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**IF YOU SURRENDER TO THE AIR, YOU
CAN RIDE IT:**

REPRESENTATIONS OF RESISTANCE AGAINST
DISENFRANCHISEMENT AND INTERSECTIONAL
DISCRIMINATION IN TONI MORRISON'S *SONG
OF SOLOMON*

Dissertação de Mestrado em Estudos de Cultura, Literatura e Línguas Modernas no ramo de Estudos Ingleses e Americanos, orientada pela Professora Doutora Maria Isabel Carvalho Gomes Caldeira Sampaio dos Aidos e pela Professora Doutora Maria José Florentino Mendes Canelo, apresentada ao Departamento de Línguas, Literaturas e Culturas da Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Coimbra.

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RESUMO

If You Surrender to The Air, You Can Ride It: Representações de Resistência Contra Exclusão e Discriminação Interseccional em *Song of Solomon*, de Toni Morrison

A publicação de *Song of Solomon* de Toni Morrison em 1977 coincidiu com os Movimentos pelos Direitos Civis, que lutavam, desde as décadas anteriores, por mudanças sociopolíticas fundamentais, e com a chamada 2ª vaga dos movimentos pelos direitos das mulheres. Coincidiu ainda com uma época de produção académica e ativista abundante e diversa, como foi o caso da *Critical Race Theory* (CRT), que veio estimular a discussão interdisciplinar sobre as relações entre raça, racismo e poder. A ficção de Morrison e a CRT não só ocupam lugares controversos na opinião pública dos Estados Unidos da América (USA), como também procuram expor formas de opressão associadas às linhas interseccionais entre raça, género e classe. Se os académicos da CRT tentam desconstruir o conceito de “raça” e dismantelar hierarquias raciais, o livro de 1977 de Morrison recorre a uma drástica reconsideração das perceções raciais da sociedade, de modo a salientar a importância da ancestralidade e tradições afro-americanas num país dominado por princípios capitalistas. Neste sentido, *Song of Solomon* destaca-se no seio da literatura afro-americana como uma obra de ficção repleta de tensões sociopolíticas.

Quase cinco décadas depois da publicação de *Song of Solomon*, as noções de raça, género e classe continuam a ser postas em questão por todos os grupos sociais. Após o assassinato de Trayvon Martin ter sido ilibado em 2013, o movimento *Black Lives Matter* uniu pessoas de todo o mundo contra a supremacia branca e contra a violência infligida às comunidades negras. Os líderes do movimento estiveram entre aqueles que criticaram publicamente a revogação do histórico caso *Roe v. Wade* em 2022, acusando o Supremo Tribunal de restringir liberdades a favor de motivações de pendor hegemónico branco e patriarcal. Em especial, os corpos das mulheres negras encontram-se agora mais vulneráveis do que nunca às prerrogativas masculinas – uma questão abordada por Morrison com as suas personagens femininas. Estes são eventos recentes que demonstram a disparidade entre os direitos civis usufruídos pelos norte-americanos brancos e as dificuldades da população afro-americana no que diz respeito à sua obtenção, assim como a prevalência do sistema patriarcal. Como Morrison sugere em *Song of Solomon*, é indispensável levantar voo em direção a uma cidadania plena.

O meu objetivo é investigar de que formas a obra de Morrison transmite representações de raça, género e classe através de uma perspetiva interseccional, no contexto de um sistema que,

particularmente nos EUA, se destaca pela exploração e marginalização de grupos vulneráveis, e simultaneamente se autopromove como paradigma da democracia moderna.

Palavras-chave: cidadania, discriminação, interseccionalidade, literatura afro-americana, Toni Morrison.

ABSTRACT

The publication of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* in 1977 was contemporary with the Civil Rights that had been fighting for sociopolitical changes with a profound impact on society since the preceding decades, and with the 2nd Feminist movement. It also coincided with a tremendous abundance and variety of academic and activist work, such as Critical Race Theory (CRT)'s interdisciplinary discussion of the relationship between race, racism, and power. Not only do Morrison's fiction and CRT share a controversial place in the United States of America (USA) public opinion, but both of them attempt to expose forms of oppression grounded on the intersectional lines between race, gender, and class. If CRT academics work to deconstruct the concept of "race" and dismantle racial hierarchies, Morrison's 1977 book appeals to a critical rethinking of society's perceptions of race, emphasizing the significance of Black people's ancestry and traditions in a country dominated by capitalist principles. In this sense, *Song of Solomon* stands out within African American literature as a socio-politically charged work of fiction.

Almost five decades after *Song of Solomon*'s publication, the notions of race, gender and class are being questioned by every social group. Following the clearance of Trayvon Martin's killer in 2013, the *Black Lives Matter* movement united people from across the globe against white supremacy and violence inflicted on Black communities. They were also among those who publicly criticized the 2022 revocation of the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* landmark case, accusing the Supreme Court of restriction of freedom on behalf of white supremacist and patriarchal motivations. Especially Black women's bodies are now more vulnerable than ever to male prerogatives – an issue already engaged by Morrison through her female characters. These are recent instances that prevent the African American population from achieving the same civil rights white Americans are entitled to. As Morrison implies in *Song of Solomon*, there is a need to fly forward, towards a full citizenship.

My aim is to investigate how Morrison's novel conveys different representations of race, gender, and class through an intersectional lens in the context of a system that, particularly in the USA, excels in the exploitation and discrimination of vulnerable groups while maintaining its façade as a model of modern democracy.

Keywords: citizenship, discrimination, intersectionality, African American literature, Toni Morrison.

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Introduction

To the Western world, the 21st century seems to represent a historical and ideological schism from the previous centuries, characterized by war, slavery, and unyielding social hierarchies. But discrimination on the grounds of class, race/ ethnicity and/ or gender are still big players in the ways we perceive and treat others. It is true that some of the most visible racist attitudes such as lynching and official segregation are no longer practiced in the USA, but when observing other important areas of human life there are lines drawn between people who are considered “superior” and people who are regarded as “inferior.” Boaventura de Sousa Santos defines them as “abyssal lines,” a fundamental part of “[m]odern Western [way of] abyssal thinking (“Beyond Abyssal Thinking” 45–6). When it comes down to essential areas for the development of a stable social and family life, these lines force minority populations to undergo oppressive environments responsible for preventing them from getting proper housing, fair job opportunities, and higher levels of education. Essentially, they prevent social and racial/ ethnic groups such as people of African, Indigenous or Hispanic descent, women, and those with a lower economic status, among others, from attaining rights that should be safeguarded by citizenship.

To this day, the USA has been a prime example of a country where minorities struggle against a continuous stigmatization and marginalization by mainstream society and by the authorities. After centuries of enslavement, African Americans are still fighting for full integration and forced to deal with discrimination from all quadrants of society, including from the police itself. These circumstances have become painfully obvious by the recent murders of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Pamela Turner, Rekia Boyd, and George Floyd. Moreover, the percentage of imprisoned Black Americans remains alarmingly higher than that of their white counterparts (Delgado and Stefancic 22–23). Interestingly enough, there were many whose arrest generated doubts regarding the authorities’ impartiality. Black activist Angela Davis was one of such cases. In 1970, Davis was accused of being involved in the armed abduction of a Marin County Courthouse in California which resulted in four dead people, including a judge, because the weapons used were in her name. Her arrest and subsequent imprisonment were generally thought to be brought on by circumstantial evidence and motivated by Davis’ ties to the Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, to the Black Panther Party, and to the American Communist Party, as well as her research about the relation between racism and poor prison conditions.

Western perception of the USA as a strong and stable example of democracy has also been put in question, particularly by how the government has dealt with discrimination and especially after the 2016 presidential election. Until then, it was easy to regard the USA as that far away land where democratic values were upheld as unbreakable guidelines that defined the moral and political core of a society officially built upon the French Revolution's motto. I was no different: as I listen to Donald Trump's speeches and to the myriad of public reactions to him and his words, especially those concerning minority groups, the easiness with which I had once dismissed this country's social and cultural policies as "far away" vanished. I have begun to think more about how much of "the Promised Land" has in fact kept up with its promises of freedom and equality. I have begun to think more about a nation that officially constructed itself as "guardians of civilization in the New World" (Franklin and Moss 265) but allowed and still allows the exclusion of people based on their skin color and cultural backgrounds. And I have begun to question how much of this hypocrisy had reached other places in the world, my own country included.

I was determined to use this investigation to learn more about narratives which hegemonic groups find too uncomfortable to confront, the kind of narratives that the USA government has been keen on ignoring and rewriting for its own benefit. Literature presents itself as the perfect medium to dive into. As the late literary critic Harold Bloom once said, "What matters in literature in the end is surely the idiosyncratic, the individual, the flavor or the color of a particular human suffering" (qtd. in Lehman 1). Each reader experiences stories in accordance with his/ her own views and perceptions of reality. The more I read, the more any crystallized idealizations of the western world as a protector of civilization shattered. The "human suffering" that western countries are so keen on erasing from their recent History, as if they could brush off their own responsibility on the issue, became increasingly impossible to ignore. Hegemonic narratives produced on the basis of power-driven aspirations began emerging from the cracks left open by a system that has never ceased to oppress the most vulnerable people.

Such cracks were remarkably explored by Toni Morrison's body of work, notably those concerning the African American population. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, she analyses the notions of "Africanism" and "Whiteness" as they are represented in American literature, particularly literature that is considered canonical, and their relation to society:

regardless of the race of the author, the readers of virtually all of American fiction have been positioned as white. I am interested to know what that assumption has meant to the literary imagination. [...] 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. When this world view is taken seriously as agency, the literature produced within and without it offers an unprecedented opportunity to comprehend the resilience and gravity, the inadequacy and the force of the imaginative act. (1993, xii–xiii)

Morrison's books breach through a variety of themes, from History to folklore, but she manages to weave a compelling guiding thread that connects all of them: language and power. These are instrumental forces in her novels, as she made a point of emphasizing in her Nobel Lecture. Using a story about an old and wise woman and a bird, she creates an allegory that drives home the idea of language as a pliable and fundamental aspect of human existence, especially when it is used to maintain "the free range of [statist language's] own narcotic narcissism, its own exclusivity and dominance" (2019, 95). Humans, she says, tend to overlook language's "nuanced, complex, midwifery properties for menace and subjugation" (96). This conceptualization is essential to the understanding of the power dynamics at play in our world and expressed through language itself, through literature, in particular.

Being a professor herself meant that Morrison could stay up to date on academic topics and methods of investigation, but becoming a novelist allowed her to go a step further: through fiction, Morrison was able to explore the meanings behind what she dubs "the vitality of language" (2019, 95-97). That is, language's capacity to depict the "actual, imagined, and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers." In this sense, her fictional work may be perceived as a form of praxis drawn from Stuart Hall's notion of meanings produced through language.¹ Dealing with issues such as class, gender, community, and discrimination in the African American context in her first two novels, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1973), Morrison creates compelling worlds where every aspect, down to the naming of characters and places, reflects on the forces polarizing human agency.

¹ A proposition further explored in his book *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997).

On the trail of the themes probed in her previous books, Toni Morrison published her third novel in 1977. *Song of Solomon*² was praised by American critics, winning the National Book Critics Award one year later. The reason for its success lies, perhaps, at the crossroads where distinct – and some previously considered incompatible – literary and cultural angles intersect. Western literary traditions, inspired for instance by Ancient Greek culture or by the Bible, merge with African American oral traditions, producing a palette of cultural tensions. These are expressed through a multiplicity of expressive resources attempting to “demolish the stereotypes and myths that permeate the Black American experience” (Middleton 74). It expertly negotiates between literary genres, music and other cultural forms, developing what “seems to be communication of painfully discovered and powerfully held convictions about the possibility of transcendence within human life, on the time-scale of a single life” (Price 1–2).

Despite presenting itself almost as an idyllic masterpiece, the coming-of-age story of the protagonist Malcolm Dead III, known as Milkman, is the tale of his social and deeply personal struggles to come to terms with his African American heritage and identity. Far from giving her readers a mere depiction of his life, Morrison additionally explores the conflicted lives of those who are somehow linked to him, delving into the limits imposed by race, class, gender, and language. Characters such as his best friend Guitar Bains, his aunt Pilate, or his father Malcolm Dead II, constitute the cornerstones in his way, the driving forces behind his journey. It is on the crossfire of interlocking dimensions of oppression and different proposals to confront them that Milkman must search for his sense of self in relation to the community he belongs to and his place as part of African American History.

With this research, my aim is to explore the intersection of oppressive dimensions as it is represented in *Song of Solomon*. Written at a time of great civil strife and sociopolitical changes, this novel ponders over that period, contemplating possible alternatives to the problems at hand and the division they bring even among those who stand for equality. It also unveils narratives conveniently overlooked throughout the History of a system successful in its exploitation of a vulnerable population, first through forced labor and then through a widening of the social and educational gap amplified by centuries of mistreatment and discrimination.

Even if this dissertation constitutes an inquiry from an outsider’s standpoint regarding an ongoing problem in a not-so-faraway land, I believe that everyone – regardless of their

² All the *Song of Solomon* references are to the edition listed in the Bibliography. From now onwards, any in-text reference to the book will be parenthetically cited using its publication year accompanied by the corresponding pages.

background – should broaden their awareness not just of the African American plight, but of the struggle of every human being that the Western society insists on “Otherizing.” The recent emergence of movements such as the *Black Lives Matter* or the fact that the majority of USA citizens regards being white as an advantage in the USA society³ prove that race and ethnicity still play a huge role on people’s socioeconomic status. Other manifestations such as the *#metoo* movement or the reactions to the USA Supreme Court’s 2022 retraction on the landmark case which had previously upheld abortion as a Constitutional right prove that women, particularly women from minority groups, are still at the margin of the rights entailed by citizenship.

In order to analyze *Song of Solomon*, considering its narrative complexity and historical references, I will first start by contextualizing the USA’s history of combining “agendas for individual freedom and mechanisms for devastating racial oppression” (Morrison, 1993, xii–xiii). The first chapter will be divided into four subchapters, each focusing on a specific point in History and different theories and proposals to handle oppression. These will be linked to Morrison’s fictional work, its themes, and motifs, paving the way to the analysis of her 1977 novel itself, which takes place in the following chapter.

Secondly, I will focus on the different voices from the African American community that bring to life their troubled relation with the hegemonic narrative enforced by the USA as they are developed in *Song of Solomon*. The goal is to look at the construction and consequences of the oppression among African Americans through an intersectional perspective. Each of the four subchapters will focus on the interlocking of different dimensions of oppression, such as racism, sexism, and class discrimination.

Song of Solomon is filled with characters whose complexity cannot be disconnected from the time and space they occupy in the novel. Therefore, I will be using Kimberlé Crenshaw’s and CRT activists’ work on intersectionality to analyze how oppression restricts the characters’ agency and affects their relationships with each other and with the environment that surrounds them. This means, for instance, considering Milkman’s father Macon Dead and his sister Pilate’s relationship in light of the “abyssal line” (Santos 45–46) that helps classifying the former as civilized while seemingly categorizing the latter as “the pagan, the barbarian, the underdeveloped” (Mignolo and Ennis 24–26). Both Santos’ investigation on Southern Epistemologies and Walter Mignolo and Michael Ennis’ conceptualization of coloniality will have an essential role in my analysis, given their relevance to understand Morrison’s

³ As concluded by the Pew Research Center’s 2020 report “Amid National Reckoning” (Horowitz et al. 25–26).

fictionalized representations of systemic and endemic discrimination and exploitation of African Americans in the USA.

Song of Solomon is not merely a depiction of historical events, but its presentation of various stances towards the aforementioned issues is nuanced. It contains more interrogations than answers, it implies more than it shows. The ending itself seems to follow this particular logic: are Milkman and Guitar indeed flying? Is Milkman killed by Guitar? Are they embracing each other? Why did Pilate, who throughout the story is implied to be the strongest character, die only moments before the end? No consensus will ever be reached regarding this book and its ambiguities, but it does beg the question: is there some sort of lesson to be taken from this tale? Perhaps it is not the author's responsibility to provide us with the answers right away. There are extremely personal and virtually infinite inferences each reader can take from *Song of Solomon*. By analyzing the intersecting faces of discrimination, be it class, race/ ethnicity or gender, I hope to explore how Morrison's writing motivates questions about the constant denial of a full citizenship to African Americans.

1. Considerations About Racism and Other Forms of Discrimination

1.1 “You say I am wilderness”: The Making of the New World as a Site of Oppression⁴

When we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, 2009.

Our past is bleak. Our future dim. But I am not reasonable. A reasonable man adjusts to his environment. And unreasonable man does not. All progress, therefore, depends on the unreasonable man. I prefer not to adjust to my environment. I refuse the prison of ‘I’ and choose the open spaces of ‘we.’

Toni Morrison, 2019, p. 46.

In her 2009 *TED Talk*, Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie argued about the importance of rejecting the notion of a “single story” in favor of raising awareness to the multiplicity of perspectives characterizing events, people, and places. She pointed out the importance of realizing how narratives produce our reality, influencing the ways we regard the “other.” Believing in or knowing only one side of a story generates a blind spot in our perception that leaves us vulnerable to prejudice. This bias constitutes the basis upon which social discourses are constructed – a practice which provides meanings to everything we do and experience. All areas of human reality are subjected to the production of meanings according to specific standpoints. Our sense of past, for instance, is constructed by various narratives laid down by the various sides involved in its production. Therefore, our perception of History as a shared or as a personal experience is heavily influenced by those narratives. This does not necessarily mean that they are completely false, just that they are subjective, dependent on the memory and perception of each individual. However, some of them can be adapted and used to establish and maintain relations of power, perpetuating “fierce conflicts of interest [...] between conquerors and conquered, masters and slaves, capitalists and workers, dominators and dominated in race and sex” (Zinn 10).

In this sense, the accentuation of differences between humans allowed the categorization of people into distinct frames according to conceptions such as race, ethnicity,

⁴ The quote “You say I am wilderness” is a direct citation from Toni Morrison’s novel *A Mercy* (2008, p. 155).

or gender – a process that unavoidably leads to some sort of hierarchization between the elements involved. The socially constructed notion of race is one of such categories which helped produce “the great classificatory systems of difference that operate in human societies” (S. Hall, 2017 31-33), providing the justification Europeans were looking for to distinguish themselves from the ones they wanted to dominate or suppress. Columbus’ own remarks about the Indigenous peoples⁵ he met are particularly suggestive of the mentality that would regulate social relationships for centuries. Surprised by the goodwill and passivity with which he and his crew had been met on the Atlantic shore, he comments on how Indigenous peoples “would make fine servants... With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want” (qtd. in Zinn 1). Today, these words seem almost prophetic, a prelude to the bondage system which would be implemented in the Americas over the following centuries.

Overlooking the Indigenous peoples’ viewpoint and way of life, ignored in favor of European economic, social, and political agendas, is not the only discriminatory attitude determining Europeans’ actions towards those they deemed inferior. As the first British colonies in North America were being founded, at the beginning of the 17th century, one of the main concerns of the new settlers was how to survive in a hostile and unfamiliar environment. Diseases such as malaria, typhoid fever and dysentery massacred the settlements, as well as salt poisoning due to their poor grasp of the tidal system which tainted their wells. Worsening matters was the interference of local climate on their agricultural attempts; they would have starved were it not for the generosity of the Native people who provided them with corn. Nevertheless, such goodwill and the “great deal of cultural interaction and exchange” between the two communities did little to prevent European prejudices to come ashore alongside the settlers. A substantial sense of self-entitlement and superiority led the English to regard their neighbors’ culture and values with disdain (Brown and Webb 13–14). This means that although they regarded the indigenous peoples as “nations” with whom to establish commercial relations (Quijano and Wallerstein 552), the Europeans still persecuted the indigenous tribes when Columbus’ proposal revealed itself unpracticable, given the difficulty of subduing them.

⁵ The naming of the populations that lived in the American continent before the Europeans’ 15th century arrival and subsequent colonization of these territories has been a matter of some contention. In his thesis *This America Has Been a Burden of Steel and Mad Death*, Fernando Manuel da Costa Dias da Silva Gonçalves notes that there are different connotations regarding the usage of the terms “Indian” and “Native” (pp. 1-3). For this dissertation, I opted to use the phrase Indigenous peoples, in accordance with Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s etymological explanation: “‘Indigenous’ is an old word, without any ‘Indian’ in it, generated within the land that is its own, originated from the land where it lives” (pp.15-19, my translation).

Broadly speaking, the New World served as a stage for the materialization of complex and increasingly divisive relationships. Its “newness” permitted its usage as a blank canvas for the different powers at stake. Morrison’s 2008 novel, *A Mercy*, explores the convergence of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds and identities at the beginning of the colonial period. Europeans had been trying to survive in a hostile and unknown environment surrounded by indigenous populations, in a multicultural conjuncture of ethnicities and religious and social groups aptly illustrated by Morrison in her novel. In the midst of an unknown land where one “could not be sure of friend or foe” (2008, 8), this convergence did not prevent the appropriation and exploitation by the Europeans. Instead, it helped establishing the power relations between American Indigenous peoples, African, and European communities. In *A Mercy*, Toni Morrison juggles her investigations on Indigenous peoples’ History and her knowledge of the hatching of slavery, bringing out perspectives that are not often portrayed together. The duality between civilization and savagery is ironically put in full display through an Indigenous peoples’ perspective:

They [the “kindly Presbyterians”] were pleased to have her [a “native woman”], they said, because they admired native women who, they said, worked as hard as they themselves did, but scorned native men who simply fished and hunted like gentry all day. Impoverished gentry, that is, since they owned nothing, certainly not the land they slept on, preferring to live as entitled paupers. (2008, 45)

This Indigenous American woman’s standpoint constitutes an ingenious way to show the beliefs of the settlers, in this case the Presbyterians, one of the religious groups who emigrated to the Americas. They baptize her as Messalina, as if welcoming her into Christendom, but maintain their bias towards the men who, like her, inhabited the Americas before them. Additionally, they do not allow her to fully participate in the religious ceremonies because they still consider her a “heathen” and end up abandoning her (2008, 46). Lina, as she is known, and her story are a symptom of the imbalance of powers that characterized colonialism since its beginning.

Another façade of American colonialism is related to the incorporation of enslaved Africans and the slave trade that generated it. Brought to the Americas from the 16th century onwards to contend the increasing need for labor in cotton, tobacco and sugar plantations, Africans were inserted in contained social lines designed to separate them from the European settlers in accordance with their role in society. “[T]orn from their land and culture, forced into

a situation where the heritage of language, dress, custom, family relations, was bit by bit obliterated except for remnants that Blacks could hold on to by sheer, extraordinary persistence” (Zinn 26), Africans were enslaved and forced to work in the hardest workplaces, such as plantations and mines.

Historically speaking, slavery has always been present in human societies, from Ancient Egypt and Greece to Medieval Europe, African states such as Ghana, and even in the Asian continent. What gives the American case its notoriety is the racialization that accompanies the process of enslavement of African individuals. To better understand how this association came to be, I will be using Aníbal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein’s work on the concept of coloniality and its role in the establishment of a world order that endures to this day. They employ “coloniality” to refer to the construction of a set of states interconnected by a hierarchical interstate system controlled by a European country. This structure they call the “hierarchy of coloniality” comprises economic, political, and cultural spheres and it continued to regulate relations of power even after the colonies’ independence from their European metropolises. For, in their own words, the sovereignty brought by the independence movements “did not undo coloniality; it merely transformed its outer form” (Quijano and Wallerstein 549-50). In the American colonies, such “outer form” took shape through a nationalist discourse heavily reliant on ethnic categorizations in place even before independence.

In an attempt to distance themselves from the Eurocentric discourse which positions non-European territories and peoples at the bottom of an imagined global hierarchy, the settlers based the superiority of the land that would become the USA on the notion of newness. Associated with the virtually endless possibilities of this recently found territory, this notion allowed them to maintain a place at the very top of the mentioned hierarchy alongside its European counterparts. In a territory where “all the boundaries,” including those between social groups, “were new” (Quijano and Wallerstein 550), it became necessary to create a separation between those who were entitled to be free men and those bound to serve them. Such thesis constitutes the basis for *A Mercy*, a story set at the moment when the production of these notions and their practical application were taking place.

The changing socio-political context aligned itself with the identification of other “human type[s]” and helped shaping the relations between labor and race which would characterize world commercial and social relations. In modern discourses, Mignolo and Ennis locate the notion of “colonial difference” associated to the “the pagan, the barbarian, the

underdeveloped” in a place of passivity, which denies them agency on the basis of a believed inferiority (24-26). In the Western imaginary, Africans took the place previously ascribed to peoples such as the Vikings and the Huns, whose origins and cultural practices were deemed “uncivilized” because of their differences in relation to the “civilized” European countries. The Africans turned thus into the “pagan, the barbarian, the underdeveloped” whose place was at the bottom of the colonial hierarchy.

Some academics argue that a crucial factor which helps explain the particular choice of skin color as a colonial discriminator was the work of “objective” scientists in the validation of “race as a true ‘fact’.” Being the most visible social marker, it became synonym with inferiority by comparison to the white/ western institutional prestige. A means to the coercion of an entire society into sharing the belief of race as a “biological fact” (R. E. Hall 2), the colonial difference became a barrier between supposed inferior and superior social categorizations. It represented a materialization of the “imaginary of the modern/colonial world” (Mignolo and Ennis 28) first produced within social ideology and then put in place through an array of increasingly segregationist legislation.

Socially and economically, there were several factors who came to reinforce the European interest in the enslavement process. The production and demand for new goods both within the Americas and in Europe in the 16th century required a massive labor force. The enslaved’s subservience when forced to work for free in hard conditions constituted a bonus to the enslavers, as well as a cornerstone in the formation of the economic system that would be known as capitalism. Emphasizing the urgency of production, the capitalist system has been profiting since then from dehumanization and exploitation, spreading out of its primarily economic shell towards other dimensions such as ideology and politics. Beginning with the Virginia slave code, several laws were enacted in the American mainland colonies aiming to contain any attempt of uprising and disobedience by the enslaved. The goal was to achieve a state of “docility” among the enslaved, thanks to what Franklin and Moss call “a comprehensive code containing provisions for punishment designed to break even the most irascible Blacks in the colony” (55). This meant a harshening of punishments for crimes ranging from murder or rape to robbery, abandoning the plantation without permission, insolence or confraternization with whites. Africans were condemned to whipping, branding, mutilation, or even death by hanging. A 1662 law, for instance, held that children born to enslaved mothers were to be considered bonded to their master (Franklin and Moss 54), who could decide whether to keep them together or to separate entire families.

The extent of slavery's traumatic consequences is hard to comprehend, even in the present day. One of Morrison's most praised books, *Beloved*, explores the darkness behind this unscrupulous search for profit. The 1987 novel traces the psycho-social costs of centuries of physical and psychological exploitation brought upon the African population in the Americas. It focuses on a heart wrenching choice a fugitive ex-slave woman is forced to make when facing the chance of her children being taken from her and forced back into slavery. A caring mother's decision to kill her children to prevent the only alternative is a clear statement of the inhumane conditions in which the enslaved population was kept by their masters.

Even with an official grounding on the Enlightenment principles of freedom, fraternity and equality, the independence of the thirteen colonies in the 18th century did little to improve Africans' lives. The new Republic saw the maintenance, rise and propagation of racist biases as the centuries went on and slavery was kept as an institution in the Southern states beyond its official abolition on their Northern counterparts. Thus, a blind eye was turned to the inconsistency of those practices with the revolutionary ideals, up to the point where any mention of slavery was erased from the Continental Congress' Declaration of Independence. Instead, several "glittering generalities" (Rufus Choate qtd. in Franklin and Moss 67) took their place, silencing the possibility of freedom for Africans while simultaneously relegating them again to a marginal place in the new country's hierarchy. The silencing of the formerly enslaved population and their suffering has been maintained by a conscious and unconscious "complex articulation of forces, of voices heard or silenced, of memories compact or fractured, of histories told from only one side that suppress other memories" (Mignolo and Ennis 28). Such attitudes have contributed to the vilification and exploitation of African Americans (Moya and Markus 21) through American History based on their racial standing within society.

