

## Alternatives to the “Talking Cure”: Black Music as Traumatic Testimony in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*

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In her critical inquiry *Bread Out of Stone*, Caribbean Canadian author Dionne Brand gestures to the implicit correlation between Freudian psychoanalysis and black music:

Someone asks when did blues piano develop . . . “beyond the twelve-bar blues.” She replies, stupendously, “When Freud and Jung discovered more about the human psyche over in Europe all that thinking had an influence on blues music.” My lover and I let out a loud, simultaneous “Puhlease!” “Like Freud discovered the Mississippi Delta, like he set up a couch in a buffet flat in Chicago!” (149)

The anecdote suggests that disenfranchised African Americans, who were, of course, not members of the bourgeois European society whom Freud and Jung usually treated, developed their own form of psychotherapy, namely, the blues and black music in general. This parallel is to some extent unusual. Freud’s interest in unconscious drives and desires does not speak to the African American experience, which was situated in the external realities of slavery and social marginalization. Freud’s early manifestation of psychoanalysis, however—what the hysteric Anna O. termed the “talking cure”—did in fact deal with external events; specifically, it involved the narrativization of traumatic events. The “talking cure,” then, is a model of traumatic testimony and is decidedly comparable to black music. Toni Morrison makes this parallel in her novel *Song of Solomon*, and has certainly designated music as therapeutic in other works. In “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” she explicitly argues that music was “for a long time, the art form that was healing for Black people” (340). This assessment, however, is reinforced by the novel’s treatment of black music in a particular way: music and song in *Song of Solomon* are situated as akin to the “talking cure.” This link is based on the ways in which expression, in both paradigms of testimony, has a performative function. As in conventional models of testimony like the “talking cure,” black music is a speech act that engenders emotional catharsis and brings latent memories to the fore.

*Song of Solomon*, however, does not simply establish parallels between these two paradigms of testimony; ultimately, the novel inherently explores the ways in which they differ. *Song of Solomon* suggests that black music serves the same purpose as talk therapy, but its configuration as a model of testimony distinctly varies. So although the two paradigms may have the same emotional and psychological function—that is, what they *do* is similar—the *ways* in which they accomplish these underlying functions fundamentally differ. These differences are significant, as they encourage a reconsideration of the foundational dimensions of traumatic testimony as they are encoded in current discourses of trauma. Specifically, our understanding of traumatic testimony, particularly as “talking cure,” implicitly privileges two coefficients: language and Western culture. This emphasis on language predominately derives from notions of testimony as a narrative act, an assessment apparent in both nineteenth- and twentieth-century theories of trauma. Similarly, theories of trauma and testimony are grounded in Western assumptions and traditions, a Eurocentric perspective apparent in the works of individual critics such as Cathy Caruth and

Judith Herman, and theorists who have historicized the concept of trauma such as Ruth Leys and Allan Young. The central place of both language and Western culture may be apparent in current theories of traumatic testimony; representations of black music as testimony in *Song of Solomon*, however, question their privileged status and so deviate from recent discourses of trauma. In this essay, I consider the ways in which black music is situated as an alternative to the "talking cure" in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, and explore how its status as a narrative paradigm and cultural artifact encourages a reconsideration of the central place of both language and Western culture in current theories of testimony. Although black music incorporates linguistic forms of language, it recognizes music as an essential mode of communication and gestures to a specifically African American cultural heritage as opposed to strictly Western psychoanalytic traditions. By doing so, Morrison does not establish a strict binary that sees music and language as inherently polarized: the novel reveals that music can be a form of language and language itself a type of music. However, the novel's treatment of black music as a form of testimony pays strict attention to music and black culture, and does so to reveal marked political implications. Ultimately, these revisions serve a decidedly counterdiscursive function, resisting dimensions of African American experience that the novel recognizes as problematic: namely, the destructive power of language and the loss of African American cultural origins. Before exploring the differences between the "talking cure" and black music as paradigms of testimony, I want to define the "talking cure" and investigate how it and music in the novel are comparable as performative modes of expression.

### **Black Music as an Agency for Emotional Catharsis and Mnemonic Integration**

The concept of the "talking cure" is developed in *Studies on Hysteria*, where Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer discuss the case of Anna O., a young female hysteric suffering from trauma. The case study inherently reveals the efficacy of narrative as a therapeutic. During the day, Anna O. experiences delusions and hallucinations of traumatic experiences, but in the early evening she develops an uncanny ability to understand and perceive what is happening to her, and proceeds to discuss her trauma in objective detail. As Breuer notes: "She aptly described this procedure as a 'talking cure'" (83). He goes on to recognize that while offering her narrative Anna O. proceeds to express intense emotional responses associated with her trauma, responses that have yet to be experienced. In their early research, therefore, Breuer and Freud develop a form of narrative medicine where the sufferer of trauma remembers both imagined and real traumatic events and gives verbal utterance to these painful memories, utterance that effects a cathartic emotional discharge. As current theorists such as Judith Herman have indicated, however, narratives formed during this process not only function as efficient personal therapeutics, but they are also testimonies with inherently political and collective dimensions (Herman 181). Dori Laub, a psychiatrist who treats Holocaust survivors, also acknowledges that while his patients tell and relive the story of their trauma, they bear witness, engaging in testimony.

