"The Variety in Which They Come":

The Presence and Function of African Traditional Religions in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Beloved*

by

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ABSTRACT

This project focuses on three areas of interest: scholarship of appropriation, or that which examines Toni Morrison's fiction through predominantly Western models; scholarship of reappropriation; and the presence and function of African traditional religions and cultural practices in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Beloved.* I explore each area, but I am most concerned with the latter, particularly how the use of such traditions and practices acts as both macro- and micro-narrative strategies as well as indications of the author's own literary progression. Throughout this project I rely on the cultural sources to which Morrison and her character subscribe, namely communal education and village literature, so as to argue that Morrison introduces readers and scholars to an African religious framework for her novels, one upon which she builds her oeuvre. The success of any critical work on Morrison's fiction, then, depends largely on how scholars deal with this framework.

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Chapter One

Black Mask, White Audience: Scholarships of Appropriation and Reappropriation

Scholarship on Toni Morrison's fiction largely centers on issues with which Morrison concerns herself: race relations, a community of women, and the African-American worldview. Many scholars attribute little or no importance, however, to the way in which Morrison's systematic incorporation of concepts central to African traditional religions contributes to effective narrative strategies within and across her corpus. Moreover, the use of these religions reflects the author's own literary progression as she works for and through a community of which she is a part. Rather than to dismiss or discount critical attention on Morrison's fiction, this project aims to address thematic issues in relation to two major areas: the first focusing on how some Western scholars have appropriated Morrison's novels, and the second exploring scholarship – both literary and religious – intrinsic to Morrison's oeuvre.

I begin this analysis with what I call scholarship of appropriation, or that which treats African-American literature as object rather than subject of "the" canon. Such scholarship relies on Western cultural sources to approach alien "other" or African worldviews, with scholars ignoring or misinterpreting cosmologies not situated in Western time and space. I then assess critical work that places Africans and African-Americans at the center by exploring throughout this project the presence and function of

African traditional religions and cultural practices in Morrison's novels *The Bluest Eye, Sula, Song of Solomon,* and *Beloved.*[1] Just as Morrison contends in "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" that she would "much prefer that they [her novels] were dismissed or embraced based on the success of their accomplishments within the culture out of which [she] writes" (342), this analysis focuses almost exclusively on the cultural sources to which Morrison (and her characters) subscribe.

I maintain, then, that Morrison's knowledge and application of such sources draws on two disparate forms of education: formal, or as Morrison claims, "what one finds in school" (Taylor-Guthrie 71) and ". . . the education one receive[s] in the community" (71). In an interview with Anne Koenen, Morrison contends that the latter interests her most; I would like to further suggest that while African traditional religions and cosmologies pervade her fiction, Morrison does not ignore Western traditions or practices that influence the lives of black people. However, as she insists in "Memory, Creation, and Writing," "foreign" literary or cultural references "are inappropriate to the kind of literature I wish to write, the aims of that literature, and the discipline of the specific culture that interests *me*" (215-16, emphasis in original). Scholars converge in that their observations about African-American culture highlight or emphasize the black community or "village" as Morrison has called it on numerous occasions. Yet little critical attention focuses on the African traditional religious tenets that frame her novels. Therese E. Higgins remains the only scholar to date who has done this work, but as I suggest in a later chapter she does not explore how these religions function on both micro- *and* macro-levels, or how these religious tenets take shape within and across Morrison's oeuvre.

So as to avoid appropriating Morrison's novels, I approach *The Bluest Eye, Sula, Song of Solomon*, and *Beloved* with respect to the communal, rather than formal, education that Morrison and other blacks received. This analysis, therefore, centers on not only African traditional religions and practices but also on the risks of reading and interpreting Morrison's corpus with regards to the "different kind of education" (Taylor-Guthrie 71) the author fails to find "useful" (71) or interesting. Although Morrison does not attribute this communal knowledge to books on or about African religions and philosophy, her exposure as a reader, editor, and critic of the work of Henry Dumas, James Baldwin, Toni Cade Bambara and others, as well as her involvement and participation in the black community, reinforces what Nellie McKay calls an "inherent connectedness to the effable qualities of blackness" (2). Moreover, Morrison refers to such work as "village" rather than "tribal" literature, a discourse that reflects a growing awareness of how the appellation "tribe" has taken on a pejorative connotation for many African peoples.

Thus, my scholarship relies on Morrison's descriptions of "village" literature, the importance of communal education, and the efforts of African theologians John S. Mbiti, Bolaji E. Idowu, and Gwinyai Muzorewa, among others, to explain African religious ideologies and practices maintained through oral rather than written communication. Like Morrison, who has asserted that she cannot rely on others to understand her cultural sources, I draw most heavily on Morrison's own understanding and interpretation of her racial, cultural, religious, and literary histories so as to identify and analyze an African theological presence found throughout her fiction. Other scholars, most notably Doreatha Drummond Mbalia, Christopher N. Okonkwo, Vashti Crutcher Lewis, and Gay Wilentz,

continue to explore such histories through predominantly African rather than Western worldviews; their observations contribute to what I call scholarship of reappropriation, or work intrinsic to Morrison and black people.

Not all scholarship, however, emerges for and out of the black community. W. Lawrence Hogue makes a similar observation in his essay "Afro-American Critical Practice," in which he maintains that critical practice, "is an active and ongoing part of the ideological apparatus as it produces certain cultural objects whose 'effects' function to reproduce values of the ideological formation" (35). Hence, critical approaches to Morrison's fiction (or to African-American literature more generally) that present the text and its characters as ideologically dependent objects rather than autonomous subjects fail to address how and why African-Americans pervade much of "American" literature, as well as their importance to, independent of the dominant culture, "the" literary canon. In an interview with Thomas LeClair, Morrison asserts that she has "yet to read criticism that understands [her] work or is prepared to understand it" (Taylor-Guthrie 128), primarily because, as she observes to Koenen, much evaluation of black literature reflects inaccurate socio-historical observations (67). Hence, Morrison contends that "it's demoralizing for me to be required to explain Black life again for the benefit of white people. Or to feel that I have to write about people who are 'typically Black'" (67).

Of course, scholarship that attempts to force blacks into stereotypical roles merely reinforces a racist discourse, one that Mbalia argues against in her criticism of work on and about African-American literature. Such criticism, she observes, emphasizes racial conflicts, those of which she believes overshadows issues of class. I might further propose that even critical attention aimed at uncovering underlying and realistic tensions

or issues in Morrison's fictional black communities stands to appropriate Morrison's novels. Two well-researched and insightful pieces about *Sula* and *Song of Solomon* reveal the inaccuracies to which Morrison refers, primarily because both authors create and support their observations with Western ideologies,[2] a situation in which as Morrison claims, "finding or imposing Western influences in/on Afro-American literature . . . [with] its sole purpose to *place* value only where that influence is located . . . is pernicious" ("Unspeakable Things Unspoken" 209, emphasis in original).

In the first of these, "The Gospel According to Pilate," Brenda Marshall accurately suggests that Pilate, the living-ancestor of Morrison's third novel, personifies a protean character, or one capable of change; yet she also makes, what I believe to be, an implicit connection between the Christ of the Bible and the "pilot" who directs the protagonist's course South when she claims that, "Pilate's willingness to love made her willing to take on the roles that she or other people needed" (489). Marshall maintains that Pilate's "protean" qualities become necessary for the latter to assume multiple and situational identities; however, Marshall presents these identities through predominantly Christian or other Western modes of interpretation. Cynthia Dublin Edelberg's more general assessment of formal education and the Bible in Morrison's fiction presents a similar problem. In contending that "formal education, which is usually linked with Christianity, corrupts black people" (223), Edelberg ignores how Christianity in Africa, as Mbiti claims, remains as "indigenous" as traditional religions to many cultures of people,[3] as well as how African-Americans have reappropriated Christian tenets for the purposes of what Joseph R. Washington calls "folk religion" in America (30).[4]

As perhaps the best example of exceedingly smart scholarship that appropriates Morrison's fiction and reads her work through Western lenses, Patricia Cooey's *Religious Imagination and the Body: A Feminist Analysis* explores "Morrison's Theological Anthropology": an investigation of *Sula* and *Song of Solomon* in which Cooey wrongly assumes that in the former, "God is a god of four faces rather than three, the fourth being that of Satan himself" (81). In an interview with Claudia Tate in 1983, Morrison proclaims that, "[w]hen I was writing good and evil, I really wasn't writing about them in Western terms. [...] Evil is not an alien force; it's just a different force. That's the evil I was describing in *Sula*" (Taylor-Guthrie 168).

While Cooey acknowledges that "the Bottom's" God has four faces – the fourth being evil itself or that which explained Sula – she equates evil with Satan, an unfamiliar association for African peoples. Moreover, in claiming that, "[l]ike Calvin and Edwards before her, Morrison locates the ultimate responsibility for human sin and evil not only within intra-human relations, but with the deity that created them" (80), Cooey adapts a Western conception of the Creator for Morrison's novel. Because Morrison has, in fact, negated such a connection between evil and Western cosmology in *Sula*, Mbiti's assertions that "many societies categorically say that God did not create what is evil, nor does He do them any evil whatsoever" (*African Religions 199)* and that "spirits are either the origin of evil, or agents of evil" (199) more closely resemble the remark made by Morrison's narrator when he/she claims, "they had lived with various forms of evil all their days, and it wasn't that they believed God would take care of them. It was rather that they knew God had a brother . . ." (Morrison 118). Unlike Cooey, I fail to read "evil" as "Satan" in *Sula*; rather, I would suggest that the "brother" of Morrison's novel,

when read through an African lens, points to and reinforces, to borrow from Cooey, "Morrison's Theological Anthropology" in that it locates evil within an anthro-theological model that centralizes man and spirits – the latter, as Mbiti maintains, four or five generations of living-dead – rather than in a Western theological worldview that situates evil primarily with the deity and Satan.

In contrast to these scholars who misread Morrison's novels through Western models, Allen Alexander, in his analysis of *The Bluest Eye*, successfully attributes the evil to which Morrison, her characters, and other African theologians refer: God's fourth face. Alexander's assessment of *The Bluest Eye*, with a focus on African cosmologies, offers a more comprehensive evaluation of non-Western forces at work in Morrison's first novel; therefore, it contributes to this scholarship of reappropriation – one dependent upon appropriating and subverting dominant ideologies and practices for racial and communal purposes, notably to reclaim an African presence in American and African-American literature. While Alexander does not pioneer this work,[5] he further reconfigures scholarship on *The Bluest Eye* with critical attention that more closely resembles what Morrison finds important to her own evaluations of literature written about and by blacks.

These evaluations, most apparent in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, point to what Morrison has called the recovery of "the presence and the heartbeat of black people" (Taylor-Guthrie 224), a process which she feels "to be both secular and non-secular work for a writer" (224). Scholarship that aids in such recovery, or relies on cultural sources to excavate, as Morrison claims, "those who have preceded you" (225) – the "Sixty million and more" (*Beloved*) – not only affirms but also

confirms the presence and important of Africans and African-Americans in the "organism to which [Morrison] belong[s]" (Taylor-Guthrie 225). In this powerful monograph, Morrison reaffirms such a necessary presence, both historical and literary, when she contends that "images of blackness can be evil *and* protective, rebellious *and* forgiving, fearful *and* desirable – all the contradictory features of the self" (*Playing in the Dark* 59, emphasis in original). Such a claim bears witness to, as she says, those past – namely W.E.B. Du Bois and the extent to which "double consciousness" impacts black writers and characters.

A significant amount of critical attention on Morrison's fiction centers on these disparate images of blackness: those produced by the white gaze, and those maintained by African-Americans. Moving beyond scholarship of (re)appropriation, this project also addresses work that examines and/or emphasizes racial tensions. Just as scholars either analyze black culture for and out of that community or manipulate its religious and cultural traditions for Western purposes, critics of Morrison's novels situate race or class conflicts in relation to or alongside ideologies and practices of the dominant culture.

Karen Carmean in her work *Toni Morrison's World of Fiction* places importance on interracial victimization, while Cynthia A. Davis goes further to contend that all of Morrison's characters "exist in a world defined by blackness and by the surrounding white society that both violates and denies it" (7) and that this "destructive act" represents "the systematic denial of the reality of black lives" (7). Denise Heinze directly addresses the "destructive act" to which Davis refers in her book *The Dilemma of Double-Consciousness*, a concise examination of Morrison's novels with particular focus on place, Victor Turner's *communitas*, and the supernatural – the latter "derivative, in part,

of their [the characters'] African heritage" (160). Scholarship such as Heinze's should persist in Morrison studies, primarily because many readers and critics ought to recognize and respond to this African influence in Morrison's work.[6]

Following the groundbreaking publications of Nellie McKay's collection *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison* in 1988 and the scholarship of Trudier Harris, four timely critical pieces rectify the socio-historical inaccuracies that both Morrison and I observe: Lucille Fultz's *Toni Morrison: Playing with Difference*, Amy Levin's *Africanism and Authenticity in African-American Women's Novels*, Yoshinobu Hakutani's essay on Richard Wright, Morrison, and the "African Primal Outlook on Life," and William Handley's examination of nommo, allegory, and ethics in *Beloved.* Each study contributes to this scholarship of reappropriation in that Fultz, Levin, Hakutani, and Handley rely on African (American) cultural sources to explore historical, socio-political, religious, and thematic concerns that emphasize an African presence in Morrison's fiction.

In *Playing with Difference*, Fultz foregrounds her analysis with Morrison's developing attitude toward issues of politics, race, and gender. Fultz maintains, moreover, that in responding to and writing about such issues, Morrison and her texts "also disclose their relationship to and interplay with events 'inside' and 'outside' their constructed worlds" (13). Her observation that Morrison's novels reflect the author's own personal and literary involvement in and interaction with multiple worlds – fictional and real – reinforces how Morrison can continue to write literature that is, as Morrison claims, "irrevocably, indisputably Black" ("Memory" 217) while simultaneously

commenting on or critiquing "city limits" and values and race and communal relations "City Limits, Village Values").

Levin's *Africanism* also speaks to an issue in which Morrison takes interest, namely the importance of oral literature and, as with the multiple worlds that Fultz identifies, a "univocal to multivocal narrative" (48). In a similar fashion to Fultz, Levin remarks on what Karla Holloway has called "cultural space," or "what happens when the textual language 'blends' in an acknowledgement of 'experience' and value that is not Western" (Holloway 62 as referenced in Levin 48). Levin concludes, then, that "for her [Holloway], as for Gates [Henry Louis, Jr.], liminality includes acknowledging the African" (48). I might further suggest, however, that "liminality" in Morrison's fiction does more than "acknowledge" the African; rather, it points to the author's systematic incorporation of communal education and village values in such a way that her novels bear witness to and speak for African peoples and those of the Diaspora.

Just as Levin identifies what she calls "Africanism"[7] in Morrison's fiction, Hakutani points to the "African primal outlook," a presence he finds unexplainable through Western discourse. Hakutani insists that such discourse "is incapable of representing the depth of tribal culture" (42) and that "Africans, conscious of the unwritten history, have erected methods of verbal jockeying to cast doubt in the minds of the Westerners who would attempt to understand them" (42). Such observations call into question the legitimacy of scholarship of appropriation, but more importantly they highlight, to borrow from Wilentz, "civilizations underneath," or multiple layers of African culture. In an interview with McKay, Morrison might corroborate with Wilentz's observations when she asserts that "it seems to me that one of the most fetching qualities

of black people is the variety in which they come and the enormous layers of lives that they live" (Taylor-Guthrie 145) and that "it's a compelling thing" (145) for her "because no single layer is 'it'" (145). In his essay on *Beloved,* Handley explores two such layers, namely the West African belief of nommo and its transformative power. Handley proposes that nommo – "the magic power of the word to call things into being, to give life to things through the unity of the word, water, seed, and blood" (676) – manifests as not only the physical embodiment of Beloved's ghost but also in a culture's propensity for "African memory" (677) and what Morrison's protagonist calls "rememory."

Despite the large volume of critical attention on *Beloved* in recent years, Handley's essay remains one of the few pieces that examines an African-American cultural discourse of slavery and loss alongside the reclamation of an African memory and presence, both of which Handley feels necessary for a "novel that so deeply mourns the past in a Western sense" (679) but "is also a novel that seeks to create a future in the African sense, a novel both of hope and of mourning, of nommo and of allegory" (679). Since *Beloved* operates in each, the novel is as Handley claims, "challenged by those Western critical assumptions from which it cannot completely dissociate itself" (677). Handley insists, however, that:

> Morison's response to those challenges is a critique of slavery's erasure of memory, but at the same time a critique of Western ideology and writing, reading that itself constructs an allegory of reading that serves that erasure. Morrison's own theoretical work demonstrates what her novel bears out—that normative theory and reading practice cannot properly unlock African

American literature when it is marked as heavily as is Beloved by African culture. (677)

For Handley, liminality implies more than what Holloway and Gates call "acknowledging the African;" rather, it reinforces what can happen when readers and scholars approach African-American literature without regard to or an emphasis on the cultural sources at work in Morrison's novels, or more significantly for this project, how such scholarship of appropriation grossly ignores and often misinterprets African traditions, ideologies, and practices for the purposes of Western scholarship. Moreover, as Handley points out, both Morrison and her texts continue to resist this appropriation while simultaneously asserting the relevance and importance of the African/Africanist presence in "American" and African-American literature.

Morrison persists in maintaining this presence primarily because of her commitment to speak for and out of the black community and to sustain the cultural and religious vestiges Africans brought with them on the Middle Passage to the Americas. As she suggests in *Playing in the Dark*, migration out of slavery and to the North, or the New World, held promise for blacks since, "all the Old World offered . . . was poverty, prison, social ostracism and not infrequently, death" (34). This "flight" from bondage, however, does not always coincide with the path taken by historical blacks; in *Song of Solomon*, Morrison's protagonist, Milkman, must leave the oppressive North for the liberating South so as to discover gold and his ancestral past.

Such a journey, if successful, ought to lead characters to, or back to as in *Sula*, the village or neighborhood. For Morrison, this nourishing environment does not exist "so much in your house as . . . outside of it, within the compounds, within the village"

(Taylor-Guthrie 11); rather, it acts as a place where "legal responsibilities, all the responsibilities that agencies now have, were the responsibilities of the neighborhood" (11). Often in her fiction, Morrison juxtaposes the "village" or neighborhood with the city, the latter a place in which the ancestor cannot always survive. Significant for Morrison, however, is the relationship between what she calls this ancestor or the "advising, benevolent, protective [and] wise Black" (39) and the black writer. In "City Limits, Village Values," Morrison elaborates on such a connection:

> When the Black American writer experiences the country or the village, he does so not to experience nature as a balm for his separate self, but to touch the ancestor. When he cannot (because the ancestor is not there, or because he cannot communicate with him), then and only is he frustrated, defeated, devastated, and unregenerated. When he is able to, he is regenerated, balanced, and capable of operating on a "purely moral axis." (39)

The success or failure of the protagonist, then, rests most heavily on the presence or absence of the ancestor, since as Morrison suggests, "the ancestor is not only wise; he or she values racial connection [and] racial memory over individual fulfillment" (43) while "fighting the ancestor frequently occurs, but the devastation of the protagonist never takes place unless he succeeds in ignoring or antagonizing the ancestor" (43). Throughout Morrison's fiction, the ancestor emerges as the "social or secret outlaw" (43) who "must defy the system . . . provide alternate wisdom, and establish and maintain and sustain generations in a land" (43). Pilate, Sula, and even Pecola of *The Bluest Eye* assume such roles in that all provide for the community in ways others cannot. I explore

in later chapters the role of this living-ancestor in Morrison's novels, but for my purposes here I would maintain that how African-American writers incorporate not only the ancestor but also other African-derived cultural sources reflects their successes or shortcomings as writers working through or for the black community or village or neighborhood.