Throughout her life, Morrison always emphasized how the double-edged perception of African Americans in USA society is closely linked to racism, stating that:

In a society with a History of trying to accommodate both slavery and freedom, and a present that wishes both to exploit and deny the pervasiveness of racism, Black people are rarely individualized. [...] Without individuation, without nonracial perception, Black people, as a group, are used to signify the polar opposites of love and repulsion. (1992, xiv-xv)

Her words resonate with Adichie's, Mignolo's and Ennis', offering yet another viewpoint: that of extending stigmas and prejudices derived from the connotation of the inferiority of

“Blackness” to the entire African American community, producing faulty generalizations which foreclose each Black individual’s self. This view is shared by other academics. In their work *Race in the American South: From Slavery to Civil Rights*, David Brown and Clive Webb remark that particularly in the South the “paternal view of Blacks as child-like and dependent” was overshadowed by a “hostile white view of the dangerous threat posed by Blacks, especially men” (175) – a stance far from mere coincidence. Deeming an entire social group as either subservient servers or violent criminals makes it easier to condemn them to a marginal place because it disables the possibility of regarding each of them as a complex individual with their own backgrounds and personalities, that is, as a full human being and individual and rightful citizen of the USA. It is indeed an ideology applied by politicians and dictators at various points in History in order to uphold an imagined homogeneity by excluding those who do not fit inside the “ideal” of their expected social and ethnic norm.

In the case of slavery, the exclusion of different narratives, especially of those who have suffered from it, has contributed to a widespread ignorance of their struggles on the behalf of the white population, as well as to the spreading of prejudices and misconceptions about them among the white population. This further complicates the coexistence of both communities in a shared country. Moreover, the feelings of ethnic inferiority internalized by the Africans ran alongside these external conditionings and were reinforced by Black families. As the primordial social stage of Black children, their families were responsible for teaching them cultural norms linked to ethnic identities, so that the latter could learn how to survive. This attitude has been, as Quijano and Wallerstein propose, both a coping mechanism that enabled the younger generations to adapt to the social environment and a way for them to understand the origins and processes of the oppressions they were subjected to, which also served as a means of political radicalization (551).

A possible outcome of such educational approach is explored in *Song of Solomon* through the character of Guitar. Growing up in a low-income household, he learns early on about the injustices he and his family endure because of their socio-economic status. The trauma he suffers in the aftermath of his father’s death and the subservience he sees in his grandmother and in the Black people around him induce his hatred of white people and anyone who might be associated with them. “There are no innocent white people,” he claims at one point, “because every one of them is a potential nigger-killer, if not an actual one” (1977, 193). This generalization demonstrates how the discrimination imposed on Guitar has contributed to his psychological and ideological development as an individual and a member of his community

and thus to his role in the story to which we shall return later. For now, it suffices to keep in mind racism as a notion sustained in space and time, especially considering the temporal distance of both the period focused by *Song of Solomon* and that of its publication in relation to the official ending of slavery in the USA.

When the Civil War ended in 1865, the line separating the triumphant Northern states from the pro-slavery South became more pronounced. Differences in the social and economic developments between regions and the urgency of rebuilding the “war-torn” states made it difficult to avoid a generalized anxiety especially in regard to how to achieve economic stability founded on free labor. Officially free, the ex-slaves were in practice trapped by the mentalities persevering among the whites, who could not fathom the notion of “a Negro as a free person” (Franklin and Moss 201-03). This period in the History of the USA has become known as the Reconstruction and it was characterized by several attempts at addressing the political, economic, and social issues of a nation trying to restore itself. The USA government was divided about the best approach to the subject and the appearance of extremist pro-slavery groups such as the Ku Klux Klan did little to improve matters. A revival of racism was occurring also in the North, as support swayed by doubts regarding the economic and social viability of Black integration. For the white population, Black officeholding and electoral eligibility were inconceivable provocations, causing general outrage. The Northern attempts at withholding political and military power in the South were based on -prejudices. Southerners were accused of trying to destroy the nation for having triggered the war, and perceived as “barbarous” and tarnished by the “spirit of slavery” (Carl Schurz qtd. in Franklin and Moss 224-25). Moreover, as both North and South progressed into a reconciliation of sorts in the last decades of the 19th century, the marginalization of African American population intensified within the American society (Brown and Webb 226). This conjuncture led to the growing of the Democratic Party in the South, especially after the 1877 Compromise. In exchange for the election of Republican Rutherford B. Hayes as president, the federal troops were withdrawn from the South which was given home rule. It was the beginning of the end of the Reconstruction, and it allowed the implementation of the Jim Crow Law System in the South.

With the Democrats in power, any attempts at integration were quickly replaced by a white supremacist doctrine in the Southern states that would lead to racial segregation. Inspired by a homonymous Black-face minstrel character, the Jim Crow System prevailed from the last decades of the 19th throughout the 20th century thanks to the white manipulation of the state system, as well as through their use of violence:

[a]lthough southern ideologies represented it as the natural order of social relations between the races, Jim Crow was a politically strategic construction that reinforced the power of white patriarchy. It united white males otherwise divided by class by emphasizing their shared racial superiority over African Americans. (Brown and Webb 180-81)

The white patriarchy's discourse served a two-way goal: it justified the superiority of whiteness and the righteousness of the "movement for complete disfranchisement of the Negro" (Franklin and Moss 235), and relegated white women to an inferior position as damsels in distress who ought to be saved by their stronger masculine counterparts, reinforcing the social hierarchy prevalent during the antebellum period. Southern white males united against a stigmatized image of African Americans as aggressive and uncivilized, justifying their actions by asserting a predominant belief in the "innate inferiority of Blacks" and the supposed danger posed by their freedom. Particularly white women, they argued, were in constant risk before the violent "Negro rapist" and under the pretext of protecting them from violence became the norm against the African-American population (Brown and Webb 175; 199-200). Lynching mobs indiscriminately focusing especially on Black males became common occurrences especially in the rural areas, creating a sense of community among whites during the insecurity of economic recession. The authorities' hesitation to intercede meant that there was little to no concern regarding the actual liability of the indicted Blacks who were being tortured and murdered.

This extra-legal punishing system was of course the cause of great distress for the African American communities. They lived in constant fear of an attack due to their randomness, as accounted for by Richard Wright, author of the renowned novel *Native Son* (1940). In his 1945 memoir, *Black Boy*, he describes "the white brutality that I had not seen was a more effective control of my behavior than that which I knew," adding that "it remained [...] something whose horror and blood might descend upon me at any moment" (150-51). Fear of reprisals kept Blacks in check, widening the gap between both groups, further encouraged by the political system's measures to counter the impacts of Reconstruction. Consequently, many African Americans fled to the North looking for better social and economic conditions, as they had been doing since the 18th century to escape the Southern oppressive environment. So did Milkman's ancestors, Macon and Sing, who left Virginia in a wagon to escape enslavement towards the "free North" (1977, 321; 400-01). This migration northwards

translated into the loss of “more than half a million African Americans” in the Southern states between 1880 and 1910 (Brown and Webb 224-25).

There was a certain legal variation from city to city, but the gist of the segregation process meant the restriction of African American’s behavior and action within the public sphere. Public transportation, medical care, the job market, burial sites, were all affected by segregation. In Brown and Webb’s words, essentially “Black and whites were separated from the cradle to the grave” (192). Hence the significance of how the protagonist’s birth came to be. Milkman was the first Black person to be born in No Mercy Hospital, an institution where up until then only whites had been allowed to receive medical treatment (1977, 11). The first birth of a Black baby among whites implies a change that is long overdue, almost Messianic in its prophetic essence. It creates a precedent for other members of the Black community of Mercy to be admitted there in the future, establishing a step towards the desegregation of the hospital and the city. Morrison places instances of segregation such as this one at several points in the story, enabling the reader to engage with the historical, political, and social contexts throughout the novel.

Another, perhaps less hopeful, example emerges with Ruth’s visit to her father’s grave. As Milkman follows his mother, he recalls her search for what she had considered a proper place to lay her father to rest: “someplace other than the one where Negroes were all laid together in one area” (151). Fairfield Cemetery had been a “county cemetery too tiny for anybody to care whether its dead were white or Black,” but it was located at a significant distance from Mercy, as showed by the long travel Ruth has to take when she wants to pay her respects. The insistence, even *postmortem*, to keep people separated according to their skin color is revealing of a total disregard for the Black community’s wishes and traditions. Moreover, the poor supply of medical care specifically intended for African Americans combined with lower wages lead to the reduction of their quality of life, as well as to higher mortality rates in comparison to those registered among the white population (Brown and Webb 193-94).

It is also noteworthy to consider the politics regarding miscegenation. Since the 18th century, the USA government has tried to produce what sociologists George Simpson and Milton Yinger had, back in the 1950s, classified as “*administrative definitions of race*” (Snipp 109-14, original underlining). That is to say, they attempted to delimit different races and organize them into categories. The boundaries between racial categories evolved according to

the conjuncture, having started by distinguishing between white, “African slaves and American Indians subjected to taxation” in the first promulgated Constitution, later adding a “foreign-born population” in their national census, and so on. In the Jim Crow South, this was conceptualized through the so-called “one-drop rule.” As C. Matthew Snipp explains, this law stated that “even the smallest amount of black heritage was sufficient to warrant the designation of ‘black’” (109-14). A “constant fear of licentious intercourse” (Sir Charles Lyell qtd. in Franklin and Moss 128)⁶ associated with the Black population had remained since the slavery period, slipping into the previously mentioned idea of the “Negro rapist.”

African American’s already scarce opportunities to do something about this conjuncture were also taken from them, as Southern states passed bills with the concrete goal of undermining the political rights conquered during the post-Civil War period. For racial reasons, white politicians found several ways to dodge the protection of the civil rights and of voting rights defined by the 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution, respectively. By deeming anyone without “sufficient evidence of his permanent interest and attachment to the community” unfit to exercise suffrage, Democrats managed to disenfranchise hundreds of Blacks and even whites in Mississippi, on the grounds of illiteracy and economic status. Other states followed this approach. After South Carolina demanded, in 1894, “two years’ residence, a poll tax of one dollar, the ability to read and write any section of the constitution or to understand it when read aloud,” Louisiana passed the “grandfather clause” in 1898 which prevented the vote of any man whose father or grandfathers were not registered as eligible to vote on January 1st, 1867. Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, Oklahoma and Virginia followed suit, under the official pretext of “a constructive act of statesmanship” because “Afro-Americans were viewed as aliens whose ignorance, poverty and racial inferiority were incompatible with logical and orderly processes of government” (Franklin and Moss 235-38). The 20th century in the USA began, therefore, rooted in an institutionalized segregation controlled by the white political elites, a racist ideology that would officially go far into the second half of the century and whose sequels still have repercussions to the present day, as explained in the following chapters.

⁶ Sir Charles Lyell was a British geologist whose research, similarly to Darwin’s, helped questioning the dogmatic views of evolution as understood by theologians and historians. For more information, see Browne, E. Janet, *Charles Darwin: The Power of Place*, Princeton University Press, 2003.

1.2 “Am I not a man?”: The Fight for Civil Rights in the 1950s and 1960s⁷

There was a time that we attempted to live with segregation. There were those who felt that we could live by a doctrine of separate but equal and so back in 1896, the Supreme Court of this nation through the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision established the doctrine of separate but equal as the law of the land. But we all know what happened as a result of that doctrine; there was always a strict enforcement of the separate without the slightest intention to abide by the equal. And so as a result of the old *Plessy* doctrine, we ended up being plunged across the abyss of exploitation, where we experienced the bleakness of nagging injustice.

Martin Luther King, Jr., 1998, pp. 102–03.

You will get freedom by letting your enemy know that you'll do anything to get your freedom [...]. [When] you stay radical long enough and get enough people to be like you, you'll get your freedom.

Malcom X, 1990, p. 145.

In the decades that followed World War II, the USA imposed themselves as a political and economic international powerhouse. Under the pretext of being protectors of freedom and democracy, they have effectively tended to their geopolitical interests in conflicts and regions worldwide. To the outside world, they tried to project an image of themselves as the self-proclaimed “guardians of civilization in the New World” (Franklin and Moss 265); inside, however, racial segregation threatened to rip that self-righteous justification apart.

The shifting social environment in Europe and in the USA during both World Wars had been a source of hope for many African Americans fighting across the Atlantic in relation to their futures back home:

In both wars, African American soldiers had performed valiantly in the service of democracy. Many of them returned to the United States, having experienced for the first time in their lives a setting in which cooperation and survival took precedence over racism. They were unlikely to return willingly to regimes of menial labor and social vilification. For the first time in years, the possibility of mass domestic unrest loomed. (Delgado and Stefancic 30)

Not only had Blacks fought side by side with whites, but they were able to experience “the more racially tolerant cultures of other countries” and consequently gained a deeper awareness

⁷ One of most iconic slogans of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement was the question “Am I not a man?.” A catchphrase used by slavery abolitionists since the 18th century, it was used in throughout the 1857 *Dred Scott v. Sandford* landmark case, in which the Supreme Court ruled that African descendants, both enslaved and free, were not entitled by the USA Constitution to the rights conferred by citizenship. In 1968, at the Memphis sanitation strike, manifestants carried signs displaying the sentence “I Am a Man!” and it has continued to be used as statement of support to the civil rights and against oppression.

of the inconsistency between the USA official ideology and their maintenance of racial segregation (Brown and Webb 234). The African American troops' hopes for homeland change, however, proved to be misleading, for while internationally denouncing discrimination, the USA managed to overlook their presence within borders.

This double-standard was particularly noticeable in their treatment of immigrants, in the discrepancy of incomes and labor opportunities and within the armed forces, which were still separated by color of skin. In order to face these issues, American President Truman created a Committee on Civil Rights in 1946. Among other recommendations, the report proposed "laws against lynching and to stop voting discrimination" and measures to equalize the labor market, going as far as to alert to the dangers of the American "civil rights record" in the international image of the USA. That is to say, how the rapidly developing world press was accusing American "democracy [of being] an empty fraud," calling out the nation for being a "consistent oppressor of underprivileged people" (qtd. in Zinn 448-49). Even so, none of these suggestions was taken into consideration by the Congress, whose priorities quickly shifted to the Cold War. The need for social, political and military support meant the revalorization of several essential sectors like healthcare and education, as well as the anti-racist cause.

Hence, by the 1950s, the African American population in the South was still living under the chains of segregation, and discrimination was still a part of the daily lives of their counterparts in the North. There was a cumulation of what Zinn describes as "[the] deep memory of slavery, that everyday presence of humiliation, registered in the poetry, the music, the occasional outbursts of anger, the more frequent sullen silences" with the memory of "words uttered, laws passed, decisions made, which turned out to be meaningless" (450), an attitude epitomized in the Truman Committee. Discontentment led to an intensification of protests, as well as to a distancing from preceding more pacifist philosophies, such as Booker T. Washington's proposal of "uplift and accommodation."

Washington had been a firm believer in the benefits of education as a means for the liberation of Southern Blacks. He focused on practical, namely industrial education, regarding it as a way for African Americans to prove their worth to the white Americans. Speaking about the relationships between the two social groups in 1884, he argued about how the "great mission of industrial education coupled with the mental" could achieve what he saw as a double goal: "the cooperation of whites" and removing any "doubt of [the Black man's] prosperity," and competence to contribute to the entire nation (qtd. in Franklin and Moss 247). Nonetheless, his

ideas were viewed by some, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, as being too compromising for the Black community.

African American communities and individuals had, from the turn of the century, been organizing themselves around goal-oriented groups to face their issues, such as the Niagara Movement, which later merged with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.⁸ Formally created in 1910, the NAACP's aims included "to work for the abolition of all forced segregation, equal education for Negro and white children, the complete enfranchisement of the Negro, and the enforcement of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments."⁹ Exhausted by the reluctance of government and courts towards civil rights issues until then, organizations such as NAACP, the Young Men's Christian Association, the Young Women's Christian Organization,¹⁰ or the Women's Political Council, worked even more vigorously, coordinating demonstrations and congresses throughout the country, and advocating for education, economic opportunities and healthcare for the African American community.

Many were those who stood out among the fighters for Black civil rights. Let us focus for a moment on a crucial figure inside the movement in the 20th century, W. E. B. Du Bois. He was the first Black man to earn a Doctorate in the USA, becoming quite influential with the publication of *Souls of Black Folk* in 1903, a collection of essays where he famously argued that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line" (2) and defined African American double-consciousness:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (*Souls* 6-7)

⁸ From here onwards mentioned as NAACP.

⁹ About the 14th and 15th amendments to the Constitution, see the previous chapter.

¹⁰ Referred to as YMCA and YWCA, respectively.

Du Bois regards the notion of “twoness,” or the duplicity of being “American” and “Negro” as a “strife” to obtain a “self-conscious manhood.” His idea is that white America has always looked upon African Americans through a double lens, forcing the separation of these two parts that constitute their identity, disregarding their “American” half. This attitude expresses an attempt to cast Black people out of mainstream American society. By turning them into the “other,” they are denying them the basic citizenship rights held by the Constitution, effectively disenfranchising them. Du Bois then points out that, contrary to widespread misconceptions among whites, the ultimate goal of African Americans is not to “Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa.” Instead, they want “to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face” (7).

One of Du Bois’ proposals to combat these stigmas is focusing on the education of Black people. His idea is that “the prejudices of the master and the ignorance of the slave” have been maintained under the guise of the preconception of African Americans as “wildly weak and untrained minds” in the pathway to “a harvest of brutish crime and shameless lethargy in our very laps” (72-73). Their education must therefore be concerned with training the Black population to contribute to the community through their labor, to which they ought to have the proper training in order to avoid “the prejudices that bulwark society.” “The guiding of thought and the deft coordination of deed,” he argues, “is at once the path of honor and humanity” (71). Next, he presents a summary of what had been achieved by the educational system since the end of the Civil War, describing how new schools and colleges were built and segregation institutionalized also in and through these new structures. To sum it up,

The educational system striving to complete itself saw new obstacles and a field of work ever broader and deeper. The Negro colleges, hurriedly founded, were inadequately equipped, illogically distributed, and of varying efficiency and grade; the normal and high schools were doing little more than common-school work, and the common schools were training but a third of the children who ought to be in them, and training these too often poorly. At the same time the white South, by reason of its sudden conversion from the slavery ideal, by so much the more became set and strengthened in its racial prejudice, and crystallized it into harsh law and harsher custom; while the marvelous pushing forward of the poor white daily threatened to take even bread and butter from the mouths of the heavily handicapped sons of the freedmen. (73-74)

According to Du Bois, the transition from slavery to freedom had been rushed and marginalized, letting the color line slip through the economic sphere alongside its ideological dimension. The racial segregation in the Southern schools and colleges constituted another effective form of controlling Blacks' socio-economic mobility in society. Because African Americans did not start out at the same level as white Americans even after their official freedom, they are still trapped by a capitalist system whose aim is to keep them at the bottom of the social hierarchy. By maintaining Black people in "hurriedly founded, [...] inadequately equipped, illogically distributed, and of varying efficiency and grade" schools, the Southern states were preventing them from accessing the proper conditions for learning and eventually use their knowledge to work for the benefit of the society. The resulting economic difficulties experienced by the African Americans helped maintain the cycle of poverty, furthering the bias of race as connected to crime and idleness, and thus widening the gaps created by the "color line."

A practical example of the inequality he is alluding to was one of the major friction points at the time: civil segregation, particularly in public services such as transportation. The official doctrine "separate but equal" meant that there were specific sections for whites and Blacks in trains and buses, and other public services. In 1955, forty-three-year-old seamstress Rosa Parks was arrested for disobeying Montgomery law by refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger as requested by a bus driver in Alabama. The local Black community united and called for a boycott of all of the city buses. Parks was a politically active member of the local Black community with ties to the local chapter of the NAACP since 1943.¹¹ In her own words, she was "quite tired" from work; if she could spend days handling white people's clothes, why was she not allowed to enjoy her travel home properly seated?

It was a small drop of unfairness in an ocean that kept on filling day after day. For the African Americans, it represented an opening that permitted them to "challenge segregation on city buses." According to Brown and Webb, despite around 70% of bus users in Montgomery being from the Black community, the state law set aside the front ten seats for whites and the back ten for African Americans. Many of the latter ended up "stranded on the kerb" because after paying their fares at the front, they were forced to leave the bus and re-enter at the back, so as to avoid the white area. Attempts to intimidate the Black people and the unwillingness of white authorities backfired, encouraging the boycott and further actions of protest. Undeterred

¹¹ Parks also had an influential position within the Women's Political Council of Montgomery, Alabama. Founded by Mary Fair Burks in 1949, this group was instrumental in organizing the bus boycotts which followed Rosa Parks' arrest.

by a wave of white violence and harassment, the Black embargo on city transportation lasted nine months. In November 1956, segregation on local bus lines was finally outlawed by the Supreme Court. In the meanwhile, the movement had gathered media attention, proving to the insurgents the possibility of overcoming “the racial terror of whites” (Brown and Webb 291–92; 293–94; Zinn 450–51).

From the Montgomery boycott rose another prominent figure for the Civil Rights Movement. Black minister Martin Luther King, Jr. was chosen as president of the Montgomery Improvement Association,¹² an organization established days after the arrest of Rosa Parks to coordinate the boycott. Throughout his activist career, he was arrested several times, received countless threats, and had his home bombed. But he never seemed to lose the sense of Christian morality which served as the basis for his civil rights leadership. “Nonviolent resistance” and “love” were, according to him, the driving forces that ought to direct the movement, as it expanded from a small town matter to a broader national campaign (King 79). By placing the struggle on a pacifist and “essentially moral plane,” he reinforced the idea of segregation as unethical (Neal 13). King attacked its maintenance both “in the South in its glaring and conspicuous forms” and “in the North in its subtle and hidden forms.” He compared segregation to an “evil [...] cancer in the body politic which must be removed before our democratic health can be realized” (102–03). Furthermore, the “underlying philosophy of democracy is diametrically opposed to the underlying philosophy of segregation,” he stated on several occasions, “and all of the dialectics of the logicians cannot make them lie down together” (King 102–03).

Education was another contentious area that the civil rights’ protesters, King included, focused on. The process of desegregation of schools and universities in the South continued to be particularly challenging. Despite the Supreme Court’s ruling the doctrine “segregated but equal” as unconstitutional in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954, the ongoing interference of academic boards, local politicians and the local white communities slowed down Federal anti-segregationist legislation. Once again, the whites were relentless about preventing desegregation, especially in public institutions. But this time the African American community was bound and determined on fighting for their rights. In 1960, the “sit-in movement” began and spread through the South. It started in North Carolina, where four Black college students defied segregation by sitting on a counter of a store where they were

¹² Referred to as MIA from now onwards.

refused service until the establishment closed. These protests extended to libraries, hotels, beaches, and schools. In spite of their peaceful nature, many protesters were detained under false pretenses. Criticized over the sit-ins, African American students answered by publishing ads in a number of newspapers, demanding “those rights which [were] already legally and morally” theirs (qtd. in Franklin and Moss 439-40).

Martin Luther King, Jr. joined several of these sit-ins, gave innumerable speeches and lectures, and participated in diverse marches demanding the promulgation and preservation of voting rights and improved living conditions for African Americans. About discrimination within the educational system, he argued in the mid-fifties that

[...] even if it had been possible to provide the Negro with equal facilities in terms of external construction and quantitative distribution we would have still confronted inequality. If it had been possible to give Negro children the same number of schools proportionately and the same type of buildings as white children, the Negro children would have still confronted inequality in the sense that they would not have had the opportunity of communicating with all children. (King 102-03)

Echoing his predecessor Du Bois, King criticizes the disparity between the education provided to white children and to Black children, claiming that even if conditions were a non-issue, the lack of contact between the two communities from infancy meant the continuation of the social disenfranchisement of Black people. School is more than learning how to read and count, “it’s a matter of psychology” (103): there is no equality until segregation is destroyed, until every individual, from childhood to old age, is free to interact and live alongside one another in a peaceful desegregated environment.

Particularly after King’s assassination in 1968, his public image has gone through a process of “canonization” that often obscures other important facets of the struggle and his own positions (Visser-Maessen 5-6).¹³ Toni Morrison alludes to what she calls “the complex personhood of King” in her “Tribute” to him: his memory, his legacy, overshadows his *persona*. His refusal to cross certain “lines of civil behavior” (2019, 116-17), for instance, comes to mind

¹³ In her 2019 article “Getting to That Promised Land: Reclaiming Martin Luther King, Jr. and 21st Century Black Activism in the United States and Western Europe,” Laura Visser-Maessen explores the mythicization of Martin Luther King, Jr. As a historical figure connected with notions of citizenship and civil rights, King has been highly subjected to argumentative agendas across the board. From “whitewashed” or “sanitized” (1-2), to revolutionary or “inconvenient hero” (5), the fact that his legacy has been brought up and fitted to such different contexts and purposes, Visser-Maessen argues, jeopardizes the “collective memory of King” (3).

when considering his approach to the fight for civil rights. However, not everyone within the civil rights movement agreed with King's methods. Even before his death, figures such as Malcolm X or names tied to the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense were demonized in comparison to the idealized form of peaceful protest King represented. Because the violence of white retaliations was regarded as a rejection of African American "peaceful pursuit of equality" (Franklin and Moss 459), the more radical methods of other figures diverged significantly from the Christian and peaceful values promoted by Martin Luther King, Jr. Many went further, rejecting paternalist and philanthropic advancements provided by whites. They would rather concentrate on Black nationalist ideology, on "Black Power" (Zinn 460–61).

In 1964, Nation of Islam ex-spokesman Malcolm X founded the Organization of Afro-American Unity, a Pan-Africanist association. He was a charismatic orator and is still viewed as "an alternative, more militant vision of social protest than Martin Luther King, Jr.'s nonviolence" (Scrimgeour 270-71):

Malcolm's ideas had touched all aspects of contemporary black nationalism: the relationship between Black America and the Third World; the development of a black cultural thrust; the right of oppressed peoples to self-defense and armed struggle; the necessity of maintaining a strong moral force in the black community; the building of autonomous black institutions; and, finally, the need for a black theory of social change. (Neal 27)

Malcolm X defended the empowerment of African Americans and their defense by brute force and guns if necessary. He was a source of inspiration for Black Power activists, sharing the wish that the USA ought to be partitioned in "two separate and independent nations, one to be a homeland for white and the other to be a homeland for black America" (qtd. in Franklin and Moss 459; qtd. in R. S. Browne 472).

Established in 1966 by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, the Black Panther Party's radical take drew inspiration from traditions such as African American nationalism, anticolonialism, and internationalism. Of special relevance were Marxist influences, for example Ernesto 'Che' Guevara or Mao Zedong (Street 1). The Black Panthers' message was clear: "total liberty for black people or total destruction for America" (Eldridge Cleaver qtd. in Franklin and Moss 459). The movement spread through several cities, demanding decent housing and employment conditions, the end of repression and violence, as well as Black control of their own communities.

This more aggressive facet of the African American fight for civil rights entering the 1960s is also expressive of an unprecedented union among the Black community. As Black scholar Larry Neal stated at the time, all “the major activities that were directed towards the question of liberation and Black Power spring from an ethos, a group spirit” (11). In his 1968 article “New Space/ The Growth of Black Consciousness in the Sixties,” Neal explores the potential behind this reinvigorated “Black consciousness” as a standpoint to achieve a higher awareness regarding its struggles through the understanding of African American History:

The African past [...] is an archetypal memory. Unless the past can be shaped within the context of a living culture, it basically has no function. That is to say: we are *an* African people, but we are not Africans. We are slave ships, crammed together in putrid holds, the Mali dream, Dahomey, magic transformed by the houngans of New Orleans. We are field hollering Buddy Bolden; the night’s secret sermon; the memory of your own God and the transmutation of that God. You know cotton and lynching you know cities of tenement cells. What we have got to do is to understand that there are no blues in Africa [...], the world view that created the blues is not there. This is the immediate History that we are going to have to shape and confront. (12-13)

Focusing on how Western repression has altered Black History, particularly within the American context, he addresses the “black man spiritual legacy,” relating Black American culture to the civil rights movement. Such expressions as Blues or Gospel are, he claims, expressions of their constant struggles, helping them to endure the increasing oppression maintained by white Americans since the slavery period. “Through their art, their taste, their genius,” argues Morrison, “we see African American subjects as individuals, as cherished, as understood” (2019, 73). And because they are no longer passive subjects, because we are able to understand them, the distance between them and the perception of them as “the pagan [...] other” to which Mignolo and Ennis refer (24-26) gradually increases.

Entering the 1970s and despite the convoluted atmosphere of the 1960s, several legal academics and activists noticed that the improvements achieved by the civil rights movement were coming to a halt, as new and cleverer forms of racism picked up speed. Alan Freeman, Cheryl Harris, Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Mari Matsuda, Patricia Williams or Richard Delgado were among those scholars who, inspired by critical legal studies and radical feminism, produced a new academic and activist movement named Critical Race Theory, or CRT. Their goal is to analyze the relationship between race, racism and power by taking into account “many

of the same issues that conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourses” through an interdisciplinary perspective (Delgado and Stefancic 18-20). By deconstructing the notion of race, they are promoting “upward mobility for minority populations” and dismantling racial hierarchies (99-100).

