“IT IS ABOUT LOVE. WHAT ELSE?”

TONI MORRISON’S NECESSARY ACTOR: REVISIONS OF SELF IN

SONG OF SOLOMON

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis demonstrates that American individualism is a failed, alienating institution that continues to produce harmful effects upon the people of this country. Current rhetoric on identity and the myth of the American dream relies explicitly on Emersonian Transcendentalism which utilizes an “Other” to show who is not a representative, American man. Ralph Ellison responds to Emerson’s precepts in his novel Invisible Man by showing an African-American man unraveling his identity. In so doing, the narrator explodes American individualism by revealing the fractured selves that its inherent racism produces and the blindness of most Americans to this contradiction. Toni Morrison’s novel Song of Solomon extends Ellison’s work by showing that one lone individual cannot sufficiently remove the layers of identity and oppression, but that individuals must deconstruct the influences of power with the help of others. Specifically, Morrison argues that only through immersion in one’s community, including language, history, and ancestry, can one find a true identity. Morrison also reclaims Emerson’s philosophy by utilizing his concept of a “necessary actor” to show that this process is an active one. It is the responsibility of each member of the community to rigorously work to decenter the effects of power so as to rebuild their identity with the values of their community and thereby create a healthy community of whole individuals. Song of Solomon demonstrates the very nature of Morrison’s argument by demanding audience participation through extensive use of the oral tradition. Written discourse is de-privileged as the author is shifted from the sole position of authority, while a new community is formed between the text and the reader. Working especially with W.E.B. DuBois’ double consciousness and Homi Bhabha’s subsequent extension of this concept to all neo-colonized individuals, I argue that Morrison’s novel demonstrates that because we are born into systems of power, specifically American capitalistic patriarchy, our very survival demands actively re-inventing ourselves through privileging our community.
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Introduction

Transcending the Jagged Edge of American Individualism

We need history, but we need it differently from the spoiled lazy-bones in the garden of knowledge. — Friedrich Nietzsche

Is there no context for our lives? No song, no literature, no poem full of vitamins, no history connected to experience that you can pass along to help us start strong? [T]ell us what the world has been to you in the dark places and in the light. […] What moves at the margin. What it is to have no home in this place. To be set adrift from the one you knew. What it is to live at the edge of towns that cannot bear your company.

— Toni Morrison

The mythology of American individualism impacts all layers of American society from our media to our private thoughts. Much of the American episteme has not changed since the time of the first European settlers. The same rhetoric used to attract colonizers from Europe or to move Easterners west is still in use today. The idea of America is not only that it is the land of opportunity, but also the land of the brave and the free. Americans continue to rely on concepts of individualistic action, of heroes and winners: here we pull ourselves up by our bootstraps; good guys win at all cost (even if this includes vigilante justice); and class/race/religion do not matter because America is a melting pot. From the day that you are born, this mythology tells you that you have the right to be you and, more importantly, that you must do what is right for you at all costs. If you do not follow your “heart,” then you are weak, un-individual, and un-American.¹

At the same time, American society demands that individuals function within its bounds in order to reap its benefits. There are innumerous laws and institutions to convince us to perform our individuality properly. Yet, America also continues to be

¹ Look no further than President Barack Obama’s “education speech,” September 8, 2009, in which school children were charged with their responsibility to their education, themselves, and America: “No one’s written your destiny for you. Here in America, you write your own destiny. You make your own future” (http://www.whitehouse.gov/mediareources/preparedschoolremarks/).
divided by wealth distribution, race, and gender, which limit an individual’s access to knowledge and power while demanding the same obedience to the concepts of individuality and society. Coupled with the American dream, our culture contains a damaging and damning paradox that continues to authorize a classed society determined from “above” and to perpetuate a system of neo-colonialism. Michel Foucault refers to this system as simply “power” because, regardless of its form (the law, education, nationalism, or family), the dominant power system is simultaneously controlling and creating us in its image.\(^2\) Power needs individuals to be passive members of society for this to happen, so it must create in us the desire to conform to its tenets well before we are faced with unappealing consequences, such as jail time. Furthermore, individuals who do not value the system’s values are a threat to its overall authority. In the same way, American mythology tells us to be individuals first, but only rewards those who perform their individualism perfectly in line with the needs of its power.

While I am not looking at an area of the world that was colonized and then set “free,” I am arguing that living in America, under the banner of the American dream and its mythology, particularly in the context of our capitalistic system, has reduced some of its citizens to colonized “Others.” As Gayatri Spivak argues, the techniques and effects of colonialism have not left us.\(^3\) Our society is not “post” colonial. Colonialism, turned imperialism, is now perpetuated under a different name (or not named at all), a condition which Spivak describes as neocolonialism. I am particularly interested in those citizens who have been born into a lineage emerging from the America system of slavery. To this end, I will examine two representations within African-American novels that speak to the

\(^2\) Many of Foucault’s texts discuss power, but specifically refer to *Power/Knowledge.*

\(^3\) Specifically see Spivak’s *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present.*
affects of this "beginning," of this history, that remain an ongoing, conflicted discourse within America.

For this project, I will consider the ways in which the concept of American individualism works upon the major characters of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. Both of these novels reveal individuals encapsulated by the Western tradition of individuality which demands perfect performance yet withholds agency from the colonized. The characters within both novels attempt to figure out their place within this system: some sink under its weight; some fight it ineffectively; and others slowly emerge from the grip of this mythology by recognizing its existence and starting over. *Invisible Man*, as an example, goes through an extensive process to find a new sense of self. Each new self that he believes he has created is shown to be only a mask designed to keep him from knowing the truth, which is that he is continually being used as a "tool" by one representation of institutional power after another. However, he eventually realizes his own blindness to this positioning and peels off the mask that oppressive power has placed upon him through a rigorous process of deconstruction.

Additionally, in *Song of Solomon*, Milkman and Pilate take this operation one step further by rebuilding themselves in their own image after re-situating the values from their community above those of the dominant culture. Finally, through this active undertaking, Milkman and Pilate reintegrate into their community as whole individuals who can now help others to heal, bringing all to the "Promised Land."4

4 In *The Souls of Black Folks*, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote, "I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color-line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. From out of the caves of the evening that swing between the strong-limbed earth and the tracery of the stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension. So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the Veil. Is this the life you grudge us, O knightly America? Is this the life you long to change into the dull red hideousness of Georgia? Are
 Appropriately, Morrison begins her novel *Song of Solomon* with a call to action in the epigraph: "The fathers may soar / And the children may know their names."

Although the flying motif within the novel is often discussed in the vein of African-American spirituals that look forward to an end of toil and a joining with God, the word "soar" here suggests more than escape from hardship. It is a transcendence. Morrison envisions a time when fathers "may soar," rising above their current place of frozen inaction. The call for children to "know their names" also denotes action—an act of comprehending—by the children of soaring fathers.

It is not just one father or one child who needs to make these self-determined and self-enforced actions, but all fathers and all children, which speaks to the communal nature of Morrison’s work, even while it conjures a very personal endeavor. In a 1981 interview with Thomas LeClaire, Morrison said that she writes "village literature, fiction that is really for the village, for the tribe" (26). In the epigraph, Morrison’s description of upward soaring fathers and remembering children help the reader to envision her project as a communal one. In this way, the language of the text convinces the reader of her project by signaling its necessity.

Throughout the novel, Morrison uses techniques from oral traditions, such as songs and “playing the dozens,” to manipulate language in such a way as to mimic its spoken form, conjuring a listener and a larger community. The listener/reader is called upon to act by testifying and making meaning in such a way that the complete storyline can only be successful if the reader participates. Each written/spoken act requires not only a writer/speaker, but also a reader/listener/responder whose action/performance

you so afraid lest peering from this high Pisgah, between Philistine and Amalekite, we sight the Promised Land?"
completes the exchange and forces the novel to perform its central idea, which is that individuals must act in order to be members of their community.

Consequently, although *Song of Solomon* stresses the need for community, it more importantly demonstrates that a community is made up of specific individuals who have responsibilities to themselves as well as to the larger group. Just being part of a community is not enough. If the typical definition of community is a group of individuals thrown together through affiliations such as birth, religion, or location, then Morrison's usage signifies that in order to be an integral part of one's community, one must comprehend, appreciate, and utilize its many layers. The full notion of community therefore is more of a compilation that includes various types of knowledge, memory, history, and action. In the article “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” Morrison writes that the point of her “books is that it's our job. When you kill the ancestor you kill yourself. [She] want[s] to point out the dangers, to show that nice things don’t always happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connection” (Denard 64, emphasis from the original). Conversely, even though *Song of Solomon* may appear to reject the individualistic lineage of Western thought and American ideals altogether in lieu of a matriarchal, communal ideology, I argue that instead the novel incorporates both into a re-envisioned, healthier community: one in which autonomy is only achieved by active deconstruction and community is only achieved by collective regeneration.

In other words, all individuals are born into systems of power. Throughout their lives, these systems mold and shape even their innermost subjectivity in order to control them and to keep its power in place. True autonomy (in the sense of being able to act independently as a separate entity in the world) is not the universal, natural condition of
man that American individualism claims it to be. Instead, autonomy is only possible by locating oneself in these systems. One must realize and dismantle the many layers placed upon her by power. After this decentering, one can resituate her sense of self outside of power and inside her own community. Consequently, by re-inventing herself, one is able to re-enter into her community. A healthy community is made up of these new individuals who together perform communal regeneration.

Morrison’s large body of nonfiction speaks extensively to her use of individualism, not as an all-encompassing, destructive philosophy so often associated with the extreme isolationism that supports both American mythology and market capitalism, but as an individual who must act in the world. For example, in her essay entitled “A Show Walk of Trees,” Morrison discusses the unchanging qualities of institutionalized racism and the adapting African-American response to it. She describes those “who know who they are because they have invented themselves and know where they are going because they have envisioned it” (Denard 14, emphasis added). Similarly, in “What the Black Woman Thinks about Women’s Lib,” Morrison details the load under which African-American women perform their multifarious duties inside and outside of their own home, with or without the help of a partner, to which she adds: “And she had nothing to fall back on: not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality she may very well have invented herself” (Denard 24, emphasis added). This need for agency in response to external forces is a thread throughout Morrison’s nonfiction writing as well as her novels. “Dear Us,” she writes in an open letter to women, girls, herself:

You were the rim of the world—it’s beginning. […] Before you were named, you were already naming. […] You had this canny ability to shape an untenable
reality, mold it, sing it, reduce it to its manageable, transforming essence, which is a knowing so deep it's like a secret. In your silence, enforced or chosen, lay not only eloquence but discourse so devastating that 'civilization' could not risk engaging in it lest it lose the ground it stomped. (Denard 32)

This statement explicates Morrison's contention that the strong individuals in her own life have acted out and upon their world through any and all means within their grasp. One's action does not need to be recognized by others, because the action itself is more important than the means or the ends and is the vital component for the community at large. It is Morrison's claim that individuals must mold, sing, and reduce reality that is especially poignant for my discussion of *Song of Solomon*.

Whereas the narrative in *Song of Solomon* is centered around Milkman's coming-of-age quest, all of the characters within the novel speak to this notion of balancing individual and communal needs. Each central character models one of the types of subjects from which Milkman has to choose. Ironically, all of the characters are motivated by love on some level, but the unsuccessful ones allow their love to become corrupted by their inability to transcend the systems of power that have created them. Whether destructive or hollow, the individuals in Milkman's early life demonstrate "failed" individuals trapped in the dominant value system that does not value them. By extension, they are truly alone, not finding value within their own community and not

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5 Here I am specifically referring to the essays that I have just quoted from in which she discusses her family's history: "A Slow Walk of Trees," "What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib," "A Knowing So Deep," "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," and Morrison's Nobel acceptance speech (all of which can be found in *Toni Morrison: What Moves at the Margin*, Carolyn C. Denard, Ed.)

6 For clarity, I will refer to Macon Dead III as Milkman throughout my project.

7 As often as possible, I will utilize the term "subject," instead of "self," because I agree with Nick Mansfield's explanation that "the word subject proposes that the self is not a separate and isolated entity, but one that operates at the intersection of general truths and shared principles" (3—Mansfield's text, *Subjectivity*, explores the discussion on whether or how much these truths/principles determine us as individuals). The term subjectivity, therefore, represents an intersection which encompasses the individual self and its connection to all. (I might add that I would swap Mansfield's terms truths and principles for Foucault's term power.)
being valued by it. Macon, Guitar, and Ruth, for example, remove themselves from the community and are isolated without a real sense of identity. Only Pilate, who relies on love to honor both her memory and history through her continued relationship with her father, goes through the process of self-ownership by deconstructing her earlier masks, shedding them, and then regenerating herself in her own image. Cowardly or selfishly basing their lives on wrong assumptions, the other characters each ruin their lives or more aptly do not live at all. Therefore, it is solely Pilate, as remade and functioning like Ralph Emerson’s “necessary actor,” who can facilitate Milkman’s evolution.

Morrison’s reworking of American individualism occurs within a larger historical context that mythologizes subjectivity as established by Enlightenment reasoning. Specifically I am interested in the way in which this much older discussion of the individual “self” was reinterpreted and transformed in America. Enlightenment ideology, with its conceptualizations of man, subject, and nature, enabled scientific exploration, botanical pillaging, and racist exploitation. However, in the newly imagined America, this ideology was used to control a large slave workforce, to dispose of an indigenous population, and to assert statehood. In order to convince its citizens of the project that was “America” and to continually entice Europeans to immigrate, politicians and scholars alike extended and reworked the language of individualism and colonization. Attempting to break from much of the Enlightenment rhetoric, Romanticism resituated man’s place in the world, a reworking that comes to a pinnacle in Emerson’s writing. It is the rhetoric of American Transcendentalism, particularly, that authorized and extended

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8 Much of the eighteenth century writing exemplifies this conversation. Specifically refer to “"What is an American?" by J. Hector St. John De Crevecoeur and "Notes on the State of Virginia" by Thomas Jefferson. Also refer to Myra Jehlen’s American Incarnation for an extensive review of the making of American individualism.
American mythology. Furthermore, its tenets continue to hold American citizens in the impossibility of performing individualism within this system of power.

As the concept of subjectivity shifted from Enlightenment ideology toward individualism, it freed the individual from old socio-political networks. Simultaneously, the ocean freed the American society from history itself, and the American man was empowered not only to mold himself, but also the world in his image. Myra Jehlen explains that although the philosophy of individualism was not new at the founding of this country, the concept of America took it a step further:

Americans saw themselves as building their civilization out of nature itself [...] Fusing the political with the natural, human volition with its object, and hope with destiny, they imagined an all-encompassing universe that in effect healed the lapsarian parting of man and his natural kingdom.9 (Jehlen 3)

In America, European individualism fused with the “new world” landscape to create a society without history. This desire to begin anew, outside of European society and history, is exemplified in Emerson’s Nature when he writes: “Why should we not have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs. [...] These are new lands, new men, new thoughts” (125). Early Euro-Americans saw themselves as not transporting European society, but leaving it for new, “natural” landownership in America. By identifying the abstract ideals of liberal humanism with the physical American landscape, “the myth of America has been both ideal and material (idealist and materialist): if it is transcendent, it is immanently

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9 Natural Law held that because God’s will and sovereignty were channeled through human reason and conscience, human (“positive”) laws decreed by the King were “right” (divine) in that they were “naturally” God-endorsed. Assumed to be from God and the notion upon which the universe was ordered, reason was subsequently connected to both divinity and the natural world; thus, the application of Natural Law was seen to be a universal condition of all mankind (as were reason and conscience). As R. S. White explains, Natural Law was “essential justice, justice itself, the origin and test of all positive laws, and “the ultimate measure of right and wrong”” (1).
transcendent” (10). By “discovering” this new, “uninhabited” land separate from the history of Europe, Americans could at once think of themselves as conquerors of the continent and outside of time.

Because this particular fusion of ideology and material reality (selfland) is so uniquely American and continues to inform our mythology, it is within the language of American Romanticism, specifically Emersonian Transcendentalism, to which I turn to establish the concept of individualism for this essay. I am interested in the way in which this philosophy played out within America along the conflicting lines of “rights” laid down at its birth and the lives of its inhabitants. Beyond voiced/written ideology, there is a cohabitant and comingled material reality, which is often in direct conflict with these doctrines. To be concise, I am interested in how philosophical rhetoric is manifested via power in “real world” applications, institutions, and relationships. Foucault calls it a “great fantasy” to think of a social body as being “constituted by the universality of wills, [because] the phenomenon of the social body is the effect not of a consensus but of the materiality of power operating on the very bodies of individuals” (Power/Knowledge 55).

