

## **Abstract**

Wilson, Martha Frances. Journeys Across Boundaries In *Mama Day*, *Praisesong for the Widow*, and *Song of Solomon*. (Under the direction of Lucinda MacKethan.)

*Mama Day*, *Praisesong for the Widow*, and *Song of Solomon*, novels by three African-American women, present characters who go on journeys of self-discovery. Cocoa, George, Avey, and Milkman all face geographical boundaries and self-imposed boundaries of knowledge that inhibit their comprehension and appreciation of their heritage. Their journeys are the process of crossing over these boundaries of geography, legend, and language in order for them to incorporate their family and cultural heritage into the actions of their present day lives. The success of their journeys lies in their continuation of the knowledge they discover and its integration into their future.

**Journeys Across Boundaries**  
**In**  
***Mama Day, Praisesong for the Widow, and Song of Solomon***

by  
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## **Biography**

Martha Frances Wilson was born in Southern Pines, North Carolina in 1980. She received her B.A. in English from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2002.

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**Journeys Across Boundaries**  
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A boundary serves to clarify. Boundaries mark place, where one area begins and another ends. Time is marked by the boundaries of past, present, and future. Examining how boundaries are crossed in literature allows for change to be analyzed. Three African-American women's novels- *Mama Day*, *Praisesong for the Widow*, and *Song of Solomon*- all present characters who take journeys, both physically and spiritually, that involve different dimensions of boundary crossing.

Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988) depicts the story of a young woman, Cocoa, from the island of Willow Springs and her journey to find love in New York City. Cocoa and George must reconcile their different worlds, but George sacrifices his life in exchange for their eternal love. Avey Johnson, in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), journeys through her memories and to the island of Carriacou to reclaim an identity that was lost in the struggle for financial success. Toni Morrison's *Milkman*, in *Song of Solomon* (1977), is a young man struggling to claim his own identity, separate from his father Macon Dead, who finally finds his freedom while trekking south to find answers about his grandfather Macon Dead I. Geography, legend, and language are three common threads in these novels that are illustrated in the crossing of boundaries within the narratives.

First, physical boundaries are crossed in the geography of the novels. *Mama Day* presents a very clear geographical boundary between Willow Springs and everywhere else referred to as "beyond the bridge." Cocoa crosses between Willow Springs and New York City. The boundaries represent different ways of life, Willow Springs preserving

its unique island culture and New York the modern mainland. Avey crosses several geographical boundaries in *Praisesong for the Widow*: between Halsey St. in Brooklyn and North White Plains, New York and between the Caribbean islands, Grenada and Carriacou. The two places in New York symbolize the differences in social class, while the two Caribbean islands demonstrate modernity vs. tradition. Milkman is surrounded by boundaries as well, including his well to do neighborhood in a Michigan city vs. the African American ghetto of Southside, and between Michigan and Virginia. The neighborhood boundaries in Michigan again represent social class while the boundary between Michigan and Virginia signifies the present vs. the past. The crossings of geographical boundaries clearly mark place, but boundaries also reveal an internal transformation for the characters.

All three novels present variations of the flying African legend, which crosses the boundaries of reality and time. The passing of these legends orally in each novel signifies the importance of maintaining knowledge of the past in present lives. Valerie Smith in *Self Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative* illustrates this concept in relation to *Song of Solomon's* Pilate:

Another consequence of Pilate's expansive vision is her cyclical, mythic vision of time. She believes that one can never escape one's past, that it exists in dynamic relationship to the present. She therefore carries her history with her in the form of her songs, her rocks, her bag of bones, and her stories. To her mind, one's sense of identity is rooted in the capacity to look back to the past and synthesize it with the present; it is not enough to put the past behind and look forward. (142)

Pilate's idea of a cyclical nature of time as opposed to a traditional linear nature of time is found in *Mama Day* and *Praisesong for the Widow* as well. This idea is reinforced in all three novels with an emphasis on the characters remembering events from their own pasts

in order to move forward with the present. The boundary of time is constantly being crossed through the telling of legends and personal stories.

The communities within each novel also create their own “language” specific to their own histories and rituals. Ngugi wa Thiong’o states in *Decolonising the Mind*: “Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture” (13). Language both spoken and written is a transmitter for information and similar to the concept of legend allows for the boundaries of time to be crossed from the past, present, and future. A tremendous focus is placed on the importance of character names and the naming process in all three novels. Essentially claiming one’s given name and understanding how the name came into being is crucial to understanding one’s personal history and current identity. These unique languages and rituals also keep the past a part of the present and ensure they remain so in the future.

The struggle for the characters in the three novels is to reconcile their present day lives with the history of their family’s past. In *Claiming the Heritage* Missy Dehn Kubitschek states: “Any attempt to live without knowledge of the historical past is doomed, but living in the present by the rules of the past simply paralyzes, stops time. To survive whole, heroines must contextualize their knowledge of their heritage in the concrete present” (22). Cocoa, George, Avey, and Milkman all face geographical as well as cultural and internal boundaries that block them from knowledge of their history. They all go on journeys of self-discovery that force them to cross over these boundaries. By the end of all three novels, a history of each family has been discovered or recognized and absorbed by the characters into their conscious lives.

## Chapter One: Crossing Geographical Boundaries

In relation to literature, geography might commonly be associated with setting or place. Setting, according to Harmon and Holman's *Handbook to Literature* includes:

(1) the geographical location, its topography, scenery, and such physical arrangements as the location of the windows and doors in a room; (2) the occupations and daily manner of living of the characters; (3) the time or period in which the action takes place; (4) the general environment of the characters.

(Harmon and Holman 477)

The geography within novels can support narrative themes and structure. *Mama Day*, *Priasesong for the Widow*, and *Song of Solomon* all have carefully crafted geographies in which characters live their lives. In all three novels the characters struggle to identify themselves through reconciling their past with their present lives. These struggles can be clearly mapped out by looking at geographical boundaries and how they must be crossed.

Willow Springs, the home of Mama Day, is an island in more than the physical geographical sense. The island that Naylor conceives lies off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia connected to the mainland by only one bridge. Willow Springs belongs to neither state, only to its inhabitants. The residents create a world of their own on the island that is not reliant on the modern mainland of the United States, which they refer to simply as "beyond the bridge." Before the narrative begins, Naylor clearly puts forward the importance of place in the novel with the drawing of a map of Willow Springs showing the island's relation to the states and the layout of the island itself. The map is not needed to clarify the landscape of the community, but it provides an immediate signal for the reader that geography is crucial to the novel and the lives of the characters.

Mama Day's healing powers are rooted not only in her spiritual connection with her family, but also in the land of the island. The land provides her with the ingredients



she needs to heal those who seek help. Mama Day's connection with nature on the island gives her the ability to listen to the land. This gift in turn allows her to understand the past and foresee the future. On the night of Candle Walk, the year Cocoa and George meet, Mama Day makes a last walk over to "the Other Place," the old family house. While walking the ground she knows by heart, she listens to the land and hears its history and future: "Listen to the wind from The Sound. Maybe it would come to her. Yes – it just might come to her. Up and down this path, somehow, a man dies from a broken heart" (Naylor 118). Mama Day realizes in listening to the land what had happened to Bascombe Wade and what will happen to George.

Cocoa resides in both Willow Springs and "beyond the bridge." She lives in New York City, also an island, but she returns for two weeks every August to Willow Springs. Mama Day and Abigail also make sure Willow Springs is present in the northern city by keeping Cocoa stocked with herbs and remedies that they make on the island. Cocoa maintains a strong sense of self through her rich family history, but an identity struggle arises when she tries to reconcile the city life and her relationship with her northern husband George to the unique world of Willow Springs. George also wrestles with his identity because he was raised an orphan in a shelter and learned that the present is all that matters. He lacks a family history to connect him to the past, which strongly contrasts Cocoa's dependence on her roots. Charles Wilson states about Cocoa and George: "As they hail from two different worlds (two different cultures), each serves as the perfect sparring partner for the other. Early on they learn that differences breed exposure to the unknown, and in demystifying the unknown, they develop into more emotionally substantive beings" (92). Their struggle is most evident during the visit

Cocoa and George make to Willow Springs, because their different worlds must be reconciled in a new setting. Willow Springs becomes a new place for Cocoa on this visit because she is forced to experience her home life through George's foreign perspective trying to understand everything around them. The geographic setting of the novel, two very different islands, helps illuminate the importance of understanding and recognizing personal history in present identity.