By tackling the legislative approaches on the issue, CRT academics and activists encourage the dismantlement of segregationist laws ratified by the Supreme Court in cases such as *Plessy v. Ferguson*. At the same time, CRT reinforces the insufficiency of the USA Constitution to combat the naturalization of racism throughout the country. As proven by the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case, when the same federal institution revoked *Plessy*’s “separate but equal” doctrine in schools, the Supreme Court judges’ interpretations of the Constitution are heavily influenced by social and cultural conjunctures. The decisions achieved in each of these cases express two different positions concerning the same social phenomenon. A similar logic can be found in a more recent decision: in 2022 the Supreme Court overruled its previous judgment made in 1973 *Roe v. Wade*, thus determining that the right to abortion is not constitutionally protected. CRT critics intend to deconstruct this pattern of law bending to cultural norms which allow the overruling of verdicts that could help protect minorities’ rights.

It is in the midst of these times of political strife and social revolt that Morrison places her *Song of Solomon*’s characters. As African Americans became more integrated in society, a Black middle class emerged, reformulating socio-economical dynamics within the community. Aspiring to integration into the white middle class, the Black middle-class tried to distance itself from the Black working-class. They associated what they perceived as the poor working-class’ inability to progress up the social ladder to “individual weakness rather than structural inequalities” (Brown and Webb 227-28). The formation of big nooks filled with poverty, criminality, and segregation emphasized this stereotypical view according to which “race was no obstacle to individual advancement.” Instead, the causes to their stalled condition were related to “personal conduct and hygiene,” fostering the underlying idea that the Black working class were to blame for the onset of segregation decrees:

When our people as a mass learn to ride in railway cars without eating water melons, fat meat, and peanuts, throwing the rinds on the floor; when our women leave their snuff sticks, greasy bundles and uncouth manners at home, railroad discriminations will abate much of their injustice. (T. V. Gibbs qtd. in Brown and Webb 228)

A Black leader, Gibbs countered the idea of an organized campaign against segregation, claiming that “better hygiene, not protest, was the best strategy to challenge anti-Black prejudice.” This linking of the conceptions of race and class led to an aggravation of class tensions in African American communities (Ortiz, 2003, 206; 2005, 55-56). Particularly, working class Black women were outraged by these notions upheld by the new Black middle class, as explained in the next chapter.

Macon Dead II in *Song of Solomon* constitutes a quintessential representation of the Black middle class’ ambition and its consequences. His lighter skin tone and his acceptance of typically white cultural values such as materialism and economic power grant him social status in the Mercy community, albeit contributing to his family’s and his own social isolation. In fact, the assimilation of such values by the young Dead children affects their developments, as well as their relationships to their own parents, who refuse to transcend capitalist and patriarchal principles even to the benefit of their family. We see those values at play from the very beginning. When asking Dr. Foster for his daughter’s hand in marriage, Macon Dead claims to be “certainly worthy of the doctor’s consideration” because of his economic achievements at such a young age. In addition, the focus on his class and gender is clear: “at twenty-five, he was already a colored man of property” (1977, 28). His wish to climb up the social ladder leads Macon Dead II to try to distance himself not only from the Black local community, but from what he perceives as the mistakes made by his father and sister. Macon relates his father’s refusal to learn how to read with “[e]verything bad that ever happened to him” (59-60). This middle-class view of education as the key for success was shared amongst many African Americans, a fact that helps explaining the contentious fight for equal right to education.

1.3 Beyond “a slave’s idea of freedom:” Black Women at the Intersectional Crossroads¹⁴

Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices. And so, when the practices expound identity as woman or person of color as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling.

Kimberlé Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1248.

Despite white feminists’ achievements so far in terms of eliminating “much of the [literary and social] phallogentrism” and reclaiming “the female aesthetics said to distinguish female creativity from male” (Williams 515-16), feminist criticism has had difficulty in accepting and incorporating the notion of race as part of the female experiences with oppression. Black women’s experiences in the intersection of the several discriminations tend to be more complex than Black men’s or white women’s, because they are standing in the intersection of race, class, and gender. Black feminist and academic Kimberlé Crenshaw has criticized the refusal to accept the existence of variations “*within groups*” (1991, 1248), adding that

while it is true that the distinct experience of racial otherness militates against the development of an oppositional feminist consciousness, the assertion of racial community sometimes supports defensive priorities that marginalize Black women. Black women’s particular interests are thus relegated to the periphery in public policy discussions about the presumed needs of the Black community. [...] The struggle against racism seemed to compel the subordination of certain aspects of the Black female experience in order to ensure the security of the larger Black community. (2021, 70-71)

By considering racism and sexism as two mutually exclusive causes, African American males and white feminists hoped to avoid a deflection of attention to their particular struggles, leaving out the multi-dimensionality inherent to Black women’s identities. Their positions, however, meant the marginalization of Black women, whose discrimination does not fit exclusively within a racist or a sexist spectrum, but exists in the intersection of both. An historical example

¹⁴ The expression “a slave’s idea of freedom” comes from bell hooks’ book *Ain’t I A Woman* (2015). The passage in question focuses on how contemporary feminist and anti-racist movements tend to be undermined by divisions in their own midst. Hooks argues that Black and white women’s notion of “liberation” has been accommodated to fit within “the existing [patriarchal] status quo,” which has been squandering any attempts of union against interlocking dimensions of oppression (176).

of this racial and gender juncture is how the rape of Black women by white men has been used as “a weapon of political repression” (Combahee River Collective 213). This instance requires careful consideration of the complexity of Black women’s experiences of racism and sexism in order to be properly analyzed.

A recent situation where the neglect of Black women’s specific experience of interlocking oppressions facilitated the marginalization of African American women occurred in 1991. Then-President George H. W. Bush’s decision to nominate Black American judge Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court showed the deep divisions at play within American society. On one side, both male and female Black Americans were delighted to be represented in one of the main political and judicial institutions in the country. On the other side, when the allegations of sexual assault against Thomas by African American lawyer Anita Hill came to public, many Americans, especially women, positioned themselves in opposition to his nomination. It took weeks of hearings during which Hill was called to testify, contrary to several witnesses who could attest to her credibility, for the Supreme Court to confirm Thomas’ nomination, dismissing the accusations against him. A year later, Toni Morrison edited a volume containing a series of articles by authors such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, focusing on Anita Hill’s case. As Morrison argues in her introduction to *Race-ing, Justice, En-gendering Power*, “what was at stake during these hearings was History. In addition to what was taking place, something was happening” (1992, x). More specifically, the History of the USA as a society pervaded by “mythologies that render blacks publicly serviceable instruments of private dread and longing” (xviii) and by female marginalization. The avoidance of both issues to this day is responsible for undermining the freedom and agency of a significantly large portion of the American population. Unsurprisingly, the intersection of the dimensions of race, gender and class is barely addressed by the mainstream social groups, which reinforces the difficult paradigm of Black women’s victimization.

In order to face the sexism of Black men and the racism of white women, a group of Black women came together in 1973 and formed the Combahee River Collective. Contrary to white feminist groups, the Combahee River Collective was one of the several Black women organizations that focused on concerns specific to African American women which had not been acknowledged by the white feminist groups, for instance socio-economic “issues such as poverty, care for the elderly and disabled, or prostitution” (hooks 185). Among the members of the Combahee River Collective there were also lesbians, who had a vital role in the diversification of their struggle against race, sexual, heterosexual and class oppression. Its

participants believed that confronting “racial-sexual oppression” from a perspective that prevents Black women from being simultaneously “women” and “Black” effectively hinders the understanding of and the solution to the problem (Combahee River Collective 213). Advocates of “the destruction of all systems of oppression” (215), their members reunited in retreats to discuss and write. The Collective is known for writing the *Combahee River Collective Statement*, where they stated their goals and motivations. This document would become the revolutionary basis behind many later social and political analyses. It introduced a concept still in use today by both academics and politicians: “identity politics,” which refers to the politization of “interlocking” dimensions of someone’s identity (213). They proposed “Black feminism” as a “logical political movement” to counter what they criticized as “the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face” (210).

Arguing that there is little to gain from insisting on the prioritization of the “struggle against racism” in relation to “the struggle against sexism,” in the 1990s, Crenshaw drew from the notion of “identity politics” and from a legal practice perspective to structure her own reflections on Black feminism (1991, 1248). She was responsible for theorizing the idea of “intersectionality” to better understand “the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis” (2021, 57). According to her, to deal with the racial struggles faced by the African American population as well as with the sexism against all women, both anti-racist and anti-sexism movements must regard each other as essential to their own issues. This means transcending “earlier approaches in which experiences are relevant only when they are related to certain clearly identifiable causes” (Crenshaw, 2021, 72-73).

USA Black feminism has specifically pointed out yet another inconsistency displayed by the dominant American ideology, not unlike the country’s contradiction between their official ideals and their practical applications regarding discrimination.¹⁵ In spite of their “democratic promises of individual freedom, equality under the law and social justice are made to all American citizens” (Collins 22-23), the USA has throughout its History as a nation allowed the persistence of “the reality of differential group treatment based on race, class, gender, sexuality, and citizenship status.” Indeed, on several occasions they have actively promoted the manipulation of the notion of citizenship as a feeling of “legal and social belonging” (Berlant 41) in order to “serve the concentration of economic, racial, and sexual power in the society’s ruling blocs.” In *Song of Solomon*, it is clear that, regarding Macon

¹⁵ A double standard explored in-depth in the Chapter 1.2 “‘Am I not a man?’: The Fight for Civil Rights in the 1950s and 1960s.”

Dead's family, particularly Pilate refuses to abide by the community's social codes. Her attempts at avoiding the capitalist way of life and her continuous association with acts of love – whether it be by helping Ruth and Milkman, protecting her daughter from an abuser, or taking care of her granddaughter when she is ill – tie her to Black feminist activists and to an anti-capitalist life model. Pilate's freedom, however, also means her own and her family's subalternity in the eyes of said community. Their lower economic class is a result of Pilate's attempts at avoiding the capitalist framework. Macon Dead himself considers them a “collection of lunatics who made wine and sang in streets like common street women” (1977, 25). Moreover, Pilate's lack of a navel has excluded her not only from the Mercy mainstream community, but also from the ethnic groups she has encountered while traveling the country, such as Indigenous peoples. To them, she is the “Other,” a concept used to alienate those subjected to the “rhetoric of racism and colonialism” (Rohy 244), despite Pilate being in a position analogous to theirs in relation to discrimination from both government and society. She seems nonetheless resigned to this isolation, creating for herself a place at the margin where she maintains her attitudes and knowledge in defiance of the notion of citizenship officially endorsed by the State. Pilate embodies a subversion of the kind of dependence demonstrated by other female characters in the book like Ruth or Hagar. Not only has she built a family based on a clear matriarchal structure, but she has also tried to transmit to her daughter, to her granddaughter, and later to Milkman ancestral values and knowledge discredited by the capitalist norms predominant in the mainstream society embodied by Macon Dead. Such stance further contributes for her own, Reba and Hagar's discrimination on the basis of being unconventional women who live without any male supervision in a society dominated by capitalist and patriarchal norms.

Examples of this power over women are the countless instances when even legislation prevailed over their personal will, such as the recent *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*. In 2022, the USA Supreme Court overruled the 1973 decision made in *Roe v. Wade*, which had declared abortion a federal right protected by the Constitution. This led to a total of fifteen states revoking pro-abortion laws as of August 2022,¹⁶ leaving many women without access to proper healthcare, especially Black women, who were already suffering from marginalization by the USA “healthcare systems and other institutions thanks to long legacies of structural sexism and racism” as Margaret Mitchell, the current YWCA CEO, declared in a

¹⁶ Since June 2022, a team from *The New York Times* (McCann et al.) has been keeping an online section dedicated to the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*, which includes an ongoing record of the judicial changes in each state. It is available at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/us/abortion-laws-roe-v-wade.html> (accessed 16-08-2022).

statement published on the organization's official website the same day the Supreme Court announced their verdict.

At the time *Roe v. Wade* was promulgated, it represented a victory for the white feminists, who had spent years fighting for anti-conception and birth control rights. These women wished to be free to choose to have children on their own terms. Again, their goals differed from African American women's. During the slavery period, the latter had been deprived of any meaningful maternal experience, propelling in them the desire to have children and a family.¹⁷ Both standpoints are linked to women regaining control over their bodies outside of the patriarchy. In this sense, Pilate's prominent role in Milkman's birth emerges as a nod to Black women's History of oppression and fight for freedom. "Long deprived of sex, long dependent on self-manipulation" (1977, 165), Ruth had become a housewife trapped in a loveless marriage with a man who refused to touch her. Recently arrived at Mercy, Pilate noticed this situation and tried to help her by providing, according to Ruth, "some greenish-gray grass-looking stuff" to mix in Macon's food. Two months later, when he found out that his wife was pregnant, "he immediately suspected Pilate" and ordered Ruth to "get rid of the baby" (154-55). Lacking the strength to face Macon, Ruth required Pilate's help to "stand him off" (154-55). In this sense, Pilate's interventions can be perceived as a defiance to the patriarchal structures that have controlled women's, particularly African American women's, sexual and reproductive rights for decades.

Considering the forty-five-year time frame between the publication of *Song of Solomon* and the promulgation of *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, Pilate's attitudes particularly towards other women and her unconventional autonomy retain importance to the present day. The fact that she does not need any man to guide her or to provide for her in a male-dominated world and her support to Ruth's liberation connect Macon's sister to an embodiment of "something we wish existed," according to Morrison, as she "represents some hope in all of us" (Morrison and McKay 418). In fact, she represents a proposal for the Black women's transcendence from their ethnicity, gender, and class. Aware of her own inability to fit within the normative lines dictated by others, Milkman's aunt refuses a passive place at the margin. Rather, she survives by constructing her own marginality as she pleases. In this way,

¹⁷ The relations between motherhood and the trauma of slavery are further explored in Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved*.

Pilate inhabits a marginal space where her class is of no consequence to herself, and where she plays with the rigid social and sexual codes which ingrain mainstream society.

Her relation to the categories that divide reality appears to be a consistent approach to the marginalization that victimizes her. In this sense, Pilate achieves a harmonious connection with her African roots by forgoing her “American” side on behalf of her African ancestry. In spite of her refusal to be rooted within the social expectations inherent to social categorizations and her subsequent isolation, throughout the novel she seems to be the only character who is comfortable in her own skin. Confronted with a State that produces and maintains social exclusions based on colonial constructs, Pilate remains critical of the version of citizenship it provides. She reinvents herself to survive in a country characterized by allowing differences of race, gender, and class to pervade and divide their society. However, in doing so, she is also condemning herself, her daughter and granddaughter to a futureless end, as discussed in the following chapters.

With this in mind, the question of how Black women could be liberated without cutting vital ties to society remains. Pilate may represent an option which, at least in *Song of Solomon*, does not seem to have fruitful consequences for herself and especially for her family, but there is something to be learned from her story, as her role in Milkman’s development suggests. She functions as a mentor to him, showing him a different way of living and introducing him to his origins. And she, alongside Guitar, are the two characters that manage to break the cycle of materialism, despotism, and repression that Macon Dead’s influence has promoted on him. Therefore, it is safe to say that Pilate’s take on the world they live in, albeit not perfect, has its merits.

At one point, Ruth Forster Dead describes Pilate as the only person who could deal with Macon Dead (171). This is due to their shared upbringing, as well as to her resilience and connection to her ancestry. She is an independent woman who frequently follows the advice provided by the ghost of her father, shot dead when she was only twelve years-old and whose bones she has unknowingly been carrying for years. Pilate is the embodiment of the African “acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time” (342). In “Rootedness,” Morrison describes African Americans as

[...] practical people, very down-to-earth, even shrewd people. But within that practicality we also accepted what I suppose could be called superstition and magic, which is another way of knowing things. But to blend those two worlds together at the

same time was enhancing, not limiting. And some of those things were “discredited knowledge” that Black people had; discredited only because Black people were discredited therefore what they knew was “discredited.” (1984, 342-43)

The discrediting of more traditional forms of knowledge in favor of the modern western way of thinking has been a global characteristic since colonialism, contributing to the obliteration of Black people’s traditions, languages, and relationships. According to Boaventura de Sousa Santos’ notion of “abyssal thinking,” western society is locked in an epistemological monopoly centered in the dichotomy between “true and false” that excludes “alternative bodies of knowledge,” such as ancestral philosophy or theology (47). Because they do not fit into the western “scientific true/false distinction,” ancestral wisdom, particularly African American, is placed outside of what is considered the “civilized world.” Interestingly enough, the frontier between “real knowledge” and “beliefs, opinions, intuitive or subjective understandings” can more or less be drawn between former colonizers and colonized. This “abyssal invisible line” (47–48) constitutes another proof that power is linked to knowledge, since the dominant group validates and imposes its own “true” knowledge on other groups, disregarding different truths. Such process facilitates and causes an epistemological dispossession in the sense that those who do not share the same truths as the dominant group lack the power to make their “truths” prevail on the other side of the “abyssal line.” Pilate is both a victim and a perpetrator of her own marginality because, in her attempt to follow one side of the “line,” she erases the other side, which could be perceived as the American dimension of her identity, and makes no effort to open up to the “other” side of the “line.”

Pilate’s mistake lies in her refusal to embrace the duality between “African” and “American” not merely as a frontier, but as a reality that she has to live with in the same manner as she does with her ancestral roots. The inferred implication seems to be that she – and Black American women in general – need to be aware of all parts of their identities in order to face the discrimination that accompanies their intersectional identity. By approaching oppression in all of its dimensions alongside the communality and love for their peers exemplified by Pilate’s character, the Black feminist movement emerges as a possible path to fight back the matrix of oppression that has been damaging African American women’s lives to the present day.

1.4 “Ain’t I A Woman?:” Black Women and the 1970s Women Rights’ Movement¹⁸

It was our experience and disillusionment within these liberation movements, as well as experience on the periphery of the white male left, that led to the need to develop a politics that was antiracism, unlike those of white women, and antisexist, unlike those of Black and white men.

Combahee River Collective, 1978, p. 211.

In the margins of the fight for civil rights of the 1960s and the 1970s, a less visible group emerged, whose importance must not be neglected, Black women. They were crucial in supporting and coordinating Black communities during the Civil Rights Movement; they raised funds for organizations such as the NAACP; they helped organizing and participated in the Montgomery Boycott and subsequent sit-ins; they marched for freedom and citizenship rights; they were arrested for protesting. They were also vital activists responsible for the establishment of communal organizations such as Fannie Lou Hamer’s Freedom Democratic Party. Like Hamer, there were many others whose role was overshadowed by Black male leaders’ accomplishments, even among the Black community. Fifteen years before Rosa Park’s arrest, for instance, Pauli Murray and a friend were imprisoned for breaking the segregation laws in a bus in Virginia. Murray went on to college, becoming the first African American to earn a doctorate from the Yale Law School, and later co-founding the National Organization For Women. Both Hamer and Murray were diligent activists for civil rights, with important works on sexism and racism published and praised including by the NAACP. Without the perseverance and hard-work of Black women such as them, Kathleen Neal Cleaver advances, “the civil rights movement as we know it could not have occurred” (48-50). Notwithstanding their key role in the abolitionist cause and later on the Civil Rights’ Movement, more often than not, Black women are presented at the margin of the African American struggles, while suffering from an identical invisibility within feminist struggles.

This marginalization of African American women can be explained by considering their experiences through Patricia Hill Collins’ notion of a matrix of oppression. According to her, any matrix of domination has “a particular arrangement of intersecting systems of oppression, [such as] race, social class, gender, sexuality, citizenship status, ethnicity and age,” as well as

¹⁸ “Ain’t I A Woman” was a speech delivered by Black activist Sojourner Truth in 1851 at the Women’s Rights Convention in Ohio.

“a particular organization of its domains of power, [whether it is] structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal” (299). It is in the frontier between gender, race, and class, for centuries expanded and exploited by the USA government and perpetuated by forces both internal and external to the African American community, that lies the ongoing matrix of oppression of Black women. To simplify this process, society turns the categorization of Black women according to – mostly negative – stereotypical views, allowing the everyday lives of these women to be permeated by prejudices outside and within their own communities.¹⁹ The complex duality presented by their status as “women” and “Black” makes it difficult to conjugate the sexual and racial discrimination which they have endured. The underlying implication is that they constitute liabilities to the fight for citizenship and freedom rights, leaving Black women outside of the Civil Rights Movement’s main sphere of interest, officially relegating their specific struggles to the margins of the fight. A similar approach occurs within the Feminist Movements from the beginning of the 20th century to this day. White feminists perceive Black women and the racial discrimination of which they are victims as a drawback from what they consider their main struggling focus. To both Civil Rights and Feminists’ interests, the intersectionality of African American women is seen as an element of dangerous deviation, which could further complicate the respective efforts of each movement.

Interestingly, many voices within the academia appear to indulge in this sexist and racist bias. Within several scholarly fields of African American knowledge, the mention of women’s actions and influences is kept down to a bare minimum, except when it comes to the necessary contextualization. John Hope Franklin’s 1947 *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*,²⁰ for example, is a renowned study of the History of Black Americans where female contributions to the fight for freedom are restricted to communal and familiar dimensions. Their roles are referred to as wives and mothers, first in Africa and later in the Americas during the period of slavery; as brief participants in the 19th century Abolitionist Movement; as an unclear part of the “rough estimate of the total number of Negroes in the armed services during World

¹⁹ In their article “Black Womanhood: ‘Essence’ and its Treatment of Stereotypical Images of Black Women,” Jennifer Bailey Woodard and Teresa Mastin investigate the role of a publication targeted to African American women as a producer and disseminator of stereotypical images of Black women. They focus on the four major African American women stereotypes: mammy, matriarch, sexual siren, and welfare mother and queen (267). Being regarded as overly dominant women or misusers of the social welfare system constitute prejudices which enter into a direct conflict with integrationist approaches to racism such as Booker T. Washington’s previously mentioned proposal of “uplift and accommodation.” Therefore, these constitute social representations of what Collins calls “interlocking systems of oppression” (8-9), which characterize social power hierarchies.

²⁰ Recently, the 9th edition of this work has been released by McGraw-Hill Higher Education. Rewritten by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, it revises Franklin’s revered seventy-five-year-old study, providing new takes on the topic, including the election of Barack Obama as President of the USA, African American Feminism, other expressions of protest and activism, and Civil Rights.

War II,” except for the Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (Franklin and Moss 16; 127-29; 162-63; 390ss). But, other than a few mentions of women’s organizations such as YWCA and WPC and the importance of certain figures such as Rosa Parks for the improvement of Black lives (390ss; 439-40), the efforts of Black American women as Hamer or Murray within the Civil Rights Movement are seemingly overlooked when compared to their male counterparts’ such as King or Malcom X.

The idea of the Black women’s role within the African American community as of no consequence to the fight could not be farthest from reality. Especially working-class Black women, who had been suffering abuse in their daily lives, were outraged by the injustice imposed on them and on their communities. They experienced firsthand how removed from reality the African American middle-class’ attempts at uplifting “the less socially and economically mobile members of their race” were (Brown and Webb 228).²¹ When Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give her seat to a white person on a segregated bus, Black women coordinated the subsequent boycotts as an outlet for their indignation. As Collins contends, Black women were vital in preserving “Black communities as places of collective effort” working as support networks to those who became more visible in the strife (52). Such conjuncture was responsible for the maintenance of African American communities whose ideals contrasted with those of the dominant white society. The model upon which the latter was built was closely connected to capitalist principles, such as individualism and materialism, which were atypical within a more spiritually connected and matriarchal African American’s sense of communality. That is, because of “an exchange-based marketplace with its accompanying assumptions of rational economic decision making and White male control of the marketplace,” the capitalist system assigns little emphasis on individuals’ influence within the society, which helps legitimating “relations of domination” (52-53).

In his famous 1965 report, Daniel P. Moynihan argues that “the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so far out of line with the rest of American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well” (18). Notwithstanding this report’s importance at the time of its publication, its male-centered and biased take on racial politics led to a strong criticism on behalf of several academic, activist and

²¹ For more on the different positions expressed among the African American community, see Chapter 1.2 “‘Am I not a man?’: The Fight for Civil Rights in the 1950s and 1960s.”

literary circles, Morrison included.²² In “The Culture of Poverty: An Ideological Analysis,” for instance, David L. Harvey and Michael H. Reed correlate Oscar Lewis’ notion of “subculture of poverty” to “the sexism, chauvinism and atavism” promoted by texts such as the Moynihan Report (468-72; 476). In essence, they criticize the Moynihan Report’s focus on the disparity between African American and white family structures, as well as his inference of the superiority of the patriarchal values recognized by the dominant white American society. According to Moynihan, the reason behind such inequality was due to the fact that the prevailing family fabric within the African American community was matriarchal. Such bias validates the distinction between public and private social spheres as they are regarded by the western society. This means assigning the dominion of public affairs to “masculine traits” better suited to intellectual and leadership roles than those considered “feminine” – or, as Morrison puts it, “no one questions the fact that politics is by men and for men” (2019, 84).

In the meanwhile, conservative conceptions of femininity such as motherhood are relegated to the private sphere, hidden behind four walls, just like those who live “according to the perceived ‘matriarchal’ pattern are [...] caught in a state of social ‘pathology’” (Spillers 66). This genderization contributed to the prevalence of a white patriarchy’s discourse²³ that always justified violence and segregation against African Americans. By applying the binary “masculinity/femininity” to “superiority/inferiority,” indulging in the production of the idea of masculinity as “the measure of adulthood (personhood)” (Morrison, 2019, 85), the association of matriarchal values to African American families produces the idea of weak, emasculated Black men. This is a circular and bilateral prejudice that has its roots in the desired “docility of the slaves” (Franklin and Moss 55) during slavery. It still reverberates through the Black community as both a cause and a consequence of the reproduction of Black women and men’s stereotypical images.

In fact, in Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, there are several female characters whose agency has been more or less restricted by the male-dominated world to which they belong, contrasting to male characters who appear to have reached the peak of success. Ruth Foster Dead, her husband Macon and their children are the prime examples of this state of affairs in *Song of Solomon*. Ruth is handed out – as a commodity – from her father directly into Macon’s

²² In his 1996 article “Ghosts of Liberalism: Morrison’s *Beloved* and the Moynihan Report,” James Berger relates the trauma caused by the impacts of institutional racism and violence on African American communities to the Moynihan Report as explored by Morrison in her 1987 novel (411-13).

²³ This notion of a white patriarchal discourse and its implications during the Jim Crow period was further explored in chapter 1.1 “‘You say I am wilderness:’ The Making of the New World as a Site of Oppression.”

uncaring arms. She has always been dependent on the men in her life, both economically and psychologically. Even years after her father's death, with whom, if her husband is to be believed, she had maintained a sexually ambiguous relationship (1977, 90-91), Ruth feels drawn to his grave. She secretly visits Dr. Foster's resting place several times per year, unable to let go of the toxic dependence that chained her to him during his lifetime (1977, 149-55; 165). Contrary to Macon, who provides for the family in accordance to dominant conservative standards, Ruth "lacks the initiative" (Ahmad 61) and the will to achieve any sort of autonomy. The family follows a typically white and patriarchal dynamic, which diminishes its female members, consigning them to inferior positions in the household hierarchy, despite their contributions as pretty much the family's maids (1977, 267-68). The fact that Ruth's daughters remain unmarried and have not yet left their parents' place by the time they reach their mid-forties, in spite of the tense environment at home, seems to indicate that they have forsaken their autonomy. In this sense, all the suffering brought about by the male dominance in this family has determined its women's lack of drive to achieve success, and it will be further explored in the following chapters.

The consequences of this patriarchal structure influence not only the women in Macon Dead's family, but also the men. They too suffer from their own self-enforced dominance. Macon Dead's refusal to regard his wife and his children, especially Milkman, without "disgust" (1977, 18-19) drives him to become a bitter man who spends his adulthood unconsciously longing for "just a bit of music" (35), for the kind of connection expressed in the scene he witnesses at Pilate's home. Akin to his sisters, Milkman is in his thirties when he leaves Mercy for the first time. His nickname, which prevails long after his boyhood, was given to him by Freddie when he finds Ruth nursing him at the age of five. Loneliness and despair for a meaningful connection that lacks in her marriage lead Ruth to search for the "golden thread stream from *her very own* shuttle" (16, my emphasis). This was her way to keep herself closer to her son. As the use of possessive deictics denotes, Ruth's means of dealing with her detachment is similar to Macon Dead's relation with landowning. By claiming Milkman as her property far beyond the short period of breastfeeding that naturally happens between mother and child, Ruth is forcing her son to do something that goes against his stage of development. Milkman is indeed "too young to be dazzled by her nipples, but [...] old enough to be bored by the flat taste of mother's milk." His reluctance towards "a pleasure [Ruth] [...] hated to give up" will soon turn into indifference towards his mother and his sisters (97-98) as well as a general alienation from his community and from his own identity (92-93).