In the same essay, "City Limits, Village Values," Morrison explores the work of Henry Dumas, Toni Cade Bambara, Jean Toomer, and others in relation to how each author effectively deals with and treats the ancestor. Yet as Morrison suggests elsewhere, some black writers alienate themselves or their protagonists from original sources of tradition and practice, and while Morrison maintains that these "eminent, and powerful, intelligent, and gifted Black writers" ("Memory, Creation, and Writing" 217) not only "recognize Western literature as part of their own heritage but who have employed it to such an advantage that it illuminates both cultures" (217), she insists that she "neither object[s] to nor [is] indifferent to their work or their views" (217). Rather, Morrison asserts that "[t]he question is not legitimacy or the 'correctness' of a point of view, but the difference between *my* point of view and theirs" (217, emphasis mine). For Morrison, this perspective emerges from and because of village literature and communal knowledge, both of which Morrison finds necessary to African-American literature if the latter is to recover or reclaim its African presence.

Morrison's work, then, draws readers and scholars into unfamiliar worlds, forcing them to leave behind expectations about what African-American literature "does" or ought to do. Rather effectively, Morrison resists what she calls "presentation" or entrance into her novels. She reinforces in "Unspeakable Things Unspoken" that these

books ". . . refuse . . . the line of demarcation between the sacred and the obscene, public and private, them and us. [They] [r]efuse, in effect to cater to . . . his or her [the reader's] alarm heightened by the emotional luggage one carries into the black-topic text" (221). Only *Sula* offers readers such presentation; Morrison begins her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, with "Quiet as it's kept," a phrase that held several attractions for her, primarily because as Morrison claims, "it was a phrase familiar to me as child listening to adults. . . telling a story, an antecedent, gossip about some one or event within the circle, the family, the neighborhood. [. . .] those words are conspiratorial" (218). As readers discover, Morrison's protagonist becomes pregnant with her father's child, loses the baby, and descends into a world of madness where she continues "searching the garbage" (*The Bluest Eye* 206) for "the thing we [the community] assassinated" (206).

As for her second protagonist, Morrison insists that she "always though of Sula as quintessentially black, metaphysically black, if you will, which is not melanin and certainly not unquestioning fidelity to the tribe" ("Unspeakable Things" 223) but rather "she is a new world black and new world woman extracting choices from choicelessness, responding inventively to found things" (223). Morrison's narrator, however, faults Sula for having "no center, no speck around which to grow" (*Sula* 119), yet Morrison refuses to see her protagonist as such. Sula is, as Morrison claims, a "new world black and new world woman" (Taylor-Guthrie 15) whose "choices from choicelessness" (15) and need for experimentation enable her to truly know "all there is to know about herself" (15) because she's "perfectly willing to think the unthinkable thing and so on" (15). Conversely, Nel "does not make that 'leap' – she doesn't know about herself. Even at the end she doesn't know. She's just beginning" (14). Morrison seems to suggest that

"femaleness" or "blackness," much like good and evil, act as mere constructions. For this reason, Sula has both a "double-dose of *chosen* blackness and *biological* blackness" ("Unspeakable Things" 223, emphasis in original) to shape her identity.

Like Sula, Pilate of *Song of Solomon* represents the "social or secret outlaw" who performs multiple roles: as the living-ancestor, Pilate serves as the physical link between worlds – black and white, village and city, and concrete and spiritual. Pilate also, and rather appropriately, acts as the "pilot" to direct Milkman's course. In this novel, Morrison draws heavily upon African myth and storytelling. She asserts that "the center of the narrative is flight; the springboard is mercy" (224). Once again, she uses colloquial language to explain the flights of Mr. Smith, Solomon, and Milkman. Each is "motivationally different" (225) in that:

> Solomon's is the most magical, the most theatrical, and for Milkman, the most satisfying. It is also problematic – to those he left behind. Milkman's flight binds these two elements of loyalty (Mr. Smith's) and abandon and self-interest (Solomon's) into a third: a merging of fealty and risk that suggests the "agency" for "mutual life," which he offers at the end and which is echoed in the hills behind him, and is the marriage of surrender and domination, [and] acceptance and rule. (225)

Morrison skillfully thrusts Milkman into paradoxical conditions of human and even collective experiences. In forcing her protagonist to stand "outside" (and alongside) communal traditions, Morrison places the "reader, the novel's population, and the narrator's voice" (226) on "the same footing" (226), which reflected for her, "the force of flight and mercy, and the precious, imaginative yet realistic gaze of black people who (at

one time, anyway) did not mythologize what or whom it mythologized" (226). This "imaginative yet realistic gaze of black people" (229) becomes more pronounced – and necessary – in *Beloved* as Morrison propels her readers into a "compelling confusion . . . with only imagination, intelligent, and necessity available for the journey" (229). To show "memory, pre-historic memory" (229) and "the urgency of what is at stake" (229), language must "get out of the way" (229). Morrison's use of, reliance on, and distancing from language tells, retells, and backdrops African and African-American traditions, literary and otherwise, worthy of legitimization in "the" canon of American literature.

One of the ways in which Morrison succeeds in recovering what she calls "the heartbeat of black people" as well as African memory and "rememory" is through her reliance on communal knowledge and village literature. She maintains that if her work "is to confront a reality unlike that received reality of the West, it must centralize and animate information discredited by the West …" ("Memory, Creation, and Writing" 388). Such "information" points to what blacks learn and internalize as "useful" or productive, namely the cultural and religious traditions brought with their ancestors to the New World. Many scholars continue to appropriate these traditions either for the purposes of Western scholarship, or because they lack a sufficient understanding of the African presence and influence in Morrison's fiction. Regardless, any critical attention on African-American literature *must* look to the cultural, social, political, and religious histories that inform such authors and their work. To approach Morrison's novels without, as Holloway claims, "acknowledging the African," further subjects the novel to appropriation and discredits the information Morrison finds central to and in her writing. I argue throughout this project that Morrison consciously relies on this useful, communal

knowledge to construct her novels, and while she doesn't explicitly reference specific African theologians and philosophers, she does present readers with cosmologies, or vestiges of such cosmologies, not situated in Western time and space.

In *African Religions and Philosophy,* Mbiti explores these African cosmologies alongside the influence of Christianity and Islam on African peoples. Mbiti, as well as Idowu and the British writer Geoffrey Parrinder, would agree that defining "African traditional religions" (1) remains an arduous task for theologians, but as Mbiti insists, "[t]o ignore these traditional beliefs, attitudes, and practices can only lead to a lack of understanding of African behaviour and problems" (1) since "religion is the strongest element in traditional background, and exerts probably the greatest influence upon the thinking and living of the people concerned" (1). These traditional religions, which differ slightly among groups of African peoples, converge in that all share certain, principle religious tenets: a belief in God as One, nature and spiritual beings; the centrality of man; the importance of community or humanity; and ethics and or justice. Muzorewa would further categorize these tenets as God, good and evil, the role of the ancestor, and the treatment of humanity.

All of these tenets emerge in Morrison's fiction, even if not in their "traditional" form; by merely manipulating time and space to more closely resemble an African model, Morrison confirms an African presence in her work. She affirms and reaffirms such a presence in that her novels present readers with not only African traditional religions but also the vestiges of such religions in America, or what Washington calls "folk religion." In the last section of this chapter, I would like to briefly explore these traditional religious tenets in Africa so as to establish a framework for later chapters where I examine the

presence and influence of such tenets on Morrison and her characters in *The Bluest Eye, Sula, Song of Solomon*, and *Beloved*.

Just as Morrison sought to uncover these civilizations underneath or the many layers of black people – "the variety in which they come" – African theologians such as Mbiti and Idowu introduce a religious discourse on Africa formerly absent, except among anthropologists and sociologists. In fact, Mbiti remarks in *African Religions and Philosophy* that, "practically nothing has been produced by theologians, describing or interpreting these religions [African traditional religions] theologically" (1). His work, like Morrison's, seeks to rectify negative evaluations about Africans or those of the Diaspora and the cultural and religious traditions to which they subscribe.

Central to both Mbiti's scholarship and Morrison's fiction, the concept of time in African cosmology differs from that of the Western world. Handley, in his essay on *Beloved,* addresses muntu and kintu: states of existence closely associated with what Mbiti calls "collective immortality" (26) and an African ontology of naming that brings things into existence (26). For African peoples, time consists of potential and actual time. Whereas the former points to "the future" (17), which Mbiti asserts "is practically foreign to African thinking" (17), the latter "is what is present and past . . . [and] moves 'backward' rather than 'forward'; and people set their minds not on future things, but chiefly in what has taken place" (17). Such progression, quite unlike that of the Western world, emerges not only in *Beloved* but also in *Song of Solomon*, in which Milkman Dead's watch, that "ticked, but the face was splintered and the minute hand was bent" (*Song* 250), represents the gradual deterioration of linear cosmology and the emergence of a cyclical and African one.

Morrison does more than manipulate time and space in her novels; she also plays with (and on) beliefs about God, justice, spirits, and human relations[8] in much the same way that Mbiti calls in question Western scholarship about Africa, its people, and their religious traditions. *African Religions and Philosophy* offers, perhaps, the most comprehensive and unbiased evaluation of these traditions, with the ideologies that Mbiti explores providing an excellent basis for comparison to those in Morrison's fiction.

As a part of his "reevaluation" or scholarship of reappropriation, Mbiti moves beyond a discussion of African cosmology to explore the nature of God, spirits, and man. In describing the former,[8] Mbiti maintains that, "God is the origin and sustenance of all things. [. . .] He is personally involved in His creation, so that it is not outside Him or His reach. God is thus simultaneously transcendent and immanent . . ." (*African Religions* 29). Unlike a Western conception of the Creator as removed from His Creation, African peoples believe that God "is so 'far' (transcendental) that men cannot reach Him; yet, He is so 'near' (immanent) that He comes close to men" (32). Nearly all African peoples associate God with the sky, recognize Him being "One," and find His presence in all things. I will return, in subsequent chapters, to these descriptions of God and those concepts associated with Him, but for my purposes of this chapter I would suggest that to African peoples, as Mbiti insists, "God is at the top as omnipotent" (32) and that "beneath Him are the spirits and natural phenomenon; and lower still are men . . ." (32).

This hierarchy – God, spirits, and then man – points to, in effect, the major or overarching tenets of African traditional religions. With a belief in God, African peoples understand that spiritual beings, or spirits and the living-dead, represent those long-dead and those "departed up to five generations" (81). Muzorewa would refer to the latter as

"ancestral spirits," an appellation Morrison adapts to include the living-dead as well as the wise or instructive Blacks in her fiction. Because living-beings have powerful relationships with spirits, African, like a number of Morrison's characters, take great care to maintain links or connections with those recently departed. Mbiti asserts that "failure to observe these acts [for the departed] . . . is regarded as extremely dangerous and disturbing to the social and individual conscience" (81). Significant to this project, Mbiti's claim that both a "social and individual conscience" exists in Africa points to Morrison's commitment to the "village" or community in her work.

Mbiti, Idowu, Muzorewa and others would agree that human relations, or connections among God, spiritual beings, and man, have importance for all African peoples. In fact, Mbiti claims that, "in traditional life ... he [the individual] owes his existence to other people, including those past generations and contemporaries. [. . .] he is not simply part of the whole" (108); rather, "the community must make, create, or produce the individual; for the individual depends on the corporate group" (108). Muzorewa further suggests that "African humanity is defined within the context of the community" (18), a sentiment Mbiti echoes when he insists that "whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: 'I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am'" (*African Religions* 108-9). This sense of connectedness among the individual and society emerges in Morrison's African-American fictional communities where characters either look to or ignore others for their own development and sustenance. Particularly in the work of many African-American novelists,

involvement in and with the "village" or neighborhood largely determines the success or failure of the protagonist.

As Morrison implies throughout her oeuvre, familial and communal involvement plays a significant role in the lives of her characters. Moreover, her focus on links among black people speaks to and reinforces how African traditional religions largely center on man's relationship with God and others. Unlike in Christianity where the original state corresponds with "the fall" and sin, Africans believe that such a state occurs when, as Mbiti claims,". . . individuals and communities get satisfactory amounts of food, children, rain, health, and prosperity" (96). The focus, then, shifts from God's distance from his Creation to His active presence and involvement in the lives of His people. For Africans living after this original state, reclaiming this presence becomes paramount; hence, daily activities include homage to God and other spiritual beings. As Mbiti contends, God's displeasure with man manifests in many ways, yet He "is not blamed for calamities, misfortunes, and sorrows which strike man" (45). Rather, Mbiti attributes these occurrences to man and his relationship with God, other spiritual beings, or specialists such as medicine-men, rainmakers, or kings and priests.

Most African theologians maintain that ". . . African peoples consider the universe to be centered on man" (77); this widely-held observation creates a place in African traditional religions for good and evil and ethics and justice – all of which emerge in Morrison's novels. Just as Africans differ from Christians in their view of the original state, they believe that evil rests with spirits rather than Satan. Mbiti goes further to claim that "many societies say categorically that God did not create what is evil, nor does He do them any evil whatsoever" (199). Morrison's narrator in *Sula,* and scholars

such as Alexander, go further to assert that God has four faces, the four being evil itself. African peoples at home and of the Diaspora realize that because evil is, as Mbiti notes, "an independent and external object which . . . cannot act on its own but must be employed by humans or spiritual agents" (200), they must deal with rather than annihilate evil in their midst. Thus, African peoples understand that "any breach of [a] code of behaviour is considered evil, wrong or bad, for it is an injury or destruction to the accepted social order and peace" (200) and that "it must be punished by the corporate community of both the living and the departed, and God may also inflict punishment and bring about justice" (200). God, then, acts as both Redeemer and Judge, roles in which Pauline of *The Bluest Eye* highlights as she urges Him to strike down her husband for her own vindictive aims.

It becomes rather apparent with further exploration of her fiction that Morrison consciously relies on cultural and religious sources central to African peoples and those of the Diaspora, and that she presents readers with cosmologies and ontologies both unfamiliar and unlike those in the Western world. Such an observation does not imply that Morrison ignores or does not implicitly refer to ideologies and practices associated with the West, but it does reinforce Morrison's opinion of African-American literature, its purposes, and the kind of work she finds interesting, useful, and necessary for black peoples if they are to recover an African presence in the New World. Part of this process involves resisting inaccurate socio-historical and religious evaluations while reappropriating images of blacks so as to affirm and reaffirm their places alongside, rather than in relation to the dominant culture and its traditions, literary or religious. Using this scholarship of reappropriation as a framework, the following chapters will

explore more fully the presence and function of African traditional religions in Morrison's novels.

NOTES

1 For detailed analyses of *The Bluest Eye, Sula, Song of Solomon*, and *Beloved*, see chapters two, three, four, and five.

2 Further examples of this scholarship of appropriation includes Glenda B. Weathers's "Biblical Trees, Biblical Deliverance: Literary Landscapes of Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison," a well-researched and timely article that explores tenets of Christianity in *Beloved* yet makes no reference to its parallel non-Western sources.

3 Mbiti associates Christianity in Africa, however, with colonialism. For a complete discussion of such tension between Christianity and African traditional religions, see Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy* and his section on Christianity and Islam in Africa.

4 I would not contest, however, that in Morrison's fictional communities formal education has the potential to "corrupt" blacks. Rather, I might emphasize that such education stands in opposition to "communal education," as Morrison has noted.

5 For earlier critical pieces on Morrison's fiction, or more specifically *The Bluest Eye*, see Michael Awkward's *Tradition, Revision, and Afro-American Women's Novels*; James H. Evans's *Spiritual Empowerment in Afro-American Literature*; Denise Heinze's *The Dilemma of Double-Consciousness*; and Nellie McKay's collection *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison.*

6 The amount of scholarship on such influence abounds. Significant to this study, Mbalia's work on Morrison (see *Developing Class Consciousness* and "Women Who Run with 'Wild'") provides a comprehensive assessment of the Africanist presence in Morrison's fiction. Lucille Fultz's *Toni Morrison: Playing with Difference* offers a less

prescriptive approach, in that she identifies and responds to Morrison's progression as an author in relation to dominant themes in the latter's novels. For other important analyses, see the work of Karla Holloway, Amy Levin, and Gay Wilentz.

7 In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison uses the term "American Africanism" to describe the black presence in "American" literature.

8 For a detailed discussion about the use of these traditional religions as an effective narrative strategy, see chapter five.

Oh these cold white hands
manipulating
they broke us like limbs from trees
and carved Europe upon our
African masks and made puppets

Henry Dumas
The Black Book

Chapter Two

Racial and Cultural Rootedness:

The Effect of Intraracial Oppression in *The Bluest Eye*

In much the same manner in which Morrison works to uncover and recover the African presence in her fiction, her novels and critical essays effectively resist appropriation by Western models of interpretation. Going beyond previously addressed scholarship, this project begins with *The Bluest Eye* because the latter does more than represent the first of Morrison's many attempts to explore the black experience(s). Rather, the novel functions on both micro- and macro-levels: through identifying and analyzing the presence and function of African traditional religions in Morrison's fiction, *The Bluest Eye* reveals the use and application of these religious tenets as a framework upon which Morrison builds the rest of her oeuvre. Thus, as the Dick and Jane primer as a preface to and throughout *The Bluest Eye* gradually breaks down, the novel itself resists appropriation. In fact, Morrison successfully demonstrates with her use of this traditionally "white" text just how pernicious it is to find or impose Western influences in or on African-American literature with the purpose to, as she claims, "*place* value only where that influence is located" ("Unspeakable Things" 209, emphasis in original).

Such influence in *The Bluest Eye* becomes most apparent through Morrison's descriptions of her characters and the community itself: racially and culturally grounded

or uprooted, blacks either subscribe to or reject Western ideologies as they move away from or toward their ancestral pasts. Unlike many other scholars whose work on *The Bluest Eye* focuses on racial tensions and conflicts, this chapter emphasizes how intraracial subjugation by and against black characters, or victimization from within the community, creates situations in which African-Americans must act as both "other" and oppressor: roles that deliberately distance characters in Morrison's first novel from one another and from an authentic African heritage. Morrison couples this failure to recover an African presence with the pervasive image of "destabilized flora," a loaded phrase used in association with perversion – racial, religious, and sexual – and the characters' roots to their shared past.

In *The Bluest Eye,* floral images illustrate racial and cultural rootedness or displacement. I contend in this analysis that Pecola – protagonist and scapegoat – embodies, in spirit, her African heritage; other characters actively oppress their own, which, in turn, prevents the community from recovering its ancestral past. While scholarship about interracial oppression in *The Bluest Eye* provides a context with which to examine the influence of Western ideologies and practices on Morrison's characters, I focus more specifically on what Sam Durrant calls "black-on-black" violence and the African traditional religions that emerge alongside and in relation to floral images. The use of these religions on both micro- and macro-levels does, in fact, point to Morrison's religious and literary framework for her novels. Moreover, all of the tenets outlined by Mbiti, Idowu, and Muzorewa take shape in *The Bluest Eye*, even if not always in their "traditional" forms.

