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# Literature as Prophecy: Toni Morrison as Prophetic Writer

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# LITERATURE AS PROPHECY: TONI MORRISON AS PROPHETIC WRITER

by

KHALILAH TYRI WATSON

Under the Direction of Dr. Mary B. Zeigler

## ABSTRACT

From fourteenth century medieval literature to contemporary American and African American literature, researchers have singled out and analyzed writing from every genre that is prophetic in nature, predicting or warning about events, both revolutionary and dire, to come. One twentieth-century American whose work embodies the essence of warning and foretelling through history-laden literature is Toni Morrison. This modern-day literary prophet reinterprets eras gone by through what she calls “re-memory” in order to guide her readers, and her society, to a greater understanding of the consequences of slavery and racism in America and to prompt both races to escape the pernicious effects of this heritage.

Several critics have recognized and written about Morrison’s unique style of prophetic prose. These critics, however, have either taken a general cursory analysis of her complete body of works or they are only focused on one of her texts as a site of evidence. Despite the many critical essays and journal articles that have been written about Morrison as literary prophet, no

critic has extensively investigated Morrison's major works by way of textual analysis under this subject, to discuss Morrison prophetic prose, her motivation for engaging in a form of prophetic writing, and the context of this writing in a wider general, as well as an African-American, tradition.

This dissertation takes on a more comprehensive, cross-sectional analysis of her works that has been previously employed, concentrating on five of Morrison's major novels: *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, *Jazz* and *Paradise*, in an order to assess how Morrison develops and infuses warnings and admonitions of biblical proportions. This investigation seeks to reveal Morrison's motivation to prophecy to Americans, black and white, the context in which she engages with her historical and contemporary subjects, and the nature of the admonitions to present and future action she offers to what she sees as a contemporary generation of socially and historically oblivious African Americans, using literary prophecy as the tool by which to accomplish her objectives. This dissertation also demonstrates—by way of textual analysis and literary theory—the evolution through five novels of Morrison's development as a literary prophet.

INDEX WORDS: Toni Morrison, Prophecy, Prophet, Scripture, Literature and Prophecy, Toni Morrison and Prophecy, Toni Morrison and The Bible, Toni Morrison and The Holy Quran, *Beloved*, *Jazz*, *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon*, *Paradise*, *Mercy*.

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Georgia State University

2009

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2009

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## DEDICATION

“The fathers may soar, so the children can know their names.”—*Song of Solomon*

First, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my deceased father—Henry Watson. It is his words of his unfulfilled desire to be a writer, and of him telling me that I must complete this PhD Program at Georgia State University, which has quietly inspired me to finish this project. It is his words that have resonated with me, during the last seven years of this journey. Next, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to all of the students that I have been blessed to instruct, who have inadvertently helped me to craft my own style of writing. They have taught me how to teach, how to read, how to write, and how to critically think about literature—thank you. These students that I speak of were in my Freshman English Composition or African American Literature classes at Georgia State University, Texas Southern University, Kennedy-King College, Olive-Harvey College, and finally, my High School English Students at Muhammad University of Islam-Chicago.

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Introduction: History Bears Witness to the Literary Prophetic Tradition	1
Chapter One: The Writer must Bear Witness: The Literary Prophet Defined	4
Chapter Two: “A Slow Walk of Trees”: The Moldings of a Literary Prophet	16
Chapter Three: “The House that Race Built”: The Awakening of Toni Morrison’s Prophetic Mission	28
Chapter Four: “Unspeakable Things Unspoken”: Prophetic Declarations in Toni Morrison’s Historical Trilogy	58
Chapter Five: “Accepting the Prophetic Responsibility”: Toni Morrison’s Messages and the Measurements of Success	93
BIBLIOGRAPHY	107

## INTRODUCTION:

### HISTORY BEARS WITNESS TO THE LITERARY PROPHETIC TRADITION

The role of the prophet or the notion of prophecy as written in both *The Holy Bible* and *The Holy Qu'ran* has been in existence almost since the beginning of the human age. A prophet or messenger of God is born into the world to set matters aright or to redirect human creation. In the same way that a biblical prophet is sent to deliver his/her people, the writer that functions as a literary prophet takes on the task, through his/her writing, by critiquing or providing guidance to the society that he/she quietly observes.

Like the Biblical and Qu'ranic prophets, the literary prophet considers the historical events of the past in the context of the present, then provides the critique, the warning, and/or the challenge to her or his audience about the deleterious societal conditions and the need for human reformation.

Morrison began to cultivate a heightened sensitivity to unjust societal ills as a result of certain childhood experiences. It further developed while she served as an editor for many up-and-coming Black writers. While Toni Morrison did not deliberately or purposefully begin to create fiction with historical and restorative imperatives, eventually all of her works began to revisit the historical implications of black life in America. Her literary prophetic platform bears witness to the challenges of being Black in America during times of slavery and all the later periods of social injustice, prejudice, segregation, racism, sexism, and classism; her work tackles the issues of religion and standards of beauty as well.

Like the biblical prophet, the literary prophet fulfills an extraordinary role as an exhortative writer. More specifically, a prophetic writer discusses in contemporary terms, the

overall condition that creates disparities in human treatment leading to negative and destructive perspectives of self and others and offers guidance for present and future generations to break the cycle of false hope followed by despair.

Chapter One: “The Writer must Bear Witness: The Literary Prophet Defined” provides the reader with the definition, origin, and conceptual analysis of prophets and prophecy. It also discusses other critics who have delved into the topic of Morrison as a literary prophet.

Chapter Two: “A Slow Walk of Trees: The Moldings of a Literary Prophet” discusses how Morrison’s childhood and her eventual awareness of the role of writer as a witness bearer, affected her writing style. Similar to the prophets of the Bible, who are chosen by God, but not totally aware of their significance and who are sometimes surprised by the call to prophesy, and may even resist it, Morrison reveals her own gradual acceptance of this difficult role.

Chapter Three: “The House that Race Built: The Awakening of Toni Morrison’s” Prophetic Mission” discusses two of Morrison’s seminal early works, *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon*. Through the vehicle of fiction, in *The Bluest Eye*, she imagines the psychological damage and social psychosis of a young black girl as a coming of age story; and in *Song of Solomon*, she provides the story of a young black man on a genealogical quest and in search for truth about his family’s past or history, in hopes that he will inevitably develop a keener sense of self.

This chapter works through the characters and the narrative voice that Morrison imagines, along with pointing out several distinct comparisons to the prophetic tradition: hearing voices that bear witness and the construction of parables as memorable as those in Old and New Testaments tales. Morrison’s prophetic voice strips away the layers in the lives of a young black

girl desiring blue eyes and a young black man who believes he has to go on a journey to find himself.

Chapter Four: “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: Prophetic Declarations in Toni Morrison’s Historical Trilogy” provides an in-depth, cross-sectional, anachronic analysis of the textual sites within Morrison’s historical trilogy: *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*, to show how Morrison consistently evokes painful historical periods in the Black-American experience and uses them as the basis for forewarning the present generation about repeating the past.

Chapter Five: “Accepting Prophetic Responsibility: Toni Morrison’s Messages and Her Measurement of Success” concludes by establishing how each of Morrison’s novels demonstrates the many ways Morrison exemplifies various aspects of literary prophetic role. This chapter also seeks to re-iterate how Morrison’s literary prophetic role allows her to function as a seer, as a foreteller, as a visionary, and as one who holds up an abstract mirror for society to critically view itself.

## CHAPTER ONE:

### THE WRITER MUST BEAR WITNESS: THE LITERARY PROPHET DEFINED

#### General: Religion as Foundation

The foundation of my argument begins with the definition of prophecy and the role it has played in religious, cultural and literary history. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines prophecy as “an inspired utterance of a prophet, esp. Biblical; the function or vocation of a prophet; *specifically*: the inspired declaration of divine will and purpose; a prediction of something to come” (666). Thus, prophecy is defined not merely as the specific utterance or the words of the prophet and how the prophet carries out his/her role, but as inspired utterances of a higher being, or we might say, simply a higher than ordinary human purpose. More specifically, prophecy is the act of one predicting what is to come and often what the prophet’s audience must do to escape or accept future events. In order to understand Toni Morrison, one can not begin to discuss the notion of a literary prophet without seeking the various origins of the word “prophecy,” and given Morrison’s own social context and sense of the prophetic tradition, one must begin with the historical origin or connection to prophecy in the *Holy Bible*.

In Western culture, prophecy gets much of its meaning and power from the language and interpretations of the Old and New Testaments, as well as from Greek mythology and Roman culture. Many Old Testament prophets responded to deeply disapproved evils with lamentations, as well as with threats and dire predictions, and they were often portrayed as rejected by their hearers. Both accepting and undertaking the role of prophet was rarely easy or even a successful choice in life, a condition prefigured in classical literature, where prophets such as Tiresias or Cassandra are not understood or readily accepted by those whom they warn.

In Islam, the *Holy Qur'an* holds the same place of eminence and reverence as the *Holy Bible* does in Christianity. In Islamic history, one discovers that without the role of one of the Prophet Muhammad's companions, Umar, none of the Muslims from around the world would have the beautiful book—*The Holy Qur'an*, which serves as a guide for all humanity. In *The Holy Qur'an*, in Surah 96: The Clot, we are admonished, “Read in the name of thy Lord who creates—Creates man from a clot, Read and thy Lord is most Generous, who taught by the pen, Taught man what he knew not” (Ali 1228). Here it is in the act of writing and the use of the pen that prophecy teaches people what they otherwise would not know.

In looking at the significance of *The Holy Bible*, several preachers, bishops, ministers, and theological scholars often re-state the biblical words of John 1:1: “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God.” Thus, it is also in words that guidance, instruction, and moral tools are conveyed. It is also in written words where acts of and the root meanings of prophecy can be found.

According to B Salem Foad's *God's Prophets: Evidence from the Qu'ran*:

God's Prophets were human beings chosen and prepared by God to deliver His message to their own people. They lived by this message and were therefore examples to follow. They exhibited the characteristics of patience and tolerance. They were kind and cared for their people, and they wanted to guide them. Despite the opposition, rejection, and abuse, they never lost hope, and they were determined and never lost sight of their goals and objectives. (1)

After God's Prophet's are chosen and prepared, then they are given the task to deliver His message to their own people. It is also understood that in this process they remained focused on the mission of providing a guidance that would warn and save others.

In *The Religion of Islam*, in Part Two: Principles of Islam, Chapter Five: “Prophets,” the role of the prophets is further explained:

not only [is he] the bearer of the Divine message but he also shows how that message is to be interpreted in practical life; and therefore he is the model to be followed...Noah was sent “to his people,” ... It speaks of Moses as being commanded to bring forth thy people from darkness into light, it speaks of Jesus as “a messenger to the children of Isreal” but in speaking of Prophet Muhammad it says in unequivocal words that “We have not sent thee but as a bearer of good news and as a warner to all mankind”(Ali 166-8).

The interpretation of practical life is a key component to this explanation of the prophetic role; thus, the role of the prophets mentioned in the Bible and the Holy Qu’ran are applicable to others in the secular realm, including contemporary writers—that is, writers who in their own time take on the burden of bearing news and warning humankind. Time and time again, history demonstrates, how prophetic voices are continuously chosen and sent to a people in need of guidance.

Within charismatic Roman Catholic Ritual, argues Thomas J. Csordas in “Prophecy and the Performance,”

the literal word of God, *prophecy* is the most overtly sacred genre of Catholic charismatic ritual language. This status is highlighted in performance by distinctive features of prosody and the imposition of formal constraints on the diction. Prophecies are typically uttered in a strong, clear voice and in a tone that can be declamatory, authoritative, or imperative. Prophecies are usually prefaced by an opening formula, most often ‘My children’ or ‘My people.’ There is a characteristic intonation pattern within each line of prophecy: the voice rises in the middle and falls again at the end of the line, producing a singsong effect. Prophecy is usually recited in couplets, a technique common in both oral and written traditional poetry (322).

Both Christian and Islamic cultures acknowledge that God’s prophets were human beings chosen and prepared by God to deliver His message to their own people, and both cultures place similar emphasis upon the value of linguistic expression, through voice or writing, as an important element of the prophet’s skills. Whether speaker or writer, the prophet must have a command of language to gain the attention of his/her audience.



## THE CRITICS: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In *Poetic Prophecy in Western Literature* (1983), Jan Wojcik and Raymond Jean

Frontain survey British Literature for writers with reputations for being prophetic:

From Langland, the Gawain poet, and the Chaucer of the great dream visions; through Spenser, the Shakespeare whose career concludes in the visionary *Tempest*, and Milton; and down through Smart, Gray, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Yeats, the English poet has been concerned with how and what man sees and has been determined to reveal or uncover—whether in dreams, vision, opium state, or psychic trance—the world beyond the one the average man sees but that actually determines the moral and spiritual significance of the quotidian... Whether because the poet by definition must be concerned with the nature of insight and inspiration, or because certain religious traditions demand that the person of heightened consciousness develop a certain type of vision, the visionary tradition exists as the greatest one in English Literature. (21-22)

Here the operative word is visionary, a term we shall return to later in this study.

In “Henry Thoreau, John Brown and the Problem of Prophetic Action” (2002) Lewis

Hyde echoes Wojcik and Frontain’s reading of “Prophecy as Vision” with a reference to the passionate anti-slavery partisanship of Henry Thoreau:

Such large aspirations give Thoreau’s writing their prophetic cast. By “prophetic” I do not mean that he engages in any literal predicting of the future. In the spiritual tradition to which Thoreau was heir, the prophet does not tell us that some celebrity will marry next year, or that the price of oil will soon rise. Rather, the prophet speaks of things that will be true in the future because they are true in all time. (126)

In this statement Hyde is suggesting that there is an intimate relationship between the prophet and history as well as between the prophet and the future. The poet-prophet can speak about the future because he is aware of what happened in the past, which if not learned from, will dictate dire future occurrences.

Aside from the poet-prophet’s role in knowing the past in order to foretell future consequences of human action, another dimension of prophecy has simply to do with the power

of language. Because it is in the eloquence of the words chosen by the prophet that his/her prophetic message become even more powerful. John Leavitt's *Poetry and Prophecy: The Anthropological of Inspiration* provides another historical-spiritual reading of the intricate relationship between prophecy and poetry. The introduction to this text provides a great explanation of the divine power that lies within the forms of expression which great writers have at their command:

Some words are so powerful that they are attributed to super human agencies: this is what, in Western traditions, has been called prophecy, oracular speech, or speaking in tongues. Some words are so moving and beautiful that they are attributed to a special faculty or skill on the part of the speaker or writer: this is what, in Western traditions, has been called poetry or poetic language. Both poetry and prophecy are culturally marked forms of speech, and one criterion, at least, of the marking of both of them is power. (3)

The uncanny poetic power of the great writer is thus linked to the prophetic tradition. The inspired writer composes words that immediately create meanings larger than their recorded definitions and writes sentences that transcend their literal meanings.

Musical prophecy, Albert Roustit observes, is another form of bearing witness though it does not necessarily have a biblical or spiritual connections. Like the kinds of "prophetic" expression found in many forms of graphic and oral art, prophecy in music functions as an abstract mirror for the society from which it comes:

Drawing its inspiration from everything which surrounds it, music contains everything that man has been able to see and to experience throughout the course of history from the influence of religion up to freedom of the people. However, prophecies concerning men appear as revelation, with men free to choose their own way; the characteristic of musical prophecy is fatality, since it appears after the destiny of man has taken a new orientation. Prophecies about mankind announce how things are going to happen. Musical prophecy announces how things have to happen...(74)

Obviously referring to ostensibly secular music, Roustit makes a comment about one of the arts that is in keeping with the equally humanistic judgment of David Loye, who in “The Knowable Future: A Psychology of Forecasting and Prophecy” writes the following:

We may see, then, that, whether or not it may seem to defy logic, and whether or not we believe in biblical prophecy, astrology or I Ching, in actuality, everyone of us daily acts on the fact that a great portion of the future *is* knowable... We seek out the soothsayer, the fortune teller—or the economist, sociologist, or the system analyst specializing in forecasting. While this may be generally wise, the irony is that it also appears the ‘gift of prophecy’ is, to varying degrees, within each of us...” (Loye 4)

All of these observations and definitions share the sense that the prophetic voice proceeds from deep knowledge of either the history or the culture from which it comes, along with the prophet’s critical examination of human nature in general. The act of the prophet is especially exercised by what she or he perceives going on in the world; the vision can be expressed in parables, abstract phrases, powerful metaphors and compelling words as well as in the simple language of the times, which is nonetheless elevated above ordinary discourse, if only by the poet’s passionate sense of a special mission. All prophetic messages share a common thread—which is to convey a seriousness of intent, to employ an uncommonly powerful expression, to express a deep-seated morality, and to demonstrate the power of concentration—of all, which makes the medium of prophetic utterances far more striking than everyday expression.

In closely examining the role of the black writer in American literature, whose first articulation appeared in the form of protest literature, one discovers that the black writer has from the beginning manifested a literary prophetic tradition—as the writer that “bears witness” to black life and exhorts action for a change of fate. It is a tradition that can also be traced back to or beyond the early African-American experience to African culture. For example, in the

article, “The Way We Do: a Preliminary Investigation of the African Roots of African American Performance,” Gale Jackson states:

For the African, the overriding collective truth to be publicly told in the early history of this country was the story of journey, oppression, slavery and liberation. In thousands of work songs, blues songs, and spirituals; in thousands of oral witness and written narratives; in early publication of black drama, African Americans voiced a communal desire to tell their story and to have it passed on. This outpouring of witness often used mythological forms which prefigured the formal religious “witness” of the Afro-Christian church, but are consistent with its passion, its sense of mission and urgency. (3)

In this article, Jackson emphasizes the overriding African communal collective truths that are publicly told in the early history of this country, through the methods of oral witnessing as the writer is also serving as a witness bearer.

Early articulations of witnessing link back to African mythology that existed before the Black church’s tradition of witnessing, including the significant tradition of African folklore and story-telling, which all began through the role of the African griot. In the African oral traditions, the griot is the speaker-prophet or the truth-sayer within the community; the griot is also known as the elder figure that has the awesome but complicated task of being the historian and the record-keeper within the community. Other critics have also borne witness to this significant role. In the introduction to the book *Griot and Griottess: Masters of Words and Music*, Thomas Hale writes: “On May 17, 1967, another traveler, the American writer Alex Haley, went to Juffure, a village in The Gambia on what was once the western fringe of the Mali empire. There he encountered a man of griot, or jail, origin who recounted what Haley reported to be a narrative about Haley’s family roots in Africa. For the American, the words of this man provided a link between his American ancestors and an African heritage nearly erased by the slave trade” (2). Haley explains that “the incumbent griot will be a man usually in his late sixties, early

seventies, and underneath him will be men separated by about a decade intervals...each line of griots will be the experts in the story of a major family clan...another line of griots would be experts in the history of a group of villages...And the stories were told in a narrative, oral history way, not verbatim, but the essential same way they had been told down across the times since the forefather” (Haley 15-6).

Based upon these descriptions of the religious and the secular poetic prophet and the African griot, it seems quite clear that Toni Morrison, though a writer of fiction, fits all of these roles as she engages her readers with the arts of historian, witness bearer, and storyteller. Yvonne Atkinson addresses how Morrison’s use of language allows for an additional clear connection to this prophetic reading:

Some of Morrison’s most memorable characters wield the power of the word. They are tellers of tales: Claudia in *The Bluest Eye*, Eva in *Sula*, Pilate in *Song of Solomon*, Therese in *Tar Baby*, Baby Suggs and Sethe in *Beloved*, and the narrator in *Jazz*. These characters may not appear to be the “traditional” models of correctness and beauty, but in Morrison’s novels beauty is perceived through a different lens. The non-traditional characters become the griots of Morrison’s fictional worlds, caretakers of knowledge, guardians of history” (21)

## **MORRISON CRITICISMS**

The matchless qualities of Morrison’s achievement as a writer who bears witness are further revealed even in how various critics, in book reviews or scholarly articles, classify her. For example, Margo Jefferson’s review of *Song of Solomon* captures in totality the significance of Morrison artistic gift as a writer who bears witness: “A Toni Morrison novel generally resembles a beautifully patterned quilt. One begins by admiring the intricacies of each square and ends surprised and delighted by the way the disparate fragments combine to form the grand design of the whole” (93). Jefferson aptly points out that Morrison’s skill as a writer is much like the quilt-maker’s, beautifully weaving together each square that tells its own story. Each

square singularly is a fragmented representation, but when the pieces are sewn together, creating a whole body of work, the display is complex and coherent.

Continuing such laudable reviews, *Atlantic* correspondent Wilfrid Sheed noted that “Most black writers are privy, like the rest of us, to bits and pieces of the street, the dark side of their group experience, but Toni Morrison uniquely seems to have all the keys on her chain, like a house detective...She [uses] the run of the whole place, from the ghetto to small town to ramshackle farmhouse, to bring back a panorama of black myth and reality that [dazzles] the senses “(119).