For example, it is of course ironic to now read Thomas Jefferson’s remaking of the old Social Contract10 into a declaration of the inalienable, natural rights of all equally-created men when retrospectively aware of our nation’s history and the rather short-sighted definition of “man.” It is another, more difficult project to look at the ongoing, often hidden, and even more often unchallenged, effects of this epistemological substratum.

10 In brief, social contract theory claims that it is not worth it for humans to be out in the world as separate individuals; there is too much to risk, too little to gain. Therefore, individuals willingly establish a governmental body to oversee the community with the realization that some individual rights or freedoms will be sacrificed for the benefits of society, such as security. Born from Natural Law, this idea was first used to explain the need for the monarchy but was gradually utilized to shore up varying types of political moves, such as the American Revolution, when its proponents felt that Britain’s government was no longer legitimately deriving his authority from the consent of the governed.
Generally speaking, Transcendentalism continued the Enlightenment idea that human reason was a universal, naturally-occurring condition of “man.” It is based on the belief that “innately present in each individual [...] is a spiritual principal that, of itself, without any external stimuli, allows one to distinguish between right and wrong, good and bad, God and Satan, and it supersedes any outward laws or injunctions” (Gura 11). The word transcendental is typically traced to Kant’s description of Idealism, which classifies a realm of ideas through which experience is acquired via intuitions of the mind and not outside stimuli. For example, transcendentalism held that no empirical proof of religion could be satisfactory and, aligned with British Romanticism, focused on man relying upon his intuition and emotion over logic or explanation from outside authorities (Gura 13; Kaplan 18). In 1881, George Ripley defined Transcendentalism as “the assertion of the high powers, dignity, and integrity of the soul; its absolute independence and right to interpret the meaning of life, untrammeled by tradition and conventions” (Gura 14). The importance of human striving for one’s betterment (in this case literally one’s own, not for God’s salvation) and of the “right to interpret the meaning of life” are the major principles of Transcendentalism that are still utilized in American rhetoric today.

The individualistic separation that began with Europe’s Enlightenment was completed in America. Here, in a new land without history, man could begin anew and, as envisioned by Emerson, discover his own new world. Merging and appropriating the earlier concepts of Natural Law and empirical science, Emerson writes of spending time in the woods:

We return to reason and faith. [...] Standing on the bare ground, --my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,--all mean egotism vanishes. I
become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. [...] Yet it is certain that the power to produce this delight, does not reside in nature, but in man, or in a harmony of both. (Nature 128)

Placing himself between the physical ground and the heavens, Emerson does more than channel the divine as discussed by the British Romantics; he becomes part of both. If the new, self-made man is both a natural part of the land and looking into the infinite, then he is all things. He is a world unto himself. As Jehlen describes:

[Emersonian Transcendentalism] discovers infinity inside the finite [...] it is an intensification of consciousness so powerful that the material universe dissolves into the observer’s universal knowledge. In short, [it] is the philosophy of the American Incarnation, and its fulfillment in an unlimited individualism whereby the self transcends its mortal limits by taking total possession of an actual world. / Emerson thus completed the development of the modern concept of individualism […] by projecting an individual who possesses the world in his own image. (77)

For the material world outside of Emerson to exist, he, the “transparent eye-ball,” must see it because this power/sight of the Universal Being cannot exist without him. This is not a passive moment. Taking possession of the world is an aggressive action. Emerson wrote in “The American Scholar” that “the true scholar grudges every opportunity of action past by, as a loss of power” (202). With “reason,” “faith,” and “action,” Emerson’s man is the all-powerful—he is the divine.

Unfortunately, Emerson’s American individualism is an inadequate system, as demonstrated in Ellison’s novel Invisible Man and by the many misguided characters within Song of Solomon. I chose to start with Ellison’s novel because he directly takes on the tenets of the Romantics in order to redefine and resituate their claims. He turns their philosophy on its head, as it were, by exposing the inherent racism in many pillars of the self-made American man as well as the desire of those in power to control and veil others in order to protect their position. Furthermore, I examine the destitute individuals in
Song of Solomon who misplace their love in varying ways and ultimately alienate themselves from their community. And finally, I explore the dual journeys of Milkman and Pilate and the way in which individual action and community work together to help each bring their quests to fruition. Together, mediated through history and the oral tradition, Milkman and Pilate finish Invisible Man's post-deconstruction task of regeneration: re-inventing themselves and re-immersing into the community.

Even though Morrison's project is responding to the limitations of the very masculine, Western literary and philosophical tradition, she is also dissecting and recreating it, authorizing what she needs and inventing solutions where it fails. At the same time, Song of Solomon is not limited to feminist African-American story. On the contrary, her larger venture, as seen in both her fiction and nonfiction, discusses the destruction of community due to glorified and unchecked individualism. Her novels displays characters trapped in failed societies distorted by capitalism and greed. Morrison is most concerned with the destructive nature of individualism as it dismembers community and consequently makes communal knowledge impotent. It is imperative to note the long lineage of literature and philosophy in which Morrison is participating. Throughout this discussion, we must remember to chart the course through Emersonian Transcendentalism as it continues to inform the discourse of this country, purposely to exclude the majority of its citizenry, to maroon the individual, and to disallow for different types of knowledge.

To our current moment, the philosophies of science, society, morality, and truth, all look to the individual subject as the site where meaning is made and value judged. So too, it was the rhetoric of individualism that championed the rise of capitalism which, in
turn, ultimately provides justification for ongoing neocolonialism and imperialism. As
with the conversation on subjectivity, the legacy of the way in which this country was
"won" and built remains today. The "founding fathers" who believed so strongly that
"all men are created equal" also believed that most of the inhabitants of America at that
time were neither men, as "men" did not include uneducated or unpropertied men,
women, Native Americans, or the slave population, nor knew what was best for them.
The history of slavery and Manifest Destiny in the "land of the free, home of the brave"
is more than just ironic, as it does not take an extensive search into current events to find
that even in the twenty-first century the terms "man" and "equality" continue to be
redefined.

Interrogating the foundational concepts of American individualism and
subjectivity remains relevant because we continue to live in a classed, gendered, and
racialized society that affects every aspect of our lives. American mythology functions as
another form of institutional and systematic power which in its need to control us
perpetuates the dream of individuality. Furthermore, our society is based upon the notion
that you will perform certain socialized actions at certain times, that you will show up to
school/work/appointments on time, that you will abide by rules that you did not create,
and that you will ultimately be a good, quiet citizen who buys into this mythology. In
this way, to be American is to be caught in the double bind of the American dream: a
dream which simultaneously promises and demands individuality even though it is a
disabling and disempowering impossibility.

While I purposely have not delved into America's history of slavery in order to
approach either text, it is of course the foundation of Du Bois' double consciousness and
the legacy in which all Americans are born today. Both Ellison and Morrison specifically examine the way in which the collision of American mythology and the legacy of slavery impacts, constructs, and silences African-Americans. Morrison says of this history that “forgetting is unacceptable” and that “remembering is unacceptable” (“Five Years”). This is yet another double bind. Teresa Goddu aptly notes that “looking back to the past in order to make the present coherent is a necessary act; however, it is double-edged” (155). If left alone, we cannot assimilate the horror of this past with our current moment because it is “unacceptable.” Humans have an amazing capacity to forget and ignore pain. However, because this history and the American mythology will not allow our identity to be a self-fulfilling prophecy, as Homi Bhabha has predicted, we must push back against this legacy. Like Ellison’s blues, we need the “impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness,” so that we can “finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism” (Shadow and Act 78).

Morrison’s work asks the community to take up this action together because “communal comfort offers some protection[,] everyone must collectively participate in bearing witness to its horror” (Goddu 155). Morrison does not offer a chance of escape. She fingers this brutal experience, keeping it alive, so that along with her characters we can find a way to live with these “horrors,” to transcend them. Furthermore, although history cannot be transformed in retrospect, Morrison does challenge her characters and readers to transform themselves in order to combat this double bind.

Both Goddu’s Gothic America and Robert Stepto’s From Behind the Veil describe the use of voice as agency in combating the horrors of history. Of course, this is not a
new concept: silence implies inaction. However, it is particularly paramount in the African-American community because as Goddu notes in her discussion of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, silence was the slave master’s greatest weapon. Furthermore, if we continue to remain silent about the horrors of past or current oppression, while understandable, this silence becomes disempowering and isolates us from each other (Goddu 154). It is so too with all power systems as they depend upon complacency.

Stepto points out that one attempt to reclaim “self” for ex-slaves was to become literate. The ultimate weapon against the horror of slavery was then to write about it, recording and making a permanent record for all to see. Stepto’s project charts two different types of quests which he divides in his book into “call” and “response.” “Call” traces narratives in which an African American flees the South, becomes literate, and tells Northern of the atrocities perpetrated by racism. “Response” looks at narratives in which African Americans travel South in attempts to relocate some of the culture and history that was lost in the first journeys North. Although both types of quests are of equal importance, they required taking up the pen of the oppressor. These writers had their own culture already, but oral traditions were, and continue to be, seen as a lack of “culture.” Therefore, African Americans had to utilize the colonizers’ written language and medium to testify against the horrors of oppression.

Morrison’s project takes up the colonizer’s pen but uses the colonized’s voice. She wants us to hear her words: “It is important that there is sound in my books—that

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11 There is also scholarship on silence as a tool for communal healing as a tool for the oppressed. I am not prepared to tackle these points at length here, but for further reading see: Fivush, Robyn. “Speaking Silence: The Social Construction of Silence in Autobiographical and Cultural Narratives.” *Memory* (2009 Jun. 29): 1-11 and

12 See Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* as example.
you can hear it, that I can hear it. [...] The open-ended quality that is sometimes a
problematic in the novel form reminds me of the uses to which stories are put in the black
community” (McKay 427). One difference between *Invisible Man* and *Song of Solomon*
is that Invisible Man silences himself by going underground. He actually oscillates
between stunned, silent observer and orator during the narrative, but in the end, he
purposely isolates himself. Although he is interrupting the gaze of the colonizer by
utilizing invisibility, he is still silent and alone. On the contrary, Milkman goes from
silent, inactive, and reliant upon others to a vocal, actor, literally soaring after assisting
Pilate in completing her journey.

Furthermore, Milkman completes his journey by understanding the importance of
using the language of his heritage. He progresses from being unable to hear Lena prior to
his quest for understanding and singing his ancestry song. He learns the power that
African-American names had for his community: “Names that had meaning. No wonder
Pilate put hers in her ear. When you know your name, you should hang on to it, for
unless it is noted down and remembered, it will die when you do” (*Song* 329). Regarding
Milkman’s curious leap at the end of *Song of Solomon*, Morrison said that she did not use
flight as “some Western Form of escape, [but] something more positive than escape”
(Brown 463). Milkman and Pilate do not need to escape because “they [are] about the
whole business of how to handle one’s self in a more dangerous element called air,
learning how to trust, to risk, and knowing that much about one’s self to be able to take
off and to surrender one’s self to the air, to surrender and control both of those things”
(Brown 463). He is not escaping; he is soaring. Mentored by Pilate, Milkman is now
able to answer Guitar’s question, “It is about love. What else?” Love is not Macon’s
money or Guitar's revenge or Ruth's selflessness. Love is having the courage that the long line of African-American questers had before him. It is finding the motivation to love and the need to act. It is about loving your community enough to make that journey—North or South or into the oppressor's language—to reclaim a voice and self so that identity is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Nellie McKay describes Morrison's novels as haunting her readers because the performative nature and often ambiguous endings leave the reader curious and wanting more. Morrison explains that this situation arises from her use of the open-ended, African, oral storytelling tradition, as she attempts to offer the story to the community, asking "well, what do you think?" While I agree about the openness of her orature, I also think that the haunting quality comes from the nature of her discourse as well. It is not just that the narrative requests the reader's participation or ends ambiguously; it is that the text asks you to "pass it on." Like all good stories, they are only good if they are shared. It is the retelling that keeps the story alive. Morrison's narrative haunts its reader to retell it, to continue the work that one lone story cannot do. For Morrison's project to "work," as she hopes it will, the reader has to take the new reader/text community seriously and pass it on—maybe not this exact tale, but the concept behind it. Morrison wishes her novels to continue to do the work that her characters in the story are doing: the work of questioning and of fighting power by denouncing it, by choosing our grandparents' stories over the dominant discourse, by rejecting media's definition of beauty for our own, by listening to the stories and passing them on. For Morrison's novels to work, her reader has to work too. In order to combat the double bind of power, we have to continue the life-long quest of regenerating our community through the
decentering, reinventing and re-immersing of our very individual selves.
Chapter 1

Emersonian Transcendentalism, *Invisible Man*, and Insufficient Individualism

Living in a nation of people who decided that their world view would combine agendas for individual freedom and mechanisms for devastating racial oppression presents a singular landscape for a writer. —Toni Morrison

In the guise of Capitalist and of Poet, the self-reliant individualist may perpetually remake the world, but since he himself is disembodied, he can never finally incorporate it. —Myra Jehlen

I began with a look at the making of American individualism not to arrive at a teleological present, but to establish a definition. To be an American subject is to be born into a heritage which at its heart is a contradiction. This enigmatic subjectivity is not a product of twenty-first century thinking projecting back, an artifact “discovered” by excavators, but is quite literally sewn into the fabric of this country from its founding documents to its current political rhetoric and practices. Specifically, the definition of American individualism is an integral part of the ongoing juxtaposition of what it means to be a citizen born on American soil as opposed to one who is permitted access and participation in all aspects of American life. This difference hinges upon the concept of definition itself. As discussed in the introduction, how narrowly “man” was defined (and in truth, continues to be defined) is the crux of battles fought in the name of all civil rights—from the legality of slavery to who has the right to marry. Consequently, because Emersonian Transcendentalism is both the culmination of European individualism and the beginning of an American version, it is imperative to explore the inadequate definitions within this philosophy.

Emersonian Transcendentalism idealized not only the poet-philosopher, but also incorporated the natural world, so that together both rose and merged with the divine.
Emerson describes man as a "necessary actor" forming a bridge between the "two craving parts of nature" which "unites the hitherto separated strands into a perfect cord" ("Method of Nature" 123). In this moment, mediated by man's sight (remember Emerson's feet on the ground with his face lifted to infinity), nature and divinity merge, thereby allowing the "self" to transcend this physical world by creating one (another world) in its own image. This transcendence, though, only occurs through the action of man in the moment of looking simultaneously into his own divinity and the world around him. Jehlen explains that "the power to act—not just to think, but to act—lay not in the individualist's hands but in his mind and soul, so that he would look out most effectively precisely by looking in" (78). Again, man is not simply channeling the divine; man as nature is divinity: spirit and flesh which Jehlen, citing Whitman, aptly calls the "American Incarnation."\(^{13}\)

Even though many of Emerson's contemporaries attempted to shift the American Transcendental movement toward one of social humanitarianism, the nation as a whole moved towards Emerson's version and pushed it beyond his initial conception to one that championed individual rights and by extension the tenets of market capitalism.

Reminiscent of the Enlightenment shift in definition of subjectivity, Emerson wrote in Nature, "Man is conscious of a universal soul within or behind his individual life, wherein, as in a firmament, the natures of Justice, Truth, Love, Freedom, arise and shine. This universal soul, he calls Reason" (135). Emerson universalizes and repositions man from observer to actor in an attempt to redefine man's place and create a "permanent,

\(^{13}\) Putting Emerson's philosophy into poetic form, Walt Whitman articulates the god-like quality and understanding of the American poet of whom he writes, "his spirit responds to his country's spirit . . . he incarnates its geography and natural life and rivers and lakes [...] He is a seer . . . he is individual . . . he is complete in himself" (7, 9).
ontological unity;” as Jehlen notes, Emerson’s all-encompassing man “encompasses God as well” (81). Just as the continent of America was outside of time and history, so too is Emerson’s divine man. Therefore, even as a particle of the “universal soul,” this man-God is unbefohden to the demands of society, as his actions are “naturally” attuned to historical and moral obligations. In this way, the larger movement and definitions within Transcendentalism, and by association a national subjectivity, became more and more identified through Emerson’s “vision of the imperial self” (Gura xv).

