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**The texture of transformation: Theology, history, and politics in
the novels of Toni Morrison**

Hunt, Patricia Anne, Ph.D.
City University of New York, 1994

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A

The Texture of Transformation
Theology, History, and Politics in the Novels of Toni Morrison

by

Patricia Hunt

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

1994

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

The Texture of Transformation
Theology, History, and Politics in Toni Morrison's Novels

by

Patricia Hunt

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Although Toni Morrison's biblical allusions are often noted in studies of her work, most critics have viewed her use of scripture as either peripheral or as subversive of Christianity, in keeping with a more general subversion of Western culture in her novels. In contrast, I argue that Morrison's subversiveness is realized through the creation, in her fiction, of an African American Christian liberation theology. The varieties of modes of theology that emphasize liberation and freedom in terms of material, this-worldly existence capture the protean, conflicted, unstable nature of Toni Morrison's texts. Instead of seeing Christianity as a belief system imposed on enslaved Africans from outside, and separate from African-based folklore and cosmologies, Morrison's political texts illustrate the intersection of *all* these systems, and the cultural specificity of African American Christianity to the community which has given rise to it. The Christianity of black Americans is an Africanized form that is foundational of African American culture. Morrison lays claim to the Bible and to African American Christianity in a culturally-generated discourse different from dualistic, competing Eurocentric discourses. By comprehending the exclusion of African and African American cultural experience from the hegemonically-constructed history of the United States, Morrison reorients the late twentieth-century reader to a new vision which foregrounds not only African American participation in, but constitution of, that history.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank a number of individuals who contributed to the accomplishment of this work. Although my perspective diverged in many respects from those who helped me, these scholars, friends, and colleagues supported this endeavor with encouragement and much-needed criticism as it progressed.

I am grateful to the Program in English at the City University of New York Graduate School, particularly to Administrative Assistant Lynn Kadison for her assistance with countless matters in bringing this dissertation to completion. In addition, former Executive Officer Martin Stevens was particularly kind and helpful to me during the early stages of my project. I thank Judy Koster and Dr. Roberta Thornton of the CUNY Placement Office for their extraordinary efficiency and kindness. Professor Jane Connor Marcus, who advised me, was unfailingly generous of her time and wholly inspiring to me at all steps. I am grateful to Professors Barbara Bowen and Michele Wallace for their input as part of my advisory committee.

Mary Been, Kathy Moore, Anneliis Koiv, Lynn Parry, Raymond Gibbs, Eve Sweetser, Holli Levitsky, Steven Pressfield, Lisa Marcus, Richard Kaplan, Kip Brott, Jocelyn Yamadera, and Cindy Stanberry are friends without whose support and love I simply could not have accomplished this work, and I thank them for their uncompromising belief in me. I am particularly grateful to my in-laws, Martha and Martin Meisel, for their generosity during the years of my graduate education. My sister-in-law, Maude Meisel, is a true sister who has slogged through with me--in person or in spirit--every step of the way.

My gratitude to my own sisters, Susan Hunt and Caroline Gamma, and to my parents, Stuart and Bridget Hunt, for believing in me and loving me always is beyond expression. For years, my children, John Stuart Evans and Susannah Kristine Evans, have put up with sharing me with "books, books, books." I thank them for their love, humor, and energy with all my heart. The memory of my grandmothers, who share the dedication of this dissertation with my parents, inspires me every day, and I am grateful that such ancestors are with me still.

Above all, my deepest thanks go to my husband, Andrew Meisel. There is no point at which his brilliance, his joy in my work, and his belief in its fulfillment ever flagged. He has been editor, friend, soulmate, and without him this work would not have been possible.

To the memory of my grandmothers

Anne Frances Higgins Darsey (1899-1983)
and
Helen Lavinia Stuart Hunt (1903-1969)

and

to my mother and my father

Preface

My work on Toni Morrison's novels began in a graduate seminar on feminist poetics where one of the texts was *Sula*. We read a great deal of criticism of the novel; that is, we read the major feminist critics who had written on it. I was dissatisfied, however, with this criticism. Having been exposed to more historically-based analyses of literature, I couldn't understand why no one was discussing the time of the novel's publication or composition. Taking these things into account myself, I wrote a seminar paper on *Sula* concerning the novel's historicity. The novel was published a year before the end of the Viêt Nam War; in several sections it focuses on the military service of African Americans in World War I; the main part of the novel begins with a battlefield scene in France; the last section of the novel is designated by "1965"--as I mention in my chapter on *Sula*, the year of the United States began Operation Rolling Thunder, the continuous bombing of North Viêt Nam, and also the year of the Watts Riots in Los Angeles.

About one year after I wrote my paper, Morrison's now well-known essay, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," was published in the *Michigan Review*. In that essay, she confirmed my focus on these issues, commenting that the novel was "begun in 1969...in a period of extraordinary political activity" (24). This confirmation has continued to contribute to my exploration of Morrison's other novels. Instead of reading them through the lens of a particular school of literary criticism, I begin with the novels, their time of composition, the historical time to which they refer, and the particular significance of these historical moments for African Americans. I continue to use Morrison's own critical essays and

ideologies. If I had found her statements about her fiction and her writing on other American literature to be at odds with what I perceived in her novels, this would not have been the case.

In my explorations, I have also found that, as a white feminist critic, if I was to be true to my own political ideology, I had to accept the novels on their own terms and I had to be educated, so to speak, by the novels regarding situations and experiences that I knew virtually nothing about until I read them. This required something of me that has proven to be difficult, not only for me, but for readers of this work. That is, I had to give up my white secular notions about Christianity and in particular my positioning of the African American religious experience as distant and relatively irrelevant. I had to try to envision an experience of religion that in no way matched my own. In so doing, however, I believe I have illuminated a crucial aspect of Morrison's work that has in general been ignored by critics working within the dominant literary theoretical paradigms of the eighties and nineties.

What I found to be more powerful than literary theory, in general, was work in theology and interpretation of scripture. It has been important for me to realize that the European and white American understanding of religion is based in the Enlightenment bargain that allowed science to coexist with hegemonic Christian doctrine and authority. That is, religion has existed as a separate discursive stream from Eurocentric philosophy, and has come to be regarded in the secular critical tradition as somehow not a cultural product. I assume it is an artefact of Western dualism, which separates religion from the humanities and the sciences, and because of the association of Christianity (evidently, even African American Christianity) with the political right wing in the United States that critics of Morrison have been blind to the rich theological discourse in her novels. In any case, the rewriting and reinterpretation of scripture by Morrison within the African American cultural

framework has been largely ignored and dismissed. I take up this dismissal in the introduction to this work.

To some readers of this work, it may appear that my concentrated focus on scripture and my reappropriation of spirituality as a fitting subject of cultural criticism is overwhelming and even misguided. To such readers I can only say that this focus is very likely a result of overturning my own former understanding of the varieties of Jewish and Christian theology as completely dogmatic and unyielding, as repressive and inherently dangerous for the oppressed. The irony, for me, has been that dogma seems to reside in the literary critical establishment to an extent far greater than that which I have discovered in theological writings. It goes almost without saying, however, that my reading has been concentrated in the theological left because there would be no resonance between Morrison's novels and the religious right.

My distance from post-structural theory is not absolute; there is much in the criticism that has guided me, and illuminated aspects of Morrison's texts that I was not seeing. However, my general disavowal of post-structuralist criticism is also based in my work, not used in this dissertation, in cognitive linguistic theory. In this regard, I subscribe to cognitive linguist Ronald Langacker's equation of "meaning with conceptualization." There are numerous critics practicing in the United States who work outside the current dominant critical paradigms, and these critics are identified (mysteriously) as "anti-theory." The tone and perspective of my work herein might lead readers to assume the same is true of me. My theoretical position is, however, that deconstructive critics are mistaken about the nature of language and the text, so that the a priori assumptions which I bring to my work on Morrison would not have, in any case, included those that find the meaning of a literary text to be completely arbitrary and indeterminate. Also underlying my theoretical comprehension of language is the work of Raymond

Williams, particularly that the work of an individual author--in this case, Toni Morrison--and the historical conditions under which her novels were written, comprise what Williams describes as "in either direction...a complex of extending active relationships" ("Base" 48).

Williams has also expressed elegantly that the twentieth-century positivist impulse created a false separation between language and history (cf. *Marxism and Literature*). I extend Williams's analyses of language and history in specific ways in this work: literary theory, and the division of the humanities into separate disciplines, has created a false sense that the meanings called up by any given literary text are isolable. That is, this division has supported notions that it is possible to remove experience, speech, and the human person from the context(s) out of which they arise. Of course, no one can possibly comprehensively discuss the many perspectives a literary text may invoke, and my work herein is of necessity limited and partial, too. What I have tried to do is to inject into the critical discourse an analysis that profiles a woefully deprived area of that discourse.

Finally, throughout I quote Morrison on her novels, and on other social issues with which they deal. I believe that Toni Morrison enacts a specific and crucial project in her writing, and there is a strong way in which her political, social, historical, and, as I will argue, theological fiction is pedagogical--not in the sense of "uplift" but in working to alter the social reality of oppressed people. While late twentieth-century schools of literary criticism have sought to, one way or another, remove the author from authority, I find that to exclude a cultural critic of Morrison's stature and erudition--Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has called her "a rigorous and unsparing intellect" (xi)--from commentary on her own work would be ludicrous.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
Signature Page	iii
Abstract	iv
Acknowledgments	v
Dedication	vi
Preface	vii
Table of Contents	xi
 Introduction	 1
Chapter 1 To keep her name in remembrance: <i>The Bluest Eye</i>	32
Chapter 2 War and Peace: Transfigured Categories and the Politics of <i>Sula</i>	63
Chapter 3 Leap of Faith: Diaspora and Salvation in <i>Song of Solomon</i>	89
Chapter 4 "The sins of his kind": Imperialism and Redemption in <i>Tar Baby</i>	119
Chapter 5 "Come here, Jesus": Ancestral Presence in <i>Beloved</i>	153
Chapter 6 City Called Heaven: <i>Jazz</i>	186
 Conclusion	 215
Bibliography	220

Introduction

But before I'll be a slave
 I'll be buried in my grave,
 And go home to my Lord and be free.
 --Traditional Spiritual

Afro-American Christianity promotes a gospel which empowers black people to survive and struggle in a God-forsaken world.

--Cornel West

It is not necessary for a people to originate or invent all or even most of the elements of their culture. It is necessary only that these components become their own, embedded in their traditions, expressive of their world view and life style.

--Lawrence W. Levine

Literary criticism of Toni Morrison's novels, since the publication of *The Bluest Eye* in 1970, centers on what Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has called her "densely lyrical narrative texture" (xi) and the ways through which that "narrative texture" subverts not only dominant white society in the United States, but also the discourse that has been used to structure the dominant mythology and hegemonic history of the nation. Writing on the roots of Morrison's fiction in African and African American folklore, however, Trudier Harris has commented:

...if we expect exact or consistent parallels between her usages and folklore as it exists in historical black communities, we will be continually surprised....She may initially use recognizable, traditional items of folklore...but more often than not she transforms historical folk materials. (*Fiction and Folklore* 7)

Harris's understanding of Morrison's transformative approach to "folk materials" extends to every aspect of her oeuvre, as other critics note. Many have focused on her subversion of a dualistic Western philosophical tradition that has enabled and

fostered racism, slavery, and the superstructure of white patriarchal dominance; all notice the non-linearity of Morrison's themes. Barbara Hill Rigney comments that Morrison "subverts concepts of textual unity and [her work] defies totalized interpretation" (32); Trudier Harris writes that Morrison's "perspective...is more puzzling than dichotomous" ("From Exile to Asylum" 157). Karla Holloway's work centers on the culturally-specific linguistic manifestations in African American women's writing, and speaks generally of their fiction, noticing the "collective 'speaking out' by all the voices gathered within the text, authorial, narrative, characters, and even the implicated reader" (11). Kimberly W. Benston describes Morrison's creation of "a site of plural preliterate re-weavings, scène, a fabric of languages alluding to a crazy-quilt of cultures, regions, religions, and affiliations" which "[encompasses] KiKongo and Greek, the Islamic and the Judaic, West Africa and Cuba..., biblical fable and Morrison's own family biography" (104). Specifically discussing Morrison's writing against Western "either/or" philosophical tradition, Lauren Lepow remarks that "Toni Morrison's fiction embodies a powerful critique of dualistic thinking" (363). Eleanor Traylor comments on Morrison's "multitextured vision" (334), and Gay Wilentz sums up the author's strategy as "perhaps not a reconciliation but a more clearly articulated dialectic of the double-self by the acceptance of one's African values and cultural heritage" (86).

Although Morrison's biblical allusions are often noted within this already-voluminous body of criticism, and sometimes acknowledged to be pervasive, most scholars have viewed her use of scripture as either peripheral (i.e., they say no more) or as subversive of Christianity, in keeping with her subversion of Western culture. However, even in these cases, the scriptural allusions are not read as having first-order significance but are subsumed under the particular paradigm of

the critic. Mae G. Henderson, for example, notes the significance of scripture in *Beloved*:

Engaging the Scriptures as a kind of intertext, Morrison enacts in her novel an opposition between the Law and the Spirit, redeeming her characters from the "curse of the law" as figured in the master's discourse. In her rewriting of Scripture, Morrison ushers in an ironic new dispensation figured not by the Law of the (white) Father, but the Spirit of the (black and female) child, *Beloved*. (64)

Leaving aside the problems which inhere in Henderson's analogizing of white fathers to the Old Testament and black females with the New, her notion of the Bible as intertext is useful. When she writes about "the deliberate intervention by black women writers into the canonical tradition of sacred/literary texts" ("Speaking" 24), however, her analysis necessitates the contemporary monolithic secular reading of scripture. In another essay, "Speaking in Tongue's: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Women Writer's Literary Tradition," Henderson analogizes "glossolalia"--speaking in tongues, "a practice associated with black women in the Pentecostal Holiness church, the church of my childhood and the church of my mother" (22)--to Julia Kristeva's "semiotic" and to Mikhail Bakhtin's "heteroglossia." It is only through this analogy to dominant critical notions, it would seem, that Henderson's quite brilliant analysis of the multivocality of black women's texts attains acceptable critical status.

It turns out that there is another more illuminating and encompassing way of reading the suffusion of scriptural allusion in Morrison's novels. Simply, her use of scripture has primary, not secondary, consequence, and her novels may be seen as constituting a theological discourse. This is not to say that other critics have been wrong, but rather that they have missed a certain revelatory aspect of her work. Morrison's subversiveness is realized through the creation, in her fiction, of an Afro-Christian liberation theology. I have taken the term "Afro-Christian,"

which I use throughout this work, from womanist theologian Cheryl Townsend Gilkes:

"Afro-Christian" recognizes that our African ancestors constructed a complex and dynamic tradition not only from the materials provided by the missionaries and other Europeans confronted in the nighttime of slavery, but also from the cultural imagination of their African background, in which women were essential to cultural and religious practice. Slaves did not forget about the women priests and queen mothers in their ancestral societies. (78-79)

Instead of seeing Christianity as a belief system imposed on enslaved Africans from outside, and separate from African American folklore and mythology, I read Toni Morrison's texts as illustrating the intersection of *all* of these systems, and the cultural specificity of African American Christianity to the community which has given rise to it. The historian Sterling Stuckey has written that the Christianity of African Americans in the nineteenth century was multi-faceted because of the pervasive influence of West African cosmologies:

The needs, physical and spiritual, of the actual concrete human being are recognized as important, and an attempt is made to satisfy them in African societies: those needs were multiple before Christianity became a part of the African's faith. The absorption of aspects of Christianity--such as a belief in Christ--did not mean they ceased being multiple, as can be seen in burial and other ceremonies in slavery. (41)

Understanding the historical matrix out of which black theology ultimately arose, and out of which the African American church arose, is crucial to my readings of Morrison's novels. As I will discuss throughout this work, and as black theologian Cain Hope Felder expresses it, "Many of the biblical stories reflect the existential reality of the 'Black story' in an environment typically hostile to the interests of Blacks attaining their full sense of human potential" (6).

Dean William Ferm has explained that "liberation theology is at least as much a reaction *against* Christian mission as an affirmation of it" (59), having emerged in the late 1960s in Latin America (60). As I will use the term "liberation theology" throughout this work, I understand it to be multi-faceted, interpretable in many

ways, to be itself always conflicted, but to have emerged both out of and against a Roman Catholic Church which often supported oppressive Latin American governments. In addition, as Fern comments, "a truly Latin American theology will emerge only out of the ongoing political, economic, and cultural life of the oppressed in Latin America" (67). It is in this attention to material conditions in the real world that a consciously black theology, also a liberation theology, arose in the 1960s as "a concerted effort by black theologians to develop and articulate a comprehensive view of the Christian gospel specifically for black people" (Fern 42). Real-world conditions constitute an area of profound conflict between historically patriarchal Christian institutional hierarchies and doctrines and the re-appropriation of Christianity and the figure of Christ in terms of liberation. In her book *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity: A Feminist Theology of Liberation*, Sharon Welch has written that where Christianity has failed, it "is a failure of practice, a failure to transform the corruption and inhumanity of the world" (33). She continues:

Liberation theology is based on dangerous memories; it recounts the history of human suffering. These accounts of specific histories of oppression are both descriptions and critiques....They criticize the structure of a society and expose its fallacious claim of universality....the accounts of oppression criticize Western theology and established religion for their failure to address grave human problems, the problems of racism, sexism, and class struggle. By uncovering the suffering unaddressed and thus tacitly tolerated by established religion, liberation theologians criticize the universal pretensions of that religion and expose it as a religion of and for the middle class. (37-38)

Thus, as the women's movement has grown in the United States, feminist theologians have also articulated a revisionary and, as they see it, recuperative rewriting of Christian theology. Rosemary Radford Ruether explicates this theology:

Thus we must say that the maleness of the historical Jesus has nothing to do with manifesting a male 'Son' who, in turn, images a male 'Father'. The divine 'Father' is equally mother. The 'Son' is equally daughter. Perhaps the parental language for transcendence and immanence itself

should be relativized by some metaphor other than parent and child to better state this relationship between God transcendent and God manifest in creation and history. (146-147)

In relation to these theologies, and having sympathy with them, Ferm describes womanist theology,¹ and this definition is important to my work:

Womanist theologians [as part of American black theology] believe *it is imperative for them to utilize their own rich black heritage of poetry and prose to make clear their own distinctive identity...* feminist theologians focus on sexism as the primary form of oppression, whereas womanist theologians stress a tri-dimensional oppression: racism, sexism, and classism.... Jacquelyn Grant writes: "To do womanist theology, then, we must read and hear the Bible and engage it within the context of our own experience." (57-emphasis added)

The literary tradition of African American women, therefore, is a resource of social, political, and *theological* empowerment, and given the historical experience of black women, it should not be surprising that their literature reflects *all* of these aspects of African American culture. In her book *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*, from which Ferm quotes, Grant analyzes the varieties of feminist and black theology currently engaged in the United States, and explains:

For Black women, the role of Jesus unraveled as they encountered him in their experience as one who empowers the weak...[Black women] have argued that in the light of our experience, Jesus meant freedom. They have maintained that Jesus means freedom from the sociopsychological, psychocultural, economic and political oppression of Black people. In other words, *Jesus is a political messiah*. (215-emphasis added)

Grant's position resonates with an essay by Susan Corey Everson, called "Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*, A Resource for Feminist Theology." Everson specifically links the position of feminist theologians to the subversion of the Cartesian dualistic tradition:

Pointing out the negative effects of cultural body-spirit dualism on women's sense of self, these theologians have argued that the way to spiritual renewal for woman, and indeed, for the entire society, lies in the integration of body and the connection with all of nature into our understanding of what it means to be human. In their search for a more adequate concept of body and for a new religious framework to incorporate the experience of women,

¹ "Womanist" is defined by Alice Walker as "A black feminist or feminist of color" (xi).

many theologians have turned to contemporary women's literature as a source of new language, imagery, and mythic models. (65)

Grant points out that a number of womanist theologians, including Delores Williams and Katie Geneva Cannon, have employed "the literary tradition of Black women as the most adequate source for a constructive Black women's ethic" (Grant 208). While these womanist and feminist theologians have utilized the fiction of African American women for theological models of liberation and for the profiling of black women's experience as empowering, my work comes to a similar but distinct place from a different direction. I have started from Morrison's texts and the now nearly quarter-century of literary criticism on those texts, but have discovered that the varieties of modern theology which emphasize liberation and freedom in terms of material, this-worldly existence capture the protean, conflicted, and unstable nature of Toni Morrison's fiction. Moreover, these theologies provide a way of talking about the history and material (economic and social) conditions to which Morrison alludes *as well as* her quite African focus on spirituality, or what has sometimes been identified as "magical realism" in her novels.² On my view,

² Ideological arguments of course exist within and between these different theologies, and certainly between various theologians, much as such discord arises between feminist literary critics. I am not in any way proposing that womanist theology or any other theology labeled in a certain way is monolithic. It is not, for example, part of what I am attempting to do within my work here to critique the ways in which white feminist theologians have ignored the concerns of black feminist theologians. This subject, as well as the more general concern of African American feminists with universalizing tendencies among white middle-class feminists, has been treated extensively in the literature. I want in this work, wherever possible, to make clear that I am a white middle-class feminist scholar, and I try implicitly to confront the divergence of my experience from the experience of African American women of various social classes, and the ways in which I have been educated by Morrison's work. My position takes in the necessary forgiveness and conciliation inherent in the theological position, as Grant has written:

To speak of Black women's tri-dimensional reality [sex, race, and class], therefore, is not to speak of Black women exclusively, for there is an implied universality which connects them to others.

....To affirm Jesus' solidarity with the "least of people" is not an exercise in romanticized contentment with one's oppressed status in life. For as the Resurrection signified that there is more to life than the cross of Jesus Christ, for Black women it signifies that their tri-dimensional oppressive

this is exactly because Morrison's work is theological, and Susan Thistlethwaite's understanding of the way in which theology works in the fiction of African American women helps to clarify my position:

Modern black women writers of fiction are not classical theologians. Like [Zora Neale] Hurston, many may not themselves be Christian, but they faithfully report the idiom of black people; *and the religion of black people, a distinctive Christianity, is a syntax for this idiom.* (99-emphasis added)

Two statements by Toni Morrison support my liberation-theological readings of her novels. The first occurs in Morrison's well-known essay, "Rootedness: the Ancestor as Foundation." I quote the context surrounding the kernel statement since Morrison situates and defines the key word in the passage, "political," in terms of "community," which accords well with Grant's understanding that, to black people, "Jesus is a political messiah" (215):

If anything I do, in the way of writing novels (or whatever I write) isn't about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything. I am not interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfills only the obligation of my personal dreams--which is to say yes, *the work must be political.* It must have that as its thrust. That's a pejorative term in critical circles now: if a work of art has any political influence in it, somehow it's tainted. My feeling is just the opposite: if it has none, it is tainted. (344-45-emphasis added)

The second statement was made in answer to Charles Ruas's question on the biblical language of *Song of Solomon*: "The Bible wasn't part of my reading, it was part of my life" (219). Morrison goes on to link Christianity to the black community and the black church, saying of the latter, "The society was there, the art was there, the politics were there, the theology was there, everything was there." She comments on the importance of "the love thing," emphasizing that Christianity "says something particularly interesting to black people" (Ruas 241):

...the openness of being saved was one part of [Christianity]--you were constantly being redeemed and reborn, and you couldn't fall too far, and couldn't ever fall completely and be totally thrown out.... *Everybody was*

existence is not the end, but it merely represents the context in which a particular people struggle to experience hope and liberation. (217)

ready to accept you. And also that transcending love, that quality, which is why the New Testament is so pertinent to black literature--the lamb, the victim, the vulnerable one who does die but nevertheless lives. (Ruas 242-emphasis added)

The words "Bible" and "Christianity" carry, however, in the United States, in our time, and particularly in secular academic literary studies, a tremendous freight. The whitemale Eurocentric ethos entails a monolithic, hegemonically-useful understanding of Christianity that, in practice, has denied secular intellectuals a context for its interpretation. In literary studies in particular, the dominant critical paradigms are informed by the tradition of Western European philosophy and psychology--Hegel, Kant, Freud, and their twentieth-century heirs such as Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan. Michele Wallace has argued that when cultural critics such as Zora Neale Hurston, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. attempt to show that

the formulations of 'myth' or the 'oral tradition' are just as good, just as complex and rigorous [as Eurocentric philosophical and religious traditions], this focus emphasizes the comparative inadequacy of black culture. For it is always in terms of the dominant critical discourse that the alternative mythic practice is being described and named, not the other way around. (244)

But "marginalized" African American culture understands the words Bible and Christianity in ways that diverge radically from the dominant readings and thus have a cultural integrity not dependent on the kind of oppositional demonstrations of worthiness Wallace points out in the work of Hurston, Lévi-Strauss, and Gates. Cain Hope Felder expresses the problematics of these comparisons with reference to African American writers:

Black writers recognize the total inadequacy and racial bias of the West's intellectual tradition in its endeavors to provide allegedly *universal* conceptual and religious norms. In this respect, Cornel West's *Prophecy Deliverance* is an invaluable resource for tracing the implicit racist tendencies of the European philosophical "giants" since the Enlightenment. The implication is that, whatever one may wish to say about the Bible, there is a need for a disciplined *skepticism* regarding its Western appropriations. (8-emphasis in original)³

³ Interested readers should see Felder's *Troubling Biblical Waters* for the ways in which biblical texts have been transmitted and used in Africa and the diaspora.

To read black literary texts culturally, according to Wallace, must also be "to promulgate 'cultural reading' as an act of resistance" (244). Therefore, it is necessary to reject hegemonically-determined interpretation of scripture and Christianity in general, remembering too that, as Walter Ong has demonstrated:

The orality of the mindset in the Biblical text, even in its epistolary sections, is overwhelming... The Hebrew *dabar*, which means word, means also event and thus refers directly to the spoken word. (75)

Toni Morrison's novels are not, in any case, inscribed attempts to bring black cultural discourse into line with *dominant* historical discourse. Instead, Morrison lays claim to the Bible and to African American Christianity in a culturally-generated discursive space different from binary, competing Eurocentric discourses. In fact, within biblical tradition, monolithic Western history is not distinct from oral tradition and Morrison's novels reveal African American Christianity as a generative cultural matrix in which what Wallace refers to as "History [with a capital-h]" and "oral traditions" are not separable discursive realms.

It cannot be overemphasized that the intersection of Christian scripture and African tradition is not a creation of recent fiction or critical discourse but a fact of history. Sterling Stuckey has decisively demonstrated this of Christian observances practiced in antebellum America, many of which have continued in African American churches since:

...in most "Christian" ceremonies on slave plantations, Christianity provided a protective exterior beneath which more complex, less familiar (to outsiders) religious principles and practices were operative. The very features of Christianity peculiar to slaves were often outward manifestations of deeper African religious concerns, products of a religious outlook toward which the master class might otherwise be hostile. By operating under cover of Christianity, *vital aspects of Africanity*, which some considered eccentric in movement, sound, and symbolism, could more easily be practiced openly. Slaves therefore had readily available the prospect of practicing, without being scorned, essential features of African faith together with those of the new [Christian] faith (35-36-emphasis added).

In *Troubling Biblical Waters*, Felder comments at length that, in recent decades, black theologians, historians, and other scholars of African America have

increasingly been committed to the "'creative residuum of African religions'" in black American Christianity.⁴ The importance of the Bible, Christianity, and *Africanity* to black Americans, and the crucial connection of these to *politics*, has much in common with the understanding of those terms by other marginalized peoples within the Americas who have reappropriated Jesus Christ as a political figure of subversion and liberation. In the words of black theologian Felder, "it is possible to argue that all theology is implicitly 'political,' that is, a discourse about God in relation to the power and social structures of a given society" (xiii). Cornel West defines liberation theology "in part, [as] an anti-imperialist Christian mode of thought and action" (*Fragments* 18). The originary tenet of Latin American liberation theology was "to humanize the oppressed" (*Contemporary American Theologies* 62),⁵ and I find an echo of this notion in Toni Morrison's desire to

⁴ Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, quoted in Felder 7.

⁵ The best-known of the Latin American liberation theologians have all expressed this idea in various forms. Gustavo Gutiérrez, generally considered to be the father of liberation theology, states:

In solidarity, then, with the poor and oppressed of Latin America in their life, their sufferings, their struggles to break free of an unjust social order, and their longing for liberation, let us now address ourselves to a task that we shall surely find to be rigorously demanding: that of entering into, taking upon ourselves, the reality of the misery and exploitation in which the great majority of our people live. ("Liberation and the Poor" 57)

Juan Luis Segundo expresses the opinion that those critical of liberation theology "tend to muzzle the word of God by trying to make one particular portion of Scripture the word of God not only for certain particular moments and situations but also for all situations and all moments" (88). An in "Jesus, a Person of Extraordinary Good Sense," Leonardo Boff writes that Jesus

detheologizes religion, making people search for the will of God not only in holy books but principally in daily life; he demythologizes religious language, using the expressions of our common experiences; he deritualizes piety, insisting that one is always before God and not only when one goes to the temple to pray, he emancipates the message of God from its connection to one religious community and directs it to all people of good will (cf. Mark 9:30-40); John 10:16); and, finally, *he secularizes the means of salvation*, making the sacrament of the "other" a determining element for entry into the kingdom of God. (120-emphasis added)

Finally, in a comparison of black theology to African theology, South African Bishop Desmond Tutu writes:

inscribe "the unwritten interior life" of black people who "were seldom invited to participate in the [historical] discourse even when we were its topic" ("Site" 111).

Throughout this work, I use Cheryl Townsend Gilkes's term "Afro-Christianity" to refer to the above-mentioned matrix of religion, politics, social critique, and liberation theology. I want to make clear, however, that I am not implying that there is only one "black church," nor that there exists a monolithic interpretation of the Bible by African Americans individually or denominationally.⁶ Felder states his understanding of the diversity of the African American church:

We can identify three tendencies within the Black Church tradition: biblical literalism; eisegesis (the process of "leading or reading into" the text our own ideas); and the Black homily that conscientiously proceeds from exegesis to serious hermeneutical exposition. Whereas biblical literalism and eisegesis depend on proof-texting, the more solidly based Black homily depends on a critical posture that is informed by the historically conditioned features of the Bible. Once aware of such, we can re-engage the text, presupposing its perennial authority in addressing the needs and aspirations of Black people. (88-89)

However, Morrison's biblical allusions are almost never investigated with Afro-Christianity, as a cultural and historical entity, in mind. Critics often understand the Bible as a "Western" text because of its relationship to Christian interpreters, such as Saint Augustine, which led to the institutionalizing of the Roman Catholic Church in the early centuries of the Common Era (cf. Pagels *Adam, Eve, and the*

Black theology is more thoroughly and explicitly political than African theology is. It cannot be lulled into complacency by a doctrine of pie in the sky which is a reprehensible travesty of the gospel of the incarnation....

I myself believe I am an exponent of black theology coming as I do from South Africa. I believe I am also an exponent of African theology coming as I do from Africa.... (262)

⁶ A colleague of Morrison's at Princeton has told me that Morrison was raised a Roman Catholic. In his book *For My People*, published in 1984, black theologian James Cone estimated that at that time there were about one million black Catholics in the United States. Cone discusses clergy "who are determined to develop a black theology that is accountable to their experience both in the black and Catholic communities" (51). I have no idea if Morrison has maintained any affiliation with the Catholic church, but I hope that all of this information taken together further supports my understanding that it is possible to posit a black liberation theology in Morrison's novels apart from any sort of monolithic "black church."

Serpent). Without understanding the complex history of Christianity, and its continuing multiplicity in spite of hegemonic doctrines that do not admit to multiplicity, we might read Morrison as subverting the black church and the Bible in African American culture. In fact, these are for Morrison what Raymond Williams calls "conditions of a practice" (48):

But I am saying that we should look not for the components of a product but for the conditions of a practice. When we find ourselves looking at a particular work, or group of works, often realizing, as we do so, their essential community as well as their irreducible individuality, we should find ourselves attending first to the reality of their practice and the conditions of the practice as it was then executed.

....

...But as we discover the nature of a particular practice, and the nature of the relation between an individual project and a collective mode, we find that we are analysing, as two forms of the same process, both its active composition and its conditions of composition, and in either direction this is a complex of extending active relationships. (*Problems in Materialism and Culture* 48)

Allowing that I have established the continuing importance of scripture and religion within African American culture, and that I will illustrate that Morrison's pervasive use of scripture and theological concepts are implicitly and complexly connected to her individual compositional method and the conditions under which she has composed her novels, the question remains that begs for a serious answer: in her *political* works of art, what is the purpose of these *biblical* allusions?

The cultural criticism of bell hooks and of Cornel West has been helpful to me in answering this question. Their position is set out in "a dialogue" reproduced in two books, *Yearning* and *Breaking Bread*, where bell hooks states: "...Cornel and I come to you as individuals who believe in God. That belief informs our message" (*Yearning* 204). West, perhaps the most astute articulator of the black left, elucidates the intersection of God and black life in the United States. The following passage is a summing up, in essence a filter through which my work here should be read:

One of the reasons we believe in God is due to the long tradition of religious faith in the black community. I think, that as a people who have had to deal with the absurdity of being black in America, for many of us it is a question of God and sanity, or God and suicide. And if you are serious about black struggle you know that in many instances you will be stepping out on nothing, hoping to land on something. That is the history of black folks past and present, and it continually concerns those of us who are willing to speak out with boldness and a sense of the importance of history and struggle. You speak knowing that you won't be able to do that for too long because America is such a violent culture. Given those conditions you have to ask yourself what links to a tradition will sustain you... *And so the belief in God itself is not to be understood in a noncontextual manner. It is understood in relation to a particular context, to specific circumstances.* (Yearning 204-emphasis added)

To take seriously Morrison's statement that "the work of art must be political," we must place the work of African American art within the "particular context," the "specific circumstances" of the ongoing black experience in the United States. The "seriousness" of "black struggle" that West is addressing--as he puts it, "past and present"--cannot be diminished. And his warning is especially relevant to the literary critical community, for whom the *immediacy* of the political work of art becomes mediated by the work's function within the purview of the academy. The black work of art often becomes decontextualized and reduced to the currency of the literary critical economy, reduced to the terms of the dominant discourse of the profession, accompanied by a de-privileging of the tradition and history out of which it has arisen.

In my reading of Morrison's novels, I abandon (with West and hooks) the reductive characterization of religion as an "opium" forced upon oppressed peoples by the dominant culture. In her dialogue with West, hooks cites "Septima Clark's book *Ready from Within*" as exemplifying black women's resources for resistance within the black church:

It was the belief in spiritual community, that no difference must be made between the role of women and that of men, that enabled her to be "ready within." To Septima Clark, the call to participate in black liberation was a call from God. Remembering and recovering the stories of how black women learned to assert historical agency in the struggle for self-determination in the context of community and collectivity is important for those of us who struggle to promote black liberation...(207)

West's and hooks's ideas make clear, as does the work of black theologians such as Felder, Grant, Cannon, Delores Williams, Gilkes, and James Cone, that the church in African American life is a "cultural resource" that has arisen from the conditions of oppression in the society of the United States.

West has written: "*The major contribution religious revivals can make to left strategy is to demand that Marxist thinkers and activists take seriously the culture of the oppressed*" (*Fragments* 19-italics in original). He delineates precisely how even progressive secular discourse has failed to capture this culture:

...the age of crude Marxist reductionist treatments of religion--along with the European secular condescending attitudes which undergird them--is passing. Concrete social and detailed historical analyses of the relation of religion to revolutionary praxis is now a major issue on the agenda for contemporary Marxism. (*Fragments* 16)

West wants us to understand religion within a cultural group as a material product of that cultural group, notwithstanding Marx's nineteenth-century characterization of religion and the post-*Roe v. Wade* association of Christianity with the religious right (cf. Carter). Some critics of liberation theology find that liberation theologians are attributing to the *church* cultural manifestations of the *community* (cf. Kee); I find such a distinction spurious and, in the case of African American churches, this distinction fails to comprehend the myriad ways church and community coextend. Other critics (primarily on the right) simply label liberation theologians "neo-Marxists" (Garrett 174), which is a non-sequitur with an entirely different genesis. But my point is simple: Morrison's novels are political, they are theological, they are African, they are American. The African American community and its churches have generated a syntax *and* a semantics by which Morrison creates a pedagogical and liberating discourse. Thus, when I claim that, in all her novels, Morrison is writing an African American liberation theology, these are the terms under which I make that statement. "To acknowledge that all theology is situated in history means that theology is done by human beings," James

Cone has written, "not by God...Black theology rightly begins with the history and culture of African-Americans" (172).

Michele Wallace understands that it is possible to construe contemporary critical theory as "avoid[ing] the question that the persistence of racial inequality poses":

From an 'Afro-centric' perspective, current trends in critical theory look mighty like an exercise in self-absorption designed to reconsolidate the canon of Western Masters (not just Milton and Shakespeare but Hegel, Marx and Freud, too!), thus trivializing the analysis of any aspect of Afro-American or African diasporic cultural development. (249)

In my analysis of Toni Morrison's work, the reified hegemonic monolith of Western civilization is juxtaposed to compositional cultural realities. As Margaret Washington Creel has understood, "the Christian God provided the African-American slaves with a 'fixed point,' and rather than being converted to God they converted God to themselves."⁷ Again, the Christianity of black Americans is an Africanized form that is foundational for African American culture and, more generally, the complexity of religious cultural practices in the United States.

Taking these factors into account, I do not wish to be understood to claim that Morrison's novels fail to reflect the nearly two thousand years of patriarchal oppression that has come under the auspices, so to speak, of the Christian church. Many critiques of Christian faith begin with the premise that it is always already so laden with ideology that it cannot possibly speak to oppressed people. Sharon Welch, in summarizing some of these critiques, notes that "Mary Daly claims that Christian faith itself is an expression of patriarchy and necrophilia" (3). But feminist theologian Beverly Wildung Harrison, a member of the Mud Flower Collective, critiques Daly's advocacy of a retreat from the world which she sees as

⁷ Creel 74, paraphrasing Paul Radin, "Status, Phantasy, and the Christian Dogma," in *God Struck Me Dead: Religious Conversion Experience and Autobiographies of Negro Ex-slaves*.

irrevocably entrenched in all contemporary society. Harrison's analysis is helpful in understanding the focus of liberation theology in general on material conditions in "this world," a phrase of tremendous significance, as I will show, across

Morrison's novels:

In contrast to Daly, my basic ethical thesis is that women, and other marginated people are *less* cut off from the real, material conditions of life than are those who enjoy the privileges of patriarchy and that, as a result, an otherworldly spirituality is far removed from the life experience of women. (197-198)

As I will show, Morrison reflects an Afro-Christian spirituality firmly rooted in the experience of African Americans, and African American women in particular.

Mixing spiritual and otherworldly figures with depictions of the psycho-social history of African Americans, the black Christian liberation theology Morrison inscribes takes place in "this world." This is not a Christianity which emphasizes the "sweet by and by"; the affinity enslaved people of African descent felt for the Christian faith *from the beginning* emphasized freedom and liberation in *this world*. In his classic history of African American folk thought, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, Lawrence Levine illuminates the interweaving of African cosmologies with Christianity, and the way in which enslaved people used scripture and their spirituals to express their desire for freedom. Levine is clear about the slaves' Old Testament bias, even in interpreting the New. Old Testament scripture continually illustrates God's vindication and liberation of his people in the here and now:

Although Jesus was ubiquitous in the spirituals, it was not invariably the Jesus of the New Testament of whom the slaves sang, but frequently a Jesus transformed into an Old Testament warrior whose victories were temporal as well as spiritual: "Mass Jesus" who engaged in personal combat with the Devil; "King Jesus" seated on a milk-white horse with sword and shield in hand. "Ride on, King Jesus," "Ride on, conquering King," "The God I serve is a man of war," the slaves sang. This transformation of Jesus is symptomatic of the slaves' selectivity in choosing those parts of the Bible which were to serve as the basis of their religious consciousness. (43)

Morrison uses the phrase "this world," often in passages where characters have failed to understand the African "this-worldliness" of spirituality. In *Song of Solomon*, for example, Macon Dead II, who advises his son Milkman to "own things" so that he can "own [himself] and other people too," misreads his Christ-like sister Pilate: "'Pilate can't teach you a thing you can use in this world. Maybe the next, but not this one'" (55). And in *Tar Baby*, when the materialistic Jadine admonishes Son that he must make it in "this world," Son, at his most Christ-like, asks her, "'Did [those colleges] tell you what was in my heart?...until you know about me, you don't know nothing about yourself'" (227-228). Jadine and Macon Dead mistake the material success of white capitalism for the liberating spirituality of their own cultural heritage; in a sense Jadine and Macon are, as bell hooks has put it, "overseen by [an] authoritative [white] Other claiming to know us better than we know ourselves" (*Yearning* 22).

As "this world" theology, Morrison's books encode the intersection of history and spirituality, and this intersection is exemplified in what Morrison refers to as "the presence of the ancestor" ("Rootedness" 343). Across religions and peoples in Africa (and this is true for both East and West Africa), the living and the dead exist together on a continuum, as do human beings and the natural world. Of the aspects of African religion that, in Morrison's words, "survived in some forms" (Ruas 242), this understanding is one that has crucially informed African American Christianity. In his book *Slave Culture* Sterling Stuckey describes the telling of a story among South Carolina blacks called "The King Buzzard." The story recounts a folktale of "the spirit of a traitor," a "chief of his tribe [who] tricked his people into slavery, betraying thousands" (4). The spirit is condemned to "eternal wandering" which means that "it could not return to its native town in Africa or communicate there with the souls of relatives and others it had known in its lifetime"--across West African peoples, this was equivalent to hell (6). In an

African-based spiritual system, hell means that you are out of touch with your *people*, in all senses: your culture, your tribe, your family, your community. In Gloria Naylor's novel *Mama Day* (1988), set on an island off South Carolina and Georgia, the sisters Miranda and Abigail represent African and Christian cosmologies respectively. They are not, however, exclusionary of each other, but reflect and affirm each other; Miranda and Abigail realize that both systems are essential to their cultural identity.

In Toni Morrison's novels, the spirits of the dead coexist with the living, and the living are responsible for keeping in touch with their departed loved ones. Thus, twenty-five years after Sula has died, Nel feels her presence. Pilate talks to her departed father in *Song of Solomon*, and understands that the Dead are part of the community. *Loa*--the *chevaliers*, the ancestors--live on the island named for them in *Tar Baby*; the ghost of Sethe's baby girl haunts 124 Bluestone Road in *Beloved*; in *Jazz*, the spirit of Dorcas completes a trinity with her lover and murderer, Joe Trace, and his wife, Violet.

Significantly, the presence of the ancestor is far more shadowy in *The Bluest Eye* than in the novels which follow it. This first novel makes historical connections; notably, as Donald Gibson has shown, it "engages in sustained argument with modes of thought and belief explicitly stated in [Count Joseph Arthur de] Gobineau's assertion [of the superiority of the white race]" (159). The empowerment apparent from *Sula* forward, however, is less obvious. Such empowerment depends crucially on an ancestral presence. Recalling that Toni Morrison's oeuvre does not consist of "private, closed exercises," but is "about the community" and "must be political," the presence of the ancestor provides the necessary link between politics, history--historically accurate allusions to events of American history--and a spirituality that is at once Christian and African. John Dominic Crossan understands the resurrected Jesus as "the continuing presence in a

continuing community of the past Jesus in a radically new and transcendental mode of present and future existence" (404). Similarly, the history of Africans on the North American continent, the history of ancestors from the many peoples of West Africa who came together as a nation of African Americans, with contributions from Fons, Ibos, Bambaras, Ashantis, and many others, is a "continuing presence in a continuing community." Torn from ancestral homes by imperialists who never considered that they possessed a vital cultural identity, enslaved people from various African civilizations found ways to share what they did, in fact, have in common, and this carried over strongly into religious observance. Christianity, a social practice acceptable to the dominant white society, and easily interwoven with many African religious traditions, thus became a primary locus of cultural, spiritual, and historical memory and action. The Bible, as a tribal, genealogical, and oral text, has served as a non-linear, Africanized typological model in black American culture as it interprets and preserves spiritual traditions and experience. Rather than seeing history as a positivistic discourse separate from the lives of the people who generate, or have generated it, Morrison portrays the Afro-Christianity of black Americans as enabling them to retain the belief that, as Sethe confirms for Denver in *Beloved*, "'nothing ever dies'" (36).

To this point, I have been primarily concerned with describing African American culture with its mixture of Western forms and African roots. The relationship of African American culture to Eurocentric culture, however, is not unidirectional. In fact, the relation is bidirectional, and by comprehending the exclusion of African and African American cultural experience from the hegemonically-constructed history of the United States, Morrison reorients the late twentieth-century reader to a new vision which foregrounds not only African American participation in, but constitution of, that history. Morrison's histories of African Americans are not separated off from so-called "Western" history, but are

coterminous with it and defining of it. Nowhere is this more evident than in the theological dimension of her work. Morrison's African American history draws in the pluralistic, empowering traditions of early Christianity, as well as the "dangerous memory" of Jesus of Nazareth,⁸ the historical radical thinker. Morrison's novels combine the parabolic form used by Jesus--in which simple, quotidian stories illustrate the community and relationality that define the kingdom of God--with mythology and folktale. Myth, folktale, and parable entail *transformation* and reversal; all of Morrison's novels contain subversive Christ-figures and the resurrection which emanates from an ancestral presence. Characters such as Sula, Pilate and Milkman, Son, Sethe and Denver, Dorcas and Joe Trace, invoke Jesus as what the African Christian theologian Bénézet Bujo calls the "Proto-Ancestor" (79-81). Numerous protean trinities in the novels represent the kingdom of God in "this world," a relationality and community that Morrison calls "the love thing" associated with the black Christian church (Ruas 242). No typology is ever uniquely or exclusively incorporated in one character, and this is particularly true of Morrison's Christ-figures. As a writer of parables, Morrison illustrates the African American experience as a reorientation to a "new way of being in the world" (McFague 168), but as with the parables of the New Testament, her texts always already reorient the reader beyond their own new reorientation:

[Paul] Ricoeur sums up this quality of the parables by suggesting that parables work on a pattern of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation: a parable begins in the ordinary world with its conventional standards and expectations, but in the course of the story a radically different perspective is introduced that disorients the listener, and finally, through interaction of the two competing viewpoints, tension is created that results in a redescription of life in the world. (McFague 46-47)

⁸ The Christian theologian David Tracy uses this phrase in discussing "the presently realized situational forms of the living tradition and its mediation of the event and person of Jesus Christ....when the dangerous memory of Jesus of Nazareth functions in its critical and corrective role upon all past, present and future mediations of the event of Jesus Christ..." (371, 372).