A literary representation of this paradigm of traumatic testimony is apparent in Morrison's novel. As critical responses to the novel have suggested, *Song of Solomon* engages with the issue of fathers or more specifically, paternal loss, and is structured as both a *bildungsroman* and quest narrative whereby the central protagonist Milkman Dead finds himself and his place in society by engaging in a quest for his lost family origins—a quest that comes to fruition when he uncovers his family's

genealogy, which is encoded in the song of Solomon, a seemingly innocuous blues song sung by his aunt, Pilate.<sup>1</sup> Milkman's progression to maturity, self-understanding, and social responsibility is intrinsically linked to his relationship with his father; understanding his father, Macon Dead, Jr., beyond his role as an infallible domestic tyrant is an essential step in this progression. It is during the beginnings of this development that the novel encodes an episode of the "talking cure." Milkman threatens his father's rule and so begins to assert his identity by intervening in a domestic dispute between his parents, refusing to allow his father to continue beating his mother, Ruth Foster. Following the episode, Macon Jr. discusses his motivation for this act of violence with his son, and offers Milkman a narrative account of his wife's supposed act of incestuous necrophilia. Like the female hysterics who articulated their stories to Freud and Breuer, Macon Jr. confides a series of delusions to a listener; we learn earlier that "little by little [Macon] remembered fewer and fewer of the details" pertaining to his wife's actions "until he had to imagine them, even fabricate them, guess what they must have been" (16). Also, like Anna O., this narrative provokes an emotional response. Macon Jr.'s testimony is preceded by a loss of all emotive facial expression, a reaction that is in keeping with his sister Pilate's response to the prospect of engaging with pain: "Macon's voice was low, but his face looked like Pilate's. He closed the door" (70). The "closed door" is a reference to Macon Jr.'s father who, like Pilate, "close[d] his face up like a door" (54) before engaging with extreme emotions. While Macon Jr. re-emplots the delusion, offering a first-person narrative account of Ruth Foster's actions, he does not merely retell the event, but also shows physical signs that he experiences latent feelings associated with the event: "Macon paused again and touched his lip as though that were where the pain in his eyes was coming from" (73). As a male hysteric, Macon Jr. is of course distinguishable from Anna O.; he is also a fictional construct and Anna O. an actual patient.<sup>2</sup> Both rely on narrative, however, with an attentive listener as a means of accessing unreliable memories and painful emotions.

Macon Jr.'s use of the "talking cure" in this episode functions as a model of testimony that is decidedly comparable to black music in the novel. Both paradigms of testimony are akin in that they are speech acts, performative utterances that produce an action. The testimonial narrative does not, then, simply relate a story; it also performs an action that has a therapeutic function, such as emotional catharsis. In *Studies on Hysteria*, Freud and Breuer discuss the ways in which telling the trauma story discharges pent-up affect. Connected to what they term the "principle of constancy" (130), their theory posits that "a tendency to keep intracerebral excitation constant" (197) exists in all of us, and when there is a surplus of affect produced by emotionally charged traumatic memories, an "urge to use it up arises as a consequence" (197). Freud's psychoanalytic model of course finds its counterpart in Aristotelian tragedy, particularly in the notion of *katharsis*. Aristotle's *katharsis* also serves a healing function by discharging emotional excess, especially the feelings of pity and fear in the audience viewing the tragedy. Aristotle's notion of reconciliation, however, deals directly with issues of ethics; *katharsis* mitigates the tendency to feel emotions inappropriately in everyday life. Although the implications of healing differ in these works, the underlying premise remains the same: narrative or artistic expression serve the purpose of releasing debilitating emotions.

Traditionally, black music has had a remarkably similar function. Frederick Douglass explains in his *Narrative* that during slavery black music served to engender emotional relief through cathartic expression:

I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of the heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears. . . . The singing of a man cast away upon a desolate island might be as appropriately considered as evidence of contentment and happiness, as the singing of a slave; the songs of the one and of the other are prompted by the same emotion. (1887-88)

This assessment is later reinforced by W. E. B. Du Bois in his chapter on "The Sorrow Songs" in *The Souls of Black Folk*. For Du Bois, black music also functions as a mode of expressing emotional grief during slavery: "They are the music of an unhappy people, of children of disappointment; they tell of the death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world" (207). Various critics have pointed to this role of black music, particularly in Morrison's work, and it is certainly apparent in *Song of Solomon*.<sup>3</sup> However, studies of "that old blues song Pilate sang all the time: 'O Sugarman don't leave me here'" (300) tend to focus on the song's importance in

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the context of Milkman's quest narrative. Its encoded history links Milkman to a larger African American community, history, and tradition, and engenders a culturally contextualized sense of self. But Pilate's blues song serves another function. As the narrator concedes, "To sing, which she did beautifully, relieved her gloom immediately" (147). Black music then, like the "talking cure," is a model of testimony that acts as a cathartic agency.

