AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF


Title: Morrison’s Magical Reality: Disrupting the Politics of Memory

Abstract approved:

___________________________________________________________________

Anita Helle

Novelist Toni Morrison is well-known for using the concept she calls rememory, or the process of actively revisiting and reconstructing a cultural past. Many critics agree that Morrison uses rememory in a strategic way, so that it provides sturdy framework for a larger discussion of issues of race, class, and gender in her literary works. A less well-known literary strategy employed by Morrison is her use of magical realism in her writing. In the context of rememory, literary magical realism functions as a particular literary device that defines reality in terms of the fantastical, often paralleling a politic that defines history in terms of marginalized perspectives. In this thesis I argue that Morrison’s strategies of rememory and magical realism serve the dual purpose of functioning aesthetically, as well as politically, to provide a larger context of cultural critique. Discussion is focused primarily on selected textual examples of rememory and magical realism from Song of Solomon (1977), Beloved (1987), and Jazz (1992). This thesis uses the methodology of feminist cultural and literary theory to discuss how the author effectively negotiates the politics of memory to ultimately empower her African-American female characters, as well as to provide a model for feminist activism.
Morrison’s Magical Reality: Disrupting the Politics of Memory

by
Amanda L. Littke

A THESIS

submitted to
Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies

Presented April 30, 2010
Commencement June 2010

APPROVED:

__________________________________________
Major Professor, representing Women Studies

__________________________________________
Director of Interdisciplinary Studies Program

__________________________________________
Dean of the Graduate School

I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

__________________________________________
Amanda L. Littke, Author
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author expresses sincere appreciation to the following people…

Dr. Anita Helle – for her assistance, mentorship, and patience through the many drafts of the thesis-writing process,

Dr. Susan Shaw – for her encouragement when I was acclimating to graduate studies,

Dr. Lisa Ede – for always emphasizing the importance of respect,

Dr. Leslie Richards – for kindly becoming part of my wonderful, all-woman committee,

Dr. Maude Jennings – for introducing me to the works of Toni Morrison so many years ago,

My Women Studies cohort – for deeply inspiring me through their feminist work,

My WS 223 and WS 224 students – for allowing me to rediscover the joy and empowerment I felt the first time I took a Women Studies course,

My family and friends – for their abiding faith and support in my choice to move across the country in order to pursue my dreams,

Lily – for always being happy to see me at the end of a long day,

Matt – for grounding, centering, and balancing me (Namaste, Beauty),

And to you, the readers of this thesis – be inspired… do good work… create change.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter One: Theories of Rememory, Magical Realism, and Morrison</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Origins of Rememory</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representations of Women as Sites of Rememory and Magical Realism</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Roots of the Magical Realist Aesthetic</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situating Morrison in the Community of Magical Realist Writers</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Four Basic Tenets of Literary Magical Realism</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Two: Morrison’s Practices of Rememory and Magical Realism</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Morrison and Magical Influences</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morrison’s Magical Realities</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Oral Traditions as Magical Connections to Community</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghosts as Magical Connections to Community</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women as Spiritual and Cultural Mediums</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magical Realism Redefining Representation and Reality</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redefining Black Femininity and Motherhood</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magical and Feminist Counternarratives</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conclusion: Bearing Witness to a Legacy of Praxis</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Magically Creating Legacies that Bear Witness</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praxis as Liberatory Education</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Endnotes                                                          | 61   |
| Works Cited                                                       | 68   |
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Margaret Garner’s Hearth</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Looking Out of the Garner’s Window</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. A Moment of Silence</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While pursing my undergraduate degree in Women Studies, I had the distinct pleasure of traveling with my mentor to Cincinnati, Ohio to attend the fourth biennial conference on Toni Morrison. These conferences are sponsored by the Toni Morrison Society and focus on various topics regarding Toni Morrison and her literary works. This particular conference, aptly entitled “Toni Morrison and Sites of Memory,” was held in the summer of 2005 and was dedicated to the legacy surrounding the subject matter of which Morrison writes in her critically-acclaimed novel, *Beloved*. While at the conference, I was able to meet the author as well as attend the Cincinnati premiere performance of the opera co-written by Morrison, entitled “Margaret Garner.” We also toured Cincinnati’s National Underground Railroad Freedom Center and held vigil at the very place along the Ohio River where many slaves historically crossed to seek their respective freedoms in the North.

During the course of the conference, we also visited the Gaines plantation, known as “Maplewood.” Set amongst the lush and rolling hills of Maplewood, Kentucky, the landscape was superbly stunning, yet it was also clear that the memories and experiences of the past have never left this place. The most memorable experience I had while visiting the plantation was my opportunity to step into the very house where Margaret lived during her time as a slave in Gaines’ keeping. The combination of overwhelming sensations I felt while standing in that dwelling was nearly indescribable. Fear. Anger. Deep sorrow. Injustice. Empathy. There was a bit of magical realism present that day, as I can attest to the fact that amid my own realities, I felt Margaret’s lingering presence in that one-room house in much the same
way that Beloved’s presence remained for so many years inside the walls of the fictional 124 Bluestone Road.

I attempted to look out Margaret’s window and create a rememory for myself, to understand what it might have felt like for her to peer outside of her window while feeling like a prisoner in her own “home.” I tried to imagine the difficulties she must have faced in deciding to kill her own daughter in order to eternally save her from the atrocities of slavery. I ultimately decided that some rememories are best left to the memory holder herself, and that what I can do is to bear witness to their legacies in my own classroom.

It is quite clear that the tragic nature of slavery and other racial injustices lives on in hallowed places, such as these, where unspeakable acts were committed, innocent lives were broken, and families were torn apart by the forces of domination and hatred. I felt humbled to be standing in such a place that also serves as a testament to those who survived racial intolerance and are continuing to heal from its effects through subsequent generations, many years after manumission and civil rights proceedings were legally put into place. Please join me in remembering their legacies.
Morrison’s Magical Reality: Disrupting the Politics of Memory
Figure 1: Margaret Garner’s Hearth

This picture was taken at the former residence of Margaret Garner on the Maplewood (Gaines) Plantation in Maplewood, Kentucky. I felt her presence lingering here, near the long-forgotten hearth.

“Sometimes the photograph of a close friend or relative – looked at too long – shifts, and something more familiar than the dear face itself moves there. They can touch it if they like, but don’t, because they know things will never be the same if they do” (Beloved 290).
The Origins of Rememory

In a 1983 essay entitled “Memory, Creation, and Writing,” Morrison states that “[m]emory (the deliberate act of remembering) is a form of willed creation. It is not an effort to find out the way it really was – that is research. The point is to dwell on the way it appeared and why it appeared in that particular way” (“Memory” 213). In this statement, Morrison suggests that memory possesses a malleable quality, capable of being willed and constructed (and perhaps reconstructed) by the human mind, and – in the case of writers like Morrison – rendered in textual strategies. As if anticipating the body of her work yet to come, Morrison once again returns to the importance of memory in 1987, during one of her paramount instances of artful storytelling in *Beloved*.

Rememory is a concept first introduced in Morrison’s Nobel Prize-winning novel, *Beloved*. This novel was not only a major success for Morrison, but also served as a source-text for her initial explication of the term, which has since been refined and revisited by Morrison in subsequent fiction and literary criticism. Readers gain an emergent sense of rememory from the mouth of protagonist Sethe in one of the first scenes that illuminate the shrouded pasts of the inhabitants of 124 Bluestone Road. Denver asks her mother, Sethe, about her visions of a woman in a white dress and the possible connection this female figure has to the painful, unspoken parts of Sethe’s past. In illustrating a basic definition of the term and its disruption of linear time, Sethe says to Denver, “I was talking about time. It’s so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do” (*Beloved* 38). In this
statement, Sethe (and Morrison) seems to suggest that rememory – in its simplest conception – is a break in the fabric of time that allows an individual to revisit the past as if it is part of the present by simply “dwelling” upon the past. When readers later discover in the novel that this female figure serves to foreshadow the return of Beloved in the flesh (as evidenced by the unmistakable likenesses of their dresses), it becomes clear that the process of rememory has the unique potential to recreate portions of the past within the context of the present (Beloved 53-54). In other words, Morrison’s fitting term rememory can be defined as the active remembrance of a memory which allows for a comingling of the past and present, creating an alternate sense of reality for those who remember.

Rememories can also coincide with one another, allowing the experiences of those who remember to overlap and become entwined, especially in cases of shared trauma or social violence. Sethe explains this overlap in further describing the qualities of rememory to Denver:

Someday you will be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it’s you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. (Beloved 38)

The overlap of self and other implied in this passage exemplifies Morrison’s use of rememory to build upon distinctive features of African-American history. Through the course of U.S. history, various forms of oppression have affected African-Americans in such a way that many share the burdens of individual or family memories rooted in slavery and racism. These oppressive forces have served to fragment Black American history, often times breaking apart families and obscuring genealogical and cultural lines. In discussing the possible healing effects of rememory
on communities affected by shared trauma, professor and literature scholar Mae G. Henderson writes, “[i]f dismemberment deconstitutes and fragments the whole, then re-memory functions to re-collect, re-assemble, and organize the various discrete and heterogeneous parts into a meaningful, sequential whole” (qtd. in Marks 48). In “Unspeakable Thoughts Unspoken,” (1989) Morrison touches upon the inherent connections African-Americans have to one another due to their shared heritage. She writes of the responsibilities they have to themselves and each other to reclaim the “unspeakable” memories and histories that have been silenced by dominant culture (“Unspeakable” 22). In other words, the culturally-defined aspect of rememory presupposes that similar traces of collective history are genealogically encoded, enabling them to be passed down to subsequent generations. Thus, Morrison’s conception of rememory does not only occur in individual instances, but is also closely linked to the African-American collective because of the cultural importance placed upon connection to one’s community.

In most literary criticism the concept of rememory is largely attributed to Morrison, yet there remains some confusion surrounding the origin of the term. Though small in number, a few scholars purport that the term rememory did not first begin with Morrison’s assertions in Beloved. Rather, the term was first published in the Oxford English Dictionary by fifteenth-century historian John Harding and was thought to have been used to refer to various forms of art produced by the minds of human beings (Marks 51). Nevertheless, for many critics, historians, and feminist literary scholars, Morrison has arguably popularized the term and is well-known for
her use of this concept in relation to instances of magical realism in her writing, as well as through her elaboration of its connection to her female characters.

For many of the female characters in Morrison’s literary works, rememory is simultaneously a healing act as well as a way to reconstruct often painful pasts, riddled with institutionalized, racialized, and gendered violence (Marks 52). Morrison scholar Kathleen Marks suggests that the dual nature of rememory, which allows for both denial and potential healing, is also an example of viewing the past apotropaically, through a process intended to dispel evil. Marks likens the apotropaic process to Morrison’s definition of rememory, claiming that both intentionally utilize memory as a tool to ward off the evils of the past so that they do not repeat themselves in the present by allowing memory to “distinguish between what of the past is threatening and what is not” (Marks 5). In remembering the past through an apotropaic lens, Morrison’s female characters are able to face their painful pasts head-on. Thereby, they each have opportunities to decide whether the past will be denied (thereby possibly perpetuating its effects through their own actions in the present), or if they will resist the effects of the past to create a potentially healing future for themselves and their loved ones.

One potential effect of Morrison’s concept of rememory on human thought is that it can serve as a healing process for those who remember and their communities. This is especially true in cases of shared social trauma, as literary scholar Keith Byerman explicates trauma theory, concluding that ambiguities and tensions that exist for certain groups of people in the present are due to traumas of the past that have been forgotten, denied, or misrepresented (Byerman 9). Very often in U.S. history, the
perspectives and subjective histories of African-Americans have been forgotten, gone
ignored, or have been recorded by privileged record-keepers and writers, rather than
by those who experienced these times of turmoil firsthand. However, Morrison’s
concept of rememory may be linked to constructs of power and witnessing. In
response to historical and social injustices, Byerman asserts that the “distorting effects
of the ‘white word’” are directly combated by Morrison’s differing narrative, in
which she encourages active recognition and reclamation of collective history, “based
on revelation and witness” (Byerman 28). Similarly, American studies scholar Nancy
J. Peterson contrasts hegemonic, grand narratives and the style of Morrison,
concluding that Morrison’s narratives, although largely considered historical fiction,
allow for the perspectives of “people who have been rendered invisible or silent in the
frames and documents of official history” (Peterson 16). It is in capitalizing upon the
experiences of those traditionally marginalized that Morrison promotes agency and a
healing space for her characters to reclaim the past, both at the individual and
collective levels.

