Toni Morrison wrote her 1977 novel *Song of Solomon* on the cusp of historic uncertainties. The outcome of the black political movements of the two previous decades, from the nonviolent Civil Rights movement to Black Power, was in doubt. These movements had seen their leaders harassed, jailed, murdered. The visions through which integrationists and nationalists had imagined a just society were losing their hold. The Promised Lands of interracial harmony, Nation of Islam, Islamic brotherhood, and Black Nation were fast becoming slogans of the past rather than designs for the future. By 1977, the only New Day to dawn in America was going to be bathed in the murky sunlight of Reaganism illuminating a landscape of decay and sorrow.

Though *Song of Solomon* was published in 1977, its story breaks off in the fall of 1963. At first glance Morrison might seem to be avoiding politics and contemporary history altogether. The years left blank in the gap between the end of the story and the beginning of the writing were filled historically with the major phase of the black political movements. Moreover, Morrison sets her story in a segregated black community in Michigan so isolated that it is barely aware of Martin Luther King Jr.’s sit-ins, marches, or boycotts and knows Malcolm X only as “that red-headed Negro named X.” The political discussions that enliven Tommy’s Barbershop do not yet give rise to organized political activity; there is only the Seven Days, a secret organization of seven men who plot random revenge killings of whites to answer for unpunished acts of racial violence against blacks. There are the barest hints of the massive political learning process that would reach the North in the intervening years and transform the consciousness of communities like Southside.

Even though the story itself contains no auguries of events to come between 1963 and 1977, the missing years do of course inform the narration. In fact, they suffuse it. The story could not have been *told* before King’s movement and his death, before Malcolm X and his death, before the Black Panthers and their deaths. And in any case, one cannot read the main character’s story from his birth in 1931 up to 1963 without drawing upon the historical awareness acquired *after* 1963. Why, then, does Morrison respond to the political situation of the late 1970s by incorporating this historical awareness as a gap in the very structure of *Song of Solomon*?
Why does she inflect the disjunction of story and narration with the sense of a missing history?

Her decision certainly runs the risk of producing a merely quaint representation of a community on the eve of its plunge into world history, a version of the picturesque that would grapple with history with no more bite or relevance than a small town paper’s Way Back When column. But in fact, Morrison’s writing is not at all nostalgic. Nor is it merely historicist. Rather, she seems to be reaching from 1977 back to 1963 to explore anew the elements of everyday African American life—the practices, values, beliefs, and memories—that gave the Civil Rights and Black Power movements their underpinnings and their impetus. Morrison’s is not so much a project of rewriting history as of recovering what it was that had given sustenance to the popular hopes of the 1960s. By the same token, as I’ll eventually argue, this literary act of recovery has a critical edge as well, for it suggests that the movements of the 1960s did not adequately articulate the potentials of the everyday life-world—taking “articulate” in the double sense of expressing and joining, connoting and connecting.

A second problem posed by the context in which Morrison wrote *Song of Solomon* concerns the very tasks and purposes of African American literature. The debates among black critics and writers in the 1960s had pitted integrationists against nationalists; the nationalists charged that the integrationists’ cultural politics was mere assimilationism, while the integrationists rejected the emergence of predominantly political criteria in evaluating literary practices and purposes. By the late 1970s these antagonisms were giving way to a new sense of impasse, corollary of the political crisis, and many black writers and critics looked to reframe the debate.

The stakes of the reframing are apparent in the highly charged debate between Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Houston A. Baker Jr.—a debate all the more striking for the fact that by the time Gates’s 1979 essay “Preface to Blackness: Text and Pretext” and Baker’s 1981 “Generational Shifts and the Recent Criticism of Afro-American Literature” reappeared in their respective books, *Figures in Black* (1989) and *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (1984), a new common ground was being tentatively explored in terms of Baker’s notion of the vernacular.

Gates had sharply criticized the Black Arts movement and the Black Aesthetic—exemplified for him by Baker, Stephen Henderson, Addison Gayle Jr., and Amiri Baraka—for stifling black writers by assigning literature narrowly political tasks. The attempt to define in a single stroke *What is African American culture?* and *What makes African American literature “Black”?* yielded formulations like Henderson’s definition of black poetry: “Poetry by any identifiably Black person whose ideological stance vis-à-vis the history and aspirations of his people since slavery [is] adjudged by them to be ‘correct.’” This definition smacks of dogma and tautology.
The critics who actually want to make the judgments about "blackness" rest their claim to representing the people and its judgment only by projecting their own ideological stance onto the people and then valuating the literature accordingly. Warning against "an alarming disrespect for the diversity of black experience itself," Gates also bridled at the terms in which Gayle couched his polemical calls for African Americans to repudiate white-dominated interpretations of their culture and art and to set their own cultural and aesthetic criteria: "To evaluate the life and culture of black people, it is necessary that one live the black experience in a world where . . . the social takes precedent over the aesthetic, where each act, gesture, and movement is political, and where continual rebellion separates the insane from the sane, the robot from the revolutionary."

Ultimately, the call for a revolutionary art was made to rest on a double claim. First, the culture African Americans create for themselves—through folklore, music, and everyday language practices—was itself deemed a culture of repudiation. And second, authentic black literature was seen to derive more or less directly from this popular culture of repudiation. Baker, for example, had earlier argued that "black American culture" was distinguished from "white American culture" by being, in Gates's paraphrase, "oral, collectivistic, and repudiative." Gates's skepticism about these claims was based in part on the fact that many traditions in world literature, including some Western traditions, have drawn substantially on oral and popular culture. The mere fact of an active relation between the vernacular and the literary culture did not seem to get at the distinctive achievements of African American literature.

Gates's central preoccupation and point lay elsewhere, however. Among the sources of African American literature, he argued, is its rich and complex encounter with European and Anglo-American literature—an encounter not reducible to an act of repudiation. Moreover, the on-going production of African American literature is shaped by African American literary history itself. Consequently, neither race nor the folk culture can be isolated as the determining context of African American literature. Such assumptions, Gates concluded, were hampering black criticism by short-circuiting an investigation of "literature as system," of the text "as a system of signs," and of "Blackness" itself as "a complex structure of meanings."

Baker's rebuttal came in the form of a masterful historical, political, and theoretical account of African American criticism since the 1950s. Baker first chastised Gates for casting the Black Arts movement as a mere antagonist to be defeated rather than as a predecessor to be joined and then transcended. The Black Aesthetic had challenged what Baker called Integrationist Poetics and its assimilationist position. "Were it not for Henderson, Gayle, Baraka, and Larry Neal, African American writing might have been fated to a deadly choice: either conform to the prevailing tastes..."
and assumptions of white-dominated culture or risk utter invalidation and imposed marginality. Before this criticism born of the protest and militancy of the 1960s was allowed to be superseded by one nurtured in the Ivy League of the 1970s, some accounting was needed.

A critique was assuredly in order, but Baker argued it had already been begun by the Black Aestheticians themselves. Moreover, the project and discoveries of the Black Arts movement should be preserved even as its “lower-level” arguments, which tended toward “impressionistic chauvinism” and “cultural xenophobia,” were discarded. The “higher-level” argument was predicated on what Baker called the expressive continuum of African American culture.

