Intertextual Narrative Identity as Religious Allegory in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

Personality psychologist Dan McAdams declares, "If one were able to 'see' an identity," it would "look like a story" (100). In *Song of Solomon,* Milkman must piece together his personal identity from fragmented communal stories. John Locke, in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, pioneered identity theory with his idea that "Personal Identity depends on Consciousness not on Substance" (Locke). In other words, memory—not the body or soul—is key to individual identity. This theory can be built upon with McAdams's work, who collaborates with professor of psychology Keith Cox in an article on multi-layer personality theory. According to them, "The I is (in part) a storyteller, and the Me is (in part) the story that it tells" (McAdams and Cox 171). Therefore, "the broad narrative of the Me that the I composes, edits, and continues to work on—functions to provide a life with some degree of meaning, unity, and purpose" (McAdams and Cox 169). Essentially, then, the I works to unify the narrative of Me. Thus, Milkman's narrative can be read as the I's search for communal memory and knowledge to unify its personal narrative identity. Further complicating this idea is the way in which Morrison adds Christian subtext to her novel, its religious themes converging with culturally African ones. Her use of Christian allegory paints the picture of the narrative Me on a spiritual journey. While there are many articles and books mentioning Christianity in Morrison's oeuvre, these readings are rather limited in scope, and do not push theories to their fullest conclusions. This paper seeks to analyze the intertextuality of the Bible, specifically Song of Songs, and *Song of Solomon* through the lens of narrative identity theory as written about by John Locke, Dan McAdams, and Keith Cox in order to emphasize the concurrent theme of communion.

Song of Solomon is a seemingly disconnected narrative that requires the unification of Christian and African American allegory to be made whole. The two main goals of the

realization of narrative identity are agency and communion (McAdams and Cox 170). McAdams and Cox define communion as "connection to others, love, community" (170). The disjointed narrative reflects Milkman's disjointed identity; for him to unify the narrative, he must learn his family's history. Morrison's use of magical realism can be compared to the Christian tradition of mysticism, and through this lens Milkman can be viewed as a mystic pursuing rebirth of identity. Morrison's *Song of Solomon* creates a unified narrative identity for Milkman Dead through the intersection of the Christian and African themes of naming, intertextuality, and myth.

Milkman's progression in identity clearly follows McAdams and Cox's three narrative categories. The scholars break down the Me narrative that the I composes into the "self as actor," "the self as agent," and "the self-as-author" (McAdams 112). They theorize that humans become aware of themselves as independent actors around four to five years old (McAdams and Cox 171). Interestingly, Milkman learns about humans' lack of flight at the age of four, establishing his role as actor from this moment until the age of thirty-two. When Guitar gives Milkman a pep talk before they break into Pilate's house, Milkman snaps out of his daze and enters the agent role of his life story. Then, Milkman experiences events in Shalimar that lead to his mystical death, rebirth, and baptism into a new authorial identity. Milkman's narrative identity must undergo spiritual rebirth to reach maturation in his bildungsroman journey and take authorial ownership of his own narrative.

CHRISTIAN AND AFRICAN SIGNIFICANCE IN NAMING

One reason Milkman's community is dysfunctional is because they lack knowledge of the Christian meaning of their names. One key aspect of establishing narrative, and even more so, identity, is the sharing of names. Not knowing one's real name or true meaning leads to

confusion of the story as a whole. In both Christian and African traditions, names are deeply connected with identity. Near the end of *Song of Solomon*, Milkman "closed his eyes and thought of the black men . . . Their names. Names they got from yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes, weaknesses. Names that bore witness" (Morrison 330). The definition of "witness" is to give evidence or to prove, and thus it seems that Morrison is proclaiming that names prove an individual's identity. Jan Stryz opines that "Literary reference possesses a serious power that is appropriate to play with in the creation of identity" (1). Agnes Surányi notes how Morrison complicates this sentiment, however, in the way that the "biblical names used in the novel rarely fit the person named" (122). The fact that the names do not fit the person reveals the distortion that occurs when one does not know their communal identity.