Charles Larson, a writer from the *Chicago Tribune Book World*, says that each of Morrison’s novels is “as original as anything that has appeared in our literature in the last twenty years. The contemporaneity that unites them—the troubling persistence of racism in America—is infused with an urgency that only a black writer can have about our society” (“Our Heart of Darkness”). Larson praises the originality of Morrison’s work, which may not be duplicated by another.

Along with these critical observations of Morrison’s role as a writer that bears witness, another aspect of her method that warrants literary critical commentary may be found in Julia Eichelberger’s *Prophets of Recognition*. Eichelberger offers a close reading of Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, comparing her with other writers whom she believes are also “prophets of recognition”. In the introduction of this text, Eichelberger proclaims: “In my title I call these four writers: Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, Saul Bellow and Eudora Welty, ‘prophets of recognition’ because I believe they offer readers a vision of an unrealized democracy in which individuals acknowledge or recognize the innate worth of one another” (2). Along with Eichelberger, I am particularly fascinated with this notion of the individual acknowledgement of innate self worth as

a common theme in many works of American literature, especially African American Literature. The journey to discover the innate self-worth of an individual is one of the many themes that is closely related to the real lives of so many Black Americans, thus making it one of the most interesting and prevalent fictional themes for many Black writers and literary critics. And I embrace Eichelberger's primary concern for how writers like Morrison depict another aspect of the democratic ways of American life, in which the African American individuals are in search of an authentic self in relation to how self-worth is depicted by others. These individuals are placed in a peculiar yet unique circumstance, because they have to measure themselves against the standards of American democracy and what constitutes the American Dream even when democracy is denied and the dream is deferred. As a result, the theme of self-worth or a search for an authentic self is a journey that remains at the core of the black experience in America, a theme that has drawn Morrison's deep interest and inspired some of her most poetic prophetic expression within the writings of American prose.

In "Is Morrison Also Among the Prophets?: Psychoanalytic' Strategies in *Beloved*," Iyunolu Osagie argues for Morrison's status as a different kind of prophet:

Yes, Morrison can be counted among the prophets of psychoanalysis. Her application of psychoanalytic material, as a rhetorical strategy, deliberately calls attention to, and lays claim to, the double status of the African American as a split subject. This strategy also arms Morrison with a prophetic voice that heralds on stage a contemplation on what a slave past means for the African American, without bracketing the multiple hermeneutic possibilities such a contemplation provokes. (424)

The double status of the African American as a split subject—enslaved and free and African and American—is, Osagie explains, "the interior life" that Morrison tries to depict in *Beloved*. This double status alludes to the cultural theoretical prophecy that W.E.B Du Bois—Morrison's prophetic progenitor—made in 1903 with his writing of *The Souls of Black Folk*. In this text, Du

Bois prophesies about the problems with the colorline in American culture and the “double consciousness” in the identity politics of African Americans.

Another variation of criticism that proclaims Morrison in the prophetic tradition is Carolyn Denard’s comprehensive entry on “Toni Morrison” in *Modern American Women Writers*. She argues there that

Morrison has become a kind of literary Moses—stripping away the idols of whiteness and of blackness that have prevented blacks in the United States from knowing themselves, and trying in her works to give them their own true words to live by. Her readers are energized intellectually by where she places the distancing culprits of society; they are moved by the poetry of her language; and they are nurtured and empowered by her trust in memory; and her always masterful affirmation of that which they have forgotten or never knew about the rich cultural life of their past. (335)

In her comparison of Morrison to Moses, a celebrated Biblical prophet, Denard also suggest the “prophetic” stature of Morrison as seer (the visionary), as one whose vision is wider than her people and as the one who can show them the way. As a literary Moses, Morrison must “deliver” Blacks from the confusion and denigration that racism has caused in this country.

Through Morrison’s “masterful” depictions of memory and history, Morrison’s role as a literary prophet becomes further defined, revealing her efforts of “bearing witness” to the importance of black history and the future of black culture. This tradition of bearing witness and its application to Toni Morrison as being like Moses can also be found in Danielle Taylor-Guthrie’s summative words in “Conversation with Alice Childress and Toni Morrison,” where she argues that “In that first interview with Alice Childress, Morrison defines the role of the writer as “witness bearer”—an idea that will be repeated throughout her career. The ability to bear witness is closely tied to her concept of prophecy that if not religious, certainly has sacred undertones. This prophecy or bearing witness, in her fiction is essential to her belief that the future is inextricably tied to the past”(x-xi).



At the center of Morrison's prophetic utterances are her intense study and deep appreciation for history. For example, in an August 1974 essay in the *New York Times Magazine* entitled "It is like growing up black one more time: Rediscovering Black History," Toni Morrison acknowledges that "despite years, despite the decades of... academic energy, there is very little scholarly recognition that a major part of American history is the history of black people: how they influenced whites and how whites influenced them" (36). Morrison's provocative critical observation, in effect explains why, through the creation of her novels, she has felt compelled, like prophets of past, to give an account of the historical omissions that she has observed and a dramatic explanation of the consequences of that omission.

While some critics have spoken of the prophetic tradition in the analysis of a single text and even compared Morrison to other prolific American writers; in this dissertation, I will seek to demonstrate how, in most of her novels, especially the historical trilogy, and in some of her nonfiction writings, Morrison heroically develops and establishes herself as a literary prophet of the highest order in order to convey a message that concerns the past, the present, and the future. By merging history, truth and an organic imagination, in each of her novels, she reclaims the perspective that Black History is American History; and a history that is still in need of being properly and completely told. Through her characters and their words, Morrison thus continues not only the African tradition of the griot, preserving tribal history, but she clearly embodies the mission of both the religious and the secular poetic prophet, telling the stories of the past in a singular way, in hope for a better American future.

**CHAPTER TWO:**  
**“A SLOW WALK OF THE TREES”—THE MOLDING OF A LITERARY  
PROPHET**

A closer look at the biographical aspects of Morrison’s life uncovers some of the distinctive components that molded her into a literary prophet. This molding process began during her childhood, when she was told about the effects that racism and prejudice had on some of her closest family members. It was also during this childhood time that she and her family engaged in one of her family’s most enjoyable traditions—storytelling. This early exposure to the art of storytelling is part of her childhood foundation to tell her own stories. An influence often spoken of in her interviews, speeches and lectures where she declares the significant and critical role that language, writing, and the writer must play in American society. Morrison’s journey not only as a writer that bears witness, but as a public intellectual reveals how she has walked in the footsteps of prophetic voices that have gone before her.

**HER CHILDHOOD**

There are several childhood influences to which Morrison attributes her writing career, from the advice given by some of her eldest family members, to the places where they lived to the fond memories that are associated with her childhood upbringing. Toni Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford on February 18, 1931 in Lorain, Ohio, the second of four children raised in a family that had endured economic and social adversity in the deep South. As a child of the Great Depression era, Morrison witnessed the struggles of her parents, George and Ramah Willis Wofford, to support their family. As Morrison’s parents grappled with economic hardship, they

also struggled to retain their sense of worth in a socially oppressive world. In an interview entitled “Blacks, Modernism and The American South: An Interview with Toni Morrison,” she speaks of her perceptions gained from her parents:

They had diametrically opposed positions. My father was born in Georgia. My mother was born in Alabama. Both were from very small towns in those states. My father thought that the most racist state in the Union was Georgia and that it would never change. My mother had much fonder memories. She was very nostalgic about the South. But she never visited—ever. While my father went back every year. Quarreling and fussing all the way, he went back to see his family—aunts, uncles—there. So I grew up with a complicated notion of the South, neither sentimental not wholly frightening. On the one hand, with no encouragement, my mother was nostalgic about the Alabama farm, yet she would talk in a language of fear about her family’s escape from the South. On the other hand, my father recounted vividly the violence that he had seen first-hand from White southerners, but he regularly returned. (Denard1)

Although eventually migrating from the South, Morrison’s father not only carried the baggage containing his personal belongings, but he also carried the baggage associated with witnessing some of the most “shocking impressions of adult white people” during his childhood in Georgia. One such impression stemmed from the excruciating pain her father experienced when he observed some “strange fruit” dangling from an oak tree. The pain intensified as he discovered that the “strange fruit” was one of this close childhood friends.

Meanwhile, Morrison’s mother’s internalization of the South being socially oppressive stems from her parents “[losing] their land, like a lot of black people at the turn of the century, and they were sharecroppers, which meant they were never able to get out of debt” (Strouse 53). Some of her mother’s insecurities derived from her family’s unsuccessful bout with sharecropping and cruel living conditions, but also from, her father’s strong general distrust of white people; inevitably, these stories of negative consequences and racial injustice indirectly continued to shape Morrison’s views on the past and future life of Black Americans. In her

novel *Beloved* (1987), one of the main characters, Sethe reflects upon the presence and the words once spoken to her by her dead mother-in-law [Baby Suggs]:

Sethe wanted to be there now. At the least to listen to the spaces that the long-ago singing had left behind. At the most to get a clue from her husband's dead mother as to what she should do with her sword and shield now, dear Jesus, now nine years after Baby Suggs, holy, proved herself a liar, dismissed her great heart and lay in the keeping-room bed roused once in a while by a craving for color and not for another thing... Those white things have taken all I had or dreamed," she said, "and broke my heartstrings too. There is no bad luck in the world but white folks" (Morrison 105).

In this scene, Sethe is not only remembering the sacred grounds or the place of worship for the slaves on her plantation, but she is also recalling the holy presence of her mother-in-law in the Ohio town to which they have escaped at a great price. Baby Suggs serves as the female-preacher and as the prophetic voice or the Jesus figure in the community. Yet, before Baby Suggs' death, Sethe is remembering how even this great woman had a lack of heart and felt bereft. At the end of Baby Suggs' life, she does not think all of she has accomplished, but instead articulates how the white people have taken all she had and how she considers them to be bad luck. Into this small moment within *Beloved*, Morrison has infused the socio-political, historical, and religious aspects of black life that she gleaned from her parents' memories of the South and her grandparents' outlooks on life.

Morrison provides an explanation of her grandparents' point of view about the problems with race in American Society, from the late 1800's to the early 1900's, in the essay "A Slow Walk of Trees (as Grandmother Would Say), Hopeless (as Grandfather Would Say)" written in 1976. Beginning with her grandfather's point of view - while making a connection between the American life that her grandparents witnessed and the present - Morrison writes:

Hopeless, he'd said. Hopeless. For he was certain that white people of every political, religious, geographical, and economic background would band together against black people everywhere when they felt the threat of our progress. And a

hundred years after he sought safety from the white man's "promise," somebody put a bullet in Martin Luther King's brain. And not long after that some excellent samples of the master race demonstrated their courage and virility by dynamiting some little black girls to death. If he were here now, my grandfather, he would shake his head, close his eyes, and pull out his violin—too polite to say, "I told you so."(qtd by Denard 5)

Later on in her life, while in college and travelling with the Howard University Repertory Theatre, Morrison observed first-hand different conditions of the South, contrasting those ideas that gave rise to her grandfather's "hopeless" disposition. In fact, she states that "what impressed [her] when [she] first went to the South for a sustained period of time (with the theater group from Howard) was the sight of so many people like [her], like [her] relatives... While it is true that [she] was going into a white domain, what [she] was aware of primarily are the Black people there, and they were like people in Lorain, Ohio" (Denard 1).

Along with this different glimpse of the South, her grandfather's idea of "hopelessness" about the future of the black race and her father's mistrust of white people still served as part of the historical foundation that later develops in her writings. Eventually, Morrison began to use her writings and the creation of her novels to project the harsh or painful reality of the black community. In the *Song of Solomon*, through Milkman's character, Morrison envisions the black men that her father knew. Milkman's transformative experience occurs during his journey to trace his genealogical roots, hoping to eventually proclaim a new self.

This same notion of a new reality is depicted in the novel *Paradise*, in the experiences that each woman has from visiting and staying at the Convent, in the final scene of this novel she writes, "There is nothing to beat this solace which is what Piedade's song is about, although the words evoke memories neither one has ever had: reaching age in the company of the other; of speech shared and divided bread smoking from the fire; the unambivalent bliss of going home to be at home—the ease of coming back to love begun" (Morrison 318). It is in these final words

that Morrison functions as the visionary, while also holding up an abstract mirror for society. Morrison is speaking directly to her readers about a space and place in time where race will not allow for exclusivity and pre-judgment, but there will be ultimate peace, bliss and love.

As a writer, Morrison recognized that there were aspects of history that were being excluded from the production of American literature; and in being aware of such, she also knew that she could not write in some sort of vacuum, only satisfying herself. Instead, she had to write in a way that would benefit her community. In her first effort to write for her community, she creates the novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and develops the life of Pecola Breedlove. In this text, written in 1993, Morrison presents her reasoning:

The extremity of Pecola's case stemmed largely from a crippled and crippling family—unlike the average black family and unlike the narrator's. But singular as Pecola's life was, I believed some aspects of her woundability were lodged in all young girls. In exploring the social and domestic aggression that could cause a child to literally fall apart, I mounted a series of rejections, some routine, some exceptional, some monstrous, all while trying hard to avoid complicity in the demonization process Pecola was subjected to. (Morrison 211)

While the extremity of Pecola's case is treated as a singular account, not only in comparison to the other characters in the novel but also within the black family structure, Morrison still admits that the aspects of “woundability” that Pecola experiences may be a problem for all young girls. So, in her effort to portray an isolated fictional representation of the psychological impact of race and the conceptions of beauty on a young girl, part of her motivation stems from how other children or young girls may be affected by various levels of rejection in American society and race is an issue. Morrison claims that she writes “village literature—fiction that is really for the village, for the tribe. Her exact words are that “Peasant literature that is for my people, which is necessary and legitimate but which allows me to get in touch with all sorts of people” (Taylor-Guthrie 120-1).

## THE IMPACT OF STORYTELLING

These ideas of “village literature” and writing for the community are still derived in part from the strong sense of family ties that was created from her family’s tradition of storytelling. In “An Interview with Toni Morrison,” in 1983, Morrison gives Nellie McKay an account of how prevalent the act of storytelling was during her childhood. “The business of storytelling was a shared activity between [family members] and people of both genders participated in it. We, the children, were encouraged to participate in it at a very early age. This was true with my grandfather and grandmother, as well as with my father and mother, and with my uncles and aunts” (Taylor-Guthrie 140-1). Other accounts of her fond memories of other storytelling experience are also given in other interviews: “As a child I was brought up on ghost stories—part of the entertainment was storytelling. Also I grew up with people who believed it. When they would tell you stories about visions, they didn’t tell them as though they were visions” (qtd in Reames 10). Along with the family participating and placing a great significance on storytelling, Morrison further explains how her childhood greatly impacted her adult life as an editor, as a writer, and as a critic. In this same interview with Nellie McKay, Morrison explains how she gained such an appreciation for her own black culture. As Danielle Taylor-Guthrie summarizes,

Black lore, black music, black language, and all the myths and rituals of black culture were the prominent elements in the early life of Toni Morrison. Her grandfather played violin, her parents told thrilling and terrifying ghost stories, and her mother sang and played numbers by decoding dream symbols as they were manifest in a dream book that she kept. She [had] a childhood world filled with signs, visitations, and ways of knowing that encompassed more than concrete reality. (139)

These childhood experiences helped to craft Morrison's ability to incorporate music, myths, history, fact, fiction and an exceptional use of language in developing her own stories and her own unique writing style.

Reading diverse literature also helped to shape her style of writing. In a 1981 *Newsweek Article*, "Toni Morrison's Black Magic" Jean Strouse writes about how Morrison recalls her teenage years:

As a studious adolescent, she read the great Russian novels, 'Madame Bovary,' Jane Austen. Those books were not written for a little black girl in Lorain, Ohio, but they were so magnificently done that I got them anyway—they spoke directly to me out of their own specificity. I wasn't thinking of writing then—I wanted to be a dancer like Maria Tallchief—but when I wrote my first novel years later, I wanted to capture that same specificity about the nature and feeling of the culture I grew up in. (Strouse 54)

In her Nobel Lecture in Literature, given on December 07, 1993, she begins by narrating parts of a story that she admits having heard several times, perhaps as a child:

Once upon a time there was an old woman. Blind but wise. Or was it an old man? A guru perhaps. Or a griot soothing restless children. I have heard this story, or one exactly like it, in the lore of several cultures.

Once upon a time there was an old woman. Blind. Wise. In this version the woman is the daughter of slaves, black American, lives alone in a small house outside of town. Her reputation for wisdom is without peer and without question. Among her people she is both the law and its transgression. The honor she is paid and the awe in which she is held reach beyond her neighborhood to places far away; to the city where the intelligence of rural prophets is the source of much amusement...

One day the old woman is visited by some young people who seem to be bent on disproving her clairvoyance and showing her up for the fraud they believe she is. Their plan is simple: they enter her house and ask one question the answer to which rides solely on her difference from them, a difference they regard as a profound disability: her blindness. (qtd in Denard 199)

While there are various ways to interpret Morrison's telling of this story, primarily Morrison is alluding to the importance of the use of language and what language symbolizes in American society. She uses the metaphor of an old black woman, young children and a bird to show that



language mirrors the vicissitudes of a specific culture; and the power that language brings, depending on how one chooses to use it. Then, throughout this lecture, she continues to show how within this tradition of storytelling, a deeper message is being given about the use of language and within the role of the writer in society.

In her delivery with such a unique lecture style and in the explanation of the meaning of her story, this speech can even be compared to how parables are written in both *The Holy Bible* and in *The Holy Qu'ran*, wherein the message is only significant and decipherable for those who have the tools to properly interpret its meaning. In carefully, parsing the lines of this text, honing in on its significance, in the article “Meditations on a Bird in the Hand: Ethics and Aesthetics in a Parable by Toni Morrison,” Cheryl Lester interprets Morrison’s methodology and the purpose of this story:

Morrison reminds her audience that storytelling is as old as the sun, crucial to the formation of societies as well as subjects, worthy of respect and emulation. Storytelling may well be, she argues, among our most enduring recollections and primal scenes of learning. Interweaving the conventions of storytelling with the conventions of lecturing...By telling this story, Morrison assumes the position of the wise old storyteller, and she places her distinguished audience in the place of the inquiring children who have come to visit her. Perhaps her audience, like those children want proof of Morrison’s wisdom, answers to their questions. In response to this demand, real or imaginary, Morrison turns her lecture into a reflecting pool, inviting us to consider and reconsider both her position and our own. (127-8)

Morrison is the old wise woman that feeds the soul of the “restless children”—the audience that is seated before her hanging on to her every word, listening to her in hopes of a certain answer. Yet, mirroring the ultimate exchange between the old woman, the young children and the bird, her listeners are eventually told that the answers (that is what to do with language) lie within them. It is “Morrison’s belief that the language you use can animate or stifle meaningful relationships with others, ourselves and our past” (Lester 125-6). It is in this historically

significant moment in Morrison's life that one can see how her childhood, her love of storytelling and her own views on the importance of language, in response to receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature, manifests her role as a literary prophet. All at once, Morrison foretells and forewarns everyone about the mishandling of language, history, and a people.

### **MORRISON'S EXPLANATION OF HER STORYTELLING STYLE**

Echoing her words from the Nobel Lecture speech and Morrison's belief that language can produce meaningful relationships dependent upon how others choose to use it, she answered a query answering the question about not having a lead character in one her novels: *Paradise* (1997) Morrison states, "I wanted to force the reader to become acquainted with the communities. I wanted—you to have to look at each one of these people and figure out who each one was and then see their relationship to each other...I wanted the weight of interpretation to be on the reader"(Oprah Book Club Interview). For Morrison, the reader is an agent of his/her own literary experience, and like the old wise woman in her Nobel Lecture that symbolizes the power of language, once again Morrison is stating that the act of interpretation, reading, and critical thinking is not a responsibility just for the writer or the storyteller but also for the reader.

In an ancillary examination of Morrison's claims about language and the role of the writer, in the interview "The Language Must Not Sweat: A Conversation with Toni Morrison" with Thomas LeClair in 1981, Morrison avows that

[the writer] thinks long and carefully about what novels ought to do. They should clarify the roles that have become obscured: they ought to identify those things in the past that are useful and those things that are not: and they ought to give nourishment. There has to be a mode, to do what the music did for blacks, what we used to be able to do with each other in private and in that civilization that existed underneath the white civilization. I think that accounts for the address in the book. I am not explaining anything to anybody. My work *bears witness* and suggests who the outlaws were, who survived under what circumstances and why,

what was legal inside the community as opposed to what was legal outside it. (qtd in Taylor-Guthrie 122)

Here, her argument is that novels not only provide nourishment, but have influence similar to the significance of how music also bears witness to black life; and, through her role as writer, she has deliberately and carefully decided that her novels ought to “bear witness”— witness to survival, witness to oppression, witness to isolation, witness to pain, and, most importantly, witness to history. Bearing witness is acknowledged as a central concept to her writing, stemming from her young adult experiences with black myth and folklore, along with the critical assertions of her parents and grandparents to her own apprehensions, to her absorption of well-know great world literature. This notion of bearing witness also serves as a key element of her role as a literary prophet.