Only one critical essay to date examines the connections among these traditional religions, conflicting roles of "other" and oppressor, and floral images.[1] As "destabilized flora" becomes more pervasive and insidious, Morrison's characters and the community sever ancestral links and deny their "funkiness" or blackness, conditions that Mbalia finds equally as pernicious as imposing Western influence on African-American literature so as to advance scholarship of or on the former. Other critical work on Morrison's fiction, as addressed in chapter one, identifies this "funkiness" as resulting from disparate images: those produced by the white gaze and those maintained by blacks. In *The Bluest Eye*, as with much of her other fiction, Morrison further complicates this "double consciousness" when she confronts characters with white standards of beauty and then demonstrates how and why subscribing to such standards proves disastrous for the individual and the community.

Geraldine, the "woman who did not sweat in her armpits nor between her thighs [and] who smelled of wood and vanilla" (Morrison 86), has effectively denied her "funkiness," or as Morrison's narrator claims, has wiped away the Funk: "the dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, [and] the funkiness of the wide range of emotions" (83). Mbalia would further suggest that this "funkiness," as the narrator implies, represents more than blackness or Africaness. Rather, it points to those wild or outlaw characters that pervade much of Morrison's fiction.[2] Such characters, namely Sula of *Sula* and Pilate of *Song of Solomon*, serve a redemptive function in that both women encourage their communities to reclaim a lost African presence. As tricksters, Sula and Pilate provide what others cannot, spiritually or otherwise.

Although she does not embody the trickster in the same manner as her fictional counterparts, Morrison's first protagonist does serve a vital role in the community as scapegoat. Pecola, then, ultimately becomes a victim in a society to which she does not belong; put "outdoors" (17) by both black and white communities and her nuclear family, this little black girl's "insignificant destruction" (214) becomes metaphorically linked with "destabilized flora" (214), an image used throughout *The Bluest Eye*. Morrison does not attribute this image solely to her protagonist; rather, she associates occurrences of seasonal flora with the experiences of nearly all black characters, often in conjunction with their adherence to or disassociation from their ancestral past.

Perhaps more so than with subsequent novels, finding or recovering this African presence becomes necessary if characters are to reconnect with their roots. Pecola remains one of the few characters to persist in maintaining African traditional spiritual and religious practices, even if her access to such traditions emerges because of and through her own madness. On multiple levels, then, this religious framework establishes the presence and function of cosmologies and ontologies not entirely situated in Western time and space. Ideas about God, justice, and ethics, good and evil, ancestral spirits, and communal relations surface in various ways in *The Bluest Eye* – in their traditional form and as a part of a "folk religion" in America.[3]

While "God preserves justice" (Muzorewa 10) and thus "is believed to intervene on certain occasions for the purpose of preserving justice" (10), the God of *The Bluest Eye* fails to deliver justice to those who ask for it. As Pauline vehemently denounces Cholly's drunken behavior, she proclaims that she is "not interested in Christ the Redeemer but Christ the Judge" (Morrison 42) and often pleads with Him to strike down

Cholly to satisfy her own vindictive aims: "[t]he lower he sank, the wilder and more irresponsible he became, the more splendid she and her task became. In the name of Jesus" (42). Mbiti and Idowu acknowledge that God does act as Redeemer and Judge, yet no redemption comes for Pauline. In fact, of all Morrison's characters in *The Bluest Eye*, only Pecola seems to receive this divine intervention; her belief that God has, in fact, granted her blue eyes allows her, as Morrison's narrator claims, "to rise up out of the pit of blackness and see the world . . ." (174).

Whereas Pecola's new eyes enable her to escape the violent persecution from within her family and community, Pauline's martyrdom and participation in the church merely act as masks for her blackness or ugliness. Moreover, the latter serves as a weapon against the Breedlove family. Alexander would suggest that because Pauline remains detached from God, his fourth face, her family and her heritage, her belief system "leads her to leave behind those persons . . . whom she feels fail to measure up to her standards. She thus becomes an extreme individualist [and] a person cut off from her cultural moorings" (2). Pauline's disassociation from her cultural moorings, as Alexander suggests, reinforces how many of Morrison's characters lack any connections among God, the community or village, and their shared past. Reclaiming this African presence, or what Sethe in *Beloved* calls "rememory," then, becomes even more imperative as characters like Pauline and Geraldine continue to pervert traditional ideas about God and His purpose in the lives of black people.

Morrison demonstrates, however, that not all characters associate with their oppressors, religiously or otherwise. In fact Cholly juxtaposes his idea of God as "a nice old white man" (134) with his fascination with "the devil who . . . hold[s] the world in his

hands, ready to dash it to the ground and spill the red guts so niggers could eat sweet, warm insides" (134). These descriptions do not, as Cooey might argue, point to evil as situated with Satan or the deity. Rather, Cholly's association of the devil with a strong black man illustrates both his recognition and acceptance of God's fourth face as well as his ascription of this natural force to man and not to God. Pecola also responds to this force, yet as she leaves Geraldine's house following the death of the latter's black cat she sees the picture of Jesus with his "sad and unsurprising eyes" (92) as evidence that she is "not loved by God" (128).

Pecola's fear of retribution arises largely from Pauline's need, much like Macon Dead's of *Song of Solomon*, to bend her children toward respectability and fear. By treating her children in such a harsh manner, Pauline acts as neither the living-ancestor of African traditional religions nor the venerable member of the Breedlove family. Mbiti and Muzorewa argue that this living-ancestor should, as the latter claims, "watch over [his/her] own folk . . . in an attempt to affirm the culture of [his/her] own people" (Muzorewa 13). Pauline cannot fulfill such a role, primarily because she remains racially and culturally detached throughout much of *The Bluest Eye*. Also, her failure to nurture and care for her own forces Pecola "outdoors" (Morrison 17), a condition the narrator, Claudia, understands as "the end of something, an irrevocable, physical fact, defining and complimenting our [black people's] metaphysical condition" (17). As with the presence of evil in the black community, being "outdoors" has a profound sense of permanency; however, Morrison seems to suggest that once a community permits such an atrocity to occur, it rejects rather than responds to and upholds any African sentiment on communal relations.

Because African traditional religions center on man and his place among God and spirits, African peoples have a deep commitment to one another and to humanity at large. Not all of Morrison's characters in *The Bluest Eye*, however, share such a commitment. Rather, many blacks in her first novel renounce all connections with the Africa of their past in favor of subscribing to Western values and ideologies, namely the certain aspects of Christianity Morrison finds "exclusive" (Taylor-Guthrie 117) or exclusionary to African-Americans. Soaphead Church, perhaps the most complex character in *The Bluest Eye*, personifies, as Alexander claims, "a character who not only rejects his African heritage but who relinquishes his identity as a human being in favor of the self-generated delusion that he is in some sense a god" (6). Pecola turns to this "cinnamon-eyed West Indian" (Morrison 167) with hopes that he will act on behalf of God and grant her the eyes she so desires. Soaphead, however, offers Pecola more than the promise of blue eyes; he drives her to the brink of madness, a condition that ironically enables Morrison's protagonist to escape persecution from within and outside four black walls.

Muzorewa maintains that within the community or village, Africans must have a sense of belonging and "serving one's own folk, and kinship" (17); therefore, "it is not enough to be a human being . . . unless one shares in a sense of community, one can easily turn out to be an enemy" (17). In *The Bluest Eye*, it becomes apparent that many of Morrison's characters lack a sense of community: the black boys who heap insults on Pecola because of her skin color; the white store owner who, "with the taste of potatoes and beer in his mouth, his eyes honed on the Virgin Mary" (Morrison 48), cannot see Pecola "because for him there is nothing to see" (48); Maureen Peal, the "high-yellow dream child" (62) who associates the African with blackness and ugliness, retorts to

Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola, "I *am* cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I *am* cute!" (73, emphasis in original). It should come as no surprise to readers why Morrison includes such characters in *The Bluest Eye*. Part of her strategy on both micro- and macro-levels involves demonstrating how black people accelerate their own destruction by substituting foreign or Western value systems for African ones. Morrison effectively, yet also subtly, illustrates this disassociation from self and community or village with seasonal flora, an image that becomes more pervasive as characters either distance themselves from or move closer to their ancestral pasts.

In the afterword to *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison elaborates on this connection between "a minor destabilization in seasonal flora and the insignificant destruction a black girl" (214) when she claims that "the shattered world" (215) she built, with "its pieces held together by seasons in childtime and commenting at every turn on the incompatible and barren white-family primer" (215), does not present itself in such a way that it can appropriately describe merely Pecola's being or what Morrison calls "unbeing" (215). Rather, the image of seasonal flora pervades the novel as it points to and illustrates the characters' own racial, cultural, and religious rootedness or displacement. The novel begins, then, with the failure of the marigolds to grow in the fall of 1941, an occurrence that permits Claudia and Frieda to realize that "[their] seeds were not the only ones that did not sprout; nobody's did" (7). Such a statement functions in multiple ways: on a micro-level, it points to the infertility of the soil to bare productive fruit, particularly because, as Claudia claims, the "earth itself" (7) has been "unyielding" (7); more generally, the narrator's remark functions as groundwork for how black characters

accelerate their own destruction, remain detached from their roots, and contribute to Pecola's demise.

The metaphor of flora, then, extends beyond Pecola's rape and subsequent infertility. Pauline, one of the many characters to abandon her African roots, creates an image of God modeled after that of her oppressors and one embodied in the "Stranger" (113) who would grant her "redemption, salvation" (113) and "a serious rebirth" (113). While Cholly becomes this "Stranger," Ivy illuminates his presence with her singing. Pauline's floral image of ivy ultimately foreshadows her infectiously uncomfortable relationship with her husband, children, and community.

Morrison does not link both women by accident, nor does she fail to connect Pauline with Cholly through his own floral image of the watermelon. Cholly consumes the heart of the melon broken by the "black devil . . . blotting out the sun" (115) while neglecting the seeds. Pauline "seeds" Cholly yet refuses to accept his own seeds, which to her do not bear productive fruit. Sammy and Pecola, spoiled because of their blackness and ugliness, become for Pauline a condition that, while inescapable, render them unworthy of their mother's concern: "more and more she [Pauline] neglected her house, her children, [and] her man – they were like the . . . dark edges that made her life with the Fishers . . . more lovely" (127). This white family for whom Pauline cares becomes more important than her own, and with this relationship Morrison skillfully demonstrates just how pernicious it is to abandon one's roots.

Morrison extends this warning to blacks with her description of the "sugar brown Mobile girls" (82), whose "roots are deep, their stalks firm, and only the top blossom nods in the wind" (82). Rather than to suggest that these women share connections with

Africa and its cultural or religious practices, Morrison uses rootedness to expound on how difficult it is for blacks to remove intraracial prejudice from their fictional community. Geraldine and other "pretty milk-brown" (92) women, then, further illustrate the danger for African-Americans to subscribe to Western values.

Like Pecola and characters that deny their "funkiness," Soaphead Church serves a valuable function in and for the black community. As a "misanthrope" (164), Soaphead transforms his "disdain for people" (165) into a profession, one that enables him to "witness human stupidity without sharing it or being compromised by it" (165). In *The Bluest Eye*, Soaphead maintains this business as a "Reader, Adviser, and Interpreter of Dreams" (165) primarily because blacks in Lorain were "manageable" (165) and, more importantly, because "God had created [evil]" (172), ". . . had done a poor job [designing the universe]" (173), and Soaphead "suspected that he himself could have done better" (173). Alexander contends that this misanthrope "embodies both the worst side of white religion" (6) as well as a distorted African one. For the purposes of this project, the latter deserves further exploration. Soaphead insists that "God had created [evil]" (Morrison 165) and that "to name an evil was to neutralize if not annihilate it" (165).

Morrison believes in and writes about the power of naming, yet she does not, contrary to what Soaphead suggests, argue that blacks can or should annihilate evil; rather, her narrator in *Sula* corroborates with Mbiti and other African theologians when the former asserts that, "the presence of evil was something to be first recognized, then dealt with [. . .] They [blacks] let it run its course, fulfill itself, and never invented ways either to alter it or to prevent its happening again" (118, 89-90). Evil, then, represents a very natural force in the lives of black people. Pecola recognizes this force at work in

Geraldine and her son, Junior, but she does not see it in Soaphead because other women in the community regard him as "supernatural but not unnatural" (*The Bluest Eye* 171). Pecola should realize, however, that Soaphead's religious and sexual perversion renders him unable to create any kind of meaningful connection with the God of his African ancestors or humanity at large. If Soaphead has any connection with his roots and his ancestral past, then he does so only by deflowering young girls of their innocence: "[t]he buds on some of these saplings. They were mean, you know . . . [m]ean little buds resisting the touch, springing like rubber. But aggressive. Daring me to touch. Commanding me to touch" (179). This perversion may not weaken Soaphead's spirit, but it illustrates his profound inaptitude for African "rememory."

"A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of blackness and see the world with blue eyes" (174), Pecola turns to Soaphead in a last desperate attempt to gain acceptance in a society that does not value its blackness or "funkiness." Unfortunately for Pecola, such acceptance comes only with hallucinations; in her delusional state, Morrison's protagonist descends into and escapes from a world where, as Claudia claims, "it's much, much, much too late" (206). Yet Claudia also understands *why* it's "too late" for Pecola: "when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We were wrong, of course . . ." (206). Claudia's assertion reinforces not only Pecola's "horror at the heart of her yearning" (204) – the desire for blue eyes – but it also emphasizes the black community's participation in and responsibility for Pecola's demise. Although Pecola may have "absorbed" "all of [the community's] waste . . . dumped on her" (205), she does not lack cultural rootedness, as Alexander suggests.

Rather, Pecola's floral image points not to her disassociation from but adherence to her African ancestral past. Dandelion roots, difficult to permanently extract from the soil, are "many, strong, and soon" (47); Pecola finds these weeds beautiful, and even with their supposed ugliness she maintains for them a "dart of affection" (47) since "owning" (50) dandelions makes "her part of the *world*, and the world a part of her" (48, emphasis mine). In linking Pecola with the dandelion, Morrison seems to imply that her protagonist remains grounded, even if in spirit, to her roots. I might further claim that such a floral image confirms rather than denies Pecola's rootedness to Africa rather than to a society from which the community excludes her. Moreover, unlike her fictional counterparts, Pecola modestly relies on and exemplifies the religious traditions to which her African ancestors subscribed.

A significant amount of critical attention on *The Bluest Eye* centers on, at least in part, Pecola's disengagement from the black community and subscription to white standards of beauty: her fascination with the Shirley Temple cup, her love of white milk and Mary Jane candy, and, of course, her desire for blue eyes. While these conclusions reinforce Morrison's warning for blacks and point to the author's own concerns about detachment from the village or community, such negative evaluations of Pecola delegitmize why Morrison's protagonist prays fervently to God for eyes like those of white-primer Jane.

I would contend, given an Afrocentric rather than Western reading of *The Bluest Eye,* that Pecola neither wants blue eyes merely for herself, nor does she desire them so that she may become more like whites. Morrison might corroborate with such an observation when her protagonist claims that:

> If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd [the community] say, "Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes." (46)

Pecola believes that these eyes will give her, as well as her family, access into a world where others will not see them as outsiders. She insists that "only a miracle could relieve her" (46) yet, as Claudia points out, "she would [also] never know her beauty. She would see only what there was to see: the eyes of other people" (46-7).

Pecola, then, becomes scapegoat and victim for community members who fail her; however, she "was not without hope" (46) since she realizes that "to have something as wonderful as that [eye color change] happen would take a long, long time" (46). Thus, Pecola prays "for a year" (46) that God will redeem her from the blackness or ugliness "that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike" (45). Unlike Pauline, who appeals to God to strike down her husband so that she may serve her own interests, Pecola ingenuously prays for a miracle: if God were to grant her blue eyes, then the community could accept the Breedlove family and their ugliness and fit them, as with Shadrack and Morrison's protagonist in *Sula,* into the scheme of things. This ugliness, as Claudia insists throughout *The Bluest Eye*, "came from conviction, their [the Breedlove family's] conviction" (39), yet Morrison doesn't condemn the Breedloves like her young narrator. Claudia may not realize until it's "much, much, much too late" the profound role the community plays in the development of its members, but Morrison understands that without inclusion in the community, individuals and collective groups distance themselves from one another and their shared pasts.

Pecola, too, understands the importance of close familial and communal relations. As a "case" (16) taken in by Claudia and Frieda's parents, Morrison's protagonist finds comfort in the nurturance and chiding Mrs. MacTeer provides for her. This African sentiment on human relation also extends to Pecola's treatment of others, namely her ability to care for Claudia and Frieda's baby dolls as well as Geraldine's black cat, the latter of which I believe reinforces Pecola's willingness to associate with and assist victimized or marginalized "others." Pecola responds with such ferocity to Junior's mistreatment of the cat, but her cries fall on deaf ears as this animal with an "empty, black, helpless face" (91) seems to confirm what Pecola fears: even with blue eyes, the community may never accept her because of her blackness. Yet Pecola should also recognize that while the community doesn't run her or the prostitutes out of Lorain, its members fail to create an inclusive space for her or China, Poland, and Miss Marie.

This affection Pecola has for the "Magniot Line" points to something larger and more significant than merely her association with marginalized people. In fact, these "ruined" (104) women represent, as Morrison describes them, outlaw characters who much like Pilate, utilize African-American cultural repositories. Claudia claims that "radio music" (102) came from their home, and that Miss Marie, a "mountain of flesh . . . [with] no shoes on . . . [had] massive legs like tree stumps . . . [and that] [her hand] like a burned limb grew from her dimpled hand" (102). In subsequent novels, namely *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, Morrison attributes such nature images to her "wild" female characters with good reason. To African peoples, trees and mountains have spiritual and religious significance: they serve as places in which Africans may access or come closer to God. I will return to both in later chapters, but for my purposes here, I would suggest

that the "Magniot Line" has a greater propensity for reclaiming an African presence than their fictional counterparts; and that their association, then, with Pecola further reinforces the latter's connection with her ancestral past.

Pecola cares for these "ruined" women, and she recognizes the importance of calling them by their names: "oh, you mean Miss Marie. Her name is Miss Marie" (106). Such an insistence on naming and the inherent worth of others continues long after Pecola has succumbed to madness. In describing this hallucinatory state, Claudia insists that Pecola "spent her days, her tendril, sap-green days, walking up and down . . . her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear" (204). I might claim that this "beat of a drummer so distant" (204) dually illustrates Pecola's connection with a society far removed from Africa as well as her attempt to recover what Morrison has called "the heartbeat of black people" (Taylor-Guthrie 224).

Moreover, in claiming that her protagonist looked like "a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach" (Morrison 204), Morrison plays on the African flying myth, one to which she returns more fully in *Song of Solomon*. Pecola remains grounded because she can't, as Pilate's father claims, "fly off and leave a body" (*Song* 332). Rather than fly home to Africa, then, Morrison's protagonist must continue to "[search] the garbage . . . for the thing [the community] assassinated" (*The Bluest Eye* 206). Even in such a delusional state, which "protected her from us [the community]" (206), Pecola remains the living-ancestor of *The Bluest Eye*: always searching for the heartbeat that will bring her closer to her people.

Other scholars, however, would negate such a connection between Pecola and her roots. Alexander insists that it is not Morrison's protagonist but Claudia who "holds the

promise for living an authentic existence . . . [and] whose telling of the story is a sign in itself that she has come to recognize the value of rediscovering the past" (7); however, Claudia's mere retelling of the story does not point to any kind of racial, cultural, or religious "rememory" but rather illustrates her growing maturity as a young girl and narrator. Alexander seems to neglect Claudia's involvement in Pecola's demise, her participation in a pathological community, or the "horror at the heart of her yearning" – seeing the world as black and white with no blue in between.

