, a copy of *Beloved* for my brother and me to share. Although all five of us had always been avid readers, as a science major I had only heard of but not read any of Morrison's novels. Yet, in the habit of sharing books we found to be of interest, I was accustomed to accepting my older sisters' recommendations. "This one," Debi said, "is confusing but its' really special. I haven't finished it as yet. But you read it and tell me what you think." More thrilled with that gift than most of the others, my brother reluctantly consented to allow me to read it first. As I spent the remainder of that Christmas day of 1988, reading *Beloved*, the seed of realization that perhaps this, reading and analyzing literature, and not that, measuring and preparing for scientific analysis, was what I was meant to do.

Debi was right. *Beloved* was, initially, completely confusing. However, I was intrigued and eager to gain an understanding of the text. Thus, I entered the English department, as an auditor of the one English course at Queens College in which the novel was being discussed. As I listened to the responses of my peers and interacted with the novel in a communal context, I gained the clarity I sought and fell in love with the prose, the power and the depth of Morrison's writings.

My increasing desire to be enveloped in the wonderment of the communities and interrelationships Morrison weaves in her texts and to be involved in private and public



analyses of them contributed, in part, to my eventual epiphany; literary analysis was what I really loved and thus decided to pursue. Yet as I delved into the academic arena as a graduate student and read the critical responses to Morrison, though brilliantly polished, significantly insightful and definitively informative, only a small percentage seemed to delve “into the work on its own terms” (Tate interview 141).

Due to the recognition of the distinctive brilliance of Morrison’s writings, over the past three decades, through awards, reviews, and popularity, her work has been critiqued and analyzed more closely than any other African-American woman author, to date. Morrison’s works have elicited a multitude of articles and books of literary criticism from a plethora of critics employing numerous approaches. Although the “criticism [...] read well, in fact very well, [...] it [was] not about the book at hand (Tate interview 141). In some cases, the vibrancy of Morrison’s texts seemed confined within the limits of the specific approach: most notably: psychoanalytic (Shapiro), cultural studies (Harris, Holloway), deconstruction (Henderson, Mobley), historiographic (Peterson, Krumholz), vernacular theory (Gates, Rushdy), and African cosmology (Higgins, Christian), to name a few. While these methodologies, and many others, incorporate Morrison’s own writings in their analyses, to a greater or lesser degree, the primary foundation for their various critiques rests on the fundamental concepts of their given perspectives. Although a few of the approaches, historiographic, vernacular theory and African cosmology, specifically, do not base their readings on “content outside [Morrison’s] work,” others could be read as “com[ing] from some other place” (Tate interview 141). Yet, none of the frameworks listed above derive their foundational concepts from *within* Morrison’s writings of non-fiction, her numerous interviews,

articles, and critical works. Thus, despite the brilliant effectiveness many of these discussions achieve in their illuminating readings of Morrison, they all, in some sense, “place [her] book[s] into an already established literary tradition” (Tate interview 141).

Arguably, no work of criticism can adequately capture the Morrisonian reading experience. Each of us can only offer glimmers, hints and shadows of the vast range of responses her texts elicit and perhaps through our analyses illumine some of the novels’ more ambiguous and confusing portions, as do many of the aforementioned approaches. In an attempt to delve “into the work in its own terms,” this dissertation adds its voice to the critical chorus through the development of a methodology established primarily based on Morrison’s writings of non-fiction (Tate interview 141). While many authors prove to be unqualified critics of their works, Morrison’s meticulous refinement, depth and prior consideration of each text may lend credence to her reflexive scrutiny. Interweaving Morrison’s cultural and literary essay with my own personal adaptations and insights, I will analyze the main characters in four of Morrison’s novels: Sethe in *Beloved*, Violet in *Jazz*, Milkman in *Song of Solomon*, and Consolata and Deacon in *Paradise*, using an approach fundamentally predicated on Morrison’s interviews and critical works.

Chapter one, *Narratives and Counter-narratives*, delineates the specific Morrisonian terms and ideas that create the springboard and foundation for my consequent analysis. Morrison describes her interaction with Gloria Naylor as a “conversation,” the only interview in which “something of consequence” is revealed (Naylor 593). I argue that Morrison structures her novels in order to engage the reader in immediate and intimate “conversation” both with the characters of the text and with the counter-narrative of her novels as a whole. In the Naylor interview, Morrison reveals that

her initial impetus for writing stemmed from her feeling that “there was no me in this world” (Conversations 198). Hence, through her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1974), she “reclaimed [her]self” (Conversations 198) thereby creating a counter-narrative specifically to the “reactionary” presentations of black womanhood created by Black Cultural Movement of the 70’s and secondarily to the societal structures which prompted the reaction (“Behind the Making” 88).

Adapting Morrison’s usage of the “national narrative” from the event based specificity of the Simpson case to the larger American racial climate, I argue that the foundation for the misinterpretations of black personhood can be linked in part to a National Narrative: the cohesion of the narratives of white domination and black subjugation. Morrison’s novels can thus be read as counter-narratives to the National Narrative and to the consequential reactionary narratives of the 1970’s. I further argue that Morrison’s novels can also be read as presenting counter-narratives to the generalized misrepresentations of African-American history.

*The Black Book*, Morrison’s one historical project, is a collection of pieces documented and undocumented memorabilia. Similarly “pieces of memory” are what begin the creative process for Morrison’s first four novels and fragments of documented history form the basis for Morrison’s historical trilogy, *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise* (“Memory” 386). Thus, viewing each of Morrison’s first seven novels as historical works, I read Morrison’s novel in historical chronology rather than publication sequence. This chronological reading illuminates the continuation of Morrison’s counter-narrative within the relational intersections found in her novels. Delving into narrative trajectory of each protagonist discussed, I argue that their lives comprise a journey that also serves

as a counter to the impact of the National Narrative that surrounds them. Often seeking to suppress a devastating experience from childhood or early adolescence, what I term a *central trauma*, each of the protagonists move towards spiritual renewal through their intimate relationships with one other and/or their communal interactions.

The only one of Morrison's texts to delve beneath the veil of American chattel slavery, *Beloved* is infused with the response, creation and impact of the spectacle, the visual measure of the National Narrative. Based on the account of Margaret Garner's attempt to deliver her children from slavery through infanticide, Mrs. Garner's case was one of the most sensational of its time. Outraged by what her actions claimed, ownership, yet intrigued by what she had dared, Mrs. Garner's actions were cited as both an example of the bestial nature of the slave and a caution to the public of the heinous "fruits" of the Institution ("A Visit to the Slave Mother" 1).

Chapter Two, "'Beating Back the Past.'" The Call to Wholeness in *Beloved*," focuses its discussion on Sethe. Dually bound physically and spiritually, Sethe's journey occurs in two cycles both propelled by communal and individual counter-narratives. As a slave within the realm of chattel slavery, Sethe is perceived as a spectacle both to the hegemony within and outside of the Institution. Measured for her animalistic qualities, milked as a scientific experiment, Sethe's personal misery lies in her discovery of her spectacularization while on the Sweet Home plantation. The conjunction of her desire to back away from this characterization and her response to the calls to love and to be loved, eventually lead to her physical liberation and provide hope for her spiritual freedom at the novel's end. Sethe's love for her children foment her quest for physical freedom despite

opposition. Allowing herself to be loved by others (Halle, Baby Suggs, and Paul D.) and learning to love herself opens the way for her spiritual freedom.

Sethe's physical journey necessitates the cultural narrative of cross-racial sisterhood. Amy Denver, a white woman wandering the woods on her way to Boston, assists Sethe physically and spiritually. Without Amy's sharp verbal banter, encouragement and willingness to serve a black slave woman the resources available to her, (her healing ability, song, chatter, and ragged clothing) neither Sethe nor Denver would have survived the physical journey. While men also assist Sethe, specifically Stamp Paid, who ferries her across the Ohio River, Sethe's spiritual deliverance is affected by the fellowship of sisterhood. Sethe's longing for her mother's touch and care is offered in proxy through the sisters who surround her. Amy Denver, Baby Suggs and Ella all assist Sethe before the Misery and all of the women in the community are necessary to exorcise Beloved, and bring the opportunity for revivification to Sethe's doorstep through their voices. "For Sethe it was as though the Clearing has come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words" (*Beloved* 261).

The unity of the women's movement on behalf of one whom they perceive as a sister, allows Sethe to be finally free from the bondage of her past, embodied in Beloved. Although she continues to mourn for Beloved after her abrupt departure, the external support of the larger community of women needs to be in place for her to progress in her own personal counter-narrative, the acceptance of herself as "her own best thing" (*Beloved* 273). Assisted by Paul D and her other daughter, Denver, Sethe will learn to live without "beating back the past" (*Beloved* 73).

Chapter Three, “Inside Nothing: The National Narrative in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*,” discusses the ways in which Morrison’s understanding of jazz music, “open on the one hand and inaccessible on the other,” is depicted through the doubly voiced narration in the text, through the one historical event explored within the novel, The Silent Protest March of 1917, and through the relationship between Joe and Violet Trace (LeClair interview 124). More significantly impacted by the generational resonances of the Narrative than by its direct contemporary assaults, both Joe and Violet struggle against the pull of the “well” in their spiritual lives (*Jazz* 102). Dark, confused, full of crevices unknown to them both, their central traumas, the spiritual effect of the Narrative in their lives, both relate to their mothers. The suicide of Violet’s mother, caused in part by her father’s forced departure and random perilous returns, forms the central trauma of Violet’s life. Despite the instructive assistance of her grandmother, True Belle, “the well suck[s] [Violet’s] sleep” (*Jazz* 102). However, her encounter with Joe Trace when sent away from home with her sisters to pick cotton, miraculously revives Violet as she is willing to work “at anything to be with Joe whenever she could” (*Jazz* 105).

Formerly believing himself to have been abandoned, Joe’s central trauma, his knowledge of his mother’s identity as the crazed local Wild woman, creates his craving for a relationship with her. Despite her erratic behavioral patterns, Joe hunts for Wild in order to confirm her identity as his mother. Unwilling to accept that her mental imbalance may reduce her ability to recognize him as her child, he is devastated by the discovery of her co-habitation and selection of another, Golden Gray, the bi-racial son of his hunting mentor Henry Lestroy. He flees from the area into the welcoming arms of the City, New York.

Even though both Joe and Violet are distracted by the pursuits of the City, neither of them addresses their deeper spiritual hungers through sharing or self-confrontation. Thus suppressed, Joe is surprised by his strong attraction to Dorcas, the young woman with whom he has an affair. Based largely on the Wild-like aura she evokes, Joe cleaves to Dorcas disclosing to her things never shared with Violet or even himself: his rage, his frustrations, his hurt, and his reaction to his mother's continual rejections; His "inside nothing" (*Jazz* 38). The gnawing emptiness both Joe and Dorcas feel because of their respective central traumas is what they term the "inside nothing" (*Jazz* 38). Joe is able to share his "inside nothing" with Dorcas and not with Violet, because he believes that Dorcas "knew better than people his own age what that inside nothing was like" while Violet does not (*Jazz* 38). His conclusion, however, is erroneous.

Once Joe fills Dorcas' "inside nothing" effectively enough to build her self-confidence, she rejects him in favor of a young man her own age, Acton (*Jazz* 38). Joe's rejoinder, his murder of Dorcas, is the communal tragedy of the text, what I term the *main Misery*. Violet's reaction to her learning of the affair and the murder simultaneously causes her to contribute to the disruption of the main Misery in attempting to slash the dead Dorcas' face at the funeral. Remarkably, Violet's action eventually opens the way for her healing discussions with Dorcas' normally austere aunt, Alice Manfred. Mutually cathartic for them both, Alice helps to improve Violet's disheveled appearance and order her confused thinking while Violet encourages Alice's release of the suppressed heartaches of her spouse's adultery and subsequent death. Alice serves as a more effective counterbalance for Violet than Joe.

Having grown-up in a household of other women, Violet's sole reliance on Joe to the exclusion of other women left a fissure in her life that increased the bitterness of the effects of her central trauma. Thus, when mother-hunger hits her in her mid-forties, part of what she longs for is female companionship; a girl with whom she "could have walked Broadway [...] and ogled the clothes. Could be sitting together, cozy in the kitchen, while [she] Violet did her hair" (*Jazz* 109).

Her career decision, hairdressing, while due in part to the narrowness of the opportunities available to her is another way for her to have the intimate connection with other women that she needs. Yet, the depth of the wounds inflicted in Joe and Violet's spirits as a consequence of the generational Narrative impact in their lives causes even these healing relationships to be insufficient to alleviate the entirety of their respective sorrows. Eventually turning to each other for solace, the balm each finds in the other continues to be necessary to their daily functioning.

Chapter Four, "Flying Home: Mercy and Transformation in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," incorporates a chronological reading of the text. Perpetuated through the sharing of merciful love, the generations of Shalimar's descendants, depicted throughout the text, owe their continued existence to women. Yet Milkman, the central protagonist, ignorant of the significance of women in his ancestral line and spoiled by all around him, focuses his attention on himself. Disrespectful, chauvinistic, and generally uncaring towards most women, he considers them objects for his sexual pleasure or personal servants whose services he expects but towards whom he has no obligation. Involving himself only with men as equals, though contemptuous and distant even from them, Milkman is unbalanced. Protected by his father's money, the security and richness of his



grandfather's home and the continual supports of the women around him, Milkman lives in an unrealistic cocoon.

Nevertheless, the impact of the Narrative surrounds him. Evinced through the poverty of the persons from whom he collects rent, overheard in the various affronts the men describe, Milkman unwittingly contributes to the continued oppression of his community. Rather than seeking to help those persons with whom he interacts, even his friend Guitar, he assumes that they have chosen to live impoverished lives. They complain because "who would they be if they couldn't describe the insults, violence, and oppression that their lives [...] were made up of? [...] They excused themselves for everything. Every job of work undone, every bill unpaid, every illness, every death was The Man's fault" (*Song of Solomon* 108).

Milkman seeks to serve only himself. The largeness of his personal concerns obstructs his vision of anyone else, even his mother. Only his departure to unfamiliar surroundings, Shalimar, and his concurrent losses of his material and social supports serve to awaken him to the needs of others. However, even these losses only awaken him to the needs of other men. The loss of his life at the hands of his friend, Guitar, causes him to see in a vision the centrality of women in his life. "Exactly the way he'd heard it would be, his *life* flashed before him, but it consisted of only one image: Hagar bending over him in perfect love" (*Song of Solomon* 279 emphasis added). His recrudescence transforms him from one who is immersed in himself and other men to one who can sing to his aunt Pilate as she passes on, and willingly fly into the killing arms of his brother. "As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew

what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it” (*Song of Solomon* 337).

The two neighboring communities of Ruby and the Convent discussed in Chapter Five, “The Dual Faces of Bliss: N(n)arrative Impact in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*,” reflect the vital necessity of balance in every society. Ruled and governed by men, Haven, the precursor to Ruby, is founded in reaction to the rejection of the residents of Fairly, Oklahoma. Blinded by hurt and without other alternatives, Zechariah Morgan searches for an independent living space for his people. Apparently answered directly by God, Zechariah is directed to the site of their first town, Haven. However, instead of responding to the “Disallowing” by a refusal to duplicate its biases, the founders choose to repeat it, perceiving all unlike them as “impure,” marrying only amongst themselves, hostile, and distrustful of outsiders (*Paradise* 194-5).

“Beware the Furrow of His Brow,” was the message on the communal Oven (*Paradise* 93). Who needed to beware? The outsiders or the inhabitants? Whose brow? Certainly, God’s brow was furrowed at the ways in which the women in the town were treated as aliens. Yet, had the opinions of the women in the founding families been considered, Haven could have been a refuge both for the inhabitants and for others who were not racially pure. Instead, the men of Haven kept their women in a “basket,” the domestic sphere, and under the “lid of lead,” comprised of quotidian responsibilities (*Paradise* 192). Haven failed; partially due to its financial crisis and partially to its spiritual shortcomings. Rather than learning from its mistakes and being more inclusive of others, they became more haughty and moved even further away from destructive influences. With male hegemony firmly fixed, Ruby, named for the Morgan’s deceased

sister, was driven more narrowly by the hatred of the Disallowers and of all who were “impure” (*Paradise* 194). Perceiving themselves to be the “pure and holy,” the epitome of impurity was seventeen miles down the road at the Convent, their nearest neighbor (*Paradise* 217).

In direct opposition to Ruby, the Convent, governed by women, was open to any in need. With sufficient resources to run independently, the women of the Convent did not require or seek assistance from Ruby. Having felt the brunt of male “brows” continually “furrowed” at them, none of the women who came to the Convent would willingly choose to be subjected to life in the basket of Ruby, even if they had been welcomed (*Paradise* 93). Yet, they too were in need of balance. Reveling in the simple pleasure of free expression, the women of the Convent were initially content to live without structure, purpose or discipline. Eating, sleeping, fighting, dancing, departing and returning whenever they desired, they all were in need of a place and space where they could emote in any manner and through any means. Although living without boundaries was a necessary step in their healing, Consolata’s personal revival and possession, and their consequential regimentation was also vital.

Consolata, though, in charge of the Convent, chose to isolate herself after the death of the woman she worshipped, Mary Magna. Desirous of death, uncaring of her own life or that of those around her, she both welcomed and resented the company of the women who arrived. However, even in the midst of incessant stupor, the power of her spiritual influence served to create the realm of self-indulgence in which the women initially functioned. Their physical behavior matched hers; they all did whatever they

desired. She chose to be in a state of continual inebriation and they chose to do whatever they liked.

When Consolata sleeps herself into sobriety and accepts the fact that she would not have the “rest of days” Mary Magna promised and would die “ungrieved in unholy ground,” she is able to accept the god who visits her and be physically and spiritually renewed (*Paradise* 251). “She has the features of dear Connie, but they are sculpted somehow [...] Had her eyebrows always been that thick, her teeth that pearly white? Her hair shows no gray. Her skin is smooth as a peach” (*Paradise* 262). Guided and directed by Consolata, they are taught “what [they] are hungry for” and how those hungers can be fed (*Paradise* 262). They are healed through speaking, sharing and shouting out their stories on the cellar floor.

Continuing the oppositional spiritual trajectory, as the women in the Convent achieve a phase of living outside of the specter of their particular “haunt[ings],” the leading men of Ruby arrive at the rational end for their doctrine of hate, the murder of the impure innocent; they mercilessly slaughter all of the women in the Convent (*Paradise* 266). Although many of the townspeople witness the aftermath of the massacre, after the bodies, and their car, mysteriously disappear, the story begins to change to benefit the speaker or family members. Nevertheless, “Ruby[...] was an unnecessary failure [...] [a] hard-won heaven defined only by the absence of the unsaved, the unworthy and the strange” (*Paradise* 306).

What happened to the women of the Convent? Each seems to have slipped through the door or window that Anna Flood and Rev. Misner “sense” the presence of in the garden of the Convent (*Paradise* 305). They shifted to an alternate plane of existence

that facilitated life and limited interaction with those who loved them but not apparently by others; they were translated to a type of earthly Paradise.

Reading each protagonist's life within the framework of a historical Morrison chronology with an awareness of the National Narrative and its impact, this dissertation seeks to add its voice to the critical works which attempt to "break new ground" through the development of methodologies established primarily on the basis of Morrison's writings of fiction or non-fiction (Tate interview 161).

## Chapter One

### Narratives and Counter-narratives

#### *The Conversation*

Despite her once hectic schedule as a lecturer, teacher, writer, and mother of two boys, Morrison has been, and continues to be, generous in the number of interviews she chooses to give. Although she has been asked many questions ranging from issues based upon her eight novels, to her thoughts on teenaged pregnancy, she has only classified one of the many interviews given as a “conversation” (Naylor interview 593). In Morrison’s interaction with Gloria Naylor she includes a postscript in which she specifies the difference between the two:

An interview is my trying to get to the end of it [...] my mind drifts so when I am being interviewed that I hardly remember it [...] I see them select or make up the details to add to the fixed idea of me they came in the door with- the thing or person they want me to be. I sense it and, if I am feeling lazy, I play to it- if not I disappear- shift into automatic... Because an interview is not an important thing. But a *conversation*- well now- that’s something [...] And this meeting between Gloria Naylor and me was going to be that. Not one but two people present on the scene, talking the kind of talk in which something of consequence is willing to be revealed [...] no observers. (593, emphasis added)

It is significant that Morrison delineates a distinction between the interactions within a conversation compared with those of an interview. Even though two persons are physically “present on the scene” in both an interview and a conversation, Morrison specifies the presence of only “one” person in an interview and “two” in a conversation (593). She implies that the *one* person present in the interview is the interviewer who has entered with a “fixed idea” of the “person they want [her] to be” (593). While Morrison remains *physically* present during the interview, she chooses to make herself *spiritually*

absent. That her spiritual presence or absence is of greater significance than her physical presence is evident in her conclusion; one person is present in an interview, the other, Morrison, has chosen to “disappear- shift into automatic” (593).

I argue that Morrison’s goals for her readership can also be read through this homologous structure. She invites the reader to be fully present in the reading of her texts: engaged in conversation with the characters and situations in the novels, and spiritually open to whatever is offered rather than limited by preconceived notions or assumptions. Even though Morrison has often commented on the intimacy she seeks to evoke between the reader of her novels and the text, the subsequent critical focus has often rested on the element of “cocreation between author and reader” in terms of the evolving nature of the novel but not specifically involving the mode of the reader’s response (Fultz 1,sic). Whereas a conversation is necessarily a co-creative act requiring the “places and spaces” Morrison provides for reader participation, the focus here on conversation seeks to clarify the awareness and the agency of the reader of Morrison’s novels as well as the type of response that Morrison seeks from that reader (“Rootedness” 341). The conversationalist not only enters the interaction aware of the framework within which he/she will operate, the conversation itself, but he/she also is open to the possibility of “something of consequence... to be revealed... no observers” (Naylor interview 593). Admittedly certain “places and spaces” are pre-set within the confines of the novel, yet conversations often overlap the boundaries prescribed; they interrupt the discourse of the other participant with moans, shouts, laughter, tears, words, silence or whatever is evoked by the interaction (“Rootedness” 341). Hence, the focus on a conversational interaction emphasizes the uniqueness of Morrison’s novels.

Since the type of conversation which occurs between reader and text hinges solely on the language used it is significant that Morrison sees “the language” as part of what she believes makes her novels distinctive (123). In her 1981 interview with LeClair in response to his question concerning what makes her fiction unique, she replies, that “the language, only the language ...It must suggest and be provocative at the same time” (123). Although every novel relies on the “language” to convey its specific story, the remainder of Morrison’s reply clarifies her apparent ambiguity (123). She uses the “standard English” *language* “to help restore the other language, the lingua franca,” the language of black people (124)<sup>1</sup>. Within the context of that language, Morrison’s further delineation of the nature of the “lingua franca” elucidates the relevance of the conversationalist/interviewer positionality of the reader of her works (124). “[The language’s] function is like a preacher’s: to make you stand up out of your seat, make you lose yourself and hear yourself” (123).

It is significant that Morrison describes the function of the language she employs as analogous to that of the type employed by the “preacher” (123). The structure of a typical church service, in many denominations and sects, is designed with the preacher’s sermon as the climax; all that precedes the sermon is focused on preparing the congregants to hear it while fully present, both spiritually and physically, and to receive whatever is presented by the preacher. The antiphonic image evoked, that of words which cause a physical response, “make[s] you stand up out of your seat” is found, most often, in the traditional black church (123). The language of the preacher who calls to the congregation as he exposit the Biblical text, depicts the function of the language she seeks to restore in her texts. The interaction, which occurs during the sermonic portion of



the black church service, is a conversation of the type in which Morrison may seek to involve the reader both as he/she engages with the narrative of the story and as he/she delves into him/herself, “mak[ing] you lose yourself and hear yourself” (123).

Interpreting the reader as the congregant and the book as the sermon, Morrison desires the reader “to stand up and to weep and to cry and to accede or to change and to modify” in response to her texts (“Rootedness,” 341). Yet, the analogous preacher/congregant interaction she desires for her readership is only one of the levels of response she seeks to evoke.

The power of the effect of the language on the intrapersonal level is seen in Morrison’s repetition of the word “make” (123). In the process of conversation between the reader and the novel, the reader will also be in conversation with *him/herself* on a number of levels: physical, “*make you stand* up out of your seat”, spiritual, “*make you lose yourself*” and audible, *make you “hear yourself*” (123, emphasis added). Any good conversation involves body movement and body language, “stand[ing] up”; and it necessitates spiritual connectivity as well as intimate objectivity, “los[ing] yourself” as you tune into the concerns, stories, and cares of another; and they make you hear yourself, as the other participant reflects your words through his/her own verbal and non-verbal responses (123).

The individual congregant/reader Morrison alludes to above is also involved in a conversation of sorts with the entire community present in the church service. The individual’s response to the language of the preacher occurs within the contextual safety of others also responding to the sermon. Thus, there is simultaneity of response, both collectively and individually. She invites the reader to “say amen” in response to a scene

or event, to share with the characters as he/she interacts with their stories, and to lose oneself, laying aside, (even if temporarily) the preconceived ideas of reading and of themselves with which he/she may have entered the sphere of the novel (Davis interview 231). She desires that her novels provide “a haven...where you can react violently or sublimely... a place to feel profoundly” (Ruas interview 109).

The visceral, vocal response Morrison desires of her readership is imbricated with one of the other goals that Morrison has for her work, aurality. “My efforts to make aural literature...work because I do hear it. It has to read in silence...but it also has to *sound* ... The point is not to need the adverbs to say how it sounds but to have the sound of it in the sentence” (Davis interview 230). Morrison works specifically on achieving the type of sound which both invites reader participation and enables the reader to experience her texts. Rather than simply reading flat words on a page, Morrison seeks to involve her reader in the “making of the story...we invent it together and I just hold your hand while you’re in the process of going there and hearing it and sharing it and being appalled by this and amused by that” (230). Morrison’s inducement begins with the first sentence of each novel. In her article on canonicity, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” Morrison explores the opening sentences of the five novels that she had written up to that point: *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby* and *Beloved*.

With the exception of *Sula*, in which she gives the reader a “safe harbor” or a “lobby” to enter<sup>2</sup>, Morrison sought to deliberately thrust the reader into immediate intimacy with the text so that he/she would not have the opportunity to “wonder...What do I have to do, to give up in order to read this?...What distance maintain?” (21). That

Morrison continues to desire immediate spiritual connectivity for the reader of her novels is evident in the first sentences of her next three novels: *Jazz*, *Paradise* and *Love*. In *Jazz*, a sound, “Sth”, promptly ushers the reader into the conspiratorial confidences of the gossip, “Sth, I know that woman” (3). Reminiscent of the “‘back fence’ connotation” of the first sentence on *The Bluest Eye*, *Jazz* also begins with an “unstaging” summary of the central story in the first few pages (“Unspeakable Things” 20). The jolting first sentence of *Paradise* disarms and alarms the reader in its starkly violent contrast to the serene images possibly evoked by the title. By beginning with the sentence, “They shoot the white girl first,” Morrison places the reader into the midst of the climax of the story, evokes compassion for the victim, raises a multiplicity of questions, (Who shoots her? Why? Why do they shoot the white girl first? etc...) and engenders our caring (3). The prologue of *Love*, in sharp contrast to the prologue of *Sula*, is not a “lobby” or a “door” or a “safe harbor” of any sort but continues Morrison’s “in medias res opening[s]” (“Unspeakable Things” 32). “The women’s legs are spread wide open, so I hum” (*Love* 3). She deliberately attenuates the readers’ defenses in the opening of the novel so that it will be difficult to “disappear-shift into automatic” in the reading of her texts (593).

Thus, part of Morrison’s motivation for seeking to fully engage the reader in her texts is in order to allow the reader to hear and interact with the sermon of her text. One of the aims for her novels which Morrison states in the following quote, is to “take on [the] responsibility [that] the community [once had of] passing on [the] mythologies, the given qualities, stories [and] assumptions” of black people (104). Hence, she writes, in part, “to carry on the tradition of African American storytelling, that is to be both ‘print

and oral literature,’ so that the novel could harken back to an older communal tradition even as it was very much of the modern world” (Christian 492).

The ideal situation is to take from the past and *apply it to the future*, which doesn’t mean improving the past or tomorrow... *The community had to take on that responsibility of passing from one generation to another the mythologies, the given qualities, stories, assumptions* which an ethnic group that is culturally coherent and has not joined the larger mainstream keeps very much intact for survival...The mythology in the books can provide what the other culture did...the novel has to provide the richness of the past as well as suggestions of what the use of it is. (Ruas interview 104,112-3 emphasis added).

Therefore, although Morrison’s novels are not pedantic, they do involve an element of didacticism as she herself describes it. “My mode of writing is sublimely *didactic* in the sense that I can only warn by taking something away” (Koenen interview 74, emphasis added). She seeks to engage the reader in conversation with the text so that he/she will “really love the characters,” be informed about the “richness of the past,” and “long for” a relationship “to work” and then she “tak[es] something away;” she allows the reader to “watch [the relationship] fall apart” (74). By deliberately withdrawing expected resolutions and neat conclusions she encourages the reader to analyze what the problems were in the given situation, consider the characters’ responses and decide what aspects of it “to apply to [their own] future” (Ruas interview 104).

I also suggest that Morrison’s design in constructing her novels in order to invite conversation, stems from the experiences she had which initially prompted her to write. During her interaction with Naylor, Morrison revealed “something of consequence” concerning her decision to begin writing her first book, *The Bluest Eye* (593). Although she had been asked by many of the previous and subsequent interviewers about her decision to begin her first novel, or why she had become an author, or what her initial

inspiration was, her answers to their queries were factual but perfunctory and superficial, a “shift into automatic” (593).

She says to Watkins that “it was a way of communicating and with few friends, I had to talk to someone” (45), to Dowling “I was very lonely. Writing was something for me to do in the evenings after the children were asleep” (52), to Parker “I was interested in reading a kind of book that I had never read before” (61), to Neustadt “I think it was the situation which I was in at that time that was conducive to writing. I was in a place where I knew I was not going to be for a long time: I didn’t have any friends and didn’t make any, didn’t want any because I was on my way somewhere else. So I wrote as a thing to do.” (89), and to Ruas “I don’t know. I never wanted to grow up to be a writer, I just wanted to grow up to be an adult. I began to write that book as a short story based on a conversation I had with a friend when I was a little girl.” (95).

Each of the above responses includes one particular aspect of the initial impetus for her nascent writing venture: emotionally, she was lonely, socially, she had few friends, and politically, she wanted to write a book that she had never read before. However, only her response to Naylor’s similar inquiry gives a fuller sense of how all of these issues cohered and what factors motivated them. In fact, in a postscript to the interview with Naylor, Morrison pinpoints her response to Naylor’s inquiry about what motivated her to begin to write, as being the clear marker of a conversation. “It was a conversation. I can tell, because I said something I didn’t know I knew. About the “dead girl” (217). Although Morrison’s reference to the “dead girl” seems equivocal, the larger context of Morrison’s response specifies the meaning (217).

Sometime after her return from Europe in 1964, pregnant and newly divorced, Morrison moved to Syracuse, New York and wrote *The Bluest Eye*. Although Morrison lived with her parents until she had the baby, Slade, she moved to New York, to assume the position of editor at Random House, soon after his birth. Thus, while in Syracuse she had two small boys to look after, no friends, and no community with which to interact. Despite her “interest... in the civil rights movement” and her acceptance of the position at Random House in the hope of “mak[ing] some changes” in the way in which blacks were being presented in the curriculum in the public schools (Dowling interview 52), she felt as if “the [black] world was going by in some direction that [she] didn’t understand and [she] was not in it” (Naylor interview 198). The sharp contrast between the nurturance and familiarity of her home environment and the isolation of her new circumstance may have heightened the pain she felt in the perceived distance between herself and the community.

While “there were a lot of noises being made about how wonderful [she] was- ‘black woman you are my queen’, [she] did not believe it...there was something in it that [she] just didn’t trust. It was too loud...It was almost like a wish rather than a fact, that the men were trying to say something that they didn’t believe either” (198). The generalized communal perception of black womanhood and specifically of herself she felt, therefore, was inaccurate. Additionally, she realized that at some point she stopped loving her own “company” and “the reason [she] didn’t like [her] company was because there was no body there to like” (199). Although she was “somebody’s parent, somebody’s this, somebody’s that...there was no me in this world”(198). Hence, she was looking for the *me* that was missing, the “dead girl,” herself, and she wrote in her efforts

to “talk about that dead girl, if for no other reason than to have it, somewhere in the world, in a drawer” (198). She believed that this “girl” was “dead” not only in her own perception but also in everybody else’s minds (198). Apart from her extended family and her parents, she did not believe that that person existed anywhere. “That person. Not the name [Toni Morrison], but the person. I thought that girl was dead. I couldn’t find her. I mean I could see her on the street or the bus, but nobody wrote about her. Which isn’t entirely accurate. People had done that. But for me at that time that was them, that was not me” (199). Morrison wrote initially then in order to reinitiate conversation with herself. As she wrote *The Bluest Eye* she was “Pecola, Claudia...everybody” and she “fell in love with [her]self...reclaimed [her]self and the world” (198).

Four years after the publication of *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison edited her first work of non-fiction entitled *The Black Book*. “Intended in part as a corrective, particularly to rhetoric that had grown more and more disparaging of ‘the Negro’ and ‘his’ history...its focus was on those whose lives and deeds had been lost to history” (Wall 88). And yet, as Wall argues further, even “the recovery of Negro history was complicated by its residual sexism” (258). This “residual sexism” evident even in the process of historical recovery may have been part of the “something” beneath the pronouncements of queenship that Morrison “just didn’t trust” (198). The sense that Morrison had of her conspicuous absence from the world by which she was surrounded at the time, (“there was no me in this world”), may have stemmed in part from the externalized assessment of personhood reflected in the “queen” persona which focused on “how one look[ed] as opposed to what one is” (89). In an article entitled, “Behind the Making of the Black Book,” Morrison elaborated on the concerns which she had with the “Black is Beautiful”

and Black Studies movements of the 1970's (88). She believed that what was being presented by the black community at that time was a version of history that was "reactionary...history-as-imagined [rather than] history as life lived" (88).

We skipped over some 300 to 2,000 years of lived life to find a myth to our liking, or we made some up...so much black history and art is not reinterpretation or re-evaluation as it should be, but an attempt to defend a new idea or destroy an old one...The best example of instant and reactionary myth-making can be found in the slogan "Black is Beautiful"...When the strength of a race depends on its beauty, when the focus is turned to how one looks as opposed to what one is we are in trouble...The point about concentrating on whether we are beautiful is that it is concentration on a way of measuring worth that is wholly trivial and wholly white, and preoccupation with it is an irrevocable slavery of the senses. (88-89)

Although *The Black Book* was published in 1974, four years after *The Bluest Eye* (1970), the Black Cultural movement inclusive of both the Black Studies movement and "The Black is Beautiful" shibboleth to which Morrison refers, ranged from the late 1960's into the 1970's (doCarmo 1). Thus, Morrison's distrust in the "noise" (198) that surrounded her in the black community at the time of her personal crisis in the mid 1960's, may also have lain in the "reactionary" nature of the "history-as-imagined" that was being presented at the time. Rather than responding to the history and art already existent and reinterpreting or re-evaluating it, Morrison believed that what was presented was "an attempt to defend a new idea or destroy and old one" (88). Morrison argued that this reactionary history based on the model of white history and art was superfluous, failing to ameliorate the depiction of the "life lived" by the persons in question and fruitless in providing Morrison with the kind of support that she needed at that time (88). Instead, the presentation served to contribute to her turmoil and add to the frustration she felt over the depictions of Black womanhood.



Hence, in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, while holding a much sought after job as senior editor at Random House, Morrison faced an identity crisis. While she did not become unsure of herself, she did feel a separation from herself and from the community, due to her disappointment with both the images of womanhood being portrayed by the community and with the depiction of history and communal identity presented by the community at the time. These disillusionments occurring in conjunction with her distance from home, her recent divorce, and the strain of rearing two small children may have served to heighten her disenchantment.

Arnold Farr in his essay, “Racism, Historical Ruins, and the Task of Identity Formation,” asserts, “it is possible for Blacks to oppress other Blacks by insisting that they conform to a set of criteria that determines one’s Blackness. Such an act may destroy an individual’s opportunity to flourish as a human being” (16). The pressure from the community to “conform to a set of criteria” (16), the “queen” persona, and the reactionary history and art were some of the factors which can be interpreted as having compelled Morrison towards the process of her own reclamation (198). Her initial writing can thus be read as a personal counter-narrative to the depiction of black womanhood promoted by the Movement of the late 1960’s and early 1970’s. She wrote at that time to assure herself that the self that she knew, rather than the image being presented, would exist somewhere, even if only “in a drawer” (199).

Her subsequent writings, after *The Bluest Eye*, while continuing to reclaim “the dead girl... her fingernails maybe in the first book; face and legs, perhaps, the second time,” also responded to what she saw as reactionary African-American history and art (199). *The Black Book* (1974) was her direct response to the historical presentation of

Black life depicted by the Movement. However, even after the publication of *The Black Book* Morrison continued to question the strength of the black community and saw a need to continue to “reclaim...the [black] world” even through the 1980’s (198). She believed that there had been a significant detrimental shift in the black community since her days in Lorain, Ohio, her hometown.

There were some things you could count on, some language, some shared assumptions. That doesn’t seem to be true now. Being black is something you have to choose to be. Choose it, no matter what your skin color...Something has happened. You see we are very close now to the society that is around us. I don’t mean that the structures that held us together are gone, but there are new things pressing in our lives- new modes, new music, new menus, television, you know, and its like going to the city...so I am a little bit alarmed by the changes...I keep thinking- the children are really in danger- our children. (Jones, Vinson interview 186)

Morrison invites us, then, as readers to be fully present as we enter into conversation with the narrative of her novels. She creates a safe space for us to “feel profoundly” (341), to hear the “sound” of the language she offers (231), to “love the characters,” and to present us with what was (74). She offers a historical representation of communal life of the sort that she recalls, leaving places within the text for the reader to decide how to personally assimilate that information during the experience of reading, and afterwards. “My criteria are very high in my books, very high because I’m trying to persuade and influence and clarify and examine and take on a journey black people” (“Living Memory” 177).

### ***The National Narrative***

The presentation of black culture by the larger society in America has contributed significantly to the disturbing changes Morrison notes above, in the “assumptions” no longer shared, and the “language” that is no longer able to be “count[ed] on (186).

Morrison argues in “The Official Story: Dead Man Golfing,” that the presentation of the Simpson case was driven by more than “media avarice and shamelessness” but by “the construction of a national narrative; an official story...A national narrative is born in and from chaos. Its purpose is to restore or imitate order and to minimize confusion about what is at stake and who will pay the price of dissension” (15- 16).

Although a national narrative can be readily discerned in the governmental manipulations which occur overtly in non-democratic societies, Morrison insightfully reveals the mechanisms for the construction of this same “official story” in our own nominally free society (15). While government intervention is not directly responsible for the creation of the narrative to which she refers, the media biases she discusses may reflect beliefs that function in a tacitly subcutaneous mode resulting in the production of belief (16).

The coverage of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, August 2005, from the bodies not shown, the *other* looters not highlighted and the heroes unmentioned, illustrates the effective workings of the national narrative. Jared Taylor, a writer for *The American Renaissance*, a racially biased website, in an article entitled “Africa in Our Midst: Lessons from Katrina” typified the misguided response many seem to have had to the apparent reactions of some of New Orleans’ residents to the hurricane. Ironically, though participating in a media presentation through his own writings and website, he believed that “media executives” sought to portray an inaccurate, liberalized view of blacks (2). He concludes his article with the following:

Our rulers and media executives will try to turn the story of Hurricane Katrina into yet another morality tale of downtrodden blacks and heartless whites, but pandering of this kind fools fewer and fewer people. Many whites will realize—some for the first time—that we have Africa in our

midst, that utterly alien Africa of road-side corpses, cruelty, and anarchy that they thought could never wash up on our shores. To be sure, the story of Hurricane Katrina does have a moral for anyone not deliberately blind. The races are different. Blacks and whites are different. When blacks are left entirely to their own devices, Western Civilization—any kind of civilization—disappears. And in a crisis, civilization disappears overnight.

The story of blacks depicted through the coverage of Hurricane Katrina was made official via print and visual media. Although Taylor and others read the coverage as “another morality tale,” the images presented in many of the news stories belied the “liberality” of the verbal narrative (4). The full realities of the horrors allowed, and sometimes encouraged to occur, in New Orleans during that time and in its wake, were not, and may never be depicted or revealed adequately. “Already scripted, fully spectacularized and riveting in its gazeability,” Taylor’s verbal imagery was reinforced in the visual media with only occasional dissent (16)<sup>3</sup>.

The crafting of a national narrative, while useful for the construction of a position of belief for an individual story or crisis, is also evidenced in more broad-based arenas. Whereas America as a nation has created many overtly positive national narratives, or common narratives<sup>4</sup> (freedom for all inhabitants, unquestioned equality, equal opportunity, etc.), one of the manifestly negative national narratives involves the African-American. Although the foundation for the national narrative depicting African-Americans<sup>5</sup> was evident in the initial response to the African, “virtually every quality in the Negro invited pejorative feelings,” slavery allowed for the cohesion of these “pejorative feelings” into an official story (Jordan 96). The subsequent conclusions about the inherently bestial nature of the African, “his heathenism and his appearance,” were used, in part, to rationalize the rightness of his enslavement (Jordan 96). Unfortunately, many contemporaries continue to respond to the African-American in a manner that

mirrors the initial response of the European, though the modern rejoinder is suppressed beneath the guise of multicultural acceptance. Despite the media's alacritous censure of many of the conspicuous public verbal and physical slippages, the continuous repetition and review of the offending words or actions, the glint in the eyes of the reporters, and the sensationalism of the given events when they occur, all lend evidence to the continuance of the sub-current of the narrative of subjugation. In addition, while some of the outrages that continue against African-Americans occur within a public and publicized sphere, the majority continue quietly, consistently and without comment.

Another factor of both the event based and the broad-based national narratives that is relevant to this discussion is that of commodification. "There [is] no competition between dollars and disinterested analysis...dollars w[i]n" (Morrison 15). Both the individual story (ie Brawley, Hill, Katrina, etc) and its packaging are sold to the public in the event-based national narrative for mercenary purposes. The continual visibility of a given story, the placement of it in papers, magazines and other modes, the scintillating photographs selected and/or crafted, all increase salability. It is, in fact, the packaging of it that "can mislead us into thinking that that the power of persuasion lies in the events themselves" and not in the "already understood and agreed upon interpretation of the events" ("Official Story" 17). When this paradigm is applied to historic America, the packaging of the presentation of the African through travel and personal accounts convinced many that the "power of persuasion" for his subsequent enslavement lay with the African himself (17). Yet profit was a considerable motive for the resulting narrative of subjugation.

Slavery was a lucrative business which greatly aided both in the fulfillment of the purpose of the first British colony in America (Jamestown, 1607) “to get rich,” and in the greater economic success of this American experiment (Cullen 34). Eric Williams argues, in *Capitalism and Slavery*, that the reason for Negro slavery “was economic, not racial; it had not to do with the color of the laborer but the cheapness of the labor. As compared with Indian and white labor, Negro slavery was eminently superior... The features of the man, his hair, color and dentifrice, his subhuman characteristics so widely pleaded, were only the *later* rationalizations to justify a simple economic fact: that the colonies needed labor and resorted of Negro labor because it was cheapest and best” (120, emphasis added). Without the use of the African, the consequential development of America as a land of opportunity and plenty would have been greatly diminished. However, “the African’s primary enemy” was not solely the “capitalism,” that drove their initial usage, as some argue, but the subsequent construction of the narrative of subjugation (Mbalia 93). Although capitalistic ventures continue to fuel some portion of continuing racial inequities, their fundamental and accustomed role within the narrative construct significantly influences their perpetuation. Thus, each subsequent event-based narrative involving the African American has been viewed through the lens of the established narrative construct of subjugation. The story (myth) continues.

I further argue that the presentation of the narrative of subjugation is imbricated within a larger historical National Narrative. Each individual event involving an African-American occurs within the context of a society that has historically, predetermined notions about the limitations and expectations of any black in America. While the methods of the presentation of the “official story” vary, dependent upon the given

historical setting, the conclusions of the analysis remain dreadfully consistent: guilt before innocence, infantile intractability, truculent amiability, scarcely civilized wilderness (15). The overt repetition of this “official story” (15) tacitly perpetuates the larger Narrative, the “telling and retelling of the mighty deeds of the white conquerors” (Long 214).

The spectacularized portrayals of both black enthrallment and black irrational incivility are juxtaposed with the consistent conveyance of the continuance of the story of the “white conqueror” (Long 214). In presenting the African-American as spectacle through visual, still, video, cinemagraphic, and live images within the context of a society in which white male hegemony persists, the perspectives of those both outside of the race and within are adversely impacted. Economic, educational and social oppressions, violent confrontations, insults and insinuations, and even the superstar-mammy syndrome,<sup>6</sup> can be traced in part to this flawed perspective. In the midst of these outrages, many persons of both races can believe themselves to be objective spectators. Yet many of us unwittingly participate in the perpetuation of the spectacularized image. Silent assent, unvoiced protests, voyeuristic purchases, research undone, discussions avoided, and a plethora of other means, allow for the continuance of the Narrative. Within the overtly multi-cultural American society in which we live the spectator, bystander, victim and witness are all deeply enmeshed participants within the spectacle itself.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, Long’s comments occur within the context of his explanation of America’s civil religion. He believes that “the *religion* of American people *centers*” on the “telling and retelling of the...deeds of the white conqueror” (214, emphasis added).

