THE RASTFARI PRESENCE IN TONI MORRISON'S *TAR BABY*, *BELOVED*, AND *SONG OF SOLOMON*

by

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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Johnnie Stover, Department of English, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

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Literary scholars frequently analyze the allusions to Western Christianity apparent in Toni Morrison's novels, but these studies overlook the ways in which some of her novels are informed by a Caribbean presence. This study argues that Rastafari themes, symbols, and ideologies are recurrent in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*, *Beloved*, and *Song of Solomon*. Rastafari is a social movement primarily concerned with restoring the image of Africa to a holy place. A Rastafari analysis of these texts broadens the literary spectrum to suggest that these novels highlight Morrison's attempt to write about the multifaceted element of the black community, which remains deeply connected to its American, African, and Caribbean roots.

DEDICATION

This manuscript is dedicated to my mother, Joyce Carr, for being my ray of sunshine when I needed it most. Thank you for listening to my constant ramblings about this project without complaint. I would also like to thank my sisters, Mackayla and Jonatha, for the laughter they provided during those late night study sessions. A special thank you goes to my brothers, Nicholas, Mackenzie, and Jonathan, for their words of encouragement. I would also like to thank Jameel for his love and patient support.

THE RASTAFARI PRESENCE IN TONI MORRISON'S *TAR BABY, BELOVED,* AND *SONG OF SOLOMON*

AN INTRODUCTION TO RASTAFARI CONCEPTS IN THE WORKS OF TONI MORRISON

"The trauma of racism is…the severe fragmentation of the self."
—Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro American Presence in American Literature"

Song of Solomon's Milkman cannot achieve an understanding of who he is until he discovers the roots of his past. Jadine Childs desires to escape racial labeling because it threatens to constrict her sense of individuality in *Tar Baby*. Whether tackling the taboo subject of incest, racism, or sexism, Toni Morrison's focus on the struggle for identity is the basic foundation upon which all of her novels are built. The way in which these characters operate within oppressive systems, relying on the utilization of the oppressors' tools to express their own unique perspective, is one of the most fascinating aspects of Morrison's fiction. This aspect is interesting particularly because it underscores the complexity of signifying. Signifying is a black cultural aesthetic best described as a "chiastic slaying at the crossroads where two discursive units meet," engendering an identity that is not quite new, but wholly different from its previous state (Gates 66).

The Bible is Morrison's main source for signifying. Ruth's devotion towards her father borders on an unhealthy obsession in *Song of Solomon*. In the Bible, Ruth's loyalty

for her mother-in-law does not feature a hint of this unnatural obsession. Signifying is not a one-dimensional process, however. As Gates points out, African Americans frequently revise or "signify" upon the works of each other. *Song of Solomon, Tar Baby*, and *Beloved* illustrate the ways in which signifying is an interdisciplinary exchange. Certain themes and images woven into the structure of these novels suggest that they are informed by the very real experience of Rastafarians living in Jamaica.

Harsh economic and political woes gripping Jamaica became the springboard for the Rastafari movement. In 1930, the crowning of young Ras Tafari as the King of Ethiopia aroused excitement in Jamaica among Garveyites. Ras Tafari's Ethiopian heritage partially accounted for the clamor that this event raised as Garveyites recalled the words of Marcus Garvey: "Look to Ethiopia for the crowning of a Black King; he shall be the Redeemer" (qtd. in Barrett 81). Ras Tafari's decision to adopt "Haile Selassie" (Might of the Trinity) coupled with the addition of "King of Kings" and "Lion Tribe of Judah" fueled speculation about Selassie's divine status. Garveyites associated "Haile Selassie" with the powerful trinity in the Bible. Selassie's titles also established his place in the legendary line of King Solomon (Barrett 81).

Selassie's ascendancy to the throne spawned the Rastafari movement. Former Garveyites gathered in the decrepit slums of Kingston, Jamaica to formulate basic Rastafari concepts. Haile Selassie as the god of black people and the notion that blacks are the reincarnation of ancient Israelites are essential principles of the movement. Since blacks are conceived as the chosen people of the Bible, there is also the belief that the black man will rule the world (Barrett 128). Ethiopia is likened to a utopia while Jamaica is a place of misery. For this reason, some Rastafarians believe that a return to Ethiopia

will occur through supernatural forces. Although these tenants form the nucleus of the Rastafari movement, it is nearly impossible to define Rastafari as a single ideology as the members of the movement believe that "what people believe or assert emphatically, represents a social force which cannot be disposed of merely by denial" (Smith, Augier, Roy 236). Rastafarians utilize this approach when scouring the Bible for passages that portray Ethiopia as a place of holiness, or Jesus as black. To become a Rastafarian, one must engage in the signifying process; Rastafarians draw upon the Bible only to alter the basic concepts of Western Christianity, challenging traditional authorial forms through revision.

This revisionary tactic parallels Morrison's penchant for creating an aesthetic that draws its power from the reader feeling as though he is "in the company of his own solitary imagination" ("Memory, Creation, and Writing" 387-389). Morrison does this by stripping away the implied supremacy of the Bible's written word. Readers never know what to expect as Morrison deliberately constructs a winding path filled with unexpected twists and turns. In *Song of Solomon,* although Pilate is named after the man who ordered the execution of Jesus, she becomes a savior of sorts to Milkman. Morrison upsets the notion of Western Christianity as an impervious structure by penetrating it and showing its malleable qualities. And, since Morrison has a formal education in literature that centers on canonical texts, it is no surprise that her texts feature themes or symbols found in classical literature.[1] Still, Morrison laments her inability to transcend these literary influences: "I sometimes think how glorious it must have been to have written drama in

[1] Patricia Magness. "The Knight and the Princess: The Structure of Courtly Love in Toni Morrison's Tar Baby" (South Atlantic Review 1989) 86. Magness compares *Tar Baby* to Chrétian de Troyes's *Lancelot* (*L*e *Chevalier de la Charrette*). Magness argues that Morrison uses the courtly love structure to show its inadequacy.

sixteenth-century England…when literature did not have a critical history to constrain or diminish the writer's imagination" ("Memory, Creation, and Writing" 387). Morrison weaves biblical verses, names, and stories into her texts like pieces of a patchwork quilt. Utilizing "many of the conventions of literacy form that comprise the Western tradition," Morrison creates a mechanism that revises traditions and overturns dominant ideologies (Gates xxiii).

A hybridized world emerges out of Morrison's desire to "find that elusive but identifiable style" indicative of black literature ("Rootedness" 337). For Morrison, the most significant figure in black literature is the ancestor because of the ancestor's ability to transmit knowledge about the past to others. The ancestor is representative of "timeless people whose relationship to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom" ("Rootedness" 335). This quest for the ancestor is recurrent in Rastafari. Rastafarians desire to preserve the memory of Africa, a memory nearly lost due to slavery, through their beliefs and cultural practices. However, the movement functions as an amalgamation of Africanist beliefs[2] fused with tenets of Western Christianity that are revised.[3] The enslavement of Africans in Jamaica during the 1800s and their eventual emancipation led proselytizing missionaries to flock to the island in the hopes of converting the "heathens" (Barrett 40). As a result, Rastafarians are

[2] Barry Chevannes. *Rastafari and Other Afro Caribbean Worldviews*. (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press 1998) 57. Slaves in Jamaica practiced Myalism, a form of community building that worshipped a pantheon of African spirits. Dancing and other communal practices were practiced to initiate a type of spirit revival that kept the memory of Africa relevant. The communal practices of Rastafari loosely resemble Myalism.

[3] Leonard Barrett, *The Rastafarians*. (Boston: Beacon Press 1997) 70. George Liele, African American Baptist preacher, achieved success on the island in 1784 as his sermons incorporated tenets of Ethiopianism. In line with Myalism, Ethiopianism recalled a noble African past and disputed traditional European religious ideology.

well-versed regarding the specific details of the Bible. This intimate relationship with the Bible is deceptive, though. Key passages in the Old Testament are consulted by Rastafarians only to repeatedly harangue Western values and society. This mechanism is also employed by Morrison as a literary device. In an interview, Morrison explains that when she does appropriate Western tradition, she does so out of a need to "show that something has gone wrong, not right" (qtd. in Denard 112). Rastafarians, ripping a page out of the book of Genesis, deplore the Western world and Jamaican society by dubbing both places "Babylon."

"Beating down Babylon" is a common refrain voiced by Rastafarians, its origins stemming from the book of Genesis (Edmonds 42). The term initially appears as Babel, the world's first city. The Bible tells of Babel's leaders attempting to build a tower stretching up to Heaven. Rastafarians interpret this attempt in several different ways. First, the attempt suggests the prideful nature of the Babylonians. Also, Rastafarians view the biblical story as warning against hubris—illustrated by the Babylonian desire to topple God from his divine position as lord over the world (Edmonds 43). But the final condemning factor abhorred by Rastafarians is the Babylonian attempt to make all people speak one language. Rastafarians draw parallels between Babylon and the Western world. The Babylonian attempt to encourage people to speak one language is viewed as "cultural homogeneity" or the desire to force all people to think as Babylonians. These actions, for Rastafarians, are analogous to European attempts to impose their cultural values onto blacks (Edmonds 43). Despite the numerous populations of blacks on the island, many Rastafarians contemptuously scorn Jamaica as the "white man's land," pointing to the economic woes crippling the poor, the disastrous political system silencing the black

voice, and the embracing of European values among Jamaicans as proof of "Babylon's" stranglehold on the people. Seizing upon language, the Bible, and beliefs grounded in African folklore, Rastafarians liberate themselves from Western ideologies that have stunted their ability to formulate an identity indicative of their own heritage. Writing is a tool Morrison uses to "express the nuances of African American oral and musical culture" (Smith 2). Morrison's works, with their focus on a vibrant black past, rescue the "black historical experience" from the annals of history, in which these accounts are often discredited or forgotten.

This thesis analyzes the ways in which Morrison's novels are representative of the Rastafari experience. I analyze Rastafari symbols, practices, and ideologies woven into the structural framework of *Tar Baby*, *Beloved*, and *Song of Solomon*. I am taking my cue from La Vinia Delois Jennings *The Idea of Africa*. Delois Jennings explores Vodun and other West Central African cosmologies and rituals appearing in Morrison's novels. I examine these novels as broadening the scope to include the Caribbean experience. In Chapter One, "Beating Down Babylon: The Challenge to Western Ideology in *Tar Baby,"* I argue that Son's connection to Rastafari is the primary source of conflict. Tension between Son and Valerian is stimulated by Son's conception of the Western world as a modern-day Babylon. My analysis in Chapter Two, "This is [Not] a History to be Told: Examining the Rastafari Presence in *Beloved,"* centers on how Morrison's "signifying" of certain Biblical tenants mirrors the way in which Rastafarians utilize the Bible to distinguish themselves as the holy or chosen people of the Bible. Baby Suggs also contradicts the image of a faithful servant due to her ability to unite blacks against oppression. Appearing to whites as a harmless ex-slave, Baby Suggs's gestures and

linguistic devices reflect a connection to Rastafari. In Chapter Three, "The Oldest Black Woman in the World: Tracing a Rastafari Lineage in *Song of Solomon,"* I view Pilate's role as keeper of domesticity and link her to the fabled Queen Sheba mentioned in *The Kebra Negast*—a historical document Rastafarians believe contains their ancestral legacy. Pilate, in alignment with Queen Sheba, fulfills her role as transporter of Milkman's heritage. I argue that Milkman's journey is a collaborative process that replicates the mutual exchange between men and women in Rastafari. Rastafarians believe that the process of liberating themselves from oppressive ideology that negates the splendor of Africa can only be attained if men and women are equal partners (Rowe 20). Milkman and Pilate discover the truth about their heritage—a heritage linked to Rastafari—by working together.

My research is explicitly concerned with uncovering how *Tar Baby*, *Beloved*, and *Song of Solomon* reflect the Caribbean experience of Rastafarians. Rastafari, grounded in Afro Caribbean cosmology, centers on the resurrection of the ancestor from the smoldering ashes of slavery and colonialism—a fundamental link between Morrison's works and Rastafari.

CHAPTER ONE

BEATING DOWN BABYLON: THE CHALLENGE TO WESTERN IDEOLOGY IN *TAR BABY*

"If anything I do, in the way of writing novels or whatever I write, isn't about the village or the community or about you, then it isn't about anything. I am not interested in indulging myself in some private exercise of my imagination ....which is to say yes, the work must be political...."

—Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation"

Tar Baby exemplifies Morrison's desire to write for the "village or the community." In this chapter, I explore how *Tar Baby* extends itself to include not just the African American experience, but the Caribbean experience of slavery, colonialism, and oppression through Son's experience on the fictional Isle de Chevaliers. The political thrust of the novel is spurred by Son's calculated attempts to challenge European social theory, language, and capitalism to, in effect, "beat down Babylon." Repudiating the Western lifestyle, Son reconfigures the traditional narrative landscape in order to reflect a reconstructed African past.

In her six-page prologue, Toni Morrison languidly reveals details with the craft of an expert storyteller as she introduces the reader to Son: a man steps away from a ship and plunges into the water below; the man struggles against a whirling current that grips him with a pressure that is both gentle and firm "like the hand of an insistent woman" (2). Eventually, the man stops fighting the current and is swept out to sea by the "water-lady" (5). Characteristic of Morrison, this vignette is jam-packed with metaphorical significance and double entendres revealing the central conflict in *Tar Baby*. In the water, Son surrenders to the powerful "water-lady." On the island, Jadine is the metaphorical "water-lady" insisting that Son discard his values in exchange for her own.

Son's value system, rooted in Rastafari, manifests itself through his interaction between various women in the novel. In "The Women of Rastafari," Maureen Rowe explains the Rastafari movement as predominantly patriarchal "with the male at the head, having responsibility for conducting rituals, interpreting events of significance to the community, the care and protection of the family as well as the community" (1). Rastafari resembles traditional Christianity by placing the woman in a position in which she defers to the man. Son's connection to Rastafari is established early in the novel. After the current subsides, Son finds shelter aboard another ship, the *Seabird II*. Hiding in the closet, Son quickly falls asleep. But he is awakened by "the sound of a woman's voice—so new and welcoming it broke his dream life apart" (6). Instantly, images of "yellow houses with white doors" and women who call out, "Come on in here, you honey you" pop into his mind (6). However, these images rapidly dissipate because this woman's voice does not "sprawl" out to greet Son:

> "I'm never lonely," it said. "Never."

> The man's scalp tingled. He licked his lips and tasted the salt caked in his mustache.
>
> "Never?" It was another woman's voice—lighter, half in doubt, half in awe.
>
> "Not at all," said the first woman. Her voice seemed warm on the inside, cold at the edges. (6)

Here, the first woman's proud assertion connotes a tone of self-sufficiency, negating the need for a companion. In contrast, the women who fill Son's dreams are greedy for a male presence; their voices cajole and invite Son. But this woman's brazen attitude alters Son's perception of gender norms. For Son, a woman must be directed by a man, or else she becomes a source of unbridled power. Rastafarian men confine the duties of Rastafarian women to the household: cleaning, occasionally cooking, and taking care of children. These duties are reserved to women not because they are perceived as inferior to men, but because Bobo Rastafarians believe that women are a contaminating source to men by virtue of their bodies, which possess the power to weaken the physical and mental strength of men. In *Rastafari: Roots and Ideology*, Barry Chevannes details the strict regulations placed on female attire by Bobo Rastafarians requiring women to cover their legs and arms at all times (176). Some Bobo Dreads refuse to live with their wives, preferring instead to have sexual intercourse and then leave their wives immediately afterwards (Chevannes 177). Son's physical reaction to the white woman's words—his scalp begins to tingle and he tastes the saltiness of the sea on his lips—is initiated by her words that suggest she will never defer to a man.

The first woman's haughty tone rattles Son because the black women in his dreams remain rooted in their domestic roles, inviting him into their "yellow houses"

with doors open wide. But the white women with their beautifully manicured nails adorned with wedding rings are viewed contemptuously by Son as they do not fit into his circumscribed notions of gender roles. Son's surprise and disappointment upon realizing that "the women had not *cooked*—they had warmed up carry-out food that they'd brought aboard," signals a departure from what he believes is the perceived natural role of women (7).

Snapshots of some of these patriarchal traditions surface when Jadine and Son visit Eloe. Jadine is ignored by the men in town and relegated to chat with the women and children. And, Jadine is shocked to learn she cannot meet Son's father until Son talks to him. When Son does slip into Jadine's room, she is terrorized by the ghostly forms of the night women, who seem to punish only her for violating the unspoken codes of Eloe; shoving their breasts out at her while Son sleeps peacefully.

This emphasis on strict gender norms is troubling as some critics argue that Son's worldview is "narrowed by sexism..." (Moffitt 371). While there is a chauvinist attitude permeating through the small town, the conversation between Soldier and Jadine reveals that the men of Eloe, like Rastafarians, believe that women must be harnessed by men not because they are inherently inferior to men, but because the female body is capable of affecting the mental psyche of men. Eyeing the sway of Jadine's hips, Soldier asks her who is in control:

> "The thing. The thing between you two. Who's in control?"
> "Nobody. We're together. Nobody controls anybody," she said.
> "Good," he said. "That's real good. Son, he don't like control. Makes him, you know wildlike." (255)

In Eloe, while women are repeatedly objectified, there is also a measure of power granted to women because of their bodies. Soldier, mesmerized by Jadine's body, is also mesmerized by the control Jadine's body can wield over Son. Soldier's desire to know if Jadine is in control suggests that she is capable of possessing Son. Soldier's satisfaction comes when he hears that "nobody controls anybody." However, his words prove prophetic—Son becomes violent towards Jadine only after she attempts to reform Son, thereby controlling him.

The characterization of Eloe as "backwoodsy" and "underdeveloped" (Mbalia 84) by some critics hinges on conversations like these, which display sexist undertones. As a result, Son is conceived by some critics as an oppressive figure desiring only to dominate Jadine (Moffitt 14). While I do not want to argue that Son is the "moral center" of the novel (Moffitt 14), I would like to submit that the origin of Son's worldview is rooted, specifically, to Rastafari patriarchal practices. Therefore, Eloe is not simply "backwoodsy," but a town with a set of codes and beliefs that resemble the practices of Rastafarians. On the Bobo communes, women are allowed to cook and serve guests, but they must never serve Bobo males. Therefore, Bobo tradition dictates that the men cook and serve the food (Chevannes 177). When Son arrives at his father's house, the "pepper pot" simmering on the stove signals his father's nearby presence (Morrison 247). Even more important, the conversation between the two men illuminates the traditional attitudes of Eloe:

> "You with a woman?"
>
> "Yeah."
>
> "Where is she?"

"Over to Soldier's. Can she stay here?"

"You all married?"

"No, Old Man."

"Better take her to your Aunt Rosa's then."

"She won't like that."

"I can't help that. You be gone. I have to live here." (249)

Old Man's message is clear: Eloe operates by a set of moral codes, and a departure from these codes could render Old Man an outsider.

When contrasted against the busy city of New York, it is easy to view Eloe as "underdeveloped" but, to Son, Eloe is a type of utopia. Son's romanticized version of Eloe seems to link him with Rastafari.[4] A discerning feature of Rastafari is the conceptualization of Ethiopia as a kind of mythical heaven existing outside the bounds of Western corruption. Jamaica, then, is hell and Rastafarians express a desire to return to Ethiopia. Socially and economically oppressed in Jamaica, Rastafarians withdrew from Jamaican society and looked towards Ethiopia as their homeland where they could "sit under their own vine and fig tree" (Barrett 117). This insular view surfaces when Son proudly asserts "nothing's better than Eloe" (173). Although white people hook up the telephones and ensure that water flows into the city, Eloe is an all black town that operates by its own set of moral codes determined by the three hundred and ninety-five black people who live there. Son idealizes Eloe because it offers the same possibility that

[4] Phillip M. Royster, "Country Son Comes to the Rescue: The Protagonist as Scapegoat Rescuer in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby,"* (Popular Culture Association Conference 1982) 221. Royster writes that Eloe, Son's birthplace, derives from Eloi or God, the first word that Jesus spoke on the cross. Therefore, Eloe suggests 'Godly' or 'special place.'

