

THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN TONI MORRISON'S SONG OF SOLOMON

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ABSTRACT

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Although Toni Morrison situates all of her novels in a specific place and time, historical context is especially relevant in Song of Solomon (1977). However, scholars typically examine Milkman's quest for his family history without addressing the Civil Rights era in which the main part of the narrative occurs. Commentary is needed on how the struggle for liberation of the black race as a whole during the Civil Rights Movement parallels the individual liberation that Milkman and other characters seek in the novel. This project examines specific dates, events, and people Morrison alludes to in the novel and her attitude toward these dates, events, and people. This project also examines Milkman's relationship with Guitar, Guitar's involvement in the Seven Days, and Milkman's journeys to Danville and Shalimar. Through all of these aspects of the novel, Morrison explores positive and negative options available to blacks in their continuing struggle for equality.

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CHAPTER I
THE MOVEMENT AND THE NOVEL: MORRISON'S VIEW
AND THE SCHOLARS' VIEWS

Toni Morrison has often commented that the books she loved to read as a child—those by Tolstoy, Austen, and Flaubert, for example—"were not written for a little black girl in Lorain, Ohio, but they were so magnificently done that I got them anyway." When she began writing, she says, "I wanted to capture that same specificity about the nature and feeling of the culture I grew up in" (qtd. in Blake 188). Nevertheless, her aim is always to write for all of humanity, not just a black audience, even though she does not define aspects of black life that appear in her novels that might be alien to non-black readers. She said about her writing in a 1981 interview with Jane Bakerman, "I didn't want to explain anything to anybody else! I mean, if I could understand it, then I assumed two things: (a) that other Black people could understand it and (b) that white people, if it was any good, would understand it also" (38). Morrison has surely been successful in achieving these aims, for she has done for many non-black readers what Tolstoy, Austen, and Flaubert were able to do for her: present timeless human struggles in such a way that many different kinds of readers can understand, even if they do not grasp every detail of the black world from and in which she writes, while "never [offering] an escape from the sociopolitical conditions that have shaped the lives of African Americans" (Valerie Smith, "Introduction" 6).

A large part of Morrison's skill lies in the very specificity she so admired in European writers. Morrison is never a sloppy writer and intends for the reader to consider carefully the entire context in which her characters exist. Often, this context revolves around black history, an interest which permeates many of her non-fiction endeavors as well as her novels. Although her name does not appear in the work, she was instrumental in the publication of The Black Book (1974), a scrapbook which reflects what would result if, as Bill Cosby writes in its introduction, "a three-hundred-year-old black man had decided, oh, say, when he was about ten, to keep a record of what it was like for himself and his people in these United States" (Harris 1). In her 1974 essay "Rediscovering Black History," Morrison states that in her emphasis on history she is not basking in the "good old days" because for blacks, there were not any. However, she does want to emphasize the "qualities of resistance, excellence and integrity that were so much a part of our past and so useful to us and to the generations of blacks now growing up" ("Rediscovering" 14).

Considering Morrison's emphasis on history's value for blacks, one is not surprised to find that black history provides a framework for all of her novels, although the main action of the novels may seem ahistorical. The Bluest Eye (1970), Morrison's first novel, is set in the 1940s, although in the novel she scrutinizes the "Black is Beautiful" slogan prominent during the 1960s, the time during which she composed the novel. The chapters of her second novel, Sula (1973), are given dates which range from 1919 to 1965 as titles; her fourth novel Tar Baby (1981) seems to take place during the late 1970s and early

1980s; and her most recent novel, Jazz (1992) is set in the 1920s. Although Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel Beloved (1987) is her most obviously historical work, centering on life for ex-slaves in post-Civil War Ohio, the historical context of Song of Solomon (1977) is especially relevant, even though this novel also seems ahistorical upon a first reading. While the main narrative of Song of Solomon begins in 1931, its pivotal events occur during 1963, a climactic year of the Civil Rights Movement.

Although there is no biographical information showing that Morrison actively participated in Civil Rights marches or rallies, the Movement was clearly an era in black history that she sees as defining. Despite Morrison's recognition of the importance of this period for blacks, she does not idealize it, as her comments in several interviews illustrate. One of her criticisms of the Movement concerns the political rhetoric used by black men. In a 1980 interview with Anne Koenen, she said, "I was not impressed with much of the rhetoric of Black men about Black women in the Sixties, I didn't believe it. I don't think they meant it. . . . But I never made any observation about any of them in print or otherwise, because it was too frail a movement to swish down certain kinds of criticism on it" (211). She also argues that the "classic" texts written by black men and "political slogans about power were addressed to white men trying to explain or prove something to them. The fight was between men, for king of the hill" (qtd. in Strouse 55).

Another aim of the Movement was unifying blacks into a community, an idea which Morrison finds admirable but unnecessary and artificial. While many of her works, including Song of Solomon, focus on the relationships of individuals to their communities,

in a 1976 interview with Robert B. Stepto she claimed she does not like the term "black community":

because it came to mean something much different in the sixties and seventies, as though we had to forge one—but it had seemed to me that it was always there, only we called it the "neighborhood." And there was this life-giving, very, very strong sustenance that people got from the neighborhood. . . . And legal responsibilities, all the responsibilities that agencies now have, were the responsibilities of the neighborhood. (379)

Morrison's most powerful statement of her dissatisfaction with the Movement comes in her essay "Rediscovering Black History," in which she asserts that many blacks were more interested in assimilating into white culture than being proud of the culture they already possessed. The time was for her one of both "excitement and a sense of loss" ("Rediscovering" 14). She makes the following comment concerning the "Black is Beautiful" slogan in particular:

It was precisely in that spirit of reacting to white values that later, when Civil Rights became Black Power, we came up with the slogan "Black is Beautiful"—an accurate but wholly irrelevant observation if ever there was one. . . . The slogan provided a psychic crutch for the needy and a second (or first) glance from whites. Regardless of those questionable comforts, the phrase was nevertheless a full confession that white definitions were important to us (having to counteract them meant they were significant)

and that the quest for physical beauty was both a good and worthwhile pursuit. The implication was that once we had convinced everybody, including ourselves, of our beauty, then, then . . . what? Things would change? We could assert ourselves? Make demands? White people presumably had no objection to killing beautiful people. ("Rediscovering" 14)

She claims that, in large measure, blacks lost sight of the collective identity and sense of community they had always possessed, despite, and perhaps as a result of, their direct efforts to forge such a community:

There was a time when soul food was called supper, when black men laughed at pimps as failed men, when violent crime was the white man's thing, when we did not need a leader to tell us when to spit (Rosa Parks, as a friend of mine once said, did not ask Martin Luther King whether or not she should stay in her seat). There was a time, heretical as it sounds, when we knew who we were. One could see that knowledge, that coherence in our wide-spirited celebration of life and our infinite tolerance of differences. We thought little about "unity" because we loved those differences among us. ("Rediscovering" 22)

Morrison has even included the Movement in two of her minor fiction works: "Recitatif" (1982), her only short story, and Dreaming Emmett (1986), her only play. The connection to the Civil Rights Movement in "Recitatif" is tenuous because the story, as

Morrison states in her book Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (1992), is primarily "an experiment in the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial" (xi). Her protagonists, Twyla and Roberta, grow up together in a home for neglected children and encounter one another several times in their adult lives; but even by the end of the story, the reader is still not sure who is black and who is white. One of their encounters happens to be during the 1960s, as is evident by Roberta's Afro hairstyle and the reference to Jimi Hendrix's popularity. At this particular time, Twyla is working as a waitress in a Howard Johnson's; and Roberta comes in to eat with friends. As the two evaluate this particular meeting some time later, Roberta recalls the era as one of racial polarization. She says, "Oh, Twyla, you know how it was in those days: black—white. You know how everything was." Twyla, however, remembers the era quite differently: "I thought it was just the opposite. Busloads of blacks and whites came into Howard Johnson's together. They roamed together then: students, musicians, lovers, protesters. You got to see everything at Howard Johnson's and blacks were very friendly with whites in those days" ("Recitatif" 255). Later on, the two women meet again on opposite sides during a protest concerning school integration and bussing.

More directly connected to the Civil Rights Movement is Morrison's unpublished play Dreaming Emmett, which was commissioned by the New York State Writers' Institute at SUNY-Albany in 1985 and was performed January 4, 1986, to celebrate the first national Martin Luther King Day (Croyden 218). Morrison's title alludes to Emmett

Till, a 14-year-old Chicago boy who was murdered in 1955 while visiting relatives in Money, Mississippi. After Till allegedly whistled at a white woman, he was beaten to death by the woman's husband and his half-brother, who were acquitted of the murder but later boasted of their guilt to the press (Linda Jones C1). In characteristic fashion, Morrison does not adhere totally to the facts of the Till case. Instead, she has the ghost of an anonymous 14-year-old boy come back from the dead to seek revenge but later realize the futility of such an endeavor. Till then acts as a symbol for the wastefulness of the high number of violent deaths among black youth in America throughout history and, as Morrison has phrased it, "all kinds of young life truncated" (qtd. in Medwick 56).

As her comments in interviews and renderings of it in her minor works illustrate, the Civil Rights Movement seems ever present in Morrison's mind. Most important for this study, one can see how the attitudes Morrison has expressed concerning the Civil Rights Movement, especially those about community, are central to Song of Solomon. Milkman is ignorant of his family history, which is woven into the history of his race as a whole; and he cannot solidify his identity in the present until he is reconnected with his past.

However, when scholars mention "history" in relation to Song of Solomon, they are typically referring to Milkman's quest for his family history which leads him to forge his own identity. This theme of self-discovery achieved through a connectedness to one's community, past and present, is a common theme in black literature and in Morrison's work as well. As a result, a significant number of scholars, such as Valerie Smith, Wilfred

D. Samuels, Clenora Hudson-Weems, Genevieve Fabre, Karen Carmean, and Barbara Christian, have written about Song of Solomon as a bildungsroman which centers around Milkman's quest for self-knowledge and subsequent reunion with his community through a pursuit of his family's history.

Because this classification of the work has now become a critical commonplace, many scholars combine their endorsement of the novel as a bildungsroman with examination of some other aspect of the text. One of the most common approaches to Song of Solomon regards style, and many classify the novel as magical realism. In a 1988 interview with Christina Davis, Morrison expressed her dislike of this term because to her it is "a way of not talking about the politics. It [is] a way of not talking about what was in the books. . . . My own use of enchantment simply comes because that's the way the world was for me and for the black people that I knew" (414). Nevertheless, in her article "Past-On Stories: History and the Magically Real, Morrison and Allende On Call," P. Gabrielle Foreman uses magical realism as a way to explain Pilate's role in the novel as griot, or keeper of a tribe's oral history, and the symbolic nature of events surrounding Milkman's birth. Sanford Pinsker also mentions magical realism in his article "Magic Realism, Historical Truth, and the Quest for a Liberating Identity: Reflections on Alex Haley's Roots and Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon." He attempts to discuss Morrison's style, the parallels between Song of Solomon and Roots, as well as Morrison's use of magical realism; however, he addresses none of these topics in sufficient detail.

Still, scholars place the novel in other classifications. Both Deborah Guth in her

article "A Blessing and a Burden: The Relation to the Past in Sula, Song of Solomon, and Beloved" and Genevieve Fabre in her article "Genealogical Archaeology or the Quest for Legacy in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon" argue that Morrison celebrates the oral tradition in the novel. Milkman must piece together random stories he hears throughout his life from Pilate and his parents and then from the citizens of Danville and Shalimar in order to make a consistent narrative, reject the culture in which he has been raised, and reclaim his past. Taking this idea of decoding a step further, Joe Weixlmann argues in his article "Culture Clash, Survival, and Trans-Formation: A Study of Some Innovative Afro-American Novels of Detection" that, in trying to break away from realism and naturalism, black authors have used "pop-culture" literary forms as models. Although Weixlmann sees Song of Solomon as a detective novel, he only superficially examines the novel's detective elements, claiming that Milkman becomes a sleuth, first as he searches for the gold and then for his family history. Finally, Jane Campbell identifies the novel as a historical romance in her book Mythic Black Fiction: The Transformation of History, and Ann E. Imbrie argues that Song of Solomon is a pastoral novel in her article "'What Shalimar Knew': Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon as a Pastoral Novel."

Another common approach is to connect events in Milkman's life with an archetypal quest. In their book The World of Toni Morrison: Explorations in Literary Criticism, Bessie W. Jones and Audrey L. Vinson connect Milkman's journey with Joseph Campbell's Hero With a Thousand Faces (1949) and its cosmogonic cycle. Patrick Bryce Bjork claims in his book The Novels of Toni Morrison: The Search for Self and Place

Within the Community that Song of Solomon follows a pattern of "miraculous birth, youth/alienation, quest, confrontation, and reintegration into community" but also has Western and African myths blended in (83). In still another variation, Gerry Brenner claims in his article "Song of Solomon: Rejecting Rank's Monomyth and Feminism" that Morrison takes Milkman through every stage of Otto Rank's monomyth outlined in his book The Myth of the Birth of the Hero and Other Writings (1959) but manages to undercut each stage in some way.

Regardless of one's approach, Milkman's journey toward self-knowledge and reunion with community is clearly central. However, with all the variations on this theme, the way in which Morrison weaves events in Milkman's life together with events of national concern in America during the Civil Rights Movement also seems pivotal but has been sorely neglected.

Several critics approach the topic of national history in Song of Solomon. However, many of their accounts are very general, and not all assessments are positive. In her article "Special Effects, Special Pleading," Martha Bayles argues that the quality of Morrison's work has declined steadily since the publication of The Bluest Eye, claiming that Morrison is always harping on black oppression for the sake of political correctness. She further states that Guitar's involvement in the Civil Rights Movement is nothing more than a "social and political ballast to keep [the novel] from floating up and turning into Song of the South" (39).

For the most part, however, critics are less antagonistic and more discerning than

Bayles. Applying a Marxist perspective in her book Specifying: The Black Woman Writing the American Experience, Susan Willis examines the economic aspects of black life in the 1960s, not necessarily specific events. In her chapter on Morrison entitled "Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison," she asserts that Morrison's use of metaphors from the past is not rooted in nostalgia but "represents a process for coming to grips with historical transition" (84). Ultimately, Morrison finds the root of the American black community in the South, and her characters who are geographically removed must find some way of reconnection. In having her characters deal with these periods, Morrison often disrupts alienation, repression and reification "with what she calls eruptions of 'funk'" (87) or "intrusion of the past into the present" (108). Because Milkman is not part of the generation of Southern immigrants, he must return to the South to locate his past. Most significant for Willis is the fact that Milkman goes into the past beyond slavery and back to Africa and that he leaves a materialistic society for an agrarian one.

Harry Reed, on the other hand, in his article "Toni Morrison, Song of Solomon and Black Cultural Nationalism," sees the novel as Morrison's contribution to black cultural nationalism because she urges blacks to "[regenerate] the community from within" (52), not strive for a standard established by white society. Reed's article wanders as he identifies Pilate, Circe, and Ruth as black nationalist archetypes but fails to explain what component of the movement they represent. He gets somewhat back on track in his examination of Pilate as a source of the folk wisdom that is integral to preserving black

culture, and he does some scattered examination of Morrison's use of African oral traditions in the novel.