America's civil religion, by definition "transcends denomination and religious affiliation," encompassing all religions practiced on American soil while not directly guided by the principles of any (Murray 2). Although it encourages love for the republic and its virtues, and acknowledges individual understandings of God, it is not codified or formalized, instead, it is primarily evidenced through the Declaration of Independence and the rhetoric of governmental speeches; in short in the overtly positive narratives of America (Murray 2). Long's assertion of the narrow center of American civil religion reveals its prescriptive bent towards European narratives of conquest and exposes the seepage of the conquest narrative into those narratives we deem to be beneficial (the American Dream, liberty, equality, etc.) as well as into the educational system, media depictions, and various economic and social opportunities. Indeed, the interweaving of the European narrative with the civil religion discloses its informal yet pervasive impact. The coupling of the narrative of subjugation and the visual and other reinforcements of white domination results in both material and immaterial devastation of the African-American in terms of self-acceptance, and standards of beauty and success, in particular. The character of Pecola in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, illustrates this most profoundly.

Due to the conjunction of both narratives, Pecola is blinded to both her external and internal beauty. She epitomizes the spiritual, mental and social derailment that can occur as a result of the internalization of the subjugated image and the individual's acceptance of herself as conquered territory. Rejected by the majority of the adults with whom she interacts, both black and white, verbally abused by her male schoolmates, and living in an opprobrious home, she believes what she is told about herself directly and



indirectly: that she is ugly. She is simultaneously surrounded by a plethora of images which depict white women alone as both beautiful and successful. The successful conqueror in life, she is tacitly told, are those who are deemed to be beautiful. You are not one of them. Accepting of the assessment of her own worthlessness, she desires blue eyes, believing that the receipt of these eyes will make her beautiful and thereby improve the quality of her life, cause her to be accepted by others, and allow her to love herself.

It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if...those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different...if she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say, "Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We musn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes (46).

The conjunction of the two official stories, that of the African-American and conversely that of the white conqueror, effectively causes blacks to continue to be "invisible...figments of [white] imagination" (Long 216). In fact, Long concludes that blacks and Native Americans are made invisible through historical absentia, while the deeds of whites are valorized and emphasized (212-4). In the midst of the presentation of the "official story," the various historic individual and collective stories of African-Americans are both concealed and suppressed from the public and even from ourselves both spiritually, as we unconsciously accept some aspects of the misrepresentations, and tangibly, as accurate records are lost, documents destroyed and dossiers ignored both by the media and by ourselves (15).

In the introduction to Manning Marable's recent work *Living Black History: How Reimagining the African-American Past Can Remake America's Racial Future*, he explains that the impetus for his composition of the text was based on the loss and inaccessibility of Medgar Evers and C.L.R. James' works and documents. Although

Evers story was ostensibly told in the film “‘Ghosts of Mississippi’ ...Evers himself is only present as a ghost” in the film (4). Whereas the life of Evers’ assassin had elicited “several detailed studies...no scholarly biography existed of Medgar Evers” when Marable began his research (4). While the documentation of the stories of prominent African-Americans are deliberately lost or barred, as in the case of James and Evers, the undocumented stories of unknown blacks are also made invisible by the assumptive truths of the “official story” (15). Thus, the narrative of subjugation also involves the domination and/or suppression of documented and undocumented stories of African-Americans while seeking to present the tale of the African-American as an already conquered people.

Marable asserts that most Americans understand American history to be “a narrative about an inevitable series of conquests: over indigenous people, over frontiers, over boundaries and borders, over vast stretches of geography and even over space itself” (1). Since the majority of those who have achieved these conquests are European, this historical narrative is one of the means of the “telling and retelling of the mighty deeds of the white conquerors” (Long 214). When the narrative of subjugation is read through the lens of this historical perspective, the African-American is perceived as being one of the conquered “frontiers” (1). The depiction of the African-American as a vanquished people is perpetuated through the spectacle. The “spectacle...[utilizes the] signs, symbols, and images...which can smoothly parody thought” in order to “*control* the presumptions and postulates of the discussion” (“Official Story” 16, emphasis added). The locus of the integration of spectacle in terms of the African-American hinges on the term *control*. Whereas the spectacle is also liberally employed in the depictions of

conquest, the incipience of the spectacularization of the African-American has continued over centuries, in various shapes and guises, in order to “control...the discussion” and thereby perpetuate the societal placement of the majority of the black population at the bottom of both the economic and social ladders (“Official Story” 16).

Since the Narrative of conquest is subtly woven into the American historical narrative, and the civil religion, manifested by the overtly positive narratives, is an integral part of that historical perspective, the narrative of subjugation becomes part of this larger National Narrative through the spectacle. As a vehicle for both the depiction of the conqueror and the conquered, the spectacle reveals the double-sided nature of the Narrative. Although the expressly favorable discourse of the Narrative covers its seamy underside, the narrative of subjugation, the two narratives are not isolated but firmly integrated. Thusly, the delineation of the African-American as one who chooses and is deserving of oppression is subtly interwoven into the National Narrative discourse. For if America is a pluralistic, multicultural society in which all men are viewed as equals, and ours is a history of conquest, then surely *all* are freely able to pursue life, liberty, happiness and the accruements of the American Dream? Those who do not aspire to dream do not achieve, and those who do not achieve do not deserve to attain any measure of success.

### ***The Counter Narrative***

All eight of Toni Morrison’s novels deftly incorporate the adverse effects of this Narrative on the African -American community of focus, and specifically within the life of the central protagonist. In particular, Morrison illustrates how the black community in general, is able to cope with the barriers which restrict and threaten to choke them in their

daily lives by her focus on “history as life lived” (88). In each novel, Morrison presents the vision of the Narrative that is historically relevant as a contextual backdrop to the focus on the lives of individual characters. In various critical moments in the texts, she interweaves the impact of the National Narrative framework into the foreground of the novel. She thus brings the historical past into our historical present. If, therefore, we read Morrison’s novels in historical chronology, the presentation and impact of the Narrative and the characters’ response to it unfolds throughout the key periods covered in her novels.

While the foundational goals of the National Narrative are consistent, continued domination on the one hand and subjugation on the other, and the primary vehicle used for Narrative dissemination and perpetuation is the spectacle, the Narrative is not static. Similar to Morrison’s novelistic narratives, the National Narrative is shaped and developed by the various characters who participate in it, those who consciously or unconsciously impose it and those upon whom it is imposed, and by the historical circumstances and locale. Thus, the shape of the Narrative evidenced in post-emancipation Ohio, for example, as depicted in *Beloved*, differs from that of the post-Reconstruction New York, milieu of *Jazz*. Although both black female characters battle poverty and daily biases, in part, the limited number of work options, the differing communal structure, the economic flow, the impact of political policies, etc. affecting Sethe, in the 1860’s, in comparison to Violet, in the 1920’s, impact the trajectory of their lives.

Whereas the only three of Morrison’s novels generally considered historical are those in her trilogy, *Beloved*, *Jazz* and *Paradise*, I argue that each of her novels can be

viewed as historical novels. As a fiction writer whose novels are based in the historical, resonance between Morrison's one non-fiction historical project and her novels would illuminate a reading of her prose. It is significant then that her novels are based on pieces of memory. "Pieces [of memory] (and only the pieces) are what begin the creative process for [her]" ("Memory" 386). Both her prose and her historical project are grounded on pieces of memory and/or memorabilia. Morrison used pieces of personal memory as the basis for her first four novels and a few of the pieces of memorabilia incorporated into *The Black Book* as the foundation for her historical trilogy: *Beloved*, *Jazz* and *Paradise*.

While traditional history books present the feats of extraordinary men, Morrison's history book "concentrate(s) on life as lived...by the people: the anonymous men and women who speak in conventional histories only through their leaders" (Morrison, "Rediscovering" 15). In opposition to the formalized linear structure historians' use to present documentation, *The Black Book* is composed in a non-traditional fashion similar to a quilt. It is comprised of variegated pieces of memorabilia and recollections, put together by collectors, "people who had the original raw material documenting our life" rather than by writers (15). With artistic liberty, non-print material was incorporated as well, based on the verbal "rememories" of various persons (*Beloved*, 36). Hence, *The Black Book* is a (re)collection of pieces of memory, documented and undocumented.

In Barbara Christian's essay, "*Somebody Forgot to Tell Somebody Something*": African-American Women's Historical Novels," she made note of the meditation on the past, in Morrison's first four novels. Referring to Morrison and others, she posited that "as a group...African-American women writers had...previously recalled the past.

However, generally speaking, they had reached back to the period of their mother's lives, from the 1920's to the 1960's... Although [their] novels ha[d] used history within the context of the present and the future...most of them would not have been properly called historical novels" (327-8). Indeed, Morrison's first four novels, do not conform to the traditional definition of the historical novel in "recall[ing] a life which no longer exists and recreat[ing] societies that are apparently past" (328). Instead, they are based on the same method of historical recollection as employed in *The Black Book*, the incorporation of documented and undocumented pieces of memory and memorabilia.

Based on the similarity of methodological approaches between Morrison's historical project and her fiction, I argue that *The Black Book* illustrates Morrison's approach to the recollection of history and that *all* of Morrison's novels can, therefore, be viewed as historical works. Each one is based upon pieces of the past, both documented, for the trilogy, and undocumented, for the first four novels. While *The Black Book* is simply a collection of "pieces" with "no order, no chapters, and no major themes," Morrison's novels can be seen as a narrativized version of *The Black Book*, with the historical pieces used as a basis for the creation of the narrative ("Black World" 89).

Since *The Black Book* was Morrison's alternative to the presentations of history generally offered by the black community of the 1970's, and thereby her means of responding to the American historical narrative of conquest, her novels can be thus viewed as continuation of her antiphon. Her works not only present the reader with an intimate view of black culture through a specific community, but they also offer an alternative historical presentation to that of the Narrative; they comprise a *responsive* rather than a *reactive* counter-narrative. Instead of merely "invert[ing] European ways of

thinking [or] react[ing] to white racism,” they focus on the interior lives of the characters lived within the context of the National Narrative (Peach 11). Additionally, Morrison chooses not to “explain anything to anybody else” in her texts (Bakerman interview 38). She assumes that “if [she] c[an] understand it...that other Black people c[an] understand it and that...white people, if it was any good, would understand it also” (38).

Her approach is consistent with “the goal of her fiction... [which] has been not just to recover [pieces] of African-American history but to choose which [pieces] are useful for “the village” or community” (Peterson 202). Morrison’s desire to “put together a thing that got close to the way we really were” is evidenced both in *The Black Book* and through her novels. Through those projects, Morrison revises African-American history and presents black life as lived by everyday people. She deliberately sets her novels in historical settings in order to “reclaim the world” she once knew, and present *that* world to the reader as an alternative to the presentations which surround him/her.

Therefore, Morrison combines through her novels two of the means that Marable proposes as a stratagem for “undermining” the type of “color-blind racism” that typifies the contemporary mode of the National Narrative; “the living power of black heritage and our narratives of resistance” (Marable xx). Through her historical presentation of the communal and individual resistances integral in the lives lived by ordinary people, she illustrates the “power of black heritage” within the context of the specific narrative of the text (Marable xx).

Thus, Morrison’s desire to engage the reader in conversation with her texts has both a wider and a narrower goal than can be seen initially. In the drawing of the reader into her texts, causing him/her to “love the characters” and care about what happens to

them, she vicariously *involves* him/her in the historical past in a way in which no traditional historical record ever could (Koenen interview 74). Her deliberate efforts to strip the reader of mental defenses and preconceived notions, allowing him/her to be fully present within the reading, facilitates ternary participation in the creation of counter-narratives: his/her own personal counter-narrative, that of the characters, and that of the Morrison text in its entirety. The intimate engagement with her texts that she strives for effectively immerses each reader into the realm of Narrative impact present in the novel encouraging self-reflection, and empathy with the characters. Although the reader's juxtaposition with the effects of the Narrative within the world of the novel is transient, and the love Morrison evokes from the reader is for fictional characters, the resonance of her novels awakens an awareness of the "history as life lived" of the characters and the disparity between the emphasis on external appearance and "what one is" (88). Yet the transience of the reader's interaction with Morrison's novels is arguable as many of Morrison's novels end with a "ambiguous moment[s]" thus allowing "the story [to] go on and on in the reader's mind and heart" even after the book is closed (Cutter 61).

***Be(ing): Speaking, Shouting, Sharing***

Our Revolutions must be different  
 Reshaping landscapes of hope  
 Remembering our beginnings  
 Marina Ama Omowale Maxwell,  
 "Our Revolutions Must Be Different"

It is significant that *Beloved* is the first book in a chronological reading of Morrison's novels for two interrelated reasons, primarily. I posit that the titular significance of the text reveals two of the critical areas of impact of the National Narrative: being and loving. A cursory analysis of the title reveals this more fully. The



title can be read as involving a multiplicity of calls, both to the reader and to the characters in the various novels: we, the readers, are called/named the beloved, called to Be, called to love and called to be loved. In light of the aforementioned goals for Morrisonian readers, the calls of *Beloved* to the readership are telling. We are first addressed: Beloved. And then instructed: Be. Love. Be Loved. We, the Beloved, are called as we read Morrison's texts *to be*, who and what we are, *to love*, ourselves and others, and *to be loved*, let others love us. The confabulatory interaction she seeks to achieve is the ingress for the hearing and answering of the calls of her texts.

Given the centrality of slavery in the foundation of the National Narrative and the continuance of the narrative of conquest, the calls of Morrison's only novel focused on slavery, present a powerful message. Chattel slavery has been abolished, yet the multilayered call offered to the characters in *Beloved*, and to contemporary Morrisonian readership remains the same, the reclamation of our freed selves through love. These same calls are also issued to each of the central characters in the other three novels that I will discuss, *Jazz*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Paradise*. I argue that as these characters become aware of these tacit calls and answer them through the vicissitudes of their lives, they begin, they enter or they complete a journey of freeing, claiming, and accepting themselves. Each of their lives can be divided into three imbricated phases toward the path of freedom during which they are told, they view and/or they experience the steps involved in the concomitant facets of (be)ing, loving, and being loved. Their responses to the various overt and covert intrusions of the National Narrative in the segment of their life journey presented in the novel allows them the opportunity to claim and accept themselves, if they so choose.

The necessity of the aspect of (be)ing for the character is not meant to imply that each character begins as a non-being. None of the characters have accepted the animalistic image of themselves that the Narrative portrays, implies, and seeks to achieve. Instead, they are existing and subsisting, as they rely on small pleasures to take them through this life as it is. Sethe, for example, needed to have some small growing thing with her in her slave owner's kitchen in order to make it *seem* like hers, so that the work that she did there day in and day out, though drudgery, did not become mind-numbing. "She who had to bring a fistful of salisfy into Mrs. Garner's kitchen every day just to be able to work in it, feel like some part of it was hers, because she wanted to love the work she did, to take the ugly out of it" (*Beloved* 22). This life of subsistence is not without resistance. Since the aim of the Narrative is domination, endurance is its own form of resistance. Continuing to strive, even for the maintenance of the *status quo* is a verification of intransigence. Therefore, *Tar Baby's* Ondine and Sydney, though servants for the Streets, perform their jobs with excellence in order to satisfy their own standards and not just to please their employers. Yet the constancy of daily resistance without the apparent amelioration of one's circumstances can be arduous. In order to transform this black and white life into one of color and vitality, each character needs *to be* who and what he/she is rather than tacitly accepting the role or assignment of identity imposed by others.

Each of the central characters under discussion for this dissertation has been distanced from an acceptance of him/herself due to what I term a *central trauma*, which occurred in their past personal history. For example, Sethe's central trauma is her mother's abandonment and subsequent murder. When she looks through the pile of

bodies to try to identify her mother's she begins to stutter; her tongue is unable to voice clearly all that her heart experiences. Violet's foundational trauma also involves her mother. Violet finds her mother's twisted body in the bottom of the well she threw herself into and is scarred by that discovery and loss for many years. None of the protagonists desire to speak about the past because of the pain involved in the telling. As Sethe states in *Beloved*, "every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost. She and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable" (*Beloved* 58).

Although the recollection of the past is painful, when it occurs within the context of a caring community it can serve to free the characters from the weight of the silence, which crushes their spirits. Violet, the protagonist in *Jazz*, experiences this lifting through her talks with Alice Manfred, the aunt of the girl whom Violet's husband has killed. Violet thus develops part of her own counter-narrative of truth; without this the character may rely on distractions to make life livable. Even Sethe in *Beloved* eventually shares some of her stories with Beloved, the embodiment of her slain daughter, and Denver, her living child. As Cheryl A. Wall asserts in her text *worrying the line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition*, various images in *Beloved* inspire the characters to share their stories (95). Wall's insightful focus on the instrumentality of imagery in Morrison's works is useful here, as the images that evoke Sethe's stories counter the spectacle of the Narrative.

The counter-narrative, however, involves more than just the recognition of, and a gleaning from personal histories through speech. Two other communal aspects of the development of the counter-narrative are critical for the processes of claiming and

acceptance to occur. While part of the basis of the civil religious base of the National Narrative encourages the expression of dominance through fierce independence and “rugged individualism” *outside* of community, the character needs to learn to express his/her own independent gifts *within* the context of his/her community (Hoover 2).

Morrison discusses this idea of the need for public yet private space in “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation”. She writes,

There were spaces and places in which a single person could enter and behave as an individual within the context of the community. A small remnant of that you can see sometimes in Black churches where people shout. It is a very personal grief and a personal statement done among people you trust. Done within the context of the community, therefore safe. And while the shouter is performing some rite that is extremely subjective, the other people are performing as a community in protecting that person. So you have a public and a private expression going on at the same time. (339)

The performance of a simultaneous public and private expression is what the character needs to learn in order to continue the process of claiming him/herself. While the private expression of gifts or grief is important, the public expression of personal gifts is also important for the growth of the individual and that of the community. Through the process of the confrontation of their personal histories, the character *speaks* publicly his/her private pain, similar to the interaction Morrison describes above, but the *shouting* aspect of that expression also needs to occur.

When Baby Suggs calls the community of Bluestone Road to the Clearing, one of the first things she calls them to do is a shouting expression of their pain. They shout through their dancing bodies, their silent tears, their pained laughs, and their voices. “It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced,

women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath” (*Beloved* 88).

The application of this aspect of the claiming process also moves beyond *speaking* of the pain and *shouting* to express it, to *sharing*. Just as Morrison during her personal crisis turned to writing in order to reclaim herself and the black world, so too each character has to find the area where he/she can creatively express him/herself in order to fully heal. Without a venue for creative sharing within the community, the energy which should be devoted towards the outlet, is turned inwards and the character can become destructive to self and others, like Sula in *Sula* and Pauline Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*. Both Sula and Pauline are limited, by the Narrative response to their gender and race, to the few options open to them for employment. Although Sula earns a college degree and Pauline does not, the available vocational opportunities are similar, each one involving subjection on some level and restricting the free expression of self: marriage, prostitution, dancing/prostitution, or some form of servile labor. Restricted in occupational pursuits, Sula turns to casual sex with various men of the neighborhood including her only friend’s spouse, leading to the destruction of her friendship and her own eventual death. Despite the limited satisfaction Pauline finds in her work as a maid, the marked contrast between the opulence of her work environment, which resembles that of the fantasy world she views in movies, and the increasing squalor of her own home, encourages her verbal destruction of her spouse, Cholly, and her continued rejection of her children. Her relational derelictions eventual contribute to the complete demise of both Cholly and her children.

***Loving: Learning to be a Daughter***

Jadine, the central character in *Tar Baby*, struggles throughout the novel with the question of *being*. Her success as a model and a student notwithstanding, she flees from seemingly idyllic circumstances in France to her home, when her encounter with an African woman derails her already fluctuant self-perception. Although never directly addressing the reason for her sudden arrival, throughout her stay with her family she focuses solely on her own care and comfort, continuing her participation in the superficial interactions that mark household relations. As servants of the Streets, her surrogate parents, her aunt and uncle, have always served her in a manner similar to that of their employers. She sits at the table with the Streets while Sidney, her uncle, serves her as well as his employers, Valerian and Margaret Street. She sleeps in the main house while her aunt and uncle live in the small quarters adjoining but separate from the home. She has been educated at leading institutions while her aunt and uncle poured all of their savings into the provisions for her education. Yet, she seems not to regard as her responsibility, the status of, or the care for her aging aunt and uncle or to recognize their desperate need for rest. Towards the end of the novel, her aunt Ondine gently shares sage advice; “Jadine, a girl has got to be a daughter first. She have to learn that. And if she never learns how to be a daughter, she can’t never learn how to be a woman...a daughter is a woman that cares about where she come from and takes care of them that took care of her...I don’t want you to care about me for my sake. I want you to care about me for yours” (*Tar Baby* 281).

The aspect of loving that the characters need to learn hinges on their understanding of caring for those who have cared for them, the principle of reciprocity.

While the knowledge and expression of their (be)ing is important, the aspect of reciprocity helps to keep the character from focusing solely on him/herself, like Jadine. The unselfish love, which underlies acts of reciprocity and its significance in Morrison, is most clearly demonstrated through one of the central characters in *Song of Solomon*, Pilate. Viewing love as a commitment to treat each one with respect and concern, Pilate's dying words underlie her position in the novel and in Morrison's oeuvre, "I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would have loved 'em all. If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more" (*Song of Solomon* 340).

Ayi Kwei Armah in his book, *Two Thousand Seasons*, highlights the importance of reciprocity in the continuance of the life cycle, "Receiving, giving, giving, receiving, all that lives is twin. Who would cast the spell of death, let him separate the two" (Armah xii). Pilate does not "separate the two" and she therefore provides healing for many of the other characters in the novel. Yet, she does not base her generosity on what she receives from others individually. As a woman without a navel, she is rejected, ridiculed and "isolated from her people...denied... partnership in marriage, confessional friendship, and communal religion" (149). Rather than retaliating against those who reject her as a freak, Pilate's giving stems from her rootedness in the "preferable kind of behavior" that her father and brother had taught her when she was growing up, and in her posthumous relationship with her father who is her mentor (150-1). She reciprocates the love she is shown as a daughter by her father, and the love initially given to her by her brother, not merely to her own family but also to all those around her. She thus stands tall and fixed in whatever neighborhood she finds herself, is a powerful presence in the text, and towers "larger than life" in all of Morrison (McKay interview 146).

Through her acceptance of each person wherever he/she is, emotionally, spiritually and otherwise, and because of her “alien’s compassion for troubled people,” Pilate is also the spiritual embodiment of a Morrisonian tree (*Song of Solomon* 150). Tall, straight, and angular, Pilate is similar in spirit and manner to Brother, the named tree of the Sweet Home plantation in *Beloved*; she shelters, protects, comforts, encourages and stands, rooted firmly in her cultural heritage, and exhibiting the behavior she was taught when she was growing up. Even her home, which seems to be “rising rather than settling into the ground,” is open to anyone in need as a haven for rest, refreshment of the spirit, or shelter (*Song of Solomon* 27).

The mythic black person of the Narrative is in constant need of civilizing, of monetary aid, of guidance and of discipline and direction. Hence, the pressure on the character to focus on him/herself, stems in part from the structures and institutions which surround him/her, that encourage and create dependence while concomitantly decrying it. The means and the mechanisms for success are often hampered and the most readily available option offered is a handout. The influence of this crafted mentality on the character limits his/her capacity for the kind of love a daughter can express.

### ***Sight to Insight: The Three Phases of the Journey***

#### ***Phase I***

In the process of freeing, claiming and accepting him /herself the character moves through three phases variously described in each novel. The use of the term phases here is not meant to imply the characters’ awareness of moving through a series of clearly demarked steps, instead it refers to the similarities in the various stages which occur in the life of each character in the course of his/her journey of reclamation. The names of



the phases or stages of movement and growth, the particular circumstances each one encounters, the ramifications in each area of impact (physical, mental, emotional), and the historical realities which formulate the context, all vary in each novel. However, consistency lies in the trajectory of each protagonists' life. They are each on a journey from fracture and subsistence to the recognition of the focal point of their disjunction and their learning "how to survive *whole* in a world where we are all of us...*victims* of something" (Bakerman interview 40). The various facets of the journey each one embarks upon are what I seek to establish here.

In the first phase of the journey, the characters is generally struggling with their sense of self, suppressing painful personal histories and seeking quotidian management. They do not seek to delve into their past or analyze the present too closely. Instead, their daily routines encourage spiritual repression, and they may believe that change is hopeless. Focused fully on their life circumstances they are unable to "squeeze from them a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism," instead they allow their experiences to dull the edge of hope and quell the spark of belief (Ellison 78). Thus, in *Jazz*, Joe Trace, though aware of the relational loss he and Violet have suffered, she eventually stops speaking to him, he feels helpless to improve their situation. His eventual depression indicates his resignation to the circumstances, though he remains unaware of the issues and circumstances which contribute to Violet's silence.

The creativity, love, and sense of being of the characters are also suppressed, repressed and oppressed by the impact of the Narrative and their unconscious response to it. Having experienced the effects of the Narrative and the racism that inherently accompanies it; they draw back in fear from reaching their hand out to the offer of life

within their grasp. For example, Paul D. says that in slavery he learned to love things that were small. “Picked the tiniest stars out of the sky to own...grass blades, salamanders, spiders, woodpeckers, beetles, a kingdom of ants” (*Beloved* 162). In this phase, their entire lives may be lived small and in secret.

### ***Phase II***

In phase II, the characters move from the perspective of being an unwitting spectacle to an awareness, on some level, of their perceived position as such. This second phase is invoked by what I term a *personal misery*. The incident is a misery to them because it gives them a sudden realization of how they have been negatively perceived through the eyes of another or others. The involuntary circumstances of the incident shift their perspective, even just for that moment, from their own to that of another. They see themselves from the perspective of another and the image is startling.

The incident is personal because the shift in perspective that occurs is of significance only to the characters. Although it does not occur in isolation, at least one other person is present, the shift, the revelation, occurs within the characters’ mind. The revelation creates emotional and mental pain for them as they recognize and cringe at the perception of themselves. The characters move in this moment from sight, seeing the world only through their own vision and perception of things, to insight, perceiving at least themselves with an awareness of the views of others.

For example, Sethe’s personal misery occurs when she is outside on the grounds of Sweet Home, the site of her enslavement. Schoolteacher and his nephews, who arrive after the death of Sethe’s owner, Mr. Garner, have been called to set things aright on the plantation, as many whites think it is wrong for Mrs. Garner to be alone with all those “niggers.” Although schoolteacher speaks softly and spits into handkerchiefs, he is a

white man who fully believes in and is deeply invested in the National Narrative. Sethe has been misled by his seemingly gentle manners into thinking that he may be different.

The conversation she overhears significantly alters her perceptions.

He was talking to his pupils and I heard him say, "Which one are you doing?" And one of the boys said, "Sethe." That's when I stopped because I heard my name, and then I took a few steps to where I could see what they was 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. I was about to turn around when I heard him say, "no, no. That's not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up."

(*Beloved* 193)

The involuntary pain of the misery encourages him/her to eventually face the trauma of confronting the past history that he/she has suppressed. This mental movement is demonstrated through the physical actions which follow the encounter. Each character moves backwards and/or towards the person or place they view as a haven. In *Tar Baby*, Jadine flies back home to her family, Aunt Ondine and Uncle Sidney. In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman flies out of his home and ends up walking on a street in which he seems to be going backwards.<sup>8</sup> In *Beloved*, Sethe literally steps backwards, from schoolteacher and the nephews' analysis. In *Jazz*, Violet steps backwards into a crack of time.<sup>9</sup> And in *Paradise*, Consolata falls back into her devotion to Mary Magna after her affair with Deacon comes to a close.

### ***Phase III***

I think my goal is to see really and truly of what these people are made, and I put them in situations of *great duress and pain*, you know, I "call their hand". And, then when I see them in life threatening circumstances or see their hand called, then I know who they are...If I see a person on his way to work everyday doing what he is supposed to do...then I know that.

But what if something really terrible happens...so that it is always a push towards the abyss somewhere to see what is remarkable, because that's the way I find out what is heroic. That's the way I know why such people survive, who went under, who didn't, what the civilization was, because quiet as it's kept much of our business, our existence here, has been grotesque.

(Toni Morrison- Jones/Vinson interview 180, emphasis added)

The *main Misery*<sup>10</sup> of the text moves the character into the third and final phase of their journey, speculation. This phase does not mark a decisive conclusion to the journey of the character but a significant beginning in the process of freeing, claiming, and accepting him/herself. Phases one and two merely prepare the character to enter phase three, when some action is required on his/her part. Although personal miseries are brief and affect only the main character, and are experienced while the character is alone, main Miseries involve the entire community, occur over a longer period of time, and require the participation of all to be resolved. While the community is peripherally involved in the personal misery by supporting the characters if they seek help, they are intimately involved in the main Misery as the characters' personal issue(s) become public.

Main Miseries are initiated by the displacement of one or more characters. In each case, one or more of the persons involved in the action of the Misery is moved out of or moves beyond their accustomed role or place. In *Jazz*, for example, Joe carries out an action, hunting, in an inapplicable area, the City, seeking prey that is off limits, a woman, and ends up out of place, at a party for young lovers. Instead of confronting and sorting out his conflated thoughts of Dorcas and his deranged estranged mother, he allows his confused merging of the two to drive his desperate actions. He shoots Dorcas in order to

stop what he interprets as her abandonment of him and to end his pain. His violent response, however, only serves to heighten and extend his suffering.

The aftermath of the central action of the Misery, also part of the process of the main Misery, always reveals the disjuncture previously hidden within the communal structure. In *Jazz*, Joe's murder of Dorcas, the main Misery, and his wife's, Violet's, attempt to slash a dead Dorcas' face with a butcher knife at the funeral, the aftermath, both open the way for the strife within the hearts of the community to be revealed. The "something evil [that] ran the streets" (9) was released in part and/or demonstrated by Violet's action and is connected to the "rage molten" that slips out from time to time (*Jazz* 16). The communal division revealed by the main Misery in each novel, exposes the need for healing, not just for the individual character but also for the community as a whole. The recognition and desire to resolve the schism is vital for the healing of the character to take place, because, in this phase, the character turns to the community for aid in working out the pain of her/his past. In order for the community to provide her/him with the type of love that he/she needs in this phase, however, the community needs to be made aware of its own need. Only the main Misery necessitates the giving of unselfish love. In this phase is it necessary for this type of love to be given by all of the members of the community directly affected by the main Misery, rather than just the visionary character, for healing to take place.

The main Misery always evokes painful memories from the past. The character is confronted with an opportunity to review the past, glean from it, and start afresh. It is after the occurrence of the main Misery that the central character finds or encounters a confidant with whom he/she can continue the development of his/her counter-narrative.

Although the personal misery caused the character to begin to consider plumbing the depths of the painful past, the main Misery's involvement of another, accelerates the concrete growth of a counter-narrative.

The mere knowledge of the personal past and full confrontation with his/her own response to it is not what results in a change in the characters' behavior, however. The behavior of the characters change as a result of the binary concomitant processes of discovery and recovery, learning, and exchanging of old ways for new. These processes gradually occur during the shouting and sharing interactions with the other members of the community. As the characters are able to know and thus express their private selves more fully within the public sphere the oppressive weight of the Common Narrative can begin to lift. Thus, in *Paradise* the women of the Convent, through a series of sessions of shouting and sharing on the basement floor, are able to begin to move forward and are finally freed from the chains that bind them.

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<sup>1</sup> The language of black people that Morrison refers to here is not defined through a particular vernacular mode or type. As is evident through even a cursory reading of Morrison's texts, her prose is not what some may label as "black English". Her emphasis is on the sound of the language rather than the "mechanics." She states, "the part of the writing process that I fret is getting the sound without some mechanics that would direct the reader's attention to the sound" (Conversations 124). Katherine Bassard's cogent critic of Gates "insistence" on the "blackness of the tongue" as representative of "a sign of black difference" adds clarity to Morrison's approach. Bassard's reformulation of the vernacular is the understanding which I attribute to Morrison. "A vernacular...is an index to the sites of domination and resistance within a sociocultural sphere and therefore is not reducible to merely linguistic constructs" (18).

<sup>2</sup> Morrison explains that she had wanted *Sula* to begin as all of her other novels do, in medias res. However, following the advice of her editor she worked on providing an entry point for the reader that he encouraged. She admits having had some resistance to the concept of the "lobby" and struggled with what she then and now is dissatisfied with ("Unspeakable Things Unspoken" 32).

<sup>3</sup> Although there were many journalists and reporters sympathetic to the overt biases which were rampant throughout the Katrina ordeal, much of the visual coverage was uncontextualized and therefore misinterpreted by some. Also, the horrific numbers of atrocities perpetrated against the helpless was superficially approached in the visual media and insignificantly weighed in the American coverage of the event. Now, in 2007, the continuing tragedies and aftermath only rarely merit the nightly news.

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<sup>4</sup> Common narratives are those narratives in operation in America which serve as a welcome to all. Offering indubitably beneficial ends, promoted through various means, they are often viewed by outsiders as an accurate assessment of the American nation. It is on the basis of these common narratives that many immigrants chose to come to America, my parents included.

<sup>5</sup> I will henceforth refer to this national narrative as the *narrative of subjugation*.

<sup>6</sup> During an undergraduate Mellon Fellowship conference, I was privileged to be involved in a session led by Nellie McKay, in which she cautioned us, as aspiring professors, to beware of allowing ourselves to fall into the trap of becoming the “superstar” on our particular campuses. She explained that when the presence of minority faculty on a campus was scarce, some other faculty members may treat us as “superstars”, seeking our opinions and advice about any and every issue related to minority peoples and requiring our presence and involvement in minority affairs. Over the course of time I have witnessed the verity of her sage words and see some aspects of its broader scope as well. I now realize, in part, that the “superstar” scenario places both the faculty member of focus and the larger minority population within a fixed space. In viewing the minority professor as a servile anomaly and the larger minority population as incomprehensible, the spectacle continues. The mammy aspect of the syndrome occurs in those situations in which the black female colleague specifically, is involved in a professional or non-professional community in which she is one of few minorities. It has been my experience, that she (I) is then relegated to the realm of service and looked to, called upon and expected to “mother” all those who cross her path. Anger, frustration, and upset often occur when she vocalizes her refusal to fill this role.

<sup>7</sup> In Lynn M. Itagaki’s cogent presentation, “Unmassing the Media, Securing the Suburbs: From the 1992 Los Angeles Uprisings to post 9/11,” given at the November 2006, MLA convention, she noted the significance of the distinctions among viewers, bystanders, witnesses and spectators. Her analysis initiated my revision of the various perspectives involved in the spectator aspect of the National Narrative.

<sup>8</sup> When Milkman leaves his home after his first personal misery, his new knowledge of the cause of his parent’s hostile relationship, he ends up walking on a street where everyone else seems to be going “in the direction he was coming from” (78). Although “the sidewalk on the other side of the street was completely empty” more and more people were crowded onto the same side of the street (78).

<sup>9</sup> Although Violet suppresses her grief over her mother’s suicide underneath a veneer of hard work and feistiness, when “mother hunger” hits her during menopause, she begins to lose the self-control that had formally served to keep her externally balanced. While she also exhibits “public craziness”, and “private cracks,” in one- on-one interactions with her husband, Joe, and with her customers on occasion, only she is aware of the way in which she sees the day when she awakens in the morning, “as a string of small, well-lit scenes” (22). She envisions the activities which will occur in her day but “does not see herself doing these things. She sees them being done” (22). Only Violet knows of the disassociation that is occurring in her mind between her activities, her words and her lived reality. Only she realizes that her rootedness has been eroded, “in truth, there [was] no foundation at all”(23).

<sup>10</sup> I formulated the term main Misery from the significance of the central event of *Beloved* which Morrison calls the Misery. Each of Morrison’s texts includes a crucial traumatic event enmeshing the entire community. Similar to the Misery of *Beloved*, main Miseries often involve violence against children as in *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Tar Baby* and *Beloved* or against women as in *Jazz* and *Paradise*. Only the main Misery in the *Song of Solomon*, the fight Milkman is involved in in Shalimar, Virginia comprises violence among men.

## Chapter Two

### “Beating back the past:” The Call to Wholeness in *Beloved*

Last Sabbath, after preaching in the city prison, Cincinnati, through the kindness of the Deputy Sheriff, I was permitted to visit the apartment of that unfortunate woman, concerning whom there has been so much excitement during the last two weeks.

I found her with an infant in her arms only a few months old and observed that it had a *large bunch* on its forehead. I inquired the cause of the injury. She then proceeded to give a detailed account of her attempt to kill her children...

I asked if she was not excited almost to madness when she committed the act. No, she replied, I was as cool as I now am; and would much rather kill them at once, and thus end their sufferings, than have them taken back to slavery, and be murdered by piece-meal. She then told of the story of her wrongs. She spoke of her days of suffering, of her nights of unmitigated toil, while the bitter tears coursed their way down her cheeks, and fell in the face of the innocent child as it looked smiling up, little conscious of the danger and probable suffering that awaited it.

As I listened to the facts, and witnessed the agony depicted in her countenance, I could not but exclaim, Oh, how terrible is irresponsible power, when exercised over intelligent beings!...We are frequently told that Kentucky slavery is very innocent. If these are its fruits, where it exists in a mild form, will some one tell us what we may expect from its more objectionable features?

#### *The American Baptist*

On February 12, 1856, a small article, part of which is quoted above, appeared in an Ohio periodical, “The American Baptist,” entitled “A Visit To The Slave Mother Who Killed Her Child.” Although the interviewer, a preacher from a Cincinnati seminary, does not overtly state his motive for his inquiry into Margaret Garner’s<sup>1</sup> case, his presentation of the story reveals his bent. He evidently seeks to use Margaret Garner’s sensationalized story to further the abolitionist cause by presenting it as additional evidence of the atrocities resulting from slavery.



Thus, no descriptive image of Margaret Garner is incorporated into his article. He begins, in fact, by only mentioning her as the bearer of her child; “I found her with an infant in her arms only a few months old” (1). There is no record of his recognition of the need to seek *her* permission for the interview. He possibly assumed that the only allowance necessary was granted by the Deputy Sheriff who through “kindness” permitted him entry to the slave mother’s apartment (1). While the Sheriff, as the guard at the door, was the one to allow him physical entry, Mrs. Gaines was the one from whom he should have requested personal entry as he sought details concerning a difficult period of her life. He begins by inquiring as to the cause of an injury on the infant’s head, Margaret, graciously, responds and shares her account and ratiocination.

The details of her presentation of her attempts to kill her children and “end their sufferings,” rather than having them taken back to slavery and “murdered by piece-meal,” are shared early on in the article, paragraph three (1). “The story of her wrongs,” however, which she evidently relates with passion and much emotion, is encapsulated in two sentences (1): “She then told of the story of her wrongs. She spoke of her days of suffering, of her nights of unmitigated toil, while the bitter tears coursed their way down her cheeks, and fell in the face of the innocent child” (1). The emphasis, even in the summary, is placed not on Margaret’s face, but on the “face of the innocent child” on whom the mother’s bitter tears of recollection fell (1). The interviewer’s presentation of Mrs. Garner’s agonizing reality, which drove her act of desperation, indicates that his predetermined perspective of her remained unchanged even after the testimony of her sufferings in slavery.

While he recognizes that the fault for the tragedy lay at the feet of the heinous institution of slavery, that even in mild forms could produce such “fruits,” he fails to see that his revealed perspective of Mrs. Garner and her mother-in-law, whom he also interviews, are at the root of both the institution and its “fruit” (1).

Never once during this article is Margaret Garner named. She is depicted instead as a singular representative of all of slavery. She is referred to as, “the slave mother,” and as “that unfortunate woman” (1). She is generally categorized as one of the “intelligent beings” over whom “irresponsible power” is exercised (1). She is said to have a “vigorous intellect” and “much energy of character” (1). Nevertheless, a presentation of her as fully human, as an individual with the rights and feelings of any other, is not conveyed in this article. She remains a nameless, faceless, pawn in an execrable institution. She is presented as a personification of the abominable “fruit” that can result from the institution of slavery but not as an autonomous, named person with an individual identity (1). Thus, this presentation contains two seemingly antinomic facets: the furtherance of the abolitionist cause and the affirmation of the non-being of the slave. While the institution is derided, the slave as an individual is not supported. The “slave mother” becomes one of a slave agglomerate, without name or personhood (1).

The significance of the anonymity of Mrs. Garner and the subsuming of her personhood within an aggregate group is in its linkage to Narrative discourse. The National Narrative during this period was the justification used for the perpetuation of slavery. Each strand of the Narrative presentation hinged on the encompassing of the individual within the group. Continuing the ethnocentric nature of the initial response to the African before slavery, the rationalizations for the complete debasement of African

people through slavery all involved generalized assessments of his personhood, intellect, culture, relational habits and religion.

At the root of this article, then, is agreement with the National Narrative and the continuance of the spectacle of Garner's case. Although several other articles depict and explain the Garner incident,<sup>2</sup> this particular article is included in *The Black Book*, the historical presentation of black life in America edited by Morrison. In response to this article and others in *The Black Book*, she "lived through a despair quite new to [her] but so deep it had no passion at all and elicited no tears" ("Rediscovering Black History" 15). While her "despair...elicited no tears" (15), it did "prompt Morrison to fashion a language and form that could penetrate and communicate such "despair," "the first novel of her historical trilogy, *Beloved* (Peterson 60).

One of Morrison's stated goals for writing *Beloved* was to depict "the *interior life* of each of those characters [...] in order to give them- not '*personalities*,' but an interior life of people who have been reduced to some great lump called slaves" (Darling interview 253, emphasis added). Unlike the depictions of Garner promoted in various news articles and even in the abolitionist article, cited above, Morrison's distinction between interiority rather than "personality" reflects a subtle yet marked difference in perspectives (Darling interview 253). Influenced by and participating in the presentation of the slave as spectacle, many of the articles encouraged the reader to assume the position of voyeur, basing the assessment of personality on external appearances and assumptions. One of the journalists goes so far as to dichotomize Margaret's face analyzing it according to her African and white features and drawing conclusions of banality based on the predominance of the African.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Morrison counters the

traditional historical presentation of “Slavery with a capital S” that the above article represents, by writing about the interior life of “these anonymous people called slaves” (Angelo interview 257). She explores in depth Margaret’s possible emotional state and envisions the larger life circumstances that may have led to her action.

Kimberly Davis in her article, “‘Postmodern Blackness’: Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and the End of History,” argues, in part, that “*Beloved* can be read as an overt and passionate quest to fill a gap neglected by historians, to record the everyday lives of the ‘disremembered and unaccounted for’” (Davis 245). Building on this aspect of Davis’s argument, I suggest that Morrison “goes as far inside as she needs to” to depict the “everyday,” interior life of the Margaret Garner figure in her novel through her presentation of the journey for individuality that Garner experiences while in slavery and after her physical escape (*Beloved* 46). As Karla Holloway insightfully argues in her article, “*Beloved: A Spiritual*,” “Slavery effectively placed black women outside of a historical universe governed by a traditional (Western) consideration of time, the *aspect* of their being- the quality and nature of their “state” of being- becomes a more appropriate measure of their reality” (Holloway 68). Morrison depicts the “more appropriate measure of [the] reality” of the Garner character, whom she calls Sethe, by focusing on her interior life, “[her] being,” in its “quality and nature”(Holloway 68).

Years before the publication of *Beloved*, Morrison, in commenting about the themes in her work, shares that she often writes “about love and how to survive [...] whole in a world where we are all of us, in some measure victims of something” (Bakerman interview 38). The implication behind Morrison’s words is that one can survive in various states: whole or fractured. The fractured individual has, perhaps, been

spiritually broken by the victimizations that he/she has faced, is unable to reconcile the pieces of his/her life, and may have distanced him/herself from communal assistance. He/she survives with fierce determination but life is mere existence. The “whole” person may be able to incorporate all of his/her life, past, present and future into the person he/she has chosen to be as he/she lives actively involved with community (38).

Sethe is fractured by the traumas that she faces and is unconsciously on a journey towards wholeness, in the novel, the integration of all of the pieces of her life. In order to survive, Sethe has to consistently “beat back the past:” her mother’s rejection and murder, the multiplicity of horrors at the Sweet Home plantation, the subsequent infanticide of her daughter and the painful passing of Baby Suggs (*Beloved* 73). Although Sethe survives all of the traumas she experiences, at the beginning of the novel Sethe is “wrapped in a timeless present,” refusing to contemplate and/or glean from her past experiences (*Beloved* 184). She subsists as a fractured individual.

Sethe’s journey involves a dual cycle towards freedom each comprised of three phases: spectacle, spectator and speculation. The first cycle, which follows the chronological story of the novel, involves her physical escape from slavery. The second cycle, which follows the sequential narrative of the text, involves her journey towards spiritual freedom and wholeness. Hence, Sethe’s journey to freedom “must be repeated twice: first to leave physical enslavement by whites and the second time to escape the physical trauma created by their brutality” (Bowers 215).