Refining his own anthropological notion of culture, Baker first redefines “the vernacular expressive products of the Afro-American masses.” It is a question of practices and social identity rather than “some mysterious trait of consciousness”: “Blues, work songs, and hollers, and such verbal forms as folktales, toasts, and dozens are functions of the black masses’ relationship of ‘identity’ vis-à-vis mainstream culture.” In the same vein, Baker renews the search for something like the “Black Aesthetic,” but he reformulates it as “a distinctive code for the creation and evaluation of black art.” And the appeal to “black experience” ceases to be the normative bedrock it designates in the essentialist idiom of Henderson and Gayle, becoming instead the field of a rather open-ended inquiry: “The guiding assumption of the Black Arts Movement,” writes the revisionist Baker, “was that if a literary-critical investigator looked to the characteristic musical and verbal forms of the masses, he could discover unique aspects of Afro-American creative expression—aspects of both form and performance—that lay closest to the verifiable emotional referents and experiential categories of Afro-American culture.” Thus redeemed from its essentialist, chauvinistic, xenophobic effects, and distanced from the political-rhetorical moment of the Black Power movement, the Black Aesthetic begins its transmigration into the new problematic of the vernacular explored throughout Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature.

Gates’s greatest error, as Baker saw it, was to “posit Afro-American ‘literature’ as an autonomous cultural domain.” It was wrong to set African American literature up as the source of its own most important motifs and myths, and to attribute the complexity of African American literary expressivity solely to the writers’ mastery of “literary language.” Baker rejected the Yale School dictum of the 1970s that criticism must consist in “close reading,” where reading is restricted to the supposedly internal relationships among signs or among texts. “Gates’s formulations,” Baker argued, “imply an ideal critic whose readings would summon knowledge only from the literary system of Afro-America.”
The political context weighs heavily in Baker’s critique. The crisis of the late 1970s and early 1980s signaled an uncharted and historic shift in the relations between black intellectuals and the black masses. The moment of the Black Aesthetic, where the preoccupations of radical writers, critics, and scholars seemed to coincide with the signposts of a mass social movement, was over. Baker saw in Gates’s position a slackening, perhaps intentional, perhaps misguided, of the tie between writing and the masses, between the literary and the vernacular culture. If black literature and criticism were equated with black culture rather than placed on a continuum with it; if critics whose esoteric practices require the nurturing environment of elite educational institutions were to believe their discursive framework is African American culture; if the specialized literacy of novelists and academics was suddenly taken to be the whole of African American structures of meaning, then the tie between intellectuals and masses would be definitively severed.

By the same token, however, Baker’s own argument that African American literature is continuous with the popular and the everyday expressivity of African Americans exhibits the proleptic gesture of most powerful political rhetoric: it places the wished-for future in the present-day reality. For, like intellectuals generally, writers actually have complex, variable, uncertain relations to the “masses.” When critics decipher the ties between vernacular and literary forms, they do not so much reveal the continuum between masses and intellectuals as make some actual and potential articulations. Criticism prefigures, even prepares the hoped-for articulation far more often than it unveils or guarantees it. Therein lies a considerable part of literary criticism’s valence and value, especially at those historic moments when the direction of social and political developments is unsure. The warnings Baker sounded in the polemic with Gates were a timely attempt to keep African American intellectuals themselves from losing all fluency in the language of the people.

By his own wry assessment, Baker won the debate the moment Gates produced his scintillating work on “Signifyin(g)” and a whole array of everyday language practices, tropes, and narrative traditions, thereby shifting his own project to the problematic of the vernacular. Lest this crucial debate seem definitively surpassed in the two polemicists’ higher-level agreement, I want to underscore the still unanswered questions and unsolved problems. For it is these that help define Morrison’s project in *Song of Solomon*. At that historic moment of uncertainty, Morrison herself was seeking to evoke the vernacular culture within her literary practice. She was also clearly seeking some alternative to the seemingly compulsory choice between an Integrationist Poetics that risked dissolving African American writing into a supposedly mainstream literary tradition and a...
How is African American tradition transformed when rearticulated through communicative forms and public spheres not of its own making?

Black Aesthetic that demanded ideological conformity to a fading romance of revolution.

Such ambitions bring Morrison’s writing face-to-face with the problems Gates and Baker too were confronting: How can the vernacular and the literary culture genuinely meld if part of the distance between literary intellectuals and the people is a disparity in literacy and learning? How do literary forms transform as well as transcribe vernacular forms? Is it the writer’s role to furnish politically useful visions and representations? And, indeed, usable to whom, for what?

Confronted with such questions, African American writing not only finds itself caught up in the specific history of African Americans and of race in America, it also encounters the multiculturalism and the modernity of contemporary American society.

When Morrison rejects the cultural politics of both assimilationism and separatism, a new question begins to take shape: How is a minority cultural tradition transformed when forced to assert itself within a context, typically a national context, it does not control? How is African American tradition transformed when rearticulated through communicative forms and public spheres not of its own making? Every community within a multicultural society participates in at least two incongruent cultural contexts. For even though the vernacular culture may furnish communal forms of expression and identity, it cannot avoid the jarring contact with the contested space of the public culture.

A crucial feature of the contemporary American novel is its tendency to give literary form to just this dissonance between incongruent cultural contexts. The novel’s aptitude for intercultural invention defined the genre for Mikhail Bakhtin. But novels do not of course serve as a mere conduit of popular cultures. Since the literacy and learning of a society are consolidated and preserved within its literature, literature itself is caught up in what Raymond Williams called the social unevenness of literacy and learning. The reading public is contoured according to all the stratifications and differentiations that divide society along its branching faultlines of race, ethnicity, region, gender, class and occupation, rural versus urban community, and so on.

The modern writer typically attempts to overreach the immediate community to which he or she belongs. Such overreaching is doubly motivated. The Enlightenment heritage’s ideals of universality prod modern writers to exact from their own discursive practice claims to universal validity. Writing is henceforth embroiled in the battle over ideologies and critiques, over false universalizations and disguised particularisms.

Moreover, political modernity—the formation of political culture since the French Revolution—pushes writers not to address the homogeneous audience of the court, the salon, or the coffeehouse, but rather to
address a public whose ultimate symbolic horizon is the “people.” By the same token, as François Furet and others have shown, the “people” is itself a symbolic entity, and therefore this effort to transcend one’s immediate community never simply amounts to stepping directly before a transparent public. Rather, it is a dissemination among several communities whose coexistence and whose potential for communication are marked by the institutionalized symbol the public. Political modernity shapes the practices of the novel just as much as the polis. Both novelistic and political discourse require a rhetoric whose address to communities is refracted through symbols of the public and whose address to the “public” is fractured in its reception by distinct communities.

The modernity and the multiculturalism of contemporary American society should cause us to suspect that our literature will not likely overcome so much as grapple with the various rifts between public and community, between vernacular and literary forms, between oral and written compositions. In Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon such rifts motivate the novelistic form itself. My reading, therefore, will be a searching out of this novel’s inner form in light of Morrison’s grappling with the interplay of the vernacular and the literary.