Julie Tharp in "The Maternal Aesthetic of *Mama Day*" states: "Naylor's use of dual settings in this novel problematizes the issue of identity broached in contemporary black women's writing, outlining the traditions available to them and seeking a tolerable solution through the character of Ophelia/Baby Girl/Cocoa" (122). Cocoa in New York City is an independent black woman skeptical of the world around her. She watches people and classifies them as food because she is skeptical of allowing those around her to seem real. Cocoa explains this behavior to George on their first date:

Nothing's just black and white here like in Willow Springs.  
Nothing stays put. So I guess the way I talk is my way of  
coming to terms with never knowing what to expect from  
anything or anybody. I'm not a bigot, but if I sounded like one,  
I guess its because deep down I'm as frightened of change and  
difference as they are. (Naylor 63)

George and Cocoa's relationship grows out of his desire for her to truly appreciate his home city. Through the eyes of George, Cocoa begins to comprehend how New York City is an island with similar characteristics to her home in Willow Springs, a place filled with communities that possess their own languages, rituals, and identities. George observes during their time exploring, "And it had been loads of fun, watching you change. You weren't becoming different, you were going back to the way you were"

(Naylor 100). Cocoa began in New York to realize, through really experiencing the city, the importance of understanding land and culture in shaping identity.

George is forced to cross the boundary from the familiar streets and sounds of New York City to the unique setting of Willow Springs when he joins Cocoa during her annual visit home. George attempts to familiarize himself with Willow Springs before making the trip by analyzing his atlas, but had little success: “It’s hard to know what to expect from a place when you can’t find it on the map” (Naylor 174). George asks Cocoa questions to try and understand the geography of the island and the areas around it but once again is left mystified about what will be in store for him once he arrives in Willow Springs.

My suspicions were confirmed when we drove over that shaky wooden bridge: you had not prepared me for paradise. And to be fair, I realized that there was nothing you could have said that would have made any sense to me. I had to be there and see-no, feel-that I was entering another world.

(Naylor 175)

George immediately falls in love with Willow Springs and spends time exploring the island and meeting its inhabitants. His battle with understanding the nature of Willow Springs and especially Cocoa’s family really starts when Cocoa becomes ill, an illness caused by Ruby’s hate. George feels she needs medical attention from the mainland rather than home remedies concocted by Abigail and Mama Day. The mainland represents security for George because it is the world that he lives in and understands. It has the things he depends on for his calculated way of living. The hurricane that hits the island at the beginning of Cocoa’s illness destroys the bridge to the mainland. The loss of this connection makes Willow Springs an island completely severed from land and clarifies how the island runs on its own time, rituals, and values. Even the process of

rebuilding the bridge by the men of Willow Springs is a ritual beyond the understanding of George. His calculations and measurements were useless to the men who built the bridge one board at a time.

In order for Cocoa to recover from her illness, George must surrender his doubts and find faith in the land of Willow Springs and the history of its people. George remains skeptical and puts his efforts into rebuilding the bridge so he can take Cocoa to the safety of the mainland and its doctors. The more George fights the ways of Abigail and Mama Day, the more he loses Cocoa to the supernatural illness that she has been infected with by Ruby's hate. George never fully gives his belief and trust to Mama Day to save Cocoa. Instead he gives his life in an attempt to follow her directions. George becomes part of the history of the Day family and remains a part of Willow Springs forever.

The loss of George forces Cocoa to reconcile their two worlds. In order for her to continue with her life, she must accept the sacrifice George makes for her. Geography once again illustrates identity for Cocoa: "I couldn't hide in Willow Springs forever. But I knew New York was out of the question. It was easier in Charleston: we'd never been there together, and I drew strength from moving in the midst of familiar ground. Enough strength to build around-and on- that vacant center in me" (Naylor 308-309). Cocoa realizes that her memories are too intertwined with place to continue living in New York or Willow Springs. She needs a setting not connected to any memories to begin to build a new life. George remains a part of Cocoa's identity that can never be severed from her, just like her ties to Willow Springs. No matter how many years pass by spent on the mainland, she always crosses back over the bridge to the island to root herself in her family's history and her life with George.

The geography of place in *Praisesong for the Widow* emphasizes boundaries of class for the African-American community and the effect that crossing these boundaries has on the lives of the Avey and Jay Johnson. The couple lives in two places during their marriage, first on Halsey Street in New York City in a small apartment and later in a home in North White Plains. Halsey Street in Brooklyn is the site of much of Avey's memory in the novel. Avey and Jay live there as a young couple just starting out together, enjoying contented evenings of jazz music, dancing, and passion. But Halsey Street also represents Avey and Jay's battle against poverty, supposedly defeated with their move to the secure setting of North White Plains.

The struggle Avey and Jay face is the desire to move beyond the harsh streets of poverty and fear. What Halsey Street has to offer their family is epitomized by the woman Jay refers to when questioning Avey during their pivotal Tuesday night fight: " 'Do you know who you sound like,' he whispered, choked, appalled, 'who you even look like?'" (Marshall 106). This unnamed woman in their neighborhood, to whom he compares her, would go out late at night in search of her man to bring him home after he had squandered his pay on booze and women. This woman aired her grievances for all to hear.

Her rage those dark mornings spoke not only for herself but for the thousands like her for blocks around, lying sleepless in the cold-water flats and one-room kitchenettes, the railroad apartments you could run a rat through and the firetraps above the stores on busy Fulton Street and Broadway; waiting all of them, for some fool to come home with his sodden breath and half his pay envelope gone. Lying there enraged and vengeful, planning to put the chain on the door, change the lock first thing in the morning, have his clothing waiting out in the hall for him when he came lurching in at dawn.  
(Marshall 108)

This woman represents the poverty and hardship almost guaranteed to them while living in a place like Halsey Street. Jay and Avey's hopes that happiness and security exist somewhere propels them to work to move from the boundaries of Halsey Street.

Avey is initially introduced in the novel as the woman from North White Plains. She is traveling on a cruise ship with two girlfriends, six suitcases, shoe caddy, and hatbox, but she is ready to abandon her luxury vacation to flee back to the comfort of her dining room. The thoughts of her dining room represent the nature of her house and the lifestyle she has in North White Plains:

Where the light from the hall fell across the table's polished surface,  
The cherry wood glowed like a banked fire that had awaited her return.  
Over on the buffet the coffee service on its chased and footed tray was  
a study in silver and black in the semidarkness. Everything was as she  
had left it: her special crystal in the china closet, her silverplate-all eighty  
pieces-in its feltlined case.

(Marshall 26)

As the novel progresses and the memories of Avey are exposed to the reader, it becomes evident she was not always one to wear a two-piece dress with a hat and gloves; during the Halsey St. years she was a woman who struggled along with her husband to get out of a cramped apartment in Brooklyn and into a better life.

Avey and Jay obviously achieve the goals of moving to a secure middle-class home and establishing financial security for their family, but the question Avey asks herself and that the reader must ask is, at what cost did they move from Halsey Street? Avey knows more has been sacrificed during their battle than time and energy.

The closing for the house in North White Plains had taken place, the actual move was only weeks away, when suddenly she found herself thinking not so much on the new life awaiting them but of the early years back on Halsey Street, of the small rituals and private pleasures that had lasted through the birth of Sis. And in the face of

Jay's marathon effort and her own crowded wearying days, such thoughts seemed a betrayal.