Each phase involves a revelation of her interior life through some aspect of her reply to the call to be, the call to love and the call to be loved. Sethe’s affirmative rejoinders to each of these calls through her eventual confrontation of her personal

history and her lovingly reciprocated interaction with others, moves Sethe towards wholeness and the development of her own counter-narrative. Although a personal or main Misery propels her movement from one phase of the journey to the next, her response to the various calls, both vocalized and tacit, enable her growth within each phase.

While Sethe embarks upon the journey of claiming herself as a “whole” individual, she is unable to make substantial spiritual progress until her confrontation with Beloved and all that it entails (38). I posit that the character of Beloved simultaneously embodies and confronts Sethe with both of the central traumas of her past: the distance slavery imposed between herself and her mother, and the murder of her baby girl, the main Misery of the novel. As Beloved evokes Sethe’s memories of her “Ma’am” through simple questioning, Sethe engages in the discussion of topics she had previously suppressed (30). Sethe believes that Beloved’s “distance from the events [...] or her thirst for hearing it” compels her to speak and find “unexpected pleasure” in it (*Beloved* 58). Yet, it may also be that Beloved’s voice “with a cadence not like theirs” was similar to Sethe’s own mother’s voice (60). Since Morrison explains that Beloved is “spirit [...] [Sethe’s] child returned to her from the dead [and] a survivor from the true, factual, slave ship,” the cadence in Beloved’s voice may have been that of an African rather than an African-American (Darling interview 247). Thus, Beloved cognizant of the knowledge held by both Sethe’s baby girl and a survivor of the Middle Passage. Sethe’s initial discussions with Beloved about the past hold the promise of hope.

Following the chronological story of the text, cycle one begins on the plantation of Sethe’s birth. Based on the traumas experienced on that first plantation Sethe is

spiritually depleted when she arrives on Sweet Home. Yet, by the second year of her life there, she develops a relationship with Halle, one of the other slaves at Sweet Home, which enables her to fulfill her need to love and be loved. However, her sense of being is subsumed within the small community on Sweet Home allowing for the perpetuation of her suppression of the past. It is not until the owner, Garner, dies and his cruel replacements arrive, schoolteacher and the nephews, that Sethe begins to be awakened to her spiritual reality.

Phase two of cycle one begins with Sethe's personal misery, her discovery of schoolteacher's view of her as bestial humanity. This experience initiates her perspectival shift from spectacle to spectator and helps to drive her escape to the healing community on Bluestone Road. However, phase three of cycle one, begins with the main Misery of the novel, the event of infanticide. The traumatic impact of Sethe's action and its' aftermath, specifically Baby Suggs withdrawal, causes Sethe to regress in her journey. She returns to phase one, once again becomes a spectacle and begins cycle two of her journey. Life for her returns to black and white subsistence. While she continues to love (Denver and Baby Suggs) and to be loved, she becomes, the one whom the neighbors talk about, the one whose house is haunted by the baby's ghost, and the one whose house is quickly passed.

At the beginning of the sequential story, phase one of cycle two, and after almost eighteen years of stagnation in her journey, Paul D enters her life and offers her an opportunity to "go ahead and count on something," to "go as afar inside as [she] need[ed] to" because he would be there to "hold her ankles" and "make sure [she] g[o]t back out" (*Beloved* 46). However, Beloved's appearance and Stamp Paid's sharing of the

documented story of the Misery with Paul D, disrupt his well-intentioned promises and consequently Sethe has a second personal misery related to the same misperception as the first. Paul D responds to her attempt at explaining the Misery with the comment that she has “two feet not four” (*Beloved* 165). Once again, her personal misery is related to a reference to her as animalistic. His subsequent departure opens the way for Beloved’s open confirmation of her identity as Sethe’s murdered daughter.

During this second cycle, no longer bounded by the physical limitations of chattel slavery and its environs, Sethe’s personal misery and Beloved’s presence free her to fully indulge in speculation, phase three. Beloved’s presence and her questions are initially helpful for Sethe, finally evoking memories of her mother and allowing Sethe to vocalize some of that pain. Unfortunately, this respite is short lived. Both Beloved and Sethe allow this time to become an opportunity for Beloved to unleash her anger at being murdered. Although Sethe meditates on the past, Beloved’s angry responses encourage Sethe’s guilt feelings about the infanticide, leading to Sethe’s self-rejection and spiritual destruction rather than self-acceptance. Sethe lays herself aside allowing “Beloved [to eat] up her life;” Sethe “yield[s] it up without a murmur” (*Beloved* 250).

Only Sethe sees the second main Misery of the novel, Beloved’s disappearance, as a Misery. Although the entire community of women is involved in some aspect of the process of driving Beloved off, their assessment of the encounter is positive not negative. However, Sethe, clinging to the same false assumptions about the world outside of 124 as she did during the first cycle, is headed toward a Baby Suggs’ like end, surrender to depression and defeat. The intervention of Paul D, the rebirth of Denver and renewed openness of the community offers hope at the novel’s end.



### *Cycle One: Phase I*

#### *Spectacle*

Before Sethe is sold to Mr. Garner, at thirteen, she lives on a plantation with many other slaves, including her mother, and Nan, the wet nurse. Due to the trauma of seeing her mother's body in a pile of others who had been hung for running away, she suppresses many of the memories of that first plantation. She begins the first phase of her journey to wholeness as an adolescent on Garner's plantation, Sweet Home.

Sweet Home was unique in its owner's philosophy towards his slaves. Whereas his neighbors upheld the normally accepted tenets of slavery, Garner chose to be a maverick. He established rules and guidelines at Sweet Home that encouraged his slave's individuality while firmly fixing the boundaries of his ownership. "He thought that what they said had merit, and what they felt was serious. Deferring to his slaves' opinions did not deprive him of authority or power" (*Beloved* 125). In encouraging his slaves to "invent ways of doing things; to see what was needed and attack it without permission. To buy a mother, choose a horse or a wife, handle guns, even learn reading if they wanted to" Garner created a cultural narrative<sup>4</sup> of his own on Sweet Home in contradistinction to the National Narrative which surrounded him (*Beloved* 125). Even though the male slaves on Sweet Home were "named [...] called," and even treated somewhat like men by Garner, none of them, other than Sixo and Halle, ever claimed their own vision and version of the Garner narrative (*Beloved* 125). Thus, Garner's counter-narrative remained effective only the grounds of Sweet Home. Sethe entered this world apart, Sweet Home, as an orphaned thirteen year-old girl. She accepted the name she was called, Jennie by Mrs. Garner, and the presentation of *being* that the Garners' encouraged.

The trauma of seeing her mother's swollen body, and realizing that she had been running without Sethe, is able to be suppressed in the environs of Sweet Home.

Although Sethe is very conscious of being a slave, the safety she feels at Sweet Home and the security in her marriage to Halle, is evident in her response. Sethe had begun to stutter after the devastation of looking through a pile of bodies for her mother's (*Beloved* 201). Once on Sweet Home, however, after she becomes versed in Garner's cultural narrative and is able to choose Halle as a mate, the stuttering ceases.

Mrs. Garner, is the only other woman at Sweet Home when Sethe arrives as Baby Suggs' replacement. A house slave, Sethe remains inside, for the most part, helping in household activities. However, Sethe is the sole domestic slave on the plantation; she therefore, spends the majority of her time away from the other slaves and with Mrs. Garner.

The African language that she spoke on the first plantation on which she lived with her mother, she forgets upon seeing her mother's body. Although she remained mostly with Nan, the woman who nursed the children, and not with her mother, some foundational cultural narrative was implanted in her heart and spirit. Yet, the trauma of her mother's death caused her to suppress this to the point of laying aside the language that she spoke and speaking with a stuttering tongue. The fluttering of her tongue in her speech may reflect the rootlessness that she felt in her soul. The language, the habits, and the customs of the cultural counter-narrative that Sethe had acquired up until that point she lays down beside her dead mother's body. While Sethe could not stay with her mother as she desired, Nan pulls her away, Sethe leaves behind the person she had become in the pile of bodies.

When therefore, Sethe arrives at Sweet Home she is open to adopting the narrative of Sweet Home and answers the tacit call of her soul to wholeness by looking to Mrs. Garner, to Halle and to her children. She becomes Mrs. Garner's helper, Halle's wife, and the children's mother, but not her mother's daughter. Since she had wanted to be a daughter to her mother but never had the chance, she seeks to be daughter to Mrs. Garner and looks to her for an example of womanhood and beauty. Noliwe Rooks in her text, *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture and African American Women* elaborates on this interaction between mistress and slave woman. "The white mistress may have served as a powerful example of the white standard of beauty. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese points out, in terms of the importance placed on clothes, slave women who worked in the house, "Shared slaveholding women's appreciation of dress as the badge of class or quality" (Rooks 25). Hence, Sethe's desire for a bedding dress, her equivalent of a wedding dress, was driven by Mrs. Garner's talk of her own wedding. "I never saw a wedding, but I saw Mrs. Garner's wedding gown in the press, and heard her go on about what it was like... Well, I made up my mind to have at least a dress that wasn't the sacking I worked in (*Beloved* 59).

Thus, this first phase, spectacle, relates dialectically to the second phase, spectator. Although Sethe is spectacle to the Garners' and her personality is assumed by them, she is also a spectator. She observes and inculcates some of the ideas she gathers from Mrs. Garner. In fact, during the first year of Sethe's stay at Sweet Home, Mrs. Garner constitutes her only company. All of the men, consumed with lust for her, stay away from her, refusing to even take food "from her hands. They stood back and waited for her to put it on the ground...and leave" (*Beloved* 23). She is therefore isolated and

alone; without friend, family, community or church, since the slaves were not permitted to leave the grounds of Sweet Home. Having suffered the loss of her own mother and being at the age in life where she was coming to understand and accept her body and her status as a woman, she naturally looked to the only other woman on the grounds, the person with whom she also worked closely, for company and example. Yet her relationship with Mrs. Garner existing within the bounds of slavery, did not provide her with the type of companionship that she needed.

Sethe still felt it necessary to bring living, growing things into her workspace in order for her to love the work that she did, and not hate or resent it. She sought to make the kitchen feel like “some part of it was hers” by bringing a “fistful of salsify into Mrs. Garner’s kitchen everyday” (*Beloved* 22). Nonetheless, she is cognizant of the reality that the kitchen is Mrs. Garner’s and not her own. Her daily additions were made in order to “take the ugly out of it [...] the yellow flowers on the table, some myrtle tied around the handle of the flatiron holding the door open for a breeze *calmed* her” (*Beloved* 22, emphasis added). Why would she need to be calmed? What aspects of her workspace caused her anxiety or fear?

Although Sethe was “scared of the men beyond” who isolated themselves from her and only “stared [...] when they saw her,” I suggest that Sethe’s first year at Sweet Home was emotionally difficult in other ways as well (*Beloved* 22). Her recent bereavement and severance from her home, the first plantation, in conjunction with her approaching physical maturity and marital expectations, occurring outside of vital communal guidance and support, cause her to look to Mrs. Garner for companionship and love. Yet, the superficial interactions Sethe had with Mrs. Garner would not have met

her needs. The “growing things” which she insisted upon having present each day were a visual reminder of life as well as a provision of a sense of the hope that she needed to continue and not lapse into a dysphoric state (*Beloved* 22).

I further suggest that since her mother had been a field hand, Sethe would have formerly spent the majority of her days outside. The presence of the flowers in her now confined space, therefore, helped to “calm her” as they would remind her of her mother and her previous environment and possibly give her some sense of home (*Beloved* 22). However, the presence of those *cut* flowers can also be read as the representation of the status of Sethe’s interior life during her first year at Sweet Home; rootless.

After Sethe’s marriage to Halle, and her peripheral inclusion into the community on Sweet Home, she became “reckless enough to take for granted” and “lean on” her marriage to the man “who had fathered every one of her children” (*Beloved* 23). Marriage to Halle, and the presence of dependent children, provided Sethe with the opportunity to love and to be loved. Yet, since she still did not speak about the pain of her past, she remained spiritually fractured. For it is “the collective sharing of that information, [of the pain, that] heals the individual- and the collective” (Morrison, Darling interview 248).

### ***Cycle One: Phase II***

#### ***Spectator***

Approximately six years after Sethe arrives at Sweet Home, Garner dies mysteriously. Despite their belief in his identification of them as men, only two of the men, Halle and Sixo, inculcated a sense of personhood apart from Garner’s assessment of them and applied it to a broader scope. Relying upon Garner for the creation, sustenance,

and reinforcement of their cultural narrative discourse and bounds, Garner's narrative dies with him. They soon discover that the boundaries of Sweet Home did not protect them from the national perspective of slavery, Garner did. After a short time alone with only the slaves on the plantation, Mrs. Garner calls Mr. Garner's brother-in-law, schoolteacher, to set things aright on Sweet Home. Her call to schoolteacher and his arrival invite onto Sweet Home what had previously been shutout: the full force of the National Narrative.

While Garner's interpretation of slavery loosely maintained the Institution and its standards, his cultural narrative had largely sheltered them from the normative realities of the Institution of Slavery. Once introduced on Sweet Home through schoolteacher, the shallowness of the security in *being* which each of the slaves had, except Sixo and Halle, was revealed. The decibel level of the voice of the Narrative heard through schoolteacher's measurement of them, his physical brutality, his confiscation of their guns, and his termination of Halle's outside work, all serve to overwhelm the foundation for selfhood that they believed they had in Garner's narrative.

The overhearing of schoolteacher's exchange with his nephews during one his teaching sessions begins Sethe's personal misery and increases her perspective shift, phase two of her journey.

He was talking to his pupils and I heard him say, "Which one are you doing?" And one of the boys said, "Sethe." That's when I stopped *because I heard my name*, and then I took a few steps to where I could see what they was doing...I was about to turn around and keep on my way when I heard him say, "No, no. that's not the way. I 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, emphasis added)

While schoolteacher had called Sethe many times before, the hearing of her name from the lips of one of the nephews within the context of schoolteacher's training in the Narrative traditions, literally and figuratively drives her backwards; "I commenced to walk backward, didn't even look behind me to find out where I was headed. I just kept lifting my feet and pushing back" (*Beloved* 193). Her physical retreat signifies the direction that her emotional response is leading her, towards a review of the painful past she desperately seeks to avoid. Yet Sethe must confront what she seeks to avoid, the trauma of seeing her mother's dead, swollen body and accepting the pain of the knowledge that she was caught when running away without Sethe. I suggest that the past calls to Sethe, just as the Narrative called to the slave men on Sweet Home. Although they both refuse to answer, looking to other options and avenues to beat it back, it continues to persist until they respond.

Although Sethe "never told Halle or nobody" of the incident, "that very day (she) asked Mrs. Garner a part of it" (*Beloved* 193). Once Mrs. Garner, unintentionally, clarifies the meaning of the exchange through a definition of terms, Sethe is jolted by the reality that she is considered bestial. She had chosen to believe Garner's narrative and rest on the false sense of self that he encouraged. Unfortunately, though aware of the contrast between her interpretation and reality, she still *seems* to cling to the familiar. Therefore, the same night, after she overhears the truth of why schoolteacher had been measuring her, she asks Halle about his opinion of schoolteacher, unwilling to trust the truth of what she has heard. Referring to the Garners as the standard, she says:

Him and her, "I said, "they ain't like the whites I seen before. The ones in the big place I was before I came here."

"How these different?" he asked me.

"Well," I said, "they talk soft for one thing."

“It don’t matter Sethe. What they say is the same. Loud or soft. (193)

However, I suggest that Sethe’s refusal to accept the truth of Halle’s words has less to do with the kindness of the whites on Sweet Home and more to do with the past that she seeks to avoid.

One of the incidents that Sethe recalls through Beloved’s questions about her own mother is the one thing her mother took the time to show her when she was a young child. “She picked me up and carried me behind the smokehouse. Back there she opened up her dress front and lifted her breast and pointed under it. Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin. She said, ‘This is your ma’am. This,’ and she pointed. ‘I am the only one got this mark now’” (*Beloved* 61). Sethe’s mother showed her the brand as a way to distinguish her body from others should “something happen to [her] and [she] can’t tell [her] by [her] face” (*Beloved* 61). Although as a young girl Sethe was afraid but unsure of the significance of the exchange, as she grew up on that other plantation she would have witnessed the branding of other slaves and then, later on Sweet Home, she would have seen the branding of the cattle for identification. I suggest that the pain of the personal misery was rooted in the memory of the animalistic treatment of her mother, as evidenced by the brand, and the fear and pain of the memory of her mother’s end. Sethe wanted to continue to “beat back the past” (*Beloved* 73).

Whereas this first part of Sethe’s misery fails to allow her to accept the reality of the invasion of the National Narrative on Sweet Home and the call of her past to be dealt with, when Sixo, the Native American slave on the plantation, suggests escape, the three remaining men, Paul A, Paul D and Halle, agree. However, by August, when the escape is planned, many obstacles have arisen that cause the plans to change. Though it remains



essentially the same, the weaknesses in it somehow alert schoolteacher's suspicion. The results are disastrous: Sethe's personal misery is continued and intensified through her milking and beating, Paul A and Sixo are killed, and Halle mentally derailed.

When the sign comes of the escape comes, only Halle hears it and sings it to the others. "Hush, hush somebody's *calling* my name. O my Lord, O my Lord, what shall I do?" (*Beloved* 224, emphasis added). The sign, then, is a musical call to freedom that counters the Narrative call to enslavement. Why is Halle the only one of the enslaved men who hears the initial call to freedom?

Despite Sixo's awareness of the reality of the situation on Sweet Home, Halle, because of his familial commitment, is motivated to listen more closely for the sign. As the only one who had been named by his mother, Baby Suggs, and able to remain with her for his entire life, up until he bought her freedom, the security of the relationship of reciprocal love that his familial tie gave him was one which none of the others had experienced. He alone had a past history that had been confronted and handled in the context of family. Although Sixo continued to dance alone at night in the woods to "keep his bloodlines open" only Halle had had the privilege of living most of his life in the tangible company of his direct "bloodline," Baby Suggs (*Beloved* 25). He was, therefore, open to hearing the call to the future represented by the call to freedom.

After Halle goes to the house to tell Sethe about the call, he is not seen again until Paul D sees him "greased and flat-eyed as a fish" (*Beloved* 224). Paul A left after dinner to move timber and never shows up to meet Paul D in the quarters as arranged, but Sethe, when she is escaping Sweet Home, may have seen his headless, footless body (*Beloved* 198). Sixo and Paul D meet Sixo's thirty-mile woman in the dry riverbed but are soon

discovered by schoolteacher and his posse. Though the thirty-mile woman escapes, Sixo is killed and Paul D collared. Sethe leaves the house, looks for Halle and not finding him takes the children to the corn to put them on the caravan with the others going North. She returns to Sweet Home to look for Halle, finds Paul D and tells him of her decision to run. After she leaves Paul D, she goes to the barn, and her personal misery continues when the milking occurs.

After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it. I told Mrs. Garner on em. She had that lump and couldn't speak but her eyes rolled out tears. Them boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still."

"They used cowhide on you?"

"And they took my milk."

"They beat you and you was pregnant?"

"And they took my milk!" (17)

The milking is for Sethe a continuation of the first part of her personal misery and causes her more emotional pain than the beating which followed. Therefore, when recalling the incident eighteen years later to Paul D, the milking still causes her to weep. Sethe, as a lactating mother, knew that the abuse she suffered at the hands of the nephews would not check or reduce her milk supply. Hence, her anguish over the milking stemmed not only from the physical stealing of her milk, but also what that thievery was connected to, the perception of her as an animal, the first part of her personal misery. While Paul D's pain for Sethe centers on the whipping that resulted in the "sculpture her back had become," Sethe's repeatedly, tearful refrain focuses on her stolen milk. Although he believes that he "learn[s] [...] her sorrow" by "rub[bing] his cheek on her back," the center of her sorrow stems from the incident that she does not share with him, the start of her personal misery, the overhearing of her description as animalistic.

The milking is the concrete, material aspect of Sethe's personal misery. The bestial milking enacts the theoretical concept she overheard being discussed. Unknown to her however, Sethe's personal misery, was shared with her spouse, Halle. Hiding in the barn, Halle sees the entire incident of the milking. The horror of viewing the consideration and treatment of his wife as animal breaks Halle. Confident in himself and his ability to save his family from facing the impact of the National Narrative, his witnessing of Sethe's treatment by the boys and schoolteacher, cause him to face the reality of the present situation. Not only would he be unable to free her from slavery, he was helpless to halt the process of Narrative brutality.

Halle had already realized the hopelessness of being able to buy out his entire family since schoolteacher had terminated his labors outside of Sweet Home (*Beloved* 196). Escape from the plantation was his only other avenue for the salvation of his family and himself from slavery. Viewing the milking may have convinced Halle of the futility of his quest. Halle heard the call for freedom, sought to collect his wife and children to answer it together, and believed that he had failed. The conjunction of this belief along with the implications and brutality of the milking may be what caused him to break. Halle is last seen by Paul D "sitting by the churn...[with] butter all over his face," in a deranged recollection of the milking (*Beloved* 69).

Sethe also hears the call of the woman for freedom. Motivated to escape by the experience of the milking, listening out for herself and for her children, she hears the rattle, places the children on the wagon and returns for Halle. Sethe's love for her children opened her ears to hear the rattle for their benefit, not primarily for her own.

Despite the abuses inflicted upon Sethe when she returns for Halle, she maintains her decision to run, though six months pregnant, in response to the call of her children which she feels in her body through the fetus, Denver, and through her aching breasts. Yet, her trek through the Kentucky hills “on two feet meant for standing still” becomes too much for Sethe and she soon finds herself horizontal (*Beloved* 29). Just as she had given up all hope of life for herself or the baby, a miracle occurs; help arrives in the form of Amy Denver who responds to Sethe’s inadvertent call. Even though Amy is white, poor and a fugitive herself, she does not turn Sethe in, despite the probable reward. Instead, she stays with her, massages her feet, gets cobwebs to heal her back, sings her a lullaby, and helps with the premature birth of Denver.

Amy, walking some distance apart from where Sethe is lying only notices Sethe only when she groans in the contemplation of her baby’s eventual death in her lifeless womb (*Beloved* 31). Despite Amy’s reference to Sethe as a “nigger,” Sethe’s pregnant state may have evoked Amy’s partial sharing of the story of her own deceased mother, her singing of her mother’s song, and her quiet expression of grief before a runaway slave (*Beloved* 32). Thus, Sethe’s groan initiates Amy’s articulation of her need for her own mother and Sethe’s pregnancy may be what encourages Amy’s nurturing response. Amy’s takes care of Sethe’s physical needs using the resources at hand, rubbing even Sethe’s feet that have been so disfigured by the extended trek that her boys “dar[ed] each other to be the first to touch them” (*Beloved* 93). Amy also aids in the birth and delivery of Sethe’s baby, Denver, carefully wrapping her in the rags of her own skirt (*Beloved* 84).

Amy’s intervention enables Sethe to answer the call of her children and “get that milk to her baby girl” (*Beloved* 83). Amy commences a process that Baby Suggs and the

women of the black community of Cincinnati continue. Baby washes Sethe, soaks her feet, “grease[s] the flowering back,” makes her a dress, and drops just about anything to massage her neck when the weight of things remembered or forgotten was too heavy for her (*Beloved* 93). Baby Suggs’ presence and the company of “forty, fifty other Negroes” knowing their names, views, habits and stories; accepting their help and advice and sharing in their fun and sorrow propel Sethe’s healing and “claiming [of] herself” (*Beloved* 95).

Within the contextual safety of the community in Cincinnati, Sethe begins the process of speaking, and sharing necessary for the creation of her communal counter-narrative. Yet, I suggest that Sethe may not have participated in the third aspect of the counter-narrative, the shouting. While Sethe would have observed the shouting in the Clearing, she had not yet come to place of the acceptance of her past with the concomitant pain that motivates and drives the shout. “It is a very personal grief...Done within the context of the community, therefore safe. And while the shouter is performing some rite that is extremely subjective, the other people are performing as a community in protecting that person” (“Rootedness” 339). Sethe’s recollections of the Clearing services evince her vicarious participation in the physical movement she witnessed. “Sethe decided to go to the Clearing, back where *Baby Suggs* had danced in sunlight” (*Beloved* 86, emphasis added). Despite her acknowledgment of having “claimed herself [...] along with the others,” Sethe offers no testimony of the movement of her *own* body or the shouts from her *own* throat offered in the Clearing (95).

### *Cycle One: Phase III*

#### *Speculation*

Schoolteacher, determined to set things aright at Sweet Home, pursues Sethe into the Ohio free territory. Since Ohio had achieved statehood less than seventy years before the reader's introduction to 124, in 1803, it was still a state in the process of shaping itself in 1855. Yet, it had settled the position about the black population early on, in 1804, with the Black Codes. Though these codes were modified, their presence in the law books and the animosity they reflected towards the black population, remained unchanged. While the Northwest Ordinance guaranteed freedom from enslavement, Ohio, an area hard-won from the French, the Native Americans and the British, was sought to be reserved for white men only (Thorpe 957).

Many moved to Ohio in order to pursue their vision of the American Dream. Whereas for the whites, the goal was primarily mercenary, freedom and equality was the objective for slaves and free blacks. They sought to live in a state without slavery or its effects. Some of the owners who freed their slaves sent them to settlements in Ohio but because of the hostile reception they received, many were forced to move further North to Canada. Thus, the idea of Ohio, the first free state, being the promised land many blacks had long awaited was quickly dismissed by the harsh realities of racism.<sup>5</sup>

In *Beloved*, the racial hostility in Ohio is epitomized through its compliance with the Fugitive Slave Bill. When Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law bought out of slavery by Halle, Sethe's husband, initially advises Sethe to "lay em down [...] Sword and shield. Down. Down. Both of 'em down. Down by the riverside. Sword and shield. Don't study war no more," she quotes the lyrics of a song that refers to the end of the spiritual battle that will come when the Promised Land of heaven is realized.<sup>6</sup> All of our weapons

will be able to be laid down by the side of the Jordan River. Because we won't need "to study war no more" (*Beloved* 86). Suggs had thought, initially, like many blacks, that the "war," slavery, was over once they entered free territory leaving slavery behind.

However, when schoolteacher, Sethe's owner, arrives at 124 and Sethe responds by killing and attempting to kill all of her children, Baby Suggs changes her view and says to lay down the weapons because "this ain't a battle; it's a rout" (*Beloved* 244). She realized that even the boundaries of freedom could be demolished by the continuance of Narrative presumptions and rulings.

When Schoolteacher arrives at 124 twenty-eight days after Sethe's escape to reclaim his property, Sethe flies to the shed to demonstrate her claim to herself and her children, the property that schoolteacher seeks as his own. She pushes her "best thing[s]", her children, into and over the veil; "[She] took and put [her] babies where they'd be safe" (*Beloved* 164). While Sethe's murder of her baby girl and the attempted murder of her other three children was Misery enough, what allowed this central action of the main Misery to occur was in some ways even more distressing.

In his text on African-American life in the Ohio River Valley, *River Jordan*, Trotter documents, in part, the inter-communal system of functioning and survival "Ohio Valley blacks had organized" (45).

By the 1850's Ohio Valley blacks had organized an elaborate communications and escape network. Designed to free fugitives by aiding their escape further north or by concealing their residence within local black communities, the underground railroad depended upon the cooperation of large numbers of Ohio River blacks. (45)

The community on Bluestone Road should, therefore, have been part of a larger "network" of blacks established to safeguard and protect those fugitives, like Sethe, who

entered their environs (45). Instead, their network was evidently structured around a reliance upon only the members of their own community rather than the “network” of blacks within the Ohio Valley (45). Functioning outside of this larger network, the safety of the fugitive in their locale was limited to the confines of their spatial terrain and the circumspection and alertness of the members of their community alone. Therefore, they would have had to rely heavily on each other, rather than other blacks, to remain vigilant for any strangers entering with “the Look...the righteous Look every Negro learned to recognize” (*Beloved* 157). Although some of the others saw schoolteacher and his posse “nobody ran on ahead” to warn Sethe and Baby Suggs of the imminent danger (*Beloved* 157). Knowing their relative isolation from the other communities in the network, Sethe would have no place to run when confronted by schoolteacher. What prevented them from alerting Sethe? Spite, malice and jealousy.

The day before the main Misery began; Baby Suggs had hosted a party. Even though she had been thinking of hosting a party to celebrate Halle and his family’s escape when he arrived, she had put it off waiting for Halle. However, Stamp Paid, one of the ex-slaves who helped ferry escapees across the Ohio, perhaps inspired by the joy of seeing Sethe and Denver settled, collected two buckets of blueberries, which inspired Baby Suggs to make a few pies. What began with a few pies led to a feast and a party for ninety. The resentment, anger and jealousy the community felt as a result of eating, laughing and feasting so well, was initially all directed at Baby Suggs. The feast led to the consideration of Baby Suggs’ life in comparison to their own: bought from slavery, driven in by her former owner, living in a house with two floors, her centrality in



everything, her continual generosity and love for everybody, and “it made them furious” (*Beloved* 137).

However, their inappropriate anger and jealousy stemmed from their own limited understandings of love and freedom. Instead of viewing the miraculous abundance and variety of food Baby Suggs offered at the party as evidence of God’s powers at work on their own behalf, since they all benefited, they resentfully attribute the miraculous to Baby Suggs. Since “loaves and fishes were His powers” why not assume that He did provide it? (*Beloved* 137) Although in the Biblical referent of the loaves and fish in Matthew 14, a little boy’s lunch is offered and used by Jesus to feed over five thousand persons, *the generosity of the boy* is what enables the miracle to occur. Yet so focused was the community on the person of Baby Suggs, rather than on the God they referenced, that they missed the miracle altogether. Instead they resented Baby Suggs, for the miracle of food, they “swallowed baking soda[...]to calm the stomach violence caused by the bounty [...] [and] whispered to each other in the yards about fat rats, doom and uncalled-for pride” (*Beloved* 137).

The communal sentiment which lays the foundation for the Misery not only reflects their jealousy of Baby Suggs but also the ways in which the National Narrative had impacted their ways of thinking and relating. Trudier Harris in her article, on *Beloved*, “Escaping Slavery but Not its Images” points out that although the slaves in *Beloved* have escaped slavery the novel remains full of the images and terms of monetary exchanges which “succeeds in sending mixed messages about how well the characters in *Beloved* have succeeded in transcending slavery” (6).

When Stamp Paid chooses to change his name from Joshua to Stamp Paid instead of killing his wife, Vashti, whom he “handed over ...to his master’s son,” Harris argues that he not only becomes free but that he also reaches a level of maturity or self-control in his freedom(8). While I concur that Stamp’s decision to exert power over what he could control, his name, instead of seeking to establish power over what he really could not control, his wife and the system of slavery, is commendable, I argue that the name he rejects and the one he assumes are indicative of the impact that the National Narrative has had on him and on the other characters in the community.

Joshua is the name Stamp is given by his owner. While he changes his name to Stamp Paid the activity he chooses to participate in, ferrying slaves across the Ohio to freedom, reflects the essence of the name given by his owners. Although the dates during which Stamp was involved in helping runaways is questionable, we know that some of his activities were occurring during the period of Sethe’s escape, the 1850’s. The decade of the 1850’s is the same period during which Harriet Tubman was most active in her efforts to bring slaves out of the South. Whereas Tubman entered the South and led slaves out, Stamp helped the slaves cross the river into the North. Tubman was known as the Moses of her people for her success in leading over 300 slaves to freedom. The correlation between the Biblical Moses and Joshua is of significance here.

Moses was the leader whom God used to deliver the Israelites from the land of slavery, Egypt, but he was not allowed to enter with them into the Promised Land, dying before they entered in. Joshua, called to be the new leader after Moses death, was told “you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give them [...] be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit

the land” (Joshua 1:2b, 6a, NIV). Although Tubman lived for many years after she concluded her work as a conductor, her role was concentrated in the South, the land of bondage, in leading slaves out of the South to the North. Stamp Paid’s work began *after* the slaves had left their respective plantations and reached the Kentucky/Ohio border on the bank of the Ohio River. In many ways, Stamp fulfills the role of the Biblical Joshua for the former slaves. He, like Joshua, takes them over their Jordan River and into their land of promise for corporeal freedom. Once in Ohio, he does not leave the slave but is the central, consistent figure in making them feel at home.

Though not a featured speaker who engenders the entire group to listen, like Baby Suggs, and without a home which serves as the center of the hub in the community, he is the one to whom almost all of the blacks in the community were in debt. The covert leader of the community, he not only ferried the slaves across the river but also continued to help them once they arrived. And “once Stamp Paid brought you a coat, got the message to you, saved your life, or fixed the cistern he took the liberty of walking in your door as though it were his own” (*Beloved* 172). Whereas Baby Suggs received all into her home and was the visible center of the community, Stamp Paid as the one welcomed by all, and to whom almost all were in debt, was the heart of the community. Yet because the liberties he assumes with each one he assists are earned through his interventions on their behalf, he establishes a motif for the expression of that same openness one to another. If you have not earned the right, you cannot freely enter my door. While Baby Suggs’ call invited the free expression of individual grief, pain, joy and heartaches within the communal context of the Clearing, Stamp Paid alone benefitted from the communal generosity, one person at a time. The relational payment he expected

reflected his continuing concern for those he had helped. Thus, when Ella questions his looking in on Sethe after Paul D's departure he protests, "That's Baby's kin. I don't need no invite to look after her people" (*Beloved* 185). Therefore, while Stamp rejected the owner's view of himself and changed his name, he in many ways assumes the role of the Biblical character Joshua. Although the owners sought to use the Bible and even his naming as a means of dehumanization, Stamp subverts their intent by using those same tools as a means of self-definition.

While his view of himself indeed reflects self-possession, as Harris suggests, the name he chose to call himself, Stamp Paid, continually reminds those in the community that they are in debt. He had "help(ed) them *pay* out and off whatever they owed in misery [...] and [his] *receipt*" lay in the "welcome door that he never had to knock on" (*Beloved* 185, emphasis added). His consideration of interpersonal relationships in terms of exchanges, payments and debts, shows that his freedom, unlike Baby Suggs, did not allow him to give without expectation of receiving. He, and others in the community, thus, unwittingly, enact an expression of love limited both by its reliance on the needy to request it and by their tacit expectation of reciprocation.

Hence, the anger the community felt at Baby Suggs for the feast for ninety was because she gave them too much, more than they could ever *repay*.

Too much, they thought. Where does she get it all, Baby Suggs, holy? Why is she and hers always the center of things? How come she always knows exactly what to do and when? Giving advice; passing messages; healing the sick; hiding fugitives, loving, cooking, cooking, loving, preaching, singing, dancing, and loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone. (*Beloved* 137)

While Baby Suggs chose to express love freely and without price, they may have resented the necessity of having to *go* to her in admittance of their need of help. Stamp

went to them and they welcomed him; a *private* debt, repeatedly paid confidentially, within their own domain. Suggs opened her home to them necessitating their having to go to her for what they had to admit that they needed in a *public setting*, her home.

In Morrison's *Paradise*, two of the ministers in the town of Ruby that differ in numerous areas of societal and communal relations, Pulliam and Misner, use the forum of a wedding to express their conflicting views of love. Pulliam's definition depicts the type of love that the community in *Beloved* demonstrates. He claims that:

Love is not a gift. It is a diploma. A diploma conferring certain privileges: the privilege of expressing love and the privilege of receiving it... You do not deserve love regardless of the suffering you have endured. You do not deserve love because somebody did you wrong. You do not deserve love just because you want it. You can only earn- by practice and careful contemplation- the right to express it and you have to learn how to accept it. (141)

Pulliam's view of love reflects his own enslavement of thought. Arguably, love that is "not a gift" and is considered a privilege to express is not love at all. "It is [in fact] a diploma" (*Paradise* 141). Yet, one only needs to *learn* to accept love when there are things that hinder him/her from its free acceptance. Pulliam, like the community in *Beloved*, is bound by various hindrances that prevent his free acceptance of unconditional love. Misner, the opposing minister, in silently holding up the cross, points out that what is missing in Pulliam's representation of love, is grace, God's unearned favor. Since God's gracious love was demonstrated on the cross, while we were "still sinners" (Rom.5:8), Misner presents this alternative type of love in upholding the cross. Baby Suggs, though claiming that the only grace you can have is what you can imagine, demonstrates a similar type of unconditional love towards the community. Love without

expectation or precondition. The message she offers the community in the Clearing, then, serves as the foundation for the counter-narrative of the text.

The discourse of the National Narrative excludes the emotional and spiritual expressions of love, *phileo*, and *agape*.<sup>7</sup> Based on control, ownership, and suppression, only *eros* love, sexual love, is incorporated for the purposes of domination and physical satisfaction. The free expression of unconditional love shared with a focus on the receiver rather than the giver, is then, antithetical to the Narrative framework and was nearly impossible within the confines of slavery. Since the slaves were treated as commodity items with whom “nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included [...] children” (*Beloved* 23) or other relations, Paul D, Stamp Paid and the others in the community had evidently decided to “protect themselves and love small” (*Beloved* 162). Hence, the limited expression of love demonstrated by the community and Stamp Paid reflect their fear of sharing “a big love” and the degree of their continued mental enslavement (*Beloved* 162). Stamp Paid’s love was safe and small; safely offered to one person at a time, and secretly repaid from house to house. Baby Suggs’ love, loving everyone at once, publicly and en masse was too big and therefore dangerous, opening the way for the possibility of being “split [...] wide open” (*Beloved* 162). “To get to the place where you could love anything you chose- not need permission for desire- well now that was freedom” (*Beloved* 162).

Sethe’s interpretation of “big” love, saving her children from slavery through infanticide, indeed splits both she and Baby Suggs “wide open,” breaking them both (*Beloved* 162). After the Misery, Baby Suggs closes up her great heart, stops conducting the services in the Clearing, and isolates herself in her room. “Baby Suggs, holy,

believed that she had lied. There was no grace-imaginary or real- and no sunlit dance in a Clearing could change that” (*Beloved* 89). Although she concludes that “there is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks,” the communal disjunction which led to the Misery also contributed to her eventual heartbreak and death (*Beloved* 89). “To belong to a community of Negroes- to love and be loved by them, to counsel and be counseled...and then to have that community step back and hold itself as a distance- well, it could wear out even a Baby Suggs, holy” (*Beloved* 177).

The entire community then, and not just Sethe, was complicit in the Misery. Schoolteacher’s entry and Sethe’s response were as much the results of their malice and resentment as of individual choice. When Sethe emerges, under arrest, to head to the jailhouse, their feelings of animosity and their continued hesitance in freely giving love are displayed afresh. Instead of empathizing with the desperation that would cause a mother to kill her child as a means of protection, and rather than recognizing that Sethe’s heart was surely broken, they look carefully at her body language, for some sign that she has been broken and is in need, and they conclude that she too is proud. “[Her] profile shocked them in its clarity;” they respond by withholding the “cape of sound” which she so desperately needed (*Beloved* 152). How could any body language on Sethe’s part convey the agony of heart she must have been experiencing?

The first cycle in *Beloved* ends with this horrific episode that results in four tragedies: the baby’s physical death, the unveiling of the communal disjunctions, Baby Suggs spiritual, and eventual, physical decline, and Sethe’s, spiritual, societal and emotional closure. Sethe’s spirit, like her dress, is “dried [...] stiff like rigor mortis” (*Beloved* 153).

## *Cycle Two: Phases I*

### *Spectacle/Spectator*

The events that occur during this cycle of Sethe's journey directly parallel those which occurred in the first phase of the first cycle. Born into slavery, the first eighteen years of Sethe's life were shaped by the confinements of the institution. The next eighteen years of Sethe's life are analogous to the first as after the main Misery she becomes a recluse, confined by communal rejection. Her eschewal of them stems from her confident belief that she can survive without the aid, assistance, or company of any of the other blacks in the community. Yet, once again she is subsisting and not living. She contents herself with the black and white life of the spectacle.

Although no longer in chattel slavery, she, the community, and the ghost in her home have created a prison for Sethe in which she resides. Her whole world now lies within the bounds of 124 just as it once was centered in Sweet Home. Even her work parallels her situation Sweet Home as she becomes the cook for Sawyer and isolates herself within 124. The "Cincinnati horizon" serving as her "fistful of salsify," becomes "life's principal joy" as she more actively continues the process of "beating back the past" (*Beloved* 4, 73).

The continued hostility between Sethe and the black community serve as a barrier, which isolates her almost as effectively as slavery did from interactions outside of her home. The plantation and Garner's restrictions prohibited connections outside of Sweet Home, and gender excluded her from the men's camaraderie at Sweet Home. It is in this state of confinement that we encounter Sethe at the beginning of the novel and in the first phase of the second cycle.



During the first nine years after the Misery Baby Suggs, heart strings broken, takes to her bed (*Beloved* 89). Sethe tends to and relies on her similar to the manner in which she cared for Mrs. Garner on Sweet Home. Baby Suggs and Mrs. Garner, both ailing as a result of the bitterness of slavery, provide Sethe with companionship as Sethe is again excluded from the larger communities.

Additionally, Sethe relies on her children for companionship and community. I suggest that while living at Sweet Home, Sethe's children filled the voids that she had in her life. Although married to Halle, "for years they saw each other in full daylight only on Sundays. The rest of the time they spoke or touched or ate in darkness...and he had so little time" (*Beloved* 25). Her children then would have provided her with the company, community, and friendship that she needed; and she responded by allocating as large a portion of her love on them as slavery allowed. However, as Morrison herself explains, lavishing excessive love on one person is detrimental to both parties. "It's too much; the lover expects so much from the beloved. If you loved five things intensely, no one of them would receive that hysterical responsibility for yourself" (Koenen interview 73). After she escapes from Sweet Home Sethe feels free to escalate the intensity of her love for her children, determining that they are "her best thing," which she could not "draw breath" without (*Beloved* 203). Her love for them becomes what Morrison warns can occur specifically within the parent-child relationship; it becomes ownership love. "Too frequently love has to do with *owning* that other person[...]parents who simply adore their children and really and truly do want the best for them may, in fact, destroy them" (Bakerman interview 42 emphasis added). The Misery, Sethe's violent claim of her ownership of her children not only results in physical destruction, death of her baby girl,

but also spiritual damage, creating the fracture between herself and the remaining children.

For eighteen years Sethe, and the community, are reminded of the manifested evidence of the evil side of the supernatural realm, and continually given an opportunity to allow the aftermath of the main Misery to change the nature of their relationships; they do not. 124 is full of spite and venom. The baby's ghost is understood to be "evil," by Paul D, "sad," by Sethe, and "lonely and rebuked" by Denver (*Beloved* 13).

Whereas Sethe was unsure even of the state in which she lived before being sold to Garner, the ghost reminds her everyday of the freshness of her past history. Although she responds to Paul D's news of Halle's end by recalling how she begins her day "working, working dough" as a means of "beating back the past," *she* cannot beat back the ghost (*Beloved* 73). This time Sethe's past refuses to be silent.

Eighteen years after the Misery, the opportunity of life rather than subsistence presents itself to Sethe in the form of Paul D, a friend from Sweet Home. Once again the past speaks. Since Paul D is initially unaware of the reason for the presence of the baby ghost, and drives it out on his first day in 124, he offers Sethe the chance of life without the haunting reminder of her painful choice. Paul D offers her the support, companionship and permission to *feel* that she has laid aside for eighteen years. The rigor mortis of her spirit begins to be reversed.

While Sethe's spirit begins to revive with Paul D's company, Denver's wilts significantly. Afraid of what lays outside of the door, aware of her mother's brutal action and the communal response to it, she sees the baby ghost as the only thing she can call her own; in keeping with Sethe's narrative of ownership love, the ghost is the one upon

whom Denver lavishes all of her love. When Paul D drives it out and then heads upstairs with her mother, Sethe, she resents his presence and ejection of “the only other company she had” (*Beloved* 19). Yet, Paul D’s optimism and joy begins to spill over to Denver when he encourages them to attend the local carnival, their first public outing in eighteen years, and they are not greeted with open hostility or malice by the other blacks. The prison doors of 124 are swung open by Paul D and Sethe and Denver, once again, are assisted in their escape from bondage. Just when it seems as if they can make a life together and Denver seems to be softening in her hostility to Paul D, *Beloved* appears, breaking the progress in Sethe’s journey.

Denver’s birth occurred shortly after Sethe’s escape from slavery, similarly *Beloved*’s physically manifested spiritual birth occurs directly after Sethe and Denver’s figurative release from their isolation within 124. *Beloved*’s birthing is evidenced by Sethe’s “bladder fill(ing) to capacity” upon seeing her face; “and the water she voided was endless [...] like flooding the boat when Denver was born” (*Beloved* 51); and by her newborn characteristics: the sleepiness (53), the thirst (51), new hands and feet (52), the noisy breathing (53), the incontinence (54), and her love of sweets (55).

The nature and identity of *Beloved* are an enigma. While she seems to be Sethe’s daughter returned, with an intimate knowledge of things only Sethe’s children would know, she is not the two-year old baby she would have been if she had been bodily resurrected, but a twenty-year old young lady, the age she would have been had she lived. Since the supernatural realm is governed by timelessness, and the physical body is unnecessary there; the baby ghost remained a baby for the eighteen years she haunted the home. Hence, if *Beloved* had been bodily resurrected, the body that would have been

restored to life would have been the decapitated body of the two-year old that entered the grave. Instead, *Beloved* emerges with a twenty-year old body, a two-year spirit, and an ancestral memory. After her initial period of infantilism, she does not seem to mature past that of a two-year old in some of her manners and thought patterns though she draws on memories of the slave ship and of her existence in death that exceed the comprehension of a child.