An important insight into how novels are constructed is gained from Lucien Goldmann’s suggestion that the rise of the novel happened as writers found methods of combining biography with social chronicle. A novel stitches together a life history and a collective history. Goldmann’s insight needs, though, to be significantly extended and modified in a multicultural context. For there are immense variations in the means and meaning of such narrative combinations. The capacity to narrate a life history can draw on disparate cultural resources, from heroic legends to saints’ lives, from representations of career to psychoanalytic case histories. Likewise, the capacity to narrate a collective history can draw on various cultural resources, from myth to sociological treatise, from national epic to family saga. What is specific to novelistic practice is the array of artistic means of stitching such narratives together, and of using the resulting artistic solution itself to fulfill the writer’s, or the work’s, larger purposes.

In Song of Solomon, Morrison casts the life history of her main character as an ironic quest. The collective history she gives the form of a genealogy. The inner dynamic of this novel’s construction—its form or composition understood as a process—consists in the interweaving of the ironic quest and the genealogy.
The life-history narrative is the story of a young black man, Macon Dead Jr., nicknamed Milkman, and his search for what he thinks will be his freedom, namely, his independence and a sense of self unencumbered by his family’s wishes, expectations, or resentments. His crisis comes to a head when he is thirty years old, still living with his parents and working for his father. Morrison telescopes his first thirty years into the first third of the novel and then in the rest unravels a story that takes place in 1962–63. Milkman has abandoned the woman he’s loved since adolescence, Hagar, his aunt Pilate’s granddaughter. And he is increasingly distanced from his childhood friend Guitar, who has joined the secret organization Seven Days.

Milkman’s mother was born Ruth Foster, only child of this segregated black community’s only doctor. She married Macon Dead in the hopes of perpetuating the gentility of her father’s house. Macon’s ambition quickly converted her father’s reputation, and capital, into a real estate business. He became the community’s chief landlord, hated by his tenants for his ruthlessness. Ruth and Macon Dead became increasingly estranged. He despised her continuing devotion to her father. She mourned his lack of love and the coldness he embodied. He convinced himself that incest had bound her and her father. She believed he let her father die to spite her.

Just as Milkman is on the verge of fleeing this emotional maelstrom, his mother tells him how he himself would never have been born had not Pilate concocted a potion that brought Macon back to Ruth’s bed after a ten years’ absence. Worse yet, he also gets her confirmation that, as he has long dreaded, he is called Milkman because his bereft mother nursed him long past infancy. To Milkman, intimacy is confusion, freedom must lie in escape:

Deep down in that pocket where his heart hid, he felt used. Somehow everybody was using him for something or as something. Working out some scheme of their own on him, making him the subject of their dreams of wealth, or love, or martyrdom. Everything they did seemed to be about him, yet nothing he wanted was part of it.

Milkman responds to the complexities by shrinking from his life. “He wanted,” we are told, “to know as little as possible, to know only enough to get through the day amiably and to be interesting enough to warrant the curiosity of other people—but not their all-consuming devotion.” Even as Milkman sees how impoverished his life is, and yearns for an initiation into adulthood, he remains without desire or goal. He hatches a plot to break away and spend a year on his own, but even then begs his father to advance him the funds.

John Brenkman
It is during his heart-to-heart with his father—Milkman pleading for his freedom, Macon retorting, “Money is freedom”—that Milkman happens to mention the green canvas sack that hangs from the rafters in Pilate’s house. He hit his head on it once, and it felt like a sack of bricks. Hagar calls it Pilate’s inheritance. Macon is thunderstruck by the story, for he has long believed that Pilate took a cache of gold she and he had found in a cave in the aftermath of their father’s murder. When Milkman and Guitar then steal the sack, it turns out to contain human bones. But Macon’s story has given his son’s quest a tangible goal. Milkman’s life story now becomes a search for this lost gold. The search for identity and independence and purpose becomes a literal quest for gold.

How to interpret the irony? You might say that Milkman’s materialistic quest is overly specific, wrongly focused; the gold is an externalization of his potential identity. Alternatively, you might say his quest is emptied of genuine content because after all he merely desires a freedom from—, never a freedom to—. Or, yet another alternative, you might say that he is doomed not to find himself because his alienation stems in the first place not from a lack of independence but from being cared for without ever being called upon to care for anyone else.

Each of these alternatives is capable of anchoring a major theme of the novel, but there is a larger irony structured into the very plotting of Milkman’s quest. From the standpoint of this quester, family or ancestry appears to be nothing more than the obstacle standing in the way of his quest. “I just know that I want to live my own life,” Milkman tells Guitar before starting his journey to Pennsylvania where Macon last saw the gold as a child.

I don’t want to be my old man’s office boy no more. And as long as I’m in this place I will be. Unless I have my own money. My family’s driving me crazy. Daddy wants me to be like him and hate my mother. My mother wants me to think like her and hate my father. Corinthians [his sister] won’t speak to me; Lena [his other sister] wants me out. And Hagar wants me chained to her bed or dead.

The quest is bathed in irony from this moment on because what Milkman keeps finding instead of the gold is the genealogy of his own family. In place of his personal grail he finds the very thing he was fleeing. The genealogy crosshatches the quest-story in the form of a stream of clues Milkman believes are bringing him closer and closer to his riches.

The collective history Morrison narrates is a social chronicle of blacks in America, from about 1840 to 1963. This history is narrated in the form of Milkman’s genealogy. Ancestry becomes a figure for African American history. I am insisting on these terms denoting representation—history in the form of genealogy, ancestry as the figure for history—because
Morrison’s is a stylized history. The representation serves, first, as a reversal of the values guiding Milkman’s quest. Family and genealogy are now the path, not the hindrance, to the truth.

The genealogy provides a social and a geographic map of the family’s diaspora. It is a movement from the South to the North, and from rural to industrial surroundings. Milkman will learn that his grandfather was originally named Jake. He became the first Macon Dead, according to the story Milkman already knew from his father, when a drunken Yankee soldier was registering him with the Freedmen’s Bureau and wrote down his answers in all the wrong spaces. Place of birth: Macon, and Father: ‘Dead’ comma ‘Macon.’” Jake became Macon Dead and migrated from Virginia to rural Pennsylvania with the young woman he loved. Milkman learns from the old men he finds in Montour County, Pennsylvania, that his grandfather “was the farmer they wanted to be, the clever irrigator, the peach-tree grower, the hog slaughterer, the wild-turkey roaster, the man who could plow forty in no time flat and sang like an angel while he did it.” But he was unable to read, and a white family, the Butlers, tricked him into signing his farm over to them. He was murdered trying to defend his land.

The second Macon Dead, Milkman’s father, turned his youthful prowess—the old men recall how he “outran, outplowed, outshot, outpicked, outrode them all”—into naked ambition, and transformed his anguish over his father’s murder into his single-minded devotion to property: “Money is freedom. . . . The only real freedom there is.” This Macon Dead found his way to industrial Michigan and to Dr. Foster’s only daughter Ruth and to real estate. Milkman’s aimlessness now stands out all the more starkly in contrast to his father’s ambition and his grandfather’s prodigious labor and heroic defense of land and home. The old men’s stories merely refuel his dreams of quick riches.