* * *

In the chapters which follow, I take up each novel in its chronological order of composition and publication in an individual chapter. This format allows me to treat, to some degree, the historical context during which each novel was written, and the historical subject that each takes up.

The Bluest Eye (1970) presents the impossible position of black people in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. The implicit message of dominant American culture to blacks was that if they became exactly like whites, they would gain equality and privilege in that society. Pecola Breedlove's family have thoroughly internalized white culture's view of them as "relentlessly and aggressively ugly" (34). Morrison invokes the story of Ham in Genesis, which through historical, textual, and ideological sleight-of-hand became a story justifying the identification of black people as a race destined to be slaves.⁹ She reveals numerous manifestations of internalized inferiority with reference to this story: the boys who tease Pecola and call her "black e mo" (55); Geraldine and women like her who refuse their black heritage; Pauline Breedlove and her desire for the distorted white life she has seen in Hollywood films.

The Bluest Eye heralds Morrison's cross-novel thematic concern with love and the African American experience in Pecola Breedlove's question, "'How do you do that?...how do you get somebody to love you?'" (29). Although Pecola may be read as a Christ-figure because she is sacrificed, in a sense, for the sins of her

⁹ Cain Hope Felder explains the ideological principle behind the creation, in about the fifth and sixth centuries C. E., of "the so-called curse of Ham as a justification for slavery and stereotypical aspersions about Blacks" (38):

The subtle process being described may consequently be called sacralization, because it represents an attempt on the part of one ethnic group to construe salvation history in terms that are distinctly favorable to it, as opposed to others. Here, ethnic particularity evolves with a certain divine vindication, and the dangers of rank racism lie just beneath the surface. (41-42)

community, she is more a scapegoat in the Levitical sense of atoning for sin (Lev. 16:8-10). In other words, she is not a salvific, empowering figure in the way that the Christs in the subsequent novels are, and Keith Byerman astutely sums up the complexity of Pecola's victimization:

More than the melancholy story of a little girl driven mad by the world's hostility, *The Bluest Eye* tells the story of the community and society that persecutes her. Pecola may be the central character, but she is far from the only victim of the blue eyes. "We" individually and collectively are both victimizer and victim... (186)

The possibility of love and redemption is represented in the novel by the counter-cultural trinity of prostitutes who are Pecola's neighbors, and who are the only characters who show her untainted, unconditional love. *The Bluest Eye* also strongly alludes to the Hebrew Bible book of Judges, a book which "illustrat[es]...a cyclical pattern of sin, oppression, repentance, and salvation" (Gunn 104).

Sula (1973), as Morrison has said, "was begun in 1969...in a period of extraordinary political activity" ("Unspeakable Things" 24). In countless ways, the novel juxtaposes war and peace, at the height of the Viêt Nam War, and what it has meant over the course of United States history to be an American of African descent serving the interests of the nation at war. *Sula* subtly interrogates the notion of war in terms of the political and social struggles of African Americans. The character Sula Peace embodies what Morrison calls in *The Bluest Eye* "Christ's serious anarchy" (134) and therefore is the locus of interrogation of the cultural categories of good and evil.

The primary Christ-figure in the novel, Sula is not necessarily a scapegoat, although in a sense she serves that function as an adult living in "the Bottom." She is a radical re-visionary presence who comes "not to send peace but a sword" (Matt. 10:34). Mae Henderson analyzes the subversive "silences and howls" associated with her in the novel:

The howl is a form of speaking in tongues and a linguistic disruption that serves as the precondition for Sula's entry into language. Unless she breaks the conventional structures and associations of the dominant discourse, Sula cannot enter through the interstices. (This reading of *Sula*, in effect, reverses the biblical movement from contestorial, public discourse to intimate, familial discourse.) ("Speaking" 33)

Through the representation of Sula, however, Morrison reminds her readers of the ongoing "orientation, disorientation, and reorientation" that define the parables. Henderson sees Sula's linguistic disruptions as "transgressions of the symbolic order" (33), put in the language of the contemporary literary critical economy. As I shall argue, Sula disrupts the social order with a parabolic language and life reminiscent of the astounding social iconoclasm of Jesus of Nazareth, and thereby provides significant empowerment to the oppressed community around her.

As she does in some of the other novels, Morrison invokes the memory of the heroic all-black 369th Infantry of World War I. Returning veterans were often still in uniform when they were beaten or lynched. In *Sula*, the African American experience is analogized to the captivity of the Jews, in Egypt and Babylon. Morrison understands that experience as giving rise to problems within the captive community itself; in their most polarized form, these problems existed for African Americans between black nationalists and integrationists, often within the black church. *Sula* contains pervasive allusions to the books of Samuel and Genesis, which serve to illustrate ancient and foundational aspects of African civilizations, but also is filled with references to Revelation, indicative of the "world-historical crisis" of black Americans' Viêt Nam-war service at the time of the novel's composition.¹⁰

Family and racial history become focal in *Song of Solomon* (1977), a novel infused with mystical and material representations of friendship, kinship, and sexual

¹⁰ I am paraphrasing Bernard McGinn's understanding that the Book of Revelation has been found to be, by so many of its commentators, particularly applicable to their own historical moments (523-524).

love, as well as manifold, conflicting characterizations of biblical personages, especially Jesus. The novel covers thirty-three years of the life of Milkman--Macon Dead III--from his miraculous birth to his indeterminate "leap of faith" into the air of his ancestral home. After a youth and young manhood steeped in the material comforts of the black bourgeoisie, a search for "gold," coupled with the influence of his Jesus-like aunt Pilate Dead, catalyzes Milkman's acceptance of the spiritual, historical world of his ancestors. By the novel's end, having received the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he has rejected the materialism of his father and "surrendered to the air" (337).

The novel posits the similarities between the "North" and "South" of the United States, and implicitly questions the Northern Migration of African Americans to find a better life, which occurred with increasing frequency after the Civil War. Milkman's father, whose own freed-slave father, the first Macon Dead, moves to Pennsylvania right after the war, seeks to kill the pain of African American existence through the amassing of wealth and material possessions; again, this constitutes an aspect of "continued fascination with the power of the white hegemonic other" (hooks 20). Having witnessed the murder of their father by whites for his land in the North, Macon II and Pilate seek widely divergent paths in making sense of their experience. Although it is never possible to make unidirectional or absolute typological assignments in Morrison's novels, I argue that Pilate and Milkman exemplify redeemer and redeemed, and love again is a pivotal point of desperation, empowerment, and rebirth.

Malcolm X said, "Sitting at the table doesn't make you a diner," and that watching others eat is not the same thing as being entitled to "eat some of what's on that plate" (26). In *Tar Baby* (1981), Son Green invades the household of the imperial Valerian Street and, with his advent, social classes, seen most clearly in the many meal-scenes, are leveled and the household is transformed. In addition to

"taking it to the Streets" by disrupting their mealtime social order, Son is connected in the text to Christ-symbols such as stars and butterflies. His textual birth is miraculous as he emerges from water, and at the novel's end he approaches the *loa*, the divine horsemen which inhabit the Isle de Chevaliers, from water as well. Again, water is the point of ancestral contact for many African peoples. Continuing her interrogation of class and race conflation in American culture, Morrison creates in *Tar Baby* a Christ in strong pursuit of a lost soul--the brilliant, beautiful, materialistic Jadine Childs. Indeed, Son and Jadine replicate the mythological Eros and Psyche, figures which were appropriated to early Christianity, in which Eros is Christ and Psyche, of course, the human soul.

Set on a fictional Caribbean island, *Tar Baby* is situated in a geography encoding the power of nature and the rapaciousness of white colonizers, fierce indigenous peoples, the influence of African culture and religion, and the mystical, spiritual African-Christian-Native American religion--Voudoun--that grew out of the intersection of these forces. In *Tar Baby*, as in no other of Morrison's novels, the lives of white and black characters intertwine; all of the characters are in a sense defined by the contemporary historical period against which the hierarchy and social stratification they enact must be seen--the late 1970s. Besides allusions to early Christian mysticism, the novel is structured in terms of at least two other well-known texts, Jean Giraudoux's play *Ondine* and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*. Both of these texts concern difference and transformation, but in the end, *Tar Baby* offers no clear resolution; it is not possible to tell whether Son has succeeded in saving Jadine's soul. He has, however, forever transformed the lives of the Street family and their servants, Jadine's aunt and uncle, Ondine and Sydney Childs. And Jadine says to herself, finally, that it will be difficult to forget the man who fucked like a star--which I read in light of the spiritual link between Eros, stars, and Christ.

The Civil War is considered by many historians to be *the* defining event of United States history. It is not merely that the "democratic experiment" had broken down and that the nation was at war against itself. Rather, the fundamental inconsistency of a government which allowed human beings to be enslaved while claiming as its basic governing law "all men are created equal" was bound to erupt in precisely the kind of bloody conflict that the Civil War became. For, as Barbara Fields has remarked, the Civil War was fought, in spite of the *stated* intentions and rhetorical postures of both Union and Confederate governments, over slavery (cf. Fields).

Beloved may be read as Toni Morrison's redaction of the historical centrality of the Civil War and the institution of slavery to the United States, through the eyes and voices of characters who endure slavery and then live within a changed nation defined, in part, by the terrors of new forms of white supremacy in the post-bellum era. Morrison began work on *Beloved* in the year that Ronald Reagan was inaugurated. Morrison explores and interrogates, in prior novels, the class struggles of African Americans within the culture of capitalism. Thus, it is not surprising that at the beginning of the nineteen-eighties she takes up a story based on an actual antebellum infanticide, during the years of the Fugitive Slave Law, committed by a runaway slave mother, Margaret Garner. The avariciousness often designated as the distinguishing feature of the nineteen-eighties obscures the increasing racial polarization manifested in the conservative-backlash years of the Reagan administration. Indeed, the decade signaled widespread activity by white supremacist groups. If read culturally, as defined by Michele Wallace, Morrison's re-vision of Garner's story constitutes "an act of resistance" to its own historical moment.

The story of Sethe Suggs and the desperate mother-love murder of her "crawling-already?" baby explores love and is structured by the "discourse on love"

of the biblical Song of Songs (Landy 305). In fictionalizing the historical fact of Margaret Garner's murder of her child, Morrison gives a tangible historical reality to the lives of people who could not give a literal (as opposed to an oral) reality to their own. The voices of Sethe, a love-obsessed and child-murdering mother, and Denver, her remaining child, are animated by the Song; Denver's: "Beloved is my sister. I swallowed her blood right along with my mother's milk" (205), echoes the Song, "[M]y sister, my spouse...I have drunk my wine with my milk" (5:1).

Denver, the primary savior in *Beloved*, is born miraculously, and completes a trinity which includes her mother Sethe and a holy spirit, the whitegirl Amy Denver. Denver becomes her mother's savior not because she is sacrificed, but because she possesses what Ashraf Rushdy calls "historical knowledge" (582), which I argue is an integral part of recognizing and honoring her ancestors. Her action of leaving the house to save Sethe, her mother, who is locked in spiritual/mortal combat with Beloved, results in the (re)spiration of Sethe, rooting her once again in the kingdom of God in "this world."

In a review of *Jazz* (1992), Henry Louis Gates, Jr., explains that in the year in which the novel is set, 1926, "a renaissance in the arts created by a group of writers calling themselves 'New Negroes' and centered in and about Harlem, was at its zenith" (52). By now it is well-known to Morrison scholars that *Jazz*, like *Beloved*, is based on an actual event: a young woman was shot by her lover at a party and, refusing to reveal his identity, she died. In Morrison's hands, the combination of these two historical events, one momentous and far-reaching and one individual and tragic, become the occasion for a continuation of her meditation on love--love within a community of black people in a nation that does not love them.

Jazz is not Morrison's longest novel, but it is arguably her most complex. In it, the spiritual, the political, and the sexual express themselves through and in relation to the novel's unified and mystical narrative Voice--a voice I will argue

resonates with YHWH of the Pentateuch. As in the other novels, Morrison creates a sacrificial lamb in young Dorcas Manfred, whose death and "resurrection" forever alter the African American community around her. The action occurs primarily in Harlem, but Morrison again subtly explores the historical and psychological ramifications of Northern Migration; Joe and Violet Trace are both born and grow up in the fictional Vesper County, Virginia. In reflecting on love in the city as opposed to the country, Morrison additionally invites an interrogation of the politics of these two structures of human civilization. Crucially, however, "the City" in *Jazz* affirms the importance of this notion to Judeo-Christian eschatology.

To read Morrison's stories as parables, and the novels as Afro-Christian liberation theology, is to comprehend the context of Morrison's central theme: love. Each of Morrison's novels meditates on "the love thing" in its full theological sense while exploring historical and social paradigms which have arisen from the African American experience and define American culture as a whole. Pauline Breedlove's loss of self in the service of whitepeople in *The Bluest Eye* illuminates the historical fact of the hegemonic deracialization of whites through a fictional black community which struggles to love itself. Unloved by her mother, young Pecola Breedlove is sacrificed to this deracialization, and real love is shown to her only by the Holy Trinity of whores within her community. *Sula* reminds us that African Americans have served in every United States war since the War of Independence, in segregated regiments until the Korean War, and reflects on community and citizenship. The character Sula is Morrison's revolutionary Christ *par excellence*; her remarkable speech of anarchic reversal--"Norma Shearer makes it with Stepin Fetchit" (145)--returns to love: "there'll be a little love left over for me. And I know just what it will feel like" (146). *Song of Solomon* focuses on the post-colonial condition of African Americans, and the African diaspora which has become yet another diaspora within the borders of the United States. *The Dead*,

after all, do not lose their identity when they arrive from Africa, but when they leave the South during Reconstruction to migrate to the illusion of a better life in the North. Milkman Dead struggles with class and capitalism, but is led to love instead of gold by his Christ-like aunt, Pilate. "I wish I'd a knowed more people," says Pilate as she's dying. "I would of loved 'em all. If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more'" (336). *Tar Baby* goes further in analyzing the colonialism inherent in United States society in a setting specifically allusive of the sweeping New World imperialism which began with Columbus's voyage to the West Indies. Jadine and Son's passionate and erotic love, which Jadine in her materialism rejects, conveys that "[i]t is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye,"¹¹ like the ancestors with whom Son ultimately connects. *Beloved* and *Jazz* sound the depths of human love within the beleaguered kingdom of God and a misunderstood African American Christianity and community. *Beloved* is structured in part by the biblical Song of Songs, of which Francis Landy has commented, "Love is the bond of a vital society. Nevertheless, it also threatens the social order" (310). An aspect of the protean trinitities of *Jazz* hovers in "a bird with a blade of red on the wing" (225), as Joe Trace searches for "[t]hat home in the rock...[w]ith a doorway never needing to be closed" (221).

While Morrison's novels are subversive, they are not subversive of everything. I claim that, although she constantly subverts dominant, hierarchical Christianity and certainly American whitemale Christian patriarchy, she affirms the importance of theology and the empowering traditions of the African American church. Her novels are inscribed theological, and therefore political, mediations which insist on

¹¹ *The Little Prince* 87.

liberation, community, and love as central principles for hope and life in "this world."

Chapter One

To keep her name in remembrance:

The Bluest Eye

In every matter of precedence, including teeth, was the priority of Bea's child most punctiliously observed. The duet of their howling might bring [Delilah] running intuitively to her own, but the switch was without hesitancy to the white child, every labor of service adhering rigidly to that order.

--Fannie Hurst

But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way, and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

--Isaiah 53:5-6

Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, published in 1970, presents an ostensibly bleak, hopeless story of American racial martyrdom. Some critics see the Breedlove family's self-hatred--"No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly" (34)--as a locus of irreconcilable conflict. What Susan Willis has referred to as "the influence of the white-dominated culture industry on the lives and identities of black Americans" (173) *seems* to be, in many respects, completely internalized by the black characters. Richard Kaplan points to the narrator Claudia's admission of her eventual "adjustment without improvement"--learning to love white iconic figures such as Shirley Temple--as illustrating that even she cannot "get outside those standards completely; she identifies with white figures" (10), and that Morrison offers "[no]

way for the characters to escape [the black/ white dichotomy]" (11). Willis argues that (for whatever reason) white people, to black people, are "reified subjects" and "little more than abstractions," which makes it "impossible for blacks to mount passionate, self-affirming resistance or retaliation" against white dominance (174). For these critics, Pecola embodies unmitigated desperation and futility, the "impossibility of resistance" and "no escape" replicating a kind of slavery in the cultural context of the early nineteen-forties.

Willis seems to realize, however, that Morrison's fictional characters encode ideas of cultural *freedom* and historical alternatives, as she says, impossible for Frantz Fanon's patients,¹ and that for Morrison "white cultural domination is far too complex to be addressed only in a retaliatory manner" (175). But the black/white cultural interface delineated by these critics seems irrevocably oppositional and always unidirectional, from white power to black suffering, from white cultural imperatives to black internalization, and not interactional. There can be no doubt of the psychological damage--what Willis calls "the emotionally crippling aspects of colonialism"--inherent in the material conditions of people of color in nations such as the United States (174). The complexities of actual American culture, however--the role of African American culture in constituting U.S. society and the way in which the society has, in great part, been constituted by its marginalized populations--go unaddressed in these models. Unfortunately, by taking a position which emphasizes the brutality enacted against people of color in this country over the course of almost four centuries, the empowering understanding of the countless ways in which African American influences have

¹ Willis 175:

...Morrison's fictional characters, while they articulate history, are not themselves bound by historical events and social structures as were Fanon's patients whose case histories are the narrative raw material of [*Black Skin White Masks*].

shaped American culture may also be marginalized. If it appears that white capitalist patriarchy has appropriated certain facets of blackness, making "blacks... deracinated, deculturated black integers in a white equation" (Willis 177), it remains for African Americans to reclaim race and cultural influence.

In fact, Morrison makes that reclamation. It is not that Morrison ever turns from revealing the ways in which United States society has victimized black people, and I am not claiming that marginalized groups don't internalize victim status. I do want to suggest, however, that, even in *The Bluest Eye*, a novel possibly more linear in its cultural view than Morrison's subsequent work, there are sources of empowerment and liberation depicted which arise specifically from the African American community. I find Michael Awkward's term *denigration* useful here to describe such "appropriative acts by Afro-Americans which have successfully transformed, by addition of black expressive cultural features, Western cultural and expressive systems" (9).

My point in this excursion into a certain critical view of *The Bluest Eye* is that the position of these *critics* seems akin to (a *prima facie* reading of) Richard Wright's words on the impossibility of his position as an African American in the South in the early twentieth century: "the white death, the threat which hung over every male black in the South....The penalty of death awaited me if I made a false move and I wondered if it was worth-while to make any move at all" (*Black Boy* 190). Wright's fatalism is analogous to the fatalism and nihilism these critics read in *The Bluest Eye*, although Wright's autobiographies present a fully-elaborated and personally-experienced rationale necessarily absent from Kaplan's and Willis's work. In a sense, they (and these are merely representative of one critical bent with regard to the novel) (re)place the novel in a space much like the Breedlove's storefront home: "They lived there because they were poor and black, and they *stayed there* because they believed they were ugly" (34-emphasis added). I am not

asserting that Pecola's scapegoat position transcends her suffering. Indeed, through Pecola, Morrison articulates what bell hooks calls the "broken voice" of African Americans:²

...when you hear the broken voice you also hear the pain contained within that brokenness--a speech of suffering; often it's that sound nobody wants to hear. (146)

Pecola is without a doubt "broken" by cultural oppression, and I read Morrison's vision as political, culturally specific, and spiritual, and even in *The Bluest Eye* it includes the possibility of a redeeming love. "The sweet communion we felt," hooks writes of her upbringing in a black community quite different from that of Pecola Breedlove, "was rooted in love, relational love, the care we had towards one another" (*Yearning* 35).

The complexity of Morrison's cultural understanding, remarked by Willis in passing, is not explored or incorporated into her reading. An interpretation that includes, however, attention to Morrison's scriptural allusions can derive the empowering political theme of liberation and redemption that runs through all of Morrison's work. In this first novel, these allusions include not only the ritual scapegoat of Leviticus and the messianic scapegoat of Isaiah, but the nameless female victims in Judges, Jephthah's daughter and the Levite's concubine, all of which come together in the character of Pecola Breedlove. As with Jephthah's daughter, Pecola will have "no child to keep her name in remembrance," but she is not "numbered among the unremembered." Morrison has inscribed the novel "in remembrance of her" and other martyrs to racism and oppression--such as Jesus of Nazareth--so that, as Phyllis Tribble puts it, "the narrative...shifts the focus of the

² In hooks's essay, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," she explains: "In an intense all-night-long conversation with Eddie George...talking about the struggle of oppressed people to come to voice, he made the very 'down' comment that 'ours is a broken voice'" (*Yearning* 146).

story...from death to life, from oblivion to remembrance."³ Recognizing Morrison's scriptural re-inscriptions allows one to argue, *contra* Willis and Kaplan, that Morrison, in the tradition of black women writers, subverts "impossibility" and "inescapability" even in a character like Pecola Breedlove. Gabrielle Foreman writes of "a tradition which embraces no easy linear fallout, no uncomplicated trajectory of similarities" (650); Karla Holloway uses "the term 'plurisignance' as a means of illustrating the dimensions of vision and language in the contemporary literature of [black women] writers in this tradition" (55).

Morrison accomplishes this "plurisignance" by creating parables, stories full of the quotidian struggles of characters who are, in general, extraordinary in their ordinariness, and the banality of Pecola's story contributes to the feeling of desperation it transmits. In addition, while not minimizing the horror of the rape of Pecola Breedlove by her father,⁴ this scene provides a clear illustration of fictional representation as liberation theology. Deane William Ferm explains the nature of sin in this framework:

Thus evil is not primarily a personal sin; it is systemic, inherent in the structures of society. It is only insofar as these structures are changed that the oppressed will have a chance to achieve true humanity and dignity. Theology is not universal and monolithic. It is situational, coming out of the particular historical conditions of an oppressed people. (63).

Cholly's rape of his own child and Pecola's subsequent insanity are dire consequences of the whitemale dominated culture that has molded their lives.

Cholly "loves" Pecola in a way he can love no other woman because of his early degradation by whitemen. Caught having sex with the young girl Darlene, humiliated and brutalized by whitemen watching and taunting, he "never

³ Tribble, *Texts of Terror* 106, 107. Tribble is writing here of Jephthah's daughter.

⁴ Michael Awkward's discussion of the rape of Pecola by her father is comprehensive. I discuss Awkward's reading below, wherein he is particularly attentive to the horror and victimization, on the mimetic level, of the incest scene.

consider[s]" hating them. "Sullen, irritable, he cultivated his hatred of Darlene" (119).

Nellie McKay writes of such transference that "even during slavery, when black men were unable to protect their womenfolk from either the whip or the master's sexual abuse, black men accused their women of cooperating with the white master against them" (283). Pecola, however, escapes Cholly's hatred because of her status as scapegoat. Cholly Breedlove is "free"--"alone with his own perceptions and appetites, and they alone interested him"--(126) and with his "love," he passes along this profoundly lonely "freedom," the only kind available to him, to his daughter. The alternating revulsion and tenderness that Cholly feels for Pecola during the rape scene represents a recurring, subversive theme in Morrison's work--that the absolute categorization characteristic of Western culture *is* insanity. Human beings can feel revulsion and tenderness, love and hate, simultaneously; in *The Bluest Eye*, Donald Gibson sees this simultaneity as an aspect of the novel's "text and countertext":

The text says we are oppressed by the values of the ruling class; the countertext says we participate in our own oppression usually to the extent of being literally the very hand or arm of that oppression. (162)

Within this tension, Morrison tells Pecola's story. Against a background of the truncated chance for love, the culturally-stunted relationships, the crippled ideas of freedom of the Breedlove family, *possibility*, as well as impossibility, hovers in Pecola's sad question: "'How do you do that? I mean, how do you get somebody to love you?'" (29) As parables implicitly pose questions of moral and spiritual perspective, Pecola poses explicitly the question inherent in her life and the life of her family within the community and the United States as a whole. In other words, *The Bluest Eye* is about love.

Morrison's question, voiced by Pecola, materializes within a space of three complex and inseparable dimensions of human experience: politics, theology, and

history. Morrison writes political, theological works that recoup and illuminate African American history; this idea recalls James Cone's understanding that "Black theology rightly begins with the history and culture of African-Americans" (172). Her mediation of the Bible and American history entails allusions to both and the recognition that both are ineluctably political.

Morrison was writing *The Bluest Eye* between 1965 and 1969, during the time when black nationalism, manifested in groups such as the Black Panthers and the Black Muslims, became part of the call for change within the civil rights movement. Melissa Walker has explored some of the conflicts within the movement as well as racial conflicts within the United States more generally:

In 1966, militants had replaced moderates in two movement organizations: Stokely Carmichael had taken over the leadership of SNCC from John Lewis, and Floyd McKissick had replaced James Farmer as the head of CORE. Both organizations were fraught with conflict by the end of the sixties. While the surviving leaders of the non-violent movement were struggling to establish a viable agenda, militants called for "black power," and some endorsed violence as a valid means of achieving their goals. (47)

Given the time of *The Bluest Eye's* composition, the novel's bleakness functions within its historicity; it reflects the effort of African Americans in the late nineteen-sixties to articulate the effects of oppression by the dominant white culture. During those years, black Americans acted out of an empowered understanding of the pervasiveness of this oppression, an understanding that racism in the United States included racialization of blackness and deracialization of whiteness, giving the latter a default status in the culture. At the same time, African Americans rejected white standards of beauty--hence, the phrase "Black is beautiful," "Afro" hairstyles, African-styled "Dashikis," and so on.

These external cultural manifestations affirmed blackness, affirmed the history and beauty of the race's African heritage. *The Bluest Eye*, however, makes its political point not by being set in the late sixties, but in 1941, illustrating African American life during the time of Toni Morrison's own childhood; the novel

portrays particular cultural influences she felt as a *female* child of color in the nineteen thirties and forties. When one juxtaposes the historical moment in which the novel is set to the moment during which it was written, the novel becomes not a hopeless prediction but an empowering cultural manifesto. Morrison achieves this in a remarkably economical fictional idiom which allows the critic to unpack the conflicted social history the novel invokes. She comprehends not only white oppression of blacks, but blacks' unfruitful cycles of turning their power over to whites--not necessarily colluding in their own oppression, but like many cultural groups, undermining their power by fighting among themselves. In this regard, Morrison's use of Judges is key; Judges is the Old Testament book which shows that turning away from God brings subjugation, and a lack of cultural and personal power. During the time *The Bluest Eye* was composed, African Americans shifted focus away from the idea that white people had to change to the idea that black people had to take power for themselves, thus reaffirming their connection to God.

* * *

The three iterations of the Dick and Jane reader which begin *The Bluest Eye* signal Morrison's inscribed engagement with a number of defining American texts. Each of these texts represents a particular ideology which fails to take into account the demography of its sphere of influence, either purposefully or through ignorance. The Dick and Jane reader, with its perfect (white) family, provided generations of Americans of all ethnicities with a homogenous, middle-class, deracialized socioeconomic model. The invisibility of non-white people in these readers reflected the dominant culture's implicitly denying them access to full participation in American culture--in *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove's mother Pauline is the "ideal servant" (101) hidden in the kitchen of Dick and Jane's white house with green shutters.

The second text Morrison engages is Fanny Hurst's *Imitation of Life*, which was not only a best-selling novel (published in 1933), but was made into a film twice, once in the thirties and once in the late fifties. Jane Caputi has discussed the relationship between *The Bluest Eye* and Hurst's best-seller:

With Pauline and Pecola serving as parallels to Delilah and Peola [the black mother and her half-black daughter], Morrison indicts *Imitation of Life*, and the culture it represents, for the promulgation of racist beliefs and for its participation in the decimation of Black female spirit and sanity. (713)

Finally, Michael Awkward persuasively argues for Morrison's "consciously (and *critically*) revising the Ellisonian depiction of incest in the Trueblood episode of *Invisible Man*" (81) in Cholly Breedlove's rape of his daughter Pecola. Awkward not only examines Morrison's reinscription of Ellison's "vocabulary of naturalism and historical regression that permits [incest] to be read in relation to undeniably phallogocentric sociocultural interpretations of human history" (86), but also critiques Houston Baker's phallus-intensive reading of the Trueblood episode. Awkward sums up Morrison's "revisionary reading":

Morrison, finally, seems to be taking Ellison to task for the phallogocentric nature of his representation of incest which marginalizes and renders as irrelevant the consequences of the act for the female victim.... Morrison...foreground[s] the effects of incest for female victims in direct response to Ellison's refusal to consider them seriously. (87)

Morrison's overwriting of these texts interrogates the blindspots evinced by white patriarchy's subgroups and, as Awkward has shown, provides for their "denigration." The Dick and Jane reader exemplifies the deracialized "white" cultural paradigm forced by default and exclusion on marginalized people. *Imitation of Life*, written by a "liberal" white woman, Fanny Hurst, reinforces stereotypes that hark back to nineteenth-century ethnology, stereotypes which were also held by abolitionist "romantic racialists" such as Harriet Beecher Stowe.⁵ The valorization of uncontrollable black male sexuality in the Trueblood episode recalls

⁵ Karcher 26.

Stokely Carmichael's "witticism" that the position of the black woman in the civil rights movement should be "prone."⁶ In these cases, white women and black men not only replicate the oppression of whitemale culture depicted in the Dick and Jane reader, but reveal their own internalization of dominant ideologies which also oppress them. The three texts are particularly proscriptive of physical and social space for black women and girls. What seems clear is that the "impossibility" and "inescapability" of white cultural ideology--its internalization by African Americans as well as its coercion of them--is encoded by the texts that Morrison takes on in her first novel. By this I mean to convey Michele Wallace's understanding of writing by African American women, that it is "engaged in a contemporary dialogue with a majority 'white' culture for the specific purpose of transcending and/or transforming it" (249).

The Bluest Eye's cultural dialogue functions in discursive space similarly to the words of Janey Starks's grandmother in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*:

"Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out....de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see." (29)

In re-presenting Hurston's words, *The Bluest Eye's* scapegoat theme focuses on the character Pecola Breedlove, a young black girl from a brutish, and brutally poor, family. Criticism of the novel has centered around Pecola as locus of cultural madness: that the deracialization of whiteness enforces the "invisible" status of blacks. In Pecola's case, invisibility (her own, as well as her parents') equals insanity, but the equation doesn't stop there. It is crazy that whiteness should equal *no* race, while blackness equals *race equals invisibility*. For Michael Awkward,

⁶ Wallace 6.

Pecola exemplifies what can go wrong with what W.E.B. DuBois calls the "double consciousness" of black folks; in Pecola, double consciousness becomes "schizophrenic double-voicedness" (58). Pecola's desperate desire for blue eyes and belief at the novel's end that she has been granted them enacts the relentless contradiction of such double consciousness and the colonized status of African Americans in racist America. Instead of seeing the insanity of the white-enforced equation, Pecola rejects her blackness as terrifying, incapacitating, and loveless.

Pecola's lack of love, and the self-hatred characterized by her family, reveal the novel's profound connections with key elements of scripture and mythology. Morrison weaves together spirituality and history in a text that initiates the meditation on love which suffuses the later novels. In *The Bluest Eye*, any genuine love Pecola receives comes from a trinity of prostitutes:

Three whores lived in the apartment above the Breedloves' storefront. Poland, China, and Miss Marie. Pecola loved them, visited them, and ran their errands. They, in turn, did not despise her. (43)

Miss Marie is called "the Maginot Line" by the community and is very fat. According to Claudia, who narrates much of the book, Miss Marie is "the one church women never allowed their eyes to rest on...the one who had killed people, set them on fire, poisoned them, cooked them in lye." Claudia deep down finds "the Maginot Line's face...really sweet" (64), but cannot admit this to a community for whom Marie is, like Pecola, pariah. Marie's crime may be that, far from being the "mule of the earth," she is a powerfully loving and awe-inspiring woman--a goddess figure, a Trinitarian presence. Like Jesus of Nazareth, the three whores earn their keep in an anti-social way that allows them to subvert the hierarchies of the governing society. Miss Marie "epithets" for Pecola are "fond ones chosen from menus and dishes that were forever uppermost in her mind" (44), such as "dumplin'," "chittlin'," "puddin'," and "sweetnin'" (44, 45, 46). The endearing food terms Marie calls Pecola indicate the pleasure of food and the interaction

associated with meals, so significant in the Judeo-Christian tradition, especially the ministry of Jesus. Pecola never finds such relational pleasures in her joyless, loveless family. In the novel, she is addressed by her own mother only as "Crazy fool" (87), after she has unwittingly spilled a blueberry pie in the kitchen of the house where Pauline Breedlove is servant.

The Trinity--manifested in triplets of characters, passages, texts, and so forth-- is a theological/mythological figuration of great importance in Morrison's work. The Trinity entails a "theology of divine relations [that makes] personhood constitutive of being."⁷ Since *The Bluest Eye* at its most basic level addresses a casualty of the failure to recognize the African identity of America, the notion that Pecola cannot establish her identity--her personhood--because of her color is fundamental. Not even God, as Catherine Mowry LaCugna shows, exists "without reference to any other person or any prior principle" (245). What Pecola lacks then, at the deepest level, is "any other person" who can be a point of reference for her in establishing her own being, her unique personhood. The "[t]hree merry harridans"(47), particularly Miss Marie, place themselves in relation to Pecola; *they* not only notice Pecola, they require her interactive presence:

The women were friendly, but slow to begin talk. Pecola always took the initiative with Marie, who, once inspired, was difficult to stop.
 "How come you got so many boyfriends, Miss Marie?"
 "Boyfriends? Boyfriends? Chittlin', I ain't seen a *boy* since nineteen and twenty-seven." (44)

Pecola's question sparks a demonstration of African American relationality: it launches the three whores into a laughter-filled signifying session:

"You mean that's when *you* got old," China said.
 "I ain't never got old. Just fat."
 "Same thing."

⁷ LaCugna, *God for Us* 245. LaCugna here discusses the Cappadocians who, as she points out, "settled on the language of relation and personhood" to explicate the Trinity.

"You think 'cause you skinny, folks think you young? You'd make a haint buy a girdle."

....

All three of the women laughed. Marie threw back her head. From deep inside, her laughter came like the sound of many rivers, freely, deeply, muddily, heading for the room of an open sea. China giggled spastically.... Poland, who seldom spoke unless she was drunk, laughed without sound. (44-45)

The first part of the quotation reveals the tone of signification, and the second part indicates a trinitarian complementarity between the three whores. This cultural demonstration, unfortunately, does not quite get through to Pecola. She asks Miss Marie, "How come they all love you?" (45), and the three continue their tall tales and signifying: "'Dillinger wouldn't have come near you lessen he was going hunting in Africa and shoot you for a hippo'" (46). At the chapter's end, Pecola is still confused:

What did love feel like? she wondered. How do grown-ups act when they love each other? Eat fish together?

....

Pecola looked and looked at the women. Were they real? Marie belched, softly, purringly, lovingly. (48-49)

These passages manifest terminology and imagery associated with the Trinity. Pecola's questioning presence--and questioning implies interaction--*inspires* Miss Marie; inspiration takes place through the Holy Spirit. Water connects to the Holy Spirit through baptism, and the water of rivers is the place where numerous African religious groups seek their ancestors. The laughter of Miss Marie, "like the sound of many rivers," is powerful and transformative and it transforms Pecola's loneliness into a contemplation of love. The food names Marie calls her "actuates her...personhood."⁸ To Pecola, the whores seem "unreal," and there is something supernatural about them, something at once mystical, powerful, earthy, and more

⁸ LaCugna, "Trinity" 55, and *God for Us* 404-405:

Baptism is the sacramental and ontological act that transforms solitariness and separateness into communion....

Naming someone actuates her or his personhood, naming a child makes him or her personal; assigning a name gives him or her a tangible identity...

than human. In effect, the possibilities of relationality, of history, of divinity, and above all of love *do* exist in the novel, though Pecola does not see where these reside any more than do the other characters.

Eating and food, particularly fish, figure prominently in Morrison's novels, and commensality and fishing symbolize important social, political, and theological ideas in the New Testament. The Messianic fervor prevalent at the time of Jesus of Nazareth was fueled by the transition to the the age of Pisces (by virtue of the precession of the equinoxes); hence, the pervasive fish metaphor and iconography associated with Christianity. Peter the Fisherman was called a fisher of men and particularly relevant here is the story of loaves and fishes. Besides the endearing food nicknames Marie gives Pecola, and Miss Marie's meditation on eating fried fish, Pecola herself associates love with eating fish. "[F]ood exchanges are able to act as symbols of human interaction. Eating is a behavior which symbolizes feelings and relationships."⁹

Crucially, we never see the Breedlove family sharing a meal. The one family interaction with food involved is the pie episode: the hot blueberries burn Pecola's legs as the pie splashes; her mother "with the back of her hand knock[s] her to the floor"; she brutalizes Pecola and then soothes "the little pink-and-yellow [Fisher] girl" (86, 87). Morrison names Pauline's employers with characteristic irony, and Pauline enjoys a relationality with the Fishers forbidden her with her own family, somehow, by the culture in which she lives:

The slightly reeking fish that she accepted for her own family she would all but throw in the fish man's face if he sent it to the Fisher house. Power, praise, and luxury were hers in this household. (101)

In the blueberry scene "Mrs. Breedlove" abuses her daughter, sacrifices her to the internalized "blond" definition of beauty that movies have impressed on her,

⁹ Lee Edward Klosinski, *The Meals in Mark 58*, quoted in Crossan 341.

which the little white girl and her family represent: "White men taking such good care of they women...them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure, but it made coming home hard, and looking at Cholly hard" (97), even though she knows that "[n]asty white folks is about the nastiest things they is" (95). Elizabeth Abel has pointed out the link between a lack of food and motherly neglect in Morrison's short story, "Recitatif": "Roberta, who is never actually represented eating, is more lastingly damaged than Twyla by maternal neglect, more vulnerable as an adult to its memory" (5). In the text, Pauline never feeds Pecola, and this reveals her inability to love her own black child; Poland, China, and Miss Marie are the only ones in the novel who show trinitarian *agape* for Pecola, unconditional love. They treat her as an equal: "With Pecola they were as free as they were with each other" (48). Their implicit respect for Pecola's human dignity, coupled with the food imagery here, invoke the commensality that John Dominic Crossan associates with Jesus and the Kingdom of God:

Here, I think is the heart of the original Jesus movement, a shared egalitarianism of spiritual and material resources. I emphasize this as strongly as possible, and I insist that its materiality and spirituality, its facticity and symbolism cannot be separated. (341)

As I will argue, Morrison, in *The Bluest Eye*, as in her other novels, comprehends this very intersection, between spirituality and history, between "materiality and spirituality,...facticity and symbolism."

* * *

The ritual scapegoating of Pecola Breedlove takes place in two separate scenes which allude to two different Old Testament texts--the story of Ham and Noah (Gen. 9:18-27) and the scapegoating rituals of Leviticus (16). The first occurs when Frieda and Claudia, walking home with the new girl--the "high-yellow dream child," Maureen Peal (52)--come upon Pecola encircled by four boys. Claudia has as little time for the likes of Maureen as she does for the blond-haired baby dolls

she receives for Christmas and then dismembers (22). She has unintentionally become "locker friends" (54) with Maureen, whose description indicates that she not only is lighter complected than Frieda, Claudia, and Pecola, but also is "rich, at least by our standards, as rich as the richest of the white girls" (52)--an indication that class as well as color is involved here. When Maureen, who is very popular in school, offers to walk home with Frieda and Claudia, Claudia's sarcastic "'Free country'" (54) plays off her previously contemptuous contemplation of Maureen's braids as "lynch ropes" (52) and foreshadows the "exquisitely learned self-hatred" of the "boys...circling and holding at bay a victim, Pecola Breedlove" (55).

Harryette Mullen has noticed an echo, in *The Bluest Eye*, of the "reciprocal humiliation" African Americans employ in a number of settings:

[The scene is] a taunting ritual in which the vulnerable Pecola becomes a scapegoat for her black schoolmates [who] yell at her that her daddy sleeps naked, probably unaware that white Christians had used the Old Testament story of Noah to justify their enslavement of the "sons of Ham." (6)

As the boys chant "Black e mo Black e mo Ya daddy sleeps nekked," the narrative commentary confirms that, to the boys, it is "irrelevant" that "they themselves [are] black," and "their own father [has] similarly relaxed habits" (55). As mentioned earlier, Morrison engages Scripture as well as *Imitation of Life* and *Invisible Man* in dialogue, mediating their internalization by the African American as well as white communities, especially black American women such as Pecola's mother and the unfunky "thin brown" Geraldine (67). Here, Pecola is the scapegoat of four black boys, *sons* of the community, who, as Mullen has astutely noticed, are "unaware" of their profound infixation of a certain interpretation, and as Cain Hope Felder argues, "sacralization," of the Ham and Noah story, "*the transposing of an ideological concept into a tenet of religious faith in order to serve the vested interest of a particular ethnic group*" (38-italics in original).

Felder and Martin Bernal, discussing race from slightly different perspectives, both in essence argue that the racialization of the Ham story did not exist in the original text, now lost, but that it came centuries later. Felder discusses the racial addition by scholars of Midrash and Talmud:

Whether or not sacralization was actually part of the original narrative, we have much evidence in the Midrashim (fifth century A.D.), where Noah says to Ham: "You have prevented me from doing something in the dark (cohabitation), therefore your seed will be ugly and dark-skinned." Similarly, the Babylonian Talmud (sixth century A.D.) states that "the descendants of Ham are cursed by being Black and are sinful with a degenerate progeny." (40)

He goes on to say that the notion that blackness originated with a curse "persisted into the seventeenth century." Although a *theological* basis for setting apart and enslaving black people may have in some technical sense only persisted until then, the invocation of a biblical basis for black slavery continued well into the nineteenth century. In addition, supremacist sciences such as ethnology and eugenics arose in the nineteenth century in Europe and the United States and continued into the twentieth, and were not only historically coterminous with the rise of capitalism and positivism (cf. Harraway), but also in some senses no more than "scientized" versions of racist theology. Such "sciences," which were often affiliated with evolutionists of renown such as Darwin, continued to posit the human race as arising in three separate places associated with Noah's sons Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Bernal has connected the Noah-Ham story and these sciences:

...for [the Comte de] Gobineau did see the three races - white, yellow and black - as separate species.... According to him, the three races represented by the sons of Noah-Ham, Shem, and Japhet-had all originated in some...region in Central Asia...and, rather like the Three Little Pigs, they had all set out to seek their fortunes....the Hamites had become hopelessly mongrelized by the native and inferior Blacks...the Semites...too...were heavily polluted with black blood...Only the Japhetites, or Aryans, had stayed in the north and retained their purity. (343)

Donald Gibson makes the point that *The Bluest Eye* "calls into question the mode of [Gobineau's] thought and the whole authoritarian, politically reactionary

system of beliefs about the nature of reality on which his and like thought is based" (159). Morrison quotes Gobineau (133) in the description of the upbringing of Soaphead Church, a "cinnamon-eyed West Indian with lightly browned skin" (132) who, along with his family

was hoping to prove beyond a doubt De Gobineau's hypothesis that "all civilizations derive from the white race, that none can exist without its help, and that a society is great and brilliant only so far as it preserves the blood of the noble group that created it." (133)

Church (Elihue Micah Whitcomb) has so completely repudiated his African blood and embraced white rule that he, like Pecola, has lost his mind. Again, Morrison makes the point that this way of thinking *is crazy*. Pecola's insanity meets Soaphead's in the second ritual scapegoating of Pecola, over which he presides.

The other reference in the boys' chant, "black e mo"--i.e. Blackamoor¹⁰--came into being at the time of England's colonizing of Africa, Asia, and the Americas.

As Winthrop Jordan explains:

The impact of the Negro's color was the more powerful upon Englishmen, moreover, because England's principal contact with Africans came in West Africa and the Congo, which meant that one of the lightest-skinned of the earth's peoples suddenly came face to face with one of the darkest. (44)

Englishmen such as Richard Hakluyt referred to West Africans as "blacke Moores" to distinguish them from the North Africans with whom they were already familiar (Jordan 44). Jordan also discusses the Noah-Ham story, commenting: "Given the text, the question becomes why a tale which logically implied slavery but absolutely nothing about skin color should have become a popular explanation for the Negro's blackness." He is willing, however, to hazard a guess:

...probably, over the very long run, the story was supported by the ancient association of heat with sensuality and by the fact that some sub-Saharan Africans had been enslaved by Europeans since ancient times...the extraordinary persistence of the tale in the face of centuries of constant refutation was probably sustained by a feeling that blackness could scarcely

¹⁰ Mullen 6-7.

be anything *but* a curse and by the common need to confirm the facts of nature by specific reference to Scripture. (46)

The complexities of biblical translation over 2500 years; of the religiocultural shift from tribal groups to nation-states; of European colonialism in the Americas, Africa, and Asia; the complexities of the rise of science and scientific discourse; and continuing Western mythologies about the "nature" of nature, and the disparities between nature and culture, are all encoded in this highly-charged and heavily freighted biblical story. Morrison, in her novels, suggests precisely these complexities, and the ways in which such intricate and tangled forces in Western societies have been falsely simplified by a white patriarchy whose interests have best been served by a minimalist, reductionist interpretation of history. Despite the fact that the sacred texts of the Judeo-Christian tradition were appropriated to support ideas of race and gender superiority, and were used to support the dominance of whites over "others," we do well to remember that Americans of African descent throughout the Western Hemisphere were mixing Christian, indigenous, and African religious practices in their own churches. These churches became powerful cultural and political forces on their own terms, despite (or because of) the generally misguided and uninformed understanding of dominant groups. Again, I do not underestimate the horror those in power were and are capable of perpetrating, but I find that scholars from dominant groups have all too easily adopted postures which reinforce the unilaterality of power relations without recognizing the insurrection and subversion, as well as the broad and subtle cultural influences in the other direction, influences that come from "cultures of the oppressed" or marginalized. Thus, science has been privileged over other discourses on human existence and the human condition, notions that some groups of people are "chosen" of God and some are "cursed" have been valorized (and that the dominant group can make these determinations), *and* the study of the Bible and of Africanized Christianity have been limited by an implicit acceptance, even by

secular critics, of Judeo-Christian institutional doctrine. According to such hegemonic doctrine, the Bible is a sacred text accurately and divinely interpreted solely by a sanctioned Judeo-Christian hierarchy. The crucial theological dimension of Morrison's fiction cannot be understood within this framework. Rather, it is necessary to recognize the historical and political nature of theology and religious practice, including the historical and political nature of scripture, both in its moment(s) of composition and its subsequent use(s). And among the historical, political, and cultural manifestations of the Christian tradition exist the varieties of Africanized Christianity and, more generally, the liberation theologies of this century.