Uprooted from African soil, Morrison transplants her protagonist into a community – one in name only – where its members do not value its blackness or "funkiness" but rather substitute traditional values and practices for those of the Western world. Morrison skillfully demonstrates just how pernicious it is for blacks to subscribe to such values, yet she also creates a space for Pecola in this racially and culturally detached community. Through her own madness, then, Pecola fully reconnects with her African past: one that sustains and keeps her so that she may remain grounded, at least in spirit, to her roots.

NOTES

1 See my article, titled the same as, at:

http://www.49thparallel.bham.ac.uk/back/issue16/balestra.htm

2 See "Women Who Run with Wild" for a more complete exploration of "wild" or outlaw characters in Morrison's fiction.

3 Scholars such as Cooey have claimed that "Black Christianity" both pervades Morrison's novels and serves as a framework in her fiction. I would disagree and suggest that Morrison relies on what Washington calls "folk religion," primarily because the former finds many elements of Christianity exclusionary to black people. Morrison seems to demonstrate in *The Bluest Eye* what can happen when blacks subscribe to these exclusionary features of Christianity with her descriptions of Pauline and Geraldine, namely because both women adopt conceptions of religion perverted by their admiration of whites.

True friendship never dies –
It grows stronger the more it is tested.

Richard Ntiru
"The Gourd of Friendship"
Poems of Black Africa

Chapter Three

The Slow Journey Home: Reclaiming an African Presence in *Sula*

With the publication of *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison introduces readers to both themes that resurface in later works as well as the African religious framework upon which she builds the rest of her fiction. This first creative attempt to explore the black experience reveals not only how characters can actively accelerate their own destruction by subscribing to foreign value systems but also the pathological nature of a community detached from its roots. Thus, by elevating the community in *Sula* to the same status as her characters, Morrison demonstrates the utmost importance of inclusion in the village and further warns blacks against putting one of their own "outdoors:" she insists, "when I wrote *Sula* I was interested in making the town, the community, the neighborhood, as strong a character I could . . . there was a cohesiveness there" (Taylor-Guthrie 11).

Sula echoes many of Morrison's concerns for black writers and characters, and with this novel Morrison continues to play on and with difference and binary opposites: village and city, good and evil, and orderliness and disorder. As with *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison incorporates African traditional religions and cultural practices into *Sula,* yet she also builds on an already established framework to emphasize the role of the community and the nature of good and evil from African rather than Western models. I explore in this chapter, as with the last, these religious traditions and practices alongside and in relation to Morrison's descriptions of her characters and "the Bottom" itself;

however, I might also emphasize that more so than with *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* reinforces Morrison's attitude toward disparate forms of education, and how an African (American) community should treat its members.

As Morrison claims in "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," only *Sula* has any kind of presentation or entrance into the novel. Such a strategy seems to function on both micro- and macro-levels: within the novel, this "introduction" places readers in familiar contexts, namely those in which characters of *The Bluest Eye* might have preferred. Yet on a macro-level, this presentation into *Sula* also reflects Morrison's persistent efforts to remind blacks of the profound effect of detachment from their past as well as the distinction between foreign or "alien" values and those of and within the African-American community. Almost as a response to her characters in *The Bluest Eye*, blacks in Morrison's second novel recognize and respond to Morrison's outlaws, deal with and treat evil, and find ways in which to fit Shadrack and Sula into the scheme of things. Morrison's second novel, then, resists appropriation, or a strictly Western reading, as it simultaneously speaks to the African religious and cultural sources to which Morrison subscribes. Just as God, justice and ethics, good and evil, ancestral spirits, and human relations emerge in *The Bluest Eye*, such religious tenets take shape in *Sula* at the same time that their use illustrates characters and a community slowly reclaiming an ancestral past.

Rather than to begin *Sula* with a familiar phrase among blacks, Morrison opens her second novel with a rich description of "the Bottom" through the eyes of a presumably white traveler. In the foreword to *Sula*, Morrison elaborates on this "entrance:" "[In] my new first sentence I am introducing an outside-the-circle reader into

the circle. I am translating . . . a 'place' into a 'neighborhood' and letting a stranger in, through whose eyes it can be viewed" (xvi, brackets in original). Morrison insists, in the same foreword, that even an entrance designed to address the problem of deference to the "white gaze" illuminates African-American cultural repositories:

> The neighborhood has been almost completely swept away by commercial interests (a golf course), but the remains of what sustained it (music, dancing, craft, religion, irony, [and] wit) are what the "valley man," the stranger, sees – or could have seen. (xvi)

Alongside images of the Medallion City Golf Course, then, Morrison describes the remnants of "the Bottom," a valley town or neighborhood where "on quiet days people in valley houses could hear singing sometimes, banjo sometimes, and . . . a dark woman in a flowered dress doing a bit of a cakewalk . . . to the lively notes of a mouth organ" (4).

Morrison's use of these disparate images points to many strategies at work in her narrative; as she has in critical essays and in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison confronts readers and characters with traditionally "white" standards and then demonstrates how and why such standards do not, and should not, apply to black people. On a more macro-level, Morrison seems to emphasize, following Pecola's exclusion from the community in *The Bluest Eye*, the rootedness of the neighborhood in *Sula* and its members, particularly when she claims that the latter "were mightily preoccupied with . . . each other . . . [with] what Shadrack was all about, [with] what that little girl Sula . . . was all about . . . and [with] what they themselves were all about" (6). Even though "they [whites] tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots" (3), blacks in "the Bottom" take "small consolation in the fact that every day they could literally look down on the white

folks" (5). This position, on the basis of geographical placement alone, suggests that because "the Bottom" looks down on whites, the former assumes the high moral ground.

Much critical attention on *Sula* centers on these absolutes but with respect to Western rather than African ideologies and cultural practices. To approach *Sula* and subsequent novels solely with regard to the kind of information Morrison fails to find "useful" or interesting has grave implications for the black community, its value systems, and those "wild" characters or "social outlaws" that serve vital functions in Morrison's fiction. Shadrack and Sula – the mad and the trickster respectively – do for "the Bottom" what others cannot. Their connections with one another and the neighborhood become more pronounced as black characters continue to provide Shadrack and Sula with, as Morrison claims in an interview with Robert Stepto, "a small space . . . [to relate] to their madness or [try] to find out the limits of their madness" (Taylor-Guthrie 11).

Morrison's characters, once they understand the boundaries and limitations of this madness, fit Shadrack into their scheme of things. As a rudimentary trickster, Shadrack, with his wild eyes and "hair so long and matted" (Morrison 15), "was drunk, loud, obscene, funny and outrageous" (15) but "never touched anybody, never fought, never caressed" (15). His solitary parade, National Suicide Day, becomes "part of the fabric of life" (16) for those of "the Bottom," so much that the latter "had simply stopped remarking on the holiday because they had absorbed it into their thoughts, into their language, [and] into their lives" (15). The cohesiveness of "the Bottom," then, largely depends on the ability of its members to provide an inclusive space for Shadrack. Thus, his presence and participation in the community serve multiple functions in Morrison's

narrative: without Shadrack, "the Bottom" could not effectively deal with disorder among them, nor could Morrison capitalize on Sula's formative role as trickster.

While the connections between Shadrack and Sula become more evident with an Afrocentric reading of the novel, many scholars continue to devote critical attention to Sula's relationship with Nel Wright, with Deborah E. McDowell suggesting that both women represent complimentary parts of the self. Morrison might agree with such an assertion, yet she also insists that her protagonist "knows all there is to know about herself" (Taylor-Guthrie 15) whereas Nel, "doesn't know about herself. Even at the end she doesn't know" (14). McDowell's observation, then, that Sula "comes to know the difference" becomes more significant as scholars attempt to categorize Sula and Nel on the basis of "the Bottom's" moral absolutes. These categorizations, however, conflict with Morrison's application of African concepts of good and evil in *Sula*. In an interview with Stepto, Morrison maintains that she "started by thinking that one can never really define good and evil" (94) because "sometimes good looks like evil; sometimes evil looks like good – you never really know what it is. It depends on what uses you put to it" (94). Hence, Sula's question for Nel, "how you know . . . about who was good. [. . .] How you know it was you? [. . .] Maybe it was me" (Morrison 146) reinforces Morrison's awareness of the complex and often interesting role evil plays in the lives of black people.

Significant to Morrison's objectives for the novel, those in "the Bottom" react to evil "with an acceptance that bordered on welcome" (89), yet they also understand that this force "must be avoided . . . and precautions must naturally be taken to protect themselves from it" (89). Good and evil, one of the many binary opposites in *Sula*,

become the basis for "the Bottom's" moral absolutes. Morrison insists that because Nel "knows and believes in all the laws of the community [and]. . . believes in its values . . . she *is* the community" (Taylor-Guthrie 14, emphasis in original). McDowell moves beyond such an assertion to suggest that Nel acquiesces to "the Bottom" and its values largely because of her marriage to Jude, an act in which McDowell believes to represent the death of the female self and imagination.[1]

Yet Ajax – Sula's lover in the latter part of the novel – observes that even before Nel's marriage, "her parents had succeeded in rubbing down to a dull glow any sparkle or sputter she had" (Morrison 83) and that "only with Sula did [Nel's] quality have any free reign" (83). Although Nel declares her selfhood with "I'm me. [. . .] Me" (28), she later finds "relief in [Sula's] personality" (53) and uses her childhood friend "to grow on" (52). Nel and Sula may take comfort in each other's personalities, but Morrison's protagonist comes to know the difference between herself and her fictional counterpart: whereas Nel becomes a part of "the Bottom," Sula's identity depends on, as Jill Matus claims, "her defiant alienation from the community . . . [but also on it's] compassion and relationship" (62). Sula, then, leaves "the Bottom," but as Morrison insists, she must return since "there was no other place where she could live" ("Rootedness" 774).

Sula's paradoxical relationship with "the Bottom" illustrates another of Morrison's binary opposites at work in *Sula*: the distinction between the city and village. In "City Limits, Village Values," Morrison maintains that the ancestor or ancestral spirit resides in the latter. Black writers and characters, then, should value the village because its communal nature fosters what Morrison calls "village values" (38). Sula leaves "the Bottom" after Nel's marriage but returns because, as Morrison insists, she "is nourished

by that village . . . [and] permitted to 'be' only in that context" ("Rootedness" 774). Moreover, "when [Sula] returns to the fold – returns to the tribe – it is seen . . . as a triumph [as per the aims of African-American literature]" (774). Unlike the community in *The Bluest Eye*, which fails to protect one of its own, those of "the Bottom" provide for Sula in ways the city cannot. Rather appropriately, then, Sula serves a vital function in and for "the Bottom." As the trickster redefined, Morrison's protagonist becomes the character to be reckoned with and, more importantly, the one to illuminate God's fourth face.

This fourth face, as addressed in previous chapters, represents the presence and function of evil in the lives of black people. Accused of "laughing at ['the Bottom's"] God" (Morrison 115) and having a sexual license unrivaled except by her mother Hannah, Sula represents a very real and necessary force in and for "the Bottom." As a result, Morrison's fictional community "did nothing to harm [Sula]" (113) because "as always the black people looked at evil stony-eyed and let it run its course" (113). And so when Sula returns to "the Bottom" accompanied by the plague of birds and a pocketbook, no one in the community "stone[s] her or kill[s] her or [throws] her out" ("Rootedness" 774). Those in "the Bottom" may nourish Morrison's protagonist, but a large part of this nourishment depends on Sula's "pathological" relationship with the community (Taylor-Guthrie 68). Contrary to how scholars interpret "the Bottom's" relationship with Sula as evidence of the latter's "evilness," Morrison insists, in an interview with Koenen, that she doesn't "find [Sula] evil as a single evil person but [that] she was used as though she were, which is very helpful for the townspeople" (68). Hence, Sula becomes the trickster for "the Bottom," a role that enables the community to reclaim its ancestral past.

Scholars who approach *Sula* through Western rather than African models often privilege the protagonist's defiant alienation of the community in contrast to Morrison's more positive evaluations of Sula, the latter of which speak to an Afrocentric reading of the text. Some proponents of this Western approach might interpret the plague of birds as an omen of misfortune for Sula; however, Mbiti and other African theologians would argue, perhaps as a response to what literary critics consider a premonition of justice from "the Bottom's God," that "God punishes the whole community with calamities" (*Concepts of God* 37) rather than a single individual. Mbiti goes on to suggest in *African Religions and Philosophy* that while God can and does punish his people, Africans do not blame Him for these misfortunes. Rather, "He is brought into the picture as an attempt to explain what is otherwise difficult for the human mind" (45). Because misfortune is both unavoidable *and* unexplainable, African peoples and those of the Diaspora regard it as a natural force, or as Morrison's narrator claims, something "as 'natural' as springtime" (Morrison 90); appropriately, "the Bottom" remarks that not only were the "little yam-breasted shuddering birds . . . everywhere . . . [but that] nobody knew why or from where they had come" (89). As for this "trivial phenomenon" (89), those in *Sula* "let it run its course, fulfill itself, and never invented ways to alter it, to annihilate it or to prevent its happening again. And so they were with people" (90).

Sula, then, runs her course in "the Bottom." Her position as a social outlaw renders her relationships with others pathological, yet overwhelming textual evidence points to why "the Bottom" continues to provide an inclusive space for Sula. Moreover, Morrison's convictions that she "wasn't thinking about evil in Western terms" (Taylor-Guthrie 168) and that her protagonist "isn't evil as a single person" (68) negate critical

work that attempts to fit Sula into a Western scheme of things or classifies her according to "the Bottom's" moral absolutes. Lewis and Okonkwo,[2] both with exceedingly smart scholarship on Morrison's second novel, point to Sula's African identity, with Lewis insisting that "knowing the Africaness of the major character . . . [both] adds a dimension that clarifies much of the mystery of the novel for the reader" (91) and "places a demand on the critic to search for a blueprint for the novel based upon an African world-view [sic]" (91). Part of this worldview involves what Morrison calls "different forces" (Taylor-Guthrie 168), namely African ideologies and practices that emphasize man and his relationship with spirits and the natural world.

Mbiti, Idowu, and others insist that water has special significance for African peoples, particularly since these individuals associate lakes, streams, and rivers with divinities. Lewis, given his Afrocentric reading of *Sula*, expounds on such a sentiment in describing Sula's encounter with Chicken Little: after Sula attempts to amuse Chicken Little following his "dangerous climb in the great tree overlooking the river in the Bottoms, [sic]" (93) he "slips from her grip into the water" (93) and "is sacrificed to the river god just as it was not uncommon for children to be sacrificed to the river gods in Africa, throughout the Bight of Benin" (93).

Sula's chance meeting with Chicken Little serves multiple functions within and for Morrison's narrative: as Lewis illustrates, this encounter reinforces an African presence in *Sula*. More importantly, it serves as both an ontological link between Sula and Shadrack and a way for Morrison to demonstrate her protagonist's humanness. Morrison's narrator claims that Sula "stead[ied]" (Morrison 60) Chicken Little as they climbed and spoke to him with a "reassuring voice" (60). After Chicken Little drowns

and Sula enters Shadrack's hut, the former feels both "relieved and encouraged" (62) since "no one with hands like that, no one with fingers that curved around wood so tenderly could kill her" (62). Significantly, Shadrack tells Sula "always" (63), an answer to "a question she had not asked" (63) yet whose "promise licked at her feet" (63). Lewis insists that Shadrack not only "recognizes and acknowledges [Sula] as a water spirit" (93) but that his promise of "always" serves as an ontological link between both characters. In fact, as Lewis claims, "Sula, a water spirit/priestess, is vowed to Shadrack and bound spiritually to him by the word ['always']" (93). While the power of the word bounds Sula to Shadrack, Morrison further conjoins her social outlaws through Sula's birthmark and role of trickster – the latter a reflection of Morrison's commitment to the aims of African-American literature.

In *The Crime of Innocence in the Fiction of Toni Morrison*, Terry Otten insists that Sula acts as both trickster and Romantic villain, roles that ultimately point to Sula's regenerative capabilities for "the Bottom" (37). The problem with such characterizations, drawn from Western ideas about the nature of good and evil, however, comes from Otten's assumption that Sula can only "regenerate" the community through her "evilness" (37). Morrison argues, as I have emphasized elsewhere in this analysis, that she neither considers her protagonist evil as a single person, nor did she think about evil in Western terms when writing *Sula*. Nancy Clasby echoes Morrison's Afrocentric approach to Sula's role in the novel when she claims that the latter, like Shadrack, must construct an identity dependent upon subversion since "disorder belongs to life and completes it" (178). These outlaws, then, represent what Karl Kerenyi calls "spirits of disorder [and] enemies of boundaries" (185, as referenced in Clasby 178).

Sula, much like her fictional counterparts Pecola and Pilate, embodies the trickster because she possesses, as Clasby suggests, a level of awareness that moves beyond the literal to the supernatural (179). While the figure of the trickster may at certain levels resemble a scapegoat, or what Carl Jung calls "the collective shadow figure" (209, as referenced in Clasby 179), Sula refuses to accept such a role: she "acknowledged none of ['the Bottom's"] attempts at counter-conjure or their gossip" (Morrison 113). She does, however, permit "the Bottom" to "[watch] her far more closely than they watched any other roach or bitch in the town . . . [because] things began to happen" (113): Teapot's Mamma, once "indifferent" (113) to her son, "became the most devoted mother: sober, clean, and industrious" (114) following Teapot's fall from Sula's porch; the "women of the town" (115) to "justify their own judgment" (115) "cherished their men more [and] soothed the pride Sula had bruised" (115) while, "in general ['the Bottom'] banded together" (117).

Because Sula "does not believe in any of those laws [of the community] and breaks them all" (Taylor-Guthrie 14), "the Bottom" sees her as a "pariah" (Morrison 122), particularly when she beds down with Jude. Students often use this event to further condemn Sula; however, Morrison's evaluations of her protagonist point to less insidious motives on Sula's behalf: "she had no thought at all of causing Nel any pain when she bedded down with Jude. [. . .] [because] they had always shared the affection of other people" (119). In an interview with Stepto, Morrison asserts that "Nel's lesson . . . is love as possession[:] You own somebody and then you being to want them there all the time, which is a community law. [. . .] The beloved belongs to one person and can't be shared . . . that's a community law" (Taylor-Guthrie 15). Since she breaks "the

Bottom's" laws and has "no intimate knowledge of marriage" (Morrison 119), Morrison's protagonist "was ill-prepared for the possessiveness of the one person she felt close to" (119). Sula realizes, however, that unlike "dangerous" (120) women such as herself, or those who possess a uniqueness between their legs, Nel "belonged to the town and all its ways" (120) since the latter "had given herself over to them" (120).

Conversely, Sula "knew that they ['the Bottom'] despised her" (122) because, as the epigraph to *Sula* reads, "they don't want glory like that in nobody's heart." Sula's birthmark, perhaps one of the most significant images in Morrison's second novel, functions on both micro- and macro-levels. Within the narrative, this "rose of the world" emblematizes how "the Bottom" sees Sula; however, the birthmark also transforms given the cultural sources through which scholars approach Morrison's second novel. Interpreted as a stemmed rose, ashes, snake, and tadpole, Sula's "rose tattoo" simultaneously denies as it reaffirms "the Bottom's" relationship with its outlaw and trickster, with critical attention on the birthmark reflections on how scholars either ignore or emphasize the African presence in *Sula*.