Figure 1: Dead Family Tree.
When there is no gold in the cave, Milkman is convinced Pilate took the gold to Virginia and goes in search of a town called Charlemagne or, as it turns out, Shalimar. Here the clues reach all the way back to his slave ancestors, his great-grandfather and great-grandmother. Jake’s father was a slave who had twenty-one children, all sons, and who, according to local legend, rose into the air and flew away, snatching up his youngest child, Jake, only to drop him as he soared above Virginia and slavery, and returned to Africa. His wife Ryna went mad with grief. Jake was then raised by a woman named Heddy, and it was with her daughter Singing Bird that he eventually eloped.

There is a shape to the male lineage in this genealogy, as it goes from Solomon to Jake (the first Macon Dead), to Macon Dead, to Milkman (the third Macon Dead). These male figures mark out, and are in sync with, a discernible pattern in African American history. They represent important junctures at which dislocation (the middle passage, the South-North migration, the rural-urban migration) generated new modes of work: slavery, farming, business, and new identities and values—freedom is, successively, flight, land, money. At the same time, there is the sense that the line running from the magical, soaring great-grandfather down to Milkman is a decline of talents: from flying to farming to the work of calculating, down to Milkman’s malaise. Let us look now at the female lineage, for its patterning differs decidedly from the linear, historically synced male figures. Historical and social changes are in fact marked, especially by the satirized position of Ruth and her daughters Lena and First Corinthians. That said, the pattern nonetheless has no arc of progress or decline. Instead, there are elements of circularity, polarity, and complementarity. A symbolic circularity connects Ryna and Hagar. The first ancestor and the last descendant both go mad grieving lost love. Ryna’s wailing voice still echoes through Ryna’s Gulch in Shalimar, Virginia, and Hagar declines in a slow suicide when she cannot recover from Milkman’s abandonment of her. But there is also a central polarity in the pattern. Pilate and Ruth are opposing types. Ruth’s gentility, her imitation of white society’s Victorian accoutrements, her need for respectability, and her dependence on men stand off against Pilate’s iconoclastic life—caring for her fatherless child and grandchild, bootlegging, singing the blues. Yet there is also a complementarity or solidarity between Ruth and Pilate dramatized in their poignant recognitions of one another as mothers and women.

The differentiated patterns of male and female characters invite allegorical interpretation. Perhaps Morrison is separating men’s and women’s spheres, the former predicated on labor as shaped by white-dominated economies, the latter on the more autonomous economies of the household. Alternatively, the differentiation suggests a distinction between his-
A subterranean culture, denied recognition or material means by the larger society, has to preserve itself through something like the collective equivalent of an outcast's survival strategies, or an outlaw's.

History is associated with the evolving, successive forms of property and labor, while heritage claims a very different temporality of recurrences and recuperations as represented by women's memories and their care of others.

Let me shift the focus somewhat, however, and come back now to the question of the interweaving of the ironic quest undertaken by Milkman and this intricate genealogical representation of a collective history of African Americans. Thematically, the genealogy reverses the values of the quest: ancestry and family feeling are revealed as the sources of what Milkman is beginning, with fatal belatedness, to learn about himself. Morrison accomplishes the interweaving of quest and genealogy by having Milkman hear the bits and pieces that will become the family saga. At first there are merely fragmented stories he hears from his father and Pilate over the years. The genealogy then develops further, though still disjointedly, through the clues he gathers while retracing Pilate's flight from Pennsylvania. Gradually, almost imperceptibly, Milkman the quester becomes an interpreter. By the time he figures out that Pilate never did have the gold, he has already slipped into a very different kind of search. He wants to know his great-grandfather. The genealogy has displaced the gold.

By the same token, the genealogy becomes even more than a figurative representation of African American history. Milkman's interpretations are a process of puzzling out the devious, witty ways that subterranean traditions and popular knowledges actually survive. Morrison challenges the habit of thinking of cultural heritage exclusively in terms of monuments and masterworks—comparable to the reduction of history to great events and heroic actors. Such a model is acutely inappropriate for the history of a people whose enslavement denied them literacy and whose oppression in the century since Emancipation denied them the material and institutional means of assembling a monumental culture. Morrison alludes to the workings of this other, vernacular form of cultural heritage in the way she weaves the genealogy into Milkman's quest. It is a heritage that is oral and transitory. It does not thrive on permanent meanings but on fluctuating connections that nonetheless lead back through time and relate individuals to their collectivity and its history. Milkman's evidences are songs, tales, and names.

Milkman first hears the song of Solomon that gives the novel its name in Shalimar, where children sing it as part of an outdoor game they play. At least, that's when Milkman first knowingly hears the song. In fact, its chorus is a variation on "an old blues song" long sung by Pilate:

O Sugarman don't leave me here
Cotton balls to choke me
O Sugarman don't leave me here
Buckra's arms to yoke me

Milkman first hears the song in Shalimar, where children sing it as part of an outdoor game they play. At least, that's when Milkman first knowingly hears the song. In fact, its chorus is a variation on "an old blues song" long sung by Pilate:

O Sugarman don't leave me here
Cotton balls to choke me
O Sugarman don't leave me here
Buckra's arms to yoke me

John Brenkman
Sugarman done fly away
Sugarman done gone
Sugarman cut across the sky
Sugarman gone home.

Sugarman is Solomon, revised and readapted through the dislocations and inventiveness that mark Pilate’s life. She has for years sung of her grandfather without knowing it. And, indeed, she has sung because her father’s ghost came to her saying, “Sing! Sing!” So she has always sung, except that the ghost wasn’t giving her a command but just trying to tell her her mother’s name: Sing, or Singing Bird, as Milkman surmises. After she died giving birth to Pilate, Jake was so anguished he had forbidden the speaking of her name, and it was forgotten. Pilate also misunderstood the ghost’s other plea: “You can’t up and leave a body,” taking it as a warning she must go back to the cave to bury the man she and Macon mistakenly believed they had killed. But Jake’s plea was re-voicing his childhood lament not to be left behind by Solomon.

The children in Shalimar—a name derived from Solomon and misremembered as Charlemagne, Shalleemone—preserve connections with the woman singing the blues in Michigan. Susan Byrd, another descendant of Hedy’s, recalls “some old folks’ lie they tell around here” of a Solomon flying off, dropping his twenty-first son Jake and abandoning his wife whose cries give Ryna’s Gulch its name. The legend glosses the song, and the legend and the song correct and are corrected by Pilate’s remembering, dreaming, and singing. Rather than monumentality, this cultural heritage is borne along through the generations by chance and inventiveness. As Kimberly W. Benston says of this motif, “With the enumeration of Afro-America’s ‘hidden names,’ unnaming becomes re-collection, a gathering of history as reverberative play and released desire, rather than as monumentalized or forgotten totality.”

Naming is crucially a part of every culture, from the mythopoetic naming of gods and heroes to scientific nomenclature, from metaphors to the naming of kin. A subterranean culture, denied recognition or material means by the larger society, has to preserve itself through something like the collective equivalent of an outcast’s survival strategies, or an outlaw’s. Its acts of naming become devious, oblique, fugitive. Since those who participate in that subterranean culture also have to live aboveground, mastering or parrying the master’s namings, they may feel anxiety and shame as easily as pride or joy at their own heritage’s fugitive namings. Morrison provides a vivid contrast between just such reactions of anguish and pleasure in two passages in which first Macon and later Milkman ruminate on names.