During the taunting of Pecola, Frieda and Claudia successfully intervene on her behalf, and the boys leave. Although Maureen buys Pecola ice cream--she expects Frieda and Claudia to be able to buy their own--their conversation, which includes reference to Maureen's and Pecola's recent menarche, dissolves into an angry "yo momma"-type signifying session.¹¹ Here, however, "yo momma" continues, as with the four boys, to be "ya daddy," as Maureen asks Pecola if she has ever seen a naked man, and Pecola replies "'Where would I see a naked man?'" Claudia recounts the ensuing exchange:

"I don't know. I just asked."

"I wouldn't even look at him, even if I did see him. That's dirty. Who wants to see a naked man?" Pecola was agitated. "Nobody's father would be naked in front of his own daughter. Not unless he was dirty too."

....

"How come you said 'father'?" Maureen wanted to know.

"Who else would she see, dog tooth?" I [Claudia] was glad to have a chance to show anger. (59)

¹¹ Geneva Smitherman specifies, however, that "yo momma" is associated with the Dozens, which "is a sig on a person's kinfolk--usually the mother, the closest kin" (131) and "constitutes a kind of subcategory within the signification mode" (128).

The dialogue degenerates from here; after Maureen asks, "What do I care about her old black daddy?" Claudia tries to punch her, and hits Pecola by accident. Maureen runs across the street, where the "high-yellow dream child" hurls her own curse at these "daughters of Ham": "Safe on the other side, she screamed at us, 'I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute!'" (61) The equation of blackness and ugliness pervasive in the cultural milieu in which Pecola and her family, as well as Frieda and Claudia and their parents, exist recalls the redacted curse of Noah in the Midrashim: "your seed will be ugly and dark-skinned." Although in the end, Claudia includes herself in faulting the community that is Pecola's undoing, Claudia and Frieda show a moral integrity here equaled only, perhaps, by the three whores who are Pecola's friends.

Like Poland, China, and Miss Marie, Pecola, Frieda, and Claudia enact a trinity of "Black love [as] Black wealth,"¹² which echoes hooks's "sweet communion" and "relational love," when the latter two stand up for Pecola and run the four boys and Maureen off. Earlier in the novel, Pecola has come to stay with the MacTeers. The Breedlove family is "outdoors" because Cholly has "burned up his house" (17). Pecola drinks three quarts of the MacTeers' milk because she gets to drink it from a Shirley Temple glass; Mrs. MacTeer becomes angry and launches into one of her "fussing soliloquies" which could "go on...for hours" (23). As the three girls wait for her wrath to spend itself, Pecola begins to menstruate:

Frieda said, "Oh, Lordy! I know, I know what that is!"
 "What?" Pecola's fingers went to her mouth.
 "That's ministratin'." (25)

Frieda and Claudia try to help Pecola on their own, but their whitegirl neighbor, Rosemary, yells to their mother that "Frieda and Claudia are out here playing

¹² Nikki Giovanni, "Nikki-Rosa," quoted in *Awkward* 66.

nasty!" (27). Mrs. MacTeer whips Frieda with a switch before she turns to do the same to Pecola and understands what really has happened:

...she pulled both of them toward her, their heads against her stomach. Her eyes were sorry. "All right, all right. Now, stop crying. I didn't know..."

 Mama led us to the bathroom. She prodded Pecola inside....The water gushed, and over its gushing we could hear the music of my mother's laughter. (28)

The scene affirms the love so intimately connected to Mrs. MacTeer's wrath, and contains images of spirit-evoking water as well as Pecola's sacrificial blood. Claudia expresses the "awe and respect" they feel for Pecola: "That night, in bed, the three of us lay still.... Lying next to a real person who was really ministratin' was somehow sacred." Pecola, for her part, "refuse[s] to lord it over" Frieda and Claudia, and the night's last words are Pecola's--indeed a mysterious and sacred question: "How do you do that?...how do you get somebody to love you?" (29) Morrison's play on menstruation--ministratin' and ministration--evokes ritual service, care-giving, and nurturing, and words such as "sacred" and "lord" support this reading of the scene as a moment of embodied spirituality. For Pecola, surely Mrs. MacTeer's laughter, like Miss Marie's, is cleansing as water and soothing as music, but her "ministratin'" suggests the service Pecola herself will ultimately perform for the community, as sacrifice and scapegoat.

Touching and relationality emerge from the ritual that all three girls share with Mrs. MacTeer. The very being of Claudia and Frieda depends on their mother's fearsome "thick and dark" love which Claudia says she can smell and taste, which coats her chest, like salve (14)--a communication more profound and, in a sense, far more terrible than language. Such ineffable descriptions of love are figured in Morrison's subsequent work as well, as her meditations on love become increasingly profound: the "too heavy" love Porter complains of carrying in *Song of Solomon* (26), Sethe's "too thick" love in *Beloved* (164), and the "deepdown,

spooky" love that will drive Joe Trace to murder in *Jazz* (3). But the love and human interaction that Pecola experiences with the MacTeers and with the three whores cannot counterbalance the weight of the "ugliness" she and her family have internalized. In *The Bluest Eye*, we only see Pauline Breedlove's hands brutalize her daughter, juxtaposed forever to Claudia's mother--"somebody with hands who does not want me to die" (14).

* * *

In the Bible, Judges, as David Gunn notes, "has often been described as a rather randomly assembled anthology of tales, at best an illustration of a cyclical pattern of sin, oppression, repentance, and salvation" (104). The same cyclical pattern structures *The Bluest Eye*. For example, when the MacTeer's boarder, Mr. Henry, molests Frieda, Claudia at first believes Soaphead Church to be the perpetrator; Soaphead is obviously known as a child-molester in the community. The aftermath of that episode of exploitation and sin begins the "Spring" section; it ends with Soaphead himself going through his possessions, some of which are things that belonged to the girls he has sexually abused. Similarly, the "Winter" section juxtaposes the "high-yellow dream child," Maureen Peal, screaming her curse at Pecola, Frieda, and Claudia in the first chapter, to Pecola being called a "'nasty little black bitch'" by the "thin brown" Geraldine in the second (75). The "Autumn" section begins with Claudia's memory of severe, encompassing love, and ends with wondering what love feels like. Frieda and Claudia's seeds and Pecola's lost baby begin the last "Summer" section, which ends with the echo of Isaiah. The novel covers a time-span of only about a year, but the histories of many of the adult characters are given; the cycle of slavery and oppression inheres in Pauline's obsession with the fantasy whiteworld of nineteen-thirties cinema, Cholly's transference of his hatred of white men to black women, the racially-informed self-

hatred of thin brown deracialized women such as Geraldine, as well as the boys who taunt Pecola.

Cyclicity appears in the novel's structural framework, too, as Michael Awkward has noticed:

...[Morrison] employs two narrators in *The Bluest Eye*: Claudia, Pecola's contemporary, who narrates the story of both Pecola's and her own experiences, and an omniscient narrator who relates the incidents in the novel of which Claudia is unaware. The result is the intricately woven text which contains...two narrators, two prologues, four sections...(11)¹³

The four sections also encode the cycle of the seasons: "Autumn," "Winter," "Spring," and "Summer." Such cyclicity is characteristic of Morrison; in contrast to what Mikhail Bakhtin calls "biographical time" (248), she tells her stories through repeated cycles which foreground information not given in a previous cycle. In *Sula* she will do this with years as headings (e.g., 1921, 1965); in *Beloved* there are no chapter titles or headings, but different narrators and characters move between foreground and background, retelling the same stories, enhancing particular aspects with their particular narratives. In *The Bluest Eye*, it is easy to make the metaphorical connection between seasons and the ages or seasons of a person's life; the framing image of the novel is of a late-summer planting which can bear no harvest. Although Cholly has planted his seed in Pecola in the Spring, the field has not been nurtured: "This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers" (160). But, as Gunn reminds us regarding Judges,

this formula [of sin, oppression, repentance, and salvation] is as varied as it is constant, not only because in some cases certain elements are redundant in the particular context, but also because the pattern of responses is itself by no means adhered to rigidly. (105)

¹³ Awkward names the first seasonally designated section "Fall"; it is in fact "Autumn." He then states: "[E]ach [section] is subdivided into three chapters, of which Claudia narrates the first and the omniscient narrator the following two" (11). In fact, the "Autumn" section has three, the "Winter" has *two*, the "Spring" has *four*, and the "Summer" has *two*. Claudia does in all cases narrate the first chapters; it also would seem, at the end of the very last chapter, that Claudia and the omniscient narrator have become the same voice.

Morrison continually returns to certain themes; they are strong but often as hard to discern as the contrapuntal bass line in a piece of music. And it goes almost without saying that there is no formula that she ever "adheres to rigidly."

In the character of Pecola Breedlove, Jephthah's nameless daughter and the Levite's nameless concubine in the Book of Judges merge. Certainly, Pecola has a name, but it is important to recall that, not only is the baby Pecola fails to bring to term from her father's rape unnamed, but also in a sense, her father, Charles "Cholly" Breedlove, is nameless as well. Abandoned by his mother in a junk heap "[w]hen Cholly was four days old," he is saved by his "Great Aunt Jimmy." Unnamed by his mother, he finds out from Jimmy that his father was "'[t]hat Fuller boy, I believe it was....Samson. Samson Fuller'" (105). Pecola's mother is, by her own standards (and the standards of her culture), unnamed:

Slight as it was, this deformity [Pauline's "crooked, archless foot"] explained for her many things that would have been otherwise incomprehensible: why she alone of all the [eleven] children had no nickname.... why nobody teased her; why she never felt at home anywhere, or that she belonged anyplace. (88)

The nicknames originate in a family cultural group, like the way that Pecola is called "chittlin'" by Miss Marie. Pauline will be nicknamed by her white employers, signifying her identification with them and not with her own people.

Like Cholly, Jephthah, the ninth judge of Israel, "was the son of an harlot: and Gilead begot Jephthah" (Judges 11:1). Reversing temporal order and social stature, as well as drawing her characters with characteristic incongruity, Morrison makes Cholly the son of Samson. The biblical Samson, the thirteenth and last "judge" in Judges, is childless and betrayed by a woman. As a young teenager after Aunt Jimmy's death, Cholly seeks out his father, who utterly dismisses him: "'Tell that bitch she get her money. Now, get the fuck outta my face'" (123). Jephthah is thrown out by Gilead's legitimate offspring: "[T]hey thrust out Jephthah, and said unto him, Thou shalt not inherit in our father's house; for thou are the son of a

strange woman" (Judges 11:2). With the death of Aunt Jimmy, and his father's cruel rejection, Cholly becomes "truly free. Abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose" (126).

The "judges who judged Israel" were, in most cases, military leaders.

Jephthah, battling the Ammonites and failing to find a diplomatic solution, makes a "tragic vow" to Yahweh:

If thou shalt without fail deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands, then it shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the Lord's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering. (11:30-31)

Jephthah's only child "[comes] out to meet him with timbrels and with dances"

(11:34). Phyllis Tribble comments on the distance between faith in Yahweh and

Japhthah's faith in his own vow:

Faithfulness to an unfaithful vow has condemned its victim... Though in anguish he calls her "my daughter," he offers her neither solace nor release.... Unlike the father Abraham, Jephthah fails to evoke the freedom of the deity to avert disaster. Nor does he wish to die instead of his child, as did the father David (2 Sam. 19:1). Although his daughter has served him devotedly ... Jephthah bewails the calamity that she brings upon him. And throughout it all God says nothing. (102)

The arrogance of Jephthah's own assumptions hides the freedom Yahweh might have allowed. Of the nameless daughter's fate, we read only that Jephthah "did with her according to his vow which he had vowed; and she knew no man" (11:39). Biblical scholars are divided regarding whether or not Jephthah killed his daughter; some argue that he condemned her to perpetual virginity. In *The Bluest Eye*, Cholly Breedlove staggers through his own kitchen door and encounters his daughter. Like Jephthah, Cholly has no faith in his culture, his community, or his family, i.e., he has no faith in God, no understanding of *agape*. Like Jephthah, who tells his daughter that she has "brought me very low" (11:35), Cholly thinks, "How dare she love him? Hadn't she any sense at all? What was he supposed to

do about that? Return it?" (127) Pecola's ultimate relation-less adult life of insanity replicates the perpetual virginity of Jephthah's daughter.

Pecola also recalls the unnamed concubine in Judges whom a Levite priest gives to a crowd of ruffians so that he himself will not be harmed; they both are scapegoats of the displaced sins of the fathers. In Judges, the concubine is raped "all the night until the morning" (19:27). The Levite--who allegedly loved the concubine--took her home then and "together with her bones" cut her "into twelve pieces, and sent her into all the borders of Israel" (19:29). Like the Levite, Cholly's rape of Pecola is motivated by a desire for self-preservation, and an attempt to alleviate psychic pain through the exploitation of one with "a broken voice."

The use of Judges, particularly these two stories of nameless women victims, foregrounds the patriarchal authority depicted in these Hebrew Bible texts. Judges focuses on moral decay and cultural disorder during a certain period of the history of the tribes of Israel. Morality and communication with God is at issue throughout. Although "the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah" (11:29), he makes an agreement with Yahweh to win a battle, and miserably assumes he must sacrifice his daughter because he has won the battle, not because God asked for the sacrifice. Norman Gottwald discusses the resistance of Israel to cultural unity and morality:

The era of the Judges is stamped by a turning of Israel to wholesale apostasy...[Yahweh] repeatedly raises "judges" to deliver the people, who nonetheless persist in apostasy and even deepen their waywardness. (243)

The unrecognized kingdom of God¹⁴ and the dysfunctional communication between the people and God shows up in Soaphead Church's ridiculous, arrogant

¹⁴ I want to reiterate that when I use the term "kingdom of God" I mean the relationality between human beings in the world. My understanding is in keeping with Sallie McFague's in *Metaphorical Theology*:

...the New Testament parables [redefine] conventional understandings of the monarchical, hierarchical metaphors of "kingdom" and "rule." God's

letter to God, setting God straight, which he writes after Pecola's Levitical scapegoating toward the novel's end. Soaphead is the race-hating, humanity-hating, disorder-hating West Indian charlatan who, as "the instrument through which [God] works," grants Pecola her wish for blue eyes (138). When Pecola consults Church, she already shows "a little protruding pot of tummy"--the result of her father's rape (137). The taunting that takes place *after* the ritual designation of the scapegoat in Leviticus, in *The Bluest Eye*, as we have seen, also occurs before the ritual. Soaphead Church, who directs the ritual atonement, is a ridiculous and disturbing parody of an Old Testament priest. As in Leviticus, the lots have been cast; Bob, the poor feeble dog belonging to Church's landlady Bertha Reece, will be the sin offering, and Pecola is the living scapegoat cast into the wilderness:

And Aaron shall cast lots upon the two goats: one lot for the Lord, and the other lot for the scapegoat. And Aaron shall bring the goat upon which the Lord's lot fell, and offer it for a sin offering; But the goat upon which the lot fell to be the scapegoat, shall be presented alive before the Lord, to make an atonement with it, and to let it go for a scapegoat into the wilderness. (Lev. 16:8-10)

Soaphead, however, alters the ritual, making Pecola--one scapegoat--the instrument of the other's--the dog's--death:

"We must make, ah, some offering, that is, some contact with nature. Perhaps some simple creature might be the vehicle through which He will speak...."

....After what seemed a suitable length of time, he rose and went to the icebox that stood near the other window...he removed a small packet wrapped in pinkish butcher paper...he took a small brown bottle and sprinkled some of its contents on the substance inside the paper....

"Take this food and give it to the creature sleeping on the porch. Make sure he eats it. And mark well how he behaves. If nothing happens, you will know that God has refused you. If the animal behaves strangely, your wish will be granted on the day following this one." (138)

Helpless and victimized as ever, Pecola's mind unravels as she watches the innocent old dog suffer and die after he eats the poisoned meat. Pecola's life has been full

"kingdom," we discover from the parables, is not like any worldly reign; in fact, its essence is its opposition to the power of the mighty over the lowly, the rich over the poor, the righteous over the unrighteous. (17-18).

of pain; the only family "love" she knows is rape by her own father. In Pecola's recognition of her unwitting complicity in and identification with the dog's suffering, Morrison installs the same complex of identification and revulsion that Cholly feels at the sight of his daughter. Claudia comes to recognize this cycle of complicity, identification, and revulsion in herself and her community--the "ideology of whiteness" that causes Pecola's disconnection from life.¹⁵

After Bob dies, and Pecola runs out of the yard, ill, Church writes his letter to God, which not only reveals his own megalomania, but that he has given himself his middle name, Micah. Church's "real" name is therefore Elihue Micah Whitcomb. Earlier in the "Spring" part of the novel, the reader hears of Elihue's "education"--an education that is heavily Western, continuing the tradition of the Whitcomb family in disavowing his African roots. Elihue lacks interpretive ability when confronted with potentially perspective-widening, mind-opening texts. The letter also demonstrates that "he allowed only the narrowest interpretation to touch him"--the narrowest conception of God, of Christ, of scripture, as well as of Dante, Shakespeare, and Dostoyevsky. Elihue misses the concern of Dante and Dostoyevsky with theology, with the nature of God, and in failing to comprehend "Christ's love of Mary Magdelene... [and] Christ's serious anarchy" he fails to see the kingdom of God in Pecola or in anyone else except perhaps vaguely and perversely in the barely-pubescent girls he is fond of molesting (134).

Church's ironic self-naming after the prophet Micah reveals another intersection of history and spirituality in *The Bluest Eye*. A simplistic reading might associate the biblical Micah's jeremiads with Church's proud misanthropy, but a deeper understanding of the book of Micah must take into account that its prophet, unlike Isaiah, was not an aristocrat, but a spokesman for the poor and

¹⁵ Morrison "Unspeakable Things" 15.

oppressed in Moresheth. "Micah was the prophet of divine justice for the inviolable rights of the poor."¹⁶ But there is also a Micah in Judges, a dishonest, idolatrous reflection of Israel's confusion in that period. The Micah of Judges hires a Levite for himself, saying, "Now I know that the Lord will do me good, seeing I have a Levite as my priest" (17:13). Morrison's Soaphead Church encodes both of these biblical Micahs.

* * *

By intersecting politics, history, and spirituality, Morrison writes against the notion that the oppressions of the current historical moment are destiny. In her use of ancient stories of nameless, voiceless female victims, she comments on a written history of patriarchal atrocities--but she embraces that history: "a struggle of memory against forgetting" (hooks, *Yearning* 147). Morrison reinscribes repentance, redemption, and resurrection; she focuses on *redaction*: the ability to appropriate and reconceive not only a canonical, patriarchal *text* for change, illumination, and recognition, but also the social forces which require a cultural group to see that text as solely an instrument of oppression and possession.

While I cannot reproduce the entire ending of *The Bluest Eye* here, nor the entirety of the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah, I want to include a few lines from each to end this chapter and invite the comparison.

And Pecola....among all the waste and beauty of the world, which is what she herself was. All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. (159)

For he shall grow up before him like a tender plant, and like a root out of a dry ground; he hath no form nor comeliness, and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. (53:2)

¹⁶ "Micah," *The Collegeville Bible Commentary*, gen. eds. Dianne Bergant, C.S.A., and Robert J. Karris, O.F.M., (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1989) 511.

...for we were not strong, only aggressive; we were not free, merely licensed; we were not compassionate, we were polite; not good, but well behaved. (159)

Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief. When thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand....and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he hath poured out his soul unto death.... (53:10,12)

Chapter Two

War and Peace:

Transfigured Categories and the Politics of *Sula*

In the beginning was not only the word but the contradiction of the word... In this lies the novel's flexibility and its ability to transcend the bounds of class and nation, its endless possibilities of mutation.

--Ralph Ellison

I came not to send peace, but a sword.

--Matthew 10:34

...unless we receive full Redress and Relief from these Inhumanities we will move to renounce all Allegiance to this Nation, and will refuse, in every way, to cooperate with the Evil which is Perpetrated upon ourselves and our Communities.

--"Black Declaration of Independence"
The National Committee of Black
Churchmen, July 4, 1970

Sula signals a major and what is to be a lasting shift from *The Bluest Eye*.

Although *Sula* is a pariah within her own community, and she is sacrificed for their sins, she is a mobile figure, an educated woman, and a purposeful social iconoclast. Unlike her friend Nel, she does not marry and passively stay in the Bottom of Medallion, Ohio, but chooses to return there; she "comes to her own, but her own people" do not accept her.¹ The locus of power has changed in *Sula*. That African Americans are victimized is not in question, but the source of empowerment is

¹ This is a modern paraphrase of John 1:11, "[Jesus] came unto his own, and his own received him not."

pointedly placed by Morrison within the black community--where it is to remain in all the subsequent novels.

Sula is a parable, and Morrison's novels are parabolic in the fullest sense: "open-ended, tensive, secular, indirect, iconoclastic, and revolutionary" (McFague 32). The parabolic form is at the heart of the political status of Morrison's work. In keeping with black, feminist, and womanist liberation theologies, her parables foreground the quotidian socioeconomic survival of African Americans, as well as the conflicted status--past and present--of race and racialized gender in United States culture. Consistent with the nature of parable, *Sula* lacks a straightforward black-and-white, good-and-evil plot. As Hortense Spillers puts it, *Sula*'s reader must "accept the corruption of absolutes and...the complex, alienated, transitory....No Manichean analysis demanding a polarity of interest--black/white, male/female, good/bad--will work here." (183-184). Much of the criticism on *Sula* has focused on the "corruption of absolutes" in the novel, its movement away from what Barbara Christian calls the "Western dualistic or 'binary' frame" (54). Morrison specifically rejects the either/or requirement that underlies what are considered classical or Western methods of reasoning, categorization, and teleology, and constantly points out the dangers inherent in a dualistic view.² As Deborah McDowell puts it, "We enter a new world [in *Sula*]...that demands a shift from a dialectical either/or orientation to one that is dialogical or both/and, full of shifts and contradictions" (60). The "shifts and contradictions" McDowell notices are part of the parabolic form. Moreover, the recognition of Morrison's parabolic technique draws together the major themes of her work: the subversion of absolute

² See also Lepow (363): "Toni Morrison's fiction embodies a powerful critique of dualistic thinking....Dualism creates warring antitheses: the 'other' is an enemy to strive with, and ideally, to dominate."

categorization, the historical specificity and accuracy, and the profound presence of Afro-Christian theology.

As parable, *Sula* at every level questions easy divisions between war and peace, good and evil. At the novel's end, for example, Nel visits "the colored part of the cemetery," which contains tombstones bearing the name/word "Peace," Sula's family name. "Together they read like a chant: PEACE 1895-1921, PEACE 1890-1923, PEACE 1910-1940, PEACE 1892-1959" (170-71). Morrison foregrounds a number of ideas in this passage. Peace is the absence of war and, in the context of a cemetery, the absence of life (a person is "at peace" when dead). But the absence of war allows for the manifestation of positive forces of growth and life, and PEACE on the tombstones does not signify the end of the lives of the individuals named, but the continuing cycle of life and death, of history and spirit, connected ironically and with great complexity to peace. In addition, Morrison installs an African worldview which sees a continuum and not a strict boundary between the living and the dead. Here and throughout her work, Morrison does not propose a way of dividing up the world, but envisions a complex cultural universe which requires dismissal of a dualistic philosophical framework.

"Peace" was a word of considerable, almost palpable, political significance at the time of *Sula*'s composition--during the height of the Vietnam war. *Sula* interrogates the notion of war in terms of the political and social struggles of African Americans, many of which took place within the military or in terms of war-related issues such as the draft. In a sense, the Vietnam War was a testing ground for demands for equality and the end of racial oppression.³ As noted earlier, Morrison has remarked that "*Sula* was begun in 1969...in a period of

³ See Berry and Blassingame. In particular, United States military service by African-Americans is discussed in the Chapter 9, "Military Service and the Paradox of Loyalty."

extraordinary political activity" ("Unspeakable Things" 24). Taking heed of Morrison's remarks, and in contrast to most criticism of the novel, I read "war" and "men" to be as central as "peace" and "women." Of particular importance is Shadrack, whose sane insanity is his response to the horror of war and death.⁴ The two sections, in which Shadrack is the central figure--"1919," signifying the end of World War I, and "1941," signifying the beginning of World War II--frame the text. The book's epilogue-like last section, "1965," coincides with the year that the United States began the sustained bombing North Viêt Nam, and was also the year of the well-known Southern California "race war," the Watts Riots.

Morrison interweaves the themes of war and motherhood and probes these cultural constructs through Shadrack and his connection to Sula, and through the relationship between Eva Peace, Sula's grandmother, and Eva's son, Plum. The characters of Sula and Shadrack examine and invert the societal prescriptions for women and men of mother and warrior, respectively; they are distorted mirror images of Eva and Plum.⁵ Shadrack, "blasted and permanently astonished by the events of 1917"(7), will "study war no more."⁶ Sula refuses her grandmother's legacy of motherhood: "I don't want to make somebody else," Sula says, "I want to make myself" (92). The parabolic structure demands moral introspection every time it is invoked: a parable teaches not a single "right answer" but constant and constantly revelatory communal and individual reflection.

⁴ Shadrack may be compared to the shell-shocked World War I veterans portrayed in the "Golden Day" chapter of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, in particular, the crazy drum major. See Callahan, especially 44-45.

⁵ Nancy Huston discusses these roles in her essay "The Matrix of War: Mothers and Heroes."

⁶ The gospel song "Down by the Riverside" is echoed in *Sula* in numerous characters and locales:

I'm gonna lay down my sword and shield
Down by the riverside....
I ain't gonna study war no more.

Morrison's parabolic interrogation which manifests itself as a theoretical subversion of binary categorization and a particular, historical probing of the complex relations between war and peace is constituted through an idiosyncratic and complex biblical typology. For example, *Sula's* "deweys" can be seen as a disturbing fulfillment of the mystery of the Trinity (God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit):

They spoke with one voice, thought with one mind, and maintained an annoying privacy. Stouthearted, surly, and wholly unpredictable, the deweys remained a mystery not only during all of their lives in Medallion but after as well. (39)

However, Morrison does not use scriptural figures and stories in one-to-one correspondence to characters and subplots in *Sula*, nor does she employ traditional biblical typology, a deliberate displacement of type by anti-type. Instead, type and anti-type often inhere in a single character; the central figures Sula and Shadrack combine and collapse a number of typologies. Among Sula's many connections to the Bible is her name: "Sula" is an anagram of "Saul," and "Sula Mae" is nearly anagrammatic for "Samuel"; and the family name Peace echoes the epithet for Jesus, Prince of Peace. Recalling that the books of Samuel are centrally concerned with war, Sula's name incorporates, and collapses together, both war and peace. With parabolic complexity, Sula Peace, like the Prince of Peace, comes "not to send peace, but a sword" (Matt. 10:34).

As historical framework, Morrison's intricate biblical allusions are perhaps the primary way in which she constructs the "presence of the ancestor" in her novels ("Rootedness" 343). The Bible, as a tribal, genealogical, and oral text, has served as a typological model for African Americans as they interpret and preserve spiritual traditions and experiences and has become part of their history and culture. Black theologian James Cone writes of the cultural importance of scripture:

Because white theologians and preachers denied any relationship between the scriptures and our struggle for freedom, we by-passed the classic

Western theological tradition and went directly to the scripture for its word regarding our black struggle. (64)

Cone and Lawrence Levine explain that, for black Americans, scripture has always had double meanings, speaking of freedom and emancipation as an earthly possibility and not merely a reward in the hereafter. If in *Sula* Morrison's political project is the deconstruction of binary categories, and her political subject is African Americans in relation to war and civil rights, then the nexus of biblical allusion is a primary component of her language and replicates the history and spirituality of the African American cultural experience. As might be expected, Morrison draws on the Old Testament as much as the New Testament. Levine writes:

The essence of slave religion cannot be fully grasped without understanding [its] Old Testament bias. It is important that Daniel and David and Joshua and Jonah and Moses and Noah, all of whom fill the lines of the spirituals, were delivered in *this* world and delivered in ways that struck the imagination of the slaves. (50)

It is in "this world" that Morrison grounds her spiritual/historical novels.

"Culture is not a fixed condition but a process: the product of the interaction between the past and the present," Levine has said (5). In becoming African Americans, Africans preserved the past--their spirituality and specific religiocultural traditions interwoven with Christianity. Again, Morrison's allusions in *Sula* to Samuel, Genesis, Exodus, the Gospels, and Revelation are part of her representation of the "presence of the ancestor," and constitute a facet of what Michael Awkward calls "the novel's cultural specificity" (76). Morrison employs scriptural texts to recreate an explicit cultural topos--in *Sula*, the geography of the Bottom and Medallion, Ohio--and thus enhances historical and political understanding. Her novels re-envision the African American, and hence the American, experience in a parabolic mode, and so provide "a new way of being in the world" (McFague 146).

* * *

Sula's first section, the only one in the novel without a year as its title, is a geography lesson on the novel's setting, the "Bottom."⁷ This section echoes the creation and destruction of the world in Genesis, but our introduction to what "was once a neighborhood" does not come at its construction, but its demolition:

...[T]hey tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course... Generous funds have been allotted to level the stripped and faded buildings that clutter the road from Medallion up to the golf course.... There will be nothing left of the Bottom.... (3)

Deborah McDowell points out that "*Sula* glories in paradox and ambiguity" and that "the Bottom [is] situated spatially at the top" (60). The beginning of *Sula* juxtaposes the end of the neighborhood to the story of how the Bottom came to be, how "A good white farmer promised freedom and a piece of bottom land to his slave if he would perform some very difficult chores" (5). The white farmer convinces the slave that the hilly land of the Bottom is "the bottom of heaven," recalling the meaning of the word "Babylon"--the gate of God.⁸

Sula contains significant allusions to the Babylonian captivity of the Israelites. Medallion, which encompasses the "neighborhood" of the Bottom, is a "little river town in Ohio," which echoes Psalm 137: "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion."⁹ The destruction of the hilly

⁷ In *Song of Solomon*, Guitart will comment on the significance of "geography" to African Americans. In "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," Morrison comments, "In between 'place' and 'neighborhood' I now have to squeeze the specificity and the *difference*; the nostalgia, the history, and the nostalgia for the history; the violence done to it and the consequences of that violence." As Ralph Ellison has put it, "Geography is fate..." (quoted in Callahan, 39).

⁸ See Gottwald 327:

The Yahwist also displays a wide-ranging interest...especially...in popular etymologies of the names of persons and places, often cast in the form of puns:...Babel, where the tongues were confused (Babylonian [Akkadian] *babel/bab'ilu*, "gate of God," resembles Hebrew *balal*, "to confuse," Gen. 11:9)...

⁹ In his July 5, 1952 address, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?", Frederick Douglass warned:

"Bottom," which reaches to the bottom of heaven, parallels the destruction of the Tower of Babel. Thus, at the outset of *Sula*, Morrison's collapse of binary oppositions installs a parabolic historical and political structure. The parable of Babel teaches not the origin of languages, but the dispersal of nations and peoples through war, greed, and oppression: "Come, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth" (Gen. 11:4). The history of the Bottom--"the bottom of heaven"--its people, and its eventual destruction, recreates in microcosm the history of African Americans, and the African diaspora: in the beginning, the end of the hilly Bottom, the whites have uprooted the blacks at the uncreation of the neighborhood.

There are many categorical collapses in *Sula*, such as the top/bottom pair, as well as allusions to biblical reversals entailed in Babel/Babylon, diaspora and exile. All of these collapses have historical, political, and spiritual significance, and so constitute parabolic structure having particular reference to the African American experience. The parabolic collapses exist problematically and call for constant moral awareness, not of the collapsing categories themselves so much as the cultural superstructures in which they exist. For example, the thriving black plants torn out of the earth of the Bottom both nourish (blackberries) and poison (nightshade); categorizing living things as good or bad is irrelevant in such violent uprooting, as Morrison herself has commented in "Unspeakable Things Unspoken":

The violence lurks in having something torn out by its roots--it will not, cannot grow again. Its consequences are that what has been destroyed is

Do you mean, citizens, to mock me by asking me to speak to-day? If so, there is a parallel to your conduct. And let me warn you that it is dangerous to copy the example of a nation whose crimes, towering up to heaven, were thrown down by the breath of the Almighty, burying that nation in irrevocable ruin! I can to-day take up the plaintive lament of a peeled and woe-smitten people! (368)

Then, Douglass quoted verses 1 through 6 of Psalm 137.

considered weeds....Both plants have darkness in them: 'black' and 'night.' One is unusual (nightshade) and has two darkness words: 'night' and 'shade.' The other (blackberry) is common. A familiar plant and an exotic one. A harmless one and a dangerous one. One produces a nourishing berry; one delivers a toxic one. But they both thrived there together, *in that place when it was a neighborhood.* (25)

Either/or categorization only reinforces the danger of dominance, the danger of violence justified by classification. Morrison interrogates moral categories of good and evil here, and implicitly asks what such labels do to respect and human dignity when they are confounded with race. Her character Sula expresses the contingency and inadequacy of moral categorization in particular and binary categorization in general in her last conversation with Nel:

She opened the door and heard Sula's low whisper. "Hey, girl." Nel paused and turned her head but not enough to see her.

"How you know?" Sula asked.

"Know what?" Nel still wouldn't look at her.

"About who was good. How you know it was you?"

"What you mean?"

"I mean maybe it wasn't you. Maybe it was me." (146)¹⁰

By questioning cultural categories of good and evil, Sula embodies what Morrison calls in *The Bluest Eye* "Christ's serious anarchy" (134). When Sula returns to the Bottom after ten years which include college and living in seven cities, her presence challenges the social order of her community. As John Dominic Crossan has said of Jesus, Sula "challenges...civilization's eternal inclination to draw lines, invoke boundaries, establish hierarchies, and maintain discriminations" (xii).

Hortense Spillers has called Sula "Morrison's deliberate hypothesis" (183). The townfolk of the Bottom attempt to categorize her as a witch or a devil, a supernatural being in either case, but the character Sula at once rejects and

¹⁰ Sula's speech toward the novel's end also resonates with the ending of Ellison's *Invisible Man*:

...Being invisible and without substance, a disembodied voice, as it were, what else could I do? What else but try to tell you what was really happening when your eyes were looking through? And it is this which frightens me:

Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you? (503)

embraces all the categorizations placed on her. This "moral ambiguity," to use Spillers's phrase again, is the source of Sula's integrity as a character, *and* what makes her the hypothesis of a reframed method of categorization. In the sense, moreover, that Sula is a "hypothesis" and *not* an exemplar or role model, *Sula* is not a "realistic" novel. Catherine Rainwater calls attention to the fact that some critics see Morrison's "elusive" narrative threads as "untenable" (101), and Morrison herself has noticed, with apparent discontent, her work "frequently falls, in the minds of most people, into that realm of fiction called fantastic, or mythic, or magical, or unbelievable."¹¹ Although Morrison's writing is not mimetic, and neither Sula nor her grandmother Eva, for example, portray "real" women, what appears fantastic or magical is always a vehicle of social and political subversion. In this way, Morrison's novels fit Sallie McFague's definition of the parables of the New Testament:

the outstanding features of the parables [are] the element[s] of the extraordinary, of radicalism, of surprise and reversal. They are metaphors with considerable shock value, for their intention is to upset conventional interpretations of reality. Yet...the parables introduce this note of extravagance in a curiously *mundane, secular* way: through seemingly ordinary stories about ordinary people engaged in ordinary decisions. (44)

Sula, for all its reversals and magical extravagance, remains mundane, secular, and historically faithful.

Morrison's parables are rooted in history, and while some critics choose to ignore Shadrack or to dismiss his significance, the fact that he is the first character Morrison introduces in *Sula* is hardly surprising.¹² It is crucial for my reading of

¹¹ See Morrison, "The Site of Memory" 112-113. She continues:
I'm not comfortable with these labels. I consider that my single gravest responsibility (in spite of that magic) is not to lie...I'm looking to find and expose a truth about the interior life of people who didn't write it (which doesn't mean that they didn't have it)...

¹² For example, Marianne Hirsch dismisses Shadrack as part of the "sons and fathers [who] have ceased to be primary forces in female plots":
Through the figure of Shadrack and through the communal rituals he invents to survive his utter inadequacy, the community tries to confront the male

the subtext of men and war, history and the Bible, that following the initial geography lesson, the novel begins with "Shadrack...in December, 1917, running with his comrades across a field in France" (7). He wonders why he is not feeling "something very strong;" instead he notices "the purity and whiteness of his own breath among the dirty, gray explosions" (8). A surreal and horrifying passage follows:

...[Shadrack] saw the face of a soldier near him fly off. Before he could register shock, the rest of the soldier's head disappeared under the inverted soup bowl of his helmet. But stubbornly, taking no direction from the brain, the body of the headless soldier ran on, with energy and grace, ignoring altogether the drip and slide of brain tissue down its back. (8)

Black men participated in U.S. wars from the Revolution forward, in a military that remained segregated until after the Korean War. During World War I, nearly 400,000 black men were drafted, half of them serving in France. The black 369th Infantry were under continuous fire for a record 191 days, for which they won the Croix de Guerre and the honor of leading the victorious Allied armies to the Rhine in 1918.¹³ The French did not subject black soldiers to the kind of oppressive treatment they received in the United States, but "the American military authorities issued orders prohibiting them from conversing with or associating with French women, attending social functions, or visiting French homes."¹⁴

impotence that defines it, an impotence that is later represented by Eva's son Plum. (179)

¹³ In *Jazz* (1992), Joe Trace relates that he "walked all the way" in a victory parade "with the three six nine":

...the War had come and gone and the colored troops...that fought it made me so proud it split my heart in two. (129)

¹⁴ See Berry and Blassingame 317. They go on to say that the American military authorities told the French that they could harm their relations with America if they continued their attitude of "indulgence" and "familiarity." "The French were asked to understand that the vices of blacks were 'a constant menace to the Americans who had to repress them sternly.'"

Morrison alludes to this familiarity in *Song of Solomon* (1977) as well: "[Empire State had] married a white girl in France and brought her home" (128).

Morrison's Shadrack survives the "fire" of the World War I battlefield, but loses his mind. As the Bottom's resident crazy man he becomes, along with his institution of Suicide Day, "part of the fabric of life up in the Bottom of Medallion, Ohio" (16). The horror and suddenness of death on the battlefield make the "unexpectedness" of it real to Shad (14), but for blacks in America war was hardly the only situation where violence could be sudden and unanticipated. John Callahan has written: "The heroism of black regiments is well-known; perhaps less well known are the humiliations and terrors these soldiers faced back home, especially in the South."¹⁵ Black soldiers returning from World War I were reminded that they were no longer in France, that they would no longer be treated as equals. Mary Frances Berry and John Blassingame write that, "Returning black soldiers were insulted, stripped of their uniforms, and beaten by white ruffians and police." The years 1919 and 1920 saw extraordinary violence against African Americans in the form of lynchings and beatings. Of the scores lynched in 1919, many were veterans still in uniform; Berry and Blassingame note that "police authorities gave little or no protection to black citizens" (318). Morrison again refers to such treatment in *Jazz*:

Some said the rioters [in East St. Louis] were disgruntled veterans who had fought in all-colored units, were refused the services of the YMCA, over there and over here, and came home to white violence more intense than when they enlisted and, unlike the battles they fought in Europe, stateside fighting was totally without honor. (57)

In *Sula*'s "1920" section, "there [is] a victorious swagger in the legs of white men and a dull-eyed excitement in the eyes of colored veterans" (19), and Nel watches her mother turn to "custard" before a white conductor on a Jim Crow train

¹⁵ Callahan explains:

With World War I and America's promise to "make the world safe for democracy" came renewed hopes that long-denied promises would be honored at home. Instead, the parades were hardly over, the troops were hardly home, before these hopes were dashed by a decade of reaction epitomized by the resurgence of the Klan. (44)

headed for New Orleans (21-22). Those watching also include two black soldiers "still in their shit-colored uniforms and peaked caps"; when Helene Wright becomes white before their eyes, they are "stricken" (21). Morrison creates Shadrack, and describes facets of the World War I experience for blacks, precisely to show what it was the African Americans were striving *against* in the 1960s.¹⁶ Military service for African American citizens at all historical periods has reflected their status in the culture as a whole, but during the Viêt Nam era the disparity between the demands placed on the African American soldier and the rights he or she was accorded was particularly conspicuous. One can hardly wonder at Shad wanting to institute a "National Suicide Day" so that "...the rest of the year would be safe and free" (14).

The historical dimensions of Morrison's project not only include specific references to the African American experience in relation to war, but also the historical analogy of those experiences to Judeo-Christian scripture, which itself reflects an historical and political as well as spiritual tradition. Shadrack is a Biblical name. In the book of Daniel, Hananiah, an Israelite noble, is named Shadrach by the Babylonians who hold him and his people captive and force him to work for the King of Babylon. Hananiah and his fellow nobles Mishael and Azariah survive Nebuchadnezzar's furnace "heated seven times more than it was wont to be heated" (Dan. 3:19)--they *escape* death. Houston Baker reads *Sula's* Shadrack as a reversal of the character of Shadrach, the Israelite noble, in his "seeming idolatry before the power of death" (n111). But Shadrack is not only a locus of reversal. Morrison's complex character is an African ancestor who promises Sula "a sleep of water always" (149), a connection to her ancestors

¹⁶ In his discussion of Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Callahan notes that "...Invisible Man tries, but cannot blot out the chaos and contradictions these [World War I] veterans represent" (44).

through death. He has rejected the captor nation's way of war which removes the African American from contact with the ancestors--this is the source of Shadrack's fear, the reason he seems to show "idolatry before the power of death."

In the book of Jeremiah, another Hananiah is the prophet of peace who speaks of freedom and the fall of Nebuchadnezzar when Jeremiah speaks of the captivity that the children of Israel have yet to endure. Morrison is not only analogizing the Babylonian captivity of the Jews to the condition of African Americans in a racist nation. Hananiah and Jeremiah were religious prophets in dispute, but they also represented opposing political factions within captive Judah. Hananiah was one of the "anti-Babylonian 'autonomists'," who, Norman Gottwald writes,

equated 'national survival' with the full independence of Judah under its present leadership, whereas the pro-Babylonian 'coexisters' [such as Jeremiah] equated 'national survival' with the socioeconomic and religiocultural preservation of the people of Judah. (403)

Recalling the "period of extraordinary political activity" coextensive with *Sula's* composition, we need to keep in mind the extent to which the African American cultural struggles have been, and are, rooted politically in African American churches. But the black churches were not united on the form that political activism should take, and Morrison's Shadrack may be seen, like his Biblical namesake in the Book of Jeremiah, as an "autonomist," a black nationalistic theologian: "The goal of Black Theology is the destruction of everything *white* so that black people can be alienated from alien gods."¹⁷

On the other hand, the association of Shadrack with the prophet of peace, Hananiah, echoes the more moderate call of the civil rights movement to "endure no more." In his "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," Martin Luther King wrote, "We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights" (292). Morrison's Shadrack is the fictional fulfillment of all the aspects of

¹⁷ James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, quoted in Ferm, 45.

these Old Testament Hananiahs, as well as of the African ancestor tradition. He sees people who "seemed to be smoking...their arms and legs curved in the breeze" (11), just as the Biblical Shadrach saw the Babylonian guards burnt to death *outside* Nebuchadnezzar's furnace. He is also reminiscent of the prophet Jeremiah, screaming curses at the "tetter heads" who tease him and Bottom-dwellers who buy fish from him. Of the New Testament prophets, he is at once John the Baptist and John of Patmos: "His eyes were so wild, his hair so long and matted, his voice was so full of authority and thunder" (15).¹⁸

Sula first appears in the novel's fourth section, "1921." Her introduction, "Sula Peace lived in a house of many rooms..." (30), echoes Christ: "In my Father's house are many mansions..." (John 14:2). The address, 7 Carpenter's Road, suggests that this is the road where Christ will be found; the number seven has great mystical significance; and Christ, of course, was not only a carpenter, but the Prince of Peace.¹⁹ The obvious reversal is that Sula does not live in her father's house, but in her grandmother Eva's house, with her mother Hannah and an assortment of uncategorizable people, such as the beautiful white/black alcoholic angel-voiced Tar Baby and Eva's indistinguishable adopted trinity, the deweys.

Equally if not more important to Morrison's project, however, are Old Testament allusions realized in Sula and her family. *Sula* contains pervasive links to the biblical books of Samuel, which are loci of issues of civil rights, war,

¹⁸ In terms of thundering voices, see Revelation 10, especially verse 3: "And [the mighty angel] cried with a loud voice, as when a lion roareth; and when he had cried, seven thunders uttered their voices." Sacvan Bercovitch notes that early Puritan theologians saw Jeremiah as speaking "'like unto a *Sonne of Thunder*'" (32).

¹⁹ Seven appears significantly in countless Biblical events, including Christ's genealogy, and in Revelation, e.g., the seven seals, the seven trumpets of the seventh seal, "the seven angels who stood before God." (Rev. 8:2)

motherhood, and family. Joel Rosenberg comments on ancestry and history in Samuel:

Samuel most resembles Genesis in its preoccupation with founding families and in its positioning of these representative households at the fulcrum of historical change. As in Genesis, the fate of the nation is read into the mutual dealings of spouses, parents, and children, of sibling and sibling, and of householder and servant, favored and underclass. (123)

Sula reveals what Rosenberg calls "a complex scheme of historical causation and divine justice" in its resonance with the Books of Samuel (123). These books are as concerned with war as any in the Bible and, again, resemble Genesis in their focus on familial politics of national or universal consequence. The Pentateuch, and Genesis in particular, surfaces increasingly in Morrison's canon from this point on.