Therefore, while her spirit may be that of Sethe's daughter, her body though similar to what the baby would have looked like at that age, may have been borrowed, like the dress and the shoes she saw and took. While the scarring on her neck could be interpreted as being made by the handsaw, similar markings would also result from a hanging or a lynching without resulting in decapitation. Thus, her body may appear to look similarly to Sethe's mother's slain body, but without the swelling.

That she has powers beyond this realm are indicated by her tacitly moving Paul D, her ability to appear and reappear, and her apparent mind-reading abilities. Her memory and description of where she was before, as many critics have argued, is reminiscent of the slave ship. Thus, the body she inhabits may be that of a slave who suffered the Middle Passage, rape, torture and lynching. Whoever she is, she embodies the past, as both Henderson and Rushdie argue. I further suggest that she also concretizes the two key memories of the past that Sethe had striven to "beat back": her mother's death and Sethe's murder of the baby girl. She emerges, driven by the baby's spirit, as an adult ready to fight for the affection of and to take the life of her mother, Sethe.

But why does *Beloved* emerge? Why doesn't she stay on the other side and continue her harassment of the inhabitants of 124 from there? I assert that she comes

forth in response to repeated calls by her mother, tacit calls by her sister, the direct challenge of Paul D to fight and because Sethe begins to focus her attention most fully on Paul D (*Beloved* 18). She thus emerges ready to battle for her mother's undivided attention.

The baby ghost initially makes its presence known only after Sethe pays, so to speak, for one of the two words she recalled from the preacher's talk, *Beloved*. "Ten minutes for seven letters. With another ten could she have gotten 'Dearly' too? [...] But what she got, settled for, was the *one* word that mattered" (*Beloved* 5 emphasis added). Before this time, the baby has been referred to only as the "crawling already? baby girl," a nameless child whom Sethe loves dearly (*Beloved* 103). The name on the headstone calls forth her intangible presence but I suggest that, in its ambiguity, it may also call forth other unknown beloveds. The potency of the rage, "for a baby she throws a powerful spell," and the strength of the ghost, slamming Here Boy into a wall so hard it dislocates his eye and breaks two of his legs, reflect a depth of venom and a spite greater than that of a two-year old (*Beloved* 4,12).

Diligent in her efforts to "beat back the past," Sethe nonetheless seeks to "end the persecution" by the baby ghost after her boys leave and Baby Suggs dies (*Beloved* 4). "Sethe and Denver decided to end the persecution by calling forth the ghost that tried them so [...] So they held hands and said, 'Come on. Come on. You may as well just come on'" (*Beloved* 4). However, their call only causes movement in a sideboard and nothing else. It takes the affectionate interaction between Paul D and Sethe to drive the ghost to it display its greatest fury, pitching the entire house, and Paul D's equally violent

response and call, “Leave the place alone! Get the hell out! [...] you want to fight, come on!” to both exorcise and inspire the incarnation of the ghost (*Beloved* 18).

Beloved’s appearance both disrupts and limits the growth of Sethe’s relationship with Paul D and of her journey for freedom, but it in no way hampers it. Sethe does begin to make progress during this brief period. She begins to move from resting solely on herself and her effectiveness in “beating back the past” to allowing herself to rely on Paul D, to “go ahead and count on something” (*Beloved* 38). However, Beloved’s desire for Sethe cannot be met with Paul D’s protective, distracting presence; so Beloved moves him, through spiritual means, out of the house to the cold house, in order to have more access to Sethe. Rushdie asserts, “Beloved represents to Sethe- the danger of the past’s taking over the present” (*Beloved* 579).

### ***Cycle Two: Phase II***

#### ***Spectacle/Spectator***

Stamp Paid unwittingly aids Beloved in her efforts to lay claim to Sethe by informing Paul D. of the Misery. The “pride goeth before a fall” expectations of the townsfolk had [may have] rubbed off on him,” and caused him to yield to the spirit of malice and share with Paul D the “eighteen year old clipping” without considering Sethe’s feelings or Denver’s needs (*Beloved* 171). Stamp Paid may have been motivated by the communal expectations and/or by the spirit of malice that Beloved feels towards Paul D.

Paul D’s response to Sethe’s attempt to share her story was to spiritually measure her actions as animalistic just as schoolteacher had physically measured her during slavery in order to reinforce his beliefs that she was indeed part man, part beast, “you got

two feet, Sethe, not four” (*Beloved* 165). Paul D unknowingly recalls to Sethe’s mind the original personal misery and creates a more intense pain in the correlation. While Sethe was shocked to overhear schoolteacher and his nephews’ assessment of her physical and animal characteristics, to have Paul D, a man with whom she was intimate, say to her face words of a similar feel caused “a forest [to] spr[i]ng up between them; trackless and quiet” (*Beloved* 165).

After Paul D’s departure, Sethe erroneously concludes that he was wrong in convincing her that there was a world out there that she could live in. Reverting to the state she was in at the beginning of phase one of cycle two, Sethe shuts up her spirit to anything outside of 124. “Whatever is going on outside my door ain’t for me. The world is in this room. This here’s all there is and all there needs to be” (*Beloved* 183). She returns 124 and herself to being a spectacle and surrenders herself to the cultural narrative of ownership love she created.

Although Paul D’s departure is a personal misery for Sethe, it does not move her forward to the positive contemplation of her past possible within a supportive community. The consuming presence of Beloved, the embodiment of her past, calls for and then demands all of Sethe’s attention and focus. Outside of a caring community, without opportunities to speak her pain to a healing listener, like Paul D, or shout it in the Clearing, Sethe has few encouragements for self-reflection. Her journey for individuality comes to an end as she pours herself into and fixes her vision solely on Beloved. She is also, therefore, a spectator; but unlike her initial position as spectator on Sweet Home where she learned from Mrs. Garner, during this point in her life she gazes on Beloved to memorize every detail of her body and meet whatever needs she may voice, call for, or

think of, and Beloved gazes upon Sethe. Each objectifies the other as spectacle yet for radically different purposes.

In fact, playing and interacting with Beloved becomes the center of Sethe's focus, first to the exclusion of her job, "she took going to work later and later each day until the predictable happened: Sawyer told her not to come back," and then to the exclusion of Denver, "she cut Denver out completely. Even the song that she used to sing for Denver she sang for Beloved alone" (*Beloved* 240-1). But no matter how much Sethe gave, explained, cried and sought to convince Beloved of her love for her, "Beloved denied it" (*Beloved* 242). The ownership love that drove Sethe's desperate action was now being enacted through Beloved's accusations and demands. "Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it. But there would never be an end to that" (*Beloved* 251).

Driven by seeing her mother "spit up something she had not eaten," and encouraged by Baby Suggs spirit, which directs her to "go on out the yard. Go on," Denver responds to the call to go and leaves 124 to look for help and then work to support her mother, her sister and herself. "It was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve" (*Beloved* 252). Hence, Denver's journey of self-realization and acceptance is also initiated by calls. Significantly, she is the only one in the novel who receives a call to *go* and not to *come*. In order to step out into the freedom that there is for her outside of 124, she must go out into the world which surrounds the only haven she has had, 124. Nelson Lord, the child who asked Denver the question about Sethe's imprisonment which so frightened her it closed her ears, is now the young man whose words "open her mind" (*Beloved* 252). "All he did was smile and say, 'Take care of



yourself Denver”” (*Beloved* 252). His simple greeting encourages Denver to think about her own future and that of her family and seek a job instead of continuing to receive hand-outs from the community.

Denver’s venture outside of 124 and her willingness to humbly share the problems occurring within the home inspire communal aid. Some of the women of the town go to 124 to rescue Sethe. After they succeed in initiating Beloved’s departure by their wordless shout, Sethe resigns herself to death, fully convinced that Beloved was “best thing” (*Beloved* 272). Thus, Sethe continues to be locked into the narrative she had created at 124 even without the presence of the ghost or any of her children. But there is hope at the novel’s end, as Paul D. re-enters, as a Baby Suggs like figure, to wash Sethe, as Baby did when she had first arrived, and to call her to claim, to accept and to love herself.

“You your own best thing, Sethe. You are” (*Beloved* 273).

*Beloved* therefore concludes with its thematic emphasis on the importance of communal participation in the processes of emotional and spiritual healing and stability. It delineates “the intrinsic value of collectivism to the African community” and risks of “isolation” both for the individual and “for the race” (Mbalia 88-90).

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<sup>1</sup> Although Levi Coffin’s often cited account of this sensational case refers to the slave woman in question by the name of Margaret Garner, Archibald K. Gaines, according to both the New-York Daily Times (Feb. 16, 1856) and The Cincinnati Enquirer’s (Jan. 29, 1856) accounts of the case, owned Margaret (also called Peggy). Since the slave was usually given the surname of the owner, her name then would have been Margaret *Gaines* rather than Margaret Garner. However, in order to remain consistent with current scholarship, I too will refer to her as Margaret Garner.

<sup>2</sup> “A Tale of Horror! Stampede of Slaves.” Such were the headings of the Cincinnati Enquirer of January 29, 1856. Covered by both local Cincinnati and other city newspapers, Garner’s case was evidently a media spectacle, for that era. In fact, several weeks after the incidents occurred the New York Times was continuing to publish articles detailing the proceedings of the ongoing trial.

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<sup>3</sup> Although some of the articles focused on the trial alone, many of the others I researched directed the reader's attention to specific details about Peggy (Margaret) herself. For example, in the New York Times article of February 16, 1856, Margaret's face is described in detail, dividing her "white" features from her "African" ones. "She is a mulatto, showing from one-fourth to one-third white blood. Her forehead is high...her eyebrows are delicate lines...and her eyes are bright and intelligent. The African appears in the lower part of her face-in the broad nose and thick lips" (2).

<sup>4</sup> I define cultural narratives simply as those based upon the specific culture of a particular community or neighborhood. Although within the bounds of the larger culture and aware of the societal expectations, cultural narratives involve the unique norms and mores of a given group. Hence, Garner developed his own standards for his slaves. While intimately integrated into the larger community of slaver holders, he boasted of the effectiveness of his brand of slavery and the narrative he had developed. Unfortunately, as a narrative it was subject to revision and erasure. Schoolteacher chose to ignore the narrative of Sweet Home and continue in the imposition of the National Narrative.

<sup>5</sup> The historical information summarized in this section is derived from Andrew R. L. Cayton's text *Ohio: The History of a People*.

<sup>6</sup> One of the Negro Spirituals documented by John W. Work, and others, this song is variously titled "Down By the Riverside" or "Study War No More." The remainder of the lyrics anticipating "put[ting] on my long white robe," and "talk[ing] with the Prince of Peace" more directly reference the heavenly realm (negrospirital.com).

<sup>7</sup> According to *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Volume Three, *eros* is "sexual love- sensual, impulsive, spontaneous" (174). *Phileo* is "fraternal love [...] indicated nobility and sense of duty , in contrast to the subjectivistic nature of *eros*" (175). And *agape* is "divine love" (174). "The covenantal aspect of *agape* is stressed in intertestamental literature as in the Old Testament" (175).

### Chapter Three

#### “Inside Nothing:” The National Narrative in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*



On July 28<sup>th</sup> 1917, some eight thousand African-Americans marched down New York City’s Fifth Avenue in protest to the feral violence unleashed on the African-American community in East Saint Louis, Illinois. Led by the children, followed by the women, and backed by the men, those who participated in the march moved as one to the rhythms of “muffled drums,” while “20,000 negroes lined Fifth Avenue and gave silent approval of the demonstration.”<sup>1</sup> Referred to as a “parade of silent protest” by one contemporary newspaper, not one word was uttered by the marchers throughout the demonstration (New York Times, July 1917). Perhaps within the minds of many of the

participants the echoes of the crackling fury of destructive fires, the dull, blunt thwack of metal, wood and brick against flesh, the screech of quickly advancing shoe leather against pavement, the tinkle crash of breaking glass, the explosions, the gunfire, and the screams of pain, horror, fear and grief emitted from the throats of the young and the old, may have continued to tacitly reverberate while they marched. Whereas explanations for the cause of the eruption range from black veteran discontent and hostility, to white protection of jobs and homes, the devastation remaining in its wake was uncontestable. The East Saint Louis riots resulted in “nearly two hundred Afro-American [deaths] and six thousand [being] burned out of their houses” (Lewis 10). “Men, women and children were beaten, stabbed, hanged and burned”(Schomberg Exhibit). It was “the worst race riot in American history” (Lewis 9).

The East Saint Louis riots were the outgrowth of an increasingly tense postwar atmosphere. Encouraged by DuBois and other black leaders to join the war effort and prove their manhood to the nation and all the world, black soldiers fought valiantly abroad only to return home as veterans to exacerbated inequalities. Instead of restraining opposition or yielding to fear and discouragement, the veterans determined to fight; to continue the fight for democracy stateside for which they had fought effectively in Europe. “We return. We return from fighting. We return fighting” (Lewis 15). The determination of the veterans to prescribe to American inequities the combative mindset needed abroad, coupled with the efforts of some whites to keep the veterans and newly migrated blacks as the lowest rung of the societal ladder, coalesced in the East Saint Louis riots. As one of the banners of the silent protestors argued, “We are Maligned as Lazy, and Murdered When We Work.”<sup>2</sup> Hence, the silent protest march could not, and

did not serve to quell an already violent racial climate. In fact, in August 1917, scarcely a month after the protest march of July, the Houston riot occurred, initiated by black veterans of the Twenty-fourth Battalion. Two years after the march, in the summer of 1919, a series of violent events erupted in a number of Northern cities, one following closely upon the heels of the other. The “Red Summer” of 1919 involved a brutal lynching in Mississippi, murders and rioting in Texas, a two-day riot in Washington D.C., and a five-day race war in Chicago (Lewis 17-20).

The racial conditions in the North during the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century mirrored the climate of the South of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, underscoring the deplorable racial milieu that existed for the African-American of that era. Many had fled to the North from the South in an effort to escape the lynchings, the town burnings, and the manifold economic and social oppressions present there. They had hoped for a better life in the North; they had hoped that they were “going to the Promised Land” (Trotter 72). In fact, they merely had changed locations while not substantially ameliorating their situations as anticipated. What could they do? Where else could they go when the North, too, was filling with their blood, and exploiting their labor? The protest march silently shouted their collective decision: We will stay. We will stand. We will fight.

However, more than a half a century after the Emancipation Proclamation, the racial situation should have been improving, should it not? What drove this hostility of whites against blacks even after years of post-slavery interactions? While racism was certainly the underlying cause for the often violent inequities against blacks, convictions of white superiority alone would not, necessarily, have led to the continuous sequence of violent events evidenced in the early 1900’s. I argue that what led to the explosion of the

feral, ferocity in the hostility against blacks during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was partially a result of the mechanisms operative within the underlying historical reality of the National Narrative depicted in the lives of the two main characters in Toni Morrison's novel, *Jazz*.

Through the presentation of the historicity of the jazz age via lists, rather than explications of inequities, I argue that Morrison depicts the racial disparities of the period. Rather than presenting historical snapshots, Morrison intricately weaves the impact of the historical setting into the very heart of the text through her depiction of its effect in the "liv[es] lived" by the characters ("Behind the Making" 23). Moreover, this approach by Morrison highlights the significance of the one extra-textual historical event that is explicated in some detail in the text: the silent protest march of 1917. I, therefore, further argue that a reading of the text through the dichotomous, concomitant tools of resistance evident during the march, namely jazz and silence, reveal the existence of and the interconnection among the various layers of narrative seamlessly meshed within.

### ***Morrison's Reading of Jazz Music***

Using the character, Alice Manfred, as analyst, Morrison presents the junction between the "muffled drums" of the march and the drums of jazz music, while delving into the meaning of the silence of the participants (New York Times, July 1917).

Alice Manfred stood for three hours on Fifth Avenue marveling at the cold black faces and listening to drums saying what the graceful women and the marching men could not. *What was possible to say* was already in print on a banner that repeated a couple of promises from the Declaration of Independence and waved over the head of its bearer. But *what was meant* came from the drums. It was July in 1917 and the beautiful faces were cold and quiet; moving slowly into the space the drums were building for them. (*Jazz* 53, emphasis added)

It is significant that a distinction is made between “what was possible to say” and “what was meant” (*Jazz* 53). The words that were stated to explain the march, and the protestors’ external response to the violence in East Saint Louis did not indicate “what was meant” (*Jazz* 53). The use of words to mask meaning rather than disclose it, reveals one of the binary stratifications of communication that African-Americans historically used to protect themselves against whites: overt statement and inner covert meaning. Morrison, in her 1981 interview with Le Clair, indicates that this aspect of the language of black people is most closely analogous to jazz music: “It is open on the one hand and both complicated and inaccessible on the other” (124). In her *New York Times* interview of August 1994, Morrison expanded her reading of jazz music in describing it as both “demanding and sophisticated” while “at the same time be[ing] accessible in a sort of emotional way to lots of people” (1). These Morrisonian readings of jazz music, then, juxtapose the qualities of being “open” and “accessibl[e] in a sort of emotional way” and the “inaccessible complication” of “demanding [...] sophistication” (1). The openness refers not only to the performer but also to the response of the listener; something within the nature of the music itself allows for a space and an opening for the listener to enter emotionally even while recognizing its “inaccessible,” “demanding [...] sophistication” (1).

The *something* that allows jazz, though complex, to provide an emotional space for its listeners, may be found in the impulse of the performer. As Charlie Parker is quoted as saying, “music is your own experience, your thoughts, your wisdom. If you don’t live it, it won’t come out of your horn” (qtd. in Cone 5). Thus, what “comes out of the horn” of the performer expresses his/her experiences (5). Some aspects of the

performance are emotionally accessible to the listener and other parts are not. Jazz music then is open yet closed, revealing yet concealing, simple yet complex. These imbrications of contrasting dichotomies are, as James Cone posits, what make “black music unity music” (5). While the marchers laid bare the “love and the hate, hope and the despair” that they felt through the drums, their expressed depth of feeling remained inaccessible to the onlookers reading the banners that they held (Cone 5). With slogans and questions such as: “Mother, do Lynchers go to Heaven?” “Thou shalt not kill,” “Give Us a Chance to Live,” the banners did not express the inexpressible.<sup>3</sup> The drums spoke into the silence of the marchers, unutterably complex, inaccessible speech: their anger, their fear, their hope, their despair. The rhythm(s) that underlie jazz music, marvelous in their complexity and intricacy, is/are driven by and stem from the same desire to express the inexpressible, as the drums of the marchers. Hence, Alice, when hearing the drums of the marchers, is reminded of jazz music, she “swore she heard a complicated anger in it; something hostile that disguised itself as flourish and roaring seduction” (*Jazz* 59).

Without the inclusion of the music from the drums, the words of the banners which waved over their heads and “the slippery crazy words” printed on the explanatory leaflets the Boy Scouts distributed to the white men observing the march, “seemed crazy” and “out of focus” (*Jazz* 58). Although Alice was a part of the assaulted community and a sharer in their grief, the words of the “explanatory leaflets” in particular, merely served to cause a “great gap” to “lunge between the print” and Dorcas, Alice’s newly orphaned niece. “Alice had picked up a leaflet that had floated to the pavement, read the words, and shifted her weight at the curb. She read the words and looked at Dorcas. Looked at Dorcas and read the words again” (*Jazz* 58).



Although some of the explanations offered on the leaflet were readily apprehensible, “We march because we want to make impossible a repetition of Waco, Memphis, and East St. Louis, by arousing the conscience of the country,” other aspects were obscure (Kellner 325). Perhaps Alice puzzled over the following segment:

We march because the growing consciousness and solidarity of race, coupled with sorrow and discrimination, have made us one, a union that may never be dissolved in spite of the shallow-brained agitators, scheming pundits, and political tricksters who receive a fleeting popularity and the uncertain financial support of a people who ought to consider themselves as one. We march because we want our children to live in a better land and enjoy fairer conditions than have been our lot. (Kellner 325)

As Alice Manfred stood “crushing” the hand of her newly orphaned niece, Dorcas, watching the “cold,” “beautiful faces” of the marchers, she was “struggling for the connection, something to close the distance between the silent staring child and the slippery crazy words” (*Jazz* 58). Into the space and “spann[ing] the distance” Alice heard the drums “like a rope cast for rescue[...]which gathered them up and connected them” (*Jazz* 58). The drums, muffled during the march, sound the same rhythms of the jazz music Alice hears all around her. Appealingly open to the emotions of the listener they “gather them up and connect them” when played alone during the march. However, when heard within the context of jazz music it made Alice “hold her hand in the pocket of her apron to keep from smashing it through the glass pane to snatch the world in her fist and squeeze the life out of it for doing what it did and did and did to her and everybody else she knew” (*Jazz* 59). The two different hand gestures, the open hand reaching for the “gathering rope” and the clenched fist, that Alice uses to “balance herself with” when she hears “some phrase or other” represent the two contradictory realities and readings of jazz music (*Jazz* 59): “open” on the one hand, and “inaccessible” on the other (LeClair 124).

The wanton violence occurring within the indissoluble “union” belied the “solidarity of race” the leaflet intoned (Kellner 325). Although the murderous fury of the riots was certainly a response to many happenings: the return of resistant black veterans, the influx of countless migrants, and the frustration of the underclass within an Industrial Age, another more ambiguous yet pervasive inducement existed, the impact of what Morrison calls, the national narrative.

### *The National Narrative*

The cohesion of the narratives of white conquest and black subjugation as perpetuated through the spectacle, my adaptation of Morrison’s national narrative, continues to resonant on both the national and local levels. Placed within the narrow framework of stereotype, the National Narrative seeks to construct the perception of the African-American by the majority, and limit his/her growth to the confines and boundaries of a preset frame. While the myth of the African-American as childlike yet ferocious, amenable yet crazed, was used to justify enslavement and the supposed necessity of strictly imposed controls, the oppressive, repressive consequences of slavery continue to resonate in America for the African-American.<sup>4</sup> Although no longer officially termed chattel, or bound within the limitations of the slave codes,<sup>5</sup> as during slavery, or the derivative black codes, African-Americans are still pressed into conformity to the mold of the National Narrative through limited economic, educational, political and social opportunities, and by its continuing effort to “produce belief” in the African-American of its creation (“Official Story” 16). Yet, the National Narrative adversely influences both of the critical groups involved. Whereas it attempts to suppress the African-American into inferiority and simultaneously valorize the hegemonic

controllers of the Narrative boundaries, the Narrative is disadvantageous to both on some level.

Those whites who believe the official story about the African-American are concurrently locked into a false belief of their own ascendancy, their own rights of privilege, and the autotelic purity of their purposes. The result can be a self-focused, externally driven, falsely assured person who is unable to view any unlike him/herself as anything other than a tool for his/her own self-glorification, self-gratification and self-aggrandizement. They thereby choose to be deprived of the wonders, joys, and complexities of authentic multiculturalism.

The African-American is also perniciously impacted not only in the external miseries of a limited life style, but also through the classification as social pariah. Even when the National Narrative is not consciously believed or accepted by him/her, some seepage of the surrounding negativity still causes one to question his/her own worth and ponder the question of being. “To the extent that the targeted group internalizes the images that the dominant group reflects back to them, they may find it difficult to believe in their own ability” (Tatum, 23). Surrounded by the pervasiveness of the National Narrative he/she may wonder, am I really okay?<sup>6</sup> The National Narrative also causes the African-American to focus on the desire for acceptance, by those who consistently reject him. The consistent onslaught of oppressions from the National Narrative can cause an accumulation of hurts that eventually pierce deeply into the spirit, but which are denied expression in an effort to maintain day-to-day subsistence.

The tool through which the National Narrative is primarily disseminated is that of the spectacle. Although the 21<sup>st</sup> Century approach to the media-produced-spectacle was

obviously absent during slavery, the milieu of slavery provided its own spectacle in the person of the slave him/herself and the mechanisms involved in the institution.

Considered anathema, viewed as a repository of ills, the person of the slave was the consistent focus of the slave owner and other whites. Since the “primary concern of the owner was to get work out of his slaves,” many plantation owners and small farmers spent much of their time in the how-to’s of yielding the highest profitability from their slave (Franklin 136). In light of the persistence of slave resistance and revolt, the limitation, control, and continued suppression of the slave was the focus of attention in the slave states and outside of them. Slave codes, patrols, instruments of torture, auction blocks, advertisements, posters, and other facets of slavery created a significant spectacle. Designed to last forever,<sup>7</sup> much of the paraphernalia of slavery would have still been present even many years after its abolition, as visual reminders of what was burned into the consciousness of most whites: African-Americans were meant to be enslaved.<sup>8</sup> Hence, during the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century a continuance and heightening of the urgency to control this loosed populace was evident. The official story of the National Narrative remained unchanged: the truculence of blacks demanded control and fixity within pre-established boundaries.

The impact in the North of an increased African-American presence within an environment rife with the iconography of the National Narrative served to heighten tensions and cause friction. The East Saint Louis riots were the outgrowth of the frustrations of some Northern Whites at the increased presence of African-Americans functioning outside of the roles the Narrative prescribed. The National Narrative adumbrates a static image of the African-American within its limited framework. The

seemingly positive portion of the contradictory package presented as representative of all of black persons (docile, loyal, trustworthy, faithful) is only applicable within the *presumptions* of inferiority prescribed by the National Narrative: i.e. servanthood. Once the African-American is seen as somehow serving the white, either overtly, as slave, servant, waiter, mammy, washerwoman, etc. or covertly, as entertainer, counselor, economic stepping-stone, tensions and conflicts are minimal. However, if the black person should step beyond the boundaries of the “postulates of the discussion” and assert personhood not prescribed by the Narrative, the perceptions as evil, threatening, violent, and treacherous immediately come into focus (“Official Story”<sup>16</sup>). The idea of the black person able to move freely outside of the bounds of the Narrative produces fear and/or anger, on a number of levels, for those whites who adhere to the Narrative. White safety, economic security, hegemonic positionality, and of course white treasures, namely their women, and other possessions all seem to be threatened.<sup>9</sup>

### ***The Common Narratives***

What was happening in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century in the North that evoked such fears? The collective decision of African-Americans to pursue their vision of the American Dream and openly overstep the Narrative framework. Their actions were reflective of an individualized perception of man/womanhood contradicting, defying and resisting the one presented for acceptance. While the National Narrative effectively presents to white, and “wanna-be” white America, a stereotypical view of blacks for belief, there are other Narratives in operation in America which serve as a welcome, open to all Americans, for consumption, for belief, and for incorporation. I term these

narratives the Common Narratives. Two of the most prevalent of these Common Narratives are the American Dream<sup>10</sup> and American Christianity.<sup>11</sup>

Black Americans have historically used their own interpretation of these Common Narratives as a means of countering the pervasiveness of the National Narrative. The African-American adaptation of American Christianity as a tool of resistance within slavery is well documented. Although contorted by many of the pro-slavery camp to be utilized as another means of suppressing the African, American Christianity was reinterpreted by the slave for his own purposes. Intertwining African religious norms and other verses and lyrics to expand upon the limited gospel of obedience formally taught, the slave, and freedman, created a counter-narrative evidenced in hush harbors, the slaves' Biblical hermeneutics, the spirituals, slave preachers and the like. In spite of the fact that many masters and overseers sought to curtail slave religious life either formal or informal by "threats of floggings,"<sup>12</sup> the underground church continued unabated throughout slavery, serving as a means of resistance, encouragement, hope and relief. The church-without-walls was the one space in slavery where the slave could be. "The 'praise nights' or 'prayer meetings', were[...]the only times when the Negro felt he could express himself as freely and emotionally as possible" (Jones 40-1). Away from the eyes of the oppressive owners and overseers, the slave could freely express the sorrows, angers, frustrations, fears and sufferings. The importance of the existence of a supportive, understanding, safe communal space in countering the impact of the National Narrative cannot be overemphasized. Yet the "religion of the slaves was both institutional and non-institutional, visible and invisible, formally organized and

spontaneously adapted. Regular Sunday worship in the local church was paralleled by illicit...prayer meetings on weeknights..." (Raboteau 212).

The ability to "behave as an individual within the context of the community" allowed the participant to express and asseverate the reality of their being within the safety of a community of sharers; here he/she found the love of God expressed through others of like-mind ("Rootedness" 339). These fellow sojourners could relate to, understand, and share in each other's pain thus lightening its load on their own spirit. Here they found acceptance, love and affirmation.

Post-emancipation, the pursuit of the American Dream was added to the arsenal of the counter-narratives of black ex-slaves. Although the hope of freedom was always present in the mind of the slave, and some were successful in the attainment of it through running away, widespread involvement in any active pursuit of their own vision of the American Dream became possible only *after* slavery. Even then, it was adapted to fit the vision needed for the individual African-American within the context of his/her specific cultural experience. Many of those who came North from the South during the Great Migration of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century came in pursuit of that Dream on some level: to have the opportunity to improve their economic status, to escape violence, to somehow move beyond the status of slaves. The presence of these migrants, in conjunction with the return of "disgruntled [black] veterans" who had come "home to white violence more intense than when they enlisted," may have contributed to the fury unleashed on the black community (*Jazz* 57). "How dare they try to go free? How evil. How stupid. Did they really think they could get away with it?" (Birth 11).

Thus, the Common Narratives open to all Americans, were culturally shaped by the African-American to be used as a tool to counter the National Narrative. Firmly fixed within a National Narrative infused society, African-Americans employed the mechanisms available within the larger culture to contravene the virulence of the National Narrative and create cultural counter-narratives. However, cultural narratives rooted in American common narratives were not the only ones created by African-Americans; they also created counter-narratives founded in African traditions and incorporating American themes. One of the most prevalent of this type of cultural-counter-narrative is seen in African-American music. “Early observers[...]pointed out that a great many of the first Negro Christian religious songs had been taken almost untouched from the great body of African religious music” (Jones 44).

### *Morrison’s Counter-Narrative*

Without the countering balance of cultural-counter-narratives, the overwhelming nature and presence of the National Narrative’s misrepresentation of African-American culture and persons can adversely affect the perception that the African-American has of him/herself resulting in complete derailment or in misdirected response. Morrison posits that one such response of misdirection was evident during the 1970’s “Black is Beautiful” movement (“Behind the Making” 87)). In Morrison’s article “Behind the Making of the Black Book” she elaborates on one of the concerns which she had with the “Black is Beautiful” and Black Studies movements of the 1970’s (“Behind the Making” 87). She believed that what was being presented at that time was a new version of history that was “reactionary,” “history-as-imagined,” rather than “history as life lived”(88).



I argue that Morrison by incorporating the historical approach she employs for the compilation of *The Black Book*, uses her oeuvre to depict the history-as-life-lived of specific characters, thus focusing on “what one is” rather than on “how one looks”(88). A historicity of reclamation rather than reaction is voiced through her texts presenting a counter-narrative to the National Narrative and to reactionary narratives.

True to her vision of filling a communal dearth, Morrison’s textual counter-narratives depict contrasting and sometimes overlapping aspects of African-American cultural counter-narratives. In *Jazz*, Morrison uses the cultural counter-narrative of the jazz music aesthetic to present her textual counter-narrative. Many critics have argued adroitly about the titular significance of jazz in Morrison’s text through brilliant explications of the language and phrasing of its presentation of the jazz aesthetic.<sup>13</sup> I build upon their arguments by positing that *Jazz* mirrors Morrison’s understanding of jazz music, “open on the one hand and both complicated and inaccessible on the other,” in its presentation of two layers of narrative; an “open,” external narrative in the first layer, and a “complicated,” “inaccessible,” internal narrative within the second layer (1). Instead of giving the reader one omniscient narrator, Morrison chooses to use two narrators: One gossipy, overtly hostile voice which presents itself as omniscient; admitting only towards the end of the text to have based all of its’ conclusions on what it can observe (*Jazz* 220-1); And another narrative voice which often follows closely on the heels of the first, makes no claims to complete knowledge, involves no insults to the characters, yet is involved in framing most of their conversations, thoughts and feelings.

Most critics have read the two narrative voices as one improvisational voice, shaping, molding its melody as it works through the text. Yet the tone of the first,

seemingly open voice can also be read as containing its improvisational elements immediately within its solo part. The superficial, erroneous conclusions of the first narrator are exposed and corrected both through the insights of the second narrator, and through the first narrator itself about Golden Gray, specifically, and about all of its conclusions in general, by the end of the novel. The second narrator provides a subcutaneous layer through which Morrison chooses to tell the reader “what [is] meant” by the music which overlays it (*Jazz* 53). Both the open “flourish” of the first narrator on the one hand, and the “complicated and inaccessible” insights of the second narrator, on the other hand, concurrently comprise the jazz music of *Jazz* (1). While the flourish of jazz heard in the improvisational techniques for which it is famous, can often be read superficially as off-handed and purely spontaneous, concerted practice, training and forethought intermingled with spontaneity produce the finished performance.<sup>14</sup> Although some spontaneity is involved in the actual performance, the entire presentation is not merely “roaring seduction” (*Jazz* 59).

The first narrator voices the persiflage of the spontaneous gossip. Based neither on experience or on forethought it reflects the type of voice sometimes mistakenly assumed to comprise all of jazz music. The first narrator does not, therefore, live the lives it describes. As an outsider looking in, without a life of its own, it merely describes the lives of the characters and assumes their thoughts and feelings (*Jazz* 220). It mistakenly speculates about the predictability of the characters while they were in fact “busy being original, complicated, changeable” (*Jazz* 220). As Charlie Parker is quoted as saying, “music is your own experience, your thoughts, your wisdom. If you don’t live it, it won’t come out of your horn” (Cone 5). The silence, then of the marchers, and the

second layer of narrative in *Jazz*, comes “out of the horn” of the characters of the text more than does the first (Cone 5). While employing a similar form, the content and tenor of the first narrator betrays its’ admitted position as an observer.

The tenor of the first narrator is evidenced in the first word of the text: “Sth” (*Jazz* 3). The teeth sucking sound implying disgust and/or scorn, is usually accompanied by some feeling of hostility or annoyance based on a previous encounter. However, the assumptions that accompany the sound are false for this narrator, though it continues by telling the listener, “I *know* that woman” (*Jazz* 3, emphasis added). The knowledge of Violet, “that woman” to whom it refers, and of her husband, Joe, whom it also claims to “know,” proves to be cosmetic and in fact erroneous (*Jazz* 3). The narrator knows neither Violet nor Joe. Yet, its’ layout of the basic story does provide the motif for the novel and open the opportunity for the improvisational additions of the rest of the band, i.e. the other characters, when they enter.

The opening section for the second narrator begins at the bottom of page nine. Unlike the closed off, know-it-all style of the first narrator, the second narrator provides the musical bridge between the initial solo and the incorporation of the rest of the band (characters). While the majority of the correctives to the initial presentation of Joe and Violet occur throughout the text, the presentation of their response to the presence of Dorcas, the dead girl’s photograph in their home, is corrected by the second narrator without reference or attention pointed to the erroneous conclusion of the first.

The first narrator claims that “both [Violet] and Joe looked at [the picture] in bewilderment” (*Jazz* 6). The second narrator, however, provides both Joe and Violet’s differing perspectives of the photo, and the setting and motives for their viewing of it. “If

the tiptoer is Joe Trace[...]then the face stares at him without hope or regret[...]Her face is calm, generous and sweet. But if the tiptoer is Violet the photograph is not that at all. The girl's face looks greedy, haughty and very lazy" (*Jazz* 12). It is significant that one of the earliest indications of the questionable reliability of the first narrator centers on Violet and Joe's perspectives and responses to the photograph of Dorcas, Joe's murdered mistress. Whereas the first narrator assumes that both Joe and Violet share the same response to it, "bewilderment," the reality of their varied interpretations of her face, Joe's reading of the photograph as "calm, generous and sweet," and Violet's view of it as "greedy, haughty and very lazy," indicate the misunderstandings possible in the interpretation of a photographic image (*Jazz* 12).

Both Joe and Violet bring their previous knowledge of Dorcas with them as they view her photo. While the first narrator, basing all of its conclusions on external appearances and on its own assumptions of what their response might be, sees unanimity of bewilderment, the second narrator, with insights into the thoughts and experiences of them both, can read their widely divergent responses. The first narrator views the Trace's and all of the characters as "sepia," flat, photographic, images rather than multi-dimensional persons (*Jazz* 226). Seeing the Traces as living within a photograph, so to speak, causes this narrator to assume uni-dimensionality.

This early concentration on the distinction between the two narrators' readings of the Trace's responses to Dorcas' photograph, evokes the import of another photograph; the photograph of the young lady "shot by her sweetheart at a party" the sight of which inspired Morrison to write the book, *Jazz* (VanDerZee 84). Viewed in the manuscript for *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, "Morrison protected the seedling of this story line" of a

young lady who would not reveal the identity of her assailant; “Tomorrow, yes, I’ll tell you tomorrow she said” (Gates 53). The character of Dorcas in the text parallels that of the anonymous young lady. Although knowingly wounded by Joe’s silent weapon, Dorcas refuses to reveal his identity or to be taken to the hospital: “They need me to say his name so they can go after him. Take away his sample case with Rochelle and Bernadine and Faye inside. I know his name but Mama won’t tell” (*Jazz* 193).

The significance of the dual readings of the Trace’s viewing of Dorcas’ photo then carries deeper significance. Bearing in mind the definitions of jazz music which Morrison offered in the two interviews mentioned above, a double-voiced reading of her text becomes more cogent. In light of the fact that the photograph of the dead girl is the basis for the book, the presentation of the readings of the equivalent photo within the text, the Trace’s readings of Dorcas’ picture, may underscore the ways in which Morrison reads the original photo within the body of the text. I argue that Morrison incorporates her understanding of jazz music into her reading of the photograph and her unveiling of the story within the text. “Open on the one hand” and “inaccessible on the other”, *Jazz* obviously delves far beyond superficial analysis (1). The imbricated double-voiced reading conflates Morrison’s understandings of jazz music and her readings of the foundational photograph.

The flat characterization of the uni-dimensional view and the assumptions which accompany it, depict the way in which Joe and Violet initially read each other. Similar to the superficial reading of the first narrator, both Joe and Violet are initially consumed with their physical attraction to each other. While their libidinous response is typical for new lovers, they never seem to mature past that point into a deeper knowing of each other

or to an emotional intimacy which matches their physical ardor. Hence, Violet is ignorant of the reasons for Joe's eventual migration to the City after fourteen years of refusal and resistance to its lure. "Violet never knew what it was that fired him up and made him want...to move to the City" (*Jazz* 107). Joe, in turn, is unaware of what causes Violet's eventual silence and sexual withdrawal. "Over time her silences annoy [him], then puzzle him and finally depress him" (*Jazz* 24). The roots of both their responses stem from what I term a *central trauma*.

### *Accessing the "Inaccessible"*

Morrison chooses to depict both Violet and Joe as wounded souls with, "sadness at [their] center[...]the desolated center where the self that was no self made its home" (*Beloved* 140). The "desolation[...]at [their] center"(140) stems from the impact of a central trauma, an incident which occurred in childhood when they were "too young to say No thank you" (*Jazz* 211). All the other episodes that stem from the pain of this trauma, or somehow remind Joe and Violet of it, continually serve to debilitate them until they choose to confront it and talk it through. "Joe's murder of his young girlfriend and Violet's stabbing of the corpse as it awaits burial indicate the powerful eruption of their unresolved pasts into the present" (Matus 122). The darkness at the center of this trauma has no sound, it is silent, like the marchers. It therefore, constitutes the foundational rhythm, if you will, the core layer of rhythm of the complexity of *Jazz*. "It lays underneath, holding up the looseness like a palm" (*Jazz* 60).

Scarcely discernable amongst the flourish and pizzazz of Joe and Violet's lives, unable to be reflected even in the lyrics or melody of the music which surrounds them, this rhythm remains hidden to those unaware of its presence. Hence, Joe is unaware that

Violet, who comes across to Joe as spunky and bodacious, suddenly acquired those traits after meeting him. She became “highly and *suddenly* vocal in her determination” to stay “in the vicinity” and “work at anything to be with Joe whenever she could” (*Jazz* 105 emphasis added). However, lying silently rooted beneath the mettle of her new persona remained the young girl who continued to “struggle against the pull of a narrow well” and “watch first light with the sadness left over from finding [her mother] in the morning twisted into water much too small” (*Jazz* 104). In *Jazz*, Morrison calls this central trauma, “inside nothing” (*Jazz* 38). Joe, unaware of Violet’s *inside nothing* believes that he alone carries an inner void, never sharing with Violet his own story. Thus, both Joe and Violet are in need of healing.

Abandoned at birth by his mother, Joe is adopted by the Williams family in response to the plea on his behalf for “one of the women to come...and take [him]” (*Jazz* 170). Although Joe is loved and well treated by the Williams, his stepmother “never pretend[s] that [Joe] [i]s her natural child” (*Jazz* 124). When he realizes, at a young age, the distinction that she makes between him and the other children, he asks about the whereabouts of his parents; she replies that his parents “disappeared without a trace” (*Jazz* 125). However, when Henry Lestroy, a man known for his hunting skills, selects Joe and his stepbrother Victory, to be his apprentices, Joe is indirectly told the truth. His mother had not “disappeared without a trace;” she was, in fact, the local wild woman whom Joe and Victory “were speculating on what it would take to kill[...]if they happened on her” (*Jazz* 175). Henry Lestroy ended their banter with “low fire galvaniz[ing] his stare[...]then he looked right at Joe (not Victory)[...]You know, that woman is *somebody’s* mother and *somebody* ought to take care” (*Jazz* 175).

Silent, lurking, present but absent, with a baby-girl laugh yet a woman, Wild is the personification of contradictions. Although Joe makes three attempts to connect with his mother, each one results in frustration due to her silent response. He only smells her presence during his first accidental encounter with his mother. Whereas Wild continues to remain hidden, the nearness of her breathing, during his second deliberate attempt encourages his request, “Is it you? Just say it[...]You my mother?” (178). Wild’s response, “indecent speechless lurking insanity,” infuriates Joe, driving his maniacal work habits (*Jazz* 179). During Joe’s third and final attempt to connect with Wild, when he locates and enters her burrow, he finds her things all “mixed up” with Golden Gray’s solidifying in Joe the *inside nothing* he carries from then on (*Jazz* 182). It is Wild’s “rejection of him[...]that marks Joe for life” (Mbalia, 626).

Wild is the avatar of the *inside nothing* that Joe and Violet carry. A living picture of the assault on African-Americans in general, and women in particular, Wild bears on her body the “traces of bad things; like tobacco juice, brine, and a craftsman’s sense of play” (*Jazz* 171). Her untamed lifestyle, her visible presence yet absence, her wordless communication with the outside world, her perception by others as crazy, all serve to reinforce the significance of her role in the novel. As the visible presence of the *inside nothing*, she also bears externally the tacit internal scars that Joe and Violet carry; she carries the societal perception as nothing which they bear inside of them. She is silent, afraid to speak, silenced by the terrors she has experienced, and afraid to trust or interact with almost anyone. She can be seen then, as conveying to the reader, much of what remains unsaid concerning the feelings of the *inside nothing* that both Joe and Violet have. Silent but saturated with experiences, present but ignored as if absent, larger than



life but unable to be confronted, the impact of the *inside nothing* in both Violet and Joe's lives becomes wild. Joe seeks to suppress his "speechless, lurking insanity" by working manically after his second encounter with his mother (*Jazz* 179); but he also "bust(s) out just for the hell of it" by "shooting his unloaded shotgun at the leaves" near to where his mother was (*Jazz* 181).

Darkness pervades both Violet and Joe's central traumas. While Joe's many searches for his mother conclude in the dim light of late afternoon, Violet's discovery of her mother's twisted body occurs in the darkness of early morning. The wide darkness of Joe's wood blend into the narrow, confinement of the well Violet's mother jumps into. Since during their first meeting Violet and Joe talk from evening into to the early morning, they each unwittingly help each other through the most difficult portions of their day. Although Joe's pain drives him to activity, Violet's response to her mother's suicide drives her gradually to increasing depression and withdrawal. Insomnia spurred by her seeking to resist the pull of the well was draining her emotional resources. Though surrounded by family support, only her grandmother, True Belle's, urgings to earn money picking cotton during an abundant harvest, shook her from her home. It is during her time in Palestine that she meets and latches unto Joe; she then becomes, literally overnight, the aggressive, vocal, determined woman that Joe believes he knows. However, just as Joe pours himself into work to distract him from the pain he carries, Violet pours all of herself into Joe determined to do and bear anything to be with him.

The Biblical origin of Joe's full first name, Joseph, provides an insight to his ability to serve as a "light" for Violet, Dorcas (his mistress), and any other woman (*Jazz* 96). The Joseph of the Old Testament, sold by his brothers into Egyptian slavery, uses

his God given ability to interpret dreams to warn the Pharaoh of imminent famine. Although Egypt would enjoy seven years of plenty, it would be followed by seven years of famine. Was it not for Joseph's prescient understanding, all the people of Egypt and the surrounding areas would have died from starvation.