While Emerson imagined himself as only dealing in the metaphysical realm, his imperialistic logic is revealed in his writing about race. For although he freely uses the term “man,” Emerson’s definition of “man” is quite narrow and exposes his racial presuppositions. In his musings on the universal soul of the universal man, Emerson does not always specify “poet” or “genius” as do other Romantics, but he does not mean to extend his brand of universality very far. Even while other Transcendentalists augmented the “rights of man” to include all humans and worked for the abolition of slavery, Emerson actually seems amazed when he writes, “Strange history this of abolition. The negro must be very old & belongs, one would say, to the fossil formations. What right has he to be intruding into the late & civil daylight of this dynasty of Caucasians & Saxons? It is plain that so inferior a race must perish shortly like the poor Indians” (Journals 393). Emerson’s racism dreams of a new country, a new America, without the contamination of “old,” non-white civilizations. Furthermore, Emerson relies upon his Calvinistic roots and the concept of predestination to justify the hierarchy of human society. He claims, “Because Nature has plainly assigned different degrees of intellect to

14 Benedict Anderson wrote, “racism dreams of eternal contaminations, transmitted from the origins of time through an endless sequence of loathsome copulations: outside history” (149).
these different races, the barriers between are insurmountable. / This inequality is an
indication of the design of Providence that some should lead, and some should serve”
(Journals 181). Obviously, an entire slave population existed within America in the
nineteenth century to demonstrate this “natural” structure provided by God. As a matter
of fact, Morrison describes Romanticism as exploring less the anxieties of the individual
mind and more the collective, American “fear of being outcast, of failing, of
powerlessness” (Playing 37).15 This fear is apparent in Emerson’s definition of “man”
because it depends upon a slave Other to highlight the “inequality” and to establish who
is a “man” and who is not. In this way, Emerson’s argument ultimately unravels his
liberationist project by exposing the inherent circular logic in his concept of the universal
man (Lee 335). His elitism makes a mockery of his philosophy, exposing both the
ludicrous nature of homogenizing principals and the limited applications of his brand of
individualism.

In his novel Invisible Man, Ralph Ellison uses Emerson’s precepts to deconstruct
and rebuild his (Emerson’s) narrow philosophy into one that is more inclusive—
specifically of the African-American man.16 Ellison revered the American Romantics for
exposing what he saw as a fissure in the fabric of the early republic: slavery. He felt that
the Romantics along with “abolitionist moral fervor had made the black man—the

15 Morrison goes on to say: “There is no romance free of what Herman Melville called “the power of
blackness,” especially not in a country in which there was a resident population, already black, upon which
the imagination could play; through which historical, moral, metaphysical, and social fears, problems, and
dichotomies could be articulated. […] In order words, this slave population was understood to have offered
itself up for reflections on human freedom in terms other than the abstractions of human potential and the
rights of man” (38).

16 For more on specific connections between Ellison’s and Emerson’s writings refer to Albrecht, James.
“Saying Yes and Saying No: Individualist Ethics in Ellison, Burke, and Emerson.” PMLA Vol. 114, No. 1,
Special Topic: Ethics and Literary Study (Jan., 1999): 46-63; Lee, Kun Jong. “Ellison’s Invisible Man:
slave—the one true symbol of the American conscience” (Rampersad 11). However, Ellison interrogates the contradictions contained within American mythology as well as within the principles of Romanticism. He particularly examines the tenets of Transcendentalism, questioning and revising them in order to insert himself into a conversation that traditionally ignored anyone who was not a Christian, land-owning, Caucasian man. Paradoxically, although he employs a wider definition than Emerson, Ellison unfortunately also undermines his own project with another exclusive definition of “man” as *Invisible Man* is ripe with the author’s prejudice toward women and his apparent inability to recognize (let alone deconstruct) this contradiction.

From the beginning, and while underground, the narrator tells the reader that he is “fight[ing]” with Emersonian concepts, specifically “power” and “light” (*IM* 4). Kun Jong Lee explains that “Ellison’s main challenge, in seeking to portray his protagonist as an American self, is to clear up and transcend Emerson’s racial prejudice so that the hero can break through the outer surface of racial difference to the inner core of common humanity” (338). Therefore, Ellison utilizes Emerson’s ideas, but he redefines and resituates his overarching philosophy, thereby rejecting Emerson’s prejudices and values, so that his limited “universal” doctrines actually include African Americans. *Invisible Man* unravels the notions of American subjectivity, both in the psychological rendering

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17 Ellison described Melville’s work specifically as imaginatively projecting “the conflicts in the human heart which arose when the sacred principles of the Constitution and Bill of Rights clashed with the practical exigencies of human greed and fear, hate and love” (“Brave Words” 44).

18 Two specific scenes demonstrate Ellison use of female characters as extreme, grotesque tropes. One of which is the dancer who Invisible Man encounters before giving his high school speech, and the other is the female activist with whom he sleeps just prior to the riot.

19 “Power,” for example, receives its own chapter within Emerson’s *The Conduct of Life* (1860): [http://www.emersoncentral.com/conduct.htm](http://www.emersoncentral.com/conduct.htm). Furthermore, Emerson discusses “light” both in the more typical Biblical use (from God/Christ) and as universally residing in every man, much as he uses his concept of the “universal soul.” See “Transcendentalism” (1842) as one such example: [http://www.rwe.org/works/Uncollected_Prose_Dial-Essays1842_2_Transcendentalism.htm](http://www.rwe.org/works/Uncollected_Prose_Dial-Essays1842_2_Transcendentalism.htm).
of the protagonist and in its depiction of an individual stuck in a society that does not value him.  

The search for identity, the psychological journey backward, forward, and inward, that is explored in Ellison's novel is reminiscent of Lewis Mumford's statement that "there is no ancestor so powerful as one's earlier selves." Mumford's choice of "selves" (as plural) demonstrates the many social conditions that affect and create each subject. This multiplicity is not only explored within Ellison's text, but it is also utilized in his compilation style of writing. Ellison described the blues' tradition of improvisation as "an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism" (Shadow and Act 78). So to, in his writing, Ellison creates a blues-like compilation of genre, style, and ideology to feel, transcend, and squeeze the "jagged grain" of the "brutal experience" of racism. Utilizing a wide range of techniques from Dostoevsky to the gothic to Platonic reasoning, he reveals an American society that cannot see his protagonist, only accepting him as a "tool" (IM 418).  

The gothic, particularly, is often associated with an antagonistic stance toward glorified individualism. In her essay on the veil metaphor, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

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20 I say "stuck" because, like Frankenstein's creation, we have not chosen to be born and inserted into a moment in the history of our world. At best we can reflect upon our place within and impact upon society.  

21 The Golden Day: A Study in American Experience and Culture. New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1926. Although I will not be discussing the scene at the "Golden Day" specifically, it is interesting to note that Mumford coined the phrase "Golden Day" when referring to the writings and time period of the American Romantics. This is of course ironic and taken to task by Ellison with his representation of the Golden Day as bar-brothel, the philosophizing "crazy" doctor, and Norton's reaction to the entire scene.  


23 All quotes from Invisible Man will be cited as "IM" with the page number.
explains that in the gothic view, “individual identity [...] is social and relational rather than original or private” (256). Identity comes “after the accumulation of the various inscriptions of character” which occur “only with the retracing or recognition of pairs of marked countenances that are ocularly (never just metaphorically or imaginatively) confronted and compared with each other” (262). In this way, personal identity is applicable “only from outside” and by a “process of visual assimilation or ‘seeing as’” (262). While ocular identity is reminiscent of Emerson’s eye, it challenges the concept of the eye’s vision as creation of itself. Unlike a solitary man in the woods, Sedgwick’s definition of identity is a relational, on-going process of comparison which cannot be accomplished alone. In this way, gothic tropes were used less as a psychological tool for peering into the darkness of an individual mind and more as a method for interrogating the social body.

Likewise, Ellison allocates the gothic for the purposes of social excavation, especially with his use of ambiguity. In *Invisible Man*, he plays with lies, half-truths, myths, and all forms of ambiguity to expose the limitations of false dichotomies and the notion of universal truth. The employment of ambiguity in a discussion of identity is fitting because as a tradition itself, the gothic is unstable: “cobbled together of many different forms and obsessed with transgressing boundaries” (Goddu 5). In Ellison’s text, Sedgwick’s ocular identity takes on physical representations, as he plays with the concept of sight on many levels including invisibility, blindness, and varying types of obscured vision as a result of veils, masks, and costumes. From the Founder’s veil-lifting to Jack’s glass eye, Ellison is obsessed with the notion of obscured vision, both figuratively and literally. Furthermore, he employs ambiguous language to keep the narrator himself in an
almost constant state of confusion caused by misperceptions, lack of information, dreams, and the oppositional constructions of darkness or light/bright/whiteness. By melding style and trope with his social interrogation of the African-American condition, the text of *Invisible Man*, its language, is unstable and performs the very ambiguity that is needed to excavate the inherited, dominant idea of static individuality.

Ellison begins his story by transgressing our notions of personhood with the subtleties of invisibility, setting up at once the idea that things are not as they seem and, even further, that they are one thing and another simultaneously. The narrator is not a "spook" but a man of "flesh and bone, fiber and liquids," and yet he is invisible "simply because people refuse to see [him]" (*IM*, 3). Here Ellison establishes his story within Romantic idealism. By invoking the notions of ghosts, the invisible/unseen, and the imagination, he adjusts the gothic tradition in order to particularly dramatize the African-American situation which, as Albrecht suggests, is "a product of that border space of doubleness" (47). Additionally, what people do see is as telling: "they see only [his] surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination" (*IM*, 3). This doubleness and the accompanying lack of choice regarding how one is seen by others are both reminiscent of Frederick Douglass' inability to know who his father was, because "the means of knowing was withheld from [him]" (340). Douglass' choice of words is extremely significant here: he does not just not know who his father is, but the "means of knowing," the ability to know, have been withheld from him. No amount of education or seeking will reveal the truth to Douglass, because the *means* have been withheld.

Similarly, Invisible Man's means of being seen have been been withheld from him. Even with a body of flesh, blood, and "a mind" and even as the voice of our story, the
narrator cannot be seen, not because of the nature of his body, but because of the “inner eye” of the looker (*IM*, 3). The looker throughout the novel changes, but his/her position as representative of the dominant culture does not change. The very idea that one can decide who/what to see establishes a hierarchy of who can *choose* to see and who cannot, as the Other does not have this choice. *Invisible Man* believes mistakenly that he has agency and that each new looker finally sees him for himself, or at least sees him for who he is trying to project. However, he does not have this kind of agency or the choice of how he is seen, as he is viewed and used by one “master” after another for their own personal gain. Reminiscent of Foucault’s theory of the way in which power utilizes our belief in individuality to fool us and keep us docile, *Invisible Man* is doomed by his misconception as each master utilizes his dream of individuality against him.24

Furthermore, the problem of sight extends to include *Invisible Man’s* interiority because, from the beginning, he has trouble seeing others and himself. The narrator explains that this realization of not being seen causes “you [to] ache with the need to convince *yourself* that you do exist in the real world” (*IM*, 3 [emphasis added]). For the neocolonized subject, as exemplified by *Invisible Man*, existence is always in relation to the colonizer and to their sight and, consequently, results in the colonized’s own Otherness. According to Homi Bhabha, the question of identity is never a “self-fulfilling prophecy.” It is always the creation of an “image of identity” with the colonized subject transforming themselves to assume this image (64).25 As the colonized subject sees their

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24 This is a theme throughout all of Foucault’s work, but specifically see *Power/Knowledge*. Also for an extensive look at Foucault’s philosophy within the conversation of identity, see Nick Mansfield’s text *Subjectivity*.

25 For my theoretical stance for this essay, I rely upon the work of many postcolonial theorists, such as Bhabha. Yo-Me Park wrote that postcolonial is not an approach but “an inescapable historical imperative in our times. Postcolonial criticism calls for an engagement that is attentive to all forms of relations of
place in comparison to the colonizer, they wish to switch places with this looker to see
themselves, so that now they are caught in the tension of demand and desire. Because
one is forced to see oneself only through the eyes of the viewer, this ache is that of the
colonized seeking the gaze of the colonizer. Thus the “very place of identification” for
the colonized “is a space of splitting” (Bhabha 64). Just as described by W. E. B. Du
Bois’ concept of double consciousness, this “image of identity” is an impossible location
for the colonized; one which creates invisibility as a result of the “inner eye” of the
looker and quite possibly tears the colonized asunder.26

Invisible Man therefore finds himself in a double bind. This doubleness is a mask
that goes both ways: the dominant culture refuses to see him to the point that he is unable
to see others or himself clearly. Cornel West describes this as the “state of perpetual and
inheritable domination” in which African-Americans have been born and that produces a
“problematic of invisibility and namelessness” (West 102). Similar to the description of
gothic identity, colonized subjectivity is not private but recognized from without.
Invisible Man is a figure of the double who transforms himself many times depending
upon whom is looking. His search for identity is never a self-fulfilling prophecy as
Bhabha has predicted.

26 In The Souls of Black Folk, Du Bois wrote, “[T]he Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and
gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but
only lets him see himself through revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-
consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s
soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an
American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark
body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (8).
In addition to interrogating colonizing characters in the form of white men, Ellison explores African-American characters who, also caught in this double bind, misrepresent themselves in order to manipulate others for personal gain. Ellison is critical of leaders who knowingly attempt to veil the truth in order to gain or keep power. Bledsoe and Ras are two such leaders who employ the gaze on Invisible Man, but then in turn, Invisible Man realizes that they are images of identities created and manipulated, unwittingly, by race. Although he presents these characters as products of historical and socio-political conditions, Ellison exposes their blindness regarding their own place within society and subsequent lack of action. In so doing, he reveals layers of racism and its impact on our "earlier selves." Furthermore, these characters illuminate how power creates subjects in its image in varying ways so as to highlight the importance of our individual responsibility to recognize and deconstruct these influences, whatever their form.

In the last chapter of *Invisible Man*, at the climax of the novel, we find a figurative dismemberment of the narrator's identity in his final epiphany. It is here, outside of the frame provided by the Prologue and Epilogue, that the action of the novel peaks and the narrator's selves begin their transcendence, the process Cornel West calls "demystification" (105). This is Invisible Man's final confrontation with Ras the Exhorter, turned Destroyer. In this moment, Ras demands the narrator's death, and Invisible Man replies, "Then kill me for myself," as he realizes all of the selves he does not want to be killed for, all of the mistaken identities and the masks that he has assumed (422). Until this point in the narrative, the protagonist has taken many small steps toward
his own “image of identity,” but each time he has been blinded into replacing one masked identity for another. However, his final unveiling is found in this instant.

Leading up to this scene is the chaos of the riot. Just prior to Invisible Man’s epiphany, Ellison’s use of gothic tropes and ambiguity highlight the narrator’s inability to perceive reality. At this point, he has trouble seeing as well as just comprehending what is happening around him. It feels as if all of his previous selves are working in unison to conceal meaning from him: he is wearing Bledsoe’s mask, the Founder’s veil and Jack’s fake eyes all at once and being torn asunder by them. The chapter begins with him being shot and not realizing it, instead only feeling a suspension and then the bursting of time. His sight and memory are obscured. He clutches the brief case carrying his mock identities “as though something infinitely precious had almost been lost” and tries to get his bearing: “I was trying to reach through the gray veil that now seemed to hang behind my eyes” (405). Yet signs and sounds have lost meaning; the street is like “shattered mirrors” (405). The novel’s gothic language continues the sense of instability and disorientation, building the moment to a jagged crescendo with words and images: unnerved, vague forms, liquid dark, grotesque. Dupre’s desperate need to burn the tenant building down instead of suffering within it pushes the narrator to be “filled with a sense of Jack’s outrageous unreality” (413).