Ethiopia offers to Rastafarians: a chance to develop a value system representative of what the black community deems appropriate for itself.

Son carries these moral codes with him when he visits New York. On the streets of New York, Son embraces Nommo, the girl with a face as "tight and mean as broccoli" (226) who is so full of anger she curses a man on the street. The "eyes inside her eyes" make Son miserable (227). Nommo's shaved head reminds Son of his sister, and her eyes, although narrowed and angry, reveal "the eyes of many other eyes—some of them hurt, some brave, some just lonely hollow-eyes…." (227). When Son stands in front of Nommo with "his arms wide open," he is performing the gender role reserved for men in Rastafari; Nommo represents the women that Son must care for and protect.

The complex gender relations in *Tar Baby* parallel the complicated role of the woman in Rastafari. Because women are viewed as "keepers of domesticity" there is a certain type of power placed in the hands of women as "the woman, without question rules" in regards to everything domestic (Hausman 62). Rosa, Cheyenne, Son's mother, and the other night women who cluster into Jadine's room horrify her, but to Son they represent a strength even he does not possess. Rosa built a room in her house with her bare hands. Cheyenne drove before Son "could even shift gears" and "could drop pheasant like an Indian" (269). Son's own mother roped horses and his grandmother built a cowshed (269). Son suggests that because these women do not receive welfare or any state assistance, they must rely on their own skills to serve their family and community. Although these tasks are not wholly domestic, the tasks imply a certain sense of functionality: Rosa builds the house so that she and her family can live in it; Cheyenne's hunting skills allow her to feed herself and her family. These tasks ensure the survival of

their loved ones, themselves, and their community. Son recalls the women of Eloe proudly primarily because they understand that it takes a certain type of strength to "stay alive and keep the family together" in Eloe (268).

However, the fact that Rosa, Francine, and Cheyenne perform actions necessary for their survival and their loved ones seems to relegate them to a role deemed repressive by some critics. For these critics, Eloe is not viewed as a viable option for Jadine because it only hinders her growth. In "Foreign Exotic or Domestic Drudge," Ann Rayson argues that Jadine's decision to leave Son frees her from "a repressive female role in rural Florida" (95). Rayson's assertion is a stance many critics espouse. But it is an exaggeration. Although there are strict regulations concerning gender, there also seems to be an area for women to explore physical liberation—the very fact that Francine runs freely in the fields suggests she is able to enjoy a type of bodily emancipation.

But Jadine's detestation of Eloe is spurred by her belief that Eloe is a "burnt-out place" with "a past, but definitely no future" (259). Jadine is like a foreigner in Eloe, bored by their conversation because she cannot understand it. Jadine, similar to the women aboard the ship, refuses to accept a male presence as a guide in her life. When Jadine falls in love with Son, she struggles against him mightily, as she struggles when she falls into the tar pit, refusing to "cleave" to Son and "sway when he sways" (183). Jadine's descent into the tar pit mirrors her entrance into the world of Babylon as a popular fashion model who is, nonetheless, objectified and exploited by these Western fashion markets. Before falling into the tar pit, Jadine is lured into amazement when she glimpses the slimy mossy floor. Similarly, Jadine is enthralled by the bright lights of New York and her ability to achieve success. Still, this success is predicated upon

commodification; she must sell herself to these fashion industries. Just as Jadine is unaware of the potential danger of the mossy floor, she does not realize that her identification with Western society jeopardizes her ability to conceive a worldview reflective of her own. The young tree, like Son, wants to "dance" with Jadine, but first she must entrust him with her life because she is up to her "kneecaps in rot" (183).

Jadine, however, refuses to allow Son to "guide, instruct, and restrict" her (Rowe 14). Rowe notes that younger Rastafari males tend to believe that the male is responsible for "guiding the female away from sin" (14[5]). In fact, the only time Son is able to impose his dreams upon her are in the predawn hours while she sleeps:

> …And he had thought hard during those times in order to manipulate her dreams, to insert his own dreams into her so she would not wake or stir or turn over on her stomach but would lie still and dream steadily the dreams he wanted her to have about yellow houses with white doors which women opened and shouted Come on in, you honey you! and the fat black ladies in white dresses minding the pie table in the basement of the church and white wet sheets flapping on a line, and the sound of a six-string guitar plucked after supper while children scooped walnuts up off the ground and handed them to her.(119)

[5] Rowe, p.14. Rowe observes that younger Rastafarian brethren view the biblical story of Eve sympathetically; Eve is the devil's victim. Also, it is natural for Eve to share with Adam. Adam is viewed as succumbing to weakness instead of holding fast to his knowledge of what was right.

Son's attempt to "insert his own dreams" into a sleeping Jadine is most certainly a patriarchal desire to possess a defenseless woman. These images also conjure up dual sensations of isolation and independence from outside influences; the basement of the church is a source of protection for the women. But it also seems cocoon-like as it excludes the women from the outside world and outside ideas by relegating them to the church basement to "mind the pie table." The fact that the children are free to roam and pick up walnuts off the ground suggests that Son desires to create a world of his own, free from Western influence due to its link to Babylon. The entire scene further implies that the fat black women and children are not participants in mainstream society. In Son's dream, the leisurely tune of the six-string guitar is in marked contrast to the frenetic quality of New York where young black women are crying.

In *Rastafari,* Ennis Edmonds analyzes the role of Babel, the world's first city chronicled in the book of Genesis to explain the application of Babylon to Western civilization by Rastafarians. Babel leaders are described as building a tower that nearly stretches toward Heaven. Rastafarians interpret this action as displaying the arrogance of Babylonians in their effort to topple God from his position as lord over the world (Edmonds 43). Perceiving the act as an endeavor to make all people speak one language, Rastafarians abhor this final act, particularly because it suggests an attempt to culturally homogenize all people into thinking like Babylonians (Edmonds 43). God's punishment of the Babylonians by throwing them into linguistic confusion is cited as evidence of God's disapproval of the Babylonian lifestyle, and a warning against hubris.

For Rastafarians, the Babylonian attempt to force people to speak one language is analogous to European attempts to impose their cultural values onto blacks (Edmonds

43).The fact that Babylonian leaders are depicted as "violent" and morally bankrupt, illustrated by numerous military campaigns ending in the ransacking of Jerusalem and the killing and enslavement of Hebrews, further links the plight of black people to the Hebrews (Edmonds 43). The forced captivity of Africans in the Western hemisphere recalls the suffering of the ancient Hebrews (Edmonds 43). Rastafarians argue that these murderous actions are typically accompanied with ideological warfare waged against blacks in the form of Western schools and churches established in Jamaica. So, Rastafarians refuse membership in these social institutions, deploring the Western world and Jamaican society as "Babylon." The desire to "beat down Babylon" is an attempt to create a cultural identity grounded in the revival and recreation of a lost African past (Edmonds 52).

The conflict between Son and Jadine arises because their value systems are fundamentally different; Jadine is entrenched in Babylonian muck. Early on, there are clues that their transition from strangers to lovers will be anything but a smooth segue. Jadine repels anything remotely reminiscent of her African heritage. Pondering whether her white lover actually loves her, Jadine considers the foundation of their relationship, but more importantly, her identity:

> I guess the person I want to marry is him, but I wonder if
> the person he wants to marry is me or a black girl? And if it
> isn't me he wants, but any black girl who looks like me,
> talks and acts like me, what will happen when he finds out
> that I hate ear hoops, that I don't have to straighten my hair,
> that Mingus puts me to sleep, that sometimes I want to get

> out of my skin and be only the person inside—not
> American—not black—just me? (*Tar Baby* 48)

Jadine's plea to be "not—American—not black—just me" is analyzed by Julia Emberley in "A Historical Transposition: Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* and Frantz Fanon's Post Enlightenment Phantasms" as a desire to decenter notions of any authentic identity (415). On the other hand, Jadine's desire to "get out" of her skin seems to be a desire to jump into a transparent one that eclipses any racial signifiers of blackness. Rayson suggests that Jadine's estrangement from blackness is a byproduct of her prestigious education and worldly travels. However, it is Jadine's psychological commitment to European ideology that distances Jadine from blackness—illustrated when she sees the dark-skinned black woman in the supermarket. According to Mbalia, Jadine and others in the store are mesmerized by the woman because she possesses a "natural beauty" that Jadine lacks (75). Still, Jadine views the woman through a decidedly European lens, considering first what the European modeling agencies would have to say about the woman:

> The vision itself was much too tall. Under her long canary
> yellow dress Jadine knew there was too much hip, too
> much bust. The agency would laugh her out of the lobby,
> so why was she and everybody else in the store transfixed?
> The height? The skin like tar against the canary yellow
> dress? (*Tar Baby* 45)

The woman's style of dress reveal a connection to Rastafari that goes unnoticed by Jadine because she appraises the woman with a European gaze. First, the woman's "many-colored sandals" reflect a connection to the Bobo Dreads who are known for their

beautifully hand-made sandals and for wearing long, flowing robes (Chevannes 171). And while Jadine describes the woman's outfit as a "canary yellow dress," she also notes the woman's "many-colored sandals and her yellow robe." Bobo Rastafarians differ from Dreadlock Rastafarians in one fundamental way: the dreadlocks of Bobo Rastafarians remain wrapped underneath a turban (Chevannes 171). Similarly, the woman's hair is "wrapped in a gelee as yellow as her dress" (45). It is not, however, merely the woman's style of dress that aligns her with Rastafari, but her actions in the store that solidify her connection to Rastafari. The woman draped in yellow parallels the women who stand in front of their yellow houses and beckon not only to Son, but to all the scattered descendents of Africa.

The woman in yellow, attempting to reconnect with an African past, selects three whole eggs from the carton in the supermarket. The precarious way in which the woman holds the eggs creates a triangular shape: "right elbow into the palm of her left hand and the eggs held aloft between her earlobe and shoulder" and recalls the triangular voyage from England to Africa, Africa to the New World, and the New World to England. Her selection of three eggs symbolizes the restoration of the fragmented souls of Africans and their descendents. As a result of the African Diaspora, many blacks feel disconnected from America and Africa as well, leading to the formation of a fragile identity in which the person feels psychologically homeless. This sentiment parallels the frustrated and alienated feelings of Rastafarians suffering from the lasting impact of slavery and colonialism. Thus, Rastafarians believe that their history is fragmented and disjointed (Edmonds 44), similar to a cracked egg. But the woman carries three *whole* eggs, and is symbolically gathering the lost souls of dispersed Africans aboard ships to the Middle

Passage. The eggs, carefully nestled between the woman's ear and her shoulder, provide succor to the dismembered souls of Africans. The woman is a listening ear, a shoulder to lean on, but more importantly, she bridges the African past with the present. Contrastingly, Jadine does not identify with black culture nor does she want to recall the horrific history of her ancestors. Jadine is struck only by the superficial aspects of the woman's beauty, power, and air of wealth.

In fact, Jadine's only connection to her African roots is through the possession of objects linked to blackness. Emberley views Jadine's seal-skin coat as signaling "the freedom she has been given to be released from the naturalizing of her black identity as an animal. Instead, she masters the animal by wearing it on her back; she wears the metaphor of nature-conquest to signify that she does not labor *like* an animal" (423). Indeed Jadine does "master the animal," but her fascination with the coat is disturbing since it is the only time she embraces blackness. Notions and images of blackness fill Jadine with disgust. When Son desires to "breathe into her the smell of tar and its shiny consistency," Jadine immediately associates the smell with "uncontrollable sexual desires and animal nature" (Krumholz 271). In addition, the night women haunt Jadine because they "threaten to engulf her in images of blackness, femininity, and death" (Krumholz 271). The coat, a gift from her white male lover, represents Jadine's attempt to subdue and exploit blackness:

> She went to the bed where the skins of ninety baby seals sprawled. She lay on top of them and ran her fingertips through the fur. How black. How shiny. Smooth. She pressed her thighs deep into its dark luxury. Then she lifted

herself up a little and let her nipples brush the black hairs,

back and forth… (*Tar Baby* 91)

For Jadine, the coat is not frightening, but seductive; however, the shiny black coat fascinates Jadine precisely because the seals are dead. The lifeless bodies of the seals—"stitched together so nicely you could not tell what part had sheltered their cute little hearts and which had cushioned their skulls—" (87) symbolizes blackness that has been killed and thus, rendered powerless. Now Jadine can enact her own fantasy upon the lifeless fur. Jadine's undulating body against the inert fur conquers blackness and parallels the ownership of African bodies and minds under slavery and colonial rule.

Jadine's fear of blackness is evident in her first encounter with Son. When Jadine first glimpses Son in a mirror, she is struck by his presence. Paralyzed with fear, Jadine's sense of identity is threatened by Son due to the stereotypical signifiers of blackness that Son represents; Son has tar-black skin and nappy hair. So Jadine instantly reduces Son to an image; similar to the construction of Africans in Jamaica as ugly and ignorant Quashee figures, Son becomes a violent outcast: [6]

Here, alone in her bedroom where there were no shadows,

only glimmering unrelieved sunlight, his hair looked

overpowering—physically overpowering, like bundles of

long whips or lashes that could grab her and beat her to

jelly. And would. Wild, aggressive, vicious hair that needed

[6] Ennis Edmonds, *Rastafari; From Outcasts to Cultural Bearers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) 9. British colonialists in Jamaica smashed the concept of an African identity through a corruption of African names. The Akan and Ewe name "Kwesi," meaning "male born on Sunday," became "Quashee"; a figure symbolizing the seemingly distorted features of Africans and the unappealing quality of their black skin. Applied to pure Africans on the island, the term also symbolized laziness, lasciviousness, and moral debasement.

> to be put in jail. Uncivilized, reform-school hair, Mau Mau,
>
> Attica, chain-gang hair. (*Tar Baby* 113)

In "Blackness and Art in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*," Linda Krumholz explores the multiple meanings of tar as an attempt by Morrison to "unlock the signifying chains" through her depiction of Son (272). Traditionally, blackness is situated in terms of evil, dirt, and death. But Morrison constructs a blackness that signifies life and an affinity for bonding (Krumholz 273). Krumholz goes even further, associating blackness with graphite, writing, and diamonds, the epitome of beauty and value (273). Thus, Morrison's construction of meaning is a direct repudiation of the binary logic displayed by "black" and "white" racial ideology (Krumholz 273). Similarly, Rastafarians reject derogatory perceptions of blackness foisted upon them through their distinctive hairstyle. In Jamaica, long, fine, silky hair is "good" and wooly or kinky hair is "natty" (Barrett 137). "Natty" hair is naughty, unmanageable hair, and suitable only if tamed by chemical products. Rastafarians sport dreadlocks to reveal the contradictory nature of Jamaican society, which repudiates all phenotypical signifiers associated with blackness. Rastafarians are literally "unlocking the signifying chains" and challenging socially constructed norms of good and bad hair by sporting "natty" dreadlocks. The wearing of dreadlocks is a decidedly political move to place one's self outside the bounds of a Babylonian society Rastafarians want little or nothing to do with (Barrett 137).

Although Jadine is not aware of the historical and cultural significance of Son's dreadlocks, her reaction is, nonetheless, the reaction Rastafarians hope to elicit from non-Rastafarians: an acute sense of fear, disrupting all sense of comfort by challenging European ideology. Consequently, Jadine's sense of superiority is drastically reduced and

her European values ridiculed. Jadine views Son favorably only if he receives an education and is successful in New York because she measures success by societal achievements. But Son is diametrically opposed to New York and the American lifestyle as it does not reflect his past.

During one of their screaming matches, Jadine calls Eloe a "dump" and suggests that Son is mentally enslaved because he does not know how to live in this world (264). But, as Son holds Jadine over the window, he denigrates Western education precisely because he is absent from it:

> "The truth is that whatever you learned in those colleges that didn't include me ain't shit. What did they teach you about me? What tests did they give? Did they tell you what I was like, did they tell you what was on my mind? Did they describe me to you? Did they tell you what was in my heart? If they didn't teach you that, then they didn't teach you nothing, because until you know about me, you don't know nothing about yourself…You find out about *me*, you educated nitwit" (264).

While Son's violent reaction to Jadine is disturbing, his words are in accordance to Rastafari ideology. In fact, the violence exhibited by both Son and Jadine is representative of the clash between Western worldviews and Rastafari. Son, like Rastafarians, views educational and religious institutions as nothing more than brainwashing organizations designed to "whitewash" blacks by "stripping" the African mind of its "African vibrations, and inculcating European values, perspectives, and

tastes" (Edmonds 48). The result is a thoroughly Europeanized black person, educated in "misphilosophy" rather than truth and wholly ignorant of his culture (Edmonds 48). Rastafarians believe that educational institutions masquerade as though they are "purged of ideology" (Althusser 133). In turn, Rastafarians argue that the university does not disseminate the truth but prefers to spread lies, so that those attending a university have not yet seen the truth and are rendered blind (Pollard 36). Constructing their own language to reflect this belief, Rastafarians apply the term "ublain" to universities and the people who attend them. Jadine, throughout much of the novel, appears blind: she never questions Valerian's patronage and the fact that Valerian did not "give up anything important" for her (263). Jadine is blinded by a European sensibility that measures success in terms of accolades. And when she encourages Son to go to law school, Son tells her that he does not want to enroll in college because "I don't want to know their laws; I want to know mine" (263).

Despite Jadine's aversion to black signifiers, Son constantly attempts to pluck Jadine out of her Babylonian blindness by engaging in linguistic warfare. Velma Pollard, author of "Dread Talk-The Speech of the Rastafarian in Jamaica," explains how Jamaican speech patterns have undergone a recent transformation spurred by the emergence of the Rastafari movement in Jamaica (32). Rastafarians deliberately alter the dominant words of society to reflect the views of "a man looking up from under" and "pressed down economically and socially by the establishment" (Pollard 33). Words like "oppression" become "downpression" in "Dread-talk" since Rastafarians believe that "oppression" depicts a positive image of one uplifting the oppressed out of poverty (Pollard 33). "Downpression" accurately connotes the actions of the "downpressor" who keeps people

down in the slums and ghettoes of Jamaica. Another example of this is the use of the term "overstand" rather than understand as Rastafarians assert that if you believe in an idea you must stand over it. This desire to "manipulate traditional language forms to reflect the social and religious views of Rastafarians" (Pollard 32) has created a conflict among upper and middle-class Jamaicans (Pollard 40).

This source of contention between Son and Jadine emerges during their first encounter and surfaces because they do not seem to speak the same language. As the two discuss the expensive jewelry worn by Jadine for her spread in the magazine, their conversation dips into a serious matter:

> "And the jewelry? They give you that too?"
>
> "No. That was mine from before—except the earrings.
> They were on loan from the Russians. But the rest is part of
> my own collection."
>
> "Collection, huh?"
>
> "Why? Are you a thief?"
>
> "I wish I was. Be a lot easier for me if I could steal."
>
> "If? What do you call what you were doing in this house
> for days? Or were you planning to give Ondine back her
> chocolate?"
>
> "You call that stealing?"
>
> "You don't."
>
> He shook his head. "No. I call it eating. If I wanted to steal
> I had plenty of time and plenty of opportunities." (120)

Son redefines the nature of stealing to reveal his own perspective. This manipulation of language reflects a Rastafari desire to challenge the traditional definition of stealing to display his narrow viewpoint. Son does not believe that his actions are stealing because he was in desperate need of shelter and food. So, Son expands and bends the rules of the Standard English lexicon. His assertive response resists easy categorization by revealing that meaning is not objectively found or deciphered, but is constructed by those in power. This concept is lost on Jadine who has internalized European ideology and desires to bracket objects and people into binary forms. Jadine remains enmeshed in European culture and ideology that causes her to falsely believe she is a member of Valerian's family:

> "You think there's a point in my stealing now?"
>
> "There might be. It depends on what you want from us."
>
> "Us. You call yourself 'us'?"
>
> "Of course. I live here."
>
> "But you…you're not a member of the family. I mean you don't belong to anybody here, do you?" (120)

Jadine identifies with Valerian because he has clothed and fed her. Valerian also provided her education at some of the best schools in Europe. Jadine's prestigious education and immersion in European culture signals her alienation or departure from African culture, as well as an acquiescent kneeling down to everything European. Although Jadine achieves international success as a graduate of the Sorbonne, Son systematically deconstructs Jadine's sense of identity as her prestigious accomplishments rapidly dissolve under his Rastafari gaze, which opposes the exploitation of blacks by Europeans:

> "How much?" he asked her. "Was it a lot?" His voice was quiet.
>
> "What are you talking about? How much what?"
>
> "Dick. That you had to suck, I mean to get all that gold and be in the movies. Or was it pussy? I guess for models it's more pussy than cock" (Morrison 121).