Sula's birthmark, then, alters in relation to the observer – fictional or critical. In the earlier part of the novel, Morrison's narrator remarks that the "birthmark . . . spread from the middle of the lid toward the eyebrow, shaped something like a stemmed rose" (52). Significantly, Morrison links Sula and Nel through this mark, one that illustrates how both girls used "each other to grow on" (52). Rootedness, then, becomes associated with Sula and Nel's friendship, one that "was as intense as it was sudden" (53). In favoring a Western rather than Afrocentric reading of *Sula,* however, Linden Peach argues that:

> Sula's mark which in the beginning of the novel is a stemmed rose, suggesting individual fulfillment and rootedness, eventually becomes ashes, suggesting the potential dissolution not only of herself but of a black cultural identity in general. (51-2)

Despite Peach's resolutions to the contrary, Sula's mark doesn't end with ashes; rather, it continues to evolve throughout the novel until it resembles the tadpole, or the self-in-transition. McDowell makes a similar observation when she claims that Sula's birthmark represents "multiple selves" (83). I might move beyond McDowell's assertion to propose that like Pilate of *Song of Solomon*, Sula personifies the protean character. Just as she possesses a multifaceted spirit, Sula carries a fire within her, one that connects her to the chorus of women or her maternal ancestors.

The importance of communal voices, ones that resurface in subsequent novels, becomes more significant with an Afrocentric reading of *Sula.* Thus, Peach's observation that Sula's mark of ashes suggests the "potential dissolution of . . . a black cultural identity in general" (52) ignores what Morrison calls the "cohesiveness" of "the Bottom" as well as how this fictional community nourishes Sula in such a way that her birthmark cannot, contrary to what Peach argues, point to "the potential dissolution . . . of herself" (52). Rather, Sula's association with birds further points to the self-in-transition. Instead of this dissolution of the self, as Peach would claim, Sula's mark of ashes points to the resurrection of Morrison's protagonist, much like that of a phoenix from ashes, as a water spirit and tadpole, the latter an image that only Shadrack acknowledges.

Prior to this transformation, however, Sula's birthmark comes to resemble the snake, a mark with which Peach finds both "sinister" (51) and necessary for Nel to see

"old things with new eyes" (51). While Nel claims that Sula's return to "the Bottom" "was like getting the use of an eye back, [like] having a cataract removed" (Morrison 95), Sula's mark of the snake serves not as a warning for Nel but rather as an ontological link between both Sula and her African past and the "mad fisherman" of Morrison's second novel. In *African Religions and Philosophy*, Mbiti insists that "the snake is though by some people . . . to be immortal [while] a considerable number of societies associate snakes with the living-dead [ancestors] or other human spirits" (51). The mark of the snake, then, foreshadows why Sula's death becomes necessary for not only "the Bottom" but also for Morrison's objectives for her narrative. Lewis maintains, in emphasizing an Afrocentric reading of *Sula*, that Shadrack "is Sula's ancestral presence – a representation of the ancestral spirit, a husband, a father, a provider dispensed by the gods to 'always' be there for the displaced Sula" (92). Morrison corroborates with Lewis when her narrator claims that for Shadrack, Sula "was his visitor, his company; his guest, his social life, his woman, his daughter, [and] his friend" (Morrison 157).

Yet Sula performs similar roles for Nel, even after the latter commits herself to "the Bottom" and its values. Nel's reunion with Sula, not unlike the protagonist's return to the community, produces a great stir in "the Bottom," namely because its members consider the impending death of this "roach" (112) and "bitch" (112) to be Sula's punishment for laughing at their God. Mbiti would argue, however, that while as Morrison's narrator claims "death was deliberate" (90), God "punishes individuals [only] through illness, misfortune . . . or a painful death" (*Concepts of God* 85). Morrison seems to acknowledge such an African sentiment when her narrator asserts that Sula "had lost no teeth [and] suffered no bruises. [. . .] It was rumored that she had had no

childhood diseases, was never known to have chicken pox, croup, or even a runny rose" (Morrison 115).

Nearing death, Sula yearns for aloneness since "it would be here, only here, held by this blind window high above the elm tree, that she might draw her legs up to her chest, close her eyes, put her thumb in her mouth and float down [to the] water" (149). This promise of "always," of a "sleep of water" (149) "loosened a knot in her chest" (149) as Sula "noticed that she was not breathing" (149) but "she realized, or rather sensed, that there was not going to be any pain" (149). Sula's assertion after death – "it didn't even hurt. Wait'll I tell Nel" (149) – speaks to African religious and cultural sources in that Morrison's protagonist neither suffers a painful death nor, as Morrison claims in an interview with Betty Jean Parker, does Sula "stop existing even after she dies" (Taylor-Guthrie 63). Like Chicken Little, whose "bubbly laughter and the press of fingers in the palm would stay aboveground forever" (Morrison 66), Sula persists as a necessary presence for and in "the Bottom," even after death.

With his promise of "always," Shadrack intended to "convince [Sula] [and] assure her of permanency" (157). Sula realizes before her death, however, that her presence will live on since "the Bottom" will "love [her] all right. It will take time, but they'll love [her]" (145). Matus, in describing "the Bottom's" reaction to Sula's death, asserts that "their sense of relief and hope that follows after her death is in fact short-lived: 'Without her mockery, affection for others sank in flaccid disrepair' (153)" (61). Without Sula, the community "had nothing to rub up against" (153) since "the tension was gone and so was the reason for the effort ['the Bottom'] made" (153). Sula's belief, then, that "the Bottom" will love her comes only after the latter violates (or will violate) its own moral

absolutes: "After all the old women have lain with the teen-agers [sic] [. . .] . . . then there'll be a little love left over for me. And I'll know just what it feels like" (146, ellipses in original). Sula, then, maintains such a conviction so as to reinforce Morrison's observation that "sometimes good looks like evil; sometimes evil looks like good – you never really know what it is" (Taylor-Guthrie 94).

Significant, as a result, for Morrison's objectives for the narrative, Nel must capitalize on this binary opposite of good and evil, even after Sula physically leaves "the Bottom." When Eva, Sula's grandmother, tells Nel that the latter and Sula were "just alike. Both of you. Never was no difference between you" (Morrison 169), Morrison reinforces her attitude toward the complex role evil plays in the lives of black people and the community. Yet she also demonstrates Nel's immaturity as a character, in much the same way as she does with Claudia of *The Bluest Eye,* when the former blames Sula for Chicken Little's death and thinks that Eva "accuse[s] [her] of drowning Chicken Little for spite" (171). Just as Nel fails to provide a reason as to why she "didn't . . . feel bad when it happened" (170) or why "it felt so good to see him fall" (170), she cannot localize her sorrow at the end of the novel. Morrison's narrator insists that although Nel's cry for Sula "was a fine cry – loud and long – . . . it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow" (174). For some readers these "circles and circles of sorrow" (174) point to Nel's cyclical identity; however, this "loud and long cry" (174) seems to more strongly reinforce the strength of a friendship more powerful than either marriage or death.

NOTES

1 Such an observation comes with a Western reading of *Sula*. Mbiti and other African theologians would suggest that marriage and the birth of the first child represent complete selfhood. For a more complete discussion of the importance of childbirth among African peoples, see Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy*.

2 For a more complete discussion of how Sula speaks to West African cultural sources, namely metaphysics, see Okonkwo's "A Critical Divination: Reading *Sula* as Ogbanje-Abiku."

You are an adult. The old one, the wise one.
Think of our lives and tell us your particularized world.

Toni Morrison
"Noble Prize Lecture, 1993"

Chapter Four

Flight out of Bondage: Physical and Spiritual Maturation in *Song of Solomon*

Whereas *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* present readers and scholars with a distinct challenge, namely identifying the layers of African traditional religions embedded within both novels, *Song of Solomon* acts as testament to the dialectic between racial, cultural, and religious rootedness and displacement, tensions between the North and the South, death and regeneration, and the triumphs and perils of the African-American experience. With her third novel, Morrison encourages scholars to not only recognize but also to devote critical attention to the African framework upon which she builds her novels. Hence, the less-than-obvious references to ontologies and cosmologies not situated in Western time and space in previous novels become more pronounced in *Song of Solomon* as Morrison's protagonist Macon Dead III (Milkman) travels from the North to the South to excavate gold and his ancestral past.

Morrison facilitates this journey, one of which she inverts for the purposes of her narrative, with the direction of Pilate Dead, the living-ancestor of *Song of Solomon*. In much the same way that *Sula* emphasizes good and evil from an African model, *Song of Solomon* centers on Pilate's formative role of ancestor in the lives of Morrison's characters. I will explore in this chapter, as with the last, the African traditional religions and cultural practices that take shape in *Song of Solomon*, and I will argue that this novel, more so than with *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, reflects Morrison's persistent and more

directly observable attempts to rectify inaccurate socio-historical evaluations of black people and their traditions. On a macro-level, then, *Song of Solomon* further resists appropriation by Western readings, particularly because of the more direct observations on or about the African presence in Morrison's third novel. Such a presence becomes more pronounced as characters move, physically or otherwise, toward or away from what Victor Turner calls *communitas*: a sense of togetherness or belonging that points to and reinforces what Morrison finds useful as per the aims of African-American literature.

In his work on spiritual empowerment in black literature, James H. Evans, Jr. addresses what he believes to be the central issue at work in *Song of Solomon*, namely the extent to which characters "are either culturally grounded or culturally uprooted" (133). I would claim, moreover, that given the purposes of this project Morrison does not limit such an association or disassociation to black culture in America but rather demonstrates, as she has in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, the point at which characters reclaim or fail to recover an African presence. Evans might agree with such an observation since he claims that cultural grounding "refers to the capacity of the character to draw sustenance from the indigenous environment" (133) whereas cultural uprooting "refers to the incapacity of the character to draw on these resources" (133). These resources, which reflect Morrison's insistence on communal rather than formal education, emerge in multiple contexts but ultimately point to the capacity of black characters to recognize and deal with the framework upon which Morrison builds their experiences.

In *Song of Solomon*, the extent to which characters seek out, utilize, or fail to utilize such resources directly corresponds with how the former makes connections with others and the religious and cultural vestiges brought with their African ancestors to the

New World. Macon Dead, Jr., much like Pauline of *The Bluest Eye*, deliberately severs any connection with his people – immediate and extended – so as to acquire property and keys, both of which become to Macon markers of self-worth. Conversely, Pilate Dead literally carries the memory of her father, with his bones a link between the physical and the spiritual world. Pilate must maintain such a connection because her brother, Macon, cannot and will not acknowledge or reclaim his African past. In fact, Evans insists that "it is not until Macon Dead III (Milkman) reaches maturity that the male side of the family is reconnected to its primordial source" (137). Thus, as she has in previous novels, Morrison charges female characters with the welfare of the village and the maintenance of its traditions.

Pilate, then, does for the community what others cannot. As perhaps the most rooted character in *Song of Solomon*, this living-ancestor unites multiple worlds: North and South, West and Africa, and physical and spiritual. Yet Pilate also represents the social outlaw whose mutability, like Sula's, enables her to remain connected to her past although, as Evans claims, "she is physically cut off from her ancestry" (142-3) and stands outside the circle of the community. Significant to Morrison's objectives, Pilate assumes such a marginal position because she came into the world with what the narrator calls ". . . the absence of a navel that convinced people that she had not [been born] through normal channels" (Morrison 27). Like her fictional counterparts Pecola and Sula, Morrison's living-ancestor of *Song of Solomon* has access to the supernatural, a realm of experience not limited to the physical. Thus, Pilate becomes the only character able to lead Milkman South in search of his ancestral past.

Morrison insists in "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" that the ancestor's "relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, protective, and [that ancestors] provide a certain kind of wisdom" (773-4). Because she attributes such a role to Pilate, Morrison ensures that Milkman's connection with his estranged aunt begins with her protagonist's birth. As the unnamed woman wrapped in "an old quilt instead of a winter coat" (Morrison 6) outside "No Mercy Hospital" as Milkman begins life and Mr. Smith ends his, Pilate's song of "*O Sugarman done fly away / Sugarman done gone / Sugarman cut across the sky / Sugarman gone home . . .*" (6, italics in original) echoes the children's song Milkman learns while in Shalimar, Virginia among his people.

This initial link between Pilate and Morrison's protagonist becomes more apparent with the latter's preoccupation with flight. While she plays on and with the African flying myth in *The Bluest Eye* and in *Sula* with Ajax, Morrison makes such a myth central to *Song of Solomon*, evident with her epigraph "The fathers may soar / And the children may know their names." Morrison reserves this epigraph for Pilate and Circe, yet only the former has the ability to "soar" *and* to retell stories of flight; thus, Pilate embodies the storyteller, the songstress, the bearer of racial, cultural, and religious traditions, as well as the only female character who "without ever leaving the ground . . . could fly" (336). Morrison, then, could not have chosen another character – male or female – to direct Milkman's course South.

Yet Pilate does more than lead Milkman in search of people and links; rather, her role as living-ancestor implies, as Muzorewa claims, that she "is charged by God with the responsibility of ensuring the welfare of the people of [her] own tribe . . . [. . .] [and] to affirm the culture of [her] own people" (13). Morrison, as well, charges Pilate with such

responsibility, primarily because the latter can appropriately recognize and respond to racial and cultural dialectics in the black community:

> You [Milkman] think dark is just one color, but it ain't. There's five or six kinds of black. Some silky, some woolly. Some just empty. Some like fingers. And it don't stay still. It moves and changes from one kind of black to another. Saying something is pitch black is like saying something is green. [. . .] Well, night black . . . may as well be a rainbow. (Morrison 41)

At a seminal point in *Song of Solomon*, Pilate maintains that while these varieties of black people seem to produce disparate images of blackness, a sense of interconnection exists among blacks, either on the virtue of race or custom. Pilate tells Hagar, after Milkman rebuffs the latter for a woman with "penny-colored hair" (315), "how can he not love your hair? It's the same hair that grows out of his armpits . . . it's all over his head, Hagar. It's the same hair, too. He got to love it" (315). Pilate can respond to these tensions because she commits herself to not only the black experience(s), but also to the depth of African (American) culture.

Music and oral narratives, both of which Morrison finds "useful" or interesting to African-American literature, pervade Pilate's home. When Hagar complains of a hunger that is, as Evans claims, as much physical as metaphysical, Pilate understands that her granddaughter "don't mean food" (49) but rather that which satisfies the African-American soul. Morrison, then, uses Pilate's home as a physical repository of black cultural traditions. Unlike Macon Dead, who values ownership, Pilate regards her possessions as more spiritual than literal. Hence, as Morrison's narrator claims, "other

than a rocking chair, two straight-back chairs, a large table, a sink and a stove, there was no furniture" (39) but rather "a moss-green sack [that] hung from the ceiling" (39) and "[an] odor of pine and fermenting fruit" (39). Significantly, Pilate's association with nature reinforces her role as the link between the physical and the spiritual world, a connection the narrator points to when he/she asserts the Pilate "looked like a tall black tree" (39). Just as she attributes tree images to Pecola and the Magniot Line, Sula, and Sethe of *Beloved*, Morrison relates such an image to Pilate because of the latter's ability to not only reconnect with but to also retell of an African spiritual or religious past.

This capacity for what Morrison's protagonist in *Beloved* calls "rememory" manifests as disparate forms of knowledge and the extent to which black characters can utilize African religious and cultural sources. The act of naming, significant to Africans and those of the Diaspora, becomes more evident in *Song of Solomon* than in previous novels as Morrison focuses on how characters regard names and their transformative power. While Macon insists that "surely . . . he and his sister [Pilate] had some ancestor, some lithe young man with onyx skin and legs straight as can stalks who had a name that was real" (17), he maintains that "his own parents . . . had agreed to abide by naming done to them by somebody who couldn't have cared less" (18). Pilate, whose father "had thumbed through the Bible [and] chose a group of letters . . . that looked like a tree hanging in some princely but protective way over a row of smaller trees" (18), regards naming as transformative in that she takes the piece of paper bearing her name out of the Bible, ". . . fold[s] it up into a tiny knot and put it in a little brass box, and [strings] the entire contraption through her left earlobe" (19). So as to reinforce disparate forms of education at work in *Song of Solomon* as well as Pilate's role as living-ancestor, Morrison

gives her matriarch a name "like a Christ-killing Pilate" (19) but also a name "like a riverboat pilot" (19).

The latter, of course, foreshadows Pilate's formative role in the lives of her fictional counterparts. As the living-ancestor, Pilate bears African cultural traditions, namely with her insistence on the aural/oral rather than written word. Significant, then, not only to Morrison's objectives for the novel but also for the aims of African-American literature, Pilate encourages music and storytelling to achieve what words alone cannot, evident when she tells Guitar to "say what [he] means" (36). Words, however, do not represent mere abstractions, nor do they perform the same function as keys or property for Macon Jr. Rather, words act as one of many mediums through which Pilate can access her ancestral past. Music, song, and oral narratives, as a result, can accomplish what words alone cannot. Moreover, this repeated act of singing introduced within the first few pages of *Song of Solomon* and continued throughout Morrison's narrative reveals Pilate's highly ritualized way of life. Unlike her brother's Sunday car rides which have, as Evans notes, "lost all ritual efficacy" (141), Pilate's ritual of song "aims at the perfection of social and cultural order" (141).

Part of the reason as to why Pilate possesses such ritual efficacy comes from her marginal position as a social outlaw and her access to the supernatural. "Cut off from people early" (Morrison 141), Pilate recalls living among a "colony of Negro farmers on the island off the coast of Virginia" (146). These people, some of whom Morrison fashioned after historical African Muslims to the New World,[1] had "a hymnal . . . but not a Bible on the island" (148) and therefore placed a greater emphasis on song and rhythm than on doctrine. Given Morrison's objectives for her narrative *and* for her purposes as a

black writer, no other community could have satisfied Pilate, religiously or otherwise. In fact, such an emphasis on both oral communication and what Morrison's narrator calls "communal religion" (148) speaks directly to the religious traditions practiced by Africans and those of the Diaspora.

Appropriately, then, Pilate feels "further isolated from her people" (148) upon leaving the island since "no place was like the island ever again" (148). Without "partnership in marriage [and] confessional friendship" (148), Pilate had only "a sack, the contents of which she never discussed . . . her geography book and the rocks and the two spools of thread" (148). These few possessions point to and reinforce Pilate's intimate connection with the primordial source; however, such valuables also isolate Pilate from those who do not or cannot reconnect with their ancestral pasts. Morrison's narrator insists that Pilate "began to take offense" (149) to the "men who frowned [and] women who whispered and shoved their children behind them" (148) because of her "defect [her absence of a navel]" (148).

Yet "when she [Pilate] realized what her situation in the world was and would probably always be she threw away every assumption she had learned and began at zero" (149). Starting over allows Pilate to "[acquire] a deep concern for about human relationships" (149) as well as the resources to hone her skills as a "natural healer" (150) and reconciler – qualities necessary for Morrison's living-ancestor if she is to reconnect with Macon and give Hagar the "family, people, [and] a life very different from what [Pilate] and Reba could offer" (151). Pilate, however, cannot reconcile with her brother until the end of *Song of Solomon*, primarily because the latter sees her, in much the same way as "the Bottom" regards Sula, as "a snake" (54). Despite Macon's resolutions to the

contrary, Milkman understands, like Mbiti and Afrocentric readers of Morrison's fiction, that Pilate's wise and instructive knowledge "can't teach [Milkman] a thing [he] can use in this world [but rather in] the next" (55).