Two scholars, Utelinde Wedertz-Furtado and Melissa Walker, examine in some detail the specific events and figures of the Civil Rights Movement that Morrison alludes to throughout the novel. First, in his article "Historical Dimensions in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon," Wedertz-Furtado argues that Morrison depicts the Civil War era through the Civil Rights Movement in order to show similarities between the two periods. She examines negative aspects, such as black economic hardship, as well as positive ones, such as "those people whose negative experiences from relying on whites have led them to become self-reliant and strong" (224). Milkman hears stories about historical events within which his family history is woven, making him emblematic of "many young blacks in America" who must choose how to react to personal and cultural histories of oppression (224).

Melissa Walker takes the same approach as Wedertz-Furtado but examines specific events in even greater detail in her book Down from the Mountaintop: Black Women's Novels in the Wake of the Civil Rights Movement, 1966-1989. Walker digs deep into the text, using the dates Morrison gives for certain events to deduce dates for other events and correlate them with significant occurrences in the Civil Rights Movement. She looks specifically at Civil Rights occurrences during the three years that Morrison mentions in the first paragraphs of the novel: 1931, 1896, and 1918. Walker develops an intriguing and convincing parallel between Guitar and Malcolm X and an intriguing but not-so-

convincing parallel between Milkman and Martin Luther King, Jr. Nevertheless, her commentary on the Civil Rights Movement in the novel is very detailed and perceptive; and she argues that Morrison uses Milkman's indifference toward events that take place within his lifetime to criticize "those who live apart from the concerns of the larger community" (130).

Although Walker in particular does examine specific events of the Civil Rights Movement in Song of Solomon more than any other scholar, the aim of this study is to go even further than she does, for she examines only three years and not specific events in the Movement which correspond with significant events in the novel. The aim of this study is to examine more thoroughly the dates and Civil Rights figures Morrison explicitly provides in the text in order to see how these relate to pivotal events in Milkman's journey toward reunion with his community and how these relate to other characters and events in the text. In addition, particular attention will be given to Milkman's relationship with Guitar, Guitar's involvement in the Seven Days, and the larger context within which Milkman's journey to Danville and Shalimar takes place. By examining these areas of the novel, one can see that Morrison has not haphazardly chosen a time period in which to place a timeless story. Instead, her juxtaposition of Milkman's journey with facets of the Civil Rights Movement enables the reader to perceive that this period during which the black race was trying to gain freedom provides an illuminating parallel for the individual liberation that Milkman and other characters seek.

CHAPTER II

THE MOVEMENT AND THE NOVEL:

DATES, PEOPLE, EVENTS, AND POLICIES

Although most Americans probably associate the term "Civil Rights Movement" with the 1950s and 60s in America, the struggle for equality that was this Movement's goal began as soon as blacks in America were objects of discrimination. As early as 1787, the Reverends Richard Allen and Absalom Jones organized the Free African Society in Philadelphia to protest discrimination in the Methodist Church (Estell 367). Although this action was not highly publicized or organized by a charismatic leader as activity in the 1950s and 60s was, it nonetheless illustrates the desire and need for equality that blacks have expressed since their arrival in America.

This "search for human liberation" (Butler 62) is integral in Song of Solomon. Although the novel seems ahistorical at first glance, Morrison carefully slips in allusions to dates, people, events, and policies relevant to black history which one could easily overlook when caught up in the personal struggles of Milkman and other characters. Because Morrison provides the birth dates of most of the major characters and refers to their ages often, one has the information needed to interpolate dates for many undated events in the novel. After a careful examination of these dates, one can arrive at a chronology of the novel's events that begins in 1869 and ends in 1963 at the novel's

conclusion (See Table 1).¹ Because the novel covers this specific time period, I define the Civil Rights Movement broadly and do not limit it to only the 1950s and 60s. Some allusions to historical figures, dates, and events exist only for contextual purposes; and I will examine only those that are especially integral to the personal struggles of characters in the novel.

The significant dates, people, events, and policies to which Morrison alludes in Song of Solomon fall into two groups. The first group is made of those which reflect the racist attitudes of whites.² In the first paragraph of the novel, Morrison provides a specific date: Wednesday, February 18, 1931, the day Robert Smith "flies" from Mercy Hospital and Ruth Dead goes into labor to give birth to Milkman the next day. The velvet rose petals carried by Lena and Corinthians are scattered on the snow; Pilate, wrapped in a quilt, sings what we later learn is the song of Milkman's great-grandfather Solomon; and a crowd gathers to watch the spectacle. As Melissa Walker points out, Morrison subtly brings attention to the presence of Jim Crow; for no blacks are admitted to Mercy Hospital and no black doctors are allowed to practice there (Walker 137). In fact, in a sort of rhetorical attack against Jim Crow, blacks in the town refer to the hospital as "No

¹ Not every event listed in Table 1 will be examined because some have no important parallel with a historical event or person. Also, there is one minor discrepancy in Morrison's dating. She places the Emmett Till murder in 1953 in the text; it actually occurred in 1955. This incongruity does not detract from the significance of the murder in the text, however.

² Although I refer to "white racism" in general throughout, I do not mean to imply that whites are essentially racist or that whites are the only ethnic group capable of racism. The values that Morrison is working against in the novel, such as materialism, individualism, and patriarchy are defined by Western culture in general; however, Western culture has typically been defined by whites, making the terms "white" and "Western" interchangeable.

Mercy Hospital" because of their exclusion, just as they call Mains Avenue "Doctor Street" after Dr. Foster moves there in 1896 and call it "Not Doctor Street" after the city notifies them that the street "would always be known as Mains Avenue and not Doctor Street" (SOS 4). Despite the hospital's discriminatory policy, Ruth Dead becomes the first black admitted to Mercy Hospital and Milkman the first black child born there simply because she goes into labor right outside the hospital as Robert Smith prepares to leap from the roof of the building.

While this date is important, it is also puzzling to some extent because February 18, 1931, is Morrison's birthdate. Because Morrison is so terribly careful in her work, her use of this date must be significant. Interestingly, scholars have not speculated about her use of her own birthdate, a decision which could have resulted from the simple desire to create a character who is her exact contemporary. At any rate, unless Morrison herself speaks out on this subject, it will most likely remain a mystery.

Using this date, Morrison gives the reader a glimpse into white discomfort at increasing black agitation for civil rights; for as this strange spectacle of a woman in labor, a singer, two little girls picking up velvet rose petals, and a man wearing blue wings preparing to leap from the top of the hospital unfolds, the white employees of the hospital are at first apprehensive. Although agitation for equality began long before 1931 and continued steadily until its peak in the 1960s, many important events which happened during the lifetimes of these white hospital workers surely came to their minds. For example, in 1890, 41 years earlier, prominent black journalist T. Thomas Fortune

organized a National Afro-American League in Chicago which demanded voting rights in the South and protested the power of lynch mobs, the unequal allotment of money between white and black schools, the "odious and demoralizing penitentiary system of the South," and segregation on railroads and in public places (White 45). Twenty-one years earlier, W.E.B. DuBois organized the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1910 (Sitkoff 8); and as early as 1917, 14 years earlier, blacks marched silently in New York City to protest discrimination after whites had led race riots in East St. Louis because blacks were being employed in a factory with a contract with the government (Hornsby 67). In 1920, only eleven years earlier, Marcus Garvey began the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) which heralded the start of Black Nationalism and urged blacks to "believe in their ability to shape their destiny" (Sitkoff 10); and similar activism for civil rights continued steadily up through the 1960s.

In light of such developments, it is not surprising that white employees of Mercy Hospital feel apprehension at seeing a large group of blacks gathered outside the hospital. At first, "they wondered if one of those things that racial-uplift groups were always organizing was taking place. But when they saw neither placards nor speakers, they ventured outside into the cold" (SOS 6). Clearly, the tone of these white people's thoughts is one of fear but also confidence. The thought that a rally like the ones led by Marcus Garvey might be taking place makes them uncomfortable. On the other hand, when they see that the black crowd is not asserting itself, they once again feel safe. As

long as the white superiority that racial uplift groups worked against remained unchallenged, blacks could be controlled.

This attitude of superiority is epitomized by the nurse who directs the grandmother of Milkman's later closest friend, Guitar, to send Guitar to the Emergency Room to find a guard. In a string of imperatives, she demands of the grandmother, "Send one [of the children with you] around back to the emergency office. Tell him to tell the guard to get over here quick. That boy there can go. That one. . . . Move now. Move!" (SOS 7). Not only does she speak rudely to both Guitar and his grandmother, but she also sends Guitar to the back of the hospital instead of the front in a typical gesture of his inferiority, even though the crowd seems to be gathered at the front of the hospital. Furthermore, when Guitar points out that the nurse "left out an s" in the word "admissions" when she spelled the phrase "Emergency Admissions" for him, his grandmother wryly responds that she left out "a 'please'" as well, although the grandmother respectfully submits to the nurse's commands (SOS 7).

In this scene, the reader also learns white attitudes toward a figure in black history: Father Divine. Divine, whose real name was George Baker, began a religious cult called the Peace Mission Movement in 1919 in New York. According to Catherine L. Albanese's book America: Religion and Religions, Father Divine "had become convinced of the presence of God within each person and at the same time continued to reflect on the connections between spiritual wholeness and a life with sufficient food and shelter and a modicum of human dignity" (209). His followers, many of whom believed that he was

God, often took part in sumptuous banquets; and the group was segregated by sex but not by race (Albanese 209-10). The white hospital workers explain Smith's standing on the hospital's roof and Lena and Corinthians Dead holding the basket of rose petals by thinking that "Philadelphia, where Father Divine reigned, wasn't all that far away. Perhaps the young girls holding baskets of flowers were two of his virgins" (SOS 6). As with their notion of a rally taking place, this connection of events to Father Divine illustrates both their confidence and their fear. Their association of Divine with a crazy black man and the odd sight of two young black girls holding a basket of velvet rose petals is their way of mocking Divine and other figures like him. Although most whites probably viewed Divine as a lunatic, they must have also acknowledged, at least secretly, his ability to mobilize his largely black followers; and the hospital workers are paranoid enough to hesitate before venturing into the predominantly black crowd outside. Although the text makes clear that the whites care little for the safety of Smith or any of the bystanders, they even summon the police, presumably for their own protection.

Numerous other allusions to Jim Crow are scattered throughout the novel. For example, although Corinthians attends college at Bryn Mawr and spends a year studying in France, her education does little for her. Despite his faults, Macon Dead has taught his children self-confidence (although he bases it on his wealth, not on his inherent worth as a human being); but reality does not offer Corinthians anything better than a job as a maid for Michael-Mary Graham. Part of her disadvantage lies in Macon's control over her life, for she does not even begin to assert herself until 1961—when she is in her early forties

and all hopes for marriage are gone.

Because Corinthians' education taught her "how to be an enlightened mother and wife, able to contribute to the civilization—or in her case, the civilizing—of her community" (SOS 188) and "unfit her for eighty percent of the useful work of the world" (SOS 189), Morrison could be criticizing the state of education for women in general in the 1930s and 40s. Corinthians' education does not even help her lead the conventional life of mother and wife because she is "too good" for the black professional men in the area who "wanted wives who would sacrifice themselves and appreciate the hard work and sacrifice of their husbands" (SOS 188) and "steered clear of a woman who had a better education than [they] did" (SOS 189). Furthermore, as Joyce Irene Middleton argues in her essay "From Orality to Literacy: Oral Memory in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon," Corinthians' education at Bryn Mawr, instead of one of the traditionally black colleges, provides her with an education in Western, and therefore white, traditions that seem to elevate her above other blacks but really serves only to isolate her (30). Even if Morrison is critiquing the state of education for women of all races, the fact that Corinthians is black is never forgotten; for "colored girls, regardless of their background, were in demand for one and only one kind of work"—being maids (SOS 189).

Not only does Macon's pride prove empty for Corinthians, but it also proves empty for Macon himself. As mentioned previously, Macon's self-love is not the kind that black leaders in the Civil Rights Movement have advocated. At a Youth Leadership Meeting in Raleigh, North Carolina in 1960, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke of the sit-in

movement as "a revolt . . . against Negroes in the middle class who indulge in buying cars and homes instead of taking on the great cause that will really solve their problems" (qtd. in Sitkoff 83), as if he were personally acquainted with Macon Dead. Indeed, the problem of lack of self-worth that kept blacks from revolting for so long was actually remedied by revolt. As Harvard Sitkoff records in his book The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1992, activist Franklin McCain, who led one of the first lunch counter sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina, in February 1961, remembers the event as an ennobling one: "I probably felt better that day than I've ever felt in my life. I felt as though I had gained my manhood, so to speak, and not only gained it, but had developed quite a lot of respect for it" (81).

Macon's pride, on the other hand, shows his conformity to a white standard of wealth and way of life, much as Booker T. Washington advocated for blacks, but that ultimately proves worthless. After Guitar and Milkman break into Pilate's house in order to steal her "gold," they are stopped by the police for "just driving along," as Milkman puts it, and arrested because they have Pilate's sack of bones (SOS 204). Macon then must go to the police station to bail them out. While Milkman and Macon recapitulate the night's events, Macon, in his superior tone, refers to Guitar as a "nigger" twice and repeatedly states that the police must have been suspicious of Guitar, not Milkman, since he is Macon's son. Macon tells Milkman, "If you'd been alone and told them your name they never would have hauled you in, never would have searched the car, and never would have opened that sack. They know me. You saw how they acted when I got there" (SOS

204). Milkman astutely points out that it was not Macon's presence that caused the police to let him and Guitar go but the materialization of his wallet. For all of Macon's wealth and pride, the police see Macon, the rich, black property owner, as no better than Guitar, the poor black from the wrong side of the tracks. They do not see social class, only skin color. Furthermore, the police seem to have no qualms about stopping two blacks for no reason or taking a bribe from another. The sense of worth that Macon's wealth brings to him is hollow even in the white world because, despite his money, he is still black and worth nothing in their eyes.

Even Pilate must capitulate to the policemen in order to secure Milkman and Guitar's release. Pilate is surrounded by a mystical air throughout the novel, seemingly possessing magical powers that make her respected in the community but also alienated from it. As the narrator reveals when Pilate saves Reba from an abusive boyfriend, this man must have been new in town because "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" (SOS 94). Pilate is presented as having magical capabilities throughout the novel; and she shows her abilities as a shape-shifter, a being who is "able to change its shape either at will or under special circumstances" (Leach 1004), when she takes on the "Aunt Jemima" persona in order to free Milkman and Guitar. She changes her way of speaking, shrinks in stature, and looks "short and pitiful" instead of strong (SOS 205). After the

ordeal is over, Milkman contemplates her change in form: "Pilate had been shorter. As she stood there in the receiving room of the jail, she didn't even come up to the sergeant's shoulder—and the sergeant's head barely reached Milkman's own chin. But Pilate was as tall as he was" (SOS 207). She even "whines" to the policeman, making up a story about the bones being those of her dead husband who was lynched in Mississippi:

"Bible say what so e'er the Lord hath brought together, let no man put asunder—Matthew Twenty-one: Two. We was bony fide and legal wed, suh," she pleaded. Even her eyes, those big sleepy old eyes, were small as she went on: "So I thought I just as well keep him near me and when I die they can put him in the same hole as me. We'll raise up to Judgment Day together. Hand in hand." (SOS 207)

After they leave the police station and Macon must drive Pilate home, she immediately changes back into her normal self: "And again there was a change. Pilate was tall again. The top of her head, wrapped in a silk rag, almost touched the roof of the car, as did theirs. And her own voice was back" (SOS 207).