Yet more importantly, Invisible Man now begins to realize his own unreality and to feel the masking veil which he, like Jack, has been looking through: “[Dupre] was a type of man nothing in my life had taught me to see, to understand, or respect, a man outside the scheme till now. […] Capable of their own action . . . [N]ow that I wanted to see them, needed to see them, I could not” (413-415). As represented by the leg chain in
his pocket, the *means of knowing* have been kept from Invisible Man. Just like he could not see Bledsoe until he removed his mask, Invisible Man himself has had a problem with his inner eye. So now, although he “needed to see them, [he] could not; feeling them, a dark mass in motion on a dark night, a black river ripping through a black land” (415). Caught in the bind of double consciousness, he has been so desperate to see through the eyes of the colonizer that Invisible Man is not prepared to see his own people when they need him the most.

Again Ellison’s language pushes us forward with the narrator—“half-running, half-walking, trying to see” (415). When Invisible Man hears the term “race riot,” another layer of veil is peeled off, and his level of understanding deepens as he conjures the true motives behind the Brotherhood and their ultimate place within his now long line of oppressors/colonizers. This time, though, he does not blame his lack of education, his southern roots, or his mistaken identity. With a “new sense of self,” Invisible Man realizes that he has been a tool and is now complicit in the creation of the riot and murder, as well as in the oppression of the people of Harlem and ultimately of himself:

*I [...] recognized the absurdity [...] and the simple yet confoundingly complex arrangement of hope and desire, fear and hate, that had brought me here still running, and knowing now who I was and where I was and knowing too that I had no longer to run for or from the Jacks and the Emersons and the Bledsoes and Nortons, but only from their confusion, impatience, and refusal to recognize the beautiful absurdity of their American identity and mine. (422)*

Invisible Man describes the scene as “unreal” with Ras literally dressed in a costume, symbolizing his own veil. Ras is desperate to blame Invisible Man instead of locating himself within the system. Here the narrator understands that they are both pawns of “blind” power:
And that I, a little black man with an assumed name should die because a big black man in his hatred and confusion over the nature of a reality that seemed controlled solely by white men whom I knew to be as blind as he, was just too much, too outrageously absurd. (422)

Furthermore, here the narrator realizes the ridiculousness of his attempt to be a leader to people he is just now able to see, “running ahead of them, only in the stripping away of my illusionment”:

[K]nowing that by dying [...] I would perhaps move them one fraction of a bloody step closer to the definition of who they were and of what I was and had been. But the definition would have been too narrow; I was invisible, and hanging would not bring me visibility, even to their eyes, since they wanted my death not for myself alone but for the chase I’d been on all my life; because of the way I’d run, been run, chased, operated, purged—although to a great extent I could have done nothing else, given their blindness (didn’t they tolerate both Rinehart and Bledsoe?) and my invisibility. (422)

In the moment of his epiphany, all of Invisible Man’s earlier selves are named and exorcised. Although he has spent his life running, he has been trapped by attempting to blindly assimilate and homogenize himself. However, his true clarity comes from realizing that Ras and the people of Harlem also do not understand the complexity of their situation. Finally Invisible Man is able to break free from his double bind: “And I knew that it was better to live out one’s own absurdity than to die for that of others, whether for Ras’s or Jack’s” (422). Reflecting on Emerson’s limited view, Invisible Man notes that, although closer to it, “the definition” of this “American identity” “would have been too narrow” for him and the people of Harlem. Pushing further into our notion of subjectivity, Ellison decenters the Western conception of autonomous individuality by showing that an individual does not stand alone, but is woven into the fabric of the society in which he or she exists.
However, this concept does not equal agency. African Americans are caught within the double bind of a society whose definition of them is “too narrow.” Invisible Man dramatizes what Bhabha describes as “the impossibility of claiming an origin for the Self (or Other) within a tradition of representation that conceives of identity as the satisfaction of a totalizing, plenitudinous object of vision” (66). Throughout the novel, Ellison considers the many possible “definitions” that American mythology has offered African-American men at this time, from student to worker to organizer, but all are confined by the eclipsing definition of “Other.” Furthermore, part of the narrator’s journey to self-discovery is having the veil lifted to see the system at work, but another part is realizing that he will never know what the truth is, as if it is a fixed, singular state of being, one that can be named and purged. Ellison’s use of ambiguity magnifies that nothing is as it seems—nothing stands alone—and finding an identity under the gaze of oppression is an impossibility. As the term subjectivity suggests, Invisible Man’s identity is rhizomatic. And while finding that you are connected to an organism that does not always see you is a painful realization, it is the realization itself, the removing of the veil, that provides hope for agency.

Within the frame of the novel, the narrator admits that now after his unveiling, he has chosen to be purposely out of sight. While this could be considered putting on another mask, this strategic use of invisibility confronts and dislocates the seeing eye of the colonizer.27 Invisible Man no longer needs to be looked upon: “Before that I lived in the darkness into which I was chased, but now I see. I’ve illuminated the blackness of my

27 Bhabha wrote, “We are no longer confronted with an ontological problem of being but with the discursive strategy of the moment of interrogation, a moment in which the demand for identification becomes, primarily, a response to other questions of signification and desire, culture and politics. […] The figure of the double […] cannot be contained within the analogical sign of resemblance… [T]he very question of identification only emerges in-between disavowal and designation (71).
invisibility—and vice versa" (IM, 13). Recognizing that the physical marker of black skin causes this looker's problem with his "inner eye," the narrator realizes the power of the colonizer in forming his subjectivity. It is only through this awareness that the Invisible Man can dismantle the system of oppression and interrupt the gaze. However, now Invisible Man has found the ability to be unrecognizable. He subverts the gaze by living underground. Beneath the surface, he does not give those with the choice the chance to see or not see him. In this way, he is manipulating the system without their knowledge: "Oh they suspect that power is being drained off, but they don't know where" (IM 5).

John Callahan describes the narrator of Invisible Man as a failed orator who needs an audience, starting with the prologue in which he is still too "hurt and vulnerable to risk intimate address even with readers he cannot see. So he puts on a defiant, sometimes hostile mask of invisibility impenetrable to readers except on his terms" (108). To Callahan, it is not until he writes his story and performs the "psychological rhetorical work of creating a resilient, genuine voice" that he can converse with the reader in a traditional call and response format (108). Yet, according to the timeline of the novel itself, the prologue is of course happening after the action of the novel, so the narrator is really setting up the story when he says that "the end is in the beginning" (IM 5). It is not just that he was invisible the whole time and is just now realizing it. He has learned to utilize invisibility as a tool, as a device against the system of reflection: "I can now see the darkness of lightness. And I love light. [...] Without light I am not only invisible, but formless as well; and to be unaware of one's form is to live a death. [...] The truth is the light and light is the truth" (IM, 6). On the other hand, I do agree with Callahan's
insistence that Invisible Man needs an audience. Locating the system and deflecting it is only the first step.

Even though the novel draws attention to the rhizomatic nature of identity, it stops short of incorporating Invisible Man into a community. The final step after deconstruction is regeneration because it is not enough to simply recognize the system of oppression. As we will see within Morrison’s work, dismantling along with the recreation of an identity is imperative. This does not mean an Emersonian creation of self and world as divine, but of a subject as part of a community interested in mutual health. Lee finds that Invisible Man ascends from the coal cellar (post burning his previous identities) into a “communal” one after affirming his African-American identity. Therefore, “when the invisible man descends into himself, the self he finds is not a spiritual essence so much as a repository for the deepest cultural values of black experience in America” (339). Yet considering Ellison’s female characters in the novel, one has to wonder at the specificity of this experience. His values, while seeking to incorporate his southern roots and communist leanings, speak narrowly to an educated, black man trying to find his place within the long line of male “geniuses.” Paradoxically, just as Emerson’s racism ultimately undermines his universal concepts, and even as Ellison resituates Emerson’s vision of liberal humanism, he also cripples his own philosophy by ignoring and subjugating his female characters.

In short, Invisible Man focuses on this double bind on many levels from the neo-colonized wrestling with the gaze of the colonizer to the collision of black bodies with the lofty philosophy of American Transcendentalism. However, Ellison’s re-envisioned individualism still “fails” because he does not move to the next level. He locates the
“problem” of history, the entanglements and impossibility of shaking it off, but does not come to a point of building himself anew. Ellison’s project of redeeming Emerson’s humanism takes deconstruction very far—peeling off layers of oppression, even interrogating the role of fellow African Americans who complacently wear a “yessing” mask or who mirror the colonizer so well as to actually become another like-minded oppressor. Yet he stops short and ends the novel with the hero alone in the “light” of his individual philosophy, his genius, his seeing eye, but still “below ground,” still alone. As I will discuss in the subsequent chapters, Invisible Man would have to literally emerge as a responsible individual, open and willing to work inside of a community, in order to truly subvert and decenter the colonizer and to create a place for himself, not outside, but within a community.
Chapter 2

Graveyard Love: Destructive Individualism in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*

The kind of work I have always wanted to do requires me to learn how to maneuver ways to free up the language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains.
— Toni Morrison

"It is about love. What else?"

They turned to Milkman. "You want the heart?" they asked him. Quickly, before any thought could paralyze him, Milkman plunged both hands into the rib cage.
— Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*

I wanted to look closely at *Invisible Man* prior to *Song of Solomon* because I find that the novel forms an indispensible bridge between the long lineage of Western thought that culminates in Emerson’s convincing philosophy28 and Morrison’s spoken, female-based, anti-capitalist project based upon love and community. Ellison appropriated the tenets of Transcendentalism to recuperate an American identity. While his neocolonial analysis of what it means to be an Other in America is still vital today, Morrison extends this analysis a step further. She asks Ellison: “now what?” So you have managed to expose these layers, lift this veil, but now you are just as alone, ostracized—you’ve “illuminated your blackness,” but you have stopped short. Morrison resituates the tropes and definitions of American Romanticism, as well the response of her African-American, male author predecessors, to imagine an alternative way of being. *Song of Solomon* shows that autonomy in the form of responsibility, similar to the unveiling that Invisible Man accomplishes, is only the first part of Morrison’s project. Individuals must

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28 By “convincing” I mean that the foundation of Transcendentalism remains the basis for the individualistic principles which enshrine the concept of America and function in very material ways, such as free market capitalism.
deconstruct their "earlier selves," but Morrison's necessary actors must also rebuild themselves utilizing communal values so as to simultaneously rebuild their community.

Morrison particularly responds to an American way of life that, as exemplified by Ellison's writing, continues to struggle with the inclusion of women. In Outlaw Culture, bell hooks describes the necessity of analyzing the colonization of women in this way: "For contemporary critics to condemn the imperialism of the white colonizer without critiquing patriarchy is a tactic that seeks to minimize the particular ways gender determines the specific forms oppression may take within a specific group" (203). Specifically, like many African-American female authors and scholars, Morrison examines the way in which money, race, and gender inequalities impact her culture. She explains that her work "requires [her] to think about how free [she] can be as an African-American woman writer in [our] genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized world" (4). Yet her project is not one of "disappointment," but one that hopes to "transform aspects of [our] social grounding into aspects of language" in order to tell stories, fight wars, and work out debates "blanketed" in her texts (4).

Morrison's emphasis on social grounding and on society's need for healing is at the forefront of both her writing and its criticism. The beauty of her novels is that she does not limit herself by only responding to the male cannon, but she marries techniques and ideology from a myriad of places including the Sentimental Romantic tradition, domesticity, African-American cultural history, and the oral tradition. Critics have discounted her novels for being too women-centric, for being modern sentimentalism,

29 In Playing in the Dark, Morrison notes that our American literary culture "has been clearly the preserve of white male views, genius, and power" (5).
and for using magical realism to avoid providing any "real" solutions. However, I argue that these responses to Morrison's work miss the point entirely and rely upon the very structures that she challenges. As Heinze notes:

[Morrison's novels] haunt and torment a guilty conscience in need of absolution and redemption, for in each of her works Morrison launders one American ideal after another [...] She is a mythbasher in a country where writers have been canonized for creating and perpetuating the myths that form the foundation of the American way of thinking. (3)

This myth-bashing voice of questioning that we found in Ellison's novel is extended in Morrison's work. She too wants to examine her place in this long lineage of Western thought, but she is not satisfied with only finding a place there. Her larger project is one of excavating all of the roots that have made her into the multiplicity of being an African-American, woman, mother, author, and scholar. To this end, she examines and reimagines this vast root system in forms that range from American hegemony to cultural ties, from historical accounts to old family songs.

In order to discover the alternative journey that Morrison proposes to the one followed by Invisible Man, it is necessary to first examine the incomplete selves presented in Song of Solomon. Like Invisible Man's many identities, Morrison's characters are in multifarious states of anguish and function both as representatives of extraneous conditions and as evidence of their frozen inaction. Morrison works extensively with the notion of double consciousness caused by neocolonialism as

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30 See Stanley Crouch's review of Beloved printed in New Republic (October 19, 1987, 43) for an example of this type of criticism. And see Joseph Reilly's article "Under the White Gaze: Jim Crow, the Nobel, and the Assault on Toni Morrison" printed in Monthly Review (April 1994, 45.11: 41) for the way in which racist discourse is very much still active in Morrison's critics.

31 Morrison made this response to her critics: "I tend not to explain things very much, but I long for a critic who will know what I mean when I say "church," or "community," or when I say "ancestor," or "chorus."" (McKay 425).
discussed with *Invisible Man*. Her characters are isolated from their own community by external forces, such as racism and institutionalized poverty, by their own blindness, or by both. Morrison shows the way in which individuals and entire communities are made and stifled by power, while simultaneously critiquing those who become consumed with the isolating pursuit of individualism. Nick Mansfield describes the crippling effect of the dream of individualism:

> What makes us such an effective ‘vehicle’ for power is the very fact that we seek to see ourselves as free of it and naturally occurring. [...] The dream of individuality denies power, and encourages the individual to become preoccupied with itself [...] To Foucault, all these images of human self-consciousness ended up as the modern individual endlessly turned in on itself, supposedly discovering its unique truth, but really making itself prey to a power. (55)

This preoccupation equates to inaction. Ultimately, the failed individuals within *Song of Solomon* are obsessed with their isolationist projects and unable to complete the process of unveiling power’s modes of control, let alone rebuild themselves within their community. Morrison’s final goal for communal-individual wholeness—mediated through history and love—demands action. Regeneration is evolving to the point of being a responsible, constructive member of one’s community which requires removing the veil to see power at work and then rebuilding yourself and your community.

One way that *Song of Solomon* deals with petrification is in the form of dominant patriarchy. Morrison’s epigraph (“The father may soar / And the children may know their names”) implies that the fathers have yet to soar and that her undertaking in the novel may provide some assistance. In his essay “The Long Strut: *Song of Solomon* and the Emancipatory Limits of Black Patriarchy,” Rolland Murray describes Morrison’s use of flight in *Song of Solomon* as “libration from social tyranny,” exemplified by Shalimar, Robert Smith, and Milkman, but at the same time, he finds the ‘strutting’ of the novel’s
male characters impede this flight. By locating "black patriarchy within an American system of racial segregation and disenfranchisement," *Song of Solomon* reveals its limitation "as an emancipatory ideology. Therefore, the novel critiques the ability of black patriarchy to provide emancipation for the larger community. Ultimately, the novel's patriarchs contribute to the reconstitution of a social hierarchy that is predicated on black Americans' dispossession and political marginality" (Murray 123). For example, while Dr. Foster's elite position functions as a "symbol of black empowerment," it offers only imaginary liberation for the larger community. Foster represents a bourgeois class whose position literally relies upon "the continued marginality of the larger black community" (Murray 123). His status was formed in part because his customers cannot go to other doctors or hospitals. It is, therefore, their segregation and disenfranchisement that has made him. Although the community tries to establish its dominion and esteem by renaming a street in honor of the doctor's symbolic rise in station (Not Doctor Street), Foster's compromised position and condescending attitude toward the community reveal this to be a thwarted mobility, as well as the limitation, if not impossibility, of his brand of patriarchy. In other words, Foster is not bringing the community along with him. On the contrary, he despises those who literally placed him in this "superior" position with their patronage and working class money, calling his patients "cannibals" and keeping his daughter isolated and separated from their neighbors (*Song* 71). In fact, Foster's career and income reveal a "disturbing parasitic need to preserve black marginality to maintain his status" which ultimately leads to communal, "black disempowerment" (Murray 127; 125). In addition to Foster, this
position is also familiar as representative of Macon Dead’s (II) predatory station within the community.32

*Song of Solomon*’s strongest critique is placed on those who ignore their own culture and destroy their community.33 Within the novel, as with many of her other texts, Morrison specifically criticizes African Americans who buy into the capitalistic model that is predicated on preying upon others within their village. As a family, the Deads have lost their connection with their culture and have instead aligned themselves with white values.34 Heinze calls the Deads “social half-breeds” because they are caught in DuBois’ double bind. They represent an “emerging Black middle class who measure[d] success in how far they have come from in denying cultural roots” (Heinze 68). For Morrison this denial reveals an inauthentic existence, and the last name of Dead “signifies forfeited beings, empty lives” (Hudson-Weems 54). She, therefore, decenters our notion of the “nuclear” family by presenting the Deads (the only two parent—

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32 To be clear and in attempt to honor the text, I will refer to Macon Dead I as Macon Dead I, to Macon Dead II as simply Macon Dead, and to Macon Dead III as Milkman.