The life to which Pilate refers, namely the restlessness that "marked her to roam the country, planting her feet in each pink, yellow, blue, or green state" (148), points to another dialectic at work in *Song of Solomon*: physical and upward mobility. For Macon Jr. and Pilate, the need to move – either up the social ladder or to a new location – coincides with racial, cultural, and religious displacement or rootedness. Apparent early in the novel, Macon Jr. values possessions more than his family since the former serve as "a way to satisfy himself that he was indeed a successful man" (31). Like Pauline of *The Bluest Eye*, then, Macon Jr. "kept each member of his family awkward with fear" (10).

Contrary to his resolution that "without the tension and drama he ignited, they might not have known what to do with themselves" (11), Macon's wife and children find ways to satisfy themselves: Ruth's visits to her father's grave and First Corinthians and Magdalene called Lena's rose-making have a ritual efficacy that Macon cannot achieve even with his Sunday car rides. In fact, as Evans contends, "the repetition of this performance [car rides] does, in fact, rob it of any ritual efficacy because they no longer serve an integrating function [and therefore] cannot truly be rituals" (135). Rather, Evans asserts that these outings "are desacralized or reduced to mere repetitions and therefore mortify the passengers" (135). As if in response to this description of the Dead's Sunday car rides, community members who see the passage of the Packard, which "had no real lived life at all" (Morrison 33), appropriately refer to it as "Macon Dead's hearse" (33). Such an evaluation of the Packard becomes significant for Morrison's objectives within

the narrative; Morrison suggests, as she does throughout her corpus, that material wealth must not become a substitute for familial and spiritual fulfillment. Pilate understands and responds to this concern when she tells young Milkman that "there ain't but three Deads alive" (38). Milkman, however, misses Pilate's deliberate, or Morrison's intentional, irony since he is one of the Deads who will insist on his "deadness" for years to come.

More so than any other character in the novel, Milkman embodies Evans's dialectic central to *Song of Solomon*: that of cultural grounding and uprooting. Born the first black child in "No Mercy Hospital" as Mr. Smith leaps from the same building in a vain attempt at flight, Milkman personifies such tension among blacks. Because he stands for both the triumphs and perils of the African-American experience, he has what Du Bois would call "the gift of sight;" however, Milkman does not gain such an understanding or awareness about himself or others until he migrates South. Like Pilate, Milkman must physically move so as to reconnect with his past; however, establishing a balance between his present life and the Africa of his ancestors becomes increasingly difficult in a community where blacks have been thoroughly decultured as the result of foreign value systems or the misappropriation of African ones.

Whereas Morrison's previous novels indirectly address the profound effect of uprooting on the individual and the community, *Song of Solomon* speaks more specifically to these concerns from within a community that personifies Du Bois's "double consciousness" for blacks in a Westernized world. Unlike the majority of characters in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* that merely subscribe to rather than reappropriate Western or Christian traditions, blacks in *Song of Solomon* serve to represent the tension between loyalty to nation and loyalty to negritude. Milkman, because he embodies this

tension, must establish a balance between these binary opposites; however, Morrison's protagonist must also construct an identity alongside decultured men like his father and his childhood friend Guitar Baines.

Evans insists that deculturation in *Song of Solomon* results from and manifests as cultural uprooting; however, I might move beyond such an observation to claim that Morrison's characters, namely Macon. Jr. and Guitar, fail to reconnect with their African pasts as the result of cultural uprooting at the hands of whites. Both men have been victims of interracial prejudice and violence from an early age. In fact, Guitar argues that "since [his] father got sliced up in a sawmill and his boss came by and gave [the] kids some candy" (61), sweets "[make him] want to throw up" (61) because they "[make him] think of dead people . . . and white people" (61). Rather appropriately, Guitar links sweets with "Divinity. A big sack of divinity. [. . .] It's sweet, divinity is. Sweeter than syrup" (61). Evans concludes, then, that Guitar "cannot partake in the eating and dying of divinity" (147, emphasis in original); yet I might argue that, given the model through which Morrison finds most useful for approaching her fiction, Guitar's association of sweets with divinity speaks not to his inability to partake in communion, as Evans implicitly asserts, but that Guitar rejects access to the Africa of his ancestors in favor of committing to interracial violence.

Morrison seems to reinforce the latter observation with Guitar's membership in the Seven Days, a Mau-Mau-like cult where, as Evans claims, Guitar "severs his own genealogical line when he submits to the requirement of the Seven Days that they never have children" (147). Significantly, this secret society points to the disparate forms of education at work in *Song of Solomon*, namely because both Western and African

cultures attach importance to the number seven. Whereas many cultures consider seven to represent complete order or even perfection, Mbiti insists that the Akamba and Vugusu "have taboos attached to number 'seven', which the Akamba refer to as 'the seven of dogs'" (*African Religions* 56). Moreover, Mbiti argues that "counting people and livestock is forbidden in many African societies, partly for fear that misfortune would befall those who are numbered" (56) and "partly, perhaps, because people are not individuals but corporate members of society which cannot be defined numerically" (56). With an Afrocentric reading of *Song of Solomon*, it becomes apparent that neither Guitar nor other members of the Seven Days have any connections with their ancestral pasts, particularly because these men wrongly believe that the cult "ain't about hating white people. It's about loving us. About loving you [black men]" (Morrison 159).

In subscribing to this particular brand of oppression, or an inner conflict between hate and love, Guitar commits himself to racial, cultural, and religious dislocation. Morrison illustrates this uprooting with Guitar's roles in the novel: as the oppositional yet connective force in *Song of Solomon,* Guitar represents both villain and brother, appellations that become more significant as Guitar mediates between the North and the South. Evans contends that Guitar's "dislocation colors his entire perspective" (146); such an observation becomes most apparent with Guitar's belief that the Seven Days, in murdering a white person for every black killed at white hands, establishes "Numbers. Balance. Ratio" (Morrison 158). Yet Guitar also insists, without regard to the balance he attempts to establish, that he "accepts it [his slave name]. It's a part of who [he is]. Guitar is [*his*] name. Baines is the slave master's name. And [he's] all of that" (161). Because he has been decultured, Guitar doesn't "give a damn about names" (161) and

their transformative power, nor does he truly understand the importance of maintaining links among generations of black people.

Unlike her husband or other decultured men, Ruth Foster seeks out and reclaims an African presence, particularly since Morrison charges her, as she does with Pilate, with maintaining cultural practices common among Africans and those of the Diaspora. One of the ways in which Ruth maintains such traditions comes from her ability to recognize and respond to the possibility of both life after death and regeneration and redemption in death. Her visits to her father's grave, unlike Macon's Sunday car rides, have ritual efficacy in that each visit confirm Ruth's connection with the spirit world. Returning to the grave, then, so as to commune with the living-dead serves as a physical link between generations, a ritual in which Ruth finds "important for [her] to know that he [Dr. Foster] was in the world" (125).

Ruth continues her visits to her father well after his death, primarily because the latter "was . . . interested in [her]. For [her] own self" (125, ellipsis in original). Ruth maintains that her father "cared whether and he cared how [she] lived, and there was, and is, no one else in the world who ever did" (124). Like Guitar, who mediates between parallel opposites, Ruth finds tension in the dialectic between life and death since such tension remains central to her life. Morrison further illustrates this dialectic, as well as to reinforce the disparate forms of education at work in the novel, when Ruth receives the host at a Catholic Mass unaware that she cannot participate in the sacrament. Ruth does not understand, as Evans insists, "how an act which is central to life for her can be selectively administered" (145); however, Morrison emphasizes, with Ruth's insistence that "communion is communion" (Morrison 66), that earlier and more indigenous

traditions reveal an immolated divinity as food – to consume such food is to become one with the gods. In playing on and with these cultural differences, Morrison reinforces dialectics central to *Song of Solomon*.

Morrison explores one such a dialectic, namely the tension between Western and African cultural practices in the novel, with Ruth's breast-feeding of Milkman past infancy. Mbiti argues that nursing, like other practices with religious significance, "gives the child a deep psychological sense of security" (*African Religions* 116), and that "some societies take as long as two years or longer for mothers to nurse their children, during which time wives are not allowed to have sexual relations with their husbands" (116). Morrison acknowledges such a practice among blacks in America when Freddie tells Ruth, "used to be a lot of womenfolk nurse they kids a long time down South. [. . .] I knew a family . . . nursed hers till the boy, I reckon, was 'bout thirteen" (Morrison 14). Yet Morrison also reveals the pressure for blacks to repress or ignore African cultural traditions in favor of Western ones when Ruth insists, only after Freddie has witnessed the act, that "these afternoons were strange and wrong" (14).

Morrison's description of Milkman's nursing does not lend itself to such an evaluation, nor does Ruth feel shameful when she engages in the act. Rather, the narrator claims that "the terror that sprang to Ruth's eyes came from the quick realization that she was to lose fully half of what made her daily life bearable" (14). Ruth's two indulgences – "the one that involved her son – and part of the pleasure it gave her from the room in which she did it" (13) reinforce her connection with both her African past and the primordial source. Morrison's narrator contends that "a damp greenness lived there, made by the evergreen that pressed against the window and filtered the light" (13) and

that like Pilate's home, "it was just a little room that Doctor had called a study, and aside from a sewing machine that stood in the corner along with a dress form, there was only a rocker and a tiny footstool" (13). Here, Ruth "sat in this room holding her son to her lap, staring at his closed eyelids and listening to the sound of his sucking" (13). In much the same way that visits to her father's grave become rituals, breast-feeding represents a transformative act for Ruth, evident when the narrator insists that "she [Ruth] had the distinct impression that his [Milkman's] lips were pulling from her a thread of light" (13). When Freddie "look[s] in the window past the evergreen" (14) and interprets Ruth's "look as simple shame" (14), the latter feels as if she has lost a medium through which to access her past.

Morrison's juxtaposition of nature images with that which seems unnatural reinforces how black characters in *Song of Solomon* struggle to resolve, often without success, parallel opposites. Gurleen Grewal points to such tension when she claims that "Morrison is mediating a split identity, a family quarrel not just between brother Macon and sister Pilate but between Northern black mobility and the jettisoned Southern past" (61). By positioning both the North and the South *and* the West and Africa as antipodes, Morrison makes an important connection between geography and ideology. For her characters, these locations serve as cultural, religious, and socio-political repositories; yet, as Morrison insists in *Playing in the Dark*, "all the Old World offered . . . was poverty, prison, social ostracism and not infrequently, death" (34). Thus, Milkman *must* migrate from the city to the village in order to have cultural and spiritual fulfillment. Heinze reinforces such an observation when she claims that "the further South blacks travel, the closer they are likely to come to . . . *communitas*" (108, emphasis in original).

Turner's idea of togetherness or closeness– a sentiment for humanity – largely coincides with the importance of human relations among Africans peoples and those of the Diaspora. Because she continues to emphasize communal and generational links in *Song of Solomon*, Morrison writes Milkman's journey in such a way that her protagonist's interactions with both the physical environment and those around him become more pronounced and valuable the closer Milkman comes to the South and his ancestral past. Morrison demonstrates, then, as she does with Claudia and Nel, the (in)capacity of her protagonist to recognize and respond to such an African presence. Hence, Milkman's gradual awareness of this presence unfolds as he works through and attempts to unite dialectics central to blacks and their experiences.

Throughout much of *Song of Solomon,* Milkman concerns himself with flight and the presence of his limp – the latter a racial, cultural, and religious disability rather than a physical one. Morrison gives credence, then, to the complexity of the African flying myth with Milkman's ambivalence toward flight; during a Sunday car ride, "flying blind" (Morrison 32) instills in Milkman a sense of uneasiness, namely because "not knowing where he was going – just where he had been – troubled him" (32). Guitar reinforces Milkman's fears when he asks Morrison's protagonist, "Looks like everybody's going in the wrong direction but you, don't it?" (106). Significantly, Milkman's inability to "concern himself an awful lot about other people" (107) speaks to the struggle for many blacks to construct identities independent of those who have been decultured.

Milkman, then, cannot begin to reclaim an African presence until he realizes that "he was bored. Everybody bored him. The city was boring. The racial problems that consumed Guitar were the most boring of all" (107). As she does in "City Limits,

Village Values," Morrison reinforces that the success or failure of the protagonist depends largely on the presence or absence of the ancestor, where "the city is wholesome, loved when such an ancestor is on the scene, when neighborhood links are secure. The country is beautiful – healing because more often than not, the ancestor is there" (39). Milkman admits that Pilate "accepted him without any question and with all the ease in the world" (Morrison 79), yet his eagerness to reinvent himself, to "get out of here [Michigan] [and] be on [his] own" (181) comes from his desire to "beat a path away from his parents' past, which was also their present and which was threatening to become his present as well" (180) rather than a need to "live it [his life]" (183).

Motivated by gold, Milkman declares that "he felt a self inside himself emerge, a clean-lined definite self" (184); however, to Milkman's dismay, this self does not permit him to live his life so much as it illuminates the shame "he felt as he watched . . . Pilate carrying what he believed was her inheritance . . . [. . .] [that] he had stolen" (209). This seminal moment in *Song of Solomon* marks the first of Milkman's latter attempts to connect with others, or what Morrison's protagonist calls "asking anybody in the world how they were" (229). In fact, as he moves from the North to the South, Milkman gradually comes to understand the "good feeling to come into a strange town and find a stranger who knew your people" (229), particularly because the people and family mean "links" (229) among blacks.

Milkman's gratification at "listening to a story come from this man [in Danville] that he'd heard many times before but only half listened to" (231) arises because such stories about Macon Jr. and Pilate "seem so real" (231). Although Morrison's protagonist insists that "without knowing it he had walked right by the place where

Pilate's earring had been fashioned . . . the fixing of which informed the colored people here that the children of the murdered man were alive" (231), Milkman continues to act on the basis of financial and self-gain rather than as an effort to reclaim his past. He claims that "in the midst of [the story about his father] that [he] wanted the gold. He wanted to get up right then and there and go get it. [. . .] He glittered in the light of their adoration and grew fierce with pride" (236). Circe, the woman who Morrison entrusts as Milkman's second "pilot," reinforces the latter's immaturity as a character when she tells him "you don't listen to people. Your ear is on your head, but it's not connected to your brain" (247).

With Pilate absent in the South, Circe directs Milkman to the creek where he must "cross it" (249) so as Guitar claims, to "give up the shit that weighs you down" (179). Milkman's immersion into the creek, an event whose significance changes given a Western or Afrocentric reading of *Song of Solomon*,[2] points to Morrison's more direct observations about African cosmologies. Morrison's narrator claims that Milkman "looked at his watch to check the time. It ticked, but the face was splintered and the minute hand was bent" (250). Significant for Afrocentric readers, Milkman's bent minute hand implies that the former emerges on the other side of the bank into cyclical rather than linear time. Mbiti argues in *African Religions and Philosophy* that "time has to be experienced in order to make sense or to become real" (17). For Milkman, time involves his own experiences but also, as Mbiti aptly claims, "partly . . . the society which goes back many generations before his own birth" (17). Morrison seems to acknowledge the latter observation when her protagonist enters the cave "with a kind of V-shaped crown" (Morison 251) in search of gold and the bones of his grandfather.

These bones, hung from Pilate's ceiling in a moss-green sack, serve an important function in *Song of Solomon*: as a link between the physical and spiritual world, it appears neither accidental nor irrelevant that "they [the men who found the body] dumped [Pilate's father] in here [the cave]" (251) since as Mbiti contends, "certain caves or holes are given religious meaning" (*African Religions* 55). Although Milkman fails to locate either gold or the divine within the cave, Morrison continues to present her protagonist with opportunities to recover his African past. Her narrator claims that after leaving the cave, Milkman "looked at the sky to gauge the hour" (Morrison 253), a practice among indigenous cultures. Such an African presence intensifies as Milkman moves, once again, from Danville to Shalimar, where in Shalimar he wonders "why black people ever left the South" (260) since "he earned the rewards he got here" (260).

Necessary for her objectives in *Song of Solomon*, Morrison revisits the distinction between the North – or the city – and the South or village when her narrator insists that Milkman, or as the men at Solomon's General Store call him "the city Negro" (266), "hadn't found them fit enough or good enough to want to know their names, and believed himself too good to tell them his" (266). Milkman realizes after this encounter that "he had said something else wrong" (266). Partly to stop "evading things, sliding through, over and around difficulties" (271) but more so to advance her narrative, then, Morrison's protagonist engages in a hunt, an act with religious and secular connotations for most African peoples. At the start of his initiation, Milkman "did as he was told and took King's shotgun, a piece of rope, and a deep swig from the bottle they were passing around" (272). J. Brooks Bouson insists that this initiation "is consciously patterned after an Africanized, tribal hunting ritual in which the initiate, Milkman, comes into black

manhood" (98). Yet Milkman's reward, namely the heart of the bobcat, cannot compare to what Morrison's protagonist learns "under the moon, on the ground, alone [and] with not even the sound of baying dogs to remind him that he was with other people" (Morrison 277): "his self – the cocoon that was 'personality' – gave way. [. . .] Little by little it fell into place" (277).

Deep in the woods, Milkman returns to the original source. He observes that "it [the distinctive voices between man and animal] was not language; it was what was what there was before language. Before things were written down" (278). Such a comment reinforces not only Morrison's efforts for scholars to reclaim an African presence in her fiction, but it also reflects Milkman's newfound rootedness as a character. The latter, of course, becomes most evident when Morrison's narrator claims that " . . . [Milkman's] legs were like stalks, tree trunks, a part of his body that extended down down down into the rock and soil, and were comfortable there . . . [. . .] And he did not limp" (281). The recovery of this limp, made possible once Morrison's protagonist connects with the earth, signifies Milkman's ability, like Pilate's, to unite multiple worlds.

Morrison uses Milkman's capacity for "rememory" to further link Milkman with both his ancestral past as well as those around him. In Shalimar, Milkman professes that "he didn't feel close to them, but he did feel connected, as though there was some cord or pulse of information they shared. Back home he never felt that way" (293). Part of the reason why Milkman feels connected to blacks in Shalimar involves the children's song the former hears and later connects with his own great-great-grandfather: "*Jake the only son of Solomon / Come booba yalle, come booba tambee / Whirled around and touched the sun / Come konka yalle, come konka tambee . . .*" (303, emphasis in original).

Milkman learns from a distant relative that Solomon "flew. You know, like a bird. Just stood up in the field one day, ran up some hill, spun around a couple of times, and was lifted up in the air. Went right on back to wherever it was he came from" (323).

Morrison notes, however, that the African flying myth, or what Susan Byrd refers to as "some of those Africans they brought over here as slaves [that]. . . could fly [. . .] back to Africa" (322), functions much like another parallel opposite in the novel. Milkman, too, acknowledges this dialectic when he tells Sweet that Solomon "left everybody on the ground and he soared off like a black eagle" (328). As Morrison suggests in an interview with Mel Watkins, "that [the flying myth] is one of the points of *Song*: all the men have left someone, and it is the children who remember it, sing about it, mythologize about it [and] make it a part of their family history" (Taylor-Guthrie 46). Hence, Milkman proclaims to Sweet "But I can play it now. It's my game now" (Morrison 327). At this seminal point in *Song of Solomon,* Milkman finally understands the importance of people, links, and "names that had meaning. [. . .] 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" (329). Pilate ensures, however, that her name lives on. After burying her father's bones, Morrison's living-ancestor ". . . reached up and yanked her earring from her ear, splitting the lobe. Then she made a little hole with her fingers and placed in it Sing's snuffbox with the single word Jake ever wrote" (335).