Morrison does not merely gesture to the cathartic effects of black music, she also enacts them. Macon Jr. reveals the cathartic function of singing while overhearing his sister Pilate and her family "singing by candlelight" (29). He envisions Pilate's physical demeanor throughout her performance, recalling the emotional release it allowed her as a troubled child: "Singing now, her face would be a mask; all emotion and passion would have left her features and entered her voice" (29). This description of Pilate is ambiguous, however. Recognizing the complexities of traumatic reconciliation, Morrison allows for the possibility that Pilate uses music to dissociate from her emotions and to "split off . . . a 'traumatic memory' from the rest of consciousness" (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 141). The image of Pilate's face as a mask implies that she does not sing in order to engage with feeling but to conceal emotion and pain from herself. At times, the novel does suggest that music is approached to numb feelings of distress. When Milkman follows his mother on her night time vigil to the cemetery, he is acutely uncomfortable, fearing what he will discover about the woman who not only supposedly engaged in grotesque relations with her dead father but also breast-fed her son longer than necessary to attain gratification. Milkman "turn[s] on the car radio" in the hopes that the music will "coat his nerve ends" (121) or cut off all feeling. However, music ultimately "splay[s]" (121) his emotions. Forced to confront his traumatic fears, music disallows Milkman the false comfort of disconnecting from them. Similarly, Pilate's song ultimately serves as a vehicle that transmits emotion. Macon Jr.'s description suggests that while performing her song, Pilate experiences "all [the] emotion and passion" (29) associated with painful events in her past.

Testimony as "talking cure" not only serves a cathartic function, it also brings latent memories to the fore, integrating dissociated recollections into consciousness. Freud and Breuer elaborate on this role of testimony in *Studies on Hysteria*, particularly throughout their "Preliminary Communication." There, they argue that hysterics suffer from "reminiscences"—what we would call traumatic memories—that are split from the conscious mind and exist in "hypnoid states" (12), or segments of

the unconscious. In order for trauma to be reconciled, Freud and Breuer explain that one must "succeed in bringing to light the memory of the event" (6), which is usually accomplished through the act of narrativization. In her study of the blues as a healing agency, Gunilla T. Kester unwittingly suggests that black music serves a remarkably similar function. Kester argues that the blues is able to heal by acting as, what she terms, a "maieutic instrument." She goes on to explain that, "derived from the Greek word for midwife [*maia*], the maieutic can be seen as a force which . . . provokes a pregnant situation and, like a good midwife, allows the process of change to conclude in healing and constructive ways" (115). For Kester, the blues as a metaphoric midwife usually engenders change in cultural and political ways. Her study of Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* reveals that central protagonists in both works use the blues to reconnect with their African American origins and community, an act that ultimately allows for an assertion of their political agency. If we consider the etymology of the term "maieutic," however, distinctly psychoanalytic dimensions are revealed. Traditionally, "maieutic" relates to the Socratic process, or other similar methods, such as psychotherapy, of "assisting a person to become fully conscious of ideas previously latent in the mind" (OED). The maieutic process, then, is comparable to the process of psychic integration that takes place during the "talking cure": both rely on bringing latent ideas or memories to the fore. However, although Kester does not explore this function of the maieutic in relation to black music, it is certainly applicable in *Song of Solomon*.

At times, black music acts as a maieutic agent by engendering reconciliatory nostalgia, particularly in the figure of Macon Jr. His need to overcome feelings of isolation incites him to leave his class pretensions behind momentarily and take a short cut through the poorer part of town where his estranged sister resides. Pilate, her daughter Reba, and Reba's daughter Hagar sing in harmonious concert, exhibiting their unity, vitality, and passion. Working as a metaphoric midwife, Pilate's song allows Macon Jr. to access and deliver suppressed memories of his past into his conscious mind: "surrendering to the sound," Pilate's "music . . . made him think of fields and wild turkey and calico" (29). Macon Jr. "soften[s] under the weight of memory and music" (29), attaining a degree of emotional fulfillment by recalling the personal history he does "not . . . reminisce much about" (51). By returning him to the land of his childhood, song allows Macon Jr. to engage in emotionally satisfying nostalgia. Indeed, the passage is characterized by Macon Jr.'s fond recollections of his sister's miraculous birth and her animated mouth. If only for a moment, Macon Jr. is free of the emotional consequences effected by his exploitation of others, for while listening to Pilate's song, he "fe[els] the irritability of the day" spent coercing money from one of his tenants "drain from him" (29).