33 Throughout this chapter, I will refer to “culture” and “community” interchangeably, and both words will refer to the difficult to define (let alone encompass in one word) notions of ancestry, history, and knowledge that are passed from one generation to the next. Specifically, as discussed in Chapter Three, I mean to capture what is important within a communal unit, regardless of the size, and which is often passed through the oral traditional—stories told, songs sung, behavior signified of and against.

34 To be clear, I am attempting to use the term “white” in the same way in which I feel that it is utilized within *Song of Solomon*, as in “unnatural” (155). Therefore, the term does not signify all non-African American characters, but behavior that is associated with American hegemony. Specifically this includes both systems which are dependent upon capitalistic markets, as well as epistemological concerns, such as overarching myths of Manifest Destiny or the American Dream which, in turn, have driven and explained many crimes and much destruction perpetrated upon non-whites. Finally this white culture is often at odds with communal needs and concerns. Specifically within much of Morrison’s fiction, this culture is the antithesis of the community/culture that she is trying to establish and even rescue from these destructive repercussions.
working father, stay-at-home mother—unit) as the most broken: capitalistic, racist, and sexist (Wall 25).  

Macon especially emulates white greed in his obsession with accumulating land, wealth, and social status. In turn his parasitic lifestyle destroys all, including his family and the larger community. Macon is a classic gothic villain based upon monetary tyranny, an economic boogie man. Purposely separating himself from his family, his history, and the larger community, he becomes a grotesque abomination, a caricature of lonely, hateful and hated, parasitic capitalism. Actually, Macon is the embodiment of capitalism. Discussing the impact on subjectivity of the shift from a communal-based to a free-market system, Nick Mansfield explains that “free-market economy needed the autonomous individual as its fundamental social unit, separate from communal and family identifications that could compromise the absolute freedom of movement of entrepreneurs, workers and capital itself (as a kind of free and autonomous inhuman subjectivity in its own right)” (174). This highlights the isolating and predatory nature of Macon’s business and the parading of his wealth which, like Dr. Foster’s practice, cannot lead to a comingled relationship with the community, let alone heal either party.

Quite the opposite, the extreme nature of Macon’s position receives one of the strongest critiques in the novel, as Guitar’s grandmother tells him: “a nigger in business is a terrible thing to see,” and Porter exclaims that Macon is the worst of all and deserves to die (Song 22; 26). As an adult, Guitar goes as far as to state that no one can help Macon and that he will reap what he sows, because he acts like a white man: greedy and hateful (Song 223). Macon cannot be an integral part of the community and

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35 Denise Heinze also writes extensively about Morrison’s critique of “capitalist patriarchy” and her “reinvisioned family” in her book Double Consciousness.
simultaneously acquire the kind of wealth that he seeks because his pursuit is dependent upon the continued domination of his people.

Macon’s power and, furthermore, his self-worth are tied to the material world as represented by his possessions, his keys, his tenant homes, and ultimately the land itself. He is comforted by his possessions, as he literally “fondles” his keys so that “their bunchy solidity calms him” (17). This reliance puts him at odds with anyone who competes with or potentially jeopardizes his possessions, including his own family and the very community on which he relies. When he evicts Guitar Bains’s grandmother, Macon thinks that if he let people like her have their way, he would not have anything; and he remembers that these keys had given him the ability to approach Dr. Foster. Because Macon did not know why the Doctor wanted Ruth to marry, he “believed the magic had lain in the two keys” (Song 23). Without his keys, this physical reminder of his material wealth, he would have “floated away…melted like new wax” in front of Foster’s status (22).

Ironically, at the same time that he is comforted by physical representations of his wealth, Macon is undermined by this same material reality on several levels. Macon is duped by his status. He believes that his symbolic authority is real power and agency. Yet he is actually a middle man caught between segregated Black America and white capitalists and rejected by both (Murray 127). For example, even though Macon claims to Milkman that he has respect due to his position, Milkman notes that it is his money, not his respect, which the police and the bankers seek (Song 204). Similarly, his relationship with the community is one based upon fear and his monetary position of landlord and not one based upon mutual respect. Macon’s choice to isolate himself from
the community by holding his keys in higher acclaim than his tenants and his family places him in a double bind.

The community, however, does not simply give over their agency to Macon because he has monetary power. For example, when he attempts to claim the physical place occupied by his office with his name in writing over the door, the locals exert their agency by continuing to call his office by its previous name: Sonny’s Shop. In this way, the community downgrades whatever power Macon’s money allows him. This instance highlights his outsider status and the community’s power to annex or ostracize. Unfortunately Macon is already too far removed to recognize this power and sees the renaming as ignorant. When thinking about his office, he imagines that somewhere in his lineage someone had a “name that was real [...] A name that was not a joke, nor a disguise, nor a brand name” (17). Yet Macon’s short-sighted lust for wealth has left him unable to comprehend the naming process.

The concept of naming is a powerful tool within the African-American community. Morrison utilizes names to indicate who is and who is not part of the community. She explains that African Americans are “very interested in names” because historically they were given white ones. They did not want to keep those names, but renamed themselves with “nicknames.” Therefore, in her writing, she uses “the names that black people are willing to accept for themselves” (Brown 460). These “names they got from yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes, weaknesses. Names that bore witness” (Song 329). Even Macon’s car is renamed by the community, revealing and bearing witness to his impotent position. The car is described as “dead,” not to associate it with Macon, but because it does not provide pleasure for the community; it is not what
a car is “for” in the eyes of the town. There are no shared experiences, no joy rides, no meeting folks, and no sex in the back seat. Rejecting the community and rejected by them, his car is aptly named “Macon Dead’s hearse” (Song 33).

Even though Macon has intentionally isolated himself and his family, he also realizes that he is missing something but does not have the agency to affect change. While critical of Pilate’s lifestyle, he voyeuristically sits outside her window, watching and listening. In sharp contrast to the lack of love or pleasure he feels at his own house, Macon momentarily feels peaceful and content (Song 29). However, even as he seeks refuge in her voice, he is embarrassed in the light of day by her unkempt appearance, by what he perceives as a shadow over his propertied position. Lost in his fervor for material acquisition and caught in its double bind, Macon now views everything around him, including his own family, through the gaze of the colonizer. Just as we saw with Invisible Man, the power of double consciousness and the juxtaposition that it causes creates a confused identity that is never a self-fulfilling prophecy. In this way, Macon loses touch with his history, ancestry, and family—aspects which literally constitute who he is. With this loss, he takes on the mask of the colonizer and sees his family through these new eyes. Therefore, stuck in this never-ending cycle, any remnants of love he has for his father and sister only serve to remind him of his loss and, by extension, the need for acquisition which he has utilized to fill this hole.

Although now warped, this thirst for ownership was instilled in Macon by this father. As noted by Murray, Macon Dead I demonstrates the limbo which black Americans lived in after emancipation and the myth that a black patriarch would (could) lead them out of the wilderness (125). Many still had faith in the American system even
when whites only recognized them in a now neo-slavery position. Macon Dead I exemplifies those who felt that African Americans could only be liberated through land ownership, not political rights or power. Described as the embodiment of the American man’s man, illiterate and without money, with only a pretty wife and free papers, Macon I was everything his contemporaries wished to be. By association, he had created “[t]he farm that colored their lives like a paint brush and spoke to them like a sermon”:

“You see?” the farm said to them. “See? See what you can do? Never mind you can’t tell one letter from another, never mind you born a slave, never mind you lose your name, never mind your daddy dead, never mind nothing. Here, this here, is what a man can do if he puts his mind to it and his back in it. [...] Stop picking around the edges of the world. Take advantage [...] Grab it. Grab this land! Take it, hold it, my brothers, make it, my brothers, shake it, squeeze it, turn it, twist it, beat it, kick it, kiss it, whip it, stomp it, dig it, plow it, seed it, reap it, rent it, buy it, sell it, own it, build it, multiply it, and pass it on—can you hear me? Pass it on!” (235)

As Murray notes, Macon I’s story demonstrates the “potential power of individual male autonomy. The farm, an embodiment of rugged individualism’s efficacy, becomes a material testament which can stand in for the litany of lacks pervading the men’s lives: their illiteracy, their history as slaves, and even the murder of their fathers are symbolically redeemed through Macon’s success” (126). However, he is vulnerable to white aggression, which keeps him from true political or legal atonement, let alone effecting larger-scale emancipation for the community. Thus the other men begin to die along with him; his children are estranged from each other; his only son, living without him and without a connection to his history, becomes warped by this singular male endeavor; and love for the father turns into an isolating obsession.

Just as Guitar calls whites “unnatural,” so too is Macon as he becomes consumed with owning things, starting with the gold which causes him to murder (at least he thinks
he has murdered the miner) and abandon Pilate, even as his father’s spirit tries to communicate with them. When Macon allows himself to remember the farm, he smiles while describing his childhood and his father to Milkman. This moment of connection, of memory/history/community, briefly changes Macon, so that his voice sounds different to Milkman: “[l]ess hard […] comfortable and soft” (Song 52). But this remembering also brings him back to his need to fill this gaping hole of loss with physical objects. Thinking of his father and their home, plus Pilate’s assumed betrayal, leads Macon to remember his need for money, possessions, and his comforting keys. Telling Milkman that he needs a job because working is what is “real,” Macon explains his philosophy: “Let me tell you right now the one important thing you’ll ever need to know: Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you’ll own yourself and other people too” (Song 55). And as Milkman realizes later, Macon “acquired things and used people to acquire more things” as homage to his father by loving what he had loved: property (Song 300). Macon had loved his father, worked along side him, but “something went wild” when Macon I was killed (Song 234). Now distorted by grief, isolation, and excess, “[o]wning, building, acquiring” becomes “his life, his future, his present, and all the history he knew. That he distorted life, bent it, for the sake of gain, was a measure of his loss at his father’s death” (Song 300). Yet even though Macon’s drive is meant to honor his father, it is now “unnatural,” predatory capitalism—a destructive abomination to the idea of family and community. Macon’s impotent revenge was transformed into needing to own things. In this way, he ends up mimicking the whites who caused his father’s demasculinization and death, as well as Macon’s loss of the family land and heritage.
The concept of Macon as an incomplete and unnatural self is furthered by his constant misrepresentation of the past. Not only has his love morphed into something unhealthy, but he also continually misunderstands situations and people. He assumes too much in his haste to reclaim the land taken from his father. From the very first moment after Macon I’s death and the idea of “free” gold appears in his mind, Macon is willing to kill the miner and, worse, to misjudge his own sister and then abandon her. His quick anger with Pilate is based on a misconception on his part. He then spends his entire life toxically blaming her for what he imagines to be this first betrayal, when in fact it was his own greed and grief that set this event in action, clouded his judgment, caused him to misunderstand his father’s message (his connection to history which Pilate understands and follows), and consequently separated him from his own community—history, knowledge, and love.

Just as he believed that this gold was his ticket to freedom—“Life, safety, and luxury fanned out before him like the tailspred of a peacock” (Song 170)—and redemption for his father, Macon continues to believe (and again base his life upon) the notion that money provides him with respect and status among both the white and African-American communities. This misplaced notion significantly affects his relationship with Ruth. Although Macon may have enjoyed their intimacy in the beginning, he also viewed Ruth as a needed component in the fulfillment of his climb to the top. Yet when he cannot completely control and own her, their relationship becomes another series of misunderstood intentions and outright lies perpetrated by Macon which, in turn, isolate and cause misery for the entire family. For example, when Macon cannot remember what happened on the night of the Doctor’s death, he has to “imagine” and
“even fabricate” it in order to keep alive his disgust and hatred of Ruth (Song 16). Still proud to say “I’m my daddy’s daughter,” as in not Macon’s property, Ruth remains a constant reminder of his failure to control her (Song 74).

It is, of course, this notion of owning others which is the most ostracizing and repugnant to the community at large and the most hurtful to his immediate family. Macon’s unnatural enterprise robs his family of love and affection, as seen in his prison-like home and his suffocating disrespect for all of them. When Lena explains to Milkman that he and their father have not really cared for her and Corinthians, she describes how Macon sought only to show them off like another possession: “they could envy us, envy him [...] First he displayed us, then he splayed us. All our lives were like that: he would parade us like virgins through Babylon, then humiliate us like whores in Babylon” (Song 215). Yet while his status as their father allows Macon to control his children and to raise up his son in his image while humiliating his daughters, his inability to own Ruth turns his feelings toward her into hatred.

Similar to the community’s use of naming to indicate character, and more specifically a flaw in character, Ruth Foster’s name reveals the fact that she is “fostered” by her relationship with her father (Hudson-Weems 56). Lacking a mother or sisters to model healthy relationships by providing a confident and education in the ways of community, Ruth relies solely upon her father. She is so dominated by him that she is literally created as simply her “daddy’s daughter.” Otherwise nameless in the community, his fostering leaves her without a true identity, without a self: dead. Reminiscent of Invisible Man, Ruth becomes lost in the identities assigned to her by others, first daughter and later mother. In this way, Ruth’s character makes a mockery of
the socially-constructed concepts of mother and daughter as she is trapped in these definitions and obsessed with the way she believes they should be performed. Colonized by her performance of daughter and mother, she becomes death-like, inoperative and unable to function as an actor for herself, let alone in such a way as to mentor her family.

Blinded by these constructs, Ruth cannot comprehend that her father, husband, and son cannot return her affection because she is so shallow. Ruth marries Macon not realizing that her father wishes to distract and unload her on him and that Macon, in turn, needs her more as piece of his burgeoning dynasty than for love. When Pilate meets Ruth early on, she decides to stay in town because Ruth was already “dying of lovelessness” (151). As Heinze notes, “Without a sense of inner beauty or purpose, Morrison’s characters cannot sustain love” (52). So without real love and affection shown toward her, Ruth’s own love cannot grow and blossom. As a matter of fact, and again playing upon names, Milkman considers his mother lost in her grief as “insubstantial,” “a frail women content to do tiny things […] jealous of death” (Song 75; 64). Specifically, Milkman does not think of Ruth as a mother at all but more as one of his sisters; together the three are a disembodied conglomeration in his mind until he is confronted at the onset of his journey.

However, whether Milkman knows his own history or not, Ruth does commit one act outside of her assumed daughter/wife role: she asks Pilate for help. Ruth recognizes Pilate’s power as her last chance at physical intimacy, conception, and birth. Furthermore, whereas she initially follows Macon’s naming tradition, Ruth ultimately provides Milkman with the means of being taken into the community and named with her needy and overdue nursing. Yet even with these acts of rebellion, Ruth performs them
selflessly, not for the betterment of herself or the community. Hence Ruth's relationship
with Milkman fashions another "identity outside herself," so that she remains an
unwhole, unrealized self (Hudson-Weems 56). As a matter of fact, the narrator explains
that Milkman "had never been a person to her, a separate real person. He had always
been a passion" (Song 131). Ethereally Ruth thinks of him first as nausea and then as "a
beautiful toy, a respite, a distraction" (Song 132). Like her half-imagined relationship
with her father, Ruth’s feelings for and relationship with Milkman are not based upon a
true bond formed between two individuals. She does not teach or mentor him as her role
within the community would dictate because she cannot. Instead she lives in a child-like,
 fantasy world in which her imagination must suffice for real love.