Sula's allusions to Genesis revolve around issues of motherhood, sexuality, and gender as well as creation; J.P. Fokkelman writes of Genesis:

The possibilities, limits, and precarious aspects of sexuality are expressly explored...[there are] stories in which women struggle with each other for motherhood.... [C]haracters and reader are forced or invited to decide what is or is not sexually permissible.... (42)

Eva, of course, is the first woman; she is, in terms of her name, "mother of all living."²⁰ But Morrison's Eva is Adam in her power to name, and she is also life-taking. In *Sula*, "those Peace women loved all men. It was manlove that Eva bequeathed to her daughters" (41). Eva Peace's daughter, Hannah, who is *Sula's* mother, possesses an extravagant love for men: "Hannah simply refused to live without the attentions of a man, and...had a steady sequence of lovers...What she wanted...was some touching every day" (42-4). Nancy Huston, in her essay "The Matrix of War," points out that many cultures throughout history have required "pre-war sexual abstinence," the idea being that sexual frustration would create a more aggressive and potent warrior. Hannah Peace, and *Sula* Peace after her,

²⁰ Genesis 3:20: "And Adam called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living."

"explore their sexuality" but they don't "struggle with each other for motherhood"-- Sula is Hannah's only child, and Sula never becomes a mother. And as long as Hannah and Sula make love to men in the novel, the men are not making war; that is, as long as women are not having babies, there will be no men to make war.²¹

Sula's rejection of motherhood parallels Shadrack's rejection of war. In a sense, Shadrack is born when he has refused war and is released from the military hospital. The archetypal "motherless child,"²² his family is a mystery not only to the reader, but to other residents of the Bottom. Morrison characterizes him with complex irony; Shadrack is a "long, long way from his home," whether that home is understood to be Africa or an America that would embrace him as her child. In fact, Shadrack has no nation to defend: "...he didn't even know who or what he was...with no past, no language, no tribe, no source..." (12). But once Shadrack has affirmed his blackness, he returns to the Bottom; he has been "only twenty-two miles from his window, his river, and his soft voices just outside the door" (14). Though his wartime experience has ostensibly robbed him of his history and identity, he *feels* and recognizes the river of ancestral and spiritual contact, and the voices of his ancestors as a vital presence.

²¹ Huston begins her essay:

While doing research over the past few years in an attempt to piece together what might be called the "fragments of a warrior's discourse" in Western culture, I came across the following Gnostic conundrum: "How long will men make war?--As long as women have children." At first glance, the answer is reminiscent of the paraphrases for "Forever" familiar to us from childhood riddles ("Until the ocean goes dry")....after further reading in the course of which I encountered the analogy between warmaking and childbearing countless times--the ancient riddle seemed to me to require a cause-and-effect interpretation: "If women would only stop having children, men would stop making war." (119)

Huston goes on to discuss parallels between childbearing and warmaking, taboos against warriors having sex before going into battle, etc.

²² The spiritual "Motherless Child" contains the words:

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
A long ways from home.

It ends with "I spread my wings and I fly" (Hughes and Bontemps 290).

Eva and Sula, however, struggle with each other in their attitudes about motherhood, and Eva's son, Plum, presents a contrast to Shadrack; he is a different sort of war casualty. Plum returns from France sane, but a hopeless junkie. The narrative consequences of motherhood and war become ominous as Eva sets fire to her son:

He opened his eyes and saw what he imagined was the great wing of an eagle pouring a wet lightness over him. Some kind of baptism, some kind of blessing, he thought.... [Eva] rolled a bit of newspaper into a tight stick about six inches long, lit it and threw it onto the bed where the kerosene-soaked Plum lay in snug delight. (47)

This passage is filled with allusions to Revelation:

And when [Satan] saw that he was cast unto the earth, he persecuted the woman who brought forth the male child. And to the woman were given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness, into her place...(Rev. 12:13-14)

When Eva descends into Plum's nether room, *Sula* echoes Revelation's "seven bowls of plagues;" Eva picks up what she thinks is a "glass of strawberry crush. She put it to her lips and discovered it was blood-tainted water..." (47):

And the second angel poured out his bowl [of the wrath of God] upon the sea, and it became like the blood of a dead man; and every living soul died in the sea. And the third angel poured out his bowl upon the rivers and fountains of waters, and they became blood. (Rev. 16:3-4)

These apocalyptic passages are prefigured in Exodus, when the Lord turns the waters of the river to blood (7:17-20) and later reminds the children of Israel "how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you unto myself" (19:4). In *Sula*, deliverance and apocalypse coextend. But the eagle allusion unmistakably invokes the emblem in the United States government, and the parable of the two eagles in the book of Ezekiel (17) warns of the consequences of those who would "cut off [the vine's] fruit, that it wither" (17:9). Black Americans have been promised the rewards of citizenship, but the oppressive policies of this country cause the people to "wither in the furrows" (17:10).

The Peace household fulfills more than one biblical typology. Hannah of the Bible is the mother of the prophet Samuel. Barren for many years, the pious Hannah dedicates Samuel's life to God, and Samuel later anoints Saul and then David as Kings of Israel. Again, Sula's name recalls both Saul and Samuel; in fact, the name Samuel is "an etymology of the name Saul" (Rosenberg 125). Sula is not exactly Saul, nor is she exactly Samuel, although she is a prophetic character. Readers in American culture are accustomed to employing an "either/or" hermeneutic for all literary forms, including the Bible. But parables do not, in fact, come with the pre-determined morality associated not only with fundamentalist Christian churches, but with secular misunderstandings of Christian theology. Sallie McFague defines the parabolic form:

A parable is...an assault on the accepted, conventional way of viewing reality. It is an assault on the social, economic, and mythic structures people build for their own comfort and security. A parable is a story meant to invert and subvert these structures.... (47)

Not surprisingly, Morrison's critics want to identify characters *precisely* with the biblical namesake or as the namesake's opposite. Such a position, however, fails to take into account not only Morrison's project regarding categories but also the subversive nature of the Christian parabolic form, as well as the complexity and depth inherent in naming in the scriptural sources themselves.

In 1 Samuel, Hannah's prophetic prayer, which she sings after Samuel's birth, encompasses a characteristic biblical reversal:

The bows of the mighty men are broken, and they that stumbled are girded with strength....
He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory....²³

As Rosenberg notes, it is a prayer in which:

²³ 1 Samuel 2:1-10. In the text I have included verse 4 and most of verse 8.

YHWH is invoked as the God of surprise, bringing down the mighty, raising up the downtrodden; impoverishing the wealthy and enriching the pauper; bereaving the fertile and making barren the fruitful--always circumventing the trappings of human vanity and the complacency of the overcontented. (124)

The Magnificat of Mary (Luke 1:46-55) fulfills Hannah's song in the New Testament.

In *Sula*, it is not Sula's mother Hannah who utters another realization of this prayer, but Sula herself. On her deathbed, Sula is speaking to her estranged and beloved Nel:

"After all the old women have lain with the teen-agers; when all the young girls have slept with their old drunken uncles; after all the black men fuck all the white ones; when all the white women kiss all the black ones; when the guards have raped all the jailbirds and after all the whores make love to their grannies; after all the faggots get their mothers' trim; when Lindbergh sleeps with Bessie Smith and Norma Shearer makes it with Stepin Fetchit; after all the dogs have fucked all the cats and every weathervane on every barn flies off the roof to mount the hogs...then there'll be a little love left over for me. And I know just what it will feel like." (145-146)

Sula's soliloquy also recalls (and inverts) the "Laws Regulating the Personal Relationships" of the Hebrews set out in the eighteenth chapter of Leviticus. Sula has been categorized by her own people as pariah: "whosoever shall commit any of these abominations, even the souls that commit them shall be cut off from among their people" (Lev. 18:29). The laws (categories) must be broken, and abominations committed, for there to be "a little love left over" for Sula. Like the anarchic, insurrectionary Christ, Sula overturns the Law as Jesus does in Matthew:

Think not that I am come to send peace on earth; I came not to send peace, but a sword.

For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.

And a man's foes shall be they of his own household.

He that loveth father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me.

And he that taketh not his cross and followeth me, is not worthy of me.

He that findeth his life shall lose it; and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it. (10:34-39)

Sula's prophecy, like Christ's (and Hannah's and Mary's), demands a radical revisioning of the world. The politics of *Sula* are not programmatic; rather the

novel focuses on social and cultural empowerment. Again, the historical Jesus of Nazareth constantly challenged social norms and hierarchies, law and dogma, as well as defying the complacency and acceptance of these norms by people of all social classes.²⁴ Textually, such an understanding must be complex, nonbinary, encompassing, and, above all, historical. For example, Eva's burning of her son is a horrifying act, if we read *Sula* as a realistic novel. But Morrison's fiction invokes history through parable, which does not necessarily replicate reality, nor pre-determined morality. In terms of the interweaving of motherhood and war, Eva has removed her son from the possibility of going to war again by killing him; she explains to her daughter Hannah the difficulty of Plum's birth, and what the war did to him:

"He give me such a time. Such a time. Look like he didn't even want to be born....After all that carryin' on...he wanted to crawl back in my womb....I had room enough in my heart, but not in my womb, not no more. I birthed him once. I couldn't do it again." (71)

Again Eva echoes Revelation, where the woman with the wings of an eagle "is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time, from the face of the serpent" (Rev. 12:14). The beginning and the end are joined as with the description of the Bottom: Eva, the first woman (Genesis), is linked to the end of time, the apocalypse (Revelation). Her relation to the serpent (Satan, the dragon) requires reflection: is Eva's act of child murder evil, merciful, or a combination of both?

The novel defies any desire to categorize its events in terms of a simplistic or fundamental morality, and instead offers a historically and spiritually informed understanding of civil rights and African American military service. Morrison chooses to foreground historical and chronological events through her use of years

²⁴ Throughout my work on Morrison, my understanding of Jesus Christ is informed by Crossan's contextualizing of Jesus within his historical moment, a time of much social unrest. In addition, I find David Tracy's phrase "the dangerous memory of Jesus of Nazareth" (372) apropos of the character Sula Peace.

(e.g., *1921*, *1923*, etc.) as chapter headings and this heightens *Sula*'s departure from "reality," but not from history. As Kimberly Benston has said, "All of Afro-American literature may be seen as one vast genealogical poem that attempts to restore continuity to the ruptures or discontinuities imposed by the history of black presence in America" (152). The fates of the Bottom-dwellers represent a political system which has enslaved a people, emancipated a people, enfranchised them, disenfranchised them, and then has simultaneously demanded their military service and denied them citizenship through civilian lives of poverty and terror. Morrison's transfigured categories fit Benston's maxim because they encompass discontinuities and contradictions, which are a distinguishing characteristic of the parabolic form. Her parables accomplish connection where before there was division, and so "restore continuity" to American history by recognizing the constitutive role of the African American experience. Morrison enriches Benston's observation in her explicit, biblical recognition of the spiritual as well as material aspects of history.

Sula's characterization incorporates numerous scriptural typologies and religious symbols. The birthmark over her eye looks to some Bottom-dwellers like a rosebud, to others like the head of a snake. The rose is the flower of Mary, mother of Christ. Mary is the anti-type, the fulfillment, of Eve, who encounters the serpent; in Genesis, God says to the serpent, "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; he shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (Gen. 3:16).²⁵ *Sula*'s birthmark also recalls the

²⁵ Snakes encode complicated mythologies associated with virtually every religious tradition known in the world, from Far East to Germanic to African religious traditions. Often a symbol of resurrection and rebirth, the serpent is not only associated with Satan, but with Christ. For a summary of the serpent's multifaceted symbolism, see "The Snake" in Charbonneau-Lassay, 153-164.

seals on the foreheads of the servants of God in Revelation.²⁶ Sula is Saul and Samuel and David, who is a type of Christ; she is the fulfillment of Eve (and therefore of her grandmother, Eva) and Mary; and she is the prophet and the Christ, a figure of redemption and resurrection--an insurrectionary, anarchic figure, like the historical Jesus.

Sula's most significant connections to other characters, to Nel on the one hand, to Shadrack on the other, have biblical parallels as well. Shad the fisherman is Peter to Sula's Christ, and Shadrack sees Sula's birthmark neither as a rose nor a snake but as a tadpole: "She had a tadpole over her eye (that was how he knew she was a friend--she had the mark of the fish he loved)" (156). Shad is both Christian apostle and African ancestor; thus, his "insanity" enables his transcendent vision of the tadpole: at once two animals--a frog and a fish--one in the process of *becoming the other*. Shadrack sees not absolute categories, either/or, but interdependence, growth, and transformation: the goal of parable.

Sula and Nel also recall David and Jonathan, biblical warriors whose greatest love was for each other. Nel's ending cry is for Sula:

"All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude.... We was girls together...O Lord, Sula," she cried, "girl, girl, girlgirlgirl." (174)

Her cry inverts David's lament for Jonathan, the son of Saul:

"I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan; very pleasant hast thou been unto me. Thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women." (2 Sam. 1:26)

Sula Peace represents a radical kind of love; her characterization combines Old Testament warrior-kings with the New Testament Prince of Peace, and resonates with the Jesus of the spirituals discussed by Lawrence Levine, "a Jesus transformed into an Old Testament warrior whose victories were temporal as well as spiritual"

²⁶ See Revelation 7:3. I am grateful to Gwen Crane for first explaining the rose imagery associated with the Virgin to me, and to Amy Bolduc for pointing out this association to the chosen in Revelation.

(43). Sula's last question to Nel, "'About who was good. How you know it was you?'" recalls iconoclastic questions posed by Jesus time and again. It is the question embedded in the inversions of Judeo-Christian scripture, that allows, for example, the first to be last and the last to be first.²⁷

After Sula's death, at the end of 1940, "Medallion turned silver," from "a rain [that] fell and froze" (151), like Revelation's "sea of glass like crystal" (Rev. 4:6). With Sula dead, "a dislocation was taking place" for the Bottom dwellers (153). Suicide Day 1941 arrives, and Shadrack is like Moses, leading his children to the Promised Land, "as though there really was hope" (160). Shad shepherds the citizens of Medallion's small ghetto to the river, where they begin to dismantle "the tunnel they were forbidden to build," having been denied jobs on the tunnel project because of their color (161). Morrison invokes the Old Testament liberation story of Exodus, and Shad guides his people to a different kind of liberation--contact with their ancestors. Melville Herskovits has written that in Africa he witnessed "ceremony after ceremony...among the Yoruba, the Ashanti, and in Dahomey" where "one invariable element was a visit to the river or some other body of 'living' water" (quoted in Stuckey 34). The river was the place where, for many African peoples, "the living [were introduced] to their ancestors through the ritual of water immersion" (Stuckey 34).

In Exodus, "the Lord saved Israel that day out of the hand of Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the seashore" (Ex. 14:30), but there is no such satisfaction for Bottom dwellers--they are the ones who die, not their oppressors. The tunnel stands for a sort of Red-Sea parting, but again, Morrison employs reversal to make her point. This tunnel has been *closed* in all ways to these chosen

²⁷ See Luke 13:30 and Mark 9:35. In Matthew 7:1-2, Christ says, "Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged; and with what measure ye measure, it shall be measured to you again."

people, and wittingly or unwittingly, Shadrack enacts an ancient African rite on the last Suicide Day, although instead of immersion, "[a] lot of them died there" (162). The passage, however, also prefigures the water-born resurrections in *Tar Baby* and *Beloved*. There is another reversal, then at the river; the Bottom residents not only commit an act of civil disobedience, but in some sense "lose the impurities acquired in life, acquire a new freshness of existence, and reenter the world."²⁸ Morrison's invocation of Exodus recalls the complexity of the chosen people's position, the nature of "chosen" status on which Morrison will reflect in subsequent novels.

In *Sula*, Morrison provides parabolic models for the interpretation of the kingdom of God, where the kingdom of God is always a matter of relations, communities, and ancestors in *this world*, in keeping with Sallie McFague's understanding:

What is stressed in the parables and in Jesus' own life focuses on persons and their relationships; therefore; the dominance of the patriarchal model in the Christian tradition must be seen as a perversion in its hegemony of the field of religious models and its exclusion of other personal, relational models. (21)

Without a doubt, Morrison's political novels subvert this "perverse hegemony." Christ-figures such as Sula engender social repentance and cultural reflection; their disruption of the social order inheres in the parabolic form. In turn, they evoke a desire for community and relationality, and for liberation, in the tradition of African American churches, and embrace the African as well as American aspects of that tradition. In Morrison's historical revisionary theology of community, the "Bottom" exists at the top, and the "fine cry--loud and long" of woman mourning beloved woman "[has] no bottom and...no top" (174). Of the Peace family tombstones in the Medallion graveyard we read: "They were not dead people. They were words. Not even words. Wishes, longings" (171). In the mystical

²⁸ Robert Farris Thompson, *The Four Moments of the Sun* (43) quoted in Stuckey 35.

world of Morrison's Afro-Christianity, the dead remain with the living always, like Sula's "sleep of water always" (149), and this ancestral presence and this yearning inscribes beauty, inscribes hope--a most significant and subversive empowerment.

Chapter Three

Leap of Faith:

Diaspora and Salvation in *Song of Solomon*

Who remembered us in our low estate; for his mercy endureth forever; And hath redeemed us from our enemies; for his mercy endureth forever; Who giveth food to all flesh; for his mercy endureth forever. Oh, give thanks unto the God of heaven; for his mercy endureth forever.

--Psalm 136:23-26

Having attained success in business
 possessing three cars
 one wife and two mistresses
 a home and furniture
 talked of by the town
 and thrice ruler of the local Elks
 Robert Whitmore
 died of apoplexy
 when a stranger from Georgia
 mistook him
 for a former Macon waiter.

--Frank Marshall Davis

So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption. It is won in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power.

--I Corinthians 15:42-43

From *The Bluest Eye* to *Sula*, the focus of Toni Morrison's fiction shifts from an indictment of the culture which causes Pecola Breedlove to lose her mind to a portrayal of a damaged but empowered and self-actualized woman, Sula Peace. Both are sacrificed, but the character Sula reveals a subversive dignity and a sense of triumph not in evidence in Morrison's more unambiguously-drawn scapegoat,

Pecola Breedlove. In *Song of Solomon*, a novel in which, as Melissa Walker points out, most of "the action takes place precisely in the peak years of the civil rights movement" (130), this shift to empowerment continues. Walker notes that "the conflicting agendas of the civil rights movement are embedded in and central to the text" (129), and shows the ways in which Morrison encodes Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X in the characters of Milkman Dead and Guitar Bains. *Song of Solomon* probably contains more historical allusions than Morrison's other books, and her theology is closely tied to this increased attention to a particular intense moment in American history.

In an essay on Martin Luther King, Jr., Cornel West delineates the ways in which King's intellectual life, his education and experience, worked within his rootedness in the black church to create the towering national political presence he became. As usual, West is careful to demonstrate the specificity of African American Christianity and its difference from traditional (white) American Protestant religion and "self-righteous" secular political movements which leave divinity out of the equation altogether. Read alongside the politically-empowering liberation theology represented in Morrison's work, West's understanding of "black Christian communities" is compelling:

...black people creatively appropriated a Christian worldview...and thereby transformed a prevailing absurd situation [the situation of Americans of African descent] into a persistent and present *tragic* one, a kind of "Good Friday" state of existence in which one is seemingly forever on the cross, perennially crucified, continuously abused and incessantly devalued--yet sustained and empowered by a hope against hope for a potential and possible triumphant state of affairs. (5)

West and other scholars of the African American experience, such as bell hooks, Lawrence Levine, and Sterling Stuckey, continue to stress (and continue to have to stress) that the black church tradition that produced Martin Luther King was not centered on "an escapist pie-in-the-sky heaven nor a political paradise on earth" (West 5). In particular, white, liberal, secularly-trained critics can easily fail to

understand the importance of the black church as the specific cultural and political product of the black experience in the United States--and thereby fail to understand the reasons a writer of Morrison's stature might repeatedly invoke Jesus of Nazareth as a figure of liberation, social revolution, triumph, and love. Again, as Morrison has said of the black church, "The society was there, the art was there, the politics were there, everything was there" (Ruas 241).

Toni Morrison structures *Song of Solomon* with specific attention to the people who surround, live in relation to, and define the main character Milkman Dead. Milkman's relationships are filled with conflict and misunderstanding, but they all to varying degrees contribute to his redemption, to his triumph over the materialism which would destroy his culture and his history. These relationships are not only part of the plot structure, but the names, thoughts, and actions of the characters also connect them to scriptural persons and texts. Furthermore, these scriptural allusions are not merely connection for its own sake, but also reversals, subversions, and the celebration of freedom. In other words, the relational structure and scriptural allusions work together in Morrison's complex fictional articulation of a twentieth-century African American liberation theology, and they are a generative component of Morrison's "historicizing fiction and fictionalizing history."¹

The friendships and kinships in *Song of Solomon* all possess both mystical and material sides, and Sallie McFague writes of conceptualizing God in terms of human relationships:

...no *one* metaphor can encompass the totality of God's relation to us...God [is] Father in creation, Mother in salvation, Brother in dividing up the kingdom, Sister in sweet companionship. (174)

¹ This is a paraphrase of Mae Henderson's understanding of *Beloved*, "a novel that both historicizes fiction and fictionalizes history" (64).

Milkman's conception is miraculous; he is created, in a sort of mystical parthenogenesis, by his aunt Pilate and his mother. His father, Macon Dead, the biological instrument of his creation, endeavors to mold Milkman to his materialistic way of life. His mother, Ruth Foster Dead, nurses Milkman--hence his name--until he is four or five, "his lips...pulling from her a thread of light" (13); salvation is associated with light. The youth of Milkman's sisters, Magdalene and First Corinthians, is "spent like a found nickel on [him]" (215). "Sweet companionship" is reversed in Milkman's relations with his sisters, who are much older than he is; they are held hostage to the coddled background from which Milkman will eventually leap. Milkman's sister Magdalene "called Lena" prophesies his future:

"....Where do you get the *right* to decide our lives?... I'll tell you where. From that hog's gut that hangs down between your legs. Well, let me tell you something, baby brother: you will need more than that. I don't know where you will get it or who will give it to you, but mark my words, you will need more than that." (215)

Hagar, Milkman's first cousin, also fulfills the companion-sister role, though she is ultimately destroyed by his misunderstanding of her spiritual physicality; Guitar is Milkman's "brother," with whom he will struggle to "divide up the kingdom" (McFague 174). Although Cynthia Davis's understanding of these connections foregrounds a perspective different from mine (that of Sartrean existentialism), she remarks on the centrality of these affiliations: "From first to last, women exist for Milkman, and in the plot development, as functions: mother, wife, lover, sister" (338). It is important to realize, however, that what Davis sees as object relations and "functions" are a vital matrix symbolizing communal, spiritual forces potentially at work in even the most self-serving life.

Toni Morrison's thematic interweaving of African spiritual images, biblical allusions, African American history, and what Melissa Walker has termed "the story of the private lives of the ill-fated descendants of Macon Dead I" (131) makes

Song of Solomon perhaps Morrison's most comprehensive manifesto of liberation theology. Significantly, that theology arises from everyday, secular, even historical events, as Walker points out:

This extraordinary story of the "Dead" family, filled with magic, myth, and improbabilities, is also tightly tied to realistic portrayal of ordinary events of everyday life: lovemaking, marital conflicts, food preparation, dinner table talk, Sunday afternoon drives, and ladies' teas. (131)

In other words, *Song of Solomon* conforms to Sallie McFague's comments on the ordinariness of parabolic stories:

parables introduce [their]... extravagance in a curiously *mundane, secular* way: through seemingly ordinary stories about ordinary people engaged in ordinary decisions (44).

McFague defines parables as metaphors for the kingdom of God and remarks that metaphor is a "way by which we understand as well as enlarge our world and *change it*" (18-emphasis added). Therefore, while Walker understands that readers may miss "the historical dimension of the novel" (131), what seem to her to be magic, myth, and improbabilities are aspects of the African American liberation theology of the novel. As becomes clear in *Tar Baby*--and as Morrison has warned her readers through Claudia's mother in *The Bluest Eye*: "'Bible say watch as well as pray'" (23)--Americans of any color have trouble *seeing* salvation. Most of the characters in this and Morrison's other novels miss, and misunderstand, what constitutes salvation; but a historical reading of these books indicates that substantive repentance (self-examination) and redemption (commitment to change) has eluded the entire nation, "a society based on coercive power relations" (Davis 326). In *Song of Solomon* the soteriological experience--and the failure not merely to find, but to understand redemption and resurrection--is most minutely examined in the personal relationships of the characters as enacted within the novel's one-hundred year historical sweep.

Morrison creates supernatural figures in *Song of Solomon*, such as Pilate Dead, who subvert categories of gender and race, and colors mystical situations and characters with a spirituality informed by African religious paradigms. Here, Afro-Christianity makes it possible for the living to coexist with the dead--and the "Dead." Janheinz Jahn has written that, in African religio-philosophical systems, "the departed are spiritual forces which can influence their living descendants" and "the dead are not alive, but they do exist" (108-110). Such African ancestors, similar to the Christian idea of the Holy Spirit, are believed to be present in air and water. African Christian theologian Bénézet Bujo describes the importance of "the elders in general [who] have a deep meaning in the life of African people." He connects Christian theology to the necessity of maintaining rituals rooted in the ancestor tradition:

The particular words, actions and rituals associated with the ancestors...constitute a rule of conduct for the living, and they must be continually repeated. The present and the future depend on this repetition and representation of past speech, actions and rituals. It is in truth a matter of life and death....a past which still lives and is the guarantee of present salvation. (77)

The ancestors, and hence the kingdom of God, are revealed within the quotidian lives of *Song of Solomon's* characters. First Corinthians, a biblical text ubiquitous in Morrison's canon, is also concerned with the presence of the dead, the "body of resurrection":

So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body. (1 Cor. 42-44)

When Pilate's dead father tells her that "'You just can't fly off and leave a body,'" (208) he recognizes the reality of "natural bodies" and "spiritual bodies," and reminds her by his presence that the living and the dead are not two distinct categories.

Pilate Dead and her nephew Milkman are redeemers (as is Guitar Bains, in his own way), and they are also the redeemed.² Spiritual figures in Morrison's theology are not tied to a single gender category; and a holy being may not necessarily be a "nice person" (a rather twentieth-century notion)--Milkman is not. In describing Jesus as "Proto-Ancestor," Bujo speaks of God as mutable, a concept which will be echoed in *Jazz*. The idea has particular pertinence to understand the redemption of Milkman Dead:

...it is only when God chooses to be "not-God" that the human comes to perfection.....The human person is a being whose nature it is to be continually searching for God, always on the way, ever seeking to entrust self to that ultimate mystery in which fulfilment and identity is found. (82)

Milkman will end the novel "on the way." Doted on and indulged until he is almost thirty-three, Milkman undertakes a quest that illuminates not only his family's and the nation's history, but also enables his redemption, his leap of faith, trusting himself to "that ultimate mystery."

Pilate Dead embodies a number of Morrisonian reversals, most obviously in her name. The antithesis of the hypocritical Roman governor who wanted to be rid of the responsibility of Jesus of Nazareth's execution, she is also the antithesis of "white, meek, pale-faced, blue-eyed Jesus,"³ not only in race but in gender. The consummate imperial emissary, Pilate's contempt for the Jewish peasants he ruled

² Kurt Rudolph explains:

The idea of the "redeemed redeemer" is therefore indeed a logical and characteristic formulation of the gnostic redeemer conception, which unites redeemer and redeemed very closely together... (131)

I find this gnostic idea of Jesus particularly suggestive in terms of Milkman. It is clear by *Beloved* and *Jazz* that Morrison has a well-informed understanding of gnostic texts; I can only conjecture that she was familiar with them at the time she wrote *Song of Solomon*, too.

³ Cone, *For My People* 65. Such a Jesus is "hung on a wall with the prettiest paper flowers fastened on the frame" in Geraldine and Junior's home in *The Bluest Eye* (73). With Morrison's characteristic multiplicity of meaning, even that Jesus "look[s] down at [Pecola] with sad and unsurprised eyes" when Pecola flees the house (76).

"engendered protest, unrest and resentment." His brutality ultimately caused his recall from Judea by none other than the emperor Caligula.⁴ The historical Jesus of Nazareth was a Jewish peasant whose mission centered on subverting the patriarchal hierarchies of law-bound Hellenistic Judaism, including the patriarchal hierarchy of the nuclear family. Such social subversion arose from class unrest against Roman--pagan, to Jews--religion as well as imperialism, and resulted in the downfall of the patronage and slavery system that was an integral part of the Roman empire. The offspring of freed slaves in the United States (arguably the "North American empire"), Pilate rejects the patronage system that is part of her own nation and community.

Pilate chooses a "wandering life" after she is "isolated" by her mystical difference, her lack of a navel (148). Pilate's realization of "what her situation in the world was" recalls (as with Sula) "He came unto his own, and his own received him not" (John 1:11). Like Jesus and his followers, Pilate becomes itinerate, and when she settles down, earns a living in a socially taboo way--ironically, selling homemade wine and bootleg whiskey--an occupation which suggests the communion and commensality of Jesus' mission. While Jane Bakerman has correctly argued that Pilate is marginalized even within the black community, her isolation recalls the overwhelmingly social, overwhelmingly alone figure of Jesus (555-556): Pilate "never had a visitor to whom she did not offer food before one word of conversation--business or social--began" (149).

Pilate rejects the hierarchy of the patriarchal family exemplified by that of her brother Macon, where women are tyrannized, as Lena describes to her brother, Milkman:

⁴ Wigoder et al. 812-813.

"First [Daddy] displayed us, then he splayed us. All our lives were like that: he would parade us like virgins through Babylon, then humiliate us like whores in Babylon." (216)

The materialism and exploitation which define white American Babylon, adopted virtually wholesale by Macon Dead II, are eschewed by Pilate. She shows, instead, radical love for others, as in the scene where she defends her daughter Reba from a man who is beating her. The neighbors watch as Pilate grabs him from behind and sticks a knife "a quarter of an inch through his shirt into the skin" (93). The neighbors figure the man must be new in town:

...more important, he would have known not to fool with anything that belonged to Pilate, who never bothered anybody, was helpful to everybody, but who also was believed to have the power to step out of her skin, set a bush afire from fifty yards, and turn a man into a ripe rutabaga--all on account of the fact that she had no navel. So they didn't have much sympathy for him. (94)

In the fictional worlds created by Morrison, good and evil coexist, and no matter which force is responsible for Pilate's navel-less state, the black community around her reason that it is the cause of her mystical, god-like powers.

Pilate's navel-less state is also, as explained by Kimberly Benston, another locus at which Morrison breaks down categories:

For Pilate's belly doesn't imply, like the phallus, that which it is not, its other as lack or totalization, but suggests rather the perversity of oppositional thought *per se*. (100)

Her smooth stomach symbolizes that she is somehow unbegotten or self-created. Like God of the Trinity, however, she does not exist apart from the other persons with whom she lives and interacts, but rather, like Milkman, is defined by her relationality with other persons, such as her brother and father, her daughter and granddaughter.⁵ She judges no one and helps everyone; like Jesus, she is a shape-shifter. When Milkman and Guitar are put in jail after they have stolen Pilate's bag of bones, she becomes "'short and pitiful'" and comes into the police station "like

⁵ Cf. LaCugna 243-250.

Louise Beaver and Butterfly McQueen'" (205). But when they leave, "Pilate was tall again...her own voice was back," her back "not bent at all under the weight of the sack" (207, 208). Such a "subtle kind of shape shifting seeks liberation from bondage or punishment" (Carse 226); shape shifting is also linked to resurrection by Paul in First Corinthians: "Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed" (15:51).

Triads of characters show up across Morrison's oeuvre; but within the trinities Morrison depicts, she does not assign a specific identity --Father, Son, Holy Spirit-- to one character. The burning bush in the quotation describing Pilate's powers is an obvious allusion to YHWH, but in terms of her character in *Song of Solomon* she may at different times be identified with Christ, God-the-mother, and a holy spirit, (in)spiring and (re)spiring others in love and liberation. The primary textual trinity in the novel that includes Pilate, her daughter Rebekah (Reba), and her granddaughter Hagar is perhaps the most significant because of the profound, almost semiotic relationality that exists between them.⁶ The point, then, is not which of the three characters symbolizes which of the three persons of the Trinity in some discrete way, but that these three persons exist *by virtue of their relation to one another*.

Because Morrison eschews the Western impulse to binary categorization, her biblically-named characters never instantiate a simple type/anti-type paradigm. They routinely *do* encode what seems "opposite," if such a thing is possible for a biblical character. When Morrison includes a biblically-named character, he or she usually (but by no means always) possesses traits which are radically different from the biblical personage, as well as similarities. For example, the biblical Rebekah,

⁶ I use "semiotic" here in the sense theorized by Julia Kristeva: each of the persons of each trinity (divine and textual) carries the trace or figuration of the others at all times, and transgresses any notion of positive identification.

mother of Jacob and Esau, is an astute, knowing woman, "regarded as the second matriarch of the Jewish People" (Wigoder 848). By contrast, and with typical Morrisonian reversal, *Song of Solomon's* Reba is guileless and seemingly not too bright; she is no matriarch and not even much of a mother. But the biblical Hagar, a "bondwoman" (Genesis 21:12), mother of Ishmael, is "excluded from the paternal household" (Wigoder 416) as Hagar is excluded from Macon's and Milkman's--and mainstream white American culture.

The biblical Hagar gives birth to a son by Abraham from whom YHWH promises to "make a nation" (Genesis 21:13). *Song of Solomon's* Hagar is childless and ultimately dies for Milkman's--and her community's--sins. Phyllis Trible, has written of Hagar as "a pivotal figure in biblical theology":

...a symbol of the oppressed, Hagar becomes many things to many people. Most especially, all sorts of rejected women find their stories in her.

....
...She is the first person in scripture whom a divine messenger visits and the only person who dares to name the deity. (28)

In the Bible, Hagar already encodes reversal; she is an Egyptian who "foreshadows Israel's pilgrimage of faith" in Exodus; "[t]he Egyptian slave woman is stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted for the transgressions of Israel" (Trible 28).

In *Song of Solomon*, Hagar similarly appears doubly oppressed. Victim of a materialistic society structured by a hegemony in which she, as a black woman, has no power, she is also, as Jane Bakerman has noted, excluded from the black community around her because of her grandmother's and mother's way of life.⁷ Pilate and Reba are "quite content" with the life they live (150), but Hagar is different:

Hagar was prissy. She hated, even as a two-year-old, dirt and disorganization. At three she was already vain and beginning to be proud. She liked pretty clothes. Astonished as Pilate and Reba were by her wishes, they enjoyed trying to fulfill them. They spoiled her, and she, as a favor to

⁷ Bakerman 557-559.

their indulgence, hid as best she could the fact that they embarrassed her.
(*Song of Solomon* 150-51)

The rejection she experiences from Milkman, coupled with her misguided belief that she will receive love through material things and an attractive appearance, kills her. At her funeral, Pilate recites "My baby girl" to each person at the funeral, "selecting [Hagar] away from everybody else in the world who had died" (318). Pilate has unwittingly contributed to the conditions under which Hagar is sacrificed to the culture of consumption so that Milkman may be redeemed from it. But Pilate remains unequivocally subversive of the materialistic culture from which Hagar feels so outcast.

Pilate, Reba, and Hagar *embody* a mystical trinity in contrast to the superficial materialism of Macon Dead and to the American materialism that perpetuates class and racial oppression, dominance, and patriarchy. Reba possesses an ineffable "simplicity" (46) and "luck" that enables her to "'win everything I try to win and lots of things I don't even try to win'" (45)--almost all of which she gives away. Reba and Hagar are sensual, sexual, embodied beings, and this installs them in particular as *spiritual* beings in Beverly Wildung Harrison's sense of "worldly spirituality." In *Song of Solomon*, they exemplify the antithesis of the "disinterestedness" and "detachment" that Harrison understands to be prerequisite of patriarchal "responsible moral action" (204). When Milkman is almost killed near Ryna's Gulch, the "life [that] flashed before him...consisted of only one image: Hagar bending over him in perfect love, in the most intimate sexual gesture imaginable" (279), which invokes a mystical characterization of God as lover (cf. McFague) and "celebrates the power of *our* human praxis as an intrinsic aspect of the work of *God's* love," as Harrison notes:

...it celebrates the reality that our moral-selves are body-selves who touch and see and hear each other into life, recognizing sensuality as fundamental to the work and power of love, so above all else a feminist moral theology insists that relationality is at the heart of all things. (207)

Physicality and sensuality define the inspiring Pilate, who is as tall as a man and makes others "feel tall too" (50). Sun streams into Pilate's curtainless house "strong and unfettered" (40); the house is a physical and spiritual space bounded away from the materialistic culture which surrounds it.

* * *

In a novel of lost souls and salvation, Milkman Dead makes a pilgrimage to find his family's true name and history which results in his own liberation from the materialistic babylon of the United States. The youngest child and only son of bourgeois blacks, for his first thirty-two years Milkman receives all the superficial saving graces of the American middle-classes: material possessions and bodily pleasures divorced from love, spirituality, or genuine freedom. For decades Milkman pursues materialism and disinterested intimacies that avoid the humanity of others until his aunt--a Christ named Pilate--shows him the "way" to salvation, the way to embracing love over gold.

Jane Campbell has explored the intersection of "the quest motif" and "Afro-American and African philosophy, folklore, and legends" (138) in Milkman's journey; Kimberly Benston examines this overlap minutely, in a post-structuralist analysis suited to the non-linearity of Morrison's texts. Explaining the many places at which the assignment of a single narrative typology to Morrison's novel will falter, he writes:

...any reading of *Song of Solomon* cannot help entertaining the possibility that the novel is a mimesis rather than an interruption or reversal of the oedipal/odyssean pattern of modern African-American narrative. (94)

Benston sums up this "odyssean pattern," this "reversed" quest motif in this way:

...Morrison, like her heroine [Pilate], does not so much imitate the Ulysses Scene as reweave and perform it, furnishing it forth with a concealed but forgotten mode of being which realizes, rather than rejects, the implications of self-enactment...Morrison's epic thematizes its own endeavor to effect what we might regard as a radical, dislocating translation of the quest for a buried Text of blackness, a critical mimesis in which repetition is at once appropriation and revision, at once the inscription of a past forgotten but not

erased and the projection toward a future possessed but not over-looked.
(95)

Benston understands the tension inherent in *Song of Solomon* between the mimesis readers expect in novels and the "dislocations" which are part of Morrison's work. His viewpoint enables a conception of the textual simultaneity, the levels of meaning encoded in Morrison's complex allusions, but he addresses these levels via a deconstructive focus on the text, ignoring the ways in which Morrison works within Afro-Christianity. Campbell, however, does discuss the African view of the continuity between the living and the dead:

No character in *Song of Solomon* possesses an ordinary designation; instead, Morrison links characters with archetypal figures that span centuries and hemispheres Even should his friend Guitar kill Milkman in their final confrontation, Milkman, like his ancestors, refuses to acknowledge death's finality, demonstrating his capacity for spiritual transcendence. Thus does Morrison underscore the relationship between the supernatural and natural worlds. (146, 147)

Besides the spiritual importance of ancestors to Africans and to Americans of African descent, the ancestor tradition is an *historical* tradition. So Morrison is also subverting the European conception of history which is driven by attention to dates and "facts," instead inscribing the experience of African American culture through non-linear, non-European analogy and typology.

Melissa Walker remarks on "Toni Morrison's rigorous adherence to the historical facts of the African-American experience" which contrasts to "the ahistorical imaginative and poetic world of personal experience and inherited narratives" (9). African American cultural history exists and is defining of a people, and is claimed in *Song of Solomon* which, as Walker astutely has noticed, "is a historical novel, but one of a new kind, a palimpsest in which the partial erasure of the fictional text reveals the historical one" (132). Because multiple conceptions are possible for the reader through Morrison's multiform texts, her works interweave discourses of African American history and religion. People of diaspora cultures who cannot know "facts" of their histories, such as the names of

their forbears and the places they were from, must construct alternative historical perspectives.

The civilizations enslaved Africans came from had methods of passing down history, not to mention perspectives on what was historically important, that differed from their European contemporaries. In the case of enslaved Africans in the Americas, their history depends on various African traditions retained in the New World commingled with the history shared with other African Americans, Native Americans, and European Americans beginning with the advent of Africans on this continent in 1609. Many of these traditions came together in the African American churches, as Cornel West explains: "[S]tylized forms of spiritual response in black church liturgy signified a sense of *homefulness* for an exilic people" (*Fragments* 6). Moreover, certain figures and histories of Judeo-Christian texts had analogic significance to African Americans, and in these histories could be read, and preserved, their own. The "homefulness" and history Milkman seeks, then, must entail a radical alteration of the materialism and the European-based (as opposed to an African-based) understanding of "this world" that has defined the first thirty-two years of his life, which distances him from spirituality as well as history.

At a crucial moment in Milkman's journey, we are witness to his soul's "dark night" in a Virginia forest:

...troublesome thoughts...wouldn't go away. Under the moon, on the ground, alone, with not even the sound of baying dogs to remind him that he was with other people, his self--the cocoon that was "personality"--gave way....*He was only his breath*...and his thoughtsout here...all a man had was what he was born with, or had learned to use. And endurance. Eyes, ears, nose, taste, touch--and some other sense that he knew he did not have... (277-emphasis added)

When Milkman becomes "only his breath," he recognizes, for the first time, his inspiration; he is alone with his soul, with his spirit. Geoffrey Parrinder attests to the difficulty of "sort[ing] out the complex strands of [West African] spiritual belief."

In a number of these systems the personality is a part of a person's soul and spirit that manifests "the worldly and outward man" (Parrinder 114, 113). Distinct from this is a person's divine spirit, connected with voice and breath. Milkman becomes aware of this "other sense" as he sits down under a tree, resting his head "back on its bark" (275); for the Yoruba, "trees are...thought to be avatars of *àshe*" and *àshe* is "spiritual command, the power-to-make-things-happen, God's own enabling light rendered accessible to men and women" (Thompson 6, 5). Besides his name, Milkman searches for, and ultimately finds, this "other sense" on his pilgrimage. Foreshadowing the novel's end, Milkman is almost killed on this night by his "friend," an instrument of African American vengeance turned upon itself, Guitar Bains. *Song of Solomon* conveys Milkman Dead's "surrender to the air" (337) of *àshe*, the Holy Spirit, and his African ancestors, in a complex "oral literature" (cf. Wilentz) which resists secular European interpretations.

Again, Morrison's historically allusive plot interweaves with the theme of Milkman's spiritual redemption; the novel covers more than three decades of Milkman's life, coinciding to some degree with Morrison's own from 1931 to the sixties.⁸ Milkman is the son of Ruth Foster, the lemony-colored daughter of a well-to-do black physician, and Macon Dead, the dark-skinned son of freed slaves who come north during Reconstruction. The middle-class Dead family, aptly named in terms of the cultural deadness E. Franklin Frazier writes of in his classic *Black Bourgeoisie*, are descendants of early migrants from the South, and the novel, published in 1977, transmits the closeness of the historical moment of its composition to slavery and the Great Northern Migration of blacks. As Campbell puts it, "Morrison...displaces the allure of urban affluence with that of rural simplicity to demystify the Great Migration's promises as insistently as do DuBois,

⁸ Milkman is born the day after Morrison's own birthday, which is the day Robert Smith jumps from Mercy, February 18, 1931.

Attaway, Ellison, and Baldwin" (144). The subliminal feeling the reader gets that history is still with us reinforces the sense of ancestral presence so important in all of Morrison's work, and in this sense the surname Dead functions to connect the family--Pilate, Macon, Milkman, Ruth, and so on--to their ancestors. Morrison also enhances our understanding of the consequences of diaspora, the repercussions of the dispersals of people of African descent through European colonialism and the rise of United States capitalism as well as recalling the colonized condition of American blacks in the late twentieth century.

The embittered Guitar Bains sums up Morrison's understanding of internal, socioeconomic colonization as well as European imperialism when he tells Milkman that he "believe[s his] whole life's geography." "'North exists because South does,'" explains Guitar. "'But does that mean North is different from South? No way! South is just south of North...'" (114). Later in the conversation, when Milkman alludes to France's more enlightened attitude about race--that "'French people love the sun'"--Guitar reminds him, "'They try to get in the French sun, but not the Congo sun. In the Congo they hate the sun'" (116)--and, implicitly, black Africans, their traditions and their culture(s). The Deads are twice-removed from the spirituality of their African heritage, once by forcible uprooting during the slave trade, but again in *Song of Solomon* by economic myths which have also forced them North and have removed them from common connection to other African Americans, represented in the communality and relationality Milkman finds in Shalimar, the Southern town of his African ancestors.

Two women in *Song of Solomon*, Circe and Pilate, particularly represent the endurance of these ancestors; they are at once spiritual, sensual, and historical presences. When Milkman finds the ancient, witch-like Circe, he gets an erection, and is overwhelmed by the combination of life and death embodied by her:

But Circe is dead. This woman is alive. That was as far as he got, because although the woman was talking to him, she might in any case still be dead-- as a matter of fact, she *had* to be dead. Not because of the wrinkles, and the face so old it could not be alive, but because out of the toothless mouth came the strong mellifluous voice of a twenty-year-old girl. (240)

Everything about Circe assaults and fills Milkman's senses, from the overpowering odor to the "sweet spicy perfume...pleasant, clean, seductive" the foul odor becomes (239), from Circe's "dainty habits" to her "torn and filthy clothes" (242). The journey that begins as a search for gold reverses and inverts all that has defined his life before.