(Marshall 122)

She reminisces about the simple amusements that made their life together so special, especially the music and the dancing. The crossing of the geographical boundaries of Halsey St. to North White Plains represents a crossing from lower to middle class. What Avey learns is that the rising in class results in more than financial success; it triggers the loss of identity which she must ultimately struggle to redefine.

A significant symbol in Avey's self-turmoil is the loss of Jay's signature mustache. "With the mustache no longer there it seemed that the last trace of everything that was distinctive and special about him vanished also" (Marshall 131). Even though the removal of the moustache is a physical change in Jay's appearance, Avey internalizes the change and struggles against the emotional and mental changes apparent in Jay as well.

While continuing to call him Jay to his face, she gradually found herself referring to him as Jerome Johnson in her thoughts. She couldn't account for the change in any conscious way. Perhaps it was that other face she sometimes thought she detected hovering pale and shadowy over his. Or the unsparing, puritanical tone that had developed in his voice. Or the things he had taken to saying.

(Marshall 132)

Avey, however, is not as perceptive to how she changed alongside Jay until she no longer recognizes herself. Instead of the "Avey" and "Avatara" she once knew, she found herself living as Avey Johnson.

Why did the change in geography and class result in a change in the identity of Avey and Jay? Missy Kubitschek in *Claiming the Heritage* explains, "This movement into the middle class entails a fundamental difficulty: the traditional African and African-

American sense of self rests on a self-in-community; in contrast-in opposition-the traditional white, European, middle-class sense of self, generally described as ‘bourgeois,’ insists on privatization and compartmentalization” (91). In the drive to succeed, Avey and Jay stop performing their rituals of listening to music and dancing. As simple as these acts are, they connected them to each other and the community around them. Avey realizes the importance of their loss during her time spent on the balcony of the hotel in Grenada.

Moreover (and again she only sensed this in the dimmest way), something in those small rites, an ethos they held in common, had reached beyond her life and beyond Jay’s to join them to the vast unknown lineage that had made their being possible. And this link, these connections, heard in the music and in the praisesongs of a Sunday “...*I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were/young...*,” had both protected them and put them in possession of a kind of power...

(Marshall 137)

Through the process of remembering, Avey is able to finally mourn the death of her husband and the Jay she lost long before his death when their music had stopped playing. She begins to mourn for the man who lived and loved with her in their private haven on Halsey Street and for the cessation of their rituals.

Avey crosses another geographical boundary between the islands of Grenada and Carriacou which leads her to a renewal of her identity as a young girl and a better understanding of her heritage. The importance of ritual is highlighted during Avey’s time in Grenada. She comes to the island from the cruise ship during a time called “excursion.” This is a ritual that is performed by those in Grenada called “out-islanders” who return to their home island of Carriacou. Lebert Joseph serves as Avey’s window and guide to the Carriacou excursion experience. Out-islanders take time every year to



return to their native island to reconnect themselves to the heritage through candle lighting, food, song, music, and dance. “Rituals reenacting past events with necessarily contemporaneous actors emphasize the characters’ awareness of their heritages and their own importance. Myth thus becomes not the distorted history of a dead past but a living embodiment of lasting forces” (Kubitschek 16). For the out-islanders the movement across the geographical boundaries initially from Carriacou to the more modern and success-driven Grenada represents a change in lifestyle similar to Avey and Jay’s movement from Halsey Street to North White Plains. However, the ritual of the excursion allows for the out-islanders to live beyond Carriacou while remaining in touch with their heritage which provides the foundation for their identities. Avey and Jay’s failure to nourish themselves with rituals from a past place result in their disconnection from themselves and their heritage.

While Avey temporarily loses touch with her identity and heritage and searches to reclaim them, Milkman Dead in *Song of Solomon* wrestles with establishing his own identity. His quest for his family history sends him from the sanctuary of his northern urban home town through a frontier of land and history. Once again the geography of the novel illustrates the character’s struggle with his identity. The Dead family lives in Michigan, the less agrarian more industrial North. Macon Dead, Milkman’s father, worked to provide himself and his family with financial success. The family lives in a comfortable home on Not Doctor Street in a city in Michigan. Ironically, Macon Dead achieves financial success through renting properties to those in the Southside of town, a place where people struggle to make it through life. When he was twelve Milkman became friends with a boy named Guitar from Southside. As the boys grow Guitar

changes, but Milkman does not. Guitar forms strong beliefs about the injustices done to African-Americans and fights for what he believes while Milkman continues to live life only for himself. Milkman's lack of identity results originally from these conflicting social classes. On the surface the Dead family is successful with their comfortable home and their Sunday afternoon drives in the Packard, but Milkman's family life is extremely disjointed. His parents have a hateful relationship and each desires him to be their ally against the other. His two sisters Magdalena and First Corinthians are not expected to do anything in life and are not valued by anyone. Milkman finds refuge in coming to know his estranged Aunt Pilate and her daughter Reba and granddaughter Hagar. Milkman even remains unaware for a quite some time about the origins of his nickname. Valerie Smith writes in *Self Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative*:

While he lives in Michigan, Milkman sees the world as a linear and rigid structure, as his father does. Generally egocentric and unsympathetic, Milkman helps other people only when his arrogance motivates him to do so. (143)

Milkman does not think of anyone but himself until he goes on his journey and learns to ask for help.

In slave narratives the journey for the characters usually depicts a movement across boundaries from the South to the North, from slavery to freedom. Morrison reverses this tradition so that Milkman must travel from his home in the North to the South in order to discover his slave heritage which alone can free him from the isolation in which he was raised. A hunger for gold originally sent Milkman on his journey South. He felt the need to acquire his own money, which would in his mind allow him to be free from the pressures and restraints of his father. Although Milkman has never worried about money because of his father's financial status, money still controls his

understanding of life. Everything in his life up to this point has been secure: shelter, clothes, money, and women. Milkman's journey south forces him to rely instead on himself and the land to lead him to the truth about his family history. As he crosses boundaries, he slowly sheds the material items that represent his re-birth in a different form.

In Danville, Pennsylvania, Milkman learns about his grandfather, the first Macon Dead, a slave freed by the Civil War. The farm he had built, called Lincoln's Heaven, represented freedom and independence.

Stop picking around the edges of the world. Take advantage,  
and if you can't take advantage, take disadvantage. We live  
here. On this planet, in this nation, in this county right here.  
Nowhere else! We got a home in this rock, don't you see!  
Nobody starving in my home; nobody crying in my home, and  
if I got a home you got one too! Grab it. Grab this land! Take  
it, hold it, my brothers, make it, my brothers, shake it, squeeze it,  
turn it, twist it, beat it, kick it, kiss it, whip it, stomp it, dig it, plow  
it, seed it, reap it, rent it, buy it, sell it, own it, build it, multiply it,  
and pass it on-can you hear me? Pass it on!

(Morrison 235)

But the beautiful piece of land was taken from Macon Dead, along with his life. He was killed by white men who then took possession of his land. As Milkman travels South, he begins to understand the importance of land and making use of one's opportunities.

Milkman is finally starting to "Grab" what belongs to him and his family, their heritage.

Milkman's father, the first Macon Dead's son, understood what it meant to have land and how easily it can be taken away, which fires Macon Dead II's desire to achieve financial security for himself no matter the cost for others. In order for Milkman to discover himself and his heritage, he must find another model than his father's on which to live. Milkman's journey continues to Shalimar, Virginia. It is in this small southern

town that Milkman goes on his first coon hunt. The hunt forces Milkman to shed his city clothes and ways of thinking and to connect himself to the earth around him. “His watch and his two hundred dollars would be of no help out here, where all a man had was what he was born with, or had learned to use” (Morrison 277). While Milkman is out in the woods he slowly becomes separated from the other hunters due to his fatigue. As he rests he listens to the sound of the hunt going on around him. He realizes that man, beast, and nature all have a way of communicating with one another. Milkman begins to listen to earth around him, and he prevents Guitar from killing him because he could hear the signals of his presence. Milkman’s new understanding of life resulting from the experience of hunting allows him to unravel the mystery surrounding his family history. Through this hunt-quest, he begins to figure out the pieces of his family history that his Aunt Pilate had been unable to put together.