First, Milkman’s father ponders the tradition begun by his own illiterate father of pointing to a word in the Bible at random to name a newborn
child—the daughters, in fact: Pilate, Reba, Hagar, First Corinthians, Magdalene called Lena—and laments the disappearance of his ancestral name at the hands of the drunken Yankee soldier, relegating his father, himself, and his own son to be called Macon Dead:

Surely, he thought, he and his sister had some ancestor, some lithe young man with onyx skin and legs as straight as cane stalks, who had a name that was real. A name given to him at birth with love and seriousness. A name that was not a joke, a disguise, nor a brand name. But who this lithe young man was, and where his cane-stalk legs carried him from or to, could never be known. No. Nor his name.

Milkman—whose name was a joke, but also a cipher of his mother’s loneliness, her grief, and her love—in fact finds the ancestor’s name. He succeeds not despite but because of the jokes, disguises, and brand names. En route from Shalimar back to Michigan, his own reverie reverses his father’s:

He closed his eyes and thought of the black men in Shalimar, Roanoke, Petersburg, Newport News, Danville, in Blood Bank, on Darling Street, in the pool halls, the barbershops. Their names. Names they got from yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes, weaknesses. Names that bore witness. Macon Dead, Sing Byrd, Crowell Byrd, Pilate, Reba, Hagar, Magdalene, First Corinthians, Guitar, Railroad Tommy, Hospital Tommy, Empire State (he just stood around and swayed), Small Boy, Sweet, Circe, . . . Jim the Devil, Fuck-up, and Dat Nigger.

Verbal invention, or intervention, contributes to the tactics that help create what Barbara Christian calls the “tradition of survival” in African American history. Community is maintained against the grain, as in the anecdote of naming that Morrison relates in the novel’s opening paragraphs. When Milkman’s maternal grandfather, Dr. Foster, first established his home and practice on Mains Avenue, his patients “took to calling the street, which none of them lived in or near, Doctor Street.” When migrating blacks settled in the neighborhood, they had their Southern relatives and friends address their letters to Doctor Street. But the post office refused to deliver them. When young black men were drafted in 1918, they gave their addresses on Doctor Street. The city fathers fought back and posted notices all through Southside describing the street and declaring that it “had always been and would always be known as Mains Avenue and not Doctor Street.” It was a genuinely clarifying notice because it gave Southside residents a way to keep their memories alive and please the city legislators as well. They called it Not Doctor Street.”

The story of Not Doctor Street glimpses the whole range of issues stirred up by Song of Solomon. The cultural creativity of African Ameri-
cans runs up against the authority of the polis from which they are in effect excluded. Civic power not only marginalizes the black community but also interferes with its very attempts to perpetuate and enlarge the ties between the rural and urban, Southern and Northern poles of its diaspora. Even the participation of blacks in the polis as soldiers does not bring them recognition or civilian participation as citizens. They are barred from legislating the society’s names, spaces, routes. Cultural creation itself, therefore, responds and achieves its complex fates in relation to political participation: it can prepare and struggle for it, or protest against its absence, but it can also become a consolation or compensation for the absence of political participation, even, in pleasing the legislators, an adjustment to it.

Morrison’s evocations of heritage bring out the most difficult problems of interpreting this novel’s inner form. The heritage evoked is the vernacular tradition, with all its power historically to nourish the whole of a people. Despite repression, diaspora, and exclusion from whole arenas of literacy and learning, African Americans have preserved a culture rich in linguistic and musical invention and replete with stories, symbols, songs, and performance. What happens, though, when the means of preservation change? What happens when Morrison uses literary means to evoke this vernacular culture? For she has transposed the dynamic of an oral tradition into the very different dynamic or logic of a written, novelistic narrative. The latter is not simply the transparent container of the former. Nor is the former merely the raw material of the latter. Even as this novelistic writing imitatively sets in motion the processes of an oral, everyday, popular culture, it also sets its own composition off against those processes. There is a sense of discrepancy.

Now, there is a nifty solution available. If we deftly pulled the rabbit of Magical Realism from our critical hat, the writer’s inventiveness could be credited with solving the dilemma by fusing the rhetoric of realistic narrative with the legendary or superstitious contents of oral storytelling. But that is not really how Morrison’s writing works. Instead of an artful synthesis of magical realism, she has folded a magical romance over the novel’s tragic realism to create something more like a rift than a blending.

Consider more specifically the evocation of flight in the closing lines of the text. Guitar has followed Milkman and Pilate to Virginia, where they have taken Jake’s bones to bury them on the very site of Solomon’s Leap. Guitar is still convinced Milkman has absconded with the gold (and is burying it); he aims his rifle at Milkman and shoots, but in the darken-
ing twilight hits Pilate instead. Milkman watches Pilate die in his arms and then stands up and shouts, “You want me? Huh? You want my life?” Setting down his rifle, Guitar too stands.

Milkman stopped waving and narrowed his eyes. He could just make out Guitar’s head and shoulders in the dark. “You want my life?” Milkman was not shouting now. “You need it? Here.” 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.

This moment of flight unites Solomon and Milkman. The text reaches its magical register when Milkman leaps without bending his knees. And it continues the magic into the simile, “As fleet and bright as a lodestar.” The romance is marked by the circular or cyclical identity of the first line and the last, and of course by Milkman’s realization of his quest. The romance even fulfills the dream that was so bitterly dashed when he was only four and “discovered . . . that only birds and airplanes could fly” and so “lost all interest in himself.” In this magical romance, the flight of Solomon and Milkman is a metaphor of prowess, of freedom, and of continuity.

As tragic realism, however, the novel discloses other significances in the images of flight that recurrently appear in the communal culture, starting with the figure of the Flying Africans from black folklore. The legend of Solomon’s flight back to Africa can be taken as an allusion to an attempted escape from slavery, but his success or failure remains unknowable, and his flight itself was at the cost of his wife and children. Mr. Smith’s winged leap from the hospital roof presaging Milkman’s birth in 1931 was simply the last deluded and suicidal act of an original member of the Seven Days. And Milkman’s own experience of the air is but a prelude to his or Guitar’s death: “it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother.”

To whom did it not matter? Only to Milkman in this, his delusional moment of flight. The phrase marks a shift in the paragraph to free indirect discourse:

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.

The stylistic shift is motivated by the novelistic rather than the romantic imperatives of the text. It refutes Milkman’s voice, even as it lets its authenticity be heard. It articulates the psychology of a tragic self-misunder-
standing rather than the heroics of romance renewal. The register of tragic realism unmasks the metaphor of prowess, freedom, and continuity. Fratricide breaks the community’s continuity with itself, and Milkman has still failed to find a fit emblem of his own freedom or a genuine activity for his own self-realization.

The values at stake—matters of justice, community, self-realization—are by no means merely abstract in Morrison’s writing. Various characters and situations are imbued with these values and serve to tacitly affirm them throughout the novel. The valuations are in fact strongest where ingrained in everyday practices and experiences. A keen awareness of racial injustice crackles in the discourse emanating daily from Tommy’s Barbershop. The small group of Southside men who gather there to match wits and stories keep close watch on the events of the world and of their community, tallying the wrongs visited upon blacks, themselves included, and chronicling their own acts of escape or defiance. A sense of community radiates from many other sources as well. Milkman encounters it among the old men of Montour County and again in Shalimar, Virginia. And there is Pilate, through whom all the threads of the historical multigenerational community seem to pass. To the awareness of injustice and the sense of community other values have to be added: the skill, determination, and self-assertion embodied in Milkman’s male ancestors.