Son's vulgar assault lifts the veil obscuring Jadine's perspective. The question Son asks is obviously related to sexual exploitation, but he is also inquiring how much of Jadine's culture she had to sacrifice to receive the adoration of her European admirers. Even after she leaves his presence, Jadine cannot quite recover from Son's disparaging comments that "jangle" her because he makes Jadine think "that the thing that repelled her was not in him, but in her" (123). The combative exchange between the two occurs throughout *Tar Baby:* both Son and Jadine try "to possess the other, to place the other in the proper and subservient role in his or her fantasy" (Page 125). However, while both thrust their views upon each other, Jadine is ultimately victorious as Son eventually relinquishes his rootedness to Rastafari.

Son's transformation occurs in stages throughout *Tar Baby*. A major link to Rastafari is destroyed shortly after Jadine leaves the room. Alone, Son wanders into Jadine's bathroom and takes a shower. The fact that he is in her bathroom, discovering her personal effects, seems to have a transformative effect on Son:

> On the corner of the tub was a bottle of Neutrogena Rainbath Gel and a natural sponge, the same color as her skin…The sponge was so large he wondered how her small

> hands held it. He squeezed it again, but lightly this time, loving the juice it gave him. Unbuttoning his pajama top he rubbed it on his chest and under his arms. (131)

While showering, Son bathes himself with Jadine's sponge. He never lets go of the sponge, fascinated by Jadine's "juice" as it sluices over his body (131). Son's fascination parallels Jadine's enthrallment with the sealskin coat. Jadine, however, seems to draw power from the lifeless baby seals. Jadine's "juice" flowing down Son's body prompts his eventual submergence into Jadine's world. The "charcoal-gray" water running down the drain represents Son's mounting disconnect from Rastafari values. The dark water is Son's "personal dirt" and it symbolizes his link to Rastafari. But the shower threatens to strip him of this connection as the soap and cologne conceal his "rife" smell and dirt.

Son moves closer towards accepting Babylonian values after this shower. In fact, Son ponders another vision vastly different from the pie-ladies after he washes his "personal dirt" down the drain (132). Standing at Jadine's window and wrapped in a towel, Son glimpses Yardman stooping to chop the trunk of a tree. Tears spring into Son's eyes as he observes the "angle of the old man's spine":

> Not the street of yellow houses with white doors, but the wide lawn places where little boys in Easter white shorts played tennis under their very own sun. A sun whose sole purpose was to light their way, golden their hair and reflect the perfection of their Easter white shorts. He had fingered that image hundreds of times before and it had never

> produced tears. But now watching Yardman…while he himself was so spanking clean, clean from the roots of his hair to the crevices between his toes, having watched his personal dirt swirl down a drain, while he himself stood wrapped waist-to-thigh in an Easter white towel—now he was as near to crying as he'd been since he'd fled from home. You would have thought something was leaving him and all he could see was its back. (141)

Son's characterization of the sun in the boys' lives reveals the exploitative nature of Western society. The boys play tennis "under their very own sun" because the sun is a self-serving agent that reflects their values, traditions, and ideologies. The reflective rays of "their own sun" shine only to illuminate the seemingly flawless character of the boys, recalling the egotism expressed by Babylonians in Genesis. The image of the children playing tennis and the spotless quality of their "Easter-white shorts" suggests that they can rely upon their own construction of authority, guided by knowledge that their conscience is also spotless—reinforced through a sun whose "sole purpose was to light their way, golden their hair, and reflect the perfection of their Eastern white shorts" (114). Surprisingly, Son identifies with the boys for the first time as he stands "wrapped waist-to-thigh in an Easter white towel" because he is "spanking clean." This alignment with the boys in his vision is enough to bring Son to tears and "now he was as near to crying as he had been since he'd fled home. You would have thought something was leaving him and all he could see was its back" (141). Subconsciously, Son understands

that something *is* leaving him. This "something" is his connection to Rastafari. Son's shower washes away his personal flaws and threatens to drown him in Babylonian ideals.

When Son emerges from the shower, he has not yet sank into Babylon, but he is significantly altered after this experience. Son visits the greenhouse, and Valerian takes in the man "wrapped in a woman's kimono, barefoot, and with gleaming wrought-iron hair" (146). This exchange between the two men is particularly troubling because Son is assessed through Valerian's eyes and seems altered by this evaluation. Underneath Valerian's gaze Son is a shrinking violet, adopting a dialect that recalls the speech of submissive slaves as he repeatedly asks Valerian if he is going to punish him. In return, Valerian drinks in Son's body, and when Son's kimono comes undone, Valerian's eyes travel to Son's "genitals and the skinny black thighs" (146). Valerian observes Son's body more than several times during their meeting and lets "his eyes travel cautiously down from the hair to the robe to the naked feet" (146). This careful examination of Son's body is similar to the slave master inspecting his merchandise. Valerian is not fearful of Son because he is secure in his ability to exploit him. Neither is Valerian interested in Son: "He was curious about the man, but not all that much" (145). The thought of Son hiding in his wife's closet is more "outrageous" than threatening precisely because Valerian enjoys the "disarray" Son's presence creates among his wife, servants, and Jadine. Thus Valerian extends an invitation to Son because it reestablishes him as master in the house.

The most disturbing aspect in this scene is Son's s altered speech when explaining his reasons for being in Margaret's room:

> "Yes, sir. I uh thought I smelled oyster stew out back yesterday. And it got dark early, the fog I mean. They done left the kitchen and I thought I'd try to get me some, but before I knew it I heard them coming back. I couldn't run out the back door so I run through another one. It was a dinin room. I ran upstairs into the first room I seen…"
> (147)

The subtle nuances of Son's speech, peppered with "it's sho pretty in here" and "I reckon," is a significant point of interest, namely because Son does not talk like this again in *Tar Baby*. Certainly, there is a measure of trickery involved in Son's altered speech pattern; Son's shuck-and-jive routine cleverly ensures that Valerian is not frightened by Son's commanding presence. But Son's deceptive trickery is still problematic because he knows that Valerian is not afraid of him. While staring in the mirror at his "wrought-iron hair," Son thinks: "They are frightened, he thought. All but the old man. The old man knows that whatever I jumped ship for it wasn't because I wanted to rape a woman" (133). Neither is Son scared of Valerian; however, he does realize that he could be sent to jail for his actions and perhaps this is why he plays the fool. But Son's act is troubling because it marks his waning connection to Rastafari. Son's shuck-and-jive routine does not challenge or upset traditional Western beliefs about black people.

The chief goal of Rastafarians is to upset the status quo by rejecting both Western tradition and Jamaican society. Rastafarians achieve this goal through a repudiation of Jamaican folk stories permeating the island. Anancy's cunning ability to triumph over seemingly stronger opponents is often praised by Jamaicans as "beating the system"

(Edmonds 57).[7] But Rastafarians blatantly reject the deceptive chicanery of Anancy, arguing that the figure lacks a moral compass; survival is the chief goal of Anancy and this takes precedence over everything and everyone else. The image of a deceptive spider that uses "doubletalk" and "backstabs" to endure oppression and to exploit family and friends is an image Rastafarians refuse to believe embodies the African personality they want to embrace (Edmonds 57). Interestingly enough, Son tells Valerian a joke about "the three colored whores who went to Heaven" (149). The fact that Son tells a joke about black women to elicit Valerian's laughter recalls the claim of Rastafarians that "the System has made us all into Anancy" by stripping black people of morality, and an overall sense of community (Edmonds 57). The depiction of Anancy as "a little bald-headed man with a falsetto voice and a cringing manner in the presence of his superior" stands in direct contrast to "the valorization of the dreadlocks, which symbolize fearlessness and fearsomeness" (Edmonds 57).[8] Although there is no clear Anancy-figure in *Tar Baby*, Son, in this instance, exhibits the characteristics of Anancy through his submissive performance in front of Valerian. Clad in a woman's kimono and speaking in a dialect of a submissive slave, Son appears emasculated in Valerian's presence. Son is a changeling in a sort of liminal space as he has not yet crossed the threshold into the Western world, in which black men are expected to occupy positions of subservience. But he moves one step closer.

Son's passive act is disturbing because Rastafarians seek to recreate an identity that speaks to the fearlessness of black people. The emergence of the lion as a symbol for

[7] Edmonds, p.57. The Anancy folktales are of particular interest because the figure symbolizes the subversive qualities of a trickster figure that uses deception to survive in a racist world.
[8] Edmonds, p. 57. The "falsetto voice" paired with the "cringing manner" is suggestive of the wilting and emasculative effect the oppressor has on Anancy.

Rastafarians is utilized specifically to repudiate the image of a weak and conniving Anancy. The lion is representative of "nobility, self-confidence, strength, pride, and moral fortitude in the face of oppression" (Edmonds 58). The foremost symbol of the lion is exhibited in the cultivation of dreadlocks worn by Rastafarians. The mane of the lion—untamed and unique—is a feature of the lion's domination that Rastafarians attempt to embody through their hairstyle in order to "simulate the spirit of the lion" (Edmonds 58). However, by the end of the conversation between Son and Valerian, Son seems to embody the Anancy figure when he dons the master's clothes and shears his "chain-gang hair."

Although Son's physical transformation is well-received amongst nearly everyone (except for Jadine), Son believes he is not seduced by the haircut and the suit. Lying in the hammock after dinner, Son's thoughts reveal a desire to flee from an American lifestyle because he "never wanted to live in the world their way. There was something wrong with their rites. He wanted another way" (166). Son's self-awakening echoes the experience all Rastafarians must undergo to receive membership in the cult. Barrett writes that membership is granted through a spiritual awakening, not adoption but by right to "sonship" (112). The notion of this "sonship" is connected to Haile Selassie's perceived divine status by virtue of his connection to King Solomon. All Rastafarians must embark on a journey to understand the truth about the Western world and their cultural heritage as descendents of King Solomon. Once they uncover these truths, they become sons of the divine Haile Selassie and, therefore, Rastafarians. Son's decision not to call himself William Green is certainly due in part to the fact that he is on the run for his criminal actions. However, his decision also stems from his belief that Son "calls

forth the true him," the one that he never lies to (139). Phillip M. Royster, in "Country Son Comes to the Rescue: The Protagonist as Scapegoat Rescuer", writes that son evolved from the Indo-European root word, seu, that means "to give birth" (218). As a fugitive on the run for eight years, Son experiences a type of resurrection or rebirth; his status as a fugitive allows Son to embark on a spiritual journey. This journey culminates in his new title as a "son" of Rastafari. Prior to his relationship with Jadine, Son does not subscribe to Westernized ideology because it requires a predatory desire to demolish all competition for basic survival. Rastafarians liken the Western way of living to a "rat race," in which human beings trample and scurry over each other to get ahead. Although Son shares this belief, as his feelings deepen for Jadine, he struggles to maintain his original viewpoint.

Adamantly refusing membership in this Babylonian "rat race," Rastafarians wage ideological assault against the Western and Jamaican establishment. Rastafarians view this as a system that is "out of touch with the divine, natural order" (Edmonds 45). Exploitation, either for economic or personal purposes, further verifies that the Babylonian system is opposed to the cultivation of "harmonious human relationships" and bent on the exploitation of people, animals, and land (Edmonds 45). The subjugation of colored people and marginalized people throughout the world is evidence of an evil nature inimical to God. (Edmonds 45). Son's vision of America resembles this rapacious image of the Western world. Son thinks of America as "loud, red and sticky" with "pavements slick with the blood of all the best people. As soon as man or woman did something generous or said something bold, pictures of their funeral lines appeared in the

foreign press" (167). And while Son is undoubtedly referring to the turbulent times of the seventies, he is also critiquing the violent nature of American society.

The moral conscience of the nation is under examination by Son; however, he is also examining his own character. Son recalls his time aboard a ship with the Mexican and the Swede. Son excitedly reels in his first catch, but when Son bends down to remove the fish from the hook, "the fish executed a dazzling final arc three feet above the deck and slapped his face" (167). What Son does next is startling: he quickly holds the snapper's tail down with one knee and then bashes his fist into the snapper's head. These actions elicit laughter from the Swede, but the Mexican is quiet, later giving Son a map of the U.S. as an open mouth filled with teeth and crammed with children. The Mexican tells Son: "*Americano. Cierto Americano. Es verdad"* (167). The Mexican's horrifying drawing, while an exaggeration, nonetheless reflects the insatiable appetite of Americans to devour the weak for personal gain. The Mexican's words horrify Son into questioning himself and his place in the "loud" and "sticky" world:

> In any case, if he was punching dying fish in anger, if he was pricked to fury by the outrageous claim of a snapper on its own life, stunned by its refusal to cooperate with his hook, to want, goddamn it, to surrender itself for his pleasure, then perhaps he was *cierto Americano* and it was time to go home. Not to the sticky-red place, but to his home in it. (168)

Son's momentary astonishment over the fact that the snapper does not want to "surrender itself for his pleasure" recalls the violent history of slavery in the Americas and the

Caribbean. The hook that plunges into the fish is akin to the thrusting rape of colonized lands, enslaved bodies, and minds. Here, Son's shock mirrors Valerian's astonishment that Gideon and Thérèse dare want some of his apples. Son moves away from a world that has "something wrong with their rites" (167).

The world Son steps into is a class of "undocumented men" who distinguish themselves by "a refusal to equate work with life and an inability to stay anywhere for long" (166). Rastafarians, citing the "competitive and exploitative nature of Babylon's economy," rebuke traditional employment or working under governmental or societal establishments, and instead choose to "hustle, to work at subsistence farming, or to establish self-help ventures" (Edmonds 48). Son aligns himself with the legion of "undocumented men" who are "day laborers and musclemen, gamblers, sidewalk merchants, migrants, unlicensed crewman on ships with volatile cargo…or curbside musicians" (167). Despite these diverse professions, the men are linked together by a sense of freedom created by the refusal to work for anyone. Son's characterization of himself as an "undocumented man" also suggests an alienation from societal values, resembling the alienation Rastafarians feel from the discordant Jamaican and Western society.

Thus Son desires to "step outta Babylon" and into a world that is "every dry, green and quiet" (SoS 167). The significance of Son's world, Eloe, is that it remains separate from the violent world of America and is "presided over by wide black women in snowy dresses" (168). And although there is an undercurrent of sexism flowing beneath Son's characterization of these women who eagerly invite him into their homes, there is also a sense that Son can be himself and need not worry about being used as a

tool. Son's world is markedly different from Western society. His musings about the lion and its relation to America reveal Son's connection to Rastafari:

> There weren't going to be any impalas or water buffalo; no mating dance, no trophies...And the lion he believed was exclusive to his past—and his alone—was frozen in stone (can you believe it?) in front of the New York Public Library in a city that had laughed at his private's uniform. Like an Indian seeing his profile diminished on a five-cent piece, he saw the things he imagined to be his, including his own reflection, mocked. Appropriated, marketed and trivialized into décor. (167)

While the importance of the lion in Rastafari stems from a desire to overturn the deceptive figure of the "bald-headed Anancy," the cultivation of the lion as a Rastafari symbol is also linked to formation of the movement by the emergence of Haile Selassie, king of Ethiopia. Rastafari teachings claim Selassie descended from the "Lion tribe of Judah" and that his lineage traces back to King Solomon. This belief is stimulated by Selassie's fascination with lions. As emperor, Selassie created statues of lions "guarding" the gates to the imperial palace and he also used the image of the lion as an official government seal (Edmonds 58).

The appropriation of the lion fills Son with disgust because the lion has been stolen from Selassie—and therefore from Son—for the purposes of exploitation. While the shacks, businesses, and vehicles of Rastafarians are commonly decorated with the symbol of the lion, their desire to display the lion is an attempt to honor their past. The

statue outside the library has been "appropriated, marketed, and trivialized" for commercial purposes; the lion statues that guard the homes and communes of the Rastafarians represent an effort to form a connection to their fragmented past. Songs, art, and chants devoted to the lion immortalize this self-assertive quality of the lion (Edmonds 45).

Son's annoyance stems from the fact that New York is rooted in capitalism and is the epitome of a Babylonian empire. When Son enters Jadine's world, he notices black girls crying and black men "looking neither to the right nor to the left" (215). Son is bewildered by New York City precisely because there is a lack of innocence in New York City: "There were short people and people under twelve years of age, but they had no child's vulnerability, no unstuck laughter" (215). The "Big Apple" is a piece of the capitalistic pie that Jadine and other black men and women like her desire. But for others, like Nommo, it reflects the "two extremes of capitalism—the poor, struggling African masses and the rich European finance bankers and corporate magnets" (Mbalia 81). Nommo and other poor black women resort to selling their bodies to survive. Even Jadine uses her body for exploitation. The moment she begins to actually look her age, the agencies begin skipping her. Although Son opens his arms to Nommo, he struggles in New York and cannot ignite the anger he felt for Valerian. Waiting in the hotel for Jadine, Son stands up and searches for the anger, but New York abates his desire to "beat down Babylon" and "even conjuring up that head-of-a-coin profile, the unfleshed skin and evening eyes, was not a vivid enough memory to produce it" (221). New York is simply at odds with Son's conception of home. While there are "people under twelve years of age," Son thinks that they lack a "child's vulnerability" (215). These little people

are nothing like the children of Son's dreams who graciously scoop walnuts off the ground. Neither can Son find any old people in the city: "Where were the Thérèses and Gideons of New York?" Thérèse and Gideon, because of their knowledge of the local people, customs, and folklore, acted as Son's anchor. Son thinks that the "old people were in kennels and childhood was underground" (217). This image conceptualizes New York as a type of concrete jungle in which children and the elderly are stifled by the chaos of city life.

Like New York, Isle de Chevaliers is a microcosm of the exploitative practices of the Babylonian lifestyle. Thus, it is fitting that Son dismantles Valerian's Babylonian system during the Christmas Eve celebration as all dinner guests—both servant and master—are forced to face harsh realities. The tension begins with Son's innocuous comment about Gideon/Yardman and Mary/Thérèse. Son is outraged and his "mouth goes dry" at the thought of Valerian sitting calmly at the table and firing "with a flutter of the fingers the people whose sugar and cocoa had allowed him to grow old in regal comfort…" (203). Son's characterization of Valerian as a greedy landowner parallels the relationship between the colonizers in Jamaica and the landless peasant class.