Like Pilate, Milkman reconnects with the primordial source for the last time. The ending of *Song of Solomon,* intentionally ambiguous so as to reinforce the many dialectics at work in the novel, ultimately points to Milkman's reclamation of his ancestral past, but Milkman's flight from Solomon's Leap also takes on a different

meaning given the cultural sources to which scholars subscribe. Morrison insists in an interview with Charles Raus in 1981, with respect to an Afrocentric reading of her novel, that she

> . . . really did not mean to suggest that they [Milkman and Guitar] kill each other, but out of commitment and love and selflessness they are willing to risk the only thing that we have, life, and that's the positive nature of the action. [. . .] [She] wanted the language to be placid enough to suggest that he [Milkman] was suspended in the air in the leap towards this thing [his past], both loved and despised, and that he was willing to die for that idea, but not necessarily die. (Taylor-Guthrie 111)

Afrocentric readers, then, should understand that Milkman's flight binds what Morrison calls "these two elements of loyalty (Mr. Smith's) and abandon and self-interest (Solomon's) into a third" ("Unspeakable Things" 225): "a merging of fealty and risk that suggests the 'agency' for 'mutual life" (225), which Milkman offers at the end of *Song of Solomon* and, as Morrison claims, "is echoed in the hills behind him, and is the marriage of surrender and domination [and] acceptance and rule" (225).

NOTES

1 For a more complete discussion of the association between these fictional settlers and historical African Muslims to the New World, see Nada Elia's article entitled "'Kum Buba Yali Kum Buba Tambe, Ameen, Ameen, Ameen': Did Some Flying Africans Bow to Allah?" as well as *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among Georgia Costal Negroes* through the Georgia Writer's Project.

2 A Western approach to Milkman's immersion would imply that Milkman has been baptized in the creek; Afrocentric readers, however, see such immersion as Milkman's emergence into cyclical time.

Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created.

Toni Morrison
"Nobel Prize Lecture, 1993"

Chapter Five

The Narrative in Transformation:
"Memory, Creation," and the Development of "Black" Texts

Throughout her career, Morrison has sought to address issues central to the lives of African-Americans and in doing so has created a body of work, critical and fictional, that often speaks directly to the racial, cultural, and religious traditions and practices to which many Africans and those of the Diaspora subscribe. Because Morrison recognizes and appropriately responds to what she calls inaccurate socio-historical evaluations of black people, her corpus, then, reflects a conscious awareness and application of African traditional religions and cultural practices in that it rectifies the way in which scholars and readers approach, and more significantly appropriate, both her fiction and African-American literature more generally. Morrison insists, given the aims of such literature, that critical work on or about the black experience aimed at placing value on Western culture fails to address what she finds interesting or even "useful" to the literature she wishes to write, the aims of that literature, and her purposes as a black writer.

As with previous chapters, I will focus this analysis on African traditional religions and cultural practices but will devote significant attention to the merits and limitations of Higgins's Afrocentric scholarship on Morrison's fiction, how the use of these religions and practices function as micro- *and* macro-level narrative strategies, and how *Beloved* represents Morrison's most effective attempt to reclaim an African presence in her fiction while at the same time reappropriating a Western, cultural discourse of

slavery and loss. My observations about how Morrison's fiction resists appropriation depend largely in part on both Higgins's assessment of African traditional religions at work in the text as well as attempts by Higgins and other scholars to categorize Morrison's novels; therefore, before establishing how African traditional religions and cultural practices culminate in *Beloved*, this chapter must first address the critical observations that give credence to and reinforce scholarship of reappropriation on or about Morrison's fiction.

In her work *Religiosity, Cosmology, and Folklore: The African Influence in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, Higgins explores the African presence to which Morrison seeks to recover if her novels are to affirm and reaffirm communal education and village values. Although Higgins presents a rather comprehensive evaluation of Morrison's novels from *The Bluest Eye* to *Paradise*, her scholarship fails to move beyond how African cosmologies emerge as more than what Higgins refers to as "themes, in characters' actions . . . [and] indeed in the very structure of her [Morrison's] novels" (ix). While Higgins's observation that "one must know the common underlying philosophy of life and cosmology of African peoples" (x) serves to converge themes within the text, Morrison's use of African traditional religions and cultural practices also points to a narrative progression in which, on a macro-level, each novel further resists Western readings or approaches, the latter of which often ignores or misinterprets African cosmologies and ontologies.

Higgins insists that Morrison's trilogy – *Beloved, Jazz,* and *Paradise* – "delves deep into the heart of the African American psyche, both on an individual level and a communal one" (xiv); however, I would argue, as apparent by the religious framework

upon which she builds her oeuvre, that Morrison's first three novels, *The Bluest Eye, Sula*, and *Song of Solomon*, introduce and emphasize how characters either reject or seek out and utilize the African presence on which Morrison capitalizes in *Beloved*. Other scholars, notably McKay and John Duvall, conjoin Morrison's novels in relation to autobiographical or historical excavation; yet to read and analyze these novels in order, rather than to merely group them according to thematic issues, reveals the extent to which Morrison focuses on and builds upon her African religious and cultural framework.

Given her critical evaluation of Morrison's corpus, Higgins approaches this framework through an Afrocentric model, one in which it seems that Mbiti's hierarchy of God, spirits, and man acts as themes upon which Higgins constructs her analyses. The first part of *Religiosity, Cosmology, and Folklore* centers on God and spirits in four of Morrison's novels: *Song of Solomon, Beloved, Tar Baby,* and *Jazz*. In this section, Higgins prefaces her observations with a rich analysis of the cosmologies she finds most evident to both the "nine major groups of African peoples" (ix) used as referents for her study as well as to Morrison's four novels. For Higgins, identifying these religious and folkloric traditions becomes a medium through which she may, to borrow from Holloway and Gates, acknowledge the African. Her objectives, then, involve delving into experiences rooted in African culture, namely those that reinforce Morrison's evaluations of Africanisms in America. On strictly a micro-level, my project reflects work similar to that of Higgins's; however, the former proverbially "picks up" where Higgins's scholarship leaves off in that it differs structurally so as to accommodate the macro-level narrative strategies across, rather than merely within, Morrison's fictional oeuvre.

Higgins's second section, "A Circle of Friends: Communities of Women in *The Bluest Eye, Sula, Tar Baby, Beloved, Jazz,* and *Paradise*," examines the last of Mbiti's hierarchy, particularly the role of the community as a vocal chorus, a force that has the ability, as Higgins suggests, "to help, to hurt, to judge, to spur a character(s) into action" (77). Yet Higgins also contends that "the community may succeed or it may fail in its duty to the individual just as the individual may succeed or fail in *her* duty to the community" (77-8, emphasis mine). It seems, as per her focus, that Higgins would direct the latter observation to Sula – the protagonist with whom scholars often fault for her defiant alienation of the community. Readers come to discover that Higgins does, in fact, use such an observation to condemn Morrison's second protagonist.

In her chapter "The Rejection of the Community in *Sula*," Higgins makes a number of assumptions seemingly incongruous with both her own research objectives and Morrison's application of Africanisms in *Sula*. First, and perhaps most significantly, Higgins juxtaposes sin with Sula when she claims that:

> The community does not so much sin against Sula as she does against her community; she separates herself physically and psychologically from the community of the Bottom. In doing so, she is much like Nathaniel Hawthorne's Ethan Brand because she commits the "unpardonable sin" of cutting herself off from humankind. Once one severs ties with humanity, one becomes a sort of monster, or as with Sula, a witch. The community considered her evil because of her detachment from them. (92)

Semantically, Higgins's use of the word "sin" implies a Western discourse of or on disobedience to God; "the Bottom's" evaluations of Sula, as opposed to Morrison's view

of her protagonist, might corroborate with such an observation when the former insists that Sula "was laughing at their God" (Morrison 115).

As addressed in chapter three of this project, "the Bottom's" treatment of Sula appropriately satisfies Morrison's narrative objectives: contrary to Higgins's resolutions that "the community considered [Sula] evil because of her detachment from them" (92), "the Bottom" continues to provide an inclusive space for Sula as a pariah so that the latter's role of trickster can, in turn, force the former to reclaim its ancestral past. Higgins maintains, in reference to ancestral links, that "the African woman's past" (93) in *Sula* emerges when "one . . . [sees] Sula in a different slant of light . . . [and] realize[s] that her desire to do or to be other than mother or wife harkens back to [this past]" (93). Mbiti argues in *African Religions and Philosophy*, however, that "when she [the woman without children] dies, there will be nobody of her own immediate blood to 'remember' her, to keep her in the state of personal immortality" (107). Morrison subverts this African sentiment on marriage and birthing with respect to her protagonist and Nel in an attempt to emphasize and legitimize bonds between women – or the female chorus of voices to which Higgins refers as recurrences in Morrison's fiction – as well as to lay a groundwork for subsequent novels.

One such chorus, namely the communal voices that Higgins believes to supercede "all of those themes" (103) in *Beloved*, speaks to and for a black community whose members must, as Higgins insists, "remember and face head-on . . . their common past – each grisly detail of the attempt by white people to dehumanize them – heal themselves with the help of each other, and move on" (103). Higgins's observations, then, point to how Morrison's fictional community in *Beloved* seeks out and attempts to recover its

past: that of slavery in America *and* the religious and cultural vestiges brought with Africans to the New World.

For Higgins, the latter becomes apparent with Baby Suggs's feast following Sethe's escape; Higgins asserts that the community "begin[s] to reflect on the abundance of the celebration and . . . begin[s] to feel offended by it" (104), particularly because its members cannot reciprocate. Although Higgins claims that this "resentment and anger harken[s] back to the ancient and modern-day cosmology of Africans, namely the Lovedu of Zimbabwe" (104), most African peoples agree that kinship involves more than sharing goods among one another. Mbiti, in describing familial, communal, and religious bonds, maintains that kinship "is reckoned through blood and betrothal (engagement and marriage)" (*African Religions* 102), and that it extends both horizontally "in every direction, to embrace everybody in a given group" (102) as well as "vertically to include the departed and those yet to be born" (102).

Morrison, as she does in previous novels, plays on and with African ontologies to establish a framework that expounds on the importance of the community while it simultaneously reflects her own changing socio-political attitudes regarding blacks and their interactions with the outside world. Higgins seems to recognize these emergent attitudes when she identifies a "disharmony within the community" (104) and points to Sethe's exclusion, the latter because "the women of this community . . . are the ones who gauge Sethe's acceptance level" (103). Yet Higgins also contends that "it is Denver who bears the brunt of this [exclusion], for she is starving for friendship and companionship" (105). Morrison might agree with the latter observation, however, it appears within the novel that the very structure upon which Morrison builds Denver's character suggests

that Morrison neither charges Denver with, as Higgins claims, "the presence of mind and the strength of body" (105), nor does she present her as a character through whom others may access their pasts.

Higgins argues, however, that Denver does, in fact, represent such a medium. In proposing that Denver must "overcome her great fear of the outside world and take what will be the greatest step of her life out of the front yard" (105), Higgins resolves that "the spirit of her grandmother, Baby Suggs, Holy, empowers Denver" (105). Morrison, though, seems to give more credence to her triad of women – Baby Suggs, Sethe, and Beloved – than she does to the character whose name corresponds with and reflects Morrison's view of the city. While Denver does act on behalf of Sethe so as to exorcise the ghost of Beloved, she does not, as Higgins suggests, "[create] a balance and [restore] harmony within their world" (107). Rather, Denver functions within the narrative, much like Claudia, Nel, and a young Milkman, as a immature character whose developing maturity comes only through recognizing and responding to the cultural sources to which others subscribe. Denver only comes-of-age as a character once she assumes a mothering role to Sethe and no longer represents what Ashraf H.A. Rushdy calls "the ideal listener" (*Beloved: A Casebook* 14) but rather the master of her text, or the story about her birth. Like Milkman, Denver matures as the result of both her interactions with those who utilize racial, cultural, and religious repositories and her realization that kinship involves links among more people than herself.

Higgins's resolution, then, that Denver "understands that she is her mother's only hope for survival" (105) corroborates with my observation of Denver's latent awareness of the importance of familial and communal relationships. Higgins certainly recognizes

the role of the latter in *Beloved* when she points to the female chorus that exorcises Beloved's ghost at the end of the novel; however, her approach to such an event in relation to what she calls "African customs and in what can be described as modern American religion" (106) does not do justice to how Morrison and other African (American) peoples regard evil in their lives and communities.

Whereas Higgins implies that Morrison's female chorus drives out "Beloved, the evil spirit" (107), the former does not acknowledge *why* these women exorcise the ghost other than to conclude that "the women, then, decide to heal the rift between themselves and Sethe, act upon that decision by helping to drive out Beloved and succeed in healing the entire community" (107). E.O. James would argue that these women act not on their own behalf, or as Higgins insists to "heal the rift between themselves and Sethe" (107), but on behalf of Sethe, namely because as he observes, "the ghost of some unsettled dead person may enter a human being on earth and weaken him" (60). Mbiti reinforces James's assertion when he claims that spirits "may cause severe torment on the possessed person" (*African Religions* 80) and that "during the height of spirit possession, the individual in effect loses his own personality and acts in the context of the 'personality' of the spirit possessing him" (81).

In fact, the events leading up to Beloved's exorcism, and the event itself, seem almost entirely extrapolated from Mbiti's discussion of spirit possession in *African Religions and Philosophy*. Higgins makes a similar observation about these obvious African cosmologies when she questions whether Morrison "ever read his [Newbell Plunkett's] text" (107), since Morrison's descriptions of Beloved closely mirror the African ghost to which Plunkett refers. I would argue, though, that a danger exists with

Plunkett's observations about "African ghosts" (91, as referenced in Higgins 107) or African cultural practices more generally, namely because he approaches both with a Western worldview.

Mbiti's Afrocentric viewpoint, one that emphasizes rites and rituals to drive away spirits, more closely resembles the groups of two or three women in *Beloved* who come to 124 Bluestone Road with objects "stuffed in aprons pockets, strung around their necks, lying in the space between their breasts" (Morrison 303). Morrison's narrator insists, as well, that "others brought Christian faith – as sword and shield" (303); yet Baby Suggs's command for Sethe to "lay em down . . . [. . .] Sword and shield. Down. Down. Both of em down. [. . .] Lay all that mess down. Sword and shield" (101) not only underscores the exclusionary features of Christianity blacks reappropriated for the purposes of a "folk religion" in America, but it also speaks to and reinforces the cultural sources that Morrison finds most imperative and useful not just for her characters, but for scholars who read and assess her fiction.

In an interview with LeClair in 1981, Morrison insisted that she "[has] yet to read criticism that understands [her] work or is prepared to understand it" (Taylor-Guthrie 128); yet, as Julia Eichelberger observes in *Prophets of Recognition*, ". . . a large portion of the rapidly growing body of Morrison scholarship explores her interest in African-American and non-Western experiences and modes of perception" (58). The critical work to which Eichelberger refers, namely that which approaches Morrison's fiction with Afrocentric models, contributes to what I call scholarship of reappropriation, or more specifically, scholarship that focuses on and emphasizes the Africanist presence in and across Morrison's novels. Higgins and other Afrocentric scholars directly point to and

reinforce such a presence, with Higgins providing the most comprehensive evaluation to date of the African traditional religions and practices that operate within Morrison's texts.

Just as Morrison's characters either reject or seek out and utilize the Africanist presence, the success of any critical work on Morrison's fiction, then, depends upon how scholars recognize and respond to the racial, cultural, and religious sources to which Morrison and many of her characters subscribe. As a precursor to Higgins's categorization of Morrison's novels on the basis of religious themes, Duvall's critical evaluation of *The Bluest Eye* through *Paradise* speaks to another way in which to read and approach Morrison's work. In *Identifying Fictions*, Duvall maintains that Morrison's corpus "can be read in two distinct phases" (8):

> Phase one runs from her first novel *The Bluest Eye*, though *Sula*, and *Song of Solomon*, and culminates in *Tar Baby*; the second phase to date consists of her historical trilogy consisting of *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*. What characterizes the former is Morrison's construction of a useable identity as an African-American novelist; what characterizes the latter is the author's working out of the implications that follow from the recognition that identity may be more a construction than a biological essence. (8)

Duvall's observation that Morrison constructs a "useable identity as an African-American novelist" (8) also speaks to the aims of this project, namely because such an observation reinforces Morrison's conscious awareness of what her fiction, and African-American literature more generally, should "do" for readers and scholars. Moreover, Duvall's classifications indirectly support my contention that Morrison introduces and then builds upon a religious and cultural framework for her novels, beginning with *The Bluest Eye*

and continuing through to *Beloved,* where the latter reflects her characters' attempts to recover African identities alongside their "rememories" of slavery and loss.

Cooey makes an observation similar to my own when she addresses the religious ideologies at work in Morrison's novels and insists that "Black Christianity, faithful to its African roots as well as its biblical ones, forms the background and also provides some of the central images and themes governing [Morrison's] narrative" (80). Yet as I have suggested elsewhere, African traditional religions, more than a Christian tradition in America more spiritual than religious, informs Morrison's work, primarily because of her attempt, like Mbiti and other African theologians, to rectify how scholars approach and deal with religious and cultural issues that govern her characters' lives. While she does recognize that a distinction exists between Africans and those of the Diaspora, Morrison seems to propose, given her aims of African-American literature and insistence on both communal education and village values, that cultural and religious vestiges brought to the New World have a greater place in her fiction than overt references to non-African cosmologies or Christianity as a part of a Western tradition.

These African traditions and practices emerge, then, on both micro- and macro-levels in Morrison's novels, namely through the characters' interactions with one another and the outside world. Just as *The Bluest Eye* represents Morrison's first attempt to explore these cosmologies in such a way that she introduces an African religious and cultural model and then demonstrates with the Dick and Jane primer the danger of subscribing to foreign value systems, each subsequent novel functions on two levels: that which operates within the text and the other as groundwork for how Morrison effectively resists appropriation of her fiction. Because Morrison commits herself to the black

experience, any critical work on her novels *must* attribute similar interest, or at least acknowledge the traditions in which Morrison and her characters participate.

While Cooey attempts to account for these traditions from within a Christian context, Higgins and Handley understand that Morrison makes non-Western sources central to her fiction, but that she also uses "alien" or "other" values so as to warn blacks against rejecting their ancestral pasts. This project, then, further contributes to the kind of scholarship to which Eichelberger refers, or scholarship or reappropriation, in that it not only gives credence to the sources Morrison and other Afrocentric scholars find most useful or interesting to her fiction, but it also points to a systematic incorporation of an African presence so as to further rectify these inaccurate socio-historical evaluations of black people.

This presence, one that becomes more pronounced with each novel as Morrison provides readers and scholars with increasingly obvious references to African cosmologies and ontologies and the remnants of such traditions among blacks in America, emerges as a narrative progression that corresponds with Mbiti, Idowu, and Muzorewa's tenets of African traditional religions: God and justice or ethics, spirits, and communal relations. Carmean argues, however, that "she [Morrison] is often misunderstood . . . because she is credited by a number of critics with deliberately writing her people's experiences from an African perspective" (15-16). Contrary to Carmean's resolution that Morrison does not intend to write her people's experiences with respect to non-Western cultural sources, Morrison does, in fact, utilize and emphasize Africanisms as underlying themes within and across her novels.