### **CONNECTION OF STORY TO MORRISON AS LITERARY PROPHET**

In the journey of Morrison’s literary life, she has travelled along the linguistic path that seeks to restore, validate, and declare the significance of the use of language and the methods used to tell the real stories that have helped to create the narrative of American history. It is within her role as one who bears witness that the vocation of literary prophet is awakened. While Morrison does not give herself such a title, but admits that the writer must “bear witness” (qtd in Taylor-Guthrie 4), it is clear from her methods of storytelling and of writing that she embodies the characteristics of such a historically significant figure as the prophet. Likewise, in support of the discovery of Morrison’s prophetic role, there have been other critical observations of such, yet not a thorough investigation of this kind by others. Even mostly recently, in one of George Shulman’s 2009 Blogs, “Civil Religion, Prophecy and Obama,” Morrison is included in an historical overview of “the prophetic tradition of language and criticism in American history and

politics.” Not only does this article provide a compelling read of such a tradition in America, by expounding upon the historical narrative for such assertions, defining the word “prophecy,” and placing Morrison within the tradition of other literary and biblical prophets. Shulman writes:

Like the biblical prophets, critics in the American prophetic tradition remember what people would forget, not only the haunting consequences of conduct in the past and the present, but also those Toni Morrison calls “the disremembered and unaccounted for.” They thus perform central aspects of the “office” of prophecy as depicted in the Bible. First, they speak as messengers, to announce unspeakable truths and inescapable realities, which people disavow, but which they must acknowledge if they are to flourish. When Amos announces to God, when Nietzsche announces the death of God, when Frederick Douglass depicts how the freedom of some depends on the slavery of others, when Baldwin names “the price of the ticket,” or when Morrison depicts the disavowed past ruling the present, they avowedly draw on prophecy as a genre to make imperative claims about truths we deny at great cost. (Shulman, “Civil Religion, prophecy and Obama )

Morrison is concerned about “the disremembered and the unaccounted for” and like the biblical prophets who are primarily concerned about the past and the present or like the literary prophetic Frederick Douglass and James Baldwin, she is unwilling to deny the truth at any cost. Further supporting George Shulman’s inclusion of Morrison within the historical American tradition of prophecy, Morrison also proclaims that within the function of the black writer and the significance of the genre of African American Literature, all artistic expressions must have a political pulse. Morrison pronounces that some people believe that “If a work of art has any political influence in it, somehow its tainted...the problem comes when you find harangue passing off as art. It seems to me that the best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time” (Morrison 345). The black artists should not swing back and forth like a pendulum between two rival ideals that black art could appear only as either beautiful or political.

Urging the black artists to continue to fulfill such an important role in the society, she leads by her own example. Each of her novels evolves in such a way that it encompasses all the complexities that come with language and written expression of prophecy, beautiful linguistic expressions that place historical truths and the seeds of socio-political understandings at the center.

### CHAPTER THREE:

#### “THE HOUSE THAT RACE BUILT”: THE AWAKENING OF TONI MORRISON’S PROPHETIC MISSION

In one of her many essays, “Home,” Toni Morrison indirectly acknowledges her literary prophet role as she speaks to the tragic results that racism has brought to the lives of Black Americans and the strong racial constructions that are associated with American language. Morrison states, “If I had to live in a racial house, it was important, at the least, to rebuild it so that it was not a windowless prison into which I was forced, a thick-walled, impenetrable container from which no cry be heard, but rather an open house, grounded, yet generous in its supply of windows and doors. Or at the most, it became imperative for me to transform this house completely”(4). In both *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon*, Morrison attempts to “rebuild the racial house that American culture has built” by responding to the once hidden and embedded socio-political and historical needs for such an examination.

Similar to the role of a griot, who sustains a profound connection with the past, Morrison uses her elder wisdom, her early exposure to story-telling, and her intense study of history, in order to provide cultural guidance through the African American past, present and for the future. Embracing an already established ancestral tradition, Morrison takes pride in, and then works very carefully to depict on the pages of her novels, black oral language and a rich African oral tradition in written form. In this effort, her role as literary prophet is manifested as she serves as a caretaker of knowledge and a guardian of black history, continuing the traditions of her ancestral past.

Toni Morrison's career as a novelist has evolved in several ways that suggest the title of this project. Her comments on her career as late as post-*Song of Solomon* express in some sense an early uncertainty about her vocation, surprise at the turns it has taken, and resistance to the increasingly compelling voice within her that demands tackling the most difficult material. It is as if she felt called by surprise to become what she has become: not merely just a very deserving winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, but a majestic literary presence whom many would credit with a prophetic voice and a prophetic impact on those who heed her words. Now we have her interviews and her essays, which document some aspects of this path, and of course we have the novels, including those latest masterworks that help us re-read her earlier texts. The interviews and essays help us answer several questions about the novelist's role as a literary prophet: Is the writer a seer? Is the writer a witness bearer to a corrupt or fated society? Or, in more ordinary terms, is the writer a moral philosopher or a social reformer or a cultural critic gifted with a passionate need to speak to and against the days in which she lives?

In the essay "The Site of Memory," Morrison provides quite a compelling explanation of one of her key motivations for writing. While acknowledging the important yet controversial purpose of these slave narratives, Morrison also critically observes what has been missing from these symbolic and significant early representations of the black experience in America. Morrison writes "most importantly—at least for me—there was no mention of their interior life" (302). This "interior life" that she speaks of can be defined, as she writes, as the "proceedings [of black life which is] too terrible to relate" (302). This "interior life" and the "proceedings too terrible to relate" are the true records of the black experience in America, when only white writers provide a narrative of American history.

In critically observing that the treatment of race is at the center of these historical omission, as mirrored in some depictions of American literature, in the Preface of *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), Morrison claims that

the readers of virtually all American fiction have been positioned as white. I am interested to know what that assumption has meant to literary imagination. When does racial “unconsciousness” or awareness of race enrich interpretive language, and when does it impoverish it? What does positing one’s writerly self, in the wholly racialized society that is in the United States, as unraced and all others as raced entail? What happens to the writerly imagination of a black author who is at the same level always conscious of representing one’s own race to, or in spite of, a race of readers that understands itself to be “universal” or race-free? In other words, how is “literary whiteness” and “literary blackness” made, and what is the consequence of that construction? How do embedded assumptions of racial (not racist) language work in the literary enterprise that hopes and sometimes claims to be humanistic?...Living in a nation of people who decided that their world view would combine agendas for individual freedom and mechanisms for devastating racial oppression presents a singular landscape for a writer.(xii-xiii)

Morrison is questioning when or how interpretive language in American fiction becomes enriched by racial awareness or racial unconsciousness. As a black woman herself, she questions the position/role of other black authors/writers, who are consciously aware that they are representing their own race, even when white literary society deems itself to be universal or race-free. Morrison also questions how “literary whiteness” and “blackness” were created in such a society that claims to be humanistic and democratic, despite all the evidence that racial oppression is ever present. Morrison’s argument is a critique of an American literary imagination that has not sought to express either the full account of the terrible proceedings of African American history or the interior life of struggling African Americans. She is determined to explore that which white literary inventions and white essentialism have apparently helped suppress—black imagination. Through her intense engagement with this true deep history, she believes, a voice of liberation can be given to black consciousness and writing in America. Not



only her essays, however, but primarily, her novels reveal how she critically views and re-imagines American history as told by whites Americans.

History plays a very important role in the creation of all Morrison novels. Consequently, having perhaps learned from her own works of the imagination, Morrison has made many intriguing statements about American society, and about how some white Americans chose to unfold the historical landscape of America. In an interview with Salman Rushdie in 1992, Morrison states:

As a writer (if we think of novels historically as the building of a nation, actually constructing it, making it original) I felt very strongly identified by my culture, which is to say my race, but not my state, not by my country. I wanted, very very much as a child, to be American, to feel that way. Everything was designed to prevent me from that. Because of my race there were parts of the lake I could not enter...I began to value more the marginality, the sort of peripheral existence, because it seemed to offer so much more. It was deeper, more complex, it had a tension, it related to the center but it wasn't the centre. So of that sense of feeling American, I was deprived. I was deprived of that, and I felt bereft. Now of course, I take it as a position of far more possibilities. (Brick 36)

Morrison thinks of her novels as the “historical building” of her race’s experiences. It is her job through writing, to reveal the multi-layered historical experiences of black people in America.

In another interview, where Christian Davis asks, “When you talk about ‘names that bore witness’ in *Song of Solomon* (1977), would they be part of the historical experience of Blacks in the United States?” (223-) Toni Morrison responds

Yes, the reclamation of the history of black people in this country is paramount in its importance because while you can't really blame the conqueror for writing history his own way, you can certainly debate it. There's a great deal of obfuscation and distortion and erasure, so that the presence and the heartbeat of black people has been systematically annihilated in many, many ways and the job of recovery is ours. (223-233)

The job of recovering and reclaiming black history in the form of writing, Morrison believes is in the hands of black people. And it is in this process that Morrison has revealed how the writing of

fiction, has frequently surprised her with voices and ideas that she did not expect, and in many cases have given her insights as gifts. This is, in a way, analogous to the visions and unexpected messengers of the prophets of the past. The reading of Morrison's novels can even serve as unconscious parables of the African American experience, by ultimately serving as a teaching tool for anyone who chooses to accept the responsibility that comes with reading her texts.

*Playing in the Dark* (1992) is more overtly admonitory, more critical of a culture, more revolutionary and directed toward both social change and a deep change of human consciousness than her fiction. Reading her text should be and can be a conversion experience for all who truly heed her message. It fulfills the purposes of prophetic expression in several ways. And it reveals or at least underscores the most abstract representation of similar ideas and similar revelations about human existence that one discovers in reading her novels. But one might think of the novels, as unconscious parables of the African American experience that teach through fiction what Morrison, says more polemically in her essays.

This sense of fiction writing as a prophetic discovery is reflected in the following statement by Morrison:

First of all, I must trust my recollections. I must also depend on the recollections of others. Thus memory weighs heavily in what I write, in how I begin and in what I find to be significant... It's a kind of *literary archeology*: on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply...my reliance on the image—on the remains—in addition to recollection, to yield up a kind of a truth. By image, of course, I don't mean "symbol;" I simply mean "picture" and the feelings that accompany the picture. (302)

In order to fully understand Morrison's view of her writing process as literary archeology, one might consider an explanation or definition of the word archeology. According to *Webster's Dictionary*, Archeology is defined as "systematic recovery and study of material evidence, such as graves, buildings, tools, and pottery, remaining from past human life and culture" (124). In

order to recover some aspects of the interior life of black American history through her novels, Morrison thus studies the remains of forgotten histories of African-American, culture and life. Then, based upon her analysis of this information and some acts of inference, she imaginatively reconstructs a lost world. Yet, what makes her work more than fiction is that act of recall, “rememory,” as Morrison has coined this phrase. It allows for the imaginative to reflect much truth. It is in the historical image or reenacted picture that Morrison derives feelings, which stimulates her imaginative process to recover things so rarely recovered in print.

This act of “literary archeology” is quite significant to the unique characteristics of Toni Morrison as a prophetic writer. Her careful, deliberate critical treatment of American history within her novels is also an act of imagining the unrecorded and thus prophecy. This reading of Morrison does not seek to ground this discussion in religious or spiritual tenets, showing instead how the act of prophecy may be rooted in the intense study of American history and the imaginative writing of the novelist.

Morrison’s intense engagement with history allows for her production of historically rich and thought-provoking works of the literary imagination in long prose fiction. She uses history in various prophetic ways—she is a witness bearer, a foreteller, a judgment bringer, an advocate of cultural understanding, and a voice in the wilderness urging her people on to a more meaningful existence. In each one of Morrison’s novels, she takes American history as it has been written, then she uses her text to critique or expand previous historical representations, injecting the “interior life” of the black experience in ways never done before. Doing this, Morrison challenges her readers to rethink American history as they once knew it. Her interest in forgotten and unrecorded historical moments is what drives her to re-imagine the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, the Middle Passage, Slavery in America, the Reconstruction Era, the Great Migration, the

black presence in the Jazz Age, and the history of Segregation, Post-Segregation, and Integration. In all of the novels written by Morrison, these significant historical moments of time are revisited and she unveils and reinterprets black interior life—“moments too terrible to relate” as well as cheering moments of positive cultural action.

For example, in Morrison’s updated Afterword to the 1993 Plume Edition to *The Bluest Eye*, she reveals what she inadvertently discovered using the critical eye of the novelist that guides her works:

The reclamation of racial beauty in the sixties stirred these thoughts, made me think about the necessity for the claim. Why, although reviled by others, could this beauty not be taken for granted within this community? Why did it need public articulation to exist? These are not clever questions. But in 1962 when I began this and in 1965 when it began to be a book, the answers were not as obvious to me as they quickly became and are now. The assertion of racial beauty was not a reaction to the self-mocking, humorous critique of cultural/racial foibles common in all groups, but against the damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze. I focused, therefore, on how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of a society: a child; the most valuable member: a female. (210)

Morrison’s view of the “novel as a public gesture” is manifested not only in this first novel but it is also continues to find its voice in the creation or the motivation of her later novels. In the explanation of her writings *The Bluest Eye*, she explains how the questions her novel inspired in her exposing the hypocritical and controversial representation of beauty in American culture. Through the point of view of a female child, Morrison found a touching way to explore the damaging effect of notions of beauty in America. Having a child’s voice to narrate this story— one who is pure, innocent, and possessing beauty— provides a greater impact on the reader than if the point of view were that of an adult. It reinforces the reader’s awareness of the tainted gaze of racism in American society. Morrison’s first prophetic words revealed in the presentation of the main character of her first novel, and her account of how she came to understand what she

accomplished is itself similar to stories told about many reluctant prophets discovering their missions.

### **THE FIRST PROPHETIC SITE: *THE BLUEST EYE***

*The Bluest Eye* is Morrison's first prophetic declaration using literary archeology to speak to the American people about the dangers of racism, prejudice, and injustice. In this text, Morrison addresses the deeply-seated problem of racism in modern American culture and the historical treatment of Black Americans from slavery to the present. Through the two main voices within this text, Claudia and Pecola Breedlove, Morrison tackles the subtle dynamics of whiteness versus blackness in America as manifested in cultural assumptions about what constitutes the standard of physical beauty. Beyond these controversial themes, and through them, Morrison also addresses the internal conflict and tension of loving oneself versus self-hatred, another serious matter within the Black community.

The historical landscape of this novel is the 1940's. A young girl's observation of a white world sparks her desire for blue eyes, an idea stemming from Morrison's elementary school memories of a classmate of hers who wanted this marker of the Caucasian race. In this first novel, as Carolyn Denard has observed Morrison carefully researched the historical background of her work because, "what she wants to ring true is the essence of cultural meaning that lies behind that history: the feelings, the gestures, the values, the memories that inform and surround the actions; the recessed mythical meanings of the historical experiences that she believes restore the soul and contain the lessons of survival" (317). No matter the medium used or the circumstances, history remains at the center of this text, because in fact, as the writer herself had to discover, history serves as the driving force for all of Morrison's work. Within the

history of how blacks have been treated in this country Morrison finds her inspiration to write the provocative opening to this novel:

Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow. A little examination and much less melancholy would have proved to us that our seeds were not the only ones that did not sprout; nobody's did. Not even the gardens fronting the lake showed marigolds that year. But so deeply concerned were we with the health and safe delivery of Pecola's baby we could think of nothing but our own magic: if we planted the seeds, and said the right words over them, they would blossom, and everything would be all right. (Morrison 5)

These strangely formed desires serves as a metaphor for the deferred American Dream. Although there is a nuclear family structure with storybook names – Mother, Father, Dick, Jane, the dog and cat and a green and white house with a red door – these storybook images contrast sharply to the realities of human situations the novel reveals. Here, Morrison immediately piques her reader's interest by contrasting two vitally different worlds, especially as concerns for Pecola Breedlove and her family.

Morrison is preparing the reader for all that will *not* take place in Pecola's family life. Nature itself is out of joint. Contrary to the natural order of the fall season, where "marigolds" should bloom, Pecola is said to be having her father's baby and "the marigolds did not grow" (Morrison 5). Pecola's father's rape of his daughter and her innocence is the reason why "the earth itself might have been unyielding" (5). Directing the reader to the original sin in this text, the narrator matter-of-factly utters that, "we" had dropped our seeds in our little plot of black dirt "just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt"—that is, Pecola. "Our innocence and faith were no more productive than his lust or despair. What is clear now is that of all of that hope, fear, lust, love, and grief, nothing remains but Pecola and the unyielding earth. Cholly Breedlove is dead; our innocence too. The seeds shriveled and died; her baby too"

(Morrison 6). While this morbid event and its consequences are simply stated, they are far from such. The circumstances that destroyed Pecola's future is a mirror of the larger cultural impediments that would lead to her ultimate fate and set the house that America built on fire.

### **CLAUDIA: THE NARRATIVE VOICE OR STORYTELLER**

Although at the onset of this novel, the reader is given a snapshot of Pecola Breedlove's life, it is actually another female child who narrates the story of her own life as well as the life of Pecola. Initially, the reader is guided to see that Claudia lives in a home where happiness cannot find its place, so she silently listens to her mother's conversations about men, equating them with dogs—aware of the harsh fact that her mother speaks at her not to her, because she believes that children should be seen and not heard. Claudia becomes an acute observer of the unspoken: she “watch[es] their faces, their hands, their feet, and listen[s] for truth in timbre” (Morrison 15). Claudia listens and observes as an outsider until Pecola arrives in their home as “[the] girl who had no place to go. The county had placed her in [their] house for a few days until they could decide what to do, or, more precisely, until the family was reunited” (16).

Upon Pecola's arrival, Claudia begins to observe, and analyze the newest member of her family. While Claudia interacts with the other young girls in the text, especially Pecola, Claudia also intently narrates privately what she has learned about her life. It is through Claudia's eyes and ears that the reader gains a sense of all the complexities that impact Pecola's existence.

Through Pecola and Claudia's observations the reader is introduced to the factors that prohibit black people from truly obtaining the so-called American Dream. It is “the real terror of [black] life” that has provided the circumstances that bring Pecola to Claudia's home.

We learn that Pecola's father "had burned up his house"—a clear metaphor of his self-destructive behavior but one with a larger meaning for aspects of black culture in America. In learning about what contributed to his burning down his house Morrison unearths the impact of racist ideologies on a black man. In explaining Cholly Breedlove's behavior, Claudia states that "[b]eing a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weakness and hang on, or to creep singly up into the major folds of the garment. Our peripheral existence, however, was something we had learned to deal with—probably because it was abstract" (17). In this instance, the "peripheral existence" and "the hem of life" are metaphorical ways to suggest that Cholly and other black people or so-called "minorities," are just seams, however, the underlying message is that—seams are critical for the structure of the garment as a whole, if not always obvious – within the garment that symbolizes American culture.

### **MORRISON'S PROPHETIC WARNING: STANDARDS OF BEAUTY**

Along with their sense of invisibility while in pursuit of the unrealized American Dream, Claudia and characters like Frieda and Pecola, another concept that race negatively hinges upon, a cultural standard of beauty that ignores these girls because they are black. Several instances in the *The Bluest Eye* that demonstrate how American standards of beauty are based upon white images and these white images are what little black girls had to compare themselves to and would aspire to. Claudia's narrative reveals that little black girls were forced everywhere to embrace white images: Shirley Temple, white Dolls and the images on the wrappers of Mary Jane candies, to name a few. "Frieda brought Pecola graham crackers in a saucer and some milk in a blue and white Shirley Temple cup...Frieda and she had loving conversations about how



cute Shirley Temple was. I couldn't join them in their adoration because I hated Shirley  
 "(Morrison 19).

During Christmas the girls also received "Blue-Eyed Baby Dolls"(Morrison 19). And it  
 went farther than that, as Claudia observes:

[a]dults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world  
 had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl  
 child treasured. "Here," they said, "this is beautiful, and if you are on this day,  
 'worthy' you may have it." I fingered the face, wondering at the single-stroke  
 eyebrows; picked at the pearly teeth stuck like two piano keys between red  
 bowline lips. Traced the nose, poked the glassy blue eye balls, twisted the yellow  
 hair. I could not love it. But I could examine it to see what it was that all the  
 world said was loveable. (20-1).

Through the voice of Claudia, Morrison repeatedly unveils the damaging impact that these  
 simple images from white-dominated culture have had over time. For girls who can never have  
 blue eyes or pale skin, in whom this cosmetic reality was genetically impossible, but desired, the  
 daily encounter even during childhood with such images created a pernicious standard. Claudia  
 "remembers the Mary Janes, a brand of penny candy: ...Each pale yellow wrapper has a picture  
 on it. A picture of little Mary Jane, for whom the candy is named. Smiling white face. Blond hair  
 in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort. The eyes are  
 petulant, mischievous. To Pecola they are simply pretty. She eats the candy, and its sweetness is  
 good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary  
 Jane" (Morrison 50). Claudia is observant and resistant, Morrison's technique of "literary  
 archaeology" dramatizes the subtle and unconscious social forces that create the unyielding  
 desire of Pecola to be one with Mary Jane and her blue eyes.