All three novels present characters who struggle with themselves and the geographical dimensions of their lives to understand their own identities. Contrasting geographies are used within each novel: New York and Willow Springs, Halsey St. and North White Plains, Grenada and Carriacou, and Michigan and Shalimar, Virginia. These places illuminate the differences of lifestyle, the differences of class, and the differences in values represented in each setting. Cocoa, George, Milkman, and Avey must all journey from the places that they know and live to places that require exploration of a land they either do not know or have denied in order to understand who they are and want to be. The characters all cross geographical boundaries at some point in their journey of self-discovery, but they also all rely on their family history associated with

rituals and embodied in place, and passed orally in the form of a story or legend, to guide them to their true sense of self.

## Chapter Two: Crossing Boundaries through Legend

A common thread in *Mama Day*, *Praisesong for the Widow*, and *Song of Solomon* is the image of characters taking flight to find freedom. In African-American folklore there are several versions of the tale of the flying Africans. All three novels use the figure of the flying African in the characters' family history which they must claim in order for it to become part of their personal spirit. The use of legend, passed on orally through the generations, begins to erase the boundary of time between past and present.

According to an entry in the *Oxford Companion to African American Literature*:

This oral story asserts that a certain tribe of Africans had the ability—if they were enslaved and brought to the new world—to utter magic words and fly back to Africa. Another version of the story maintains that the magic words enabled any African to return who had not drunk water in the New World. And yet another version maintains that the magic words would allow almost anyone—not just those from a special tribe—to fly back to Africa. (284)

In Fred Metting's essay "The Possibilities of Flight," he states: "Flight - physical or psychological – is presented as an antidote to difficult circumstances" (par. 39). Taking "flight" in the mind allowed those who were unable to escape slavery physically to take refuge in their minds through accessing such legends as the flying African. The story of the flying African and other African American folklore was passed on and survived through oral tradition. Naylor, Morrison, and Marshall all incorporate this traditional oral legend into their novels. Through various narrative techniques, the importance of the oral tradition in the African American community can still be heard in the written word.

The legend of Sapphira Wade serves as the origin of Willow Springs in *Mama Day*. The story revealed in the first pages of the novel consists of various explanations of Sapphira Wade's relationship with Bascombe Wade.

Mixing it all together and keeping everything that done shifted down through the holes of time, you end up with the death of Bascombe Wade, (there's his tombstone right out by Chevy's Pass), the deeds to our land (all marked back to the very year), and seven sons (ain't Miss Abigail and Mama Day the grand-daughters of that seventh boy?). (Naylor 3)

An important part of the legend that is not specifically stated in the opening pages is that Sapphira Wade disappeared from the island. The only version presented in the opening pages is that she burst into flames. During the narrative, more information is revealed about the legend of Sapphira Wade. The residents of Willow Springs celebrate Candle Walk, a tradition of exchanging the phrase "Lead on with light," and giving homemade gifts. This tradition is celebrated every year, but changes slightly with each generation. Mama Day explains to current residents that there is nothing to worry about in young folk changing things a bit by bringing gifts from beyond the bridge. When she was younger, the celebration was different, and when her Daddy participated in Candle Walk it had its own qualities. Through Mama Day's description of these differences, more of the legend is revealed:

Say you'd hear talk then of a slave woman who came to Willow Springs, and when she left, she left in a ball of fire to journey back home east over the ocean. And Miranda says that her daddy, John-Paul, said that in his time Candle Walk was different still. Said people kinda worshipped his grandmother, a slave woman who *took* her freedom in 1823. Left behind seven sons and a dead master as she walked down the main road, candle held high to light her way to the east bluff over the ocean.

(Naylor 111)

These images of Sapphira Wade are directly linked to the folklore of the flying African.

Mama Day is a living legend for the island of Willow Springs. Her true name is Miranda Day, but she is called Mama because she helps birth a majority of the residents

on the island. Everyone comes to Mama Day for her herbal remedies and her wisdom. Mama Day is a descendant of Sapphira Wade and she possesses powers passed on to her by the conjure woman. The entire narrative stands as a legend with the events of Cocoa and George's relationship, the hurricane, Cocoa's illness, and George's death all being told as past events. George's death occurs in 1985 and the narrator states in the prologue that it is currently August of 1999 in Willow Springs. The reader hears the legends of the islands.

The oral nature of the narrative is established in the introductory pages of the text when an unnamed member of the Willow Springs community shares the story of Sapphira Wade with the reader. Trudier Harris in *The Power of the Porch*, a work centered on the importance of orality in the storytelling tradition of African Americans, states:

The voice establishes the porch connection that serves as the interactive metaphor for tellers and listeners. The hearers/readers of the tale are on the porch (drawn by the voice) as well as beyond the porch (separated by geography and time), yet the latter collapses in direct proportion to the power of the former. The power of orality reflects a tradition that transcends temporality as well as chronology. The link between narrative voice and audience, therefore, is one that cannot be broken by the physicality of the text itself, for the voice enters into the minds of the readers, finds fertile ground in a commonality of philosophies, characters, activities and approaches to the world. Readers thus become voluntary extensions of the voice.  
(57-58)

This concept of tellers and listeners performs on two levels. The community of Willow Springs relies on the oral passing of information to keep its unique rituals and beliefs flowing from one generation to the next. The reader also serves as a "hearer" of the text, being immediately drawn into what feels like a conversation with the narrator. Especially in the last paragraph of the introduction, after the narrator has recited the legend and the



nature of Willow Springs, the reader feels as if s/he is really being talked to with the use of “you.”

While Naylor uses the action of Sapphira Wade returning home over the ocean in *Mama Day*, Marshall presents her own version of the well-known legend of Ibo Landing, located on the Sea Islands. “Before the Civil War, the Sea Islands off the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina were one of the last areas in the United States to see a continual arrival of Africans who had illegally been transported to the United States to be sold as slaves” (Brøndum 153). Filmmaker Julie Dash uses the Ibo Legend in her film *Daughters of the Dust*. In her research for the film she discovered: “almost all the Sea Islands have an area claimed as the ‘real’ Ibo Landing” (Brøndum 159). The recurrence of these sites demonstrates the importance of the Ibo legend to the Sea Island culture.

Like the legends about Sapphira Wade, the legend is passed on orally, but Marshall presents it so that the reader witnesses the ritual telling of the story from Aunt Cuney to Avey. As a small child Avey traveled south to visit Tatem Island on the South Carolina Tidewater every August upon her great-aunt Cuney’s insistence. The annual visit held its own tradition for the old woman and the young girl. They would walk together to the “landing,” where great-aunt Cuney would recite her family’s version of what happened to the Ibos at this site. The Ibos were a West African tribe brought to be slaves in the new world. When they arrived on shore at what has become known as “Ibo Landing,” they foresaw the life of slavery that awaited them. Aunt Cuney recounts:

They had seen what they had seen and those Ibos was stepping!  
And they didn’t bother getting back into the small boats drawed up  
here—boats take too much time. They just kept walking right on  
out over the river. Now you wouldna thought they’d of got very far  
seeing as it was water they was walking on. Besides they had all that  
iron on ‘em. Iron on they ankles and they wrists and fastened ‘round

they necks like a dog collar. ‘Nuff iron to sink an army. And chains hooking up the iron. But chains didn’t stop those Ibos none. Neither iron. They way my gran’ tol’ it (other folks in Tatem said it wasn’t so and that she was crazy but she never paid ‘em no mind) ‘cording to her they just kept on walking like the water was solid ground.  
(Marshall 38-39)<sup>1</sup>

This ritual and story had been passed down to Aunt Cuney from her grandmother Avatara whom Avey was named after. In Aunt Cuney’s version, the Ibos continued to walk across the water back to Africa, singing along the way. She recited this litany to Avey twice a week during her visits to Tatem, and Avey could recount the story word-for-word, including gestures. However at the age of ten Avey insults this faith held by her Aunt by asking at the end of her recitation: “But how come they didn’t drown, Aunt Cuney?” (Marshall 39). As a young girl Avey heard only a story being told. She did not understand what the legend represented to her aunt and to so many before her: the Ibos had performed an act of resistance and escaped from the horrible life that slavery would have imposed on them. Aunt Cuney finished her account of the Ibos saying, “my gran’ declared she just picked herself up and took after’em. In her mind. Her body she always usta say might be in Tatem but her mind, her mind was long gone with the Ibos...” (Marshall 39). After Avey has been reconnected to her heritage she recalls those last lines about her great-aunt’s gran and finally decides to take on Aunt Cuney’s role as the cultural narrator in Tatem.