Unlike her brother Macon Jr., Pilate deliberately uses song to take possession of her past, particularly her traumatic history. Pilate knows that "to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (Caruth, *Trauma* 5). As she tells Milkman, "the dead you kill is yours. They stay with you anyway, in your mind" (208). In an effort to allay the memory of both her father's death and her role as an unwitting accomplice in the murder of a seemingly threatening white prospector, Pilate heeds her father's admonition to sing. After both instances and throughout her life, Macon Dead's ghost returns to Pilate and "tells [her] things [she] need[s] to know" (141), advice that Pilate deems "real helpful," such as the imperative to "Sing, Sing" (170). The reader later learns that Pilate misinterprets her father's directive, for in actuality, he calls out to his dead wife, who is named Sing. Nevertheless, the text implies that Pilate's old blues song allows her to reintegrate traumatic memory, a gratifying psychological process that is repeated when she retrieves the white prospector's bones. In an effort to alleviate both her conscience and the memory of her painful past, Pilate heeds her father's cryptic reproach, "You just can't fly off and leave a body" (208), interpreting his maxim as a directive to return to the bones

of the man she and Macon Jr. left dead in the cave. We learn later that Macon's moving refrain relates to his own trauma of paternal loss, for he was the body left when his father Solomon escaped slavery by flying back to Africa. Unaware that her father's admonition is directed towards his own father, Pilate returns to the recesses of a dark cave in Montour County and unearths the bones of a man whose death she believes is partially her responsibility. Pilate carries the bones with her on her travels and ultimately hangs them in the center of her home, preferring to confront the anathemas of her past rather than having the memories haunt her. As she tells Milkman, it is "a more better thing to have the bones right there with you wherever you go" (208). Singing her old blues song figuratively replicates her return to the cave; it allows her to access her history from the dark recesses of her mind and bring it to the fore. In her study of the novel, Valerie Smith concedes that "instead of repressing the past, [Pilate] carries it with her in the form of her song, her stories and her bag of bones" (281). In Pilate's terminology, both singing and collecting the bones offer her solace because they allow her to "free up [her] mind" of trauma (208).

### Black Music as Narrative Paradigm: Reconsidering the Status of Language

There are thus marked similarities between the "talking cure" and black music as paradigms of testimony. Ultimately, both function as what J. L. Austin would deem "performatives"; that is, they perform the action of releasing intense affect and unearthing latent memories. *Song of Solomon*, however, not only suggests that the two models of testimony are comparable, but also situates black music as an alternative to Freud and Breuer's paradigm of the "talking cure." *Song of Solomon* suggests that black music serves the same emotional and psychological function as talk therapy, but its configuration as a model of testimony distinctly varies. Specifically, the privileged status of language is decidedly undercut in representations of black music as testimony.

The emphasis on language in current discourses of trauma predominately derives from notions of testimony as a narrative act. Basing their assessments on the psychoanalytic discourses of Sigmund Freud, Joseph Breuer, and Pierre Janet, critics such as Judith Herman argue that testimony is essentially the act of telling a story (Herman 3). As a psychoanalyst and social critic, Herman's definition of testimony is derived from the therapeutic encounter. For Herman, testimony as trauma story occurs while the sufferer engages in a dialogic narrative with an attentive listener, usually a health-care professional. This narrative configuration of testimony, namely, the "talking cure," is composed predominantly, if not exclusively, of the spoken or written word. Indeed, this emphasis on language is apparent in the embryonic stages of trauma theory during the nineteenth century. For Freud, "verbal utterance" (57) is an intrinsic aspect of releasing pent-up affect during talk therapy; Freud insists that the patient must "describe the event in the greatest possible detail and put the affect into words" (57). Pierre Janet, Freud's contemporary, also emphasizes the importance of "linguistic operations" in what he termed "psychological analysis" to heal hysterics of "traumatic memory" (662), and these preoccupations are also apparent in contemporary studies of trauma. But current theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman write within poststructuralist discourses, and so draw attention to the limits of language as a mode of representation. In their discussions of testimony, these critics predominantly approach literary texts as examples of testimony, and by offering a rhetorical analysis, they argue that traumatic memory destabilizes language and demands a vocabulary and syntax in some sense

incommensurable with what went before it. Although current theories draw attention to the referential limitations of language, "linguistic operations" continue to be a central preoccupation.

Morrison's *Song of Solomon* diverges from current discourses of trauma, however. Although it incorporates "linguistic operations," the privileged status of language is critiqued in discussions of black music as testimony. The importance of language is in part compromised by the novel's treatment of its referential capacity. In its assessment of language as a signifier of grief, Morrison's text anticipates current theories of trauma, for it recognizes that trauma is an elusive mental wound that defies representation and leaves its victims without a vocabulary that can sufficiently articulate traumatic experience. Dori Laub explains that in the face of trauma "there are never enough words or the right words . . . the story cannot be fully captured in *thought, memory, and speech*" (63; original italics). The referential limitations of language are apparent in the novel during Hagar's funeral. Having witnessed Hagar psychologically and physically deteriorate after Milkman abandons her, Pilate bursts into the church while her granddaughter's funeral is in progress and repeatedly shouts "Mercy" (317), hoping the word will articulate not only Pilate's emotional and psychological distress but also Hagar's story. But Pilate acknowledges that the word itself "was not enough. The word needed a bottom, a frame" (317).