Pilate's family, on the other hand, is characterized by its total lack of male influence. Pilate lives with her daughter Reba and her granddaughter Hagar in a household depicted as caring and free from any capitalist expectations or social norms. Despite their initial portrayal as a viable alternative to the oppression and fear observed in her brother's house, Pilate makes the mistake of closing herself and her family to the outside world, which leaves Hagar, the younger and more easily influenced of the three women, vulnerable to the contradicting values of the mainstream society. Pilate and Reba also fail to realize how different Hagar is from them. By indulging her every whim, they are not raising a mentally strong woman, but rather a woman whose lack of self-esteem will cloud her critical judgement of the world around her, making it impossible for Hagar to free herself from the white capitalist and patriarchal influences on her daily life. This bias will affect her self-image as well as her relationship to others. Particularly her affair with Milkman will prove disastrous when she fails to achieve what she believes to be his approval. Hagar's death seems to represent a form of criticism to this self-imposed seclusion, but it does not take away all the worth of Pilate's teachings. As we shall discuss in later chapters, the alternative presented through her household and her life has its own merits and it will be crucial to Milkman's development beyond his father's shadow.

2. Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

2.1 "The pieces I am:" Intersectionality and Discrimination²⁴

For how could it have been real if now I am invisible? If real, why is it that I can recall in all that island of greenness no fountain but one that was broken, corroded and dry? And why does no rain fall through my recollections, sound through my memories, soak through the hard dry crust of the still so recent past? Why do I recall, instead of the odor of seed bursting in springtime, only the yellow contents of the cistern spread over the lawn's dead grass? Why? And how? How and why?

Ralph Ellison, 1952, pp. 19-20.

The fathers may soar

And the children may know their names

Toni Morrison, 1977, p. vii.

The previous chapters attempted to establish interconnections between a theoretical framework and the historical developments that constitute the backbone of Morrison's body of work, including several instances in *Song of Solomon*. Her fiction as well as her academic writings are characterized by a thorough examination of forms of exploitation that contribute to the disenfranchisement of the Black community in the USA. In order to combat these intersecting faces of oppression that African Americans and African American women in particular have experienced since they were brought to the Americas, several activists and academics have put forward theories and concepts essential to understand how discrimination works regarding race, gender, sexuality, and class. Each of the mentioned aspects, in all their complexity and specificity, are interlocking elements of oppression present in the American society to this day. The multitude of different perspectives from African American to Native American authorship prove that the History of the Americas cannot be explained simply by following one single narrative. In analyzing the USA society, one must be aware of the colonialist omnipresence left by the Europeans during the 17th century and further developed after the 1770s Revolution. This section will try to summarize the lines of oppression presented in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, as well as how their intersection means the denial of basic human rights like citizenship to large factions of the American society.

²⁴ This citation is a reference to Sixo expressing his feelings for the Thirty-Mile Woman in Morrison's *Beloved* (1987, 273).

From the 15th century onwards, a new mindset focused on the mass exploration of the resources found on the American continent began developing among European colonizers. It was, as seen in the first chapter, the beginning of capitalism, a crucial economic system that manifested and contributed to the construction of coloniality, as Quijano and Wallerstein argue (549-50). A Eurocentric approach to these lands, peoples, and goods meant the advancement of an ideology that regarded the native peoples as inferior and, after these had proven to be hard to tame for work, the same hierarchical structure was applied to the Africans. The latter were forced to leave their continent to be enslaved and shipped to the Americas where they became chattel and part of a new facet of capitalism, slavery.

In order to justify the exploitation of Africans, “the colonizers codified the phenotypic trait of the colonized as color” (Quijano and Ennis 534-35). The use of skin color as an “instrument of universal social domination” meant the association of “Black” to an allegedly inferior place in the Great Chain of Being as reflected in the power hierarchy of the New World. It also contributed to deprive Africans and their descendants of any right or value attributed to the “white” Europeans. Black people were regarded as property in the same manner that land was: A means to accelerate the production and exportation of sugar, cotton and mining. They were, therefore, deprived of their homeland and traditions and pushed to work far beyond their limits for free. The harsh conditions in which they were kept are a testament to the dehumanization and exploitation of which they were victims. “Breaking” an African into an idealized state of docility constituted a matter of pride for the enslavers whose involvement in local politics helps explaining how the legal system firstly allowed and then officialized a total separation of whites and Blacks. This business-driven logic of dominion helped cementing a default mindset that has maintained its hold on American society even after slavery was officially abolished in 1865.

The independence of the American colonies, in particular, constitutes a period of instability and political, economic, and social changes which could have brought about some improvement to the African Americans’ lives. In the process of distancing themselves from England, an official Constitution based on Enlightenment ideals was drawn and signed by the Founding Fathers. These principles – liberty, equality, and the pursuit of happiness – were indeed included and implemented, but only by and to a small portion of society, from which African Americans and women were excluded. Concerned with uniting the thirteen colonies, the ruling class tried to produce a narrative of them as a nation to which white American men with property belonged as citizens whose rights were to be protected. Thus, “in return for

cultural, legal, and military security, [they] are asked to love their country and to recognize certain stories, events, experiences, practices, and ways of life as related to the core of who they are, their public status, and their resemblance to other people” (Berlant 41). That is, they owe loyalty and respect to the legal systems instituted and maintained by the sociopolitical structures of their country. Beautiful on paper, in practical terms the notion of citizenship produces an arbitrary distinction between the so-called “citizens” and those who, like the African American population, are excluded from citizenship because they do not fit into the dominant categories of the national identity such as ethnicity, gender or class.

Citizenship can then be considered an immaterial good, in the sense that it constitutes a trading mechanism between individuals that befit the citizen status and the State to which they are aligned. As Berlant claims, the concept of citizenship relates to its legal and social practices as History progresses, constituting “an intricate scene where competing forces, definitions, and geographies of freedom and liberty are lived concretely” (42). In the USA, the exclusion of Black Americans from this process is a statement to the pervasiveness of a concept manipulated by a government that, besides obliterating the “non-citizens” sense of belonging, denies them the political rights to participate in society. Many nations have used their specific definition of citizenship as a way to exclude certain minorities or vulnerable groups such as women, and the USA have taken a step further by fostering a system of functional racial segregation and discrimination for centuries. In spite of the officialization of citizenship rights and the abolition of slavery promulgated by the 14th and the 15th Amendments to the Constitution, respectively, the USA government and society’s roles on the enslavement of Africans in the colonial period led to the discrimination of African Americans in the Northern States and formal segregation in the South for more than one century.

In this sense, citizenship in the USA is an especially problematic notion due to its association with racialized identities. As Stuart Hall claims in his book *The Fateful Triangle*,

[...] identity is not a matter of essence but of positioning, and hence there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position and positionality that follows ‘the end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject,’ which can have no guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental law of origin. Hence I am arguing that cultural identities matter not because they fix us into place politically but because they are what is at stake— what is won or lost—in cultural politics. (130)

The production of identity “through racial difference” (Morrison, 2019, 133) promotes an ongoing struggle for many Black Americans and Indigenous peoples who remain “[c]onfined to an everlasting status as second-class citizens, [while] they actually mourn for citizenship” (Caldeira 4). As Berlant and Hall’s conceptualizations demonstrate, the arbitrariness of notions such as identity, citizenship status and the civil rights’ distribution contributes to the obliteration of the “non-citizens’” sense of belonging by denying them the political rights which would allow their participation in society. Such is the reason why, in *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison links the notion of citizenship to the idea of being visible, that is, the denial of citizenship means to turn invisible those who are not considered rightful citizens.

Not only is USA citizenship informed by racial difference, but gender roles also define who is denied these rights. The patriarchal structure that defined oppression in the USA functions as a politics of identity that places African Americans and their culture as the “Other,” alienating them from the rest of the society. At stake here is not merely the political disenfranchisement of an entire community, but also how this makes them susceptible to the whites’ authority. Such power dynamic is represented in *Song of Solomon* through the story of Macon Dead’s father after the Civil War. When he goes to the Freedman’s Bureau in the 1860s to register as a free man, “the man behind the desk was drunk” (1977, 66), which already shows how little respect he had for his job and for the people for whom registering meant officializing the freedom they had been fighting to achieve. The same man misunderstands Milkman’s grandfather’s answers to his survey and does not care enough to check them. Thus, his family name becomes “Dead,” as Macon Dead himself explains to Milkman:

He asked Papa where he was born. Papa said Macon. Then he asked him who his father was. Papa said, ‘He’s dead.’ Asked him who owned him, Papa said, ‘I’m free.’ Well, the Yankee wrote it all down, but in the wrong spaces. Had him born in Dunfrie, wherever the hell that is, and in the space for his name the fool wrote, ‘Dead’ comma ‘Macon.’ (66-67)

Whoever their African ancestors were, the connection of the future generations of this family to them is once again severed and traded away by an English name that denotes the humiliation inflicted by the “Yankee.” This process follows a similar logic to the one present in the slavery trade: the enslaved were forced to use their proprietor’s name, marking their destitution as rightful citizens or as free human beings. The scene also serves as the crucial point when part of the Deads’ legacy for the next three generations is established. In this sense, not only are

African Americans being forced to adhere to a Western system of registration in order to become “free,” but they are also being victims of the same system’s inconsistency between the politics it endorses and the ideology that is maintained by its individuals.

A midwife in Danville who helps deliver Macon Dead and his sister Pilate, Circe has also worked for the family responsible for their father’s murder, the Butlers, and now lives alone at their decrepit mansion. She addresses the white Americans’ disdain towards Blacks in the final chapters, when she asks Milkman where he had gotten “a name like [his],” remarking that “[w]hite people name Negroes like horses” (303). After centuries of being the inventors of the enslaved’s names, the whites are not so keen on letting go of this way of controlling African Americans. Their attitudes are on par with their disregard of Africans as human beings, manifested here by their refusal to acknowledge their perceived “Other” as people whose identity and culture could have been expressed by the unwritten name. In a book that begins precisely with an epigraph emphasizing the importance of naming and the reconnection of new generations to their past (vii), it is of little surprise that the main character’s quest will be searching for his ancestors and that that journey is undeniably associated to their names. Additionally, the epigraph seems to imply that “children may know their names” through the soaring of their “fathers.” Indeed, it is due to Shalimar’s flight from enslavement that his name is preserved in both the collective memory and the places Milkman visits. This suggests another layer of the process of achieving freedom beyond the political sphere: the possibility of “flying away” from the perceptions and categorizations inflicted on oneself by outside powers.

The Mercy Black community’s response to another instance of white dominion further links the importance of reflecting about “names, their signification, and [...] their resisting function in African Americans’ life” (Farshid 331) to the novel. When “the city legislators, whose concern for appropriate names and the maintenance of the city’s landmarks was the principal part of their political life” (1977, 4) attempt to name one of the most important Mercy streets, Mains Avenue, they were not counting on the Southside African American population’s resilience. The latter had been calling it Doctor Street since Ruth’s father, “the only colored doctor in the city [...] moved there in 1896.” As Dubek notes, this was also the year when the Supreme Court declared its “separate but equal” doctrine in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (93), a historical reference which complexifies the symbolism of the Southside residents’ attitude. More than an homage to Doctor Foster, their insistence on maintaining the street’s name also constituted a way to express that they were aware of the system of segregation in place, given the fact that no other Black people lived in that segregated zone of the town. Later, “when other Negroes

moved there, and when the postal service became a popular means of transferring messages among them,” these missives were “addressed to people at house numbers on Doctor Street.” White authorities tried to counter this by instructing their post office workers to either return these letters or readdress them to the Dead Letter Office. However, as referred in previous chapters,²⁵ the international wars brought on several social changes such as the drafting of African American soldiers to fight, whose hope of the end of segregation and discrimination within the USA soon proved to be misplaced upon their return. The “colored men” of Mercy seem to be in line with the general growth of awareness and discontentment among African Americans even before they went to war, for some of them registered their address as “Doctor Street” at the “recruitment office.” A statement against the legislators’ power, the recruits’ attitude also led to the name achieving a “quasi-official status.” The legislators, nonetheless, refused to concede the right to choose the name of the street to the African American community:

since they knew that only Southside residents kept it up, they had notices posted in the stores, barbershops, and restaurants in that part of the city saying that the avenue running northerly and southerly from Shore Road fronting the lake to the junction of routes 6 and 2 leading to Pennsylvania, and also running parallel to and between Rutherford Avenue and Broadway, had always been and would always be known as Mains Avenue and not Doctor Street. (4-5)

The Southside residents did not back down. Instead, they began calling the street “Not Doctor Street,” and “were inclined to call the charity hospital at its northern end No Mercy Hospital” (5). The name seems to be ironically denying the hospital’s association to the town it was failing to serve while pointing at the fact that the segregation of the hospital meant that there was “No Mercy” to those who were ill, because of the color of their skin.

In fact, the racism and class discrimination behind the legislators’ attitudes towards the Southsiders culminates with the segregation of the local hospital. Despite the doctor’s importance among the Black community, he had never been given “hospital privileges” and only two of his white patients had been accepted in the facilities (5). Segregating the hospital constitutes an instance of whites effectively preventing the Black people from accessing proper healthcare and contributes to the worsening of the living conditions in the Southside. These situations were, and are still, occurring in innumerable other places inside the USA where

²⁵ See Chapter 1.2 “‘Am I not a man?’: The Fight for Civil Rights in the 1950s and 1960s.”

African Americans are denied basic civil and human rights on the basis of their race and its alleged link to their class.

In the 1960s, the connection made by the Moynihan Report between Black matriarchal families and the Black man's emasculation as a motive for this community's typically lower economic status (Moynihan 18) contributed to this prejudiced correlation between race, class and gender. By prioritizing white, capitalist and sexist standards for family structures (Crenshaw, 2021, 71-72), Moynihan dismisses the Black community's social values as "pathological." It is thus a document that blames the victims of the system, particularly Black women, for their own socioeconomic status, effectively marginalizing them from the white mainstream society.

While considering the perpetuation of such an oppressive status quo, another of Morrison's characters who comes to mind is Guitar Bains. His father's attempt at providing for his family comes at the cost of Guitar and his siblings' orphanage. He dies in a work-related accident and no indemnity is attributed to his family besides the Divinity baked by his boss' wife. The children are raised by their grandmother who struggles to keep them fed and keep a roof over their heads (1977, 26-27). These experiences during infancy will prove essential for Guitar's development, as discussed in the following chapters. They help connecting Milkman's friend to a particular figure and idea of how to fight back against the marginalization and discrimination of African Americans: "Malcolm X, the black leader often considered the ideological opposite of Martin Luther King and generally associated in the American public's imagination with hate" (Dubek 100-01). Regarded as a more aggressive alternative to the type of social activism and protest embodied by Martin Luther King, Jr. (Scrimgeour 270-71), Malcolm X argued for the protection of the African American community, with guns if necessary. He accused American democracy of being "nothing but disguised hypocrisy" in cohorts with "an American nightmare," rather than a "dream" (X. 26). Politically, Guitar serves as an instigator to Milkman, by showing him another vision about "the racial problems that consumed [him]" (1977, 133), about the hypocrisy of a dream that, because of the matrix of oppression that plagues the country, is not within everyone's reach from the start. Guitar shares with Malcolm X the bitterness towards the whites' treatment of different ethnicities coexisting within the American borders. More than a way to maintain "the ratio" between African American victims of lynching and the white population (1977, 193), Guitar's membership in the Seven Day Society constitutes an opportunity to fight back, to show his love for his community (198-99).

The main character's progression along the story serves a symbolic purpose as much as Guitar's serves a political one. Milkman represents a crossroads where every other character and the diverse layers of discrimination that oppress them and unite them seem to converge. His mother and sisters live "awkward with fear" (1977, 12) of his father and then of Milkman, as Magdalene called Lena points out (267-69). He is the son of the man responsible for evicting his best friend's family. The same friend who will join a Society to kill whites in retaliation for the suffering they have been bringing on the African American community. While he is growing up, Milkman meets his aunt Pilate who lives with her family in a way that evokes their ancestry and seems to disregard the white social norms that take hold among the mainstream society. Despite her teachings, he remains his father's son and mistreats her granddaughter Hagar, with whom he is romantically involved. The lovelessness and lack of self-esteem she feels because of him will eventually lead to her death. Later, he will even rob Pilate while trying to take her green bag which Macon Dead mistakenly believes to contain gold. His father's and his own greed are behind Milkman's journey southwards, but he quickly finds value in the knowledge of his ancestors' story. Pilate's connection to the land and to ancestral wisdom certainly contributes to Milkman drawing conclusions from the song he hears children singing, from the stories he listens to and the names of places he visits (328-30; 375-80). To complete himself, Milkman has to travel to the place where it all started: Shalimar, the fictional Virginia city where his family originated, and where he will set himself free through flight. Associated to Shalimar/ Solomon, the mythical motif of flight has been repeated and reinforced throughout the novel and can also be linked to the African American struggles for freedom and rights in the USA.

2.2 “Just a bit of music:” The Dead Children’s Contentious Approaches to Life²⁶

Romance, an exploration of anxiety imported from the shadows of European culture, made possible the embrace—sometimes safe, other times risky—of some quite specific, understandably human, American fears: the fear of being outcast, of failing, of powerlessness; of boundarylessness, of Nature unbridled and crouched for attack; of the absence of so-called civilization; of loneliness, of aggression both external and internal. In short, the terror of human freedom—the thing they coveted most of all.

Toni Morrison, 2019, p. 131.

In the 18th century, the Founding Fathers expressed their desire that the new nation was to be built and developed in accordance with the democratic and economic values which had inspired the Revolution – later dubbed as “the American Dream” by James Truslow (qtd. in Dermo 1-2; Paul 384). They shared a belief that democracy, freedom, equality and the “pursuit of happiness” should be upheld, which contributed to the notion that the static social hierarchy of the “old Europe” would never have a place in the New World. From the get-go, it was assumed that all of their citizens would have equality of opportunities to ascend socially and economically through the merit of their efforts. A conception heavily influenced by the Puritan hardworking principles,

The myth of the self-made man [...] may be the prototypical modern American fairy tale. Decker points out how “stories of entrepreneurial success confer ‘moral luck’ – a secular version of divine grace – on their upwardly mobile protagonists” [...] Their protagonist, the self-made man, personifies the American dream as wishful thinking and wish-fulfillment at the same time: “[T]he assumption that men were created equal, with an equal ability to make an effort and win an earthly reward, although denied every day by experience, is maintained every day by our folklore and dreams” [...]. (Margaret Mead qtd. in Paul 379)²⁷

In this mythical sense, the self-made man constitutes the ultimate goal of the American, and he has been personified by an abundance of prominent men over the centuries. From Henry Clay to Abraham Lincoln, several figures succeeded in leaving behind their humble origins “largely

²⁶ “Just a bit of music” is a direct citation from Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, p. 35.

²⁷ Jeffrey Louis Decker is an Associate Professor at the Department of English of the University of California in Los Angeles whose research focuses on American Culture and Literature.

on [their] own, by [their] strength, [their] iron will, [their] exertions and convictions” (Cullen 69; 73-76).

Milkman’s father Macon and his aunt Pilate constitute two different approaches to the American Dream that are questioned as to their rightfulness and impact on the protagonist’s development. It is important, therefore, to analyze how they emerge in his life as polar opposites and how the ideologies they adhere to guide Milkman towards and throughout his quest for identity. The Dead siblings have come a long way from the orphanhood that left them deprived of the primordial care and support provided by a family to a difficult relationship that led to a divide within their own midst. When Macon was sixteen and Pilate was twelve years-old, their father, also called Macon Dead,²⁸ was shot, and the children were taken in by “Circe, the midwife who had delivered them both” (1977, 205-06). She hid them in her white employers’ house and secretly fed them. By then, they had no one else to turn to, with their mother dead since Pilate’s birth, and their father freshly buried by his own son. But they ran away, ending up in a cave in the nearby woods where “a man that looked just like their father” seemed to be following them (174; 206-07). Scared, Macon stabbed him, and found out that he had been carrying three bags filled with “gold nuggets.” This motif is behind their argument about whether to take the gold with them or not, and it will later reappear as the reason for Milkman’s robbing his aunt’s house and then leaving for the South. In the woods, it serves as the catalyst for the Dead children’s separation, suggesting that a deep fissure is taking place: their different views of the world generated by their shared experiences of trauma and grief. These standpoints are accompanied by multiple lessons which will lay at the center of Milkman’s life and influence his own perceptions of himself, his family, and his identity.

Throughout *Song of Solomon*, Morrison maintains a narrative style observable in her previous and subsequent works of fiction. Akin to *Beloved*, the narrator in *Song of Solomon* is anonymous and omniscient, meaning that he knows the characters’ background as well as their inner thoughts and discloses them objectively without interfering in the action. Readers are met with the characters’ versions of the narrated events rather than with the narrator’s perception of them. In an interview with Nellie Mckay, the author explains how she tries “to see the world from [her characters’] eyes” (423), and then transmitting this to her readers, who will have to actively engage with her texts as a “rescue of sorts, an excavation for the purposes of building, discovering, envisioning a future” (Morrison, 2019, 111). “Delving into literature is neither

²⁸ Referred to as Macon Dead I.

escape nor a surefire route to comfort,” Morrison argues, it “has been a constant, sometimes violent, always provocative engagement with the contemporary world, the issues of the society we live in” (223). The way how distinct perceptions of the same events and different ways of living are narrated promote the reader’s “active participation in the nonnarrative, nonliterary experience of the text” by negating them the “comfort” of escapism (231; 223) and compelling them to “read between the lines” of the story in order to uncover its potential layers of meaning. As representations of possible stances within society, the Dead siblings are a case in point since their argument about the dead man’s gold.

When Macon Dead returns to the cave a few days after breaking away from Pilate, and no longer finds the gold, he believes his sister had tricked him and taken it for herself. In despair and alone, he is torn by what Morrison considers “some quite specific, understandably human, American fears.” The author discusses these fears in terms of the binary power versus vulnerability that makes human beings come together in societies in order to face “the fear of being outcast, of failing, of powerlessness; of boundarylessness, of Nature unbridled and crouched for attack” (2019, 131-32). Contrary to Pilate, who eventually begins to relish on the freedom that comes from being on her own and builds her own micro-community, Macon requires the “so-called civilization” due to his reliance on the mainstream social norms, namely those behind an individualistic construction of the American Dream. The capitalist and Puritan mores to which he adheres motivate his entrepreneurship and alienate him from his ancestral roots and from nature itself, as Macon chooses to return to the cave for the gold and later builds his renting business based on ownership values which lead him to exploit people, including his own family. As he explains to a young Milkman, “Let me tell you right now the one important thing you’ll ever need to know: Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you’ll own yourself and other people too.” (1977, 62)

About nine years after he starts this enterprise, he reaches No Doctor Street where he introduces himself to “the most important Negro in the city,” Dr. Foster, with the goal of marrying his only daughter, Ruth. Each of the keys he carries “represented a house he owned at the time” (1977, 27-28). The fact that, at twenty-five-years-old, “he was already a colored man of property” instills into him the confidence to approach the Doctor. For Macon Dead, this notion started to take form in his mind when he, as a little and nervous teenager, saw the gold: “[I]f, safety, and luxury fanned out before him like the tail-spread of a peacock” (211). This animal, with its rich plumage and vain demeanor is symbolic of the “materialism that binds [Macon Dead and eventually his son] to earth” (Harris 10). Property as the sign of a successful

life and the enforcement of a patriarchal power structure as his engagement scene suggests are central values to the character and the nation since its beginning, who embodies a paradoxical facet of the concept known as the American Dream.

Initially, Macon Dead II's attempt at economic success encompasses this idea of achieving a better life through hard work and perseverance. However, his morals eventually grow questionable, as the desire to enrich overrules the needs of those around him. The system he adheres to is responsible for the perpetuation of an abusive cycle that empowers individuals first according to their race – “the whites buy back the elevated property and the blacks once again wind up on the bottom” (Powell 753) – and then according to their class. Macon Dead II uses class to transcend his race by exploiting and manipulating vulnerable Black individuals. His actions denote “a disturbingly parasitic need to preserve black marginality to maintain his status” (Murray 127). His attitude towards Guitar's grandmother, one of his tenants, is an obvious instance of this attempt to maintain one's own privilege at the expense of a poorer fellow citizen. Her commentary “[a] nigger in business is a terrible thing to see” (1977, 27) is essential to understand the nuances through which Morrison critically connects Milkman's father to capitalist exploitation and racial divisions over class status. The power he achieves through his “business” provides him with a link, however indirect, to the White bourgeois population, whose way of life he aspires to achieve. He may have achieved economic success in his ventures, but he is unable to put himself in another's shoes. His lack of empathy also derives from the belief that, since all “men were created equal,” they were bestowed “with an equal ability to make an effort and win an earthly reward” (Paul 379). Therefore, when Mrs. Bains keenly points out that her family needs food and housing as much as the Dead's household does, he chooses to ignore the remark, reiterating the date when rent was due, and telling her to “rustle it up” (1977, 30). His “faith in the American system” (Murray 125) induces his disregard for the specificities of her precarious situation. In this way, Macon Dead is virtually exploiting his own people, mirroring centuries-old white dominion upon the African American population.

These questionable morals and need for white approval led to Macon Dead's isolation from his community. Morrison is very attentive to the subtleties of language and uses them to her advantage, in this case with the intention of showing how he is “outside of his community when he breaks the language codes of [that] community” (Atkinson 12; 19-20). When Mrs. Bains visits him to ask for more time to pay her rent, he detaches himself by responding only to what corresponds to his own interests in the conversation, disregarding the old lady's

concerns. She has “[s]ignified on him,” that is, she is needling him to “make a point”: by referring to him as “sir,” she is “effectively putting him in the position as controller, master, or The Man, not a favorable position in the African American community” (20). Macon Dead is oblivious to these implications, meaning that he is further self-isolating himself. According to Stuart Hall, members of a given culture must share the same “cultural codes,” that is “sets of concepts, images and ideas which enable them to think and feel about the world, and thus to interpret the world, in roughly similar ways” (1997, 4). The communal bond inherent to and expressed through the production of meaning is absent in the dialogue between these two characters. In fact, the opposite is happening: Mrs. Bains’ message is lost to her landlord, who remains insensitive towards her predicament. He does not care whether her babies “make it with nothing to put in they stomach” due to the family’s economic difficulties. He even threatens to evict them if they do not pay until the following Saturday, showing no compassion whatsoever for these people (1977, 30).

To those African Americans such as Macon Dead who aspire to attain the ideal life standard proclaimed by the American Dream at the turn of the millennium, education was regarded as the way to achieve prosperity and social status. In his 1901 *Up From Slavery*, Booker T. Washington reuses Benjamin Franklin’s ideas about social and economic uplift, and argues that success is accomplished thanks to the development of “qualities often assumed by other Americans: equality, life, freedom, and a sense of identity” (qtd. in Twagilimana 204). This is Macon Dead’s ambition. In fact, he has taken up learning how to read and write with the goal of moving up the social ladder. He has built his own business, as we have seen, through exploitation of Black people, but also by being exploited by white men. The racism that he has experienced, which led to his father’s murder at the hands of whites who did not accept Macon Dead I’s success, mold him into a man that self-distances from his family and community, as he tries to go up the social ladder. His ambitions are closely linked to the trauma he has been through, as they are the result of his rationalization of his father’s murder. Recalling how his father had refused his teachings, Macon Dead tells Milkman that he “couldn’t read, couldn’t even sign his name” (1977, 65-66). He blames the whitewashing of his family’s name on his father’s illiteracy, noting how Milkman’s grandfather had been tricked into signing off their farm, their hard-won means of subsistence, to powerful white landowners, the Butlers. However, Macon Dead does not seem interested in recovering or merely knowing his name. When questioned by Milkman about it, he changes the subject and begins talking about his feeble memory of his mother. Having lost his youth connection to oral memory, he only

remembers the name that had been written down by the drunk Yankee. As Middleton points out, Macon Dead's "own father's original name, which existed on in speech, he has either forgotten or dismissed as insignificant" (68), further showing the character's detachment from his own roots.