This episode seems strange because Pilate is so self-actualized that the reader hardly connects her with discrimination by whites, but she has had a previous brush with Jim Crow. When Pilate tells Ruth of her wanderings after her separation from Macon, she recounts her experience as a washerwoman in Virginia. When she asks her fellow workers how much a ticket on a passing train costs, they simply laugh at her because there are "only two passenger cars, and no colored allowed." When Pilate inquires, "Well, how do

colored people get where they want to go?" the girls reply, "Ain't supposed to go nowhere," articulating the objective of whites who kept blacks from public transportation for so long (SOS 145). Even before she was a washerwoman, Pilate was no stranger to discrimination because of her father's murder by whites who wanted his land. Pilate may exist apart from the larger community, but she is not ignorant of events and attitudes around her.

Additional evidence of Jim Crow concerns Pilate's daughter Reba. When Milkman and Guitar make their first visit to Pilate's house in 1943, they learn of Reba's luck at winning contests as she tells of winning a diamond ring for being the five hundred thousandth customer to enter Sears. Ironically, Reba goes into Sears because it is one of only two businesses in town that allows black people to use its restrooms. Furthermore, Guitar remarks, "I remember that contest, but I don't remember hearing nothing 'bout no colored person winning it," and he is right (SOS 46). He never heard anything about it because the white man who entered the store after Reba won "second place" and had his picture printed in the paper. Guitar inquires, "What kind of 'second prize'? Either you the half-millionth person or you ain't. Can't be no next-to-the-half-millionth." Hagar shrewdly replies, "Can if the winner is Reba. . . . The only reason they got a second was cause she was the first. And the only reason they gave it to her was because of them cameras" (SOS 46).

In addition to the numerous allusions to Jim Crow, Morrison provides three dates in the first and second paragraphs of the novel that relate to white attitudes toward blacks:

1931, 1896, and 1918. The year 1931 has been discussed already because of the events in the novel which happen that year. In addition, 1931 was also the year of the Scottsboro case in which nine black men were convicted of raping two white women on a train from Chattanooga to Memphis and the year that Wallace Fard founded the Detroit Temple Number One, which was followed by a surge in Nation of Islam membership (Walker 135). Second, it was in 1896 that Dr. Foster, Ruth Dead's father, moved to Mains Avenue, which was thereafter called "Doctor Street" by local blacks. In addition, 1896 marks the Plessy v. Ferguson decision by the U.S. Supreme Court which upheld the concept of separate but equal facilities for blacks. Interestingly enough, the main black proponent of this doctrine, Booker T. Washington, was given an honorary master's degree by Harvard University that same year (Hornsby 55). Finally, 1918 marked the end of World War I. Because nearly 300,000 blacks served in the military during the war, many expected to receive better treatment from whites upon their return from the war (Walker 136). In fact, W.E.B. DuBois led the First Pan-African Congress in Paris at the same time that the Paris Peace Conference officially ending the war was taking place, and he claimed that true democracy would become a reality now that the war was over (Hornsby 71). DuBois overestimated white gratitude to blacks, however, because those who had worked in wartime industries were often fired so that white soldiers returning from the war would have jobs (Walker 136).

Melissa Walker examines these three years and argues that "though these outside events are not specifically mentioned in the text, as we shall see, they inform the context

and have consequences in the novel" (136). However, she never explains just what the consequences of these specific events are. Despite Walker's oversight, it seems that Morrison includes all three of these years to remind the reader of real events which took place during those years, to emphasize the racist context into which Milkman is born, and to introduce subtly the novel's historical subtext, for in all of the events mentioned above, white racism is illustrated. Washington's being awarded an honorary master's degree by Harvard seems at first like a step away from racism, but it may not have been, depending on exactly who decided to award him the degree. The Plessy v. Ferguson decision illustrates that white faith in and backing of the separate but equal doctrine was strong; why not reinforce that doctrine by awarding the black man who also supported the doctrine? In doing so, whites could maintain the status quo while appearing to honor black achievement.

While these instances illustrate the white racism that Morrison weaves into the narrative, other allusions to the Civil Rights Movement fall into a second group: those which parallel personal struggles in character's lives. First, Morrison's allusions to Abraham Lincoln and other key figures in the Civil War shed light on Macon's lack of connection to the history of his race. After Milkman's first confrontation with Macon in 1943 when Milkman visits Pilate's house, a place forbidden to him, Macon II remembers his tender feelings for his own father, Macon Dead I, and tells Milkman about life on their farm. As Valerie Smith contends in her book Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative, Macon II lives exclusively in the future, fails to see the nexus of past,

present, and future, and therefore, tells his stories only when forced to do so, unlike Pilate who "believes that one can never escape one's past, that it exists in dynamic relationship to the present" (142), which is why she has her songs, rocks, bag of bones, and earring.

Macon II daydreams about his life with Pilate and their father on their farm, Lincoln's Heaven, named for Abraham Lincoln. Macon II describes the animals on the farm, all of which are named after prominent historical figures of his father's era. They had a cow named Ulysses S. Grant, a horse named President Lincoln, a foal named Mary Todd, and a hog named General Lee. The narrator explains:

That was the way [Macon II] knew what history he remembered. His father couldn't read, couldn't write, knew only what he saw and heard tell of. But he had etched in Macon's mind certain historical figures. . . . His father may have called their plow horse President Lincoln as a joke, but Macon always thought of Lincoln with fondness since he had loved him first as a strong, steady, gentle and obedient horse. (SOS 52)

While the names for the horse, foal, and cow seem to honor their usefulness and strength, the appellation of General Lee for the hog could have been a way for Macon I to degrade the man who led the South in the Civil War; for later they relish slaughtering the hog and eating "the best pork outside Virginia" (SOS 52).

Unfortunately, however, Macon II seems to have lost the appreciation for history that these names originally instilled in him; but his voice changes as he speaks of Lincoln's Heaven to Milkman: "Less hard, and his speech was different. More southern and

comfortable and soft" (SOS 52). Still, the reader questions how connected to this past Macon really is, for the information the reader receives about the names of the animals providing a historical connection for both Macon I and Macon II comes from the narrator who says that this connection existed for Macon II "as a boy in school" (SOS 52). Therefore, it seems that this historical connection no longer exists for the adult Macon II.

Despite this ambiguity, one can see clearly that Macon II no longer holds the values he learned while living at Lincoln's Heaven. Although slaves actually freed themselves by running away from their masters during the Civil War, Lincoln is symbolic of black freedom as the signer of the Emancipation Proclamation. Therefore, his name applied to this land is most appropriate for Macon I, a former slave, because the land symbolizes his freedom. As Wilfred Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems argue in their book Toni Morrison, it does not seem that Macon II realizes the land has any value other than spiritual until his father is murdered. Then, he abandons his father's view of the land for a life that "though materialistically fulfilling, requires the prostitution of his spirit" (Samuels and Hudson-Weems 60). As Macon II reminisces with Milkman, he concentrates on the land's beauty with its forest, stream, mountain, and wildlife; but in the same conversation, he admonishes Milkman to "own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too" (SOS 55). This proprietary attitude reflects quite a different sentiment from his youthful appreciation for the land's Edenic beauty. Macon II may be able to recall his past and the historical figures linked with it, but he is not truly remembering this past. Because of the violence done to his

father by whites, he has become bitter. He seems to want to get revenge by getting rich—by outdoing the white man at his own game and achieving what his father could not. Instead, he proves nothing to whites and gradually destroys his identity as a black man because his obsessive materialism is rooted in a family past that he has misinterpreted and because he lacks an identity apart from the possessions he owns or, rather, the possessions that own him.

The personal struggles of Milkman and Guitar are also closely tied in with Morrison's historical allusions. In fact, all of her remaining allusions involve both Milkman and Guitar in some way. The first allusion involves President Franklin Roosevelt. In 1945, when Milkman is 14 years old, he notices that his legs are of unequal lengths. In typical adolescent fashion, Milkman is highly self-conscious and "acquired movements and habits to disguise what to him was a burning defect" but was probably unnoticed by others (SOS 62). Milkman convinces himself that he must have polio in order to connect himself with Roosevelt. Most likely, Milkman desires such a connection because Roosevelt was a man of stature in America and probably seemed larger than life to Milkman, who was only two years old when Roosevelt became president, but was imperfect because of his polio. The narrator explains that Milkman felt very close to Roosevelt, "closer, in fact, to him than to his own father, for Macon had no imperfection and age seemed to strengthen him" (SOS 63). Milkman needs a father-figure, but he turns to Roosevelt instead of Macon because Macon is so intimidating.

Morrison's connection of Roosevelt and Milkman serves another purpose as well.

The narrator states that "even when everybody was raving about Truman because he had set up a Committee on Civil Rights, Milkman secretly preferred FDR. . ." (SOS 62-63). Milkman's status as the first black child born at Mercy Hospital might at first seem to predict that he will be a civil rights activist later in life, but such is not the case. In her article "Toni Morrison's Black Magic," Jean Strouse describes Morrison's character Jadine in Tar Baby by saying that "fully assimilated into white American culture, she should be wonderful; instead, she is tragic, because [as Morrison has said] 'she has lost the original and ancient characteristics of her tribe'" (53). The same can be said of Milkman because he is so far removed from the struggle for equality that members of his race are undertaking. Despite the fact that Roosevelt did help blacks to some extent by appointing over 100 blacks to offices in his administration and beginning desegregation of federal rest rooms and cafeterias (Sitkoff 10), Milkman remains oblivious to events going on around him by admiring Roosevelt, a figure from the past, instead of Truman, a man his black peers felt was trying to help their cause in the present. As Wahneema Lubiano states in her essay "The Postmodernist Rag: Political Identity and the Vernacular in Song of Solomon," "Time passes, but not the shallowness of Milkman's thinking about his relation to the world" (106).

Whereas Milkman idealizes Roosevelt, a later allusion to Eleanor as well as Franklin Roosevelt involving Guitar presents the opposite end of the spectrum. In 1963, shortly after Hagar has stalked Milkman for the last time, he and Guitar engage in a conversation about the natures of whites; and Milkman repeatedly counters Guitar's

assertion that "white people are unnatural" with examples of whites who "made sacrifices for Negroes" (SOS 156). Milkman expresses his faith in whites because Macon has raised him to value and emulate their world. Guitar argues that any white who seems to be "natural" would "join a lynching party just for the hell of it" if other whites were doing so (SOS 156). Milkman mentions Eleanor Roosevelt, and Guitar is reluctant to judge her because he claims he does not know much about white women (SOS 156). However, he pinpoints a solitary example of "those white mothers holding up their babies so they could get a good look at some black men burning on a tree" (SOS 156-57). He assumes that these women represent the entire sex and constructs a syllogism: these women are racist, and Eleanor Roosevelt is a woman. Therefore, he concludes that Eleanor Roosevelt is probably a racist, despite her support of civil rights groups, about which Guitar may or may not have known (Sitkoff 81).

Guitar's comments about Franklin Roosevelt are even more harsh, for he does not even consider that FDR was sympathetic toward blacks: "You could have taken him and his wheelchair and put him in a small dusty town in Alabama and given him some tobacco, a checkerboard, some whiskey, and a rope and he'd have [joined a lynching party] too" (SOS 157). As this passage and several others illustrate, Guitar has been scarred by the callous way in which his father's white employer atoned for his father's work-related death in a sawmill by giving the family divinity and forty dollars and has broadened his bitterness toward this one white man to include the entire race. Guitar is also incredibly aware of and involved in the activity of the Civil Rights Movement and undoubtedly has reason to

be suspicious of whites, past and present, especially since he probably knew all about white violence toward blacks happening in the very year that he and Milkman have this conversation: 1963, one of the peak years of the Movement. Guitar's distrust of Roosevelt contrasted with Milkman's idealization of him illuminates Milkman's ignorance of the racism other blacks suffer because he has lived a sheltered, affluent, "white" life.

Another political figure whom Milkman and Guitar discuss is President John Kennedy. Guitar first refers to Kennedy in the same conversation in which he and Milkman discuss Roosevelt because Guitar argues that Kennedy is also "unnatural." Although Milkman does not mention Kennedy as an example of whites who helped blacks, Guitar presumably mentions him because JFK took action to help blacks gain equality but did so only when he benefited politically. As Harvard Sitkoff explains, both JFK and his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, "believed Jim Crow to be wrong. They hoped to better the life of African-Americans—but slowly, and at the proper time" (96). JFK was anxious to keep Southern voters happy since he had lost their support to Richard Nixon in the 1960 election (Sitkoff 96-97), so he was reluctant to act unless violence escalated to such an extreme that he was forced to, as it did during the Freedom Rides through the Deep South in the summer of 1961. Kennedy never did act forcefully regarding civil rights for blacks until the summer of 1963 in the wake of the "Negro Revolution" in which King's desire for a confrontation with whites in Birmingham and Malcolm X's rise to prominence threw the South into chaos. A white mail carrier from Baltimore named William L. Moore, who began his own individual freedom march

wearing a sign saying "Equal Rights for All—Mississippi or Bust," was shot to death (Sitkoff 125-26); over 1000 children participated in a "children's crusade" and were accosted by police with high powered water hoses that cut them and tore their clothes (Sitkoff 127); and over 20,000 blacks were arrested, many being shocked with cattle prods and beaten mercilessly (Sitkoff 118, 126). Sitkoff writes:

The appalling pictures of snarling dogs lunging viciously at youthful marchers, of bands of policemen ganging up to beat children and women, of high-pressure hoses knocking the very young and the very old off their feet, brought a surge of anger and determination across black America and aroused the conscience, or guilt, of millions of previously indifferent whites. King suddenly had massive support. Kennedy now had to act.

(128)

With the election of 1964 looming ahead, Kennedy decided to put the Southern vote aside and "assist [James] Farmer and King and [Roy] Wilkins in securing their objectives lest the movement be taken over by extremists" (Sitkoff 145). In other words, Kennedy wanted to use the civil rights struggle for his own political purposes; and in order to do so, he had to control its leadership.

It is not clear in Song of Solomon how much Guitar may have known about such matters. When he communicates his distrust for the Kennedys to Milkman, he has been involved in the Seven Days for some time; and other members of the group who congregate in the barbershop discuss national affairs enough to indicate that they are well-

informed. For example, when a young white boy is strangled, the men nervously gather at the barber shop, "each man [knowing] he was subject to being picked up as he walked the street and whatever his proof of who he was and where he was at the time of the murder, he'd have a very uncomfortable time being questioned" (SOS 101). To hide their nervousness, they joke about meeting up with Orval Faubus, the Arkansas governor who used the National Guard to try to prevent black students from attending Little Rock's Central High School in 1957. These men also gather at the barbershop to discuss the Emmett Till murder in 1955 in an effort to remain informed. Most of them are members of the Seven Days and would be required to be knowledgeable of recent violence against blacks so that they could take appropriate actions for revenge. Apparently, they discuss all kinds of racial affairs often because Milkman wonders "what they would do if they didn't have black and white problems to talk about. Who would they be if they couldn't describe the insults, violence, and oppression that their lives (and the television news) were made up of?" (SOS 108). It seems likely, then, that Guitar would have been well-informed concerning JFK's political maneuverings. Regardless of Guitar's knowledge, his distrust of the Kennedys is another example of Guitar's awareness and Milkman's ignorance of what goes on in the world around them.