The de-privileged status of language is also apparent in that Morrison does not focus on the lyric or the word as the only means through which specific and individual pain is communicated. In traditional paradigms of testimony, bearing witness to trauma is dependent on locating and expressing the event by developing a personalized traumatic narrative that articulates a specific experience. Finding the right words is considered the key to unlocking traumatic history. Indeed, even the tradition of the blues song focuses on revealing specific experience. According to Angela Davis, "the blues represent experience as emotionally configured by an individual psyche" (112), and episodes of abandonment, love, and betrayal are often configured by a variety of differing lyrics. With the exception of the death of her granddaughter Hagar, however, Pilate sings the same blues song to access trauma or to communicate pain. The death of her father, her estrangement from her brother, and her ostracism from a number of small communities due to her mysterious navel-less belly are all managed with the aid of a single song, "O Sugarman don't leave me here," and so a single set of lyrics. Although the lyrics of the song are significant as encoded intertexts that reveal Milkman's personal and cultural history, as signifiers of trauma their referential capacity is exposed as limited; they do not reveal the nuances of particular occurrences and events.

Rather than predominately relying on language to communicate trauma, Morrison opts for an alternative medium of expression, namely, music. In Saussure's terminology, language is one among several sign-systems that formulate traumatic testimony in the novel. We see this commitment to music in the aforementioned scene, where Pilate enters Hagar's funeral and recognizes the referential inadequacies of language: the word "Mercy" "[is] not enough" to convey her grief, and so "needed a bottom, a frame" (317). Music ultimately provides this referential frame, offering Pilate a medium with which to relay her emotional anguish and the traumatic memory of Hagar's demise: "She straightened up, held her head high, and transformed the plea into a note" (317). The musical note here conveys meaning; indeed, the novel recognizes that sound can act as a medium of expression. When hunting in Shalimar, the sound of men's voices and the dogs' barking become a kind of music that functions as a pre-symbolic form of language:

All those shrieks, those rapid tumbling barks, the long sustained yells, the tuba sounds, the drumbeat sounds, the low liquid *houn houn*, the reedy whistles, the thin *eeee's* of a cornet, the *unh unh unh* bass chords. It was all language. An extension of the click people made in their cheeks back home when they wanted a dog to follow them. No, it was not language; it was

what there was before language. Before things were written down. Language in a time when men and animals did talk to another, when a man could sit down with an ape and the two converse; when a tiger and man could share the same tree, and each understood the other; when men ran *with* wolves, not from or after them. And he was hearing it in the Blue Ridge Mountains under a sweet gum tree. (278)

The notion that musical sound is a sign that communicates, particularly the ordeals of trauma, is a consistent theme throughout Morrison's works. *Tar Baby* most explicitly conveys this assessment when Michael, after being physically abused by his mother, curls up in a linen cabinet under the sink and hums or sings, "because he could not speak or cry—because he had no vocabulary for what was happening to him, who sang la la la, la la la instead" (234). Indeed, Peter J. Capuano's study of *Beloved* recognizes that "words have no meaning and the sound carries every inch of sorrow and despair harbored inside the members of the enslaved community" (101). As a model of testimony, then, song may incorporate "linguistic operations"—in the form of lyrics—but it does not privilege them, for Morrison suggests that music is a medium of expression that can also give voice to an experience that is otherwise difficult to communicate.

By exposing the referential limitations of language and drawing attention to the power of music as a preliterate mode of communication, the novel does not construct a reductive binary that opposes language with music. Indeed, the novel often conflates the two. It not only exposes the ways in which music is a form of language, but also suggests the musical quality of language and narrative. The novel's use of various rhetorical strategies, particularly forms of repetition, invests language with both musical and lyrical intonations. Anaphora is a comma technique, particularly during exchanges in dialogue (25, 125), and establishes a rhythmic beat that is inherently musical: "'Freaky,' said Milkman. 'Some freaky shit.' 'Freaky world,' said Guitar. 'A freaky, fucked-up world'" (102). Instances of anadiplosis (48), homoiop-toton (86), and epizeuxis (129, 133) are also modes of repetition that add inherently musical dimensions to the language and narrative. At times, repetition as a stylistic shapes the dialogue so that it takes on the character of a blues rhapsody, as the exchange between Milkman's sister Corinthians and her lover Porter suggests:

Corinthians looked down at him. "Is this for me?" she asked. "Yes," he said. "Yes, this is for you. Instead of roses. And silk underwear and bottles of perfume." "Porter." "Instead of chocolate creams in a heart-shaped box. Instead of a big house and a great big car. Instead of long trips . . ." "Porter." ". . . in a clean white boat." "No." "Instead of picnics . . ." "No." ". . . and fishing . . ." "No." ". . . and being old together on a porch." "No." "This is for you, girl. Oh, yes. This is for you." (200)

In her study of the novel, Nancy Ellen Batty also recognizes the musical dimensions of the narrative trajectory, which like jazz music, disallows teleology:

Morrison herself repeatedly describes her own work in terms of music, particularly Jazz: "Classical music satisfies and closes. Black music does not do that. Jazz always keeps you on edge. There is no final cord . . . and it agitates you. . . . There is always something underneath . . . that is incomplete." . . . Morrison senses in Jazz music an analogy to her own novels as indeterminate. (77)

Indeed, the novel ends on a distinctly ambiguous and indeterminate note, with Milkman and his best friend Guitar locked in mortal combat and denying a clear resolution. *Song of Solomon*, then, refuses reductive binaries, but it does offer a critique of language in discussions of traumatic testimony, particularly by drawing attention to its referential limitations and situating music as a viable alternative medium of communication.