It must be noted, however, that not every rememory ultimately paves the way
toward healing. The second effect of rememory on human thought is denial of the
past, as Sethe points out: “[f]unny how you lose sight of some things and memory
others” (Beloved 211). In the same way that one is able to create an act of rememory,
he or she is also able to create an act of dismemory. Unlike rememory, this term is not
traditionally attributed to Morrison; however, this concept is clearly exemplified
through the way her characters selectively forget certain memories in the interest of
survival. Dismemory is best illustrated by the descriptions in the coda of Beloved,
where the ghost of 124 is deliberately “disremembered” as an act of resistance to a traumatic past that cannot be completely reconciled through the healing effects of rememory (*Beloved* 289). While remembering her experiences in slavery, Sethe emphasizes the importance of dismemory in stating that the hardships of the past come back to haunt those who remember, regardless of what is done to prevent them from doing so. At this point in the novel, the most Sethe hopes for each day is to succeed at the “serious work of beating back the past” (*Beloved* 14, 77). Likewise, Keith Byerman writes,

in the context of a traumatic history, memory also plays a complicated role as events are both repressed and recurrent. Scenes of violence, humiliation, and dehumanization are blocked out by both individuals and communities, but they cannot thereby be erased. (Byerman 27)

In cases of historical trauma, the pain of the past does not lie in the realm of memory alone. Within the context of Morrison’s fiction, those who remember may attempt to forget or block out portions of the past, but complete erasure of such severe trauma is nearly impossible. This is especially true for (real or fictional) survivors such as Sethe, who know that each day brings the prospect of traumatic memories which threaten the present.

While some transgressions of racism and hatred cannot fully be forgotten, never forgetting comes with one condition. Some things are meant to be actively forgotten, because if they are actively remembered, their painful recollections might hurt more than help, as evidenced when Beloved returns in flesh form and wreaks havoc on the lives of the inhabitants of 124. Thus, hers is “not a [hi]story to pass on” (*Beloved* 289). This physical entity and the history of social violence she represents are given power in her remembrance, but as soon as she is “[d]isremembered and
unaccounted for,” those who once remembered her are free to live their lives as they so wish (*Beloved* 289). In the same vein, Morrison writes,

> What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don’t think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still right out there. Right in the place where it happened…The picture is still there, and what’s more, if you go there – you who was never there – if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. (*Beloved* 38)

In other words, no amount of rememory can heal some wounds of the past. Therefore, in order to reach some degree of reconciliation with the past, these memories must be abandoned or deliberately forgotten altogether. Those who remember might not be able to fully forget, but they must also be careful what they recollect, for the past is always there, lingering, waiting to be remembered and manifested in the present. In discussing the manifestations specific to Morrison’s text, we must extend the concept of rememory one step further to include its connection to the literary genre of magical realism, the subject matter of which comprises the following sections.

**Representations of Women as Sites of Rememory and Magical Realism**

Literary magical realism, which is often marked by its elements of haunting, maintains a unique connection to rememory in Morrison’s texts through the actions and memories of her female characters. Quite often, manifestations of rememory in Morrison’s narratives come in the form of spectral figures or ghosts, which serve both literal and metaphorical functions in her texts. Literary scholar Daniel Erickson’s work examines Morrison’s *Beloved* and other magical realist works from a historical perspective, surmising that the presence of ghosts in Morrison’s fiction represents the
absence of an unfettered history for African-Americans while also metaphorically emphasizing the importance of reclaiming said past for the African-American community. In illustrating how rememory aides the presence of magical realism in Morrison’s texts, he writes, “the ghost’s intermediate existence represents the parallel worlds in which the characters live, simultaneously negotiating their enslaved past and their emancipated present” (Erickson 79). Going one step further to connect individual memories to historical recovery, Peterson proposes that this negotiation between the wounds of the past and the realities of the present inherently brings about the desire to forget that which is most painful and traumatic, thereby creating unmistakable silences in an otherwise rich narrative form (Peterson 67). In successive sections, I argue that is in these very silences that Morrison allows magical realism to thrive in an attempt to fill the spaces of these silences with counternarratives that largely capitalize upon African-American female perspectives.

Thus far, I have only discussed the connection between rememory and the women of Beloved, because these connections are the most explicit and illustrative of Morrison’s constructs. It is important to note that most of the female characters in Morrison’s narratives are the prime sites for rememory and subsequent occurrences of magical realism, perhaps in less obvious ways than those clearly defined in Beloved. For example, literary scholar P. Gabrielle Foreman proposes that Morrison’s female characters preserve and pass on oral traditions which allow for African spiritualities, mythologies, and ideologies to seep into the realities of Morrison’s characters and to counteract the fragmentary effects of dominant history and discourse (Foreman 285). Additionally, Marks argues that rememory privileges the perspectives of traditionally
marginalized women, as it encourages exposure of “inner, feminine, and psychic realit[ies]” which have been largely ignored by patriarchal culture (Marks 132).

Similarly, in 1971, feminist writer Adrienne Rich discusses the important connections between memory, cultural survival, and female empowerment in writing,

> Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text [history] from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival… We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us. (Rich 190)

Like Rich’s concept of re-vision, Morrison’s construct of rememory is, indeed, an “act of survival” for African-American women, as they have been doubly-marginalized in terms of their representation (or lack thereof) at the hands of hegemonic, patriarchal culture. In response to these social inequities, Toni Morrison utilizes both rememory and magical realism to go beyond and often transgress the socially-constructed boundaries that were historically established for women of color. Through the incorporation of these strategies, Morrison is ultimately able to empower and change the lives of her female characters. In utilizing the varied experiences of Black American women as the driving force behind the characters she develops, she is able to cleverly intersperse dialogue which exposes the social injustices that living women of color have faced and continue to face within dominant society. It is in this way that Morrison’s prose serves not only an aesthetic capacity, but also provides powerful and moving political commentary.
The Roots of the Magical Realist Aesthetic

The term *magical realism* has served to express the cultural and political identifications of many groups around the world and has evolved over time to include both a visual artistic style and a written literary genre. The term *magischer realismus* (magic realism) was first associated with German art critic Franz Roh in 1925 to describe the then-current artistic trend of moving away from the style of Expressionism, which was signaled by a return to the style known as Realism.³ In terms of the art world, magic realism was marked by unconventional visual representations of ordinary objects. Although there were rarely any overtly fantastical representations incorporated into these early modernist works of art, the “magical” aspect of this artistic style was in the way it could evoke visceral reactions in viewers to look upon ordinary objects with “new eyes” (Roh 17).

However, the associations between magical realism and art are certainly not limited to the early modernist visual artists of Europe, as magical realism has evolved to include other cultures and other forms of artistic and political expression. In 1949, Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier redefined the term to describe a Latin-American literary movement known as *lo real maravilloso americano*.⁴ Translated in English to mean “the marvelous American reality,” it was embraced in the literary world by Latin-American modernist writers, including such notables as Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Luis Borges, and Juan Rulfo, all of whom used the aforementioned term to describe their styles of blending elements of the fantastical into the often politically-charged, yet altogether real, environments and settings of their respective literary works (Zamora and Faris 7). In contrast to the idea originally presented by
Roh, which allowed the artists and critics of the visual art world to question the traditional representation of ordinary objects, the literary adoption of the term took Roh’s idea one step further. This literary genre allowed fantastical components to transgress the boundaries established by traditional definitions of what is real, thereby allowing writers and readers of the literary world to question the very notions of representation, politics, and reality.

Situating Morrison in the Community of Magical Realist Writers

Although the primary site of the literary genre was founded in the writings of Latin-American authors, magical realism has been increasingly expanded to encompass the works of various writers of color. However, it is difficult to situate Toni Morrison within the community of magical realist writers, as she has maintained a complicated stance toward such classification of her writing. On at least one occasion, she has commented that definitive labels might simplify the point of including African tradition, culture, and spirituality in her writing. In her famous essay, “Memory, Creation, and Writing,” (1983) Morrison writes that in incorporating these aspects into her writing, such “information [is] often dismissed as ‘lore’ or ‘gossip or ‘magic’” (“Memory” 217). Likewise, in an interview in 1986, Morrison claimed to be “indifferent” to the “evasive label” of magical realism in regard to her literature, as she believed on one hand that the label “dilutes the realism” of her narratives, while on the other hand maintained that the label is somewhat legitimatized by the supernatural and mythical occurrences that often take place in her novels (Davis 226). Despite Morrison’s ambivalent stance, magical realism scholars such as Faris,
Zamora, Foreman, and others have placed her within the magical realist community, also citing Morrison’s work surrounding rememory as being essential to magical realism’s political implications in her literary works.

The Four Basic Tenets of Literary Magical Realism

Although definitions of magical realism have been drawn from a diverse cultural field, most scholars and critics agree on some basic tenets. For the purposes of this essay, I have included some of the definitions most agreed upon, as well as the definitions most useful to discussion of Morrison’s text.

First, it is important to note that the genre of magical realism is starkly different from that of the genre of fantasy literature. In the first published study of magical realist literature in 1935, Professor Angel Flores writes, “[t]he practitioners of magical realism cling to reality, as if to prevent ‘literature’ from getting in their way, as if to prevent their myth from flying off, as in fairy tales, to supernatural realms” (Flores 115-116). In other words, compared to fantasy literature, which most often takes place in unreal or completely imaginary locations, magical realism incorporates elements of fantasy while remaining firmly grounded in reality’s framework.

Likewise, scholar David Mikics writes that magical realism “projects a mesmerizing uncertainty suggesting that ordinary life may also be the scene of the extraordinary” (Mikics 372). Thus, it is quite possible in magical realist literature for supernatural or extraordinary occurrences to take place within the context of real-life situations, thereby challenging traditional notions of representation and reality.
In addition to the characteristics that set it apart from mere fantasy, the second tenet of magical realism is that it assumes individual characters’ connections to a broader sense of community, whether geographical, political, or cultural. Foreman writes, “[m]agical realism, unlike the fantastic or the surreal, presumes that the individual requires a bond with the traditions and the faith of the community, that s/he is historically constructed and connected” (Foreman 286). Similarly, literary critic Luis Leal offers that magical realism is not merely “the creation of imaginary beings or worlds but the discovery of the mysterious relationship between man [woman] and his [her] circumstances” (Leal 122). Although magical realism occurs largely in individual occurrences in literary texts, its implications are farther-reaching to encompass the collective, due to the inherent connection it assumes between the individual and his/her community.

Third, magical realism acknowledges the binaries present in society and seeks to transcend them, rather than adhere to them. As magical realist scholar Lois Parkinson Zamora articulates, magical realism asks the reader to go “beyond the limits of the knowable,” in order to critique widely-held, societal-based assumptions and to define new dimensions of reality, based upon extending individual subjectivity, rather than the values of dominant society (Zamora 498). For many racial and ethnic groups with strong literary roots in magical realism, there are also often connections to long histories of discrimination, oppression, and domination.⁶ Writers within these racial and ethnic groups sought to escape the binaried systems of dominance/submission they saw present in their collective histories through an incorporation of their mythical and “magical” cultural traditions into the discussion of hegemonic reality in their texts.
Magical realist scholar Amaryll Chanady illustrates this concept in writing that magical realism “juxtaposes two worldviews without establishing a hierarchy between them, thus relativizing the dominant Western national paradigm” (Chanady 141). Magical realism’s transcendence beyond dominant modes of thinking and its disruption of hierarchy thereby makes this genre inherently political.