Like his Biblical namesake, Joseph Trace also staves off starvation from the women whom he encounters as they are drawn to the "light" he "carried [...] inside him" (*Jazz* 96). The energy devoted to the suppression of the *inside nothing* and the demands of quotidian life only allows for these women to have lapses, slips into the revelation of their emotional and spiritual condition: The laughter which turns to tears; "the seep of rage. Molten. Thick and slow-moving," which lies just beneath the surface, and their armed response to the racial violence around them (*Jazz* 16). "Black women were armed; black women were dangerous and the less money they had the deadlier the weapon they chose" (*Jazz* 77). Even though the unarmed black women were "silent or crazy or dead," the spirit of even the armed women remained vulnerable, unarmed, and even hungry (*Jazz* 78). Those women who suppressed the *inside nothing*, refused to acknowledge its impact, and "beat back the past,"<sup>15</sup> only serve to delay or intensify its manifestation (*Beloved* 73). Seen in the paralytic hand of Neola Miller "positioned[...]as though she held the broken pieces of her heart together," in Alice Manfred's strictly controlled manner and lifestyle, and in Violet's desperate purchase of a doll, the *inside nothing* continued to surface despite the external armor each of these women bore.

Although Joe is able to aid the women he loves in the satisfaction of some of their hungers, he continues to carry his own barrenness. The Biblical pattern of plenty followed by famine established in the Joseph narrative also figures significantly in Joe's

life. Through the God-given gift of dream interpretation the Biblical Joseph is able to warn Pharaoh of the future events of the next fourteen years. While the Biblical events occurred separately, the feast/famine events in Joe's life occur sequentially.

Joe describes himself as having changed seven times. The list that he gives includes seven changes, not including his encounter and affair with Dorcas. As he describes his life through these changes, a pattern of feast/famine becomes evident: he is taken in by a loving family but differentiated as belonging to another; he is chosen by Henry Lestroy to be trained in the woods and learns to love it, but then those same woods, seemingly full of Wild, force him to leave; his town of Vienna is "burned to the ground" which sent him "running from one part of the county to another[...]walk[ing] and work[ing]" but then he meets and marries Violet; he was able to "buy a piece of land" but then he and Violet were "r[u]n[...] off with two slips of paper [he]never saw nor signed;" they moved to the City but had to live initially with "flesh-eating rats"; they moved to a "bigger place on Lenox" and were doing fine financially when "whitemen took [a] pipe from around his head[...]almost kill[ing] [him]"; he "walked all the way[...]with the three six nine," "Gistan got [him] a job at another hotel where the tip was folding money more often than coin" but then "Violet started sleeping with a doll in her arms" (*Jazz* 123-9).

The evidences of the impact of the National Narrative on Joe's life individually, and on he and Violet's lives together as a couple, are manifold. Through every one of Joe's self-described changes he and Violet resist and fight the effects of the National Narrative as attested through racist practices. Yet none of those situations causes the emotional and spiritual devastation of the magnitude of their central traumas. Dealt with

as adults, faced together and not in isolation, they are able to handle and overcome share-cropping, beatings, death threats, and even extreme poverty at the initial stage of their City life, the “flesh-eating rats on West Fifty-third” (*Jazz* 127). Violet’s silence and her “sleeping with a doll in her arms” has a far more significant impact on Joe than any other of his adult experiences and clearly demonstrates some tacit devastation in Violet (*Jazz* 129). The direct encounters with the resonances of the National Narrative that Joe and Violet experience after marriage are less destructive than the indirect effects they suffered before marriage. The central trauma, *inside nothing*, that both Joe and Violet carry result from their parents’ encounters with the National Narrative’s effects, and serve to shape their respective lives; thus illustrating the continuing spiritual devastation of the Narrative even into the second generation.

The choice of Violet’s father to be involved in the Readjuster Party during the Reconstruction period shapes Violet’s childhood.<sup>16</sup> Driven out of his own home by the landowners and “persuaded to transfer himself someplace, anyplace, else,” Violet’s Dad left his wife and their five girls alone in Rome, Virginia, to make it somehow (*Jazz* 100). Although “he made fabulously dangerous and wonderful returns over the years[...]the interims got longer and longer” between his visits (*Jazz* 100). Never knowing whether he was alive or dead, they clung to the hope of his return in the interim periods. While Violet’s mother, Rose Dear, survived single-parenthood within the helpful context of a caring community, their dispossession by landowners, “talking low as though nobody was there but themselves,” eventually proved to be the last straw (*Jazz* 98).

Sitting alone at her table throughout the night “sipping boiled coffee from a white china cup as long as it was there, and pretending to sip it when it was gone,” she was

waiting (*Jazz* 97). When the morning came with the landowners “pick[ing] around in [their] things, lifting out what they wanted,” she remained in her chair, still waiting (*Jazz* 98). When “they took the table out from under her” she continued to sit there, waiting (*Jazz* 98). And when, finally, “they came back and tipped the chair she sat in” spilling her onto the ground like the coffee that had been in her cup, she lay on the floor continuing to wait (*Jazz* 98). What was she waiting for? Deliverance.

However, the specific deliverance she waited for, the husband whom she may have hoped would suddenly appear, never did. Four years later, she stopped waiting and jumped into the bottom of a well. Though surrounded with spiritual support and safety within a caring community, and helped by her mother, True Belle, Rose Dear had placed her hope in a phantom spouse; in a person who could not or chose not to return “to get them all out” (*Jazz* 100).

The necessity of having a balance of counter-narratives to the National Narrative in order to survive, the hope in something concrete and able to be tangibly pursued and the need for a safe, communal space, are seen through Rose Dear’s experience. Although resting in the midst of a spiritually supportive community, she longs for and remains without a concrete hope. Without the focus and motivation of a tangible hope to work towards and cling to, Rose Dear is unable to make an effort to help herself. Completely undone by the dispossession, she remains silent in the days following, choosing to rely fully “upon the few neighbors left in 1888” (*Jazz* 98). The *neighbors* locate an “abandoned shack for them,” the *neighbors* share their food, and the *neighbors* pass the message of “Rose Dear’s distress” to True Belle (*Jazz* 98, emphasis added).

When Violet's father does return, four years and two weeks late, laden down with gifts, stories, and a "smile that made the sisters forgive him," Violet "never forg[e]t[s] Rose Dear or the place she had thrown herself into- a place so narrow, so dark it was pure breathing relief to see her stretched in a wooden box" (*Jazz* 100-1). After her mother's suicide and Violet's discovery of the body, in the midst of a caring community and her loving family, Violet is also drawn to the well. Twelve years old when the dispossession occurred, she too rests her hopes on a phantom. Not persuaded by her phantom father's flourish, Violet places her hopes on the stories of the little golden boy, Golden Gray, with whom True Belle fills the girls' heads.

Golden Gray is the child of Henry LesTroy, Joe's mentor, and Vera Louise, True Belle's mistress. Outraged by their daughter's choice, to be sexually involved with a slave, and its outcome, her pregnancy, Vera Louise's parents encourage her departure. "The lingerie case full of money that lay on Vera's pillow [...] was [...] more money than anybody [...] needed for seven months or so away from home. So much money the message was indisputable: die, or live if you like, elsewhere (*Jazz* 141). Vera chose to live. She moved to Baltimore, taking her servant, True Belle, with her and together they raised and spoiled Golden Gray.

In an effort to keep them at the hard tasks of making a life for themselves in a racially and agriculturally hostile terrain, True Belle shares her stories. These stories take the place, for Violet, that her phantom father once did; yet one phantom hope is simply replaced by another. With no knowledge of Golden Gray, other than what True Belle shares, and little chance of ever meeting or seeing him, the person that Violet fixes her hopes on is even less concrete than her father. Surrounded by the realities of life infused

by the National Narrative, grieving over her mother's death and her father's abandonment, though in the midst of a caring community, Violet is drawn to the well; "the well sucked her sleep" (*Jazz* 102).

Violet meets Joe one year after her mother's suicide when True Belle sent her to Palestine with two of her sisters, to pick the abundance of cotton that had blossomed suddenly. Discouraged, "humiliated and teased to tears" by the others, "Violet had no talent" for picking cotton (*Jazz* 103). Though seventeen, she was placed "with the twelve-year-olds" to trail the pickers and get the "few inferior puffs left on the twigs" (*Jazz* 103). Her placement with the twelve-year-olds to pick gives some indication of where she remained emotionally, twelve, the age she was when the dispossession occurred and when she realized that her mother had been broken. The cup which fell when her mother was tipped out of her chair was "stronger than she [wa]s" (*Jazz* 98).

Due to her chagrin at her inferior picking skills, upset with even her sisters, and just about ready to return home, she chooses to sleep away from the others under a "handsome black walnut" tree (*Jazz* 103). There Joe startles Violet by falling out of the tree and down to her side. A conversation ensues which lasts all through the night.

"Could've killed me."  
 "Might still, if my arm ain't broke."  
 "I hope it is. You won't be picking nothing in the morning and climbing people's trees either."  
 "I don't pick cotton. I work the gin house."  
 "What you doing out here, then, Mr. High and Mighty, sleeping in trees like a bat?" (104)

Joe talks Violet "through the dark" of that first night, forever transforming the nature of her nighttime experiences (*Jazz* 105). "Never again would she wake struggling against the pull of a narrow well. Or watch first light with the sadness left over from

finding Rose Dear in the morning twisted into water much too small” (*Jazz* 104). Violet holds unto Joe immediately and from then on she “claims as her own [...] the shaft of his legs, the plane of his shoulders, jawline and long fingers,” seeing the “light” he carried “inside him” but all the while “wishing he was the golden boy” she had never seen (*Jazz* 96-7, 105). Since Joe serves merely as a substitute for Violet and not the boy for whom she longs, she is distracted from the *inside nothing*, through the strenuous physical labor that she does for the sake of improving their living conditions, and through the sexual relationship she has with Joe. Her *inside nothing*, however, is not healed. It is only covered and suppressed. The balancing counter-narratives of a concrete hope and a caring community, serve only as a means of survival and not healing.

Joe consents to marry Violet, is tender to her and faithful, looking at her with his “two-color eyes and never [seeing] anybody else” (*Jazz* 96). Yet he too places his hopes in a phantom. Having never seen, touched, or spoken with his mother, she becomes his phantom hope, like Golden Grey and his father-in-law are for Violet. At the same time that Violet latches onto Joe as her concrete hope from despair, Joe immerses himself in the counter-narrative of the American Dream to combat the *inside nothing* he carries as a result of the impact of the National Narrative in his mother’s life and consequently his own. The combination of the occupation of his physical body in extraordinary amounts of hard work and the sating of his sexual appetite for the first time with Violet, serve to create a protective shell or wall around his heart without healing the *inside nothing* which remains trapped inside.

Unlike Violet, Joe has no concrete manifestation or substitute for his phantom hope other than the woods. He stays in his mother’s hometown in the hopes of making a



connection with her at some point. After fourteen years of resisting all of the stories told them of the wonders of the City and why they should come, “abruptly, he changed his mind” (*Jazz* 106). He chooses to leave the area having, finally, abandoned all hope of ever connecting with his mother. On his third attempt to find her, he confronts the tangible reality of what he perceives as her rejection of him. She lives with someone else, the Golden Gray of True Belle’s stories. “A green dress [...] a doll, a spindle, earrings [...] a pair of man’s trousers with buttons of bone [...] a silk shirt, faded pale and creamy” (*Jazz* 184). Thus, Joe and Violet’s departure from Virginia in 1906 marks his decision to bury any hope of the acquisition of his phantom dream. Giving away “every piece of his gear but one,” his gun, Joe chose to lay aside the vestiges of his connection with the woods and place all of his hopes in the City, looking to it as his concrete hope (*Jazz* 107).

Once in the City, striving together towards the goal of economic security and material comfort, both Violet and Joe are distracted from the continued presence of their *inside nothing*. Like the flourish of jazz, the hard work required to fight each phase of the way into the apartment building to which they eventually earn access, caused them not to hear the silent call of their own hearts. Only after both Joe and Violet have acquired some financial stability, through Violet’s hairdressing and Joe’s two jobs, do Violet’s personal cracks begin to appear. While Violet was focused on working their way out of the Tenderloin district she was unaware of the continuance of the *inside nothing*. Far away from home and family, though in the midst of a supportive community, the silence of Violet’s *inside nothing* breaks through and “when she isn’t paying attention she stumbles onto [a] crack, like the time when, instead of putting her

left heel forward, she stepped back and folded her legs in order to sit in the street” (*Jazz* 23). Joe did not know about Violet’s “public craziness”, but he is aware of her personal misery: her “mother-hunger” (*Jazz* 108). “Violet was drowning in it, deep-dreaming[...]just when her nipples ha[d] lost their point, mother-hunger had hit her like a hammer. Knocked her down and out” (*Jazz* 108).

“Mother-hunger” drives Violet to begin sleeping with a doll, “a present [...] she bought herself” and “hid [...] under the bed to take out in secret when it couldn’t be helped” (*Jazz* 108). She refuses to allow Joe near her and stops speaking to him, unsure of when “the anything-at-all” might “begin in her mouth” (*Jazz* 23). She mistakenly assumes that “the business going on inside [her] [...] was none of [her] business and none of Joe’s either” (*Jazz* 97). Although she realized that something was going on inside of her mind and spirit that she did not understand, she seeks to suppress it through silence, rather than to confront it. She was desperate to do anything to “keep hold of [Joe] any way [she] could” (*Jazz* 97). Unfortunately, Violet’s silence produces the opposite effect; it serves to crack through the resistance Joe had allowed to build around his own heart. Much like the “shield” of hard flesh “that had once covered [Violet’s] hands and fingers” the tight muscled strength which Joe’s physical body once held also reflected the protective wall surrounding his empty center (*Jazz* 92). Violet’s silence, stillness, and sexual withdrawal, occurring after they had acquired their vision of the American Dream, eventually break through Joe’s emotional barriers.

Driven from his wife’s side, primarily by her silence, Joe sees in Dorcas and the setting of the candy store, the concrete vision of his long suppressed phantom hope.

All I know is I saw her buying candy and the whole thing was sweet. Not just the candy- the whole thing and picture of it. Candy’s something you

lick, suck on, and then swallow and it's gone. No. This was something else. More like blue water and white flowers, and sugar in the air. I needed to be there, where it was all mixed up together just right, and where that was, was Dorcas. (122)

The blue water of the Treason River and the white hibiscus flowers adjacent to his mother's burrow, combined with the sugared air he tasted on his tongue after the burning of his town, were all elements evident in his various encounters with his mother. Long buried deep within his wounded spirit, he may have thought that the City had effectively fed his original hunger for his mother. He may have assumed with many others that once he "f[e]ll in love with the city it [wa]s forever [...] as though there never was a time when [he] didn't love it" (*Jazz* 33). However, what Joe wanted, was to be with the young woman who brought it all together, who had "little half moons [of acne] clustered under her cheekbones, like faint hoofmarks" (*Jazz* 130). Thus, Dorcas combining some of the traces of elements that he recalls in connection with his mother, becomes his means for the fulfillment of his desire

During the brief affair Joe has with Dorcas, he tells her "things he never told his wife" about the details of his *inside nothing* (*Jazz* 36). In speaking to her of his private pain he begins the difficult confrontation with his personal history necessary for healing to occur. She, therefore, serves not only as his lover and the concrete fulfillment of his phantom hopes of connection with his mother, but she also provides what Joe desperately missed since he left home and what is a necessary counter-narrative to the National Narrative; the spiritual connection of relational intimacy. Having shared deeply only with his stepbrother, Victory, and assuming that the picture he saw of Violet was all there was, he suppresses and hides his wounded heart from everyone except Dorcas. Dorcas fills his *inside nothing*, "just as he filled it for her, because she had it too" (*Jazz* 38).

When Dorcas, therefore, seeks to break off their relationship for a “chance to have Acton,” a young man her age, Joe becomes desperate (*Jazz* 189). Violet became anxious at the thought of losing Joe due to her “crazinesses,” similarly Joe panics at the prospect of Dorcas’ abandonment (*Jazz* 22). Violet’s resulting silence effected Joe’s withdrawal and his obsessive attempts to reconcile with Dorcas that produce his creation of a permanent schism: he hunts Dorcas and kills her. Joe’s murder of Dorcas and its aftermath, Violet’s attack on Dorcas’ dead body, is the main Misery of the novel. A communal incident, it serves to highlight the previously hidden areas of disjuncture between the community and the Trace couple. Although everyone knows and loves Joe, their love for him is peripheral. Even his friends Gistan and Stuck do not share in his understanding of, and his approach to life. Hence, he did not tell either of them about his affair with Dorcas or his need for it. He believed that “Gistan would just laugh and try to get out of hearing it [and] Stuck would look at his feet, swear [he]’d been fixed and tell me how much high john [he] need[ed] to remedy [him]self” (*Jazz* 121).

Violet, who had never been close to anyone in the City except Joe, is further ostracized by the community after her attack on Dorcas’ corpse (*Jazz* 9). However, she reaches out to Dorcas’ aunt, Alice Manfred, because she “had to sit down somewhere [...] and thought [she] could do it [t]here. That [Alice] would let [her] and [she] did” (*Jazz* 82). What develops between them is the type of relationship that they both need in order to heal the *inside nothing* that they both carry; spiritual connection of platonic intimacy. Both Violet and Alice provide a space for each other where they are able to be and to be loved. “When Violet [...] came to visit something opened up [...] the thing was how Alice felt and talked in her company. Not like she did with other people[...] No

apology or courtesy seemed required or necessary between them” (*Jazz* 83). Violet’s relationship with Alice serves to move her to the place in her journey that Joe had reached with Dorcas before her death; speaking about and confronting the pain of their respective central traumas. Joe and Violet together are able to move together to the final phase of healing, sharing.

Although the expression of and confrontation with their respective central traumas was an essential portion of their journey to healing, both Joe and Violet needed to work out the problems in their own relationship to provide for each other what they sought in others; relational intimacy. Since Joe killed the one who helped him emote some of the pain he felt concerning his *inside nothing* and Alice Manfred moves back home, Joe and Violet need to move to the place where they could support each other. Communal aid comes in the form of Felice, Dorcas’ best friend. She provides the view of Dorcas that both Violet and Joe need to move forward, and she serves as a mediator between them. She introduces the topics of conversation and asks the questions which illicit the type of responses they both need to hear from each other. And it is also with Felice that Joe and Violet share their gifts. Violet shares her clarity: “She doesn’t lie Mrs. Trace. Nothing she says is a lie the way it is with most older people” (*Jazz* 205). And Joe his “light”: she sees in him the something that makes “[you] feel deep- as though the things [you] feels and think are important and different and [...] interesting” (*Jazz* 206).

Yet Morrison leaves the denouement of Joe and Violet’s relationship ambiguous. While Felice’s perspectives on Dorcas and the Trace’s individually aid in their relational sharing, the pain of their *inside nothings* are still present, though perhaps to a lesser degree. Even though at the novel’s end they cleave to each other, they cling, in part, as a

means of coping with the ongoing grief of their respective traumas. Joe continues to grieve over his murder of Dorcas and his maternal rejection: “Lying next to [Violet][...] he sees through the glass darkness taking the shape of a shoulder with a thin line of blood. Slowly, slowly it forms itself into a bird with a blade of red on the wing” (*Jazz* 225). Violet also continues to struggle with the pain of dual losses; her mother’s suicide and her father’s abandonment: “Violet rests her hand on [Joe’s] chest as though it were the sunlit rim of a well and down there somebody is gathering gifts...to distribute to them all” (*Jazz* 225).

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<sup>1</sup>“Negroes in Protest March in Fifth Av.” *New York Times*, July 29, 1917.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Many of the banners noted in the New York Times article seemed to have simply stated the truth of the events and the situation in general while also, perhaps, raising the consciousness of some of the onlookers. They did not, therefore, express the inexpressible feelings of the marchers; they were for the benefit of an extra-communal observer. “Your Hands Are Full of Blood,” “India is Abolishing Caste America is Adopting It,” “Memphis and Waco, Centres of American Culture.”

<sup>4</sup> Many thousands of African-Americans today continue to live under slave-like conditions. Many of the workers in the cane fields of Florida, the tobacco fields of North Carolina, and the fruit orchards of various states, for example, live in shacks and squalor unimaginable for 2007. Although slavery was formally abolished in 1865, some of the work once completed by slaves, and more contemporary yet equally undesirable occupations, continue to be completed by blacks. Violently forced to remain or unable to flee due to poverty, illiteracy and other factors, countless numbers are locked in by hopeless conditions and merciless employers.

<sup>5</sup> The slave codes sought to restrict the slave’s behavior and activity through their allowance of a “wide range of physical punishments including branding on the cheek or thumbs, amputation of body limbs, splitting noses, castration and the death penalty, each one applied according to the nature of wrongdoing by the slaves” (Morgan, 77). The black codes were passed after slavery as a means of “coerc[ing] the labor of black men, women and children” (Painter, 131). Thus, both systems of codification sought to limit the black person to operation within externally prescribed guidelines.

<sup>6</sup> The significance of the impact of an often negative visual image in conjunction with the biased and/or icy treatment sometimes received by whites “is...to face a difficult challenge [and] to exercise a demanding discipline...to ward off madness and discredit suicide as a desirable option” (West, 81).

<sup>7</sup> I am indebted to Prof. Bassard for this significant insight.

<sup>8</sup> Painter asserts that “by the middle of the eighteenth century, slavery had taken form and become identified with Africans and their descendants by race” (25).

<sup>9</sup> The variety of responses to Sen. Barack Obama's bid for the White House has engendered the, sometimes, covert realities of blacks remaining in their place.

<sup>10</sup> Most often conceived currently as the attainment of a house in the suburbs, a car and 2.5 children, the American Dream was envisioned before the founding of America as an independent nation. The first British settlement in America, Jamestown, Virginia (1607), was a business venture. Due to its central focus, profit making, the success of the Jamestown colony was viewed in monetary terms. Although the Puritans founded a New England with the goal of "preserving themselves and their posterity from the common corruptions of this evil world...", the merging of the material and religious visions of what became the American Dream has gradually been predominated by the material pursuit (LeBeau, 38). Hence, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century vision of the Dream seems to interpret the "life, liberty and pursuit of happiness" intoned by the Declaration of Independence in material terms available to all who cross these borders.

<sup>11</sup> The overall goal of colonial American society was to achieve an overwhelmingly Protestant, God directed political order that allowed for the participation of many fleeing various religious persecutions in Europe. Hence, while the influence of Puritan philosophy and vision greatly influenced America and continues to resonate today, the Puritanical goal of a society composed of individuals pure in the eyes of God was limited to a specific locale (Noll, 33). Although both ideas and goals are based on Biblical referents, the Puritans focused on allegiance to God, as the duty of the individual, and the majority focused on individual allegiance to a society, nominally ruled by God. The nominal rule and acknowledgement of God, evidenced in our founding documents, instituted in some of our governmental traditions, and stamped upon all of our money is America's version of Christianity. The use of this version of Christianity as supportive evidence in the pro-slavery argument indicates it marked departure from the Christianity of the Bible.

<sup>12</sup> Raboteau recounts the experience of "former slave Wash Wilson: When de niggers go round singin' 'Steal Away to Jesus,' dat mean der gwine be a 'ligious meetin' dat night. De masters...didn't like dem 'ligious meetin's, so us natcherly slips off at night, down in de bottoms or somewhere. Sometimes us sing and pray all night" (213).

<sup>13</sup> Alan J. Rice, "Jazzing It Up A Storm: The Execution and Meaning of Toni Morrison's Jazzy Prose Style," *Journal of American Studies*, 28 (1994), 423-32; Robin Small-McCarthy, "The Jazz Aesthetic in the Novels of Toni Morrison," *Cultural Studies*, 9 (1995), 293-300; Anthony J. Berret, "Toni Morrison's Literary Jazz," *College Language Association Journal*, 32 (1989), 267-83.

<sup>14</sup> Arguably one of the greatest contemporary jazz musicians was Charlie Parker. His techniques and approaches to the music continue to defy duplication. In Martin's book on Parker he posits that "motivic formulation," "thematic interconnection," and unplanned "abstraction" all contribute to his solos (3).

<sup>15</sup> Sethe, the protagonist of *Beloved*, uses this phrase to refer to her method of suppressing her past. Similar to the characters in *Jazz* she initially refuses to confront the memories of the past in order to spare herself the pain of the recollection. Until the appearance of the character of Beloved, Sethe continues to "beat back the past" (22).

<sup>16</sup> Opposing the Funders and the Republicans, the Readjuster Party of Virginia won control of the 1879 General Assembly due largely to the black vote. Although the white leadership of the Party assumed black acquiescence to their proposals and suggestions, black legislators used the Party as a means of promoting their own agendas: demanding "state jobs for their race," seeking to "reduce the penalties for racial intermarriage," calling "for legislative action to discourage lynching" and so on (Moore, 173). Violet's father's association with this party was, therefore, dangerous and life threatening. None of the whites involved in the political process or outside of

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it approved of the majority of the proposals put forth by the black members of the party. The multilayered opposition, then, to black Readjusters intensified the hostility of the racial climate.



## Chapter Four

### Flying Home: Mercy and Transformation in

#### Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

##### *The Legend of Ibo Landing*

While out on a morning foray, Oba, an Ibo warrior, was attacked from behind by an unknown captor and thrust into the foul belly of a sailing ship already filled with many others. Disoriented, sick, wounded, confused and afraid, the continual threat and execution of violence from their captors heightened the horror of their nightmarish experience. Whenever he was discouraged, Oba thought of the words his unborn child had whispered to him hours before his capture: "the waters will bring you back to us" (Dominey 2). Comforted by the words throughout the misery of the passage, he in turn, was able to bolster others. When the ship's rocking finally ceased and they were all brought out onto the shore of a land foreign to them, Oba looked and saw that they were to be enslaved in perpetuity; he saw the apocalyptic horror of that institution; he saw their losses: of language, of courage, of culture, and of hope. With this vision in his mind's eye, he turned and whispered something to the boy chained beside him; the words were quickly passed on to all the other captives and soon became a chant which rose to their lips, "The water brought us the water will take us away." "The water brought us the water will take us away." "The water brought us the water will take us away" (Dominey 6). Encouraged by the chant, they turned back to the waters over which they had come and they walked. Ignoring the shouts behind them, they walked. Focusing on the triumph before them, they walked back home to freedom.<sup>1</sup>

##### *The People Could Fly*

They say the people could fly. Say that long ago in Africa, some of the people knew magic. And they would walk up on the air like climbin up on a gate. And they flew like blackbirds over the fields. Black, shiny wings flappin against the blue up there. Then, many of the people were captured for Slavery. The ones that could fly shed their wings... Say the people who could fly kept their power, although they shed their wings... One such who could was an old man, call him Toby... say the next day was dead hot in the fields. A young man slave fell from the heat. The Driver come and whipped him. Toby come over and spoke words to the fallen one... They went way inside him. He got up and rolled over on the air. He rode it awhile. And he flew away. Another and another fell from the heat. Toby was there. He cried out to the fallen and reached his arms out to them. "Kum kunka yali, kum... tambe!" ... And they too rose on the air... they crossed the rows, the fields, the fences, the streams, and were away (Hamilton 166-170).

One of the most salient and inspiring features of both *The Ibo Landing* and *The People Could Fly* legends lies in their hopeful end: the self-wrought freedom that the Ibos and the Flying Africans secured through their escape and flight. Seeing the vision of their future based on an intimate understanding of their past, they saw the futility of their present save for one option, departure. Emboldened and encouraged by the words of Oba's child and of Toby, they remembered their homeland, and rose above their oppression to freedom. Their walk and flight were autonomous and defining acts involving both transcendence and transformation.

In the course of his discussion on the blues, Ellison posits that transcendence occurs as one "keep[s] alive the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience," chooses to shape and rise above it by "squeezing" from it "a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism" (78).<sup>2</sup> In transcendence, then, a person chooses both the perspective, and the response, to the pain of a "brutal experience" rather than allowing it, or those who have created it, to choose for them. In lieu of accepting a victim-like status and the oppressive realities that accompany it, the person chooses to look directly at the experience despite its pain, and *learn* from it thus distilling something that benefits and strengthens the spirit rather than destroying it, "lyricism" (Ellison 78).

The principles inherent in Biblical transformation can be read as the prerequisite for transcendence. It can be viewed as the step that occurs in the midst of the experience, which empowers the person with the strength necessary to review the "painful details" of the "brutal experience" at the conclusion of the episode (Ellison 78). Transformation enables the sufferer to endure the brutality of the experience, as it occurs, through the

refocusing of his/her mind, not through “the consolation of philosophy,” but by spiritual renewal (Ellison 78). Romans 12:2 enjoins believers in Christ to “be not conformed to this world,” do not allow the circumstances/experiences in which you find yourself to shape you, “but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (KJV). The mental and spiritual recrudescence that the passage commands is possible, for the believer, through a meditation on the Person of Jesus Christ, the concrete Hope upon Whom the believer should fix his/her eye. The continual refocusing of the mind upon the hope found in Christ encourages the spirit, strengthens the determination, and enables the sufferer to make it through. Instead of being molded and crushed by the experience, the person is renewed in their spirit and internally transformed.

The principles found in Biblical transformation can be evidenced in Oba’s endurance of the Middle Passage and Toby’s perseverance in Slavery. Their meditation on and belief in the power of the magic held in the words they repeat, serve to renew, refresh and re-fix their minds on a concrete hope, returning home. Focused on this hope rather than on the horrors of the Middle Passage and Slavery enable them to be continually transformed. As the circumstances surrounding them sought to cast them into the conformity of despair, despondency and defeat their mental focus renewed and transformed their spirits each time, throughout the journey for Oba and in the face of violence for Toby.<sup>3</sup> Enabled by the transformations that occurred during their respectively “brutal experiences” both Toby and Oba finger the “jagged grain” of the circumstance (Ellison 78) and were enabled to “see things that you and I don’t have the eyes to see” (Marshall 37). As they reviewed the “painful details and episodes of the brutal experience they had just endured” (Ellison 78) they were able to derive a vision of

the future and shape it into a lyricism based on hope; “the water brought us the water will take us away” (Dominey 2), “Kum kunka yali, kum...tambe!” (Hamilton 170).

Hence, both transformation and transcendence involve the decision *to shape* rather than to *be shaped by* experiences. Transcendence, occurring after the experience, achieves this through a reviewing configuration of the pain endured which cultivates “lyricism” (Ellison 78). Transformation, transpiring throughout the circumstance, shapes the individual through the decision to shift one’s mental focus from the difficulties of the present to a concrete hope of the future. Oba’s meditation on and belief in the discerning words of his child, served to renew, refresh and re-fix his mind on a definitive goal, returning home. And Toby’s focus on the ability of some of the slaves to fly enabled him to recall the words needed to help them transcend the experience, while being spiritually transformed in the midst of it.

The salient similarity between Biblical transformation and Ellison’s transcendence then lies in the source for the resulting change. Both occur due to some active choice made by the individual within his/her spirit rather than as a result of the tangible and intangible oppressions of a harsh predicament. Transformation emboldens the spirit enabling the individual to endure present maltreatment as he/she chooses to shift his/her focus away from the circumstances and onto a concrete hope. Transcendence capacitates the individual’s handling of the lingering memories and resonances of the experience through his/her shaping of the pain rather than his/her submission to it.

Thus, the Ibos departure demonstrated the spiritual flight that occurred upon hearing the encouraging words of Oba’s unborn child as the slaves physical flight

illustrates the power of the hope and love contained in Toby's words. The immediacy of the affect of the words is evident in the responses of the Ibo's and the slaves: walking and flight. The mental envisioning, spiritual acceptance and verbal confession of the truth contained within them served to strengthen the captives and to lift and carry them all. The freedom, then, of the Ibo's and of the Flying Africans, was wrought first in their minds and then involved the rapid conflation of both transformation and transcendence. Embracing the words reflective of a internal renewal, they were spiritually transformed through the alteration of their focus from their dreadful present and future circumstances to the return to their homeland. They then decide to end the "brutal experience" (Ellison 78). No longer hampered by the confinement of the slave ship, undeterred by the threat of guns and beatings, they use their renewed vision to lay aside any resonant fears. Their consequential departure through walking and physical flight can thus be read as reflecting both a bodily and a spiritual reality: the duality of their transcendence and of their flight.

The sequential story of Morrison's *Song of Solomon* revolves around Milkman and his unwitting spiritual and physical journey to his ancestral home. A chronological reading of the text however, illumines its underlying theme of a specific type of flight: that demonstrated by both the Flying Africans and the Ibos, the journey to freedom through first spiritual and then physical flight. Morrison, interweaving both the legends of Ibo landing and that of the Flying Africans, presents the story of Shalimar/Solomon a *flying* Ibo. Images of flight, flying, spinning and twirling are interwoven throughout the novel but, as Morrison states in her exegesis of the opening sentence of the text, in her article "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in Literature," while "the center of the narrative is flight; the springboard is mercy" (50).

Building on Morrison's reading of the text, I posit that *merciful love* serves as the "springboard" to the flights in the text and *is* the spiritual flight which precedes the physical action (50). Merciful love, love extended though undeserved, enables the giver to refocus their attention away from their own experiences and onto the needs of another. While several characters demonstrate this type of love in the novel, the novel hinges on the manifestation of this love from three women in particular: Heddy, Circe, and Pilate. Each of the women allow the love that they extend to others to transform her as she chooses in the midst of her own pain to focus not on herself but rather on a person(s) in need. Having arrived at some understanding of themselves, Heddy, Circe and Pilate each also transcend the inhumanity of their own experiences and "squeeze from it" the "lyricism" necessary to express caring for another (Ellison 78). Thus, their flights involve both transformation and transcendence. Their loving focus on others transforms them and their fecund transcendence provides the mechanism for the expression of the love that they feel.

The love extended by each one of these women enables both the continuation of the individual whom she aids and that of their familial generation, thus creating a counter-narrative to the continuing resonance of the National Narrative. In each generation of the central family, one of the women is instrumental. Heddy's adoption of Jake makes possible the birth of his children, Macon and Pilate. Circe's sustenance of Macon and Pilate permits the possibility of Milkman, Macon's son. And Pilate facilitates both the conception and the birth of Milkman. These women therefore provide and represent both the "springboard" and the "center" for the physical and spiritual flights in the novel ("Unspeakable" 50). While these women, through the offering of merciful

love, undergo the processes of creation and vivification, of sorts, the recipients also have the opportunity to transcend their experience. Within the safety of the haven created by the giving of merciful love, the recipient is enabled to speak and shout the pain of their experience, “finger” its “jagged grain”, and then “transcend it” (Ellison 78). The recipient can then choose to focus his/her attention on the needs of others around him/her and allow him/herself to be transformed by merciful love, as did Jake, Pilate and eventually Milkman. Thus, the merciful love shared with specific members of the central family in *Song of Solomon* during critical times of crisis, aids in the healing of his/her spirit from trauma, perpetuates the physical continuance of the familial line and inspires mercy.

While each of Morrison’s novels depicts the presence and involvement of one or more of the ancestors of their respective protagonists, a chronological reading of *Song of Solomon* clarifies the more overt linkages between and among the generations with various historical visions of the National Narrative as the milieu. In so doing, the connectivity of both the scope of National Narrative and the weightiness of the responses to it are illumined. Whereas *Jazz* elucidated, in part, the tacit existence of the National Narrative paradigm through the historically collective impact of event-based national narratives, *Song of Solomon* limns the duality within the National Narrative, the imbrication of the spectacle of black subjugation and the linearity of white domination.

Morrison contextualizes the place of the Narrative in the text as she continues her analysis of the first sentence of *Song of Solomon* in the aforementioned article. She states, “the composition of red, white, and blue in the opening scene provides the national canvas/flag upon which the narrative works and against which the lives of these black

people must be seen” (51). Morrison foregrounds the response of heterogeneous flight against the variations in the colors of the Narrative “flag” (51). Situated as the “national canvas” throughout the diverse historical periods depicted in the text, the Narrative assumes various shapes and guises: domination within slavery, Reconstruction, land ownership, and even City life (51).

*Song of Solomon* also reveals the antinomic shapes of both the National Narrative and the African-American response. The National Narrative can be read as moving in a linear fashion throughout the text. Manifested through slavery, at the outset of the chronological story, to the nascence of the civil rights movement, at the end of the novel, the clarity of its goal is consistent: uncontested domination. While the motion of the Narrative within the text is linear, with a beginning point and an end goal, the response of the African-American community moves in a cyclical fashion. The references to the spinning, circular motions of the individual characters at various periods in novel underscores this circular scope of the response as does the trajectory of the gradual migration of Solomon’s family from Virginia (Southeast), to Pennsylvania (Northeast), to Michigan (Midwest), and finally back to Virginia (Southeast). The reciprocal sharing of merciful love that enables the existence and migration of the family is then reflected in the physical migration of the family and in the circular imagery involved in the flights themselves.

Solomon, a slave in Virginia sometime around the mid 1800’s is three generations removed from Milkman, the central protagonist. Identified, by Milkman’s cousin Susan Byrd, as one of the group of “flying Africans” that was in their area, Solomon’s flight marks the response of his descendants to their experience of the National Narrative (*Song*



of *Solomon* 322). Yet Solomon's flight also creates emotional devastation for his family. Fortunately, Heddy, a Native American neighbor, extends mercy through her immediate adoption of Jake, the child Solomon drops in his ascent. Thus, the conjunction of Solomon's flight and Heddy's act of mercy enable Jake's response to post-emancipation violence by his flight from his birthplace in Shalimar, Virginia to the North, specifically Pennsylvania. Macon, Jake's son, though unaware of the heritage of flight, is enabled by Circe's merciful love to fly to Michigan and away from the violence he witnesses through his father's death. Although Macon does not choose to share the love he has received, his sister, Pilate, completely invests her life in the giving of merciful love to others, even to Macon's wife. One of the tangible results of her efforts, her nephew Milkman, is the one who inadvertently completes the physical cycle of the family's migration, when he flies from his oppressive family in Michigan back to his ancestral home in Shalimar, Virginia.

Morrison adduces that the images of physical flight create bookends for the sequential story of the novel. Mr. Smith's departure "on his own wings" is announced on the first page of the narrative and Milkman's leap into the "killing arms of his brother" closes the novel (*Song of Solomon* 3, 337). Mr. Smith's leap from Mercy hospital and Milkman's flight from Solomon's Leap can be read as symbolizing the pattern of the Ibo flight: Smith's flight, from Mercy, representing the spiritual and Milkman's flight from Solomon's Leap representing the physical. Ironically, Mr. Smith's leap is not a movement towards healing or freedom but one that reaches for the "cessation of things-as-they-are" ("Unspeakable" 51). Motivated by his mental and emotional despair, inspired by the guilt stemming from his involvement in a secret society of murderers, the Seven Days, he remains masked, even in his death, beneath his super-hero like costume.

His scheduling of the event, “at 3:00 PM on Wednesday the 18<sup>th</sup> of February, 1931,” the “promise” of his plan, “he tacked a note on the door of his little house,” and his preparation for it, wrapping himself in “wide blue silk wings,” all focus and rely on external methods and means for departure without apparent spiritual preparation (*Song of Solomon* 3). Was Smith’s “mind...long gone with the Ibos”? (Marshall 39)<sup>4</sup>. No. Although Smith states his love for the community, the distorted nature of his love does not allow for spiritual flight.

The Seven Days, the group Mr. Smith is a member of, believe that their work, the taking of one white life for every black life, is based on love for black people (*Song of Solomon* 159). Their sacrifice of the pleasures of marital relationships and family for their goal of “keep[ing] the numbers the same” is a distortion of merciful love (*Song of Solomon* 154). Their murder of whites is neither an expression of “near-comic lyricism” nor a refocusing of their vision (Ellison 78). In their quest to shape the world into one that is free from the threat of white violence, they voluntarily commit themselves to a life of bondage. Sworn to secrecy, unable to form close relationships outside of the society, unable to speak even with each other about the atrocities they commit, they must continually suppress the emotions they experience. Moreover, in order to kill the innocent they must ignore or suppress any innate compassion for their fellowman. They thereby commit themselves to self-imprisonment. Therefore, Mr. Smith’s flight is an attempt to secure freedom but without the spirit of mercy needed to undergird it, his flight fails. The rightness of the residents’ name for the hospital from which he leaps is reinforced through his jump; they call it “No Mercy Hospital” (*Song of Solomon* 4).

Milkman's leap, conversely, occurs directly after his recognition of his Aunt Pilate's means of flight, "without ever leaving the ground," at the conclusion of his spiritual journey, and, significantly, after his singing to her in love as she passes over into death (*Song of Solomon* 336). His wheeling into his friend's "killing arms" from Solomon's Leap, the same ground from which his great-grandfather was "lifted up in the air," adjacent to the fresh grave of his grandfather Jake, and the slain body of his Aunt Pilate is also an act of mercy (*Song of Solomon* 323). From the springboard of merciful love, he is able to leap, offering his life to his friend Guitar who has assumed the murderous persona of the group of which he is a part, the Seven Days. "Guitar!" he shouted... "Over here, brother man! Can you see me?"... "You want me? Huh? You want my life?"... He could just make out Guitar's head and shoulders in the dark. "You need it? Here." (*Song of Solomon* 337).

The sequential text thus moves from the fatal spiritual and physical flight of Mr. Smith to Milkman's transcendent leap; death to life, resurrection. A chronological reading of the text between these two flights illumines the realization of this resurrective process in Milkman through his uncovering of his ancestors pursuit of the freedom of the Ibos. Moving from spiritual flight to physical/behavioral flight(s), Heddy, Circe and Pilate are enabled to demonstrate merciful love. Though most of his consanguinity are ignorant of Solomon's physical and spiritual flights they each, on some level, seek a freedom beyond the material realm.

The text moves through four periods of historical significance: slavery, slave codes/sharecropping, the Great Depression and World War II, and the beginning of the Civil Rights movement. Although the specific canvases of the various historical periods

remain mostly covered, providing the backdrop for the story, a brief delineation of the particular ways in which the Narrative of spectacularized domination worked during the era of slavery may clarify the ways in which the resonance from that time moves throughout the other historical periods eliciting simultaneity of response.

### *The Spectacle*

Spectacle offers signs, symbols and images that are more pervasive and persuasive than print...the spectacle is the narrative.  
Toni Morrison ("The Official Story" 15-16).

The locus of the "spectacularization" of the African-American lies in slavery. As the personification of the tableau, in the eyes of whites, all of the various instruments used by and for the slave were incorporated into the larger vision. Thus, the extrinsic apparatuses created for and used on the slave, the shackles, bits, facemasks, chains, collars, whips, and other mechanisms became seen as inherent to the slave and served to solidify the image of subjection. The careful crafting of these various tools and objects indicates the importance of the image to the white spectator. In Deborah Willis' text, *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*, she discusses an experience she had while visiting the Maryland Historical Society, which illumined her understanding of the "craft and industry of punishment" (22):

I saw a whipping post in an installation curated by Fred Wilson titled "Mining the Museum." The cherry-wood whipping post was displayed in the same room with three or four chairs carved out of the same beautiful wood. The juxtaposition of these several items was the ironic comment by the artist that the same meticulous care and craftsmanship went into both the chairs and the whipping post. (22)

Although the slave who more than likely carved the post was aware of its future use, he/she took pride in his/her work and chose to carve it carefully. Over the years, the consistency and "rightness" of the image of the slave working, outside, in the house, or

anywhere they were told, and the white overseeing, from the porch, the horse, or the road as they passed by, was assumed. The auction block, slave quarters, holding pens and other animalistic paraphernalia all contributed to the visualization of the narrative of white dominance “more pervasive[ly] and persuasive[ly] than print” (15).<sup>5</sup>

Since the classification as slave relegated one to the status of chattel in perpetuity, this commoditization justified the viewing of and relating to the slave as a beast; purchased to fulfill a purpose and available for amusement, contempt or passing folly. The excision of the slave from the category of human eradicated the natural “conflict between public and private life” (“Rootedness” 339). Hence, the subtext of the spectacularization of slavery was its creation of public privacy for the slave. Through capture and purchase, the African was separated from humanity and normalized assumptions of personal boundaries, and thrust into the center ring of the slave arena as the main event. Slaves were given no area for privacy; even the slaves shacks in which they spent the night, were as accessible as the auction block, to the master, overseer, or any white person. In the slave ships, the holds, on the auction blocks, and finally on the plantations, the wall between “the two modes of life that... [should] exclude and annihilate each other” was shattered (“Rootedness” 339); the private was deliberately publicized for purposes of the black subjugation and white domination. Slaves were taught “often brutally, that they were no longer their own masters” (Wood 90).

In light of the unremitting public dehumanization of the slave, Solomon’s belated flight is prodigious. Enslaved for possibly twenty years or more, Solomon “just stood up in the fields one day, ran up some hill, spun around a couple of times, and lifted up in the air” (*Song of Solomon* 323). Solomon fathered twenty-one children, “all of them with the

same mother,” Ryna (*Song of Solomon* 322, emphasis added). Atypically, his family was able to stay intact for possibly as long as twenty-two years, if Ryna had single births. After so many years of what had become their lives, it is equally arresting that he was able to leave Ryna and all of his children behind.