Even though Morrison's work recognizes the limitations of language, it cannot dismiss its power. Language, particularly the written word, has the power to mediate the violence inherent in cultural relations between the white and black community in the novel. This violence is at times literal. Macon Dead is shot protecting land that he loses because, as Macon Jr. explains, "[he] couldn't read, couldn't even sign his name" (53). It is not surprising that Macon Jr. concedes that "everything bad thing that ever happened to him happened because he couldn't read" (53). Language, as John Marx recognizes, "is not a passive object" (86); the plight of Macon Dead reveals that it can kill. Language exerts its power in other ways, however, particularly in its capacity to negate identity. The "drunken Yankee in the Union Army" (18) who registers Macon inserts the word "dead" in the area reserved for Macon's surname, as he confuses Macon's reply "he's dead" (53) to the question of his father's identity. In that moment of renaming, Macon's past is "wipe[d] out" (54). By losing his ancestral name, Macon and subsequent generations of Deads also lose their history, community, and tradition, all of which are coefficients in the formation of identity.

In light of these implications, Morrison's critique of language in her configuration of black music as testimony has counterdiscursive implications. Repeatedly disenfranchised by language, protagonists opt for an alternative medium of expression in the form of music that not only emotionally appeases but also politically empowers. This parallel is most apparent in the novel's treatment of Guitar Baines, an unorthodox political activist whose name is associated with music. In the figure of Guitar, the novel implicitly aligns music and political action. Although Guitar's methods are not unequivocally supported by the novel, his association with music suggests an important interrelationship between music and political agency for African Americans. This correlation is understandable as music is not invested with the power relations that have served to enslave, marginalize, and monitor the black community. Unlike language, music as a means of expression has not traditionally functioned as a tool of oppression. In fact, black music, particularly the blues, has generally served as an expression of cultural repression: as Paul Oliver suggests, the blues emerged out of the tragic circumstances of African American history, expressing "the themes of suffering and misery that have arisen from poverty and destitution, from disease and disaster, violence and brutality, from bad living conditions and aimless migration" (289).

If Morrison's text does critique the power of language, however, it relies on various strategies to do so. On the one hand, as I have suggested, this imperative is achieved through the *repudiation* of language and adoption of music as a mode of signification. On the other hand, the novel reveals that the *appropriation* of language can also be politically efficacious. Language may have the power to negate identity, but as Morrison reveals, it can also be appropriated to reconstitute identity. As Theodore O. Mason recognizes, there is a tradition of linguistic appropriation in the African American community: "The emphasis on the constructive power of language has a long history in the Afro-American literary tradition. When Frederick Douglass 'steals' language in chapter 7 of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), for example, it is one of the most important moments in Afro-American literary history. There Douglass finds a method with which to carve out an identity" (173). We find that language serves a similar function in black music late in the novel when Milkman discovers both his personal and cultural heritage in the rhymes of children's games set to an old blues song.<sup>4</sup> In effect, Morrison may expose the limitations of language, but her critique does not reduce its significance.<sup>5</sup>

## Black Music as a Cultural Artifact: Reconsidering the Primacy of Western Culture

If language in Pilate's blues song speaks to the cultural politics in the novel, then the status of the song as a cultural artifact is also politically significant. These political implications are discernible in light of the privileged place of Western assumptions and traditions in current theories of trauma. This decidedly Eurocentric perspective is apparent in the works of individual critics, such as Caruth and Judith Herman, both of whom rely on a Western psychoanalytic tradition: Caruth is heavily indebted to Sigmund Freud's insights in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* while Herman's work is particularly informed by the theories of Pierre Janet. This commitment to Western psychoanalytic paradigms is not only apparent in the works of individual critics but also in theorists who have historicized the concept of trauma. Ruth Leys's genealogy of trauma and testimony is exclusively informed by concepts derived from Western psychoanalysis, medicine, and literary theory. Similarly, Allan Young's Foucauldian approach to trauma, which historicizes the specific discourses out of which various psychological forms of trauma were constructed, relies exclusively on North American and European paradigms. Indeed, Patrick J. Bracken has pointed to this tendency in current discourses of trauma, recognizing that the "supposition is that the forms of mental disorder that have been found in the West, and described by Western psychiatry, are basically the same as those found elsewhere" (41). Relying on terminology developed by A. Kleinman, Bracken goes on to argue that this universalizing tendency is inherently inaccurate or a "category fallacy" (41). In other words, trauma is "a nosological category developed for a particular cultural group that is then applied to members of another culture for whom it lacks coherence and its validity has not been established" (Kleinman, qtd. in Bracken 41). He posits that "in non-Western settings, idioms of distress are likely to be quite different" (55), and ultimately encourages a deconstructive hermeneutics that reveals discourses of trauma as forms of "ethnopsychiatry: a particular, culturally based way of thinking about and responding to states of madness and distress" (40).