A third figure whom Guitar and Milkman discuss is Malcolm X. In particular, they discuss his name. In 1948, after spending three years in prison for burglary and earning the name "Satan" from other prisoners because of his blasphemy, Malcolm Little was introduced to Islam by his brother Philbert and became one of its most well-known

adherents. As John White explains in his book, Black Leadership in America, 1895-1968, Black Muslims "discarded black surnames as marks of the slave past, substituting instead the suffix 'X'," which Malcolm did in 1952 after his release from prison (104-05).

When Guitar describes the activities undertaken by the Seven Days, Milkman responds, "You sound like that red-headed Negro named X. Why don't you join him and call yourself Guitar X?" The conversation continues:

"X, Bains—what difference does it make? I don't give a damn about names."

"You miss his point. His point is to let white people know you don't accept your slave name."

"I don't give a shit what white people know or even think. Besides, I do accept it. It's part of who I am. Guitar is my name. Bains is the slave master's name. And I'm all of that. Slave names don't bother me; but slave status does." (SOS 160)

A number of scholars have commented on the significance of names in Song of Solomon, but most discuss Milkman, Pilate, and others while neglecting Guitar. Although Guitar's bitterness toward whites proves to be unhealthy, he does have a healthy view of his race's past, although we know little about his personal ancestors. He realizes that even though the slave heritage contained in his last name is something he despises, he does not forsake his name, as did Malcolm X, because he accepts his slave past as part of who he is. As Molly Abel Travis points out in her article "Speaking from the Silence of the Slave

Narrative: Beloved and African-American Women's History," black women often felt they should "keep silent about the enslavement, marginalization, and racism [of the past] so as not to stifle the hope and potential of the children . . . hers is the desire to recover history but also the need to deny history" (75). This denial of the past and, consequently, of the total self is exactly what happened to Macon Dead I when the drunk Freedmen's Bureau official erroneously recorded his name in 1869. Macon II claims that his mother encouraged his father to keep his new name because it "would wipe out the past" (SOS 54). Despite the symbolic erasure of the past that his adoption of a new name indicates, Macon I was not able to erase the past by simply changing his name. He was still taken advantage of by greedy whites who knew they could take his life without fear of punishment because he was black, and Guitar realizes that this attitude is alive and active even in his day. The Emancipation Proclamation was 100 years old in 1963 when Milkman and Guitar have this conversation, but Guitar is correct in accepting his slave past as a reminder of his slave status because he still is not truly free.

Although Guitar's first name has not been examined by critics either, it has an important connection to his bitterness toward whites. While the reader knows that Milkman's real name is Macon Dead III, we never know Guitar's real name, only his nickname. During Milkman and Guitar's first visit to Pilate's house where they help her, Hagar, and Reba smash grapes to make wine, Reba asks Guitar how he got his name; and he replies that he once wanted to play a guitar when he was young and saw a guitar being given away in a contest. He says, "I saw it when my mother took me downtown with her.

I was just a baby. It was one of those things where you guess how many beans in the big glass jar and you win a guitar. I cried for it, they said. And always asked about it" (SOS 45).

Although Guitar is deprived of this musical instrument, music plays a positive role in various lives throughout the novel. For example, music is a vital part of Pilate's household, as Macon learns when he secretly visits her house one evening and as the community learns at Hagar's funeral; and music is one means by which she retains and transmits orally her family's history. Additionally, the "song of Solomon" that Pilate sings at Milkman's birth is an integral part of Milkman's search for his identity. One of the most climactic moments in the text is when he finally decodes the song while in Shalimar.

This role of music in the text is seemingly juxtaposed with the music Guitar is denied because he cannot obtain the guitar. The text tells us that after Guitar's father's murder, he and his siblings are sent to Michigan to live with their grandmother where they seem to be loved and well cared for but are by no means affluent. In fact, Guitar and his family are evicted by Macon for being behind in their rent although Guitar's grandmother tells Macon that "Cency [presumably Guitar's mother] left all them babies with me. And my relief check ain't no more'n it take to keep a well-grown yard dog alive—half alive, I should say" (SOS 21). In his name, Guitar is given his identity—one defined by lack. It is no wonder that Guitar becomes resentful towards those he sees as depriving him; but because of the positive role of music in the novel, one wonders how Guitar's values might differ had he not been deprived this access to music and if the creative faculties that would

have developed might have counteracted the destructive force within that motivates him.

Finally, the murder of Emmett Till coincides with a decisive moment in Milkman's life: his second confrontation with his father, at which time he learns more about his mother's relationship with her father and remembers the origin of his nickname. After Macon strikes Ruth at dinner, the 22-year-old Milkman jumps to her defense and strikes Macon. After their conflict, Macon tells Milkman of his troubled relationship with Ruth, with special emphasis on his belief that Ruth and her father had an incestuous relationship. Milkman is so bewildered by what he hears that he seeks out Guitar for counsel. As he walks down the street toward Southside, he suddenly remembers being "old enough to talk, stand up, and wear knickers" yet still being nursed by his mother (SOS 78). Just as he makes the connection between Freddie laughing at the scene he remembers and his name, "the street was even more crowded with people, all going in the direction he was coming from" (SOS 78).

Jane Campbell argues that it is "entirely implausible" for Milkman to be walking in one direction while everyone else walks in the other (143), but Campbell seems to overlook the fact that news has just been released concerning Emmett Till's murder and people who live in Southside would be going to a central location in order to hear the latest information on the radio. In addition, Milkman has been and continues to be so self-consumed throughout the novel that it seems quite appropriate for his community to be walking on one side of the street, headed toward a place of unity, while he is walking on the other side and going in the opposite direction.

Milkman finally arrives at Tommy's Barbershop to find Guitar, Railroad Tommy, Hospital Tommy, Porter, Freddie, and others discussing the news of Till's murder that they have just heard on the radio. The men debate whether Till's murder will receive any attention and hurl insults at whites and each other. This section is a powerful illustration of the lack of justice available for blacks in the 1950s, but the men rightly assume that the murderers will be caught. As Porter states, "They'll catch 'em, all right, and give 'em a big party and a medal" (SOS 82).

All this time, Milkman has been patiently waiting for Guitar's attention; and significantly, he is silent during the conversation about Till's murder and injustice against blacks because he has little interest in the sufferings of his fellow blacks. Milkman informs Guitar of his confrontation with his father, and Guitar encourages him to persevere, to "try to understand [life's trials], but if you can't, just forget it and keep yourself strong, man" (SOS 88). When Guitar brings up the fact that whites "got to" Till, the following exchange ensues:

"He was crazy." (Milkman)

"No. Not crazy. Young, but not crazy." (Guitar)

"Who cares if he fucks a white girl? Anybody can do that. What's he bragging for? Who cares?"

"Crackers care."

"Then they're crazier'n he is."

"Of course. But they're alive and crazy."

"Yeah, well, fuck Till. I'm the one in trouble." (SOS 88)

Milkman immediately apologizes for this last comment; but in truth, he has no appreciation for the struggles of anyone but himself. His rash comment illustrates that he is so uninformed that he does not even know that Till was murdered for allegedly whistling at a white woman, not having sex with her. This incident gives another instance of Milkman's lack of awareness of the struggles of his race and his apathy toward the Civil Rights Movement.

However, the situation surrounding Till's murder has additional meanings in relation to Milkman. First of all, Till was a physical victim of white society. Two weeks after Till's disappearance, his "bloated mutilated body was found floating in the Tallahatchie River. . . . There was a bullet hole in his head and barbed wire wrapped around his neck. . . . One eye was missing and the other dangled from its socket. The bridge of his nose was chopped up. An ear was also missing and there was a hole in his head where the bullet passed through." Till's barber, Gene Mobley, Jr., was able to identify his body only by Till's haircut (Linda Jones C2). The brutality is almost unspeakable; yet all Till was accused of doing was whistling at twenty-one-year-old Carolyn Bryant, a white woman who worked in the store where fourteen-year-old Till was buying candy. Bryant was the wife of one of his murderers. Till's mother, Mamie Till Mobley, maintains to this day that "her son had a speech impediment that caused him to stutter. She taught her son to whistle when he got stuck on a word. If any whistling was done in the store, it was an attempt to communicate with someone, not flirt, she says"

(Linda Jones C2). This information, if true, adds to the senselessness of the murder.

Whether Till did or did not whistle at Bryant in a flirtatious manner, he was a victim of "the white patriarch protecting 'his' property" and a judicial system that would acquit the men who later bragged to the press about the murder (Hirsch 82).

Although Milkman is never physically attacked by whites as Till was and is not subject to much hardship because of his father's wealth, he is a spiritual victim of white ideologies Macon teaches him. However, the outcome of his victimization is infinitely more positive than Till's. Macon so totally buys into white values that he forsakes his own sister and becomes no better than a slavemaster of his own race by mercilessly exploiting blacks through his rental property and teaching Milkman to do the same. Macon's Packard, which he flaunts to the poor blacks of Southside every Sunday and owns for no other purpose, symbolizes his insatiable need for the symbols of success in a "white" world. Just as Till's murderers took action to maintain their dominance, so does Macon use his car to remind the residents of Southside of his financial dominance over them. The blacks of Southside have certain images of a car's function, most of which pertain to amusement and none of which they associate with Macon's car: "There was never a sudden braking and backing up to shout or laugh with a friend. No beer bottles or ice cream cones poked out from the open windows" (SOS 32). They realize that "the Packard had no real lived life at all. So they called it Macon Dead's hearse," playing on Macon's last name (SOS 33). Guitar and Milkman also often use Milkman's last name as a pun. For example, when Guitar tells Milkman to pay attention to his warning about

Hagar's stalking him, Milkman jokingly replies, "And if I don't? What then, man? You gonna do me in? My name is Macon, remember? I'm already Dead" (SOS 118).

Although the pun is not used frequently, it is a reminder of both Macon's and Milkman's spiritual barrenness. White racists in the South, typified by Till's murderers, wanted to remain in control of blacks; likewise, these white values control Macon and Milkman, keeping them from real self-love and from agitation for equality with whites.

It is these very white values which have warped Milkman all his life that motivate him to search for Pilate's gold after he and Guitar only find the bag of bones. Genevieve Fabre points out that Milkman is like slaves of the Civil War era in that he thinks he can buy his freedom. Apparently, he has learned little from the experiences of his grandfather, who was murdered for his wealth, and his father, who is wealthy but spiritually imprisoned. In her article "Community and Nature: The Novels of Toni Morrison," Barbara Christian claims:

Milkman's search for gold, the profit from the land of his origins, which ironically he wants in order to free himself from his family, underscores the difference between the old traditions and the new. But the land reaffirms itself, for in his search for the gold, Milkman discovers a greater treasure, his real name and his roots in the land, which enable him to fly beyond it to a greater truth. (51)

As most victims do, Milkman comes to the point in his life where he must choose between freeing himself from white ideologies or remaining a victim. Had he not forsaken the

values with which he was raised, it is likely that he would have ended up like Hagar, the most vivid example of the destructiveness of adopting white values in the novel.

However, he chooses freedom from victimization, an option Till never had.

Secondly, Morrison seems to play with the circumstances of Till's murder to foreshadow Milkman's journey South. Because the day of Till's murder is the day Milkman realizes the origin of his nickname, it seems fitting that the murder should foreshadow the events which lead Milkman to find his real name. Till traveled from Chicago to Mississippi to visit his uncle; and before his departure, his mother counseled him "on how he should carry himself to avoid trouble with whites" (Linda Jones C2). Till's mother says that he had white friends in Chicago and would not have been used to racist attitudes common in the South. Milkman is in much the same situation in his journey South, only on the basis of class instead of race. Milkman is accepted and even praised by people in Danville, such as the Reverend Cooper, who hear of Macon's wealth and respond, "See? See what you can do? Never mind you can't tell one letter from another, never mind you born a slave, never mind you lose your name, never mind your daddy dead, never mind nothing. Here, this here, is what a man can do if he puts his mind to it and his back in it" (SOS 235). Of course, they do not realize that Macon has sold his birthright as a black man for wealth that is no more nourishing than a single bowl of stew. Nevertheless, Milkman is accepted there although he has lived a radically different life from Danville's inhabitants.

On the other hand, the people of Shalimar are antagonistic toward Milkman and

see through his fine clothes to his arrogance. Till's murderers certainly argued that he whistled at Carolyn Bryant because of arrogance and were immediately offended because he was black and, therefore, unlike them. Because of Milkman's different social class, the men of Shalimar react to him in a similar way. In a town where "[t]he women's hands were empty. No pocketbooks, no change purse, no wallet, no keys, no small paper bag, no comb, no handkerchief. They carried nothing" (SOS 259), Milkman's car and three-piece suit are grossly out of place. With his air of superiority, Milkman, who has had Hagar "on call" to fulfill him sexually for fifteen years, comments on the beauty of Shalimar's women, immediately offending the men lounging in front of Solomon's General Store, much in the same way that Till offended the men who murdered him by whistling at one of "their women." Milkman asks about boarding houses in town and about the ability of the men to fix his car, flaunting his money and not even knowing that he is:

They looked with hatred at the city Negro who could buy a car as if it were a bottle of whiskey because the one he had was broken. And what's more, who had said so in front of them. . . . His manner, his clothes were reminders that they had no crops of their own and no land to speak of either. . . . He was telling them that they weren't men, that they relied on women and children for their food. And that the lint in their pants pockets where dollar bills should have been was the measure. . . . They had seen him watching their women and rubbing his fly as he stood on the steps. They had also seen him lock his car as soon as he got out of it in a place

where there couldn't be more than two keys twenty-five miles around. He hadn't found them fit enough or good enough to want to know their names, and believed himself too good to tell them his. They looked at his skin and saw it was as black as theirs, but they knew he had the heart of the white men who came to pick them up in the trucks when they needed anonymous, faceless laborers. (SOS 266)

Surely, the men of Money, Mississippi, felt equally as threatened by Till, a "city Negro" from the North. In fact, Morrison herself has commented on this topic:

And what is this about anyhow, this whistling at a woman? Is it the rite of passage or what? Why was it such an important thing for the boy to do? He thought it was a male thing. The white men understood that, too. It was a male rite of passage that all men understand. But the interesting thing is that the men accused of the murder had a store right in the middle of the black area, and they prided themselves as having that ability to work with and among blacks, and they didn't want to lose that status. If this boy got away with this offense, then their reputation among white people as "handling" blacks would be threatened. (qtd. in Croyden 220-21)

Despite his class difference, Milkman is of the same race as these men in Shalimar; and after he proves himself to them in a fight and in the hunt, he is no longer an outsider. Furthermore, these men who initiate him into the ways of people in Shalimar provide the setting for him to find his identity. Obviously, Morrison gives the Till story a positive

twist; for Till, on the other hand, was never given such an opportunity to prove himself a valuable human because his murderers saw him as nothing more than a "nigger" trying to undercut their status as white men.