What, though, is the fate of these values? They never flow together and coalesce. The story’s outcome dramatizes, rather, how the range of values embodied in the various groups and individuals of Southside fails to attain a durable synthesis. Morrison unfolds a tragedy of unrealized possibilities, unrealized because disjoined. Consider how the aspirations toward justice, community, and self-assertion are affirmed by the story but denied realization in its outcome.

The members of the Seven Days possessed an acute sense of racial injustice forged from their own experience. The radio in Tommy’s Barbershop brought them the news in 1953 that Emmet Till had been stomped to death in Mississippi for whistling at a white woman. When they also learned that his murderers could brag of their deed and go free, a white boy was killed in the local schoolyard. Their revenge was not some form of primitive retribution; it was a groping for justice in a society that cut them off from all legal means of redressing the wrongs done them, even as it fostered violence against their own people. And yet what they mete out is not justice. The Seven Days’ vision of evil does not yield a vision of justice but only a hallucinatory racial arithmetic. They believe their actions will, in Guitar’s words, “keep the ratio the same” between blacks and whites: “You can’t stop them from killing us, from trying to get rid of us. And each time they succeed, they get rid of five to seven generations. I help keep the numbers the same.”
The forms of revenge in which the Seven Days seek justice strain its members to the breaking point, perhaps because they are reduced to imitating the white killers and rapists:

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

These acts eat away at the men who commit them. Mr. Smith was driven to madness and suicide, and Mr. Foster to alcoholism and despair. Guitar himself has entered the same spiral. When he sets out in search of revenge against Milkman, he has let his rage at white injustices turn into violence against another black man. His sense of injustice is losing its grip on truth. Even his immediate motive is false, since Milkman has never in fact reneged on his promise to share the gold. And Guitar’s other motive for tracking down Milkman, namely, his rage over Milkman’s treatment of Pilate’s granddaughter Hagar, leads him blindly to kill Pilate herself.

More than any other figure in the novel, Pilate anchors the sense of community. Her death also violates this value even as her dying words reaffirm it: “I wish I’d a knowed more people. I would of loved ‘em all. If I’d a knowed more, I would a loved more.” The processes and patterns that threaten to unravel the community run deeper than Pilate’s fate. Insofar as sense of community arises from the women’s sphere, it remains unrealized because that sphere itself is left largely cut off from the world of men and from the world of politics. Insofar as it also arises in the world of men and politics, especially in the tireless “crisscrossed conversations” at Tommy’s Barbershop, sense of community is lost in the pathologies of the Seven Days. It dies in every one of their acts of justice, which, being shrouded in secrecy, remain unknown and uncomprehended by the very community in whose name they are carried out.

And finally there is the value of self-assertion and self-realization represented by Solomon’s flight, Jake’s skill and courage, and even, though it is treated ironically, Macon’s acumen and ruthless ambition. This patrimony of self-assertion breaks off at Milkman. Even as he magically flies into “the killing arms of his brother,” he still lacks the social footing required for his own self-assertion within society. He will die, or kill, without having become anything more than his father’s glorified errand-boy. Despite his surrender to the air, no form of work, no activity, has yet emerged to give him his figure of freedom. However much he adores his newly discovered ancestors, he lacks anything to compare really with his great-grandfather’s flying, his grandfather’s land, or his father’s capital.
In the novel’s tragic-realist register, Milkman’s ultimate predicament unexpectedly foretells the fate of so many young black men in the decade and a half since the writing of the novel. He is locked in a life-and-death struggle with another young black man; he lacks any material or social hold on an activity that could enhance his well-being and his growth; and his sexual desires, need for care, and yearning for community draw him to the world of women, which he nonetheless doesn’t know how to share in. Prowess, freedom, and continuity may find their metaphorical apogee in Milkman’s magical flight, but in his actual life history they are undone.

This discrepancy between magical romance and tragic realism does not, however, put Morrison’s writing at cross-purposes with itself. On the contrary, this discrepancy has a shape. In fact, it is what gives shape in this novel to the rift between vernacular and literary expressiveness. For Morrison’s writing shows that the “continuum” of the vernacular and the literary is not continuous but broken or interrupted. The magical romance gathers elements of vernacular expressiveness from everyday life, folk culture, oral tradition, and collective memory, and works them into a narrative of soaring and caring. The romance foregrounds communal aspirations and multigenerational solidarities. By romancing the vernacular, Morrison endeavors to preserve it. But by exposing its rift with the tragic realism of individual and collective destinies, she at the same time transposes the vernacular culture into a new discursive and communicative space.

This new discursive space is that of the novelistic, and this particular novel draws generously upon the genre’s capacity for realism, irony, and critique. The new communicative space is that of the socially complex, multicultural public, with all its contours of difference and inequality and all its symbolic import as an image of a democratic polity. Once Morrison’s writing enters this new communicative space, it overreaches the African American community itself, in the sense that the meanings produced in the vernacular culture now travel beyond the community’s partly real, partly imaginary boundaries. At the same time, her writing stakes that community’s claim to participation in the public, and thus advances onto the risky terrain where the community cannot be preserved without being transformed.

The reading public to which novelistic discourse is addressed differs from the community that produces, from and for itself, the vernacular culture. Multicultural and multiracial, the public coincides—in principle—with the body politic. The difference between the community and the public is an inescapable feature of multicultural society. However, there is also another kind of discord between the African American community and the American polity. The exclusion of blacks from full
participation in politics, the public sphere, and civic life distorts the meaning of the "public." In turn, the very production of African American literature applies pressure on the society, symbolically and institutionally, to deepen and widen the participation of the African American community. But so long as the rights and the means of full participation are denied the community, African American writing finds itself buffeted between conflicting discursive contexts. At the most elementary level, then, the discrepancy between magical romance and tragic realism in *Song of Solomon* is used by Morrison to give a perceptible, intelligible shape—in short, to give form—to the discord between community and public or, more specifically, between vernacular and literary expressiveness.

A crucial question remains unanswered. Why does Morrison choose to stylize the discrepancy between vernacular and literary expressiveness through the incommensurability of magical romance and tragic realism? A thorough answer to this question might well have to assess a variety of comparative and theoretical questions that have, for example, led critics from Bakhtin and Northrop Frye to René Girard, Fredric Jameson, and Michael McKeon to suggest that the ironic reinscription of romance is a mainspring of novelistic discourse. I'm not prepared to evaluate that generalization here, though I am suspicious of any tendency to affix a single meaning to the recurrent interaction between these genres. I want especially to caution against a hasty generalization based on the analogy Morrison adduces: *romance* is to *vernacular culture* as *novel* is to *literary culture*. The stress needs to remain on the particular context and purposes of her playing upon this analogy.