Morrison's *Song of Solomon* unwittingly responds to Bracken's call for a more nuanced cultural response to definitions of trauma by moving outside the Western biomedical mainstream and complicating predominately Eurocentric responses to trauma and testimony. Morrison's commitment to cultural specificity is not surprising; critics have generally recognized Morrison's Afrocentric approach to storytelling. This priority is apparent in the mythic infrastructure of the novel, particularly its incorporation of the myth of the flying African. The underlying theme of the novel, which is reinforced in the culmination of Milkman's quest, is the reconstitution of black cultural heritage. It is also apparent at the level of the signifier, in the novel's "systems of language, the style, and the lexicon of Black English" (Atkinson 28). Additionally, this priority is discernible in Morrison's approach to traumatic testimony as she opts for a culturally specific understanding of traumatic cures when situating black music as an alternative to the "talking cure."

This cultural tradition is evidenced in Part II of the novel when Milkman leaves North Carolina and travels north, returning to his father's hometown in Danville, Pennsylvania. Morrison's novel alludes to a genre of black music that develops in response to the era of slavery, and so is a culturally specific method of addressing trauma. In Danville, Milkman learns of his grandfather, Macon Dead, a prosperous ex-slave who owned "one of the best farms in Montour County . . . could plow forty in no time flat and sang like an angel while he did it" (235). In the scene, the novel gestures to a tradition of work songs that helped lighten the load of field labor during slavery. Although the passage espouses Macon Dead's ability to sing,

situating it as another of his many accomplishments, Morrison's novel does not lose sight of the cultural circumstances that fostered Macon's gift. Macon Dead is born a slave, and despite his release, he dies a slave to the whims of white neighbors who have the authority to shoot him in the head and take his land without suffering legal repercussions. In light of Macon's subservience—first, to white men under slavery and second, to white law during emancipation—the song that he sings while plowing is reminiscent of the work songs that developed in response to slavery. They are the songs that Frederick Douglass wrote about in his *Narrative*, and are situated as a culturally specific strategy of reconciling trauma.

The work song is the generic progenitor of the blues, another category of black music that is represented in the novel and associated with traumatic reconciliation and experience. In *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, Houston Baker posits that the lyrics and musical form of the blues evolved from work songs. Morrison's novel exhibits that the blues not only inherited the lyrics and musical form of the work song but also its therapeutic function. That "old blues song Pilate sang all the time: 'O Sugarman don't leave me here' " (300) serves to "relieve her gloom immediately" (147). But the novel not only situates the blues as a culturally specific form of traumatic appeasement. By inscribing the blues theme, Morrison also draws attention to culturally specific traumas that have affected the African American community, particularly women in that community. Through her depiction of Hagar, Morrison inscribes the quintessential blues theme of a woman abandoned by her man. This theme is in fact articulated in a popular blues lyric which, according to Newman White, "generations of Negroes" repeated with variations:

When a woman takes the blues,  
She tucks her head and cries;  
But when a man catches the blues,  
He catches er freight and rides. (394)

Morrison again inscribes this blues "note" in her depiction of Ryna, Solomon's wife, who is left behind during his flight to Africa and dies as a result of overwhelming grief. Ryna and her children were sacrificed for Solomon's triumphant flight, just as Hagar must suffer so Milkman can reach self-understanding and maturity. Through her portrayal of Hagar and Ryna, Morrison reminds us that some women have no way to cope with the trauma of abandonment.

This abandonment inevitably leads to Hagar's death, and in the scene depicting her funeral, the novel alludes to the slave spirituals, another form of black music that acts as a culturally specific configuration of testimony. The rhetoric of call/response that defines the scene most apparently aligns Pilate's song to those of the spirituals. Pilate enters the church where Hagar's funeral takes place and shouts "Mercy!" repeatedly, an invocation that is addressed by her daughter Reba's reply in "a sweet soprano: 'I hear you' " (317). The pair proceeds to sing in concert, and their song forms a lament. However, Yvonne Atkinson's study of black music argues that the call/response dynamic has further implications, suggesting that it is intrinsically linked with the rhetoric of "witness/testify, another part of the word-of-mouth facet of the African American community" (22). In effect, when Pilate calls "Mercy," she bears witness; that is, "she affirms, attests, certifies, validates, and observes" (22) the implications of Hagar's experience. When Reba replies "I hear you," she testifies, or as Geneva Smitherman posits in her discussion of testimony in the call/response dynamic, she "gives verbal witness to the efficacy, truth, and power of some experience that all blacks shared" (58).

Smitherman's critique here indicates that the call/response motif also has communal and collective dimensions. Witnessing as a coefficient of call/response "is a shared experience, emotional, physical, communal, historical—it is social empathy. Testifying articulates and validates the shared experience through gesture, sign, symbol,

or verbal expression" (Atkinson 23). The communal dimensions of the call/response dynamic are apparent in the scene when, having sung a reassuring lullaby to Hagar, Pilate turns to the congregation and directs her grief to the community as a collective by addressing each member with the phrase "My baby girl" (318). The aphorism encodes Hagar's painful history and the significance of her loss to both Pilate and Reba. The African American community responds as well, for there are members of the congregation "who had the courage to look at her, shake their heads, and say, 'Amen'" (318). Black music in the form of call/response, then, not only bears witness to trauma but also implicates the African American community in the event, and so has collective dimensions. These communal facets serve to further distinguish black music from Western paradigms of testimony. Bracken has argued that Western discourses of trauma work "on the basis of a strongly individualistic approach to human life, in which the intrapsychic world is emphasized, and society is understood to be a collection of separate individuals" (41). Even though Morrison's work suggests that black music certainly serves to convey and ameliorate trauma that affects the individual psyche, this scene also indicates that it diverges from this predominately Western model by revealing that black music also has communal dimensions. As a model of testimony, black music not only affects the individual but also implicates a community, and the collective facets of this form of testimony are specific to the African American community.