Additionally, although Ruth is the only member of the community for whom Dr.
Foster actually cared, she represents the larger, marginalized black citizenry who are
"over-invested in patriarchal symbols" (Murray 125). Both Ruth and Macon
idealistcally remember being raised by their fathers, but without real mentoring (cut
short for Macon and not existent for Ruth), they remain limited as wounded, orphaned
young with misplaced obsessions. Raising the material provisions provided by her father
to symbolize love, even loving an empty room that was once his, Ruth becomes
associated with individualized material reality and consequently objectified. Even if
Macon cannot completely control her, she is another piece of his status puzzle in his own
warped homage to his father. Ruth is another house, another key, a commodity, more
land to be owned and manipulated for Macon’s end.

For this reason, Ruth is an example of another double bind: she is a colonized
woman. Battling over Milkman’s affection, Ruth is a described as “the Indian, of course,
[who] lost her land, her customs, her integrity to the cowboy and became a spread-eagled footstool resigned to her fate and holding fast to tiny irrelevant defiances” (Song 132). Furthermore, while materially dependent upon and bound to Macon, she also remains dependent upon Dr. Foster for her commodified status, which is unknowingly highlighted by Macon when he says, “You by yourself ain’t nobody” (Song 67). Ruth is fractured in that she cannot act autonomously and is not part of the larger community because first her father and later her objectified condition keeps her separated from it.

At points within Song of Solomon, Ruth is unsympathetic in her desperate hollowness. As a mother, more is expected of her—more action. Yet, as I have already discussed, she was created in the loveless image of a father who disapproved of the same community that he fed upon. However, unlike the patriarchs Foster and Macon, Ruth is not actively destroying the community, but she is a product of her own lacking community. She does not perform communal duties by teaching her children, instead living in a dead father’s fantasy world. She is motivated by love; but without a solid foundation of her own identity, this love, first for her father and later for Milkman, becomes ineffectual selflessness. Therefore, Ruth is a hollow and failed individual because she does not assist with healing or growth.

At the same time, Ruth attempts to act out of her desperation for love. Not only does she ask Pilate for assistance, but she drugs Macon. Then, again with Pilate’s help, she protects Milkman against Macon and Hagar. She provides the mechanism for Milkman’s communal name. And most importantly, Ruth creates a bound between him and Pilate which, unknown to infant Milkman, will carry him throughout his life.
Unfortunately, in the end, Ruth remains lost, never strong enough in herself, to receive
love, even genuine son-love.

With both Hagar and Ruth, Morrison demonstrates that selflessness to the point of
literally not having a self, an identity, is worthless. As Heinze points out, Morrison is
critical of female characters who search for fulfillment that cannot enrich the community
(99). Because a healthy community is always the goal, “Morrison offers possibilities,
avenues of change, escape, and hope that speak to the inviolate self. Indeed it is self, the
individual, who must first undergo realization, who must originate; otherwise, change
becomes the possession of fate and accident rather than intentionality” (Heinze 142).
Depending completely on unrequited love retards Ruth’s potential growth and ultimately
destroys any chance of autonomy and acceptance. Pilate tells both Ruth and Hagar that
Milkman does not want them because hollow as they are, they cannot be a home for him:
“whatever he need, don’t none of you got it” (Song 139). Later Pilate’s sentiment is
repeated by Guitar when he tells Hagar, “You’re turning over your whole life to him.
Your whole life, girl. And if it means so little to you that you can just give it away, hand
it to him, then why should it mean any more to him? He can’t value you more than you
value yourself” (Song 306). As we will see with Pilate’s lifestyle and Milkman’s quest,
for Morrison, it takes a whole individual to create a whole community.

Like Ruth and Macon, Guitar is initially motivated by love, but this same love
becomes misguided and ultimately consumes his life. For much of Song of Solomon,
Guitar is a brother and mentor to Milkman: “the boy who not only could liberate him,
but could take him to the woman who had as much to do with his future as she had his
past” (36). Guitar is pivotal in pushing Milkman to conceive of a world outside his
insular one, as well as in bringing him to Pilate and functioning as one of the catalysts that push him to follow his father’s gold and finally find his own quest. Conversely Guitar tells Milkman very little. Morrison said in an interview that she was “amazed at how little men taught one another” in *Song of Solomon* and that she chose a man “to make that journey because [she] thought he had more to learn than a woman would have” (McKay 428). Unlike in a mentoring relationship where teaching and modeling are the modes of operation, the relationships between men in the novel are more often based upon and limited by fear or camaraderie, neither of which lead to the type of education that Milkman needs to understand his history and culture. This is specifically clear with Guitar’s older brother-like friendship that relies heavily upon him feeling that he knows better than Milkman and which turns secretive and finally full of hurt by the end of the narrative.

Although Guitar represents one of the types of knowledge contained within the community and facilitates Milkman’s exposure to it, he simultaneously represents the limits of anger and hatred as an impetus of change. Guitar opens Milkman’s eyes to the racism that he has been relatively insulated from until this point. He helps Milkman to dream and imagine other ways of living that are not determined by his father. He assists Milkman with accepting the communal naming process in general and his own name specifically. And he provides Milkman with the adage that will eventually bring him to his final epiphany: “Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down” (*Song* 179). Indeed Guitar at first appears to be the inverse of Macon—a surrogate, community-based, father figure with knowledge on how a man should act in his world. He loves the community. He tells Milkman that he is not part of the Seven Days because of hatred
towards whites but love for Blacks: "My whole life is love" (Song 159). Yet his answer to racism, his method, is ineffectual. For as Guitar acknowledges, he and all of the Seven Days chose to live apart because of the danger that they bring to the community. They cannot marry, must act anonymously, and do not even discuss their actions with each other. Therefore, Guitar is similar to Macon in that his brand of patriarchy is limited and his warped love is not compatible with healing the community.

Guitar is also like Macon in that he is fighting for the land. When discussing politics and Milkman's lack of interest, Guitar tells him: "No geography? Okay, no geography. What about some history in your teas? Or some sociopolitico—No. That's still geography. Goddam, Milk, I do believe my whole life's geography" (114). Although understanding one's history may encompass understanding (and in Milkman's case, visiting) geography from the past, or specifically transgressing the North/South divide and comprehending the migration of one's ancestors, both Guitar and Macon place too much value in land. As Heinze points out, Guitar sees this value as "key to ethnic and personal identities" (134). Yet as I have already discussed there are limits to landownership as seen with the murder of Macon I and the isolation of Macon (II). Specifically Macon replaced his missing community with an "unnatural" material acquisition and, by extension, dominion over others. Similarly, although Guitar is raised and mentored by his grandmother and sisters, he allows the loss of his father and its association with whites to usurp this grounding and consume him. Like Macon, Guitar's misplaced value and love become twisted and destructive when he mimics white behavior, which in his case is killing innocents. For both of them, their individual
obsession with revenge (through owning for Macon and killing for Guitar) becomes a greed and need that is opposite of the community and consequently detrimental to it.

Finally and most apparent is Guitar’s loss of the concept of community when he turns upon his brother and wants to kill Milkman. Much like the scene between Ras the Destroyer and the Invisible Man, which I discussed in Chapter 1, by the time Guitar comes for Milkman, he has lost all footing in his own community, all remembrance of his initial values, of who he is fighting for and why. Isolation from the larger community at first and later his own surrogate brother coupled with this individualistic greed for revenge completely separate Guitar from the communal family that has raised and made him.36 Even before he completely turns, Guitar’s language moves from one of reprimanding Macon for his “unnatural” wealth accumulation to one of realizing the power that money will provide for his anarchist commitment: “You can’t get no pot of gold being reasonable. Can’t nobody get no gold being reasonable. You have to be unreasonable” (Song 183). In fact, this entire exchange with Milkman reveals Guitar’s communal love and desire to help turning toward material possessions in a misplaced dream of freedom and revenge. Along this path, Milkman cannot follow Guitar—accepting some of this wisdom (“give up the shit that weighs you down”) while rejecting the overall sentiment. Furthermore, and possibly most telling is when Guitar misunderstands, misjudges and hates Pilate for placating to the police in order to rescue him and Milkman. This instance has another layer of foreshadowance in that it provides a

36 The reader finds out early in the novel that Guitar was raised by his mother and sisters. Also he is presented as having street knowledge and experience, learning in barber shops and pool halls. In this way, he is raised by a mix of community and a family unit that is not typically associated with the white, heteronormative, “nuclear” family structure.
moment of clarity for Milkman as he both recognizes Pilate’s power to protect and Guitar’s capabilities as a killer (Song 210).

In the end, Guitar goes so far as to attempt to murder his brother. His warped love evolves to the same point of opposition that we find Macon’s. Also similar to the selfless, “Anaconda” love that consumes Ruth and Hagar is the selfish-love-turned-greed in which Macon and Guitar cannot assist, let alone heal, the community at large. Quite the converse, selfish love destroys communal bonds, even between brothers. With both Macon and Guitar, we find men who started out in healthy, familial relationships but, because of fear and anger, slowly allowed their families to slip away, while these emotions took hold and warped their love along with their memory and history. With Ruth we see a woman not raised by a community, but separated from it by a parasitic, selfish father and therefore unable to rebuild herself anew but only in the image of others. With Hagar, we see a woman who has rejected the healthy community she was born into, lost in a false ideal of love. With these four unfulfilled (Dead, dead, or willing to kill) characters, Morrison demonstrates the dire consequences of living within one’s own mind, of getting lost in unreality, in a dream of freedom that cannot be, in obsession. To make a whole individual takes a community, and to make a whole community takes whole individuals, who, while not perfect, are striving for the betterment and love of themselves within the larger group.
Chapter 3

Singing in Harmony:
The Necessity of Community in *Song of Solomon*

Culture is what remains after we’ve forgotten everything we’ve read.
– Ortega y Gasset.

There can be no vulnerability without risk; and there can be no community without vulnerability; and there can be no peace—and ultimately no life—without community. -- M. Scott Peck

The community is the owner of the story, and it can tell it the way it deems it fit.
-- Zakes Mda

So far I have examined the unveiling of Invisible Man who, in his attempt to remove and destroy the masks of his oppressors, fails to glimpse a resolution for himself, let alone a solution for his community. Similar to this stunted brand of patriarchy, the obsessive forces of greed and hatred in Dr. Foster, Macon Dead and Guitar in *Song of Solomon* eclipse the mind and lead to destroying even the love of brothers. Also, Ruth Foster-Dead illustrates in the novel the inability of selfless, unearned, and unrequited love to sustain itself. The novel demonstrates that misplaced love that does not create action cannot heal one’s self or one’s community. Therefore, all of the selves we have considered so far are “failed” individuals, unable to help themselves because they have failed to act, to remember their ancestors, to speak, and to hear the chorus.

Morrison does not provide specific, static directions, but she does conceptualize another way of being in the world; one that signifies on those “failed” individuals and demonstrates an alternative journey. Furthermore, according to Morrison, a novel must act by providing a sense of what is at stake: “It should be beautiful, and powerful, but it should also work. It should have something in it that enlightens; something in it that
opens the door and points the way. Something in it that suggests what the conflicts are, what the problems are. But it need not solve those problems because it is not a case study, it is not a recipe” (Denard 59). Within *Song of Solomon*, we know who the problems are because of the strong critique they receive. Also, although Morrison did not provide the original Invisible Man as an example of the conflicts and problems which she considers, she does speak back to Ellison by re-envisioning another type of quest. Even while Morrison says she does not provide a recipe, her writing demonstrates that realizing what is not working is not enough.

Morrison’s successful characters are presented in a very different way from these “failed” individuals; specifically, they act as individuals but with a communal mind. Like most strong women in Morrison’s fiction, Pilate is forced to choose between death under the weight of power (a living death like Ruth’s or a literal one like Hagar) or her own path, rejecting much of what was expected of her as a woman within that society. On the other hand, Milkman can choose to stick with the easy road given to him by default (as a man and as Macon’s son/inheritor) or to reject his parent’s way of living by taking alternative path. Together Milkman and Pilate demonstrate Morrison’s response to the double bind of American individualism as each follows her/his own quest toward self-actualization and reemergence into the community.

The novel encompasses dual journeys. The first one is begun by Pilate who then functions as the “ancestor” for Milkman, as well as the creator, sustainer, and seer for his own quest. In his need for a teacher/ancestor and her need to teach, they form a new community—one that is not parent-child or limited by their blood relations. Pilate and Milkman’s relationship is based upon mutual need and respect, as well as the ability to
hear, listen, and transmit. Theirs is a symbiotic relationship: neither can complete their journey without the other. Both need the other to provide not only knowledge and emotional support, although these are definitely part of their relationship, but also to act, to “work,” as Morrison put it, for their individual objectives as well as each other’s. For in the end, they depend upon each other to see their quests to fruition, with Milkman ultimately providing both the final bit of information for Pilate to re-see her past and the literal transportation to the location of her flight.

It is this imperative to act, to form a new community, that reveals Morrison’s reworking of one of our most American tenets. As I have suggested in earlier chapters, an important development with Emerson’s brand of individualism was the demand for action. Specifically, a man must be a necessary actor in the world and recognize his divine state of being. Morrison acknowledges this accountability, but not as a selfish endeavor of one man to become divine. Her necessary actor is not an empty vessel, like Invisible Man, nor destructive, like Foster, Macon, and Guitar, and obviously not passive, like Ruth, but an individual who knows her place within her own history and who brings the ancestor and communal knowledge into every moment. This individual must act for herself but as a member of the community—the very health of both the individual and community are inexplicably bound together and neither can survive without the other. Furthermore, an individual must first deconstruct the notions, masks, and identities that the outside world, often in the form of a power system, has imposed upon her. Next, an individual has to rebuild herself, “invent” herself by “envisioning” who she can and must be for herself and her village. At this point, she can reintegrate into the community as a renewed individual. Morrison’s proposition imagines us re-envisioning ourselves outside
of the restricting bonds that we are born into through a three-step process of regeneration: de-center, re-center, re-enter.

Morrison's use of self-invention is similar to Foucault's answer to our dream of individuality. Referring back to early conversations of subjectivity, Foucault aligns the transfer from conceptualizing our selves within the communal body of God and king into autonomous selfhood as power extending its reach, quite literally into our definition of who we are:

In thinking of the mechanisms of power, I am thinking rather of its capillary form of existence, the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives. [A] synaptic regime of power, a regime of its exercise within the social body, rather from above it. (Power 39)

Specifically the “self” is the entity that social institutions need us to feel we are, so that we will remain isolated and susceptible to their manipulation. In order to combat this situation that we are born into, Foucault also suggests a sort of rebirth. Nick Mansfield describes Foucault’s solution in this way, “Since there is no authentic or natural self that we can simply recover or struggle to liberate, subjects should be geared towards a dynamic self-creation, an experimental expansion of the possibilities of subjectivity in open defiance of the modes of being that are being laid down for us constantly in every moment of our day-to-day lives” (63). Similarly, Morrison painstakingly describes the system within which her characters find themselves. Those who have “failed” have not become aware of their entrapment nor have they been successful at “dynamic self-creation.” On the other hand, her successful characters not only locate themselves within

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37 Foucault lays this transference out extensively in *Biopolitics*, especially as this shift of self and location of power affected and was affected by governmental reason and economics.
the power system that has created them thus far, they also act to disengage themselves from it in order to pursue reinvention.

At the same time that I highlight the need for an active individual, I do not wish to downplay the need for the collective because both the individual and the community are of equal importance. A major distinction with Morrison’s writing is that her successful characters are only able to see and re-see (de-center and re-center) because they have assistance. Cheryl Wall writes that African-American women authors, such as Morrison, do not limit themselves to focusing strictly on the black/white color line like many male authors (Douglass and Ellison, for example), but also consider intimate relationships in which the painful consequences of racism corrode love and fracture family. Because women have been reduced by the qualifiers “black” and “women,” which negate the “possibility of a unitary self,” they must maneuver individual needs/desires within this social construction. Therefore, the best defense against colonization is a multidimensional, cultural identity mediated through history (Wall 6).

In this mediation, we see Morrison’s novel literally acting out its philosophy. In addition to her call for action, of both the novel and the characters, she employs the techniques of orature to further the performative nature of her words. Discussing the marriage of print and oral literature, Morrison writes that her goal is “to combine those two aspects so that the stories can be read in silence, of course, but one should be able to hear them as well. […] make you stand up and make you feel something […] I have to provide the places and spaces so that the reader can participate” (Denard 59). By employing oral tradition, which demands the participation of an audience, Morrison’s
work epitomizes the reliance on community, as the text itself forms a new community
with the reader.