The fourth tenet of magical realism lies in the fact that the genre does not merely serve an aesthetic capacity by artfully blending reality and fantasy, but also serves as a metaphor for a blending of hegemonic history and marginalized history, thereby problematizing the nature of traditional modes of representation. In contrasting magical realism to its literary counterpart (realism), Zamora and Faris explain that “realism intends its version of the world as a singular version, as an objective (hence universal) representation of natural and social realities” while “[m]agical realism also functions ideologically but... less hegemonically, for its program is not centralizing but eccentric: it creates space for interactions of diversity” (Zamora and Faris 3). In terms of this collaborative worldview, Morrison uses the varied voices of liminal figures on the margins of her fictional societies to explicate possibilities of resistance to dominant power structures. In doing so, her characters provide a model for those who have been traditionally dominated or marginalized to become empowered in situations that would otherwise be disempowering. Zamora and Faris connect Morrison’s strategy to other writers in the genre, concluding that “magical realist texts are subversive: their in-betweenness, their all-at-onceness encourages resistance…” (Zamora and Faris 6). In allowing for this “all-at-onceness,” magical realist texts serve to question the politics surrounding memory, history, and
representation. In so doing, Morrison’s literary works create legacies that bear witness to both individual African-American women and the Black American community.
Chapter Two: Morrison’s Practices of Rememory and Magical Realism

Figure 2: Looking Out of the Garner’s Window
This picture was taken through the window of the Garner house, facing the other small cabins which once housed families of slaves. While I looked through the dusty window panes, I attempted to create a rememory of my own.

“Denver was seeing it now and feeling it – through Beloved. Feeling how it must have felt to her mother. Seeing how it must have looked. And the more fine points she made, the more detail she provided, the more Beloved liked it. So she anticipated the questions by giving blood to the scraps her mother and grandmother had told her – and a heartbeat” (*Beloved* 82).
Morrison and Magical Influences

Although Morrison maintains an indifferent stance toward the label of magical realism in regard to her writing, this is not to say that she does not believe in the power of magic and of its ability to manifest in her writing. Morrison has claimed that magic is part of her family history and has asserted that she has used this concept as inspiration for most of the magical aspects in her novels. In an interview in 1977 with Mel Watkins, Morrison purports that in writing *Song of Solomon*, she deliberately “wanted to use black folklore, the magic and superstitious part of it. Black people believe in magic. Once a woman asked me, ‘Do you believe in ghosts?’ I said, ‘Yes. Do you believe in germs?’ It’s part of our heritage” (Watkins 46). Additionally, in an interview in 1986 with Christina Davis, Morrison remembers growing up in a house in which people talked about their dreams with the same authority that they talked about what ‘really’ happened. They had visitations and did not find that fact shocking and they had some sweet, intimate connection with things that were not empirically verifiable. (Davis 226-227)

As evidenced in these two interviews, it seems that Morrison does recognize the importance of magic within her family’s history and of its ability to enhance her literary authority by incorporating aspects of African spirituality, sharing oral traditions of storytelling, recognizing the spiritual presence of ancestors, ghostly or apparitional elements, and elaborating upon women’s connectedness to the supernatural/spiritual realm.
Morrison’s Magical Realities

One of the most effective ways that Morrison illustrates magic in her novels is in her use of magical settings and their connectedness to the people of the past and the struggles they faced. *Song of Solomon* (1977), which moves through three generations of one racially-mixed American family, begins in the historical period just after manumission and ends in the Civil Rights Era of the 1950s and 60s. In this novel, Morrison creates a seemingly ordinary, Southern town that is secretly filled with the magic of cultural ties and traditions. *Jazz* (1992) provides readers with layered senses of time and place through Morrison’s magical envisioning of the streets of New York during the Jazz Age, as well as a connection to a haunting past outside the hustle and bustle of the city. Last, but not least, Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) takes place during the times of slavery and the Underground Railroad, offering a geographic space and a specific household where readers can examine the plaguing aftereffects of horrific social injustices. Although *Jazz* is thought to be part of Morrison’s great trilogy (also including its historical predecessor, *Beloved*, and its subsequent literary descendent, *Paradise*), *Song of Solomon* lies outside this framework. However, I’ve included *Song of Solomon* in lieu of *Paradise* because it is the first novel published by Morrison in which readers gain an emergent sense of her use of magical realism, including implementation of aspects such as ghosts and winged, flying people. In creating the backdrops for these three novels, Morrison sculpts realities for her characters while also simultaneously creating a space for the magic in her works to thrive.

Unlike many of Morrison’s more recent novels, which primarily focus on female protagonists, *Song of Solomon* is centered on the story of Milkman Dead, a
young man who is trying to find a sense of purpose by searching for and reclaiming what he presumes to be his family’s greatest treasure. Although he has never seen the treasure, he believes in its existence due to inflated, fantastical stories told to him by his father, Macon Dead. His father tells him that when he and Pilate were young, their parents died, leaving them orphaned. As a result, the two run away and come upon a cave, in which they find a very pale, old man. The old man approaches them in a menacing manner, and in an effort to protect his sister, Macon kills him. In assessing the old man’s possessions, Macon and Pilate find small bags of gold among his belongings. The two argue about what should be done with the gold, as Macon wants to keep it and Pilate believes that taking the gold incriminates them with the murder of the old man. As a result of this argument, the two part ways and never fully reconcile (*Song of Solomon* 166-172). Constantly driven by money, Macon firmly believes that the gold is still in existence, engaging Milkman in efforts to trace it. Milkman sets out to find the gold, and through a series of events, he finds himself strangely drawn to the town of Shalimar, Virginia.

The magic in the novel first makes its presence known when Milkman is driving en route to Shalimar, and his car breaks down in a small town somewhere in rural Virginia. Milkman stops for assistance at Solomon’s General Store, asking for the name of the town, as he cannot find the town on his Texaco map. One local man pronounces the name of the town as “Shalleemone.” Milkman immediately begins piecing the puzzle together, and finally realizes that his misfortune with the car has coincidentally brought him to his intended destination: Shalimar. Upon closer
inspection, he begins to see more magical coincidences between Shalimar, its inhabitants, and his own family history, as he observes:

All the women looked alike… the men looked very much like the women… wide sleepy eyes that tilted up at the corners, high cheekbones, full lips blacker than their skin, berry-stained, and long long necks… the way Pilate must have looked as a girl, looked even now, but out of place in the big northern city she had come to. (Song of Solomon 263)

In his observations, Milkman begins to foreshadow what is later revealed to reader, as connections between the story of the mythical flying Solomon, the community of Shalimar, and Milkman’s family history become increasingly entwined and he begins to realize that the treasure does not consist of bags of gold, but rather lies in the knowledge and affirmation of his people.

Morrison again stretches the boundaries of the magical to create another magical reality in an urban setting in Jazz. Magical phenomena first make their presence known in the city of New York by means of natural light and its ability to affect the perceptions of the novel’s characters. Morrison’s narrator describes daylight as a magical entity within the city, as it “slants like a razor cutting the buildings in half. In the top half I see looking faces and it’s not easy to tell which are people, which the work of stonemasons” (Jazz 7). In other words, the combination of light (magical) and the stone (reality) plays tricks on her, making it difficult for her to distinguish between reality (living, breathing people) and fantasy (the stone carvings). So, too, is the case in twilight, as the sky changes its colors to accommodate the approaching nightfall. The narrator takes note of the ways in which the colors of the twilight temporarily remove the people from the reality of the city, instead invoking memories and emotions in them through the beauty of comingling colors and shadows
In a sense, these colors and shadows are animated magical presences, acting as catalysts which propel Morrison’s characters (not to mention, her readers) back and forth between the present and past occurrences of the novel. By creating a story which exists in multiple locations and time periods, Morrison thereby allows the magical to pervade into the tangible boundaries of the city.

However, reality is grounded within the confines of the city limits of New York, with its concrete sidewalks and mile-high skyscrapers serving as confirmation of the city as a manufactured space which leaves little room for the fantastic. Thus, most of the actual magical occurrences in the novel take place in the characters’ origins in the country, a place associated with natural phenomena and magical qualities. Morrison strategically juxtaposes the closed-off, constructed world of the city with the open possibilities of the country to heighten the contrast between these binary settings. It is in this juxtapositioning that she creates a space for the magical realism in her text to thrive, such as the occurrences that surround Joe’s quest for Wild, which will be discussed in following sections. Nevertheless, the magical is able to find ways of seeping into the reality of the cityscape through the theme of haunting, as the unreconciled memories of the characters’ pasts serve as the bridge between magical occurrences and their everyday realities.

In the same way that haunting serves to connect the magical and the real in *Jazz*, themes of haunting also provide a backdrop for the larger issues present in *Beloved*. One of the most obvious and perceptible ways that magical realism functions in *Beloved* is in the haunting that surrounds the lives of Sethe and the other women of color in her community. According to scholar Rafael Pérez-Torres, readers
of *Beloved* are “placed generationally in a space that floats somewhere between an absent past and an absent future. Into this static fictional present a ghostly past perpetually attempts to assert itself” (Pérez-Torres 93). Thus, the entire milieu of *Beloved* is a place of unrest, plagued by the spirits of the oppressive and unreconciled pasts of people of color. Not only do the ghosts of slavery’s past haunt these Midwest fields and forests, but the spirits of Native Americans still linger in their respective places of atrocity. The land is rife with the agitation of dead Miami no longer content to rest in the mounds that covered them. Over their heads walked a strange people; through their earth pillows roads were cut; wells and houses nudged them out of eternal rest” (*Beloved* 163).

Furthermore, Sethe’s home (124 Bluestone Road) is in a state of deep unrest, due to Sethe’s actions in the past and the resulting feelings of grief and fear experienced by her entire family. The reader “[m]ight see anything at all at 124,” as the world Morrison creates for readers of *Beloved* provides ample space for all types of being, including the living, the dead, and those who linger between such definitive realms (*Beloved* 194).

By weaving magical aspects and elements of haunting into the fictional lands and homes she creates, Morrison is able to completely envelop the reader in her carefully-constructed magical realities. In doing so, she also creates a space for individual characters to share their memories and experiences with others to create a communal history, which also serves to expose the inequalities and injustices faced by real people of color throughout U.S. history. This very topic will be explored in the following section.
Female Oral Traditions as Magical Connections to Community

As discussed in the previous section, the magical link between the past and the present in Morrison’s fiction also stitches together individual and collective memories. In his article “Culture’s In-Between,” postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha discusses the concept of interstitial agency, or agency based on the collectivity of differing experiences. He believes that in combining individual experiences, marginalized people within ethnic and racial minority groups can collectively bring their histories to a place of coexistence with dominant, white history. He writes,

Hybrid agencies find their voice in a dialectic that does not seek cultural supremacy or sovereignty. They deploy the partial culture from which they emerge to construct visions of community, and versions of historic memory, that give narrative form to the minority positions they occupy; the outside of the inside: the part in the whole. (Bhabha, 58)

In other words, this hybridity does not seek to find one, dominant form of history, but allows for the possibility of previously marginalized voices to find their places at the proverbial table. Through Bhabha’s concept of interstitial agency, the individual memories of racial and ethnic minority groups provide further perspective to collective history, perhaps also thereby providing a place for healing. This concept is mirrored in Morrison’s push for a dialogue which combines the experiences of the individual and the collective, especially through cultural traditions, such as oral storytelling and sharing of myths. Through her incorporation of female storytellers as interstitial agents who promote the (hi)stories of their cultures, Morrison is able to call attention to the experiences of those traditionally marginalized. By including these shared oral heirlooms, Morrison creates a unique overlap of time, in which the story being told brings events of the past into the framework of the present. In actuality, Morrison is
rendering an act of rememory, which allows these events (and perhaps the storytellers that recount them) to simultaneously exist in both spaces of time and history, an act which exposes the underlying magical qualities of the storyteller. Furthermore, in a 1988 interview, Morrison mirrored Bhabha’s concept of interstitial agency and illustrated the healing potential of storytelling traditions in proposing that “each character tells his or her story… the collective sharing of that information heals the individual – and the collective” (Darling 248). In sharing the individual stories of her Black female characters, she is able to connect their varied experiences to the larger collective through ties to cultural traditions of storytelling and language use.