From the beginning, Pilate Dead is presented in an antithetical position to her brother. While he does not see beyond his own navel, she has no navel to look at – a curious occurrence that embodies their predisposition towards culture, community, and material goods. Akin to Milkman's birth, hers is also a symbolic event in the book. Macon Dead recalls Pilate "struggling out of [their already dead] mother's womb without help from throbbing muscles or the pressure of swift womb water" (1977, 33-34). Because of this "unnatural" birth that is mystical also in the sense that she survived it against all odds, she was born without a navel. Throughout her life, this lack was regarded as something anti-natura that ostracized her from society. If Macon Dead's isolation comes from his own contempt towards other Black people who he perceives as poor, initially Pilate's is not the result of a personal choice. "On account of [her] stomach" Pilate was excluded from groups such as the pickers with whom she had been traveling and working after living with a preacher and his wife (175; 177-79). In Pilate's own words, she was "cut off from people early" (1977, 174) due to her parents' death, but in her trips, she has interacted with very different people, which has deeply developed her social skills, allowing her to be more tolerant and socially aware than her brother. Her birth put her on a different level than his and set her on a path of self-sufficiency that tries to honor her rural past and African heritage.

Such values suggest a strong link to communal ideals which Morrison emphasizes as a positive influence associated with "nurturing, cohesive, and healing" properties that provide "security and comfort" to the individual who integrates it (Conner 49):

She [...] emerges as a strong individual because she draws sustenance from her racial memories and never breaks the vital connection to her native agricultural past. This is why, though she can claim no umbilical cord that has linked her genealogically to traditional mother figures, she is the one, of all the female characters, who is most connected to her African heritage, and whose relationships with other people have always been nurturing ones. (Ahmad 67-68)

This idea of a nurturing community is evident in Pilate's household where she lives with her daughter and granddaughter. It also helps the demonstration of the huge social and economic

gaps between Pilate's household and his own. She appears to have no use for commodities linked to consumerism such as electricity or gas, choosing to live an unconventional form of life, more connected with nature. For Macon, she and her family "lived pretty much as though progress was a word that meant walking a little farther on down the road" (1977, 33-34). However, the Darling Street inhabitants' refusal to indulge in the progress that permeates Macon's household seems to have made way for something that Macon Dead at one point wishes he had: "just a little bit of music" (35). Music here functions as a symbolic link to those African American values upon which his sister has built a caring household. Life within those walls could not be more different than the everyday of the Deads in Not Doctor Street where there "was no music" (35). If the latter lived in a house ruled by "fear," "hatred" and "disappointment" (12), Pilate, her daughter Reba and her granddaughter Hagar's way of life is peaceful and attuned to their necessities, although, according to Macon's stance, deprived of value within the capitalist society.

The scene that Macon witnesses and the following interactions that Milkman and Guitar have with Pilate, Hagar and Reba denote the positive side of the latter's chosen way of living in comparison to Macon Dead's conservative and materialistic approach. Loyal to "her native agricultural past," Pilate collects berries to make wine which she sells (58-59), providing for the little they seem to need, and follows no westernized social mores. They are unmarried and have relations with any man they choose to love. This poses an obvious disregard of the conservative norms which prevailed in the Mercy community. Furthermore, Hagar begins a relationship with her cousin Milkman that will last years, which is suggestive of her inclination to reject socially accepted standards she has been raised to disregard. It also implies their influence on Milkman who has been brought up to stick to such norms. But the underlying implication that the story's progression evokes is that, in her attempt to protect her family from capitalist social constructs, Pilate overlooks their influence on Hagar. As discussed later, consumerism stirs her granddaughter's otherwise undisturbed existence, leading her to search for validation on bourgeois principles that characterize western society, and culminating in her downfall.

While there seems to be no affectivity among Macon's household's members, Pilate's is grounded on love and affection between three people who care for each other. This is particularly noticeable at Hagar's funeral at the end of *Song of Solomon*. Among the various instances that prove this bond, Pilate stands out when shows her more aggressive side to protect Reba from her "man friend" when he threatens her daughter. In spite of her anger, Pilate keeps

her composure, grabs a knife, and pulls it against the man's heart. After making sure that he knew how easy it would be for her to kill him, she tells him what it feels like to be a mother:

You see, darlin, that there is the only child I got. The first baby I ever had, and if you could turn around and see my face, which of course you can't cause my hand might slip, you'd know she's also the last. Women are foolish, you know, and mamas are the most foolish of all. And you know how mamas are, don't you? You got a mama, ain't you? Sure you have, so you know what I'm talking about. Mamas get hurt and nervous when somebody don't like they children. First real misery I ever had in my life was when I found out somebody—a little teeny tiny boy it was—didn't like my little girl. Made me so mad, I didn't know what to do. We do the best we can, but we ain't got the strength you men got. That's why it makes us so sad if a grown man start beating up on one of us. (116-17)

More than proof of her fierce maternal instincts, this speech reveals that she is aware of the social unfairness that so commonly befalls women. Black women are to this day especially vulnerable to violence due to their intersectional identities. As Crenshaw's body of work denotes, there is a tendency to separate the racial and the gender dimensions, which means that these women rarely see themselves represented in both feminist and antiracist discourses and are, therefore, less likely to be protected from experiences in which both ethnicity and gender play a part (1991, 1243-45). By facing the man who is hurting her daughter, Pilate is defying the gender roles responsible for the subjugation of Black women such as Reba. Her words "we ain't got the strength you men got" seem to not befit the situation. Ironically, she is suggesting that strength seems to be handed to men, while women must earn it, as she has just done to protect Reba. In that particular moment, the power lies not with the male, but with the female who is holding the knife and who is being empowered by her own words. Pilate is making use of *nommo*, the power of the spoken word, an essential notion for the African peoples to whom she is spiritually connected (Atkinson 20-21), to influence the events taking place in her backyard.

It is no coincidence that Macon Dead's eyes are the readers' first guide to his sister's home in Darling Street. His westernized gaze is in line with Santos' notion of "Western modernity" that renders invisible the side of the abyssal line that is considered "uncivilized" (50-51). Because Macon Dead is solely looking at the life that Pilate has built from his viewpoint within civil society, his perception offers not only a description of the "narrow single-

story house whose basement seemed to be rising rather than settling into the ground” (1977, 33-34), but it discredits her way of living, connection to her ancestral roots and her acceptance of a supernatural wisdom.²⁹ The western notion of knowledge as valid only if it fits the positivist standards is yet another symptom of the “coloniality of knowledge.” This concept has been linked to the “coloniality of power” in the political and economic dimensions by Quijano as mentioned in previous chapters (Quijano and Wallerstein 549-50).³⁰ Pilate represents a possible attitude towards this form of disenfranchisement. She is very much aware of how others, including her own Mercy neighbors, may perceive her as odd and uses this stereotype to her favor, as the scene with the police demonstrates. She is confident in her way of doing things and in the “discredited” wisdom (Morrison, 1984, 342-43) she possesses. Despite Milkman and Guitar breaking into her home, she goes to their rescue when they are arrested and presents herself as a benevolent and innocuous Black old lady who seems to pose no threat to the men around her. Then, she surprises them when she begins reciting from the Bible. Milkman, in particular, is bewildered:

He thought Pilate’s only acquaintance with the Bible was the getting of names out of it, but she quoted it, apparently, verse and chapter. Furthermore, she had looked at Milkman and Guitar and Macon like she didn’t know who exactly they were. In fact, when asked if she knew them, she pointedly said, ‘Not this man, here,’ looking at her brother, ‘but I do believe I’ve noticed this fella around the neighborhood.’ Here she motioned toward Guitar, who sat there like marble with the eyes of a dead man. (1977, 257)

The clueless innocence she displays is in accordance with the social expectations associated to her subalternity. Pilate has always lived at the margin of civil institutions: she did not learn in school, but out in the world, a fact that discredits the knowledge she has in the eyes of Milkman, Macon Dead, and the police officers; and even after she settled in Mercy, she refuses to abide by socially constructed expectations, remaining unmarried alongside her daughter and granddaughter. Portraying herself as a religious and odd old woman is an act of revelry that

²⁹ This theme has been widely explored by the critics of Morrison’s work. Among other academics, Joyce Irene Middleton, for instance, discusses how *Song of Solomon* manages to shine a light on ancient values within a westernized literary form, the novel, in her article “Orality, Literacy, and Memory in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*” (1993). Other examples include research on Morrison’s employment of mythology and folklore to demonstrate the alterity imposed on women, often demonized as “witches” (see Ramírez 2020); and Maria Emília da Silva Quintela Ribeiro’s dissertation titled “Legado da Ancestralidade: Mito, Magia e Ritual em *Song of Solomon* de Toni Morrison” (2010).

³⁰ See chapter 1.1 “‘You say I am wilderness:’ The Making of the New World as a Site of Oppression.”

shows how even the police falls for the marginalization of Black women. She also pretends not knowing her nephew or her brother, proving that her attitude is a farse, but she admits having “noticed this fella [Guitar] around the neighborhood,” confirming to the officers that she is indeed from the Southside, where the Black community of Mercy lives. This bit of information helps cementing the stereotypical lens through which the guards are seeing her, associating her bizarre attitude to her being Black and an inhabitant of the local African American community. It puts in full display the racist ideology rooted in the minds of someone whose function was to protect and aid everyone regardless of their skin color.

According to Morrison, this alleged “superiority of Western culture” ought to be “measured thoroughly against other civilizations and not found wanting, and [...] Western civilization [must own up] to its own sources in the cultures that preceded it” (1977, x-xi). Western hegemony associated with an Eurocentric Christian ideology led to “the increasing assertion of the totality of knowledge [which] reached its pinnacle at the crossroads of Greek philosophical legacies and medieval Western Christian concerns about universals” (Mignolo and Walsh 203). These perceptions have imbued themselves in the western conceptualization of the world to this day, marginalizing knowledges and ways of thinking that do not fit into what is considered a rational formula. In order to provide credit to the latter and displacing “Western rationality as the only framework and possibility of existence, analysis, and thought,” Mignolo and Walsh put forward the concept of decoloniality. This notion implies Crenshaw’s intersectionality in the sense that it proposes a sociopolitical awareness and the deconstruction of “the hierarchical structures of race, gender, heteropatriarchy, and class” (17). A decolonial framework makes it possible to look beyond the mesh of “structures that are clearly intertwined with and constitutive of global capitalism and Western modernity” (17-18) and to demarginalize perspectives that continue to be dominated by a western white patriarchal matrix of power.

I propose Morrison’s body of fiction as an intersectional experiment on the praxis of decoloniality, as it is characterized by an integration of African American and European folklores and motifs that re-affirms the possibility of interaction between the two sides of the abyssal line. The author is aware of the potentialities of this confluence between European and non-European forms of literature and ways of thinking. In her text “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” she compares tragedy, a classical Greek genre, to African American literature:

A large part of the satisfaction I have always received from reading Greek tragedy, for example, is in its similarity to Afro-American communal structures (the function of song and chorus, the heroic struggle between the claims of community and individual hubris) and African religion and philosophy. In other words, that is part of the reason it has quality for me—I feel intellectually at home there. But that could hardly be so for those unfamiliar with my “home,” and hardly a requisite for the pleasure they take. The point is, the form (Greek tragedy) makes available these varieties of provocative love because it is masterly—not because the civilization that is its referent was flawless or superior to all others. (2019, 146)

Through her use of the language and traditional cultural codes of African storytelling, the author brings *Song of Solomon* into the forefront of the “saga-like” epics that populate western literature, bridging the literary gap between the canonical “boom of power announcing an ‘officially recognized set of texts’” considered the “canon,” and those “[r]eadily available people/texts of little value” (144). Through Pilate’s character, ancient knowledge emerges onto a world that does not regard it as “proper” knowledge. Her presence is a constant reminder of the African American traditions and set of values, passed on from generation to generation through “oral memory.” By creating a character who lives in accordance with her ancestral mores and disregards the comforts of modernity, Morrison is rewriting African roots back into literature, re-ascribing their importance and value, freeing her character of the mainstream western society’s enduring colonial perceptions. In Pilate, ancestral African American traditions and wisdoms merge with a knowledge of other cultures and values, such as the Christian teachings she takes from the Bible: “Bible say what so e’er the Lord hath brought together, let no man put asunder—Matthew Twenty-one: Two,” (1977, 257). This paraphrase demonstrates Pilate’s resourcefulness while producing a subversion of colonial expectations that regard the colonized as intellectually inferior and ignorant of “proper” knowledge.

If *Song of Solomon* is, as H. Nigel Thomas defends, linked to the African American folktale performance, in order to reach the full “meaning of the story” the hero needs to understand the “ancestral wisdom” and complete his “ancestral obligations” (177). Pilate’s role is that of the communal storyteller responsible for the maintenance of “a cultural and historical past with that of the present,” the one associated to the *nommo*, the *griot* (Atkinson 20-21). These notions taken from communal and ancestral bonds as essential to one’s self-perception constitute a continuum in Morrison’s fiction, establishing themselves through the essential role

also played by the community in *Sula*, *The Bluest Eye*, or *Paradise*, and how it relates to a given character:

[one of the “distinctive elements of African American writing”] was oral quality, and the participation of the reader and the chorus. The only thing that would add to this question is the presence of an ancestor; it seems to me interesting to evaluate Black literature on what the writer does with the presence of an ancestor. [...] There is always an elder there. And these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom. (Morrison, 1984, 342-43).

The fact that Pilate has unknowingly been carrying her father's bones her entire life constitutes a symbolic manifestation of her connection to her ancestors. As the embodiment of the wise elder's figure, Pilate provides Milkman the ancestral knowledge and guidance that will help him meet the demands of his quest for identity. Twelve-year-old Milkman, accompanied by Guitar, are profoundly impacted by Pilate's attitudes and how they do not seem to correspond to how she was regarded by her brother and the community. He thought of her as his “queer aunt,” known in the region for “her ugliness, her poverty, her dirt, and her wine” (1977, 46). His expectations are, however, reversed when he sees how far removed from reality those accusations are. Rather than feeling ashamed of his aunt, Milkman is uncomfortable due to Pilate's acute remarks. She starts by forcing them to think about the way they speak and what they are saying. “What they telling you in them schools? You say ‘Hi’ to pigs and sheep when you want ’em to move. When you tell a human being ‘Hi,’ he ought to get up and knock you down,” she points out to the boys (45-46), demonstrating a knowledge that surprises them. She “change[s] rhythm on them” (47), captivating them to the point where they feel attached to her and ask for a glass of water to remain by her side. Despite her “poor” and “unkept” looks (46), Pilate is not dirty, does not seem drunk, and nothing in her stance or eyes confirms that a life of deprivation has broken her, nor that she has become bitter towards other people. She only has a meager source of income, but Pilate is generous, offering Guitar and Milkman a “soft-boiled egg” (47). She also does not appear to hold a grudge on Macon Dead, as she speaks about him with nothing but nostalgia and fondness, particularly regarding how he saved her when their mother died in childbirth and after their father's murder (49-50).

What Milkman does not yet know at the time of their first encounter is the crucial role played by his aunt in his birth. When she arrives at Mercy, Pilate finds her brother married, with

two little daughters. She also discovers that Macon Dead has been neglecting his wife Ruth, who lives an unfulfilled and loveless existence despite all the commodities assured by her husband's business. Wanting to help out, Pilate provides Ruth with a "nasty greenish-gray powder [...] to be stirred into rain water and put into food" that induces in Macon Dead a "sexual hypnosis" state (161-62), allowing the conception of their third child. But when he finds out about his wife's pregnancy, Macon Dead becomes violent in his attempts "to get her to abort," in a clear violation of her will and her body. From making her drink "half ounce of castor oil," to forcing her to attempt abortion with a "knitting needle" of which "she inserted only the tip, squatting in the bathroom, crying, afraid of the man who paced outside the door," she became so terrified of her husband that it took Macon Dead punching "her stomach" for her to run "to Southside looking for Pilate" (162).

The notion of "subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis," Crenshaw argues, is brought on by "dominant conceptions of discrimination" that contribute to an effective and stereotype-based marginalization of Black women (2021, 57). By reducing the focus of experiences of discrimination rather than considering them as resulting from the intersection of several factors, these perceptions undermine the efforts to understand and fight back discrimination and violence on the grounds of race, gender, and sex. The above-cited instance of domestic violence, for instance, does not fit into the stereotypical beliefs that connect violence to class, that is, the premise that "domestic violence occurs primarily in minority or poor families" (Crenshaw, 1991, 1259). The Deads are a middle-class household to whom their outside perception as upper-class and bourgeois to the rest of Mercy remains crucial. The importance they attribute to this self-imposed social image helps explaining why instead of going to the local authorities when she is abused, Ruth reaches out to the only woman who might help her without spreading it. It is another side of the oppression Black women face and that remains insufficiently addressed even today.

Ruth had never been in the Southside before searching for Pilate – a detail that contributes to the implication of the two women's different socio-economic status. Faithful to her way of living, and perhaps reminiscent of her class, Pilate has "no telephone and no number on her house" (1977, 162), which forces Ruth, used to the comforts of a middle-class upbringing, to interact with "some passer-by" to gather where Pilate lives. When she explains to the older woman what was transpiring at her home, Pilate shows remarkable care and strength, giving her advice on how to protect both herself and the baby. She also leaves in her brother's office "a male doll with a small painted chicken bone stuck between its legs and a

round red circle painted on its belly” (163) that discourages him from further hurting his wife and unborn child. These actions attest to her moral compass and female solidarity and to her resistance to patriarchal and misogynist principles, including those embraced by her own brother, as well as to her understanding and acceptance of other forms of knowledge.

Pilate’s singular way of surviving in a world that has excluded her gives weight to Morrison’s claim that Macon Dead’s sister “represents some hope in all of us” (Morrison and McKay 418). This character’s independence from men in a male-dominated world as well as her help in Ruth’s regaining ownership of her body’s freedom and her right to bear children suggest that Pilate embodies “something [women] wish existed,” a confidence to refuse to “run anybody’s course” (418-19) but her own. In fact, she embodies a possibility for Black women’s transcendence from their ethnicity, gender, and class. She can be perceived as a response to Du Bois’ notion of African American identity as a divided reality,³¹ in the sense that throughout the novel she appears to be the only character who is comfortable in her own skin, the only character that appears to have managed to obtain a “self-conscious [wo]manhood” (*Souls* 6–7). Pilate, the bearer of ancient wisdom, is a complex but articulate character who acts upon her own values, demonstrating great social awareness. In *Song of Solomon*, she brings forward the collective African American “memory” shared orally through the song thanks to the “intimacy” (Middleton 65) created through the strength drawn from the communal bonds that ground her attitudes.

However, her complexity does not mean that she is perfect and flawless. In fact, Pilate achieves her *griot* standing by forgoing her “American” side on behalf of her African ancestry, and by refusing to be rooted within the social expectations inherent to these categories. In doing so, she is also condemning herself, her daughter and granddaughter to a futureless end, as discussed in the following chapters. She serves also as a materialization of the warnings and lessons associated to folktales. As Thomas affirms, “Toni Morrison’s [transforms] old folktales into entire novels that interpret contemporary Afro-American reality and that warn, as the folktales do, against the aberrations occurring in Afro-American communal values” (177). She has moved to Mercy to provide to Hagar what she thought the girl needed: “family, people, a life very different from what she and Reba could offer” (1977, 187). But mother and grandmother failed to properly integrate the child in the society from which they were isolated. Since Pilate and Reba ceded to her caprices, Hagar was educated without developing a critical

³¹ As developed in Chapter 1.2 “‘Am I not a man?’: The Fight for Civil Rights in the 1950s and 1960s.”

thinking of her own, allowing the capitalist ideology prevailing in Mercy to permeate her every will.

The answer to what Hagar needs comes from Guitar: “She needed what most colored girls needed: a chorus of mamas, grandmamas, aunts, cousins, sisters, neighbors, Sunday school teachers, best girl friends, and what all to give her the strength life demanded of her— and the humor with which to live it” (1977, 383). “Hadn’t anybody told her the things she ought to know?,” he wonders, recalling his own upbringing alongside two sisters. He compares them to Hagar, “grown women now who could deal,” concluding that Pilate’s granddaughter had lacked the “litany” of social interactions that had provided emotional strength to his sisters. The absence of “a little guidance from women who make up the core of the black community, and are capable of passing on its sustaining qualities to her through their nurturing abilities” has deprived Hagar of a connection to her roots which could fortify her (Ahmad 64). To compensate for her disenfranchisement, she turns to mainstream culture, based on white values such as beauty as a precondition for women’s success. Pilate and Reba have failed to transmit her the confidence and the self-preservation instincts that would allow her to question her cousin’s mistreatment of her and move on. Instead, Hagar attributes Milkman leaving her to her looks, particularly her African features such as her curly hair, commenting “No wonder he didn’t want me,” adding that she looks “terrible” (1977, 385).

When her self-indulgent shopping spree falls short of her expectations, because she was buying items in accordance to the white beauty standards that prevailed even in non-segregated shops rather than shopping for herself as a Black woman (390-92), her despair is evident and there is nothing to prevent her downfall:

At last she opened the door and presented herself to Pilate and Reba. And it was in their eyes that she saw what she had not seen before in the mirror: the wet ripped hose, the soiled white dress, the sticky, lumpy face powder, the streaked rouge, and the wild wet shoals of hair. All this she saw in their eyes, and the sight filled her own with water warmer and much older than the rain. Water that lasted for hours, until the fever came, and then it stopped. The fever dried her eyes up as well as her mouth. (392-93)

The comparison of Reba and Pilate to “two divi-divi trees beaten forward by a wind always blowing from the same direction” (393) shows powerlessness while linking them to their ancestral roots. These plants, also known as watapanas, as they grow, are famous for bending to the strong winds of the Caribbean and Central and South America, regions well-known for

their connection to slavery, particularly their sugar plantations. At that moment, both women are bending over Hagar in her deathbed, offering her “all they had: love murmurs and a protective shade.” Despite exhibiting her strength throughout the novel, Pilate is as helpless as Reba to prevent the tragic demise of Hagar, who dies in anguish.

Another point in the story that constitutes an argument in favor of the power of community, namely the African American bonds, is when Milkman takes Macon Dead and Pilate to the South. Surprisingly, it is his father who comes up with the idea to visit Danville. He appears to have forgotten the reason for Milkman traveling there in the first place, the gold, and he even considers to loosen his control of the renting business by permitting “Freddie [to] pick up the rents, maybe” (416-17). The “story” about the South and “the fact that places were named for his people,” as Milkman tells him, constitute Macon Dead’s main motivations for the trip. He wishes to visit these places which he regards as symbolic proofs of his family’s legacy. On the other hand, Pilate wanted to finally bury their father’s bones in his homeland, and her brother is agreeable to this purpose but does not go with his sister and his son to Shalimar. His decision implies that he wishes to hear about his family’s legacy directly from “the ‘boys’ who remembered him in Danville,” but sticks to his own perception of the world. While talking to Milkman, he “wasn’t a bit interested in the flying part,” caring more about being known and remembered by the inhabitants of the place that he had left at such a young age. Through these stories, he regains a sort of connection to his ancestral roots, forgoing for a bit the material values which had alienated him from his community and from his family.

This development does not mean, however, that things in his life and in the way he conducts his relationships are going to change. It does mean however that Milkman is a different man from his father, as he is now aware of his own shortcomings.

No reconciliation took place between Pilate and Macon [...] and relations between Ruth and Macon were the same and would always be. Just as the consequences of Milkman’s own stupidity would remain, and regret would always outweigh the things he was proud of having done. Hagar was dead and he had not loved her one bit. And Guitar was ... somewhere. (417)

The biggest “consequence of Milkman’s own stupidity” is revealed next. It is no coincidence that Guitar is mentioned, for when Milkman and Pilate finish burying her father at Solomon’s Leap, his aunt is shot by his best friend who wanted to kill him instead. Ignoring Milkman’s concern, Pilate’s last words echo the love prevalent throughout her life. The only thing she asks

of her nephew is to look out for Reba, and she shares her regret of not having known more people. “I would of loved ‘em all,” she says, “If I’d a knowed more, I would a loved more” (418). Just like she had been impotent to save Hagar, here Milkman is forced into a helplessness that grows as he sings to her a variation of the song that had driven his journey until then: “Sugargirl don’t leave me here/ Cotton balls to choke me/Sugargirl don’t leave me here/ Buckra’s arms to yoke me” (419).

But she does leave him, as two “birds circle round them,” picking up her earring that contained a piece of paper with her name copied from the Bible by her father when she was born. They fly away carrying it, suggesting Milkman “and Pilate’s merging with the mythical universe of the Flying Africans, who flew back to Africa to escape slavery in the Americas” (Twagilimana 204-05). This had happened with Solomon, Pilate and Macon Dead’s grandfather and Milkman’s great-grandfather, who, according to Circe, left his family, flying “right on back to wherever it was he came from” (401-02). It is because of this story that the place where Pilate and Milkman bury her father’s bones is called Solomon’s Leap, the “hill” to where he run, “spun around a couple of times, and was lifted up in in the air” (402). Pilate’s death at the same location contains a myriad of possible meanings. She has finally learned about her family’s past, laid to rest her father’s bones, and her mission as Milkman’s guide has been fulfilled. Finally, her passing makes way for his own leap: his reckoning with his past by facing Guitar. Lastly, her journey comes full circle through an outright escape from the material world and into the skies – a reminiscence of her ancestor’s journey for freedom.

Macon and Pilate represent two possible interpretations of the American Dream: one where success is measured in terms of what one owns and can do, and the other, where it is achieved by relying on one’s ancestry and knowledge of the past and of the community. As Twagilimana suggests, “to the African American, the American Dream that seeks the excesses of wealth at the expense of family and cultural heritage is not worth pursuing” (205). The white peacock’s appearance (1977, 211) seems to be in line with this African American take on the American Dream: the conspicuous bird is mentioned during Milkman and Macon Dead’s conversation about Pilate’s alleged bag of gold. But Hagar’s demise also implies that isolation of the African American community and their shared values in relation to the mainstream American society does not constitute a perfect response to capitalism and to the deprivation of a full citizenship. Rather, a middle-term must be reached, as the last scene between Milkman

and Guitar denotes.³² In order to breach the gap between, on one side, ancestral roots and orally transmitted knowledge, embodied by Pilate, and, on the other side, capitalism and formal knowledge, represented by Macon Dead's bourgeois aspirations, that is, between African Americans and white Americans, there ought to occur a dialogue from which both sides may draw their own conclusions and make up for their respective shortcomings. Such confrontation between the two siblings never, in fact, occurs. But it does seem to take place in some form between the younger generation, represented by Milkman and Guitar, as discussed in the next chapter.

³² Further explored in the next chapter 2.3 "Guitar and Milkman's 'Flight Over The Dark Sea.'"

2.3 Guitar and Milkman's "Flight Over The Dark Sea"³³

It's all the white folks, not just one. They all against us. Every stinking low-down one of them.

Ralph Ellison, 1952, p. 210.

my main man/ my main main man

we niggers together/ forever

raise.

Baraka, Amiri/ LeRoi Jones, 1979, p. 168.

You know the best way to get rid of segregation? The white man is more afraid of separation than he is of integration. Segregation means that he puts you away from him, but not far enough for you to be out of his jurisdiction; separation means you're gone. And the white man will integrate faster than he'll let you separate.

Malcolm X, 1990, pp. 42-43.

By setting *Song of Solomon* mostly in the 1960s, Morrison is making room for the intertwining of Milkman and Guitar's story with the History of the Civil Rights Movement, and this includes not just certain personalities, but events and places as well. Alongside Milkman Dead's birth and development, his association with the idea of dreaming throughout his life (1977, 93-98; 372) connects this character to the historical figure of Martin Luther King, Jr., who in 1963 gave his iconic "I Have a Dream" speech. The same year corresponds, in *Song of Solomon*, to the time when Milkman rises to the air in Solomon's Leap (Dubek 96-97; Morrison, 1977, 419-20). King was known for his pacifist take on the fight for civil rights, which led to accusations by some members of the African American population of him being too integrationist, to the point of compromising with the white people's interests. A more aggressive attitude is demonstrated by Guitar Bains, whose belligerent demeanor for his beliefs is linked to Malcolm X's fight for Black self-determinism, as already suggested and further explored in this chapter.