Magical romance permitted Morrison to evoke or reinscribe a dynamic of the vernacular culture—its everyday, oblique, fugitive tenacity—while simultaneously foregrounding its capacity to express communal aspirations and multigenerational solidarities. Now, it is just those aspirations and solidarities that have continually been put at risk, first by slavery and then by the segregation, political exclusion, and economic exploitation whose effects are legible in the stories of every character in the novel. The discrepancy between magical romance and tragic realism has therefore the further effect of marking, or making reference to, the rift between the aspirations and solidarities of African Americans and the destructive social forces that threaten them.

Is this to suggest that *Song of Solomon* is a contemporary form of social realism? Not, I suppose, if one clings to a pictorial conception of realism and therefore expects the realistic novel primarily to render descriptions of social conditions. But that is a depleted conception of realism in the first place. Novelistic form manifests the realist imperative by coming to grips with the process of social and political reality, including its movement in time. And the representation of process is not a matter of the

John Brenkman
picture-perfect rendering of objects or actions, nor is it the re-presentation of an already established, consensually validated view of social reality. These last two definitions of realism have become the standard strawmen for various antirealisms but have little to do with modern novelistic realism itself.

When Erich Auerbach examined the beginnings of modern realism in the European novel, he recognized that the writer's relation to reality had somehow been refashioned in the aftermath of the French Revolution. The new political culture, we can say with Furet and Claude Lefort, was fraught with a new form of uncertainty and ungroundedness. The formation of political movements, the legitimacy of political rule, and the very possibility for politics to channel the activities of society would henceforth depend, on the one hand, on the ability of ruling groups to secure the legitimacy of their power with reference to the "people" and, on the other hand, on the capacity of mass movements to master the ever-shifting necessity of creating, defending, or dismantling specific institutions. For individuals and groups there is no unmoving place to stand within society and no vantage point immune from the effects of changes beyond one's own immediate control.

Auerbach identified the literary relevance of this new reality in his commentary on Stendhal in Mimesis, seeing him as the first modern realist:

He who would account for his real life and his place in human society is obliged to do so upon a far wider practical foundation and in a far larger context than before, and to be continually conscious that the social base upon which he lives is not constant for a moment but is perpetually changing through convulsions of the most various kinds. . . . [T]he reality which [Stendhal] encountered was so constituted that, without permanent reference to the immense changes of the immediate past and without a premonitory searching after the imminent changes of the future, one could not represent it; all the human figures and all the human events in his work appear upon a ground politically and socially disturbed.

This is the realist imperative that animates Morrison's writing. To get at Morrison's response to it, it is necessary to stay focused on her discursive practice and pull together several strands of the analysis thus far. As I've shown, the discursive rift created from the interplay between the genres of magical romance and tragic realism is made to signify another kind of rift, namely, that between vernacular and literary expressiveness. The incongruence of the cultural contexts of the novel's production is thus inscribed within the novel's own form. Once the analogy is made between the conflict of genres and the conflict of cultural contexts, yet another referent starts to take shape. Because vernacular expressiveness is associated with the communal culture and literary expressiveness with the public
Morrison’s is a social realism not of “conditions” but of process.

Culture, their clash refers in turn to the conflict between the community and the polis. The force of African American aspirations and solidarities is set off against the destructive impact of racial oppression and political exclusion.

The conflict between community and polis is readable in two directions: it points to the injustices that threaten to destroy the aspirations and solidarities of the African American community, and it marks out the ground that that community has to traverse politically if it is to participate in the polis while yet fulfilling its communal aspirations and solidarities. Morrison’s is a social realism not of “conditions” but of process. Key to her writing’s representation of social and political process are the very gaps in narrative structure that at first blush might have seemed an evasion of politics and history. By seemingly blanking out the history that unfolded between the end of the story (1963) and the writing of the novel (1977), Morrison demarcates a political task left undone.

The black political movements of those years did not succeed in securing full participation in the polis or fulfilling those communal aspirations and solidarities. By representing the inhabitants of Southside as still virtually untouched by the historical and political awareness the intervening years would bring, Morrison reveals how the potentials contained within the community’s practices, traditions, and memories are completely at risk in the absence of a political articulation. At the same time, by suffusing the telling of this tale with a sense of the actual movement of politics and society in the intervening years, Morrison stressed that the needed political articulations were once again lacking and that the community was being precipitated into some new tragedy dimly intimated in the fate of Milkman, Guitar, Hagar, and Pilate.

The “reality” to which Song of Solomon refers is not society “in process” in the abstract. Morrison’s writing refers, rather, to politically unarticulated social reality. That is, it attempts to render those aspects of social reality that have remained uncomprehended and unconnected in political discourses and political movements. It gives representation to a life-world as it is subjected to unprecedented social changes and as it strives to maintain its traditions, identity, and solidarities. Morrison’s writing measures the need for the African American community to force its way to inclusion in the national polity, even as it portends that that act will subject the communal traditions, identity, and solidarities to still more unforeseeable transformations. Song of Solomon engages a kind of tacit dialogue with the political articulations that surround it, taking stock of the range of available political responses to “reality,” adequate and inadequate, just and unjust, and giving meaningful shape and urgency to the disjunctions of community and polis.
I want to thank Houston A. Baker Jr., Carla Kaplan, and W. Douglas Payne for their extremely helpful comments and insights.

Many critics opt for Song of Solomon's magical romance to the exclusion of its tragic realism. The resulting readings are one-sided insofar as they underestimate Morrison's engagement with harsh social realities and political uncertainties, but they are rich in their evocation of the elements of myth, folk culture, and naming from which is extrapolated an alternative world of experience and identity. Foremost among such romantic-transcendent readings of the novel are the following:

Valerie Smith, “The Quest for and Discovery of Identity in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon,” Southern Review 21, no. 3 (summer 1985), 721-32, and reprinted in Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and K. A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993), 274–83, organizes the novel's themes along an opposition between two worlds or cosmologies: an individualistic, patriarchal, future-oriented and linear, possessive and exploitive world represented by Macon Dead Sr.; and a communal, woman-centered, past-regarding and cyclical, empathetic and spiritual world represented by Pilate. According to Smith, Milkman’s quest for identity is the process of discovery that leads him to shed the cosmology of his upbringing and embrace the alternative. “Assuming identity is thus a communal gesture in this novel . . . Milkman bursts the bonds of the Western, individualistic conception of self, accepting in its place the richness and complexity of a collective sense of identity.”


Barbara Christian, “Community and Nature: The Novels of Toni Morrison,” Journal of Ethnic Studies 7, no. 4 (winter 1980), 65–78, interprets the folk element of Morrison’s writing as her exploration of the “meaning of Nature” concretized in motifs of earth and air. According to Christian, the folk traditions of the Southern community represented in the novel resolve the tension between earth (= earthly matters) and air (= freedom) in a way that Milkman’s Northern community, preoccupied with possession and things “artificial,” cannot. Macon
and Pilate are opposites to the extent that he seeks to possess Nature, through property and acquisition, while she "represents the tradition that so identifies with Nature, it has no desire for material things." While Christian acknowledges that Milkman may be leaping to his death at the end, it is simply because "he must still suffer the consequences of his former quest for gold. . . . For in order to fly, he learns that he must surrender his life to the air rather than own it: 'You want my life? You need it? Here.'"