One of the most potent ways in which Morrison creates interstitial agency is through her incorporation of female griot figures. Former president of the Toni Morrison Society, Marilyn Sanders Mobley, writes that in West African tradition, a griot is a “bearer of folk culture… [who uses] narrative fiction for cultural affirmation and transformation” (Mobley 16). Morrison carries on this tradition by utilizing her female griots as the voices of reason and the connections to culture and magic within her novels. As Morrison traces African griot traditions in her Nobel acceptance speech (1993), it is made clear that her personal envisioning of the griot is characteristically female. She writes,

Once upon a time there was an old woman. Blind but wise… In the version I know the woman is the daughter of slaves, black, American, and lives alone in a small house outside of town. Her reputation for wisdom is without peer and without question. Among her people she is both the law and its transgression. The honor she is paid and the awe in which she is held reach beyond her neighborhood to places far away…

(Nobel Lecture 9-10)
For Morrison, the female griot is marked by the connections she has to her ancestors who have faced historical oppression and injustices, yet her authority is proven in her ability to pass on the stories of her people.

In *Song of Solomon*, many women serve as wise storytellers, but Pilate forges ahead as the main female griot, with her continuous implementation of lyrical music as a critical form of communicating the oral history of the Solomon family line. When readers meet Pilate in the first few pages of the novel, she is singing a song which seems meaningless to the individuals around her, but provides its full meaning at novel’s end. Shortly after the suicide of Mr. Smith, which highlights the cultural significance of flight for African-Americans, Pilate sings,

*O Sugarman done fly away
Sugarman done gone
Sugarman cut across the sky
Sugarman gone home*... (*Song of Solomon* 6)

Readers discover later in the novel that “Sugarman” is also Solomon, Morrison’s singular embodiment of the mythical flying Africans who are often described as being encouraged by one individual to sprout wings and fly back to Africa when the oppression they face becomes too difficult to bear.7 Morrison scholar Kokahvah Zauditu-Selassie suggests that in singing this song, Pilate is actually singing an Oriki (West African) lineage chant, which allows her to actively take part in the perpetuation of her family’s cultural line. She writes,

Pilate remains linked with other African women [griots] through a deep and abiding morality and ethical consciousness representing the continuation and resonance of African culture, imagination of homelands, a sense of tradition, and history. (“Women Who Know Things” np)
Likewise, at the end of the novel, when readers witness the death of Pilate, her final breaths request that Milkman continue this lineage chant, as it is actually the song that outlines the direct descendents of the mythical Solomon. In passing on the song, she gives Milkman her legacy and a much-needed sense of purpose by entrusting him with the family history (Song of Solomon 336). Morrison scholar Gurleen Grewal writes of Pilate’s legacy: “A song is what Pilate offers her nephew, a song that is a register of historic and cultural memory” (Grewal 61-63). Even in death, the griot Pilate is able to bear witness to a rich cultural history worthy of keeping alive, a history that heals through its acknowledgement and continual remembrance.

Another famous female griot figure in Morrison’s novels is Baby Suggs in Beloved. Proclaimed as “holy” by many in the community, she is a woman whose son has bought her freedom from slavery, thereby allowing her to create a life as an “unchurched preacher” to newly-freed slaves (Beloved 92). She claims that every part of her life as a slave has broken her physically and mentally, and that the only possession she has left is her heart, which she willingly offers to her brothers and sisters. Many of her sermons in the Clearing are focused on individuals loving their own bodies and thereby loving one another, due to their shared heritage as African-Americans. She contrasts the deprecating effects of slavery with her suggestions for counteracting those effects through love by preaching,

Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it… Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face ’cause they don’t love that either. You got to love it, you!... More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize. (Beloved 93-94)
In claiming agency and validating the existence of oneself, she claims that love can heal the wounds of the past. Moreover, in extending that love to others, individuals are able to connect to the collective because of a shared past and a desire to create a hopeful future. Just as Milkman finds treasure in learning of his family’s genealogical history, Baby Suggs suggests that the “prize” of newly-freed slaves lies in the ability to love oneself in the midst of oppression, while also extending that love out to others to validate and strengthen the collective.

Morrison’s distinctive implementation of storytelling and female griot tradition also seems to be a fundamental connection between magical realism and *Jazz*. Traditionally, griot not only served as an oral heirloom to be passed down to the next generation, but also served as allegory, or to prove a larger cultural truth, much like the process of magical realism seeks to expose the larger issues evident in Morrison’s works. Magical realism makes itself evident through the introduction of such mythical characters as Golden Gray and Wild. In keeping with Morrison’s griot tradition, several female characters in the novel pass on both of these myths, allowing these characters to exist within the framework of reality, regardless of the authenticity of their actual existence.

The two mythical characters, Golden Gray and Wild, speak to African-American culture and are also reflected in the racialized experiences of Morrison’s individual characters. Thus, Golden Gray and Wild possess magical qualities, but also serve as allegories for larger truths within the novel. For example, the mythical Golden Gray’s racially mixed heritage (his mother is white, while his father is black) mirrors the sobering reality of race issues and social violence against African-
Americans that are continually present throughout the storylines of Jazz. Golden’s father, Henry LeStory, advises him to “[b]e what you want – white or black. Choose. But if you choose black, you got to act black, meaning draw your manhood up – quicklike, and don’t bring me no whiteboy sass” (Jazz 173). Golden’s struggle to come to terms with his racial position is not just the mythological struggle of one man’s search for origins, but can be applied in a larger scope to encompass the struggle many black and racially-mixed Americans face in finding their place in a society which consistently labels and categorizes people, leaving little room for variation or diversity and ultimately creating fissures between individuals and their communities.

Similarly, Wild’s denial of Joe as her son can be read as paralleling the feelings of diaspora many African-Americans felt as a result of the aftereffects of slavery, as well as a result of the Great Migration (Jazz 179). Although these occurrences separated individuals from their communities in extremely different ways, both ultimately served to expose individuals losing their communal values and traditions, leaving them vulnerable to the constraints of the reality defined by dominant culture. Morrison scholar Therese E. Higgins explicates, “[i]n Jazz, Morrison demonstrates what happens to African Americans who lose their sense of community, who uproot themselves, and, in so doing, become fragmented, changed people” (Higgins 109). Thus, Joe’s never-ending search for his mythical mother (which he later parallels in his search for Dorcas) actually signals his perpetual state of disconnect from his heritage. Opposite from the healing effects of love discussed by Baby Suggs, Joe has changed by leaving the country to move to the city and no longer
“know[s] how to love anybody” (Jazz 213). Higgins links this process of forgetting how to love others to dismemory, in that both keep the individual from reconciling with the past until the individual actively decides to reconnect with his/her community through the process of rememory (by way of oral traditions), as readers see Joe doing in the final pages of the novel (Higgins 115, Jazz 213-214). In recounting the story of Dorcas’ death with Felice, he is able to forgive himself of his transgression, as well as seek agency through his newfound connectedness to Violet and other members of his community.

Ghosts as Magical Connections to Community

In the same way that oral traditions illustrate larger cultural truths that connect (or disconnect) the individual to the collective, individual interactions with ghosts and apparitions provide connections to the deeper meaning behind Morrison’s use of haunting elements. Higgins writes that Morrison was raised in a household which celebrated the ghost story because of a deep and abiding faith in one’s ancestors and of ghosts made manifest by her own family’s rememories (Higgins 5). Influenced by her family’s connectedness to the spiritual realm and the historical reality faced by African-Americans, the ghosts in Morrison’s novels often symbolize silences in collective history or acts of unspeakable violence committed against particular cultural groups. Scholar Lois Parkinson Zamora articulates the political and cultural significance of ghostly presences in magical realist fiction in writing,
Such ghosts… are culturally specific, behaving according to particular cultural patterns of belief and serving particular cultural (and literary) purposes. Indeed, they may be evoked in order to overcome or escape a particular cultural heritage, that is, evoked in order to exorcise themselves. (Zamora 499)

Morrison uses the ghosts and apparitions in her novels as characters that interact with individuals to provide deeper context into collective histories that have been affected by social trauma. In so doing, she provides another way for the individuals in her fiction to reconnect to their communities.

Perhaps the most prominent ghost in Morrison’s fiction is that of Beloved, or the grown-up representation of the “crawling already?” baby that Sethe murders several years previous to her appearance in the novel (Beloved 99). Sethe has spent most of her life evading and not speaking about her past because of the shame, guilt, and pain associated with it. She explains, “every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost… it was unspeakable… the hurt was always there – like a tender place in the corner of her mouth that the bit left” (Beloved 62). The “bit” of which she speaks is not only a horse’s bit that was often used in her experiences with slavery (Beloved 75), but also the bit of her past that remains in her memory, no matter how hard she tries to rid herself of it. It is due to the combination of Sethe’s experiences with slavery and her subsequent act of killing Beloved that she is unable to speak of the trauma and guilt which consistently haunt her everyday life. Sethe’s habit of having too much focus on memories past has created an act of rememory, what she defines in much the same way as Morrison as the “ability of the past to repeat itself in the future” (Heinert 91). Sethe is so focused on and consumed by the past that her memories magically manifest into Beloved’s return in the flesh, as
the fully-grown woman she would have been, had she survived. In the words of
Sethe, Beloved recognizes her mother’s desires to reconnect and therefore “had no
choice but to come back… in the flesh” (Beloved 210).

When “the miraculous resurrection of Beloved” occurs, and Beloved is willed
into human form by her mother’s rememory, she maintains unearthly, magical
characteristics, signaling to the reader that she is not, and cannot ever be, read as fully
human (Beloved 110). For example, Beloved is cited by various characters as having
superhuman strength (Beloved 59), omniscience (Beloved 67), lineless hands (Beloved
54), the ability to direct the actions of others (Beloved 133), and a non-human voice.

Denver and Sethe agree that they are disturbed by Beloved’s “gravelly voice and the
song that seemed to lie in it. Just outside music it lay, with a cadence not like theirs”
(Beloved 64). Additionally, both her footsteps (Beloved 106, 123) and her breathing
(Beloved 122) are unheard by the living humans that interact with Beloved. All of
these elements combine to illustrate Beloved in such a way that she remains ghostly
despite her outward human appearance. Instead of attaining full human status, she is
merely a manifestation of rememory, and therefore magical realism. Professor A.
Timothy Spaulding points out that “[a]s the other characters in the novel try to
interpret her presence in the material world, they ultimately must come to terms with
the fact that she resists any single or coherent definition” (Spaulding 66). In other
words, Beloved cannot be human, because to be human is to be defined as a definitive,
material entity and Beloved’s interpretation varies, depending on how the individual
remembers or perceives her. Instead, she functions as the material presence of Sethe’s
unspeakable past, which must be forgiven and forgotten in order for individual or collective healing to occur.

Another famous ghost in Morrison’s fiction is that of Circe in *Song of Solomon*. She represents cultural ties between African-Americans and their roots in Africa. Circe has particular significance in the novel, as she shapes the lives of two male characters: Macon Dead and his son, Milkman. Circe is first known in the novel as the neighborly Black housekeeper who works for the Butlers, the family whose patriarch murders Macon’s father (Jake/Macon I) over a land dispute. In the days following the murder, Circe hides, shelters, and feeds young Macon and Pilate until they run away to a cave, as was discussed in a previous section (*Song of Solomon* 165-166). As a result of her turmoil over Jake’s murder and the subsequent missing children, Circe seeks ultimate revenge on the Butler household, by remaining in the house in order to watch its decay long after the Butler family line ceases to exist (*Song of Solomon* 247). On the journey to seek his family’s treasure, Milkman encounters Circe along the way, who provides additional information to his quest. When Milkman first encounters Circe, he envisions her as the witch of his childhood nightmares (*Song of Solomon* 239). Circe is described in some of the same unearthly and magical ways as Beloved, as she is simultaneously “a woman older than death” who has a “face so old it could not be alive… [yet has] the strong, mellifluent voice of a twenty year-old girl” (*Song of Solomon* 219, 240). Although the reader is never explicitly told whether or not Circe is alive, it is made evident that Circe is connected to the smell of decay overshadowed by sweet ginger. Literary scholar Jacqueline Fulmer suggests that Morrison’s connection between Circe and the smell of ginger is
reminiscent of ancient religious texts which describe the sweet-smiling tombs of saints, signifying their connection to otherworldly realms (Fulmer 76). Furthermore, the smell of ginger also occurs in the novel when the narrator comments on the mysterious “heavy spice-sweet smell that made you think of the East and striped tents and the sha-sha-sha of leg bracelets” that is only perceptible by the African-American residents of the city’s Southside (Song of Solomon 184-185). Thus, Circe is representative of a saintly presence that is also connected to African tradition and culture. In conversing with Milkman, her connection to the smell of ginger allows him to experience and recollect a sensory aspect of his homeland, which further draws him toward community in Shalimar.