The culture of American materialism which Frazier calls the "social myth of Negro business"⁹ has severed the Deads from their ancestors and hence, in African terms, from their voices and their souls. Frazier quotes Booker T. Washington, infamous for his advocacy of a separate black economy mimicking exactly white values, who makes *business* African American salvation:

One of the leading bankers was a minister whose success, according to Washington, showed "how closely the moral and spiritual interests of our people are interwoven with their material and economical welfare." (133)

Morrison exposes how preposterous Washington's position is. Milkman's father, Macon Dead, is a black business man and ghetto-rental slumlord to his own people. His tenants include Guitar and his grandmother, Mrs. Bains, who refers to Macon's soul-lessness: "'What's it gonna profit you, Mr. Dead, sir, to put me and them children out?'" (22). The allusion to Christ's "For what shall it profit a man, if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" (Mk. 8:36) is clear; less obvious is Mrs. Bain's signifying on Washington: "A nigger in business is a terrible thing to see. A terrible, terrible thing to see" (22). Booker T. Washington, as Frazier notes:

made the highly dubious generalization that wherever he had "seen a black man who was succeeding in business, who was a taxpayer, and who

⁹ See Frazier's Chapter VII, "Negro Business: A Social Myth," 129-145.

possessed intelligence and high character, that individual was treated with the highest respect by the members of the white race." (131-132)

Mrs. Bains's signifying, of course, resists Washington's assimilationist stance, and implicitly, what "the highest respect" of white Americans might be. Macon Dead's success in business depends on his relationships with white bankers and investors as he colludes in white capitalist exploitation of his people. In this he violates the living community of his people and the community of the departed ancestors, as explained by Parrinder:

"Constantly before the Ashanti, and serving to regulate his conduct, is the thought that his ancestors are watching him, and that one day, when he rejoins the world of spirits, they will ask him to give an account of his conduct, especially of his conduct towards his kinsmen. This thought is a very potent sanction of morality." (115)¹⁰

His ritual Sunday drive in his "big Packard" becomes "much too important for Macon to enjoy. For him it was a way to satisfy himself that he was indeed a successful man" (31). But early on it is clear that this form of salvation cannot fill the void inside Macon Dead; in the daytime, his properties are "reassuring to see," but as he walks by them at night

they did not seem to belong to him at all--in fact he felt as though the houses were in league with one another to make him feel like the outsider, the propertyless, landless wanderer. It was this feeling of loneliness that made him decide to take a shortcut back to Not Doctor Street, even though to do so would lead him past his sister's house. (27)

Here, Macon realizes at some level that his "drive for wealth," his embracing the dominant male role in hierarchical, patriarchal family life, and his alienation from the history and traditions of his people has rendered his wife "narrow [and] unyielding," his daughters "boiled dry from years of yearning," his son spoiled and indifferent. In this scene he wants "just a bit of music--from the person who had been his first caring for" (28). He is captivated by the song of the trinity inside Pilate's house--Pilate's, Reba's, and Hagar's effortless and beautiful voices--by the

¹⁰ Parrinder is quoting Dr. K.A. Busia, *The Position of the Chief in the Modern Political System of Ashanti*, 24-25.

life he can only distantly view, a spiritual life where "progress [is] a word that mean[s] walking a little farther down the road" (27). He is, therefore, at once mesmerized by and blind to his ancestors, to the kingdom of God he sees before him.

* * *

Written in the early and mid-seventies, *Song of Solomon* signifies on centuries of broken promises made to African Americans in the United States. In the wake of the civil rights gains of the nineteen fifties and sixties, and the "progress" and "uplift" they seemed to promise, the decade of the seventies proved particularly disappointing. Richard Nixon had, according to Mary Frances Berry and John Blassingame, "launched a campaign in 1969, 'Black Capitalism,' to give blacks a greater stake in the economy." But it wasn't long before the nation understood that the campaign was, in Berry and Blassingame's words, "a colossal hoax" perpetrated to gain black voters in the Republican party (219). The program's patent disingenuity, not to mention misappropriation of funds, was obvious to black people:

Julian Bond, a Georgia legislator, argued in 1971 that it was "a pitifully underfinanced public relations gimmick.... What we need is not Black capitalism but something more properly called 'community socialism,' that we may have profit for the many instead of the few." (220)

Macon Dead, of course, is concerned only with profit for himself. As one of Macon's victims, Guitar Bains characterizes the desperation born of relentless economic, social, and political oppression. In the same way that social and economic reforms such as Nixon's "Black Capitalism" strike reasonable historians as almost beyond belief, Guitar's logical and perhaps too rational sense of justice simply cannot tolerate the enormity and terror of white American oppression.

Guitar Bains is a kind of holy man, an ascetic who adopts the way of the Seven Days, the black vigilante group exacting eye-for-an-eye reprisal for crimes by

whites against African Americans. Melissa Walker notes that "the guitar is associated with evil" in black folklore.¹¹ The name "Bains" is a "nickname meaning 'bones'" in Scotland and Northern England.¹² The guitar is an instrument, and a homonym of Guitar's last name, "bane," originally meant murderer or slayer. These images are conflated with bones, which are in *Song of Solomon* an important symbol both of the ancestors and of resurrection. Guitar, like Milkman, is a seeker; his inability to find justice in the United States results in his becoming the instrument in the death of the Christ-like Pilate.

In contrast to Milkman's indulged and spoiled upbringing, Guitar's childhood is one of tragedy and poverty. When he is a child in the South, his father dies in a horrible sawmill accident; he explains to Milkman why sweets make him sick:

"...my father got sliced up in a sawmill and his boss came by and gave us kids some candy. Divinity. A big sack of divinity. His wife made it special for us. It's sweet, divinity is....Real sweet." (61)

Indeed, Guitar rejects "white divinity" for another holy path, but his obsessive desire for justice ultimately becomes confounded with a deep sense of deprivation, and his anger at white terrorism fuses with his anger at avaricious American society. Having watched Macon Dead dun his grandmother for the few dollars in rent, he eventually changes from ascetic avenger to the gold-obsessed slayer who can keep faith in nothing and no one. Guitar's response to white predation, even in its black capitalistic form, is to become a predator himself; he takes on the characteristics of the dominant white culture he seeks to destroy.

In his rejection of "white divinity," Guitar also rejects Jesus as a bleeding-heart liberal "Northerner." He has accepted the sacralization of whiteness in the United States: that whites have made the political ideology of whiteness a part of religion.

¹¹ Walker 143. Walker's footnote explains that this information is from Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes's classic *The Book of Negro Folklore* (216).

¹² Hanks and Hodges 47.

Guitar's misunderstanding of Jesus as "white divinity" becomes his own undoing, undermining any clarity of purpose in his "revolutionary praxis" (Story 156). His rejection of Milkman and Pilate, and the kingdom of God he mistakenly conflates with white de-racialization, are evinced in a scene I alluded to earlier, where Guitar is giving Milkman the "geography lesson." He is also making tea for Milkman, but the latter complains about the geography lesson as well as the tea: "'Yeah, well, if this is tea, I'm a soft-fried egg'" (115). Guitar tells him, however, that he can't be an egg:

"Nature says no. 'No, you can't be no egg, nigger. Now, you can be a crow if you wanna. Or a big baboon. But not no egg. Eggs is difficult, complicated. Fragile too. And white.'" (115-116)

At the end of this seemingly light-hearted discussion of eggs, Milkman maintains that he can be a fried egg if he wants to:

"Fried?"

"Fried."

"Then somebody got to bust your shell."

Quicker than a pulse beat, Guitar had changed the air. Milkman wiped his mouth, avoiding Guitar's eyes because he knew the phosphorus was back in them. (116)

A political radical, Guitar is trying to communicate to his shallow friend Milkman the need for "breaking eggs" to achieve political change. Thus, the egg discussion encompasses miscegenation, the racialization of blacks but not whites in American society, colonialism, and the folly of absolute categorization. In the end, although Guitar realizes that "eggs is difficult, complicated," he misses the religiocultural meaning of eggs, which is significant in *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*: eggs represent creation and resurrection, "fertility, purity, and rebirth."¹³ In other words, there is more to eggs than merely possessing a brown or white shell (116), more to a person than his exterior, a lesson Milkman learns, but Guitar does not.

¹³ Newall 37.

In associating himself with an egg, Milkman recalls the spirituality of his first encounter with his aunt. When Guitar "changes the air," he removes himself from the Holy Spirit's (in) and (re) spiration; he changes the possibility of grasping a more profound, intangible way of "being" an egg, of being "reborn." Guitar's embracing of the colonizer's form of categorization and his internalized hatred in the end makes him fail to see that the "phosphorus" of his ancestors' bones are worth far more than the gold he believes is in Pilate's green sack. Instead of affirming his ancestors--the encompassing African understanding of life--he affirms violence and death, a "phosphorus" associated with hell.

Nowhere in *Song of Solomon* is the fusion of African belief systems and African American Christianity more obvious than when Guitar and Milkman go to Pilate's house on the night of "September 19, 1963" to steal the bag they believe is filled with gold, and Jane Campbell remarks on the importance of this fusion:

Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*...invite[s] the audience to investigate the relationships between North American and West African culture, with a particular emphasis on spirituality and religion, the supernatural, and family history. In fusing the Judeo-Christian and African naming traditions with the notion of ancestor worship, Morrison... underscore[s] and amplif[ies] a deification of heritage. (136-137)

Campbell notices that "the recurrent smell of ginger, equated with Accra [capital of Ghana] and 'the sha-sha-sha of leg bracelets,' furnishes another link between the pastoral in Africa and in America (184)," but she makes no comment on the Judeo-Christian images in the episode. It is night, but neither Milkman nor Guitar are ready "for the deeper darkness that met them there in that room," or the fact that, although it is a very warm evening in late summer, "it was as cold as ice in Pilate's house" (185). The moon comes out, however, and lights the room for them:

They both saw it at the same time. It hung heavy, hung green like the green of Easter eggs left too long in the dye. And like Easter, it promised everything: the Risen Son and the heart's lone desire. Complete power, total freedom, and perfect justice. (185)

The "Easter" sack contains both the Risen Son *and àshe*--the bones of the ancestor--and they are the same thing; they coexist in Afro-Christianity. In fact, the "power, freedom, and justice" that the young men so desire *is* in the sack--the *àshe*, the power-to-make-things-happen they have received leaning against the tree outside, the freedom of resurrection, the freedom from absolute Western divisions between life and death, and the power of knowing who they are. They hear "a huge airy sigh," and another, "and an even more piercing chill." Guitar even sees the figure of Pilate's father in the darkness "standing right behind his friend" (186), but he will fail to grasp the empowerment this ancestor offers--that, for those of African American heritage, "living and dead [may] meet and mingle freely" (Parrinder 120).

Guitar has forgotten the lesson he and Milkman are taught earlier, when Milkman is twelve, and together they visit Pilate Dead for the first time. Pilate will demonstrate that the kingdom of God *and* the ancestors exist in "this world," but in Guitar's experience, the whiteman-created hell exists in "this world" as well. Like Jesus, Pilate refuses to engage in the greedy materialism of her nation and era or to abide by certain societal "laws" which have nothing to do with the Holy Spirit--"while she looked as poor as everyone said she was, something was missing from her eyes that should have confirmed it" (38). This description is uncannily similar to Crossan's of Jesus of Nazareth, who "looks like a beggar, yet his eyes lack the proper cringe, his voice the proper whine, his walk the proper shuffle" (xi).

Pilate is detested by her brother, Macon, who forbids his son to "go near" her, but neither Milkman nor Guitar can "live one more day without finding out the truth":

They found her on the front steps sitting wide-legged in a long-sleeved, long-skirted black dress. Her hair was wrapped in black too, and from a distance, all they could see beneath her face was the bright orange she was peeling. She was all angles...knees, mostly, and elbows. One foot pointed east and one pointed west. (36)

The allusions to Christ here include "truth"--"I am the way, the truth, and the life"--(John 14:6) and "east and... west"--"For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be" (Matt. 24:27). Pilate, "as tall as [Milkman's] father," is an awe-inspiring mystical presence, telling Milkman that she knows his daddy and "I know you too" (38). When the invitation into her home includes reference to an egg--"You all want a soft-boiled egg?"--the boys turn down the egg but are delighted to enter the "large sunny room that look[s] both barren and cluttered" (39). Again, the fact that Pilate "offer[s] food" to every visitor before anything else takes place connects Pilate to Christ; sharing food and eating with others symbolizes friendship, kinship, physical pleasure, i.e. the human relationality that creates community.¹⁴

Pilate asks the boys twice more if they want an egg before she goes into an elaborate explanation of "how to do them just right": "You ought to try one....How come you don't just try one?" (39). In offering the food symbolic of purity and rebirth to Milkman and Guitar, Pilate also offers them an alternative to the hierarchical Eurocentric relationships in the society around them, for eggs are ubiquitous as offerings at births and to ancestors in a variety of West African traditions (cf. Parrinder). It will be years, however, before Milkman understands the significance of Pilate's offer and Guitar never does. But Guitar, in his own radical way, contributes to Milkman's eventual redemption from shallowness; with Pilate, Guitar liberates Milkman from his enslavement to materialism.

¹⁴ See Crossan 341:

...Lee Edward Kosinski, having "reviewed the significant anthropological and sociological literature which... discussed food and eating" concluded that "sharing food is a transaction which involves a series of mutual obligations and which initiates an interconnected complex of mutuality and reciprocity....Also, food exchanges are able to act as symbols of human interaction. Eating is a behavior which symbolizes feelings and relationships, mediates social status and power, and expresses the boundaries of group identity."

As Guitar and Milkman get older, Guitar is increasingly concerned with "racial problems" which Milkman considers "boring" (107). Guitar reminds Milkman that he thinks "'everybody's going in the wrong direction but you'" (106) and that he's "'not a serious person'" (104). But Guitar's "gloom...golden eyes [a]nd politics" also have their effect on Milkman, and contribute to his change from a wholly self-centered man who is only going "'[w]herever the party is'" (106) to a man concerned with history and faith.

Mercy, forgiveness, and love distinguish Pilate's mystical, holy, ancestral presence. Instead of being concerned with the approval of white-dominated society, or with making that society over according to her own understanding, or succumbing to hatred over the injustice inherent in black life in America, she lives at peace with herself and with love for others. In this way, she contrasts strongly to her brother Macon Dead and to Guitar Bains. Macon is a doubly dispossessed "white" black man. He denies his own heritage, but at the same time blames his parents because they

agreed to abide by a naming done to them by somebody who couldn't have cared less. Agreed to take and pass on to all their issue this heavy name scrawled in perfect thoughtlessness by a drunken Yankee in the Union Army. (18)

Macon contemplates an ancestor "with onyx skin and legs as straight as cane stalks, who had a name that was real" (17) and tells his son, "'If you ever have a doubt we from Africa, look at Pilate. She look just like Papa and he looked like all them pictures you ever see of Africans.'" But Macon fails to understand that Pilate's lack of "normality" and "niceness," her refusal to become enslaved to white values and material things, and her African as well as Christ-like spirituality are linked to the heritage and the name Macon is so angry to have lost. He says "'She's a snake'" (54); although he admits she might be able to teach Milkman something about "'the next [world],'" he tells him that she "'can't teach you a thing you can use in this

world'" (55). In his anger at the white man, he has completely internalized what Ralph Ellison has called the "white man's value system" (111). When Macon synthesizes his own youth and his sister's for Milkman, the advice he gives his son is "'Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too'" (55). Milkman will eventually understand, as Macon fails to, that in fact Pilate's connection to the "next world" enables her to see the kingdom of God and to live with the love and mercy of her ancestors in "this world."

* * *

The signifying of the Southside residents--their changing "Mains Avenue" to "Not Doctor Street" and "Mercy Hospital" to "No Mercy"--encode a community cultural history, a history of oppression and violence. At Tommy's Barbershop, in a discussion of the murder of Emmett Till, who was stomped to death by whitemen for saying "Bye, baby" to a white woman,¹⁵ we see Guitar's desperate sense of justice and outrage, and his frustration that, as Porter puts it, "'Don't nothing change in the good old U.S. of A'" (82). After the suicide of Robert Smith, Guitar becomes a member of the Seven Days, and he explains the organization to Milkman:

"...when a Negro child, Negro woman, or Negro man is killed by whites and nothing is done about it by *their* law and *their* courts, this society selects a similar victim at random, and they execute him or her in a similar manner if they can. If the Negro was hanged, they hang; if a Negro was burnt, they burn; raped and murdered, they rape and murder. If they can." (154-155)

The "Seven Days" is another locus of complex allusion in *Song of Solomon*; it was a "bloody sequence of battles around Richmond [which] began on June 26, 1862"¹⁶--about one-hundred years before Milkman undertakes his pilgrimage to

¹⁵ Story 156.

¹⁶ Ward 142.

Virginia. Participants in the Civil War battles commented: "It was not war, it was murder" and "We were very lavish with blood in those days."¹⁷ The Civil War was fought about slavery and about the nature of democracy and equality in the United States. The defining moment of the nation's history arose out of racial terrorism, which is what Guitar believes that he is fighting against as well, and carnage is a part of war.

Milkman is stunned by Guitar's announcement; Guitar tells him that "[t]here are no innocent white people" and that "[w]hite people are unnatural" (155, 156) because of the monstrous crimes they have committed against blacks. Guitar's rhetoric recalls that of Malcolm X, but as Melissa Walker points out, "He has assumed the surface manner of Malcolm X, but not the substance of his mission" (143). Milkman can only respond to Guitar, "I can't see how it helps. I can't see how it helps anybody" (157). Still, Guitar maintains that what he's doing "'ain't about hating white people. It's about loving us....My whole life is love" (159). Walker notes the "striking parallels between Guitar and Malcolm X":

Six years older than Milkman, Guitar would have been born around 1925, the year Malcolm Little was born. Both grew up in Michigan and had fathers who died violently--by having their bodies cut in half or almost in half....At about the time Malcolm X was released from prison and moved to Detroit, where he very soon became a leader in the Muslim movement, Guitar embraced vengeance as the appropriate response to racial injustice. (142-43)

Walker also finds correspondences between "Milk," as Guitar calls him, and Martin Luther King: "MILK. Remove the 'I'--and with it the egotism and preoccupation with self that make meaningful life impossible--and you have MLK" (144). Walker sees the subtle historical invocations Morrison manages in creating these flawed characters. Ralph Story finds "that it takes just such experiences and tragedies [as Guitar has suffered] for black men to embrace a revolutionary praxis" (155-56), but

¹⁷ Foote 509; Ward 143.

I think Walker's interpretation is less simplistic and more enlightening in terms of the complex historical references encoded in this novel. In the end, Morrison affirms the mercy and reconciliation embodied in Pilate, which is ultimately embraced by Milkman and cruelly rejected by Guitar.

As with Hagar, Milkman's cousin-lover and Pilate's granddaughter, Guitar's "love" for his people, however, becomes obsession and a rejection of spirituality. His love for "us" means he has to murder some of "us" to carry out his mission against "them": again, the dangers of either/or thinking. Although Hagar lives her whole life in her grandmother's eccentric but love-filled house, and although Guitar spends a great deal of time with Pilate, neither Hagar nor Guitar are able to internalize the love and mercy she embodies. When Pilate sings, she not only makes a joyful noise, but she continually renews her communication with her ancestors, with her mother--Sing Byrd--and therefore with the Holy Spirit. When she dies, she says, "'I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would of loved 'em all. If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more'" (336). For different reasons, both Hagar and Guitar believe that material things--brand name clothes and shoes for Hagar and gold for Guitar--will establish them in community, will free them, but it is only love, not obsession, that can free anyone.

In the book of Ezekiel, God says of his people, "...I scattered them among the heathen, and they were dispersed through the countries" (36:19a), but promises, "A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you" (36:26a). In the valley of the bones, YHWH asks Ezekiel, "Son of man, can these bones live?" and he answers, "O Lord God, thou knowest" (37:3). The dead of the nation say, "Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost: we are cut off for our parts" (37:11b), whereupon the prophet sees the resurrection of his people and his nation. YHWH vows:

And they shall dwell in the land that I have given unto Jacob my servant, wherein your fathers have dwelt.... Moreover I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them: and I will place them, and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in the midst of them for evermore. (37: 25a, 26)

Pilate and Milkman head south to bury the bones of her father, Jacob, now known as "Jake," and "[p]eace circled her" (334). They walk to Solomon's Leap, "but neither stopped for breath." When Pilate opens the sack containing the bones, a "deep sigh escaped from [it]" (335). In the midst of these images of the ancestors and the Holy Spirit, Guitar shoots Pilate. Milkman does not hear Pilate's breath leave her, but he is aware of birds. The presence of the spirit hovers over the final resting place of Pilate and her father. One of the birds "dive[s] into the new grave" and flies away with the earring containing Pilate's name which she has placed there (336), creating a trinity of ascending spirits: Father, Daughter, and Holy Spirit Mother, Sing Bird. Unafraid, in the presence of his ancestors, Milkman asks Guitar if he wants his life. Pilate's disciple at her death, Milkman makes his leap of faith into the arms of Guitar. Perhaps it is finally redemption and rebirth he brings to Guitar:

Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees--he leaped. As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it. (337)

Chapter Four

"The sins of his kind":

Imperialism and Redemption in *Tar Baby*

All the gold and the jewels of the world meant nothing to Ondine. Of the treasures of humanity, she preferred only the humblest--the stove, the kettle, the spoon.... This Ondine was the most human being that ever lived. She was human by choice.

--Jean Giraudoux, *Ondine*

She didn't, in spite of her racial markings, belong to these dark segregated people. She was different. She felt it. It wasn't merely a matter of color. It was something broader, deeper, that made folk kin.

--Nella Larsen, *Quicksand*

I'm not going to sit at your table and watch you eat, with nothing on my plate, and call myself a diner. Sitting at the table doesn't make you a diner, unless you eat some of what's on that plate. Being here in America doesn't make you an American.

--Malcolm X

For I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and you gave me drink: I was a stranger and ye took me in: Naked and ye clothed me.... Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

--Matthew 25:35-36a, 40

"But all these stars are silent. You--you alone will have the stars as no one else has them....In one of the stars I shall be living..."

--Saint-Exupéry,
The Little Prince

In *Tar Baby*, Toni Morrison continues her interrogation of the materialism and superficiality of United States society, and also extends her illumination of the complicated race and class oppression of African Americans in the late twentieth century. The theology that informs *Tar Baby* embraces the cultural complexity of

Voudoun, a religious practice composed of African, Christian, and Native American elements specific to the Caribbean region. Since Morrison's theology is encompassing and not oppositional, it does not, as with a number of other feminist theologies, require the positing of an otherworldly "theology of the goddess."¹ Instead, Morrison utilizes sacred Judeo-Christian texts, such as the Bible and the Apocrypha, and extracanonical scripture, such as Gnostic texts, along with culturally specific references such as "*chevaliers*"--the *loa* of Voudoun are known as "divine horsemen," *chevaliers*, who take possession of a person, the "horse", by "mounting" her or him (cf. Deren). These sources combine in *Tar Baby* to create a theology that rejects absolute categories and boundaries.

Recalling Morrison's professed lack of interest in "indulging herself in private, closed exercises of her imagination," *Tar Baby* signals what I perceive as her effort to move out of the bounded space of "black literature" and into the mainstream of American letters. A perplexing novel for many critics,² I see it as the failed precursor to Morrison's great novel, *Beloved* (much as *Mardi* was for Melville before *Moby-Dick*), wherein her creative gifts find a form suitable to the literary mainstream. This is not to say that what readers have come to think of as characteristic Morrisonian elements are not in evidence, but her depiction of a fragmented community of both black people and white people is installed within a similarly fragmented narrative.

More than Morrison's previous three novels, however, *Tar Baby* alludes to the historical constitution of Christian doctrine, particularly the creation of the religio-

¹ A recent article which employs the goddess paradigm--with considerable misunderstanding of the varieties of Christian theology--is Jacqueline Trace's "Dark Goddesses."

² John Leonard writes that he "fell off the truck with *Tar Baby*... It still seems overly didactic, somehow brittle, her only novel you can't sing, the least operative" (42). Marilyn Sanders Mobley sees the novel as Morrison's "most problematic," narratively and thematically (284).

political hierarchy associated with the Roman church. This hierarchy appropriated and obscured the radical egalitarianism that, for many modern theologies, especially liberation theologies, is the defining characteristic of the mission of Jesus. Riane Eisler, whose work has been instrumental in the development of the Goddess paradigm, argues that in the teachings of Jesus:

we find that the cornerstone of dominator ideology, the masculine-superior/feminine-inferior species model is, but for a few exceptions, *conspicuous in its absence*. Instead, permeating these writings is Jesus' message of spiritual equality. (121-emphasis added)

Equality for all people is not only a political ideal, but a spiritual and liberation-theological imperative; Morrison's novels are, once again, *specifically political works of art*. The subtle point, so relevant to *Tar Baby*, is that the rise of Christianity occurred simultaneously with the rise of the nation-state, and that Christianity in the early centuries of the first millennium of the common era was divided into numerous sects, many of which were suppressed as political leaders of the time cast about for ways to control an unruly peasant populace. Again, repressive and hierarchical models of "Christianity" gained primacy at that time, not at all by virtue of a close connection to the philosophy and theology of Jesus of Nazareth. These hierarchical models diverged from other models of Christianity, such as Gnostic Christianity, which were effectively suppressed.

Morrison's theology is neither oppositional nor hegemonic; rather, she reappropriates and reinterprets the Christian paradigm in accordance with African American history. This paradigm reveals in no small measure the cultural specificity of her novels, always coming out of the black church tradition of which Morrison herself is a cultural representative. By setting *Tar Baby* in the Caribbean, Morrison maximizes allusive potential: to past and present imperialism in the region, to Native American history, to slavery and Caribbean slave revolts, to religion and culture. These allusions, moreover, take shape as the historical and

spiritual presences on the Isle des Chevaliers, horsemen who encode *marronage* in the French Caribbean and the Voudoun religion specific to the region; "the very nature of plantation slavery implied violence and resistance, [and] the wilderness setting of early New World plantations made *marronage* and the existence of organized maroon communities a ubiquitous reality."³

Tar Baby, it may be argued, is at once Morrison's most secular and most theological novel; Sallie McFague writes of the New Testament parables that "While the stories are, at one level, thoroughly ordinary and secular, events occur and decisions are made which are absurd, radical, alien, extreme" (46). This intersection will appear most clearly in Morrison's climactic rewriting of the Parable of the Great Supper (Luke 14:15-24; Matt. 22:1-14),⁴ when what is depicted is "an assault on the social, economic, and mythic structures people build for their own comfort and security"--including, as McFague shows, "all forms of idolatry and absolutism, *even* the new orientation to reality brought about through the parables' redescription of reality" (47). The hallmarks of the "ordinary and secular" in *Tar Baby* include the almost relentless materialism of the Streets and of Jadine Childs--a litany of designer names invades the narrative: "'Chloë has four new perfumes'" (72); "wiping teary cheeks with the top hem of a Vera sheet" (74);

³ Price 2. The word, *marronage*, or flight from slavery, came into being as follows, according to Price:

The English word "maroon," like the French *marron*, derives from Spanish *cimarrón*. As used in the New World, *cimarrón* originally referred to domestic cattle that had taken to the hills in Hispaniola...and soon after to Indian slaves who had escaped from the Spaniards as well... By the end of the 1530s, it was already beginning to refer primarily to Afro-American runaways..., and had strong connotations of "fierceness," of being "wild" and "unbroken"... (1-2)

⁴ This should not be confused with the New Testament chronicles of "The Last Supper (The Lord's Supper)" (Luke 22:19-38). The parable concerns a "great supper" in Luke and a wedding feast in Matthew in which none of the invited guests attend, and "the wedding was furnished with guests" from "the highways" (Matt. 22:10).

"'Ballys don't cause corns'" (16); and so forth--contrasted to the ascetic physicality of the Christ-interloper, Son: "he had no things to gather" (1).

Son's associations with Christ have also been widely noticed and, in general, dismissed. Similarly dismissed therefore is the reason Morrison might repeatedly use Christ figures in a variety of novelistic incarnations. The politically powerful in the first four hundred years of the current era transformed the socially subversive "Son of man" into a controlling force and an agent of law. The early Christian movement was in fact diverse through the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine to Christianity in 313, only half a century after the end of the reign of the emperor Valerian to which *Tar Baby* alludes. "Yet even by A.D. 200," Elaine Pagels has written,

Christianity had become an institution headed by a three-rank hierarchy of bishops, priests, and deacons, who understood themselves to be the guardians of the only "true faith." The majority of churches, among which the church of Rome took a leading role, rejected all other viewpoints as heresy.⁵

Pagels argues that the control of Christianity by church hierarchies and governmental structures in the centuries since has increasingly diverged from the mission of the historical liberating figure of Jesus, meshing with the designs of oppressive and colonizing nation-states. The complexity of the history of the Christian religion, a religion destined to dominate and alter forever the lands of the New World, but which arose out of the North African-Middle Eastern religious traditions of the ancient Hebrews, must be acknowledged at some level in order to begin to penetrate Morrison's dense web of allusions.

* * *

⁵ *The Gnostic Gospels* xxiii. Pagels more recent book, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*, further explicates the way dogma and doctrine were formed in the early centuries of the Common Era.

As I mentioned earlier, countless critics have explored Morrison's subversion of rigid either/or categories, and Keith Byerman asserts, "Perhaps more than any other [contemporary African American] writer...Morrison shows the exploitative nature of logocentric orders" (185). Byerman's footnote to this comment explains that "*logocentric* is used to suggest the assumption of a fixed relationship between signifier and signified that does not allow for the ambiguity of language" (285-86). He also comments on Morrison's creation of characters who resist binarity:

Son and others like him [refuse] to participate in those social orders which categorize and systematize; they create identities by deliberately evading the conventional markers of identity--family, job, education, religion, politics--and they equate this evasion with life. (213-14)

I find Byerman's understanding of Morrison suggestive for my purposes: not even Jesus is a "transcendent signified"; Christianity is not monolithic. The figure of Jesus of Nazareth and the interpretation of "word made flesh" are subject to countless historical indeterminacies.

Morrison's preoccupation with historical Christianity appears in all the novels, beginning with *The Bluest Eye*, in which she designates at least two rigid interpretations of Christ which are legacies of political oppression; two characters in that novel explicitly misunderstand the mission of Jesus.⁶ Pauline Breedlove is "not interested in Christ the Redeemer, but rather Christ the Judge....She needed Cholly's sins desperately....In the name of Jesus" 937), and Elihue Micah Whitcomb--Soaphead Church--

learned everything he needed to know well, particularly the fine art of self-deception....he chose to remember Hamlet's abuse of Ophelia, but not Christ's love of Mary Magdalene; Hamlet's frivolous politics, but not Christ's serious anarchy....he allowed only the narrowest interpretation to touch him. (133-34)

⁶ I use the term "mission of Jesus" in the sense of John Dominic Crossan uses it in *The Historical Jesus*, the method by which Jesus took his subversive message to the people of his time.

Why are the juxtapositions between Hamlet and Christ here? I believe that Morrison is pointing to the secular humanistic deification of the dead white bard which connects then to the remarkably "narrow interpretation" of the life and ministry of a Middle Eastern man of color who was wildly subversive in his own time. Pauline Breedlove represents the kind of fundamentalist Christian who needs the sins of others to create a personal identity where one may not otherwise exist.⁷ In these passages, the intersection of redemption, love, and anarchy suggests a liberation theology. Pauline Breedlove and Soaphead Church *fail to recognize* the "Son of man," just as do those at L'Arbe de la Croix; the obviousness of Son's name and his arrival at Christmas are only the beginning of the conceptual theological vision Morrison transmits in *Tar Baby*.

In her previous novels, biblical allusions are more easily discerned, if somewhat cryptic. Names such as "Micah" and "Samson" point to Judges in *The Bluest Eye*, and "Eva" indicates a connection to Genesis and "Hannah" to 1 Samuel in *Sula*; Pilate, Rebekah, Hagar, and First Corinthians are all character names in the biblically-titled *Song of Solomon*. In *Tar Baby*, Morrison shifts to the interpretation of scripture--including interpretations of the story of Adam and Eve by St. Augustine and John Milton--and to the interpretation of the person and experience of Jesus of Nazareth by the early Christian church. The link between Margaret Street and the medieval mystic Margaret of Cortona; the Christian-mysticism suggested by the "breasts [that] go on giving" of the "Mary," Thérèse

⁷ I conjecture that Pauline's name is an allusion to Paul, another conflicted but central figure in early Christianity, one at whose door the more conservative elements are often laid. For an explication of some of the "different 'Pauls' in the NT," see Leander Keck's *Paul and His Letters* (5). Feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza comments, "Those who joined the early Christian missionary movement joined it as an association of equals" (71).

(132);⁸ Valerian as misguided and despotic early Christian-era imperialist; and the role of "the prince" (29)--"*le petit prince*," the archangel Michael, are manifestations of Christianity across a number of historical periods.

Aside from *The Little Prince*, a Christ story to which I will return later, I conjecture that one important subtext of this novel is Jean Giraudoux's 1939 play, *Ondine*, which ran on Broadway in the early nineteen fifties. Although all of Morrison's novels deal with families of one kind or another and with domestic situations, *Tar Baby* replicates *Ondine*'s concern with the intersection of the mystical and the real, with domesticity in the midst of an overwhelming natural world--as Ondine thinks in *Tar Baby*, "Things went back to their natural state so quickly in that place" (80). Maurice Valency comments on the play:

...*Ondine* is a domestic drama--with a difference. It is the drama of nature which strives to domesticate itself out of love for man, the drama of man who, once he has caught a glimpse of the world beyond reality, can never more reconcile himself to the conventional life of his fellows. (xix)

If nature in *Tar Baby* does not exactly "love the men" who alter the course of the river and destroy the refuges of wild parrots, it is in a sense accommodating and is certainly interested in and observant of the follies of the humans who inhabit the natural world of Isle des Chevaliers.

Nature possesses consciousness in *Tar Baby*--a very African idea--but is also linked to the Christlike Son: "Only the champion daisy trees were serene. After all, they were part of a rain forest already two thousand years old and scheduled for eternity" (7). None of the characters in the novel seem able to adjust to conventional life after the intrusion of Son--including Son himself. However, the relationship of "nature" to "man" noticed by Valency is remarkably parallel to the relation of Christian divinity to humanity as described in John. As "nature...strives

⁸ In *Jesus as Mother*, Caroline Walker Bynum discusses at length the medieval mystical notion that Christ's "breasts" are an endless source grace, compassion, kindness and inspiration (113-125).

to domesticate itself out of love for man," so the Christian deity "so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son" (John 3:16). As nature domesticates itself in *Ondine*, so the Christian deity becomes flesh in order to establish a relationship with humanity.

Other connections suggest themselves here in terms of Son and the natural-mystical domestic story *Ondine* presents. *Tar Baby's* prologue is, in Susan Cory Everson's words, "heavy with birth imagery" (67); as Peter Erickson puts it, Son "submits to a mother nature personified as 'the water lady'" (25). Son is consubstantial with nature, and this in turn implies a connection to another god "closely associated with natural process"--Dionysus. James Carse notes the disruptive power of Dionysus:

His usual dwelling place is in the wild, physically and psychically far from civilized human existence. The natural order from which he is inseparable usually causes social disorder.... Even his birth has a strange ambiguity about it: he was born twice... This double birth may account for the fact that he can sometimes be found in female form. (228)

Death and resurrection define Dionysus, as they do Christ. Jesus and Dionysus are both "shapeshifters" and shape-shifters are also tricksters. Trudier Harris remarks that "Son exhibits the amorality of the trickster by refusing to recognize any limitations on his movements or his behavior" (120). Indeed, Dionysus, the amoral "god of wine and revelry" (228), is certainly related to tricksters who according to Carse

very often suffer, and even die, for their blundering misdeeds, but they nonetheless return miraculously for more adventure, changing from death back into life--the ultimate feat of a shapeshifter. (226)

Christ, Dionysus, the Voudoun loa Agwé, and water-spirits (in this case one named Ondine, a figure linked to the water spirits of numerous mythologies) intersect in Son. Water is the common place of contact with the ancestors across African belief systems; Geoffrey Parrinder discusses "[t]he royal ancestral cult of the Fon of Abomey":

The ancestors of commoners were said to be the 'water-spirits' (*to-vodù*), for they were supposed to live in rivers with other water sprites and lesser human and divine beings...(119)

Son--the novel's alpha and omega--is born out of water, like an African ancestral water spirit and like a fish. In his classic *The Bestiary of Christ*, Louis Charbonneau-Lassay writes of the ubiquitous fish imagery surrounding Christ, especially in the early Christian church:

"We, small fish," wrote Tertullian in the second century, "like our Fish, Jesus Christ, swim in the (baptismal) water, and we can be saved only by remaining in it." And in the following century, St. Cyprian expressed himself thus: "It is in the water that we are reborn, in the likeness of Christ, our Master, our Fish." (300)

The morning after Son has been discovered at L'Arbe de la Croix, "Only the emperor butterflies appeared excited about something" (69). These butterflies appear coincidentally with Son; they are a conscious natural entity that wants to see Jadine's coat made of "the hides of ninety baby seals" (74) and they are "agitating the air" when Son appears later in Jade's room (97). Charbonneau-Lassay, in his discussion of butterflies, explains the symbolic shift from the Ancient Greeks to the early Christians:

The Greek language uses one and the same word for the human soul and the butterfly: *Psyche*. And for ancient Christian symbolism, the dove-winged Eros in amorous pursuit of the butterfly Psyche, the human soul, was one of those prophetic symbols that the Church adopted unchanged and transferred to Christ. In the times of the catacombs, the Roman pontiffs countenanced without hesitation the inclusion of the fable of Eros and Psyche on the sacred decoration of the underground sanctuaries. (348-349)

Within Morrison's complex symbol system, Christ is Eros is Son and the soul is Psyche is Jadine. Christ pursues the soul like a lover; on this reading, Jadine is a lost soul pursued by Son. The eroticism associated with Eros and Psyche is replicated in Son and Jadine and, as is often the case in her novels, Morrison makes explicit the spiritual and political nature of the erotic.⁹ When Son surprises Jadine

⁹ See Audre Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" in *Sister Outsider*.

in her room, the continuing sexual image of "small dark dogs galloping on silver feet" (97), which Jade associates with Son, is repeated. Jade and Son's love relationship consumes them; their bodies become the world for each other:

together they could not concentrate on the given world. They reinvented it, remembered it through the other. He looked at her face in the mirror and was reminded of days at sea when water looked like sky. She surveyed his body and thought of...casks of green wine...and the recollection of a tree that wanted to dance with her. (198)

Morrison's theological models are never unitary or univocal; Son and Jade will fall from the state of grace their love has brought to them. Their fall entails the Adam and Eve story that runs throughout the novel, most obviously in the events surrounding the stolen apples, from which ensues the dissension at the Christmas dinner. After their expulsion from Eden, Jade recalls "the tree" in the garden, and at some level, has also recognized the holy love, equality, and *àshe* brought by "the man," the "human being," Son.¹⁰

Son understands that "[h]e had produced [Jade's] nakedness and having soiled it, it shamed him" (234), as Adam and Eve become ashamed of their nakedness after disobeying God (Genesis 3:7). The nexus of allusions in *Tar Baby* consistently invokes reversal; the butterfly symbolism, for example, encodes a darker side:

Because it goes from one flower to another without settling for long on any, it has become the image of inconstancy; and the night-flying moths, in the words of St. Francis de Sales, "seeing a flame, go to it and fly around it seeking to know if it is as sweet as it is beautiful, and continue until they are lost..." (Charbonneau-Lassay 349)

Jadine, a character of seemingly shallow motives and little understanding of herself, her African American heritage, or of anything not material and European, is certainly inconstant, but perhaps she is not "lost." In the reader's last view of

¹⁰ *Adam* is Hebrew for human being. Adam is a type of Christ and, as Pagels has shown, the earliest Christians interpreted the Adam and Eve story as one replicating the equality and moral freedom inherent in the words of Christ (cf. *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*).

Jadine, she returns to Paris with the thought that "Still it would be hard. So very hard to forget the man who fucked like a star" (251). While the ending of *Tar Baby*, like the endings of Morrison's other novels, is indeterminate, it is not without hope. I read the ambiguous outcome of Jadine and Son's relationship in terms of Morrison's theological project, which at all points in this novel relates to recognizing Christ and redemption, and understanding his resurrection in terms of the continuing presence of the ancestors in a continuing community (Crossan 404).

* * *

The story in Jean Giraudoux's *Ondine* centers around a knight's love for two beauties--the fair, blonde Ondine and the dark Bertha: "I am dark, I trusted my love to darkness" (211). Ondine, longing to become human for her love, Hans, "gave up her power in favor of such human specialties as...cooking" and "renounced her race and betrayed its interests" (242). The Ondine of *Tar Baby*, not blond but black, is the Street family's cook, married to Valerian's butler Sydney. "[D]reaming of sliding into water," Ondine is "frightened that her heavy legs and swollen ankles will sink her" (51).

In *Tar Baby* there are three beauties: Ondine is the dark one, in contrast not only to the red-haired, white-skinned Margaret Street, but also to Jadine, her niece by marriage, who with skin the color of "raw silk" (234), is sort of black and sort of white. Jadine encodes what Elizabeth Abel calls, referring to Morrison's story "Recitatif," "[t]he racial ambiguity so deftly installed...through codes that function symmetrically for black women and white women" (1). Each in her own way, all three of these women may be seen to renounce and betray her race: Ondine with the Dominique natives whom she regards as *her* servants in the social hierarchy of L'Arbe de la Croix (and with whom she feels little racial connection), Jadine as she identifies with Valerian Street instead of with her uncle and aunt, and Margaret in her abuse of her baby son. In fact, it is not only Jadine, but Ondine too, who

refuses to acknowledge the ancestors they share with the Dominican workers, ancestors present everywhere in the animated natural world of the islands. Even the "maiden aunts" (47, 52) of Margaret Street's past inhabit Isle des Chevaliers.

In a sense, the race betrayed by Margaret, Ondine, and Jadine is the human race, for each has trouble extending spirituality, humanity, compassion (in other words, the kingdom of God) to "others" who are outside a bounded "approved of" region. Morrison remarks that "everybody [in *Tar Baby*] was sort of wrong...Some more than others,"¹¹ and each of these characters suffers from an inability to connect with those to whom they should be the closest. Together, the three women represent the skin-class system begun when slavery was introduced in the Americas, a social hierarchical system that the advent of Son disrupts thoroughly.

Morrison situates the secular, domestic story of *Tar Baby* within a matrix of theological propositions: that the relationality between people establishes them in personhood; that without meaningful community, the human person withers and becomes stunted--as is the case with Margaret Street, who was establishing community with Ondine before it was forbidden by Valerian; that Jesus of Nazareth carried the kingdom of God with him from house to house, from table to table as John Dominic Crossan has shown "not as an apocalyptic event in the imminent future but as a mode of life in the immediate present" (304). The commensality of the Jesus movement equalized social hierarchies, and Morrison explores such subversion most fully during the Christmas dinner scene at L'Arbe de la Croix. Son, like Christ (and like Pilate Dead in *Song of Solomon*), "looks like a beggar, yet his eyes lack the proper cringe, his voice the proper whine, his walk the proper

¹¹ This remark is quoted in Jacky Martin's article, "From Division to Sacrificial Reconciliation in Toni Morrison's Novels," p. 80; Martin does not give a source.

shuffle" (Crossan xi).¹² Not only are social classes called into question and made irrelevant at the dinner, but Jesus's words dissolving family hierarchies are enacted:

...I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother...And a man's foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than me, is not worthy of me. (Matt. 10:35-37)

Like Jesus, Son arrives without shoes or possessions, without money, food, or a change of clothes. Like Jesus, he shares a meal with whoever is in the house he has come to, regardless of class or connection. And, finally, his disruption of the Christmas dinner does more than merely subvert the social hierarchy--it provides healing to the oblivious Valerian Street and his family.¹³

Trudier Harris has commented of the lack of absolutes in *Tar Baby* that "[Morrison] makes it impossible to delineate clearly agents of good and evil" (126). Son is mystically identified from the outset: his miraculous textual birth, with images--water, breath, and "the water-lady" (2)--of the ancestors and the Holy Spirit, as well as his "wide surgical hunger" (4) and Valerian's seemingly unaccountable inviting Son for a drink (68) are all indicative of "a symbolic representation of unbrokered egalitarianism" associated with Jesus.¹⁴ Son's disruption of the Street household, although it can be seen as the invasion of Satan into Paradise,¹⁵ is consistent with what is known of the historical Jesus. Crossan

¹² Pilate "looked as poor as everyone said she was, [but] something was missing from her eyes that should have confirmed it" (*Song of Solomon* 38).

¹³ Crossan (338-39) delineates the possible prohibitions and permissions Jesus gave to his followers when they were to begin their mission to the people. For example, "Matthew 10:9-10 forbids money, bag, two tunics, sandals, staff" (338).

¹⁴ Crossan 346.

¹⁵ Lepow, for example, writes, "Son too is Satanlike (or 'Satan-hero'-like) in catalyzing the release of knowlege" (370).

has shown that "Jesus, as magician and miracle worker, was a very problematic and controversial phenomenon not only for his enemies but even for his friends" (311).

* * *

Of all Toni Morrison's fiction, only the novel *Tar Baby* and the short story "Recitatif" have settings contemporaneous to their composition.¹⁶ In the other novels, the narratives end usually at least a decade before the time in which they were written. *Tar Baby*, published in 1981, takes place on a fictional Caribbean island, on Manhattan island, in a fictional all-black town in Florida, and briefly in Paris, in the late nineteen seventies--during the Carter administration.¹⁷ At that time, the momentum and gains of the Civil Rights movement seemed to falter under an increasingly hostile and conservative political climate which saw such "reverse discrimination" cases as *Bakke v. University of California* come to prominence. Conservative, reactionary whites regarded affirmative action programs as threats to their own employment; by 1980, with the election of Ronald Reagan, it had become "okay" to doubt the necessity and to express strong disapproval of programs which were designed to right imbalances created by centuries of whitemale dominance.¹⁸ *Tar Baby* reflects this time, and Melissa Walker notes that "Jadine and Son fight about race from the moment he invades her bedroom" (193).

The depicted historical era changes in each of Morrison's novels, but in all she evinces concern with ideological-racial differences within African American culture

¹⁶ I judge the time covered in "Recitatif," published in 1983, to be from the late 1950s to the early 1980s. The first person narrator, Twyla, is looking back on the course of her friendship with Roberta from a vantage point that is post-1970s bussing, and her son is in college.

¹⁷ Melissa Walker comments:

The opening events of the novel take place around 1979, though Morrison is more vague about the dating than in any of her previous novels, and readers have to add and subtract from the few given dates to come up with a time that is certainly in the late seventies. (194)

¹⁸ Berry and Blassingame 188-194, *passim*.

as well as racial situational conflicts within American culture more broadly. Son is a Vietnam veteran; Jadine has been given a coat by her Parisian boyfriend made of "the hides of ninety baby seals" (76); Valerian builds a house that drastically alters a natural Caribbean island paradise and puts in a greenhouse there so that he can grow plants native to Pennsylvania. Calling the moment of the novel's setting and composition "a time of lulls, of in-betweens," Walker lists the era's concerns:

The year 1979 was a time when many Americans were waiting: for the energy crisis to be resolved, for the Iranian [sic] hostages to be returned, for a presidential election....It was a time when those who had once focused on the atrocities of racial violence in the American South and the massacres of women and children in Southeast Asia could afford to turn their energies to the less sensational violence being done to the environment; when conservationists bought full-page ads in the *New York Times* complete with pictures depicting the murder of baby seals; and when the absence of war and civil unrest made possible the retreat into a kind of personal isolationism. (195)

Given the historical moment of *Tar Baby's* composition, therefore, it is not surprising that Morrison should write her first novel in which white characters have prominent roles and that one of those characters is a wealthy white man named for a Roman emperor. Valerian Street allegedly means well, but appears psychologically out-of-control when his power over his household is threatened and his unexamined whitemale acceptance of his family's relationality has been devastated.