As mentioned previously, many scholars have pointed out the archetypal nature of Milkman's quest for his identity; and Utelinde Wedertz-Furtado argues that his quest especially represents "the situation of many young blacks in America" (224). Morrison makes his quest unique by having Milkman live in and go back through historical events within which his personal family history is woven; and she also uses historical events, people, and policies to establish the racist white society within which characters exist and to illuminate personal struggles of other characters, like Macon, Corinthians, Reba, Pilate, and Guitar. A large part of these allusions points the reader to the struggles blacks faced in relation to white values, especially white standards of wealth. As Catherine Denard points out in her essay "Toni Morrison," "Morrison shows the emptiness of self-definition in economic terms" (220). In large measure, it is this economic self-definition that causes Milkman to be oblivious to the events going on around him. As Melissa Walker points out, many of the most well-known events of the Civil Rights Movement, such as the Montgomery bus boycott, the lunch counter sit-ins, and the March on Washington, are not mentioned explicitly in the text because they "are apparently absent from Milkman's consciousness" (140). In addition to economic self-definition and lack of racial awareness, however, Morrison also entertains another option

available to blacks: violent retaliation in response to injustice.

Song of Solomon Chronology

Table 1

DATE	EVENT(S)
1869	Macon Dead I registers with the Freedmen's Bureau
1891	Macon Dead II born
1895	Pilate Dead born
1896	Dr. Foster moves to Mains Ave
1901 or 1902	Ruth Foster Dead born
1907	Macon Dead I murdered
1917 or 1918	Magdalene (called Lena) and First Corinthians Dead born
1921	Macon wishes he'd strangled Ruth in this year; Dr. Foster dies
1924, 1925, or 1926	Hagar born
1925 or 1926	Guitar born
1930	Pilate uses "magic" for Macon and Ruth to conceive Milkman
Wednesday, Feb. 18, 1931	Robert Smith's suicide; Toni Morrison's birthday
Thursday, Feb. 19, 1931	Milkman (Macon Dead III) born
1935	Milkman realizes he cannot fly; Guitar's family is evicted; Porter goes crazy; Macon visits Pilate's house secretly
1936	Roughly the time Milkman gets his nickname
1939-40	Corinthians attends Bryn Mawr and studies in France
1942	Reba wins the diamond from Sears
1943	Milkman meets Guitar and goes to Pilate's house for the first time; Milkman's first confrontation with Macon when he learns about Macon I
1944	Guitar begins taking Milkman to bars and the barbershop
1945	Milkman begins to limp and starts collecting rents for Macon
1948	Milkman first sleeps with Hagar; Reba attacked in the front yard by her boyfriend
1953	Milkman's second confrontation with Macon; Milkman learns the circumstances of Dr. Foster's death; Emmett Till murder
1961	Corinthians starts working as a maid and begins her affair with Porter
1962	At Christmas, Milkman breaks up with Hagar
1963	Milkman follows his mother to her father's grave; Hagar stalks Milkman and Ruth visits Pilate as a result; Milkman and Guitar rob Pilate (September 19); Lena confronts Milkman about his attitude toward women; Hagar dies; Milkman goes to Danville and Shalimar searching for the gold

CHAPTER III

GUITAR AND MILKMAN: SELF-DESTRUCTION AND SELF-DISCOVERY

For two of the central characters in Song of Solomon, Milkman and Guitar, the 1950s and 60s Civil Rights era is a time of transformation. During this time, these two men who are closer than brothers experience the most crucial events in their lives: Guitar's involvement in the secret vigilante society called the Seven Days and Milkman's journey to Danville and Shalimar. During this pivotal time for these men, Morrison uses events and circumstances to "squeeze" them in order to see what they are made of. Morrison commented on this topic in a 1983 interview with Nellie Y. McKay:

There is something more interesting at stake than a clear resolution in a novel. I'm interested in survival—who survives and who does not, and why—and I would like to chart a course that suggests where the dangers are and where the safety might be. I do not want to bow out with easy answers to complex questions. It's the complexity of how people behave under duress that is of interest to me—the qualities they show at the end of an event when their backs are up against the wall. (420)

The tension between Milkman and Guitar mounts as Guitar becomes steeped in the ideology of the Seven Days, a group whose logic and sway over Guitar Milkman cannot understand, and as Guitar remains blind to Milkman's change in thinking as he is initiated

"back into the tribe" (Fabre 14) through his journey into his familial and racial histories. Although Guitar's actions seem more linked to the Civil Rights struggle than Milkman's, Morrison uses both to explore two of several options that were and continue to be available to blacks in their agitation for civil rights: violent retaliation and transcendence through self-knowledge. The results of Milkman's and Guitar's final experiences together bear out the fact that one of these options is more desirable than the other for achieving true black freedom in America.

While Guitar's involvement in the Seven Days is a convenient way for Morrison to illustrate black response to violence with violence, it is not one she had to invent; for the Seven Days is grounded in historical fact. In his article "An Excursion into the Black World: The 'Seven Days' in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon," Ralph Story connects the Days to "black secret societies of the nineteenth century," groups whose activities were largely unrecognized and unrecorded, unlike similar groups active in the 1950s and 60s (152). Story cites a society called the Knights of Liberty formed in 1844 by Moses Dickson to bring an end to slavery through active retaliation against white masters (152). In addition, Utilinde Wedertz-Furtado links the Days with militant groups formed after blacks were unable to escape discrimination as they had hoped by migrating North in the 1920s (226). In fact, the Days was formed during this era after a black soldier from Georgia was castrated and a black veteran was blinded upon returning from World War I (SOS 155).

In addition to the Days' connection to earlier vigilante groups, several scholars

have linked Guitar and the Days to Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam. Melissa Walker provides the most detailed elucidation of this connection, citing the conversation between Guitar and Milkman in which Milkman suggests that Guitar change his name to "Guitar X." In addition to pinpointing this conversation, Walker argues:

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—and both were separated from their mothers. Guitar was raised by his grandmother; Malcolm was placed in a foster home when his mother had a nervous breakdown. 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)

In addition, Guitar adopts the lifestyle of the Nation of Islam members, giving up cigarettes and alcohol and embraces the antifeminism often promoted by Black Muslims. Even though he complains about the black woman's possessive attitude toward black men, Guitar justifies his retaliation against violence done to black women by saying that he can avenge her "Because she's mine" (SOS 222-23). Because Guitar himself expresses his indifference to Malcolm X's techniques, Walker concludes that while Guitar is not a clone of Malcolm X, he may be a private type of the public figure.

Whether Guitar is a type of Malcolm X, the ideologies of the Seven Days, which

the reader learns through Guitar, certainly coalesce with Malcolm's ideas and even with Marcus Garvey's, whom Malcolm admired. One significant difference is that the Days are not black nationalists; they do not desire a separate black state, only equal treatment for blacks right where they are. On the other hand, both Garvey and Malcolm were racial essentialists, believing that "black was good, and white was evil" (White 80). Although in 1964 Malcolm appealed to whites for aid in civil rights efforts, prior to this time he saw all whites as racists, an idea promoted by Guitar as the spokesman for the Days. As mentioned previously, when Guitar and Milkman discuss Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy, Guitar posits that "white people are unnatural. As a race they are unnatural. . . . In the movies they call it adventure. It's just depravity that they try to make glorious, natural. But it ain't. The disease they have is in their blood, in the structure of their chromosomes" (SOS 156-57). Not only would all whites participate in a lynching "under certain conditions," but Guitar also adds that "under the same conditions [blacks] would not," arguing not just for the baseness of whites but also for the moral superiority of blacks (SOS 157).

In addition, both Garvey and Malcolm attracted working class blacks instead of those of the middle class. Certainly all the members of the Seven Days are of the working class (SOS 159); and Guitar consistently points out to Milkman that while they are friends, Milkman is from a different economic and social world. He tells Milkman, "You got your high-tone friends and your picnics on Honoré Island and you can afford to spend fifty percent of your brainpower thinking about a piece of ass," whereas, on the other hand,

Guitar appears to work a low-paying, blue collar job and his first acquaintance with Milkman was through Macon's evicting Guitar's family because they lacked the money to pay their rent (SOS 102-03).

Of course, the most striking connection between the Days and Malcolm X is the promotion of revenge as a way of combating injustice, an idea which Malcolm continued to promote even after his break with the Nation of Islam in 1963. Speaking with sociologist Kenneth Clark in 1963, Malcolm X made the following statement concerning Martin Luther King's philosophy of non-violence:

Any Negro who teaches other Negroes to turn the other cheek is disarming that Negro . . . of his God-given right . . . his moral right . . . his natural right . . . his intelligent right to defend himself. Everything in nature can defend itself except the American Negro. And men like King—their job is to go among Negroes and teach Negroes, "Don't fight back." He doesn't tell them, "Don't fight each other." "Don't fight the white man" is what he's saying . . . because the followers of Martin Luther King will cut each other from head to foot, but they will not do anything to defend themselves against the attacks of the white man. (qtd. in White 108)

Although mention of Martin Luther King and his philosophy is conspicuously absent from Song of Solomon, Guitar and the Days have clearly adopted the "eye for an eye" approach instead of King's doctrine of love toward all humanity.

Although the reader gains some knowledge about the Days from the narrator and

from Milkman's thoughts, most information comes in key conversations between Milkman and Guitar. Although they have three conversations about the Days, one in particular provides the reader with a detailed sketch of the Days' philosophy, insight into the logic behind this philosophy, and an idea of Milkman's skepticism about the Days' purpose. It seems important to examine closely the logic used by Guitar since he is promoting a philosophy around which his life and the lives of at least six others are centered. While no philosophy is "perfect," his is not only fraught with fallacies but is also based in bitterness and violence that he calls justice.

As one can see from the example of Malcolm X and others, not everyone finds this kind of reasoning problematic. However, logic becomes important for two reasons, one rhetorical and one personal. First, Guitar's audience, which in this case is Milkman, finds fault with Guitar's argument because it is illogical in several places. Logic is important to Milkman throughout the text, as the reader learns when Milkman uses Pilate's lack of a navel, a phenomenon he can see, to convince himself that ghosts, which he has never seen, also exist: "Here he was walking around in the middle of the twentieth century trying to explain what a ghost had done. But why not? . . . One fact was certain: Pilate did not have a navel. Since that was true, anything could be" (SOS 298). Most important, however, are the consequences that this logic has for Guitar and for his relationship with Milkman. Guitar becomes increasingly paranoid and willing to fulfill his mission as the "Sunday man" at all costs, even to the point of sacrificing his friend, as we see in his actions during Milkman's journey.

The most important of the three conversations Milkman and Guitar have about the Days occurs in 1963 after Hagar has stalked Milkman at Guitar's apartment. Before this time, Milkman senses that Guitar is keeping a secret from him which involves Barbershop Tommy, Empire State, and other men who frequent the barbershop. First, Milkman recalls incidents in which two young white boys and four white men had been strangled in the early 1950s. The men in the barbershop attribute these murders to Winnie Ruth Judd, an insane woman who supposedly escapes from an asylum several times every year and dismembers people with an ax; but she seems to be only a cover for the Days. Milkman becomes suspicious that "one or more of these murders had in fact been either witnessed or committed by a Negro. Some slip, someone knowing some detail about the victim" (SOS 101). When he questions Guitar, Guitar at first evades him, then calls him nosy, and then diverts Milkman to discussing their class differences. Milkman gets even more hints concerning Guitar's involvement in the Days from Freddie the janitor later in the text (SOS 110-11).

It is not until this conversation with Guitar, however, that Milkman gets confirmation of Guitar's involvement in the Days. Still totally self-consumed, Milkman does not even want to talk about Hagar, who has recently tried to kill him, except to use her "as a way to sit Guitar down and get around to asking him something else" (SOS 152). Finally, Milkman gets the opportunity to ask Guitar directly what is going on with him; but at this point, Guitar is already suspicious of Milkman, who has always been his trusted friend. Milkman asks, "You don't think I can be trusted?" when Guitar hesitates to tell

him about the Days, and Guitar replies, "I don't know if you can or not" (SOS 153).

Finally, Guitar articulates the mission of the Seven Days:

There is a society. It's made up of a few men who are willing to take some risks. They don't initiate anything; they don't even choose. They are as indifferent as rain. But 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. If they can't do it precisely, they do it any way they can, but they do it. They call themselves the Seven Days. They are made up of seven men. Always seven and only seven. If one of them dies or leaves or is no longer effective, another is chosen. Not right away, because that kind of choosing takes time. But they don't seem to be in a hurry. Their secret is time. To take the time, to last. But to grow; that's dangerous because you might become known. They don't write their names in toilet stalls or brag to women. Time and silence. Those are their weapons, and they go on forever. (SOS 155)

Just previous to this summation of the group's makeup and goals, Guitar mentions a concept expanded on here: maintaining mathematical balance. He claims that "any man, any woman, or any child is good for five to seven generations of heirs before they're bred

out. . . . And each time [whites] succeed [in killing a black], they get rid of five to seven generations. I help keep the numbers the same" (SOS 154). This line of reasoning fits the "two wrongs make a right" fallacy by claiming that if whites are going to destroy generations by killing an individual, the Days are justified in doing the same. As Valerie Smith has noted, "This kind of rigidity—specifically this willingness to appropriate the oppressor's rules—imprisons Guitar and the other Days within the very system they attempt to subvert" (Self-Discovery 152).

This same fallacy is at work at several other points in Guitar's argument, and Morrison uses Milkman to ask key questions that bring this lack of logic to light. First, the Days claim their response to violence against blacks is a just one; but how can their response be just when it punishes random whites who are not responsible for the particular event to which they are responding? As Milkman asks, "Why kill innocent people? Why not just those who did it?" (SOS 155). As one might expect, Guitar's answer is based in racial essentialism; for he does not believe that whites are people at all. When Milkman asks, "You? You're going to kill people?" Guitar responds, "Not people. White people" (SOS 155).

Although Guitar does not acknowledge it, he and the Days have adopted the same racist attitude promoted by whites about blacks. One of the key pro-slavery arguments was that blacks are sub-human and whites are morally superior; and as mentioned previously, Guitar simply reverses this argument used to oppress blacks for years and applies it to whites. Milkman questions Guitar because he cannot prove scientifically that

whites are "unnatural," once again illustrating his need for logic; and Guitar falls into the ad hominem fallacy by countering Milkman's questions with an irrelevant attack on whites themselves rather than their argument: "Did they prove anything scientifically about us before they killed us?" (SOS 157).