Women as Spiritual and Cultural Mediums

Just as Morrison uses the magic provided by ghosts to connect individuals to the cultural aspects of community, she also capitalizes upon the connectedness between her female characters and the spiritual realm. She does this through fashioning select female characters as mediums for the dead, including Denver and Pilate, both of which connect to a broader sense of community through their interactions with their deceased family members. Denver is very sensitive to the dynamics of 124 and she treats it with respect, knowing that the ghost residing amongst her family is deeply troubled. Morrison writes, “Denver approached the house, regarding it, as she always did, as a person rather than a structure. A person that wept, sighed, trembled and fell into fits” (Beloved 31). At the beginning of the novel, Beloved is described as a sad ghost who is “[f]ull of a baby’s venom,” revealing
herself in childlike ways, such as breaking mirrors, leaving handprints in freshly made cake, leaving smoking chickpeas in a pile on the floor, and arranging cracker crumbs to form lines in doorways (Beloved 3). All of these signs foreshadow desperate cries from the world of the dead that both Denver and her mother, the only two who remain with the ghost, have an indisputable obligation to reconcile with their family’s past. This reconciliation is facilitated by resulting acts of rememory and dismemory, both of which are inevitably aroused by communication with Beloved’s magical embodiment.

Aside from Sethe, Denver is the only person with whom Beloved desires to communicate. In expressing Denver as a sensitive, “charmed” character, Morrison provides room for Denver to become a medium for her sister’s spirit as the novel progresses, which ultimately provides healing for Denver (Beloved 44). It is interesting to note that Sethe refers to her daughter as a “little antelope” when Denver is still in her womb (Beloved 32). According to animal symbologist Ted Andrews, those who spiritually transgress the boundaries between human and animal forms and are identified with the antelope “usually sense imminent danger, and as long as they pay attention to it, they will seem to lead charmed lives – always just avoiding the catastrophes that seem to befall those around them” (Andrews 242). This definition is quite befitting, as Denver is the only one to realize that Beloved is nothing more than a “greedy ghost” (Beloved 220), capable of destroying Sethe because of the anger and abandonment she feels (Beloved 253). Because Beloved’s anger represents the unspeakable (therefore absent) parts of a collective African-American history, her presence in the novel makes clear Morrison’s commitment to the magical as a connection between the historical past and the politics surrounding memory in her
fictional narrative present. As the novel progresses, Denver’s intuitions about Beloved ultimately provide her with a place of healing, as she gathers enough strength to face the outside world after twelve years of solitude to bring the women in her community together to save her mother from Beloved’s wicked ways.

In the same vein that Denver is a medium for her sister, Pilate serves as a medium for her father, Jake, who also happens to be the last known child of the mythical Solomon (*Song of Solomon* 302). At its core, *Song of Solomon* is a story of tracing roots and rediscovering familial and cultural ties in the midst of unconventional and somewhat magical circumstances. When readers experience meeting Pilate through Milkman’s eyes, she is described as being witchlike, “all angles… knees, mostly, and elbows. One foot pointed east and one pointed west” (*Song of Solomon* 36). Zauditu-Selassie suggests the similarity between Pilate’s stance and the Akan (West African) concept of sankofa:

> Symbolized by a bird whose feet are facing forward and whose head is turned looking behind him, the description of the Sankofa bird is similar to Pilate’s feet, pointing forward and backward and establishing her ability to assist people in their spiritual and cultural recovery (*African Spiritual Traditions* 81-82).

In other words, Morrison’s placement of Pilate within the storyline and her involvement with the magical aspects of communicating with the dead serve the purpose of connecting her family’s past (Jake, and therefore Solomon) and her family’s present (Milkman). At the novel’s end, when readers discover that Pilate’s bag of gold is actually the bones of her deceased father – which also coincidentally smells of ginger – the connection is made and Milkman finalizes his bond to the culture and community of Shalimar. In addition to such connections made between an
individual and his/her community, magical realism is also used by Morrison to redefine reality and representation in terms of the (fictional) lived experiences of her individual characters.

Magical Realism Redefining Representation and Reality

As was discussed in previous sections, it has been seen throughout U.S. history that the perspectives of African-Americans have been largely ignored or misrepresented by dominant culture. Additionally, institutional racism has shaped the minds of both dominant and oppressed individuals to create a hierarchy where people of color and their contributions have been historically considered unimportant and unequal to their white counterparts (Lee and Shaw 64-73). For example, Morrison asserts that in her personal experiences studying literature within the institution of education, race/racism was not a subject to be discussed; race was not considered worthy of discussion. Not only that, there was an assumption that the master narrative could not encompass all of these things. The silence was absolutely important. The silence of the black person. (Moyers 262)

This example illustrates the history of a racist paradigm in which Black Americans were made to keep silent, regardless of the enduring pain that they had gone through as a result of inequitable race relations. This racist paradigm has evolved over time, yet it is still present in society and is reflected in the literature constructed by dominant culture. Nevertheless, literature also provides a medium for resistance to oppressive paradigms. This resistance has been the goal of the intellectual and literary work of some women writers of color who allow their characters, especially women, to tell their own stories and reclaim their own histories. In sharing these perspectives,
Morrison is able to create counternarratives that redefine traditional notions of representation and reality. In Morrison’s fiction, this redefining process allows for possible resistance to dominant culture and occurs most often in conjunction with instances of magical realism. Scholars Zamora and Faris agree that magical realism “encourages resistance to monologic political and cultural structures, a feature that has made the mode particularly useful to writers in postcolonial cultures and, increasingly, to women” (Zamora and Faris 6). Thus, it is largely through Morrison’s depiction of women narrators and characters that magical realism serves to question representation and reality for African-Americans and their communities.

For Morrison, social violence, oppression, and discrimination pervade every aspect of the lives of her female African-American characters and the historical struggles they represent, from roots in colonialism and slavery to the social unrest and racism that continues to exist into the present day. In an interview with Bonnie Angelo in 1989, Morrison asserted that racism was so pervasive in the world that she deemed it a “scholarly pursuit.” In performing a sociological analysis on the state of racism, Morrison maintained that people are not innately born to hate one another. Instead, she explains that racism stems from individuals being institutionally socialized to fear and despise the Other (Angelo 258). This institutionalized racism is clearly exemplified through black-white race relations throughout U.S. history, and inspires much of Morrison’s political literary work.

Moreover, within the institutional racist paradigm, there seems to be a particular assault on women of color. This is due to what are called intersecting systems of privilege and inequality, processes which feminist ideology suggests create
a conflux of multiple, overlapping layers of oppression for women of color, as they fall into many categories of the aforementioned Otherness (Lee and Shaw 60-64). Morrison scholar Elizabeth Cannon uses Morrison’s black female characters as examples of possible resistance to these systems of privilege and inequality through their identification as subjects. She writes,

"Ultimately, Morrison shows that sexism and racism are interlocking systems of oppression in the dominant ideology of Western culture and that black women must achieve not only the mental state of seeing themselves as subjects but also the social state of being recognized as subjects by dominant cultural discourses. (Cannon np)"

In this statement, Cannon effectively points out that these systems not only affect the way the female subject is viewed by dominant culture, but also how the subject views herself. I argue that Cannon’s point reveals that if institutional oppression is internalized by both women of color and society as a whole, then one possible resistance to inequality lies in self-affirmation as a subject.

Being not only a literary scholar but a revolutionary thinker, Morrison strategizes additional solutions for alleviating the effects of institutional racism and systems of privilege and inequality in her groundbreaking 1992 essays, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Morrison argues for a transformation of literature as a social institution through the reclamation of multifaceted Black American voices, not to replace dominant discourse or ideology, but to stand alongside it, as an alternative (*Playing* 8). This transformation of literature is best exemplified in Morrison’s desire for more African-American representation in the literary community. In writing about the disdain she feels for the traditional literary canon, she states, “since the [canonic] author was not black, the appearance of
Africanist characters or narrative or idiom in a work could never be about anything other than the ‘normal,’ unracialized, illusory white world…” (Playing 16). In other words, how can we hear traditionally marginalized voices in the midst of literary whiteness if there is no representation of these voices in the literary canon? While universities and institutions of higher education are evolving to include course offerings that focus on non-canonical literature, issues of equitable representation are still evident in public high schools as they continue to teach curricula largely derived from the canon. Morrison claims that agency, or “[p]ower – control of one’s own destiny – would replace the powerlessness felt before the gates of class, caste, and cunning persecution” (Playing 35). Morrison’s form of power is in her refusal to placate the literary canon by taming her stories and forming them to fit in with other canonized materials. Instead, she (and the female characters she creates) tells the stories that desperately need to be told through her unique combination of rememory and magical realism.

Not only does Morrison fight vehemently for the differing voices of Black Americans, but she is also passionately advocates the publications of more women writers. Morrison states, “[a]n instructive parallel to this willed scholarly indifference is the centuries-long, hysterical blindness to feminine discourse and the way in which women and women’s issues were read (or unread)” (Playing 14). In other words, she believes that there is a parallel between the lack of representation for African-Americans writers and the literary community’s historical inattention to the contributions of women writers. It is with this in mind that she pays particular attention to the voices of Black American women, as they are doubly-marginalized in
Jacqueline Fulmer discusses another reason behind the double-discrimination of black women writers in stating:

> representatives of the artistic elite… didn’t view the concerns of African-American women as sufficiently ‘political.’ This only meant that women writers had to face more difficulties having their work seen as ‘serious’ than the men would have, at least in their own circles. (Fulmer 44)

In other words, black women writers had to face not only discrimination from men, but also discrimination from white women writers. It is important to note that even in feminist (meaning anti-hegemonic) discourse, black women’s issues have a history of being misrepresented (or ignored) by scholarly, white women.

Morrison fights for equitable representation for African-Americans, but she does so without essentializing their *confluence*, or what feminist scholars define as their multifaceted existences as individual human beings (Lee and Shaw 62). While she recognizes the struggles faced by black individuals throughout the history of America’s thorny past, she also uses objectivity to efficiently dissuade the reader from the assumption that all instances of oppression and all aspirations for social change are universal among African-Americans.

One of the most evident ways that Morrison creates a sense of objectivity is through the political implications of magical realism in her novels. She maintains this objectivity in validating each character’s perspective, allowing subjective memory to function as a form of reality. In writing “Morrison’s narrator [in *Jazz*] does not subsume other voices into a single, univocal, and authoritative voice, but instead acknowledges the possible differences among members of the community,” African-American literary scholar Abdellatif Khayati offers a prime example of subjective
memory at work in Morrison’s fiction (Khayati np). Rather than asserting that there is only one, hegemonic “T”ruth (and therefore all other perceptions are false), the narrator of *Jazz* allows several “t”ruths to hold sway, by her repetition of the same story through the differing perspectives of several characters. She neither negates nor accepts the points-of-view of the other characters; she simply acknowledges that they and their experiences are a part of reality, just as she and her experiences are (*Jazz* 228-229). Peterson suggests the social importance of Morrison’s objectivity toward reality in writing,

> To arrive at a coherent narrative, a monumental history inevitably eliminates local, individualized, or contradictory stories… Individual lives, outside of such a grand narrative, however, are much more chaotic, contradictory, and unpredictable; by emphasizing individual stories, Morrison’s novel creates a necessary space for resistance, agency, and counternarratives. (Peterson 79)

I agree with Peterson’s use of the term counternarrative, rather than meta-fiction, in her analysis of Morrison’s work, as the narrative drive of her historical fiction rests heavily on her strategy of deliberately creating a storylines which diverge from and counter traditional representations of historical narrative. In capitalizing upon the varied experiences of African-Americans, especially women, she makes the reader take notice of inequities in representation, as well as offers a very “necessary space” for the reclamation of both individual memory and collective history.