Although the Ibos of Aunt Cuney’s legend “walk,” only symbolically taking flight, the concept of an escape to freedom keeps the legend within the flying African tradition. Morrison uses the image of the flying African in *Song of Solomon* in a similar

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<sup>1</sup> *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature* states “The slave ship *Wanderer* arrived in 1858 at Ibo Landing with a smuggled cargo of so-called salt-water, African-born slaves imported half a century after the prohibition of the international slave trade” (578)

fashion to Naylor's Sapphira Wade with an ancestor "flying" back to Africa off of a cliff.

However Morrison uses other images of flight to reinforce the idea of escape and freedom throughout the narrative. The opening image of the novel is a man, Robert Smith, ready to fly off the top of the hospital with homemade wings to commit suicide.

Missy Dehn Kubitschek relates Robert Smith to the Greek myth of Icarus:

In the myth, the builder Daedalus and his son Icarus are imprisoned. They fashion wings of wax and feathers, then fly over their prison walls. Daedalus makes good his escape, but Icarus is carried away with the joy of flight and, ignoring his father's warnings flies too close to the sun. When the sun melts the wings, Icarus falls into the sea and drowns.

*(Toni Morrison: A Critical Companion 87)*

The narrative reveals later that Robert Smith was a member of the Seven Days, the society Guitar joins intent on keeping the numbers even of black and white murders.

Guitar explains to Milkman:

The earth is soggy with black people's blood. And before us Indian blood. Nothing can cure them and if it keeps on there won't be any of us left and there won't be any land for those who are left. So the numbers have to remain static. (Morrison 159)

The pressure of the Seven Days was too much for Robert Smith to handle, so he took "flight" in order to escape. In the crowd awaiting Mr. Smith's leap into the air were two little girls, a pregnant Ruth Dead, and a woman singing, "O Sugarman done fly..."

(Morrison 9).

Macon Dead III, Milkman, was born the day after Robert Smith jumped off the roof of the hospital.

Mr. Smith's blue silk wings must have left their mark, because when the little boy discovered, at four, the same thing Mr. Smith had learned earlier-that only birds and airplanes could fly-he lost all interest in himself. (Morrison 9)

The desire and fascination of flight remains with Milkman his entire life. The concept of flight appears again when Guitar and Milkman see a peacock as they walk down a road planning their theft of Pilate's inheritance. As they observe the bird Milkman asks Guitar why it does not fly very well, Guitar responds: "Too much tail. All that jewelry weighs it down. Like vanity. Can't nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down" (Morrison 179). Guitar's philosophical thought does not make much of an impact on Milkman until he is on his search for the answers to his family history.

Milkman's quest in *Song of Solomon* becomes to solve the mystery of identifying the source of the stories of his great-grandfather, Solomon, and his grandfather, Macon Dead. For the first section of the journey Milkman takes a flight from Michigan to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: "The airplane ride exhilarated him, encouraged illusion and a feeling of invulnerability" (Morrison 220). The excitement of the flight is followed by a bus ride to his father's hometown Danville, Pennsylvania where Milkman encounters Circe, the housekeeper that took care of Macon and Pilate after their father was killed. Circe, a guide in Milkman's journey, provides him with the names of his grandfather and grandmother, Jake and Sing, and that they came from Virginia. Following the route taken by his Aunt Pilate to find her people, Milkman finally arrives in Shalimar, Virginia. In this town he hears a children's song which points him in the right direction of understanding what happened to his family. Milkman visits with a resident of the town, Susan Byrd, to fill in the remaining pieces of the puzzle. He asks why Solomon was called a flying African and she replied:

Oh, that's just some old folks' lie they tell around here. Some of those Africans they brought over here as slaves could fly. A lot

of them flew back to Africa. The one around here who did was this same Solomon, or Shalimar—I never knew which was right.  
(Morrison 322)

Milkman does not understand what Susan means by fly and asks for clarification, thinking Solomon's flight might be a metaphor for his running away and escaping.

No, I mean flew. Oh, it's just foolishness, you know, but according to the story he wasn't running away. He was flying. He flew. You know, like a bird. Just stood up in the fields one day, ran up some hill, spun around a couple of times, and was lifted up in the air. Went right back to wherever it was he came from.  
(Morrison 322-323)

The flight of Solomon was a means of escape from slavery. Morrison's version of the flying African brings attention to the suffering of those left behind. Kubitschek writes: "If men fly away, women must remain earth-bound to care for the children" (*Toni Morrison: A Critical Companion* 88). Freedom for Solomon left a lifetime of grieving by his wife Ryna, captured in the sobs heard from "Ryna's Gulch." Milkman possesses a fascination of flight his entire life, but the significance of flight does not become clear to Milkman or the reader until the legend of Solomon is uncovered.

Morrison finds yet another technique to encapsulate the importance of the oral dimension of this legend. The children's song and game tells the story of Solomon flying away and leaving his children and wife behind him, the last two lines saying:

*Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone*  
*Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home.*  
(Morrison 303)

Milkman's aunt, Pilate, had gone on a journey similar to Milkman's in search of her father's people after he was killed. She too arrived in Shalimar, Virginia, but she never learned her family's story while living there. Pilate did hear and learn the children's song

because she continued to sing it with either the words she heard or her own transmutation of the lyrics the children sang:

*Sugarman done fly away*  
*Sugarman done gone*  
*Sugarman cut across the sky*  
*Sugarman gone home.*

(Morrison 49)

Pilate had no idea how close she was to what she spent so much time searching for-- a story and a history with which to identify. Through the slight differences in lyrics Morrison demonstrates the dangers of losing important details of heritage when passed orally. The information might be available, but without someone to decipher the legend such as Susan Byrd, the actual story could get lost over generations of telling.

In each of the novels the legends of flight offer the characters a connection to their heritage that they all search for in their struggle for identity. With the assistance of community storytellers, Mama Day, Aunt Cuney, Susan Byrd, the boundary between what is known and unknown and the boundary between past and present disappear. The oral passing of legends or stories from generation to generation requires two roles be filled, the teller and the hearer. The process of communicating makes legend an active ingredient in present time. The legends in each novel have always been available for each character to access and appreciate. Their journeys allow for them to witness the importance of legend in a community outside of their own or in Cocoa's instance from a different perspective. Cocoa, Avey, and Milkman, through their process of self-discovery, realize the value of not just possessing their heritage, but transmitting it to others.