When Milkman suggests that the Days should rise above white atrocities and be "better than they are" (SOS 157), Guitar argues that even though the Days take the exact same actions as whites, they are justified because their motives are better. They do not kill for fun, power, or anger, as he claims whites do, but for love of their race: "What I'm doing ain't about hating white people. It's about loving us. About loving you. My whole life is love" (SOS 159). However, Guitar later contradicts his doctrine of love when he says, "It's about trying to make a world where one day white people will think before they lynch" (SOS 160). By choosing not to emphasize making a world where black people will see themselves as valuable but frightening white people into stopping violence against blacks because they fear retaliation, Guitar affirms that the Days is not about love of blacks but about control through fear—the same idea behind white abuse of slaves. If slaves thought they would be whipped for misbehavior, slaveowners reasoned, they would remain under control. Again, Guitar reverses an attitude used to oppress blacks and applies it to whites. Finally, even when Milkman points out that once Guitar becomes accustomed to killing whites he could be capable of killing anyone, Guitar responds with an empty appeal to traditional wisdom: "The Days are the Days. It's been that way a long time" (SOS 161).

Although Morrison has defined the Days' philosophy as fallacious, she is not totally unsympathetic toward the Days. As Patrick Bryce Bjork states, "The author shows a certain amount of understanding for the emergence of such groups as the Seven Days by explaining how the members' personal histories account for their recourse to violence" (227). Guitar's hatred for whites, for example, is rooted in his father's death in a sawmill accident, and "his perceptions of his mother's moral cowardice and betrayal [in eagerly accepting forty dollars from the white sawmill owner] convince Guitar that his commitment to and love of black people must find its expression in hateful aggression" (Bjork 99).

Furthermore, not only is this turn to retaliation rooted in the nineteenth century, but it is also part of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s. Part of what allowed figures such as Malcolm X to come into power was the fact that blacks who adhered to Dr. King's theory of non-violence and love increasingly grew weary of bearing white violence. For example, after demonstrations in Albany, Georgia, in 1961, to register black voters and desegregate public facilities failed, many became disillusioned with King's methods. Cries that "you can struggle without hating, you can fight without violence" (qtd. in Sitkoff 119) turned into "revolution is bloody, revolution is hostile, revolution knows no compromise . . . the day of nonviolent resistance is over" (qtd. in Sitkoff 143).

Disregarding the fallacious logic in the Seven Days' creed, one must consider the effects of this philosophy on Guitar. At the end of the conversation just examined, Milkman and Guitar express their mutual fear for one another, Guitar because Milkman is

still separated from the concerns of his race, and Milkman because he seems to know that Guitar's attitude will make him as "unnatural" as the whites he claims he is unlike.

Furthermore, even before Guitar begins to self-destruct visibly, Morrison subtly provides clues that the attitude of the Days leads to deterioration of the self. Guitar himself brings up two members of the Days who self-destructed: Robert Smith and Porter. He claims that Porter, who is still part of the Days, "just needed a rest" (SOS 159), but Morrison reveals more through her portrayals of Smith and Porter. Smith's suicide is one of the first events in the novel and, as previously mentioned, corresponds with Milkman's birth. Ralph Story argues that Smith's suicide is an act of martyrdom, that "the life he chose as an assassin for the Seven Days . . . ultimately gave him only one way to end his life—by his own hands" (151). In fact, Guitar tells Milkman that Days' members are so devoted to secrecy that if they begin to "crack," suicide is their only option (SOS 158). However, Smith's reasons for choosing a public suicide seem more complex than either Story or Guitar portray them. The narrator tells us that Smith was an unassuming life insurance salesman who never brought attention to himself:

He never had a woman that any of them knew about and said nothing in church but an occasional "Amen." He never beat up anybody and he wasn't seen after dark, so they thought he was probably a nice man. . . . Jumping from the roof of Mercy was the most interesting thing he had done. None of them had suspected he had it in him. Just goes to show, they murmured

to each other, you never really do know about people. (SOS 8-9)

Because of Smith's unassuming demeanor, it seems that no one ever suspected his involvement in the Days. Therefore, he has kept the hatred which spurs the group hidden within him for many, seems to feel a sense of guilt about his involvement, and needs to do away with himself publicly as a sort of atonement.

As benign as the note Smith tacks to the door of his home two days before his suicide appears, his language gives the reader an insight into the torment he feels as part of the Days. The note says, "At 3:00 p.m. on Wednesday the 18th of February, 1931, I will take off from Mercy and fly away on my own wings. Please forgive me. I loved you all. (signed) Robert Smith, Ins. agent" (SOS 3). His request for forgiveness indicates that he feels some sort of guilt, either because of his activity as a member of the Days or because of the stigma of suicide or perhaps because he feels he has not done enough for his race. Whatever the reason, he is an anguished man. His statement "I loved you all" indicates that he sincerely believes that the Days are motivated by love of their race, but the rest of the note undermines the concept of love and shows the destructiveness of the hatred that has truly motivated him. Even though his use of the word "Mercy" is a reference to his place of departure, Mercy Hospital, the word "from" can mean more than a starting point in his movement. It could mean that Smith is flying as a result of mercy. It seems that he either realizes that the murder of innocent whites as a means of punishing guilty ones is not just or that he is being compassionate toward himself and allowing himself the only release from the Days that he feels is possible. In addition, the fact that he says he will "fly

away on my own wings" indicates that he is releasing himself from the grip the Days has had on him and reclaiming his ability to choose something other than revenge.

Unfortunately, the only choice he feels is available to him is death.

Only four years after Smith's suicide, Freddie the janitor and Southside's "town crier" shows up at Macon's office to inform him that Porter, one of his tenants and a member of the Days, has "gone crazy drunk again," "got his shotgun," and is standing in his attic window threatening to jump (SOS 24). Porter claims that he has to kill someone before the morning; and Macon, Freddie, and others who witness the scene believe that Porter is speaking about himself. However, it is likely that he must kill someone because of his involvement in the Days. Porter repeatedly pleads for someone with whom he can have sex, seemingly because he feels the need for love as an antidote to the hate which drives his action as part of the Days. After he urinates over the heads of the frightened but curious crowd, he cries "great shoulder-heaving sobs, followed by more screams":

I love ya! I love ya all. Don't act like that. You women. Stop it. Don't act like that. Don't you see I love ya? I'd die for ya, kill for ya. I'm saying I love ya. I'm telling ya. Oh, God have mercy. What I'm gonna do? What in this fuckin world am I gonna dooooo? (SOS 26)

These pleas illustrate that he too has been led to believe that the actions of the Days evidence love for blacks. But this love is too onerous for him to bear. He cries:

Gimme hate, Lord. . . . I'll take hate any day. But don't give me love. I can't take no more love, Lord. I can't carry it. Just like Mr. Smith. He

couldn't carry it. It's too heavy. Jesus, you know. You know all about it.

Ain't it heavy? Jesus? Ain't love heavy? Don't you see, Lord? You own son couldn't carry it. If it killed Him, what You think it's gonna do to me?

Huh? Huh? (SOS 26)

Clearly, Porter sees himself as giving himself totally for his race, just as Christ did for humanity. His "love" for his race is certainly self-sacrificial, but it has destroyed him to the point that he longs for hatred—its opposite—not realizing that hatred is already consuming him. The same feelings that are evident in Smith's letter are evident in Porter's cries: desperation and the need for relief because of the torment his involvement in the Days causes him. As Bessie Jones and Audrey Vinson state, "He had chosen hate, the dynamo of the Seven Days, but the intrusion of love—for those for whom he sought revenge, and the intrusion of frustration born of the loneliness of isolation, were too heavy a burden for him" (94). Porter's life is saved only at this point because he passes out, but he is finally able to be emancipated spiritually when he finds real love in his later relationship with Corinthians Dead. In this relationship, he is truly able to save a member of his race from a sort of white violence because he is able to save Corinthians from Macon's white, materialistic, patriarchal values. Because Corinthians and Porter eventually begin to live together, he may be beginning a break from the Days. Two solutions exist for those who find themselves being torn apart by the Days: real love or suicide.

In light of the torment that involvement in the Days causes for Smith and Porter, it

should be no surprise that Guitar gradually disintegrates as he is called upon to commit a murder in the name of the Days because of a real historical event. On Sunday, September 15, 1963, four black girls from ages 11 to 14 were killed and several other children injured in a bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham during Sunday School, marking the "twenty-first bombing incident against Birmingham Negroes in eight years—all 'unsolved'" (Adams 146). Because Guitar is the "Sunday man," he is obligated to retaliate. The narrator reveals that Guitar can think of nothing else: "Every night now Guitar was seeing little scraps of Sunday dresses—white and purple, powder blue, pink and white, lace and voile, velvet and silk, cotton and satin, eyelet and grosgrain" (SOS 173). While Guitar seems fairly stable at this point in the narrative, Morrison undercuts his stability through the connection Guitar makes between the scraps of the murdered girls' dresses and the velvet rose petals Corinthians and Lena pick up off the snow outside of Mercy Hospital just before Smith's suicide. Significantly, during his reverie Guitar does not recall Ruth Dead being in labor, his grandmother being present, or Pilate singing; he only recalls "Magdalene called Lena and Corinthians bending in the wind to catch the heart-red pieces of velvet that had floated under the gaze of Mr. Robert Smith" (SOS 173). This correlation of images indicates that, despite appearances, Guitar is no more stable than Smith was at that point, that the act of murder he is planning will lead him to similar self-destruction.

Because Guitar's mission is to kill four white girls on a Sunday in the same manner as the black ones were killed, he needs money for explosives; and when Milkman

approaches him about stealing Pilate's gold, Guitar is overjoyed that he has found the means to his end. Almost immediately after Guitar and Milkman begin their plans to steal the gold, Guitar becomes obsessed with his mission and is willing to do anything to carry it out. He talks of all he wants to buy for his family with the money they will get from the gold; but in reality, "his mind was on the wonders of TNT" (SOS 181). Ironically, just as Guitar expresses his false desire to use the money to help his family, he rationalizes their crime by saying to Milkman, "This ain't no burglary. This is Pilate." When Milkman says, "So?" Guitar replies, "So! They're your people" (SOS 181), implying that stealing from one's family is acceptable behavior, just after he has expressed devotion to his own family. Just as Milkman will do later, Guitar simply uses his family as an excuse for wanting the gold.

After the bag Guitar and Milkman steal from Pilate turns out to be only bones, Guitar is incensed. On the car trip home from the police station, "Guitar never said a word. His anger was like heat shimmering out of his skin, making the hot air blowing in through the open window seem refreshing by comparison" (SOS 207); and he seems to blame Pilate for their failure since her bag did not provide what he wanted (SOS 210).

This anger leads to Guitar's growing paranoia and mistrust of Milkman, whom he also feels has deceived him in some way. In their last conversation before Milkman leaves for Danville, Guitar brings up the fact that Macon has just evicted him; and when reflecting on Guitar's disparagement of Macon, Corinthians, and Lena, Milkman asks, "Why you trust me?" Guitar responds, "Baby, I hope I never have to ask myself that

question" (SOS 225). Apparently, though, Guitar has already asked himself that question because he follows Milkman to Danville and then to Shalimar and leaves Milkman a message at the store in town: "Your day has come," the very words members of the Days speak to their victims just before they are killed. Milkman tells himself that Guitar leaves that particular message so that Milkman will know for sure he was there or perhaps to let Milkman know that he is in some sort of trouble. Milkman never doubts Guitar's trust; but only days later when Milkman is hunting with the men of Shalimar, Guitar tries to strangle him in the woods. Only when Milkman fires his gun into the air does Guitar retreat.

Milkman does not mention this incident to his hunting partners; but when the men skin the bobcat they have killed, Morrison juxtaposes descriptions of their actions with statements made by Guitar in conversations with Milkman. A portion of this section reads as follows, with Guitar's remarks underlined, as they are in the text:

Omar cut around the legs and neck. Then he pulled the hide off.

"What good is a man's life if he can't even choose what to die for?"

The transparent underskin tore like gossamer under his fingers.

"Everybody wants the life of a black man."

.....

Luther reached into the paunch and lifted the entrails. He dug under the rib cage to the diaphragm and carefully cut around it until it was free.

"It is about love. What else but love? Can't I love what I criticize?"

Then he grabbed the windpipe and the gullet, eased them back, and severed them with one stroke of his little knife.

"It's about love. What else?"

They turned to Milkman. "You want the heart?" they asked him. Quickly, before any thought could paralyze him, Milkman plunged both hands into the rib cage. "Don't get the lungs, now. Get the heart."

"What else?"

He found it and pulled. The heart fell away from the chest as easily as yolk slips out of its shell.

"What else? What else? What else?" (SOS 282)

Scholars have provided a variety of explanations for Morrison's technique here, all of which illustrate Guitar's deterioration. Ann Imbrie states that "the contrapuntal arrangement of lines . . . emphasizes the contrast between the religious respect Solomon's men have for their sacrificial victim and the perversion of religious devotion that allows Guitar to ignore the humanity of those he 'sacrifices' in the name of evening the score" (483). In addition, Deborah Guth argues that "the hunt and the slow dismembering of the prey become first a metaphor for the history of racial persecution in America" and "reveals Guitar the prophet of violence to in fact be its victim—dead as the cat but for the eyes glinting revenge" (583). Guitar has stated earlier that the Days are about maintaining

"balance," but balance is exactly what he has lost. He becomes a monomaniac willing to kill not only a fellow black (which he told Milkman is against the policies of the Days) but also his closest friend in order to carry out his mission.

Milkman and Guitar meet one final time before Milkman returns home to get Pilate and take her to Shalimar; and Guitar directly confronts Milkman about cheating him out of the gold, which he believes he saw Milkman ship from the train station in Danville. He readily admits that he tried to kill Milkman because he "cut us out," referring to the Days (SOS 297). Vehement in his anger, he tells Milkman, "Your Day has come, but on my schedule. And believe it: I will run you as long as there is ground. Your name is Macon, but you ain't dead yet" (SOS 297). Even though Milkman found no gold and tells Guitar the truth about not shipping anything but only helping a man lift a heavy crate, Guitar, at the height of rage, refuses to believe him and plans to wait in Shalimar for the crate to arrive and then to kill Milkman for trying to cheat him.

As Milkman realizes, he is trying to convince Guitar of something unlikely in relation to Milkman's past: that he "willingly, spontaneously, had helped an old white man lift a huge, heavy crate" when Milkman's entire life has been characterized by selfishness and indifference (SOS 296). What Guitar does not realize is the change in character Milkman has undergone during his trip to Danville and Shalimar, a process that is appropriate to examine before looking at Milkman and Guitar's final confrontation.

Part two begins with Milkman already in Danville; and interestingly, Morrison begins this section of the novel with a reference to Hansel and Gretel. Here, the narrator

explains the desperation but sense of danger the two children must have felt as they saw the gingerbread house before them. The narrator claims that "blinding hunger alone could have propelled them forward," and it is this same kind of hunger that propels Milkman: "A grown man can also be energized by hunger, and any weakness in his knees or irregularity in his heartbeat will disappear if he thinks his hunger is about to be assuaged. Especially if the object of his craving is not gingerbread or chewy gumdrops, but gold" (SOS 219).

Both Milkman and Guitar are driven by the same type of desperation but for different reasons: Guitar wants the gold to subsidize his mission for the Seven Days, and Milkman thinks the gold will bring him freedom. Just after the beginning of the chapter, Morrison uses flashback to chronicle some of the events preceding Milkman's departure from Michigan; and here the reader learns Milkman's final comments to Guitar before he leaves for Danville. Most importantly, Milkman states, "I just want to live my own life. I don't want to be my old man's office boy no more. And as long as I'm in this place I will be. Unless I have my own money. I have to get out of that house and I don't want to owe anybody when I go" (SOS 221-22).