By situating black music as a culturally specific form of traumatic testimony, Morrison continues the counterdiscursive imperative apparent throughout the novel. The impetus of the novel is about finding African American heritage, and by exploring black music as testimony, Morrison unearths yet another manifestation of African American culture. This need to situate black music as a distinctly African American reconciliatory art form becomes particularly marked in light of Morrison's current responses to black music as a healing agency. In "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Morrison suggests that the capacity of African American music to cure emotional and mental wounds has been undermined as a result of cultural assimilation: "For a long time, the art form that was healing for Black people was music. That music is no longer *exclusively* ours; we don't have exclusive rights to it. Other people sing it and play it; it is the mode of contemporary music everywhere" (340; original italics). This assertion is echoed in the closing chapter of the novel when Milkman, having decoded the riddle of the children's song, acknowledges the importance of reclaiming his connection to the past. Closing his eyes, Milkman recites a series of "Names that bore witness" (330) to the history of a culture perpetually silenced, traumatized, and co-opted by white America. Included in this list are the names of legendary musicians Muddy Waters, Lead Belly, and Bo Diddley, each of whom were assimilated by white commercial culture. According to Pete Welding, Muddy Waters, a pioneer of the postwar blues style, was in the late 1950s "taken up by a new audience—young, white, and middle class" (5). Lead Belly "found an appreciative audience" in the leftist folk community, and was predominately co-opted by white musicians, such as Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger. Similarly, Bo Diddley's distinctively African-based rhythm pattern was assimilated by white artists, such as the Rolling Stones and Bruce Springsteen. Morrison, therefore, also explores the healing function of black music to remind the reader of a decidedly political issue: this culturally specific consolatory agency has been compromised as a result of cultural and even commercial co-option.

Morrison's assessment of African American music in this context inherently encourages further consideration of the novel and its relationship to black music. In part, Morrison's statements and Milkman's lament at the close of the novel suggest that *Song of Solomon* memorializes a culturally specific method of healing now undermined as a result of white assimilation. Morrison's ensuing sentiments in "Rootedness," however, further complicate the issue, suggesting that the novel is more than merely a vehicle of commemoration and nostalgia for black music,

a now compromised art form. Morrison insists: "that music is no longer *exclusively* ours . . . so another form has to take its place, and it seems to me that the novel is needed by African Americans now in a way that it was not needed before" (340; original italics). Rather than simply memorializing music as an art form, the novel, Morrison's assertions suggest, has replaced black music and taken up the work of traumatic consolation and political action. But this transposition is not merely a matter of absolute substitution, as the novel as a distinct genre does not replace black music, effacing its significance entirely. Rather, *Song of Solomon* reveals in its reliance on musical language and open-ended narrative sequences modeled on jazz riffs that this replacement is more akin to an organic metamorphosis. Black music has found its way into black literature, and exists in *Song of Solomon* both explicitly as Pilate's old blues song and implicitly in the narrative's aesthetics. By incorporating elements of black music, the novel testifies both to its resilience and continued efficacy as a consolatory agency for African Americans.

1. Matus's chapter on *Song of Solomon* in her book length study of Toni Morrison most explicitly engages with the issue of paternal loss, and the psychoanalytic reading of the novel by Eleanor Branch particularly explores the personal quest.
2. Macon and Anna O. are also distinguishable in other ways. If we critique both within discourses of hysteria, we find that Anna O. is often aware that the delusions she narrates are in fact imagined constructions whereas Macon Jr. designates his story not as fantasy but as "the whole truth" (70). This commitment to his fabrication suggests the severity of Macon Jr.'s psychopathology, which when read in light of the political dimensions of hysteria, reveals the extent of his disempowerment. Hysteria in men, Eng argues, "not only testifies to failed social interpellation but also speaks to the production of subjects marked by particular deprived social positions" (179). In other words, hysteria, a traditionally female malady, does not simply suggest emasculation here; it also points to Macon Jr.'s inability to enter the social arenas he desperately desires. Despite his accumulation of wealth, Macon Jr. is denied recognition within Ruth's family and, by extension, her class of wealthy African Americans due to his lack of education and breeding. Similarly, his color keeps him racially marginalized in a predominately white society.
3. Moses, Wegs, Garabedian, Rubenstein, and Capuano all investigate the subject of music in Morrison's works.
4. Similarly, Atkinson's convincing reading of the novel suggests that oral configurations of language are prized in African American culture, particularly in the mediums of storytelling and song (25).
5. Critical essays by Clarke and Mason have offered a detailed exploration of the complex role of both oral and literate forms of language in *Song of Solomon*.

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