### ***The Song of Solomon***

Solomon had evidently continued to harbor love for his homeland in his heart and mind even as he pursued a relationship with Ryna. In a method perhaps similar to Oba’s during the Middle Passage, Solomon must have continued to reflect on some threads, aspects, and thoughts of home that eventually enabled his spiritual flight, “without ever leaving the ground,” and ultimately facilitated his physical flight (*Song of Solomon* 336). Perhaps Solomon was a singer and shared with his children songs from home. The lyrics of the song created by the community about Solomon and Ryna, after his departure, include several lines of verse of African words that were quite possibly taught and/or sung by Solomon himself. Perhaps the song is a tribute to Solomon not only through its telling of his story, but also through its inclusion of part of a song that he had sung while he was with them. The song may partially reflect Solomon’s own transcendence as his creation of some of the lines of the verse would have been “squeezed from” the “brutal experience” of slavery (Ellison 78). That he also experienced a duality of transformation is manifest through his eventual flight back to Africa, where his mind was partially fixed, and through his years of remaining in America, a stay that expressed merciful love towards Ryna. The song, which remains unnamed in the text, could simply be titled “Song of Solomon.”

Jake the only son of Solomon  
 Come booba yalle, come booba tambee  
 Whirled about and touched the sun  
 Come konka yalle, come konka tambee

Left that baby in a white man's house  
 Come booba yalle, come booba tambee  
 Heddy took him to a red man's house  
 Come konka yalle, come konka tambee

Black lady fell dwon on the gorun  
 Come booba yalle, come booba tambee  
 Threw her body all around  
 Come konka yalle, come konka tambee

Solomon and Ryna Belali Shalut  
 Yaruba Medina Muhammet too.  
 Nestor Kalina Saraka cake.  
 Twenty-one children, the last one Jake!

O Solomon don't leave me here  
 Cotton balls to choke me  
 O Solomon don't leave me here  
 Buckra's arms to yoke me

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

Although the verses of the song document the story of Solomon's departure and Ryna and Jake's demise (stanzas 1-3), the chorus reflects the wretchedness of being left behind to face the "yok[ing]" domination of "buckra's arms" and the subjugation of slavery as a field hand (stanzas 5 & 6). If the second line of the chorus is to be read literally then "cotton balls" could only cause one to choke if attempted to be ingested; however, the figurative meaning of the line induces an important facet of helotry.

The dehumanizing nature of slavery marred both the spirit and the body of the slave. The intention was to seek to own the slave in his entirety, controlling the mind and breaking the spirit of the slave in order to produce the ideal; a slave without the desire to

express his own will or resist, one entirely compliant, one over whom total domination was achieved. The efficacies of the strivings towards ascendancy were consistently tested. Slaves were watched closely to see if any resistance could be read in their actions or perceived in their attitudes. Both the fear of slave rebellions and the desire for complete conquest actuated their fixation. Slave owners were well aware that slaves would feign compliance in order to runaway or rebel in other ways. They knew that it was the spirit, which needed to be broken to ensure a problem free interaction. Hence, severe punishments were meted out publicly in response to slave rebellions and harsher recriminations assured for any future rebels. For example, after the execution of four rebel slaves in New York, 1708, “a new regulation... was passed allowing Justices to sentence rebels to be executed in any way or manner they might think most likely to secure public tranquility” (Aptheker 169).

The will, thoughts and spirit are all intangible aspects of human composition and able to be expressed in many non-verbal ways. The spirit, however, is differentiated from the other immaterial aspects of man in its definition as the “breath of life” (OED).<sup>6</sup> The image then of the choking cotton makes figurative reference to the stoppage, suppression or interruption of the breath. When breath is correlated to the spirit, the image evoked is that of the breaking of the spirit and the domination of the slave. The cry of the chorus can be read as a plea to the listener not to leave the singer alone here, where I (the singer) am subject to spiritual domination.

O Solomon don't leave me here  
 Cotton balls to choke me  
 O Solomon don't leave me here  
 Buckra's arms to yoke me (303)



Yet the simultaneity of the “cotton balls chok[ing]” and “buckra’s arms yok[ing]” is significant. Although the yoke can refer to an oppression that is coupled with the choking cotton, it may concurrently carry its primary meaning, as a “device that connects a pair of draft animals” (OED). As “buckra’s arms” form the yoke both “buckra” and the singer/slave would be bound together. In a yoke two animals are bound, both working the same row of ground. Slavery indeed bound both the slave to the owner and the *owner* to the slave as well as to the Institution itself. Though seeking the freedom to dominate the slave, buckra in yoking the slave also yoked himself into his own subjugation. Since buckra is both yoke and animal, he is fixed into the completion of the “row” even if the slave strays away. His bodily formation of the yoke commits him to a level of functioning no higher than the one whom he yokes. Thus, though the pursuit of domination and complete thralldom were affected in a multiplicity of external ways, the creator of the Institution and of the Narrative may have been and may be in a deeper bondage than the one enslaved, unable to transcend or have the opportunity for transformation. Solomon was able to fly even after so many years; buckra was not.

### ***Jake’s Narrative***

While not explicitly mentioned in the text, Jake, Solomon’s youngest child would also have been greatly affected by his father’s sudden departure. Solomon “lifted him up” and then began his flight “but dropped him near the porch of the big house” when “he brushed too close to a tree and the baby slipped out of his arms and fell through the branches to the ground. He was unconscious, but the trees saved him from dying” (*Song of Solomon* 323-4). Jake’s last memory of his father then, would have been when he was falling away from him to the ground. For a baby, the sudden separation from his father

alone would have been devastating, but the fall that accompanied that disengagement must have made the experience horrific. To have then regained consciousness in unfamiliar surroundings without the comfort of either his father or his mother most probably caused Jake to “scream out loud for days” in a response similar to his mother’s (*Song of Solomon* 323).

Aware of Ryna’s traumatized state, Heddy, a nearby Native American neighbor, reaches out in mercy, picks up Jake after his fall and adopts him as her child. Jake, the son of a slave mother, would also have been classified as a slave.<sup>7</sup> In taking Jake, a slave child, into her own home, Heddy opened her door to a number of possible accusations and dangers: theft, damage of property, assault, even possible enslavement. Yet, Susan Byrd tells Milkman that Heddy “took [Jake] home and raised him” (*Song of Solomon* 321). Was Jake raised as a free black? How did Heddy manage to hide him?

“Working at the big house” only “certain times of the year” may have enabled Heddy to stay out of the owner’s path (*Song of Solomon* 323). Since she “lived a good ways off from the place Solomon and them others worked” and she “tried to keep [her daughter] away from that place too,” it seems that Heddy indeed raised Jake as her own *free* son exposing herself to danger for a number of years (*Song of Solomon* 324). Thus, her informal adoption of Jake was simultaneously an act of merciful love and an experience of transformation. Choosing not to conform to either Indian societal norms, most of the Indians “never was too crazy ‘bout colored folk,” or to Virginia law, Heddy focused on doing whatever was best for the object of her affections, Jake (*Song of Solomon* 284). In her decision to eschew either system of biased thinking, and lovingly

risk her freedom for Jake, viewing him simply as a child in need, Heddy attained spiritual flight.

With no knowledge of his father, mother or siblings, all that Jake learned about familial relationships he would have gained from Heddy and his observations of those around him. Yet, the desire for spiritual flight was deeply ingrained in his heart through Heddy kindness, and the idea of physical flight may have been planted in his mind through the historiographic song of his family; “Song of Solomon.” A children’s round sung in Shalimar, the place of Jake’s birth and Solomon’s flight, the chorus of “Song of Solomon,” quoted above, is a plea addressed to Solomon imploring him not to leave. “O Solomon don’t leave me here” (*Song of Solomon* 303).

Unfortunately, Jake does not return merciful love to Heddy and remain with her for the duration of his life, giving his life as she gave hers. Instead, perhaps driven by the idea of flight derived from the “Song of Solomon,” Jake “ran off” with Heddy’s only daughter, Sing (*Song of Solomon* 324). Since Jake deliberately gave misinformation to the drunken soldier with whom he registered during his departure from Virginia, neither of his children, Pilate or Macon, are ever told about Shalimar, visit the area, or meet any of its residents, yet Pilate sings the chorus of the song several times during the course of the narrative. The only possible source for their knowledge of the song would have been their father, Jake. However, the version of the chorus that Pilate sings replaces Solomon’s name with Sugarman. Would Jake have changed the address to Sugarman?

I posit that *Sing* is the one who was in the habit of singing the song *to Jake*. Thus, Jake’s first posthumous words to Macon and Pilate could be read not just as a repetition of his wife’s name but as a request he often made of her, “Sing. *Sing*” (*Song of Solomon*

170, emphasis added). Also, Circe tells Milkman that Sing was “crazy about her husband too, overcrazy...watched over him like a pheasant hen” (*Song of Solomon* 243). Sing may have been afraid that he too would fly away and may have sung to him as a means of request. After her death, he also sang the song, thus enabling Pilate to learn it, and pass it on to her progeny.

Jake and Heddy’s daughter, Sing, choose to leave Shalimar precipitously. They fly off leaving a bereft Heddy behind. “You can imagine how she felt when both of them ran off” (*Song of Solomon* 324). Jake may have left Shalimar for a number of reasons. In 1869, the year of their departure, violence against ex-slaves was rampant, despite the 1867 institution of Congressional Reconstruction.<sup>8</sup> In light of the hostile post-emancipation climate, a very dark complexioned man like Jake, “Black Jake. Black as coal Jake,” accompanied by Sing, a woman who appeared to be white, “Sing...was light-skinned, with straight black hair,” would have been even more susceptible to assault (*Song of Solomon* 284, 321). Having observed the operations of public privacy for the slave and any African-American, they may have chosen to leave in order to be free from the violence that threatened them. They, similar to Oba, saw the future, realized the present and chose to fly to a home yet to be established.

Sing and Jake moved to Danville, Pennsylvania and established a home there. “He had come out of nowhere...and in one year he’d leased ten acres, the next ten more. Sixteen years later, he had one of the best farms in Montour County. A farm that ...spoke to them like a sermon...We live here. On this planet, in this nation, in this county right here. *Nowhere else!*” (*Song of Solomon* 235). Thus, Jake countered his

likely oppressive experience through physical flight and by focusing on and establishing his own concrete hope, his pursuit of the American Dream.

Historically, the American Dream, while offered as an incentive to European immigrants also served as one of the motivations for the enslavement and oppression of the African.<sup>9</sup> Arriving in chains, and continuing to be subjugated even after emancipation, the African was used as the basis for the achievement of the Dream by others. The economic freedoms of others came at the expense of the enslavement and oppression of the African. Material gain overrode the demands of common humanity and religious beliefs.<sup>10</sup> Although the promise of freedom was shouted from the founding documents, proclaimed by the political leaders and believed by the immigrants, the freedom intoned focused on the *individual's* economic autonomy, rather than that of the collective. This type of freedom was pursued regardless of the possible cost to others. Post-emancipation African-Americans sought to pursue their own vision of the Dream; the enjoyment of some of the prosperity by which they were surrounded, without the suppression of their fellows. Hence, Jake achieved the Dream without becoming consumed by its' material bent. Instead, he rooted his vision in a set of values different from the ones that surrounded him. Despite his acceptance of the name given by the white soldier and his desire to "wipe out the past," the love he experienced through Heddy allowed him to take a different approach to the Dream (*Song of Solomon* 54).

As opposed to using his land ownership as a means of oppressing others or disregarding them to gain it, his farm land, Lincoln's Heaven, was the nexus of "good times [...] Sunday break-of-dawn fishing parties [...] digging a well, fashioning traps, felling trees...breaking young horses, training dogs" (*Song of Solomon* 234-5). Jake's

success was shared with the community. “*We* got a home in this rock, don’t you see! Nobody starving in my home; nobody crying in my home, and if *I* got a home *you* got one too!” (235, emphasis added).

His achievement of the Dream was not then merely a selfish pursuit, sought at any price for his own satisfaction and glory, but it was adapted to be a communal achievement done with the help of and for the benefit of others as well. His land acquisition was not, therefore, a marker of his spiritual death, but the plain on which he shared his extant “primal qualities” (Reckley 23). Unfortunately, twelve years after his wife Sing dies, the Southern violence from which Jake fled reveals its presence in the North, and Jake’s Dream comes to an abrupt end. While sitting on the fence of the property he is seeking to defend, his assailants stealthily creep up behind him, shoot him in the head and cause him to fly “five feet up into the air” (*Song of Solomon* 40). The Butler family driven by greed and their vision of the American Dream kill Jake, simply because his “land was in their way” (*Song of Solomon* 232).

Jake’s flight at the point of a white man’s shotgun educes an important point about the Narrative response of flight. Both during and after slavery some whites wanted blacks to go back to Africa.<sup>11</sup> Although during slavery Solomon’s flight was an act of resistance, after slavery many whites would have been happy if the entire population of African-Americans had flown back to Africa, leaving them to enjoy the fruits of our labor. However, since the majority remained in America and, like Jake, simply fled from one part of the country to another, some whites were threatened by this freedom of movement and sought to curtail it through violence. “In the eyes of those who resented the former slaves’ freedom, the very fact of their mobility invited attack” (Painter 130).

### **Macon and Pilate's Dichotomous Narratives**

The witnessing of their father, Jake's, murder is the central trauma of both Macon and Pilate's lives. The ways in which they respond to the emotional havoc it wreaked within their spirits determines the course of the rest of their lives. After their father's murder, Macon and Pilate go to Circe for assistance. Circe, the local midwife who lives with and works for their father's murderers, was apparently involved more intimately in their family than her midwifery duties required. She apparently cooked for them after their mother, Sing, died, "Circe made up the best pot of maws she ever cooked" (*Song of Solomon* 52). She was around them often enough to observe Jake and Sing's relationship, and felt comfortable enough with Jake to correct what she believed was a mistake in his motives for keeping the name "Pilate" for his baby girl. "You can't get much worse than that for a name. And a baby girl at that" (*Song of Solomon* 19).

Her loving, warm welcome of the children and her willingness to hide, feed, and shelter them in the Butler's mansion despite the risk to her own welfare may have affected healing for them both. "The something wild" that ran through Macon at the sight of his father's body "twitching in the dirt" did not surface during the two weeks that he and Pilate stay with Circe (*Song of Solomon* 51). She "had risked her job, her life, maybe, to hide them both after their father was killed, emptied their slop jars, brought them food at night and pans of water to wash. Had even sneaked off to the village to have [...] Pilate's and snuffbox made into an earring. Then healed the ear when it got infected" (*Song of Solomon* 246). Her extension of merciful love provided them with the space, time and environment that they needed to begin the process of confronting and sorting

through their grief. But Pilate longed for the sky. But they hated the soft carpets. But they ached for hard work. But they could not bear the monotonous leisure. Hence, after two weeks, they left. “The first day out was joyous for them. They ate raspberries and apples; they took off their shoes and let the dewy grass and sun-warmed dirt soothe their feet. At night they slept in a haystack, so grateful for the open air even the field mice and the ticks were welcome bedmates” (*Song of Solomon* 167-8).

After the initial euphoria fades, the visual reminder of their central trauma confronts Macon and Pilate. They see their father’s ghost. Although terrified at the “distance in his eyes” as night falls they opt to follow him into a cave rather than remain in the open (*Song of Solomon* 168). When, through a series of events, Macon disturbs a white man who was sleeping further back in the cave, the memory of his father’s murder overwhelms his mind. He reacts fearfully and, in what he believes is self-defense, he slashes through the old man’s ribs with his knife. Macon’s murder of the man is immediately followed by his discovery of the man’s gold and the reappearance of his father’s ghost. The Macon that surfaces from this subitaneous series of events is radically different from the one who had been outside enjoying nature with his sister the previous day. When Pilate resists Macon’s decision to take the gold which he believes will “keep [them] for life” their physical and emotional conflict reflective of their spiritual disunity, results in a life-long schism (*Song of Solomon* 171).

Whereas Macon had been kind to, patient with and loving to Pilate for the twelve years prior to their conflict, carrying her “in his arms every morning” to the farm where she stayed, his unforgiving fury, belief of her deceit, and continued rejection of her even



years after their disagreement, displayed an apparent change of personality (*Song of Solomon* 51). What happened?

I suggest that the numbness which came over Macon and the simultaneous wildness that ran through him indicate a type of personality fracture. The impact of witnessing his father's brutal murder may have caused the numbing of the Macon he was up until then and created the Macon in which the "something wild" that ran through him, took precedence (*Song of Solomon* 50). In Macon, this *wildness* may have manifested itself in his rapid change in behavior. Unleashed in the murder of the white man, Macon may have succumbed to the anger and rage he felt at the sight of his father's body. Although his time at Circe's house may have begun a slow reduction in his numbness, his grief and his tenderness were evidently suppressed, though not destroyed, after the conflict with Pilate. The Macon controlled by *wildness*, though still a hard worker, focused on and lived by seemingly rational decisions and approaches separated from merciful feelings. Whereas before his father's murder he may have suppressed the feelings of resentment he felt at having to care for his baby sister, and he may have resisted his impatience with her own *wildness*, after the conflict, the converse becomes true.

Macon, similar to Joe Trace in *Jazz*, plunges himself into the pursuit of the American Dream after his separation from Pilate. Whereas he has convinced himself that his affinity for property is in honor of his father's life, Macon chooses to forget that his father's methods for land acquisition and his use of property are completely contrary to his own. Unlike his father, Macon approaches the Dream without cultural adaptation, therefore seeing the end, his personal gain, as the most important element. Beginning

with his willingness to fight against his sister, whom he once dearly loved, and in his assumption of her treachery, Macon's desire for material success at any price heightens as his assets increase. Thus, Macon is driven by "the same greed that killed his own father" (Rice 59).

Yet he too strives for freedom. His desire for wealth is his vision of a freedom quest. He chooses to believe what he shares with his son, Milkman, "Money is freedom, Macon. The only real freedom there is" (*Song of Solomon* 163). While his marriage to Ruth Foster initially seems to soften the veneer of harshness that he allowed to mask his heart, his conviction of her preference for her father over and above himself constitutes a second trauma in his life. Instead of allowing himself to simply feel sad about his relationship with Ruth or extend mercy and forgive her for her perceived infractions, he harbors a "disgust" for her which solidifies into a hatred, a hatred which "sifted down... like ash" over his entire household (*Song of Solomon* 16, 10). Yet, the magnitude of the greatness of heart that he once shared is manifested through his sister, Pilate, who bases her decision to love others on his once kind treatment of her.

His life philosophy reflects his focus: "Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too" (*Song of Solomon* 55). Perhaps Macon chooses to focus on things because they *cannot* love you back and they therefore they cannot reject you. Money and properties become the center, the joy and the focus of Macon's life outweighing the importance of his relationships with people. Nevertheless, his focus on things as opposed to the pain of his experiences does result in his transformation; he mutates from a kind loving brother and son to a harsh exacting

man. Thus, Macon's decision in the cave to pursue material security rather than familial relations creates his inimical spiritual change.

Macon, therefore, lives by the same American Dream prevalent in the mass culture; one fixed on the pleasure and comfort of self at any cost. Unlike his father who invited the communal sharing of his Dream, Macon participates in the oppression of the Southside community of African-Americans in becoming an exacting proprietor for the sole purpose of increasing his own assets. Macon, having suppressed his heart and spirit cannot and does not achieve spiritual flight but instead initiates the process of spiritual death. The Dream then does not fulfill what it promises. Even though Macon "appears to have successfully imitated middle-class respectability" he has simultaneously "adopt[ed] an oppressive and stultifying system" resulting in death, not life, bondage, not liberty, and misery, not happiness (Heinze 68-9).

Fortunately, Pilate's response to the murder of her father and the series of events surrounding it was antithetical to Macon's. Although her grief also must have been substantial, she chooses to continue to allow herself to feel the pain, even pursuing her father's ghost while in the cave. Her decision to seek out other familial relationships even after her conflict with Macon epitomizes her eventual life-long commitment. Macon leaves the cave to "seek his fortune" and Pilate "headed for Virginia," where Macon believed "they had people" (*Song of Solomon* 141).

However, not only was Pilate unable to find her family, her unusual birth defect, the absence of a belly button, resulted in her consistent rejection, expulsion or desertion by those among whom she sought to live. "Partnership in marriage, confessional friendship, and communal religion [...] w[ere] denied her" (*Song of Solomon* 148). The

series of rejections she faced by the African-American community shortly after her brother's desertion and her father's murder could easily have allowed Pilate to become bitter, hostile, angry or even deranged, in her isolation. Although she did "finally [...]" take offense," she did not level vitriol at those who hurt her, instead she took the time to "decide how she wanted to live and what was valuable to her," choosing to extend merciful love (*Song of Solomon* 149).

Pilate unlike any of the other characters in the book, bases her decision on how she wants to live her life with a focus solely on the African-American community. Basing her pattern for behavior on the kind care she had been given "by [her] father, [...]" brother" and Circe, Pilate chooses to value "a deep concern for and about human relationships" (*Song of Solomon* 149). Pilate determines to love others, treating each one with respect and concern. Her dying words underscore the focus of her life and her place in Morrison's texts, "I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would have loved 'em all. If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more" (*Song of Solomon* 340). Pilate demonstrates merciful love to all who enter her door or with whom she comes in contact. She is, in fact, the epitome of love in Morrison.

Based on a syllogism which appears early in the text, it can be reasoned that Pilate represents love. Jake, continuing the familial naming tradition, randomly selects a name from the Bible for his daughter. As an illiterate, he relied upon Circe, the midwife, to read the name he selected. In the course of her protestations against it, she twice mentions the identity of the one whose name Jake selected. "You wrote down Pilate [...]" not like a riverboat pilot. Like a Christ-killing Pilate [...]" You don't want to give this motherless child the name of the man that killed Jesus do you?" (*Song of Solomon* 19). A

few pages later, Porter, in the midst of drunken ravings, cries out to Jesus, bemoaning the weightiness of love. “Gimme hate Lord [...] But don’t give me love [...] I can’t carry it [...] It’s too heavy. Jesus, you know. You know all about it [...] Don’t you see Lord? You own son couldn’t carry it. If *it killed Him*, what You think it’s gonna do to me?” (*Song of Solomon* 26, emphasis added). Since love killed Jesus and Pilate is the “Christ-kill[er],” Pilate, therefore, represents love in the text (*Song of Solomon* 19).

Pilate’s largess is also evidenced in her physical appearance. Similar to the shape that the letters of her name formed in the Bible, “like a tree hanging in some princely but protective way over a row of smaller trees,” Pilate looks “like a tall black tree” (*Song of Solomon* 19, 39). Remarkable within the text, when Pilate is compared with characters from Morrison’s other works, she remains unparalleled. Although many other Morrison characters demonstrate merciful love, Baby Suggs, Alice Manfred, Ondine, etc, Pilate alone seems to personify this ethereal characteristic. The sense of protection derived from her tree-like appearance, is also reflected in her home. Seemingly “rising rather than settling into the ground,” Pilate’s home is open to anyone in need as a haven for rest, refreshment of the spirit, or shelter (*Song of Solomon* 27). It is, as Cheryl A. Wall asserts, “a utopian alternative” (“worrying the line” 25).

While her gravelly voice hints at her supernatural aspects, in its reminiscence to Beloved’s voice, she limits her shape-shifting abilities for use only when needed to aid another. When Macon convinces Milkman that Pilate’s green tarpaulin bag contains gold allegedly stolen fifty years earlier, he and Guitar stealthily enter her home to steal it. Although Pilate would have been justified in her anger towards Milkman, whom she had loved and cherished, she instead, once again, extends merciful love when Milkman is

arrested for the theft. Instead of filing charges against him, she changes her form in order to garner the police officers' pity, appearing as a short, frightened old lady, rather than the tall, confident tree that she was. "Pilate had been shorter [...] she didn't even come up to the sergeant's shoulder [...] and her hands were shaking as she described how she didn't know the sack was gone until the officer woke her up" (*Song of Solomon* 206).

Completely devoid of any interest in material acquisitions, Pilate seeks a means of income solely for the purpose of sustenance, not as an avenue for economic success.

"Along with winemaking, cooking whiskey became the way Pilate began to make her steady living. That skill allowed her more freedom [...] than any other work a woman of no means whatsoever and no inclination to make love for money could choose" (*Song of Solomon* 150). While her father chose to pursue the American Dream *and* involve the community, Pilate's pursuit is focused solely on serving the community and not herself. She therefore creates a counter-narrative environment of healing in her home and by her presence. She is a "natural healer," has an "alien's compassion for troubled people," has "respect for other people's privacy," and "she never ha[s] a visitor to whom she d[oes] not offer food before one word of conversation [...] beg[ins]" (*Song of Solomon* 149). Pilate was thus able to fly "without ever leaving the ground" (*Song of Solomon* 337). Her life of love, care, and respect for other people defined her and allowed her to transcend the mundane. Morrison describes Pilate as coming the closest to being the kind of woman who is "full, complete...who understands her past...how to nurture *and* how to survive" (Conversations 81).

Pilate's desire to love others included even her estranged brother. Despite his cruel and misdirected response to her efforts to save him from the horrors which would

have awaited him had he stolen the gold, she still sought him out for the sake of her granddaughter, Hagar, who “needed family” (*Song of Solomon* 151). Although she found him “truculent, inhospitable, embarrassed and unforgiving”, she stayed in order to help her sister-in-law, Ruth “who was dying of lovelessness” (*Song of Solomon* 151).

### *Mercy*

After Ruth’s father dies and Macon becomes enraged when he “catches” her kissing her father’s dead fingers, he fabricates a plethora of sordid assumptions about the type of relationship Ruth actually had with her father. Ruth talks him out of killing her; however, Macon withdraws from his wife and moves to another room. Ruth is left “with nobody touching [her] or even looking as though they’d like to touch [her]” (*Song of Solomon* 125). The combination of her father’s death, the one person who genuinely cared about her, and Macon’s withdrawal create Ruth’s central trauma. With no genuine friend to talk to, no significant communal interaction, and the withdrawal of affection from anyone, Ruth thought that “[she]’d really die if [she] had to live that way” (*Song of Solomon* 125).

After Macon’s second rejection of her, Pilate had intended to leave Michigan and continue her sojourning lifestyle. However, observing Ruth’s demise, she stays in Michigan in order to help Ruth and to perpetuate the familial line. Pilate’s intervention aids in healing for Ruth and in the conception of Milkman. Pilate, once again, extends merciful love.

Notably, it is Pilate and Reba, her daughter, who sing about mercy in one of the most important scenes in the novel, Hagar’s funeral. Milkman’s initial disregard of persons other than himself extended even to those women with whom he was sexually

intimate. Although five years his senior, Hagar and Milkman's sexual play continued to excite and entertain Milkman well into his twenties. However, after their relationship had stretched out for more than a decade, and she finally *asked something of him*, commitment, he discarded her like detritus. After all, she had become "the third beer. Not the first one, which the throat receives with almost tearful gratitude; nor the second, that confirms and extends the pleasure of the first. But the third, the one you drink because it's there, it can't hurt, and because what difference does it make?" (*Song of Solomon* 91).

While Milkman was experiencing his spiritual epiphany in Shalimar, Hagar was dying in Michigan, of a broken heart. The cry for "Mercy!" which issues from Pilate's throat during the service and the counterpoint song that she and Reba sing about mercy, is the first emphasized call for mercy in the novel (*Song of Solomon* 316). Placed near the end of the text, it caused this reader to reflect on and review the significance of mercy in the scenes that preceded it. It was only upon reflection that the importance of mercy was seen in the novel as being the "unspoken wish of the population" and one of the threads which links together the Southside community ("Unspeakable" 49). It is what Freddie, the town crier, relies upon for tolerance, what Empire State needed from everyone to in order to survive, what Porter trusts in throughout his drunken tirade, what the attentive group at the barbershop gives to each other, what Macon refuses to give to anyone, what Pilate chooses to share with everyone, and what Milkman assumes he should receive from each one. It helps to connect the community to each other in mutual reliance and it forms a protective circle around the community, as they lend reciprocal aid, recognizing the dichotomy between themselves and the larger society. As the one character who



shares love with each one she meets, it is fitting that Pilate “repeat[s] the word “Mercy” and Reba replie[s]” in the song they offer at Hagar’s funeral (*Song of Solomon* 317).

In the nighttime.  
 Mercy.  
 In the darkness.  
 Mercy.  
 In the morning.  
 Mercy.  
 At my bedside.  
 Mercy.  
 On my knees now.  
 Mercy. Mercy. Mercy. Mercy. (317)

Pilate then, extends to everyone what they need most in order to be able to soar. Merciful love lends healing to the wounded spirits of those around her enabling them to discard some of the weights that ground them.

### **Milkman’s Journey**

#### ***Phase I***

While Pilate proffers mercy to all those around her, Milkman receives it from everyone in his community. Tenderly treated by those in his household and by the Southside residents as he grows up, Milkman *expects* the mercy that everyone else *desires*. Ironically, he does not believe that he deserves anything else. “Apparently he thought he deserved only to be loved- from a distance, though- and given what he wanted” (*Song of Solomon* 277). The protective circle of merciful love secures Milkman in nest-like fashion. However, as one who only receives love and never gives it, Milkman does not participate in the shaping of the communal nest, never adding his bit of paper or twig. He instead remains in a state of continual infancy, in relation to the community and in his interactions with his family. Milkman remains in a state similar to an unhatched yet fully developed chick.

Initially his shell consists of the external trappings imposed by his mother, the clothes she makes him wear, “velvet suits,” the nursing sessions she continues for years after it is appropriate or necessary, and the area and the home that he lives in, all serve to isolate and infantilize him (*Song of Solomon* 264). When the nursing sessions are consequently terminated, by Freddie’s discovery, he is renamed “Milkman” rather than Macon, is able to wear “straights,” is befriended by Guitar, and finally gets to meet his aunt Pilate and his cousins, Reba and Hagar (*Song of Solomon* 264). No longer socially isolated, the shell that his mother has woven around him cracks. His father then makes a concerted effort to get him away from his mother and have “his son belong to him [...] and not to Ruth” (*Song of Solomon* 63). Subsequent to the discussion he and his father have about his aunt Pilate and why Milkman should stay away from her, Macon suggests an alternative use for Milkman’s time. “Boy, you got better things to do with your time. Besides, it’s time you started learning how to work [...] After school come to my office; work a couple of hours there and learn what’s real” (*Song of Solomon* 55).

The shell that Macon forms around Milkman he sets up deliberately in an effort to remake Milkman in his own image. He wants Milkman to embrace his philosophy of life and to take over the family real estate business. Milkman does embrace his father’s expectations not only in becoming very efficient at the business, but also in living out Macon’s philosophy of life, though he does not *pursue* it. Milkman does not care about money or property, because it has always been readily available for him, but he unwittingly rests on his fathers’ wealth and position in the community and regards everyone as available for his service and pleasure. He, therefore, takes Macon’s philosophy to the next level and *assumes* the control and ownership of others that Macon

deliberately *strives* to achieve. Phase one of Milkman's journey then begins in earnest when he begins working for his father after school at twelve years of age.

Macon effectively shapes the shell around Milkman's heart, specifically. Milkman does not love other people. He loves himself and the pursuit of sensual pleasures. He is eudemonistic. He sees his mother as "insubstantial, too shadowy for love" (*Song of Solomon* 75); he assumes and expects Pilate, Reba, and Hagar's love for him, he overlooks the sacrifice of his sisters, who gave up their childhood to cater to him; and his father, the one person he claims to love, he does not give to or share himself with. Thus, in this first phase of Milkman's journey his heart and his life are encased in a shell.

However, the shell of the lifestyle and the assumptions that Macon has created for Milkman to rest in are only applicable in the nest of the Southside neighborhood of Michigan. Milkman begins to see, hazily, the realities of life outside of the nest, when he and Guitar are arrested for the theft of his Aunt Pilate's tarpaulin. Yet, even in the police station, his shell is not busted. He is released because of Macon's money, a bribe to the police, and Pilate's willingness to once again extend mercy in "her Aunt Jemima act" (*Song of Solomon* 209). Unfortunately, Milkman's contemplation of the evening's events, his first negative encounter with whites, does not alter his self-perception.

### ***Phase II- Taxiing***

Milkman's experiences two personal miseries involving his family, which shift his mental perspective on his life from merely his own to that of another. Yet, he resents the resulting alteration in his outlook and feels oppressed by the "forced" consideration of someone other than himself. After Milkman's retaliatory strike on his father, performed

out of a defense of his mother, Macon shared with his son his version of the central cause for his anger at Ruth; her alleged incestuous relationship with her father. Milkman's speculations about Macon's "way-out tale about how come and why" lead him to recall for the first time the circumstances of his renaming, his own extended nursing period (*Song of Solomon* 76). Thus, his contemplation of problems not his own only leads him back to himself.

Milkman's first personal misery continues when he furtively follows his mother on her trek to the graveyard where his maternal grandfather is buried. Assuming the worst of her, that she was the "queer, faintly obscene woman" that his father had described, he startles her when she exits the cemetery (*Song of Solomon* 123). She explains her side of the story, the circumstances of Milkman's birth, Macon's disposal of her father's medicine, and even the pain she experienced by Macon's sexual refusals. Milkman hears her story as a "sad, sad song" but instead of sympathizing with her, he merely feels used because, for the first time, his parents were asking something of him (*Song of Solomon* 165): Listen to our stories; understand our relational history; and *care*. Having to listen to his parents' stories is a personal misery for Milkman, at this point, instead of an opportunity for transformation because he still had not arrived at the place where he was able to focus on anyone other than himself.

Milkman's second personal misery involves Hagar, his cousin and lover. When Milkman first meets Hagar he is infatuated, fascinated and entranced. However, as the years progress and he becomes more involved with young people his own age, her demands and constancy increase. Unwilling to commit himself to anyone, Milkman decides to end the affair irresponsibly and coldly, with a letter and a sum of money.

Unfortunately, Hagar as a spoiled child, believes that sexual love and possession are synonymous. She seems to assume that the identity of the beloved rested on the perspective of the lover. Therefore, if Milkman loved her she was beloved, but if he did not, if he discarded her, then she *was* only worthy of disposal. Unlike Ryna, whose heartbreak caused her to “f[a]ll down on the ground” and “thr[o]w her body all around” (*Song of Solomon* 303), Hagar was “totally taken over by her anaconda love, she had no *self* left” (*Song of Solomon* 137 emphasis added). Once a month, for six months, Hagar’s “anaconda love” took over and she hunted Milkman with an ice pick, a skinning knife, a butcher knife, or whatever was at hand (*Song of Solomon* 137).

The call for responsibility and some form of reciprocity from both his parents and Hagar drive Milkman’s desire to flee. Desirous of continuing to make himself the central and only real concern of his own life, he believes his father’s assessment that money will provide him with the freedom from relational responsibilities that he seeks. “Money is freedom, Macon. The only real freedom there is” (*Song of Solomon* 163). Although Milkman and Guitar’s theft of Pilate’s green tarpaulin only yields bones and an arrest, Milkman’s thirst for the gold that he believes will secure his freedom away from “the wings of all those other people’s nightmares” drives him away from Michigan, for the first time, to his father’s home in Danville, Pennsylvania (*Song of Solomon* 220). The egg, Milkman, had rolled out of the nest with its shell intact.

In Danville, Milkman meets Rev. Cooper, a man who knew both his father and grandfather. For first time while sitting with Coop and reviewing the various aspects of the story of his grandfather’s demise, Milkman gets angry at the injustice of the murder; away from the City and its many distractions of noise and its claims of reality, Milkman

feels compassion for someone other than himself. While waiting for Coop's car to be repaired, Milkman is visited by many of the other men who were his father's contemporaries. As they reminisce about his father and grandfather, Milkman "loved the boy they described and loved that boy's father" (*Song of Solomon* 235).

It is evident through their talk that Jake's counter-narrative of the Dream had not just been shared with those men through their participation in working the farm but also through their belief in his narrative vision. Thus, when Jake died they also began to die. As Matus states, "the death of the first Macon Dead affects not only his son but [...] an entire community of men" (Matus 74). They, therefore, looked to Milkman for "some word [...] that would rekindle the dream and stop the death they were dying" (*Song of Solomon* 236). Although the "word" that Milkman shares is a litany of his father's assets, he provides them with what to them becomes a life source, a means of realizing a hope that was still alive and being lived out through Macon's son, Milkman's father (*Song of Solomon* 236). For the first time then, Milkman begins to live out the promise his name holds; he brings, through his listing of Macon's resources, their supply of milk, and they, thirsty for its sustenance, drink down every drop.

Thus, the shell of Macon's philosophy, the centrality of money, begins to show evidence of cracks. When Milkman finds the cave which once held the gold he is disappointed to discover that the pit is empty. It is significant that Milkman chooses to continue to seek the gold in Shalimar, Virginia and follow in what he believed were *Pilate's* tracks in his search for it. In following Pilate's path after she left the cave and not Macon's, he breaks the pattern of Maconic discipleship that he adhered to previously. Thus, the cave becomes a crossroads in Milkman's life also. Even though he leaves the

cave determined to continue in his search for a fortune, similar to his father, the subtle shiftings which had begun to occur in his fulfillment of his communal identity, as Milkman and not Macon, his given name, contrast with Macon's inimical spiritual transformation.

While Milkman's goal, fortune hunting, and his hunger for the gold remains and increases as he speaks to the men about monetary resources, his desire is kindled not only for himself but also for revenge. "He wanted to [...] snatch every grain of it from under the noses of the Butlers, who were dumb enough to believe that if they killed one man his whole line died" (*Song of Solomon* 236). Yet, despite these areas of movement, Milkman, is still able to rely on many of the external trappings that constitute his shell: his family name, the love and respect that the men had for his forefathers grants him a "hero status" in Danville; his clothing, the cut of his suit is admired by Coop's nephew and by the man who gives him a ride back to town after he seeks the gold; his appearance, Circe, the midwife of Pilate and Macon, runs towards him in the mistaken assumption that he is his father; and his money, which he relies upon to buy necessities and build relational bridges.

### ***Phase III- Flight***

Milkman purchases a car and enjoys a pleasant ride down south to Shalimar, Virginia. Believing himself to be "earning" the kind treatment he receives on the road, convinced that "all that business about southern hospitality was for real," he misses the possible signs of the subtle changes in cultural climate and the realities of the impact of the poverty, which may have surrounded him (*Song of Solomon* 260). Blinded by pride

and deafened by the roar of what he believes is approval in his ears, his car breaks down in the heart of Shalimar, Virginia, his destination. It is the sequence of events which occur during his first day in Shalimar that finally bust Milkman's shell. The positive effect that his appearance, clothing, full wallet, and name had in Michigan and again in Danville, produce the opposite effect in Shalimar. None of the external securities that he normally relied upon, yield the expected results, instead they serve to increase the hostility of the residents, who base interactions on mercy and respect for others and not money and its material benefits. Therefore, Milkman's disrespect for and disregard of others excused in Danville because of his name, unimportant on the road because of his wealth, create shell smashing results in Shalimar.

The main Misery of this novel occurs throughout Milkman's first day in Shalimar. Morrison states that one of her goals for her characters is to "see really and truly of what these people are made and [...] put them in situations of great duress and pain [...] then when I see them in life threatening circumstances or see their hand called, then I know who they are" (Jones, Vinson interview 180). These situations of "great duress and pain" constitute the main Misery in all of Morrison's novels including *Song of Solomon*. Milkman faces three "life threatening" situations on his first day in Shalimar (*Song of Solomon* 180).

The first one, which occurs in the general store, the hangout, of the hamlet, reveals the communal disjuncture between Milkman, who is ancestrally tied to the area, and the young men in the shop. Offended by his airs: he enters without introducing himself, immediately asks for what he wants, speaks only to Mr. Solomon and refers to the other men as "them"; irritated by the assumptions of privilege declared by his attire



and his words: he makes it clear that he wants one of their women; and careless about his wealth in the face of their poverty, he says that he may have to replace his car if he cannot fix the one he has, Milkman succeeds in driving a sledgehammer between himself and the men in the shop (*Song of Solomon* 266). Although Milkman's behavior is unacceptably rude and irresponsible, the violent response of the young men, one of them attempts to slit his throat, indicates the area where they also need healing. They are offended by "his manner" and "his clothes" because of their own insecurities about their manhood. Therefore, they are infuriated by his covert declaration that "they weren't men...that the lint and tobacco in their pants pockets where dollar bills should have been was the measure. That thin shoes and suits with vests and smooth smooth hands were the measure" (*Song of Solomon* 266).

Milkman's response to this first situation of "great duress" is the desire to "slaughter everybody in sight" (*Song of Solomon* 269). This initial response seems to indicate his regression and the rigidity of his shell; however, the next two stages of the main Misery demonstrate that this response was possibly an indication of shell disruption.

The next stage of the main Misery occurs between Milkman and the older man in the area, those whom he passed without speaking, in order to enter the store. Having witnessed his conflict with the young men "they would test him, match and beat him, probably, on some other ground" (*Song of Solomon* 269). Invited to accompany the men on a hunt, Milkman undresses, before them, and changes into the clothing they provide him for the hunt. All that remains of his former garb is his underwear. It is *after* Milkman accepts both their clothing, with *gratitude*, and their laughter at his former

attire, that “the revelry mixed with meanness abate[s]” (*Song of Solomon* 271). Milkman thus expresses some measure of humility. In disrobing before them, opening himself up to their censure, reminiscent of Pilate before the Michigan police, and accepting their clothing for him as more appropriate for the terrain, he loses and loses two of his original moorings, his clothing, and manner. Once he takes them both off at King Walker’s garage, he never puts them back on.

Milkman is paired with Calvin during the hunt but is soon unable to keep up having difficulty canvassing the terrain, adjusting to the darkness, and avoiding the rocks, roots, and branches he is forced to work his way around. When he finally surrenders to his body’s call for rest, he is able to see himself from the perspective of others for the first time in his life. Surrounded by the darkness, without any of his usual moorings, he is “only breath [...] and [...] thoughts” (*Song of Solomon* 277). He realizes that perhaps the fine treatment he had received from others on the way to Shalimar was misinterpreted because of his prideful understanding of himself and the assumptions about the effect his status, appearance and money had previously afforded him. He finally recognizes that it was wrong for him to assume and *expect* to be loved, “from a distance,” without reciprocation (*Song of Solomon* 277). The shell around his heart, having already cracked was at the point of breaking when Guitar makes an attempt on his life. It is “only when he is quite literally in the position of a hunted animal [that] he can do what Guitar has challenged him to do with his life: ‘Live it!’” (Rice 62).

Guitar had never overcome his central trauma, the brutal but accidental death of his father and his mother’s willingness to love and forgive the sawmill owner responsible for it (*Song of Solomon* 224). The bitterness, anger, and nausea he felt because of the

situation may have solidified into rage when his mother proceeded to abandon her children, unable to “cut it when [their] father died” (*Song of Solomon* 307). Guitar then found it difficult to love any woman afraid that the desertion would be repeated, and it was, by the one woman to whom he chose to commit. Nevertheless, he did have genuine affection for Milkman, when they were young. Despite Macon’s unfairness to Guitar and his family, in evicting them, Guitar, initially, was able to separate Macon’s actions from Milkman’s recognizing them to be two very different individuals. However, as Milkman matured chronologically yet continued to function emotionally and otherwise as an irresponsible boy, the friends grew apart, especially on the issues concerning the impact of the Narrative on the African-American. Milkman, never having felt socially oppressed or materially deprived, continues to seek out Guitar’s company for fun and excitement, while Guitar becomes more invested in the painful realities of life as a black man in America. In seeking to find a counter-narrative to cope with the root anger he felt and the helplessness he resented, he became a member of The Seven Days.

Participation in the Seven Days serves to feed Guitar’s repressed anger, fan the flames of his hunting prowess, and free him to hunt whomever he chooses. Guitar becomes a killer. When Milkman leaves in search of the gold, alone without Guitar, Guitar’s resentment at Macon for being just like a white man, anger at Pilate for her “aunt Jemima act” before the police, and suspicions of Milkman’s treachery in seeking to take the gold for himself, coalesce (*Song of Solomon* 209). He heads to Pennsylvania and then Virginia to kill Milkman; “he had snatched the first straw, limp and wet as it was, to prove to himself the need to kill Milkman” (*Song of Solomon* 331).

Melvin Dixon in his book *Ride Out the Wilderness*, posits that the roles in Guitar and Milkman's relationship are analogous to "the water and the egg" of Pilate's soft boiled egg (39). "In the folk logic of this equation, Milkman is the egg [...] Guitar's last name is Bains, which in French means "bath" or "watering place" or both" (159). Guitar as the water in the relational pairing can thus be read, in this latter section of the text, as having come to a boil. The heat, his anger, and the bubbling intensity of the water, his belief that Milkman has stolen the gold, both contribute to the final busting of the eggshell, his attempt on Milkman's life. Read in this manner, the first two stages of the Main Misery provide the setting, the pot, in which the water, Guitar, sits.

Significantly, the one image which flashes in Milkman's mind as he takes his final breath is that of "Hagar bending over him in perfect love, in the most intimate sexual gesture imaginable" (*Song of Solomon* 279). It is "in the midst of that picture" that Guitar's voice enters clarifying the identity of his assassin (*Song of Solomon* 279). The conflation of his sad acceptance of Guitar's deceit in conjunction with his recognition of the centrality of Hagar in his life allows him to take his next "living breath" (*Song of Solomon* 279). Milkman does die when Guitar succeeds at securing the wire around his neck. However, immediately before Guitar's assault he becomes fully cognizance of his previously selfish lifestyle and gains incipient insight into the heart of others. Yet, the "sudden a rush of affection" he feels is only for the men in his life and not for the women (*Song of Solomon* 278). Only his physical death awakens him to the impact of women in his life.