In Morrison's other novels "America"--the United States--is a framework within which the stories are acted out, establishing the context for the African American experience she portrays. Morrison confirms the role of the novelistic setting in a comment on *Song of Solomon*:

The composition of red, white and blue in the opening scene provides the national canvas/flag upon which the narrative works and against which the lives of these black people must be seen, but which must not overwhelm the enterprise the novel is engaged in. ("Unspeakable Things" 29)

The primary setting of *Tar Baby*, Isle des Chevaliers, is a fictional Caribbean island to which servants of the Streets can commute from Dominique, the island/nation of

Dominica.¹⁹ To the north of Dominica is Guadeloupe, and between the two are groups of small islands called Iles des Saintes and Iles de Petite Terre--thus, the name of Morrison's fictional island is consistent with others in that area.

"[L]aborers imported from Haiti came to clear the land" of Isle des Chevaliers, we read early in *Tar Baby* (7). The histories of Dominica and Haiti are connected in significant ways: *marronage* was rampant throughout the French West Indies, and slave revolutions were going on in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Haiti, St. Lucia, Jamaica, Martinique and Guadeloupe:

'slave revolt/resistance...was resistance against totemic authority, against law and custom, against the loss of Africa, against the loss of an imaginary Africa, against a set of people who had been inured into thinking and believing and reacting in a certain way and who had systems of defending themselves against and controlling "others" who often outnumbered them by ten to one.'²⁰

The Caribbean constitutes a concentrated locus of colonization and uprising; as I have previously mentioned, it is a geography in which African, Native American, and European cultural practice came together in particular ways.

Tar Baby foregrounds the Caribbean as the first site of European colonization in the Americas. Black Africans were brought to Haiti as slaves in 1510, almost one hundred years before they set foot in Virginia in 1609. Dominica stands out from other Caribbean islands in certain key respects:

After nearly 3,000 years of human habitation, Dominica, known to many as "the Nature Island of the Caribbean," is one of the few places where untouched primary tropical forests can still be found....The steep mountains and deep valley provided the early Carib Indians with a natural fortress against European colonizers, making Dominica one of the last islands to be fully colonized. These same features later provided a safe haven for escaped slaves. (Meditz and Hanratty 263)

¹⁹ Dominica became independent in 1978, when *Tar Baby* was being written.

²⁰ Edward Brathwaite, quoted in Parry et al. 137. On the interactional nature of the history of the French West Indies, see Chapter XI, "The Second American War of Independence."

Because "Dominique" figures so prominently in *Tar Baby*, I take the island's geography to be paradigmatic. It is the backdrop against which Morrison wishes her characters to enact their stories, a geography that encodes nature's power and the rapaciousness of white colonizers, fierce indigenous peoples, the influence of African culture and religion, and the spiritual African-Christian-Native American ambience in which Caribbean peoples dwell. Maya Deren writes of the rage that united the displaced African and the dispossessed Caribbean Indian:

Wherever and whenever the African and the Indian met in the hills they had two major bases for a common cause: they shared, as human beings, a hatred of the white man, who had dislocated both races and from whose brutality both were fugitives; and they had in common the so-called "primitive mentality", with religious traditions strikingly similar, toward which they both looked for their reply to this catastrophe. (64-65)

The white and black characters in *Tar Baby* are defined by a hierarchy and social stratification that are part of the historical allusiveness of the novel. Class structure is carefully delineated in *Tar Baby's* many mealtime and food preparation scenes; according to Gillian Feeley-Harnik, "In establishing precisely who eats what with whom, commensality is one of the most powerful ways of defining and differentiating social groups" (11). Eating, food, and meals pervade *Tar Baby*. The central theological point about the commensality associated with Jesus is that the homes where Jesus was given meals were sites of "an egalitarian sharing" (Crossan 344) that leveled class hierarchies.

The white characters--Margaret Lenore Lordi Street, Valerian Street, and their absent son Michael Street--are not, as Linda Wagner has argued, merely part of "long and perhaps misleading context chapters" providing information to the reader on the beautiful black Jadine Childs and her internalized white-world values (202). The "context" the Streets provide for Jadine is the very salient fact that she has joined their social class. And for Son, as a type of Christ, theirs is the house to which he brings his "unbrokered egalitarianism" (cf. Crossan). The Streets are no

more extraneous or peripheral to *Tar Baby* than the rich man is to the Christian parables. The white "presence" in the story of American Blacks has been separated off much in the same way that the black "presence" has been by white authors and other dominant cultural voices in North America--denying in both directions the constitutive role of African Americans in United States culture. Unfortunately, critics like Wagner, in contesting the importance of any of Morrison's characters, replicate a division that is dangerous to both poles of the opposition. In fact, Valerian, whom Jadine admires greatly, has supplied the "capital" for Jadine's shift to bourgeois capitalism. Recalling the black bourgeois attitude and its consequences for the African American community delineated in *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby* depicts the continuation in the contemporary moment of this economic and class struggle for blacks: assimilation, shallowness, loss of a rich cultural matrix, and the continued exploitation of African Americans under capitalism.

The spiritual, historical, and cultural matters encoded in the novel's black/white relations, the problematic racial definitions espoused by Jadine and Son, the composite religious practice of the French Caribbean are summed up by Cornel West's understanding

that religious impulses are one of the few resources for a moral and political commitment beyond the self in the capitalistic culture of consumption. These impulses often require commitments to neighbor, community, and unknown others.... (17)

Jadine receives two warnings about this which are usually interpreted by critics in a way specific to her personality as a character, but I read them as being directed at this crucial social, economic, and theological complex of issues. The first warning to Jadine comes from Son, when their relationship is disintegrating:

"Correct," he said. "The problem is not Valerian. The problem is me. Solve it. With me or without me, but solve it because it ain't going anywhere. You sweep me under the rug and your children will cut your throat...." (232)

I read Son's polemical monologue here--in which he takes up issues of racial dominance, class as it is integrally confounded with race in United States society, and gender stereotypes within the black community--as not so much an indictment of Jadine, but as suggesting that if each individual does not consider the nature of racial oppression and take responsibility for ending it, he or she colludes with the dominant white group against liberation. And surely, in terms of the novel, Jadine is guilty of this. The passage alludes to two of Jesus's best-known sayings:

...and the children shall rise up against their parents, and cause them to be put to death... He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad. (Matt. 10:21b, 12:30)

Jadine receives a second warning when she has returned to Isle des Chevaliers to retrieve her sealskin coat, in this case from Ondine:

"Jadine, a girl has got to be a daughter first. She have to learn that. And if she never learns how to be a daughter, she can't never learn how to be a woman... What I want from you is what I want for you. I don't want you to care about me for my sake. I want you to care about me for yours."
(242)

Both of these warnings again echo New Testament verses:

...he that loveth son or daughter more than me, is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross and followeth after me, is not worthy of of me. He that findeth his life shall lose it; and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it. He that receiveth you receiveth me, and he that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me. (Matt. 10: 37b-40)

Ondine's warning also echoes *The Little Prince*, another subtext of *Tar Baby*, alluded to when Valerian tells Jadine that it is his son Michael's favorite book. The cautions Jadine is given refer to the responsibility and community that are necessary for full, genuine love. In *The Little Prince*, the prince is told by the fox, "'You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed. You are responsible for your rose...'" (88). For Jadine, her love for Son, and for her adoptive parents Sydney and Ondine, becomes confounded with tangible capitalist indicators of success.

These complex ideas boil down to a critique of social hierarchy realized in a "traditional" family setting or more broadly in any society. At a certain level, Ondine and Sydney share this misunderstanding with Jadine and the Streets. Wagner's notion that the white characters in *Tar Baby* provide only background for the Jadine-Son relationship ignores crucial aspects of the novel; every word of Morrison's texts enhances her political project, and poses historical, theological, cultural questions. As it turns out, the Jadine-Son relationship *is* central for its replication of "Eros [Christ] in amorous pursuit of...Psyche, the human soul," as discussed above. But the white characters are also absolutely necessary to *Tar Baby's* ambiguous and encompassing liberation theology.

Margaret Street--red haired, white skinned, with "blue-if-its-a-boy blue eyes" (69)--is an unwitting icon of America, a beauty queen martyred to whitemale power at the hands of her tyrannical husband. Margaret is another not-very-admirable character in a book filled with unadmirable characters, but she evokes sympathy nonetheless. Confused and lacking self-esteem, Margaret is dismissed not only by her husband, but also by American culture and by her own family who seem able only to relate to beautiful people in terms of their looks. Margaret, we understand, had hoped that her husband would see her "Margaret-hood...faceless, silent and trying like hell to please" (71), that he would interact with her as a human being. Margaret--white, rich, beautiful, and a child abuser--is another victim of whitemale dominance. During mealtime scenes Morrison shows Valerian's tyranny of Margaret most clearly. The equality characteristic of tables at which Jesus dined contrasts specifically in the New Testament to Greco-Roman meal customs. The latter were hierarchical arrangements which often included either men only, or were social occasions during which only men reclined. These contrasts are revealing of Valerian's imperial personality:

...there was always some sense of ranking presupposed by the position of the diners, beginning with the "highest" position...then proceeding in a descending order....Only the upper echelon of society were to recline....Another way in which social ranking was addressed was by providing greater quantity or quality of food to those of the upper echelon....²¹

Valerian's mealtime tyranny is apparent in his idiosyncratic eating habits--visited upon his servants, Sydney and Ondine--as well as in Margaret's mealtime nervousness; she drops things and is always confused over the use of utensils in Valerian's presence. An early breakfast scene shows him condescendingly ordering Margaret to "'Slurp away'" (19) at her breakfast food and reveals how Valerian "put a stop to" (25) Margaret's kitchen friendship with the young Ondine when both Ondine and Margaret were newly married, when Margaret was seventeen and Ondine twenty-three.

In drawing Margaret, Morrison has created not merely a contrast to Jadine, who may be even shallower than Margaret, particularly because she is educated as Margaret is not, but also a white woman who has internalized her own liminality (cf. Wynter) and agreed to the superiority of her husband and his attitudes:

[Margaret] had never known [Valerian] to be [wrong] and doubted if he could be in error about anything. Not him, not with those calm eyes or that crisp quiet voice that reassured and poked fun at you at the same time. And although the theme of her defense in the argument was that Ondine (if not all colored people) was just as good as they were, she didn't believe it....The point was not consorting with Negroes, the point was her ignorance and her origins. (50)

Valerian "plays God" and represents the hierarchical form of Christianity which arose in the early centuries of the common era in place of the potential social disruption of the Jesus movement. Margaret exhibits neurotic symptoms of the colonized personality; as Morrison has commented, "Margaret has been thoroughly crippled by her husband" (Ruas 227). She has internalized much of the oppressor mentality, and fails to see the very important link between "her ignorance and her

²¹ Smith 651, 652.

origins" and an ignorance of the kingdom of God, the community around her. Morrison's worldview, her ambiguous situations and characters, are designed to reveal how encompassing and deleterious dominance is, and how it is deleterious to the oppressors as human beings and those who collude with them as well as to those they oppress.

While Margaret's name is not found in the Bible, it was a popular name for women in the Middle Ages. The name Margaret ultimately derives from an ancient Hebrew word and is understood to mean "pearl" and sometimes "child of light." Margaret's middle name, Lenore, is a form of Helen, which also means "light."²² Margaret has been born to "two ordinary looking people, Joseph and Leonora Lordi" (46); their surname contains an obvious reference to the Christian deity and possibly to feudal authority. Margaret's dark Italian parents are stunned by "Margaret's head glowing like an ember among the coal-dark heads" at Mass; because of her beauty, Margaret's parents believe "[s]he won't have to worry" (47). When Valerian sees the fair-skinned, "rosy-checked girl," the child of light in a "red velvet coat and...ermine muff"... "something inside him knelt down" (13). The curse of Margaret's looks creates an impenetrable barrier to her difference, her personhood, for both her parents and her husband.

There are several saints named Margaret, but I have identified significant parallels between Morrison's character and the thirteenth-century Italian mystic, Margaret of Cortona. Caroline Walker Bynum calls Margaret of Cortona "one of the most interesting of women saints, because of her lowly origins" (141), like Margaret Street's. I find Margaret's confusion when eating, her concern about "calories" that Valerian plays into, the ascetic meals--"fruit and cold consommé" (96)--that she shares with Jadine to be akin to the medieval saints' "deliberate and

²² The information I use here is from Hanks and Hodges' *A Dictionary of First Names* (222-223) and Flora H. Loughead's *Dictionary of Given Names* (261, 299).

extreme renunciation of food and drink" (Bynum 2). For medieval women, a life of holiness and deprivation was a way out of the odiousness of marriage; Margaret of Cortona and others "had to wait for their husbands or lovers to die before they could espouse chastity" (Bynum 24). Margaret Street's marriage certainly becomes odious; in it, she is mystified, lonely, and victimized, and victimizes her child in turn. Once Margaret of Cortona took on her mystical way of life, she felt unworthy of the eucharist which was to be her main sustenance; as well as starving herself, she also "refused to cook for her illegitimate son" (Bynum 222).

Bynum comments on the role of commensality in "late medieval Europe":

Eating was also an occasion for union with one's fellows and one's God, a commensality given particular intensity by the prototypical meal, the eucharist, which seemed to hover in the background of any banquet. (3)

The refusal of food by medieval women was not a refusal, of course, of God or Jesus, but was, according to Bynum, "in some sense a rejection of family" (223). According to Morrison's distinctive system of reversal, Margaret, hoping to the last that the beloved son whom she has abused will come to Christmas dinner, kicks Ondine out of her kitchen so that she can cook Christmas dinner for Michael herself. Margaret's loneliness and alienation, which begins with her own family, seems only to have been exacerbated by her marriage and the birth of her only son. Like Margaret of Cortona, she always feels "unworthy" and of a low social class, until the Christmas dinner revelation of her abuse of Michael demands that Valerian finally see the reality of her life--Margaret Lenore's "light," in a sense--and the folly of his own.

Valerian Street's name puns one of the great roads of Ancient Rome, the Valerian Way. Valerian--Publius Licinius Valerianus--was Roman emperor from 253-60 C.E., a time when "plague and civil strife raged within the provinces of the Empire" and "its northern and eastern borders" were beset by invasions by "Goths and German tribal groups" (Grant 163). Michael Grant describes Valerian as

"apparently an honest and well-intentioned man" who had the "misfortune to inherit an Empire that was now completely out of control" (165). The third century was a formative time for the Christian church; under Valerian, "clergy [were] liable to capital punishment" and a number of early Christian saints were martyred under Valerian's rule (168).

Jadine finds Valerian "splendid" and even courageous (78, 79). He is the benevolent, snobbish, but "apparently well-intentioned" white emperor of his retreat on Isle des Chevaliers. The allusion to "ermine" (when Valerian first sees Margaret) and to Valerian's basic decency within his small world recalls again *The Little Prince*, and the king the prince encounters, whose "entire planet was crammed and obstructed by [his] magnificent ermine robe" (41). Like Valerian, this king "tolerated no disobedience. He was an absolute monarch. But, because he was a very good man, he made his orders reasonable" (42). Valerian, like this emperor, is a patriarchal--that is, *male*--God. In the end, more is required of anyone than merely good intentions and reasonable orders; Valerian may be "guilty...of innocence" (209) when he eventually finds out about Margaret's abuse of their son Michael, but he is guilty of much more. Valerian, like many whitemen, assumes that his narrow and uninformed view--what he calls "normal" and "decent" (45)--of the world is fine and that it subsumes the experiences and views of all who labor beneath him--in *Tar Baby*, Ondine and Sydney, Gideon and Thérèse, but also Jadine and Margaret. He possesses the ultimate colonialist mentality: appropriating the position of the colonized, he calls Michael's favorite book "'that quisling *Little Prince*'" (61). He tells Jadine in this same scene that Michael's "'idea of racial progress is All Voodoo to the People'" (61), positioning himself as the beleaguered and invaded one. Benevolent feelings for "others" come only when he can project his white secular-Christian reality onto "natives" he finds

inherently evil, as when he has decided that "the washerwoman" and "the yard boy" have been "celebrating and have taken a Christmas nip" (161).

Morrison imbues Valerian with humanity as well as narrowness, though; we see him as a small boy grieving at the death of his father with another "washerwoman." He is visited in his greenhouse by the ghost of the first wife he divorced, an "unlovable shrew" (123), "a termagant" (13) whom he starts missing after her death. He "conjure[s] up old friends and childhood playmates" (123). In the end one cannot help feeling that Valerian, too, is the victim of the patriarchal system of which he has been so heedlessly a part; he has married Margaret, we discover, not because of her "Margaret-hood," but because he "was determined to love [her] to prove he was capable of it to his first wife" (122-23). Valerian's personal losses, then, come about because of his inability to see the dangers inherent in his patriarchalism and colonialism--his inability to analyze the pitfalls of whitemale dominance, including its reification of a certain kind of beauty--and his inability to shake the material ease of wealth. As Morrison has commented--and as is illustrated so clearly in *Tar Baby*:

The trauma of racism is, for the racist and the victim, the severe fragmentation of the self, and has always seemed to me a cause (not a symptom) of psychosis.... ("Unspeakable Things" 16)

Michael Street is the novel's ubiquitous absent presence, one who shares with Son the position of Christ--some of the same imagery is associated with both of them, such as stars. Margaret and Valerian's son is "'twenty-nine going on thirty'" (170), a sixties person given to causes--like the Archangel Michael, a "principal fighter of the heavenly battle against the devil."²³ Two days before the Christmas revelation of Margaret's abuse of Michael, Valerian has a vision of his son: the "face smiling at him from the bowl of peaches was both the winsome two-year-old

²³ Farmer 300.

under the sink and the thirty-year-old Socialist" (123). The description of Valerian's vision is full of allusions to God and Christ, including the idea of Michael's coming as an eschatological event:

...he hoped far more than [Margaret] did that Michael would come. That maybe this time there would be the feeling of rescue between them as it had been when he had taken him from underneath the sink. (123)

When "his only living son" appears to him, "smiling...a smile of reconciliation," he connects it immediately to his egalitarian extension of hospitality to "the black man," Son (123).

Margaret tells Son that Michael is "'working on an Indian reservation. With the young people there, teenagers'" (171). Margaret wants Son to know that her son has chosen to reject those things that could have given him his father's life of ease and dominance:

her son was beautiful, wise and kind. That he loved people, was not selfish, was actually self-sacrificing, committed, that he could have lived practically any kind of life he chose, could be dissolute, reckless, trivial, greedy. But he wasn't. He had not turned out that way. He could have been president of the candy company if he had wanted, but he wanted value in his life, not money. (171)

One almost feels that Margaret's abusive "sacrifice" of Michael was *his* salvation. What caused him to refuse the predetermined patriarchal legacy that Valerian had not known to refuse? Was it the experience of suffering? Morrison's point, of course, is not that child abuse is acceptable, but rather that a heritage of ignorance and narrow, privileged experience continues to enable the patriarchal tradition of imposing suffering on "others."

The suffering of Jesus associated with Michael Street also connects him significantly to Michael the Archangel who, when referred to in the Bible, is most often associated with the fight against evil--another link between him and the figure of Jesus Christ. Bryan Wilson remarks on the ways in which people look for relief from the evils the plague the world:

Men may seek salvation from evil conceived in many forms--from anxiety; illness; inferiority feelings; grief; fear of death; concern for the social order. What they seek may be healing; the elimination of evil agents; a sense of access to power; the enhancement of status; increase of prosperity...; the transformation of the social order.²⁴

Inappropriate, materialistic forms of salvation plague the Street-Childs household, and are part of what blinds them to real salvation when they see it in the person of Son. The concern for the social order mentioned by Wilson inheres, again, in the Caribbean setting and the interracial and inter-class relationships of L'Arbe de la Croix.

The biblical associations around the figure of Michael are for the most part found in the apocalyptic books Daniel and Revelation, where the Archangel is indeed at the forefront of battles to change the social order:

And at that time shall Michael stand up, the great prince which standeth for the children of thy people: and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time...And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever. (Daniel 12:1-3)

And [the dragon's] tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to earth; and the dragon stood before the woman who was ready to be delivered, to devour her child as soon as it was born....And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels...(Revelation 12:4, 7)

Michael Street, from what we are told of him, stands with the children, as does "the little prince" who learns the "truths" forgotten by men and berates the narrator for "talking like the grown-ups" (*The Little Prince* 88, 28). The archangel Michael is an apocalyptic figure, a figure of the end-time, of "a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation." As Margaret tells Son, Michael "works with young people" on the Indian reservation. The American Indian Movement was most active in the mid-seventies; their occupation of Wounded Knee and the Pine

²⁴ Bryan R. Wilson, *Magic and Millennium: A Sociological Study of Religious Movements of Protest Among Tribal and Third-World Peoples*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) 492, quoted in Crossan 303.

Ridge Reservation took place at the end of 1973. Again, these allusions to indigenous people in the Americas reintroduce the particular sins of imperialism also present in the sins of Valerian.

Both Son and Michael are associated with stars throughout *Tar Baby*; Son tells Jadine what it's like to be a star, "a star star. In the sky" (184). Lauren Lepow finds that the poem written by Michael Street's teacher, which Margaret is looking for when she discovers Son, applies to Son as well as well as Michael: "And he glittered when he walked" (56). Cornel West has connected Jesus, the black church, stars and, implicitly, the political perspective that inheres in African American Christianity:

The Christocentric language of the black church--of Jesus as the bright and morning star against the backdrop of the pitch darkness of the night, as water in dry places, a companion in loneliness, a doctor to the sick, a rock in a wearied land--exemplifies the intimate and personal relationship between God and individual and between God and a world-forsaken people. (5)

Moreover, as with other significant symbols for Christ, the star imagery encodes what seems to be Christ's "opposite," Satan. This doubly-encoded symbolism accomplishes for Morrison her subversion of monolithic readings in particular of Son's character. In an essay that points out *Tar Baby's* correspondences with *Paradise Lost*, Lauren Lepow discusses the satanic side of star imagery:

When we first see Son at Isle des Chevaliers, he is clearly satanic, an intruder in Eden....Star imagery associates Son with Lucifer: Son is "as silent as a star" (89), and Jadine will find it "so very hard to forget the man who fucked like a star" (251). (370)

But *The Little Prince*, which is an obvious fable of Christ, is filled with star imagery clearly resonant with that of *Tar Baby*, such as, "...all these stars are silent. You--you alone--will have the stars as no one else has them" (*Little Prince* 104). Michael the Archangel, the Son of God, and Lucifer are interconnected but alternative representations of light in the Bible, but particularly in *Paradise Lost*; in *Tar Baby*, Margaret's name also associates her with light. Lucifer, called "son of

the morning, " wants to "exalt [his] throne above the stars of God" (Isaiah 14:12-13). Although the dragon (Satan) casts the stars to earth in the passage quoted above from Revelation, the "Son of man....had in his right hand seven stars" (Rev. 1:13, 16). Satan is also depicted in scripture as Leviathan, "that crooked serpent...the sea monster" (Isaiah 27:1), which recalls Son's birth out of the sea and his link to the water-sprite, Ondine.

Lepow is mistaken if she reads Morrison's subversion of "dualism" as only the analogy of Satan's invasion of Paradise to Son's water-born assault on Isle des Chevaliers; that is, if she reads Son as only subversive as the incarnation of Satan and not as Christ as well. Stars symbolize transformation and resurrection in *many* religions, myth-systems, and philosophical traditions:

It has been a common belief in many cultures that gods and heroes have taken permanent places in the night sky. This belief enters into Plato's philosophical speculation, in the *Timaeus*, that the stars are the souls of those liberated from their earthly shapes. (Carse 227)

In I Corinthians, from which Morrison takes her epigraph,²⁵ Paul concentrates on two of *Tar Baby's* most central conceptions, commensality and resurrection, and associates them with stars. As Carse remarks, "The Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body also shares in the general character of immortalization by shape shifting" (227):

There are also celestial bodies, and bodies terrestrial: but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars: for one star differeth from another star in glory. So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption....Behold, I show you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed... (I Corinthians 15:40-42, 51)

Lepow notices that, after he is "transformed by a shower, new clothes and Paco

Rabanne, "Son "becomes plausible as a redeemer who may rescue Jadine from

²⁵ "For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you" (I Corinthians 1:11). It has been widely noted that Morrison's given name is Chloe.

Valerian's world" (370, 371), but fails to connect Son to Jesus, instead equating Valerian Street's "white, male, capitalist supremacy" with Christianity (371).

While Lepow is correct in finding connections between Valerian and a patriarchal God, she misreads those connections as Morrison's understanding of Christian theology. In fact, Morrison's understanding is profound, and reaches back to the historical Jesus, who was immeasurably subversive of law and the social hierarchies of his time. Valerian is, rather, the patriarch who installs himself as God, the Roman emperor or whitemale capitalist who deifies himself and who builds his own Garden of Eden, dictating who will stay and who must go. And, as the political radical Milton so subtly showed in *Paradise Lost*, it is an imperial God, and not Satan, who is ultimately culpable in the expulsion of disobedient mankind from Paradise.

Lepow makes nothing of the Archangel Michael's speeches in Book XI of *Paradise Lost*. Michael's speech to Adam and Eve about the fate of the world up to the flood has special relevance to Michael Street's renunciation of his father's wealth:

....Those whom last thou saw'st
 In triumph and luxurious wealth, are they
 First seen in acts of prowess eminent
 And great exploits, but of true virtue void;
 Who having spilt much blood, and done much waste
 Subduing Nations, and achiev'd thereby
 Fame in the World, high titles, and rich prey,
 Shall change thir course to pleasure, ease, and sloth,
 Surfeit, and lust, till wantonness and pride
 Raise out of friendship hostile deeds in Peace.
 (Book XI, 787-796)

Without a doubt, the "pleasure, ease, and surfeit" of the Valerian Street "raises out of friendship hostile deeds" at Christmas dinner.

In his absence, Michael must be defined by his family (including Ondine and Sydney Childs) in relation to the colonized people he feels compelled to help.

Ondine alludes to the present attitude of this once "'sweet boy'" in terms of food:

"Now I suppose he'll be wanting mangoes too. Well, he can have em if he'll stop coming in my kitchen to liberate me every minute'" (30). According to his father, Michael is "a cultural orphan" seeking "other cultures he could love without risk or pain" (124)--much in the way the actual orphan, Jadine, embraces white culture to avoid searching for her mother among the ancestral *loa* of her race. Michael the Archangel has been thought to be "so powerful that souls can be rescued even from hell" (Farmer 300). Through the absent Michael, and his transfiguration in Son, the community of black and white Americans--"both bad and good" (Matt. 22:10)--sit down together to eat a dangerously liberating Christmas dinner: "This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them" (Luke 15:2).

* * *

The Christmas dinner at L'Arbe de la Croix is the enactment of St. Paul's prophecy: "we shall all be changed." Son's presence, the flip-side of Michael's absence, results in an altered social order, the removal of the quotidian hierarchy of the Street-Childs household. As the dinner progresses, Valerian becomes increasingly, and impotently, imperious--"as if I *could* be called into question!" (177)--and Son becomes a righteous and passionate savior leading Ondine and Sydney to their own revelation and prophecy. During the course of the dinner, both Valerian and Son call up visions of the island's *chevaliers*. Valerian's are French soldiers, imperial representatives of "the security of the Napoleonic Code" (177)--another reference to tyrants and to the slave revolts in the Caribbean during Napoleon's reign. Son's *chevaliers* are the *loa*, his own blinded ancestors and those of Thérèse and Gideon, but also of Ondine, Sydney, and Jadine. Morrison reminds us, however, that Ondine's righteous revelation of necessity entails evil, "a full recognition of the legitimacy of forces other than good ones" (*Sula* 90). As Ondine breaks down after she recounts Margaret's abuse of Michael, "her diadem braids turned into horns" (180). Understanding evil's coexistence with good also means

sharing responsibility, comprehending complicity. Valerian, devastated by "something so foul...so revolting"--his own "crime of innocence" (209)--hears in Margaret's retreating footsteps, "I will say it to you. Share it with you. Make it yours as well as mine'" (200), that is, "the sins of his kind" (209), of *adam*, the human being.

In the end, there is no clear resolution; it is not possible to tell whether Son has succeeded in saving Jadine's soul. He does succeed in reversing the social order at L'Arbe de la Croix so that he can try. He brings a kind of salvation to the young "Nommo" in New York City (195), but Jadine, within the boundaries of the text, still cannot recognize this kind of success. Neither Son nor Jadine seem to be able to retain a sense of the kingdom of God in the praxis of living in "this world," nor that their bodies and their sensuality and sexuality are also their link to the spiritual realm of the ancestors. Jadine fears redemption; her fear is symbolized by the "night women" (233) who possess her room and her consciousness in Eloe. She fears that salvation means she will have to give up the self she has struggled so to define, instead of the mere material things she has equated with success, and so she gives up her savior. Though ostensibly and resolutely returning to Isle des Chevaliers to find Jadine, Son enters the mystical, ancestral space of the *chevaliers*, the *loa*: "The mist lifted and the trees stepped back a bit as if to make *the way* easier for *a certain kind of man*" (263-264-my emphasis). "A certain kind of man," a "dangerous memory," joins the blind and naked riders in traveling "the way," knowing "[i]t is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye."²⁶

Tar Baby, like the novels that come before it, does not describe a mimetic world. In contrast to the other novels, however, Morrison's emphasis on the

²⁶ *The Little Prince* 87.

difficulty in recognizing and living the spirituality of "this world" seems almost overwhelming. Or is it? Similarly, one might ask if it is (or was) possible to live as Jesus of Nazareth insisted his disciples live: no money, no bag, no extra clothes, no sandals, no staff (Crossan 338). In a sense, she is prefiguring the "City of God" which coexists with the "city of the world" in *Jazz*. Morrison remains a profoundly theological writer; her interests range within the varieties of belief systems within and connected to Christianity for African Americans. Particularly in her later novels, there is increased attention to Gnosticism, Judeo-Christian religious history, and the redaction(s) as well as doctrinal interpretation of the sacred texts of this multivalent tradition--always within an Africanized frame. And the revealed and perhaps impossible world(s) she inscribes, the questions she inherently poses about community and relationality, constitute the "kingdom of God."

Chapter Five

"Come here, Jesus"

Ancestral Presence in *Beloved*

Love is a triple desire:
 Flesh, freedom, hope:
 No wanton thing is allowed.
 I will sing thy psalms, all thy psalms,
 Take me while you can.
 --Owen Dodson

Who is this that cometh up from the wilderness, leaning upon her beloved? I raised thee up under the apple tree: there thy mother brought thee forth: there she brought thee forth that bare thee. Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it....

--Song of Songs 8:5-7

Oh, nobody knows the trouble I've seen,
 Nobody knows but Jesus.
 Nobody knows the trouble I've seen,
 Glory, Hallelujah!
 --Spiritual

Beloved continues two of Morrison's general themes with respect to African America. The first is the large historical concern, diaspora--the dispersal of a people and their enslavement and oppression in places far from their homeland. The second is a relational issue--the bonds that exist between individuals in the diaspora, the way love works between friends, between mothers and fathers and children, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, under the conditions of slavery.

The central narrative of *Beloved*, the story of former slaves Sethe, Paul D, Baby Suggs, Ella, and Stamp Paid has been widely treated in the criticism.¹ What I want to suggest here is that Morrison employs the story of these slaves--a redaction of the true story of Margaret Garner--to develop her historical, cultural, and theological meditations on love and liberation. Besides explicit allusions to Joshua and the Song of Songs, and the continuing creation of African ancestral presence, Morrison adopts Gnostic scripture and Egyptian mythology as part of the descriptive language of *Beloved*. By employing a variety of cosmologies, she can create different perspectives on love, freedom, and community.

The presence of the ancestor--making history palpable and making the dead part of the life of the living--becomes perhaps most vivid in *Beloved*; Morrison has commented of the novel, "The purpose of making [the ghost] real is making history possible, making memory real."² The past is invoked through visions of water; water is the medium through which history and the ancestors become real:

Nothing else would be in her mind....Then something. The splash of water, the sight of her shoes and stockings awry on the path...; or Here Boy lapping in the puddle near her feet, and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes... (6)

It is after rinsing chamomile sap off her legs that Paul D shows up, "the last of the Sweet Home men" (6); she offers him "a basin of water" for his feet, too (7), an allusion to Jesus's washing of his disciples feet (John 13:5). *Beloved* appears out of and returns to water, which is associated with the relationship between her and Sethe throughout the novel.

¹ For example, Trudier Harris, "Escaping Slavery but Not Its Images"; Valerie Smith, "'Circling the Subject': History and Narrative in *Beloved*"; Barbara Schapiro, "The Bonds of Love and the Boundaries of Self in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*"; Karla F.C. Holloway, "*Beloved*: A Spiritual"; Mae G. Henderson, "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text."

² Quoted in Darling 6.

The water imagery associated with key characters in each of her novels is at once the water of Christian baptism symbolizing (in)spiration by the Holy Spirit and the Pan-African sacred tradition that "introduc[es] the living to their ancestors" (Stuckey 34). The laughter of the whore Miss Marie ("the Maginot Line") in *The Bluest Eye* "[comes] like the sound of many rivers, freely, deeply, muddily, heading for the room of an open sea" (45), and Sula is promised "a sleep of water always" by the ancestral character Shadrack (149). Across Morrison's canon, these images also allude to the water of the Middle Passage. In *Beloved*, water is the site of the intersection of the ancestral, spiritual, and historical: the African presence of Beloved; the medium through which Paul D emerges from slavery to become, for Sethe, a holy and inspiring presence; an African and Judeo-Christian religious symbol of undying love.

Morrison works within the African-Christian framework to evoke what Walter Ong calls the "primacy of the oral" in the traditions of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, and to enact what Karla Holloway speaks of as the "return [by African American women writers] to the word as a generative source--a source of textual power that both structures story and absorbs its cultural legacy" (20). Morrison coextends the biblical Word (scripture) of African American culture with *Nommo* as defined in its life-giving African context(s). Thus, in her novels, word is Word is "*Nommo*, the life force, which produces all life, which influences 'things' in the shape of the word."³ This is not the same as saying that Morrison's language "shifts[s] from the abstract to the concrete [which] creates the illusion of words sliding back to a base in the material world" (Wyatt 475). Morrison's attention to scriptural, African, and historical orality illuminates, again, the

³ Jahn 124. See also Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken" 33: "I sometimes know when the work works, when *nommo* has effectively summoned, by reading and listening to those who have entered the text."

spirituality of "this world"--the African understanding of the presence of the dead with the living. *Nommo* is not an "illusion" to Africans, but is an integral part of human life.

The title of this chapter comes from an oral form of address to Jesus used by characters such as Baby Suggs and Amy Denver. When Amy looks at Sethe's back and says "'Come here, Jesus'" (79), when the ancestral voice of Baby Suggs admonishes Denver with "'My Jesus my'" (244), the address is direct and familiar. It is not a literal text, but an oral invocation. Amy and Baby do not say "Lord" or "Father" or "Christ"; it is *Jesus* who *hears* their voices. Sojourner Truth told her white audiences that when her children were all sold into slavery (like Baby Suggs's), and she cried out in grief, "None but Jesus *heard me*." She could not read; "I has just one text to preach from, an' I always preaches from this one. My text is, 'When I found Jesus!'" In her book, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*, Jacquelyn Grant characterizes Sojourner's address to Jesus as "a tough, active love that empowered her to fight more fiercely for the freedom of her people" (214).

Granted Ong's understanding that the Bible began as, and in the context of most Hebrew and Christian religious rituals continues as, an oral text, its written textual history indicates the ways in which it has structured and been structured by cultures for whom it is important. Since the original texts from which the Hebrew Bible was translated are now lost, its conformation has been designated by its ancient redactors and translators, as well as the translators of these translations, and thus it always already encodes its contested status.⁴ Judaism itself has never been

⁴ Gottwald 116-117:

One way of viewing the fluidity of the Hebrew text traditions... is to think of three basic families of texts: (1) a proto-Masoretic family of texts...; (2) a family of texts most fully represented in the Samaritan Pentateuch; and (3) a family of texts from which at least part of the Greek Septuagint was translated.... there are those... who recognize instead a plurality of redactional traditions.

monolithic, but may appear that way to the modern mind in contradistinction to Christianity. But the scriptural redaction of the Hebrew Bible reflects millennia of social and political changes (cf. Crossan). In addition, the cultural placement of scripture has changed with lived history, and African American churches and theologians have interpreted the Bible's relevance in terms of the dynamic, conflicted position of their community.

For African Americans, the Bible has provided a "site of memory" (to use a term of Morrison's),⁵ a text which serves as the repository of history and culture, including spirituality. In this sense, African Americans have understood that biblical figures and stories are simultaneously *historical* and *spiritual*, that is, ancestral. The spiritual can be defined, in this usage, as a complex of relational events in which the living participate, including rites honoring and invoking the dead, and including the natural world as well as human beings.

* * *

Critics have connected the name "Beloved" to the "beloved community" of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and the "beloved people" of the novel's epigraph from Romans 9:25:⁶ "I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved." Morrison's New Testament allusions define love, community, and the intersection of history and spirituality, as she has remarked:

...that transcending love...is why the New Testament is so pertinent to black literature--the lamb, the victim, the vulnerable one who does die but nevertheless lives. (Ruas 242)

⁵ "The Site of Memory" is the title of Morrison's essay in Zinsser's *Inventing the Truth*.

⁶ Walker 33-46. Walker points out that "*Beloved* has special significance in the struggle for racial justice" (40).

Mae Henderson sees the novel's epigraph as signaling "the tension between Old Testament Law and New Testament spirit" (64). The division or "tension" between the Old Testament and the New is not as clear-cut as Henderson makes out. The "law" of the Hebrew Bible is not absolute; questions of relationship constantly arise in Old Testament stories, profiling the political nature of theology pointed out by Cain Hope Felder.

Old Testament texts have been empowering, prophetic texts to the "beloved community." Certainly in the nineteenth century, Hebrew Bible stories of a people liberated from bondage--stories which Felder comments "reflect the existential reality of the "black story" (6)--were foundational to the developing black church. As previously mentioned, Lawrence Levine has pointed out that the "transformation of Jesus" into an Old Testament warrior was "symptomatic of the slaves' selectivity in choosing those parts of the Bible which were to serve as the basis of their religious consciousness" (43). In keeping with these political foundations in African American religion, Morrison is constantly aware of the scriptural texts that most speak to liberation in "this world."

Beloved resonates with the Old Testament Song of Songs, a text in which the love relationship crosses racial and class boundaries, as Francis Landy notes that "a king falls in love with a country girl and forsakes his kingdom" (318). The biblical Song, with its erotic associations, structures the political and the cultural as a "discourse on love" (Landy 304); it is a call-and-response recognition and affirmation between lover and beloved. In an essay on *Beloved* based in "the object relations school of psychoanalysis," Barbara Schapiro explains:

...human beings are...innately responsive and relational.... The experience of one's cohesiveness and reality as a self is dependent on this primary relationship, on the loving response and recognition from an other. This issue is repeatedly illustrated and explored in Morrison's novels. (195)

The Song illuminates the many levels of love: the personal and psychological, the relational and communal, the political bonds of a people whose survival as a people is tenuous. Commenting on the histories that inspired *Beloved* and *Jazz*, Morrison says "something seemed clear to me. A woman loved something other than herself so much, she had placed all of the value of her life in something outside herself."⁷ In this statement, Morrison expresses her concern with love beyond merely the first level, the level of personal obsession; in this novel, her fifth, she connects the political, cultural, and personal nature of love. In *Beloved*, rather than Henderson's "tension" between Old and New Testament scripture, I see a synthesis of prophetic Old Testament books like Joshua, a fictional-historical account of the Hebrews' attainment of the Promised Land, and the poetic Song of Songs, with its strong emphasis on love and recognition, with the "continuing presence in a continuing community" (Crossan 404) of figures of resurrection like Jesus and African ancestors.

Morrison explores the quality of and possibilities for love for enslaved people in *Beloved*: "Slave life; freed life--every day was a test and a trial," thinks Ella, who also "considered love a serious disability" (256). Sethe tells her living daughter, Denver, of "the powerful way I loved her"--the daughter she murdered as a baby (4), but she later thinks, when Paul D has asked her to become pregnant by him, "O Lord...deliver me. Unless carefree, motherlove was a killer" (132). Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, reflects that "[w]hat she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children" (23).

Sethe's memory of her first love-making with her husband Halle in the cornfield of Sweet Home, analogized to eating corn-on-the-cob, is rhapsodic:

⁷ Naylor and Morrison 583-584.

No matter what all your teeth and wet fingers anticipated, there was no accounting for the way that simple joy could shake you.
How loose the silk. How fine and loose and free. (27)

Here, as in countless other places in her work, Morrison conjures sexual and sensual joy and pleasure as also spiritual; they stand for the sometimes terrible power of love. The beauty of this passage recalls feminist theologian Beverly Harrison's assertion that "our moral-selves are our body-selves who touch and see and hear each other into life, recognizing sensuality as fundamental to the work and power of love" (207).

Beloved's "discourse on love" signifies on the historical event of Margaret Garner's act of infanticide: a fugitive slave, Garner, in 1856, "determined to fight, and to die, rather than to be taken back to slavery." She cut the throat of her baby daughter, but was overpowered before she could kill her other children. The historical Margaret was "sold South" after her trial, but fictional Sethe, after spending a year in jail (with the surviving Denver) for the murder of her "crawling already?" baby girl (95), remains on Bluestone Road on the outskirts of Cincinnati. Levi Coffin wrote that Margaret Garner's story "seemed to stir every heart that was alive to the emotions of humanity...."⁸ By choosing to rewrite Garner's story, Morrison not only imagines the personal psychology of such "too-thick" (165) mother love, but addresses the history of an enslaved, dispersed people. Morrison comments on her project as a writer of fiction and history:

My job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over "proceedings too terrible to relate." The exercise is also critical for any person who is black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic.... These "memories within" are the subsoil of my work. But memories and recollections won't give me total access to the unwritten interior life of these people. Only the act of imagination can help me. ("Site" 110-111)

Morrison not only draws attention to the historical reality of the lives of slaves in the United States through the tension between her rewriting of Garner's story and

⁸ "The Case of Margaret Garner," 60-63.

the actual story, but creates her own redaction to illustrate that liberation is a matter of faith long before it is fact. She fills out the human story, enlarges on "the interior life of these people." Mae Henderson gives another perspective on the tension between fiction and history in *Beloved*:

...Morrison challenges the hegemonic status of the (primarily male) slave narratives as well as the "canonical" history embodied in the master('s) narratives in a project which seeks to make both more accountable to the "disremembered and unaccounted for."

Like several of her contemporaries, Morrison seeks to achieve these ends in a novel that both historicizes fiction and fictionalizes history.⁹

In African American tradition, Morrison employs scripture as she "imagines" the psychology and unwritten history of black people such as Margaret Garner, adding flesh to "memories and recollections." These biblical and historical threads comprise the stuff out of which Morrison weaves her art. In *Beloved*, Morrison conveys the historical genesis and consequence of Garner's tragedy by allusions to Old Testament texts such as Exodus and the Book of Joshua, stories of the triumph and liberation of a people, and the Song of Songs, a dialogue between a lover and a beloved. In Denver's narrative, "Beloved is my sister. I swallowed her blood right along with my mother's milk" (205), echoes the Song, "I am come into my garden, my sister, my spouse...I have drunk my wine with my milk" (5:1). The Song's voice, according to Francis Landy, "announc[es] its own presence and desire" (306).

When Sethe tries to explain to Paul D the love that caused her to murder her baby daughter, she says:

"...I couldn't love [my children] proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love. But when I got here, when I jumped down off that wagon-- there wasn't nobody in the world I couldn't love if I wanted to."

⁹ Henderson 64. "Disremembered and unaccounted for" is a quotation from the end of *Beloved*, page 274.

Paul D "[knows] exactly what she meant: to get to a place where you could love anything you chose--not to need permission for desire--well now, *that* was freedom" (162). Both Paul D and Sethe understand the sine qua non of love: love may be an abstraction, but it can exist neither apart from flesh-and-blood people who love, nor apart from community, a relational cultural space within which love can flourish. Their mutual explanation, like the dialogue between the lover and beloved in the Song, embraces the trinitarian understanding that, according to Catherine Mowry LaCugna, "freedom is a hallmark of personhood" (*God for Us* 244). Affirming *Beloved's* attention to desire, Barbara Schapiro remarks, "Love is a form of knowing and being known." She points out that the "yearning of *Beloved*, Sethe, and Denver...is poignantly captured in the image of two turtles mating" (201). Again, the coextension of sensuality, sexuality, desire, and spirituality: the ineffability of love and freedom only exist within material community and personhood.

The meditation on love, desire, and community resonates between *Beloved* and the biblical Song:

the lovers, ...a community predicated on love, first developing from the family, the mother-child relationship, and then the society of lovers to which the Song appeals...[it] also draws into its orbit things, plants, animals, geography. (Landy 305)

As I have mentioned earlier, "geography" carries an acute importance to African Americans, as well as to all colonized Africans and Africans of the diaspora. The conscious world of nature, so salient in *Tar Baby*, reflects the African understanding that "all life...constitut[es] a single undifferentiated whole [which] occupie[s] a privileged place in the ancestor-cult" (Bujo 17-18).

In *Beloved*, the natural world--including the mystical agency of Amy Denver--assists Sethe's escape. The geography over which the pregnant, beaten Sethe travels to get milk to her baby girl, in her escape from the Sweet Home plantation

across the river into Ohio,¹⁰ is woven throughout the novel. Having sent her three children ahead because she can't find Halle, her husband, she is brutalized by "Schoolteacher" and his nephews. The nephews hold Sethe down and suck the milk from her breasts, and when she tells Mrs. Garner, the dying widow of the plantation owner, what has happened, "Schoolteacher" nearly kills Sethe by brutally whipping her.