### Chapter Three: Crossing Boundaries in Language, Ritual, and Time

Written and spoken language can be analyzed on many levels: the languages of different nations, the various dialects spoken within nations, and the languages of smaller communities. Communities develop their own language based on geography, communal events, and within cultures, the interactions of their people. Words and phrases come to have a significance that breaches the boundaries of time when shared in a community. Phrases and stories that are passed on from generation to generation become folklore in communities, which signifies a communication of history and a desire to maintain an awareness of the past in the present. *A Handbook to Literature* describes folklore as:

Myths, legends, stories riddles, proverbs, nursery rhymes, charms, spells, omens, beliefs of all sorts, popular ballads, cowboy songs, plant lore, animal lore, and customs dealing with birth, initiation, courtship, marriage, medicine, work, amusements, and death. (217)

Thus customs and traditions arise through the passing on of language. The rituals within a community serve to preserve significant portions of a community's past, again crossing boundaries of time and place. In *Decolonising the Mind* Ngugi wa Thiong'o explains the relationship between culture and language:

Culture embodies those moral, ethical and aesthetic values, the set of spiritual eyeglasses, through which they come to view themselves and their place in the universe. Values are the basis of a people's identity, their sense of particularity as members of the human race. All this is carries by language. Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history. Culture is almost indistinguishable from the language that makes possible its genesis, growth, banking, articulation and indeed its transmission from one generation to the next. (15)

Language as culture becomes more than an immediate form of communication, but serves as a "collective memory bank" uniting generations. Karla Holloway in *Moorings and Metaphors* discusses how, through the narrative strategies of memory and myth,

African-American women writers present a language, focused on the act of speaking, that collapses time. This language is: “a collective ‘speaking out’ by all the voices gathered within the text, authorial, narrative, characters, and even the implicated reader” (11).

*Mama Day*, *Praisesong for the Widow*, and *Song of Solomon*’s use of a cultural language demonstrates how the boundaries of time between the past and the present become blurred.

In *Mama Day* language often communicates more than is literally stated. A name or a year carries a tremendous amount of meaning, more that is felt and understood than is expressed through the actual words. The importance of understanding the multiple meanings of language in *Mama Day* is shown in the emphasis on the act of listening. In the opening pages of the narrative, Naylor presents an intimate community insulated from the outside world and explains that in order to understand a language spoken within a community, one must know how to listen to the memory embodied within words. The prologue illustrates the interconnections of language, listening, and time. Language and time are described as concepts that do not maintain their typical definitions in Willow Springs.

The prologue, narrated by an unidentified voice of Willow Springs, introduces the year 1823 and implies how it remains part of the contemporary language of the island. Margaret Whitt has explained the phrase of “18 & 23”:

When these numbers are placed in varying contexts, they mean whatever the speaker wants them to mean. Even though the use of “18 & 23” is private in-speak for Willow Springs’ inhabitants, the reader has no trouble substituting a meaning within the greater context of its usage.

(120)



The only character who actually uses the phrase “18 & 23” is Mama Day. She describes the color of Cocoa’s skin in an inner monologue: “But the Baby Girl brings back the great, grand Mother. We ain’t seen 18 & 23 black from that time till now” (Naylor 48). Mama Day in her use of “18 & 23” draws a clear connection between Sapphira Wade and Cocoa. It appears upon first reading that Mama Day connects the two because of their similar light skin color. However, if we return to the prologue, the narrator refers to Sapphira Wade as “satin black, biscuit cream red as Georgia clay: depending on which of us takes a mind to her” (Naylor 3). Mama Day is not simply referring to skin color; she is connecting the two as having the same fiery “18 & 23” spirit. This demonstrates the fact that the phrase not only refers to an important date in the community, but is also used to describe characteristics that Sapphira Wade represents. Mama Day knows that Cocoa is the woman of the family who finally will bring peace to their history. The connection of Cocoa to Sapphira demonstrates the multiplicity of meanings the phrase carries throughout the narrative. “18 & 23” is used again by Mama Day later in the novel in reference to the hurricane that hits the island while Cocoa and George are visiting. In a phone call to Abigail, Mama Day refers to the approaching storm: “This here is an 18 & 23er” (Naylor 228). In this instance the phrase is used to forecast disaster. Mama Day’s connection with the island enables her to listen to the nature around her, and to point out all of the signs of the storm, although this time she does not want to listen to what she heard.

Well, she had looked without seeing, listened without hearing.  
Ain’t her rag rugs been warping and the chairs been creaking?  
Ain’t she been listening to crickets trying to tear their legs off  
for nights on end? Listening without hearing. But she knew  
what she’d hear now: crows, hawks, ducks, and geese making  
A mighty racket for no *earthly* reason; ‘cause the reason was

coming in from the southeast, pushing clear skies before it.  
And storms like that are born in hell.

(Naylor 227)

Mama Day through her prophetic nature not only feels the storm approaching the island, but she also senses other troubles looming that will hit her home after the wind and rain clear.

The expression “18 & 23” demonstrates how time runs on a different clock in Willow Springs. The history of the island is an important part of its present, especially for the Day women. The Day home, referred to as “The Other Place” and originally the slave owner Bascombe Wade’s, serves as a physical symbol of the past that crosses boundaries to remain available in the present. Neither Mama Day or Abigail live in the house referred to as “the other place.” But the house and the surrounding land are sites of memory for the Day women, and Mama Day often visits “the other place” to enable her to understand the past’s role in the present. The entire community of Willow Springs honors the legend of Sapphira Wade with the tradition of Candle Walk on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December every year. At the end of Candle Walk, the year Cocoa and George started dating, Mama Day makes her customary final walk to the “other place.” Completing the walk is a hard struggle, but she pushes on to discover what the memories are telling her. She has an epiphany of the true nature of the relationship between Sapphira and Bascombe Wade: he loved her. Whitt explains the significance of the structure of the language in this passage:

Naylor’s choice of present tense for her concluding statement—“somehow, a man dies from a broken heart”—places Bascombe’s past demise in the present, but it also projects into the future and predicts that George will follow suit, for in the place, George, too, will die from a broken heart. This collapsing of time suggests that, on Willow Springs, all that was and will be can be understood in the

all-present now.

(123-124)

The grammatical features of speech show that language and time have no boundaries and run freely into each other.

Willow Springs as a community has a strong cultural language and does not allow factors from “beyond the bridge” to dilute its meaning, through language the community values and preserves their heritage. However for Avey, in *Praisesong for the Widow*, the loss of the rich language of her community on Halsey St. and the absence of a meaningful language in her community in North White Plains contribute to her loss of identification with her heritage.

As a young girl Avey is forced to remain in an active conversation with her heritage during her annual visits to Tatem. Aunt Cuney recites her litany of the Ibos landing on the shores of Tatem and then defiantly walking across the water back to Africa. As a child Avey is able to recount the entire story to her brothers almost word for word and with the same gestures and inflections. During Avey and Jay’s early years on Halsey St. they spoke a private language expressed through song and dance, but as the years pass and the hardships weigh on them, their focus shifts to the material world around them in the quest for financial freedom. Their language becomes muted in the sounds of success, and there is no attempt to recover their former language once they are situated in North White Plains.

While aboard the cruise ship Aunt Cuney appears to Avey in a dream beckoning her to join her on the ritual walk they used to take during the summers on Tatem. The dream forces Avey to search for a true self. Upon landing on Grenada, after abandoning

the cruise ship, she is immersed in a patois of the nearby island of Carriacou.<sup>1</sup> In an attempt to secure a taxi ride, Avey becomes extremely frustrated because the throngs of people passing her and heading to the wharf speak only in their patois, a language foreign to her ears, and thus ignore her requests for assistance. A taxi driver eventually assists Avey in finding a hotel, and during their drive he explains the crowd speaking in patois are “out-islanders” making their annual crossing back to their native island of Carriacou, a trip known as the “excursion.” He also explains: “They can speak the King’s English good as me and you, but the minute they set foot on the wharf for the excursion is only Patois crossing their lips” (Marshall 76). The “out-islanders” immerse themselves in their culture during their ritual of the excursion. Speaking their language connects them to their land and heritage as an act of celebration and remembrance.