Although only Hagar's image "flashe[s] before him," as the woman whom he mistreated the most, the picture of her "bending over him in perfect love," despite his

abusive behavior, personifies and epitomizes the type of merciful love he has been shown by all of the women in his life (*Song of Solomon* 279). Thus, it is immediately after his death experience that he is able to demonstrate reciprocal love towards a woman previously unknown to him, Sweet. “She put salve on his face. He washed her hair. She sprinkled talcum on his feet. He straddled her behind and massaged her back. She put witch hazel on his swollen neck. He made up the bed. She gave him gumbo to eat. He washed the dishes” (*Song of Solomon* 285). Unlike the depiction of his former behavior delineated by Magdalena, “to this day you have never asked one of us if we were tired, or sad, or wanted a cup of coffee,” Milkman finally learns the importance of reciprocity (*Song of Solomon* 215).

Furthermore, I posit this final facet of the main Misery of this novel occurs concurrently in two different locations. While Milkman is privately envisioning Hagar and recognizing their spiritual connectivity, the Southside community in Michigan is publically acknowledging that same linkage through Hagar’s funeral. Thus, the cries for “Mercy!” voiced through Pilate and Reba’s song at Hagar’s funeral are answered in Shalimar through Milkman’s resurrection and spiritual renewal (*Song of Solomon* 316). The momentous transformation evident in Milkman, after his rebirth, is as a result of the mercy he will now have “in the nighttime [...] in the darkness [...] in the morning [...] at [the] bedside [...] [and] on [his] knees” (318-9).

The realization of Milkman’s spiritual death and renewal is further illustrated in his abandonment of the quest for the gold. No longer focused on securing freedom through money or running away from his familial responsibilities, Milkman becomes excited about the discovery of the facts of his ancestry. His brief relationship with Sweet

provides him with the forum necessary to learn and express reciprocal love. The conjunction of his learning of the verses for the “Song of Solomon,” as well as the information he gleans from Susan Byrd, his cousin, fill in the missing pieces of the ancestral puzzle. Milkman is thus able to return to Michigan as a new man. Armed with a new sense of self, a heart of mercy, an understanding of love, and a willingness to confront the consequences of his former actions, he finally flies, “without ever leaving the ground” (*Song of Solomon* 336 ).

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<sup>1</sup>My first conscious introduction to the Ibo Landing Legend was during the study of Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow* in one of Prof. Busia’s graduate classes. At the time, amidst my own grief at the loss of my Aunt Rita, I was most impressed by the character of Avatara’s great-aunt Cuney, who, in many ways, reminded me of my deceased relative. As I revisited Marshall and Dominey’s accounts of the legend for this particular chapter, however, the marvel of the Ibo’s themselves struck a chord deep within my own heart and soul. Although both Marshall and Dominey’s recollections of the landing legend involve their walking over the water, Morrison’s vision of the legend, incorporates aspects of Hamilton’s *The People Could Fly* legend also by presenting Solomon as a flying Ibo. Both the Flying African Legend and the Ibo Landing story demonstrate the power, fortitude, courage, passion, love and unity of African people.

<sup>2</sup> Although there are many various interpretations of transcendence, Ellison’s bluesy interpretation of the term seems particularly appropriate in the analysis of this legend about slave rebellion. Arguably, slavery is the primary core from which stems the oppressive shadow that inspires the blues. The incorporation of Ellison’s definition serves as a means of linking the historical and the more contemporary roots of African-American defiance.

<sup>3</sup>The applicability of the Biblical definition for transformation here is more involved than this reference may indicate. In the original Greek, the contrast between conformity and transformation are emphasized. Transformation (metamorphousthe) is the change of the individual from the inside out. It is a metamorphosis which occurs based upon a spiritual action *within* the person, the “qualitative renewing of [their] mind” (Zodhiates 1350). In conformity (suschematizo), on the other hand, an alteration occurs due to the pressure exerted by *external* forces.

<sup>4</sup> In Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow*, the Ibo Landing legend is passed on through one of the ancestral figures in the text, great-aunt Cuney. Having learned the story from her own grandmother, Aunt Cuney included, in her version of the account, some of the responses to the legend that her grandmother had shared as she presented it. One of the last rejoinders her grandmother would include reflected the spiritual linkage she felt to the Ibo’s. “Her body she always usta say might be in Tatem but her mind, her mind was long gone with the Ibos” (39).

<sup>5</sup> This is a brief, cursory perusal of the spectacularized nature of slavery. Many other arenas remain unmentioned: entertainment, sexual assaults, tortuous punishments, court cases, animalistic usages, etc.

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<sup>6</sup> The immaterial nature of man is necessarily much more complex than this brief listing indicates. The soul, emotions, character, personality, intuition, discernment and other areas are also vital aspects of our intangible figuration.

<sup>7</sup> “In a surprising exception to the English legal tradition that children inherited the status of their father, it was agreed that in the case of African Americans, the offspring would inherit the status of their mother” (Wood, 87).

<sup>8</sup> The enfranchisement of black men and the declaration of their citizenship during Congressional Reconstruction was resented by a number of whites. Fortunately and unfortunately, these changes occurred in conjunction with the withdrawal of the Freedmen’s Bureau. “Most agents had been withdrawn from the South by 1867, all by 1869” (Painter, 132). As one writer for *Harper’s Weekly* stated in 1868: “Except for the Freedmen’s Bureau, keeping the peace with intelligence and authority, organizing labor, establishing schools, saving the white population from the consequences of their own ferocity, it is easy to imagine how fearful would have been the condition of the Southern States during the period between the end of the war and the establishment of loyal governments” (147).

<sup>9</sup> Eric Williams argues in his text, *Capitalism and Slavery*, that the enslavement of the African was motivated almost entirely by economic incentives. In his discussion of colonial Virginia he asserts that, “Negro slavery...cheapened the cost of production. Negro slaves, one-twentieth of the population in 1670, were one-fourth in 1730. ‘Slavery, from being an insignificant factor in the economic life of the colony had become the very foundation upon which it was established.’”

<sup>10</sup> Although proslavery advocates manipulated the Scriptures for their own ends, American chattel slavery defied basic Christian principles. For example, the Biblical injunction for each man’s equality before God sought to be countered by the denial of the slave’s humanity. Yet, even this approach is decried by Scripture: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither *slave* nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28, emphasis added).

<sup>11</sup> In fact, the goal of the American Colonization Society was the repatriation of the African. Started before the abolition of slavery (1816), they initially sought to encourage free blacks to return to their native home. “Finley believed that blacks would never be fully integrated into American society and that they would only be able to fulfill their potential as human beings in Africa, the ‘land of their fathers.’ He saw colonization as a charitable work, one that would benefit American blacks and Africans alike through the spreading of Christianity to Africa. He also thought that it would prompt a gradual end to slavery” (Africans in America, PBS).

## Chapter Five

### The Dual Faces of Bliss: N(n)arrative impact in Toni Morrison's

#### Paradise

Then I [...] saw the holy city [...] coming down out of heaven from God [...] and I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying; and there shall be no more pain for the former things have passed away [...] And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the great city [...] having the glory of God. And her light was like a most precious stone, like a jasper stone, clear as crystal. Also she had a great and high wall with twelve gates [...] and the twelve gates were twelve pearls: each individual gate was of one pearl. And the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass [...] And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb [...] And there shall be no night there: They need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. And they shall reign forever and ever.

Revelation 21:2-21; 22: 1-5, NKJV (excerpts)

The holy city, center of the heavenly paradise depicted in the book of Revelation, holds the promise of freedom: from mundane existence, from quotidian stresses, and from the degeneracy of this life. Enveloped in the security of the presence of God, the inhabitants will be redeemed from "death," "sorrow," "crying," "pain" and even "tears" (Rev. 21:4). The peace, safety and emotional bliss many long for in this world, will be an immutable reality in that city. Glorious structures, surpassing those realized on earth, will surround the inhabitant: streets paved with "pure gold," "gates [...] of one pearl" and "foundations of [...] sapphire" (Rev. 21:21,19). Operating within the realm of the timeless, there will be "no night" in heaven for the light of God, coruscating like "a jasper



stone,” will illumine the entirety of the city (Rev. 22:5; 21:11). Pure, holy, a wondrous sanctuary, this heavenly city epitomizes paradise. The Biblical portrait illustrates a vision of a concrete, ethereal hope. Yet, the radiant resplendence of the heavenly domain is reserved for the believer’s future rather than his/her terrestrial existence.

However, a vision of the eternal realm as ideal is subtly woven into our earthly existence indistinctly affecting our perspectives and desires. Thus, most of us are disquieted by pain, sorrow, crying and death preferring to avoid what are deemed to be inimical circumstances. While the specific physical structures of the heavenly realm are unattainable, the pearl gate of approximately 216 feet high,<sup>1</sup> for example, an earthly equivalent of a paradisaical aura is often sought. The American Dream exemplifies one such striving. The motivating factor beneath the influx of immigrants to America, it is a version and a vision of the attainment of an earthly paradise. Promising improved economic status, food in abundance, a voice in governmental proceedings, and a brighter future for one’s family, the Dream presented(s) America as a heaven on earth.<sup>2</sup>

The quest for an earthly paradise is foundational to an understanding of Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*. For African-Americans, however, the vision of paradise and its realization is unlike that of the many immigrants who have come willingly to these shores. In a 1998 PBS interview, Morrison explicates this distinction. “African-Americans were not immigrants in this rush to find a heaven. They had left a home. So they’re seeking for another home, while other people are doing the same thing, except the other people were leaving a home that they didn’t want to be in any longer, or couldn’t be in any longer [...] African- Americans were looking for a second one and hopefully one

that would be simply up to them, their own people, their own habits, their own culture, and to contain themselves in that” (2).

The towns of Haven and subsequently of Ruby are visions of what that African-American paradise might have looked like from the early 1900’s through to the 1970’s. The inhabitants aspire to effectuate a corporeal utopia through the belief in and enactment of a counter-narrative of isolation and seeming separation from the impact of racist practices rooted in the National Narrative. Yet, the antinomic relationship the town of Ruby has with its closest neighboring community, the Convent, reveals the fissures in the superficial perfection of the town. “Quiet white and yellow houses full of industry; and in them [...] elegant black women at useful tasks [...] linen laundered and ironed to perfection; good meat seasoned and ready for roasting” (*Paradise* 111).

Although both the Convent and Ruby lie deep within the heart of a rural area in Oklahoma, the Narrative impact remains having been brought into Ruby through their creation of a derivative communal narrative and their reliance upon that narrative’s rhetoric for spiritual and relational nourishment. Their sense of being, loving, and being loved are each adversely affected as they variously focus on the maintenance of the narrative structures rather than on the community members themselves. Thus, their “clean and blessed [...] mission devour[s] itself and become[s] the world they had escaped” (*Paradise* 292). Even though the nuns of the Convent also subscribe to a derivative cultural narrative, as the population of the Convent changes the narrative radically morphs into one that eventually provides emotional healing rather than relational destruction.

## Haven

Indeed, the demise of Haven provides part of the historical backdrop for the novel. Some of the inhabitants of Haven recognizing the imminent end of their utopia, due to economic crises, flee from Haven to found a new Haven, called Ruby. Seeking to maintain the traditions and philosophies established by their forefathers, Haven's communal narrative, they eschew the destructive influences of the surrounding world and move even further away from those outside their community; there are "ninety miles between [their town] and any other" (*Paradise* 3). Grounded in a philosophy founded more on bias than on the Biblical referents they intone, they read the influences from those who surround them as destructive, not because of their derivation from the National Narrative but due to their variance with the foundational beliefs of Haven and Ruby. Despite this general communal interpretation of the ills inherent in all of the surrounding culture, many of the inhabitants of Haven abandon the cocoon and flee to integrate themselves into a variety of cities, choosing to seek an alternative paradise and laying aside the communal narrative philosophies once held dear. However, those few remaining true to the original paradisiacal desire, decide to move further out into uninhabited lands.

Unrealized was the reality that the destructive impact they fled, personified, they believed, through whites, racially mixed, and otherwise impure African-Americans, was already invisibly yet inherently woven into their own community. The "dung" they believed to be visibly apparent based on the complexions of some and through the behavior and attire others, was spiritually mired in the hearts of many of the leadership (*Paradise* 201). This admixture is most clearly evidenced in Deacon Morgan (Deek), one

of the leaders of Ruby. Securely shrouded in his recollection of and reliance upon their communal narrative, Deek is initially unaware of his spiritual bondage. I posit that he is on a journey from unrecognized and unacknowledged intangible helotry to spiritual freedom.

### *The Convent*

“Christ the King School for Native Girls,” renamed the Convent by everyone but the nuns in charge, was established by its benefactress to be a type of paradise for the Indian girls selected to attend (*Paradise* 224). The school was purposed to “help them despise everything that had once made their lives worthwhile and to offer them instead the privilege of knowing the one and only God and a chance, thereby, for redemption (*Paradise* 227). The Convent thus sought to give “wicked, wayward Indian girls,” sent by the state, a spiritual paradise on earth through the knowledge of God and the abandonment of their own culture (*Paradise* 227). The girls were considered to be in need of cultural reform and societal refuge from the ills of their own communities.

The mission of the Convent, then, was antithetical to that of Ruby. Instead of seeking to *separate out* and protect the racially and ethnically pure from the impure, as in Ruby, the Convent *invited in* those believed to be culturally and religiously “impure,” the “wicked, wayward Indian girls,” for spiritual cleansing and renewal.<sup>3</sup> Consolata, a Portuguese ward of the Convent, lives within its paradisiacal world for the majority of her life. Initially a street urchin, Connie was taken from the streets of Portugal by Mary Magna, a “difficult nun,” and subsequently adopted by her as a dependent of the Convent (*Paradise* 223). Although Connie devoted herself to Catholic ritual and piety, within the surreal realm of the Convent, she too, like Deek, was in spiritual bondage.

Reading the text through the narratives upon which each community is founded illuminates some of its areas of confusion since much of the novel's content focuses on "issues of interpretation[s]" which are based upon the respective cultural narratives (Page 1). Thus, it becomes clear that both Deek and Connie are enmeshed in and spiritually imprisoned by the divergent religious cultural narratives of their respective communities. The communities in which they are respectively involved, while seeking to be an earthly paradise or to provide an avenue to one, press the participants into the boundaries of their own narrative structures rather than freeing them to develop their own. Consequently, neither the Convent nor Ruby provide effective counter-narratives to the National Narrative, as I will delineate further in this chapter, thereby creating an environment which necessitates the journey to wholeness that both Deek and Connie embark upon.

### *The narrative of Ruby*

The original intent of the forefathers of Haven, the town from which Ruby sprang, was simply to find an alternative to the classification of detritus that the National Narrative had assigned them. Initially involved in reconstruction government, they sought to politically alter the realities of the post-emancipation world in which they lived. When, however, they were ousted from office on false premises and closed out of any "mental labor," they found themselves having apparently affected no lasting changes, for they were locked into "penury and/or field labor" for fifteen years (*Paradise* 193). Unwilling to accept the retrogressive position assigned by the Narrative, and unable to reenter the political realm, they sought a community based counter-narrative. They decided to answer the invitations published by some of the all-black towns and go; "Prepared or not at All" (*Paradise* 13).<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, all of the towns to which they

sought entrance turned them away culminating in the final refusal at Fairly, Oklahoma which they called thereafter, the “Disallowing” (*Paradise* 189). Rejected for their “raggedy appearance” and the insufficiency of their collective purse “to satisfy the restrictions the ‘self-supporting’ Negroes required,” the refusal by those in Fairly was overtly based on complexion (*Paradise* 14). “Blue-eyed, gray-eyed yellowmen in good suits. They were kind, though [...] gave them food and blankets; took up a collection for them; but were unmoving in their refusal to let the[m] [...] stay longer than a night’s rest” (*Paradise* 195).

This disparity and segregation based on color perpetrated by other African-Americans was the “one rebuff out of many” that made them choose to form their own town (*Paradise* 189). Expecting to be rejected by whites, knowing the limiting nature of the Narrative and seeking to move and live outside of it they were unprepared for the acrid nature of the refusal by other African-Americans. “The sign of racial purity they had taken for granted had become a stain” (*Paradise* 194). After the series of rejections culminating in the Fairly, “Disallowing,” they had to choose; would they *react* to the actions of others and treat them in a similar fashion or would they, like *Song of Solomon’s* Pilate, *respond* by choosing “a preferable kind of behavior”? (*Song of Solomon*, 150).

They choose to *react* founding their own exclusive community; rejecting all those who had rejected them, especially those African-Americans of lighter complexion who were perceived as those who showed evidence of “racial tampering” (*Paradise* 197). By labeling those of lighter hue the “impure,” they chose to see themselves as the “pure,” those who showed no visible evidence of racial tampering (*Paradise* 217). Determined to

maintain the purity of their line, they quietly encouraged intermarriage among the original nine-founding families: “Blackhorse, Morgan, Poole, Fleetwood, Beauchamp, Cato, Flood and both Dupres families” (*Paradise* 188); as well as the additional five added later on: “Harper Jury, Sargeant Person, John Seawright, Edward Sands, and[...]Roger Best” (*Paradise* 195). Although “nobody admitted” that a “blood rule...existed” it “lived a quietly throbbing life” in Ruby (*Paradise*, 195). The desire for racial purity was a communal rather than a leader imposed goal. The collective rejection experienced through the “Disallowing” transformed them from a group of sojourners to “a tight band of wayfarers bound by the enormity of what had happened to them” (*Paradise* 189). Their pride in their collective purity, however, was not the only basis of their founding narrative.

Some time before he decided to seek out a black town, Zechariah Morgan, also known as Big Papa, the organizer and leader of the travelers, had chosen to rename himself. After he witnessed a decision and behavior in his twin brother, Tea, which caused him to feel “shame in himself,” he “went off and never spoke to his brother again” (*Paradise*, 303).<sup>5</sup> It is highly probable that it was after this incident that Coffee changed his *whole name*, to excise any association with his sibling, and became Zechariah Morgan. It was also after this critical incident that he contacted other “former legislators” and “began to plan a new life elsewhere” (*Paradise*, 302). Patricia Cato, daughter of one of the founding fathers of Ruby, Roger Best, speculates that Zechariah may have changed his name to that of the Old Testament prophet. Some of the verses from the book of Zechariah to which she alludes “fit nicely for Zechariah Morgan” and they are also, I argue, of critical significance to an understanding of the narratives of

Haven, and consequently, of Ruby. The verses are found in Zechariah 7: 4-13, especially verses 9 and 10. They state:

This is what the Lord Almighty says: Administer true justice; show *mercy* and *compassion* to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other.

Zechariah 7: 9&10 (NIV, emphasis added)

While the commandments issued in this verse could certainly pertain to those in who rejected the original nine families who appeared to be both “poor” and seemingly “alien” to those from whom they sought aid, the commandment also could apply to the inhabitants of Haven and Ruby(Zech. 7:10). In order for relational bridges to be built one cannot “think evil” of others in their “hearts,” especially towards those often marginalized by society, “widow[s],” “fatherless,” “aliens,” and the “poor”; each one should be treated with both mercy and compassion (Zech. 7:10). Unfortunately, though Zechariah and his progeny seem to use the verses as the continual ratiocination for the offensiveness of the “Disallowing,” they themselves fail to “show mercy and compassion” to those who had wronged them or to any they deem to be outsiders (*Paradise* 189). The members of the Convent community are “poor,” “fatherless,” and “alien[s]” to the Rubyites yet, they are generally oppressed and mistreated by the inhabitants of Ruby whenever they encounter each other (Zech.7:10). Although the Havenites show mercy and compassion to one another, they do not include any one other than themselves in the reference. Once the town relocates and becomes Ruby the seeds of hypocrisy sown in the contradictory nature of their response to the Biblical mandate by which they judge Fairly has created a communal environment in which they fail to show



mercy and compassion towards each other. Yet, in Ruby they adhere unshakably to their resentment of the Fairly community and to any considered to be outsiders.

The Havenites, and the subsequent Rubyites, perceive themselves to be “the pure and holy” (*Paradise* 217). “God bless the pure and holy” is an often repeated phrase in their communal gatherings (*Paradise* 217). While the purity refers to their unblemished racial heritage, the holiness refers, in part to their interpretations of the above verse and the beliefs and actions that they exhibit as a result. In using this command as a basis for the condemnation of all those who rejected them, the interpretation of the phrase “one another” was initially seen as inclusive of the entire African-American community (Zech. 7:9). Thus, those who refused them were unmerciful and without compassion and would, they believed, be “crumbled” by God: “God will crumble you. God will crumble you” (*Paradise* 211). When, however, applying the same verse to themselves the phrase “one another” took on a different meaning, referring solely to the inhabitants of Ruby (Zech. 7:9). That the rejection by these other members of the African-American community in disobedience to this verse served to make “holy” those of Haven is also evident in their interpretation of the Christmas story as enacted in the children’s play (*Paradise* 217).

While the traditional performance of the Christmas story depicts Mary, Joseph, the baby Jesus, shepherds and wise men, the Haven interpretation reveals the intermingling of the “Disallowing” with the Biblical account (*Paradise* 189). Instead of one innkeeper refusing Mary and Joseph admittance due to a lack of room, there are two innkeepers, both in suits and wearing yellow masks, representative of the Fairly residents, and there are several pairs of Mary and Joseph couples some already holding babies in their arms. Since the necessity of the room for Mary and Joseph was due to Mary’s late

stage of pregnancy,<sup>6</sup> the request for room in the inn was one of the ways in which the Rubyites sought to conflate the stories. While some of the Mary characters are pregnant, others are not. This addition to the Biblical account not only equates the refusals faced by Mary and Joseph to the rejection the founders faced during the “Disallowing” but it also reduces the significance of the Christ child (*Paradise* 189). Additionally, the fusion reflects the weightiness with which the Rubyites viewed their story. They considered it to be comparable to the Biblical account of the coming of Christ as a baby, thus they freely comingle various elements of both stories.

Do the babies represent the Christ child in the Ruby account? No. The insignificance of the babies in the Ruby account lies in the amalgam of the pregnant Mary characters with those who already carry infants. The incarnation of holiness in the story is shifted from the child to the representative founding families. Since the children enacting the story are themselves representatives of the founding families, and they are referred to as the “holy families,” the Biblical centrality of the Christ child is replaced by the nine founding families of Haven, all of whom are implicitly deemed to be “holy.” Thus, instead of worshipping the Christ child in their Christmas program they worship and celebrate themselves, using their version of the story as a means of reinforcing the significance of their own narrative.

Hence, the religious basis for the narrative of Haven/Ruby centers on the dichotomous hermeneutics of Zechariah 7: 9&10 and, according to their understanding of it, places them in the position of the “alien” denied mercy. In their humbled place, as those rejected, they claim a spiritual superiority over the Disallowers; and become the “holy” (*Paradise* 217). Their claim of holiness allowed the Havenites, to consolidate the

hatred which they felt towards the Disallowers and grasp it more tightly; thereby allowing it to enslave them more fully. “They saved the clarity of their hatred for the men who had insulted them in ways too confounding for language” (*Paradise* 189). In seeking to retaliate against those who had refused them, they fell into the trap of a reactionary narrative. Rather than moving outside of the boundaries of the biases which were leveled against them, they solidified their own bias, conflated and strengthened it with self-righteousness.

However, their reactionary response to the Fairly residents and their Biblical justifications for it were not the only aspects of their founding narrative; they also enmeshed into their foundational beliefs one of the visions that the prophet Zechariah records in the Biblical text: the female personification of sin. The angel who asks and answers Zechariah’s questions throughout the book, at some point shows him a measuring “basket” inside of which a woman sat (Zech. 5: 6-8). The angel describes the woman as the measurement of “the iniquity of the people throughout the land” and “pushe[s] her back into the basket and pushe[s] its lead cover down over its mouth” (Zechariah 5:6-8, NIV). Although a woman is presented as the personification of the sin of the people, *two other women* with “wings like those of a stork” take the basket away to “build a house for it” (Zechariah 5:9, NIV). Evidently then not *all* women are to be understood as representing the measurement of sin, only the one in the basket. The two women responsible for “build[ing] a house” for the basket are in an authoritative position; they guard the basket that contains the sin representative. Thus, women are presented in this prophecy as both ascendant and abased.

Unfortunately, Zechariah Morgan and his followers seem to interpret this verse to mean that women must be suppressed in an enclosure, the confines of marriage and home, and subjugated by a “lead lid,” given a tremendous amount of work; “there wasn’t a slack or sloven woman anywhere in town” (*Paradise* 8). All the women of Haven and Ruby are paired off in marriage at a relatively young age, with a few exceptions, and expected to begin bearing children as soon as possible, while maintaining the home, gardens and grounds. Women are supervised before marriage by their families and by the community to diffuse or eliminate any evidence of aberrant behavior such as the application of any cosmetics. “The women of Ruby did not powder their faces and they wore no harlot’s perfume” (*Paradise* 143). Neither was it perceived as acceptable for them to wear lipstick or possibly any other makeup. Billie Delia, Patricia Cato’s daughter, has rosy colored lips. It is evidently assumed by the women in town that she is wearing lipstick and they respond by trying to wipe it off. Apparently, many of the women give her “hateful lecture” as well (*Paradise* 151). “Once when Mrs. Dovey Morgan stopped to wipe what she thought was makeup from Billie Delia’s rosy lips, she did it with a smile and no hateful lecture” (*Paradise* 151). Suppressed, oppressed and sometimes depressed, the women bore the weight of the sin measure of the town.

The men, on the other hand, unmonitored and free to roam, ruled both Haven and Ruby. Nominally the “pure and holy,” they were not looked to as the measurement for sin and were therefore not condemned for it when they participated in it (*Paradise* 217). For example, although K.D., nephew to the twin rulers of Ruby, Steward and Deacon Morgan, impregnated Arnette, he assumed that the baby was her problem since she had pursued him and invited his sexual attentions. “You cornered me at more socials than I

can remember and when I finally agreed I didn't have to take your drawers down you beat me to it so this ain't my problem" (*Paradise* 54). In fact, it does become her "problem" for K.D. does nothing to help her once she becomes advanced in the pregnancy. His uncles not only remove him from accountability, they initially discourage any permanent union (*Paradise* 113).

The narrative of Haven, and Ruby, is founded on sexism, false righteousness, false superiority, and racial hatred. Although they do succeed in the establishment of a town independent of any reliance upon others, the narrative they develop does not effectively counter the National Narrative or the Disallowers as it incorporates some of the same destructive elements which exist in the (N)narratives they seek to resist.

Haven eventually fails. Steward Morgan, one of the new fathers of Ruby, reads its failure as being due to economics, "railroad companies laid their tracks elsewhere"; agricultural difficulty, "cotton collapsed"; and frustration, they were "eager [...] to get away" (*Paradise* 6). Yet the destabilization of the monetary supports for the community may have only been the visible signs of the spiritual judgments also promised in Zechariah for those who violated the commandment of "mercy and compassion" (Zech. 7:14). Haven suffered both the "scattering among all the nations" and the desolation of the "pleasant land" (Zechariah 7:14).

Rather than scattering with many of the others, Steward and Deek, shortly after their return from combat, chose to continue the pursuance of the dream of paradise sought after by their forefathers. They decide to continue in their isolation, continue to fan the fire of hatred, continue to suppress the measurement of sin, women, and continue the perception of the former Havenites as the "pure and holy" (*Paradise* 217).

Blinded by the pride and haughtiness encouraged by their self-righteous superiority, they read the failure of Haven in superficial terms only; as occurring due to monetary mishandling, poor advance planning and inefficient monetary investments. They, therefore, focus their attention in Ruby on the maintenance of the capital flow of the town. Whereas in Haven the Morgan family were the owners of a traditional bank, in Ruby the Morgans suggested that everyone “buy shares...instead of just making deposits they could run through any old time” (*Paradise* 115). Believing their money to be “safe,” with the exception of Anna Flood, the majority of the town was “prospering on [Morgan] credit” (*Paradise* 115-6). The controllers of the monetary resources, the Morgans had to approve or disapprove most of the houses, businesses, and vehicles before a purchase could occur. Rev. Misner, while observing Deek circling the town, rightly concludes that “it’s sort of his town [...] his and Steward’s” (*Paradise* 115). Although Anna, with whom Misner speaks, protests his assessment, the Morgans’ monetary control increases the measure of their societal control as well. They use their wealth as a means of controlling the inhabitants of the town if or when a conflict arises.

As Patricia Cato concludes, the Morgans “ran everything, controlled everything” (*Paradise* 217). Thus, I posit that the Morgans decided which of the nine families would continue to be represented as the “pure” and “holy” in the Christmas play and which ones were to be excised (*Paradise* 217). In the particular Christmas play depicted in the text, only seven “holy families” are presented in that year’s presentation rather than nine (*Paradise* 211). Two of the families are exempted. The Cato family was expunged first.

Patricia and her daughter Billie Delia both hold the “dual status of insider/outsider[s]” in Ruby (Fultz 86). Although Pat “is, on her father’s side, a

descendant of the original founders- Cato and Blackhorse. On the maternal side she has mixed blood” (Fultz 82). Pat also marries into the Cato family. Despite the brevity of their married life, Pat technically remains a Cato after her husband’s death although her students refer to her by her maiden name, Best. The visceral evidence of racial tampering reflected in both she and Billie overshadows the children’s verbal reinforcement of her separation from the Cato line. Thus, she and Billie, though an integral part of the community, are closely watched. When, at the age of three, Billie Delia, innocently “pulled down her panties” in public to enjoy the feel of her body on a horse’s back, she is consequently condemned, as a “wild” girl (*Paradise* 151). Even though as an innocent child she could not have committed an adulterous act, the Cato family may have been dismissed from inclusion in the play immediately after that incident. Pat recalls that “some time” after she “noticed the singularity of the numbers [...] she saw that there were only eight [...] and understood that the Cato line was cut” (*Paradise* 215). The surviving Cato’s, Billie and Pat, are omitted from representation in the play.

The second family which may have been excised were the Fleetwoods. Although Arnette Fleetwood had become part of the Morgan family, through her marriage to K.D., her father Arnold and her brother Jeff remained at odds with both Deek and Steward. Arnette and K.D. were intimately involved before their wedding. When Arnette, however, told K.D. her news, his response was hostile and unsupportive. Since Gigi, one of the women of the Convent, arrived by bus at the exact moment of Arnette’s disclosure, K.D. shifted his full attention to Gigi’s “screaming tits closing in on them” (*Paradise* 55). Arnette’s sharp retort, “if that’s the kind of tramp you want, hop to it, nigger,” partially provoked K.D.’s unacceptable riposte; he “slapped [...] her face” (*Paradise* 54-5). The

cohesion of Arnette's pregnancy and K.D.'s insults, physically, in striking her, and relationally, in his initial refusal to marry her, sparked the feud between the Morgans and the Fleetwoods. Arnette rids herself of the baby at the Convent, with repeated thrusts of her fists, and vicious jabs to her womb with a mop handle (*Paradise* 250). The Morgans, placing none of the responsibility on K.D., may have then determined that the Fleetwoods were unholy. Surely none of the holy families would have premarital sex and then abort the child?

The centrality of money in Ruby subtly but radically alters the narrative of the town from a partial adherence to the command of "mercy and compassion" to complete neglect of it (Zech.7:9). Whereas in Haven the forefathers chose to interpret the aforementioned verses as a command in how to treat each other within their community though not outside of it, in Ruby Morgan driven concerns over money cause even this latter interpretation to be neglected. "Mercy and compassion" are no longer shown even to the "one another(s)" of Ruby (Zech. 7:9). Money takes precedence each time. Thus, when Deek observes Sweetie Fleetwood walking down the street alone in the cold, "coatless on a chilly October morning" though the lead lid of her "broken children" had kept her locked in her home for six years, he chooses to open the bank and handle business with Nathan DuPres, rather than lay aside monetary concerns to show mercy and compassion to a woman who was clearly distraught and in need of aid (*Paradise* 114). While "Haven residents refused each other nothing [and] were vigilant to any need or shortage," communal assistance was withheld in Ruby (*Paradise*, 109). The inhabitants followed the Morgan example, kept their money to and for themselves, not offering help when others were in need but looking to the Morgans for a loan or credit.



The varied role of the Oven in both Ruby and Haven clarifies the distinction. The Oven was initially built, in Haven, in order to bring coherence to the community. Reducing the necessity of individual stoves, the Oven was built in the center of Haven. As a place to gather and share problems, stories, and fellowship while meat slow roasted, the Oven was accessible to and utilized by all of the community members. Providing an avenue for the sharing of food resources and of communal interaction, the Oven continued to operate even when the town was clearly failing. It was used in Haven as the place to go after baptism, “the blessed and saved waded to the banks and made their way to the Oven” (*Paradise* 103); as a schoolroom, “children and adults [...] learning to read from those who could” (*Paradise* 111); as a community meeting place, “Haven people gathered for talk, for society and for the comfort of hot game” (*Paradise* 15); for discussion about current problems, or events or celebrations the community gathered at the Oven. The transmission of their oral history also took place at the Oven; the passing down of the historical stories that remained locked inside the heads of the children and their parents. “Time after time they heard stories of the blue dresses and bonnets the men bought for the women with cash from the first harvest or the first cuts from the herd” (*Paradise* 15). The Oven then, was the Clearing space of Haven. Speaking of experiences and hurts, shouting through laughter, song and tears, and sharing resources both material and spiritual, all took place at the Oven in *Haven*.

When Haven failed and it was decided that the New Fathers would move further into Oklahoma to begin anew, the first thing the brothers broke apart carefully, brick by brick, was the Oven. Yet, the focused attention given to the disassembling and reassembling of the Oven immediately upon arrival in the new town site was not driven

by spiritual or other necessity but by ritual. Since all of Ruby's inhabitants owned ovens, the Oven served no utilitarian purpose. The baptisms, story times, celebrations all took place in different locations. Other than its use as the public gathering place for "the lazy young," it served little useful purpose in Ruby (*Paradise* 111). The absence of the communal sharing evoked by the cooking of food left a void in place of fellowship.

With three churches in Ruby, rather than the one and then two in Haven, there was no place or space in Ruby for community fellowship. The safety and security once felt by the inhabitants, in sharing personal stories and information as they sat savoring the infusions of roasting game in the air, was not replicated in Ruby. Outside of the friendly bantering which occurred among a few in Menus' barber shop, Rubyites kept more to themselves and their own families than they had in Haven and began to resent any perceived intrusions by their neighbors.

The urgency and import given to the transportation and reestablishment of the Oven were, therefore, more for the purposes of the reinforcement of a "shrine" than for utility (*Paradise* 103). To the Morgans, the Oven represented the assurance of the continuance of their paradise in the new location. Although it no longer fulfilled its intended usage, the Morgan's seemed to believe that it symbolized their unity of purpose and action: "stay[ing] together, work[ing], pray[ing] and defend[ing] together" (*Paradise* 112). Deek, as he contemplated the Oven and reflected on the status of Ruby in general concluded that "except for a crack here, a chink there everything in Ruby was intact. There was no need to wonder if moving the Oven had been a mistake; whether it needed its original foundation for the respect and wholesome utility that was its due. No. No, Big papa. No, Big Daddy. We did right" (*Paradise* 112).

Without a communal Clearing space, the interpretation of the “one another” of the command narrowed even further, limited to only those within one’s own family or even just to oneself, rather than the community at large (Zech. 7:9). The absence of mercy and compassion towards other members of the community began to seep into their interactions among each other. Unaired angers, conflicts and frustrations felt and held in the hearts of the inhabitants one against the other led to public conflicts, “Steward Morgan and Arnold Fleetwood had shouted at each other in the street” (*Paradise* 150); and family feuds, “something’s tearing that family apart” (*Paradise* 207). On one level then, the renaming of the town was appropriate. It was like a ruby; a beautiful jewel hard to the core. Ruby was not an emotional haven for its residents.

Patricia Cato, in her work on the history of Haven, believed that Zechariah Morgan had made a deal with God. In exchange for immortality, Havenites would be “the pure and holy[...]not only racially untampered with but free of adultery too” (*Paradise* 217). The holiness of the founding families then was also based on the rule of remaining “unadulteried” (*Paradise* 217). However, since Patricia bases her information and conclusions on what information she is told or able to discern, she may have been mistaken in the assumption that the deal for immortality stemmed from Zechariah.

Having been rejected repeatedly, a rejection distilled in the “Disallowing,” Zechariah Morgan may have been more concerned about establishing, building and running a town, without outside aid, than about immortality (*Paradise* 195). He had said that “if they stayed together, worked, prayed and defended together” they would not fail in their efforts to establish an independent town (*Paradise* 112). Additionally, as Patricia herself indicates, the part of the promised judgment for unkindness and cold-heartedness

that would most have concerned Zechariah would have been “the scattering. The scattering would have frightened him [...] not knowing a jawline that signified one family a cast of eye or a walk that identified another” (*Paradise* 192).

It seems instead that the “deal for immortality” was initiated by the Morgan twins after the death of their sister, Ruby (*Paradise* 217). The decision to change the name of the town from Haven to Ruby, after their relocation, was determined, in part, by the women of the town. Ruby, Steward and Deacon’s sister, died shortly after their arrival in the new location due to the refusal by the nearest hospitals to care for an African-American woman. Distraught in their grief over their sister and the refusal of the available doctors to care for her appropriately, one nurse had been trying to “reach a veterinarian” to tend to her, “it was then that the bargain was struck. A prayer in the form of a deal, no less, with God, no less which He seemed to honor until 1969, when Easter and Scout were shipped home” (*Paradise* 113). If they remained racially untampered, pure, and free from adultery, holy, then God would grant them immortality, but only for “as long as [they] resided in Ruby” (*Paradise* 217). Easter and Scout, Deek’s sons, were both killed in combat, *after* he had an affair with Consolata, one of the women from the Convent. Thus, Deek indicates, “after that they understood the terms and conditions of the deal much better” (*Paradise* 113).

Although “unadulterated and unadulteried 8-rock blood” was the deal they made with God, that was not the entirety of the deal that He made with them (*Paradise* 217). While the twins focus was on the sins of the body, the verses in Zechariah indicate that God’s focus was on the heart, whether or not they demonstrated love towards each other. Demonstrating “mercy,” “compassion,” and choosing not to have “evil” thoughts about

others bespeak a loving heart (Zech. 7: 9& 10). Since God will stand by His Word and is not governed by the desires of men, it was the commands laid out by God that if unheeded, would bring judgment.

Thus, while Ruby prospered monetarily and increased in numbers, the spiritual environment of Ruby was unhealthy. Based upon a narrative built on hatred, pride, anger, and materialism, the purity and holiness of the inhabitants was only external. Deek Morgan, a leader in Ruby, perceived these baseline principles as good; thus, when they arrived in Ruby he was not yet on a journey to wholeness. Smug, righteous in his belief that he was doing what he ought, helping to build a town, in the manner that he ought to do it, following in the steps of his forefathers, he believed that his life was just as it should be. Then in 1954, he saw Consolata Sosa and his journey began.

Thus, Morrison in the process of “assessing the role of narrative in the community as a whole” simultaneously enmeshes the reader in the “individual process of reconstitution” (Davidson 1). *Paradise* continues the pattern, established in Morrison’s earlier novels, of the individual journey to freedom within the context of community.

### ***The Convent***

In contrast with the invention of the narrative of the neighboring town of Ruby, the underlying narrative of the Convent is governed by the preexistent doctrines and statues of Catholicism. The benefactress who purchased the property sought to bring “God and language to natives who were assumed to have neither,” Native American girls (*Paradise* 227). On the basis of the continued goal of the “redemption” of these lost girls, the school “solicit[ed] wards of the state” to train, educate and release to live a “pious life” (*Paradise* 227). The goal of the Convent, when it functioned as a school,

was to transform wayward Native American girls into the “pure and holy” citizens of America, who, unlike their peers, could be models of decency (*Paradise* 217). They sought to achieve this end by “alter[ing] their diets, their clothes” and “their minds;” by training them to “despise” their cultural narratives and adopt the one offered by the school, the National Narrative with a Catholic emphasis (*Paradise* 227). Krumholz posits that “the Convent[...] exhibits the imprint of the “master’s voice” and the racist and violent history of the United States. An embezzler’s house shaped like a bullet, the Convent’s first incarnation represents the brutality and paranoia as well as the economic and sexual domination that characterized the European conquest of the Americas” (Krumholz 4). Thus, both the external appearance of the building and the internal teaching of the nuns embody the Narrative.

The purity and holiness that the nuns sought to achieve in the girls was in order to keep them away from “the three *d*’s that paved the road to perdition [...] disorder, deception, and [...] drift [...] and the greatest of these was drift” (*Paradise* 221-2). The Narrative assumption that these “three d’s” would be present in their lives without the intervention they were providing, necessitated the process of reform that the nuns hoped to achieve (*Paradise* 222).

Well-intentioned, loving, caring and devoted, the nuns choose to share with the girls what they believed would help them to have a meaningful life. Unlike Ruby whose narrative sought to bar outsiders, the mission of the Convent was to invite those Native American girls who remained outside of the Narrative veil. Yet, what the girls were actually encouraged to participate in was spiritual death. Although the nuns believed in the rightness of their quest, the girls were expected to die to their culture and to the life

that they once knew; to enter and accept the view of their people as inferior and American culture and ways as supreme; they were told to come prepared to live our way and learn about our God. Thus, their mission was to both invite and to reject the girls who entered.

Mary Magna, while in Portugal, rescued Consolata Sosa from the mire of the streets. Instead of placing Consolata in a local orphanage as she did with the other two children she salvaged from the streets, Consolata accompanied Mary Magna on her journey back to the United States. Amazed at the caring and concern of this adult for her, Consolata fell in love. She “worshipped” Mary Magna (*Paradise* 224). Even though she sat in the re-education classes with the Native American girls, she did not befriend them or interact with them as peers. A devoted follower, she fully absorbed Mary Magna’s philosophies and perspectives. She therefore perceived the other girls from a viewpoint similar to that of the nuns.

In her veneration for Mary Magna, Consolata chose to embrace all that Mary Magna embraced with the same devotion and the same furor. Hence, she too “offered her body and soul to God’s Son and His Mother as completely as if she had taken the veil herself” (*Paradise* 225). Yet, the apparent devotion she manifested for Christ and the Virgin Mary may have been a consequence of the reverence she felt for Mary Magna, not a derivative of her awe of God.

As a worshipper of Mary Magna, Consolata adopted Mary Magna’s attitude towards her native culture and way of life. Although loving and genuinely concerned for Consolata and the other girls, Mary Magna participated in training them to reject their inherent culture and accept a Narrative driven American Catholicism, as preferable.

Viewed through the lens of the National Narrative all cultures other than America's own was inferior and every citizen should seek to conform herself to what was better, Americanism. The filtration of the Americanism of the Convent through the suspension of Catholicism was to produce young ladies transformed by mental and spiritual recrudescence. Consolata thus became Connie, laying aside her native culture and her homeland.

### ***Phase I- Revival***

Connie had chosen to reject her former life and become a disciple of Mary Magna's yet she had not forgotten her culture. In the summer of 1954 when she and Mary Magna were out for a routine stop at the pharmacy in the neighboring town of Ruby, she saw "the living man...Sha sha sha" (*Paradise* 227). Immediately preceding Connie's sighting of Deek, however, Consolata was drawn to the music, laughter, and festivities of the people, as they evoked her memories of the music and dancing of her own people and that brought the "Sha sha sha" to the forefront of her mind for the first time in years (*Paradise* 227). Deek and Consolata's ensuing affair serves as a, temporary, but significant, turning point in both of their lives.

Connie's close identification with and veneration of Mary Magna parallels Deek's connection with his brother Steward. In constant communication with each other telepathically, "each knew the other's thoughts as well as he knew his face [...] the brothers [...] agreed on almost everything" (*Paradise* 155). Deek and Steward had always been in harmony. However, Steward's eventual murder of Consolata reveals his tacit dominance over Deek. While Deek and Steward shared the same passion for the



cultural narrative of Ruby, and the importance of the establishment of it, Deek may not have fully agreed with the view of impure women that the narrative embraced.

Steward would never have had an affair with Consolata. Despite his apparently lustful feelings towards her, evidenced by his brushing of her breasts with his arm during their one encounter, he was fully invested in the belief of her status as “dung” (Paradise, 201). Deek’s affair with Consolata then may indicate that he had suppressed his own attraction to women like Consolata, unwittingly submitting to Steward’s view and accepting it as his own. Even though both he and Steward, while on a tour of other blacks with father, had misbehaved to garner the attention of nineteen women “with creamy, sunlit skin,” Deek’s emotional response to them, their “skin [...] took his breath away” and “excited him,” may not have been shared by Steward (*Paradise* 107-8).

Deek’s affair with Consolata is the first instance in which he makes an effort to deliberately shut his brother out. In order to maintain the secrecy of the affair, Deek had to have sought to bar Steward from his thoughts about Consolata; but still Steward knew. The day following Deek’s first missed meeting with Consolata, she begins the seventeen mile walk towards Ruby assuming the occurrence of a grave situation. Despite Deek’s efforts to avoid his brother’s mental probing, Steward, evidently saw Consolata in Deek’s minds’ eye and sensed that she may have been desperate to see him. For, although he had never previously visited the Convent or wished to, and had never physically seen Consolata before, Steward departs from Ruby heading towards the Convent, and both recognizes and stops for Consolata. Consolata’s detection of the poisoned silence, “a muteness lined with acid,” and the hostile eyes, “chaste and wide with hatred,” of this

man “inhabiting the body of him but not him,” emphasizes the significant divergence of the twins on the issue of “impure women” (*Paradise* 235).