Rastafarians are highly critical of the Jamaican land system characterized by "greedy landowners" who avariciously take the produce of their tenants, thereby sanctioning "the misuse of the poor in order to fatten the wallets of the upper and middle-class" (Edmonds 48). The anger boiling within Son is directly linked to the gluttonous possession of land, resulting in greed so absolute that it renders the Western system of capitalism an interminable, grinding wheel of toxicity:

> …Although he had taken the sugar and cocoa and paid for it as though it had no value, as though the cutting of cane and picking of beans was child's play and had no value; but he turned it into candy…and made a fortune in order to move near, but not in the midst of, the jungle where the sugar came from and build a palace with more of their labor and then hire them to do more of the work he was not capable of and pay them again according to some scale of value that would outrage Satan himself and when those people wanted a little of what he wanted some apples for *their* Christmas, and took some, he dismissed them with a flutter of the fingers, because they were thieves, and nobody knew thieves and thievery better than he did and he probably thought he was a law-abiding man, they all did, and they all always did, because they had not the dignity of wild animals who did not eat where they defecated but they could defecate over a whole people and come there to live and defecate some more by tearing up the land and that is why they loved property so, because they had killed it soiled it defecated on it and they loved more than anything the places where they shit. (203)

Son's subtle switch from "he" to "their" reveals his scorn for the capitalist and colonialist systems as a whole; therefore, he is critical of Western society because their "sole lesson"

centers on "how to make waste" (203). The "shit" Son refers to represents the crimes against humanity committed by Western establishments and is analogous to the Rastafari view that conceptualizes Western and Jamaican society as inherently evil due to its lack of concern for humanity. Coupled with this idea is the notion that Babylon or the Western world must implode upon itself in order to produce any modicum of change. Hence, Rastafarians desire to "beat down Babylon," but ultimately believe that the corrupt nature of the Western system will, undoubtedly, self-destruct (Edmonds 50).

So, too, does Son. As he considers the decadent nature of Western society, he comes to the conclusion that their own "shit" would "drown them one day, they would all sink into their own waste and the waste they had made of the world and then, finally they would know true peace and the happiness they had been looking for all along" (204). Son's concluding thoughts reflect the belief that the ways of the Western world will lead to a similar fate suffered by the ancient Babylonians. The conflict between "the man who prized fraternity" and the "man who respected industry" mirrors the Rastafari critique of the Western world. In fact, Son's fictional argument mirrors the very real plight of Rastafarians in the seventies. The excerpt below is taken from *The Rastafarian Voice* in 1975:

> The people of Jamaica are near to starvation. Everywhere there is a hue and a cry for food. Government claims it is interested in I and I planting the land. Yet still when I and I plant food to feed I fellow African, I and I are harassed and driven off the land. When will this wickedness stop? (qtd. in Chevannes 70)

While Gideon/Yardman and Thérèse/Mary are not exactly starving, they only eke out a living working for Valerian—a fact Son notices when he visits the pair for dinner. Son considers the cookies, canned milk, and rum as "delicacies" because he knows they earn meager wages working for Valerian (151). Even as Son lies in the hammock, contemplating the red stickiness of America and his place in it, he feels as if "something had come loose in him" and he wants to go home, but "that woman was on his mind" (169). Son's attempt to "beat down Babylon" is not over, his Rastafari concepts are challenged by Jadine.

During their trip to the beachside, Jadine asks a simple question, "What do you want out of life?" Son's confession that all he wants in the "money line" is his "original dime" he earned for "cleaning a tub of sheephead" elicits Jadine's surprise and contempt. Son admits that San Francisco, the man who gave him the dime, was a lousy husband and philanderer, yet Son revels in the memory of cleaning the fish. Son even recalls crying when he learned about Frisco's death. The significance of Son's "original dime" is that he has not had to "trample" or compete with anyone to earn it. And Son is not lazy; he has worked before, but he never acquires the same feeling as he did in the past: "I couldn't just work for that—just for money. I like to have it, sure, it feels fine for a while, but there's no magic in it. No sheephead. No Frisco" (170). Although Leplow connects the "original dime" to original sin (370), Son's assertion that there is "no magic" in other money is because the "original dime" is tied to the community. The dime itself is not the source of Son's contentment. The fact that Frisco, a member of the black community, rewards Son with the dime stimulates Son's happiness. Frisco represents a connection to the diverse black community in Eloe and Son's "original dime" is priceless because of

this link. Even Son's cleaning of the sheephead suggests a shared experience among people in the South, as this fish is found chiefly in the Southern states.

Jadine, however, ridicules Son's ideals: "Ah got duh sun in duh mawnin and duh moon at night…Ooooo, Ah got plenty of nuffin and nuffin's plenty for meeeee" (171). But Son *does* have something. A common cry among Rastafarians is that Jamaica and the entire Western world is a "pimper's paradise" (Edmonds 48). The phrase is derived from Bob Marley's popular song detailing the story of a woman who "loves to model in the latest fashion" while dabbling in illicit drugs and fulfilling the needs of her pimp with her body. Marley warns his audience "not to lose track of yourself" by becoming a "stock on the shelf" (*The Uprising Album*). Rastafarians apply the metaphor of the prostitute to the Babylonian system of capitalism that utilizes the labor of others for economic gain. Greed and avarice are the end result of working for a capitalist society. The soul of those working for the system is lost, serving only the capitalist enterprise (Edmonds 48). Rastafarians believe that capitalism is detrimental to the victims and perpetrators of the system because it destroys any connection to the community (Edmonds 48). In New York, Jadine is a "model of industry and planning," but Son realizes that she possesses a power he does not want any part of (267). Jadine's insistence that Son attend college stems from her desire that he accept capitalistic norms, becoming a "showpiece" to dazzle her friends (Mbalia 82). Therefore, in Jadine's presence, Son's story is "not admirable" but "dumb" (171). And in New York, Jadine's and Son's relationship comes to a turbulent end as Jadine acerbically rewrites Son's original dime story so that it is mired in exploitation. In her eyes, his dime is a piece of currency that "some black woman… fucked a white man for" and "then gave" to Frisco, who made Son "work his

ass off" for it (272). Jadine's alteration of Son's "original dime" story mirrors his attack on Jadine when he accuses her of utilizing her body for European praise. And, like Son's verbal assault, Jadine's attack unhinges something inside of Son. In New York, and on the heels of their argument, Son looks at the pictures taken by Jadine of his family and friends in Eloe. Suddenly, their faces appear stupid:

> Beatrice, pretty Beatrice, Soldier's daughter. She looked stupid. Ellen, sweet cookie-faced Ellen, the one he always thought was so pretty. She looked stupid. They all looked stupid, backwoodsy, dumb, dead… (273)

Son has finally reconnected with the home he has been so desperately searching for; however, Jadine's disapproval renders Eloe and the people who live there as incompatible with Son's perspective. This is the moment Son's link to Rastafari finally snaps. Consequently, Son understands what he must do in order to get Jadine back: "Whatever she wants, I have to do it, want it" (273). Previously, Son stood in the middle of the road, half-heartedly agreeing to Jadine's wishes but secretly hoping his dreams would become her dreams. Now, after Jadine's rendition of the "original dime" story, Son no longer vacillates; he is willing to cross the threshold and enter Jadine's world. Son thinks that "Catherine the Great earrings" are more precious than his relationship with Ernie Paul and Soldier (299). Son surrenders his fraternity, his vision of the pie-ladies, his original dime—essentially, his connection to Rastafari.

Yielding to Jadine, Son no longer wants to restrict and guide her; he is willing to be subdued by her. In his review of *Tar Baby*, James Coleman argues that Morrison did not fully reconcile the issue of Son's fate precisely because Son remains on an island

yearning for Jadine while she lives a successful life, although she still remembers the man "who fucked like a star" (*TB* 292). This conclusion, Coleman claims, leaves the reader "in a muddle at the end" (72). Similarly, the ending leaves Son in "a muddle at the end." Interestingly, Thérèse tells Son "the men are waiting for you. Choose them" (305). But the men waiting for Son are blind. And, when Son crawls on the rocks he cannot see Thérèse, so he throws "out his hands to guide and steady his going" (305). Son, like the men in New York, looks "neither to the left nor the right" (305).

Son's waning desire to challenge the exploitative system in New York, and his yearning to find Jadine to do whatever she desires are the final links in the chain dragging him away from a Rastafari core. Thus, the prologue reveals Son's fate even before the concluding chapter does; as Son floats aimlessly in the dark water, "he knew he was in a part of the world that had never known and would never know twilight and that very soon he might be zooming toward the horizon in a pitch-black sea" (4). In this sense, blackness is not negative, but symbolizes the unknown. Rastafarians, in "beating down Babylon," consider themselves to be light permeating through the mystery surrounding their African past. In order to do this, Rastafarians reject Jamaica as their homeland in favor of this African past. Joe Ruglass, Rastafarian poet, summarizes this sentiment in a clever play on words: "Jamaica is a islan' but is not I lan" (Chevannes 1). This spirit of resistance characterizes Rastafarians, but stuck on the island, pining for Jadine, and removed from the pie-ladies and fraternity, Son is voiceless and powerless. Son cannot defy the system on the swampy island; as a result, he becomes a mythical creature destined to haunt the swampy forests of the Caribbean.

This conclusion is troubling because Son's ability to contest the Western value system is snatched away. However, Son's avowal of Rastafari values does illuminate the inadequacy of the Western system. Although Son cannot fully penetrate the core of this system, Son's initial actions provide a skeletal framework for the descendents of the African Diaspora to conceive of an alternative lifestyle despite the lingering vestiges of oppression.

CHAPTER TWO

THIS IS [NOT] A HISTORY TO BE TOLD: EXAMINING THE RASTAFARI PRESENCE IN *BELOVED*

Dis poem

shall speak of the wretched sea

that washed ships to these shores

of mothers crying for their young

swallowed up by the sea..…

Dis poem shall call names…

—by Mutabaruka, from the album *The Mystery Unfolds*

In "Dis Poem," Rastafarian poet Mutabaruka invokes the voice of Africans bound towards a foreign land in European slave ships, an invocation reminiscent of Toni Morrison's summoning of the forgotten slave in her Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *Beloved*. Morrison dedicates her novel to the "sixty million and more" lives lost in the Middle Passage. The telling of Beloved's story, however, appears contradictory as Morrison's final chapter cautions the reader that "this is not a story to pass on" (275). Similarly, Mutabaruka's assertion that "dis poem will not be amongst great literary works" suggests that because he references the Mau Mau, Ashanti, and Niabinghi

warriors, slavery, and the Middle Passage, his poem will be pushed aside by a society eager to forget this "dark" past. This concern surfaces with *Beloved* as the novel's focus on the gruesome details of slavery led critics like Denise Heinze to realize that despite praise lauded upon Morrison's novels, the bulk of her work is "often a slap in the face to an America suffering from moral and intellectual lethargy" (3). Simply put, Morrison deals with intense subjects that many Americans would rather forget. Morrison, while writing *Beloved,* did not believe the novel would be well-received due to its subject matter:

> "I thought this has got to be the least read of all the books I'd written because it is about something that the characters don't want to remember, I don't want to remember, black people don't want to remember, white people don't want to remember. I mean, it's national amnesia." (qtd. in Angelo 1)

Beloved becomes the nation's catharsis "haunt[ing] and torment[ing] a guilty conscience in need of absolution and redemption…" (Heinze 3).

In order for this healing to occur, Morrison understands that the muzzle must be removed for the slave to speak. This task is realized by subverting traditional Christian beliefs. *Beloved,* therefore, is emblematic of Rastafari, as it reconfigures the status of Africans and their descendents as the "chosen" or "cherished people" of the Bible. The novel also showcases characters who challenge conceptions of race entrenched in racist ideology that objectifies blacks as animals. Baby Suggs embarks on a journey that initiates self-discovery and passage into the world of Rastafari. Seizing upon the chance

to mold and shape her own philosophies pertaining to blackness, Baby Suggs upsets Western conceptions of black people.

The recreation process Baby Suggs undergoes is comparable to certain rituals developed by Rastafarians. The most significant ritual is the gathering in the woods for weekly and monthly meetings (Barrett 120). The "nyabingi" meeting occurs when members from all over the island gather in the woods or the hills of Jamaica (Barrett 120). The term "nyabingi" pays tribute to an East African "religio-political cult that resisted colonial domination from the last decade of the nineteenth century to about 1928" (Barrett 121[9]). One important element of these meetings is that the medium or "nyanbingi" is always a woman who, in the Rastafari tradition, brings the community together for "inspiration, exhortation, feasting, smoking, and social contact" (Barrett, 121).

Similarly, an aura of holiness surrounds Baby Suggs as she is the only woman for the job. Stamp Paid insists that she cannot "quit the Word" because it was given to her to speak (177). "Uncalled, unrobed, and unanointed," Baby Suggs nevertheless takes her "great heart to the Clearing" to perform her holy duty (87). Stamp Paid's insistence that Baby Suggs return to preaching in the Clearing is based upon the fact that she is, indeed, the only one who can do it: "You got to. Can't nobody Call like you. You have to be there" (178). Although Baby Suggs is "followed by every black man, woman, and child," she gives up the Word twenty-eight days after the arrival of her daughter-in-law. Sethe's

[9] Although a general consensus about the origins of the movement has not been reached, Robert I. Rotberg in *Rebellion in Black Africa* suggests that the movement may have started in Ruanda-Urundi or Uganda, instigated by the story of a Ruandise royal princess who was murdered by colonialists for her resistance (qtd. in Barrett 121). Consequently, a number of cults sprang up in honor of her memory as natives gathered in the woods to celebrate her.

murderous actions shock Baby Suggs into forfeiting the Word and the empty space in the Clearing is silent. 124, the house that had been “alive” with visitors, is disregarded by the rest of the black society (95).

The black Ohio community, therefore, needs Baby Suggs precisely because she unifies them against oppression. In Jamaica, the “nyabingi’” gathering in the woods is both a religious and political experience for Rastafarians as both women and men "praise Jah" and "chant down Babylon.” At these events there is music in the form of drums as people dance and chant (Barrett 121). There are no drums present in the Clearing, but the rhythm of the drum is brought to life through the stomping of the feet and the clapping of the hands. In a “wide-open place cut deep in the woods,” the men, women, and children participate in a type of revival (87). The participants can “let loose” and “just cry” (88). And they do: “laughing children, dancing men, crying women” partake in a celebration that is both festive and somber, as the women stop crying and dance; men sit down and cry; children dance, and women laugh (88). In the silence that follows their exhaustive exhortation, Baby Suggs delivers her speech to the members and then dances “with her twisted hip the rest of what her heart had to say while the others opened their mouths and gave her the music” (89). Baby Suggs embodies the literal meaning of a nyabingi because, in her presence, people in the Clearing symbolically cast off all forms of oppression they endure in their daily lives.

This respite from daily oppression is only offered to the black community provided that they understand their primary role in achieving salvation. By creating a space for these ex-slaves to envision their own world, Baby Suggs emphasizes a key

Rastafari concept that centers on the formation of an identity free from the strictures of oppressive forces:

> In a generic sense a Rastafarian is one who is attempting to restructure identity so that s/he can consciously live from an Africentric perspective. This covers the physical, mental and spiritual dimensions of life. Rastafari therefore provides a vehicle through which and by which the Africans in the Diaspora can recreate an African identity. (Edmonds 52)

Although Baby Suggs exhibits the resistant spirit of the nyabingi, she is forced to conceal her emotions for her own survival. And, as a result, she struggles to develop a medium through which she can restructure her identity so that "she can consciously live from an Africentric perspective" (Edmonds 52). Still, Baby Suggs retains a tenuous understanding of her position in society because she realizes that while "nobody knocked her down (or up)" at Sweet Home, she is still marginalized: "It's better here, but I'm not" (141). Baby Suggs, like Sixo, refuses to be seduced by the "special kind of slavery" at Sweet Home. She is pleased by Mr. Garner's refusal to "stud" his boys, yet she realizes that he is playing a dangerous game by treating slaves as men on Sweet Home but nowhere else. All these thoughts Baby Suggs keeps to herself, not saying much when she is Mrs. Garner's slave. This rebellious spirit does not taper off as Baby Suggs creates a pact with her "husband:" "whichever one got a chance to run would take it; together if possible, alone if not, and no looking back. He got his chance," but Baby Suggs did not (142). When Baby Suggs crosses the river towards freedom, she feels strange because she

hears her heart pounding for the first time. Looking down at her hands, Baby Suggs realizes: "These hands belong to me. These *my* hands" (141). In this moment of self-awakening, Baby Suggs is reclaiming her corporeal self. For Reed, this particular moment and Baby Suggs's preaching in the Clearing symbolize "a childlike newness and innocence, as with Christ's birth" (66). In fact, Reed likens Baby Suggs to Christ because she shares her joy of self-discovery with others, assumes the role of a folk preacher and transitions "from her earthly role to her spiritual role in order that the community might come to full awareness of its own salvation" (66). But Reed's last point is crucial as she clarifies that "the recognition of her spiritual self" is not exclusive to Christ and Christianity, "but to her ancestral self and heritage" (67). To expound on this point, Baby Suggs's preaching in the Clearing is also the mechanism by which she expands and manipulates the foundation of her African heritage to include her experience as the enslaved and oppressed.

This nexus between her African heritage and her experience as a slave is strengthened through her spiritual nurturing in the Clearing, which further establishes Baby Suggs's rootedness to Rastafari. Baby Suggs is aligned with the chief goal of Rastafari that desires to "construct a new and noble identity" by insisting upon a "return to black originality, black creativity and to the ideals of Everlasting life" (Edmonds 58). Rastafarians create an identity that fuses their experiences in Jamaica with a desire to reconnect to an African past nearly severed by slavery. By revising certain elements of Christianity, Rastafarians construct a mechanism through which they can establish a sense of identity by creating their own self-serving truths. Rastafarians believe that Haile Selassie encouraged them to "find the truth for themselves" in the Christian Bible.

Therefore, the Christian Bible is considered as a rite of passage into Rastafari. The search for the truth leads Rastafarians to accept certain passages in the Bible and repudiate other Christian tenets that do not reflect their African heritage and experience of oppression in Jamaica.

When Baby Suggs preaches to the black people in the Clearing she is countering the traditional Christian belief that consigns the body to a secondary status in praise of the Holy Spirit. Baby Suggs deliberately revises this traditional Christian tenet by calling on black people to love their own flesh as a direct result of the oppressive experience as slaves: "They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon as pick 'em out*"* (88). The repeated use of "they" as a euphemism for whites is clearly Baby Suggs crying out against oppression. However, her heartfelt plea that blacks love their necks—"unnoosed and straight—" is also a plea for a return to life before the pernicious inception of slavery, an institution that simultaneously stripped the black body of freedom and the black mind of a dignified conceptualization of Africa. Baby Suggs wants the blacks in the Clearing to visualize their own self identity: "She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see, they would not have it" (88). La Vinia Jennings in *The Idea of Africa* discusses Baby Suggs's celebration of the corporeal body as evoking the core beliefs of Vodun and Voudoun that "does not relegate flesh to a subordinate position to spirit but unifies them as coequals" (104).[10] And while Baby Suggs may identify with the Vodun culture, her actions nonetheless reflect a desire to bend the Christian landscape to accommodate her experience of

[10] La Vinia Jennings, *Toni Morrison and the Idea of Africa.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2008) 104. Jennings characterizes Vodun as the survival of West and Central African cosmologies and practices, which coalesced in Haiti.

oppression as a slave and ex-slave, echoing the Rastafari desire to subvert the traditional Christian narrative. Roxanne Reed in "The Restorative Power of Sound in *Beloved*" defines the role of black women preachers as exhibiting the ability to exhort for special services. Baby Suggs is "the figure responsible for aiding the community members in bridging sound and memory in order to achieve salvation" (Reed 64). Not only does Baby Suggs fulfill her maternal role as nurturer to her family and "spiritual nurturer to the entire community" through her preaching in the Clearing (Reed 66), but she fulfills her role as a "nyabingi" by drawing upon Christian ideology to resist and rework the main tenets so as to reflect her worldview.

The connection between the Rastafari movement and *Beloved* is further expressed by the novel's emphasis on slavery. *Beloved*, like Rastafari, brings what was dead back to life by "[giving] voice to the unspoken, unwritten feelings that slave narratives could not and did not express" (qtd. in Page 148). Slave narratives, while capturing rarely documented emotions, also operated under a cloak of secrecy. Former slaves, such as Harriet Jacobs, avoided recounting painful incidents of sexual molestation and violence so as not to upset the moral sensibilities of white Christian readers. Many ex-slaves feared losing support from the abolitionist movement.[11] But Morrison rips away this veil by drudging up the painful past of slavery. Beloved becomes the medium through which the past is brought to the forefront and her journey can be described as a "reverse birth" since she is killed as a baby and "circles from death to life and back to death, or at least absence" (Page 146). This observation underscores the non-linear element of time in

[11] Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2000) 33. Jacobs writes that "the degradation, the wrongs, the vices that grow out of slavery, are more than I can describe."