Redefining Black Femininity and Motherhood

One way that Morrison creates this “necessary space” is through the way she uses her characters as examples of women who resist and redefine traditional notions of Black femininity and motherhood. Mary K. DeShazer defines resistance as
an especially important concept in feminist theory articulated by women of color, many of whom recognize, because of their positions on the margins of institutional structures, that radical systemic transformation is necessary to remove social inequities. (“Resistance,” 1079)

Toni Morrison sees another form of resistance for African-American women as “radical systemic transformation” in terms of her own area of interest, literature. In Playing in the Dark, she expresses that even language has played a complicit part in maintaining the systems of privilege and inequality in society, and that white narrative, as seen in the canon, serves “the construction of a history and a context for whites by positing history-lessness and context-lessness for blacks” (Playing 53). One plausible remedy for language’s complicity in the oppression of Black Americans is to have more accurate representations of African-American lives, especially that of women, in mainstream literature. Morrison does this by creating characters that confront and break the mold of dominant culture’s definition of African-American female identity.

In stark contrast to the representations provided in Morrison’s fiction, African-American women have been historically portrayed in canonized literature as either the nonsexualized mammy or the hypersexualized mulatta. The image of the mammy conjures thoughts of African-American women primarily serving the capacity of domesticity. Patricia Hill Collins discusses this image in depth, affirming that “the mammy image is one of an asexual woman, a surrogate mother in blackface” (Collins 81). While this image was not an actual identity for most black women, it was often historically imposed upon them by white culture’s ignorant perceptions of what it means to be an African-American woman. Directly opposing the image of the
mammy, the alternative identity historically imposed upon African-American women was that of the eroticized mulatta. Patricia Hill Collins further explains the reasoning behind the dominant culture’s hypersexualization of the mulatta in stating, “[t]he allegedly emotional, passionate nature of Black women has long been used to justify Black women’s sexual exploitation” (Collins 79). Again, this image is a direct representation of the ignorance of white culture’s perceptions of African-American female identity. This socially-defined binary of African-American female identity causes ambivalence among actual women of color, as it leaves little room for the identities of real women. Morrison addresses these two opposing representations of Black American women by explicitly challenging traditional notions of motherhood and femininity, opting instead to reflect varied African-American female perspectives in her characters, as most of these women refuse to be relegated to a predetermined existence as a mammy or a mulatta.

Perhaps the most evident example of a Morrison character who challenges traditional feminine scripts, namely motherhood, is that of Sethe in *Beloved*. In crafting Sethe’s tale, Morrison creates a space for readers to examine their own biases as well as conceptualize alternative definitions of a mother’s devotion to her children in the midst of racialized and gendered violence. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese recounts the tale of an anonymous mother who bore three children while indentured as a slave, only to have them taken from her and sold for income. As a result, she chooses to kill her fourth child by means of poisoning, so that she and the child do not have to endure separation for their white master’s gains (Fox-Genovese 262-263). Similarly, on the day Sethe murders her daughter, she makes a conscious decision to collect
every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe. (*Beloved* 171)

Although Paul D claims that Sethe’s mother-love is “too thick,” it seems as if she has no other choice in her situation (*Beloved* 173). She can either give up her child or claim agency through her actions, however controversial or questionable they may seem. In linking the true story of the unnamed slave mother to the fictional representation of Sethe, Fox-Genovese asserts that each woman, in her own way, “enforce[s] her right to define herself as a mother, not a breeder” (Fox-Genovese 263, 270).

In the same way that Morrison creates Sethe’s strength as a woman redefining motherhood, she also creates Wild, a female character who refuses to be part of the masculine symbolic, instead opting for an illusiveness which allows readers to examine binary feminine scripts which exist as a result of the masculine symbolic world of order (Cornell 313). Like Beloved, she is not fully human; she is known for having animalistic features, such as the “deer eyes” which mesmerize Golden Gray (*Jazz* 153). In addition to animal features, she is thought of as having the ability to transcend the limitations of her human form, changing at will into a red-winged blackbird, as evidenced through its recurring presence in the novel. This animal embodiment is a strategic and fitting choice for Morrison, as it is interesting to note that in Pagan belief, the red-winged blackbird is “associated with the Dark Mother and the primal feminine energies” (Andrews 119). These “primal feminine energies” are exactly the attributes given to Wild in the varied mythical (and often patriarchal) interpretations of her that circulate throughout the novel.
Several instances in the novel make clear the existence of the archaic and patriarchal belief that women are to remain in the home, raising families and maintaining the confining images of wifehood and family. On the opposite end of this binary, it is also made clear that women who refuse this way of life are linked to the unpredictable (and therefore wild) ways of nature. Morrison’s depiction of Wild and her cave-like household are in sharp contrast to traditional literary representations of women in domestic novels. Thus, Wild’s “sloven, unhousebroken self” serves as the magical embodiment of the woman who refuses to conform to traditional notions of feminine domesticity, and she is threateningly used by the masculine culture of Jazz as a warning for young women who toy with the idea of nonconformance to hegemonic ideals (Jazz 178). Patriarchy’s fear of women stepping out of the realm of the domestic sphere is best illustrated through Morrison’s exaggerated portrayal of Wild as a sort of fiendish Lilith figure who frightens children and must be satiated by the superstitious young brides who offer her edible sacrifices on their wedding nights (Jazz 178).

In much the same way that Wild threatens the established patriarchal order through her illusiveness, Pilate also breaks the mold of representation for black women in the way that she chooses to live her life androgynously, not as a man or a woman, but as a combination of the two. Androgyny, or genderqueering, can be defined as an individual’s nonconformance to traditional gender roles, including performing as the opposite of one’s gender or purposely combining gender scripts to create an alternative gender identity that better suits the individual (Lee and Shaw 131). For example, Pilate chooses to raise her daughter (Reba) and granddaughter
(Hagar) as a single mother/grandmother, and the paternity of both her offspring is never discussed in the novel. In contrast to traditional notions of motherhood and femininity, which encourage devotion to domestic work, Pilate “and her daughters ate like children. Whatever they had a taste for. No meal was ever planned or balanced or served. Nor was there any gathering at the table” (*Song of Solomon* 29). Similarly, Pilate sheds all that which is quintessentially female, such as her long hair, in favor of a more practical approach to life that assesses what is and is not truly needed for a happy life (*Song of Solomon* 149). Additionally, she chooses a career for herself as a bootlegger, traditionally work reserved for males, but nevertheless “a skill [that] allowed her more freedom hour by hour and day by day than any other work a woman of no means whatsoever… could choose” (*Song of Solomon* 150). By actively creating her gender identity to suit her particular lifestyle, Pilate embodies what Morrison describes as “the best of that which is female and that which is male,” as she has the unique ability to bring aspects of both genders into her life to create a balanced worldview, free from the constraints of traditional gender roles (qtd. in Awkward 77).

Magical and Feminist Counternarratives

In addition to resisting and redefining traditional notions of black femininity and motherhood, Morrison also carves out a “necessary space” for women through her implementation of magical and feminist counternarratives. Perhaps the most obvious example of these counternarratives at work is in one of Morrison’s most controversial novels, *Beloved*. It is important to note that this entire novel functions as a counternarrative; it is the attempted retelling of a famous historical figure’s story from...
her reconstructed perspective, rather than the historical perspective of dominant
culture. According to local historian, Ruth Wade Cox Brunings, Margaret Garner has
been recorded in history as a prominent infanticidal figure: the woman who murdered
her own daughter in order to eternally save her from the clutches of slavery.\(^9\)
Moreover, Peterson writes, “Morrison’s novel was inspired by newspaper accounts of
the slave mother Margaret Garner, who became a cause célèbre of the abolitionist
movement” (Peterson 54). Thus, it seems that before the publication of *Beloved*, most
media representation regarding Margaret Garner was sensationalized and performed
from an outside perspective, much like the Africanist representations Morrison herself
criticizes. But Garner’s story is much more complex than the mere labels placed upon
her by historians throughout the ages, which is the reason why Morrison chooses not
to sensationalize, but to personalize Margaret’s tale. In a 1988 interview with Marsha
Darling, Morrison describes her decision to stray from the widely-held and socially-
constructed assumptions surrounding the history of Margaret Garner, instead opting to
construct her tale from Garner’s point of view (through the fictional character Sethe),
as well as from the perspectives of her female children (both living and dead), and
from other women of color in her community (Darling 248). In this way, rememory
allows the women of color in *Beloved* to reclaim their histories for themselves and to
offer up alternative versions of reality. Similarly, Zamora and Faris describe how
magical realism functions within the context of historical writing: “History is
inscribed, often in detail, but in such a way that actual events and existing institutions
are not always privileged and are certainly not limiting” (Zamora and Faris 6). In
other words, history’s framework (dates, times, locations, etc.) remains as the
backbone of the story, while the varied perspectives of women of color added by Morrison provide depth, richness, and experience to an otherwise hegemonic representation of history.

In carving out a space to share their own memories as well as reclaim collective history, Morrison’s female characters also embody feminist activism, in that they are simultaneously resisting dominant modes of thinking and replacing these with counternarratives that are more productive. Morrison scholar Nancy J. Peterson illustrates that there is a connection between feminist activism and the work of many contemporary political and historical writers, such as Morrison and other female authors of color. Even though these authors do not identify themselves as feminist, their work remains committed to intervening injustices; even while they accept the contingencies of writing history in postmodern conditions, they insist on their ability to correct the historical record, to write a counterhistory that can address and work through the wounded histories of their people. It is this activist emphasis that aligns these writers and their texts with the goals of feminism. (Peterson 169)

In addition to correcting historical records for African-American women, Morrison’s writing also allows for certain fictional families to regain their once lost or obscured histories through the agency provided by feminist counternarratives. Once again, it is through the dual processes of rememory and magical realism that a female character becomes responsible for this reclamation. P. Gabrielle Foreman writes that in “Song of Solomon, women are simultaneously the site of the historical and the magical,” as they are the gatekeepers of family history (Foreman 287). Although Song of Solomon is largely Milkman’s story of a quest for identity, it is ultimately Pilate who predicts that his life will be saved and ultimately changed by a woman (Song of Solomon 140).
But, before any of these magical connections take place which allow for Milkman to find his lineage, Pilate must create a feminist counternarrative to the patriarchal worldview he receives from his father.

Macon is a man driven by his desire for wealth, which, as mentioned previously, is what causes the breaking point in his relationship with his sister, Pilate. Zauditu-Selassie suggests that Macon, in true masculine fashion, has defined himself in terms of his wealth and prestige, reveling in the fact that he is the “modern equivalent of a chief” (*African Spiritual Traditions* 75). Conversely, Plate lives a humble life, focused on connecting with people in her community to share her knowledge of natural medicine, midwifery, and wine-making. In contrast to Macon’s patriarchal worldview, which defines success in terms of dominance and competition for resources, Pilate’s worldview is feminist, in that she works collaboratively with others to share resources and to discover the wealth provided by human connectedness.