Deek and Consolata’s affair serves to highlight the area of their identities that they had both chosen to suppress in order to conform to the boundaries imposed by their respective narratives. Deek had suppressed any attraction he had felt to “impure” women in order to obey the “unadulterated” command of the narrative of the father (*Paradise*, 217); and Consolata had suppressed her love for her country and her people, choosing instead, to willingly adopt Mary Magna’s view on her homeland; she too laid aside a part of her identity. Unfortunately, their mutual willingness to step outside of the limits of their respective narratives and enter the door of the world outside of either narrative, ceases abruptly when Deek withdraws from the relationship.

Consolata realizes that “she had lost him completely” when she remembers that in her hunger for Deek, she bit his lip, drew blood and then hummed “over the blood she licked from it” (*Paradise* 239). Although the bite did not alarm Deek the humming did. “His eyes, first startled, then revolted” conveyed to Consolata all that she needed to know (*Paradise* 239). This action on her part seemed to verify for Deek all of the narrative lies about “impure” women and their evil ways. He never again returns to the affair. Yet, Consolata and Deek awaken something in each other that neither brief confessional, in the arms of Mary Magna; nor distance, Consolata never returns to the town; nor hard work, Deek throws himself fully into the Ruby effort; nor grief, both of Deek’s sons die; nor time, they do not see each other again for over twenty years, causes to fail, die or effectively hush.

### *Phase II- Repression*

The mutuality of their individual personal miseries concurrently usher both Consolata and Deek into phase two of their respective journeys. Neither Connie nor Deek ever fully share with any other person the depth of the misery that the conclusion of their affair causes. Connie does begin to tell Mary Magna of the affair but she only manages to say a few words before Mary hushes her confession. “But he, but he.” Sha sha sha. Sha sha sha, she wanted to say, meaning, he and I are the same. “Sh sh sh. Sh sh sh,” said Mary Magna. “Never speak of him again” (*Paradise* 241).

Deek also never speaks of the affair. Though his wife, Soane, knew of its occurrence, he fails to confess, apologize or explain his motives for it. Instead, he represses his misery over its occurrence and conclusion, even from himself, through his renewed fervor in the narrative of Ruby. Yet, Connie and Deek’s mutual repression of both the affair and of their response to its end seems to lead to the beginning of their shared hypersensitivity to the type of light from which neither can hide. Connie becomes intolerant of physical light and Deek of spiritual light.

Immediately after Connie’s partial confession to Mary Magna she begins to develop a physical intolerance to light which eventually drains all of the color from her irises, making her appear to be blind. The “sunshot” which “seared her right eye announcing the beginning of her bat vision” is what caused her to quickly agree “never” to “speak of [Deek] again” (*Paradise* 241). Apparently at just that moment her irises ceased their proper functioning and the pupil, instead of being expanded or contracted by the iris, remained wide open thereby allowing her to “see best in the dark” (*Paradise*, 241).<sup>7</sup>

Although Connie initially interprets the “searing” light as God’s judgment, “she had been spoken to,” the message she was to receive through the malfunctioning of her eye was beneficial rather than punitive. It signals the induction of her deeper vision; the ability to see and manipulate the spiritual life force of others. “Inside the boy she saw a pinpoint of light receding. Pulling up energy that felt like fear, she stared at it until it widened. Then more, more, so air could come seeping, at first, then rushing, rushing in” (*Paradise* 245).

The “boy” whose “energy” she manipulated in order to restore his life, is Deek’s son, Scout (*Paradise* 245). Informed by Lone DuPres of Connie’s intervention in the deliverance of her son, Soane, Deek’s wife, visits the Convent, overwhelmed with gratitude. However, this was the second trip that Soane had made to the Convent, for Soane had been aware of Connie’s affair with Deek. At the conclusion of the affair she came to request that Connie help her to abort her unborn child. Connie had refused to assist her with the abortion and she repudiates the notion of concluding the affair with Deek, yet Connie knew at that point that the affair with Deek was over.

I’ve had two children in two years. If I have another...  
 Why come to me? Why you asking me?  
 Who else?...  
 The poison spread. Consolata had lost him. Completely. Forever. His wife  
 might not know it, but Consolata remembered his face. (239)

Scout’s resurrection marks the beginning of Connie and Soane’s friendship and the initiation of Connie’s journey towards spiritual freedom. Connie learns to eventually love Soane and Soane, more remarkably, learns to love Connie. Connie becomes her confidant, yet within the confines of the leaded lid of Ruby’s narrative, suppressed by the expectations of her spouse, Deek, Soane is unable to delve into her own feelings and

ideas about the issues which surround Ruby and are integral to her life. Soane's spiritual growth does begin through her brief interactions with Connie, but she remains at a level of infancy.

On the other hand, Connie's humble acceptance of her part in the affair, her distance from the narrative of Ruby, and her willingness to confess to Mary Magna allow her to be open to moving forward in her journey towards spiritual freedom. The three losses she experiences during this phase: "the rudiments of her first language," "embarrassment" and "the ability to bear light," are balanced by what she gains through both Mary Magna and Lone DuPres' guidance: patience, self-confidence, knowledge of various remedies, and the ability to "step in" to others, what Connie calls "insight" (*Paradise* 247). Thus, two of her losses prove to be beneficial, as they are eventually transformed into the strengths which serve as the foundation for the healing counter-narrative she develops fully in the final phase of her journey.

Connie is privileged to have two teachers. One, Mary Magna, directs her character, teaching Connie patience and a lack of embarrassment but it is the second teacher, Lone Dupres, Ruby's midwife, who teaches and instructs Connie in what Connie perceives as witchcraft. Although Connie is initially reluctant, it is through Lone that she learns of her giftedness and is guided in its usage.

It is significant that Lone, an inhabitant of Ruby, trains Connie in "practicing" (*Paradise* 245). One of the charges leveled against the women of the Convent by the nine men who descend upon them intent on slaughter, is that they are witches. "Bitches. More like witches" (*Paradise* 276). Yet, it is Lone, a Rubyite, who makes Connie aware of her gift, trains her in its practice, and, ironically, encourages Connie to be more open

minded. To Connie's repeated protestations at the "devilment" in which she was involved, Lone replies; "Don't be a fool. God don't make mistakes. Despising His gift, now, that is a mistake" (*Paradise* 246). The interaction between Lone and Connie indicates the distinctive narrative by which Lone lives.

Although Lone shouts her surety of God's judgment on those depicted as the Disallowers in the Christmas play, "Finer than flour he'll grind you[...]Strike you in the moment of His choosing!," she does not limit God's power to operation within only the denominations represented in Ruby and she does not abide by the definition of holiness offered by the narrative, "unadulterated and unadulteried" (*Paradise*, 211). The embodiment of a breach of both of Ruby's standards of purity and holiness, Lone is unmarried and unrelated to any of the inhabitants. She is therefore, both adulterated and a temptation for adultery. An orphan picked up by the holy families while they were enroute to Haven, both she and Connie were taken in by women, Fairy DuPres and Mary Magna, respectively, who countered their own controlling narratives by the adoption of their charges. Lone thus teaches Connie not only the skills of "practic[ing]" but also her own religious, healing counter-narrative (*Paradise* 247).

### ***Deek***

During Rev. Misner's silent sermon at K.D. and Arnette's wedding, Deek's sensitivity to spiritual light is evidenced. Rev. Misner, pastor of the Baptist church in Ruby, where the wedding is held, is one of the town's nonconformists. Involved in following the civil rights movement and teaching the teens about African history, he encourages the young people's free expression of their individuality and is resented for it. "Letting children talk as if they had something important to say that the world had not

heard and dealt with already” (*Paradise* 143). When Rev. Pulliam, a pastor well acquainted with and freely accepting of the Ruby narrative, is asked to make a few comments before the homily, he chooses to level his incendiary remarks about love at Misner. “Love is not a gift. It is a diploma [...] how do you know you have graduated? You don’t” (*Paradise* 141-2). Misner, too angry to verbally reply to Pulliam’s vitriol, carefully unhooks the cross from the wall of the church and silently upholds it. That “Misner’s silent presentation of the Cross is an urgent plea for a sort of spiritual or ‘second sight’ on the part of the congregation” is borne out in the various responses which his action evokes (Bassard 112). Although Misner’s thoughts about what he desires for the congregants to contemplate while looking at the cross, are unknown to the observers, the message of sacrificial love that the cross bears alone, without comment, causes the dross of past relationships and mistakes to be resurrected within the hearts of those watchers who have suppressed secret hurts or sins.

K.D. thinks angrily of Gigi whom “he had loved for years” and hopes that his marriage to Arnette would “flush that Gigi bitch out of his life completely” (*Paradise*, 147); Arnette mistakenly believing that the women of the Convent had managed to salvage the life of her child born four months early and weakened by the ruthless assaults of its mother, finally wanted to claim the child. “The hole in her heart” temporarily sealed by K.D.’s proposal developed a “tiny rent[...] in exactly the place where her heart’s hole had been” (*Paradise* 149). And Deek is disturbed enough by the simple silent sermon to be driven to his feet to put a stop to it; Misner lowers the cross just before Deek rises.

The confirmation of Deek's discomfort can be seen in Steward's response to the sermon. Secure in his memories of the story his father told about a town of debauchery which had a cross at one end, reflecting on the places where and the people on whom he has seen the cross, the Biblical message of the Christ's sacrificial love shown through the cross holds no significance for Steward. He, secure in his narrative view that replaces Christ with the holy families, looks at the cross without disturbance, concluding that "a cross was no better than the bearer" (*Paradise* 154).

Deek, unlike Steward is obviously disquieted by his own thoughts. It is possible then, in light of the responses of the other observers, that the silent sermon brought memories of Consolata to Deek's mind. Perhaps the hole he thought had been mended by his extensive efforts in town building, money making and trying to forget, was, like Arnette's, "rent" by Misner's sermon (*Paradise* 149). His adherence to the narrative was not enough to blot out all memory of Consolata. The spiritual light of sacrificial love represented by the cross of Christ may have pierced through the protective shell he had deliberately built around his heart and "cracked [it] like a pullet's egg" (*Paradise* 225). Unfortunately, his response to the possible fissure in his heart during this phase is perhaps anger, as heard through "his heavy breathing," and his rejection of any notion of continuing care and love for Consolata, evident through his ensuing decision to storm the Convent.

Deek also experiences gains and losses, in this second phase, which serve to bring to a climax the destructiveness of the narrative to which he adheres. Having met Consolata only five years after Ruby was founded, Deek returns, after the affair concludes, giving his full commitment and attention to the joint effort of making Ruby



succeed. He is quickly re-enveloped in the narrative of the town. Driven by the false belief that the success of the venture lies primarily with he and his brother, Steward, as two of the moneyed new fathers of Ruby, Deek learns more fully from Steward, how to be a disallower.

Unconsciously following the steps of those who Disallowed their forefathers, Deek and Steward seek to shut-out any and everything that they perceive may hinder Ruby's internal progress. In their efforts to fulfill the law of the Fathers, "unadulteried and unadulterated," they seek to specifically emulate the actions of the forefathers and adopt the attitudes and perspectives conveyed through the oral record (*Paradise* 217). Through their incredible memories, the twins can recall each detail of the histories imparted and seek to conform themselves to it. "The twins have powerful memories. Between them they remember the details of everything that ever happened- things they witnessed and things they have not" (*Paradise* 13). They thus, re-create the narrative of Ruby reshaping it into a worship of the Fathers and the memory of them; it becomes the narrative of the Fathers, driven by worship of the Old Fathers and adhered to by the New Fathers. Anything that hinders the full acceptance of the Fathers' beliefs and stories they therefore see as a hindrance to Ruby's progress.

Therefore, when Haven failed and the idea for Ruby was born they, in seeking to emulate the fathers every action, moved the Oven with them. While the Oven once served as the Clearing space for Haven it became a monument to the Old Fathers in Ruby and is therefore seen by the Morgans, as the visible assurance of the continuance of the town. The command that Zechariah inscribed on the plaque attached to it "Beware the

Furrow of His Brow,” though seemingly addressed to the Disallowers, was enigmatic (Paradise 93).

Yet the narrative of the Fathers that Steward, and consequently Deek, encourage causes them both to lead the opposition against the young people in even the possibility of alteration, when the first word of the plaque is somehow absented. Steward ends the meeting by saying, “if you, any one of you, ignore, change, take away, or add to the words of that Oven, I will blow your head off just like you was a hood-eye snake” (Paradise 87). The similarity of Steward’s threat to the caution regarding any alteration of the Biblical text, found in Revelation, indicates the reverent weight with which he and Deek regard the words of the Fathers and the godlike position in which he places himself as one of the adherents of the narrative.

*If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.*

Revelation 22:18b- 19 (emphasis added)

Deek also learns to disallow love and its companions, mercy and compassion. Repressing the love he feels for Consolata through strict adherence to the Father’s narrative, Deek also ceases to express the kind of caring and concern for his family and neighbors that he bore witness to in Haven. Thus, when Deek learns of K.D.’s involvement with Gigi, one of the women of the Convent, he, and Steward, explain to him “the law and its consequences” (Paradise 143). “The Law” that they explain to K.D. is the law of the Fathers regarding the impact on the community of the fraternization with the impure (Paradise 143). Although it is not clear whether or not Gigi is or seems to be racially mixed, the provocative nature of her attire, from the perspective of Ruby’s

narrative, would place her in the category of an unholy, loose woman, the personification of sin. “There she was- across the street from them in pants so tight, heels so high, earrings so large, they forgot to laugh at her hair” (*Paradise* 53). The fact that K.D. loves Gigi and wanted to hold onto her, regardless of her eventual refusals, is not apparently discussed. Love is repressed and ignored if not within the scope of what the Fathers’ law permitted, 8-rock marital unions.

Deek attributes both of his losses, the death of his sons, Easter and Scout, killed in the Vietnam War, and the loss of his wife’s passion indirectly and directly to Consolata. Abiding by and fully invested in the narrative of the Fathers, he sees his sons’ death as a consequence of his breach of the law, in committing adultery, and the waning of Soane’s passions as a result of Consolata’s “pl[ying] her with evil potions to make her less loving than she used to be and it was not the eternal grief for their sons that froze her but the mess she was swallowing still” (*Paradise* 280).

### ***Consolata’s Phase III: Resurrection***

Connie moves into the third and final phase of her journey after the occurrence of the main Misery of the small Convent community, the death of Mary Magna in 1969. Some time after the last two “wayward Indian girls” departed only three women remained in the Convent, Mary Magna, Sister Roberta and Connie (*Paradise* 227). When Sister Roberta is moved to a nursing home, only Mary Magna and Connie remain. Although Connie had developed, through both Lone and Mary Magna’s instruction, into a capable and confident woman she continued to worship Mary Magna throughout. “Consolata had nothing on her mind but the care of Mary Magna” (*Paradise* 242). With her eyes fixed on Mary Magna “she hardly noticed losing the rudiments of her language”

(*Paradise* 242). Thus, the death of Mary Magna, despite Connie's frequent in-sight-full "step in[s]," forms the central action of the main Misery for Connie (*Paradise* 245).

Connie is completely derailed by Mary Magna's death and "orphaned in a way she was not as a street baby" because of it (*Paradise* 247). "Her rope to the world had slid from her fingers" (*Paradise* 247). The reason for her life having died, Connie falls into a deep depression and seeks to join Mary Magna through excessive and continual inebriation. Every morning she awoke "to the wrenching disappointment of not having died the night before" (*Paradise* 221). Since Connie had laid aside her longings for her homeland, her language, and her desires for "the living man," Deek, in order to devote herself to the purity and holiness of the worship of Mary Magna, after her death Connie feels as if she becomes nothing (*Paradise* 225). "She felt like a curl of paper- nothing *written* on it- lying in the corner of an empty closet" (*Paradise* 248). Yet, despite her feelings of uselessness and her belief in the pointless nature of her existence, her "insight" and the spiritual light that she radiates, even in a stupor, draws the individual, staggered arrival of the various hurting, lost and abused women who alight at the Convent door.

The basic principle of the narrative of the Convent had been to help those who were in need, "wayward girls," and to refashion them into narrative adherents who learn to despise their culture and embrace the one offered (*Paradise* 227). Connie unintentionally changes the nature of the narrative in the aftermath of the main Misery. Glad for the company, Connie allows into the Convent anyone who has a need, yet without the mandate of cultural change or Catholic strictures. She opens the Convent to the various women who arrive and requires nothing from them in return. She gives to

them of her time, care and the Convent's resources, and they willingly receive it. No formal training occurs initially, and no overt counter-narrative is shared should they chose to return to the outside world. Her sequestering of herself into the small room that she had prepared for she and Deek, allows the women what they need initially, a place to be free from the physical reminders of the National Narrative and a space to feel the lenient, compassionate, insightful love and mercy of a mother figure.

This sweet, unthreatening old lady who seemed to love each one of them best; who never criticized, who shared everything but needed little or no care; required no emotional investment; who listened; who locked no doors and accepted each as she was.

*Paradise 262.*

Mavis, Grace, Seneca and Pallas, the four women who are unwittingly drawn or directed to the Convent, each have had wrenchingly bitter experiences related to their perceived inferiority. Thus, the Convent in its openness to any in need, becomes a haven for the women who arrive and also for those in Ruby who are in trouble. Significantly, the women and the Rubyites who go to the Convent for aid are only drawn to it during Mary Magna's illness or after her death. Connie's increasingly consistent use of her gift of "in sight" on Mary Magna's behalf may have created a spiritual light that drew them (*Paradise 247*).

For those few who utilize it, the Convent becomes the haven that they once had within their own town. Trampled by the Morgan's focus on money and the exacting duplication of the Father's actions, the Rubyites who enter the Convent are unknowingly desperate for mercy and compassion, the two aspects of the law of the Fathers that the Morgans choose to ignore.

Arnette, for example, pregnant with she and K.D.'s child apparently seeks a place of haven to deliver the baby without questions, accusations, or conflicts. While she does seek a refuge, her desire is to viciously attack the child in gestation without questions, accusations or conflicts. She succeeds in causing the child's early arrival, at five months, and leaves before discovering if he would survive; he does not. Menus, having never recovered from the foolishness of succumbing to the pressures of the narrative of Ruby and rejecting his light-complexioned future wife, remains desperately in love with her and dreadfully hopeless without her. Instead of leaving to seek her out, however, he stays in Ruby and becomes an alcoholic. He arrives at the Convent in order to detox. The women "wiped up after him, washed his drawers, removed his vomit, listened to his curses as well as his sobs" (*Paradise* 278). He is accepted by the women, cared for, and returns to the "pure and holy" (*Paradise* 217).

Thus, as the women arrive and are welcomed in by Connie, they in turn become those who welcome any others who arrive. Although still somewhat self-focused, haunted by their pasts and engaging in a variety of secret vices, they are welcoming to any and all other women who enter and to any Rubyite who arrives in need of aid. Their lives, therefore, mirror Connie's life; she is still self-focused and hoping for death, still haunted by her despair over Mary Magna's death, and continues to be saturated by her not so secret vice, perpetual intoxication. Even her sometimes caring, sometimes resentful attitude becomes theirs.

It is their presence in the Convent that eventually brings Connie to sobriety. Frustrated at their "drift" and some days "want[ing] to kill them all," Connie sleeps without the aid of alcohol and awakens sober and finally ready to accept the reality of

God's continuance of her life, despite her fervent desires for its end (*Paradise* 223). She realizes that the rewards Mary Magna promised for adherence to the narrative, "rest of days...happiness...serenity...blessing of good works" she would not have because of the use of her gift of "in sight". "Was what I did for love of you so terrible?" (*Paradise* 251). She chooses then to finally step away from continued mental adherence and longing for the holiness Mary Magna encouraged and knew, she thought, that she would die "alone, ungrieved in unholy ground" (*Paradise* 251). She bids God farewell, "I'll miss You [...] I really will" and chooses an "unholy" path to wholeness and completion (*Paradise* 250).

Possessed by the strength, clarity, confidence and power of the being from the "far country" who comes to "see her," her appearance is transformed, "higher cheekbones, stronger chin [...] Her hair shows no gray [...] Her skin is smooth as a peach," and *her* narrative firmly in place (*Paradise* 252, 262). She realized the errors in her former narrative: Worship of Mary Magna and adherence to her narrative focused solely on the nurturance of the spirit and the laying aside of the body, even of one's culture; "My child body [...] leaps into the arms of a woman who teach me my body is nothing my spirit everything"; and in her dalliance with Deek she focused solely on the body and not on the spirit, "My flesh is so hungry for itself it ate him" (*Paradise* 263). She discovers, through the assistance of the being who strengthens her, that the spirit and the body should never be broken in two. "Hear me, listen. Never break them in two. Never put one over the other" (*Paradise* 263). She realizes that the balanced nurturance of both the soul and body are necessary to completion and wholeness. Her former willingness to ignore one or the other created the turmoil that raged in her mind after Mary Magna's death. She was not only the follower of Mary Magna, but she was also

the Portuguese woman, Consolata Sosa, gifted with “in sight” and the knowledge of various remedies, as well as the patience, caring and discipline she acquired from the nuns (*Paradise* 247).

Each of the women, Mavis, Grace (Gigi), Seneca and Pallas agree to stay with Consolata and learn about “what [they] are hungry for” (*Paradise* 262). Consolata gradually takes them through the healing process of speaking, sharing, and shouting in the Clearing space they all work to create in the basement of the Convent. Using the space adjacent to the room which had been Connie’s place of reclusion, Consolata creates a true haven for their spirits and their bodies. Free from all distractions: the basement is quiet and cleaned; free from physical inhibitions: Consolata instructs them to take off their clothes. Then they lie on the hard, cold stone floor, and are made to remain still in the position of their choice until eventually she guides them in *speaking*. They each review the event that serves as their central trauma, the one hurt deeper and more devastating than all the others they had experienced, and discuss it among themselves. “Are you sure she was your sister? Maybe she was your mother. Why? Because a mother might, but no sister would do such a thing” (*Paradise* 265). They share their insights and caring in that space and in the rooms above it. They learn self-control and discipline; “Do what I say. Eat how I say. Sleep when I say,” and they learn how to focus their minds past the immediacy of their bodies so that they can speak in that space (*Paradise* 262).

When the urgings of their former vices overtakes them, or the pain of a particular memory overwhelms them, they *shout* through chalk and paint, using the templates



drawn of their bodies on the basement floor as their place for the free expression of their hurt, their confusion, and their fears.

Careful etchings of body parts and memorabilia occupied them. Yellow barrettes, red peonies, a green cross on a field of white. A majestic penis pierced with a Cupid's bow. Rose of Sharon petals, Lorna Doones. A bright orange couple making steady love under a childish sun.

*Paradise 265*

They "gradually [...] lost the days" (*Paradise 262*).

### ***Deek's Phase III- Repentance***

Succumbing to the weight of the oppressive hatefulness of the narrative of the Fathers, Steward leads those men he can control and manipulate to destroy the women of the Convent. Placing the blame for all of Ruby's problems and disturbances on the women who served to help those in need, Steward gathers a posse; armed, angry and desirous of killing off the cause of their own shame, the nine men gather to plan their strike.

Creating an argument against the women with the insubstantial evidence of rumors, hearsay, and myth the men readily convince themselves that Ruby was a "peaceable kingdom" before the arrival of those women "drawing folks out there like flies to shit" (*Paradise 276*). Blind to the problems inherent within their narrative, choosing to ignore the difficulties as the consequences of their own actions, they develop a cause for which to attack defenseless women. Emboldened by each other's testimonies and accounts of various outrages reputedly caused by or evoked as a result of interactions with the women in the Convent, they conclude that complete annihilation is the only answer.

Although Deek remains silent during the others' harangues, he has one motive for action against the Convent: the erasure of "his personal shame" and of "the kind of woman he believed was its source" (*Paradise* 279). Fully focused on the narrative of the fathers, Deek believes that his continued consideration of Consolata, twenty-two years after the affair, is attributable solely to his "personal shame" (*Paradise* 279). Yet, the limitation and suppression of his own and others feelings of love outside of the prescribed boundaries of the Ruby population needed to be released in some way. Menus turned to alcohol to numb his pain, Roger Best to a numerous string of business ventures, K.D. sought his release in marriage, but Deek had suppressed, shaped and then slid his release under the door of his narrative. From his perspective on the other side of the narrative door and away from Consolata, his love merely added to the "glacier that was Deacon Morgan's pride" (*Paradise* 279).

Outside of the hypersensitivity to the spiritual light of Misner's silent wedding sermon, he was thus able to consider his love dead. Viewing Consolata through the perspective of the narrative as a "Salome from whom he had escaped just in time" he could remain one who was "pure and holy" (*Paradise* 280). Outside of the narrative filter however, on the other side of the door, he was just a man having fallen in love with a woman who was not his wife.

The main Misery of Ruby moves Deek to the other side of the door. Solidifying their fury into destructive bullets of violence the men converge on the unsuspecting women of the Convent and Steward blasts his weapon into "a door that has never been locked" (*Paradise* 285). "They shoot the white girl first" (*Paradise*, 3). Mavis' fatal wounding energizes the others in their hunt for innocent female victims.<sup>8</sup> Yielding to the

hatred and anger foundational to their narrative, they prowl about the Convent misreading their findings and allowing their conclusions to fuel their continued outrage.

When Consolata disrupts the men's slaughter of Grace, Seneca and Pallas, Deek, at the sight of her, moves to the opposite side of the door of the narrative. His resolve to eliminate the woman who had caused his shame, his "glacier" of pride, and the solidity of his narrative rationales all melt away. But as he "lifts his hand to halt his brother's [...]" [he] discovers who, between them, is the stronger man. The bullet enters her forehead" (*Paradise* 289).

The division between Deacon and Steward that began at start of Deacon's affair with Consolata resumes and gains permanency immediately after the main Misery, the murder of the women. Awakened and informed by Lone of the atrocities occurring at the Convent, the majority of the Rubyites arrive to witness the carnage. When confronted by Pious DuPres about the "evil" they have within them Steward continues to respond in narrative fashion indicating that the "evil" is not in him but "in this house" (*Paradise* 291). Deacon from the opposite side of the door of the narrative, no longer willing to shut out or misread the truth refutes and opposes Steward. "My brother is lying. This is our doing. Ours alone. And we bear the responsibility" (*Paradise* 291).

Although all five of the women were killed, none of their bodies can be found after the outraged townspeople leave the grounds of the Convent. The women are resurrected, perhaps, by the instructive spirit being whom Consolata seems to see just before she is killed. The intrusion of "white law" that the townspeople feared would have to be notified becomes unnecessary without any proof of wrongdoing and Ruby seems to continue on unabated, and unchanged with the exception of Deacon Morgan (*Paradise*

290). However, the first death in Ruby, that of Save-Marie indicates that things in Ruby have indeed changed significantly. The assumed protection from mortality was apparently lifted in the aftermath of the slaughter of the Convent women.

Deacon remains on the opposite side of the narrative door and views his neighbors and even his wife from the perspective of an outsider. Affecting even his hearing, all of his interactions in Ruby become distorted by the barrier of the closed door, firmly fixed in his mind. “Since July, other people seemed to him to be speaking whispers, or shouting from long distances” (*Paradise* 301). He, therefore, reaches out to form a friendship and share confidences with the only other recognized outsider in the town, Rev. Misner. The hope for Ruby’s eventual awakening to the injustices and hypocrisies inherent within their narrative lies in the union of those members of Ruby who live on the other side of the door.

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<sup>1</sup> Each of the twelve gates of the heavenly city are “of one pearl” (Rev. 21:21, NKJV). Earlier in the chapter the angel with John the apostle, who is given this vision of heaven, “measures its wall: one hundred and forty-four cubits” (Rev. 21:17, NJKV). According to the annotations in *The Study Edition of the The New Open Bible*, this cubit measure is equivalent to 216 ft. Assuming that the height of the gates and the walls are equivalent, the gates would also be 216 ft.

<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, the vision presented of America through the Dream was false, especially during the Industrial Age. Termed “The Gilded Age” by Mark Twain, “the exterior glistened brightly golden but if one scratched through the paint, it was only a cheap pot metal” underneath (Miller 189). While the immigrants were encouraged to come to these shores, they were sought in mass numbers to provide the cheap labor necessary to fund large industrialist ventures and pockets. Whereas the immigrant lived in squalor, rarely earning more than a small percentage of the profit he produced, the industrial leaders lived in mansions. Thus, part of the motivation for the propagation of the Dream, was its fulfillment for those behind the incentive advertisements (Miller 189-193).

<sup>3</sup> The mission schools for Native Americans were specifically designed to “suppress the [native] culture and encourage youths to adopt European-centered culture,” based upon the assumption that assimilation would ensure success (“America” 1).

<sup>4</sup> “Between 1865 and 1915, approximately 50 years after the Civil War, there were at least 60 Black Towns settled in the Nation. With more than 20, Oklahoma led all other states. With help from the Five Civilized tribes, Freedmen from the South settles the all Black Towns of Oklahoma.

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Most of these towns were established by African-Americans for African-Americans on land that was formerly held by one of the Five Civilized Tribes" (Littlejohn 1).

<sup>5</sup> We learn the story of the fracture in the brother's relationship during the aftermath of the main Misery of the novel, when Deek and Steward have also become estranged. "Walking near a saloon, some whitemen, amused by the double faces, encouraged the brothers to dance. Since the encouragement took the form of a pistol, Tea, quite reasonably, accommodated the whites...Coffee took a bullet in his foot instead" (*Paradise* 302).

<sup>6</sup> In the Biblical account, Bethlehem was overcrowded because of the large number of families who had returned to the city "to be registered" for the census (Luke 2:3, NKJV). If Mary had not been "with child" and on the verge or in the process of early labor, she and Joseph could have conceivably settled down to rest on a housetop or other outdoor location (Luke 2:5, NJKV).

<sup>7</sup> "The iris controls light levels inside the eye similar to the aperture on a camera. The round opening in the center of the iris is called the pupil. The iris is embedded with tiny muscles that dilate (widen) and constrict (narrow) the pupil size" ("Eye Anatomy" 1).

<sup>8</sup> There are, I believe, at least two subtle indications of Mavis' racial identity: 1. The reaction of the neighbors to her husband Frank's car- they laugh at him but do not directly confront him, through signifying or the dozens, about his foolish use of money; and 2. The reaction of the hitchhikers to Mavis- the white girls are friendly and the black girls "are slow to melt" (*Paradise* 33). If Mavis were a black woman, the reverse would have been true.

## Conclusion

Through the process of reading and re-reading Morrison's works of fiction in conjunction with her works of non-fiction, I have come to see the ways in which Morrison's works are gifts for the reader. In the dense, culturally rich communities she depicts she offers us the opportunity to become part of Ruby (*Paradise*), Southside (*Song of Solomon*), of the community of Bluestone Road (*Beloved*) and of Harlem (*Jazz*). I have lived with the characters of each of the novels discussed in this project. I have interacted with them and within the quiet privacy of my own space, I have come to a clearer sense of myself. I can now say, with Morrison, that I am not just "somebody's this [and] somebody's that" I am, me (Naylor interview 198). The dawning awareness of my own process of discovery, the finding of my own voice, was enabled, in part, by my reading of the characters' journeys. The phases that I posit the characters undergo are similar to ones that I have seen in my own life and that of some others. While a *main Misery* is not clearly demarcated in my life or the life of most readers, the *central trauma* is something which I, and others, have experienced some aspect of to a greater or lesser degree.

Morrison's initial writing stemmed in large part from her own crisis. Lonely, without family, spouse or friends, the passion, care, vivification and closeness one can hear and sense in *The Bluest Eye* is derived from the place the novel had in her life during the time of her writing. It took the place of a community; it enabled her to reclaim herself; and it fueled her to write more for others. The care, intimacy and passion she expressed in and through the writing of *The Bluest Eye* continued and increased as she

came to accept herself as a writer, and is evident in all of her texts, calling us into intimate connection with the characters and with the text as a whole.

However, the one text that engaged me most saliently was *Paradise*. Struck by the violence with which the novel begins, “they shoot the white girl first,” empathetic to Mavis’ plight in the second section of the text, I became more intimately entangled in the textual conversation of *Paradise* than any of Morrison’s other novels (*Paradise* 3). It was from *Paradise* that the idea of a common narrative sprung. Seeing the ways in which a narrative could eventually develop into the icy religious hypocrisy of Haven and Ruby, and wound those adjacent to them, the Convent, caused me to reread the other texts with a narrative framework in mind. I then saw foundational stories/narratives in each: Materialistic pursuits in *Song of Solomon*; City Life in *Jazz*; and slavery in *Beloved*.

The common narrative of slavery was immense and seemed to have resonances far larger than the others. As I researched the impact of slavery and considered the ongoing consequences, I was struck most especially by Eric Williams’ argument in *Capitalism and Slavery*. While the construction of race was something that I had contemplated in light of academic theses on the topic, his contention that the slaves’ “subhuman characteristics so widely pleaded, were only the *later* rationalizations to justify...the colonies need [for]labor... [that]was cheapest and best,” was intriguing (Williams 120, emphasis added). What elemental premise lay beneath these constructs? A narrative, the story of cultural dominance. Continued within European ethnocentric narratives, the cohesion of various European cultures while on these shores in conjunction with the presence of the Native American, the seemingly untamable

wilderness and the African slave all aided in directing the shaping of a National Narrative of white autonomous authority and non-white suppression.

Morrison includes in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, an example of the transformation of an educated elite European, William Dunbar, to a Mississippi planter. She uses him as an illustration of the ways in which the black population was available to white men for the shaping of their own identities.

4,000 miles from the sources of culture, alone on the far periphery of British civilization where physical survival was a daily struggle[...]and where disorder, violence, and human degradation were common place, he triumphed by successful adaptation. Endlessly enterprising and resourceful[...]and feeling within himself a sense of *authority* and *autonomy* he had not known before, a force that flowed from his *absolute control over the lives of others*, he emerged a distinctive new man[...]a man of property in a raw, half-savage world.

*Playing in the Dark* 42, emphasis added

Despite privileged learning and home environments Dunbar is unable to feel “authority and autonomy” to a full extent until he becomes a Mississippi planter and has ascendancy over the lives of others, his slaves (*Playing in the Dark* 42). “The site of his transformation is within rawness: he is backgrounded by savagery” (44). “It was this Africanism, deployed as rawness and savagery, that provided the staging ground and arena for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity” (44).

The National Narrative simply presents the concept that there are two main narratives at play in America, the story of white dominance and the story of black subjugation. Both stories are reiterated through the spectacle. Begun in slavery, backed by savagery and wilderness, the white man in this new American frontier had opportunities to feel “autonomy and authority” unlike that experienced in Europe (*Playing in the Dark* 42). The American-Africanism Morrison sees in American Literature stems from this National Narrative. She posits that white dominance,



specifically in terms of identity, can be seen as being rooted in the presentation of the African-American as base.

How does the National Narrative differ from racism? Using Beverly Daniel Tatum's employment of the definition of racism as "a system of advantage based on race" I assert that the "system of advantage" is based on the assumptive dominance of whites and the presumed suppression of blacks (*Why are all of the Black Kids* 35). Based on this ratiocination, I read the National Narrative in the various texts discussed as the backdrop for the internal narratives of the characters and of the texts as a whole.

Rooted in slavery and the various policies and practices which stemmed from it, the National Narrative has historical foundations. I therefore sought, in this dissertation, to focus on the four texts which most clearly demonstrate Morrison's historical themes and focus, the three which comprise her historical trilogy, *Beloved*, *Jazz* and *Paradise*, as well as one other, *Song of Solomon*. Although written ten years before *Beloved* (1987), the first text in Morrison's trilogy, *Song of Solomon* (1977) is one of the few books outside of the trilogy which bases its present time action upon the understanding and interpretation of a significant historic element in the text, the musical song of Solomon. Similar to the function the photo of the murdered young lover from *The Harlem Book of the Dead* (Van Der Zee) and Margaret Garner's story serve in *Jazz* and *Beloved* respectively, elements and fragments of the historical song from Solomon's descendants surface throughout *Song of Solomon*, at critical junctures. Just as Morrison utilizes both the story of Garner's infanticide and the fragments of information concerning the murder of the young lady in Van Der Zee's photo to form the focal tragedy of each novel, the *main Misery*, so too the often repeated bridge for the song of Solomon contains the *main*

*Misery* of the novel, the departure and/or separation of the loved one and the sorrow of those left behind.

O Solomon don't leave me here  
 Cotton balls to choke me  
 O Solomon don't leave me here  
 Buckra's arms to yoke me  
 Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone  
 Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home.  
 (*Song of Solomon* 303)

Morrison was intrigued by the connection between the deceased young woman of Van Der Zee's photo and Margaret Garner. The unnamed young lady in the photograph "was shot by her sweetheart at a party with a noiseless gun...they saw the blood on her dress. They asked her about it and she said, 'I'll tell you tomorrow, yes, I'll tell you tomorrow'" (Van Der Zee 84). Garner set out to "kill all the children and then destroy herself, rather than return to slavery" (New York Times Feb. 2, 1856). In both cases they each loved someone outside of themselves more than their own lives. Morrison illustrates this in *Beloved* through Sethe's infanticide. Although Sethe believes that she "wouldn't draw breath without [her] children," she attempts to take her "best thing[s]" beyond the realm of life in order to save them from slavery (*Beloved* 203, 272).

In *Jazz*, when Joe finds Dorcas, his young lover, at a party in the arms of her new love he shoots her, instead of touching her with his hand, as he desired, and allowing her to fly free. "I had the gun but it was not the gun- it was my hand I wanted to touch you with" (*Jazz* 131). Dorcas, fully cognizant of the identity of her murderer refuses to name him before she dies. Comparably, those left behind in the first and last generations of Solomon's family seem to love the departed almost more than themselves. Ryna is so grieved over Solomon's flying away from her that she "thr[o]ws her body all around" and

loses the ability to function (*Song of Solomon* 303). And Hagar's devastation at Milkman's, her lover's, rejection of her comprises a significant portion of the *main Misery* of the text.

Although the *main Misery* in *Paradise*, the unsolicited attack by the leading men of Ruby, an all-black town in Oklahoma, on the women of the nearby community, the Convent, is not also driven by a form of unrequited or excessive love, it is contingent upon the flipside of love, irrational hatred motivated by misguided self-preservation. The men who storm the Convent convince themselves that all of their communal ills are rooted in the interactions of some of their members with their neighbors. "Drawing folks out there like flies to shit and everybody who goes near them is maimed somehow and the mess is seeping back into *our* homes, *our* families. We can't have it, you all. Can't have it at all" (*Paradise* 276). Yet the central story in *Paradise* is based upon the historic newspaper enticements for the all-black towns of Oklahoma, encouraging preparedness, "Come Prepared or not at all" (Denard interview 1). The intentional isolation and self-focus which results from the rejection of the sojourners by those who presented the advertisement does center on their self-love. Believing themselves to be better than those who refuse them entry, the self-preservation reflex which encourages them to develop their own town eventually morphs into the hatred which drives the *main Misery* of the novel.

Hence, the central action for each of the four texts discussed in this dissertation hinges not only on documented or undocumented historical information but also on love, communal, and individual, excessive or withdrawn. The progression of the life trajectory

of each protagonist discussed is based on their relationships with others in the context of community and their eventual ability to accept and/or give love in beneficial ways.

The hope for Sethe at the end of *Beloved* lies in her willingness to believe that she should and can love herself, that she ought to be her own “best thing” (*Beloved* 273). Violet and Joe’s hope in *Jazz* rests on their mutual decision to love each other in the ways that they needed to be loved, after becoming aware of the emotional difficulties they suffer as a result of their *central traumas*. Milkman’s transformation in *Song of Solomon* occurs as he finally realizes the critical importance of the love he has consistently received from the women in his life and acts upon the necessity of the reciprocation of that love. And the women of the Convent, in *Paradise*, directly prior to the attack by the men of Ruby, eventually learn to love and accept themselves despite the repeated rejections that each had faced in the past. Thus, a central aspect of the counter-narrative of each of the characters lies in their willingness and ability to be, to love and to be loved, to answer the call of the first book in the Morrison’s historical chronology, *Beloved*.

The call of *Beloved* is also extended to Morrison’s readership. Her texts provide us with a safe communal space in which to “feel profoundly” (Ruas interview 109). Our rejoinders occur within two spheres simultaneously, that of the novelistic reading experience and that of the larger reading audience. Thus, every Morrison reader participates both in the community of the novel and in the community of other Morrison readers through the experience of the novels themselves.

Hence, part of my thrill in discussing *Beloved* with others who were strangers to me, many years ago in Queens College, was due to the sense of community and connectivity that our mutual interaction with the novel evoked. Due to the intimacy of

the topics revealed in the text, the classroom became that safe space in which to share, feel and emote some of our inmost thoughts. Although the exchanges were often heated and passionate, they encouraged us to continue the process of sharing the experience of the novel and ancillary issues, outside of the classroom. The space created through our discourse thus served as a form of communal support, which emboldened each of us, and enacted a living counter to the spectacle. We claimed ownership of ourselves and each other and we loved what we saw.

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## Caryl Loney-McFarlane

### Education

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<b>October 2007</b>	PhD, Rutgers University, Literatures in English
<b>March 1996</b>	MA, Rutgers University, Literatures in English
<b>May 1991</b>	BA, City University of New York, Queens College, English

### Dissertation

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Dissertation: "Claiming Ownership of that Freed Self: Toni Morrison's American Counter-Narrative"

In this dissertation, I argue that a historically chronological reading of Morrison illumines the connectivity between larger societal realities and the protagonists' redemptive journeys.

Dissertation Director: Abena P.A. Busia

### Research and Teaching Interests

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- 20<sup>th</sup> Century African-American Literature
- 20<sup>th</sup> Century Caribbean and West African Literature
- Religious Literature
- African-American history
- Writing and Composition

### Academic Experience

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Fall 1992- Spring 1996	<b>Rutgers University</b> , New Brunswick, New Jersey, <b>Teaching Assistant</b> Designed and taught 20 <sup>th</sup> Century African Diaspora Literature course, instructed Expository Writing I & II
Fall 1990	<b>Queens College</b> American Studies 110, Race and Racism <b>Team Teacher</b> Co-authored exams, designed lesson plans, lectured.
1988-1989	<b>Queens College Teacher Opportunity Corp (QTOC)</b> , Queens, New York. (A program designed to encourage and support minority education majors.) <b>Session Director/Group Leader/Mentor</b> Planned and led weekly sessions designed to improve writing skills, study habits, and interpersonal relations.

### Other Teaching Experience

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Spring 2001-present	<b>Homeschool Teacher</b> Taught basic elementary subjects to preschool and elementary age children
Fall 1996- Spring 1998	<b>Princeton Day School</b> , Princeton, New Jersey, <b>English Teacher</b> , Upper School (11 <sup>th</sup> & 12 <sup>th</sup> grade) Literature of the Black World Designed a course involving 20 <sup>th</sup> Century African-American, West African and Caribbean Literatures. <b>Princeton Day School</b> <b>Speech and Debate</b> Taught public speaking and debating skills.

Spring 1997- Fall 1998	<b>NJ SEEDS Writing Teacher</b> <b>(Scholars. Educators. Excellence. Dedication. Success.)</b> Instructed junior high school students in basic writing skills.
Summer 1995	<b>Upward Bound</b> , New Brunswick, New Jersey <b>Coordinator of Activities and Tutor-Counselors</b> Supervised all activities, organized program schedule, conducted weekly planning sessions, created instructional workshops.
Summer 1992- 1994	<b>Educational Testing Service</b> , Princeton, New Jersey <b>Test Developer</b> Created reading comprehension sections for the GRE and GMAT examinations.

### **Academic Honors**

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1991-1995	Rutgers University, New Jersey Council of Higher Education, Minority Academic Career Program Fellowship
1989-1991	Queens College, Mellon Foundation, Mellon Undergraduate Fellowship for Minorities.
1991	Queens College, Chaney-Goodman-Schwerner Award For the promotion of racial harmony
1991	Queens College, Dean of Students Award
1991	Queens College, Choral Society Award
1991	Queens College, Commencement Speaker

### **Papers & Presentations**

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April, 1998	"Climbing the Ancestral Hill" Caribbean Women Writers Association Grenada, WI
April, 1997	"The Progression of Identity: Sight to Insight" African Literature Association Conference Michigan State University
April, 1996	"The Novels of Toni Morrison" Minority Academic Career Program, Speakers Symposium Rutgers University
May, 1993	"The Black Woman Recedes" Celebration of Our Work Conference Rutgers University

### **References**

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Prof. Brown	Rutgers University Department of Literatures in English (Retired) 732-932-7674 wesbro@taconic.net
Prof. Busia	Rutgers University Department of Literatures in English Dissertation Director 732-932-7349 <a href="mailto:busia@rci.rutgers.edu">busia@rci.rutgers.edu</a>
Prof. Wall	Rutgers University Department of Literatures in English 732-932-7571 cwall@rci.rutgers.edu