Beloved and its resistance to the notion of death as permanent and lasting. As Amy massages Sethe's swollen feet, she also expresses this central theme: "Anything coming back to life hurts" (35). Beloved, then, symbolizes the horror experienced by those aboard the slave ships bound to America:

> Small rats do not wait for us to sleep…if we had more to drink we could make tears…we are all trying to leave our bodies behind…I cannot fall because there is no room to…the bread is sea-colored…those able to die are in a pile…(Morrison 211)

Morrison's desire to explore the cramped quarters of the slave ship parallels the Rastafari desire to "reach back across the years to feel the pain and indignity of everything that befell their forebears" (Edmonds 46). Thus, Rastafarians frequently speak about the Middle Passage in songs, spoken word, and other forms of discourse. Bob Marley's "Slave Driver" illustrates this point:

> Ev'rytime I hear the crack of a whip, my blood runs cold. I remember on the slave ship, how they brutalize the very souls. (qtd. in Edmonds 43)

Other Rastafarian reggae singers make conscious attempts to invoke the slave experience. Burning Spear mournfully asks his audience, "Do you remember the days of slavery?" (Edmonds 46). W.J.T. Mitchell, however, poses another question: "What if the materials of memory are overwhelming, so traumatic that the remembering of them threatens identity rather than reconstitutes it?" (212). Rastafarians do not embrace this concept primarily because they believe that in order to understand the black man's position in the

world, one must journey back to the past—a past that is never buried but exists in time that is both "unlimited and undefined" (Mutabaruka). This concept is reflected in their desire to reclaim a seemingly lost past and history.

In Rastafari, the Bible is consulted as a source that restores the black man to a place of royalty. Rastafarians believe that the Book of Revelation contains specific quotes establishing Haile Selassie as their god because he was born in Ethiopia (Barrett 106). The manipulation of biblical quotes to establish the black man's claims to a royal heritage is present in the Rastafari movement and *Beloved*. Rastafarians "accept no other interpretation of the Bible, but that which they themselves have evolved" or developed (Barrett 127). Morrison, in an interview, is quoted as expressing her desire "to subvert [the reader's] traditional comfort so that he may experience an unorthodox one" (qtd. in Coonradt 4). The opening epigraph to *Beloved* underscores this point, referring readers to the ninth chapter of Romans and the words spoken by Paul the Apostle: "I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved." In "The Female Revealer in *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*: Syncretic Spirituality in Toni Morrison's Trilogy," Sharon Jesse explains the epigraph as illustrative of the "salvation bestowed by God on those who are not professed believers; mercy is God's choice" (133). I would like to extend Jesse's notion of mercy upon slaves by interpreting the remainder of the chapter so as to reveal the implicit message in the epigraph:

> I will call them my people,
>
> which were not my people;
>
> and her beloved, which was not beloved.
>
> And it shall come to pass

> in the place where it was said to them,
> You are not my people, there they shall be called
> children of the living God. (*King James Version,* Romans 9:25-27)

Here, Paul prophesies the eventual acceptance of Gentiles as "children of the living God" despite their status as foreigners in a strange land. The association of Gentiles with Jesus ("children of the living God") imbues sanctity upon Gentiles. Morrison, however, alters the Christian landscape as Blacks become the "beloved" people of the Bible—strangers in a distant land, but worthy of God's mercy. Morrison's appropriation of the Bible mirrors the Rastafari alteration of traditional tenets of Christianity. In *The Rastafarians,* Leonard Barrett explains the seemingly contradictory relationship between Rastafarians and the Bible. Rastafarians rely on the Bible to inform their beliefs and everyday lives; yet, Rastafarians adamantly reject the Western interpretation of Hebrews as the "chosen people" mentioned in the Old Testament (111). The Bible, Rastafarians argue, has been subverted and manipulated by whites, obscuring the truth. Ethiopians, and not Hebrews, are the "holy people" of the Bible, as Rastafarians believe that their sins have caused punishment from God in the form of slavery to whites and their subsequent exile in "the white man's" Jamaica (Barrett 111). African Americans, too, in accordance to Rastafari religion have been enslaved and exiled in America. Although God has pardoned the sins of blacks, blacks remain in exile because of the trickery of oppressors (Barrett 112). Rastafari uses the Bible, or the master's tools, to dismantle not only the master's house,

but the basic foundation upon which the house stands.[12] Hence, Morrison's reference to Romans suggests that while blacks served as slaves in a foreign land, their time of acceptance as God's "chosen people" will eventually come. For Rastafarians, the title as God's "chosen people" is bestowed upon blacks when they undergo a spiritual birth or awakening that moves them closer to divinity (Barrett 106). This "spiritual birth" is achieved after Rastafarians scour the Bible and revise traditional tenets that place black people in a subordinate position and Christ as a white savior. Membership in the cult is granted based on an individual's ability to undergo a spiritual transformation in which blacks are recast as God's "chosen people" (Barrett 106).

The chance meeting between Sethe and Amy in the woods illustrates how *Beloved* elevates black people to a status beyond the lowly position of slave. In "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Psalm and Sacrament," Nancy Berkowitz-Bate draws upon the significance of the imagery in this scene to explain its connection to the Israelites found in David's 124th Psalm (35). David praises God for not giving "us as prey to their teeth;" Sethe flees from the "mossy teeth" of the white boys "who stole her milk" (31). The tumultuous waters of the Red Sea are discussed in this psalm and David professes that "if it had not been for the Lord who was on our side, when men rose against us, then they would have swallowed us alive" (Psalm 124:1-2). Similarly, Sethe's baby is described as "drowning in its mother's blood" (84), an occurrence Berkowitz-Bate likens to the overwhelming waters of the Red Sea that threaten to drown the "soul of the Israelites in Psalm 124" (36). Thus, Sethe is an Israelite fleeing Sweet Home, the land of her captors. Sethe is, in a

[12] Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches (Crossing Press Feminist Series* 1984*)* 55. Lorde argued that the "master's tools may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change**.**"

sense, delivered by Amy as the Israelites were delivered by God from the perils of the Red Sea. Amy embodies the role of healer as she rubs Sethe's feet. Sethe's body also becomes a symbol of her similarities to Christ; Sethe is beaten so forcefully that she has a tree on her back. Yet she forgoes her status as slave, and, like Amy, becomes Christ-like because she is a scapegoat for schoolteacher, literally carrying the cross upon her back as Jesus does (Berkowitz Bate 42).

This sense of holiness is again conferred upon Sethe in one of the most poignant scenes of the novel in which Amy washes Sethe's feet. In her essay entitled "To Be Loved: Amy Denver and Human Need—Bridges to Understanding in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," Nicole Coonradt argues that Morrison, by giving Amy the ability to perform her "magic" and heal Sethe's feet, is placing Amy in the role of "prophetic healer" (4). Coonradt draws upon the thirteenth chapter of John to support her claim, in which Christ rubs and cleans the feet of his disciples and says,

> If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet,
> you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given
> you an example, that you also should do as I have done to
> you. Truly, truly I say to you, a servant is not greater than
> his master…if you know these things, blessed are you if
> you do them. (John 13:14)

Terming both Amy and Sethe as "throwaways" neglected by society, Coonradt draws parallels between the two women (169). Amy, like Sethe, experiences a form of servitude; she is an indentured servant with "fugitive eyes." Coonradt suggests that Amy is sexually abused by her "master" when she is locked in the root cellar—an experience

akin to the sexual abuse suffered by other black females in *Beloved*. However, Coonradt's analysis lacks cogency when she asserts that "the difference between slavery and indentured servitude is primarily a semantic one," thereby placing Sethe and Amy on equal footing.

Despite the fact that Amy is so thin her arms resemble cane-stalks and Sethe believes that she is the "raggediest-looking trash" she ever saw, Amy automatically occupies an elevated status solely by virtue of her white skin—a fact Amy reminds Sethe of as the pair walks in the woods. After Sethe expresses concern about Amy walking with a slave in the woods, Amy's reply establishes the gulf between the two "throwaways": "I got more business here [walking in the woods] 'n you got. They catch you they cut your head off. Ain't nobody after me but I know somebody after you" (78).

Yet this scene between Amy and Sethe does support Coonradt's assertion that Amy is a "prophetic healer" precisely because Amy humbles herself by rubbing Sethe's swollen feet. White, and therefore anything but Sethe's equal, Amy nonetheless performs an act of kindness when she kneels to comfort a runaway slave. However, if Amy is Christ-like in her role as "prophetic healer," then Sethe is also elevated to a "blessed" status that exceeds her societal label as "runaway slave." Thus, Sethe is likened to Jesus' disciples who are imbued with his holy spirit after Jesus washes their feet, saying to them: "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me" (John 8:14). Correspondingly, Amy desires that Sethe tell her child about who brought her into the world: "You better tell her. You hear? Say Miss Amy Denver. Of Boston" (84). Metaphorically, Amy does divest a part of herself to the newborn child; Sethe names her baby girl Denver. The exchange between the two women reifies both Amy's *and* Sethe's claim to holiness.

Also, Denver's "watery birth" is suggestive of "baptism" that initiates her role as savior to her community, her mother, and herself (Berkowitz-Bate 37).

Beloved, then, engages in the textual script of Westernized Christianity only to reveal the limitations of a Christian foundation that is utilized by zealots to justify the enslavement of blacks. Baby Suggs refuses to subscribe to this normative discourse embedded in racist ideology. This challenge to traditional discourse is comparable to Rastafarians who desire to supplant traditional values by altering language. In "Dread Talk—The Speech of the Rastafarian in Jamaica," Velma Pollard notes that the use of the Jamaican Creole form mi/ (me) is expressly prohibited by Rastafarians (37). Rastafarians reject the Jamaican Creole form of /mi/ and use the pronoun /ai/ (I) for I, me, my, mine (Pollard 37). Thus the Jamaican Creole /mi/ form is commonly heard among Jamaicans, but not Rastafarians. For example, a Jamaican might say "mi go to the store" but a Rastafarian would say "ai and ai go to the store." Rastafarian Joseph Owens explains the rejection of the JC /mi/ as the result of the Rastafari perception which views

> The pronoun 'me' as expressive of subservience, as representative of the self-degradation that was expected of the slaves by their masters….As a consequence the pronoun 'I' has a special importance to Rastas and is expressly opposed to the servile 'me' in the singular….or the plural….or the reflexive. (Pollard 37)

While Rastafarians do not create a completely different language, they understand that the implication of this linguistic shift is "far more extensive than the Standard Jamaican English pronoun I could ever bear" (Pollard 37). In this way, Rastafarians are in

alignment with Mikhail Bakhtin's theory which views the word as not coming from the dictionary but from the mouths of others (Bakhtin 294). Similarly, Rastafarians understand that words are saturated with history (Maddison 21), laden with the "intentions of others" (Bakhtin 280). Bakhtin terms language as a form of heteroglossia that reveals the contentions between diverse groups:

> At any given moment of its historical existence, language ...represents the coexistence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth ...(Bakhtin 291)

The function of the novel is to bring "different languages into contact with another, a system for having at its goal the illumination of one language by means of another" (Bakhtin 361). In the moments of her newfound freedom, Baby Suggs draws upon the language of her former slave master to develop her own system of meaning when she asks Mr. Garner a question she has pondered for a long time—why does he call her Jenny? Mr. Garner's answer is simple: her bill of sale says Jenny. The conversation between slave master and former slave delineates discursive modes of meaning:

> "When I took you out of Carolina, Whitlow called you Jenny and Jenny Whitlow is what his bill said. Didn't he call you Jenny?"
> "No, sir. If he did I didn't hear it."
> "What did you answer to?"
> "Anything, but Suggs is what my husband name."
> "You got married, Jenny? I didn't know it."
> "Manner of speaking."
> "You know where he is, this husband?"

> "No, sir."
> "Is that Halle's daddy?"
> "No, sir."
> "Why you call him Suggs, then? His bill of sale says Whitlow too, just like yours."
> "Suggs is my name, sir. From my husband. He didn't call me Jenny."
> "What he call you?"
> "Baby."
> "Well," said Mr. Garner, going pink again, "if I was you I'd stick to Jenny Whitlow. Mrs. Baby Suggs ain't no name for a freed Negro." (142)

Here, Morrison illuminates Mr. Garner's steadfast belief of the authorial superiority of not only white men ("Whitlow called you Jenny") but the written word; Baby Suggs's "bill of sale" dictates her identification as Jenny. Baby Suggs rejects both the authorial power and the written word by maintaining that if Whitlow called her Jenny she did not hear it. In turn, Baby Suggs takes on the name of her "husband" because he *called* her that name. Despite the fact that "Mrs. Baby Suggs ain't no name for a freed Negro," it is exactly the name Baby Suggs chooses (143). Much like a Rastafarian, Baby Suggs engages in the traditional form of discourse only to alter it by removing the servile signifier of Jenny Whitlow and becoming Baby Suggs—a name that connotes a term of endearment given to her by her "husband."

Baby Suggs, therefore, constructs an alternative space for discourse through her manipulation of the dominant discourse. Justine Tally discusses this aspect in *Toni Morrison's Beloved: Origins* and views Baby Suggs as refusing to participate in a textual script that delegitimized African culture and subjugated blacks (24). Tally's discussion of the "hypomnemata, a copybook or a notebook" is particularly enlightening as she notes its likeness to schoolteacher's notebook that "calls to mind the Socratic dialogue in *Phaedrus* in which the written word is disparaged in favor of the oral precisely because

the oral word is closer to the truth" (23). Schoolteacher's observations of the Sweet Home slaves, copied into his notebook, are what Sethe believes "tore [Sixo] up for all time" as he realizes the power of the written word to devalue the African identity primarily because slaves relied on a vibrant oral history. Slaves could not produce an actual source documenting their claim to humanity; therefore, the written word imposed a "truth" upon slaves (Tally 24).

Baby Suggs rejects the name on her bill of sale precisely because it does not give her access to her own truth, specifically her conception of herself as a human being capable of emotion. Yet Tally claims that Baby Suggs experiences "a profound loss of self-knowledge" after Sethe kills her grandchild (25). I think, however, that Baby Suggs's decision to "go to bed" is incorrectly perceived by many critics as a form of surrender, and more significantly, as a departure from her oppositional stance displayed in the Clearing. Baby Suggs is not simply going to bed to contemplate color, but she also seems to go on a spiritual journey that leads to self-knowledge. Baby Suggs's journey mirrors the psychological journey Rastafarians undergo to develop an Africentric perspective devoid of all forms of oppression.[13] The spiritual journey an individual embarks on is to discover Rastafari ideals by "correcting" history through the analysis of the Bible. This journey leads to a self-awakening in which the believer achieves divine-like status because of his relationship with "Jah Rastafari" or god.[14] Baby Suggs's journey parallels

[13] Leonard Barrett, *The Rastafarians*. (Boston: Beacon Press 1997) 112. Rastafarians achieve "personal divinity" through their relationship with Haile Selassie. However, to become a Rastafarian one must enter in a divine state of "sonship." Thus, membership is granted through a spiritual awakening, not adoption, but by right to "sonship."

[14] Barrett, p.112"Jah Rastafari" is synonymous with god and the term suggests that the Rastafarian will become like God after a self-awakening.

this experience as her journey across the Ohio River stimulates her burgeoning desire for self-expression. Baby Suggs thinks of the children lost to slavery and realizes one essential fact: "she knew more about them [her children] than she knew about herself, having never had the map to discover what she was like" (140). Next, Baby Suggs goes on a journey to discover herself and the truth about the world around her.

The final step of her journey is when she retires to the keeping room that represents a "place of rest" (Reed 68). The concept of a keeping room is rooted in the sixteenth century term *keep,* which is defined as "the innermost and strongest structure or central tower of a medieval castle" and functioned as "a place of refuge and protection" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). For Baby Suggs, the keeping room "represents a period of preparation and a transitional space between her earthly ministry and future ancestral role" (Reed 68). It is also the place where, lying in bed, Baby Suggs realizes one final truth: "Those white things have taken all I had or dreamed and broke my heartstrings too. There is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks" (89). Implicit in Baby Suggs condemnation of white people is her realization that even the gatherings in the Clearing are not enough to intercede or inhibit the caprices of white people. Finally, Baby Suggs understands that white people "could prowl at will, change from one mind to another…." (244). While her preaching in the woods is beneficial to the black community, Baby Suggs finally understands that the power to change the actions of racist white people is God's task alone. The conversation between Baby Suggs and Sethe illustrates this point as Baby Suggs strips away the veil to reveal the truth:

> "They got me out of jail," Sethe once told Baby Suggs.
> "They also put you in it," she answered.

> "They drove you 'cross the river."
> "On my son's back"
> "They gave you this house."
> "Nobody *gave* me nothing."
> "I got a job from them."
> "He got a cook from them, girl."
> "Oh, some of them do all right by us."
> "And every time it's a surprise, ain't it?"
> "You didn't used to talk this way."
> "Don't box with me. There's more of us they drowned than there is all of them ever lived from the start of time. Lay down your sword. This ain't a battle; it's a rout." (245)

Baby Suggs, as Sethe points out, did not always speak this way about white people. Now, however, she understands that she alone cannot topple the racist system that subjugates blacks. It seems that Baby Suggs reaches Foucault's level of self knowledge lying in the keeping room:

> Knowledge of the self is demanded, implied by the fact that the heart should be purified to understand the Word; and it can only be purified through self-knowledge; and it is necessary that the word be received for the purification of the heart to be undertaken to lead to self-knowledge. There is therefore a circular relation between self knowledge, knowledge of the truth and the care of the self. (qtd. in Tally 25)

Baby Suggs's "heart" is stripped of all braggadocio and the purification process occurs when Baby Suggs contemplates color because she realizes that she, alone, cannot be the

bulwark against oppressive forces. Baby Suggs's preaching in the Clearing can carve out a path devoid of white oppression, but her preaching cannot curtail the actions and desires of white people. Baby Suggs's conversation with Sethe bears a resemblance to a type of verbal competition among Rastafarians referred to as the "ritual of words" (Chevannes 226). This interchange is similar to "the dozens" performed by black Americans, but is distinguished by the fact that those involved in this ritual are, in a sense, actors as some participants assume the role of Rastafari and other participants represent Babylon. And, while "playing the dozens" is structured to "totally destroy somebody else with words" (Brown 25), the purpose of the verbal game between Rastafarians is to heap insults upon Babylon (Chevannes 227). This session is a reasoning session; thus, both sides are granted the ability to present their sides of the argument with the main goal being to elicit responses from other Rastafarians (Chevannes 226). The purpose of the "ritual of words," therefore, is to figuratively destroy Babylon through a spoken word format in which the hearers are inspired into anger or submission (Chevannes 227).

The exchange between Sethe and Baby Suggs resembles this Rastafari ritual—Sethe represents the voice of Babylon and Baby Suggs embodies a Rastafari personality. Baby Suggs manipulates Sethe's responses through a subtle alteration and exposes the exploitative nature of Babylon. According to Chevannes, Rastafarians adhere to Braithwaite's concept of the significance of orality within a culture as a result of "a deeply embedded philosophical concept, rooted in African culture, which gives language the ability to acquire deeper levels of meaning than the literal, to create and to destroy" (226). The verbal exchange between Baby Suggs and Sethe is a truth-telling session in

which Baby Suggs reveals the harsh racial realities between blacks and whites—"there's more of us they drowned than there is all of them ever lived from the start of time"—presenting it as an alien culture with an insatiable desire to mistreat and murder black people. Correspondingly, Rastafarians contend that the main function of the reasoning session is to represent a symbolic form of aggression against the system as they deal only with "sounds" (words) and no harm is actually dealt against the person (Chevannes 229). Much of this attitude stems from the belief that a divine power—either Selassie or God—will intervene to finally obliterate the Babylonian institution (Chevannes 229). Baby Suggs's final words to Sethe: "Lay down your sword. This ain't a battle; it's a rout," is a final acceptance of Baby Suggs's inability to topple this Babylonian system.