In terms of her counternarrative affect on Milkman, Pilate must save him before he is even out of the womb, as Macon’s aggressive tendencies cause him to try to abort Milkman in utero to avoid competition among males in the Dead family. From forcing his wife, Ruth, to sit on hot pots, use soapy enemas, and attempt abortion with a knitting needle to actually punching her stomach in an attempt to cause miscarriage, it seems that Macon wants no threat to the masculine order he has worked so hard to establish (*Song of Solomon* 131). As a result of Macon’s abuses, Ruth turns to Pilate for help. Pilate uses voodoo, a traditionally female-based spirituality, to stop Macon from further abusing Ruth by creating a doll to resemble Macon. Pilate
fashions this doll herself – complete with a round, red belly that reminds Macon of his responsibilities as a father – and conspicuously plants in his office. Pilate’s actions create a counternarrative thread which diverges from Macon’s original intentions, as he immediately burns the doll, but “must have remembered the round fire-red stomach, for he left Ruth alone after that” (*Song of Solomon* 132).

After Milkman is born safely, Pilate continues the process of instilling in him a feminist counternarrative as she consistently counteracts the confining and hateful rhetoric fed to him by Macon. Macon wants his son to follow in his footsteps, to carry on the family business of buying and renting cheap properties like a slumlord, regardless of Milkman’s own wishes. This idea is best illustrated in Macon’s advice to 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” (*Song of Solomon* 50). To counteract pressures such as these, Pilate imbues in Milkman a desire to search for connectedness to community instead of the material wealth his father advocates. Thus, Pilate fulfills her own prophecy, as it is actually she who “saves” him by preserving and passing down their family’s history through the continued singing of Solomon and Ryna’s song (*Song of Solomon* 336). It is through Pilate’s unwavering strength and his family ties that Milkman is able to see some truth behind the magical myths of both Solomon and the flying Africans. This allows him, in turn, the ability to “fly” with his own wings and to soar, if only momentarily, while basking in the knowledge of his people (*Song of Solomon* 337).
It is important to note that Morrison’s counternarratives do not only take place in the context of her fictional worlds, but they also magically transcend the constructs of the written page to affect the reader’s worldview. Morrison unabashedly asserts that “Black people have a story, and that story has to be heard” (McKay 152). Through her implementation of magical realism and her concept of rememory, she is able to tell the once-silenced histories of African-Americans, bringing their truths to the literary foreground. In reading Toni Morrison’s stories, readers are able to take part in a collective history which includes all perspectives. For example, the reader is encouraged to take part in the discussion of history on the last page of Jazz. The narrator proposes a feminist (meaning collaborative) counternarrative, urging, “[s]ay, make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now” (Jazz 229). In other words, the narrator beseeches the reader to bring or his or her own experiences to the text, in order to share in the process of rememory. Likewise, Morrison writes, “I want my fiction to urge the reader into active participation in the nonnarrative, nonliterary experience of the text, which makes it difficult for the reader to confine himself to a cool and distant acceptance of data” (“Memory” 215). In urging the reader to connect with the text, Morrison exposes the reader to revealing his or her place within the systems of inequality and privilege. In looking where one’s “hands are now,” one is faced with recognizing his/her complicity in or resistance to forms of oppression that continue to pervade society today.
Conclusion: Bearing Witness to a Legacy of Praxis

Figure 3: A Moment of Silence

This picture was taken outside the Garner home, where people of all ages, races, genders, and backgrounds held a moment of silence in respect for the families that experienced oppression based upon racial intolerance. I remember this as one moment (of many) when I have reflected on my obligation to educate others to actively seek out places of praxis, opportunities to create informed, social change in the world.

“What I remember is a picture floating around outside my head. I mean, even if I didn’t think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still there. Right in the place where it happened... The picture is still there, and what’s more, if you go there – you who was never there – if you go there and stand in the place where it was... it will be there for you, waiting for you” (Beloved 38).
Magically Creating Legacies that Bear Witness

The potential healing function provided by these magical and feminist counternarratives in Morrison’s novels is found in the celebration of spiritual and cultural legacies which inspire activism, both on the written page and in the world. Baby Suggs and Pilate are among the repertoire of female characters that create lasting legacies in their fictional communities through ties to both magic and to African-American cultural storytelling tradition. Additionally, the narrator of *Jazz*, who I am presuming to be female, creates a legacy for African-Americans in creating a living Black history book, reminiscent of *The Black Book* (1974), of which Morrison was the editor. All three of Morrison’s novels bear witness to rich histories through processes of cultural reclamation, thereby allowing the political aspects of rememory to provide counternarratives to dominant history and discourse. These alternative narratives serve not only in an aesthetic capacity in Morrison’s work, but also have the potential to become a form of theory, in that they promote social change through the conscious, informed actions of the people they inspire. This theory may serve to inform and empower those who have traditionally been marginalized, as well as their allies, creating a model in which Morrison’s writerly act of rememory encourages concrete and material social change through collaboration and education.

In Morrison’s fiction, rememory’s healing and educative potentials are made apparent in the enduring legacies left behind by ancestors, as well as the female characters that carry on these legacies to create further change in their communities. One prominent example is that of Baby Suggs and the other women of *Beloved*. After *Beloved* has become an uncontrollable, “greedy ghost,” Denver leaves 124 in search
of help or resources which might save her mother from her insatiable desire to be forgiven and Beloved’s inability to forgive (*Beloved* 254). Although she is afraid of leaving the relatively safe confines of her home, Denver creates a rememory of her wise grandmother, Baby Suggs, and asks for guidance. Denver thereby invokes an act of magical realism and is persuaded by the spiritual presence of Baby Suggs to consult women in the community to help her mother (*Beloved* 257). As the women of town develop conversations with Denver they also create their own rememories, recalling stories of the good times shared with Baby Suggs. These acts of remembrance provide a place of healing for not only Denver (who now has fully human acquaintances and friends), but also for themselves, in forgiving Sethe for her past actions (*Beloved* 262).

Not only have the women of 124 been directly affected by the brutality of slavery, the women of color in Denver’s community are also plagued by its aftereffects, which are brought to a culminating head in Sethe’s unspeakable act of killing Beloved. There is a great deal of stigma surrounding Sethe’s past and the women of the community who once welcomed her with open arms find themselves blaming her for bringing the evils surrounding slavery back into their community (*Beloved* 267). However, in developing relationships with Denver, they ultimately realize that they are “sorry for the years of their own disdain… they were simply nice people who could hold meanness toward each other for just so long and when trouble rode bareback among them, quickly, easily, they did what they could to trip [it] up” (*Beloved* 262). Ironically, it is through the very haunting provided by Beloved’s manifested form that the women of color in the community are brought together for the common cause of saving Sethe from the “trouble” brought on by Beloved.
It is important to note that in saving Sethe, the women of the community are also able to pay tribute to and celebrate the legacy of Baby Suggs by bearing witness to the importance of her freedom work. The character of Baby Suggs embodies the spirit of the Underground Railroad, a woman who spends her few short years as a free woman devoted to bringing others to freedom, both geographically and spiritually (Beloved 262). Moreover, Baby Suggs is a self-proclaimed preacher dedicated to teaching others how to find salvation from within, rather than being subjected by the dominant ideologies of formal religion, such as that dictated by Christianity (Khayat
np). Scholar Jacqueline Fulmer links the efforts of the women of the community to Baby Suggs’s legacy in writing, “Baby Suggs’s mission, as it were… must be completed by other wise women in the novel. The folkloric women who do save Sethe in the end, the wise women who surround Sethe’s house, must call on a grace they cannot completely imagine” (Fulmer 161). By taking small steps to forgive Sethe (and in turn, to forgive themselves), they are carrying on Baby Suggs’s legacy and promoting a new consciousness that relies not on domination, but rather on enduring faith, forgiveness, and love. Within this new frame of consciousness, a space is created where healing can occur.

Despite Sethe’s attempts to reconcile with the ghost of Beloved, it is the collective of women in the novel who, together in an amalgamation of spiritual folk magic, chanting, and prayer, exorcise the spirit of Beloved from 124 to finally free Sethe from her unforgiving past. Morrison illustrates this powerful women’s collective in writing:
the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words, building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash.  

*Beloved* 275

In other words, these women utilize magical realism by calling upon folk magic forces that transcend the distinctions of both reality and formalized religion. In doing so, they are able to forgive and cleanse Sethe of her “sin,” as well as provide a space in which Sethe can forgive herself for her past actions. As a result, Sethe is finally able to find happiness with Paul D in creating new memories to overshadow those of the past (*Beloved* 287-288). Sethe’s process of reclaiming her own history in a more self-affirming way illustrates the healing effects of rememory on individuals, whether fictional or true-to-life.

Similar to the healing effects provided by celebrating Baby Suggs’s legacy, Pilate is able to heal Milkman by giving him an alternative to the violence he sees in his peers and by connecting him to a lineage that bears witness to him personally. Morrison believes that the passing on of (hi)stories has an innate healing capacity, as evidenced in her Nobel speech. In reference to violence among youth of color, she speaks of the old wise griot woman appealing to younger generations of African-Americans who have lost their way from their connection to culture. The wise woman reports that they have opted to bite “their tongues off and use bullets instead to iterate the void of speechlessness” (*Nobel Lecture* 15). This same concept is evidenced in the violent tendencies of Milkman’s best friend, Guitar, and the Seven Days. Although the Days strategically utilize violence to counter and retaliate against acts of historical violence committed against African-Americans (ex. the brutal beating and murder of
Emmett Till in 1955 for allegedly whistling at a white woman, the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in 1963 which killed four young Black girls), both Pilate and Morrison contend that this is not an effective method of reclaiming cultural history. Because these acts only serve to further perpetuate the cycle of violence, Morrison advocates using language as a much more effective weapon against violence and ignorance. At the end of her Nobel speech, Morrison illustrates how the female griot has changed the perceptions of the younger generations in voicing, “[l]anguage alone protects us from the scariness of things with no names… How lovely it is, this thing we have done together” (Nobel Lecture 28-30). Morrison’s griot shares an invitation to participate in shared history and reclamation of African-American culture by advocating that the tongue is mightier, and more effective, than the sword. Similarly, Pilate intervenes Milkman before he is too adversely affected by the violent tendencies of Guitar and the Seven Days, offering him the knowledge of his family’s history through the language of song as an alternative to violent retribution. In accepting the knowledge of his people, Milkman mirrors Sethe in his ability to validate his own existence in a positive and affirming way.

In the same way that Morrison uses language to validate the existence of individual characters, she also uses the power of language to celebrate the legacy of Black Americans. A few years before publishing any of her own work, Morrison first made her desire for a recorded history of Black American experiences through her work as Random House’s senior editor on Middleton Harris’s celebrated text, The Black Book (1974). When one opens The Black Book, it is immediately apparent that there is no overtly structured order to the material inside. There is no Table of
Contents, only a few forwards from Morrison herself (in the 35th anniversary edition only) and Bill Cosby, followed by what feels like a personal scrapbook. Most of the photos, recipes, news clippings, political cartoons, voodoo spells, advertisements, jokes, songs, and words of wisdom have no descriptive labels, and all are structured only by quotes in large font, each suggesting a theme for the subsequent material. In not explicitly labeling each theme, I believe that Harris and Morrison (who, in acting as the editor for the book, chose the materials and layouts of the pages) invite the reader to participate in the witnessing of African-American history. The reader must decide to make sense (or stitch together the fragments) of the information before him/her, essentially enacting forms of rememory in the way that he/she recounts and bears witness to this historically marginalized history. In reliving these experiences through the images and words on the pages, the reader finds the process of rememory emotionally difficult at times (photos of lynchings and burnings) and uplifting at others (photos of children making faces at the camera). It is through this process of bearing witness to the events and faces in the book that the reader is able to sense the book’s slight magical quality in the way that it seems alive with vivid representations of Black American history. In reflecting on her work with this project, Morrison interprets The Black Book as “a genuine Black History book – one that simply recollected Black Life as lived” (qtd. in Peterson 57).

Morrison contends that her work on this project heavily influenced the way she crafted the narrative of Jazz. In the same way that The Black Book illustrates “Black Life as lived,” Morrison “wanted to tell a very simple story about people who do not know that they are living in the jazz age, and to never use the word” (Schappell 259).
In *Jazz*, Morrison’s realistic details make it apparent that the setting is in the streets of Harlem during the Jazz age, but Morrison’s characters never explicitly reveal the time of the novel’s occurrences. Much like the loosely-themed artifacts present in *The Black Book*, Morrison’s intention is to reclaim and recount history for Black Americans through her realistic fiction, without feeling obligated to spell out every detail. In this way, she provides varied voices to fill the once-gaping silences of African-American history through the timelessness of the characters and the way their stories function as a talking history book for the reader.