Since its beginning, the relationship between Milkman and Guitar is established as two contrasting forces coming together. It starts with their backgrounds, which could not be any more different: while Milkman has been raised in a middle-class household, in "the community's principal family" (Bjork 38), Guitar is brought up in the Southside, a part of the town distinctly characterized by a lower economic status. They begin as friends but, similarly

³³ During Milkman's stay at Sweet's house, he has a "warm dreamy sleep all about flying, about sailing high over the earth" during which he flies alone "over the dark sea" (Morrison, 1977, 372).

to Macon Dead and Pilate, their views of the world end up diverging into distinct paths. Through their stories and the imagery associated with each one of them, Morrison presents a narrative analogous to the Civil Rights Movement: a fight that has known as many different faces as political positions which, if the novel's ending is to be taken into consideration, must converge in order to make any sort of fruitful change possible. The advocates of opposite perspectives such as integrationism and racial uplift, or self-determinism and separatism must therefore realize the shared nature of their cause: the achievement of liberty, equality, and full-citizenship. *Song of Solomon* proposes a metaphor in the form of Shalimar's lesson: if they "surrender" their rivalries, their antagonism, in the interest of their shared cause, all of the Black community will be able to "fly" without "ever leaving the ground" (Morrison, 1977, 419-20), that is, to achieve the freedom they have longed for since they first arrived at the American shores. Before reaching such empowerment, however, both characters undergo several trials analogous to those faced by the Black community and those who fought in the Civil Rights Movement.

Milkman's own privilege is made clear from the very first page: he is the first Black baby to be born in the segregated local hospital. While his birth seems to encourage the prospect of racial integration in the American society, any association of this event with hope for desegregation is quickly put on hold by the narrator, who attributes the "hospital's generosity" towards his mother to another event occurring in the building's roof at the time (1977, 5). At 3:00 pm, insurance agent Robert Smith fulfilled his promise of flying "away on [his] own wings" (3), committing suicide by leaping from the hospital's roof. As Mr. Smith appears on the roof, Ruth goes into labor (5-6), almost as if his eminent death had provoked the advent of a new life. At first, the hospital's white staff, afraid that "the half a hundred or so people gathered there" (6-7) was due to "one of those things that racial-uplift groups were always organizing," keeps their distance (7). When they at last venture outside, they see a man about to jump to his death and "a few men and some girls playing with pieces of velvet and a woman singing," and mistakenly attribute this scene to "some form of worship." Notwithstanding their preconceptions regarding African Americans, the surgeons, the nurses and the clerks function as an outsider audience whose perception of the scene enhances the mysticism of the moment. Supporting this symbolism are Ruth's older daughters, compared to "two of [Father Divine's] virgins" because they are "holding baskets of flowers," and Pilate, who is singing (5-6).

It is the first instance that integrates the motif of flight, which will recur throughout the novel. In fact, this is the first of several moments that refer to the song "*O Sugarman done fly*

away,” with its lyrics suggesting the idea of flying alongside Mr. Smith’s suicidal jump from the roof:

O Sugarman done fly away

Sugarman done gone

Sugarman cut across the sky

Sugarman gone home....

[...] *O Sugarman done fly*

O Sugarman done gone... (1977, 8; 10)

Only later in the novel will Milkman realize that this is in fact a song about his ancestor, Solomon/ Shalimar. This adds another layer of mysticism to the song and to the moment it is inserted in: A foreshadowing of Milkman’s future as an embodiment of one of the “flying Africans” as explained in the previous chapter. The notion emerges from African American folklore as a representation of the will – and the need – to fly, that is, to escape slavery (Barnes 73-74). In Jason Young’s article “All God’s Children Had Wings: The Flying African in History, Literature, and Lore,” the author explores this notion further, connecting it to a mindset typically African American. Seen as a “metaphor in the religious and cultural lives of bondsmen” (51) during the slavery period, this myth encompasses the idea of flying away from the shackles of enslavement and later from the oppression of segregation. It also constitutes a mythical idea that embeds Milkman’s story: for him to find himself, he must fly, that is, trace backwards the path of his ancestors, and thus free himself – and symbolically the African American community – from the limitations imposed upon them by their race. Because he is eventually able to transcend his own limitations, and because of his progress, his birth has, therefore, mythical properties, just like his aunt Pilate’s had.

Initially, Milkman is still trying to follow on his father’s steps, and this pushes him away from the symbolic freedom that his birth represents. He is unaware of his association to the Black American Dream of Freedom and Equality because he does not yet have a sense of selfhood which will allow him to question the world around him and himself. Milkman has “no sense of the ‘extreme importance’ of his decisions, not even to himself” (Dubek 98), including, for instance, his participation in Macon Dead’s morally-questionable business and the full extent of his father’s attitudes towards his family and his tenants. He cannot yet empathize with

the African American plight for civil rights, nor does he seem to have any intention to do so. His mother's overprotection and overnursing and his father's depreciation while Milkman enjoys the advantages of his family's economic standing prevent him from becoming an independent and socially adjusted person. He lacks the affective connection to someone who could help him feel at ease among his peers. After his discovery that "only birds and airplanes could fly" (1977, 11) at the age of four, Milkman loses interest in himself and, subsequently, in others, as he realizes while observing the children in Shalimar:

He'd never played like that as a child. As soon as he got up off his knees at the window sill, grieving because he could not fly, and went off to school, *his velvet suit separated him from the other children*. White and black thought he was a riot and went out of their way to laugh at him and see to it that he had no lunch to eat, nor any crayons, nor ever got through the line to the toilet or the water fountain. His mother finally surrendered to his begging for corduroy knickers or straights, which helped a little, but he was never asked to play those circle games, those singing games, to join in anything, until Guitar pulled those four boys off him. (329-30, my emphasis)

The cited passage, especially the emphasized part, shows how Milkman's parents prevent him from reaching out to the community by denying him the knowledge of his ancestry and imposing middle-class ideals upon him. The absence of the African American community "nurturing, cohesive, and healing" values (Conner 49) in Milkman's life is both cause and effect of his passivity and lack of social and self-awareness. Looking at his reflection in the mirror, he notes that despite having a "fine enough face," "it lacked coherence, a coming together of the features into a total self" (85-86). At this point, he is experiencing the notion of African Americans as a divided reality, as defined by Du Bois (6-7). Milkman is both American and African but he is wrestling between these two dimensions of himself, these "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (6). He is feeling trapped by his parents' expectations and his self-doubt, there is no "coming together" (1977, 86), no convergence of the different elements that construct Milkman's identity.

This shortcoming is made obvious when one particular night, while he is trying to find Guitar, he opens his eyes to find out that

[t]he street was even more crowded with people, all going in the direction he was coming from. All walking hurriedly and bumping against him. After a while he realized that nobody

was walking on the other side of the street. There were no cars and the street lights were on, now that darkness had come, but the sidewalk on the other side of the street was completely empty. He turned around to see where everybody was going, but there was nothing to see except their backs and hats pressing forward into the night. He looked again at the other side of Not Doctor Street. Not a soul. (1977, 97)

This dreamlike vision of the protagonist forcing his way against a sea of people walking in the opposite direction may very well be symbolic of his isolation from the local community. As the narrator points out, Milkman “never once [wonders] why he himself did not cross over to the other side of the street, where no one was walking at all” (1977, 97). He remains trapped in a sea of people ramming against him, instead of taking the initiative to walk by himself or trying to understand where the crowd is headed. His isolation is total due to his passivity and unwillingness to do something about it. As Laura Dubek remarks, to become “a total self” and “[t]o be an effective change agent, Milkman must ‘cross over’ to the other side “where no one was walking at all (78). He will then become a ‘total self,’ which should be understood as a ‘coming together’ *not* of different races or of multiple perspectives on the problem of racism, but of different dimensions of space and time.” (98). The sole goal of finding Guitar represents one of his few real connections to something exterior to himself, but it blinds him to the opportunity of being his own self without following a pattern of overdependence that his parents have enacted upon him. For Ruth’s unmeasured dedication to her son and Macon Dead’s greedy ambition also cloud their judgements about other people.

Milkman’s journey of maturing and learning about his past and the importance of remembering is also related to another theme that Morrison would return to in *Beloved*: the part played by slavery and later segregation and discrimination in the maintenance of the traumas which scarred an entire community for centuries and still scar the USA today. Far into adulthood, Milkman has not been interested in listening to others and learning from them. Circe even tells him: “You don’t listen to people. Your ear is on your head, but it’s not connected to your brain” (1977, 307). The process of awakening of Milkman’s social consciousness is comparable to the path traced before by those who became aware, particularly during World War II, of the inequity brought on by a system based on white supremacy.³⁴ The growth of Milkman’s “interest in his own people, not just the ones he met” (1977, 365) mirrors the African

³⁴ As mentioned in chapter 1.2 “‘Am I not a man?’: The Fight for Civil Rights in the 1950s and 1960s.”

American mobilization to fight for Civil Rights. In this sense, his journey embodies Jim Cullen's proposed notion of the Dream for Freedom and Equality (103-31).

According to Cullen, the industrial capitalism's development in the 19th century merged with a "growing application of the Darwinian theory of 'the survival of the fittest' to human affairs" (107). This conjuncture contributed to a

popularized [...] notion of freedom as the right of the individual entrepreneur [...] to make as much money as he could without interference that would drag down the progress of the human race as a whole. In this view, freedom meant freedom to dominate and freedom from regulation. Equality, by contrast, was a base 'leveling' instinct that restricted freedom by insisting that everyone, even those who were evidently superior, had to play by the same rules, respect the same limits. Any assertion that people should be more equal than they theoretically already were smacked of socialism—and socialism, like other 'foreign' ideas, was thoroughly beyond the pale. (107-08)

The idea that freedom could be compromised by equality allegedly endangered the nation where no-one "was prepared to make [the freed enslaved] *equal*" (107, original emphasis). Equality is presumed to be a core principle of the American Dream – a founding notion that would lay the groundwork for the formation of a nationalist ideology in the USA. The assertion that everyone is eligible to work towards this Dream is part of its appeal, but to bring former enslaved and former masters to the same level was unconceivable to many among the USA white population and thus met with great contestation. The aforementioned "freedom to dominate" remained a concern to Jim Crow supporters, as the decisions reached in *Plessy v. Ferguson* and in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* demonstrate (106).

Using Frederick Douglass' thoughts on a Dream of Equality, Cullen discusses how its principles remained unaccomplished fifty years after the Civil War, linking the Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s and 1970s to other attempts to accommodate and integrate various minorities among the white American population (25-34). For the most part, Milkman's feeble position resembles "the promised land," a pipe-dream that the USA is supposed to represent. That is, a continent whose novelty led to the expectation of avoiding the mistakes made in the Old World. Nonetheless, it ended up as a stage for the materialization of complex power structures based on race, gender, and class. As for Milkman, the people present during his upbringing constantly pull and push him towards distinct ideological forces that permeate his identity and deeply impact his sense of self. This is evident when he looks at his reflection on

the mirror (1977, 86). His quest for identity leading up to the final moments in the story can thus be analyzed as a possible pathway for growth and dialogue between the various factions at play within USA society.

Not only has Milkman's birth oneiric properties, but throughout his life he is continuously connected to the imagery of dreaming, particularly to nuances of the notion of the American Dream and to the African American dream for civil rights. While his father and grandfather followed the principles associated to the American Dream of Upward Mobility (Cullen 60-61), Milkman also has the influence of Pilate, who does not adhere to capitalist exploitation of others in one's self-interest. As the prime contrast to Macon Dead's greed, Pilate functions as an embodiment of African Americans' connection to ancestral roots. In the previous chapter, we have seen how she stands as an opposite force to the protagonist's father. She also represents what Joseph Campbell calls "the helpful female figure" responsible for protecting Milkman, this story's hero, "through all the frightening experiences of the father's ego-shattering initiation" (110). Firstly, Pilate's protection of Ruth meant the conception and birth of Milkman against Macon Dead's wishes. It is an instance of female empowerment prevailing over male prepotence. Secondly, while her nephew is growing up, she allows him into her home, the place in Mercy where he had been the farthest away from his father's control and more in contact with a lifestyle focused on his ancestry and on the ancient knowledge disdained by Macon Dead.

The latter has ruled his household through "fear" and prepotence (1977, 11), denying his children the means to a proper psychological and emotional development. As an adult, Magdalene called Lena is aware of this and she points out Milkman's role in his family's suffering. "You are to blame," she tells him, referring to how his denouncing of Corinthians' affair has led to Macon Dead knocking "the ice out of [her] hand again" (268-69). Even Pilate's influence on his "rhythm" (47) had not been enough to help Milkman see the error of following on his father's ways. In fact, his mistreatment of Pilate's granddaughter and his cousin, Hagar, proves that Milkman is still within his father's oppressive teachings. He has been taught to overlook women as inferior tools to serve only his pleasure. However, from the moment he meets Pilate, she is the only woman in his life who demands from him the respect that he does not show to anyone else. She reverts his expectation of her when they meet, proving to be far from Macon Dead's stereotypical depiction of his sister. Later, when Milkman and Guitar try to rob her, instead of being revengeful or mad at them, she uses social biases to her advantage at the police station, as mentioned previously, which results in the boys' release without further

consequences. Pilate is a constant and benevolent presence in Milkman's life, presenting a possible approach to life of which the protagonist might not have been aware otherwise.

It is through Milkman's connection to his ancestors – the enslaved Solomon who flew towards freedom, and his son Macon Dead I and Sing who “met on a wagon going North” (409; 303) – that he will rediscover the possibility of flying as Solomon had done. For Milkman, however, this revelation will occur as he is retracing his ancestors' path backwards – from Mercy, in the North, to Shalimar, in the South. Milkman's journey forces him to open himself to others and to the wilderness, in a contrary motion to that of his grandfather, Macon Dead I. After reaching Virginia, Macon Dead I did what so many recently freed Black men and women were doing: he tried to establish a means of subsistence for himself and for his family. And just as it was happening to Black people across the country, the local whites were not that eager to watch his success grow. For centuries, the notion of citizenship had not included everyone living and working in the USA, in spite of the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution. Years of racial supremacy had led to the widespread white belief on Black community's natural subalternity, which had also worked to justify their enslavement. The economic success of the formerly enslaved challenged this thesis, further angering the whites, who, contrarily to the official position of the government, began working towards a “complete disfranchisement of the Negro” (Franklin and Moss 235). This often meant the destruction of Black people's businesses or their murder. In *Song of Solomon*, these historical circumstances are represented by the Butlers, a powerful white family, who end up shooting Macon Dead I to take over his farm, leaving his children orphans. The same dream to possess land – which, in the case of Macon Dead I, had been primarily out of necessity for survival – is a means to an end, in the sense that, first by trying to buy his property, and secondly by murdering him, the Butlers are effectively dispossessing Macon Dead I and his children of a constitutional right in place since the 18th century. The fact that there is no official, legal or social structure to aid the children and to punish the Butlers for taking a Black life – a notion also consecrated by the Constitution – is proof that, as Berlant affirms, “the promise of U.S. citizenship to deliver sovereignty to all of its citizens has always been practiced unevenly” (41). Thus, one of the variants of the American Dream, the hope for freedom and equality shared among the African Americans since they were forced into bondage on foreign lands, was once again left unattended to.

Contrasting with his best friend Guitar, even as an adult Milkman is not yet “an active agent,” as conceptualized by Rose: he does not wish “to exercise informed, autonomous and

secular responsibility in relation to his [...] own destiny” (145). Where Guitar has the strength to act upon his personal beliefs and stand by them, Milkman remains passive towards others and his own life as he ends up working for his father without even trying to reach outside of this comfortable bubble. Guitar Bains, the grandson of one of Macon Dead II’s exploited tenants, represents the only relationship outside of Milkman and Pilate’s family that Milkman has in Mercy. Since Ruth’s son was a teenager, Guitar has been one of the few challenging aspects in his life, at least until he leaves the town behind. Born and raised in the Southside, Guitar has experienced trauma in various instances of his life, which has shaped his strong personality. His father dies when he is still a child, “sliced up in a sawmill” (1977, 76) while working, further complicating his family’s means of subsistence. The only compensation they receive is Divinity, a candy baked by the wife of his father’s boss for the recently orphaned children. It is a vain attempt to show care for a grieving family on the part of privileged people, which consequently leaves Guitar unable to eat sweets because he associates the sweetness to “dead people. And white people” (75-76). Later, he waits on the street outside while his grandmother pleads in vain to Macon Dead for leniency to their rent which they could not afford (24-27).³⁵ As Guitar himself puts it, he and Milkman “got to be friends anyway,” even if the first memory he has of his friend’s father is of him “kicking [them] out of [their] house” (126).

Nonetheless, all the injustice Guitar has witnessed and suffered from have hauled an unforgiving response from him. He argues that white people are inferior to Black people due to a “disease they have [...] in their blood, in the structure of their chromosomes” (1977, 194-96). Guitar’s reaction to the discrimination of Black people ironizes how hegemonic racism uses certain arguments to justify the inferiority of Blacks. Guitar is picking up on the biological claim linking white “depravity” to their genes, extending this “disease” to the entire white population regardless of their involvement in the prepotence over African Americans. While explaining to Milkman what the Seven Days Society stands for, Guitar points out the violence brought upon the African American population – and “before us [them] Indian blood” (196) – and the failure of the justice system to do right by them: “when a Negro child, Negro woman, or Negro Man is killed by whites and nothing is done about it by *their* law and *their* courts” (191-92). He joins the Society hoping to “keep the racial ratio the same” (193), believing that the way to achieve this was to kill white people just as they killed Black people. Being a member of the Seven Days is a form for Guitar to put his political and civil ideals into practice.

³⁵ See Chapter 2.2 “‘Just a bit of music:’ The Dead Children’s Contentious Approaches to Life.”

In this sense, Guitar represents a particular faction of the African American 1960s political activism whose answer to racial injustice comes in the form of violence. Associated to this character is a bellicose imagery, for instance “the clarion call” in his voice (1977, 227), as his demeanor becomes progressively more aggressive and action-oriented. As previously mentioned,³⁶ the Black community was divided in terms of which course of action they ought to take regarding segregation and other forms of discrimination. As Martin Luther King, Jr. explains, some among them

felt that at least a modicum of violence would convince the white people that the Negroes meant business and were not afraid. A member of my church came to me one day and solemnly suggested that it would be to our advantage to “kill off” eight or ten white people. “This is the only language these white folks will understand,” he said. “If we fail to do this they will think we’re afraid. We must show them we’re not afraid any longer.” Besides, he thought, if a few white persons were killed the federal government would inevitably intervene and this, he was certain, would benefit us. (King 79)

According to Guitar, he is not “kill[ing] people,” he is killing “white people” (Morrison, 1977, 193-94). Such line, he argues, is drawn between whites and Blacks since “[t]here are no innocent white people, because every one of them is a potential nigger-killer, if not an actual one” (1977, 193-94). Guitar’s deeply embedded fear and rage are thus behind his stance on “the problem of the color line” (Du Bois 2): in a reversal of the lynching logic, he wants to “frighten them [the whites] into behaving” (1977, 197). Such militant image – “fighting violence with violence” – is a notion closely linked to factions of the movement generally considered to be more extreme, or even antagonistic to King’s views.

The trauma endured by Guitar in his childhood is similar to the trauma experienced by Malcom X, whose father also died in a work-related accident, resulting in his mother being hospitalized. Milkman compares Guitar to the late Black activist at a certain point, confirming the relation between his friend and the leader of the Organization of Afro-American Unity:

[Milkman:] ‘You sound like that red-headed Negro named X. Why don’t you join him and call yourself Guitar X?’

[Guitar:] ‘X, Bains—what difference does it make? I don’t give a damn about names.’

³⁶ See Chapter 1.2 “‘Am I not a man?’: The Fight for Civil Rights in the 1950s and 1960s.”

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

[Guitar:] 'I don't give a shit what white people know or even think. Besides, I do accept it. It's part of who I am. Guitar is my name. Bains is the slave master's name. And I'm all of that. Slave names don't bother me; but slave status does.' (1977, 198-99)

The aforementioned conversation is one of the various moments when Guitar demonstrates that he is aware of his History and of the social meaning of his race and economic status, contrary to Milkman. The youngest Dead is, in Guitar's own words, "not a serious person" (128), at least not yet. Bains is condemning the protagonist for his social detachment, in a similar way to how Malcom X condemned those who had a more pacifist approach to the fight for civil rights.

While imprisoned for burglary and trespassing, Malcom X changed his surname in protest against the name Little, given to his family by their former slave master. In this particular aspect, however, Guitar's stance differs from the late Black leader's attitude. It is not that Milkman's friend does not "give a damn," as he affirms, but he actively chooses to focus on "slave status" instead of "name," acknowledging the suffering endured by his ancestors as part of his identity. Guitar's name is also relevant to understand this character and the role he plays in Milkman's journey: he does not get it because he plays the musical instrument; It is his wish for owning it that ends up naming him. Two logical deductions may follow this point: either his naming is due to his idealism, his dream of having or playing a guitar – something that his family could not afford and thus the symbolic hope of a better life –, or the simpler notion of ownership. Perhaps both options are plausible: he started out as an idealist willing to stand for what he believed to be right, but in the end his dream becomes entrenched in the very violence that enforced slavery and racism to this day.

This interpretation positions Guitar as a dreamer who eventually becomes corrupted by the same forces he is trying to combat. With this character, Morrison shows how a narrative is always complexified by external and internal influences, and how rarely idealists succeed in following their own utopic principles to the end. Guitar's bitterness has transformed him into the opposite of the ideals he preaches to Hagar and Milkman. Although Guitar disparages the notion of "belonging" as he is trying to assuage Hagar (1977, 382-83), it is funny that for him love and belonging do "go together." If his role as a vigilante is "about love" (198) as he argues, then when he gives up all of the other aspects of his life to serve the cause, including his friendship with Milkman, is he not "turning over [his] whole life" (382) to it, against his own

advice to Hagar? Furthermore, he is unable to justify himself when Milkman points out that there is little difference between the secret organization and the white supremacist groups. Guitar claims that his Seven Days' membership allows him to be "better than" the racist whites he is killing because he is "reasonable" (197-98). But, as Milkman adds, "Guitar, none of that shit is going to change how I live or how any other Negro lives. What you're doing is crazy. And something else: it's a habit. If you do it enough, you can do it to anybody. You know what I mean? A torpedo is a torpedo, I don't care what his reasons. You can off anybody you don't like. You can off me" (200). Despite Guitar's claims that they "don't off Negroes," Milkman's words foreshadow future events. Associated with his greed and ideological extremism, Guitar's anger will fuel his distrust in his friend, who he will end up hunting because of the gold he believes Milkman is hiding from him. He ends up blindsided by his own avarice, just as Milkman had been when he decided to travel South.

In this sense, Guitar is as weighted down as Milkman is by materialistic and societal expectations. There is no clear explanation regarding his wish for the gold. It could be to provide for his family, but it could also relate to Malcolm X's doctrine of Black Nationalism – proposing economic growth as a means of empowerment of the Black community (X. 39). In line with Milkman's grandfather's take on the American Dream, the underlining idea is that achieving financial independence frees African Americans from the shackles of white exploitation. Malcolm X points out the necessity of controlling other key areas that influence Black people's everyday lives, such as local politics (38). He argues for "unity and harmony" (40) among the Black community in order to respond to the attacks from a country that ought to be a "country of freedom" but whose government "has proven itself either unwilling or unable to defend the lives and the property of Negroes" (42-43). This includes the use of all means at their disposal, including disregarding of pacifist approaches which, according to him, had been proven ineffective:

[I]t's time for Negroes to defend themselves. Article number two of the constitutional amendments provides you and me the right to own a rifle or a shotgun. [...] This doesn't mean you're going to get a rifle and form battalions and go out looking for white folks, although you'd be within your rights—I mean, you'd be justified; but that would be illegal and we don't do anything illegal. If the white man doesn't want the black man buying rifles and shotguns, then let the government do its job. That's all. (X. 43)

Malcolm X points out that fighting back systemic discrimination is justifiable regardless the methods used as long as they are within the law. The government's incompetence, its refusal to "do its job" (X. 43), that is, to prevent the earth from becoming "soggy with black people's blood" (Morrison, 1977, 196), leads many African Americans to take matters into their own hands. The Seven Days' Society is a representation of this contentious conjuncture: one of those "battalions" formed by Black people united in their shared goal to "go out looking for [and murdering] white folks" (X. 43), "knocking off white folks" (Morrison, 1977, 199) in retaliation for the system's inability to transcend its own prevailing racism.

In his desire to distance himself from white hegemony and its capitalist values, Guitar adheres to an ideological extreme: retaliating to violence with violence in an attempt to "frighten [whites] into behaving" (1977, 197). The kind of violent activism in which he engages follows a similar premise to that of terrorist white patriarchal organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan, as he indeed points out to Milkman. Guitar then compares this to certain responses to the horrors of the holocaust, asking his friend if "[when] concentration camp Jews hunt down Nazis, are they hating Nazis or loving dead Jews" (198). Milkman denies the connection, not because of the discrepancy between the two causes in terms of "money and publicity," but because those Nazi war criminals are turned over to the courts where, according to him, they will receive justice. There is a difference, he affirms, because the Seven Days Society does not "kill the killers," instead they "kill innocent people." However, Guitar remains set on his beliefs, remarking that they live in a segregated country where "the judge, the jury, the court, are legally bound to ignore anything a Negro has to say" (199). Keeping the "Ratio" even by "knocking off white folks" constitutes his way to physically manifest his "love" for the African American community.

Ideologically, Guitar constitutes the perfect antagonist to Milkman's passivity, challenging him to burst the security of the self-pity bubble he had been left in by his upbringing and his passive attitude. In spite of Guitar's nonchalance when Milkman compares him to Malcolm X (199), this character conveys the Black leader's notion of love and particularly of love for one's community in his own way throughout the novel. His nonconformist demeanor is reminiscent of Malcolm X's words: "die for what you believe in. But don't die alone. Let your dying be reciprocal. This is what is meant by equality" (34). He, alongside Pilate and later Circe, provides the lens through which Milkman can glimpse beyond his own limitations and gain political, social and self-awareness. Contrary to Milkman's previous assertion, his relationship with Guitar is not "a one-way street" (191). In fact, they both need each other, as

much as they require Pilate's guidance, in order to spread their wings into the sky as they do in the final scene of the book. But first, they need to follow Guitar's own advice: "Wanna fly," he tells Milkman, "you got to give up the shit that weighs you down" (222). And that is something they only achieve as the last chapters progress. Milkman loses his material possessions while he is walking to meet Circe, an event that helps him questioning his actions:

Under the moon, on the ground, alone, with not even the sound of baying dogs to remind him that he was with other people, his self—the cocoon that was “personality”—gave way. [...] There was nothing here to help him—not his money, his car, his father's reputation, his suit, or his shoes. In fact they hampered him. Except for his broken watch, and his wallet with about two hundred dollars, all he had started out with on his journey was gone: his suitcase with the Scotch, the shirts, and the space for bags of gold; his snap-brim hat, his tie, his shirt, his three-piece suit, his socks, and his shoes. His watch and his two hundred dollars would be of no help out here, where all a man had was what he was born with, or had learned to use. And endurance. Eyes, ears, nose, taste, touch—and some other sense that he knew he did not have: an ability to separate out, of all the things there were to sense, the one that life itself might depend on. (346-47)

He is reaching the conclusion Pilate had reached many decades before, the same thesis behind the Combahee River Collective's statement: to be truly free, he does not need the gold, but rather to distance himself from “the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy” (213).

In his desire for retaliation, Guitar's reasoning falls under a fallacy similar to the white prepotence he is fighting against. He only seems to grasp the fault in his ways at the end of the book. After accidentally killing Pilate while he is after Milkman, Guitar puts “the rifle on the ground and [stands up]” (Morrison, 1977, 418-20). Milkman is in fact the one who calls for his friend – and perhaps his killer –, offering Guitar his “life,” as the echoes around Solomon's Leap return his own words to him, “*tar*” and “*life*.” After being passive for the majority of his life since he discovered he couldn't fly (1977, 11), Milkman appears to have made a decision that is his own to make: he is surrendering his life, a Black life, or else a “*tar life*” as shouted by the nature around him, to Guitar. The latter's smile seems to confirm his approval of Milkman finally letting go of his fears and indifference, as the protagonist is now willing to give his life for something, or someone, other than himself. Guitar's words “My main man” are

an echo of Amiri Baraka/ LeRoi Jones' poem "ask me what I am." Milkman has tried to answer this question as he grows up, and Baraka/ Jones provides a possible answer:

nigger is a definition of the wholly detached from material consideration

a nigger don't have no gold

not even a negro got gold but a negro think like he wd if he had gold

a nigger is holy

a nigger is killer and builder struts frantic for love

nigger is a frantic love man hippity hoppity 7 sided figure

the nigger who i am

who is my self and father mother your self

deep man

my man (Baraka/ Jones 168)

Both characters represent the complexity of human nature that the white patriarchy has tried to deny African Americans. They are the result of their ancestors' suffering and perseverance, and of the "frantic love" necessary to survive and maintain a community plagued by discrimination and violence throughout the centuries. The poet presents Black Americans as a "definition of the wholly detached from material consideration." Identity is a notion whose construction does not rely on the material possessions which were taken from them or which they had to fight for, but rather on questioning who they are while being dispossessed of their property and material goods, as demonstrated by Pilate.