## MORE PROPHETIC UTTERANCES: PECOLA

Along with Morrison's efforts to deconstruct or dismantle "the house that race built" by focusing on the pervading images of whiteness in a black child's everyday life even within a black community—she also uncovers the theme of self-hatred depicted in Pecola Breedlove's character. The novel dramatizes how self-hatred is actually what drives Pecola's yearning for "blue eyes":

It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different. Her teeth were good, and at least her nose was not big and flat like some of those who were thought so cute. If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say, "Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes"...Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a long, long time. (Morrison 46)

Pecola is rejecting her own self-worth and manifesting feelings of self-hatred that are also unself-consciously prevalent in the entire Black community. It is in the tragic development of Pecola's character that Morrison warns society against creating, accepting or even trying to ignore such detrimental images.

In "Morrison's *Bluest Eye*," Rachel Blumenthal aptly writes: "Morrison, in other words, seeks to expose the economic and racial codes that create the ultimate horror of Pecola's story. (the why)...Certainly she investigates the why—the reasons for racism, guilt, and self-hatred. But she also exposes the how—the modes by which these destructive elements are circulated and diffused throughout American society" (118). Through the multi-layered presentation of Pecola's character, Morrison makes bold statements about how the house that America built perpetuates the damage done by racial injustice and the resulting self-hatred.

For example, one day at school, Pecola is harassed and victimized by a group of boys:

They had extemporized a verse made up of two insults about matters over which the victim had no control: the color of her skin and speculations on the sleeping habits of an adult, wildly fitting in its incoherence. That they themselves were black, or that their own father had similarly relaxed habits was irrelevant. It was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth. They seemed to have taken all of their smoothly cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely learned self-hatred, their elaborately designed hopelessness and sucked it up into a fiery cone of scorn that had burned for ages in the hollow of their minds—cooled—and spilled over lips of outrage, consuming whatever was in its path. They danced a macabre ballet around the victim, whom, for their own sake, they were prepared to sacrifice to the flaming pit. (65)

The boys, like Pecola, were filled with rage and contempt because of their own blackness and the negative connotations that society associated with their skin color. This self-hatred they inflicted onto Pecola makes her an object of their own dissatisfaction, the sacrificial lamb of the flaming pit in which they unconsciously try to make their own blackness disappear by a kind of black magic. This scene also demonstrates how, over time and from one generation to the next, black self-hatred lingers on.

Other aspects of this text also suggests just how deep this problem is in the black school community—revealed in the difference in treatment given lighter skin and darker skin blacks:

A high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back. She was rich, at least by our standards, as the richest of the white girls, swaddled in comfort and care. The quality of her clothes threatened to derange Frieda and me...There was a hint of spring in her sloe green eyes, something summery in her complexion, and a rich autumn ripeness in her walk...She enchanted the entire school. When teachers called on her, they smiled encouragingly. Black boys didn't trip her in the halls; white boys didn't stone her, white girls didn't suck their teeth when she was assigned to be their work partners; black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girls' toilet, and their eyes genuflected under sliding lids. She never had to search for anybody to eat with in the cafeteria—they flocked to the table of her choice. (Morrison 62-3)

This difference in skin color is much like the historical dichotomies that were set up on the slave plantations for the lighter skin black slave versus the dark skin slave—always asking the

question of who is treated better? Historically, it has been this tension between the two which helped to establish a self-hatred that has affected present-day tensions between the two.

It is also from this historical time where Black people were “being robbed so thoroughly of the knowledge of self and kind...opposed to [their] own salvation in favor of [their] enemies [or slavemasters]” (Muhammad 96). Slave masters acculturated the slaves to their expectations and limitations, quickly depriving the slave of a sense of self, and inevitably creating a new being that lacked authenticity and was filled with more and more self-hatred.

Pecola’s victimization plays a crucial role in the method Morrison uses to mirror, how, over time, blacks in America have been victimized, and often abused, just because of their black skin. As with Pecola’s own father’s “peripheral existence” and the need to operate on the “hems of life,” the weight of her black existence sits heavily on her shoulders and, as a consequence, on the shoulders of those who read this text. In creating this dysfunctional black American family, Morrison strives to tweak the conscience of an American culture that has been lulled to sleep by the acceptance and indoctrination of racist ideologies.

As Pecola approaches the brink of insanity due to her desire for “blue eyes,” she seeks the aid of a “spiritualist and psychic reader,” Soaphead Church. Pecola tells him that she cannot go to school anymore—too tired of victimization—and she needs to have “blue eyes.” At this moment, the narrator shares the silent thoughts of Soaphead, in response to Pecola’s request:

He thought it was at once the most fantastic and the most logical petition he had ever received. Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty. A surge of love and understanding swept through him, but was quickly replaced by anger. Anger that he was powerless to help her. Of all the wishes people had brought him—money, love, revenge—this seemed to him the most poignant and the most deserving of fulfillment. A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes. His outrage grew and felt like power. For the first time he honestly wished he could work miracles. (Morrison 174)

In Soaphead Church, Morrison provides a thought-provoking psychological view of others in the black community who are confronted with Pecola's impossible wish. Soaphead thinks of Pecola's petition as acceptable and most deserving of fulfillment. Like everyone else, he also thinks that she is ugly, and quickly his feelings of love for her shift to the same anger and outrage that allowed her to be victimized by the boys in her school. Soaphead is both helpless and outraged because Pecola believes that she can remove herself from the "pit of blackness" just by possessing blue eyes. While Soaphead Church admits to the legitimacy of her request, he can do nothing about it.

As one who represents "the church," he is expected to be God-like and perform miraculous acts. Just as his name suggests, Pecola wants him to wash clean her blackness—by giving her blue eyes. For it is in these blue eyes that Pecola believes that she can reverse her own tragic fate. While Soaphead unscrupulously pretends to solve Pecola's psychological dilemma, convincing her that he has given her blue eyes, the members in her community become increasingly aware of her unstable mental state. By the end of this text, no one sincerely offers to help her. Instead she continues to serve as the subject of everyone's gossipy conversation, or as the object of the quiet desire of other's dissatisfaction with their own blackness.

Morrison ended this text—this parable—with both the black community and American society having to take responsibility for Pecola's insanity, one for accepting the conditions and interpretations of skin color and the other for imposing negative values on blackness. As in the novels to follow, Morrison does not offer a neatly packaged solution to the racially-grounded dilemma and problem of social psychosis presented here. Instead, she expects that her readers will have to work to properly consider her underlying message and then what they must do with it. *The Bluest Eye* is Morrison's first literary prophetic declaration, a critical response to how

American culture must take a profound look at the way race in America is defined, perpetuated, and internalized, while at the same time suggesting that American society can no longer uphold whiteness as a standard that inevitably engenders inferiority in others.

*The Bluest Eye* portrays a kind of reverse vanity that is the destruction of an individual's concept of self-beauty, a false and impossible desire for a change in identity because of an unreal standard of appearance. What is tragically validated in everything an abused black child sees and hears—down to penny candy wrappers and china dolls—is futile vanity; as, saith the prophet Isaiah—all is vanity. In *The Bluest Eye*, the unconscious vanity of white society leads to a misbegotten vanity that begets insanity in an innocent child and even in some who, though false prophets themselves, vainly try to help her out of the crucible of race.

### **CONTEMPORARY BIBLICAL PROPHECY: *SONG OF SOLOMON***

While vanity does not serve as the downfall of the black community in *Song of Solomon*, a father's pursuit of the American Dream creates resentment in his son, motivating his son to pursue the historical roots of his family, instead of the middle class achievements that his father worked so hard to establish. In *Song of Solomon* (1977) Toni Morrison interrogates the complex concepts of race and associated with the black family structure in America. In this novel, she once again carefully examines what it means to be black in America, but now it is through the journey and the singular gaze of a young black man. "*Song of Solomon* centers around a male protagonist, Milkman Dead, and his search for identity as well as a connection to his ancestors and the larger African American community...*Song of Solomon* opens with the captivating suicidal leap of Robert Smith, a North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance agent, off of No Mercy

Hospital and the simultaneous birth of Milkman Dead, the son of Macon Dead Jr., a middle class African American slumlord...in Morrison's fictional Midwestern town" (qtd in Beaulieu 315).

*Song of Solomon* focuses on a young black man in search of himself beyond his own family, their fragmented past, and his community. In an interview with Anne Koenen in 1980, in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, Morrison explains:

I think that is because my mode of writing is sublimely didactic in the sense that I can only warn by taking something away...And I wanted to say you'll never know who you are, you'll never be a complete person, until you know and remember what Milkman had been knowing and remembering. And that's so important that you know that, that it doesn't matter how long your life is, because at the end of every book there is an epiphany, discovery, somebody has learned something that they never would otherwise. But that's the only way I can...reveal the message, and it gives my books a melancholy cast, because it's more important to make a reader long for something to work and to watch it fall apart, so that he will know what, why and how and what the dangers are, more important than to show him how they all solved all their problems. (Taylor-Guthrie 74)

In this interview, Morrison alludes to her prophetic role as a writer through her ability "to warn" others. Simultaneously, Morrison also admits that it is not her responsibility to answer "the longing" that arises in the reader, while moving through the novel, for easy answers. From the very beginning of *Song of Solomon*, Morrison establishes Milkman's character as a man who is incomplete, and it is through the process of searching, seeking, and discovering that he finds the answers to questions he has had, which inevitably will make him whole.

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison reveals how a black man can and must undo his family's history, in order to be "made new by his appropriation of his own family's fable" that is intimately connected to how he will live in the future. In fact, early in the text, the narrator states that "if the future did not arrive, the present did extend itself, and the uncomfortable little boy in the Packard went to school and at twelve met the boy who could not only liberate him, but could take him to the woman who had as much to do with his future as she had his past" (35-6). The

narrator makes the reader aware that Milkman's future was also contingent upon his friendship with Guitar. For it is from his interaction with Guitar, to his first meeting with his aunt Pilate, that Milkman is able to weave together his family's history, allowing him to have a better understanding of his present life and his future.

In several instances in this novel, Milkman expresses his desire to take flight and leave his old life behind so that he can begin to understand his family and himself in an effort to become a whole man. Just as Milkman is forced to embark upon a journey in search of self, Morrison suggests that it is also the job of the reader—to ultimately uncover the various pieces of the puzzle that will eventually grant Milkman a complete picture for the conditions of his immediate family: especially his father.

In this text, the migratory nature of the black man is the essential truth embedded within this novel. More specifically, with regards to black male migratory acts, Morrison passionately states that:

black men travel, they split, they get on trains, they walk, they move. I used to hear those old men talk about traveling—which is not getting from here to there, it's the process—they even named themselves after trains. It's part of black life, a positive, majestic thing, but there is a price to pay—the price is the children. The fathers may soar, they may triumph, they may leave, but the children know who they are; they remember half in glory and half in accusation. That is one of the points of *Song*: all the men have left someone, and it is the children who remember it, sing about it, mythologize it, make it a part of their family history. (Taylor-Guthrie 46)

The migratory nature of Black men, coupled with the quasi-abandonment of their children, has its historical roots on slave plantation, where slave-masters often forcibly separated black men from their families or men ran away from their oppression. The epigraph of this text: “The fathers may soar. And the children may know their names---” is suggesting that it is the children of these men who have taken flight or migrated, who quietly assess this paternal void or absence



in their life, in hopes of one day finding or understanding what is missing from their lives. It is also in this process, similar to the experiences of Milkman, that eventually they are able to identify the names and the people in the family history that have been unknown to them, a matter of importance.

Parallel to this historical and biblical need of human creation's desire to know, it's "fathers" dramatized, in the beginning and the first half of this text, Milkman just as his name might suggest, is striving to extract the essence of his being from his mother. For example, within the first few pages of this novel, the narrator describes how

In late afternoon, before her husband closed his office and came home, she called her son to her. When he came into the little room she unbuttoned her blouse and smiled. He was too young to be dazzled by her nipples, but he was old enough to be bored by the flat taste of mother's milk, so he came reluctantly, as to a chore, and lay as he had at least once each day of his life in his mother's arms, and tried to pull the thin, faintly sweet milk from her flesh without hurting her with his teeth. (Morrison 13)

This metaphorical expression of breastfeeding between Milkman and his mother is also the method that Morrison uses to make her prophetic claim or warning that suggests how the black man is still incomplete, not whole and in need of restoration. Although Milkman is old enough "to talk, stand up, and wear knickers...[drink] milk, and Ovaltine and everything else from a glass," he is still physically and mentally nursed by his mother. Milkman continues to ponder this reality throughout this novel, and he even acknowledges the need to be separate from his mother and father. It is from this description that the reader learns that Milkman has not reached the moment of maturation and growth.

There are several other examples within the private thoughts of Milkman that suggest his need to separate from his mother and his father in order to proclaim his own identity. After

Milkman has an altercation with his father, in an instinctual effort to defend his mother against his father's abuse of her, the narrator reveals Milkman's disapproving opinion of himself:

Milkman stood before his mirror and glanced, in the low light of the wall lamp, at his reflection. He was, as usual, unimpressed with what he saw. He had a fine enough face. Eyes women complimented him on, a firm jaw line, splendid teeth. Taken apart, it looked all right. Even better than all right. But it lacked coherence, a coming together of the features into a total self. It was all very tentative, the way he looked, like a man peeping around a corner of someplace he is not supposed to be, trying to make up his mind whether to go forward or to turn back. The decision he made would be extremely important, but the way in which he made the decision would be careless, haphazard, and uninformed. (Morrison 69-70)

Milkman's critical view of himself, recognizing that he is not whole, echoes the view of other Black men during the time period of this text—since blacks and whites were segregated; and blacks were striving to reconstruct themselves and obtain equality in all aspects of their American lives or existence. What is also critical about this particular moment in the text, Milkman views himself as also derived from how he has been groomed and by his own father. His father's treatment further motivates Milkman's realization of his desire to leave. Milkman even quietly considers his father's name—Dr. Dead, and whether or not “If [someone were] sick, would [a person] go see a man called Dr. Dead?” (Morrison 69) “Dr. Dead” represents Milkman's father's inability to heal anyone, which stems from the ill treatment that he offers his family. The name “Dr. Dead” also symbolizes the mental state of all members of this family, who appear to all walk around in a stupor, full of hurt and pain as well as feelings of fragmentation and incompleteness. Affirming this application of the meaning of the word *dead*, in the article “To Live This Life Intensely and Well: The Rebirth of Milkman Dead in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*,” David Wehner claims:

Figuratively, Milkman is dead; I would argue that in the course of the text, he comes back to life—he learns to live this life intensely and well. To live this intense life, *Song of Solomon* suggests, Milkman must rethink his position in

relation to the African American community, must rethink in doing so, interrogate received notions of blackness. (qtd in Stave 78)

Through the series of conversations that Milkman has with his father, it becomes clear that both men are aware of the lifeless conditions that make up their community environment. In fact, his father tells him that “You have to be a whole man. And if you want to be a whole man, you have to deal with the whole truth” (Morrison 70). After this powerful statement that suggests how truth is synonymous with manhood, Macon Dead begins to share some of the family history as he knows it with Milkman. Macon Dead is trying to teach his son that with maturity and the concept of manhood lies the responsibility of knowing the truth.

Essentially, it is through this conversation with Milkman’s father and others that Morrison’s prophetic utterances or words of warning can be found. For example, in the many conversations that Milkman has with Guitar, his best friend, he is challenged to consider the sociopolitical climate of the world. Through the words and actions of Guitar’s character, Morrison includes the historical aspects of black American culture where injustice can be found or where the problems of race in American culture are given. It is also within the construction of Guitar’s character, similar to Pecola’s character in *The Bluest Eye*, that Morrison is painting a realistic picture of how historical racist ideologies have allowed for the house of America to continue to burn. Milkman accuses Guitar of “slipping into his race bag” by speaking of “the boy [that] had whistled at some white woman, refused to deny he had slept with others, and was a Northerner visiting the South. His name was [Emmett] Till” (Morrison 80); but Guitar also says that “The earth is soggy with black people’s blood. And before us Indian blood. Nothing can cure them, and if it keeps on there won’t be any of us left and there won’t be any land for those who are left” (Morrison 158). Finally, Guitar adamantly exclaims that “I don’t give a shit what white people know or even think...Guitar is *my* name. Bains is the slave master’s name.

And I'm all of that. Slave names don't bother me; but slave status does" (Morrison 160). These socio-politically aware conversations with Guitar, further demonstrate Guitar's reason for posing a question once stated by Ralph Ellison, "What would American be without Blacks?"

Ironically, in further examining Guitar's character and the journey that Milkman is determined that he must embark upon, there are some great parallels to the Teachings of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad and his prophetic assertions about the role of the black man in America. For example, in *Message to the Blackman* (1965), in the chapter entitled "Who is that Mystery God? Part II," the Honorable Elijah Muhammad argues: "The most important question of all questions that one could ask is 'Who is God?' It is like a child who does not know his father asking his mother to tell him the name of his father, wanting to know what his father looks like and if he favors his father. Can we not ask the same question [for those] who are seeking the knowledge of Our Father, God?" (Muhammad 4) Mr. Muhammad parallels the question of identity and understanding "Who is God" as important as a child's search for a father and the desire to know about his/her father. This statement provides a clear connection to Morrison's uses of the words "the fathers may soar. And the children may know their names," for the *Song of Solomon*. The child will also be seeking and pondering over who his father was and if he/she favors his/her father. From a spiritual sense, all human beings are referred to as "Children of God," submitting to Him as the "Heavenly Father or Our Father who art in Heaven." Thus, children of God will always strive to become one with God—which is indeed a lifelong journey. They will also begin this journey in order to obtain the knowledge of God, Our Father, because to know God is to also know thy self. Knowing thy self is the motivating factor, along with becoming the complete and whole man that drives Milkman's entire existence as he departs from the regular course of his life.

Within the first half of this text, Morrison builds quite a case study that reveals how Milkman's character functions as sign for something bigger than himself as well as the historical transformation that needs to occur within the black community and American society as a whole. She even dedicates this book to her own father; "Daddy," and says that it is through this novel that she wants to restore the role of the black man in American society. And for these reasons, Milkman must become a whole man, which will also serve as a symbolic gesture or moment for all black men to reach completeness.

It is within this construction of manhood that one can also see how Morrison's prophetic voice is declaring that Milkman's becoming a whole man is just as critical as the messengers or the prophets of God. Just like each of the prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Elijah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Abraham, Moses, and Muhammad—came to deliver a specific group of people, while also bearing witness to the one prophet that came before them, within the line of prophetic tradition, Milkman's character is a symbol of the dire need for the black man to be reawakened and resurrected within his own community. After his many conversations with his father, his mother, Lena, Corinthian, Pilate, Guitar, and Hagar serving as a fact-finding and soul-searching missions, to learn more about himself, Milkman realizes that he is like "the lost sheep" that are spoken of in the *Holy Bible*, in Jeremiah 50:6; Mathew 18:10; Luke 15:1. The lost sheep represent those that have "lost" the knowledge of self and the knowledge of God, so they are in need of being renewed by being brought back into the knowledge of self and the knowledge of God—who makes all things new. Similarly, in Milkman's private thoughts, he reveals that he needs:

New people. New places. Command. That was what he wanted in his life...He just wanted to beat a path away from his parents' past, which was also their present and which was threatening to become his present as well. He hated the acridness in his mother's and father's relationship, the conviction of righteousness they each held on to with both hands. And his efforts to ignore it, transcend it, seemed to work only when he spent his days looking for whatever was light-

hearted and without grave consequences. He avoided commitment and strong feelings, and shied away from decisions. He wanted to know as little as possible, to feel only enough to get through the day amiably and to be interesting enough to warrant the curiosity of other people—but not their all-consuming devotion. (Morrison 180)

Milkman desires to interact with new people and go to new places. More importantly, he wants to “beat prophecy,” so to speak, because he wants to assure that the path ahead of him will not reflect his parents’ bitter past. In looking closely at his life, it was already clear to him that if he did not do something different with his life, he would follow in the same dreadful footsteps of his parents and, consequently, the rest of his family and other black men before him.

Finally, within this first part of *Song of Solomon*, which recounts examples from the earlier aspects of Milkman’s life, Morrison fuses her prophetic warning within the voices of the narrator, the dialogue between other characters, and the character’s actions. All declare the importance of the black man reclaiming his rightful place, within his family and within American society. He must move beyond accepted images of race and whiteness and put aside the ways of the generations preceding him, which have negatively defined his role as a man. He must transcend the expectations of him within his own family. Overall, Milkman has several experiences that eventually propel his own departure or his moment to take flight.