Oral literature assists individuals with understanding their world, themselves, and
each other. Texts, whether written or spoken, performed or read, remember the past,
announce the present, and project the future. They provide entertainment, psychological
relief from everyday difficulties, and a way to model desirable behavior and ridicule the
undesirable, as well as to create shared memories and communal consciousness. In
contrast to other forms of literature, orature allows the added components of explicit
audience participation and on-the-spot improvisation of the story’s elements by the
narrator/performer in the performative style that we often find in live music and theater.
Morrison describes it in this way:

To make the story appear oral, meandering, effortless, spoken—to have the reader
feel the narrator without identifying that narrator, or hearing him or her knock
about, and to have the reader work with the author in the construction of the book
[...] The real presence of a chorus. Meaning the community or the reader at
large, commenting on the action as it goes ahead. (Denard 59, emphasis original)

Skillfully pulling from both literary and oral traditions, Song of Solomon invokes the oral
tradition and brings the reader/listener into the community of the story itself, thereby
reinforcing the overarching motif of the novel that healing and survival in this world
against the effects of colonization depend upon community. Techniques of orature, such
as call and response (or witnessing and testifying), use “the act of communication as a
metaphor for unity” (Atkinson “I Been” 4). As the construction and performance of the
narrative emulate the search for kinship that the characters within the story are
performing, the endurance of this chronicle therefore relies upon the reader/listener
taking it up and, more importantly, creates a collaboration with the reader/listener in forming this new community.

Morrison utilizes many of the techniques from the oral tradition, such as signifyin’ and call-and-response, which invite the reader/listener’s participation to make meaning. In addition, while appearing to follow one individual storyline (Milkman’s coming-of-age), the narrative reaches out to the larger community through other stories, histories, memories, allusions, and of course song. Morrison describes her intent as providing “a sound [...] a place where the reader can come in, like a congregation, or like an audience at a musical concert, where they participate in it and [she] have to make it open enough so that they can” (Brown 466). Although the techniques from the oral tradition add to the pleasure of reading/listening, the reader/listener’s imagination and consciousness in comprehending all that Morrison presents in the novel epitomizes the craft of orality. In this, we find exemplified what Abiola Irele points to as the ability of oral texts to remain “open and mobile” in comparison to the fixed, material reality of a written text (80). Orature in general and *Song of Solomon* particularly not only communicate directly to the audience, but also establish that the two (story and reader/listener) are inextricably bound together. This marriage is in direct opposition with the privileging of written texts and the raising of individual authors to a position of creator/genius that is often found within the Western literary tradition. By contrast, literature that is either spoken or written to anticipate and participate with the reader/listener intentionally avoids the elevation of the author as the only maker of meaning for a text.
As for the specific work of a story, Isidore Okpewho notes that when stories are handed down within a community, they connect the audience to their shared history. As a result, "oral literature helps to promote the basis for social harmony and an emotional balanced citizenry," providing individuals with a "collective sense of who they are" and helping "them define and comprehend the world at large in terms" familiar to them (110). Narratives, songs, proverbs, and riddles are used to explain nature and historical events, to convene cultural information, such as ideals, conduct, morals, and rules, and also to chastise behavior; all of which lead to recording the lives of individuals and providing symmetry among the larger society (Okpewho 118). Similarly Walter Benjamin describes the storyteller as functioning as a counselor and providing "communicability of experience." This "counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding" (Benjamin 3). The art of storytelling is not to provide explanation or force connection to the events of the story on the listener, but to leave it up to her to interpret. Morrison explains her interest in storytelling in a similar fashion: "I am interested in folklore, black folklore [...] it's open-ended folkloric tales, sort of open-ended; they don't close and shut the door, which is like the Western tradition, where the moral is—click!—locked up. But in African folktale, the people often say, "You end it," "What do you think?" It's a more communal response" (Brown 464). Morrison's use of "you end it" in this explanation is, of course, apropos of the ambiguous conclusion of Song of Solomon. This also speaks to her style of layering the story together from various viewpoints, which showcases the subjective nature of events and the need for communal retelling to make sense of them.

38 As Morrison is specifically interested in utilizing orature from the African-American tradition, Robert Stepto's text From Behind the Veil is an excellent resource as it charts African-American narrative from slavery through Invisible Man.
Additionally, there are many places within the text that highlight the way in which orality is woven into the storyline. In general, Morrison uses the spoken word, the dialog within the novel, to indicate who is part of the community and who is not. Through the use of call and response and signifying, those who either purposely do not respond or who are so far outside of the community as to not realize that they are being called upon reveal their marginalized status. For example, Macon’s exclusion and otherness is repeatedly demonstrated through his lack of communication: “He hailed no one and no one hailed him” (Song 32). Call and response demands action. It is “collaborative improvisation” based on “shared experience” and “shared history and culture” that requires a participant and witness (Atkinson “Language” 18). As Atkinson describes it, Macon “lacks perception and feelings. He is isolated and fragmented, and he does not even know it […] Macon has lost his ability to participate in his community’s oral tradition” (21). As an outsider, he does not comprehend or respond to Mrs. Bains signifying on him, even as she attempts to utilize language he does understand, when she asks, “What’s it gonna profit you[?]” (Song 22). Macon’s position highlights his sad fall from grace because previously, when he was younger and closer to relationships with his sister and father, he had been an active member of the community: “when he was just starting out in the business of buying houses, he would lounge around the barbershop and swap stories with the men there. But for years he hadn’t had that kind of time or interest” (Song 52). “That kind of time and interest” epitomizes just how incapable he is of participating within the community’s conversation because he has left it behind in his obsession with white interests and values. As Atkinson notes, “Morrison’s use of call/response and witness/testify is a signification through which she is censuring the
community for abandoning their culture in the pursuit of an unattainable assimilation” ("I Been” 5). Another example of Macon’s censure is during the scene where he voyeuristically listens to Pilate, Reba, and Hagar singing. He wants “no witness” (Song 29). He enjoys the song, the call and response that they are performing, but he is unable to participate. In this moment, only the reader is witness to Macon’s isolation and is, therefore, called upon to comprehend his position outside of the community. Here again, the reader is an integral part of the meaning-making process by witnessing and testifying to Macon’s estranged position.

In many ways, Macon is positioned non-competitively as the direct opposite of Pilate, who is a teacher, counselor, historian, and keeper of the community. While Macon purposely separates himself from the community, Pilate embraces communities and communal rituals, even as she has been held apart as an orphan and because of her lack of a navel. Actually her entire story, her journey/quest throughout the novel, is for love of others. Even as she lies dying, she tells Milkman, “I wish I’d a knowed more people. I would of loved ‘em all. If I’d a knowed more, I would a loved more” (Song 337). From trying to save Ruth from lovelessness to mentoring Milkman, Pilate forms one community after another, never abandoning her relationship with her father, her ancestor, or her history, and, as importantly, teaching and singing what she has learned as she goes.

While Macon is the embodiment of capitalism, Pilate is the embodiment of community through her use of orature and her reliance on history and memory. Morrison describes an ancestor as “not just parents[,] they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they
provide a certain kind of wisdom” (Denard 62). From their first meeting, Pilate begins to teach Milkman how to act in the world through her use of language. She tells him and Guitar to “say what you mean” and chastises, “Don’t sound like a question. Sound like an answer. Gimme the question” (Song 37). Her directness causes Milkman to realize that “to keep up with her he had to pay careful attention to his language” (Song 37). In this fashion, his first encounter with Pilate turns into a lesson in the oral tradition, in call and response, and, more importantly, on how he should speak to those who see him as still a child and yet an individual (which is quite different from the obsessive ethereal presence of his mother and angry indifference of his father).

Utilizing another form of signifyin’, Pilate sings her way through the novel, not just as a technique to frame the story itself, but as an actor, a seer, and a speaker who marks events and imparts communal information through her words. From the opening scene of Robert Smith’s flight to her final words, “Sing a little somethin’ for me,” Pilate’s singing counsels those listening, including the reader, on who is in the community, who is not, where to look for answers, and even how to act. One such example is Hagar’s funeral when Pilate and Reba are singing, asking for Mercy, which is an irony that would not be lost on a community (including the reader) who is intimately familiar with the town’s “No Mercy Hospital.” In this scene, as Atkinson points out, “the characters testify by retelling this story in their community, the narrator testifies by telling the story to the reader, and the reader is left with the obligation to testify and thereby to become a participant in the discourse of the community” (4). In this way, it is Pilate’s act of signifyin’, not just Solomon’s song, which provides a refrain for the novel, as well as
Milkman’s life, as her methods facilitate his conception, and her lessons and song lead to his flight.

In particular, Pilate is the quintessential self-actualized individual who chooses to immerse herself in the community. Unlike other colonized women in the novel, such as Ruth and Hagar, Pilate understands both the necessity of living on your own terms and of having a connection to your history. From the beginning, she is presented as self-made, as she literally births herself and has no physical marker (a navel) of being in the womb. Because of this unusual genesis, she finds herself continually ostracized from communities as they fear her otherworldliness, which in turn, causes Pilate to throw away all assumptions and re-invent herself. Denied the resources of “partnership in marriage, confessional friendship, and communal religion,” Pilate begins “at zero” (Song 149). However, Pilate’s communion with her father mentors and sustains her, even while the living reject her. This relationship “plus her alien’s compassion for troubled people ripened her and—the consequence of the knowledge she had made up or acquired—kept her just barely within the boundaries of the elaborately socialized world of black people” (149). So even as she gives up the trappings of socialized appearance, she, in turn, is able to focus on what she finds important and becomes a healer and teacher with “a deep concern for and about human relationships” (149).

I would not describe Morrison’s use of Macon Dead I as magical realism, but as another way of knowing, another type of relationship in which the ancestor happens to be deceased. For Morrison, the concept of community encompasses different types of knowledge, history, and memory often expressed and passed along orally. This includes knowledge held by ancestors. However, it is not magical, but the continuation of a belief
system in which the dead are as important as the living because they continue to impact the living, passing down information as the living become aware of its significance. This type of knowledge might not be privileged in the Western episteme, but it is no less important and "real" to this community. As I have already stated, Morrison's use of community extends beyond the metanarrative family to encompass the many types of knowledge that are included in one's village, history, and ancestry. Denise Heinze describes Morrison's use of community as not held together by land or capitalism but by love mediated through time and history, creating an endless cycle, a "timeless ability of individuals, usually women, to create working myths of value and meaning in a world pathetically devoid of both" (148). Morrison sees an ancestor as someone who is timeless, who imparts knowledge, and who provides protection, and Macon Dead I is such an ancestor for Pilate. Therefore, it is the relationship itself and Pilate's reaction to it (her action) that is paramount.

As evidenced by Pilate's relationships, Morrison has reinvisioned family, not just to be matriarchal, but specifically against capitalistic patriarchy, so that members are not divided and compartmentalized into socially-constructed roles (Heinze 67). By showing the only "traditional" family, the Deads, as the most empty and morally corrupt, Morrison "defamiliarizes notions of family" and "implies that community is a state of mind" (Heinze 148). Unlike Macon, Pilate is not obsessed with land ownership or acquisition. She does not care about acquiring money or status, so she is free to focus on healing and immersing herself into the community. She creates a home without "progress" which is based on love and memory (Song 27). When she needs to financially support herself, she does not have a parasitic relationship with the locals, like Dr. Foster and Macon did. As a
home-based bootlegger, she has freedom and a position within the neighborhood that is based on mutual need and respect. Throughout her process of deconstruction and regeneration, Pilate chooses her own ideas on how to live in the world. She creates a “working myth” which invents a place for her and her family, maintains a loving relationship with her deceased father, and thereby keeps a connection to her history.

Morrison describes Pilate as the “best of that which is female and the best of that which is male, and that balance is disturbed if it is not nurtured, and if it is not counted on and if it is not reproduced” (Denard 63). Particularly through Pilate’s household, her relationship with her father and Milkman, and Milkman’s journey, we are able to glimpse the ways in which Pilate is able to keep this balance and communal state of mind as she and Milkman re/discover their ancestry and depend upon each other to fulfill their quests. For Milkman, she provides the means of both birth and lifelong protection; she is the impetus of his conception and his journey. Pilate’s communal knowledge teaches Milkman how to “be” in the world, which in turn allows him to take flight at the end of the novel. Furthermore, exemplifying community as a state of mind, Pilate as a concept reaches beyond their small story, as Milkman exclaims, “It’s in that dumb-ass box hanging from her ear. Her own name and everybody else’s. Bet mine’s in there too. I’m gonna ask her what my name is” (89). Paradoxically, Milkman cannot ask Pilate what his name is, and she cannot tell him without robbing him of his own fulfillment: an ancestor can only guide. Therefore, as a self-actualized individual and community-maker, Pilate represents the need for agency that Morrison demands of all members of the community.
In addition to Pilate, *Song of Solomon* reveals various types of knowledge and authority which are distributed throughout the community. As such, the community at large has the power to critique a member, such as renaming Macon Dead III to Milkman, or to ostracize someone altogether who is seen with Macon. Even before Milkman’s journey, his major moments of learning take place outside of the home. For example, Guitar facilitates many of Milkman’s early lessons by taking him around town, away from Macon’s restricting influence, introducing him to Pilate’s household and the community of locals found in the bar, pool hall and barbershop. Milkman is exposed to discussions on race, class, and inequality more than once in the barbershop, and even though he is not receptive at the time, he hears the conversations and has them to rely upon later, merging them with his newer experiences. At thirteen, Milkman and Guitar are schooled by the two Tommys in the barbershop because of their complaint regarding the bartender refusing to serve Milkman. Immediately, Hospital Tommy’s language affirms his position of an experienced, knowledgeable teacher, another ancestor:

‘Have all the halls of academe crumbled, Guitar?’ Hospital Tommy spoke from his chair. His eyes were milky, like those of very old people, but the rest of him was firm, lithe, and young-looking. His tone was casual but suggesting authority nonetheless. [...] Hospital Tommy talked like an encyclopedia and Guitar had to guess at most of his words. (58)

At this moment, both the words and the meaning are lost on the boys, and throughout the exchange, the Tommys’ call and response between themselves and the boys which ends up signifyin’ on both Guitar and Milkman as they are told their place not only here at this moment, but also within the larger world. Railroad Tommy produces a long list of “other stuff [they] are not going to have” (59). As the boys squirm, Tommy says he’s not teasing, but telling the truth, and the list expands from Tommy’s own experiences as an
older man to the authority and luxuries that were not open to African Americans. At the end, Guitar tries to exert himself and deflect Tommy’s lesson with humor, “'No baked Alaska?' [...] ‘You breaking my heart!’,” to which the full weight of Tommy’s lesson comes to bear:

“Well, now. That’s something you will have—a broken heart.” Railroad Tommy’s eyes softened, but the merriment in them died suddenly. “And folly. A whole lot of folly. You can count on it.”

“Mr. Tommy, suh,” Guitar sang in mock humility, “we just wanted a bottle of beer is all.”

“Yes,” said Tommy. “Yeah, well, welcome aboard.” (61)

With a father like Macon, who is not interested in obtaining or passing on communal knowledge, or lack of a father altogether for Guitar, it is the responsibility and function of the larger community to teach them. As a matter of fact, it is because Macon is only interested in imparting his obsession with money and ownership that Milkman ultimately rejects his limited form of knowledge because it is in direct opposition to cooperative living.

However, prior to this realization, Milkman has a problem with his identity because he cannot reconcile himself with his family. As a product of Macon and Ruth, Milkman does not value the community and its knowledge. He is incomplete, unwhole, and lost. He wants autonomy but is unmotivated and unwilling to take risks: he is afraid of action. Actually, he is incapable of action. Much like Invisible Man, Milkman cannot act as a responsible individual until he has unveiled himself. Milkman slowly unravels his old selves, often realizing after the fact that he has lost something in the process: a shoe or a watch, symbols of his old way of being and of his father’s values. Before he is able to claim any real agency, Milkman must shed these superficial layers just as Invisible Man did his masks and Pilate her assumptions. And yet, unlike Invisible Man,
Milkman gains something too. He gains knowledge, understanding, agency, and participation in the chorus—the ability to see and listen and speak.