Later on, we learn that freedom is not the only thing Milkman thinks the gold will bring him; for part of the impetus for finding the gold is having a story to share. When he and Guitar initially plan their theft of the gold, Milkman realizes that his hesitation to take the gold stems from the fairy-tale quality of the gold's existence. However, because Guitar's belief in the gold's reality "made [their planned theft] into an act, an important, real, and daring thing to do" (SOS 184), Milkman realizes that this act would give him a

"self that could join the chorus at Railroad Tommy's with more than laughter. He could tell this" (SOS 184). Later, when he visits the Reverend Cooper and Cooper begins to tell Milkman about his grandfather and father's life in Danville, Milkman realizes that "Already [Cooper] was framing the story for his friends: how the man came to his house first, how he asked for him. . ." (SOS 230). Cooper is not the only one with a story to tell, for Milkman's presence provides "the ignition that gunned [the] memories" of all the old men of Danville who visit Cooper's house while Milkman is waiting to get his car fixed (SOS 235). Milkman presents his father in the best light possible, bragging to these economically deprived men about how many houses his father owns but failing to mention his consuming greed and selfishness. Their pride when they hear of Macon's success increases Milkman's hunger for the gold because he wants a story of his own to tell which will win their admiration and make him feel a part of their community. Ironically, Milkman does eventually become part of a community but not through any gold he finds or any story he tells. Instead, Morrison chronicles his gradual loss of wealth and his gain of a "people" as his attitude toward his family history changes, all of which reaches a climax in the final scene.

As previously noted, Macon's love of his wealth is one of the primary factors he allows to alienate him from his family and race; and wealth operates in the same way for Milkman, giving him a false pride that is gradually stripped away as he loses the trappings of his wealth. As he enters Danville, he possesses two suitcases: a large one in which to carry back the gold he expects to find and a smaller one containing his personal

belongings—two bottles of liquor, two shirts and underwear (SOS 226). In addition, he is wearing a "beige three-piece suit . . . button-down light-blue shirt and black string tie . . . Florsheim shoes and a gold watch" (SOS 227), all of which are grossly out of place in rural Danville.

None of Danville's residents make direct reference to Milkman's curious appearance, but his fancy clothes begin to deteriorate as soon as Cooper's nephew drops Milkman off at the edge of the woods where Circe lives. As if in direct attack by nature, "his hat had been knocked off by the first branch of the old walnut trees. . . [and] his cuffless pants were darkened by the mile-long walk over moist leaves" (SOS 238). Then, after he leaves Circe's house to search for the cave which he believes contains the gold, he must cross a creek. He tries to preserve his clothes, removing his shoes and socks and rolling up his pants; but his efforts are futile as he slips on the slimy rocks on the bottom of the creek, gets the legs of his pants wet, and drops his shoes. As he reaches a spot in the creek which is deeper than it looks, he goes completely under. By the time he reaches the bank, not only is he soaked, but the face of his watch is shattered and the minute hand bent. Later on, when he visits Susan Byrd in Shalimar, her flirty friend Grace, who is amazed that his watch has only dots in place of numbers on it, asks to see his watch and does not return it.

His time in Danville strips him of most of his belongings; and Milkman loses most of his money in Shalimar, primarily at two points in the text. First, he leaves Danville headed to Virginia, not knowing exactly what town he is looking for. When he learns

Shalimar's name, he also learns that neither trains nor busses go there; so he buys "a fifty-dollar car" for \$75, a car which breaks down before he can even get it to a gas station, where he must spend \$132 on parts to keep it running (SOS 260). Even though he trades money for a possession in this case, the car breaks down again in Shalimar and contributes a great deal to the hostility the people there feel toward him, since he locks the car even though "there couldn't be more than two keys twenty-five miles around" and simply assumes that one of the men there will fix it for him (SOS 266).

The second instance in which Milkman loses his money concerns the hunt. By this point, he has lost his clothing entirely. Since his suit is inappropriate for the hunt, the men outfit him in boots, hunting socks, army fatigues, and a knit cap, making him appear much like Pilate, who often wore men's boots and a knit cap with her dress (SOS 5, 38) and, as the reader learns later, is very much at home in Shalimar. When Milkman places a flashlight in his pocket, Calvin, one of the men on the hunt, tells him, "Take that change out your pocket" (SOS 272). This action is certainly practical since jangling coins could announce one's approach to one's prey, and it is still another step in Milkman's gradual loss of nearly every material object he left Michigan with.

When Milkman realizes how inept he is at maneuvering through the woods with the other hunters, the worthlessness of his wealth finally becomes clear to him:

There was nothing here to help him now—not his money, his car, his father's reputation, his suit or his shoes. In fact they hampered him. Except for his broken watch, and his wallet with about two hundred

dollars, all he had started out with on his journey was gone. . . . His watch and his two hundred dollars would be of no help out here, where all a man had was what he was born with, or had learned to use. And endurance.

(SOS 277)

When Milkman realizes the emptiness of his father's wealth, he turns to the very lessons he learned from Pilate in order to survive, especially the ability to listen. According to P. Gabrielle Foreman, Pilate attaches the snuffbox containing her name to her ear "to symbolize her belief that the value of the word is in the hearing, in the telling, that the living tradition is an oral/aural one. . ." (372). Because he returns to Pilate's values, Milkman is able to hear Guitar's approach and catch the wire with which Guitar plans to strangle him. As Foreman also points out, "Listening also allows him to puzzle out the pieces of Pilate's song and recognize in it his family's history" (374). He has paper but no pencil in his wallet, so he must listen and memorize the song as the children sing it. Once again, Pilate's values are effective, and his father's are not. "Stripped of pencils and pens, Milkman abandons his status as observer and becomes a participant in his own history" (Foreman 374).

The hunt and the preceding knife fight are of great significance because the men of Shalimar put Milkman through these tests before they will admit him to their community. Throughout his journey, Milkman gains a growing sense of community with individuals of his race in Danville and Shalimar, a marked departure from his life dominated by white values and total insensitivity to the struggles of his race for real equality with whites,

especially in the Civil Rights Movement. Most important, however, is his change in attitude as he learns more of his family's history. What begins as a way to locate the gold becomes for Milkman a way to find himself.

In the early stages of Milkman's journey, he sees his family history only as something he can selfishly use. Milkman feels a sense of pride in his family when the men of Danville discuss the Macon Dead they knew as a boy. Milkman realizes that they have idealized Macon: "He could not recognize that stern, greedy unloving man in the boy they talked about, but he loved the boy they described and loved that boy's father" (SOS 234-35). For the first time, he finds pride in his family; but his pride is false because the vision that affords him this pride is also false.

Milkman carries this pride with him to Shalimar, where no one knows him or his father. He is enraged when the men there do not worship him the way the men in Danville did. Because some of his family members once lived there, Milkman expects a homecoming of sorts but is disappointed: "He had thought this place, this Shalimar, was going to be going to be home. His original home. . . . In Danville they had made him the object of hero worship. In his own home town his name spelled dread and grudging respect. But here, in his 'home,' he was unknown, unloved, and damn near killed" (SOS 270). Clearly, Milkman has not yet realized what it means to have a "people."

Second, when Milkman visits Circe, he uses his family as an alibi for wanting to find the cave. When Milkman learns that his grandfather's body was stashed in the cave he is looking for, he tells Circe that he wants to go there so that he can bury whatever of his

grandfather's remains may be left. Circe says, "Now, that's a thought worth having" (SOS 245), but this thought is a lie. On his way to the cave, Milkman decides he will use this lie as an alibi if he gets caught snooping around the cave. His callous, mercenary attitude is rooted in his lack of appreciation for his ancestors.

Joe Weixlmann argues that Milkman is a sleuth who is given bits of his family history during his journey that he must finally piece together to form a unit. Weixlmann is generally correct, but Milkman does not gradually piece together the tidbits of information he gets because he is so centered on finding the gold. Instead, he experiences an epiphany in which all the pieces fall together at once. After the hunt in Shalimar, Milkman is accepted into their community, as evidenced by the way the men tease him and, as offensive as it may be to the reader, offer him one of their women. Even at this point, Milkman thinks to himself, "And, somehow, he had to get around to the purpose of his visit to Shalimar," i.e., locating the gold (SOS 283). Because he has become part of this community, though, a door is opened that allows him to learn more about his grandmother Sing and the location of Susan Byrd, who provides him with even more information about his grandparents and tells him the story of the flying African.

Although he is still thinking about the gold, Milkman's thoughts are being gradually overtaken by his curiosity about his ancestors and his growing sense of family. When he introduces himself to Susan, he says, "I'm from Michigan and I think some of my people lived here a long time ago" (my emphasis) (SOS 287). This is the first time Milkman refers to his family as "my people" in the novel. When he first meets the

Reverend Cooper in Danville, one of Cooper's first statements to him is, "I know your people!" but at this point, Milkman does not (SOS 229). In fact, he finds the phrase strange; but he does seem to have some sense of what it means: "All his life he'd heard the tremor in the word: 'I live here, but my people. . . ' or: 'She acts like she ain't got no people,' or: 'Do any of your people live there?' But he hadn't known what it meant: links" (SOS 229).

After Milkman is accepted into Shalimar's community, however, he does know what it means; and he associates his sense of connectedness with Pilate:

He didn't feel close to [the people in Shalimar], but he did feel connected, as though there was some cord or pulse or information they shared. Back home he had never felt that way, as though he belonged to anyplace or anybody. . . . But there was something he felt now—here in Shalimar, and earlier in Danville—that reminded him of how he used to feel in Pilate's house. (SOS 293)

Furthermore, Milkman admits that even though he told Susan Byrd that finding out about his family is not important, it has become important to him; and he has numerous questions about them, many of which he finds answered when he pieces together the children's song of Solomon. After he unravels the mystery of Jake, Solomon's Leap, Ryna's Gulch, Heddy, and the flying African myth, "Milkman was getting confused, but he was as excited as a child confronted with boxes and boxes of presents under the skirt of a Christmas tree. Somewhere in the pile was a gift for him. . . . He was as eager and happy

as he had ever been in his life" (SOS 304). After visiting Susan Byrd a second time, Milkman is ecstatic; and he cannot wait to share his joy with Sweet. He is physically dirty and jumps into a pond even after Sweet's warning about water moccasins, but their swim is more significant on a symbolic level. In the physical act of baptism, Milkman washes away all that has kept him from knowledge of his family in the past—his wealth, his selfishness, his lust for the gold—and is brought back into his race and into his family. Just before Guitar and Milkman steal Pilate's bag of bones, they see a white peacock. When Milkman wonders why the bird cannot fly, Guitar responds, "Too much tail. All that jewelry weighs it down. Like vanity. Can't nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down" (SOS 179). After Milkman is stripped of the values and material possessions that have held him down, he too is on his way to flying.

Part of Milkman's joy comes from the fact that his great-grandfather Solomon simply flew away from slavery's oppression to go back to his home in Africa. In his conversation with Sweet, who thinks he is drunk because he is so happy, he explodes in jubilation that someone he is related to could fly:

And he began to whoop and dive and splash and turn. "He could fly! You hear me? My great-granddaddy could fly! Goddam!" He whipped the water with his fists, then jumped straight up as though he too could take off, and landed on his back and sank down, his mouth and eyes full of water. Up again. Still pounding, leaping, diving. . . . "Oh man! He didn't

need no airplane. He just took off; got fed up. All the way up! No more cotton! No more bales! No more orders! No more shit! He flew, baby. Lifted his beautiful black ass up in the sky and flew on home. Can you dig it? Jesus God, that must have been something to see." (SOS 328)

Part of Milkman's elation stems from his lifelong fascination with flight, which Morrison alludes to throughout the text. For example, the narrator explains that "Mr. Smith's blue silk wings must have left their mark, because when the little boy discovered, at four, the same thing that Mr. Smith had learned earlier—that only birds and airplanes could fly—he lost all interest in himself. To have to live without that single gift saddened him . . ." (SOS 9); and when he and Guitar see the peacock, he "felt again his unrestrained joy at anything that could fly" (SOS 178). His airplane ride on the way to Danville which "exhilarated him, encouraged illusion and a feeling of invulnerability" (SOS 220), and his comparison of the children who sing the song of Solomon with their arms outstretched to airplanes signify his continuing fascination with flight. In addition, his comparison of the bags of gold he seeks to fat pigeons solidifies the connection he makes between flight and freedom since he believes that the gold will make him free.

Milkman's enchantment with flight derives from more than Robert Smith's suicidal flight at his birth, however. As Valerie Smith points out, when Milkman learns the story of his ancestors and decodes the song of Solomon, "it becomes clear (certainly to the reader if not explicitly to Milkman himself) that his fascination with flight is an inherited affinity" (Self-Discovery 151), one that his aunt Pilate also possesses. One of the men in

Shalimar hears her name and mistakes it for "pilot," asking Milkman, "She do any flying?" (SOS 283). He answers no, but she is a character of freedom and transcendence throughout the novel. Interestingly, when Milkman takes Pilate to Shalimar, she refuses to travel by air (SOS 335), a decision which illustrates that she has no need for imitation means of flight. At her death, when a bird flies away with her earring, Milkman realizes "why he loved her so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly" (SOS 337); and in large manner, it is Pilate who has served as Milkman's "pilot" to this point in his life, teaching him the value of family and commitment to others.

The significance of Milkman's flight during the final scene of the book is one of the most ardently debated aspects of the novel because of its delightful ambiguity. For example, Robert James Butler argues in his article "Open Movement and Selfhood in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon" that Milkman's "riding the air may be seen by some as an act of transcendence but it is just as valid to see it as a repetition of the demented flying done by Robert Smith" as the novel opens and that Milkman "has been finally trapped by circumstances beyond his control and makes a 'final exit' from life in sheer desperation" (73). Wahneema Lubiano is one of the few scholars who comments on Guitar's role in the scene; she confirms Guitar's gradual development into a Machiavellian monomaniac and states:

In the name of that overt political action, all is sanctioned, even those practices shared by a dominant society [Guitar] opposes. So while he hates the oppressiveness of a system that could kill his father and give him candy

to sweeten the loss, and while he is able to see the inability of the peacock to fly because of all the "shit" weighing it down—a symbol of the oppression of material things—nonetheless, he is ready to kill his brother for the gold that he wants/needs for his political movement. Politics, finally, simply means gold and death to Guitar. (110)

Although Guitar claims that as a member of the Days he would never kill anyone who is black, he is able to kill anyone he feels does not fit his definition of "black," i.e., those who do not share his mission, like Pilate and, apparently, Milkman (Lubiano 111). Lubiano sees Milkman in a negative light as well and argues that his reconnection to his past does not enrich him but only gives him a means of avenging Pilate's death, which he also views selfishly because his primary concern is that he find the one other woman in existence who is like Pilate for himself. Lubiano finally links Milkman's leap to Solomon's flight in which he selfishly abandons his wife and children, a leap "back to the behavior of a slave ancestor, back to nothingness, back to death" (112).