Milkman begins the process of self-improvement in the second half of this text by actively tracing his family history, which automatically results in his own self-comprehension. In the essay, “Call and Response: Voice, Community, and Dialogic Structures in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*,” Marilyn Sanders Mobley provides an adequate synopsis for part II of the novel, proclaiming that “Part II traces Milkman’s journey through the South, a journey transformed from a search for gold to a quest to learn the meaning of a song he had heard Pilate sing at home in Michigan. He learns that the song encodes his family history, including the story

of a like-named Solomon, his paternal great-grandfather, who, according to the story in the song, “flew away from slavery back to Africa” (qtd in Smith 40). Milkman’s discoveries and experiences during his voyage are the pieces to the puzzle of his life, which will inescapably make him complete and whole.

At the start of his journey, Milkman begins to immediately reap certain benefits. Not only do his conversations with Reverend Cooper confirm stories that he once heard from Pilate and his father but also it is these conversations that a new sense of family appreciation develops inside of him. As he listens to the old men at Reverend Cooper’s, he hears many stories:

But they shot the top of his head off and ate his fine Georgia peaches. And even as boys these men began to die and were still dying. Looking at Milkman in those nighttime talks, they yearned for something. Some word from him that would rekindle the dream and stop the death they were dying. That’s a why Milkman began to talk about his father, the boy they knew, the son of the fabulous Macon Dead. He bragged a little and they came alive. How many houses his father owned (they grinned); the new car every two years (they laughed); and when he told them how his father tried to buy the Erie Lackawanna (it sounded better that way), they hooted with joy. That’s him! That’s Old Macon Dead’s boy, all right! They wanted to know everything and Milkman found himself rattling off assets like an accountant, describing deals, total rents income, bank loans, and this new thing his father was looking into—the stock market...He glittered in the light of their adoration and grew fierce with pride. (Morrison 235-6)

Milkman’s spirit is not only fueled by the words at Reverend Cooper’s but takes pride in knowing the historical legacy that was left in the South by his grandfather and father. It was believed that these old men, his listeners,-were spiritually dying inside, yet from talking to Milkman they became alive, hanging onto every word that he spoke about his father’s successes. The dream that these men once had was re-ignited by Milkman’s reports and the rapid process of death was put to a halt.

Other examples from Milkman’s travels demonstrate that he is like the lost sheep out in the wilderness, wrestling with himself as he views the people around him and as he visits various

towns, while still striving to keep his mind on “following in [Pilate’s] tracks” (Morrison 256). In moving beyond his initial conversations of discovery with Reverend Cooper and Nephew, to his interactions with Circe, Mr. Solomon, Vernell, Sweet, and to his hunting excursion with Omar, Calvin, and Luther, Milkman is reminded of his previous conversations with Guitar. Based upon his experiences up until this moment in the text, after slaying a bobcat with Omar, Calvin, and Luther, he quietly thinks: “Everybody wants a black man’s life. Not his dead life; I mean his living life; It’s the condition our condition is in. What good is a man’s life if he can’t even choose what to die for?” (Morrison 281-2) Milkman is drawing an analogy from the bobcat’s death, and it is in these private thoughts that Morrison asserts her prophetic tone in the way that Milkman analyzes himself and this experience. He looks at how the bobcat did not have a say in how he died; and then, he further ponders how just like the bobcat was hunter’s prey, the condition of the black man in America is quite the same; and it is also in this moment that Morrison further declares that “everybody wants a black man’s life.” In everyone desiring the life of the black man, this pressure disallows his becoming a whole and complete man. Milkman’s clear ability to identify with the bobcat, allows for him to further examine why he had to leave his home town, so that he would not remain as dead as the bobcat that lies before him.

One can see how in these singular spaces Milkman is somehow being given mercy from the death trail that followed him back home; and it is in this space that Morrison inserts her prophetic utterances that, if heard, will save the black man’s life. Another self-reflexive moment for Milkman that is instrumental in his journey of learning more about himself occurs when he has some quiet time, after he has visited with Susan Bird and Grace:

He was both angry and amused and wondered what Omar and Sweet and Vernell thought of Miss Susan Byrd. He was curious about these people. He didn’t feel



close to them, but he did feel connected, as though there was some cord or pulse or information they shared. Back home he had never felt that way, as though he belonged to anyplace or anybody. He'd always considered himself the outsider in his family, only vaguely involved with his friends, and except for Guitar, there was no one whose opinion of himself he cared about. Once, long ago, he had cared what Pilate and Hagar thought of him, but having conquered Hagar and having disregarded Pilate enough to steal from her, all that was gone. But there was something he felt now—here in Shalimar, and earlier in Danville—that reminded him of how he used to feel in Pilate's house...he didn't have to get over, to turn on, or up, even out. (Morrison 292-3)

In this place, Milkman feels a sense of a familiarity and clear connection to Danville and Shalimar, as well as the people. He even admits that he never felt at home. In most instances, back at home, he often felt like an outsider, with exception of his relationships with Guitar, Pilate and Hagar. At this point, he even exhibits a humble gesture, by admitting that he is aware of the pain that he inevitably caused Hagar and Pilate, especially. Milkman's character reflects the tenets of newness that he was looking for and that motivated him to leave his hometown.

Like the parable of the prodigal son in *The Holy Bible*, Milkman must return back home in order to be a complete and whole man. Now that he is able to look critically back at his life, he admits to many lessons learned. He has a better sense of appreciation for his family: "Milkman smiled, remembering Pilate. Hundreds of miles away, he was homesick for her, for her house, for the very people he had been hell-bent to leave. His mother's quiet, crooked apologetic smile...And his father. An old man now, who acquired things and used people to acquire more things...His mind turned to Hagar and how he had treated her at the end. Why did he never sit her down and talk to her" (300-1)? Some of Milkman's most valuable lessons are derived from his relationships with women. From Circe and Susan Byrd he learns more about his family ancestry, from Sweet he learns the reciprocating nature of the art of lovemaking within male and female relationships, along with solace that comes; from Hagar he learns that when someone consumes you or smothers you in the name of love, it must not be ignored or just

simply taken for granted; from his dear Aunt Pilate, he can embrace sincere acts of humility and peace; and from his mother, he realizes the danger that lies between death and living, along with the reasons why he should not judge her, despite her history of pain and loss.

While Milkman seems to gain something new in his existence as a man because of the women in his life, within the historical landscape that makes up his genealogical story, he is also able to heal, to grow and to look at his life completely different. He even “read the road signs with interest now, wondering what lay beneath names...Names that had meaning” (Morrison 329) In this time of consideration, the narrator extensively describes the historical connection that Milkman feels now that he has been with other black men, “He closed his eyes and thought of black men in Shalimar...in the pool halls, the barbershops...Their names. Names they got from yearnings, gestures, flaws, events mistakes, weaknesses...” (Morrison 330) Beyond this introspective moment that brings him to a moment where he ponders and thinks of other men and their names. Through the development of Milkman’s character by the end of this novel, Morrison is declaring that the spiritual process of resurrection that needs to take place in the black man can only occur when he is the agent of his own self-development; simultaneously, in this process the black community must also be a part of this history.

By the end of the text, Milkman has reached the ideal moment of his life; he finally has achieved a sense of self and he is whole at once. First, he has to return to his hometown, where it all began, and then he decides to move forward with his own self. In an interview, Morrison explains Milkman’s growth process, “Milkman learns so much in a very short time. He learns how to love somebody, nicely, tenderly, give something in return. He learns how to take risks about something important, he gets civilized” (qtd in Guthrie-Taylor 75). Milkman returns to Shalimar, which, as the word suggests, is the place where fertile ground exists for him, just like

the terraces at “Shalimar Gardens” in Lahore, Pakistan, where pleasure, goodness, and the re-awakening of life is supposed to be bestowed upon its visitors. Milkman finds complete solace in Shalimar. And it is in his return to Shalimar, that Milkman also learns his final lesson towards self-improvement: “Milkman laid her head down on the rock. Two of the birds circled round them. One dived into the new grave and scooped something shiny in its beak before it flew away. Now he knew why he loved her so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly” (*Song of Solomon* 336). Milkman is finally able to understand the life lesson that Pilate tried to teach him through her own life experiences. From Pilate’s death, Milkman learns that the ability to gain a sense of freedom or to “fly” is to no longer be afraid of death, as it has followed him through his life, but he must face his fear and embrace death.

Finally, it is in this text, and especially through Milkman’s character, that Morrison’s prophetic calling is realized. As stated by Deborah E. McDowell, in her review of *Jazz*, “Morrison’s entire *oeuvre* has involved a studied effort—to invoke Ezekiel—to make the dry and disconnected bones of the black historical past live” (qtd in Smith 17). Within the transformative nature and declaration of Milkman’s character, Morrison invokes the biblical prophetic voice of Ezekiel. Because it is through this narrative that the dry and disconnected bones of the black historical past are restored, whereas, -it is-through his new proclaimed self in America, and in his family that Morrison allows him to come alive. From this text, the black man is whole, complete and no longer like the lost sheep without knowledge or the prodigal son who needs to return home. Through Milkman’s character, the black man has the “testicular fortitude”—the freedom—to walk the Planet Earth and be finally himself.

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### “UNSPEAKABLE THINGS UNSPOKEN”: PROPHETIC UTTERANCES IN TONI MORRISON’S HISTORICAL TRILOGY

Morrison knows that history is bound to repeat itself, unless something significant occurs to disrupt the continuum of past traumatic moments of history. Like the prophets of the *Holy Bible* and the *Holy Qu’ran*—such as Noah, Moses, Abraham, Jesus, and Muhammad, who reinforced the importance of being obedient to God and God’s law, Toni Morrison uses her literary platform to provide true and accurate historical representations of the interior life of blacks in America and stresses the importance of American society not repeating history. In examining Morrison’s historical trilogy—*Beloved* (1987), *Jazz*(1992) and *Paradise*(1998)—one discovers that these novels embody the concept that “there is a profound connection between the laws which govern the production of prophecy (which comes from human brains) the laws which govern the process of history, (which also account for the repeating of history), the laws of human behavior and the consequences which flow from human actions”(Muhammad 35). Each novel is a prophetic production, derived from the brain of Toni Morrison, based upon her intense study of various historical periods. Furthermore, in probing each prophetic production, her novels, one discovers that the characters, the narrator, and the overall plot are also governed by insight of real aspects of human behavior and human interaction, which are based upon the narrative of human history.

This narrative of human history in America is also theme that Morrison tackles in all of her novels, while also inserting her prophetic utterances, by speaking about societal matters that were once unspoken. As suggested in the previous chapter, both *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon* focus on the black human family, more specifically a little black girl trapped in “the

house that race built” and a black male in search of an identity that uncovers the function of race and history within his own family. Similarly, within the her historical trilogy, starting with the first novel, *Beloved* demonstrates how Morrison provides a revisionist and prophetic reading of the effects of enslavement and the inevitable racism that grows out of it in order to emphasize the importance for contemporary Americans to seek healing from this historically transformative experience and pay homage to the ancestral spirit that lives and still embodies the pain from such a harrowing experience.

Then, the second novel in this trilogy, *Jazz* synthesizes and bears witness to the implications of black life as through participants in the Great Migration from the North to South, who are living in Harlem, New York, a place imbued with its own history and culture. Morrison’s method—here—can be identified as musical prophecy. Morrison tells the story about the people, the city, and the liberating music along with effects of slavery and racism still lurking in its shadows of this new developing society.

Finally, *Paradise* continues the interrogation of the ex-slaves ability to live within an American culture or society that has still not been “delivered” or restored racism; in fact, as her story has moved into the periods of integration, hopes for a brighter future ironically have disappeared. In responding to this, Morrison’s prophetic voice acknowledges that human existence is being further corroded or threatened by others issues that are afflicting the society: sexism, classism, nationalism and religious ideologies. Thus, *Paradise* is Morrison’s most potent warning and challenge regarding contemporary challenges and the need to create paradise on earth.

## **BELOVED: RACIAL HISTORY NOT TO BE IGNORED**

*Beloved* is an effort to further proclaim the importance of a re-examination of the effects of the Middle Passage and the “interior life” of Slavery for Black Americans. Morrison pays homage to the horrific past of slavery; especially to a young female slave mother’s riveting story. The fictionalized characters that Morrison creates in this text serve as the witness bearers, the historical reminders of the experiences of the Middle Passage, the trans-Atlantic slave and Slavery itself. Morrison creates her characters as historical and psychological representations of how such long-passed traumatic experiences continue to inform contemporary lives. The entire text is like a collective family flashback. However, Morrison uses the actual historical account of Margaret Garner’s story as a focal point for this book. According to Morrison,

The historical Margaret Garner is fascinating, but, to a novelist, confining. Too little imaginative space there for my purposes. So I would invent her thoughts, plumb them for a subtext that was historically true in essence, but not strictly factual in order to relate her history to contemporary issues about freedom, responsibility, and women’s place. The heroine would represent the unapologetic acceptance of shame and terror; assume the consequences of choosing infanticide; claim her own freedom. The terrain, slavery, was formidable and pathless. To invite readers (and myself) into a repellant landscape (hidden, but not completely; deliberately buried, but not forgotten) was to pitch a tent in a cemetery inhabited by highly vocal ghosts. (Morrison 17)

From the very beginning, this entire novel is circumscribed by how Sethe’s character must strive to beat back a painful past of enslavement. The narrator describes this process in Sethe’s life as “working, working, working dough. Nothing better than that to start the days’ serious work of beating back the past” (*Beloved* 5-6). With every conversation that Sethe’s has with others, her past as a slave becomes even clearer—as she is forced to remember things that she really wants to forget.

Sethe’s character is another manifestation of Toni Morrison’s method of “literary archaeology”—Sethe’s character is a fictional representation of the truthful experience of the life

of a female slave: Margaret Garner. As the protagonist of this novel, Sethe often reconnects with her past experiences as a slave, which in part reflects what is known of the real life slave-- Margaret Garner.

The first chapter of *Beloved* introduces the reader to Sethe's whirlwind of private thoughts, in which all thoughts are connected to or about her life as a slave. Sethe is reminded of the death and the spiritual presence of her mother-in-law: Baby Suggs; the unseen spiteful ancestral presence of her crawling baby girl; images of lynching—bodies hanging from “beautiful” sycamore trees, the chokeberry tree on her back after she is beaten with cowhide, the men that “stole her milk,” and finally, to her initial arrival as the only female slave on Sweet Home Plantation, owned by Mr. and Mrs. Garner. All of these moments are the “rememories” of an ex-slave. Morrison is warning America about the lingering emotional and psychological disorders created by experiences of slavery, through the construction of characters: Baby Suggs, Paul D, Denver, Beloved, as well as Sethe herself.

The reader is forced to identify with her pain—the interior life— of a victimized woman who must try not to allow her memories to destroy her completely. In Sethe's mind, body, and spirit, there is no psychological separation between her present life and her life at Sweet Home. For example, when Paul D arrives on the porch of 124 Bluestone Road (once a place used like the Underground Railroad for slaves), he and Sethe instantly resume where they left off the last time they saw each other—18 years ago. In one of the most heart-wrenching scenes of this initial reunion, Sethe says:

“After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it. I told Ms Garner on em. She had that lump and couldn't speak but her eyes rolled out tears...

Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It still grows there still.”

“They used cowhide on you?”

“And they took my milk.”

“They beat you and you was pregnant?”

“And they took my milk!” (*Beloved* 19)

Since the role of the mother is essential to Sethe’s entire existence, when her milk is sucked out by a white man, and not by her baby, she is unable to restore her own image as a mother. She is mentally scarred from this violent act, just as her back is physically scarred from the cowhide whip.

According to one critic:

What also comes back through the stories that Paul D shares are fragments of history. Sethe is unprepared for such as the fact that years ago her husband had witnessed the white boys forcibly take milk from her breasts, but had been powerless to come to her rescue or stop them...perhaps more importantly, these elements comprise the signs of history that punctuate the text and that disrupt the text of the mind, which is both historical and a historical at the same time. (Moblely 23)

Morrison confronts her readers with the horrors of the past that are “too terrible to relate” by allowing the reader to eavesdrop on the private conversations between Sethe and Paul D. Also in this conversation, Morrison offers another re-memory of the proceeding of black life that is “too terrible to relate” and “speaks the unspoken.” Sethe’s character is an example of Morrison’s method of literary archeology and re-memory: history merges with the imagination.

Another character who represents a significant historical facet of enslavement is the mysterious girl Beloved. Beloved’s arrival, however, is described as real, not supernatural: “A fully dressed woman walked out of the water. She barely gained dry bank of the stream before



she sat down and leaned against the mulberry tree...Nobody saw her emerge or came accidentally by. If they had, chances are they would have hesitated before approaching her” (*Beloved* 60). *Beloved* is presented as a mystery through Paul D and Sethe: “one day while Paul D, Sethe and Denver were coming back from the town carnival, *Beloved* suddenly appears outside of Sethe and Denver’s home, sitting on a tree stump in a wet black dress, wearing a hat and untied ankle boots (*Beloved* 60-1). Some critics argue that *Beloved*’s character is the physical embodiment of the crawling baby or the baby ghost introduced to the reader in the beginning of the text as “spiteful[,] [f]ull of baby’s venom,” or as the baby ghost of the daughter that Sethe murdered because she did not want her to be enslaved. Elizabeth House argues *Beloved* is actually a descendant of an African female who was a part of the Middle Passage:

Such uniform acceptance of this notion[that *Beloved* is not real but a ghost] is surprising, for evidence throughout the book suggests that the girl is not a supernatural being of any kind but simply a young woman who has herself suffered the horrors of slavery...In large part, Morrison’s Pulitzer Prize-winning fifth novel is about the atrocities slavery wrought both upon a mother’s need to love and care for her children as well as child’s deep need for a family...(17)

*Beloved* is a metaphoric embodiment of both arguments. The reader will readily identify *Beloved* as Sethe’s long-lost daughter because of Sethe’s own guilty memories, but *Beloved* also has a strong connection to the general horrors of the Middle Passage, which goes beyond the historical narrative of Sethe’s life and is conveyed in the stream-of-consciousness passage near the novel’s end. Still, this dark recovery of the horrors of the slave ship can be kind of racial memory on the part of a slave girl who was viciously abused, sexually, by her master, before he threw her into the river upstream from the place where Sethe lives.

This duality in *Beloved*’s character is necessary to fully grasp the purpose of a literary prophet because, as Morrison herself has said, “until you confront [the past], until you live through it [it] keeps coming back in other forms. The shapes redesign themselves in other

constellations, until you get a chance to play it over again” (Taylor-Guthrie 241). Not only is Sethe’s character confronted with actions from her own past, but Beloved’s past is also a true representation of a racist past. Only when Sethe confronts her past—as represented in the physical existence of Beloved—can she begin to *truly* heal and move beyond her painful personal past.

Beloved’s ancestral memory is representative of many of the slaves that were a part of the Middle Passage and the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade; she is the atavistic symbol of those slaves whose stories remained unrecorded or forgotten. Morrison uses the dialogue between Beloved and other characters to paint a clear and distinct picture of the historical truths of the past. As depicted in a conversation between Sethe’s youngest daughter, Denver and Beloved:

“Beloved closed her eyes. ‘In the dark my name is Beloved.’”

“Denver scooted a little closer. ‘What’s it like over there, where you were before?’”

“Can you tell me?”

“*Dark,*” said Beloved. “I’m small in that place. I’m small in that place. I’m like this here. She raised her head off the bed, lay down on her side and curled up.”

“Denver covered her lips with her fingers. Were you cold?”

“Beloved curled tighter and shook her head. Hot. Nothing to breathe down there and no room to move in.”

“You see anybody?”

“*Heaps.* A lot of people is down there. Some is dead.”

“You see Jesus? Baby Suggs?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know the names.” (*Beloved* 88)

Beloved speaks of her experience in “the dark”, which is actually a cryptic description of the foul hold of the slave ship in the Middle Passage experience that brought Africans to America. At the bottom level of these ships, several women, men, and children were piled on top of one another, not often exposed to sunlight. In this confining space, the slave traders left the Africans to urinate, defecate, and even regurgitate on one another. The only time slave traders doused the slaves with buckets of water was before the slaves were about to be bought or sold.

Morrison further confronts the reader with the horrors of the slave trade by the way Beloved contorted her body and curled up on her side. This physical gesture actually depicts how closely together captured Africans had to remain on a journey that took days, even months. Despite these details from the slave ship, given Beloved’s apparent age—eighteen years old—and a brief hint that she was dumped into the river, she could not actually have the experiences of the Middle Passage except as a racial memory that is being released from her subconscious.

Another example of historical racial memory that parallels Beloved’s recall of the slave ship occurs in a conversation between Beloved and Sethe:

“Sethe occasionally put to her:

“You disremember everything? I never knew my mother neither, but I saw her a couple of times. Did you never see yours? What kind of whites was they? You don’t remember none?”