Through the complex relationship of these two characters, Morrison critically presents two faces of a long-lasting struggle, angling them against each other. Milkman and Guitar represent two agents of change whose viewpoints must reunite to bring about any meaningful progress. Finally, they learn the "language of autonomy, identity, self-realization" (Rose 145), which allows them to leap together into the arms of each other. That is, it is irrelevant which of them dies or who wins the quarrel, as Milkman realizes. They are leaving the material, the physical world, and entering in a metaphysical dimension. At last, they have arrived at the final moment of spiritual revelation: their true power lies in letting go of their anger, self-doubt, and

resentment, which in this case means to be ready to die for their beliefs and for their love for each other.

In this sense, Milkman learning Shalimar's lesson encompasses what Campbell calls "a mystery of transfiguration — a rite, or moment, of spiritual passage, which, when complete, amounts to a dying and a birth. The familiar life horizon has been outgrown; the old concepts, ideals, and emotional patterns no longer fit; the time for the passing of a threshold is at hand" (75). After being at odds for most of the story, Milkman and Guitar are coming together as brothers, standing for the African American people's strength in the union of their efforts towards freedom, equality, and full citizenship. For it was predominantly when Blacks joined forces, transcending their inner divisions, that they began to "*soar*" (vii, original italics).

2.4 “I hear you:” A Plea Against Black Women’s Disenfranchisement³⁷

Who’s been botherin my sweet sugar lumpkin?

Who’s been botherin my baby?

Who’s been botherin my sweet sugar lumpkin?

Who’s been botherin my baby girl?

Toni Morrison, 1977, p. 397.

Song of Solomon represents a significant shift in Morrison’s fiction: the writer opts for the first time for a male protagonist, Milkman, instead of a feminine axis as she had previously done with *The Bluest Eye*’s Pecola and Claudia or with *Sula*’s Nel and Sula. However, in spite of the importance of men in *Song of Solomon*, the story relies heavily on female characters as its building blocks. Some of them, such as Ruth or Pilate, or even Lena, Corinthians and Hagar are complex figures, with their own goals and characteristics, and all of them are, including Reba and Circe, to varying levels, influenced by the fact that they are women and Black in a society constructed and still informed by racist and sexist standards. Different forms of oppression deriving from Black women’s intersectional identities are represented and explored through these characters, connecting them in ways that mirror the real-life struggles of Black women. White heteronormative thinking has prevailed in society combined with the production of stereotyped images of Black women based on their subalternity and therefore reinforcing it, as noted by Collins (83). The social, political and ideological structures in which they are inserted have been built by the intersection of “prevailing images of Black womanhood” with interlocking oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality (84). This chapter focuses on how Black women are represented in *Song of Solomon* considering their marginalization that stems from this multidimensional system of oppression, as well as on the ways through which these characters attempt to regain some agency.

Although this chapter is dedicated to female characters, some contextualization is essential. Women such as Pilate, Ruth or Hagar have important roles to play throughout the story, but they are presented in relation to the men at almost every instance. In order to understand how these women have survived under capitalist patriarchy’s oppressive

³⁷ In *Song of Solomon*, Pilate begins singing at Hagar’s funeral, and Reba answers her “in a sweet soprano: ‘I hear you.’” (1987, p. 396).

circumstances, it is relevant to explore their brothers, husbands and fathers' influence in their respective environments and families.

Akin to her son, Ruth has grown up in a privileged environment thanks to her father's hard-won success. Milkman describes her to Reverend Cooper and his Danville companions as the "daughter of the richest Negro doctor in town" (Morrison, 1977, 294). Chronologically, Dr. Foster is the first self-made man to appear in the story. His efforts at achieving better life conditions led to him becoming the "first Negro doctor in town," a position that granted him a high status among the African American community of Mercy. The local Black inhabitants went to the point of standing up to the white authorities on the matter of naming the street where "the only colored doctor in the city had lived and died" (4). It takes some time for other African Americans to move there after the Doctor does, but they insist on calling it Doctor Street instead of its official name, Mains Avenue. But Dr. Foster became arrogant and, similarly to Macon Dead, deeply proud of his wealth. Since the Doctor has been dead for "a long time by 1931" (5), the year of Milkman's birth, it is interesting that most of his characterization is provided through his son-in-law.

The fact that Macon Dead entered the Foster's household as an adult and feels isolated from the father-daughter relationship allows him to observe Doctor Foster and Ruth from an outsider standpoint. He tells Milkman at one point that they "managed to have things their way" and actively "made sure [he] remembered whose house [he] was in" (88). Macon Dead begins to suspect that their relationship was built on more than fatherly love, especially after the old Doctor's death.³⁸ He describes to Milkman how he found Ruth and the Doctor's corpse "[i]n the bed. That's where she was when I opened the door. Laying next to him. Naked as a yard dog, kissing him. Him dead and white and puffy and skinny, and she had his fingers in her mouth" (90-91). Macon Dead has never found conclusive answers to his misgivings, but he expresses doubts regarding his own daughters' parentage. He concludes that Corinthians and Lena must be his due to the Doctor's concern about "the color of their skin" (88). This implicates a form of discrimination called colorism, as the old man and his daughter had a lighter skin tone, a fact that complemented his wealth, leading to his self-perceived superiority

³⁸ In her article "Signifying Circe in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," Judith Fletcher does reflect on how the alleged instance of "incestuous necrophilia" has driven Macon Dead away from his wife but provides no additional insight on Ruth and Doctor Foster's relationship. This matter has not been widely addressed by Morrison's critics, requiring further inquiries.

to other African Americans with darker skin, whom he called “cannibals.”³⁹ Macon Dead believes that Doctor Foster would have “disowned” Milkman because of his skin, a darker shade than his sisters’.

Despite their differences, Doctor Foster and Macon Dead’s lives follow ideals associated to the American Dream. They start from having nothing to achieving success through hard work and exploitation of vulnerable individuals. Overlooking his own despotic relationship with his tenants, Macon Dead accuses Dr. Foster of “not giving a damn” about the local African Americans (87-88). The people to whom Doctor Foster called “cannibals” were the same people who, according to Macon Dead, “worshiped him.” Notwithstanding his prominent role in the local Black community, Ruth’s father never attempts to challenge the *status quo*, nor even for the benefit of his patients, of which “only two,” “both white,” have been “admitted to Mercy [the hospital]” (4-5). He is constantly worrying about the maintenance of his own perceived privilege, as well as his family’s, as his colorist concerns regarding his grandchildren denote. This is the patriarchal structure informed by middle-class values and norms at place throughout Ruth’s life. It is their goal of transcending their race through class, which both her father and her husband aim to achieve, that encourages Ruth to believe in her superiority above the local community which could have otherwise supported her.

Milkman’s mother associates her upbringing to an “affectionate elegance” (Morrison, 1977, 14), a notion that she maintains after her father’s death through a “large water mark” on the dining room’s “fine mahogany table” (13):

The cloudy gray circle identified the place where the bowl filled every day during the doctor’s life with fresh flowers had stood. Every day. [...] It was for her father a touch that distinguished his own family from the people among whom they lived. For Ruth it was the summation of the affectionate elegance with which she believed her childhood had been surrounded. (14)

To Doctor Foster, the centerpiece at the table constitutes “a touch that distinguished his own family from the people among whom they lived.” It “added something to grace the dinner table in the evening” (14-15), a kind of beauty that he believes Black Americans uninterested in due to their lower socio-economic class. In this sense, the centerpiece represents the Fosters’ vanity and materialism and their depreciation of the local African American community. It also implies

³⁹ Morrison had previously explored colorism in *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and would return to the topic in *God Help The Child* (2015).

discredit for other ways of life and “alternative bodies of knowledge” (Santos 47), erasing their connection to their own roots, similarly to how whites have disregarded Black people’s traditions, languages, and relationships. The Fosters are reproducing the “Modern Western thinking [that] goes on operating through abyssal lines that divide the human from the subhuman” (52-53) thanks to the frontier established between them and the “Other,” the local Black community, whose subalternity is based on race and class prejudices.

Regarding the water mark, Ruth’s obsession with it relates as much to the discriminatory values she has learnt from her father, as it represents a connection to her past and a way of keeping Doctor Foster alive after he and the bowl are gone. In fact, she talks “endlessly to her daughters and her guests about how to get rid of [the stain on the table]” (Morrison, 1977, 13-14), yet she is mesmerized by its sight. She has kept on arranging the centerpiece until her father is abed sick, only to give up when Macon Dead disregards it and, instead of answering her question, starts criticizing her cooking (14-15). Besides this being a pivotal moment in the construction of what would become their relationship power dynamic, it also constitutes a change in Ruth, who lets the “seaweed disintegrate,” and then removes the bowl from the table, which has left a “water mark, hidden by the bowl all these years.” She looks at it several times a day, and “[e]ven in the cave of sleep, without dreaming of it or thinking of it at all, she [feels] its presence” (13). The water mark has become to her a link to the past, to her father, that she unsuccessfully tries to clean away. The centerpiece, like her father, is gone, leaving behind a stain that Ruth can either try to erase or to regard it as a “mooring, a checkpoint, some stable visual object that assured her that the world was still there; that this was life and not a dream” (13). Such duality foments the idea of the mark on the table as a physical materialization of Ruth’s memories, and her inability to let them go. The stain also seems to give credit to Macon Dead’s suspicions concerning the father-daughter relationship (88-89), as something unclean and ugly which marks an otherwise “fine mahogany table” (13). It is a mark of an ugly past that Ruth remembers as “elegant” maybe denying the Doctor’s lack of affection towards her, or perhaps refusing to acknowledge the ambiguity of their relationship as Macon Dead sees it. There is no confirmation for either of these theses, with the narrator choosing to disclose information as perceived by each character at different moments, but both options could have led to Emily Kane’s conclusion that Ruth’s relationship with her father even before his death “ill-prepared her to be a strong figure for her children” (80).

Consequently, Macon Dead’s wife seems more interested in showcasing her wealthy lifestyle than providing a sensible education to her kids. The patriarchal oppression she has

suffered, first from her manipulative father and then from her husband, as well as the middle-class values they shared, contribute to Ruth's social isolation and apathy. She has grown up without a mother and pretty much serving her father, her only parental figure, as a maid (1977, 28). Feeling aggravated by Ruth's excessive devotion, Dr. Foster had seized the opportunity provided by Macon Dead's request, which led to her tense and loveless marriage with the latter. At sixty-two years old, Ruth is described as being "[l]ong deprived of sex, long dependent on self-manipulation" (165). She has no meaningful relationships, which further hinders a possible escape from the forces that pin her down as a trophy wife and daughter. Besides her household members and Pilate, she entertains some "guests" in the afternoons (1977, 13). Rather than striving to form any sort of connection to them, Ruth lets her "quiet smile die from her lips" once they leave, suggesting that to her these gatherings are no more than fulfilling social obligations associated to her middle-class status.

Despite this, she seems to appreciate the opportunity to bask in the attention and to indulge in her vanity. A young Milkman is brought onto the room whenever she is entertaining where the guests "pried pieces of baked-too-fast sunshine cake from the roofs of their mouths and looked once more into the boy's eyes" (11). It is clear from his "pleading glance" that Milkman wishes to be anywhere but there, as his mother forces him to parade for the women. Ruth's social ambitions supplant her parenting skills, for she fails to recognize that something is amiss in her son. The ladies "who accepted her invitations for tea" found him "dull," describing him as "peculiar" and "deep," observations that Ruth dismisses alongside advice that could help Milkman. Her aloofness evidences her isolation and social disenfranchisement, as well as her unwillingness to listen to others – a trait that she and her husband will transmit to their son. Later, Ruth will relish "the blank stares she received when she told her lady guests what position her daughter [Corinthians] had acquired with the State Poet Laureate" (232) due to her pride on her daughter, but also because of how she believes Corinthians' success reflects on herself and on the perception of her own success as a parent. These are instances when she uses her children and social life to establish and reinforce her social standing in the local community instead of committing herself to the people in her life, so that they might fulfill her need for love and care.

The fact that she has had no one who would care for her does not excuse her attitudes towards her family and community. Indeed, her participation in the system perpetrated by her male relatives constitutes an attack to other Black women as Morrison herself explains: "The willingness of innocent, ignorant, or self-regarding women to dismiss the implications of class

prejudice, and to play roles that act in concert with the male-defined interests of the state, produces and perpetuates reactionary politics — a slow and subtle form of sororicide” (2019, 87). By doing nothing, Ruth is allowing the same patriarchal structures of power which hold her captive to evolve and to confine Black women inside and outside of her home. Interestingly, whenever an issue outside her home, outside of what she regards as her sphere of influence, is raised, Ruth is nowhere to be found. She rarely interferes with her husband’s business, not even on behalf of the Bains, who are about to be forced to leave their home by Macon Dead, their landlord. Mrs. Bains’ plea to Macon Dead takes place at his office and without his wife’s presence nor mention, but Macon’s thoughts after his tenant leaves concern the beginning of his relationship with the Doctor’s daughter (Morrison, 1977, 25-28). They portray a lifestyle and its construction that is completely different from the Bains’ experiences.

The main display of agency that Ruth takes – aside from those relayed through her husband’s perspective (1977, 87-92) or when she helps pay for Hagar’s funeral (394-5) – is when she believes that her boy’s life is in danger. She learns of Milkman’s convoluted relationship with Hagar, who is now trying to kill him. Admittedly hurt (164), she goes to face Hagar, warning her that if she “so much as bend a hair on his head,” Ruth would “tear [her] throat out” (169). Ruth’s determination is short-lived, for Pilate manages to appease them both before they start arguing, proving once again the frailty of her willpower. The easiness with which Ruth is gaslit by her sister-in-law serves as further proof of her representation as “a black woman whose life is meaningless because she makes no attempt to justify her existence. She is immensely passive, and terribly apathetic toward her own self” (Ahmad 60).

Ruth’s passive isolation could never be mistaken with Pilate’s self-aware marginalization. Where the former is socially apathic, the latter is arguably the most resourceful female character in *Song of Solomon*.⁴⁰ Pilate has traveled alone for years, and upon arriving in Mercy she starts a wine business on her own. Interestingly, between 1920 and 1933 the USA government forbade the manufacture, transport and sell of alcoholic beverages under the 18th Amendment. Given that Pilate reaches Mercy before Milkman’s birth in 1931, it is safe to assume that her business, the only thing she does that could be seen as a compliance with capitalism, is also at the margin of the official system. Besides, Pilate’s method of production is far from industrial, as she uses berries caught in the woods instead of having her own production (1977, 27-59). She does not harbour capitalist goals like her brother does, her only

⁴⁰ As discussed in the Chapter 2.2 “‘Just a bit of music:’ The Dead Children’s Contentious Approaches to Life.”

aim seems to be to survive and support her family.

Both characters – alongside Macon Dead – have a clear influence on their family and community. The two Dead family sides represent two possibilities in terms of upbringing and education. Milkman and his sisters grow up following their parents' patriarchal and conservative ideology, while in Darling Street there is a matriarch that actively positions herself beyond the "Other" side of the abyssal line (Santos 47-48). Pilate is a social pariah because of the superstitions associated to her lack of a navel, but also because throughout her life she makes choices that directly oppose and confront the conventions of the westernized side of the abyssal line. For instance, she has "a daughter but no husband, and that daughter [has] a daughter but no husband" (25). In practical terms, this means that their lives are not under any direct male control. The fact that Macon Dead longs for "just a bit of music – from the person who had been his first caring for" (35), Pilate, as he walks unnoticed to his sister's house and then as he peeps through the window, reinforces the idea of matriarchy as a family structure based on care and benevolence, contrasting to his patriarchal dominion over his unhappy and oppressed family. But Hagar and Pilate's fates urge a returning to the analysis of Milkman's aunt and to how her stances within the story put the women she cares about in vulnerable positions.

The moment Pilate begins to sing at her granddaughter's funeral is the last time she sings in the book, after spending her life utilizing music to show her connections to others and to make sense of the world around her. It functions as a catharsis to herself and to Reba, who answers her from the other side of the church, allowing them to express their shared grief through song. Toni Morrison associates music to "the art form that was healing for Black people" (1984, 340) during the slavery period and continued as such through decades of marginalization and segregation. It is fitting that a character who embodies the essence of the African American people and their roots remains so linked to oral storytelling and singing. Indeed, the first mention of Pilate occurs during Mr. Smith's leap from the roof and the beginning of Ruth's labors and she is already singing "*Oh Sugarman*" (1977, 6-7). She is presented singing at several points, such as when Macon Dead overhears her singing with Reba and Hagar (34-37), or when Milkman and Guitar visit them for the first time and Hagar admits that some of her days had been "hungry ones" (60-61). Her final request to Milkman, after asking him to watch over Reba, is for him to sing: "'Sing,' she said. 'Sing a little somethin for me.'" (418-19). Music has been a part of Pilate's life since she was a child, and now she has finally transmitted this ancestral legacy, its historical weight and its healing properties to her nephew, who "could not stop the worn old words from coming, louder and louder as though

sheer volume would wake her.” Sometime passes before Milkman realizes she is dead, as he immerses himself in the song that has guided them to Solomon’s Leap – “*Oh Sugarman.*”

This relation to cultural and epistemological constructs closer to her African American roots will be a constant with Pilate, who refuses to adhere to the dominant white norms of social conduct. Her views work as a critique to the patriarchal and capitalist system and her attitudes are a statement to her determination in abiding by her own rules. Milkman’s aunt favors a lifestyle considered unconventional by the other Mercy inhabitants, an option which allows her to be somewhat freed from some social and systemic constraints. By playing around with the definitions of a system that has excluded her since birth, she constructs her own way of living, her own place at the margin of the community and her family. But this attempt at survival comes at a cost to herself and to her family. Not only is she discriminated because of her lack of a navel and her isolation, but she is judged by her own brother for living in what he considers to be uncivilized conditions.

Pilate accepts the existence of “alternative bodies of knowledge” (Santos 47-48) as part of her daily experiences. This is made obvious by her relationship to the ghost of her father. Western rationality would lead us to question the existence of such supernatural being, but it does not pose a problem to Pilate. Moreover, she tries to learn from him and gather information, however wrong her interpretations of his words might be. And even if neither her daughter nor her granddaughter seem to have the means or the sensitivity to connect with something more metaphysical or beyond themselves, both Reba and Hagar accept the existence of such a connection, or at least they do not question it. They have lived all their lives following Pilate’s lifestyle and under her protection, so to step outside of the mindset laid out by her eventually leads to Hagar’s death.

At first glance, Hagar seems but a symbolic character in this story, doomed from the start to a tragic destiny because of her fragilities and obsessions. Pilate and Reba’s efforts to bring her up in a loving household give rise to an overindulgent upbringing which leaves Hagar unprepared to deal with the capitalist exploitation outside of their bubble, as well as with her own feelings and emotions. She falls in love with her cousin Milkman, with whom she has had an affair for years despite his mistreatment of her (Morrison, 1977, 112-14; 160-61; 189; 383). His abandonment drives Pilate’s “baby girl” (397) to despair, and she ends up dying after one last attempt to “fix herself up” (394). A closer observation, however, shows veiled criticisms that the author incorporated in the construction and development of this character and her

relation to her family and to the world around her. The nefarious power of westernized “hierarchical structures of race, gender, heteropatriarchy, and class” (Mignolo and Walsh 17-18) intersect in Hagar’s character, contributing to her marginalization and demise.

Guitar’s reflections while he is driving Hagar home help to establish the origins of her troubles, demonstrating how ill-prepared Hagar is to live outside of Reba and Pilate’s “protective shade” (1977, 393):

[p]retty little black-skinned woman. Who wanted to kill for love, die for love. The pride, the conceit of these doormat women amazed him. They were always women who had been spoiled children. Whose whims had been taken seriously by adults and who grew up to be the stingiest, greediest people on earth and out of their stinginess grew their stingy little love that ate everything in sight. They could not believe or accept the fact that they were unloved; they believed that the world itself was off balance when it appeared as though they were not loved. Why did they think they were so lovable? Why did they think their brand of love was better than, or even as good as, anybody else’s? But they did. And they loved their love so much they would kill anybody who got in its way. (382-383)

The possessiveness she exhibits towards Milkman constitutes a toxic symptom of her lack of self-esteem and loneliness which, in turn, derive from her spoiled childhood. Pilate and Reba fail to realize how different Hagar is from them. Pilate is a strong and experienced woman, and Hagar’s mother is a “simple[r]” character whose eyes are frequently compared to those of an infant’s (1977, 383; 57) due to her naivety. Her family’s isolation from the local community means that Hagar has not had, according to Guitar, “what most colored girls needed: a chorus of mamas, grandmamas, aunts, cousins, sisters, neighbors, Sunday school teachers, best girl friends, and what all to give her the strength life demanded of her—and the humor with which to live it” (1977, 383). This means that her only role models have been her grandmother and her mother, to whom she, belonging to a different generation that has grown up surrounded by materialistic principles of a society which follows hegemonic notions of well-being, cannot relate. She falls victim of a standardization of beauty ideals whose target public is white women.

Despite their differences, Pilate and Reba, as Guitar notices, have always tried to provide Hagar with everything she wanted. Her “whims had been taken seriously by adults” (1977, 382-383), Pilate and her mother Reba, without considering the possible consequences to her psyche and capacity of resilience, nor even the consequences to themselves. As a result,

adult Hagar only finds some resemblance of solace through the approval of others, particularly Milkman, who has been raised unaware of his own privileges and with no regard for others. It is a relationship fated to disaster. Their breakup is harsher on Hagar, as her possessiveness over him is motivated by her own self-doubts and constitutes the catalyst for comparisons to other girls with physical attributes rarely associated to the African American population. She convinces herself that Milkman has left her because she lacks “[s]ilky hair the color of a penny,” “lemon-colored skin,” a “thin nose,” and “gray-blue eyes” (393-94). Notions such as these beauty ideals are part of a globalized conventionalization of the world that marginalizes knowledges and aesthetics that do not fit into a “Western [...] framework” (Mignolo and Walsh 17-18). As such, beauty standards that do not correspond to westernized conceptualizations of beauty are marginalized in favor of white standards. The capitalist system has proven quite efficient in the exploitation of these conventions through product marketing over the decades, with many Black people falling victims of ideals of beauty impossible to achieve by a vast majority of African Americans, like Hagar does.

After being in bed for three days, she suddenly gets up and washes herself at the sight of her face reflected in Pilate’s compact mirror. “No wonder,” she concludes, “No wonder he didn’t want me” (1977, 385). Believing that Milkman has left her because of her appearance, she feels that she must change it to fit to his expectations. A dangerously unhealthy misconception, which is further intensified by her shopping spree – that she is only able to do because, yet again, Pilate and Reba sacrificed themselves to give money to “the child” (386; 394). As Hagar walks downtown from store to store, the narrator incorporates elements that add to a problematic capitalist layer to this character’s predicament.

Various brands of fragrances, clothing and cosmetics are mentioned: “Myrurgia,” “Nina Ricci,” “Playtex,” “little Joyce heels,” among others (387-89). Interestingly, there seems to be little concern about featuring products targeted at the Black female population, in spite of these establishments allowing their entrance. This means that Hagar spends these moments surrounded by products and advertisement promoting beauty standards in line with the dominant white model. “She could spend her life there among the cut glass, shimmering in peaches and cream, in satin. In opulence. In luxe. In love” (389). Manipulated by these futile promises, Hagar buys the advertised goods, choosing especially light-colored items, most of which would fall onto the ground and soak in rainwater as she walked back home. So, when she eagerly tries on her new purchases “without taking time to dry her face or hair or feet” (392), the result is disastrous. She has shopped not for herself, but for what she is convinced

Milkman requires of a woman and conforming to racist and capitalist ideals unsuitable for non-white subjects.

Even after she falls ill, her primary anguish is that she does not fit in what she believes to be Milkman's ideal of beauty:

"Mama." Hagar floated up into an even higher fever. [...]

"Why don't he like my hair?"

"Who, baby? Who don't like your hair?"

"Milkman."

"Milkman does too like your hair," said Reba.

"No. He don't. But I can't figure out why. Why he never liked my hair."

"Of course he likes it. How can he not like it?" asked Pilate.

"He likes silky hair." Hagar was murmuring so low they had to bend down to hear her. [...] "Silky hair the color of a penny." (393)

She is again assuming that Milkman's preferences correspond to white ideals of beauty associated to the aforementioned "[s]ilky hair the color of a penny," "lemon-colored skin," "gray-blue eyes" (392-93). And, again, Pilate and Reba are unable to understand Hagar and what she needs. They can only give her "love murmurs and a protective shade" and, as the analogy with the "divi-divi trees" (393) suggests, they stand at the mercy of an antagonizing "wind," which bends them in the direction of Hagar's bed. The meaning of this "wind" is left unclear: is it a metaphor for Milkman's lover's disease and her parental figures' impotence to help her? Or does it concern the power of mainstream capitalist society from which Pilate escapes early on her life, dragging her daughter and her granddaughter with her, an ideology that snatches away the most vulnerable member of her family? Morrison, subverting the expectation of the reader's "traditional comfort" of having every element of a story explained and laid out in its pages (2019, 231-32), refuses to provide any sort of answer, choosing instead to pass on directly to Hagar's funeral.

Pilate arrives late to her granddaughter's funeral, and even under such sorrowful circumstances we are reminded of her attitude towards the discrimination against her that

pervades the local community. She refuses to address the mortician, who later “[steps] back and [looks] at the floor” when he sees Pilate’s “inky, berry-black lips, her cloudy, rainy eyes, *the wonderful brass box hanging from her ear*” (395-97, my emphasis). Pilate proceeds unacknowledging him, and, grief-stricken, she sings accompanied by Reba in church, similarly to how they used to do with Hagar at home. The song denotes their pain while also proving that they had been spoiling their “baby girl” during her life:

Who’s been botherin my sweet sugar lumpkin?

Who’s been botherin my baby girl? (397, original emphasis)

These lines are from the second part of the song, when Pilate places “three fingers on the edge of the coffin,” addressing Hagar directly. “Softly, privately, she sang to Hagar the very same reassurance she had promised her when she was a little girl” (397). It is a heartbreaking moment that shows how her overprotectiveness towards her granddaughter persist even after Hagar’s death. Even now she seems more worried about whoever is responsible for the condition her “*sweet sugar lumpkin*” was before her death than about Hagar’s responsibility on her premature end. By protecting her from the outside world and spoiling her, Pilate and Hagar disregarded the difficulties of survival at the system’s margin.

Even if the dire outcome of this branch of the Deads’ story seems to imply that the Moynihan report was not so far off the reality,⁴¹ the matriarchal and single-parenting structure in Darling Street is not the only reason for Hagar’s problems. In fact, considering the effects of the patriarchy at Not Doctor Street in the children’s upbringing and Ruth’s demeanor, both families indulge in the mistake of following exclusively one possible educational approach, rather than preparing their children to experience other points of view. They cut off their children’s wings from the start, that is, the possibility of them experiencing and accepting different ways of living and thinking whose coexistence could prove beneficial for their survival and development.

A different destiny befalls Hagar’s cousins, who are deeply influenced by materialist values and middle-class assumptions. “Magdalene called Lena Dead and First Corinthians Dead” (21-22) are Milkman’s older sisters. Their family has money and social status, but they are raised within a patriarchal structure endorsed by their father and later by their brother with

⁴¹ For more on the Moynihan report, see chapters 1.4 “‘Ain’t I A Woman?:’ Black Women and the 1970s Women Rights’ Movement” and 2.1 “‘The pieces I am:’ Intersectionality and Discrimination.”

the passive complacency of their mother. Mother and children live in fear of Macon Dead (12), and even after Milkman hits him, there is no evidence that anything has changed in their dynamic. As adults, Lena accuses Milkman of “peeing” on and “laughing at” his own sisters “all [his] life” (266-67). She recalls a Sunday drive with their parents when she was forced to take Milkman out in the country to pee, since their father would not let their mother go, nor went himself. This moment is first presented by the narrator through Milkman’s perspective in the second chapter: “He didn’t mean it. It happened before he was through. She’d stepped away from him to pick flowers, returned, and at the sound of her footsteps behind him, he’d turned around before he was through. It was becoming a habit—this concentration on things behind him. Almost as though there were no future to be had” (43). The idea of looking behind him is testament to a little more than an excuse for subjecting Lena to such a gruesome episode. It seems as if Milkman is looking for the wings whose lack had “saddened him and left his imagination so bereft that he appeared dull even to the women who did not hate his mother” (11). It implies that instead of facing frontwards to the life and experiences ahead of him, he is as stuck in himself as his sisters are, showing another consequence of their upbringing.