The reason for celebrating the tradition of the excursion is further explained to Avey by Lebert Joseph, an out-islander who becomes Avey’s guide in reconnecting her to her ancestry. Avey enters Joseph’s rum shop in search of shade after she has walked on the beach in the hot sun and initially asks him if there was a reason for the excursion as a way to prolong her stay in the cool hut. He explains that people travel back to Carriacou to see their family, to tend to property, to relax, and to visit with friends. Joseph also shares a more solemn reason for the excursion: “The Long-time People. Each year this time they does look for us to come and give them their remembrance” (Marshall 165). A main facet of the excursion is paying tribute to ancestors through setting out food and drink in their honor, dancing for each nation, music, and song. A cultural language, the island patois, functions to unite the out-islanders to their native

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<sup>1</sup> *Webster’s Dictionary* defines patois: “a form of a language differing generally from the accepted standard, as a provincial or local dialect.” (1056)

land and to their heritage as they cross the water to celebrate their ancestry. Avey finds herself confiding in Joseph all the accounts her strange visions and memories of the prior days. The result is that he insists she accompany him on the excursion so she can experience the Big Drum and the dances of the nations.

The ritual of the excursion brings attention to the positioning of the past in the present and future. On the boat ride to Carriacou, Avey becomes sick from riding on the rough waters. Joseph eventually assists Avey in moving into the deck house to allow her to rest. In this place Avey crosses time to the past:

She was alone in the deckhouse. That much she was certain of. Yet she had the impression as her mind flickered on briefly of other bodies lying crowded in with her in the hot, airless, dark. A multitude it felt like lay packed around her in the filth and stench of themselves, just as she was. Their moans, rising and falling with each rise and plunge of the schooner, enlarged upon the one filling her head. Their suffering the depth of it, the weight of it in the cramped space-made hers of no consequence.

(Marshall 209)

The boat ride begins to reconnect Avey to her ancestry, demonstrated by her own conjured images of the middle passage. Shelia Smith Mckoy discusses Avey's journey and its relationship with time:

Marshall's description of Avey's middle passage when she travels to Carriacou with her Legba-like guide, Lebert Joseph, is a depiction of Limbo time in which the present fuses with the past. When Avey travels to Carriacou to escape the confusion that accompanies her immersion into limbo time, she unknowingly undertakes a journey to meet her ancestors, the "Long-time People." Marshall links Avey to these countless Africans who, in defiance of their captors, re-invented time to retain their cultural moorings.

(217)

In her article Smith McKoy establishes limbo time as "a fusion of the past, present, and future" which aids in cultural preservation through ritual. Avey's experience on the boat

completely erases the boundaries of time for a moment because she simultaneously participates in the past and present.

A significant amount of the first, second, and third sections of the novel exposes Avey's memories of her life with Jay in Brooklyn and North White Plains. She allows for her past, which she has kept stagnant, to seep into her present in part two, *Sleeper's Wake*. Part four, *the Beg Pardon*, takes the command to allow the past into the present a step further by showing Avey's participating in a ritual dance honoring a community's ancestors.

Avey's preparation for the Big Drum begins with being cleansed after excreting all the fluids and waste from her body on the boat ride. Joseph's daughter Rosalie Parvay washes the soiled Avey, cleansing her body and spirit. Barbara Christian explores the significance of this scene:

The bathing rite, the laying on of hands which Rosalie Parvay performs on Avey is sensual in a pleasurable way, as Avey's expulsion of artificiality is sensual in a horrifying way. Central to African ritual is the concept that the body and spirit are one. Thus sensuality is essential to the process of healing and rebirth of the spirit. (81)

After Avey has been cleansed, her mind opens up to experiencing the rituals of the excursion, and she is reminded of Tatem and the rituals this small southern community performed. The ear of corn and lit candle remind her of the custom of placing a plate of food beside the coffin at funerals in Tatem (Marshall 225). On the island as Avey, Rosalie, and Milda, the maid, begin making their way to the Big Drum, the darkness of the night reminds Avey of being out at night with her great aunt (Marshall 231). Avey, with Milda as a translator, witnesses the ritual of the Big Drum. Joseph begins the ceremony with the *Beg Pardon* and the dances follow with each nation calling out its

song, led by their elders, and finally the circle dances begin with livelier music. The young people dance in the center and the elders on the outside do their non-dance, a dance of moving their feet without lifting them off the ground. Avey remains a spectator as the crowd of dancers expands towards her until:

Finally, just as the moving wall of bodies was almost upon her, she too moved- a single declarative step forward. At the same moment, what seemed an arm made up of many arms reached out from the circle to draw her in, and she found herself walking amid the elderly folk on the periphery in their counterclockwise direction.

(Marshall 247)

Dancing immediately takes Avey back to Tatem in her memory to the Ring Shout, the same type of non-dance, dance performed at her aunt's church. In *Shout Because You're Free* the ring shout is described as:

The oldest African American performance tradition surviving on the North American continent. An impressive fusion of call-and-response singing, polyrhythmic percussion, and expressive and formalized dancelike movements, it has had a profound influence on African American music and religious practice. (1)

Dancing provides an outlet of expression that bridges the spoken language and spiritual feeling by allowing the body to "speak" through movement. As Avey continues to dance at the Big Drum, her body takes over her thoughts and feels its way through her memories, and she finally shuffles along with those old folk in Tatem she had watched so often from a distance. As Avey simultaneously experiences the past and the present, the boundaries of time do not exist. Joseph acknowledges Avey's reconnection with her ancestors by stopping all the movement around them and bowing before her. Other elders in the crowd follow his lead and bow as they pass by Avey. One woman introduces herself and asks Avey, "And who you is?" At this moment Avey recalls how

her great-aunt had always insisted she answer this question, “Avey, short for Avatara” (Marshall 251). Avey now comprehends the importance of claiming her name and her history.

Avey is not momentarily transformed during the dancing, but she carries the newly found connection with the past home with her. She finally comprehends the importance of ritual in honoring the past in the present and accepts that their loss of rituals while working to achieve financial security and the move from Halsey St. had severed Jay and her from their community and themselves. Most importantly, Avey plans to take the final steps by ensuring that the story of the Ibos in Tatem is continued in the future by telling her grandchildren just as she was told.

All three novels depict characters struggling with understanding their personal histories, but *Song of Solomon* presents characters who initially lack the sense of community bound through language and ritual. Milkman is disconnected from his community due to his family’s financial success. “Milkman is ultimately outside of black cultural traditions in the first half of the novel. His parents have placed him in a world of materialism and privilege that contrasts sharply with the folk, agrarian culture that he discovers in Danville and Shalimar in the last half of the novel,” as Rice tells us. (57) There is a site of communal language for the men in Michigan in which Milkman does not participate. Tommy’s Barbershop is a site where the men discuss current politics and swap stories.

The men began to trade tales of atrocities, first stories they had heard, then those they’d witnessed, and finally the things that had happened to themselves. A litany of personal humiliation, outrage, and anger turned sicklelike back to themselves as humor. (82)



Milkman is present at this scene, but he only observes the dialogue happening around him. He denies himself the opportunity to participate in the men's communal language. Milkman also feels no connection to his family due to his lack of information of the past. The knowledge he does possess of both his mother and father's families is fragmented because he receives only small pieces of their histories through their personal perspectives. Against his father's wishes, Milkman forms a relationship with his aunt, Pilate. Macon Dead and Pilate were very close as children, but after their father was murdered they went their separate ways. Macon is financially successful while Pilate is poor, and both remain in their separate worlds even while living in the same town. Milkman is linked to both Pilate and Macon, but there is no relationship among the three of them, and no one attempts to cross this rigid boundary. Milkman must immerse himself in the community his grandfather came from in order to find a language and tradition which will allow his heritage to become a part of himself and heal the hearts of his father and Pilate.

After Milkman arrives in Shalimar, he gets into a fight with a local man. An exchange of insults about manhood between the two men initiated the fight. Unknown to Milkman, this type of conversation serves as a test of manhood in Shalimar. Bernard Bell explains in *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* this ritual swapping of insults is tied to "sounding," "signifying," and "the dozens" which are traditional methods of taunting, boasting, and insulting within the black community (22). After holding his own in this ritual, Milkman is invited to go hunting with the local men. This is the first instance in Milkman's life that he engages himself in a tradition of the black community.

The further Milkman travels on his journey the more he learns to communicate within the communities he finds himself.