“Beloved, scratching the back of her hand, would say she remembered a woman who was hers and she remembered being snatched away from her. Other than that, the clearest memory she had, the one she repeated, was the bridge—standing on the bridge looking down. And she knew one whiteman.”(*Beloved* 140)

This dialogue between Beloved and Sethe – neither of whom knew their mothers – speaks to the fragmented existence of slave life and how the slave masters regularly separated children from their mothers. Sethe saw her mother only a few times and Beloved remembers being snatched away from her mother. Sethe also believes that Beloved was captured by some white men, which parallels her painful experience with white men—like when Schoolteacher’s nephew stole her milk. Both women appear to have been victimized by a white man. Finally, in this scene, Beloved also recalls, standing over a bridge; perhaps, she too escaped from the clutches of the white man that once held her hostage by jumping in the river.

Essentially, these two characters force the reader to intimately engage with the interior life of the black female slaves. Parallel to the details given in the true accounts of slavery by legendary figures such as Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and David Walker even, Morrison’s text continues to “speak the unspoken” and expands the written tradition that documents this aspect of black life that some consider “too terrible to relate.”

### **BABY SUGGS: THE FEMALE PROPHETIC VOICE**

Another noteworthy character that is critical to perceiving Morrison’s prophetic style of writing is Baby Suggs. As the elder figure in this text and the matriarch of her family, Baby Suggs often reflects a wisdom and grace that not only sustains her family, but also transcends her family. Baby Suggs serves as the griot, the seer, and the historical witness bearer to African tribal history and the life of the enslaved. This novel examines aspects of African mythology, folklore, and story-telling, which are also links to prophetic characteristics such as foretelling what is to come in the future if the past is ignored or serving as a visionary for the community.

Baby Suggs embodies the role of the speaker prophet, the truth-sayer, the historian and the unofficial record-keeper for her community.

Baby Suggs maintains a profound connection with the past; and she uses her elder wisdom to provide guidance for the present and the future, based upon the past. Her paramount role, however, is to be the religious advisor for the slaves. “Like other preachers, [Baby Suggs] gave the slave community, a context in which it could place itself and in which it could [find] refuge and a source of strength” (Peach 113-4). And the place where Baby Suggs provides former slaves with refuge and sources of strength is in the Clearing—“a wide-open place cut deep in the woods nobody knew for what at the end of a path known only to deer and whoever cleared the land in the first place. In the heat of every Saturday afternoon, she sat in the clearing while the people waited among the trees” (*Beloved* 102). The Clearing is the place where Baby Suggs’ makes her spiritual ministrations unto the people that come to her. More specifically, she would say:

Here...in this here place, we flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes, they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O people they do not love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face’ cause they don’t love that either. And no, they love ain’t in love with your mouth. Yonder, out there, they will see it broken and break it again. What you say out of it they will not heed. What you scream from it to nourish your body they will snatch away and give you leavins instead. No they don’t love your mouth. You got to love it...(Beloved 103-4)

In this passage, Baby Suggs strives to restore the fragmented existence brought on by slave life. She acknowledges that while they are at “The Clearing,” there are still obstructions in their lives—i.e., enslavement—that prevent them from being whole human beings. Chattel bondage notwithstanding, Baby Suggs emphasizes that they must love themselves.

Baby Suggs is functioning like Jesus in the New Testament, where he is teaching his followers to love thy neighbor as you love thy self, and she provides her “followers” with the first act of repair, rebirth, and recovery after being abusively shaped by the institution of slavery and by those who chose to oppress them. Since slavery violated the laws of God, Baby Suggs is trying to redirect the people who have come to see her, back to the Commandments of God.

Similarly, Baby Suggs’ prophetic role as described by the narrator of this text can be compared to Jesus during his time in Palestine. As stated in Mathew 8:7 and the Miracle Stories of Jesus, “Jesus saith unto [them], I will come and heal [them].” Baby Suggs initiates this same kind of healing process for the many slaves that come to see her in “The Clearing”. She encourages them to cherish every aspect of their physical reality—their flesh, their eyes, their skin, their back, their hands, their mouths, and their bodies must be cherished. She is providing them with a counter-argument to how every inch of their bodies and their flesh is exploited by the laborious tasks given by their slave-masters. While their slave-masters only see them as property or economic capital, they must be grateful for how the Creator has made them.

Baby Suggs preaches that the only means of survival is self-love. In order to enable these fragmented souls to become truly free and whole, she knows that she has to give them the initial steps in overcoming their present existence as slaves. While slavery has created feelings of self-negation, self-hatred and self-destruction, Baby Suggs must redirect them back to the significance of creation and self. Similar to Jesus’ words when, after declaring his ability to heal, he states that one should, “honor thy father and thy mother: and thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself.” In this instance, honoring one’s parents is more metaphorically equivalent to honoring the source of life, which is the Creator. Since all things originate with the Creator, in order for honor and love to take place with one’s neighbor, parents, family, and community, one must first

exemplify love for God and self. Like Jesus, and the moral principles of honor and love that he speaks of, Baby Suggs' words manifest the spirit of redemption for these slaves, who are being instructed to return back to the true value of themselves.

Not only does Baby Suggs' restorative and redemptive tone reflect the prophetic spirit of Jesus and other prophets in the New Testament, she also echoes the voices of some black theologians, ministers, and activists. A historical example of such occurred during the 1930's and 1940's, the time of the Great Depression and the New Deal, when President Franklin D Roosevelt was trying to re-energize American citizens. The Honorable Elijah Muhammad was striving to do the same within the Black Community. Likewise, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad injected self-love into the psyche of blacks while not focusing on the negative impact of being enslaved. By giving black people an alternatives way to view themselves, he sought to give black people the initial orientation back to the true value of self. After they had become somewhat lost, he had to turn black people back to the right direction, as prescribed by the Creator—to value self. And this momentum continues, especially with many preacherly voices that followed in Black Liberation Theology. In an explanation of Black Liberation Theology, Rufus Borrow, writes that “Black theology is a theology of liberation. The point of departure is a critical reflection on a prior religious and political context and commitment. It seeks to identify with, and understand the oppressive conditions of black people in light of, and under the judgement of, the Gospel” (54). Within this branch of Christianity, it is understood that the liberation of an oppressed group can occur only through the comprehension and practical application of the principles given in the gospel /study of Jesus Christ. This same notion of Black Liberation Theology is the method that is proven to be transformative by the words declared by Baby Suggs to all the men, women and children in “The Clearing.”

Through the description of the “The Clearing” as the spatial existence where recovery can take place for many slave families, along with her portrayal of Baby Suggs serving as the conduit for this necessary healing process, Morrison is able to use her text to prophesy to American Society about the need for the experience of slavery and the black interior life to be truthfully confronted. America is a country that after 400 years is still in need of a meaningful healing. Morrison demonstrates the ways in which the human condition continues to be intricately linked to the fragmented and horrific generational past that must be confronted by all—perpetrators and victims. According to Morrison, it is the spirit of those whom involuntarily participated in such an unwilling exodus from their native land that deserves such an honorarium. From *Sethe* to *Beloved* to *Baby Suggs*, Morrison declares the need for a memorial, while also reminding all of America that the horrors of slavery did not end with the Emancipation Proclamation, but has continued to be presented and will continue well into the future unless a meaningful dialogue occurs first, which is then closely followed by meaningful healing

### **JAZZ: A BEARING OF WITNESS**

In continuing to examine Morrison’s treatment of the interior life of Black Americans and her literary prophetic voice, we now take up the second novel of her great trilogy, *Jazz*. *Jazz* reveals another perspective into Morrison’s ability to foresee and forewarn American society of its wrongdoings pertaining to the effects of slavery, racism, and the unsettling nature of the Black presence in America. The content of this novel embodies words in the essay “The World and the Jug” where “Ralph Ellison’s powerful meditation upon the roles of aesthetics and politics in the African American novel [are discussed and] Ellison makes a distinction: [that] the novel is ‘always a public gesture, though not necessarily a political one’”(qtd in O’Conner ix). In this



novel, Morrison's post-slavery critical analysis is an example of the kind of "public gesture" that Ellison is alluding to, for she has selected two major historical time periods of American Culture: The 1920's Great Migration and the Jazz Age. Each historical time period depicts life after the harrowing experience of enslavement: the time where Black people were striving to reconstruct their lives as they once knew them. Some left the Southern life of sharecropping or any other kind of manual or field labor, essentially in hopes for a better life in the commercialized North. Others found a new means of survival by continuing to express themselves through the artistic medium of music like "The Blues," based upon the humble beginnings of the slave songs or Negro spirituals during plantation life. "Furthermore, Amiri Baraka explains: Jazz incorporates blues...as cultural insistence, a feeling matrix...So at its strongest and most intense and indeed most advanced, jazz expresses the highest consciousness of that people [the African American nation] itself, combining its own history..." (qtd in Lesoinne 159)

It is in these African American historical moments that "Jazz" and its prophetic power, which is based upon the implications of "musical prophecy" can be found throughout Morrison's writing. As it has been suggested by some scholars like Rousitt, musical prophecy "announces how things have happened in the world or society," and Morrison also uses this novel as means to announce and to once again provide a "public gesture" that bears witness once again, to the fragmented interior black life, with music and migration at the center. Furthermore, Morrison once stated that while "historians must necessarily speak in generalities and must examine recorded sources...they habitually leave out life lived by everyday people," *Jazz* is a manifestation of Morrison's attempt to fill in the gaps and spaces in time that have been historically omitted or left unspoken.

Using her method of “literary archaeology,” *Jazz*, in part, is “based upon a photograph in James Van DerZee’s *Harlem Book of the Dead* (1978), which depicts the body of a young girl, shot at by a jealous boyfriend, who died refusing to identify her assailant.” Explaining the title of this text, in an interview with Salman Rushdie (1992), Morrison says:

I was interested in the concept of jazz, the jazz era, what all of that meant before it became appropriated and re-distributed as music throughout the world. What was jazz when it was just music for people, and what were those people like? That subject is highly contested—its origins, what it means, what the word’s etymology is, and so on. The only thing that’s consistent in the debate is the nature of improvisation—that one works very hard in order to be able to invent. It was that quality in these people’s lives that I wanted to capture, moving from the South on into a city, where there were endless possibilities, of both security and danger. (Brick 33)

The innovative and spontaneous nature of jazz becomes Morrison’s method in telling the stories of the lives of the people who were affected by the infectious nature of the music and its origins, both where they came from and in the cities where the music was commercialized. As she reveals and places the “common folk” at the center of this text, each character’s story is fused with or interrupted by another character’s stream of consciousness or personal history in the way that improvisational changes in jazz are performed.

For instance, in a critical observation of how the people or the characters arrived in the City, the narrator claims:

Some were slow about it and traveled from Georgia to Illinois, to the City, back to Georgia out to San Diego and finally shaking their heads, surrendered themselves to the City and no other. They came on a whim because there it was and why not? They came after much and where. They came for a visit and forgot to go back to tall cotton or short. Discharged with or without notice, they hung around for a while and then could not imagine themselves anywhere else. Others came because a relative or hometown buddy said, Man you best see this place before you die; or, we got room now, so pack your suitcases and don’t bring no high-top shoes (*Jazz* 32).

In this excerpt, the reader is given the *simple* reasons why many people migrated from the South to the North. Some who already had a taste of city life were seduced back to the City. Others arrived in the North because they had family members living there and they needed a change—or what they were told about the City made them feel hopeful about their possibilities of a new future.

While *Jazz* does provide several narrative accounts of the lives of many characters living in The City—Joe and Violet Trace, Dorcas, Alice Manfred, Felice—and those that were left in the South—True Belle, Vera Louis and Golden Gray—primarily this book traces the lives of Joe and Violet as well as those whom they interface with. In the essay, “Movin’ On Up: The Madness of Migration in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*,” Deborah H. Barnes writes:

We are told for example, that the once-happy Joe and Violet Trace begin their descent into marital discord after a succession of ameliorative moves that take them further and further from their cultural roots. Like so many other real-life (and fictional) African Americans, the Traces reify the ambitions of rural blacks who believed that the urban North was the promised land of opportunity, equality and plenty... Accordingly, in this and other novels, Morrison portrays culture shock as traumatic, yet inevitable, consequence for upwardly mobile, migrating or rootless blacks. (qtd in Middleton 286)

Although, like most people who migrated to the City, Joe and Violet anticipated a better life—by “movin’ on up” to live in the Promised Land—they did not expect the trauma or the challenges that they would face.

As the layers of Joe and Violet’s lives unfold in a manner similar to how a jazz band improvises during a performance, with one interruption after another, Joe and Violet’s life is continuously in concert with the lives of the other characters in the text, whose stories also must be heard. The importance of these stories is critically observed in the essay “Sth, I know that Woman: History, Gender and the South in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*” where Angelyn Mitchell observes that

In *Jazz* Morrison offers literary portraits of southern Black women during three significant historical moments of American history—American slavery, Reconstruction, and the Great Migration... As a cultural and historical conservator, Morrison inscribes her three southern woman characters—True Belle, Rose Dear and Violet—as the texts of their respective historical moment, American slavery, Reconstruction, the Great Migration. By revealing how their particularized histories inform their lives, Morrison augments her readers' understanding so that they too will “know that woman” (“Sth, I know that woman”)

Morrison wants the reader to empathize with and truly envision the simple but complex lives that she has given rise to through her use of history and her literary imagination. Parallel to reading the black interior life in narratives of *Sethe*, *Beloved* and *Baby Suggs* against the key historical moments in black history—Middle Passage, the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade and American Slavery in *Beloved*, in *Jazz*, True Belle, Rose Dear, and Violet are epithets of other historical moments in the black interior life that must be revealed or further clarified. Once again, it is through these key female characters back to the role of the jazz narrator that Morrison's voices as a literary prophet can be traced.

The words of Ralph Ellison—as he describes the role of a jazzman in relation to the band—denotes precisely, the duality that exists in the prophetic voice of Toni Morrison's *Jazz* narrator. In describing this dual role, Ellison states:

There is a cruel contradiction implicit in the art form itself. For true jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment (as distinction from the inspired commercial performance) springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest, each solo flight or improvisation represents (like successive canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity: as individual, as member of collectivity and as in the chain of tradition. Thus, because jazz finds its very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional materials, the jazzman loses his identity even as he finds it. (qtd in Gates Signifying Monkey epigraph viii)

In further deconstructing the words of Ellison on jazz, Kimberly Benston (1987) describes Ellison's ideas about music and literature and the jazzman and the narrator as “Ellisonian

culture.” “Ellisonian culture” is formed in the creative and continuous struggle between individual impulse and traditional imperative, between freedom and order, difference and identity. And so the process of self-delineation is for Ellison inextricately interwoven with the avowed “end” of that process, a tradition of achieved selfhood” (Benston 3). Benston’s discussion of “Ellisonian culture” circulates around what he observes as “the masks of Ralph Ellison,” where the individual is always in search of his authentic self, rejecting the masks that make up multiple selves. Therefore, “Ellisonian culture” is based on the struggle that the individual has between how the self is viewed and how others formulate an opinion of who he may be. In addition, “Ellisonian culture” speaks of the tension between freedom and order of the individual, the difference and identity of the individual, and the process in which the individual must finally reach the moment of definition of self that isolates him from those around him and what some expect of him.

This notion of true jazz as an individual assertion within and against the group, is clearly seen in the narrator in Toni Morrison’s Jazz. The narrator simultaneously provides the perspectives of the circumstances being presented in this text, while also supplying a resistant attitude to the knowledge he/she proclaims. For as the narrator is caught in his/her own vacillating nature, other solo flights are being performed in response to the self-perpetuated tension. The nature of these solo flights (the stories of the characters) is strictly improvisational, creating an organic effect. The narrator seeks definition of self, in relation to the other characters that are in the text continuously performing through improvisation. This relationship is similar to how a jazzman may sit amongst his group on the stage, participating in the performance; and then, finally, he steps away from the group, usually when he steps away others are playing their solos. The role of the jazzman that Ellison speaks of is equivalent to the narrator’s function in

this text. Both the narrator and the jazz leader are involved in a moment of Ellisonian culture—where there is this creative and continuous struggle between the individual impulse and the traditional imperative of the group—between the desire to be in the culture and outside of it at the same time. The function of the narrator in Morrison’s *Jazz*, is intricately linked to the root of Ellisonian culture, which further verifies the act of musical prophecy. For as a new identity is being formed (as depicted in the newly formed narrative voice in this text) based upon the premise that this need for authenticity is the result of the movement between the formal and the communal, this historical tension is part of the cultural practice of the black aesthetic. And it is this tension that helps to create a new identity as well as the newly formed narrative voice that reflects some literary prophet qualities.

### **THE NARRATOR AND MUSICAL PROPHECY**

For example, the opening sentence of this text reads “Sth I know that woman;” and for the author to have the narrator begin with an informal conversational tone or gossip frame is quite suggestive. The woman that the narrator speaks of is Violet, and to say that she “knows” her is to immediately convince the reader that she is quite familiar with Violet. The narrator moves then to the third person omniscient—made less formal now by the communal language of the opening line. The narrator’s attitude at this juncture denotes a high level of confidence in her role. This strong impulse that this text begins with is similar to how the jazzman may lead his band in the opening performance, wanting to grab the attention of his audience. In this instance, the narrator definitely captures the attention of her readers as a unique point of view, while trying to seem like a creditable, reliable source.

The dual role of the narrator continues: she fulfills the role of the omniscient narrator on the one hand, and then, through the role of the gossipy neighbor on the other hand—musical

prophecy is uncovered. In the introduction of Violet, the narrator says, “But like me, they knew who she was, who she had to be, because they knew that her husband Joe Trace, was the one who shot the girl” (*Jazz* 4). As the narrator states that “like me”, the others knew who Violet was. The nature of the narrator’s role is exemplified; she is acknowledging that she has a wealth of information to offer, not merely due to her assumed role as a “third eye” or the sociologist of the community, but also like a nosey woman who looks out her window every day, in hope of striking a conversation with anyone that walks by. It is also in these roles as the “third eye,” “the nosey woman,” or the sociologist of the community that “musical prophecy” can serve as a significant aspect in reading of this text; set of voices sometimes playing together, sometimes characterized by a single voice stepping forth.

Several brief examples in this text that shows the narrator stepping outside the bookish narrator role and showing her human, communal, in-group qualities of the narrator. Such examples include “I can’t say” or “though I suspect that girl didn’t need to straighten her hair” or “as it was to me.” In these moments where she makes a conscious effort to impart her knowledge and make herself an active member of the community that she intimately observes, but is obviously separate from, the musically prophetic moments of this text.

Furthermore, it is through the narrator’s initial introduction of the main characters Violet, Joe, Dorcas, and Alice, that musical prophecy is written into the text and the readers gain a real sense of the interior life of the black “common folk” that were in Harlem during this time. It is also in this moment that her narrative speech makes a shift- at one moment she is sustaining an authoritative voice as she introduces or speaks for the characters, but then on the other hand, she is projecting an image of not being informed or not being sure about the information she claims to know. Then the role of the narrator becomes even more questionable, since she questions her

own and abilities, in comparison to others. Parallel to the dilemma that Ellison's *Invisible Man* faces as he interacts with others and synthesizes the circumstances around him, in constant paranoia, and split between two realities, this narrator of *Jazz* is also forced to take precautionary measures.

Conscious of her duality, the narrator tries to protect herself and she takes careful measure to never let anyone know all there is to know about her. This protective attitude is not only a reflection of the historical identity struggle of the black American, which creates such a phenomenon as Ellisonian culture. It is also at this moment that the narrator displays an aspect of the cultural practice of the African American experience derived from slavery, because of the lack of trust that slaves developed in their lives, particularly because they never knew whom to trust, after experiencing betrayal often.

Although the narrator does not plan to reveal too much about herself, the duality in her everyday life allows her to do the complete opposite from time to time. Upon the conclusion of this first section of the text, the reader is completely aware of the narrator's presence as the histories and stories of the main characters are revealed. Here it is through her role that one can find utterances of musical prophecy and the combination of an appearance that is all-knowing with the reality of only partially knowing the truth; and it is through this complex duality—that the interior life of the black “common folk” of this historical time period is further displayed.

For example, after Joe's conversation with Malvonne about the attention he is not receiving from Violet, the narrator interjects giving her opinion of what type of man she thinks Joe is says he is not the kind of man that goes stepping out every night, and the narrator observes:

Of course he wasn't, but he did it anyway. Sneaked around, plotted, and stepped out every night the girl demanded. They went to Mexico, Sooks and clubs whose



names changed every week---and he was not alone. He became a Thursday man and Thursday men are satisfied. I can tell from their look some outlaw love is about to be or already been, satisfied. (49)

The contradiction between what the narrator knows and what she doesn't know about the characters continues in her "unreliable" description of Golden Gray.

How could I have...[not] noticed the hurt that was not linked to the color of his skin, or the blood that beat beneath it. But to some other thing that longed for authenticity, for a right to be in this place, effortlessly without needing to acquire a false face, a laughless grin, a talking posture. I have been careless and stupid and it infuriates me to discover (again) how unreliable I am (160).