Sethe finds herself "that afternoon in the wild onions--when one more step was the most she could see of the future" (70). For slightly more than twenty-four hours, Sethe exists in a supernatural, time-suspended locus between Kentucky and Ohio. Amy Denver--the "whitegirl" with "breath like burning wood", "fugitive eyes and her tenderhearted mouth", and a "dreamwalker's voice" (78-79)--delivers her from death. Amy indeed invokes "things, plants, animals, geography." She is traveling from Kentucky to Boston to "[g]et me some velvet"; she appears because she "[t]hought there'd be huckleberries" to eat (32); she talks of the snakes that might bite Sethe if she stays in the woods unprotected, the bears that might eat her, and tells Sethe of the catfish she once caught in the Beaver River (34). Abused and motherless herself, Amy revels in freedom and personhood: "[s]leeping with the sun in your face is the best old feeling" (80). The sun, like rivers, figures centrally across African cosmologies:

The sign of the four moments of the sun is the Kongo emblem of spiritual continuity and renaissance.... In certain rites it is written on the earth, and a person stands upon it...to signify that he or she understands the meaning of life as a process shared with the dead below the river or the sea--the real sources of earthly power and prestige.¹¹

¹⁰ Joshua 3:1-4:24 tells the story of the Hebrews' miraculous crossing of the Jordan. For slaves in the South, the Ohio was their Jordan, and is mentioned everywhere in the spirituals.

¹¹ Robert Farris Thompson, *The Four Moments of the Sun* 54, 28, quoted in Stuckey 12.

Amy and "Lu" (the name Sethe gives herself when Amy asks), "two throw-away people, two lawless outlaws" (84) "understand the meaning of life," and know, as their oppressors cannot, "the real sources of earthly power and prestige."

Amy has "good good hands" (81) and when, despite her wounds, Sethe has survived the night, Amy says, "Come down here, Jesus... That's because of me. I'm good at sick things" (82). Amy helps Sethe to deliver her "charmed child," Denver; Sethe later recounts this to Paul D:

"Nothing bad can happen to [Denver]... Even when I was carrying her, when it got clear that I wasn't going to make it--which meant she wasn't going to make it either--she pulled a whitegirl out of the hill." (42)

Denver's birth is miraculous; such extraordinary births are almost always identified with images of divine breath or water, and "[t]he birth itself often takes place in a grove or other hidden place." Denver is born as Amy and Sethe have come to the Ohio River after the night in the woods. The miraculous mother, "as *omphalos*, or center of creation, receives the divine breath or spirit" (Leeming 273); this imagery also shows up in the Song of Songs:

A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed. (4:12)

....
Awake, O north wind, and come, thou south; blow upon my garden, that its spices may flow out. Let my beloved come into my garden, and eat his pleasant fruits. (4:16)

At once womanist and feminist liberation theology, Sethe's story entails *agape*, which Sallie McFague defines as "the love that gives without calculating the return, that wills the existence and fulfilment of other beings" and "the revelation that the source of all being in the universe is on the side of the lovers of the world and the healers of the body of the world" ("God as Mother" 260, 261). Sethe's loss of a sense of self is experienced, as Schapiro points out, by "all of the black characters in the novel... [Beloved] has been denied the narrative of her being, the subjectivity and continuity of inner experience that should be everyone's birthright" (209).

Amy Denver wills Sethe's existence when Sethe might die as a result of the whipping; she heals Sethe's body. References to Amy's breath and breathing, as well as her miraculous appearance, link her to the Holy Spirit; Denver is born as "cooling evening air" surrounds her (84). The newborn Denver completes the trinity: "the wet sticky women clambered ashore to see what, indeed, God had in mind" (84). Here, the narrative specifies *prophecy*; the Old Testament prophets "interpret[ed] the past, the present, and the future in the light of God's purposes" (Neil 142). Sethe later believes Denver willed Amy into being, but in fact it is Sethe's own embodied spirituality which at some level *desires* Amy's mystical presence. Amy calls, "'Come here, Jesus'....in her dreamwalker's voice," invoking their own vital divinity. Barbara Hill Rigney emphasizes the significance of the African "Great Mother [in much of Morrison's work], the giver of both life and wisdom, who is *nommo*, the creative potential and the sacred aspect of nature itself" (68-69). "[A]ppropriately and well" Amy and the mother-creator, mother-goddess Sethe, usher the "charmed" baby girl into the kingdom of God and wrap her "in the rags they wore" (79, 85).

Eighteen years after Denver's miraculous birth, Sethe and Denver are two persons of another trinity who alternate as the lover of "Beloved," the strange and beautiful young woman they believe is the dead baby girl, reborn, as it were, to them. "Beloved has eyes only for Sethe," (121) while Denver "[nursed] Beloved's interest like a lover whose pleasure was to overfeed the loved" (78). For Denver, "looking [at Beloved] was food enough to last" (118). The food passages in *Beloved* signal, as in the Song of Songs, an intense and transcendent pleasure. The Song describes the connection of the lover and the beloved as that of siblings, nursing at their mother's breasts: "Oh, that thou wert as my brother, that nursed at the breasts of my mother! When I should find thee outside, I would kiss thee..." (8:1). Sethe tells Paul D, "All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl.

Nobody was going to nurse her like me" (16). Nursing imagery fills the Christian-trinitarian tradition--God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are all associated with consoling, nourishing, unconditional mother-love.¹²

Lactating breasts are not only erotic and motherly, but are also a source of grace and spirituality; nursing is central in *Beloved* and the Song of Songs, and in traditional African belief systems as well. Across West African peoples, rituals associated with parturition and childbirth involve ancestor offerings; babies are thought still to be very close to the realm of the ancestors from which they come. Thus, Sethe's encounter with Schoolteacher and his nephews enacts a horrifying reversal and perversion not only of mother-love, but of the care West African women are given when pregnant.¹³ The three of them represent an un-personed trinity, loveless and violent, a discourse of unabashed exploitation, animalization, and objectification of the person of Sethe. Ironically, of course, these three seem not only inhuman, but also somehow not even alive--not a part of the African life-unity. Lacking relationality, they lack personhood and are irrevocably alien and unbodied in contrast to Sethe's embodied abundance. Put in feminist theological terms, as Sethe celebrates sensual and spiritual embodiment, Schoolteacher and the nephews represent "moral rationality...[as] *disembodied* rationality" (Harrison 204-205).

In *Beloved* and the Song of Songs, food as bodily pleasure and divine nourishing love are interwoven again and again. The mystical Beloved loves sweets: "It was as though sweet things were what she was born for. Honey as well as the wax it came in..." (55), echoes the Song "I have eaten my honeycomb with

¹² See Caroline Walker Bynum's *Jesus as Mother*. Bynum's discussion of the Christian traditions surrounding the persons of the Trinity as each, in turn, mothers, and nursing mothers, is comprehensive.

¹³ Parrinder 95-101 passim.

my honey" (5:1) and "Thy lips...drop like honeycomb; honey and milk are under thy tongue" (4:11). "Feed me with raisin cakes, restore me with apples," we read in the Song, "for I am sick with love" (2:5). When Paul D contemplates finding Beloved "her own place," "Beloved strangle[s] on one of the raisins she had picked out of the bread pudding" (67). As in *Tar Baby*; the shared physical pleasure of food enacts an intensification of community. Paul D's suggestion implies that eating might no longer serve the mediating function as locus of communal delight. This, in part, is why Paul D engages in what seems to him an incomprehensible sexual obsession with Beloved--the intimacy, the shared pleasure, Beloved's power, and Paul D's redemption through the power of surrender to such pleasure must be made manifest. The incorporation of food is metaphorically associated with the incorporation of divinity and the possibility that spirit can become flesh, which is also true of Beloved's incorporeal/corporeal sexuality (116-117). The wine-blood connection in *Beloved* recalls Christ's blood in communion (Mark 14:23; Luke 22:20); in fact, the idea of communion is that (in)spiration takes place as a result of the ingestion of food, a worldly and bodily function. Because of Paul D's sexual liaison with Beloved, he must give up his "tobacco tin" and affirm his life, his "Red heart. Red heart. Red heart" (117).

* * *

The nexus of pleasure, physical love, and Judeo-Christian ideas of divine love has remained the primary interpretive paradigm for the Song of Songs from the first centuries of the Christian era when it was used to justify the Song's status as scripture.¹⁴ In the allegorical interpretations of medieval Jewish and Christian biblical scholars, the Song's lovers are YHWH and Israel, or Christ and his church,

¹⁴ Wigoder, et al. 951:

The book attained canonical status, due to the allegorical interpretation, primarily associated with the name of Rabbi Akiba (died A.D. 135), who explained the book as a love song between God and Israel.

and the Song reflects on God's love for the world. The narrative of *Beloved* enhances this connection by allusions to Joshua and the covenant between YHWH and Israel.

Caroline Walker Bynum explicates Bernard of Clairvaux's understanding of the lover as Christ and the beloved as the soul; Bernard wrote of "[t]he richness of grace that flows from your breasts"--making the breasts Christ's.¹⁵ Saint Augustine "sought the image of the trinity within the rational soul and formulated analogies (memory, intellect, will; lover, beloved, love)" (LaCugna, "Trinity" 55). The strong feminine aspect of divine love and divinity, images of mother love, are figured as siblings nursing together at their mother's breasts. What Francis Landy writes of the Song is compelling when applied to *Beloved* in turn:

...the dominance and initiative of the Beloved are the poem's most astonishing characteristics. Metaphorically aligned with a feminine aspect of divinity, associated with the celestial bodies, the land, and fertility, the Beloved reverses the predominantly patriarchal theology of the Bible. (317)

As in *Tar Baby*, the obsessive love recalls the love of Christ as Eros in his pursuit of the human soul, Psyche. Beloved, like Son, is first born out of water and then consumed with love for a member of the household she disrupts. Like Son with Jadine, her presence more than her volition reveals Sethe's falling away from the promise of the kingdom of God. The Song of Songs, the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth, and *Tar Baby* and *Beloved* center on a transformation of the social order.

The meditation on love in all of Morrison's books has a strong feminist trinitarian-theological component, particularly in *Beloved* and *Jazz*, the second book of her love trilogy. Again, trinitarian theology emphasizes *agape*--unconditional love; trinitarian theology is, according to LaCugna, "par excellence a theology of relationship, which explores the mysteries of love, relationship, personhood" (*God*

¹⁵ Bynum 117.

for *Us* 1). Reversal is a staple of Morrison's literary style, and the trinities in her work range from the three prostitutes in *The Bluest Eye*; to "the deweys," a trio of unrelated and distinct boys in *Sula* who become mystical and indistinguishable; to the sensual triad of women in *Song of Solomon*, Pilate, Reba, and Hagar; to a multiplicity of shifting trinities in *Beloved*. By calling into question the canonical descriptions of the Trinity, Morrison interrogates the hegemonic configuration of a narrowly gendered and racialized divinity as well as invokes an African cultural geography wherein the living and the dead, history and spirit, coexist in the same space and not as separate or separable entities.

Barbara Christian asserts that trinities of women in Morrison's novels are her signature, her identifying novelistic mark.¹⁶ In *Beloved*, the primary Trinity is Sethe, Denver, and Beloved. When Paul D drives the "baby ghost" from Sethe's house, however, he in effect supplants her "holy spirit." There is a Morrisonian reversal here: Paul D may expel the Baby Ghost, but it is Beloved who gives him back his heart. In the end, Beloved causes not only Sethe, but also Paul D, to confront their common history.

Paul D represents "something [Sethe] wanted to count on but was scared to" (95). Recalling the Augustinian analogy of Holy Spirit to memory, Paul D is to Sethe a vehicle for memory:

[H]e added...new pictures and old rememories that broke her heart....that empty place of no definite news was filled now with a brand-new sorrow... Years ago...she had women friends, men friends from all around to share grief with. Then there was no one, for they would not visit her while the baby ghost filled the house...But now there was someone to share it, and he had beat the spirit away the very day he entered her house and no sign of it since. A blessing, but in its place he brought another kind of haunting... (95-96)

Paul D passes oral history on to Sethe when he relates the last "word" of Halle, her husband and Baby Suggs's son. The "rememories" of Halle evoke the heartbreak,

¹⁶ Barbara Christian, personal communication, 24 October 1992.

"righteous resentment," "sorrow" and "grief"--the "empty space" that has been the presence of Sethe's long-absent husband (95). Her bridge to the past, the "memory" in the ineffable trinity evoked through the history she shares with Paul D, has been the baby ghost, the adored spirit who "filled the house" as well as her days for eighteen years. Many years earlier, Sethe has invoked a powerful trinity when she names herself "Lu" to Amy Denver (33): Halle-Lu-Jah; that is, "Praise Yah"--Yahweh (Wigoder 418). Sethe's act of self-naming establishes the three-way relation between her husband Halle, herself, and divinity.

The appearance of Paul D engenders a new trinity created by his being; both Paul D and Beloved are at once and alternately "memory" and "will." The incarnate Paul D, the incarnation of Sethe's history, is a "blessing," but his willful "beating away" of "the spirit" feels to Sethe like the loss of a kind of redemption which the baby ghost provided for her--the loss of a pro-genic ancestor. Sethe and Denver are the mother and daughter revision of the "father" and "son" of the triune godhead; Paul D and Beloved seem warring spirits over the (ex)piration or (re)piration of Sethe. The idea that "breath" can be "swallowed away" resurfaces in *Jazz* (174). As he is freed to love by Beloved, Paul D brings about a trinitarian reorientation, enabling Sethe to move out of her Augustinian psychological/spiritual trinity into the actuality of a historical/communal trinity with him and Denver.

Within Morrison's trinitaries themselves, the canonical persons of "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" shift not only in terms of gender, but in terms of consistent or discrete identity. This makes sense particularly within the framework of Morrison's "systemic" biblical language, which refuses a systematic, top-down view of narrative, and is actually in keeping with certain structural ambiguities of the Song of Songs. Differing readings of the Song see either two or three main characters, and one may map the Trinity onto these characters in various ways. Therefore, in *Beloved*, the metaphorical mappings of characters to divinities and biblical

characters are not linear. Sethe often represents God in the Trinity, but the "rape" of Sethe's breasts--what Henderson refers to as "the bovine-like humiliation of 'being milked'" (71)--and the brutal whipping which follows suggest the Second Person of the Trinity, the crucified Christ. The scene demands multiple interpretations, but again, Schoolteacher and the two nephews enact a perversion of the Trinity, an artificial but privileged social hierarchy juxtaposed to the kingdom of God which exists in "this world." In addition, Schoolteacher's textual genesis in "racial science"¹⁷ defiles the traditional African oneness of *all* creation; "for the African, God cannot be imagined without God's creation, nor without God's saving will for humankind" (Bujo 32).

To Sethe, "this world" is her children, the concomitant actuality and ineffability of her desire to nurse them, which recalls the "thread of light...spinning gold" that Ruth Foster feels her son draw from her breast in *Song of Solomon* (13).

¹⁷ Morrison's "act of imagination" surrounding the Garner tragedy engages "the emergence of a discipline known as ethnology...[in the late 1840s and early 1850s]." Carolyn Karcher describes the aims of the new "science":

...ethnologists attempted to trace the racial differentiation of mankind back to the very genesis of the human species, even postulating a separate creation for each race; [this meant] that they extrapolated intrinsic moral and intellectual propensities from the physical differences they observed; that they assumed the quasi permanence of both physical and psychological characteristics; that they ranked the races of men according to ethnocentric standards of beauty and innate intelligence that allegedly entitled each race to a particular station in life--the Anglo-Saxon at the top and the Negro at the bottom. (21-22)

Modern readers will (I trust) find the ethnologists' "science" preposterous, but its effects are still felt in the United States and its beliefs still live in white supremacists. Morrison's *Beloved* is born in 1854, the same year that the magnum opus of ethnology, Josiah Clark Nott and George R. Gliddon's *Types of Mankind: or, Ethnological Researches, Based upon the Ancient Monuments, Paintings, Sculptures, and Crania of Races, and upon Their Natural, Geographical, Philological, and Biblical History* appeared. The shadowy and malevolent "Schoolteacher" in *Beloved* represents this "science" and the valorized, privileged position science has enjoyed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In addition, the abolitionist Bodwins are not unlike "romantic racialists" such as William Ellery Channing and Harriet Beecher Stowe, who believed "the African" so mild-tempered as to be incapable of insurrection unless Anglo-Saxon blood flowed in her veins (cf. Karcher 1-27).

Beloved embodies resurrection and transformation; thus, both Sethe and Beloved are associated with Christ's sacrifice. But it is Denver, the "charmed child" (41), who is most engaged with the kingdom of God described by Jesus. As a child and teenager, she plays in an "emerald house," "five boxwood bushes, planted in a ring...which form[ed] a round, empty room seven feet high, its walls fifty inches of murmuring leaves" (253, 28). Here, Denver "could stand all the way up in emerald light" (28). Boxwoods are evergreens, and the Gospel of Thomas contains a suggestively similar parabolic statement made by Jesus to his followers:

For there are five trees for you in Paradise which remain undisturbed summer and winter and whose leaves do not fall. Whoever becomes acquainted with them will not experience death. (36:19b)¹⁸

"Quiet, primate and completely secret"--the intimation of physical, sexual pleasure suffuses the description of the times Denver spends in her "emerald house"--but the erotic signals redemption and personal power. "Veiled and protected by the live green walls, she felt ripe and clear, and salvation was as easy as a wish" (29).

The Bible contains many analogies between evergreen trees and everlasting life, and this link is not unrelated to their symbolic use during Christmas. The Cedars of Lebanon--cedars are evergreens--are invoked in the Song as a form of praise, and are mentioned in Psalms and elsewhere as a symbol of righteousness and God's eternally faithful presence. In *Beloved*, "[r]ainwater held on to pine needles for dear life and Beloved could not take her eyes off Sethe" (57)--an image that unites the water of African ancestral communion with eternal life represented, especially in the Judeo-Christian tradition, by evergreens. Although Sethe understands that "nothing ever dies" (36), the past causes her to lose her vision of the kingdom, the everlasting light, within her: "It was as though Sethe didn't really want forgiveness given; she wanted it refused. And Beloved helped her out" (252).

¹⁸ *Nag Hammadi* 128.

* * *

Like Morrison's other novels, *Beloved* discloses the secular and sacred in parabolic form. And it is characteristic of the New Testament parables that they are, according to Sallie McFague, "revolutionary," that they "[redefine] conventional understandings of the monarchical, hierarchical metaphors of 'kingdom' and 'rule'...It is a *new* rule which is defined by the extraordinary reversal of expectations in the parables as well as the life and death of Jesus" (*Metaphorical Theology* 17-18). The story of former slaves like Sethe, Paul D, Stamp Paid, Baby Suggs, and Ella is that of ordinary human beings in extraordinary circumstances, as Terry Otten has pointed out:

[*Beloved*] describes evil as all-encompassing, evident not just in the overt sadism of many Southern whites (which is, after all, a fact of history) but also in the "banality of evil," to use Hannah Arendt's phrase, in the "nice Nazi" nature of the kindly slave-owners the Garners and even more in the potential for evil within the black community itself. (81-82)

McFague argues that the life of Jesus enacts a parable for the kingdom of God. In *Beloved*, quotidian love and desire (motherly and sisterly) reveal the power of the earthly-heavenly (historical-theological) kingdom characterized in Denver. When Denver acknowledges that she must go to work to save her mother's life, she also affirms her own and her mother's personhood. Denver's practical actions recall Jesus's "great sympathy for those in physical pain," as well as "the healings, like the teachings, [that] were signs of the kingdom," and finally her growing belief in herself (McFague, "God as Mother" 262). In the following passage, then, Denver is not only joined to "God as mother," but to an unseen but present "God as father":

Her father's daughter after all, Denver decided to do the necessary....She would hire herself out somewhere, and although she was afraid to leave Sethe and Beloved alone all day not knowing what calamity either one of them would create, she came to realize that her presence in that house had no influence on what either woman did....

Somebody had to be saved, but unless Denver got to work, there would be no one to save, no one to come home to, and no Denver either. It was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve. (252)

In "doing the necessary," Denver catalyzes Sethe's (re)piration, literally and spiritually bringing her mother back in touch with everyday life, as well as with her interior life. As Ashraf Rushdy has shown, at this point Denver takes possession of "historical knowledge...understanding the forces of slavery that compelled her mother to do what she did" (582). Denver's "historical knowledge" derives from the spiritual contact she has made in her emerald room. The intimation is that Denver learns about her own body, the source of her spirituality, there. When she leaves her emerald room early in the novel, she has a vision of an ancestor:

What was unusual (even for *a girl who had lived all her life in a house peopled by the living activity of the dead*) was that a white dress knelt down next to her mother and had its sleeve around her mother's waist. And it was the tender embrace of the dress sleeve that made Denver remember the details of her birth--that and the thin, whipping snow she was standing in, like the fruit of common flowers. The dress and her mother together looked like two friendly grown-up women--one (the dress) helping out the other. And the magic of her birth, its miracle in fact, testified to that friendliness as did her own name. (29-emphasis added)

Here, the narrative affirms the miraculousness of Denver's birth, which I discussed earlier, and the African totality of the natural world--the snow, fruit, common flowers, the two friendly women. Also confirmed is the African idea of the coexistence of the living with the dead; Denver's life is "peopled by the living activity of the dead." Denver's magical birth is explicitly connected in this passage to the bond between women; the reference to her name recalls the work that Amy and Sethe "did...appropriately and well" (85).

When Denver at last leaves the house to return to town, the voice of her dead grandmother, Baby Suggs, is like the voice of God. She reveals to her child the indeterminacy of the kingdom, and its historical, political, this-worldly reality; community means everything in *Beloved*, as it did and does to so many African peoples. She gives Denver the courage to go forth:

"You mean I never told you nothing about Carolina? About your daddy? You don't remember nothing about how come I walk the way I do and about your mother's feet, not to speak of her back? I never told you that? Is that why you can't walk down the steps? My Jesus my."

But you said there was no defense.

"There ain't."

Then what do I do?

"Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on." (244)

The ancestral voice of Baby Suggs relates the physical sufferings and historical realities of her life to "my Jesus," and alludes to Amy Denver's exclamation, "'Come here, Jesus,'" when she has seen Sethe's raw back. Baby's address to Denver is like God's to Joshua when he despairs of reaching the promised land: "Get thee up; wherefore liest thou thus upon thy face?" (7:10), and recalls Jesus's no-nonsense admonition to his disciples:

Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it. (Mark 8:34-35)

The voice of Baby Suggs recalls Ong's notion of the "primacy of the oral" in religious texts (75), and spoken and sung orality is the central expressive idiom of black churches. God in the Bible speaks to human beings orally, appearing commonly as a disembodied voice.¹⁹ In certain West African religions, the voice of a person is analogous to the soul; "[the voice] leaves the body at death, so does the soul" (Parrinder 113). The power of voice and the Word in Judeo-Christian and in African religious practices brings to mind *Nommo*--"the life force...a unity of spiritual-physical fluidity, giving life to everything, causing everything" (Jahn 124). Voice, Word, and *Nommo* depend on breath and breathing. Life depends on water, and water is pivotal in African religious practice; *Nommo* is also "'[t]he vital force that carries the word [and] issues from the mouth in a water which is both water and word'" (Jahn 124).

¹⁹ Exodus 19:19, Joshua 7:10, Matthew 17:5, and Acts 9:4.

Sterling Stuckey has shown that water immersion baptism, "common to West African religions and to Christianity" (34), was far more important for the Christian denominations of slaves than it was in white Christian churches with related denominational designations. In West African religions, the "living water" of a river connected the living to the dead, and in baptism immersion rituals, a deacon drove a staff "made like a cross" into the riverbed:

The staff made like a cross was, for the Bakongo, "a tree across the water's path, a bridge that mystically put the dead and the living in perpetual communication."

....

The horizontal axis of the cross signifies the sea or river that divides the world of the living and the dead, the heavens above and the earth below, this world and the next. The staff-cross enabled the deacon, as it did the Bakongo king, to traverse the watery barrier...to mediate between the world of the living and that of the dead. (Stuckey 34-35)

The connection of the living water and the symbolism of the cross is one way African traditions were preserved in the Americas, as Stuckey notes, "under cover of Christianity" (35). In many respects *Beloved* reveals the convergence of these two religious traditions in what was to become the black church in the United States. The Bakongo cross that Stuckey describes recalls the mark made on Sethe's mother, under her breast:

"[My mother] picked me up and carried me behind the smokehouse. Back there she opened up her dress front and lifted her breast and pointed under it. Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin. She said, 'This your ma'am. This,' and she pointed. 'I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark.'" (61)

While the mark clearly alludes to the Song--"Set me as a seal upon thine heart...for love is strong as death" (8:6a)--it also signifies the intersecting traditions, and Sethe inherits the mark through the "tree" engraved on her back. Its similarity to the circle and cross of the Bakongo is unmistakable; trees, according to Richard Farris Thompson, "are also thought to be avatars of *àshé*, sentinels guarding the Yoruba

universe" (*Flash of the Spirit* 6). When Sethe's mother equates the mark with herself, she says in effect that Africa is Sethe's mother.

Water is associated with love, with fear, with creation and motherhood, with death, with the Holy Spirit and the word of God. Sethe first sees Beloved's face when she, Paul D, and Denver have returned from a carnival, and "the water she voided was endless...like flooding the boat when Denver was born" (51). Beloved emerges, new and unlined, from the stream behind 124 Bluestone Road; the Beloved and the Lover in the Song of Songs exchange these words: "[L]ove is strong as death....Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it" (8:6, 7). The African mediation between the living and the dead, water and death, materializes in the person of Beloved, whether she is the grown ghost of the dead baby girl or an escaped young slave who believes Sethe looks like her dead mother.²⁰ Sethe and Denver, as well as the women of their community, believe that the mystical girl is certainly a spirit.

The Judaic tradition associates water and death in a way that, in contrast to the African mediation, is part of the books of Law in the Pentateuch; it is not, however, irrelevant to Morrison's probing of spirituality and history, memory and death and love. In Numbers, the "water of separation" ritual cleanses a person from the defilement through contact with the dead:

Whosoever toucheth the dead body of any man who is dead, and purifieth not himself, defileth the tabernacle of the Lord; and that soul shall be cut off from Israel; because the water of separation was not sprinkled upon him, he shall be unclean; his uncleanness is yet upon him. (19:13)

After Sethe has killed her baby girl, Baby Suggs brings Denver to her mother:

"It's time to nurse your youngest," she said.

²⁰ House 17-26 *passim*. House claims she is arguing against "writers [who believe] that Beloved is unquestioningly a ghost"; House elaborately argues that Beloved is "a human being" (17). Although in the end House mentions "emotional ghosts of hurt, love, guilt, and remembrance" (24), it seems that she also misses the way that Beloved *represents* history and spirituality.

Sethe reached up for the baby without letting the dead one go. Baby Suggs shook her head. "One at a time," she said and traded the living for the dead, which she carried to the keeping room. When she came back, Sethe was aiming a bloody nipple into the baby's mouth. Baby Suggs slammed her fist on the table and shouted, "Clean up! Clean yourself up!" (152)

But Sethe remains defiled with her dead baby's blood as she is taken to jail: "The hot sun dried Sethe's dress, stiff, like rigor mortis" (153). When released from jail, Sethe is ostracized by the community, as prescribed in Numbers:

But the man who shall be unclean, and shall not purify himself, that soul shall be cut off from among the congregation, because he hath defiled the sanctuary of the Lord: the water of separation hath not been sprinkled on him; he is unclean. (19:20)

Eighteen years after the murder, Denver understands "the connection between her mother and Beloved: Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it" (251). But Denver also understands the real source of Sethe's defilement:

...what Baby Suggs died of, what Ella knew, what Stamp saw and what made Paul D tremble. That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up. (251)

Denver recognizes that her mother has suffered through having been "dirtied so bad she forgets who she is." The violence of the holocaust of slavery has defiled Sethe's selfhood; since no creation takes place *ex nihilo*, it is only through relationality, through community, through love that any self can exist.²¹ Baby

²¹ LaCugna, *God for Us* 243-245:

The relational ontology in which all of reality is referred to its origin in personhood--if it were carried forward through the whole of dogmatic theology--would avert the separation of *theologia* [the mystery of God as such] and *oikonomia* [the economy of salvation]...The ontology proper to this understands being-in-relation, not being-in-itself. (246)

Other feminist theologians affirm this emphasis on relationality:

To speak of the primacy of relationship in feminist experience, and to speak of a theology of relation...is...to insist on the deep, total sociality of all things....Nothing living is self-contained... (Harrison 208)

Womanist Grant puts it simply: "...other kinds of relationship, hierarchical, or other unequal relationships are not 'Christian' ones" (92).

Suggs survives the theft and murder of her children, and then creates "a wide-open place cut deep in the woods" for her community to come to her, touch her and each other, to dance and laugh each other into recognition and being (87). Early in her life, Ella is forced to forfeit her body and her own creativity; she refuses to allow her body's use in a materiality that only confirms a white man's perverted idea of self, and she lets her baby die. Although Sethe murders her child because of her "too thick love," she is, as Giulia Scarpa has noted, "portrayed as a sort of endless source of life, as an Earth Mother" (99). Sethe's character evokes the maternal imagery of God and Jesus,²² the mystical mother who miraculously bears an extraordinary child, and the Mother-Goddess common to African religions. The rape of her breasts by Schoolteacher and the unclean, mossy-toothed nephews defiles Sethe's sacredness. Her defilement at Sweet Home and through her baby's murder leads Sethe to forget her own essential link to light and spirit until Paul D and Beloved appear--for all the complications surrounding her being, the water-born Beloved brings to Sethe a desperate renewal.

* * *

The name "Sethe" also calls up images of water and death in alluding to the Egyptian deity Set (alternatively spelled "Seth"). Martin Bernal writes in the first volume of *Black Athena* that Poseidon, the Greek god of sea and storms, "should be identified with Seth, the Egyptian god of the wilderness or sea...and with the Semitic Yam (Sea) and Yahwe" (20-21). A complex figure, Set is identified with Typhon by Plutarch as well as with Hades. Egyptian theology is elaborate, and over the three-thousand year period of Egyptian civilization changed with Egypt's political course. Set was generally considered "the personification of sin and evil," having "stole[n] light from Horus and Ra...he was held to be the cause of all the

²² See Bynum, particularly 110-125.

evil, both physical and moral, which resulted therefrom." However "[i]n the Pyramid texts we find Set associated very closely with Horus, and he always appears in them in the character of a god who is a friend and helper of the dead;" Set helps the deceased get into heaven, and even helps Osiris do so (Budge 241, 244). The mythological traditions of Egypt, Africa, and Ancient Greece inform the Hebrew biblical tradition, and therefore the authors of New Testament texts. Although the hellenizing influence on soteriological religious traditions is widely known, the African and Egyptian influences on ancient Greek thought and culture are only beginning to be understood and reappropriated to African civilizations.

Morrison has remarked that "However much the abhorrence of slavery makes *Kindermord* 'the right thing to do,' she had no right to do it."²³ The Bluestone Road community will not visit Sethe after she murders her baby. It is not only that she has killed her own child, but the community is also frightened by the spirit of baby girl who is haunting 124. When Ella reminds Stamp Paid that "'people who die bad don't stay in the ground,'" Stamp cannot argue: "Jesus Christ Himself didn't" (188). Like the Egyptian Set in certain incarnations, Sethe is an agent of death and resurrection--without sin, there is no "Holy Redeemer" (188). By this I do not mean that Morrison presents human beings as weak and sinful and in need of salvation by a hierarchical, all-knowing deity. She does show--and this is often misunderstood--that while people *are* subject to such frailties, every moment holds the possibility of renewal of community and triumph of the spirit, which is, of course, what happens at the novel's end. Both Sethe and Paul D have "some womanish need to see *the nature of the sin* behind them" (117-emphasis added), but as Paul D finally understands, "'we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow'" (273).

²³ Interview, "MacNeil-Lehrer Newshour," PBS, 29 September 1987, quoted in Otten 83.

When Paul D has left 124 because he cannot comprehend the enormity of Sethe's crime, he goes to work in the Cincinnati pig-slaughter yards:

Pigs were crying in the chute. All day Paul D, Stamp Paid and twenty more had pushed and prodded them from canal to...slaughterhouse.... Cincinnati was still pig port in the minds of Ohioans. Its main job was to receive, slaughter and ship up the river the hogs that Northerners did not want to live without. (154)

The slaughterhouse passage subtly discloses an issue Morrison has addressed in past novels, especially *Song of Solomon*: how little difference there is, for African Americans, between the North and the South. Northerners have reaped the benefits of slavery and the continued low socio-economic status of blacks without having to get their hands dirty--that is, bloody. In other words, Northerners want to devour "pig meat." In discussing Ardell Shelley Bragg's 1926 "Pig Meat Blues," Paul Oliver explains the significance of the term:

...in the use of the term "pigmeat" a deliberate acknowledgement of the low status accorded to Blacks may be detected. Most "unclean" of animals by Biblical standards, the pig was rated of more importance than the slave, who remained conscious of being "treated like a hog." (112)

But African Americans appropriated and refigured the insult, and it shows up in numerous blues songs.²⁴ In *Sula*, Nel and Sula are delighted when the handsome Ajax calls them "pig meat" (50).

Pigs were sacrificed to Set and to his sometime-enemy, Horus, the son of Osiris. "According to the *Book of Going Forth by Day*...Seth changed himself into a black pig during his fight with Horus," and "in order to drive away Set from attacking the full moon of the month Pachons...a black pig was hacked to pieces upon an altar made of sand."²⁵ The allusion here is also to Sethe's sawing open of her own baby girl's throat:

²⁴ For example, there is Ollie Shepard's 1938 "Little Pigmeat" and in the 1920s a vocal duet named "Pigmeat Pete and Catjuice Charlie" performed in New York.

²⁵ Waida 326 and Budge 248.

Beloved...thought...Pieces of her would drop maybe one at a time, maybe all at once....It is difficult keeping her head on her neck, her legs attached to her hips when she is by herself. Among the things she could not remember was when she first knew that she could wake up any day and find herself in pieces. (133)

Set hacked the body of Osiris into fourteen pieces and scattered them up and down the Nile in order to prevent resurrection. Osiris, a fertility god associated primarily with the cyclic inundations of the Nile, is comparable to Christ, at once a sacrifice and the resurrected king of the dead. Like Osiris and Christ, Beloved is sacrificed and resurrected in the novel which bears her name.

In contrast to the evocation of the Egyptian Set, Sethe's name also alludes to the third son of Adam and Eve, Seth. Seth means "for God has appointed"; because of the sin of Cain, Seth becomes the founder of the human race. In *Beloved*, the explanation of Sethe's naming resonates with a passage in the gnostic Apocalypse of Adam. Sethe, after she has recounted the story of her mother's circle and cross mark to Denver and Beloved, remembers being told the significance of her name:

...Nan told her...[in] [t]he same language her ma'am spoke...which would never come back. But the message--that was and had been there all along.... "Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe.... You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him.... Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe." (62)

This echoes the Apocalypse of Adam:

The revelation which Adam taught his son Seth in the seven hundredth year, saying, "Listen to my words, my son Seth....I myself have called you by the name of that man who is the seed of the great generation...."(Nag Hammadi 279)

Significantly, the Apocalypse of Adam ends thus:

This is the hidden knowledge of Adam, which he gave to Seth, which is the holy baptism of those who know the eternal knowledge through those born of the word and the imperishable illuminators, who came from the holy seed: Yesseus, Mazareus, [Yesse]dekus, [the Living] Water. (Nag Hammadi 286)

The passage profiles water, and its connection to birth and fertility, life and death, to the Word and *Nommo*. At the end of *Beloved*, the women of Sethe's

community arrive to exorcise "[t]he devil child" from 124 (261). The voices of the women, swelling together, retrieve for Sethe her creativity within the African American community that embraces "a little of both" magical charms and "Christian faith--as shield and sword" (257):

the voices of the women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off the chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (261)

The women "sound deep water" and Beloved returns to "some ocean-deep place" (265) of the African ancestors, a place that Paul D now realizes is part the "life hunger" that Beloved left him with, analogous in a sense to Lynda Koolish's characterization of Beloved's hunger--"ancestral hunger, and therefore insatiable" (6).

As "the seed of the great generation," Sethe is indeed, as Paul D tells her at the novel's end, "[her] own best thing" (273). In her representation of Sethe, with Paul D's empowering statement of love and Sethe's response, "Me? Me?", Morrison has encoded individual and collective discourses: the discourse on love and desire in the Song of Songs; the discourse of the isolated and bereft self; the deep layers of (African) American history--figured in Sethe's own scarred body (cf. Henderson). Morrison employs her unique language of Judeo-Christian scripture and Egyptian mythology (not to mention, as I have not here, Egyptian-inspired Greek mythology) to (re)place these traditions at their source: Africa.

Morrison's critique of United States society is similar to that posited by Francis Landy for the Song of Songs, and like the Song, *Beloved* is a meditation on love. Landy comments on the complexity of the individual, cultural, and even theological issues the Song confronts throughout this meditation:

The poem is unfailingly critical of a society that does not know the true value of love and that imposes shame on lovers. The affirmation [is] that

love is as strong as death and is not quenched by floods (8:7), that it alone is not transient and illusory... (318)

Beloved's meditation on love comprehends Katie Geneva Cannon's basic understanding of intersection of the situation of the antebellum black woman and her religious beliefs:

The biblical interpretation of the Black church also made slaves discontent with their servile condition. Under slavery the Black woman had the status of property: Her master had total power over her, and she and her children were denied the most elementary social bonds--family and kinship. The Black woman was defined as "brood sow" and "work ox." (31)

The holy Baby Suggs is denied all of her eight children except for Halle, and the name Suggs puns the "brood sow" designation.²⁶ The feminist theologian Sharon Welch has written, "Liberation theologians emphasize the collective manifestations of sin" (48); the collective horror of slavery and the oppression of African Americans in the United States is written in and on Baby Suggs's broken body, Sethe's "chokecherry tree," and her "rough choice" (180) of resistance through infanticide. For better or for worse, however, love *is* as strong as death. Through "suffering too great to name" (Welch 89), like Sethe's baptism in "the sound that broke the back of words," like Baby Suggs's loving and faith-full instruction to Denver that she must know there is "no defense" and "go on out the yard," human love is fraught with almost inexpressible risk and power.

The elaborate structure of historical and scriptural connections that I have described, and the positions I have taken, again, are consonant with the general understanding of Morrison's texts that critics (including myself) have evinced: that she writes against the dualistic philosophical tradition that has enabled and fostered racism, slavery, and the superstructure of white patriarchal dominance. The coextensive, overlapping, non-linear themes in these texts represent an endless

²⁶ According to A.H. Smith, the name comes from old English sugu, "a sow," which in turn comes from Old English sugan, "to suck," another prominent association, of course, throughout *Beloved*.

tension between love and horror, triumph and tragedy; these political works of art, complex and subtle, each demand the reader's continual questioning of discursive authority. None of them, however, can be divided from the African spiritual and historical presence that, as Morrison has pointed out in *Playing in the Dark*, is everywhere defining of the American experience.

Chapter Six

City Called Heaven

Jazz

And the Lord said, Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous; I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto me; and if not, I will know.

--Genesis 18:20-21

For my people thronging 47th Street in Chicago and Lenox Avenue in New York and Rampart Street in New Orleans, lost disinherited dispossessed and happy people filling the caberets and taverns and other people's pockets needing bread and shoes and milk and land and money and something--something all our own....

--Margaret Walker

By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

--Hebrews 11:9-10

The dichotomy between the spiritual and the political is also false, resulting from an incomplete attention to our erotic knowledge. For the bridge which connects them is formed by the erotic--the sensual--those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings.

--Audre Lorde

The Voice¹ that animates Toni Morrison's 1992 novel, *Jazz*, is simultaneously compelling and unsure, all-knowing and equivocal, patronizing and forgiving, and

¹ While not identifying the Voice of *Jazz* as in any way divine--although he does call the novel "our metatext" (49)--John Leonard chooses in his review of the book to capitalize Voice. In terms of what I am proposing here, I find it convenient to follow Leonard.

ultimately loving. The second book of the trilogy on love begun with *Beloved*,² the novel continues to explore the interdependency of human relationality and divine love, and the way these are structured reciprocally within culture and politics. Early on, the Voice remarks of Violet Trace, "Maybe she thought she could solve the mystery of love" (5). This complex book, through a narrative that invokes both the quotidian and supernatural--"grounded in the earth and... connect[ed] to the heavens"³--extends the central meditation of all Morrison's novels, beginning, perhaps, with Pecola Breedlove's question, "'How do you get somebody to love you?'" (29) Pecola's question encodes the "mystery" of love which Morrison contemplates--the mystery of motherlove, of erotic and sexual love, and the mystery of divine love--which becomes in *Jazz*, even more than in her previous works, the central and unifying theme on which many variations are played.

Morrison's theology, which integrates her individuality as a writer with the historical conditions under which she has composed her work,⁴ arises from "the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United States."⁵ The embodied souls of *Jazz* reflect the Africanized Old and New Testament traditions associated with the black church in the United States, and Morrison inscribes the theology of *Jazz*, as in her earlier novels, within a rich and precise historical matrix. *Jazz* is replete with allusions specific not only to the historical moment in which the story of Joe and Violet Trace and Dorcas Manfred is enacted, but also to the era in which their parents live.

² Naylor and Morrison, 583-584.

³ The phrase is Russell Banks's, quoted in Fussell 111.

⁴ Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory" 48.

⁵ Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* 5.

The history referred to in *Jazz* comprehends the most horrific of the postbellum period, when white supremacist terrorism including lynching and torture of all kinds flourished virtually unchecked in the United States. The main storyline unfolds in 1926, a signal year of the Harlem Renaissance, but the book's allusions include the lynchings of blacks and plundering of black-owned land by whites in the late nineteenth century; the urban riots such as occurred in East St. Louis in 1917, in which whites murdered African Americans and burned them out of their homes; and the NAACP silent march to protest lynching that same year. Alice Manfred and her niece Dorcas, whose father is "pulled off a streetcar and stomped to death" and whose mother is "burned crispy" in the fire of the East St. Louis riots, watch the "beautiful...cold black faces" "for three hours on Fifth Avenue" (57, 53). In *Jazz*, African American history interweaves with the "deepdown, spooky" love story of the Traces and Dorcas, and with Joe's murder of the girl he seeks much as he seeks his unknown and unknowable mother Wild--a supernatural ancestor figure. Encompassing and affirming African American cultural life, and describing the continuum of the living and the dead, Morrison subtly but forcefully reminds her readers that, in Herbert Shapiro's words, "Blacks have fought against those who would oppress them, but they have not organized lynch mobs and carved up the flesh of their victims as souvenirs" (xvi).

The teller of *Jazz* is reminiscent of God in the Pentateuch as drawn by J, the Yahwist. Norman Gottwald writes that the Yahwist delineates "a portrait of God as a forceful 'folk' expression of divine presence and agency in the world":

Yahweh is alluded to in well-nigh corporeal terms. Even as a human being cannot be conceived by J except as a body-soul unity, there being no disembodied human "soul," so God--while no mere human--is talked about in bodily and affective language. Yahweh is evidently not all-knowing, but shows an experimental openness toward creation, abandoning one line of action for another as advisable. On more than one occasion the deity is perturbed by the ways of humanity and is taxed to find new methods for coping with them.... Yahweh is "high god," not confused with nature spirits,

but an overarching root metaphor of a living reality to be pictured necessarily in human imagery. (328)

The God-like Voice narrating *Jazz* is similarly not all-knowing, and at several points in the novel abandons one line of thinking, if not action, for another; "I may be doomed to another misunderstanding," comments the Voice at one point (161). The Voice contemplates and assesses the behavior of the characters, in the country and the city, in attempting to understand their motivations, and in this way recalls YHWH in Genesis, who must "go down and see" whether or not Sodom and Gomorrah are as bad as he has heard (Gen. 18:21):

You have to understand what it's like, taking on a big city: I'm exposed to all sorts of ignorance and criminality. Still, this is the only life for me. I like the way the City makes people think they can do what they want and get away with it. (*Jazz* 8)

By the novel's end, the Voice has embraced the ineffable spaces of relationality between human beings, their ability to comprehend and *know*, in the gnostic sense, divine love. The spiritual and embodied experience of the believer becomes the locus of liberation in the gnostic framework; in *Jazz*, the powerful, invisible presence of the ancestor figure Wild is liberation incarnate--or at least known:

She has seen me and is not afraid of me. She hugs me. Understands me.
Has given me her hand. I am touched by her. Released in secret.
Now I know. (221)

Besides *gnosis*, relationality--touching, understanding, seeing, hugging--creates the kingdom of God in "this world."

Morrison's composition of the Voice plays with the notion of the "omniscient narrator" in fiction, which is often related to the idea of God or a "God's-eye view." In turn, and related to my understanding that the Voice in *Jazz* recalls YHWH as drawn by J, the narrative Voice subverts authority and the power associated with authority. Or, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has written, "[Morrison's narrator] remains indeterminate: it is neither male nor female; neither young nor old; neither rich nor poor. It is *both* and *neither*" (54). Gates's attempt to

characterize the Voice recalls YHWH's answer to Moses when asked for a name: "I am that I am" (Exodus 3:14a).

Readers and critics have noted the jazz-like, music-like quality of the narrative, but I find especially remarkable Morrison's creation of Presence in the Voice of *Jazz*, where Presence includes the ancestors, the dead, the spiritual, in "this world." As I have argued in previous chapters, she depicts an Afro-Christian kingdom of God, which is, according to Jesus in The Gospel of Thomas, "spread out upon the earth, and men do not see it" (*Nag Hammadi* 113). As with the "body-soul unity" comprehended by J, African theology does not, as Bénézet Bujo puts it, "accept [the] mutilation of the human being," that is, stereotypical Western Christian theology's separation of the human body from the soul; "[p]eople in Africa experienced themselves as a unity, living in a network of living relationships with God and with nature" (Bujo 31-32).