On the whole, though, scholars tend to interpret the scene in a positive manner, emphasizing Milkman's leap as a symbolic act of commitment and transcendence of his preoccupation with self. Patrick Bryce Bjork argues that prior to this time "All images and scenes of flight have ended either in death, disillusion, or desertion" (107). However, it seems that Robert Smith, the prime example of deadly flight, realized he needed to transcend his circumstances—his involvement with the Days—but simply chose a permanent, destructive means for doing so. Milkman, on the other hand, transcends his

circumstances through commitment. Just prior to his return to Shalimar with Pilate, Milkman takes responsibility for Hagar's death by placing some of her hair in a box to keep with him just as Pilate kept her father's bones with her; and just as he knows he must take responsibility for Hagar's death, he understands that he can no longer run from Guitar. Unlike Solomon, "Milkman does not fly away, he leaps in acknowledgment of personal kinship and brotherhood. He realizes that only in commitment is he free" (Bjork 109).

The kind of commitment Milkman embraces is markedly different from the kind of commitment Guitar embraces, however. Guitar is committed to the Days and the gold he believes he can access through Milkman, and he reacts to his belief that Milkman has cheated him out of the gold. Just as Guitar has been wronged by whites and joins the Days to get even, Guitar feels that he has been wronged by Milkman and again seeks revenge. Guitar, then, has become as self-consumed as Milkman once was.

Milkman's action, on the other hand, seems to be the culmination of his gradual ability to be committed to someone other than himself. On his way home from Shalimar, he realizes that Pilate and his mother are the only two people who have ever taken action to preserve his life when it was in danger; and "he had never so much as made either of them a cup of tea" (SOS 331). He seems to be doing more than simply avenging Pilate's death, however. Because of his journey, Milkman has come to value himself as part of his family and his race; and he seems to realize that Guitar killed Pilate because he felt she had a part in cheating him out of the gold. The new Milkman finds value in himself—not his

money or his father's name—and, knowing that Guitar will try to kill him for the same reason he killed Pilate, Milkman refuses to be defenseless. As Jane Bakerman states in her 1978 review of the novel, "As Milkman unravels—and re-weaves—the story of his ancestors, he also evaluates Guitar's concept of black responsibility, and the protagonist's triumph comes when he can interpret the lessons of all his friends and forebears to arrive at his own sense of himself as an able, mature, black man. A man who knows who he is can deal with danger, pain, violence, and love" (448).

Milkman's defense of himself is more than a physical one, however. He has finally come into possession of his soul, and he is not willing to relinquish the freedom he has gained. Milkman now comprehends some of Guitar's earlier comments. At one point, Guitar explains to Milkman that Milkman's family does not want his "dead life; they want your living life. . . . Everybody wants the life of a black man" (SOS 222). In other words, everyone wants to possess a black man, to control him. In the final scene, when Milkman shouts to the hidden Guitar, "You want my life? . . . You need it? Here" (SOS 337), he shouts in defiance, daring Guitar to attempt to possess him. After his journey and reconnection to his family and race, Milkman finally has self-knowledge and with it self-possession and freedom. Consequently, he refuses to let Guitar or his warped sense of love control him.

Interestingly, during the hunt in Shalimar, it is his ability to "surrender" to the fact the Guitar is strangling him that gives him the moment to place his hand between the rope and his neck, allowing him to save his own life (SOS 279). Likewise, at their final

confrontation, he again surrenders instead of struggles, only this time to the air; and the implication is that he will again save himself from Guitar's possession. As Morrison said in a 1983 interview with Nellie McKay, "Milkman was ignorant. That was his problem. He wanted to be comfortable, and he didn't want to go anywhere, except to chase something that was elusive, until he found out that there was something valuable to chase" (420). Now that he has found a familial and racial connectedness and a self that are all valuable, he is willing to defend them if necessary.

Because the novel ends with the two men suspended in mid-air, it is impossible to answer the myriad questions that arise about Guitar's and Milkman's fates. Does Milkman die? Does Guitar? How does their relationship change if neither dies? Does Guitar continue to deteriorate? Whatever the outcome, we can be sure that Milkman has changed. He has a positive sense of racial community, as opposed to Guitar's negative one, which Morrison found crucial to black life but damaged by the Civil Rights Movement's emphasis on assimilation.

Melissa Walker argues that Milkman is the "moral and psychological obverse" of Martin Luther King, just as Guitar is a type of Malcolm X (144). Although Milkman is undoubtedly nothing like King early in the novel, he does grow to be more like him as he embraces his heritage, learns to love himself, and sees the futility in Guitar's aggression. Regardless of Milkman's future, he has learned to value himself and his race, convictions which do more to liberate anyone than any piece of legislation.

Morrison has made it clear in several interviews that she is not against black

success or equal treatment. Coming from the poor family that she did, she undoubtedly understands the importance of tearing down racial barriers so that blacks can have access to decent jobs and facilities. However, as already mentioned, she avoids "easy answers to complex questions" (McKay 420) and looks for a balance between the spiritual and material. Through her portrayal of Guitar and Milkman, she communicates that the spiritual, especially racial dignity and community, is as important as the material. If blacks have those things, what the white world calls "success" will no longer matter. As Melissa Walker states so well:

The final tableau, a visual image of possibility and interdependence, suggests that to succeed all factions must somehow transcend a preoccupation with self and the personal, to become part of the greater history that affirms and loves "life, life, life, life," in order to escape the potentially fatal embrace of each others' "killing arms." The condition of black Americans in 1963, the novel suggests, had two possible futures: on the one hand, for those who live on the stage of history, a future in which self is subordinated to community; for those whose lives continue to be directed by old and festering personal wounds, a future informed by anger, self-absorption, and violence. (146)

CHAPTER IV

MORRISON'S VISION: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

In the introductory pages of her book Down from the Mountaintop: Black Women's Novels in the Wake of the Civil Rights Movement, 1966-1989, Melissa Walker poses three questions that she intends to explore regarding the 18 novels she examines: where have we been? where are we? and where do we go from here? (2) Interestingly, these same questions are a fitting framework for a final examination of Song of Solomon and its implications for the past, present, and future of American blacks.

When Morrison composed Song of Solomon in the 1970s, the Civil Rights Movement was far from over; and in many ways, it continues today. However, following its peak in 1963, white backlash increased; and with national attention deferred to the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal, events such as the March on Washington and the Freedom Rides must have seemed like decades ago to black activists who found it increasingly difficult for their voices to be heard. As Harvard Sitkoff explains, "The movement had secured basic civil rights for African-Americans, yet much remained to be done" (210).

Through her use of historical allusions in Song of Solomon, Morrison explores much of the territory before and during the 1950s and 60s segments of the Movement. Certainly, she brings negative aspects of black treatment in America into sharp focus as

nearly every character in the novel is touched in some way by Jim Crow laws and white racism: Macon I's being murdered for his property, Macon II's having to bribe the police, Ruth's being denied access to Mercy Hospital until Milkman's birth, Pilate's being unable to ride a train, Guitar's father's employer's ineptly handling his employee's death, Reba's being denied publicity after winning a prize at Sears.

On the other hand, allusions to figures such as Franklin Roosevelt, Malcolm X, and John F. Kennedy relate to the progress—albeit slow progress—that was made during the Movement. This progress, however, is countered with the bitterness of some blacks, tired of being deprived of their rights, like Guitar and the Days, and with the continuing acts of violence against blacks, like the murder of Emmett Till.

Despite the progress made, the present must have looked bleak to black Americans in the late 60s and early 70s, as the media promulgated images of "armed black students seizing college buildings [and] Black Panther shoot-outs with police and the FBI" (Sitkoff 213) and political leaders promised more civil rights legislation but failed to follow through. It is here that Morrison intrudes with Song of Solomon. In the novel, she presents several options for all blacks as she presents them to her protagonist Milkman. While she spends relatively little time exploring one option, the passivity of Ruth, Lena, and Corinthians Dead, she explores in depth two other options: black ability to be radical like Guitar or to adopt white values like Macon and Hagar.

As is typical with Morrison, no character is totally "good" or "bad," and she displays a certain affinity for Guitar and respects the freedom and self-confidence he

possesses. In a 1983 interview with Claudia Tate, Morrison explained that Guitar, as well as Cholly Breedlove of The Bluest Eye, is a "salt taster. . . . They express either an effort of the will or a freedom of the will. It's all about choosing. . . . They [take risks], and they're misunderstood. They are the misunderstood people in the world. There's a wildness that they have, a nice wildness. . . . When I see this wildness gone in a person, it's sad" (164-65). The parallel between Cholly and Guitar is an interesting one because, although freedom can be a positive attribute, they are both dangerously free. In one of the most subtly powerful passages of The Bluest Eye, Morrison writes, "Love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly, but the love of a free man is never safe" (159). Just as Cholly's "love" destroys both himself and Pecola, Guitar, in his attempts to "love" his race, destroys himself and his relationship with Milkman, transforming him from a man with a healthy perspective on his racial, historical, and personal identity into a man consumed by paranoia, greed, and revenge.

All of the characters in Song of Solomon who participate in "anarchy," as Bessie Jones and Audrey Vinson call it (89), eventually self-destruct. The most prominent example besides Guitar is Circe. Although she does not die during the novel, the only wish of Circe, holed up in the house in which she was a servant to whites all her life, whites who would rather be dead than do the work she did, is "that when she died somebody would find her before the dogs ate her" (SOS 246). As Jones and Vinson state, "Each stage of rotting became vengeance to her" (92); but her action has no real lasting

effect, except to eat away gradually at Circe herself. Milkman mistakes her persistence in living there for love of the Butler family; but she fiercely corrects him, noting that she remains neither for love nor loyalty but revenge. Likewise, Guitar claims that he acts out of love for the black race; but, in reality, he too is neither loving nor loyal—only bent on revenge that leads him to self-destruction.

Morrison does not leave us hopeless, however; for Pilate provides a fourth option: to transcend one's circumstances through commitment and a connection to community, which Morrison expands on through Milkman's journey to Danville and Shalimar. Initially, it may be difficult to see how Milkman's journey is more than "a noble quest but one which is only individually rewarding" as Ralph Story claims (156); but Morrison presents Milkman's journey toward self-knowledge as an alternative to Guitar's destructive involvement in the Seven Days. As mentioned previously, Morrison expressed in her 1974 essay "Rediscovering Black History" that the Civil Rights Movement was an exciting time but that blacks lost something of their community in the process of equality because equality meant assimilation: "In the push toward middle-class respectability, we wanted tongue depressors sticking from every black man's coat pocket and briefcases swinging from every black hand. . . . In trying to cure the cancer of slavery and its consequences, some healthy as well as malignant cells were destroyed" (14).

It seems appropriate then that one of the crucial factors in Milkman's journey is his acceptance into a community of blacks. As Utilinde Wedertz-Furtado points out, references to time and history are conspicuously absent from the second part of the novel.

As a result, Danville and Shalimar seem isolated from the Civil Rights activities which were at their peak during 1963 when Milkman visits there. On the other hand, these people, especially those in Danville, know all about violence against blacks. For example, the Reverend Cooper is amused at Milkman's naiveté when he asks if the police ever caught the people who murdered his grandfather. Cooper responds, "Didn't have to catch 'em. They never went nowhere" (SOS 231).

Yet as Milkman travels farther South toward Shalimar, he seems to travel back in time. In a land where credit cards are as odd as three dollar bills and one can buy two pairs of socks for a quarter (SOS 260), Shalimar in particular seems to exist in a time warp and appears to be Morrison's rendering of the black community before the Movement. While Milkman's arrival in Shalimar is certainly a meeting of city and country, as Ann Imbrie has pointed out, it seems to be a meeting of past and present black communities as well. Shalimar is the type of community in which Morrison grew up and which she saw corrupted by Civil Rights leaders' calls for assimilation. Even though Morrison grew up in the Northern town of Lorain, Ohio, her visits to the South while she was in college at Howard University revealed to her the same type of community cohesion she experienced growing up in the North (Denard 213). She has said of Lorain:

All sorts of people cared about me in terms of what I was doing—not just my parents and my aunts and my uncles, but everybody on the street. If I was misbehaving somewhere, put on lipstick too soon, they felt not only free but obliged to tell me not to do it, and I knew I had better, because

they were like surrogate adults who participated in our lives. (qtd. in Amanda Smith 50)

Of course, a contrasting world is one like Milkman's town, about which Morrison says, "Living in a world of real strangers, you learn that the strangeness is not skin, the strangeness is not jobs—the strangeness is that they really don't care about you" (qtd. in Amanda Smith 50). Milkman, then, is the symbol for blacks who exist in a community of strangers and have already committed themselves to pursuing white, patriarchal, materialistic values in order to blend in. Shalimar may be economically impoverished, but it is spiritually wealthy.

So what of the future? In Morrison's words, "For larger and larger numbers of black people, this sense of loss has grown, and the deeper the conviction that something valuable is slipping away from us, the more necessary it has become to find some way to hold on to the useful past without blocking off the possibilities of the future" ("Rediscovering" 14). Ann Imbrie argues that Danville was once like Shalimar but has been "corrupted by the workaday world," represented by Milkman and Guitar (481), and intimates that Shalimar could very well follow its path. However, she also notes that Shalimar's values can be sustained, as Morrison illustrates through Pilate who so touchingly possesses the qualities which Morrison felt were necessary if a genuine black community were to be maintained and not crushed under the weight of the "community" black leaders tried too hard to create in the 60s: a deep sense of racial and personal history, a revolt against assimilation and materialism, and, perhaps most of all, an abiding

love of self and others. In her last breath, Pilate sighs, "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" (SOS 337); and we see this kind of love and commitment grow in Milkman as he journeys back through the history of his race and his people during his physical travels to Danville and Shalimar. He is able to trade the false community of Southside's barbershop for the genuine one of Shalimar's front porches.

Milkman, then, is a symbol for his race. As blacks struggled during the Civil Rights Movement finally to see themselves as worthwhile human beings due equality and respect, many were deterred by values promoted by the Macon Deads of the world; and just as Milkman must overcome the values Macon passes on to him, so did blacks in the Movement.

But Morrison does not simply say, "Overcome!" without providing an alternative. As much as Milkman's affinity for wealth can be seen as inherited, so can his potential for flight. Although Solomon's flight back to Africa was selfish in many ways, Milkman learns a new type of flight, not of abandonment but of commitment. As Carolyn Denard states, "Morrison shows the emptiness of self-definition in economic terms, the shortsightedness of the willful violence of revenge, and the healing and growth possible in individuals when they know and are nourished by the history and culture of their ancestry" (220). For Milkman to have an identity and any kind of worthwhile future, he must be reconnected to his past; and Morrison seems to say that the black race must follow suit.

Toni Morrison seems to have been looking backward and looking ahead as she

composed Song of Solomon, presenting the "ambiguous condition of blacks in 1963" (Walker 145), poised in possibility but uncertain about who would win the struggle, those who promoted Guitar's values or those who promoted the Milkman's. Although the final scene speaks nothing for certain, Morrison's portrayals of Milkman and Guitar indicate who she predicts will endure in this struggle between selfish violence and racial self-knowledge. As she has stated many times, "When you kill the ancestor you kill yourself" ("Rediscovering" 344). Milkman, who once was as dead as his last name indicates, is resurrected as he finds an identity through community and a connection to the past and learns new commitment. Morrison hopes for nothing less for all humanity.

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