In these masking scenes of Joe and Golden Gray, the narrator reveals that the characters and the narrators herself are behind a mask. This notion of a mask is another aspect of the cultural practice of the black aesthetic and black interior life, once again derived from being enslaved. "Masking, as Ellison defines it is, 'a play upon possibility' that gives an individual an ironic awareness of the joke that always lies between appearance and reality, between the discontinuity of social tradition and that scene of the past which clings to the mind"(Ellison 53). As a result of this scene it is clear that the narrator also serves as a foil for the characters and she too hides behind a series of masks like those she observes in the characters.

The narrator's mask revolved around her being caught between her role as narrator, herself, her own baggage of life, the characters, their dilemmas and the movement or the tempo of the story. Her words are intermingled in the beginning and as the story progresses, contrary to her own observation of herself, she makes herself equivalent to the function of the characters. It appears that this struggle with the individual self and the traditional role as omnipotent narrator are becoming more and more challenging. Like the jazzman of "Ellisonian culture" the narrator experiences a multi-layered tension: of the societal expectation as narrator, merged with the cultural representation of an African American woman who has been an eyewitness to the music,

the people, and the City; and then with the characters or the people around her having their own history and stories to share. This tension of experience is the “traditional imperative” of “Ellisionian culture” that the narrator also wrestles with as well as the “individual impulse” which is this uncontrollable desire nature of the narrator to have a sense of freedom to insert whatever she desires.

By the conclusion of this text, the omnipotent narrator has collapsed and she can no longer separate her identity from that of the characters. In the end, she completely inserts her own voice in the text. Some critics argue that this seems to have been her agenda all along. Katherine Mayberry suggests: “All narrators must tell their stories of other people, even when their primary focus is their own experience. And in doing so, they move characters around, speak for them and to some degree, in recording their fates, determine them” (298). Throughout the text, the narrator includes her viewpoint as a witness bearer, while simultaneously proclaiming not to have all the knowledge by the end of the text. It is as if she knows more about herself now than in the beginning, thus she is directly influenced by the people and the characters that she tried not to judge.

The entire last section of the text is the narrator’s story, and the conversational tone that was introduced in the beginning of the text and that, at times, takes over completely and finishes out the book. She says, “I break lives I can mend them back again. And although the pain is theirs, I share it, don’t I? Of course. Of course. I wouldn’t have it any other way. But it is another way. I am uneasy now. Feeling a bit false” (*Jazz* 221). Finally, the narrator removes her own mask and acknowledges the difficulty in being split between two realities. She is acknowledging the power that she possessed throughout the text as the narrator, but tries to be subtle or objective about it, but now she directly addresses the reader and writes of her role as narrator. In addition,

she acknowledges the fact that she told stories of the characters the way that she wants to, yet now she feels guilty and feels compelled to tell the truth. Since, she is “feeling a bit false” her true, authentic identity is beginning to take shape now, as she is affected by the lives of the characters.

This internal revelation that the narrator admits to outwardly is also a part of the “Ellisonian culture” that has been applied to demonstrate how text includes several musically prophetic moments, thus revealing the interior life of common black folk after enslavement.

Furthermore, in Benston’s discussion of Ellison’s vision, he concludes by asserting:

Ellison’s ultimate mask like that of his hero is that of the writer and Trueblood. His esteem for craftsmanship, style, discipline and intellectual sophistication is but one version of the mask; his celebration of human willfulness and the comic unpredictability of experience yet another but the freedom and compulsion to choose our “selves” endlessly. It is in this sense, finally, that he offers himself and his art as a mask in dialectical relation to our own emergent identities, a ritual persona of our grand and complex culture: Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you? (7)

Ellison, according to Benston, suggests that the writer of the text presents one version of a mask through traditional imperatives of craftsmanship—style, discipline and intellectual sophistication, a role that is reflected in the narrator’s function in *Jazz*. The writer’s celebration of human willfulness and comic unpredictability is yet another aspect of the narrator’s function. The narrator of *Jazz* has several humanlike qualities, for instance, the narrator’s ability to choose herself and examine her own role and then give a truthful account of the characters’ lives that she has been in control of. This suggests the emergence of her true authentic self—a merging of the formal and the communal that makes the story our own. The narrator’s final words are the ultimate example of this merging of the formal and the communal: “I can’t tell anyone that I have been waiting for all this all my life and that being chosen to wait is the reason I can. If I

were able I'd say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it. I am free to let you because look. Look where your hands are. Now"(*Jazz* 229).

In support of this examination of the musically prophetic moments in this text, along with the importance of the black interior life, in the end, the narrator is also like a biblical prophet who has only the responsibility to bring the warning or the word of God, not to make sure that the word is implemented. Essentially, by the end of text Toni Morrison's narrator, has left the ultimate interpretation of the novel in the reader's hands. She is speaking for herself, somewhat speaking for the characters, while also speaking to the reader. The internal conflict that always existed in her role as narrator is now outwardly admitted: "But I can't say aloud: I can't tell anyone that I have been waiting for this all my life and that being chosen to wait is the reason I can. If I were able I'd say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now"(*Jazz* 229). At this juncture, we are not only aware that the narrator is directly speaking to you as part of a living community, but also that the narrator has a self-conscious authoritative power as storyteller that she can longer suppresses.

Just as the improvisational momentum of jazz is passed on to another player, Morrison leaves the reader with the responsibility of passing this story on. In the narrator's final words, she is boldly speaking to the reader suggesting that she is not who we think that she has been all along. Her purpose was to take us through this journey of illusion, the separation of appearance and reality, the jazzman and his band and the narrator and the reader; ultimately to arrive back to the power that lies within the pages of the text, in the same way in which the narrator tells the story. As a jazzman shifts from his role as leader to his role as member of the band, the narrator

shifts from her authoritative role back to the communal role with the characters in the text then back to herself again.

Simultaneously, while the narrator provides the prophetic moments of the text through a glimpse into intimate lives of the characters,—the historical backdrop of the music also plays out. Beyond the main characters—Joe and Violet—other characters are inadvertently impacted by both the music and the life of the City. Initially, the music is negatively received; for it was considered to be “low-down” dirty music:

Songs that used to start in the head and fill the heart had dropped on down, down to places below the sash and the buckled belts. Lower and lower, until the music was so low down you had to shut your windows and just suffer the sweat when the men in shirtsleeves propped themselves in window frames, or clustered on rooftops, in alleyways, on stoops and in apartments of relatives playing lowdown stuff that signaled Imminent Demise. Or when a woman with a baby on her shoulder and a skillet in her hand sang “Turn to my pillow where my sweet-man use to be...how long, how long, how long.’ Because you could hear it everywhere. (*Jazz* 56)

Jazz is different from the kind of music the newcomers are used to—the music that would start in one’s head and fill one’s heart—like spirituals and gospel music, which provided spiritual uplifting or encouragement.

In bearing witness to the impact of the music, Morrison uses personification as a means for the narrator to describe its powerful nature of music. But this same effect is applicable to how the narrator portrays the City. Matching the alluring and enticing nature of the music, the City is also quite hypnotic:

And the City, in its own way, gets down for you, cooperates, smoothing its sidewalks, correcting its curbstones, offering you melons and green apples on the corner. Racks of yellow head scarves; strings of Egyptian beads. Kansas fried chicken and something with raisins call attention to an open window where the aroma seems to lurk. And if that’s not enough, doors to speakeasies stand ajar and in that cool dark place a clarinet coughs and clears its throat waiting for the woman [singer] to decide on the key...The City is smart at this: smelling and good and looking raunchy; sending secret messages disguised as public sings: this

way, open here, danger to let colored only single men on sale woman wanted private room stop dog on premises absolutely no money down fresh chicken free delivery fast. (*Jazz* 63-4)

The City appeals to all of the five senses. And the cool sound of the Music—whether it is an instrument like the clarinet or the voice of woman singing at a night club—is like the subliminal messages in advertisements. The visual stimulation of the City offers a sense of direction to its onlookers. Morrison’s montage—colored only, the single man, the sale woman, a private space, dog premises, no money down, fresh chicken and free delivery fast—is both the music and the place.

Once again Morrison is able to use her text to musically prophesy to American society about the need to tell the story of the “common folk” that migrated from the South to the North, witnessed by and through the narrative voice of this novel, which primarily focuses on The City, The Music and The People. As many scholars have critically stated, *Jazz*, the music, is an art form that tells the story of the lives of everyday black folk. Like the Blues and other musical art forms that followed, *Jazz* was born out of a rich historical time period of the Black experience in America. It is through the creation and the presentation of this text that Morrison sheds light on another significant time period of American history that has often been ignored or unspoken of.

### **PARADISE: MORRISON AS VISIONARY**

The final novel in Toni Morrison’s trilogy, *Paradise* (1998), is another moment in American history revisited and the unveiling of the interior life of Black Americans. Similar to how *Beloved* and *Jazz* are rooted in significant moments of black history, and based upon news clippings of traumatic historical events that were “too terrible to relate” or often left “unspoken,” *Paradise* is another novel in which Morrison employs the method of literary archeology in an

exploration of the unmentioned spaces within the landscape of American history. Once again the reader is presented with another vital message, which further exhibits Morrison's role as literary prophet.

*Paradise* (1998) revisits the time in African American history when all-black towns were created after the abolition of slavery. In an Oprah interview, Morrison recalls how she was led to write *Paradise*:

I am interested in a very little known, poorly understood period in African American life in history, and that was the creation of all of those all-black towns in the West. And then I began to read about how they got started, soliticing people to come, and I got taken with that newspaper column, "Come Prepared or Not At All." And it seemed so reasonable a request that people not come out there unprepared with no food, no money, into virgin territory. But then, I read that some ex-slaves, about 200 of them, had, indeed, c—come there, and they didn't have a thing, and they were turned away. That made me think, what happened to those people who were turned away? Where did they go? Because that was an extraordinary situation of ex-slaves. (6)

Although Morrison shares a deep concern about those ex-slaves that were turned away, she unfolds many issues that plague Ruby, her fictitious African American Western town.

In response to Morrison's, the critical essays and book reviews about *Paradise* varied from laudable commentary to disapproving remarks, yet the most often repeated question was what is Morrison suggesting by the biblical implications of paradise in this text? Louis Menard of the *New Yorker*(1998) wrote, "*Paradise* is the strangest and most original book that Morrison has written...the genius of *Paradise* is that the biblical subtext is rarely allowed to obtrude on the reader's attention to the gritty particulars of the character's stories"(832). Diedre Neilen of *World Literature Today* (1998) states

Morrison effortlessly weaves together all of the fabrics of the United States' mosaic. What was done to the slaves, the freedmen, to the Native Americans, to the dispossessed, to the poor, to women here in the novel finds common cause. In short, Toni Morrison continues to remind her audience what good writing does: the undeniable pull of an entertaining story, the hynoptic push of history's

demands. *Paradise* is as close to divine writing as we will know this side of heaven. (78)

The underlying religious elements that Morrison seems to suggest and the spiritual discourse that many scholars allude to when critically examining *Paradise*; however, the concluding novel of the trilogy just a bolder statement of earlier ideas that Morrison.

In fact, Morrison has employed provocative, spiritually-laced and prophetic writings in some of her earlier novels—including *Beloved* and *Jazz*. Julia Eichelberger's *Prophets of Recognition* (1995) offers another close reading of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* in the context of other writers who she believes are "prophets of recognition." In the introduction of this text, Eichelberger declares "In my title I call these four writers: Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, Saul Bellow and Eudora Welty, "-prophets of recognition-" because I believe they offer readers a vision of an as-yet-unrealized democracy in which individuals acknowledge or recognize the innate worth of one another."(2) Self-love is also a prevalent theme in Morrison's portrayal of the prophetic voice of Baby Suggs in *Beloved*, where "The Clearing" is a healing place for other slaves, in *Jazz* where Joe and Violet Trace's historical journey as part of the Great Migration brings them from, the South to the Industrial North- to experience the City and the Music.

This same kind of introspective individual journey that Eichelberger speaks of and relates to other novels or writing by African Americans is present in *Paradise*. In *Paradise*, the journey of transformation is seen through the narratives of each woman at the Convent who is in search of a better understanding of self. Because their all-black town is in search of the ultimate paradise, so they decide to partially reject the American standards of life presented them as slaves.

The most common tasks of biblical prophets are "(1) Predicting the future. (2) Advising leaders. (3) Enacting change. (4) Performing Symbolic Acts and (5) Declaring Oracles



“(Geoghegan 199). Morrison seems to primarily function as an Oracle, in this instance, whereas each woman’s story, whether it is from Mavis, Seneca, Consolata, Divine, Pallas, Patricia or Grace, becomes the critical space, where through the characters and the historical landscape of this novel Morrison displays her ability to see or bear witness. She bears witness to the factors that continue to threaten, the most important stage of human development.

“Paradise” is a

word of Persian origin, found only three times in the Bible: (Luke 23:43, 2 Cor 12:4, Rev 2:7) and referring in each case to heaven. There was a similar word in the Hebrew Old Testament, *pardes*, translated “forest” or “orchard” or park (Neh 2:8, Eccl 2:5, Song of Songs 4:13)...It is used of Adamic Eden (Gen 2:15,3:23) and of the well-watered plains of the Jordan that Lot viewed (13:10). Since it was used to describe gardens of beauty and splendor, one is not surprised to see the New Testament begin to use the term to refer to spiritual bliss. (Luke 23:43)(Douglass 75)

Paradise refers a place called heaven. Other places associated with this word are the forest, a park or an orchard. It is also described as the space where beauty, splendor and spiritual bliss exist. The most common references of paradise of given in the Bible, especially in mentioning the Garden of Eden, from Book of Genesis.

Although the word “paradise” has many religiously positive connotations attached to its meaning, Morrison’s *Paradise* is an interrogation on what is believed to be the state of spiritual bliss—paradise. There are many communities within the fictitious town of Ruby that created a space that is supposed to be a form of paradise: the Convent is the feminine space that is away from the rest of the town, a place where women can escape from their burdens, even though they drift in and out, in hopes of gaining a ultimate moment of inner peace and self-acceptance. Within this all-black town full of people, other communities have developed, based upon critical attitudes where the same beliefs, feelings or thoughts are shared; first, there are those that question the behavior that goes on at the Convent; then, there are those that feel compelled to

sustain the towns as all-black status; to the generation gap that exist between the youth and the elders or the three groups of people that belong to the three different Christian churches within the town. Lastly, the most controversial sub-community are the body of men, who uphold a patriarchal authority; and these are the same men that are responsible for shooting the only white girl that visited and lived in the town. The presence of all of these communities and sub-communities seems to suggest that everyone is trying to obtain a moment of paradise, a true utopian society. But no single inner sub-community achieves paradise in isolation. Morrison revises the notion of how one attains spiritual bliss, by provoking a deeper analysis from the characters in the text as well as from the reader on what is truly paradise. Morrison critically questions the values of the spaces that are deemed righteous while excluding “sinners”—spaces that are exclusively for a single certain kind of people, whether: Christian, non-Christian, black, white, male, or female.

The first warning Morrison offers in the beginning of the novel is that racism and sexism tear up the black community. *Paradise* provocatively begins with “They shoot the white girl first. With the rest they can take their time. No need to hurry out of here. They are seventeen miles from a town which has ninety miles between it and any other. Hiding places will be plentiful in the Convent, but there is time and day has just begun” (*Paradise* 3).

Morrison’s second warning as prophet is against this notion of fragmented exclusivity, which is the most pervasive flaw in the town. In effect, *Paradise* becomes Morrison’s warning on the traditional perspective of how the world began, the problems that destroy the world, and a further exploration of the traditional understanding of the state of paradise from the Garden of Eden in Genesis or the creation story of the Bible. In her effort to critique the traditional patriarchal views of women, merged with traditional religious implications, at the end of the first

chapter Morrison writes: “Bodacious black Eves unredeemed by Mary, they are like panicked does leaping toward the sun that has finished burning off the mist and now pours its holy oil over the hides of game”(18). Eve is being recognized as a Black woman and Mary is a representative of the redemption that never took place in Eve, which is also reflected in later generations of women. These later generations of women are manifested through the Convent women in *Paradise*. Interestingly enough, the Convent was once a religious place of worship, where women were restricted by the rules of Catholicism, but now it is the place of redemption and the women are free to be themselves, rejecting societal pressure and previous mistakes. Although Morrison allows the Convent to be a female space for female agency, the Convent is not limited to just women, thus like as a literary prophet she is warning against the danger of allowing such a place of exclusivity to exist. Simultaneously, she is also warning against the sexist attitude of men that dates back to the Biblical Garden of Eden. In this instance, Eve was blamed for the fall of man; and then, many generations later, this same sexist attitude provides some of the explanation of why the women in this novel, would seek out such a place.

Another aspect of exclusivity in *Paradise* is manifested in the narrative of Patricia. Here Morrison is warning against the exclusion of ideas in the black community. Patricia analyzes the genealogy of the town with intricate detail, so the reader begins to see the interrelationships that exist between the town members, who have been indirectly alluded to throughout the text. She is the woman who really helps to establish the historical essence of this text; she echoes the cautionary voice of Morrison as a literary prophet. Unlike the other textual examples, Patricia’s conversations with Reverend Misner are not only a reflection of spiritual discourse, but these conversations are also a reflection of the importance of the cross reference of history in the lives of the people in Ruby. Despite the description of Ruby as a place of spiritual bliss for the black

community, the ex-slaves, the town is still entrenched in the attitudes or perspectives that destroy the chance of a place called Paradise actually to thrive.

The ongoing dialogue between Patricia and Reverend Misner is one of many that display the tensions between women and men, black and white, past and the present, youth and the elders, the new and the old ways to live life:

“They are better than you think,” she said

“They are better than they think, he told her. Why are they satisfied with so little?”

“This is their home; mine too. Home is not a little thing.”

“I’m not saying that it is. But you can’t even imagine what it must feel like to have a true home? I don’t mean heaven. I mean a real earthly home...but your home where if you go back past your great-great-grandparents, past theirs, and theirs, past the whole Western history, past the beginnings organized religion...back when God said Good!”(*Paradise* 213)

Patricia is not concerned with the implications of just history, without religion; instead she appreciates the merging of all aspects of life, to create a distinct reality. She also recognizes that Ruby is the home of several years of sacrifice, which has made Ruby a safe place for all that reside there. However, Reverend Misner is not as concerned about an earthly home that is likened to the intangible Paradise or Garden of Eden that existed in the early stages of creation, when God was pleased with the world. Reverend Misner is consumed with the idea of progress and the socio-political issues that surround blacks in other areas outside of Ruby. As he shows concern for the future, unlike many of the adults in the town, he is finding a better connection with youth and whatever they may view to be the new paradise. The younger generation, which

has grown up with the “one drop rule,” the Dred Scott case, the debates of Booker T Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, to Dr. King and Malcolm X seem to be more aware of the issues that plague society. Similar to some of the youth, the Reverend’s attitude about how to conquer the spiritual wars that are happening all around the town is to sustain a military posture. His words often resonate the position of Malcolm X, while Patricia seems to embrace the philosophy of Dr. King. These seemingly opposing philosophies allow for the creation of communities that function in isolation, the type of isolation or essentialist attitude that Morrison seems to be warning the reader against. Through Patricia’s character Morrison suggests that there is a need for a paradise where all can finally co-exist and learn to function together and no one is to blame.

So, by the end of the text, Morrison has uncovered some of the dangers that revolve around the issues of racism and sexism, and she is warning us against the creation of exclusive communities. The reader has received a thorough explanation of reasons why the women of the Convent have been murdered. The men of the town have realized that their need to sustain patriarchal authority has caused them to commit an ungodly act at the Convent. The town has relinquished its role as a holy, all-black town of security and productivity to become a town that has collapsed. Ruby is no longer the Paradise for the black people who had to flee from Haven to Ruby, for the blood of the convent women remains on the hands of the entire town, destroying their chance of ever achieving paradise, the state of spiritual bliss.

Morrison efficiently re-asserts her role as a literary prophet in this final book of her trilogy. As a literary prophet, she uses her text to bear witness and to warn of social attitudes that have historically caused communal destruction: sexism and racism. As in *Beloved* and *Jazz*, according to Morrison’s writings, and already proven prophetic utterances, once again the (black) community is responsible for its actions against a group of marginalized and ostracized

people. What happens in *Ruby* is just a more violent version of the social conflicts Morrison observed in other times and other situations. What Morrison shown her readers are, simply put, some of the major problems that exist in the world, but in focusing not only on how the black community is marginalized and mistreated because of white prejudice but also on how within the black community a broader judgment.

In this final book of Morrison's historical trilogy, Morrison has created this novel to project another universal message. In order for the state of bliss or peace to exist on earth; and in order for all members of society to co-exist, everyone must be willing to purge themselves of the thoughts, beliefs and ideologies that exclude or hurt others and create the unjust attitude of superiority. Morrison is not suggesting that paradise can only be achieve when a person dies, but it can be achieved when all human beings are still in the midst of living life; and willing to learn as well as embrace some of the harder lessons of life. Morrison has taken on the responsibility of speaking to the consciousness of all members of society, in hopes that the result will reveal that a prophetic presence or voice was amongst them.