The "network of living relationships" in *Jazz* is composed of the juxtapositions and syntheses of the country and the city, the body and the soul, the living and the dead, God and human beings and the natural world, the African American as African and American, and, crucially, the City of God and the City of the world. The continuum between the living and the dead, the relationality between persons, and God and God's voice enmeshed in and inseparable from the complexities of his/her creation exist in *Jazz*: through Dorcas's presence as she is living, dying, and dead; in the trinities of Joe, Violet, and Felice as well as Joe, Violet, and Dorcas; and in the pervasive absent presence of Joe's and Violet's dead, mysterious-mystical mothers, as well as in the attenuated presence of the Voice. Bujo explains the inseparability of God from God's creation in African religious traditions:

God is not far from the African world. All relationships, between person and person, living and dead, and between persons and nature, are rooted in God and point towards God and towards the end of all things in God. (32)

Besides the relationality between people that represents the kingdom of God, the novel inscribes the African, African American, and Hebrew understanding that forces of evil are at work "in all holy places" (Ellul 114)--in the Edenic countryside of Joe Trace's memory as well as in the sinful, vibrant, human activity of the City. Morrison has expressed this coextension implicitly and explicitly, throughout her novels, and in her essays and interviews:

It always interested me, the way in which black people responded to evil. They would protect themselves from it, they would avoid it, they might even be terrified of it, but it wasn't as though it were abnormal.... Evil was a natural presence in the world. (Ruas 223)

In *Jazz*, the vital Voice of the deity is ineluctably one with "the City," which is, in Raymond Williams's words, "at once a social fact and a human landscape" (*Country* 158). In centralizing the narrative within the unnamed "City,"⁶ Morrison invokes a cultural structure of profound importance not only to the industrial nations of the West, but to the people of West Africa who were forced to come to the Americas in great numbers: "All of these [West African] traditions are ancient and charged with nobility of blood and purpose. And all of them, with the exception of the villager Ejagham, are urban" (Thompson xiv). Raymond Williams sums up what the city and the country have come stand for:

On the country has gathered the idea of the natural way of life: of peace, innocence and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation. A contrast between country and city, as fundamental ways of life, reaches back into classical times. (1)

Commentators such as Williams, art historian Robert Farris Thompson, and French theologian Jacques Ellul all note the association of cities with intellectual and

⁶ There are of course, numerous, references to streets and landmarks of New York City: Seventh, Fifth, and Park Avenues. Particularly important are specific references to Harlem: Harlem Hospital, Lenox Avenue, and so forth. But "New York" is never named.

artistic life; "jazz" therefore is born of a matrix of intense human contact. But the tremendous social and cultural importance of the city is also a principle, a metaphor, of great theological importance and complexity.

The City may be the antithesis to Eden--Cain is the first city-builder--but the City has become not only Babylon, but a holy place: Rome, Mecca, Jerusalem, and especially the New Jerusalem. Moreover, Williams has remarked that "the city [can] be seen as an independent organism" (46); Ellul expresses this in the context of the New Testament:

...the city is a specific being, independent of its inhabitants. Jesus speaks to the city itself... against the collectivity of its inhabitants, of course, but even more certainly against the city as an independent being...For it is not a question of the inhabitants, but of the city itself. (114)

The Voice bespeaks the alienation of the characters from themselves and one another in *Jazz*, and the power of the City as itself a being:

As though there never was a time when they didn't love it...in a city, they are not so much new as themselves: their stronger, riskier selves...twenty years later they and the City have grown up, [and] they love that part of themselves so much they forget what loving other people was like... (33)

The political must also be relational--the structure of human culture cannot be defined separately from interpersonal relations--seductive as the "stronger, riskier" side of the city may be.

The City of God--coterminous with the City of the world and the City as being--is imaged in numerous ways in *Jazz*. "There is no air in the City but there is breath" (34), announces the Voice, and:

...I have seen the City do an unbelievable sky....It can empty itself of surface, and more like the ocean than the ocean itself, go deep, starlessall the while heaven, unnoticed and beautiful as an Iroquois, drifts past their windows. (35-36)

These passages invoke the power of the City as being, as a structure of divine as well as human substance; they resonate with ideas of heaven, the divine breath of the Holy Spirit, and the words of Jesus:

If those who lead you say to you, 'See, the kingdom is in the sky,' then the birds of the sky will precede. If they say to you, 'It is in the sea,' then the fish will precede you. Rather, the kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. (Gospel of Thomas 3:1)

The complexity of "the city"--"its factual and spiritual relations....the human system it concentrates and embodies" (Williams, *Country* 148-149)--makes it simultaneously a material and transcendent locus of historical and spiritual significance. Saint Augustine's *City of God* arises from the unique eschatological vision of the ancient Hebrews--"the Hebrew myth...considers the future of humanity as the establishment of a city" (Ellul 161). Augustine sees two cities, coexisting:

One of these is the City of God, the other the city of this world; and God's City lives in this world's city, as far as its human element is concerned; but it lives there as an alien sojourner. (761)

The term "this world," as I have noted in previous chapters, is a typical way that Morrison calls attention to spiritual presence, to divine presence in the quotidian world around us. The divine Voice of *Jazz* delineates early on a sense of being "an alien sojourner": "I have lived a long time...in my own mind. People say I should come out more...I agree that I close off in places..." (9). The way in which the Voice depicts the City also recalls the spiritual "City Called Heaven":

Sometimes I am tossed and driven.
Sometimes I don't know where to roam,
But I've heard of a city called heaven
And I've started to make it my home.
(Hughes and Bontemps 291)

Leslie Fiedler's interpretation of Simone Weil on the nature of God's presence also is illuminating of the coextension of the City-of-God/City-of-the-world in *Jazz*. Weil's view complements the idea that the Voice of the novel is *not* an all-knowing, omnipotent God, as well as Morrison's conception of "Presence":

Having withdrawn from the universe so that it might exist, God is powerless within it, ineffective except as his grace penetrates on special occasions, like a ray of light, the dark mechanical realm of unlimited misery.

Yet we must *love* this world, this absence of God by virtue of which we are, for only through it, like the smile of the beloved through pain, can we sense the perfectly nonpresent Being who alone can redeem it....(37)

The inherent dialectic encoded in "the City," between its earthly and heavenly manifestations, between the presence and the absence of God, between the conception of it as "being" and the city as a basic structure of human civilization, further illustrates the ways in which, as Ellul has noted, "the Hebrew notion is completely other" (162).

Whereas systems of myth and religion such as the Greco-Latin and Islam call for a repudiation of human history and a return to a primitive "golden" age, the eschatology of Judeo-Christian tradition embraces the works and history of human beings, as Ellul has written:

Far from advocating a return to the past, it calls for a step ahead; it wants to lose nothing of what man has done. And in this respect Karl Marx was, as many have asserted, directly inspired by Jewish mythology, in which there is nothing to be destroyed from the fantastic adventure of human civilization Thus the golden age will be characterized by an acceptance of history, and not by its refusal. (162)

In *Jazz*, as in Scripture, Eden is of the past and there will be no return to it:

"History is over...and everything's ahead at last" (7). Morrison incorporates the apocalyptic visions of biblical books such as Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation in all her novels, as part of their parabolic form. Her viewpoint is both eschatological and soteriological; the statement that "history is over" calls attention to the folly of "forgetting the past," the folly of believing that what matters happens now, and has no relation to, and does not arise from, history. But "history is over" also implies that "what's done is done," and that the apocalypse--the rip in the veil--and the end of time are imminent. The statement implicitly juxtaposes what John Dominic Crossan calls sapiential, or gnostic, notions of the mission of Jesus to the eschatological; Morrison's theology, however, embraces both.

* * *

The stories of the characters make manifest the African American history that forms *Jazz's* foundation. Again, "the City" of *Jazz* exists in complex structuring relation to the contrasting "country" of Joe and Violet Trace's memories and of this foundational history. Joe Trace is a "new Negro....seven times"⁷ before he meets Dorcas Manfred: a country man, he is self-named, a hunter, the adopted child of a country family who, like him, are at once chosen and dispossessed. He is almost killed by a whiteman in a 1917 Manhattan riot, and in 1919 walks "every goddamn step of the way" with the legendary World War I regiment, the all-black 369th, in their victory parade (128, 129).

Joe Trace's given name, Joseph, connects him to a number of scriptural figures, as well as to Jesus of Nazareth. First, it links him to Joseph of Genesis, one of Jacob's (Israel's) two sons by Rachel. Joseph is sold into bondage by his jealous, blood-thirsty brothers, but his refusal to lie with Potiphar's wife and his ability to interpret dreams leads to Pharaoh making him "ruler over all the land of Egypt" (Gen. 41:41) The Joseph story connects to the later bondage of the Hebrews in Egypt, when "there arose a new king over Egypt, who knew not Joseph" (Ex. 1:8), and I have noted in previous chapters that the bondage of the nation of Israel has been analogized to the slavery of Africans in the United States and to the subordinate social status of black Americans more generally. The Joseph story, however, depicts the jealousy, infighting, and self-destructiveness among the sons of Jacob and the particular chosen status of one of their number--Joseph. What is perhaps most central to the complex stories of the Pentateuch to which Morrison so often alludes is the concern of Genesis in particular with the foundations of a people, the concern with the African theological notion of

⁷ The obvious, and somewhat ironic, allusion here is to Alain Locke's 1925 *The New Negro*. In other words, the novel de-romanticizes the Harlem Renaissance by (re)placing the movement in its historical moment.

ancestors, even when, as in Joe Trace's case, exactly who those ancestors are cannot be precisely known. Joe Trace's own history as a country man invokes a characteristic state of longing for the lost Eden of Genesis, and this in turn brings up at least two things Joe tries to connect with through his love affair with Dorcas Manfred: the lost pastoral idyll of his youth and his early love for Violet, and his mystical and invisible mother.

Joseph in Genesis testifies to the particular triumph and misery of being "chosen" of God. Some of Joseph's own brothers would just as soon have killed him, but they are appeased by Judah's suggestion, "Come, and let us sell him to the Ishmeelites" (Gen. 37:27). The Ishmeelites take Joseph into Egypt. Years later, when his brothers come to him in Egypt during the famine, and he finally reveals who he is, he tells them to "be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that you sold me hither:"

for God did send me before you to preserve life....And God sent me before you to preserve you a posterity in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So now it was not you that sent me hither, but God... (Gen. 45:5, 7-8)

The concept of being chosen holds a particular poignant significance for African Americans: countless Africans were taken from their homelands; countless Africans died in the Middle Passage, as well as before and after; others remained in Africa. Through a tortuous history of slavery and terrorism, the Africans removed became Americans. The idea that a people may be chosen of God is subtle, and I don't wish to be understood to claim that Morrison is attempting to mitigate the enormity of the crimes against African Americans by attributing such status to them. But Morrison herself illuminates the particular pain of being chosen for African Americans in a section on Paul D in *Beloved*:

And in all those escapes he could not help being astonished by the beauty of this land that was not his. He hid in its breast, fingered its earth for food, clung to its banks to lap water and tried not to love it. On nights when the sky was personal, weak with the weight of its own stars, he made himself

not love it. Its graveyards and low-lying rivers. Or just a house--solitary under a chinaberry tree; maybe a mule tethered and the light hitting its hide just so. Anything could stir him and he tried hard not to love it. (268)

By selecting the name "Joseph" for her main character, however, Morrison indicates a certain (complex) historical fact: both the Jews of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and African Americans have experienced bondage and deliverance that sets them apart from other groups of people. Joseph is another type of Christ; Jesus is "chosen" but pleads with God against his suffering: "Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee. Take away this cup from me; Nevertheless, not what I will but what thou wilt" (Mark 14:36). This understanding of chosenness resonates with the "absurd situation" of African Americans delineated by Cornel West, "in which one is seemingly forever on the cross." The point is, as West emphasizes, that black people within their culturally specific Christianity are "sustained and empowered by a hope against hope for a potential and possible triumphant state of affairs" (5). Chosenness, then, as West and Cain Hope Felder unequivocally assert, is a political situation in *this world* for Americans of African descent.

Joe Trace's name, in its allusions to the New Testament, and in Joe's trinitarian relationships with other characters in *Jazz*, makes him the center point of a nexus of salvific beings who each in turn reflect and represent Jesus Christ. The several Josephs in the New Testament serve various specific functions in the gospels and subsequent books. In contrast to the both dispossessed and chosen status of Joseph of Genesis, the Joseph mentioned in Acts, "called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus" (Acts 1:23) is one of two men nominated by Peter potentially to replace Judas as one of the twelve disciples. The disciples pray that God, "who knowest the hearts of all men, [will] show whether of these two thou has chosen" (1:24). Lots are cast, and Matthias is the chosen one--this Joseph is not. The "step-father" of Jesus of Nazareth, Joseph the husband of Mary, descends from the line of King

David, but his status has always been contested, his place ambiguous in Scripture.⁸ He is a transition figure, a place-holder; standing in, as he does for God as the "father" of Jesus, he conceals--poorly, of course--certain gaps in the theology surrounding Jesus as the Son of God.

Jesus, like sacrificial figures in other mythological and religious systems, is an Everyman; Joe Trace is a Morrisonian "chosen" figure who encodes his own reversal. He is not separated away from the world, but is an everyman like Jesus. "Joe" can be used to indicate an *unnamed* man: "an average Joe," Joe Blow, Joe Cool, G.I. Joe, and so on. When Alice Manfred contemplates Joe Trace, "the man who killed her niece just because he could," she calls him the "sample-case man. A nice neighborly, everybody-knows-him man" (73). As Everyman, however, Joe Trace also recalls Joseph, Mary's husband--innocuous and well thought of. Joe is old enough to be Dorcas's father and in part he plays that role with her, as he does when she is resurrected in a new form as Felice, her friend. Joe Trace is also a Christ figure who encodes salvation, liberation, and history. The function of stand-in father, filled in Jesus's life by Joseph, is in turn filled in Joe Trace's life by the mystical character Golden Gray, about whom I will have more to say later.

Joe Trace is chosen time and again: by his miraculous birth, by his adoptive parents, by Hunters Hunter. Joe should be killed when the whitemen hit him over the head with a pipe, but he is chosen to live. The biblical figure who perhaps best embodies the double-edged sword of chosenness is Job. The similarity between the names Joe and Job may or may not be more than fortuitous, but Joe Trace echoes Job when he contemplates how Dorcas "makes him wish he had never been born" (40). Job laments, "Let the day perish in which I was born" (3:3a). Like Job, Joe

⁸ In Matt. 1:1-17, Joseph is the son of Jacob; in Luke 3:23-38, he is the son of Heli. How long Joseph lived, or even if he actually was married to Mary is unknown.

Trace is known to be a good man, who "eschews evil" (cf. Job 1). In a Morrisonian reversal, Joe tells Dorcas, "'I chose you'" (135), throwing off, in a sense, the terrible burden of being chosen of God. Though Joe is a type of Christ, Dorcas will be the sacrificial lamb, the ultimately chosen One.

Another significant figure in the New Testament sharing Joe's name is Joseph of Arimathaea, who John Dominic Crossan argues is a fictional figure encoding the gospel writers' concern with the appropriate burial of the body of Jesus after his crucifixion (cf. Crossan 393-394). All of the Gospels describe Joseph, "an honourable counsellor, who also waited for the kingdom of God"; after Jesus has died on the cross, Joseph of Arimathaea goes "in boldly unto Pilate, and crave[s] the body of Jesus" (Mark 15:43). On this New Testament Joseph therefore centers a cross-gospel focus on the mortal remains of Jesus of Nazareth, again, Jesus's earthly *body*. In John, a Pharisee named Nicodemus comes to anoint the body with spices "as the manner of the Jews is to bury" (cf. John 19:39-40). Earlier in John, Jesus has instructed Nicodemus: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (3:6). Morrison configures the Africanized Christian traditions surrounding the ancestors and the continuum of the living and the dead through these allusions to the *dead body* of Jesus and with the ritual concern his followers and other political figures show for that body. In *Jazz*, the references to Dorcas's body replicate this attention to the body of Jesus: "Dorcas stood in her body and offered it to either of the brothers for a dance"; "[Dorcas and Felice] know that a badly dressed body is nobody at all"; "The body she inhabits is unworthy" (64, 65, 67-emphases added). At the end of the novel, the Voice affirms that "the body is the vehicle, not the point" (228); again, "our moral-selves are body-selves who touch and see and hear each other into life" (Harrison 207)..

The anointing of the body of Jesus associated with Joseph of Arimathaea is represented in Joe and Dorcas's ministrations to each other; their lovemaking

involves massaging, grooming, "lotioning" one another (38-39). These acts also recall the anointing of Jesus by the unnamed woman in the gospel of Mark. But it is Dorcas who is the primary Christ figure. Reversing, as she so commonly does, the genders of the participants, Morrison creates a "deep-down, spooky" pre-homicidal love: "that unnamed woman believed in [Jesus's] imminent death, and she anointed him in symbolic preparation for it" (Crossan 416). While not possessing the singular moral presence of, say, Pilate Dead in *Song of Solomon*, Dorcas and Joe each incorporate the intersection of history, sexuality, and spirituality so important to *Jazz* and to Morrison's intricate liberation theology. As with other of Morrison's Christs, Dorcas is, as John Dominic Crossan defines the resurrection of Jesus, a "continuing presence in a continuing community" (404).

The Voice speaks of "the range of what an artful City can do" to its inhabits, especially in spring, the season of resurrection, when "the City urges contradiction most" (118, 117)--that is, urges salvation and transformation. Early in the novel, the Voice explains such a contradiction: "...this young good God young girl who both blesses his life and makes him wish he had never been born" (40), and later alludes to Jesus in terms of the City's power when explaining Joe Trace's love affair with Dorcas:

Because [Joe] has never messed with another woman; because he selected that young girl to love, he thinks he is free. Not free to break loaves or feed the world on a fish. Nor to raise the war dead, but free to do something wild.

Take my word for it, he is bound to the track.... That's the way the City spins you. Makes you do what it wants, go where the laid out roads say to. All the while letting you think you're free.... (120)

The Voice's "take my word for it"--"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1)--plays on its own season of contra-diction, when the Word made flesh is murdered, renewed, and ultimately restored.

Joe is no more able to capture Dorcas than he is successful at finding or even seeing his mother, Wild, but his killing of Dorcas makes her the sacrificial lamb, a Christ who is not born but murdered at Christmastime, and who rises again in the person of Felice at Easter. Joe's love and desire for Dorcas finally cannot bring to him the thing he thinks he wants, or even needs. The Voice contemplates him, his suffering, his desire, his hope: "To this moment I'm not sure what his tears were really for, but I do know they were for more than Dorcas" (221). As Joe weeps at the death of Dorcas, so "Jesus wept" at the death of Lazarus, and then raises him from the dead (John 11:34-44). Like Alice Manfred, the Christian disciple Tabitha, "which by interpretation is called Dorcas" (Acts 9:36), is a seamstress. As the widows for whom Dorcas made clothes are weeping at her death, Peter prays and says, "Tabitha, arise. And she opened her eyes: and when she saw Peter, she sat up" (Acts 9:40). Through *Jazz's* parables, Morrison illustrates the African-Christian "participation in that other world where the dead live and where is to be found the key to the fate of the living" and "give[s] expression to the belief that the dead person becomes a guardian spirit who shares life with the earthly family" (Bujo 24).

Joe's love-triangle becomes a Trinity, the representation of divine relationality between persons which establishes them in personhood and in community. Violet's violent behavior to Dorcas's body discloses "[s]omething else you have to figure in before you can figure it out" (228): that the City of God is the City of the world, that the kingdom of God is revealed "in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings" of *this* world, and the City-dwellers "learn in their own experience Who He is."⁹ The City in the end enables Violet "'to be the woman my mother didn't stay around

⁹ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, quoted in Crossan 225.

long enough to see'" (208). In her own way, Violet then becomes a part of the scriptural entourage who take responsibility for the handling of the body of Christ.

Violet's violent ministrations to Dorcas's body is reportedly her attempt to "kill what lay in a coffin" (79). Instead, Violet kills the person who "forgot that her life was hers" so that she becomes "'Me'" (208, 209). Felice contemplates "the way Violet says 'me'":

"...Not like the 'me' was some tough somebody, or somebody she had put together for show. But like, like somebody she favored and could count on. A secret somebody you didn't have to feel sorry for or have to fight for. Somebody who wouldn't have to steal a ring to get back at whitepeople and then lie and say it was a present from them." (210)

The recognition of self here echoes Sethe's tentative "Me? Me?" at the end of *Beloved* (273).

When Felice returns to the Traces' apartment for dinner, she feels compelled to ask her

"why did she mess up the funeral that way. Mr. Trace looked at her as though he had asked the question.
 "'Lost the lady,' she said. 'Put her down someplace and forgot where.'
 "'How did you find her?'
 "'Looked.'" (211)

Later, Joe and Violet start dancing to music being played in their building, and Felice "'laugh[s] for real.'" They invite Felice to join them, and she doesn't, "'but I wanted to'" (214). There is much in the section of *Jazz* which reflects the gnostic "Acts of John," which in turn recalls the antiphonal call-and-response of "The Thunder, Perfect Mind" from which Morrison takes her epigraph. Recognition and affirmation surface again in this allusion; Rod Cameron explains that, in the "Acts of John," "the believer is to recognize himself in the revealer; by understanding who Jesus is, the believer will come to know himself" (88). The section of "The Acts of John," "Grace dances," is part of a hymn Jesus is said to be singing, to which his followers respond after each verse, "Amen"; it in part reads:

'To the Universe

belongs the dancer.'
 'He who does not dance
 does not know what happens.'
 'I will flee,
 and I will remain.'
 'I will adorn,
 and I will be adorned.'
 'I will be united,
 and I will unite.'
 'I have no house,
 and I have houses.'
 'I have no place,
 and I have places.'

....
 'Now if you follow
 my dance,
 see yourself
 in Me who am speaking
 and when you have seen what I do,
 keep silence about my mysteries.' (95:16-22, 96:28-30)

In the sorrow-filled weeks after Dorcas's funeral, "Violet did the dance steps that the dead girl used to do...when she was shown how" (*Jazz* 5). Years before, in 1906 when Violet and Joe are on a train that "trembled approaching the water surrounding the City":

the trembling became dancing under their feet. Joe stood up, his fingers clutching the baggage rack above his head. He felt the dancing better that way, and told Violet to do the same. (30)

Violet's attempted murder of the dead Dorcas signals the rebirth of her own identity, her embracing the community of her people, her "seeing herself in Me that is speaking."

* * *

In her essay "Uses of the Erotic: the Erotic as Power," Audre Lorde affirms the link between the spiritual and the political, a link which has been crucial to my thesis throughout this work:

For the bridge which connects [the spiritual and the political] is formed by the erotic--the sensual--those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love in its deepest meanings. (56)

Crucially, Lorde also links the spiritual and political manifestations of the erotic to her body's response to music, echoing the "dirty, get-on-down music the women sang and the men played and both danced to....Just hearing it was like violating the law" (*Jazz* 58). The "belt-buckle tunes" (59) of the nineteen-twenties which Alice Manfred and her friends, the Miller sisters, find so sinful are expressed in the youthful sexuality of Dorcas.

Perhaps jazz reflects the wickedness of the City of the world, but "the bright wood chip" that Dorcas swallows as the fires of East St. Louis consume her mother, that "lodged comfortably somewhere below her navel" (61) constitutes more than a giving over to the physical and sexual because of unendurable psychic pain. Dorcas carries the ember of history. In her passionate, erotic love affair with Joe, she passes on the history that burns within her, and it ultimately becomes part of Joe's transformation, and the transformations of Violet, Felice, and her aunt Alice as well. Like Jesus's, Dorcas's is a death "sealed by resurrection... [which] 'open[s] up a new relationship of human beings to God and in so doing has established a new relationship of one human being to another in the world in which they live.'"¹⁰

Although Dorcas is only eighteen, her brief life and her violent death recall Jesus. Bujo characterizes Jesus Christ as "Proto-Ancestor":

Jesus Christ is the ultimate embodiment of all the virtues of the ancestors, the realization of the salvation for which they yearned. Further still, Jesus Christ is the Proto-Ancestor, the Proto-Life-Force, bearer in a transcendent form of the primitive "vital union" and "vital force"....He not only has life, he is life, and awakens others to life... (81)

Joe's love affair with Dorcas is a "primitive 'vital union'"; he sees the "secret love appetite soaring inside" her which others fail to comprehend (67). Allusions to the apple of Eden enhance the sense that Joe and Dorcas do find something idyllic,

¹⁰ Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Church with a Human Face*, quoted in Bujo 81.

uncomplicated, and basic. Joe tells Dorcas that she is "the reason Adam ate the apple and its core. That when he left Eden he left a rich man" (133); and when Dorcas is dying she asks Felice to tell Joe, "There's only one apple...Just one" (213). Joe and Dorcas "feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of" (Lorde 57). Dorcas herself reflects on the power of the erotic, the power of desire when she listens to "cautionary tales" told by Neola Miller, one of the sisters with whom Alice leaves Dorcas while she works. Neola's arm has been paralyzed over her heart since her "soon-to-be-groom" deserted her, years before Dorcas hears how "the goodness of good behavior collapsed before the thrill of the sin they deplored" (62). We are reminded of Morrison's point that the African American community acknowledges the natural presence of evil in the world, and in Dorcas's mind it is "Paradise. All for Paradise" (63).

In addition to the presence of evil and good in the world, the erotic--sensitivity and sexuality--and the spiritual, political, and historical coextend with the events of the lives of these city dwellers. This includes Dorcas's death and Violet's complex reaction to learning of the affair and the murder. Long before Joe meets Dorcas, Violet develops a sudden and rather uncontrollable second sight. When she and Joe are discussing "the daily number combinations" (23), she says, "Got a mind to double it with an aught and two or three others just in case who is that pretty girl standing next to you?" (24). Violet's visions of the pro-genic ancestor¹¹ are "troublesome. Like the time Miss Haywood asked her what time could she do her granddaughter's hair and Violet said, 'Two o'clock if the hearse is out of the way'" (24). Violet's troublesome contacts with the dead render her silent, and her silences contribute to Joe's longing for the past.

¹¹ In Yoruba religion, for example, babies are thought to be particularly close to the ancestors, to the departed. "A newborn child is often thought to be the reincarnation of some ancestor seeking to return to this life, or at least part of his spiritual influence returns" (Parrinder 95).

The "idyll" Joe achieves in his love affair with Dorcas comes with a price, however. The ember that burns in Dorcas, that makes her sexual and appealing and makes the affair possible for Joe, is precisely the same ember that makes history inescapable--that makes history *not* be "over." In other words, because of Dorcas, Joe discovers that he can neither escape his history nor return to the past. This is encoded in his desire to "escape" his relationship with Violet through Dorcas, a relationship that began at the time he was trying so hard to find his mother and that perhaps temporarily substituted for a resolution to that search. In the sense that *Dorcas* is at once like Joe's child and serves a kind of replacement for his mother, she represents, like Beloved, a pro-genic ancestor figure. The younger of the two of them, it is Dorcas who reveals history to Joe. He holds her as she cries and tells him about the horror of her parents' deaths, of trying to retrieve her trinity of clothespin dolls, "Rochelle and Bernadine and Faye" (61):

There was no getting in that house where her clothespin dolls lay...But she tried anyway to get them. Barefoot, in the dress she had slept in, she ran to get them, and yelled to her mother that the box of dolls, the box of dolls was up there on the dresser can we get them? Mama? (38)

In the end, neither of them can return to a golden age of joy in Eden, nor can they transcend the violence and sorrow of their collective memories. They will proceed with their people, with the history in which there was "only one apple," to the City of God--a city called heaven--filled with their ancestors.

As I have previously remarked, Morrison's parabolic novels do not describe a mimetic world. Therefore, sexuality and the erotic in *Jazz* articulate not only sensual love and humanity, but also Joe and Violet's parental love for Felice. We leave Violet and Joe on "[their] mattress, curved like a preacher's palm asking for witnesses in His name's sake" and their "whispering, old-time love" (228). When spring comes after Dorcas has let herself die of her wound, the music the Voice describes is "just like the light of that day, pure and steady and kind of kind. You

would have thought everything had been forgiven the way they played" (196), again invoking the end-time, the revelation. Violet "listen[s] to the music penetrate Joe's sobs," the music which has "joined the light." She has returned the "photograph [of Dorcas] to Alice Manfred. But," we read, "the space where the photo had been was real":

Perhaps that's why, standing there on the porch...she easily believed that what was coming up the steps toward her was another true-as-life Dorcas, four marcelled waves and all. (197)

Resurrection suffuses these passages. Besides the associations of God and Jesus to light (e.g., John 1:8-9) and the Gnostic image of knowledge as light, the "real space" that exists when Dorcas's photograph is gone recalls "the continuing presence" of Jesus of Nazareth after his death (Crossan 404). When Violet sees Felice coming up the steps, she reveals what Morrison has called "inner faith" (Ruas 242): "she easily believed" in "another true-as-life" girl, whom she has "fall[en] in love with...too" (15).

* * *

Notions of space, of presence and absence, and of light animate the "sense of place"¹² in *Jazz*. The novel's epigraph is from a *Nag Hammadi* text, "The Thunder: Perfect Mind." Besides resonances with the "'I style' of proclamation by a revealer figure" (*Nag Hammadi* 295) (who is not gendered) between *Jazz* and "Thunder," the novel repeatedly returns to the Gnostic tenet that light is knowledge of God in numerous ways. "Daylight slants like a razor cutting the buildings in half," the Voice proclaims early on (7). When Joe Trace finds his mother's "home in the rock; that place sunlight got into most of the day" (221), "[i]t was like falling

¹² Stepto 213. This is the well-known interview in which Morrison tells Robert Stepto that, although she "never felt like an American...I felt a very strong sense of place...in terms of the details, the feeling, the mood of the community, of the town."

into the sun" (183). Violet associates her first meeting with Joe at night with dawn and light:

His name was Joseph, and even before the sun rose, when it was still hidden in the woods, but freshening the world's green and dazzling acres of white cotton against the gash of a ruby horizon, Violet claimed him....All through the night, taking her sass, complaining, teasing, explaining, but talking, talking her through the dark. And with daylight came bits of him: his smile and his wide watching eyes. (104-105)

Joe brings salvation to Violet, he brings light to the darkness of her mother's suicide; "Violet never forgot Rose Dear or the place she had thrown herself into--a place so narrow, so dark it was pure, breathing relief to see her stretched in a wooden box" (100-101).

Rose Dear's "face at the bottom of the well"¹³--is associated with the character who links Joe and Violet--Golden Gray. Raised by Violet's grandmother, True Belle, Golden Gray is the facilitating presence of Joe's miraculous birth; he is the son of a white woman, Vera Louise Gray, and a slave on her father's plantation. Brought up as a City child in Baltimore by his mother and True Belle, at the age of eighteen Golden Gray seeks out his father--Henry Lestory, "Hunters Hunter" (166), who is also a father-figure and guiding presence for Joe Trace and his step-brother, Victory. Golden Gray wants "to find, then kill, *if he was lucky*, his father" (143-emphasis added), and his character is conveyed by the racial "war" waged by whites on blacks in the United States. As a "white" American gentleman, he aspires to kill the ancestor he refuses to own, an ancestor not only unempowered but also *unrecognized* in his paternity of the national foundation.

Golden Gray is an ephemeral, abstract character imaged in terms of gold, champagne, and ease, but also light and fire. On his journey to find his father, he discovers Joe's mother, Wild, who is similarly transitory and spiritual. Golden

¹³ This image frames Derrick Bell's recent book on *The Permanence of Racism in the United States*.

believes, when he first sees her, that she is "not a real woman but a 'vision'" (144). Later, when white terrorists burn the cane fields, Joe fears that Wild will fail to "understand that fire was not light or flowers moving toward her, or flying golden hair" (174)--Golden's hair--that she will have "confused fire with hair and lost her breath to it" (175). But the breath Joe is afraid Wild will lose to the fire *inspires* Golden Gray, and he disappears, in the text, into the mystical story of the ancestor whom he has *saved*--Wild herself.

The first to see "the boy," Golden Gray, after he arrives at his father's cabin outside Vienna, Virginia, is another boy named Honor:

Later he told his mother that the whole cabin was rainbowed and when the man came out the door, and Honor looked at his wet yellow hair and creamy skin, he thought a ghost had taken over the place. (168)

In this image, Golden is connected to the "rainbow sign" of the covenant in Genesis (9:12-13) between God and Noah and also seems to symbolize the "salvator [redeemer] and salvandus [redeemed]" of gnostic soteriology, "one nature...formed of the world of light" (Rudolph 122). The rainbow also appears in two apocalyptic books of the Bible; in Ezekiel, the prophet sees "the likeness of the appearance of a man" on a throne (Ezek. 1:26):

And I saw like the color of amber, like the appearance from fire round about within it...I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and it has brightness round about. Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.... (Ezek. 1:27-28)

Golden has traveled all day through a rain storm before he takes his place at the rainbowed cabin of his father, and the rainbow and the cabin's open door is replicated in Revelation (4:1, 3). The amber-colored divine presence is seen again in Revelation as an angel:

And I saw another mighty angel come down from heaven, clothed with a cloud; and a rainbow was upon his head, and his face was as though it were of the sun, and his feet like pillars of fire. (Rev. 10:1)

All of these images come together in Golden Gray, and in the spiritual "I Got a Home in Dat Rock," which also alludes to Wild's "home in the rock" (221):

God gave Noah de Rainbow sign,
No more water but fire next time,
Better get a home in dat rock,
Don't you see?
(Hughes and Bontemps 298)¹⁴

The fiery golden angel, Golden Gray joins Wild as a supernatural absent presence for almost the entire novel. What we are told about him as a character is incomplete, and the kind of characterological closure that is inscribed, in some sense, with Joe, Violet, Dorcas, and Felice vaporizes, like the breath Joe fears Wild will lose, in Golden Gray. He has been doted upon and coddled by his mother and by True Belle; he has lived in luxury. Vera Louise and True Belle embroider "G on his underwear... with blue thread." He is a "perfect gentleman" who shows "cavalierlike courage"--a subtle reference to the "courtly" behavior so treasured in the South--when he sets out for Virginia to murder his father (143). In him two races blend, and his narrative becomes a locus of mediation--like Joseph, the husband of Mary, he holds God's place for the miraculously-born Joe Trace. The city-raised, soft-handed boy apparently himself becomes "wild" "not [for] a real woman but a 'vision'" (144). He is Violet's fantasy lover as well as Joe's in the form of the light-skinned Dorcas, "that queer boy [Wild] set so much story by" and, temporally, the last reference to him is the contrast between "the young man's head of yellow hair long as a dog's tail next to her skein of black wool" (168, 167), indicating his transformation into spirit and vision--into ancestor--himself. In his

¹⁴ It is from this spiritual that James Baldwin, of course, took the name for his wonderful book, wherein he states:

If we--and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of others--do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. (119)

combined embodyings and forms, Golden reveals his importance as the center of a nexus of relationality.

Sallie MacFague writes that the "Judeo-Christian tradition has always been personalistic and relational in its religious languages," pointing out "images of God as father, mother, lover, friend, savior, ruler, governor, servant, companion, comrade, liberator, and so on" (*Metaphorical Theology* 20). Similarly, Morrison locates the connections between the lives of the characters and, therefore, the relationality of the kingdom of God within Golden Gray; he is, like Wild, the invisible, the mystical, the one who is all things, the one who cannot be named or categorized or identified, but who is nonetheless real for all that. A divine representative Presence, he is a place-holder who even narratively cannot be considered a Christ-figure in the sense that Joe is or that Dorcas is. Golden actually possesses two parents, but the sense of rootedness they should give him dissipates rapidly since his parents do not fit any acceptable social model of his time. But the Voice comes closest to him in offering God's gifts: the Word, the Holy Spirit, and forgiveness:

I have to be a shadow who wishes him well, like the smiles of the dead left over from their lives....I want to be the language that wishes him well, speaks his name, wakes him when his eyes need to be open....There then, with nothing available but the soaking or the brittleness, not even looking toward the well, not aware of its mossy, unpleasant odor, or the little life that hovers at its rim, but to stand there next to it and from down in it, where the light does not reach, a collection of leftover smiles stirs, some brief benevolent love rises from the darkness and there is nothing for him to see or hear, and there is no reason to stay but he does. (161)

As the soul of Rose Dear rises to meet the light of the golden angel, Golden turns to meet and embrace his ancestors: "Golden Gray watched and he thought he was ready for those deer eyes to open" (162).

* * *

Ellul points out that the Judeo-Christian tradition has been most condemnatory of civilization and human progress. "Nevertheless," he writes, "it is the city,

death's domain, which appears as the crowning moment of history" (162-emphasis added). In *Jazz*, the "city called heaven" is "death's domain" in more than Joe Trace's murder of Dorcas. Morrison sets this novel in a year of signal achievement by black American artists and continually juxtaposes those distinctions to a civilization whose violence rivals that of any in history. As Joe puts it after he survives the Manhattan riot, "'Crackers in the South mad cause Negroes were leaving; crackers in the North mad cause they were coming'" (128). Felice's father subscribes to many of the black political newspapers of the day, such as Du Bois's *The Crisis*--such newspapers were sources of information for African Americans regarding the constant and unpredictable danger from whites. Felice's mother steals a ring from Tiffany's--perhaps expecting, like Derrick Bell's Mrs. MacDonald, not to "win out over whites", but to "'harass white folks'" (xvi). The point is that, horrific as American history has been for people of African descent, it is to be embraced, not forgotten or regarded as "over."

Eric Foner, in his response to Toni Morrison's essay, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," finds that her work, particularly *Beloved*, "dwells more on disruption and degradation than resiliency and creativity" (48) in its historical meditations. He quotes Karl Marx on the past: it "'weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living'" (49). A brilliant historian, Foner, like most secular analysts of history and literature misses, or finds trivial, "the love thing" that Morrison talks about in terms of the African American church (Ruas 242), and that has been a singular and profoundly influential product of "the culture of the oppressed" in the United States. The nightmare of history and memory does weigh heavily in *Jazz*, as it does in *Beloved* when Paul D tells Sethe "'we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow'" (273). And it is true that a concentration on the Harlem Renaissance obscures the horrific violences against black Americans that were taking place in the nineteen twenties.

But there is hope as well as sorrow in Paul D's words, as in *Jazz's* "History is over....and everything is ahead at last" (7). Foner mistakes Morrison's message here: history must be embraced, both the nightmare of slavery and the tree of Yoruba *àshe*¹⁵ which grows on 143rd Street.

The grace of God dwells in the City--the city called heaven--in God's people, in "the stairway of the Lions" (223), in "[t]hat home in the rock...with a doorway never needing to be closed" (221). As with Job, African Americans have survived their history, their complex chosenness. In discussing the place of Christianity within the black community, Morrison has commented:

And of course there was that wonderful, very strange Job, not his original wealth, but his steady, sustained "I will not do that, I will not do that," all the way through, and then finally the recompense. That's your test of inner faith. (Ruas 242).

Love, and faith in love, triumphs within all the suffering, horror, and sorrow of *Jazz*. Faith is neither doctrine, dogma, nor abstract "belief," and it is love in Morrison's world that is the truth that will lead to freedom.

Like the stories of Milkman Dead, Son Green, and Denver Suggs, the story of Joe Trace includes a miraculous birth, and is thus a "story of divinity entering the human experience by the only doorway available to it" (Leeming 273). Unlike the other orphaned characters in *Jazz*, whose fathers are either dead or absent, Joe seems unconcerned about who his father might be, and only with making contact with his mother. Joe's search for Wild dovetails with his love affair with, and ultimate murder of, Dorcas Manfred. But it is Golden Gray's search for *his* father that makes it narratively possible for the reader to be present at the birth of the unnamed baby, Joseph. The name Joe will choose for his surname--when his adoptive mother tells him, "'O honey, they disappeared without a trace'" (124)--tellingly echoes the end of *Beloved*:

¹⁵ See Thompson 6.

...her footprints come and go, come and go. They are so familiar. Should a child, an adult place his feet in them, they will fit. Take them out and they disappear again as though nobody ever walked there.

By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what it is down there. The rest is weather. Not the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for... (275)

The African ancestors, living in the water, and the Holy Spirit, air and breath, are re-membered through Joe, Violet, Dorcas, and Felice. The "rememory" (*Beloved* 36) of the ancestors affirms a hope born of the full realization of history, a hope born of the recognition of the kingdom of God in the City of the world, of God's promise through the relationality between human beings:

That I have loved only you, surrendered my whole self reckless to you and nobody else....That I love the way you hold me, how close you let me be to you....I have watched your face for a long time now ...(229)

Conclusion

I'm trying to get at all kinds and definitions of love.

--Toni Morrison

And now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

--I Corinthians 13:13

Over the course of this project, it has become more and more clear to me what Toni Morrison meant when she wrote "yes, the work [of art] must be political." In part I understand because Morrison's fictional work and her essays point to the ways in which the art work of African Americans in particular *will* be political--it is an ineluctable part of what it means to be a citizen of the United States of America.

When I first read "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," however, I was sure that Morrison was mistaken when she continued, "That's a pejorative term in critical circles now: if a work of art has any political influence in it, somehow it's tainted" (344-45). Or if she wasn't mistaken, perhaps, I thought she had written the piece without really understanding that there were plenty of literary people--certainly literary critics--who were Marxists, Historicists, and so forth. Or maybe the piece was merely dated and Morrison had written it before the popular movement to "multiculturalism" had really gotten off the ground.

But it is I who was wrong. As a white leftist scholar, I had seen plenty of instances of both blatant and insidious racism during the years of my education. But I was wrong if I thought that the use of such words as "privilege" and

"hegemony" removed other leftist critics from their cemented-in-place positions well within the European philosophical tradition. And I was doubly wrong if I thought that such scholars would ever be able to believe that the practice of the study of non-white cultures should have its genesis from within those cultures, that is, that in studying the literature of a people of color, one should start with the culture and not the critical paradigm of a white European philosopher.

I do not wish to be misunderstood to say that I am the only white scholar who has really "gotten it" concerning the cultural matrix out of which the late-twentieth-century United States has arisen. But there continues to be a failure--and I would say it is often a studied and purposeful failure--on the part of liberal scholars of American literature--what Cornel West terms "crude Marxists" (*Fragments* 14)--to move away from the secular notion that religion dissipates political power and removes it from the hands of oppressed people through "pie-in-the-sky" promises. West explains the roots of this failure:

Ironically, the major figures of so-called Western Marxism were preoccupied with culture--but none was materialist enough to take religion seriously. Whether it was Adorno and Marcuse on the subversive character of highbrow music and poetry, Sartre and Althusser on the progressive possibilities of avant-garde prose and theater, or Benjamin and Bakhtin on the revolutionary potential of film and the novel--all rightly viewed the cultural sphere as a domain of ideological contestation. *Yet none highlighted religion as a crucial component of this cultural sphere.* (15-16-emphasis added)

It is not surprising that West names the canonical, approved-of figures of contemporary literary criticism. African American religion exemplifies a particular case of the generalized phenomenon, which is, to quote West as I have throughout this work (and I will quote him more completely here), the disinclination of secular, Eurocentric critics to understand cultural phenomena at their source:

The major contribution religious revivals can make to left strategy is to demand that Marxist thinkers and activists take seriously the culture of the oppressed. This fundamental shift in the sensibilities and attitudes of Marxists requires a kind of desecularizing and de-Europeanizing of Marxist praxis, a kind of laying bare and discarding of the deep-seeded

Enlightenment prejudices that shape and mold the perspectives and perceptions of most Marxists. This shift does not demand a softening of critical consciousness but rather a deepening of it. (19-emphasis in original)

More insidious and possibly even more dangerous, this critical resistance can be interpreted as a resistance to understanding the culture of the United States as a whole, and the vital, immediate effect that the varieties of American religious experience (to paraphrase William James) and tradition have on who we are--and who we *think* we are and what we do. As the popular-cultural critic Michael Ventura has written:

In America today there are few more urgent political questions than this: Exactly who do you think Jesus is? Not "was," mind you, but is--because concepts rooted in visions of Jesus live in, and twist and turn, both major and minor political decisions on every level of our government. Fundamentalism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Mormonism, and the reactions against these movements, in many ways define the political limits of this country. (18)

I find the spirit of Ventura's essay, called "Jesus is Yeshu," not dissimilar from my work here. Twentieth-century positivism has led critics to believe that their critical practice can be separated out from other cultural issues. In the preceding chapters, I hope the impossibility of such separation is apparent.

In doing this research, however, who other critics think *I* think Jesus is has become part of the discourse, too. I have presented papers based on some of this work and have engaged in discussions with other scholars on it. I have been called both an atheist and a born-again Christian, which, I try to say without irony, gives me some idea of the rigidity of the categories people maintain on the cultural form and place of religion in our critical discourses.

Besides all of this, however, it is troubling to me that the knowledge that the Hebrew Bible--the Old Testament--originated as a African document seems to have gotten lost, not by accident but by design, over the last two thousand years. Similarly troubling is the loss of the understanding that Jesus of Nazareth was, in John Dominic Crossan's words, a "Mediterranean Jewish peasant" who spoke

Aramaic and looked nothing like a European. Martin Bernal has shown in *Black Athena* the conscious and successful effort on the part of Western scholars to remove the taint of Egypt from classical Greek civilization, and the taint of Black Africa from Egypt. Therefore, the historical trajectory of the texts of the Judeo-Christian traditions has resulted in their being labeled "Western." Cain Hope Felder notes that "Professor Robert Bennett calls the belief that the ancient Egyptians originated outside Black Africa 'insidious racism'" (9). The point of all this is, at the very least, that one must understand the Hebrew Bible as a text of Middle Eastern and North African origin that became Hellenized and then, in a sense, followed the path of Saint Paul into Rome. I believe that when Morrison alludes to the Bible she does so with this understanding, as well as with her comprehension of the Bible as the primary political text of the African American church.

* * *

In this work, I have tried to show some of the ways in which Toni Morrison analyzes and meditates on the source(s) of political power within the African American community. It is my hope that I will have convinced at least some of my audience that Morrison, for all her phenomenal success, and for all the attributions that she is a "diva" set apart from a community of black writers, is, at every moment in her novels, operating to illuminate the many faces of the African American experience from within.

It would be impossible to exhaust the myriad allusions to the texts of the Judeo-Christian tradition alone, and of course Morrison brings in much more, including allusions to American and African American literature, to continental European literature, to texts of classical mythology. I have argued that what emerges from her novels is an African American theology of liberation. There is something especially defiant that inheres in this theology, however, something as hard as

religion to work into critical discourse. It is the thing, for those of us who have tried to step outside of the Enlightenment-born dynamic between atheism and fundamentalism, that gives us hope and empowers each of us. John Leonard has called it "Toni Morrison's surpassing love for her people and her readers" (49).

For me, in this personal odyssey, as for the African American Christians like Martin Luther King, Jr., who, to paraphrase West, "hope against hope," the love Morrison demonstrates within her texts is political beyond reckoning. Presenter of historical reality, Morrison hesitates to prescribe. Moral in the core of these inscriptions, she will not moralize. But from her books, I have come away with the knowledge that the liberation of oppressed people in any part of the world will never come about through the replacement of one power structure with another. The hatred of any given people for an "other" people can only further dominance and oppression. And thus I conclude with a verse from the New Testament text so ubiquitous in Morrison's canon, so pertinent to the magnificent orality of her inscriptions:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:1-2)

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