Two critics repudiate the romantic-transcendent readings from contrasting perspectives:

Joyce Ann Joyce, "Structural and Thematic Unity in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon," *CEA Critic* 49, no. 2-4 (winter-summer 1986-87), 185-98, believes the novel charts the "sweeping disintegration" of the Dead family. She sees only cultural pathology where others have seen acts of cultural creativity and inventiveness: "by rearranging and completely muddling Biblical genealogy, Morrison metaphorically suggests that the Black people in her novel whose ancestors were uprooted from their native land have become cultural hybrids with lives governed by chance and ignorance." James W. Coleman, "Beyond the Reach of Love and Caring: Black Life in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon," *Obsidian II: Black Literature in Review* 1, no. 3 (winter 1986), 151-61, sees a different kind of pathology represented in the novel. The social psychology of oppression spawns a pathology that is epitomized by Guitar and the Seven Days but in fact defines the world of all the novel's characters, with the exception of Pilate. Morrison expresses "an essential truth about the Black experience," according to Coleman, namely, "that creative, imaginative, and practical Black survival responses to oppression inevitably merge into the strange and destructive behavior that is a consistent, unbreakable cycle in the Black community." Coleman rejects the idea of any "positive, restorative effect of the Black folkloric tradition in the novel" and considers the ending "romantic" and therefore flawed.

In my view, Joyce mistakenly equates cultural hybridity with decline, and Coleman undervalues the novel's distinctive use of vernacular and folk traditions. Nevertheless, they offer an antidote to the romantic-transcendent interpretations that typically read the ending as a triumphant resolution. Romancing the vernacular also promotes a false dichotomy between the values of the folk culture and "Western" "modern" values. When, for example, Valerie Smith claims that in Milkman's "ancestors' world communal and mythical values prevail over individualism and materialism," she misses the complexity of the ancestors' choices and acts. The great-grandfather Solomon took flight from slavery on his own, leaving his grieving wife and twenty-one children behind. Nor was the next generation a stranger to materialism and individualism; the grandfather Jake related to the land as property, as his to work and improve. The romantic-transcendent readings impute a politics to Morrison that is not grounded so much in African American history as in absolutes: the folk versus modernity, the African versus the Western, Nature versus social hierarchy.

Political readings of *Song of Solomon* all face the question of identifying what aspect of the narrative provides the surest clue to Morrison's political outlook (which even her most extensive interviews have done little to clarify):

Harry Reed, "Toni Morrison, Song of Solomon, and Black Cultural Nationalism," *The Centennial Review* 32, no. 1 (winter 1988), 50-64, makes a compelling case for Morrison's contribution to black cultural nationalism. Morrison holds, he argues, that blacks' "cultural survival" is prerequisite to any "political progress."
She rectifies the views of previous black cultural nationalisms, radical and conserva-
tive, by bringing to light black women's role in creating and preserving cultural forms and traditions. Reed considers Pilate “the embodiment of black folk wisdom,” while even Circe and Ruth are “nationalist archetypes” expressing “the unity of the black historical experience”: “Their personae incorporate bits of Ancient Africa, New World Slavery, Southern Reconstruction and the present.”

Kimberly W. Benston, “Re-Weaving the ‘Ulysses Scene’: Enchantment, Post-Oedipal Identity, and the Buried Text of Blackness in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon,” in Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text, ed. Hortense J. Spillers (New York: Routledge, 1991), 87–109, also sees in Morrison’s reworking of black literary motifs a revisionary “womanist” contribution to black cultural nationalism. The intertextual reference point he foregrounds is Invisible Man: “If Morrison critiques Ellison by directly refashioning the Ulysses experience of bewitchment—suggesting thereby that the black woman, far from blocking or distorting the male quest, serves as its enabling agent—she more radically undermines the assumed equation of maleness with mobile self-discovery by subtly presenting the female quest as a parallel, if not prior, version of its male counterpart.”

While Reed and Benston identify Morrison’s politics in broad brush strokes as a cultural nationalism regrounded in women’s social and cultural role, other critics believe Song of Solomon endorses very definite political or ideological perspectives:

Ralph Story, “An Excursion into the Black World: The ‘Seven Days’ in Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon,” Black American Literature Forum 23, no. 1 (spring 1989), 149–58, stands out among Morrison’s critics in viewing the Seven Days as exemplary militants who “have even transcended ego and the need for glory or martyrdom”: “The central message conveyed by Morrison’s Seven Days via the Milkman-Guitar dialogue is that if more than just a handful of courageous, righteous, and sacrificial black men and women had been willing to ‘love’ enough to avenge the murder of their people, virtually giving up their lives, then the overt and covert oppression of black folk might have ended long ago.” Story distorts Morrison’s psychological insights into black rage by extracting a rigid allegory of class, race, and politics from the narrative.

Susan Willis, “Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison,” in Black Literature and Literary Theory, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Methuen, 1984), 263–83, reprinted in Toni Morrison, ed. Gates and Appiah, 308–29, assimilates Morrison’s writing to Latin American magic realism, likening the latter’s juxtaposition of Third World myth and First World rationality to Morrison’s juxtaposition of rural black culture and Northern consumer society. While Willis insightfully relates the novel’s style to this kind of interpenetration of different social worlds, with their distinct values, history, and temporality, she construes the object of Morrison’s social criticism too narrowly as reification and in turn idealizes the culture and everyday life of African Americans as a kind of enforced resistance or alternative to capitalist society: “None of Morrison’s black characters actually accedes to the upper reaches of bourgeois reification, but there are some who come close. They are saved only because they remain marginal to the bourgeois class and are imperfectly assimilated to bourgeois values.”

Wahneema Lubiano, “The Postmodernist Rag: Political Identity and the Vernacular in Song of Solomon” (I thank the editors of Social Text for bringing this manuscript to my attention), attempts to derive a politics for Song of Solomon...
from its postmodern style and approach to the self. Lubiano’s argument draws on Gates’s work on the Signifying Monkey and resembles Benston’s fine-grained reading of Song of Solomon, especially his idea that the narrative reveals the making of the self in the “collective translations or improvisations” of the vernacular. Rejecting the romantic-transcendent reading of the novel and disputing any merely affirmative interpretation of flight, Lubiano finds the alternative to Milkman’s apoliticism and Guitar’s destructive racial politics in Pilate: “Finally, it is not around Milkman and Guitar that political possibilities cohere; it is Pilate, who, by defying Macon Dead Sr. and intervening in his marriage, is the political agent responsible for Milkman’s life. It is Pilate who teaches Milkman to ‘read’ history. And it is Pilate who represents not only embodied history but the praxis that comes with recognizing history’s effects, the willingness to theorize about possibilities in the face of history, and the ability to make concrete alternatives to personal and public inequities.” I am skeptical of giving Pilate overt political significance, since she is nowhere associated with any political idea or movement or process. Turning Pilate into an exemplar of a supposedly radical postmodern politics, the “marker of a decentered and highly effective political identity” warring against “Euro-American systems of oppression,” risks tearing the novel from its historical context in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements.

Melissa Walker, Down from the Mountaintop: Black Women’s Novels in the Wake of the Civil Rights Movement, 1966–1989 (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991), 131–45, documents the many, barely submerged historical benchmarks throughout the novel, arguing that Morrison has attempted to dramatize through Milkman and Guitar “the consequences of living as [these] characters do, with little awareness of the historical forces affecting their lives.”