In the final pages of the novel, the narrator of *Jazz* leaves the reader with the impression of a talking history book by creating a form of social dialogue. She implores the reader to take part in the process of making and remaking history, providing a space where readers, regardless of race or gender, can work collaboratively to re-envision a history that celebrates a legacy of diversity. Thus Morrison’s strategy of rememory as a form of “willed creation” is not simply relegated to the pages of her fiction; these legacies and testaments have the potential to educate people, thereby serving as theory for larger-scale social change through activism.

**Praxis as Liberatory Education**

Before discussing how Morrison’s process of rememory can be applied to my chosen form of activism, I feel that there is an important discussion regarding perspective that begs my attention. Although recognition of one’s privilege and social location is key for participation in any form of social activism, I have intentionally not included discussion of my social location until this point. My reasoning is that I
would rather have the reader focus on my message rather than my privilege. In
discussing my research with colleagues and friends, many wonder why a Caucasian
woman would choose to write about an African-American female author. If I had
been born instead as a Black American woman, there is no doubt in my mind that my
work with Toni Morrison’s texts would formulate a very different discussion, but I
would like to think that some of my conclusions about her work are universal among
readers, regardless of social location.

However, my particular social location allows me to connect with and imagine
forms of social activism in ways congruent with my particular background. Although
I am not writing from the perspective of a Black American woman, I am writing from
the perspective of a Midwestern woman who, like Morrison, has seen first-hand the
inequities and devastating effects of racism in my home communities. I am also
writing from the perspective of an English student who is sensitive to and altogether
appreciates the aesthetic and political devices implemented by Morrison. Last, but
certainly not least, I am also writing from the perspective of a Women Studies student
who understands, above all else, the necessary sensitivity and understanding that
inherently comes along with examining the lives of other women who have faced
varying degrees of oppression, whether they are lived experiences or they are merely
representations on the written page.

I fully understand the interesting paradox that I bring to the academic table
regarding perspective, and in no way am I attempting to assert my privilege in my
analysis of Morrison’s work. However, I feel that as an educator and activist, it is
within my realm of responsibility to engage lines of communication which embody
empathy, understanding, and respect, regardless of my social location. These
dialogues may prove to be difficult or uncomfortable at first, but they also provide
valuable opportunities to learn and grow with one another through reflection,
collaboration, education, and possible social change.

* * * * *

In his famous educational text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire
writes, “human activity consists of action and reflection: it is praxis; it is
transformation of the world. And as praxis, it requires theory to illuminate it” (Freire
125). I argue that it is Freire’s definition of praxis – a combination of reflection and
action, resulting in informed human activity – that is mirrored in Morrison’s concept
of rememory. Like praxis, rememory has potential educative and transformative
effects by way of its cultural work, or process of recounting history, learning from
lessons past, and actively creating counternarrative dialogues which value alternative
visions of representation and reality. In Morrison’s call-to-action in the final pages of
*Jazz*, which encourages active participation in forming these new dialogues, I find a
natural connection to my work as an educator. Feminist educator bell hooks echoes
Morrison in writing, “a transformation in our classrooms, in how we teach and what
we teach, has been a necessary revolution” (*Teaching* 29-30). In the same way that
Morrison advocates a transformation and collaboration in the way we view history,
hooks extends this idea into the realm of education. In terms of my personal work as
an educator and activist, I see this “revolution” as synonymous with emphasizing
feminist pedagogical practices in my classroom.
For the past two years, I have been teaching Women Studies to Oregon State University undergraduate students. It is because of these experiences that I have made two important conclusions: most students are not self-motivated to read literature, especially that which is written by women, and most students have difficulty understanding how feminist pedagogy affects their individual lives. I always ask my students at the beginning of the term if they have read something written by a female author. Few raise their hands, and most explicate how much they adore J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series, or more recently, Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* saga. While these may be entertaining novels written by female authors, they offer only glimpses into the realm of social critique or commentary. Moreover, because many of my students enroll in Women Studies as a Baccalaureate Core Requirement or as a chosen elective, few of them have much experience within the discipline. Therefore, in contrast to courses within their own majors, it is more difficult for students to see how Women Studies (and therefore feminist pedagogical practices) are applicable to their own fields. With students underprepared in many aspects of cultural literacy, as well as a lack of exposure to courses which encourage active reflection and analysis of social processes, it is no wonder that the vast majority of my students have difficulties in grasping the importance of feminist pedagogy in the classroom.

Shortly after publishing her most recent novel, *A Mercy* (2008), Morrison emphasized that the lessons in her literature must exist beyond the confines of the written page, and should be read as inherently political. Morrison explains, “My point is that it has to be both: beautiful and political at the same time. I’m not interested in art that is not in the world” (Nance 50). In relation to my work as an educator and
activist, I agree with Morrison that students should not only be challenged and moved by the aesthetics in the literature they read, but should also be exposed to literature that includes farther-reaching implications into their lived experiences as human beings. During an age in educational history when the humanities are undervalued by many students (as evidenced in their lack of motivation to read literature), these kinds of changes to curricula are essential to maintaining student interest. By incorporating assignments which require students to read and analyze texts which offer opportunities to reflect on social processes, they are also provided with models to create possible social change in their own lives.

Within the institution of education, the newest demand of teachers is to emphasize “21st century skills” for their students. While this is largely emphasized within the K-12 educational setting, given the common issues I have observed with my students, perhaps it is important to extend the emphasis of these skills to the college classroom as well. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21) claims that these skills are hardly new to the 21st century, but rather promote broad concepts such as creativity, innovation, problem solving, communication, collaboration, teamwork, and critical thinking, as well as media and technology literacy, financial literacy, health literacy, and global literacy. (Senechal 5)

In other words, teachers are being asked to revisit the benchmark skills outlined by educational theory (communication, collaboration, critical thinking, etc.), as well as to fuse these skills with newer concepts, such as global and technological literacy. These very concepts are also foundational to a feminist pedagogy that has a goal of modeling social change through students expanding their awareness of the world around them. Feminist writer and educator bell hooks agrees that in revisiting the mines of the
intellectual past to harvest useable nuggets of educational theory, we may find that they contain “important ideas, thoughts, visions, that could, if used differently, serve a healing, liberatory function” (*Teaching* 65). hooks’ assertion of the importance of reflecting upon and renewing our teaching practices is similar to aspects of Morrison’s concept of rememory which emphasize the importance of reflecting upon the past to create a potentially better future. Both concepts, if combined with feminist pedagogy, allow for educational opportunities which offer social transformation and healing.

What might this feminist pedagogy look like? In my classroom, I not only create assignments which focus on women writers, but I also actively encourage students to change the way they see the world, reminiscent of Franz Roh’s notion of seeing everyday life with “new eyes.” For example, I am currently teaching a course on “Personal and Social Change,” which requires that my students participate in a service-learning component, allowing them to put their newly-found feminist theoretical concepts into practice, thereby enacting praxis. They must go out into the community, guided by their knowledge of social processes and societal inequities, to provide service to others. They then have to complete an activist portfolio, which requires them to do a number of assignments that encourage reflection and analysis of their time spent in the community. Assignments include journaling, which allows for the students to reflect upon their experiences and to intimately connect with their service-work, an art project, which emphasizes creativity and analysis of the social inequities they have witnessed, and a research paper, which allows them to connect their experiences serving the community to their own lives. The end goal of this portfolio is that they not only recognize the importance of incorporating feminist
concepts into their everyday lives, but also that they recognize the importance of helping to create a place of potential social change. It is through this experiential learning that my students are, in some small way, mirroring Morrison’s concept of rememory. They are recognizing inequalities present in society, actively seeking out opportunities to participate in work that combats these inequalities, and thereby creating a future that encourages accountability for one’s social location as well as collaboration for a better future.

While visiting the Maplewood Plantation, which is the inspiration for Toni Morrison’s depiction of “Sweet Home” in *Beloved*, I was able to take part in a moment of silence for those affected by racial oppression and hatred. In this moment, I was able to bear witness to the legacies of Margaret Garner and her family, as well as to recognize the healing and educative potential of bearing witness. This was one moment when I was sure of my path as an activist-teacher who strategically utilizes feminist practices which embody reverence and revision. In discussing why she is so passionately involved with feminist (meaning revisionary) practices in her classroom, bell hooks writes,

> I am grateful that I can be a witness, testifying that we can create a feminist theory, a feminist practice, a revolutionary feminist movement that can speak directly to the pain that is within folks, and offer them healing words, healing strategies, healing theory. (*Teaching* 75)

I, too, am grateful for the unique opportunity I have to combine feminist theory with literary and activist practices in order to potentially foster a place of healing discourse in my classroom, as well as in the world outside it. From this place of healing, it is my greatest hope that seeds of new social growth can be nurtured in new generations of readers and activists.
Endnotes

1 See also A. Timothy Spaulding’s *Re-Forming the Past: History, The Fantastic, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative*, in which he simultaneously discusses the detrimental effects of traditional slave narratives on African-American history as well as the potential reclamation offered by postmodern slave narratives (2005).

2 See also Daniel Erickson’s *Ghosts, Metaphor, and History in Morrison’s Beloved* and Gabriel Garcia Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (2009).

3 Roh contends that although the artistic genre of magic realism incorporates seemingly ordinary objects – as in the fashion of Realism – these objects are depicted in a fresh manner that allows them to be seen from a new perspective, thereby giving them a slight fantastical quality while contesting traditional notions of visual representation. See also Wendy B. Faris’ translation of “Magic Realism: Post Expressionism” (Zamora and Faris, 1995, pp. 15-31), originally published by Franz Roh as *Nach-Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten Europäischen Malerei* (Leipzig, Klinkhardt, and Biermann, 1925).

4 Carpentier writes of his travels and of witnessing miraculous occurrences in everyday life, asserting that his variation of Roh’s original term more accurately describes the situations particular to those of Latin-American heritage. He states that *lo real maravilloso americano* illustrates the subjective natures of reality, time, and perspective, allowing for contradictory entities to coexist within the experiences of our everyday lives, such as that of reality and fantasy. See also Alejo Carpentier’s “On the Marvelous Real in America” (Zamora and Faris, 1995, pp. 75-88), originally published as the preface to Carpentier’s *El Reino de este Mundo* (1949).

5 See also *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (1995). This collection of essays discusses the use of magical realism in various texts from cultures around the globe, concluding that writers from all cultural backgrounds similarly utilize the political aspects of magical realism to reclaim history for the marginalized.


7 See also Julius Lester’s “People Who Could Fly,” which recounts the popular tale of the flying Africans who are encouraged by a fellow slave to escape the hands of their cruel master by growing wings and flying back to their homeland (1969).

8 Domestic novels, or “women’s novels,” rely heavily on representations of traditional feminine scripts, especially within the context of the domestic sphere. This genre was made popular in the nineteenth century by authors such as Harriet Beecher Stowe.
Margaret Garner was a slave woman who belonged to the slave-owning Gaines family in Maplewood, Kentucky. During her time as a slave, it was speculated that she suffered from sexual abuse. It was reported that Margaret and her children escaped from their owners and attempted to cross the river into Cincinnati to freedom. While enroute, they were captured by the authorities and rather than have her children returned to slavery, Garner attempted to kill them. She managed to slit the throat of her daughter, Mary, but the remaining three children were unharmed. Today, it continues to be debated whether this was the act of a woman suffering from the trauma of slavery or an act of defiance against dominating forces. See also Ruth Wade Cox Bruning, “Slavery and the Tragic Story of Two Families – Gaines and Garner” (2004).

Among the authors listed in Peterson’s analysis are Louise Erdrich, Irena Klepfisz, and Joy Kogawa.

See also Middleton Harris’s The Black Book (1974).
Works Cited