Unfortunately, Baby Suggs must learn that while she can challenge and subvert the Babylonian system, she cannot overturn it. In fact, Sethe's arrival to Bluestone Road with Baby Suggs's grandchildren instigates a chain of events that initiate Baby Suggs's self-discovery. Overjoyed by the sight of her four grandchildren and Sethe, Baby Suggs takes the "two buckets of blackberries" and makes "ten, maybe twelve, pies" (137). The meal grows into a celebratory feast "that put Christmas to shame" and the neighbors feel as though the food is "too much, they thought. Where does she get it all, Baby Suggs, holy?" (137). The ex-slave community of Ohio is angered by the excessive feast (despite the fact that Baby Suggs feeds her neighbors) because they believe that Baby Suggs is performing miraculous actions typically reserved for Jesus: "Loaves and fishes were His powers—they did not belong to an ex-slave…" (137).

Mbalia posits that Morrison uses Baby Suggs to send a particular message to the black community: the only way to overcome the racial challenges of life is to rely on

collectivism (91). Mbalia further asserts that Baby Suggs's effort to feed the community is insulting precisely because she "attempts to do alone that which should be done together" (Mbalia 91). While Baby Suggs cares for the fugitive slave community and even invites her ninety friends and neighbors to the feast, the feast itself is excessive. Earlier in the novel, Baby Suggs admits that she does not "approve of extra" and that "everything depends on knowing how much. Good is knowing when to stop" (87). But Baby Suggs seems to forget this cardinal rule. This rule is also the harshest critique leveled against Western society by Rastafarians: the western world is a mere replication of Babylon as it simply does not know when to stop exploiting people, land, and animals. This type of avaricious lifestyle, Rastafarians argue, destroys any sense of communality (Edmonds 48). And just as Babylonians were punished by God for their arrogant attempt to build a tower stretching towards Heaven, Rastafarians believe all those submitting to a Babylonian lifestyle will be punished accordingly (Edmonds 43). In a sense, Baby Suggs is punished for these excessive actions when she is cast outside the black community and the protection it offers.

In the eleventh chapter of Genesis, God chastises the Babylonians by throwing them into linguistic confusion and scattering the people to different geographical locations. Baby Suggs is also punished. Swept away by the sight of Sethe and her grandchildren, Baby Suggs expands the food supply to include five turkeys, bread pudding, shortbread, batter bread, raised bread, fresh cream, ice and sugar, and ten to twelve pies (137). The crime Baby Suggs commits is unforgiveable in the eyes of her ninety neighbors, and her swell of pride occurs just before the fall. When Baby Suggs wakes the next morning, she is plunged into a fog of confusion; the "scent of

disapproval" is "heavy in the air," but she cannot immediately identify the source (137). Baby Suggs lifts her head and looks around more than three times as she does her chores, and when she finally identifies the source, she realizes that "her friends and neighbors were angry at her because she had overstepped, given too much, offended them by excess" (138). Still, there is something else, another "dark and coming" thing Baby Suggs "couldn't get at because the other odor hid it" (138). Despite Baby Suggs's effort—"she squeezed her eyes tight to see what it was but all she could make out was high-topped shoes she didn't like the look of"—she is unable to pinpoint the uneasy feeling. The image of the "high-topped shoes" is like a glimpse of a snapshot snatched away too soon; Baby Suggs cannot put the pieces of the puzzle together before schoolteacher arrives to take Sethe and her children. She struggles to decipher the meaning of the ominous "high-topped shoes" (140). Even the architectural features of 124 parallel the towering heights of the structure the Babylonians built in Genesis; 124, described as a house with "two floors," is a source of contempt for the other blacks in the community precisely because they believe Baby Suggs and Sethe are "putting on airs" since they live in a house with two stories (47). It seems as if the black community has always harbored contempt for Baby Suggs. Watching Baby Suggs prepare the food, members of the free black community remember that Baby Suggs did not actually escape slavery as many of them had, but that she had been "*driven* to the Ohio River in a wagon—free papers folded between her breasts (driven by the very man who had been her master, who also paid her resettlement fee—name of Garner), and rented a house with *two* floors *and* a well from the Bodwins…" (137). This passage nearly drips with envy, clearly expressed by the emphasis on certain words.

All of these factors ignite their fury as the small fugitive slave town is plunged into a silence so deafening it culminates in their refusal to warn Baby Suggs about the arrival of the four slave-catchers. While the residents are not geographically dispersed, those who live in 124 on Bluestone Road endure castigation from their neighbors in the form of isolation from the community. For Mbalia, Beloved is the origin of this isolation that "literally tears apart the family" and divides "124 from the rest of the African community" (91). For me, the events preceding the arrival of Beloved divide Sethe, Baby Suggs, and Denver from the African community. Although Stamp Paid's offering of blackberries starts the celebration, it is Baby Suggs's arrogant panoply of dishes that split the community and blunt her razor-sharp intuitions. Well before a "full dressed woman" walks out of the water, the black community purposely distances itself from the inhabitants of 124 (50) as they whisper to each other about "uncalled-for pride" (137). Therefore, while the fugitive slave community resides together in the same small Ohio town, 124 becomes a remote structure in the minds of the black community. 124 is basically neglected by the members of the community. Prior to Paul D's arrival, Denver and Sethe are treated as loathsome pariahs, not only because of Sethe's murderous actions, but also because of Baby Suggs' attempts to perform works exclusive to God. And, like the Babylonians, her actions backfire terribly.

The hazy confusion surrounding 124 parallels the plight of the Babylonians when God deliberately mystifies their language so they cannot understand each other. When Stamp Paid goes to visit Sethe, he is struck by one recurring thought: "124 was loud" (170). Stamp Paid hears "a conflagration of hasty voices—loud, urgent, all speaking at once so he could not make out what they were talking about or to whom" (173). And

despite the deafening sounds coming from the house, Stamp Paid "couldn't describe or cipher it to save his life" (173). However, Stamp Paid is able to make out one word: "mine" (173). This possessive pronoun is constantly repeated throughout the novel:

> Sethe: "Beloved, she my daughter. She mine." (200)
> Beloved: "I am Beloved and she is mine." (210)
> Denver: "She's mine, Beloved. She's mine." (209)

This refrain continues as the voices and stories of the three women blend together to form a single phrase: "You are mine" (217). In *Dangerous Freedom*, Phillip Page notes that while "mine" is both loving and controlling, "the novel demonstrates that no one can or should belong to anyone else and that, in fact, such possession uncomfortably resembles another form of human possession—slavery…" (139). The desire to possess another human being also suggests an inculcation of beliefs onto another person. Hence, "you are mine" is essentially saying you are mine to control, you are mine to serve, you are mine to do whatever it is that I please. And this desire to possess is also an act of hubris—an act that mirrors the actions of the Babylonians in Genesis when they conspired to develop one language for the purpose of making their values supreme. Page explains the dual purpose of the women's voices, characterizing the voices as a song that is "a testimony to their intimacy, their shared sense of family" and their common lives and memories (138). But Page also points out that the dependency of the female characters upon one another is devastating; Denver is unable to function beyond the confines of 124: "Beloved becomes increasingly tyrannical and infantile, and Sethe loses her physical and emotional strength" (138). The three women, united by their yearning to possess another human being are punished as their conditions steadily deteriorate.

The only intelligible phrase coming from the trio of women living at 124, "mine", heard by Stamp Paid is significant because it is analogous to Baby Suggs's attitude of possession surfacing shortly after she quits the Word. A resolute Stamp Paid visits Baby Suggs to encourage her to resume her duty in the Clearing:

> "You saying the white folks won? That what you saying?"
> "I'm saying they came in my yard."
> "You saying nothing counts."
> "I'm saying they came in my yard."
> "You saying God give up? Nothing left for us to do but
> pour out own blood?"
> "I'm saying they came in my yard." (179)

Here, Baby Suggs expresses contempt for schoolteacher and his brood because they had the audacity to come into her yard. Her repetition of this phrase echoes the sentiment repeated three times by Beloved, Denver, and Sethe: "You are mine" (217). Baby Suggs allows the Bodwins, the two story home, and her title as "holy" to instigate her participation in Babylonian narrative. Baby Suggs, in lamenting her inability to control what occurs in her yard, is implying that she had the power to control the actions of the slave catchers because of her esteemed status within the community. Baby Suggs's emphasis on her material possession causes her to falsely believe her yard and her family should remain beyond the control of white people. Baby Suggs must relinquish these beliefs in order to realize the truth about the world and her role in it.

Retiring to the keeping room, Baby Suggs possesses knowledge of the truth and her journey is nearly complete—nearly complete because Baby Suggs, despite her death, still has a role to fulfill. In *The Idea of Africa,* La Vinia Jennings discusses the role of the kanda in West and Central African cosmology as a "living-dead ancestor" who is "timeless" (83). Baby Suggs, Jennings explains, is a "living dead ancestor" with "vital

agency in the afterworld" (104). The idea of a spirit possessing "agency in the afterworld" is also present in Rastafari ideology. Rastafarians, believing that they have acquired the appropriate spiritual way of dealing with life, steadfastly think that they are immortal (Barrett 111). Baby Suggs's period of restoration heralds a stirring truth within Baby Suggs. Since she is not truly dead, Baby Suggs becomes the spirit-force that initiates Denver into action. Standing on the porch step, Denver hears her grandmother clearly:

> Her throat itched; her heart kicked—and then Baby Suggs laughed, clear as anything. "You mean I never told you nothing about Carolina? About your daddy? You don't remember nothing about how come I walk they way I do and about your mother's feet, not to speak of her back? I never told you all that? Is that why you can't walk down the steps? My jesus my."
>
> But you said there was no defense.
>
> "There ain't."
>
> Then what do I do?
>
> "Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on." (245)

Remarkably, Denver hears Baby Suggs's laugh. Most important, Baby Suggs' words reflect an acceptance that there is no defense against racism, but only an awareness ("know it, and go on out the yard") of the nature of a Babylonian world. Therefore, Denver must rely on the community to help her—actions Baby Suggs could not do *until* she retired to the keeping room. In striking contrast to Baby Suggs's feast, Denver's

request for help from the community "trigger[s] a chain of events which ultimately save her mother, save Denver, and heal her community" (Berkowitz-Bate 37). Denver seems to embody the spirit of Baby Suggs, who has restored her link to Rastafari as she is ready to humble herself and assist with the rebuilding of the community.

The spirit of Baby Suggs, residing now in Denver, alters the attitude of the black women living in the community. After Denver visits them, they are reminded of all Baby Suggs did for them and "the days when 124 was a way station, the place they assembled to catch news, taste oxtail soup, leave their children, cut out a skirt" (249). The women, pondering their reason for this sudden change, think that "in any case, the personal pride, the arrogant claim staked out at 124 seemed to them to have run its course" (249). Baby Suggs, through her relationship to the women as girls, is essentially born again so that when the women arrive at 124 to cast Beloved out of the house they do not see Denver, but themselves—"younger, stronger, even as little girls lying in the grass asleep" and Baby Suggs laughing and skipping among them, "urging more" (258). Baby Suggs's rebirth echoes a Rastafari concept that views life as continuous in which the atoms of the body are "utilized into the formation of other newborn babies and life continues as before" (Barrett 113). Finally, Baby Suggs has achieved a sense of communal cohesion and while, posthumously, combated the forces of Babylon.

Baby Suggs's spirit, however, does not stop there as Ella's holler instigates the praying of the women, who had "no idea what they would do once they got there" (257). But once the women join Ella, they stop praying and take "a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sounded like" (259). Reed characterizes the scene as a "re-created worship

setting of the Clearing" because the women recall their "ancestral heritage rooted in the practice of storytelling, which incorporated both sound and word" (57). Baby Suggs, like the women, steps back to the beginning when she dances to the music the people give her. Thus, the women, while some possess Christian crosses, forgo the written word to rely upon a holler that is "unarticulated, unformed, and undefined." This holler reflects a desire to construct an alternative discourse that counters the traditional Western ideology that regards the written word as superior to oral cultures (Reed 57).

The final chapter reveals the "re-remembered" history of black people. *Beloved* symbolizes the history of black people mired in blood, exploitation, slave ships and slavery. But Morrison also calls on blacks to rediscover this past and challenges blacks to remember the horrors of this journey to America. And, just as Mutabaruka warns that "dis poem shall call names", Morrison gives a voice to the "sixty million and more" for whom there remains "no clamor for a kiss" in her depiction of Sethe, Baby Suggs, and others (275).

But, as Mutabaruka cautions, spoken word, literature, and music is "just part of the story." The rarely told stories of slaves and ex-slaves must be told in order to result in "the rebirth of a people" by instigating an arising…awakening…overstanding" (*The Mystery Unfolds*). To guarantee that the awakening occurs, Morrison writes of the "crawling already baby" who is both a living person and a ghost to illuminate the experience of slaves, ensuring that this *is* a story to pass on, or else it will haunt the American psyche—both black and white.

CHAPTER THREE

THE OLDEST BLACK WOMAN IN THE WORLD: TRACING A RASTAFARI LINEAGE IN *SONG OF SOLOMON*

"Would it be ridiculous to consider our lived history as a steadily advancing neurosis?"
—Edouard Glissant, "Spatial Responses of the African Diaspora in Jamaica"

Edouard Glissant, Martinican writer, poses the above question in reference to the disjointed experience of blacks who continue to endure the psychological impact of the African Diaspora. It is a question Elizabeth Pigou-Dennis in "Spatial Responses of the African Diaspora in Jamaica" answers resoundingly: "The fact is, the cultural and political imperatives of slavery and colonialism have created behavior which can be labeled neurotic—possibly even psychotic" (150). The psychological impact of these practices—slavery and colonialism—remain etched on the psyche of these descendents of the African heritage. Many black individuals suffer from a crisis of identity that produces a sense "of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (DuBois 2). Here I utilize the notion of "double-consciousness" to suggest that Caribbean blacks experience this particular sentiment as well. This sense of "two-ness" is initiated by

racist discourse that conceptualizes black people as amoral and ugly, which results in a "peculiar type of neurosis" that splinters one's claim to a coherent identity (Pigou-Dennis 150). Although DuBois writes that the black man "wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American", Rastafarians fully honor Africa by casting aside their ties to Jamaica and England (5). By celebrating an African heritage, Rastafarians hope to combat the encroachment of "double-consciousness" so as to develop a distinct identity liberated from the residual effects of slavery and colonialism.

Song of Solomon traces the history of a black family through Milkman's efforts to uncover the story about his ancestors and their experience with slavery. The novel is also a *Bildungsroman* that captures a young man's feelings of isolation as a result of his disconnection to his past. In "Civilizations Underneath: African Heritage as Cultural Discourse in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*", Gay Wilentz characterizes the novel as an "interrogative" text that "literally invites the reader to produce answers to the questions it implicitly or explicitly raises"—an element that reflects the antiphonal quality of West African orature (61). *Song of Solomon* interrogates its readers, but it also challenges readers to rethink the traditional narrative script in which blackness is labeled in terms of inferiority. Readers set out on the journey with Milkman to discover a transcendental past. In this chapter, it is my intention to establish a link between Milkman's past and Rastafari.

Initially, Milkman lacks any sense of identity. Guitar's obsessions about race bore him, and he loses all interest in life at the age of four when he realizes he cannot fly. Having no foundation upon which he can construct a solid self-image, Milkman is plagued by neurotic thoughts; at fourteen Milkman believes that one of his legs is shorter

than the other. Milkman's deformity is never acknowledged by anyone else and while Milkman experiences shooting pains whenever he plays basketball, "the deformity was mostly in his mind" (62). Nonetheless, Milkman goes to extreme lengths to hide what he believes is a "burning defect," acquiring an exaggerated limp and dancing with "a curious stiff-legged step that the girls loved and other boys eventually copied" (62). Milkman's steadfast belief about his leg can be perceived as a metaphorical nod to the theme of flight coursing throughout the novel; since he believes his left foot is nearly half an inch off the floor, it appears he is preparing to take flight. But his obsession with this physical deformity, or lack thereof (it is not entirely clear whether Milkman's leg is actually shorter or whether he simply believes it is), also suggests that Milkman is burdened by these fears because he lacks a coherent sense of self-identity.

Without mooring, Milkman remains divorced from himself because he lacks a connection with his family and his past. He has little concept of who his parents really are, and has an even smaller understanding of who his ancestors were. On a family drive in his father's Packard, a young Milkman relieves himself in a woodsy area and his older sister goes along with him. Milkman, surprised by Magdalena's footsteps behind him, turns too soon and soils her dress with urine. Although Milkman insists he is sorry, a single and telling thought emerges in his young mind: "It was becoming a habit—this concentration on things behind him. Almost as though there were no future to be had" (SoS 35). Milkman lacks the crucial connection between himself and his ancestors. This is a connection that Morrison frequently cites as essential in creating a bridge between the past, present, and future. Morrison writes in "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" that ancestors are not merely parents, but "timeless people whose relationships to the

characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom" (335). The lack of ancestors in Milkman's life hinders his growth as a man. Instead of embracing manhood Milkman has "stretched his carefree boyhood out for thirty-one years" (SoS 98).

In turn, Milkman is disinterested in life as his sense of self is deeply fragmented. When Milkman studies his face in the mirror, he realizes that while he has splendid teeth and eyes that elicit compliments from women, his face lacks "coherence, a coming together of the features into a total self. It was all very tentative, the way he looked, like a man peeping around a corner of someplace he is not supposed to be, trying to make up his mind whether to go forwards or to turn back" (Morrison 70). For a large portion of the novel, Milkman remains in this indeterminate state, frozen by his refusal to make decisions about his own future. Through this characterization of Milkman, Morrison shows that the absence of the "ancestor" is a "frightening" event, causing "huge destruction and disarray" ("Rootedness" 335). Therefore, Milkman's saving grace *and* the novel's saving grace is the emergence of Pilate.

Pilate's birth marks her connection to a fundamental element of Rastafari: language. A conversation between Macon I and the midwife illustrates this point when he refuses to change Pilate's name despite the midwife's insistence that he select a more favorable name from the Bible because "you can't get much worse than that for a name. And a baby girl at that" (19). This exchange forces readers to consider an alternative reading of the Bible. Readers are challenged to reconsider Pilate, not as the Roman official who authorized the crucifixion of Jesus, but as a deeply compassionate woman who initiates Milkman's journey of self-discovery. Rastafarians, in accordance with

Marxist theory, understand that "what we say or think is ultimately determined by what we do. It is historical practices which lie at the bottom of our language games" (Qtd. in Eagleton 11). Marx asserts that where language and social practice meet, there arises a crystallizing moment in which the subject's role in society is made clear so that "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness" (Qtd. in Eagleton 8). Rastafarians understand that once an individual is labeled in society he begins to embody or take on the characteristics associated with that particular labeling. So, Rastafarians challenge and subvert traditional definitions developed within the dominant framework of society. In "Dread-Talk—The Speech of the Rastafarian in Jamaica," Velma Pollard outlines the alteration of both Jamaican Creole and Standard Jamaican English as the perspective of a man who is "looking up from under" because he is "pressed down socially and economically by the establishment. His speech form represents an attempt to bend the lexicon of Jamaica Creole [the standard language in Jamaica] to reflect his social situation and religious views" (32).