From the beginning, Milkman is presented as immature and dependent upon others, yet uneducated in the ways of relationships and the world outside of Foster’s home. This infantilism, while described as a benefit to Ruth, not Milkman, is highlighted first by the act of nursing well past infancy and second by the ensuing nickname. Although Ruth’s action provides Milkman with a foothold into the community (through naming process), it also exaggerates his dependency upon the women in his life and the amount of education he lacks. Living within the frozen household with contradictory values and unresolved concepts of ancestry, Milkman epitomizes one living only in the moment, resistant to time and history. Already sounding like Macon, who chooses forward-looking consumption over understanding his own history, young Milkman did not want to look out of the car’s back window because “riding backward made him uneasy. It was like flying blind, and not knowing where he was going—just where he had been—troubled him” (Song 32). Paradoxically and now sounding like Ruth, in the same scene, Milkman pees on Lena because he turns too quickly to see what is behind him: “It was becoming a habit—this concentration on things behind him. Almost as though there were not future to be had” (Song 35). Juxtaposed between his parent’s warring obsessions, Macon’s yearning for a future of more and Ruth’s living in the past, Milkman and his sisters are formed in the image of their parent’s toxic relationship.

Isolated from the community, neither Ruth nor Macon participates in its chorus. Consequently they cannot teach their children to contribute in the conversation, so Milkman, Corinthians, and Lena are left unwhole and fractured as well. As an adult,
Milkman tries to separate himself from his parents’ selfish stories, but in doing so, misses the relevance of a shared past, history and culture.

Conversely, while his sisters continue to be suffocated by their parents, Milkman begins to find agency through the burden of this relationship. As his parents fight to keep him on their perspective sides, his unhappiness with his confused, incomplete identity grows. For example, after confronting his father, “infinite possibilities and enormous responsibilities stretched out before him, but he was not prepared to take advantage of the former, or accept the burden of the latter” (Song 68). Milkman is unprepared because he remains stifled and lacks agency. This unwholeness is visible; even his appearance “lacked coherence, a coming together of the features into a total self. It was all very tentative, the way he looked, like a man peeping around a corner of someplace he is not supposed to be, trying to make up his mind whether to go forward or to turn back” (69).

This concept of not having a total self harkens back to discussions on subjectivity. Kant took “I think” a step further by noting that we must have a sense of unity of self in order to understand our world. Specifically, Kant’s notion is that “subjectivity can only have content through awareness of the world” (Mansfield 19). In this way, a sense of self requires action (I think) and awareness. Milkman’s fractured identity is so extreme that he is “disassociated” from his own feelings, let alone the world around him. It takes him a while to realize, after the confrontation with his father, that no one supported him and that “his action was his alone” (74, 68). His action. Finally recognizing his father’s abusive treatment of his mother, Milkman confronts Macon, which is the first, true independent action that Milkman can claim. He has a myriad of conflicting emotions to go with this action, but at least he is acting and feeling. Therefore, Milkman’s first act of
self-assertion begins his deconstruction: the decentering of Foster’s home, Ruth’s selflessness, and Macon’s greed from his identity.

As stated earlier, Morrison utilizes orature to punctuate these moments of action. For example, when Milkman laments his feelings of disconnection to his communal brother Guitar, the two go back and forth in a call/response format in which Guitar witnesses and testifies to Milkman’s point of view and then provides a signifyin’ lesson. After he explains that “the cards are stacked against” African Americans who are just trying to “stay in the game” and that sometimes they accidentally hurt each other, he guesses that Milkman’s real problem is that he “doesn’t like [his] name” (Song 88). Guitar enlightens him, “Let me tell you somethin, baby. Niggers get their names the way they get everything else—the best way they can. The best way they can” (88). When Milkman wonders about Hagar and her name, Guitar tells him to “ask Pilate.” Milkman responds, “Yeah. I’ll ask Pilate. Pilate knows. It’s in that dumb-ass box hanging from her ear. Her own name and everybody else’s. Bet mine’s in there too” (89). In this conversation, Guitar situates Milkman’s name within his community. He explains the greater process that African Americans find themselves a part of and finally leads Milkman to understanding the communal significance of Pilate’s name and its burden.

Conversely Milkman is still far from comprehending how he fits into his parents’ story or understanding the “boring” racial problems that consume Guitar. He feels used. Everyone is “working out some scheme of their own on him, making him the subject of their dreams of wealth, or love, or martyrdom” (165). Even though he has responded to his parents’ unhealthy dichotomy, he still feels that “his life was pointless, aimless [and that] there was nothing he wanted bad enough to risk anything for, inconvenience himself
for” (107). In fact he is so inactive at this point that he is willing to have Hagar kill him so that he can “escape what he knew,” “to beat a path away from his parents’ past, which was also their present and which was threatening to become his present as well” (120, 180). However, misguided, this desire to escape increases for Milkman, forcing him to accept his father’s proposition to seek Pilate’s gold, which, in turn, ultimately leads him to real action.

Along the way, Milkman continues to receive education from several places. In a splendid moment of foreshadowing, which explicitly demonstrates both the oral tradition and need for decentering, Guitar tells Milkman that if you “wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down” (179). Additionally, from the theft of Pilate’s bones, Milkman realizes that his father has been living his life based on a lie, that Guitar’s obsession has turned against his own people, and that Pilate is capable of doing whatever it takes to save those she loves. And finally, moments before his geographical journey begins, Milkman learns from Lena that he has had the ability, the agency that she does not, to act the entire time. He has squandered it, however, in his pathetic inaction. She tells him, “You are a sad, pitiful, stupid, selfish, hateful man. I hope your little hog’s gut stands you in good stead, and that you take good care of it, because you don’t have anything else” (214). Although he does not appreciate what Lena has to say at this time, Milkman will remember them later when he considers how he has lived his life thus far. Lena’s words provide the final catalyst which sends Milkman onto his first flight: his ascension into his community, his history, his ancestry, and ultimately himself.

To begin with, there is the physical journey, as Milkman literally travels south into places and towns which know “his people” (Song 229). As the journey begins,
Milkman is ill-equipped for the world outside of his infantile lifestyle. Unmindful of his surroundings, he remains self-absorbed and superficially tied to the concept that finding the gold will somehow lead to personal freedom. Although his father had “raved about the beauty” of the countryside, Milkman “saw it as merely green. [...] the city man’s boredom with nature’s repetition overtook him” (226). Even as he traipses through the woods to find Circe’s house, he sees “no signs of life there now. He was oblivious to the universe of wood life [...] Birth, life, and death—each took place on the hidden side of the leaf” (220). However, even as he remains exhilarated from the plane ride which “encouraged illusion and a feeling of invulnerability,” the logistical reality of his treasure hunt comes to bear (220). From not knowing what to do with his suitcase to wearing inappropriate clothing, Milkman begins to comprehend that his sheltered ways will not help him here. Not surprising, he has to reach out to the community and ask for help.

This stop in Danville begins a series of connections that Milkman makes with strangers that turn out to not be strangers at all, but folks intimately familiar with his family and history. Slowly, Milkman begins to understand the concept of this extended community and the comfort that it provides: “It was a good feeling to come into a strange town and find a stranger who knew your people. All his life he’d heard the tremor in the word: ‘I live here, but my people ... ’ [...] But he hadn’t known what it meant: links” (229). This connection leads Milkman to realize that while he had heard these stories before, he had “only half listened,” but now they seemed “so real” (231). Now he feels real emotion, getting angry that “nobody did anything” about his grandfather’s murder and that “white folks” are not different where he lives (232, 233). By re-listening, he hears the impact that being African American has had on his
community, something that he has been relatively isolated from until now (finding Guitar's "race talk" "boring"), and he comes to understand his father's strange way of loving his own father and the way that the entire community of demasculinized men needed Macon Dead I's success (235). Furthermore, Milkman begins to open up to the many ways of being in the world that differ from the short-sighted, unhealthy way his family has exposed him to thus far.

Even as Milkman begins to listen and hear the chorus, Circe functions as another level of understanding. Like Pilate's relationship with her father, Circe is not an employment of magical realism, but another form of knowledge. Ancient and otherworldly, Milkman cannot deny her power and is eager for her information. Through Circe, he not only learns specific details about his family, but also about an ironic way of enacting revenge upon the whites who hurt her and killed his grandfather. In many ways, Circe is an answer to Guitar's warped desire to even the "numbers" by killing whites, for as Cooper tells Milkman, "any evening up left to do, Circe took care of" (233). She had taken care of his father and Pilate and eventually outlived the Butlers, "who were dumb enough to believe that if they killed one man his whole line died," to see their home "crumble and rot" (236, 247). Circe functions as a transition for Milkman from an unwhole self without communal knowledge into one that is immersed (inside and out) in his community.

Milkman's process of self-actualization has many steps. He learns to hear and to speak—a process that he began with Pilate and Guitar and continues while on his journey. He also has to abandon the limited, selfish ways of being in the world that he has learned from his "failed" parents. As already discussed, the most damaging aspects
to his parents' behavior is the way in which they prize white ideology, isolating themselves from the African-American community and mimicking white values. For Macon, this looks like parasitic greed, and for Ruth selfless, obsessive love. Milkman ends up emulating both his parents by becoming a dependent, spoiled infantile man. He wallows in what he sees as oppression, but what is really his family's story and, in effect, his responsibility. In order to deconstruct this identity, this mask that does not serve him but is a hindrance with dire consequences, as seen with Hagar's death, Milkman must lose the physical trappings that are representative of his misguided lifestyle.

Milkman is not prepared for how different his surroundings are in the countryside. He is constantly misjudging time and distance, and presumptuously even what he will find in certain locations (from bus stop lockers to bags of gold) because he has never been to these places or really even listened to his father's descriptions of them. While his pride and belief system take awhile to unravel, not so with his material possessions. In a comical series of events, Milkman loses what he brought on the trip. He soaks his cigarettes, breaks his watch, tears his clothes, and busts his shoe: "he had no idea that simply walking through trees, bushes, on untrammeled ground could be so hard" (250). In his frustration of finding nothing in the cave, he throws his lighter. He leaves the woods hungry and sore. However, in these losses, he gains, as he starts to appreciate the work his grandfather did in creating Lincoln's Heaven, that a stranger can afford to provide a Coke and a ride, and that what he thought of as scenery are "real places that could split your thirty-dollar shoes" (257). In the end, Milkman swaps material excess for communal insight.
In Virginia, this insight comes to full fruition when Milkman comes to hear Solomon’s Song and realize Guitar’s betrayal. He also comes to recognize how separated he has been from his own culture—from playing games and singing with other children—by his “velvet suit” (264). As a matter of fact, his city clothes continue to separate him in Shalimar. Representing Northern wealth, his ability to buy a car and his fine clothes cause the local men to feel like “they weren’t men [...] They looked at his skin and saw it was black as theirs, but they knew he had the heat of the white men who came to pick them up in trucks when they needed anonymous, faceless laborers” (266). This is ironic for the reader who can testify to Milkman’s preceding reliance on others, especially women, for everything. However, Milkman tries to get on equal footing with the men by playing the dozens and using his fists. In this scene, the oral tradition emphasizes the shared communal heritage between Milkman and the young men, even if this knowledge is overlooked by them in the moment.

Imagining who he wants to be in the world, Milkman begins to re-invent himself through action. Although both sides remain angry after the fight breaks up, the older men register Milkman’s attempt to play along and invite him on a test of their own (269). In this scene, we find a major shift in Milkman’s reaction to the world, as he chooses to act, not because he has to, but because he wants to: “Even if he could have come up with a way to get out of the hunt, he wouldn’t have taken it, in spite of the fact that he had never handled a firearm in his life. He had stopped evading things, sliding through, over, and around difficulties” (271). This way of thinking is an evolution from his desire to only escape his life. Furthermore, in the woods, Milkman extends this line of thinking. Considering the fact that he had come on this quest to “find traces of Pilate’s journey” in
order to find the gold, he falls into the familiar trap of self pity, thinking that he does not “deserve” the reception that he has received here in Shalimar. The word sticks in his mind, and he realizes how he has been using it as an excuse, a mask, his entire life:

Under the moon, on the ground, alone, with not even the sound of baying dogs to remind him that he was with other people, his self—the cocoon that was ‘personality’—gave way. [...] There was nothing here to help him—not his money, his car, his father’s reputation, his suit, or his shoes. In fact they hampered him. [They] would be of no help out here, where all a man had was what he was born with, or had learned to use. (277)

With this epiphany, Milkman’s deconstruction is complete enough for him to start the process of regeneration and re-insertion. It is his action that will ultimately insert him in the ongoing stream and conversation that is community.

In many of the exchanges that Milkman has while in the South, we glimpse the oral tradition at work as it unites and heals the village of Solomon’s ancestors. In a discussion with Reverend Cooper, he wants “to get all the facts straight” as he was already “framing the story for his friends” (230). Cooper’s friends visit, and they all retell the stories about Milkman’s father and grandfather—each with a different version, different understanding and knowledge, but as a shared story, a uniting, communal experience: “A farm that colored their lives like a paintbrush and spoke to them like a sermon” (235). The healing power of words is again understood when Milkman wants to help Circe, he thinks financially, but she responds that he has already helped her by talking about Pilate and Macon (248). And finally, in one of the most powerful scenes in the novel, after the hunters return with the bobcat, they signify on Milkman’s poor hunting skills, and his remembering performs a call and response with the butchering of the cat.
As Milkman struggles to understand and justify Guitar's words with his recent deeds, Morrison layers and punctuates the action of the novel with his memory. At the height of the performance, Milkman remembers: "It is about love. What else but love? Can't I love what I criticize?" But no answer can come because Luther grabs the cat's "windpipe and the gullet, eased them back, and severed them with one stroke of his little knife." Again, Milkman remembers Guitar's question:

"It is about love. What else?"
They turned to Milkman. "You want the heart?" they asked him. Quickly, before any thought could paralyze him, Milkman plunged both hands into the rib cage. "Don't get the lungs, now. Get the heart."
"What else?"
He found it and pulled. The heart fell away from the chest as easily as a yolk slips out of its shell.
"What else? What else? What else?" (282)

In this moment the novel poignantly performs its central question as Milkman dances with his quest and participates in a communal ritual that is arguably the furthest he has come from his old, isolated life. To be a member of the communal conversation requires action: listening, comprehending, and speaking. In the very physical act of gutting the cat and the very private act of remembering, Milkman becomes fully immersed into the same community that he thought he was fleeing by leaving Foster's home. In this moment, he understands the impotent love that he has received from and given to Guitar, Ruth, Macon, and Hagar and what he needs to do to repair himself, his family, and his community.

Engrossed in his ancestral story (his past and present) and re-born into the community, Milkman sheds his isolating self-pity and gains a heart while realizing the necessity of being able to claim these "people" as his own. Like Pilate, he has now gone through a series of losses and gains, giving up all assumptions, so that he can reinvent
himself as a man who acts, loves, and works to heal his family. Already initiated into the community of the local men through the hunt and their use of language, he continues by going to Sweet, doing things for her, trying to love and appreciate her in a way that he failed to do with Hagar. He finds empathy for his parents' sad, warped love and is eager to merge "his own remembrances" with Pilate's peace and song (301). Finally Milkman fully immerses himself into his history and the community via the oral tradition by memorizing Solomon's song when he has nothing to write on and taking his new knowledge home to Pilate. In this way, his search for ancestry immerses him into familial history which provides the ingredients to both decenter his old notions of self and family and to recreate him as a distinct member of the community. Furthermore, Milkman's quest and knowledge allows Pilate to return to her roots in Shalimar to lay down her burden, which releases them both to fly.

With her title and her epigraph, Morrison tells us that her novel will encompass the themes of flight and song. However, it takes a careful reading to see these are not just tropes. Many scholars focus intently upon Solomon's song as a motif and representation of Morrison's use of community and history to impart meaning and to heal individuals. However, as I have suggested throughout, Morrison's employment of the oral tradition goes beyond Milkman learning an ancestral song. The point is to "pass it on." In this way, the techniques of orature create a new community with the reader, and together reader and text act out Morrison's quandary: "It is about love. What else?" The "else" is all the rest. Love is of course important, but the individual must reject the dominant culture's ideology, rejecting power, and find value in her own culture for this love to be active and healing. She must re-envision a way to be in the world and re-invent herself in
her own image. Both of these are actions. Acting for herself and her community, an individual must engage in her own creation as well as the continuation of her community's knowledge and history so that the two coalesce. In this way, she can "soar," riding the air and bringing her community along with her.
Bibliography