At the mention of him peeing on his sister and on the “purple violets [...] and wild jonquil” (266-67) that she had picked up, Milkman again refuses to take any responsibility for his actions. Instead, he mocks Lena, disregarding her feelings. She hits him in response, likely following on the violence she has witnessed between her parents. Referring to how Milkman denounced Corinthians’ relationship with Porter, causing Macon Dead to forbid it, another instance of Milkman’s control over his sisters, Lena points out that “there are all kinds of ways to pee on people:”

You’ve been laughing at us all your life. Corinthians. Mama. Me. Using us, ordering us, and judging us: how we cook your food; how we keep your house. But now, all of a sudden, you have Corinthians’ welfare at heart and break her up from a man you don’t approve of. Who are you to approve or disapprove anybody or anything? [...] You don’t know a single thing about either one of us—we made roses; that’s all you knew—but now you know what’s best for the very woman who wiped the dribble from your chin because you were too young to know how to spit. [...] You have yet to wash your own underwear, spread a bed, wipe the ring from your tub, or move a fleck of your dirt from one place to another. And to this day, you have never asked one of us if we were tired, or sad, or wanted a cup of coffee. You’ve never picked up anything heavier than your own feet, or solved a problem harder than fourth-grade arithmetic. Where do you get

the right to decide our lives? (267)

Lena's words demonstrate the anger and frustration that she feels about the way she and her mother and sister are mistreated and repressed by the men that ought to care for them. The fact that their parents display little interest in putting a stop to this oppressive dynamic show that the girls receive no respect from the family, and therefore no encouragement to express themselves and to advance in life such as the opportunity given to Milkman to work for their father. Consequently Lena and Corinthians are still dependent on their parents in their mid-forties, particularly Lena who "seemed resigned to her life" (234) and remains workless at home. Later, she tells Milkman that the reason behind her decision of not going to college was fear of what their father "might do to Mama" (268).

On the other hand, after graduating from college, Corinthians is trapped by the social constraints of her time which meant finding a husband or entering "a work world in which colored girls, regardless of their background, were in demand for one and only one kind of work" (235), being maids to middle and upper-class white families. Her insecurities and shame regarding her work as a maid prompts Corinthians to lying to her parents about being a servant:

Amanuensis. That was the word she chose, and since it was straight out of the nineteenth century, her mother approved, relishing the blank stares she received when she told her lady guests what position her daughter had acquired with the State Poet Laureate. "She's Michael-Mary Graham's amanuensis." The rickety Latin word made the work her daughter did (she, after all, wasn't required to work) sound intricate, demanding, and totally in keeping with her education. (232)

Funny enough, the reason why she is hired in the first place is not her talent – because she has "no real skill" (235) –, but her name. Her boss, Michael-Mary Graham, is a laurate poet who, admittedly "overwhelmed" by "her poetic sensibility," was beguiled by "the sound of '[First] Corinthians Dead'" (238), a name that joins together a Biblical reference and the notion of death.⁴² Corinthians' work provides her with economic autonomy, but it is a labor that she

⁴² Perhaps it would be interesting to consider the themes into which the source material delves. In his epistle, Paul alludes to the relation between women and faith: he attributes to them a position connected to prophecy and speaking tongues inside the church, a practise that must be silenced. But he does point out that since both men and women come from God, there is a relation of interdependence and mutuality between them (*King James' Holy Bible*, I Cor. 11.7–12), a notion that has since then been overpowered by male preponderance over the Christian Church. Paul also denounces the ideological and moral divisions within Christians and the church brought on by elitism and immorality. He argues that his role is inspired by Christ's teachings and thus he is qualified to spread his word, contradicting many preachers who questioned his competence (I Cor. 2.1-3). These arguments seem in

considers to be beneath herself. Alongside her privileged upbringing, her academic education at Bryn Mawr “had done what a four-year dose of liberal education was designed to do: unfit her for eighty percent of the useful work of the world. First, by training her for leisure time, enrichments, and domestic mindlessness. Second, by a clear implication that she was too good for such work” (235). Such arrogance also costed her the possibility of marrying, as prospective suiters see her as “a little too elegant” (234).

In this specific case, gender norms are also at play. These men were seeking wives that could manage, who were not so well accustomed to middle-class life that they had no ambition, no hunger, no hustle in them. They wanted their wives to like the climbing, the acquiring, and the work it took to maintain status once it was achieved. They wanted wives who would sacrifice themselves and appreciate the hard work and sacrifice of their husbands. (233-34)

Notwithstanding Corinthians’ overcritical attitude towards her suiters, the “teachers, two lawyers, [and] a mortician” see that she “[lacks] drive.” She is too “accustomed to middle-class life,” and consequently they fear that she will be of little help to them in their respective labors. They are not in search of a meaningful relationship, rather they are looking for their own genderized ideal of what a wife should be. They are unwilling to rethink their own prejudices which lead them to conclude that a “woman who spoke French and who had traveled on the *Queen Mary* might not have the proper attitude toward future patients or clients” (234, original emphasis). Besides, the men Corinthians meets are intent of maintaining the social status quo that deem women’s inferiority: “if the man was a teacher, *he steered clear of a woman who had a better education than he did*” (234, my emphasis). They cannot stand the notion of a wife more knowledgeable than them since she could prove a challenge to deal with. They want a woman who above all values her husband’s “hard work and sacrifice,” and in return prove to be the perfect submissive and diligent wife. This means a wife they can put in what they deem her place to be.

Another consequence of her highbrow education has to do with the way her arrogance and feelings of superiority influence her relationship with Henry Porter, one of her father’s Southside tenants. At first, she notices only how poorly dressed and old he looks, refusing to

line with Corinthians’ trials: she is a Black woman fighting against her fears of failure and inadequacy in a world plagued by gender discrimination and racism and struggling to reconcile her elitist expectations with the realities of her job and the man she loves.

acknowledge his presence. Even after Porter writes her a letter assuring her of his good intentions, she tries to hold to her prejudices, regarding him as a “complete nuisance and his flirtation an insult” (239). Just like she and her sister had previously done with other suitors (233-24), she cannot relate her own idealized version of a suitable man to marry with the one that is right in front of her. Nevertheless, when she sees him in the bus for the first time in two weeks, she smiles at him. They eventually engage in conversation and begin a relationship that she wishes to maintain secret due to her shame of his lower status. Her doubts are related with the physical and psychological violence she experienced growing up as much as they are with her unwillingness to stray away from the comforts of the life she knows. That is, just like Milkman, she does not know how to fly, how to open herself to a meaningful relationship because this would implicate a conscious vulnerability display to others, in this case, to Porter.

And, once again, Milkman is there to “pee” on her when he tells their father about Corinthians’ affair. Lena believes that he has not told Macon in order to protect Corinthians or to do right by his sister (267). Milkman is trying to maintain his control over the household to which he feels entitled as a man. Lena compares her brother’s attitudes to those of Macon Dead, adding that their father was more troubled with showing his children off than with their wellbeing. The Sunday trip during which Milkman peed on Lena is one among many ritualized rides they take with their parents. “[M]uch too important for Macon to enjoy” (38) just for the sake of spending time with his family, they present an opportunity for him and Ruth to show off their family and flaunt their wealth. The route they take is always the same:

Macon Dead’s Packard rolled slowly down Not Doctor Street, through the rough part of town [...], over the bypass downtown, and headed for the wealthy white neighborhoods. Some of the black people who saw the car passing by sighed with good-humored envy at the classiness, the dignity of it. In 1936 there were very few among them who lived as well as Macon Dead. Others watched the family gliding by with a tiny bit of jealousy and a whole lot of amusement, for Macon’s wide green Packard belied what they thought a car was for. (39, my emphasis)

Macon Dead’s goal is to reach the prosperous “white neighborhoods” where, as Lena points out, no Black people can afford to live (41). Her father’s ultimate goal is to observe the Honoré beach community where he plans to build a “nice summer place for colored people,” disregarding how poor most of the local African Americans are. His oppressive attitude towards his tenants’ struggles has been made obvious back in the first chapter where he dismisses the

vulnerability of the Bains' situation, as explained previously. Here his oblivion and lack of empathy return in full force, driving home the notion of his material ambitions over any sort of moral concern for the wellbeing of others.

Macon Dead's shortsighted interests are on full display during their visit to the icehouse in Hudson where he drives his children around in his expensive Packard so that others can "see [them], envy [them], envy him" (268). He only returns to his daughters' side when he realizes that a "little boy" has approached Corinthians. After knocking the ice-cream she was sharing with the boy to the ground, he forces them back into the car and leaves. This occasion presents an uncanny foreshadowing of Macon Dead's future attitudes, in Lena's words, "[knocking] the ice out of Corinthians' hand" years later by forbidding her to see Porter (268-69). "All our lives," she tells Milkman, "were like that: he would parade us like virgins through Babylon, then humiliate us like whores in Babylon" (269). Macon Dead's priority clearly lies not with his daughters or to his son's happiness but with the social and economic status that he longs for.

The aforementioned citation also provides readers with the local Blacks' reactions to the public sighting of the family in their car. The Deads aim is to parade their children, to perpetuate their outside image as the idyllic middle-class family. Some of the locals who watch them are indeed jealous of their wealthy lifestyle, as Macon intends. But most actually scorn the ridicule of the situation, "for Macon's wide green Packard belied what they thought a car was for" (39). In Macon Dead's hands, the car's sole purpose is to serve as a statement to his power and prosperity, instead of being a tool that he needs to work. To the pedestrians, "[o]ther than the bright and roving eyes of Magdalene called Lena and First Corinthians, the Packard had no real lived life at all" (40). Hence their sarcasm towards the Packard, to which they called "Macon Dead's hearse" – a parody of which Macon Dead is likely unaware and that shows how his status-driven intentions backfire among the community.

That is why, in their adulthood, the girls remained limited by how little care they received as kids and to toxic behaviors that stem from the patriarchal and oppressive environment which they experienced in their first years. They have adapted to the demands of the middle-class system, contrary to Hagar, but akin to their cousin, they have not learned how to deal with their emotions in a healthy way. This is due to their little self-esteem and perhaps to a lack of a positive paternal figure that could help them realize that their worth should be independent from society's norms and masculine conceptions of women's roles.

The most obvious way in which the two households differ thus seems to relate to the female influence that prevails within their midst. While Macon Dead has monopolized his family's lives, restricting their desires and way of living, Pilate has allowed her daughter and granddaughter to behave as they please in more relaxed lifestyle. Even so, she and Reba have tried to protect Hagar so much that they ended up spoiling her to the point that she is in fact vulnerable to other people's opinions and perceptions of her. This happens in her relationship with Milkman: Hagar is unable to love him in a balanced way, just as she is unable to love herself outside of their affair because she believes that her value is justified by what Milkman thinks of her rather than what she wants or needs. Meanwhile Lena has resigned to a life serving her parents, and it takes Pilate's support and a trip to the South for Milkman to question himself and his place in the world. Out of the three girls of this generation, Corinthians seems to be the only one who has managed to escape the constraints brought on by her family. She leaves her parents' home with Porter, who has also cut his ties to the Seven Days Society for her benefit, demonstrating a balance between the two that implies the possibility of an equal relationship.

Conclusion

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

Toni Morrison, 1970, p. 419.

These are *Song of Solomon*'s very last words and lesson: “If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it.” They reiterate the flight motif which has been a constant from the first page where Mr. Smith jumps off the roof of No Mercy Hospital. They reaffirm a hope that has been ingrained in the African American community since they were forcibly brought from Africa and enslaved: the notion of flying away from the enslavement and from the marginalization enforced by white hegemony. Morrison's book reimagines the Flying American myth, a metaphor for escaping towards freedom, or back home, even if it ultimately means committing suicide. Such is Mr. Smith's case, but is it a consequence of Milkman and Guitar's leap towards each other? In other words, does the final message suggest giving up one's life as the solution to the African Americans' century-old struggles?

Considering recent events such as the emergence of the *Black Lives Matter* movement across the globe and particularly in the USA, it appears that the African American community's necessity and will to fight for civil rights, for freedom and equality, remains as alive as it was in the 1960s. Since then, circumstances have evolved, of course, but Martin Luther King, Jr.'s “dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed—we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal” (249) in its various interpretations has been kept alive by people willing to commit their lives to it. The Black Americans' struggle against official segregation may have pressured the *Brown v. Board of Education*'s decision, but other issues were poorly addressed, such as the socioeconomic disparities between the white and the Black American population. Recent research conducted by the Pew Research Center has demonstrated that African Americans are more likely to fall from upper and middleclass status than their white counterparts (Kochhar and Sechopoulos 1). Furthermore, they remain deeply entrenched in the lower-income stratum, while whites have a bigger success rate when attempting to move up the socioeconomic ladder.

These instances confirm the urgency of fighting against the disenfranchisement of social groups which the USA government should be striving to protect. Moreover, they confirm *Song of Solomon's* topicality decades after its publication. Morrison's book deconstructs the ways race, gender, and class interlock to generate multiple intersectional oppressions – most of which have been maintained to this day. It also highlights different options chosen by oppressed individuals to resist marginality. Milkman's journey is not about giving up, but rather letting go of “the shit that weighs [them] down” (222) to be able to fly. In the context of African American History, this story seems to reflect on the failures of the long-standing struggle and the critical implication of the things which “weigh” the characters down as representations of different ideological perspectives among the community and their respective limitations.

This way, we can observe how the older generation remains so trapped in distinctive mindsets that they refuse to acknowledge or reflect upon their own shortcomings or even the possibility of sharing their burdens with someone else. Both Macon Dead and Pilate are obstinate in their ways of perceiving the world around them, closing themselves to alternatives. There is a clear contrast between the former's adherence to a westernized and capitalist conception of reality and the latter's association to her African roots. Their relationship reproduces the relations of power established between colonizer and colonized. Macon Dead constitutes a perfect encapsulation of the Modern Western way of thinking, as he constantly positions himself and Pilate in opposite sides of what Santos calls the “abyssal line,” which virtually renders the “other side,” in this case Pilate's side, invisible.

The difference between them is constantly alluded to by Macon, who is eager to prove his superiority while otherizing his sister and her way of life, which remind him of what he regards as their father's mistakes. In constant fear of repeating his family history, Milkman's father's life runs analogously to the paths laid out by the African Americans who have managed to reach a middle-class status. He has worked hard to follow the capitalist principles of the American Dream and become, in his own view, “the propertied Negro who handled his business so well and who lived in the big house on Not Doctor Street” (Morrison, 1977, 25). In order to feel fulfilled, he constantly uses his socioeconomic power to transcend the limits imposed by his race. This means exploiting and mistreating others to his own benefit, as his interaction with Mrs. Bains demonstrates (25-27). It is curious, however, that Macon seems to forget how, despite their class divergences, he has come from the same womb and place as Pilate. Truly, their race positions them both on the same side of the “abyssal line” that he reinforces daily between them, as well as between his tenants and himself. He follows a similar pattern at home,

where he also asserts his dominion by “[keeping] each member of his family awkward with fear” (12).

Despite his disregard for his sister’s family, whom he reduces to a “collection of lunatics who made wine and sang in the streets ‘like common street women [...]’” (25), he does not remain unaffected by their presence. At one point, Macon even goes to his sister’s house just to listen to the song Pilate, Reba and Hagar are singing, because the caring and communal nature here implied by the music is amiss in his own house (34-35). These women live according to Pilate’s reliance on her African ancestry and knowledge. As Macon notes, they do not own the material commodities typically expected by middle class standards. But what he fails to realize is that Pilate does not necessarily perceive wealth as a sign of success since she does not abide by the values typically associated to the American Dream. In her attempt to survive social exclusion, she has built her life in accordance with her own values, at the margin of capitalist conceptions, in a nod to the African American critical perception of the American Dream’s prioritization of “the excesses of wealth at the expense of family and cultural heritage” (Twagilimana 205). But even the existence of Pilate’s small business venture is suggestive of the difficulty that characterizes her efforts at transcending the capitalistic norms. Plus, her family’s effective isolation from the system eventually leads to Hagar’s death, a fact that compromises some of the merits of Pilate’s answer to systemic exploitation and discrimination.

Pilate’s failure to promote a sense of self-esteem that would empower her granddaughter seems to confirm the difficulties of testing a different model within the framework of a dominant structure. Moreover, it seems to confirm the damaging consequences of a system that has been constructed and maintained through racial capitalism. The “abyssal line” that separates Pilate’s family from the community appears to contribute to Hagar’s curiosity about other ways of living which she is not prepared to deal with. Reba’s fate after losing her daughter and then her mother is left undisclosed, except for Pilate’s entreaty to Milkman that he watches over her. This last wish seems to confirm Pilate’s awareness of her own daughter’s vulnerability without someone to take care of her, while ascertaining Milkman’s aunt’s apparent failure in her attempt create a life for her family at the margin of a hegemonically patriarchal society. Pilate’s skepticism towards the capitalist mindset closes her and her family to the hindrances of the mainstream society while also preventing these women from learning about them and thus find ways to properly deal with its existence and protect themselves.

Not only do Macon and Pilate's storylines exemplify the problems inherent to their ideological positions, but they also evoke the ideological tension between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois. While neither of the characters directly addresses the fight for civil rights, Macon's path follows Washington's idea that formal education and hard work will grant success. In hopes that his perseverance will allow him to transcend his race through class, he leaves behind any resemblance of empathy or bonds to his community and ancestry, a fundamental part of identity. On Pilate's side, by finding what Du Bois calls the "soul-beauty of a [despised] race" (8) in her African ancestry, she severs any ties she might have otherwise had to the mainstream American society, condemning herself and her family to disenfranchisement. The lack of any attempt at "reconciliation" between the two siblings before Pilate dies (1977, 417) is suggestive of their failure to breach outside of their comfort zones, and of the apparent impossibility of compromising their perceptions of the world to find a middle ground.

As for the younger generation, Milkman and Guitar appear to be more open to new possibilities while retaining some of their predecessors' patterns and limitations. They, after all, are the "young dudes [that] are subject to change the rules" (200), as Milkman affirms. He and Guitar discuss their different positions at several instances, although during most of the story Milkman's "ear is on [his] head, but it's not connected to [his] brain" (307). He remains blindsided by his own privileged upbringing and pays little attention to what others around him think or how they feel until he leaves Mercy. His journey constitutes a reversal of his father's path in terms of direction and symbolism. Milkman is returning to his family's roots, starting out in the North and travelling towards Shalimar, in the South. That is, from the upper part of the country where the Southerners believe "everybody [...] got big money" (333) to the lower states whose people are regarded by the Northerners as "savages" (345) and as "black Neanderthals" (337). He then returns to Mercy to bring Pilate and his father back to the South. The two-way route taken by Milkman is a "soaring affirmation of black selfhood" (Powell 749), suggestive of African American History's circularity, from the South to the North and backwards.

In the South, Milkman's perceptions clash with his experiences: in Danville, he is treated with "the glow of hero worship" (344), as Macon Dead's son who brings them the story of the Deads' self-made success. But in Shalimar he is forced to rethink about "the explosive hostility that engulfed him" (345) while he is alone in the woods during the hunt. Only then does Milkman realize his responsibility in the locals' reaction. His attitude, perceived as

arrogant by the Southerners, has socially alienated him from the local community. The hunt and the search for Circe represent the Northerner's return to nature, to a position where he is compelled to abdicate his material possessions in order to be alone with himself and finally ponder on his place as an African American in the world. Milkman's disconnection from the full extent of the oppressive reality endured by his fellow Black Americans parallels some of the criticism made to Martin Luther King, Jr., whose pacifist views were regarded by other activists as too conformist while overshadowing and even demonizing other factions of the Civil Rights Movement such as Malcolm X's take on "Black Power."

To bring home the hostility between Martin Luther King, Jr.'s pacifism and Malcolm X's "Black Power," Morrison introduces her readers to Guitar. This character's belligerent activism is, in his own words, his own way to love his community (1977, 198). What starts out as his role in the Seven Days' Society escalates as Milkman's fears come to life: "If you do it enough, you can do it to anybody," he tells Guitar, "You can off me" (200). Despite Guitar's assertion that they "don't off Negroes," his mistrust of Milkman drives him to chase his friend South in an attempt to shoot him. This choice seems to be motivated by materialism, as Guitar believes Milkman has decided to deny him the gold they were looking for. It also expresses a critique to the Black Nationalist doctrine's focus on economic principles, which state the urgency of economically empowering the Black community to fight against white capitalist exploitation (X. 39). But this position, as Guitar points out to Milkman, is motivated, and fueled by love:

[Milkman:] 'There's no love in it.'

[Guitar:] 'No love? No love? Didn't you hear me? What I doing ain't about hating white people. It's about loving us. About loving you. My whole life is love.' (1977, 200)

Milkman's view on the Seven Days' Society's stance is reminiscent of the self-righteousness that appears to characterize King's supporters while demonizing the work done by Malcolm X. It is easy to forget how much the latter advocated for love, including for love among the Black American community despite inner differences. Perhaps this process of mythicization of figures of the 1960s Movement is purely a matter of public perception. More importantly, it contributes to a collective forgetfulness that categorizes Black American activism hierarchically, fomenting inner tensions that prevent their union towards common objectives.

Contrarily to the older generation of the Dead family, Milkman and Guitar do come together at the end, which implies the possibility of rescuing at least some of the love they share for each other. Their relationship is characterized by animosity, yet it also encompasses a friendship bond. They remain “scared for” each other (200) even as they are positioned against each other. Their antagonism stems not from hate, but from love: as members of the African American community, they need to find their own ways to survive white oppression. They embody representations of a dream of achieving something that thus far has not been reached in the USA. That is, the freedom and equality promised at the birth of a country that wanted to spread its wings far from the Old World’s hierarchical conceptions, something that has so far been denied to African Americans by white racist dominance, as analyzed by CRT academics and activists.

The hypocrisy of the notion of the USA as “land of freedom and opportunity” is put on full display by the ways in which citizenship is performed in order to exclude “non-citizens” from the rights conceded by the Constitution. Black American women are especially affected by how citizenship is constructed and applied in the USA. The consequences of their disenfranchisement can be observed in the representations of female characters in *Song of Solomon*. Reba, Ruth, and Hagar suffer different variations of gender discrimination and violence at the hands of their partners. A case in point is how Pilate’s daughter’s subservience even as an adult leads to her still needing her mother’s protection when a man wants to beat her. For years, Ruth undergoes physical and psychological violence at the hands of her husband, who keeps denying her the affection promoted by the institution of marriage; she is Black, and so is her father, who she is forced to bury far from home at the Fairfield cemetery due to the segregation of graveyards (152-53); and her ornamental place at home “[stuns her] into stillness” (12-13). Hagar endures emotional abuse at the hands of Milkman, then is unable to cope with their breakup, which prompts her to search for validation in the consumerist culture that pervades the mainstream society and further traps her in the “hierarchical structures of race, gender, heteropatriarchy, and class” (Mignolo and Walsh 17–18). Conversely, Pilate – a marginalized Black woman who chooses unconventionality over any advantages offered by the mainstream lifestyle – experiences discrimination due to what Crenshaw calls intersectionality of gender, race, and class.

It may seem perplexing that a book so seemingly centered around male figures can transmit Black female’s struggles, but Morrison does so through an exploration of the

relationships between the two genders, as she affirms in an interview for *Contemporary Literature*:

[Interviewer:] There are some issues surrounding Pilate's granddaughter, Hagar, that have been disquieting for readers. Hagar dies because Milkman rejects her, and she is unable to cope with that. Milkman goes on to fulfill the role of the transcendent character in the novel. Aren't there disturbing implications in this type of plot – the young woman dying so that the young man can learn and rise?

[Morrison:] There is something here which people miss. *Milkman is willing to die at the end, and the person he is willing to die for is a woman.* (Morrison and Mckay 419, my emphasis)

The reduced agency of most of the represented women is corroborated by their destinies, but this does not mean that all of them remain apathetic towards the unfairness perpetrated against them. Particularly Pilate displays an active consciousness towards others that has helped her survive in a world that fears and despises her, firstly because of her lack of a navel, and secondly because of her total acceptance of her ancestral roots and disregard for social constructs such as marriage. The life she builds at the margin empowers Macon's sister in a way that her brother's capitalism cannot, for it enables in her the freedom to stand for what she believes is right, regardless of social expectations. Such is the case when she helps Ruth with her pregnancy, or when she threatens Reba's boyfriend (1977, 154-55; 116).

We only see the effective fruits of her teachings, of Pilate "chang[ing] the rhythm" on Milkman (47), closer to the end. At Solomon's Leap, after she and Milkman bury her father's bones, Guitar accidentally shoots Pilate. As she is dying, Pilate asks her nephew to "sing a little something for [her]" (419). It is the first instance in the novel where Milkman sings, expressing his grief through music in a way that recalls the way his African ancestors survived their own suffering. Moreover, after losing the person that "[w]ithout leaving the ground, [...] could fly" (1977, 419), Milkman now comes across as "*willing to die*" – because of her – "*for a woman*" (Morrison and Mckay 419, my emphasis). The reason behind Milkman's choice of letting go of Pilate's body, standing up and facing Guitar, is not explicit. It can simply be an outcome of a newly found self-confidence that stems from his awareness and reconnection to his African roots and from his recent experiences, which encouraged him to reflect upon his past indifference and attitudes. Apparently free from the patriarchal influence of his father, he is finally able to do what Pilate has done her entire life: to gaze beyond his navel, and empathize

with other people's struggles, namely those faced by the opposite sex and by the community to which he belongs. He acknowledges the error of his ways until then and accepts himself as an African American, surrendering to the air, just as Shalimar did, in the place where the myth of his ancestor's flight started. Or else, Milkman can merely be giving his life up out of grief for his aunt or out of despair after confirming that his friend's bloodthirstiness is not limited to white people.

Notwithstanding Pilate's important role in Milkman's development, it is still a fact that most of the *Song of Solomon's* women experience their agency restricted by the dominance of men in their lives. Even Pilate dies at the end, along with any hope she might embody. This frequent displacement of Black women in the novel constitutes a representation of a prevailing tradition of subalternization and oppression, but it fails to translate to the page any sort of portrayal of female African American's success. In doing so, it seems to be forsaking any hopes of emancipation for these women.

Song of Solomon's ending scene remains open for discussion. Similarly, both male and female African Americans' struggles and forms of fighting back remain ongoing battles. While new forms of exclusion have been emerging in the USA, others still need to be dealt with, and even those which appeared to be settled remain subject to cultural biases, as the USA Supreme Court made painfully clear with *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*. Morrison's 1977 book and her life's work are but an example of possible readings of the African American fight for citizenship rights of freedom and equality, a dream that remains unfulfilled to this day. In 1988, her words on the meaning of being a human echoed through an auditorium filled with young people at the Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York:

We are already life-chosen by ourselves. Humans, and as far as we know there are no others. We are the moral inhabitants of the galaxy. Why trash that magnificent obligation after working so hard in the womb to assume it? You will be in positions that matter. Positions in which you can decide the nature and quality of other people's lives. Your errors may be irrevocable. So *when you enter those places of trust, or power, dream a little before you think*, so your thoughts, your solutions, your directions, your choices about who lives and who doesn't, about who flourishes and who doesn't will be worth the very sacred life you have chosen to live. You are not helpless. You are not heartless. And you have time. (2019, 69, my emphasis)

Milkman's story embodies the nuanced connections between different perspectives on a shared problem. Rather than providing a concrete answer to the divisions among the African American community regarding white hegemony, it serves as a deconstruction of the potential responses to racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination. It constitutes a reflection on the advantages and possible tensions of a dialogue between the various factions at play which could benefit the whole of USA society, not merely the Black American population. Former USA President Abraham Lincoln's words come to mind: "A house divided against itself cannot stand" (1). This has proven to be on point in relation to the abolitionist cause and to the Civil War that issued in the 19th century. It might, as well, be observed in the divisions within the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. Today, perhaps more than ever, it reflects the urgency of transcending the tensions imposed by race, gender, and class, in order to create an environment of mutual understanding, rich in standpoints, ideas and dreams, where a common ground can be settled: the fight against political and social disenfranchisement of African American men and women. For only by surrendering the prejudices and mistruths that weigh us down, can we hope to take off the ground and ride the air.

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