Macon adamantly refuses to change his daughter's name, and when the midwife questions him, his initial response reveals how he situates the meaning of the word in terms of his own limited knowledge. Since he is illiterate, he believes that Pilate refers to "a riverboat pilot" (19). However, upon learning that Pilate is for the "Christ-killing Pilate," Macon still refuses to change his daughter's name. Jan Stryz argues in "Inscribing an Origin in *Song of Solomon*" that Macon "does not merely ignore the traditional meaning of a particular written sign; he redefines writing, allowing inscribed characters to speak their own physical characteristics" (32) because Macon chooses "a

group of letters that seemed to him strong and handsome; saw in them a large figure that looked like a tree hanging in some princely but protective way over a row of smaller trees" (SoS 18). Macon reconfigures the traditional definition of the word as his perception of the word resists codified meaning, and instead reveals a deliberate distortion to reflect his own perspective. Stryz writes that even as Macon "acknowledges" the "textual source of the name," he repudiates it. Thus, although Macon is made aware of Pilate's role in the murder of Christ, he refuses to fully accept Jesus' role as savior on this occasion, saying, "I asked Jesus to save my wife" (19). Macon is revealing what Ferdinand de Saussure expressed years ago as the two-fold quality of language in which language relies both upon an "inherited social system of arbitrary signs" and the "active individual use of that system" (Qtd. in Waterman 307). The power to define oneself in opposition to the prevailing "social system" is at stake. Macon negotiates within this system only to create alternative linguistic signifiers.

Subverting conventional beliefs, Pilate alters the traditional landscape when she reveals the flaws in traditional institutions. When Milkman meets Pilate, he is nervous and can only squeak out an awkward "Hi". This greeting elicits a laugh from Pilate, and despite the fact that Milkman believes Pilate is "ugly, dirty, poor, and drunk," she embarrasses him, saying:

> "You all must be the dumbest unhung Negroes on earth. What they telling you in them schools? You say 'Hi' to pigs and sheep when you want 'em to move. When you tell a human being 'Hi,' he ought to get up and knock you down." (Morrison 37)

Although Pilate's perspective is undoubtedly colored by the fact that she has grown up on a farm and is older than the adolescent Milkman, there is an implicit challenge embedded within her words. Pilate chastises the traditional system of education, asking "what they telling you in them schools?" In doing so, she is disputing the efficacy of what is taught in the classroom. Rastafarians commonly refuse to enroll their children in schools because they feel the institution does not promote learning. Pilate is a testament to this notion. While she only has a geography book, she has "been from one end of the county to another," relying "on a storehouse of certain knowledge to survive" (139). On this same occasion, Pilate challenges traditional forms of meaning when she refers to Milkman as Hagar's brother. And when Reba tries to point out her mistake by relying on the strict definition of the word saying, "A brother is a brother if you both got the same mother…" but Pilate refuses to accept the distinction. It is the same thing, Pilate maintains, because there is no difference "in the way you act toward 'em. Don't you have to act the same way to both?" When Hagar admits this, Reba wonders, "Then why they got two words for it 'stead of one, if they ain't no difference?" (44). Reba's confusion stems from the ambivalent quality of the system of language, which is simultaneously dualistic, cogent, and ambiguous. Therefore, Pilate depicts language as a multi-faceted concept that often results in confusion or meaningless babble rather than anything meaningful.

Not only is language inadequate, but it is a lexicon that is constantly altered to reveal a fleeting spectrum of meaning that has the ability to confound even when defined. Recounting the story of her father's murder and how she stayed in the woods with

Macon, Pilate describes the multitude of colors, but suggests the inadequacy of language to capture images:

> "We were lost then. And talking about dark! You think dark is just one color, but it ain't. There're five or six kinds of black. Some silky, some woolly. Some just empty. Some like fingers. And it don't stay still. It moves and changes from one kind of black to another. Saying something is pitch black is like saying something is green. What kind of green? Green like my bottles? Green like a grasshopper? Green like a cucumber, lettuce, or green like the sky is just before it breaks loose to storm? Well, night black is the same way. May as well be a rainbow." (Morrison 41)

For Pilate, just as color refuses to stay still, meaning is fluid and can be created from within her own value system; Pilate remains in charge of her own fate precisely because she considers for herself what is valuable and what is not. Like a Rastafarian, Pilate realizes that to construct her own meaning she must not passively sit back and accept societal values as truth. Instead she must develop her own notion of identity and "stand ova it." Thus, Pilate "ovastands" that in order to do this she must rewrite the narrative to reflect her own perspective.

Pilate's actions reflect a desire to divest herself of all traditional ideologies that threaten to confine her and the ones she loves. Pilate re-conceptualizes notions of blackness, chipping away at this racist foundation when she speaks at Hagar's funeral. In

the Book of Genesis, the Egyptian handmaiden's exploitation at the hands of Sarah and Abraham is a fact that, according to Susanne Scholz, establishes Hagar's place as a cherished member in the African American community precisely because she is "enslaved, raped, but seen by God" (3). The story of Hagar is a tale Morrison reworks in *Song of Solomon* so that Hagar is exploited by Milkman for his own selfish purposes. Hagar is the "third beer…the one you drink because it's there, because it can't hurt, and because what difference does it make?" (91). The objectification of Hagar is illuminating as she becomes a symbol for the rejection of blackness itself. As Hagar lies in bed with a high fever, she insists that Milkman does not like her wooly hair and prefers "silky hair the color of a penny," "lemon-colored skin" and "gray-blue eyes with a thin nose" (317).

During the funeral Hagar, however, ascends above Milkman's rejection of her wooly hair and dark eyes. Eulogized by Pilate, Hagar symbolizes unyielding love worthy of a mournful song to reify the notion that Hagar was indeed loved:

> Suddenly, like an elephant who has just found his anger
> and lifts his trunk over the heads of the little men who want
> his teeth or his hide or his flesh or his amazing strength,
> Pilate trumpeted for the sky itself to hear, "And she was
> *loved!*" (SoS 319)

The exploitation of the elephant at the hands of "little men" parallels the exploitation of Hagar at the hands of Milkman, who has not yet taken on his responsibilities as a man. Here, Pilate overcomes not only the exploitation of Hagar, but the negative signifiers of blackness present in the traditional narrative of the exiled Hagar. Pilate's emotional

appeal is the assurance Hagar so desperately sought when she was alive; her black hair, her black skin, her black being was loved. And in praising Hagar, Pilate's trumpeting cry is also a command for members of the black community to love themselves.

Negative connotations of blackness are continually revised in *Song of Solomon* through Milkman. In "Intimate Fatality: *Song of Solomon* and the Journey Home," Beth Benedrix writes that Milkman's journey is driven by a nostalgic desire for "the sublimated—the repressed—text, the text that is covered over by the politics of power, ownership, and hierarchy" (115). Morrison, thus, unleashes Milkman from his shackles to soar freely while simultaneously bringing the narrative of the repressed from the depths of the subaltern to the forefront. Specifically, I refer to the subaltern as the nearly forgotten customs and oral histories of black people. This worldview is regarded by Morrison as the "discredited knowledge that Black people had; discredited only because Black people were discredited therefore what they *knew* was discredited" (Qtd. in Stryz 31). Morrison also reveals that in writing *Song of Solomon,* she blended realism with the supernatural, finding the experience "enhancing, not limiting" (Qtd. in Evans 353).

This enduring aspect of magical realism in African-American folklore is explored by Therese E. Higgins in *Religiosity, Cosmology, and Folklore: The African Influence in the Novels of Toni Morrison.* Higgins notes the historical significance of the flying myth in South Carolina among West African slaves who retained a distinctive Gullah dialect and stories about African slaves "who soared into the air and flew to Africa" (4). The source for Morrison's narrative is specifically related to stories from a work entitled *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes.* The similarities are strong: the names Ryna and Solomon appear in various stories from *Drum*

and Shadows. The seemingly nonsensical language Morrison uses in her own song: "Come booba yalle, come booba tambee" is similar to the language repeated by one of the African descendents interviewed in the text; Tony William Delegal remembers the words "kum baba yano" and "lai, lai tambee" being sung by his ancestors (Higgins 20). Thus, the flight motif in African and African American cosmology is indelibly linked to the shared experience of slavery among Africans. The flight motif reflects a desire to soar above oppression through supernatural forces and return to Africa—a persistent conviction among Rastafarians.

For Rastafarians, the origin of this belief, however, is rooted in a slightly different historical backdrop. Leonard Barrett, in his book entitled *The Rastafarians,* explains that the roots of Rastafari are grounded in an earlier movement known as Ethiopianism, which served as the "grassroots resistance to oppression" (76[15]). Due to their unlimited access to the Bible, black preachers began learning that Ethiopia and Egypt were African countries significant in the history of civilization. This knowledge became the building blocks for many black preachers to ascribe royalty to the African lineage. Black preachers consulted and cited scriptures such as "Princes shall come out of Egypt" and "Ethiopia shall soon stretch her hands unto God" (*New King James Version,* Psalms 68:31).

Barrett cites Marcus Garvey as the impetus for the idea of repatriation to Africa. Garvey hosted passionate speeches to inspire black masses to recognize that "Africa was peopled with a race of cultured black men, who were cultured and refined; men, who it is said, were like the gods" (Barrett 77). A return to the land of Ethiopia became necessary

[15] In 1784, the emergence of Ethiopianism was first established by the American Baptist slave preacher George Liele through the Ethiopian Baptist Church in Jamaica (Barrett 76).

because the homecoming would revive black people as holy and royal rulers of African nations (Barrett 77). Although Garvey's attempt to return to Africa failed, the idea of repatriation remains a focal point among Rastafarians. This slightly altered concept manifests itself in the Rastafari belief that a return to Africa will occur through supernatural forces (Barrett 77).

The closing events of *Song of Solomon* conclude in Milkman's knowledge of his ancestor's ability to ascend above his oppressors. When Milkman returns to Susan Byrd's house, he questions her about his grandparents Sing and Jake, and Susan mentions something about "flying Africans" (322). Milkman's interest is piqued and he immediately asks, "Why did you call Solomon a flying African?" Susan offhandedly answers: "Oh, that's just some old folks' lie they tell around here. Some of those Africans they brought over here as slaves could fly. A lot of them flew back to Africa" (322). And while Susan is quick to dismiss the flying ability of Africans as "just some old folks' lie" told around town, it is nonetheless the cultural history that Milkman proudly accepts as an integral part of his identity. Even more important is that Solomon assumes the status of a quasi-god, achieving nearly godlike status in the town through his ability to fly away from his oppressors.

Susan jokingly refers to Solomon as "hot stuff" since there "must be over forty families spread in these hills calling themselves Solomon or something or other" (322). Rastafarians believe that King Solomon, ruler over Judah and Israel, was both a wise and virtuous king, but that his tragic flaw was his "passion for women and his desire to sow his seed so that his line might continue forever" (Hausman 11). Susan's innocuous comment, that Solomon "had a whole slew of children, all over the place" and the "forty

families" claiming ties to his lineage, suggest that this Solomon had the same frailty; Solomon attempts to take Jake with him and his original twenty-one children are all boys.

And when Milkman initially visits Shalimar, Virginia and inquires about directions, he notices that Mr. Solomon pronounces Shalimar "Shalleemone" (261). The repetition of the name Solomon, Milkman's flying great-grandfather, delineates a crucial concept Milkman realizes in Danville: killing one man does not mean his whole ancestral line will die with his murder (236). Furthermore, this concept suggests that Solomon never truly dies, living on in the minds of his descendents, and in the town and people named after him. Among Rastafarians, Haile Selassie is the living God who cannot die because he is perpetually restored through music, chants, and prayers that keep him alive. Similarly, the songs and landmarks named after Solomon revive his existence in *Song of Solomon*. In the metaphorical sense, keeping the memory of Haile Selassie alive is rooted in an attempt to maintain the Rastafari claim to holiness. Haile Selassie is regarded as a god among Rastafarians due to his holy convocation as emperor of Ethiopia coupled with the belief that Haile Selassie is a descendent of King Solomon. By tracing their heritage to Haile Selassie, Rastafarians believe that they are also eternal:

> Even if a Rastafarian passes away because of old age he really is not dead. The atoms of his body pass back into the totality of things. These same atoms are again utilized into the formation of other newborn babies and life continues as before. (113)

Despite Solomon's death, his supernatural flying abilities live on through his great grandson. The ambiguous conclusion to *Song of Solomon* raises more questions

than it answers: Does Guitar kill Milkman? Or, does Guitar drop his gun and embrace Milkman? In this moment, what is clear is that, in some ways, Solomon's flying ability is transported to Milkman:

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

Milkman embodies Solomon's ability to soar above his oppressors. And Milkman's knowledge of this initiates his retrieval of the missing historical link in the chain to his African past, imbuing him with his ancestor's legendary supernatural powers. Milkman's knowledge of his great grandfather's flight to Africa instills a sense of pride and cultural heritage in him. As he swims in the river with Sweet, Milkman shouts:

> "The son of a bitch could fly! You hear me, Sweet! That motherfucker could fly! Could fly! He didn't need no airplane! Didn't need no fuckin tee double you ay. He could fly his own self!" (328)

Milkman's message is clear: his great-grandfather refused to escape in a typical fashion by fleeing north and reintegrating into the society of his oppressors. In direct parallel to Rastafari, Solomon literally absconds from his oppressors and returns to his own homeland. Solomon, therefore, relies on African core values to free himself from

slavery. Milkman's proud shouts that "he didn't need no airplane" reflects what Leachim Tufani Semaj, in his article entitled "Rastafari: From Religion to Social Theory," describes as a total and "conscious departure from participating in an alien culture and a reconstruction of an African cultural orientation in terms of worldview, ethos, and ideology" (22). Not only does Solomon escape to his native land without assistance from whites—"he could fly his own self"— but his flight pays homage to the African tradition rooted in the folklore of African slaves. Returning to Africa, Solomon can live from an "Africentric perspective" (Semaj 22).

But Solomon's actions come at a price—he is forced to abandon his children. The biblical King Solomon is also punished for his nihilism, which heralds the fall of his empire. This rendition, found in the Christian Bible, differs significantly from the version in the *Kebra Negast.*[16] Solomon is depicted as "struggling with his own mortality" and as a result of his disobedience to God, he is essentially lost (Hausman 11). The *Kebra Negast*, however, is not regarded as the dominant authorial text in the West. In fact, it is considered as a "great storehouse of legends and traditions, some historical and some of purely folklore character, derived from the Old Testament and the later Rabbinic writings, and from Egyptian (both pagan and Christian), Arabian, and Ethiopic sources" (Hausman 15). Thus, the *Kebra Negast* could be that form of knowledge Morrison considers "discredited by the West…information dismissed as 'lore' or 'gossip' or 'magic' or 'sentiment' (Qtd. in Stryz 31). Rastafarians do not regard the *Kebra Negast* as

[16] Edward Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible* (London: Oxford University Press 1968) 75. The *Kebra Negast* is written in Ge'ez and depicts the origins of the Solomonic line of the Emperors of Ethiopia. The actual text is nearly 700 years old. It tells the story of how Queen Sheba met King Solomon, the conversion of Ethiopians from worshipping the sun and moon to the "Lord God of Israel," and how the Ark of the Covenant came to Ethiopia.

magical realism or fantasy. Rather it is the lost Bible of Rastafarians expressing wisdom, faith, and the actual cultural heritage of Rastafarians.[17]

In exploring Milkman's lineage, there are certain similarities between *Song of Solomon* and the *Kebra Negast*. First, let us view Morrison's Solomon as the King Solomon found in the *Kebra Negast*. Although Solomon "could fly his own self" into freedom, his actions are nihilistic; his flight signals a total rejection of established Western laws and institutions. However, Solomon is honored just as King Solomon is: the children sing songs about him, stores are named after him (Solomon's General Store), and even physical landmarks (Solomon's Leap) honor Solomon. All of these elements depict the level of esteem the community reserves for him. The town itself seems to be named after him (Shalleemone). And Solomon's failed attempt to take Jake with him reflects his desire to carry on his lineage. Macon Dead I and Macon Dead II do achieve measures of success, but their success hinges on the ownership of land rather than ownership of their cultural past. Macon Dead I, known for having one of the "best farms in Montaur County," is blown "five feet into the air" by whites due to his possessions (41). Similarly, Macon II never soars above his greedy desire to acquire possessions. For Macon II, magic lies only in the two keys to the houses he owns, which allow him to essentially marry (buy) Ruth. Ironically, it is Milkman, nourished by Pilate, and preoccupied with things behind him, who restores the Solomonic line to holiness. Like Menyelek, the fabled son of King Solomon and Queen Sheba, Milkman shares a likeness with his great-grandfather. Milkman identifies with his great-grandfather's Africentic

[17] Some Rastafarians refer to the *Kebra Negast* as lost due to the fact that the text was largely ignored by the Western world, despite the fact that it has existed for nearly 700 years. The first English translation of the text was prepared by Sir E.A. Wallis Budge in 1922.

history and his departure from the "alien world" of whites. Before receiving knowledge of Solomon's other-worldly traits, Milkman is devoid of the necessary cultural link to his past, so he is unable to claim Solomon as his descendent. For much of his life, Milkman heard the tremor in the word my *people* but never felt this tremor stir within him when referring to his people. It is his knowledge of Solomon's god-like status that allows him to understand and possess this connection to his *people* (229).

All roads of self-discovery, however, originate with Pilate. Milkman establishes a connection to his *people* because Pilate is a life-sustaining force for Milkman precisely because her compassion has no boundaries. There is the deliberate juxtaposition of Pilate against Ruth and Hagar, women whose love is overbearing, and possessive. Ruth's love for Milkman is more of an obsession: "Her son had never been a person to her, a separate real person. He had always been a passion" (131). Thus, when Ruth learns of Hagar's plot to kill her son she is determined to impede Hagar's efforts, but not because she wants to protect her son from harm. Instead Ruth views "her son's imminent death as the annihilation of the last occasion she had been made love to" (134). Milkman *belongs* to Ruth; he is a possession she cannot afford to lose as it would confirm her own worthlessness. This is why Ruth breastfeeds Milkman even after his legs dangle to the ground: "She had the distinct impression that his lips were pulling from her a thread of light. It was as though she were a cauldron issuing spinning gold" (13). This unnatural act—unnatural because Milkman is far too old for it to continue—is "a pleasure she hated to give up" (14). Hagar's love is also possessive and despite Guitar's warnings that she should not bind or wrap Milkman, Hagar steadily desires to possess him (306). It is little

surprise, then, that Milkman does not "give a pile of swan shit" for either of the women (137).

In contrast, Pilate's love is like the clouds swirling around a mountain; Pilate neither covers nor binds Milkman with her love (306). Pilate ensures Milkman's survival even before he is born. Pilate's life-sustaining role is significant when examining her through Rastafari spectacles. Although women are excluded from political thought, they are viewed as the "keepers of domesticity" a title that connotes the high regard for which women are held, specifically within the domestic sphere. Although Pilate is described by her brother as a "raggedy bootlegging bitch", she exemplifies the honorable role of protector and cultivator of domestic relationships in Rastafari (SoS 204). When Ruth, trapped in her loveless marriage to Macon, craves the physical touch of her husband, it is Pilate she calls upon to seduce Macon into a "sexual hypnosis" (131). Pilate's mysterious gift of the "nasty greenish-gray powder" to Ruth—"stirred into rain water and put into Macon's food"—is the concoction from which Milkman is conceived. And, Ruth once again flees to Pilate's Southside home when Macon employs his abortive techniques to rid Ruth of the baby; Pilate's home becomes a beacon of safety.

Pilate initiates Milkman's birth and she also saves his life before he makes his physical entrance into the world. As Ruth travels to the Southside again upon learning of Hagar's attempts to kill Milkman, she imagines for a moment "that Pilate who had brought her son to life in the first place, was now bound to see him dead" (131). Ruth's musings cause her to remember how, years ago, Pilate fed her "Argo cornstarch" that calmed her and supplied what the unborn baby had been craving. Also, Pilate wraps Ruth up in a homemade girdle to protect her from Macon. Years later, Ruth learns that Pilate

terrified Macon into submission by placing a small "male doll with a small painted chicken bone stuck between its legs and a round red circle painted on its body" on Macon's office chair (SoS 132). The protection Pilate offers is vital to Milkman—without it, Milkman would not have entered the world of the living.