## CHAPTER FIVE:

### “ACCEPTING THE PROPHETIC RESPONSIBILITY”: TONI MORRISON’S MESSAGES AND THE MEASUREMENT OF SUCCESS

Toni Morrison has explained that “Writing for me is challenging for a number of reasons, but the actual craft and the aesthetics of it are—what I’d like to do—it’s a kind of restoration. I like to write a story in which the story matters and the people matter, you care who drops dead, that’s old fashioned novel-writing, with very primitive recognitions. When people talk about black writing, that’s what I think it is...I think it’s something so much more earthbound...much more in touch with the magic and the mystery and things of the body” (Taylor-Guthrie 77-8). Morrison has also stated on several instances that her writings are about and for “the village.” Thus, for her, black writing is about black people: their lives, their language, and their experiences, which all serve as the important material or archeological seeds used in the development of all Morrison novels.

Restoration is also another key element in all Morrison novels; it is “the essential ingredient” that further drives Morrison’s writings. Her writing restores a lost or misrepresented view of history; it seeks to rebuild and renew a people, a culture, and a community. While reading a Morrison novel like *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, *Jazz* or *Paradise*, one encounters Morrison’s critical and prophetic voice, like the pervading voices of the prophets in the *Holy Bible* and the *Holy Qu’ran* as well as like the more modern prophetic voices of today: the preachers, teachers, and scholars who are crying out to a world and a people going wrong or in need of guidance. Serving as a parallel, to this position that Morrison has embraced for the writer, as the one who bears witness or makes prophetic and critical declarations onto the world, the words of the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan can be inserted into this discussion. In one

of his more recent addresses, “Accepting Responsibility to Build Our Community,” the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan introduces his subject by stating that

One hundred thirty-two (132) years ago, in the Holy City Mecca, in Arabia, a child was born with the purpose of seeking to find and save a people who are styled in the scriptures as “The Lost Sheep.” And we can find no persons on this planet more fitting of that description of the Lost Sheep—The Lost People—than the Black man and woman of America and the Western Hemisphere, who were brought to these shores over 450 years ago, and robbed completely of the knowledge of self. Our names, our language, our culture, our history: stripped from us, so that in the Western world, having no root in ourselves; no knowledge of our own God, and our own religion, it rendered us—spiritually—blind, deaf and dumb. (“Accepting Responsibility”)

Yet, like Morrison’s novels, these words are not a belittling of the community to whom they are directed but intended as a prophetic life-giving apparatus for those who hear them. Like Morrison’s stories, they are admonitions to reattach to values that are important and that, though long lost, can be restored. It is in such teachings that true redemption and restoration can take place for Black people in America. Minister Farrakhan acknowledges that his teacher, The Honorable Elijah Muhammad, once avowed that “Blessed is he who forges the way for others.” In her literary masterpieces, Morrison writes that she not only calls others to personal and social action but she paves the way for the younger artists to come who will follow her, trail her and continue to speak truth through fiction.

Within the critical framework of American Literature, Morrison serves as the literary prophetic voice that reverberates within and beyond the realms of the academy and the canon of American fiction. Morrison exposes how the past has caused the present interior life of Black Americans to be intricately linked to a mindset that enslaves or oppresses, but she also shows how heroic individuals come to understand the sources of such a mindset and can restore dignity and positive purpose for themselves and their community.



## MUSIC AS A PROPHETIC MEDIUM

In this effort, Morrison uses bits and pieces of history to create a revised story of how things happened. She also explores various mediums to declare her prophetic messages: multiple genres of music, black language and the art of storytelling each allow her characters to recover the lost history of their people. In fact, while *Beloved* was published in 1987, the historical truth behind this novel continued to resonate with Morrison and eighteen years later she wrote a stirring libretto revisiting one of the sources of *Beloved*, creating for the *Margaret Garner Opera*, which premiered in 2005 in Detroit, Michigan. In 2008, for the Chicago premiere, the playbill includes “A Note from Toni Morrison,” that speaks to her identity as a prophetic writer, one called to explain the past in order to affect the future:

For more than five years I had been in thrall to the material, trying to do justice to the historical characters involved while exercising the license I needed to interrogate the dilemma Margaret both presented and represented...Some ten years later, free from exhaustion following the publication of *Beloved* I realized that there were genres other than novels that could expand and deepen the story...Finally, to the real people who lived this tale, I trust we have done them, their heirs, and the spirits justice. (Program 12)

Another example of Morrison’s use of music as a medium is uncovered in *Jazz*. *Jazz* is a novel that not only borrows the structural composition of this unique American music, but it also uses both the form and the content of jazz to bear witness to the richness and complexity of black life. Unlike her other novels, where the narrator is objective, in *Jazz* the narrator improvises with her instrument, writing, in the context of the story-telling of all the other characters. In fact, in writing the novel this way Morrison embodies her belief that the reader must “participate” in the story and, as an individual in a jazz group does, must also listen carefully to all the voices. This shift in the presentation of her narrative style is another deliberate and conscious effort to continue to fulfill her role as a literary prophet. Within this narrative style, each of the character’s

resembles in some respect the solos/duets, the riffs, the narration and comments of piano and horns and voices, the acts of improvisation, and the coded language that characterize jazz.

Morrison is well aware that jazz music is a fusion of history and emotion, blues and humor, rhythm and discordance, that it is dance music as well as self-expression, that it brings joy and solace and carries secret messages for black culture, hearking back to Africa, back to slavery and sharecropping, back to Jim Crow and the escape from oppression, back to the heart and soul of W.E.B Du Bois's "black folk." Her interest in telling such a story in such a way stems from her fascination with the music and with the culture in which it developed and is played. In the preface to *Playing in the Dark*, she writes about a passage in the Algerian writer.

The one precise, unique note tracing a sound whose path was almost *painful*, so absolutely necessary had its equilibrium and duration become; it tore at the nerves of those [other than Armstrong, apparently] who followed it' [*italics mine*]. . . What solicited my attention was whether the cultural association of jazz as important to Cardinal's "possession" as were its intellectual foundations. I was interested, I had been for a long time, in the way people ignite critical moments of discovery or change or emphasis in literature not written by them. The Louis Armstrong catalyst was an addition to this file, and encouraged me to reflect on the consequences of jazz—its visceral, emotional, and intellectual impact on the listener. (vi-viii)

Marie Cardinal's biography speaks of where she has an extreme reaction when she encounters the music of Louis Armstrong. The brilliance of Armstrong's ability to play the trumpet, triggered the pain and insanity that resided inside of Marie Cardinal—"it tore at her nerves." As Morrison continues to discuss Marie Cardinal's experience with the music of Armstrong, she says that it encountered her "to reflect on the consequences of jazz—its visceral, emotional, and intellectual impact on the listener"(viii). Obviously, some of this impact is what she sought to create in *Jazz*, where is a metaphor for American culture and the black experience in Harlem, New York, as well for the voices of those who were a part of the Great Migration from the South. The reader is forced to experiences the Music, the City and the People in this text, in

order to gain another perspective on black culture as expressed through the music. Lar Eckstein further supports this notion of music as a form of bearing witness, in the article “A Love Supreme: Jazzthetic Strategies in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.” Therein he writes: “For Morrison, African American writing fundamentally relies on the sounds and rhythms of black music—as a source of narrative content, but particularly also an as aesthetic “mirror”. She notes: he writes, “If my work is faithfully to reflect the aesthetic tradition of Afro-American culture, it must make conscious use of the characteristics of its art forms and translate them into print: antiphony, the group nature of art, its functionality, its improvisational nature, its relationship to audience performance, the critical voice which upholds tradition and communal values and which also provides occasion for an individual to transcend and/or defy group restrictions” (qtd in Ecks 272). Here, Morrison admits that her work mirrors the cultural practices of the Black Aesthetic, which allows for a movement from traditional or individual concerns to community concerns. And Black music, especially the sounds and rhythms, are a very important part of this mirroring that she translates into written expression, in the novel *Jazz*.

### **SEGMENTS OF HISTORY AS A PROPHETIC MEDIUM**

In a critical discussion of Morrison’s newest novel, *A Mercy* (2008), Kevin Nance claims that

Morrison returns to the great theme of her Pulitzer Prize-winning *Beloved*: slavery and its tar pit of historical, political and emotional implications. But where *Beloved*, which was published by Knopf in 1987, combined the slow-building epic sweep of Greek tragedy with the mounting horror of a ghost story, *A Mercy* has the intimacy and speed of a chamber piece while still being impressively dense, like a small valise packed with enough outfits for a month in the country. It parses sometimes surprisingly fine distinctions between master and slave, male and female, black and white (and brown). (48)

While *A Mercy* (2008) is not a novel that has been critically examined within this dissertation, since it was published after this study was already intensely underway, it is important to mention that Morrison has made another attempt at addressing the impact of slavery, but she is writing from a different angle or position than before, while still enforcing her prophetic claims about the impact of slavery on American society.

In an interview a few months after the release of *A Mercy*, Morrison addresses the difference in her examination of slavery for this novel. As a response to Marilyn Milloy's initial question about the setting being in the late 1600's, in Virginia, long before slavery had matured as an institution, Morrison explains: "I was very interested in separating racism from slavery. The assumption has always been, in this country, that [slavery] began with a few colonists, and then came the Africans, and that relationship is the reason for much of the racism that still exists in this country. And I didn't believe it, because nobody is born [a racist]. Racism is constructed. It was an insisted-upon protection for the landed and the aristocrats "(24). Therefore, in this novel, her interests lie in looking at the institution of slavery absent from racism. Thus, Morrison argues that slavery must be acknowledged and examined from various positions; and until this investigation is truly exhausted, the historical problems in American culture that are race-based will continue.

Another insight into Morrison's exploration of many different means to practice her prophetic role comes in a comment she made about *The Bluest Eye*. Morrison says that "One problem was centering the weight of the novel's inquiry on so delicate and vulnerable a character could smash her and lead readers into the comfort of pitying her rather than into an interrogation of themselves for the smashing. My solution—break the narrative into parts that had to be reassembled by the reader—seemed to me a good idea, the execution of which does not satisfy

me now. Besides, it didn't work: many readers remain touched but not moved" (*The Bluest Eye*, 211). This means that the visceral effect that she desired, did not transpire. Her observation of the reception of this novel is quite important in understanding her literary prophetic role, because it also applies to the historical prophetic tradition that is given in the Bible. God sent several prophets and messengers to various groups of people with almost the same message, but at different times and to different places, because over time each group did not heed the warning of the previous prophet that came to deliver the message. As most prophets are charged with the responsibility of delivering a message to others, Morrison's acute realization of how her early novels are received inadvertently allows her to revisit certain themes within her later novels; and like *Biblical* and the *Quranic* prophets that preceded her, she realizes that, especially if she feels the message did not get through, she must remind her audience of what she has already stated.

### STORYTELLING AS A PROPHETIC MEDIUM

While in *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola is trapped within the "house that race built," in *Song of Solomon*, the male protagonist is not confined to such a racially historical space, so he embarks upon the quest to find himself and to become a complete man. A significant connection to the writings of this novel is Morrison's memory of her father and the thoughts of his answer to her question: "What are the men you have known really like?" (*Song of Solomon*, Vintage Edition xii) In this same moment of critical reflection or personal acknowledgment, Morrison also claims that

the challenge of *Song of Solomon* was to manage what was for me a radical shift in imagination from a female locus to a male one. To get out of the house, to de-domesticate the landscape that had so far been the site of my work. To travel. To fly. In such an overtly stereotypical male narrative, I thought that straightforward chronology would be more suitable than the kind of play with sequence and time I had employed in my previous novels. A journey, then, with the accomplishment

of flight, the triumphant end of a trip through earth, to its surface, into water, and finally into air. All very saga-like. Old-school heroic, but with other meanings.  
(xii)

Morrison found she had to move beyond the social psychosis of a little black girl in *The Bluest Eye*, to the importance of providing another perspective about what ails the black community—the need for the restorative process for the black man in America.

In *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*, and the *Song of Solomon*, race or racial history is what propels these novels, yet in her most recent novel, like in her other novels, *Paradise*, or in the short story “Recitatif,” Morrison proclaims something new. Ultimately, Morrison believes that the ideologies of race hold too much power in American culture. In fact, in the essay “On the Backs of Blacks,” she states that “this is race talk, the explicit insertion into everyday life of racial signs and symbols that have no meaning other than pressing African Americans to the lowest level of racial hierarchy...Race talk as a bonding mechanism is powerfully on display in American Literature” (qtd in Denard 145-7). Consistent with her theoretical beliefs, Morrison uses the literary arena, as a space where she can suggest how “race talk” should slowly be moved from center stage.

For example, in the short story “Recitatif,” Morrison forces the reader to determine the racial identification of the main characters, by way of the unfolding details, as opposed to any obvious context clues in the narrative voice. According to Morrison, the Preface of *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, “Recitatif was an experiment in the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial”(Morrison xi).

This same kind of experimentation and removal of racial codes takes place in *Paradise*. In an Oprah book club meeting on television, shortly after this book's publication. Morrison provides an explanation of how she arrived at the first sentence: Morrison explains,

The first sentence of the book is an important sentence, because, A, it launches the story and that's its job, to pull the reader in, seduce you immediately into the narrative and tell you a little bit about what's going on. There's a lot one doesn't know when you read that first sentence. There's an awful lot of you do know. I didn't write, 'They shoot the tall girl first or They shoot the fat girl or the thin girl. I mean, I said 'white,' which means that race is going to play a part in the narrative. It may not play the part we are used to race playing in identifying who is black and who is white and what does all that mean. It played another kind of role which was to signal race instantly and to reduce it to nothing. (Oprah 16)

In reading about these kinds of racial tensions that exists in American society, it becomes the reader's responsibility to figure out how and why they have developed into such critical matters such that the "white girl was shot first". When asked if there was any leading character as in *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon* or *Beloved*, Morrison replies that "there was no leading character...I wanted to force the reader to become acquainted with the communities. I wanted—you to look at each one of these people and figure out who each one was and then see their relationship to each other and how that changed in each of these paradises. And I wanted the weight of interpretation to be the reader" ("Book Club" 9). Ultimately, she claims that it is the reader's job to determine who "the white girl is;" and then, "who are the rest", and why did "they take their time." It is also the reader's job to unravel this text and the underlying message that Morrison has fused into the text.

*Paradise* can also be compared to the parables found throughout the Bible, where there are embedded lessons that must be properly interpreted. Morrison has qualified an earlier statement of just how significant the Bible was in her life: "the Bible wasn't part of my reading, it was part of my life" (qtd in Taylor-Guthrie 97). Ultimately, it is the responsibility of those

who read the Bible and interpret the message to gain the proper insight, in order to be restored, and to receive the proper wisdom, and guidance; Morrison expects the same of her readers.

Morrison's prophetic literary voice is further revealed as she elaborates on the problems associated with race, even though race is not placed at the center of this text. *Paradise* focuses on how one should understand the deeper meanings of perfect community. For example, in the final few paragraphs of this text, the narrator states:

There is nothing to beat this solace which is what Piedade's song is about, although the words evoke memories neither one has ever had: of reaching age in the company of the other; of speech shared and divided bread smoking from the fire; the unambivalent bliss of going home to be at home—the ease of coming back to love begun.

When the ocean heaves sending rhythms of water ashore, Piedade looks to see what has come. Another ship, perhaps, but different, heading to port, crew and passengers, lost and saved, atremble, for they have been disconsolate for some time. Now they will rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in paradise. (*Paradise* 318)

Morrison's text is declaring that the state of paradise is not something that can occur only after physical death. Paradise is accomplished when a mental resurrection has taken place. More specifically, in fact, it exists when human inclination no longer leans towards sin and exclusivity of any kind. Paradise arrives when the moral principles of what is considered to be right or wrong are no longer needed as tools of human measurement: and the state of paradise is accessible to everyone. Morrison's literary representation of paradise exhibits some parallels to the belief of the establishment of God's kingdom as referred to in the Lord's prayer within Christianity and to "The Hereafter" in Islam, which both claim that paradise can be achieved on earth.

More specifically, each of these two religious traditions also seems to suggest that paradise occurs after all works in opposition to God and righteousness are removed from the Earth. Within her revisionist claim of paradise, Morrison rejects the belief that paradise is



granted only to an elite group. As given in *The Holy Qu'ran* 59:8, Allah says: "I have prepared for my righteous servants what no eye has seen and no ear has heard and what the mind of man has not conceived" (Ali 38). Just as Morrison suggests in the final words of her text, paradise is a reality that has not yet been achieved on Earth, but it represents a condition that everyone is looking for.

Paradise, which is a seemingly unobtainable human destination, is a critical aspect of Morrison's vision. In the same manner that paradise is a condition unseen by human beings, as suggested in *the Holy Qu'ran*, it is the same notion for the people in the town of Ruby. The very motivation that allowed them to flee from the places that made them feel excluded, victimized, oppressed, and/ or ignored, is linked to the longing for a haven or paradise, which they hoped to established in Ruby. In order to universalize her message about the human condition and its desire for peace and tranquility, in *Paradise*, Morrison removed those societal, political, and religious identify markers that qualify or disqualify a person to be in receipt of God's grace and mercy and a state of paradise.

Paradise is the place where one can be free from all of the reasons why a prophet would come to warn a wayward people. Simultaneously, within this revisionist presentation of what paradise means in various communities and to various people, the reader will then unintentionally discover the then unimportant racial identity of the characters. This approach parallels how, in Islam and Judeo-Christian traditions, God chooses to send different prophets or messengers to the people that he is trying to save, restore, or resurrect. As one examines the prophetic history as written in both the *Holy Bible* and in the *Holy Qu'ran*, God strives to make sure that his message is well-received. In that same way, Morrison critically examines how her other novels were received, and what it is that she was trying to achieve by writing those texts.

Some of her readers were consumed, she realized, with the wrong ideologies. These wrong ideologies have caused further detriment, so Morrison understood that she must re-present her message in a new way.

After carefully examining Morrison's treatment of history, her use of language (her use of music) and her imagination to create her novels, the critical question at the end of this work is whether or not she was successful in accepting and fulfilling her literary prophetic role. In an interview with Nellie McKay, in 1983, Morrison was asked an almost similar question: "How do you see your own growth and development as a successful writer?" She responded by stating that "The writing gets better, too. The reading experience may not, but the writing gets better. I am giving myself permission to write books that do not depend on anyone's liking them, because what I want to do is write better. A writer does not always write in the ways other wish. The writer has to solve certain kinds of problems in writing. The way in which I handle elements within a story frame is important to me" (qtd in Taylor-Guthrie 142).

### **BLACK LANGUAGE AND STORYTELLING AS A PROPHETIC MEDIUM**

Finally, Morrison uses, plays with, and signifies on the creative genius within black language, making sure that the "language does not sweat." In an interview with Thomas LeClair, "The Language Must Not Sweat: A Conversation with Toni Morrison", in 1981, Morrison explains the importance of how one uses language; "the language must be careful and must appear effortless...It must suggest and be provocative at the same time. It is the thing that black people love so much—the saying of words, holding them on the tongue, experimenting with them, playing with them. It's a love passion. Its function is like a preacher's; to make you stand up out of your seat, make you lose yourself and hear yourself. The worst of all possible things

that could happen would be to lose that language” (qtd in Taylor-Guthrie 123). Therefore, in Morrison’s writing she is careful, slow and deliberate in how she molds and shapes her own use of language. In the Foreword to the Vintage Edition of *Love*, Morrison claims that she like the challenges that language brings: “I like so much the challenges that writing *Jazz* gave me: breaking and dismantling conventional rules of composition to replace them with other, stricter rules. In that work, the narrative voice was the book itself, its physical and spatial confinement made irrelevant by its ability to imagine, invent, interpret, err, and change”(x-xi). Beyond this conscious moment about her writing process, *Jazz* is one of her novels that provide the reader with several linguistic expressions that demonstrate the soulfulness of black language. Some examples include the ways in which Morrison captures the essence of black orality in written form: “He fell for an eighteen year old girl with one of those deepdown, spooky loves that made him so sad and happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going” to “though I suspect that girl didn’t need to straightened her” or “Good Luck and let me know” (*Jazz*, Plume Edition 3-5). Because the language must be provoking, informing and just as powerful as someone preaching: the one who inspires or gives guidance. Black language includes a vigor and passion that can not be lost, so Morrison strives hard to preserve the language; and in this attempt, inevitably she is also sustaining the richness of black culture and history.

Morrison serves as the historian and musician who gives an account of what is happening within American culture, and the artist and the prophet who has a keen critical sense of the world around her. As a writer that bears witness, a term that has often been associated with Morrison’s style of writing, Morrison has achieved several moments of success as literary prophet, but according to her own standards, not the standards of others. After all, (as qtd in Taylor-Guthrie 153) Morrison says that “[she] wants [her] books to reflect the imaginative combination of the

real world, the very practical, shrewd, day to day functioning that black people must do” (qtd in Taylor-Guthrie 153). Toni Morrison has recognized her mission and the critical response to her work, and her personal review of her work, agreed that Toni Morrison has succeeded as a literary prophet.

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