It is also in Shalimar that Milkman hears the children sing a song that tells the story of his great grandfather. “Once again, Morrison is drawing on traditions within the black community: call and response singing dates back to slave culture” (Rice 60). The Dead family history has been told orally for years within the community of Shalimar. The children of Shalimar perform their own ritual while singing the verses to the song. A child stands in the center and twirls around until they chant the line “Twenty-one children, the last one Jake!” which prompts the child to stop and point to someone in the circle. If the child’s finger is pointed at nobody, then they start over, but if it is pointed at someone, they all fell to their knees and sing the verse Milkman had heard Pilate sing. In Pilate’s version she had replaced “Solomon” with “Sugarman” (Morrison 302-303). Pilate often sings the tune to herself or with her daughter Reba and granddaughter Hagar without knowing the true identity of the names. Through the lyrics to the song and his conversation with Susan Byrd, Milkman recovers the family history, which helps him establish his sense of self. During his bus ride back to Michigan from Shalimar, Milkman’s revelation on the significance of names demonstrates his new found understanding of his past:

Under the recorded names were other names, just as “Macon Dead,” recorded for all time in some dusty file, hid from view the real names of people, places, and things, Names that had meaning. No wonder Pilate put hers in her ear. When you know your name, you should hang on to it, for unless it is noted down and remembered, it will die when you do.

(Morrison 329)

Milkman finally recognizes how names retain complex meanings that encompass an entire history and tradition. The blunder that generated the family name “Dead,” perpetrated by a Freedmen’s Bureau official, becomes part of the family history and represents the struggles in three generations of “Dead.” Earlier in the novel, Milkman jokes with Guitar about his family’s names and about the earring Pilate wears with her name written on the piece of paper inside, but after Milkman’s journey South he is ready to claim his name and everything it represents.

At the novel’s end Milkman takes Pilate back to Shalimar to bury her father’s bones. The past intertwines with the present on Solomon’s Leap. Pilate marks the small grave dug for her father’s bones by yanking the earring out of her ear and placing it in the earth. Lucinda MacKethan explains the significance of this gesture: “releasing her recorded name with her grandfather’s bones, frees and reconstitutes her identity and her father’s along with both the name and the memory of the man whose bones are buried” (105). At this moment Pilate follows the legend of her grandfather in a spiritual flight. Guitar shoots her when he is actually aiming for Milkman. Pilate’s “flight” is guided by Milkman’s singing the words he had heard Pilate sing so many times before. “He changes the words of Solomon’s song for his listener, singing ‘Sugargirl don’t leave me,’ as a creative substitution for the ‘Sugarman’ of the song’s earlier versions” (MacKethan 113). At this point Milkman is ready to confront the present that awaits him. Guitar wants his life and he will not miss a second time. Milkman takes action: “Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees—he leaped” (Morrison 337). Milkman, like his great grandfather, surrenders his life to the air and takes flight. He finally understood what his great grandfather experienced, if he

surrenders himself to the air then he can escape this earthly life and find freedom through flight in the next spiritual life.

Language functions as a gateway for Cocoa, Milkman, and Avey's self-discovery via the words, stories, and actions of their ancestors. Similar to legend, a multi layered language that contains the culture of a community works to erase the boundary between the past and the present. Cocoa learns to listen to the language of her family and surrounding community. Avey realizes the importance of maintaining a personal, emotionally felt language developed to preserve heritage in everyday ritual. Milkman finally allows himself to contribute to his family's language, and as a result to connect to the "collective memory bank" of the community of Shalimar. All three novels demonstrate that not every person has the gift or ability to listen to the history their language offers them. But those who listen and understand must then take the next step and speak their language so that others may hear.

## Conclusion

Cocoa, Milkman, and Avey all go on personal journeys in order to claim or reclaim their own identities. Each character crosses boundaries of place and time while on their quest. Cocoa, Milkman, and Avey are all successful in recognizing how their family heritage is an essential part of their being that they must accept to feel complete. However at the end of their journeys lies a final boundary that must be crossed: they must re-cross the geographical boundaries to their homes. The significance of their journeys may be evaluated by examining the characters' re-entry into their original settings and the impact they have on their communities.

Cocoa's journey took her between her two homes of New York City and Willow Springs, and it brought her a new understanding and relationship to the community of Willow Springs. After George's death Cocoa remains in Willow Springs for a while before moving on with her life "beyond the bridge." For the first time in many years Cocoa is present for Candle Walk. She celebrates the tradition with her grandmother and Mama Day by walking with their candles exchanging the greeting "Lead on with light." After they return from their walk Mama Day continues her own journey to the family plot.

She reaches up for just a tad of damp moss to put in her shoes.  
And then she makes her way by smell toward the wind coming  
off The Sound to pass them graves and get to a little rise where  
the water is visible on clear days. George done made it possible  
for all her Candle Walks to end right here from now on; the other  
place holds no more secrets that's left for her to find. The rest  
will lay in the hands of Baby Girl-once she learns how to listen.  
But she's grieving for herself too much now to hear, 'cause she  
thinks that boy done left her. He's gone, but he ain't left her. (308)

Mama Day has carried the Day history as far as she is able. Cocoa takes the place of Mama Day as the carrier of the family's history and future symbolized in their Candle Walk. "It's the three of them under two umbrellas with Cocoa in the middle as they take the stretch toward the bridge junction. Bunched together, so it's hard to say who's holding who up when one stumbles in the fog. But it's Cocoa who keeps the matches dry in her coat pocket to relight the candles that the cold wind keeps blowing out" (307). Cocoa becomes the light that carries the legacy of Sapphira Wade for Willow Springs.

Milkman travels from Shalimar back home to Michigan ready to reveal to Pilate and his father the discoveries he made about their father and grandfather. Macon Dead was excited to hear of Danville and the stories of his father and grandfather, but nothing seemed to change in the Dead family as a result of Milkman's journey.

It was nice. No reconciliation took place between Pilate and Macon (although he seemed pleased to know that they were going to bury their father in Virginia), and relations between Ruth and Macon were the same and would always be. (335)

However, Milkman and Pilate journey together back to Shalimar to put his grandfather's bones to rest at the site of Solomon's leap. Now Milkman's journey brings Pilate's journey to an end, allowing her heart finally to heal from the pain of losing her father. Milkman's last act is to reenact the legend of his great-grandfather when he leaps into the air, his final action not simply telling what he learned on his journey, but living it.

Avey's journey to reclaim her identity ends successfully on Carriacou. She leaves the island by plane, ready to cross back over the geographical boundaries to her home in North White Plains. The experience of the excursion and her new found understanding of the need to honor her heritage bursts from within Avey, and she is determined to share her knowledge with all those she come into contact. The first person she thinks of telling

is the taxi driver who shared his skeptical version of the purpose of the excursion with her.

Nor would she stop with the taxi driver, but would take it upon herself to speak of the excursion to others elsewhere. Her territory would be the street corners and front lawns in their small section of North White Plains. And the shopping mall and train station. As well as the canyon streets and office buildings of Manhattan. She would haunt the entranceways of the skyscrapers. And whenever she spotted one of them amid the crowd, those young, bright, fiercely articulate token few for whom her generation had worked the two and three jobs, she would stop them. (255)

Avey decides it is her purpose to spread the message of listening to the language and ritual of heritage to all those she could reach. Before Avey had reached Grenada in the plane, she resolves to fix or rebuild the old house in Tatem. She will insist her grandsons visit her in Tatem every summer just as she had as a child. Avey's last thoughts for the readers begin the litany of the Ibos she had learned as a child and is ready to pass on to future generations. Avey demonstrates the most success of crossing boundaries with her plans to spread her message not only to individuals, but also to the communities around her.

The journeys in *Mama Day*, *Praisesong for the Widow*, and *Song of Solomon* serve different purposes and end with different results, but they all present boundaries that must be crossed, re-crossed, broken down, and even erased. The changing boundaries reflect the changes within Cocoa, Milkman, and Avey and provide a framework to expose and resolve the significance of each character's journey.

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