Yet Pilate does more than just safeguard Milkman's physical entrance into the world; she provides Milkman with the necessary clues he needs to put the pieces of his historical past together. In the first chapter, Pilate unknowingly sings a song about their ancestor, Solomon, and foretells the birth of Milkman. While watching children play during his visit to the small town, Milkman's initial interest is piqued by the song because he is reminded of Pilate's bluesy song that "he had heard off and on all his life" (SoS 301). Milkman's knowledge of the "Sugarman" song is the impetus that spurs his discovery of the rich facts about his cultural heritage. As transporter of Milkman's heritage, Pilate's role in *Song of Solomon* resembles Queen Sheba's role in *The Kebra Negast.* Rastafarians interpret the brief union between Queen Sheba and King Solomon as producing an Ethiopian son, Menyelek. Rastafarians cite Menyelek as heir of a rich Ethiopian heritage by virtue of Queen Sheba's mystical powers that are bestowed upon Meneyelek (Hausman 12). Queen Sheba "waited until the appropriate time and turned over the affairs of state to him, [thereby] granting him all her powers" (Hausman 13). [18] Although Pilate does not physically give birth to Milkman, she offers him physical

[18] Leeman, p. 66.The notion of Queen Sheba as a mystic are related to a number of myths about her mother who was conceived of as a sort of "jinn" or genie with unusual powers and special knowledge in healing, divination, or rainmaking. Her mother's "powers" seem to bestow Queen Sheba with sharp intellectual ability. As a child, she is noted for solving difficult riddles [quicker and faster than her own mother]. As Queen Sheba, she challenges King Solomon to a series of difficult riddles. Due to her remarkable intellect, her ability to exercise free will, and paired with the fact that she was a woman, Queen Sheba became a mystic due to capabilities thought to be reserved for men during this time.

protection and later gives him the invaluable gift of his cultural heritage, allowing him to finally soar at the end of novel.

However, as Stryz and other critics point out, Pilate gets the lyrics wrong, substituting "Sugarman" for "Solomon" (31). Yet Jane Campbell in *Mythical Black Fiction* sees the substitution not as a blunder by an illiterate person who displaces the biblical referent of Solomon to "Sugarman" but as Morrison's decision to lure readers "into expecting a fictionalization of the Biblical song of Solomon but [replacing] Christian associations with African ones" (152). Pilate's mistake is the result of the "fragmented" quality of the African oral tradition and "not an ignorance of the written text" (Stryz 32). Pilate's song is the key to Milkman's discovery and is representative of the esteemed position of orality within the African community. Milkman's journey, then, is also a recovery of his identity through the discovery of oral tradition. In doing this, Morrison produces a unique text "that fictionally creates its own unwritten source while also affirming the value of the unwritten [oral] tradition" (Stryz 32). Pilate's song is an ode to the fragmented oral tradition (Stryz 31).

But "Sugarman" also bears obvious similarities to the "Milkman" moniker (Higgins 16). And like "Sugarman" (Solomon), Milkman leaves Hagar behind; Solomon leaps into the air as Ryna throws herself all over the ground, loses her mind, and is still crying in the ditch for her lover. Ryna's madness parallels Hagar's own insanity. Additionally, Milkman yearns to fly even at age four and loses interest in everything when he believes he cannot. Still he dreams of flying and by the end of the novel, he realizes that "if you surrendered to the air, you could ride it" (337). Thus, Milkman embodies the spirit of his great-grandfather and returns the Solomonic line to glory. In

the *Kebra Negast*, too, King Solomon's only hope is that his Ethiopian son "will outshine his own accomplishments and bring greater glory to a new Solomonic line of kings" (Hausman 12).

The fabled story of Queen Sheba's childhood is another connection Pilate has with this central figure in Rastafari. The circumstances surrounding Pilate's birth mirror Makeda's own ascendance as the mystical Queen Sheba In the *Kebra Negast,* Queen Sheba is described as a simple and "pretty Abyssinian girl" named Makeda who experiences an event that sets her apart from the rest of the community, and thus, "to her befell the opportunity to become a mystic ruler, one who had been chosen by some force of nature" (Hausman 67). As a young girl, Makeda hides behind the branches of a tree after seeing a dragon. Just as she sees the dragon, a group of holy Ethiopian saints slay the creature, but not before a single drop of blood splashes onto the girl's foot. The girl's foot is transformed into a cloven hoof, but the girl is honored as Queen Sheba among the villagers who incorrectly believe she killed the dragon (Hausman 69). And while Queen Sheba is healed by the powerful King Solomon, she retains a sense of otherworldliness precisely because of her physical deformity. Wilentz points out that "Pilate also has mystical powers. She is born without a navel, which allows her special privileges as a conjure woman, even though it separates her—like any religious figure—from her community" (66). Pilate's physical characteristic, or lack thereof, is therefore twofold—it both distances her from the black community but seems to bring her closer to the role of a mystic among blacks precisely because she is deemed otherworldly. For Stryz, Pilate is the "embodied name of evil, a transgressor of both spirit and flesh" (34). The women of the small community who, after learning she has no navel, send her off with more than

her share of earnings do this because they are afraid "that she might hurt them in some way if she got angry, and they also felt pity along with their terror of having been in the company of something God never made" (144).

Although an outcast, Pilate is bewitching and seems to cast a spell over others. When Reba's lover abuses her, Pilate shows up just in time to skillfully jab the tip of a knife into the man's heart, scaring him so badly he runs out of sight and down the road. Interestingly, the neighbors do not call the police but gather in Pilate's backyard, craning their necks to hear Pilate's menacing words to the man, knowing that Pilate "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" (Morrison 94). Thus, black people simultaneously reject Pilate for her deviation from the norm, but also elevate her to an unearthly status. In a 1983 interview with Nellie McKay, Morrison says, "Pilate is larger than life and never really dies in that sense. She was not born, anyway—she gave birth to herself" (Taylor-Guthrie 146).

In the mythical story of the *Kebra Negast,* Queen Sheba is believed to actually surpass the wisdom of Solomon, nearly rivaling his power. Pilate, nearly as tall as Macon, is also described by Morrison in "Memory, Creation and Writing" as the "oldest black woman in the world, the mother of mothers" (387). And Milkman's sudden realization at the close of the novel that "without ever leaving the ground, she could fly" connects her to her flying ancestor, Solomon. And Milkman witnesses an instance in which he sees Pilate "step out of her skin" (Morrison 94). After Milkman's and Guitar's attempt to steal Pilate's "gold" fails and they are stopped by police officers, Pilate shows

up and spins a creative yarn about the green bag being filled with her lynched husband's bones. Although Pilate is lying in an attempt to thwart punishment for her nephew and Guitar and is described by Milkman as "Louise Beaver and Butterfly McQueen rolled up in one," Milkman notices something extraordinary; Pilate looks different. In the receiving room of the jail, Milkman thinks that Pilate "didn't even come up to the sergeant's shoulder—and the sergeant's head barely reached Milkman's own chin" (206). Yet Pilate transforms during the ride home in the car, and Milkman notices that "Pilate was tall again. The top of her head, wrapped in a silk rag, almost touched the roof of the car, as did theirs" (207). Pilate's strength seems to return to her and Milkman observes that when they get out of the Buick, Pilate's back is not even bent under the weight of the sack (208).

The source, however, of Pilate's mythical abilities stems from her unyielding desire to love all people. After the violent incident in the cave, Pilate is the one who refuses to steal the man's gold, later insisting that "you can't take a life and walk off and leave it. Life is life. Precious. And the dead you kill is yours" (208). Pilate's compassion causes her to return to the cave and scoop up what she believes to be the dead man's bones, "piece by piece" (208). As "the mother of mothers," Pilate is the crucial balance between the domestic sphere and the social sphere, and acquires a "deep concern for and about human relationships" (SoS 149). Pilate extends herself to Milkman but others as well. In the presence of Milkman and Guitar she recalls the time she locked her fingers around the man's chest who believed he was falling off a cliff. The man falls "stone dead" because Pilate lets go when the man's skeptical wife enters the kitchen (41).

Pilate, therefore, revives and cultivates human relationships. In fact, this is Pilate's only concern and is her saving grace—she does not allow her own desires to consume her. Pilate, like Solomon before her, constructs her own perspective, refusing to submit to a culture she views as alien. After Pilate realizes that her lack of a navel isolates her from the rest of the community, she decides to begin at zero: cutting her hair and "trying to decide how she wanted to live and what was valuable to her" (149). Pilate seeks to answer the basic question of "what is true in the world" and her journey leads her to discover truth within herself as she acquires knowledge based upon her assessment of the world around her (SoS 149). Pilate's self-discovery mirrors Rastafari, as the movement "derives not from a body of systematic or logical truths but rather from the psychological, emotional content of the ideology" (Barrett 103). Thus, "what people [Rastafarians] believe or assert emphatically represents a social force which cannot be disposed of merely by denial" (Barrett 103). This is the crux of Rastafari thought and is displayed in their appropriation of the Bible—Rastafarians reject and accept elements of the Christian Bible, but they also construct their own perspectives that counter traditional Western beliefs. Pilate not only thinks as a Rastafarian, but she lives like one.

In "To Live This Life Intensely and Well: The Rebirth of Milkman Dead in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," David Z. Wehner characterizes Pilate's house as "off the grid" since her house has no electricity, no telephone and no number. Wehner likens Pilate to the title character from *The Invisible Man* whose association with electricity is a metaphor about the "power and ubiquity of white hegemonic culture" (Wehner 79). Morrison, Wehner writes, is making a larger statement about the African American experience, and that is to "have life as an African American…is partly a question of

where one positions oneself in relation to the grid of white hegemonic culture" (80). Clearly, Pilate does not want any part of "white hegemonic culture" and Wilentz notes that "Pilate's house resembles one in a traditional African village compound" (66). Similarly, Rastafarians construct shacks designed specifically to resemble the shantytowns of Africa, and neither electricity nor clean water, in some cases, flow through the compound. This is certainly a result of economical factors, but Rastafarians maintain that squatting on fragmented land space in these shacks is a testament to "black marginality" (Dennis 159). Thus, the characterization of Rastafarians as backwards and without refinement is frequent. And, this characterization appears in Macon's assessment of Pilate when he goes to her house, seeking solace after a long day of work. Macon thinks that his sister lives "pretty much as though progress was a word that meant walking a little further down the road" (27). Macon, of course, views Pilate through his parochial view, grounded in "white hegemonic culture" (Wehner 80). Macon places value only in the ability to possess things, specifically land and money.

Pilate desires a different lifestyle as she does not want to be ruled by a world that can only limit and confine her. Therefore, Pilate chooses her profession as a bootlegger not because of the profits it can yield her, but because the skill allows her "more freedom hour by hour and day by day than any other a work a woman of no means whatsoever and no inclination to make love for money could choose" (150). Pilate maintains that she makes and sells liquor but she never drinks the alcohol. Rastafarians adamantly refuse to drink liquor of any kind, a belief that stems from their desire to cultivate I-tal food

(Barrett 140).[19] Thus, Pilate's construction of her own lifestyle, free from an alien and white culture, places her within the bounds of Rastafari as a cultural savior to Milkman.

Milkman's journey down South is a journey of ancestral reclamation that uncovers a vibrant past grounded in Rastafari folklore. Pilate's transportation of knowledge imbues Milkman with all he needs to finally become whole. And he learns, as Pilate did, that he must consider what is valuable to him. Like the beautiful peacock weighed down by his jewelry, Milkman realizes that in order to fly he must divest himself of all earthly ties that bound him previously. Milkman's excursion down South allows him to realize his worth, and after hunting "he is exhilarated by simply walking the earth" and for the first time, he walks the earth as though he belonged on it and he does not limp (281). Now, Milkman realizes the significance of Guitar's words: "Everybody wants a black man's life…not his dead life; I mean his living life" (281). Milkman understands that his life is valuable due to his connection to a rich historical past. Before this experience, he was dead—disinterested and apathetic in life. Milkman learns that his life is worth living. This is a concept Pilate has always understood, becoming Milkman's savior again as she is felled by a bullet intended for Milkman.

And while Milkman's ability to fly comes on the heels of Pilate's death, Milkman finally realizes his love for Pilate and her exceptional character. His final words reveal his desire to find another like her: "There's got to be at least one more woman like you" (336). But there is no other like her; Pilate's compassionate nature distinguishes her as one of a kind, and as Milkman cradles her in his arms, she expresses a desire to love:

[19] Leonard Barrett, *The Rastafarians*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997) 140. The term I-tal signifies a desire to live and eat naturally. Consequently, Rastafarians drink herbal tea made from natural herbs and roots.

"I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would of loved 'em all. If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more" (336).

The physical death of Pilate is, as Morrison says, "irrelevant" because "she gave birth to herself" (Taylor-Guthrie 146-147). What is relevant, however, is the gift Pilate gives to Milkman. Armed with his ancestral history, Milkman can soar above a world in which the lives of four little black girls are deemed worthless.[20] *Song of Solomon* restructures the racial system that frequently casts blacks as lowly and ignorant species. Milkman's leap into the air exemplifies his desire to construct a lifestyle reflective of his own unique cultural heritage. By leaping into the air, Milkman achieves the same sense of freedom his great-grandfather experienced before him. Milkman flies away from societal conventions that threaten to confine him. At the close of the novel, Milkman understands that "everybody wants a black man's life" because blackness is not only worth living for; it is life (SoS 218). But the significance of Milkman's sudden realization is that he comes to this conclusion through the reclamation of his past. He does not violently lash out against white people as Guitar does. Milkman does not become avaricious and cold-hearted like his father. Instead Milkman relies on the stories of ancestors that act as a salve, healing Milkman's splintered identity.

The healing process Milkman experiences reverberates throughout Morrison's 1993 Nobel Lecture speech in which she recalls the story of an old woman, who is revered in the community for her clairvoyant powers despite her blindness. A group of young people visit her one day. Initially, it seems as though the young people are intent

[20] Frank Sikora, *Until Justice Rolls Down: The Birmingham Church Bombing Case.* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press 1991) .On September 15, 1963, members of the Ku Klux Klan bombed a church in Birmingham, Alabama. The bombing incident killed four black girls.

on proving the old woman is a fraud. They ask her one question: "Is the bird we hold living or dead?" The exchange between the old woman and the young people represents the tenuous relationship with the ancestor that Morrison believes is essential to understanding one's place in the world. In response to their question, the woman says, "I don't know. I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands." Since the bird is a metaphor for language, in saying this, the old woman is giving the young people a chance to discover the magic of language—a chance to define the world in accordance to their own perspective. But this answer is not enough. The young people reject her "made-for-television script that makes no sense if there is nothing in [their] hands." Their retort reveals their need to hear the old woman's stories in order to gain an understanding about themselves:

> You are an adult. The old one, the wise one. Stop thinking about saving your face. Think of our lives and tell us your particularized world. Make up a story. Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created. We will not blame you if your reach exceeds your grasp; if love so ignites your words they go down in flames and nothing is left but their scald. Or if, with the reticence of a surgeon's hands, your words suture only the places where blood might flow…For our sake and yours forget your name in the street; tell us what the world has been to you in the

> dark places and in the light…Tell us what it is to be a
> woman so that we may know what it is to be a man.
> What moves at the margin. What it is to have no home
> in this place…

The children's response reflects Morrison's belief that the ancestor must be a source of wisdom for the youth; the children cannot understand their place in the world until they know the old woman's story. Pilate exemplifies the role of the ancestor in *Song of Solomon*, guiding Milkman's path by supplying him with her own knowledge about the world. Relying on Pilate's knowledge, Milkman solves the mystery surrounding his ancestry—he understands his grandfather's cryptic messages: "You just can't fly on off and leave a body," and Pilate's mistaken belief that her father was telling her to "sing" (332). Pilate receives this information as a gift. Morrison again emphasizes the collaborative relationship between the ancestor and youth in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech. After the children finish speaking, the old woman is pleased. "Finally," she says, "I trust you now. I trust you with the bird that is not in your hands because you have truly caught it. Look. How lovely it is, this thing we have done—together." Milkman and Pilate's ability to work together to restore their ancestral heritage mirrors this story, underscoring the need for an ancestor. And, the collaboration also alludes to the interdependent relationship between men and women in Rastafari. Rastawoman Judy Mowatt explains this relationship:

> "We know as rasta queens and sisters that a woman is just
> as important as a man in the sight of God, and we live to
> please God and to live with man as brothers and

> sisters…We are equal because, whatever is revealed to a man is revealed to a woman. It's not that a man has more knowledge…than a woman. It's the same mind that God has put in a man that a woman has, but it's the one who develops it more and uses it wisely…" (Yawney 3)

It is only through Pilate's instruction that Milkman is able to uncover the truth about himself and his ancestors. Milkman develops the clues Pilate gives to him and together they decipher these clues, restoring their ancestors to glory.

PostScript

"You work with one facet of a prism, you know, just one side, or maybe this side, and it has millions of sides, and then you read a book and there is somebody who is a black woman who has this sensibility and this and she's over here writing about that side of this huge sort of diamond thing that I see, and then you read another book and somebody has written about another side. And you know eventually that whole thing will be lit—all of these planes and all of the facets. But it's all one diamond, it's all one diamond. […] This fantastic jewel that throws back light constantly and is constantly changing because even the face that I may have cleaned or cleared or dealt with will change"

—Toni Morrison, "A Conversation: Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison"

Morrison's fiction emerges out of a desire to write literature that is indicative of the black experience. This desire to produce literature illustrative of the black community raises concern as it runs the risk of depicting black people as a monolithic group. On one hand, Morrison's focus on the black community underscores the shared bond between people who share a particular ethnic heritage. At the same time, it also bolsters the myth of black people as a uniform race of people operating as a single mind. But Morrison avoids this trap by taking readers down a path that explores the specific cosmology, religiosity, and folk traditions of black people (Higgins ix). In order to understand

Morrison's fiction, one must perform the necessary task of excavating the African past. It is also crucial to understand that the black people Morrison writes for are not simply Africans, or African Americans. Rather they form a community, its members stretching from one end of the earth to another, of diverse black people for whom Morrison writes. This community cannot be defined without first realizing it as a blend of Christian, African, and Caribbean worldviews.

As I have shown in the previous chapters, there is a significant parallel between Morrison's works and Rastafari. The link is the constant attempt to restore Africa to a place of prominence by blending one's unique experience in America and the Caribbean with the memory of Africa. In her 1993 Nobel Lecture, Toni Morrison told the story of an old woman musing about the Tower of Babel story:

> The conventional wisdom of the Tower of Babel story is that the collapse was a misfortune. That it was the distraction, or the weight of many languages that precipitated the tower's failed architecture. That one monolithic language would have expedited the building and heaven would have been reached. Whose heaven, she wonders? And what kind? Perhaps the achievement of Paradise was premature, a little hasty if no one could take the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives period. Had they, the heaven they imagined might have been found at their feet… ("Toni Morrison Nobel Lecture")

Embedded into the above passage is the acknowledgement and celebration of diverse perspectives and cultures. The old woman's musings—"Whose heaven, she wonders?"—suggest that this utopia may just be a replica of the oppressive relationships on earth. Both Morrison's novels and Rastafari reflect the desire to overturn these repressive structures by taking the reins from the oppressor. Even though this is a task fraught with risk, it must be done in order to achieve self-expression. Only then, can the celebratory process occur.

As a little girl growing up in Ohio, Morrison remembers hearing the ghost stories and African legends that were "outside the Bible" (qtd. in Higgins 5). Yet Morrison was raised in an especially religious family that relied heavily on Christian religion, taking the Bible "very seriously" (qtd. in Higgins 5). Morrison's own childhood illustrates the ways in which the black experience is a mosaic of various folklores, traditions, and religion. Too often, however, critics analyze Morrison as simply appropriating Western religion. Analyses like these also negate the fact that Morrison's works are informed by African and Afro Caribbean cosmologies as well. The Rastafari themes present in *Beloved*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Tar Baby* show that there is need for critical dialogue examining the black community as one would examine a diamond, paying close attention to the "millions of sides" that are representative of the multi-faceted quality of blackness.

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