While she recreates and subverts Western ideologies and myths, Morrison consciously relies on communal education and village values to recover the African presence she finds most valuable to African-American literature; therefore, each novel selectively highlights a particular religious tenet or cultural tradition, beginning with the framework in *The Bluest Eye*, continuing with the role of good and evil in *Sula*, the living-ancestor of *Song of Solomon*, and the culmination of such tenets in *Beloved*. Handley reinforces the need for scholars to acknowledge and assess Morrison's fiction through African religious and cultural models when he insists that "Morrison's own theoretical work demonstrates what her novel [*Beloved*] bears out – that normative theory and reading practice cannot properly unlock African American literature when it is marked as heavily as is *Beloved* by African culture" (677).

In fact, Handley's exploration of *Beloved* accounts for Morrison's attempt to rewrite a cultural discourse of slavery, one that bears witness to the "Sixty million and more" as well as to those who persist in uncovering their African pasts. The last sections of this project will use Handley's assessment of nommo, allegory, and ethics in Morrison's sixth novel as a theoretical framework for the African traditional religions and cultural practices in *Beloved* as well as a basis upon which to suggest the profound need for Afrocentric rather than strictly Western readings of Morrison's fiction.

As a part of this scholarship of reappropriation, Handley's critical piece on *Beloved* examines the West African belief of nommo, or the transformative power of the word, and its function within the text in relation to the kind of allegory and ethics Handley finds most significant to *Beloved*, namely an African sentiment on time and space that involves the ghost of Beloved and her illumination of the African presence.

Addressed in chapter one, muntu and kintu – states most closely associated with Mbiti's concept of "collective immortality" and the African ontology of bringing words into existence – take shape in *Beloved* as categories of existence that, as Handley observes, "includes human beings, both living and dead, who exercise . . . the efficacy of the word in bringing things to life [. . .] [and] the categories of things that only the power of nommo can restore and animate, make actual and real" (676). Because Beloved does "[inhabit] both West African and American cultural spaces" (677), she "is at once found and then lost, visible and then invisible, tangibly alive and then a part of language, emblematic of both African survival and American loss" (677). Handley's observation about Beloved's presence in the novel, then, reinforces Morrison's claim that language in *Beloved* "must get out the way" ("Unspeakable Things" 229) if the latter is to show "memory, pre-historic memory" (229) and "the urgency of what is at stake" (229).

For both Handley and other Afrocentric readers, the need to uncover an African-American history of slavery involves excavating the "Sixty million and more" of Morrison's novel, a history through which some scholars see as fulfilled through Beloved's ghost and the "more" (Morrison 266) to which Denver refers. Handley maintains that Beloved's name, or that of "disremembered" history,

> . . . asserts itself as the swinging door that both occludes the African past and marks an entry into it. The name both marks and preserves against loss; it inaugurates this present narrative and serves as a stop against total absence, as an enabling limit for an African American cultural memory, precisely because "Beloved" is insufficient as a name but sufficient as a call. (677-8)

In suggesting that Beloved's name "is insufficient as a name but sufficient as a call" (678), Handley proposes that "Beloved" "is a call that resists slavery's name and asks for a response" (678) *and* that it effectively personifies the intrusion of slavery into the West African belief of naming since it represents, as Handley insists, "both preservation and loss, pricelessness and purchase, [and] the sacred name and the deficient word" (678).

Morrison would agree with Handley's latter observations since, as she argues in "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," *Beloved* propels readers linguistically into a "compelling confusion" (229) in which any kind of entrance, or what Morrison calls a "gangplank" (228) into the novel functions only so that the "reader is snatched, yanked, [and] thrown into an environment completely foreign" (228) much like slaves that were "snatched" (228) "from one place to another, from any place to another, without preparation and without defense" (228). The transformative power of language, then, comes when, as Morrison insists, "*nommo* has effectively [been] summoned" (228, emphasis in original) – or when the incantation of Beloved's name makes her a living thing. Handley argues that this word "is pulled almost in separate directions . . . *Beloved* reflects its own historical crossing-over in Morrison's desire to revive lost African traditions and to recover an African American past" (679).

Moreover, "the loss of Beloved and of African memory is recuperated by her resurrection through the power of nommo; [her] cultural memory is preserved in the text we read, even though Beloved vanishes" (679). Yet Beloved never truly vanishes from Morrison's text. Because she embodies an African survivor rather than merely an African-American slave, Beloved persists as the African presence in and across Morrison's fiction. She represents Morrison's most effective attempt to retell an African-

American history of slavery while at the same time recovering both Africans aboard the Middle Passage and the sources to which the latter subscribe. Through Beloved's memory, or "rememory," Sethe – and Morrison's readers – have the ability to do what Handley calls "hear things just beyond speech, to hear something 'over there,' both the richness of the ancestral spiritual world so crucial to an understanding of West African culture and the sounds of that culture before the Middle Passage" (686). It seems, as reinforced by Handley's observations about Beloved's transformative power in the novel, that Morrison does, in fact, give more credence to her triad of Baby Suggs, Sethe, and Beloved than to Denver since Beloved's name, with its power, effectively binds each woman to one another and to the Africa of their past (678).

Within the first few pages of her sixth novel, Morrison introduces readers and scholars to the nommo of which Handley describes when Sethe claims that this word – "Beloved" – "was the one . . . that mattered" (Morrison 5). The importance of the word reflects one of Morrison's key objectives for *Beloved*, namely that in order to describe and reappropriate a cultural discourse of slavery, language must "get out of the way" ("Unspeakable Things" 229) so as to make room for what the narrator calls "the song that seemed to lie in it [Beloved's voice]. Just outside music it lay, with a cadence that was not theirs" (Morrison 72). Mbiti, as well, acknowledges the centrality of the word to African peoples when, in describing God as spirit, he points to a Pygmy hymn which says: "He [God] is a word which comes out of your mouth. / That word! It is no more, / It is past, and still it lives!" (*African Religions* 34). Much like her African ancestors and their incantation of the word for the divine, Morrison ensures that Beloved's name

becomes "*nommo* . . . summoned" ("Unspeakable Things" 228, emphasis in original) – or the word made flesh.

Beloved, then, serves multiple functions in and for Morrison's narrative. Because she represents both African survivor and African-American slave, Beloved embodies the African presence while she simultaneously encourages Sethe and readers to reclaim a history previously unwritten by African peoples of the Diaspora. This history, one that took Morrison almost two decades to rewrite after editing *The Black Book*, bears witness to and accounts for the African traditional religions and cultural practices at home and among black people in the Americas. Moreover, the emergence of these traditions in *Beloved* points to a culmination of not only the religious and cultural practices that Morrison incorporates in previous novels but also how past characters and themes resurface as Morrison describes Beloved's interaction with 124 Bluestone Road and the surrounding village. The following sections of this chapter will examine how *Beloved,* the novel and the word, acts as a testament to Morrison's awareness and application of African traditional religions and cultural practices on both micro- and macro-levels.

As with *The Bluest Eye, Sula,* and *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved* encourages an excavation of the layers underneath, or the African presence Morrison finds "useful" and interesting to her fiction. In fact, as the center of Morrison's sixth novel, these religious and cultural traditions become more evident as characters slowly recover their "rememories" – ones laden with African tradition and those of an African-American slavery and loss. Sethe, in recalling Sweet Home, insists to Paul D that "those boys came in there and took my milk. [. . .] Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still" (Morrison 20). Sethe's possession of her milk

and association of the scar on her back with the chokecherry tree evokes two recurrent images in and across Morrison's fiction: nursing and the tree as a medium through which to access the divine. The difference, however, between Sethe and Ruth Foster of *Song of Solomon* comes with Sethe's attitude toward the act, the former of which celebrates what Mbiti calls a "deep psychological sense of security" (*African Religions* 116) that comes with nursing: "Nobody was going to nurse her like me. [. . .] Nobody knew that but me and nobody had her milk but me" (Morrison 19).

For Sethe, establishing this bond becomes necessary if she is to relieve, as Paul D claims, "the weight of her breasts" (21) or "the way of her sorrow" (20). Paul D, however, appropriately realizes that this weight, more emotional and spiritual than physical, comes from what Sethe calls "the responsibility for her breasts" (21): when Paul D holds her breasts "in the palms of his hands" (20) and " . . . learned the way of her sorrow, the roots of it; its wide trunk and intricate branches" (20), the former recognizes Sethe's roles of both mother and rudimentary living-ancestor. Morrison, as she does in previous novels, capitalizes on and subverts the latter role when Paul D maintains that Sethe's scar "[may be] shaped like one [a tree], but nothing like any tree he knew because tree were inviting; things you could trust and be near; talk to if you wanted to . . ." (25). Morrison seems to suggest, then, that like the tree, each religious or cultural image in *Beloved* speak to not only African cosmologies but also how slaves in the New World reappropriated these cosmologies for an African-American spiritual religion in America.

Morrison skillfully demonstrates this reappropriation at work in the novel when Sethe recalls the "little antelope" (36) that "rammed her with horns and pawed the ground of her womb with impatient hooves" (36). The antelope, an image that resurfaces later in

Beloved, represents the Africa of Sethe's past, or as Morrison's protagonist claims, "an invention held on to from before Sweet Home, when she was very young. [. . .] [a] place where she was born [. . .] and they danced the antelope" (37). Mbiti would insist that this image, while it holds no obvious religious significance, reinforces Sethe's connection with her ancestral and immediate pasts, primarily because Morrison's protagonist goes on to assert that she "believed that she was [like the snake]" (39), a familiar association for many of Morrison's female characters.

To satisfy her narrative objectives, then, Morrison plays on and with animal and nature images, particularly when her narrator, not unlike characters in *The Bluest Eye Sula,* and *Song of Solomon*, juxtaposes parallel opposites: the roses whose "abundance" (57), "crawled all over the stake-and-post fence that separated the lumberyard from the open field next to it where homeless men slept, and . . . [where] carnival people pitched tents" (57), become associated with "the stench of rotten roses" (57) since "the closer the roses got to death, the louder their scent" (57). Just as she does with Sula's "rose tattoo," Morrison transforms floral images in *Beloved* to emphasize links beyond the physical world: in attributing an aural quality to the roses, Morrison calls Beloved into being since the latter materializes after Sethe, Denver, and Paul D's return from the carnival.

Morrison's narrator asserts that "a fully dressed woman walked out of the water" (60) and sat "down on . . . a stump not far from the steps of 124 [Bluestone Road]" (60), yet "for some reason she could not immediately account for" (61), Sethe fails to connect "the face" (61) of the woman with "a black dress [and] two unlaced shoes below it" (61) with the ghost of Beloved. She does, however, maintain that "her bladder filled to capacity" (61) "the moment she got close enough to see [the woman's] face" (61). In

claiming, "not since she [Sethe] was a baby girl, being cared for the eight-year-old girl who pointed out her mother to her, had she had an emergency that unmanageable. [. . .] [where] the water she voided was endless" (61), Sethe metaphorically rebirths Beloved, especially since the former insists that "there was no stopping water breaking from a breaking womb and there was no stopping now" (61). Morrison, too, rewrites Beloved into the novel as the former strengthens both communal voices and her female chorus.

As the African medicine-woman, healer, and medium to the spiritual world, Baby Suggs performs roles not unlike those of M'Dear in *The Bluest Eye* and Pilate of *Song of Solomon*. Morrison's narrator illuminates these roles when he/she maintains that Baby Suggs "loved, cautioned, fed, chastised, and soothed" (102) and that 124 had been "a cheerful buzzing house where . . . not one but two pots simmered on the stove; where the lamp burned all night long; [and where] [s]trangers rested there while children tried on their shoes" (102). Baby Suggs's home, a repository of African and African-American cultural traditions, extends, however, beyond 124 Bluestone Road. "Uncalled, unrobed, [and] unanointed" (102), Baby Suggs, holy,

> . . . became an unchurched preacher, one who visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it. [. . .] When warm weather came, Baby Suggs, holy, followed every black man, woman, and child to the Clearing – a wide-open place cut deep in the woods nobody knew for what at the end of the path . . . [. . .] She [Baby Suggs] sat in the clearing while the people waited among the trees. (102)

Important for a number of reasons, the Clearing has both religious and secular connotations in *Beloved*. Morrison's narrator observes that Baby Suggs "bowed her head

and prayed silently" (102) after "situating herself on a huge flat-sided rock" (102). In *African Religions and Philosophy,* Mbiti suggests that "[some] peoples, like the Lugbara and Langi, hold that rocks are a manifestation of God" (54) while "[a] number of peoples . . . are reported to have sacred stones and rocks, which are used for religious rites and observances" (54-5). With the stone as her pulpit, Baby Suggs "offered up to them [the people at the Clearing] her great big heart" (103).

Yet Baby Suggs fails to offer blacks a resolution to the underlying tension at work in *Beloved:* namely the difficulty of maintaining African religious traditions while at the same time reappropriating the exclusionary features of Christianity for a spiritual tradition in the New World. Hence, she localizes a religious discourse that both utilizes African ideologies and practices – specifically song and dance – and acknowledges the effect of Christianity on the lives of black people. Morrison seems to underscore, however, the latter, particularly when Baby Suggs "did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or glorybound pure" (103). Rather, "she told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it" (103). Part of Morrison's objective for *Beloved*, then, involves working through these multiple layers of religious, cultural, and socio-political histories so that her characters may reclaim and rewrite their own pasts. Yet in order to reappropriate a Western discourse of slavery, blacks must return, like Milkman and Pilate in *Song of Solomon,* to an original source, namely to nommo and its transformative power.

As the chorus of voices in Morrison's sixth novel grow louder and more insistent, readers and characters are propelled into, as Morrison calls it, a "compelling confusion" ("Unspeakable Things" 229) where "language must get out of the way" (229) so as to uncover "memory, pre-history memory" (229) and " . . . what is at stake" (229). Stamp Paid appropriately recognizes the urgency of "what is at stake" (229) when he observes that:

> Out on Bluestone Road he thought he heard a conflagration of hasty voices – loud, urgent, all speaking at once so he could not make out what they were talking about or to whom. The speech wasn't nonsensical, exactly, nor was it tongues. But something was wrong with the order of the words and he couldn't describe or cipher it to save his life. (Morrison 202-3)

These female voices, which Stamp Paid calls an ". . . eternal, private conversation that takes place between women and their tasks" (203), transform as, once again, the incantation of the word calls Beloved into being. As "Nobody saw them falling" (205) becomes repetitious, Sethe has a moment of realization, or what Morrison's narrator calls "the click" (206):

> When the click came, Sethe didn't know what it was. Afterward it was clear as daylight that the click came at the very beginning – a beat, almost, before it started; before she heard three notes; before the melody was even clear. Leaning forward a little, Beloved was humming. (207)

At this seminal point in the narrative, Sethe understands that the "touches from the other side" (116) and the "unspeakable thoughts, unspoken" (235) have, in fact, materialized in

the physical world. Sethe, in responding to Beloved's call, insists that "[Beloved] come back to me, my daughter, and she is mine" (241). Beloved, as well, echoes Sethe's response: "I am Beloved and she is mine" (248).

Yet, as Morrison demonstrates syntactically, this declaration becomes lost in "compelling confusion" ("Unspeakable Things" 229), namely because, as she does with the white primer in *The Bluest Eye,* language breaks down to reveal "memory, pre-memory" (229) and that which came before the spoken word. Beloved's own incantation, "I am not dead I am not there is a house there is what she whispered to me I am where she told me I am not dead" (Morrison 252) as a part of what Handley interprets as call and response, points to the conjoining of mother and daughter/ghost when both voices converge: "You are my face; you are me / [. . .] I waited for you / You are mine / You are mine / You are mine" (255, 256).

Unable to respond to either call, Denver must "leave the yard; step off the edge of the world, [and] leave the two behind" (286) since "Beloved ate up [Sethe's] life, took it, swelled up with it, [and] grew taller on it" (295). In describing spirit possession, Mbiti insists that "the possessed person becomes restless, may fail to sleep properly, and if the possession last a long period it results in damage to [one's] health" (*African Religions* 81). Denver's observation that " . . . the brighter Beloved's eyes, the more those eyes that used never to look away became slits of sleeplessness" (Morrison 295) seems to corroborate with Mbiti's, particularly since Denver also acknowledges that "somebody had to be saved" (297). As I suggested earlier in this analysis, the exorcism of Beloved seems almost entirely extrapolated from Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy.* Just as Mbiti maintains that "there are usually formal ceremonies to drive away the notorious

spirits" (*African Religions* 81), the group of two or three women who come to drive away the spirit possessing Sethe understand that "an invasion" (Morrison 302) between "the two worlds [physical and spiritual]" (302) deserves immediate attention.

Morrison, however, in illuminating the African presence alongside a history of slavery and loss, arms the thirty women who "walked slowly, slowly toward 124" (303) with African traditional religion *and* the Christian faith, both of which become necessary if the women can "[take] a step back to the beginning" (305) since "[in] the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like" (305). For Ella and the other women present, this sound converges into a chorus of voices, one where "the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice . . . a wave of sound . . . broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash" (309). Through the women's incantations, Beloved departs Sethe, leaving the former "alone on the porch [. . .] [with] Sethe running away from her, running . . . into the faces of the people out there, joining them and leaving Beloved behind" (309). Although Handley proposes that Beloved vanishes from the text, Morrison insists, in recalling this "disremembered" (323) history of the "Sixty million and more," that "this was not a story to pass on" (323). Rather to suggest that one should not tell, retell, or rewrite a history of slavery, Morrison argues that one cannot ignore Beloved's history as both African survivor and African-American slave.

Because she explores the African presence alongside a "disremembered and unaccounted for" (323) history, Morrison must demonstrate to readers and scholars the need for voices that "rememory" ancestral and immediate pasts; hence, *Beloved*

represents more than a "story not to pass on" (323); it becomes, for African peoples of the Diaspora as well as Afrocentric scholars of Morrison's fiction, a necessary vehicle through which blacks can reclaim and retell individual and collective "rememories" while simultaneously affirming the African cultural and religious sources to which Morrison and her characters subscribe.

Beloved, rich with these sources, acts as a culmination text for multiple reasons. Although McKay asserts that *Beloved* "seemed to her [Morrison] very different from the others" (*Beloved: A Casebook* 9), the very structure of the former, with the emergence of images and themes embedded within previous novels, reveals a macro-level narrative progression that reflects Morrison's attempt to not only work toward reappropriation of her fiction but also to rectify inaccurate socio-historical *and* religious evaluations of African peoples and their descendants. With each novel, Morrison builds on and emphasizes the religious and cultural framework introduced in *The Bluest Eye* in an effort to seek out, utilize, and reclaim communal education and what she finds most useful for blacks. Other scholars, notably Eichelberger, acknowledge a growing need in Morrison scholarship to identify Afrocentric traditions and modes of perception. Yet since the publication of her critical essays and *The Bluest Eye* in 1970, Morrison has presented scholars with increasingly obvious references to cosmologies and ontologies not situated in Western time and space.

Scholars, however, have not always listened to Morrison's call. In recent years, following the work of McKay, Harris, and others, critical observations on or about Morrison's novels that give credence to, and often highlight, the African presence further contribute to scholarship of reappropriation in that such evaluations draw on cultural

sources most significant to black peoples. My project, which draws on Afrocentric approaches to Morrison's fiction and relies most heavily on Morrison's understanding of the religious traditions and practices that inform the African (American) community, further contributes to the kind of work Eichelberger identifies, namely that which acknowledges, utilizes, and illuminates Africanisms in Morrison's novels. Moreover, by assessing this religious and cultural presence in Morrison's first through third and sixth novels, it seems as if Morrison does more than revive a lost call and response among scholars and readers. Rather, her observations about social, political, economic, and religious issues at work within and across her oeuvre manifest as invitations to others to credit "disremembered and unaccounted for" (303) histories.

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