In Christian traditions, names are highly revered as sacramental, divinely affirming a particularly noble trait the parents wish to impart on or emphasize within their child. An ongoing interdisciplinary discussion exists about the extent that a name creates and affects identity. Almost every central character in Milkman's community possesses a Christian name. These names are ironic because biblical names are typically thoughtfully chosen, however, in this novel, names are chosen at random due to lack of literacy in the African American community. Sean Kirby weighs in on this conversation in relation to Morrison's books. He discussed how when it comes to slavery in America and the naming and renaming of slaves by white slave owners, the question of how deeply names affect identity arises, especially when considering the topic through a biblical lens (Kirby 1). François Bovon, Swiss biblical scholar and historian of early Christianity, points out that when a divine message is received and written in ancient Jewish or Christian texts, inherent in the narrative are concerns about the name of the revealing entity as well as the individual to whom the revelation is delivered (270). For example, Philo of

Alexandra asserted that in Exodus, Moses represents the experience of God's presence while Aaron represents the need for words, particularly names, to express this religious experience (Bovon 272). It is not enough for the event to take place, but must be signified through the act of naming. Functioning in the same way, sacraments represent the "outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace" (Starr 36). Thus, the power to name is a sacred act in communicating the divine. According to Olatunji, "the Creationist theory of evolution claimed that the ability of Adam to know and identify the name of all things positioned him to have dominion over other creatures," as seen in the Quran (73). The Christian tradition around naming provides rich intertext to Morrison's narrative, alluding to the unconscious spiritual authority influencing the characters.

Milkman's African heritage also increases the significance of naming in his narrative journey. In indigenous African religions, animism—the belief that everything has a spirit—plays a large role in daily life. This worldview is holistic, believing there is a holy aspect to every object and act in all parts of life, including names (Molloy 38). In African societies, a name determines "personhood and character," provides a "definition of human self," and offers not only social identity but also "influence[s], mold[s] and shape[s] the character and personality of its bearer" (Olatunji 73). The Swahili of East Africa believe a name is an essential part of spiritual being: "you are what your name has made you" (73). In fact, when naming a child, "that person is not simply naming the flesh of the infant; but rather, the name is for the person's soul" (82). Understanding the holistic culture of Milkman's past sheds light on the significance of names around him. One can view Milkman as on a Adam-like quest for the ability to identify and name those in his family, thus elevating him from a level as agent to author of his own narrative.

The Dead family's biblical naming tradition extends to everyone but the oldest son; Macon III "Milkman" Dead was given his father's name, then renamed by his mother's actions. Morrison goes so far as to write that Freddie's—and eventually the whole town's—nickname for Macon II "rechristened" him (15). McAdams writes that identity "arises from the selective repudiation and mutual integration of *childhood identifications*" which is reliant on the way in which "a society (often through subsocieties) identifies the young individual, recognizing him as somebody who *had to become the way he is*, and who, being the way he is, is taken for granted" (101). In Milkman's case, his society prophesizes his dead identity. The name Milkman Dead thus combines the negative identity of his mother and father. In the epigraph of the novel, it is stated that "The fathers may soar / And the children may know their names." Knowledge of the Dead family's names is necessary for Milkman's authorial flight to occur.

As head of the household, Macon II Dead is responsible for his family's defunct identity. Assigned by a drunk old white man, his arbitrarily-chosen name cuts the family off spiritually and literally from their African ancestry. Thus, "Dead" literally pertains to the state of the family's identity (Kirby 2). In the same way, "God as a person remains transcendent; God's real name, nature, and person cannot be known, but the experience of God can be known and needs to be expressed," there is a "correlation between religious reality and religious expression" (Bovon 272). In this case, Macon willingly choosing to keep his accidentally-given name cuts him off from his familial spiritual reality and creates a new (dead) reality. In fact, death follows Macon everywhere, including in his vehicle. Macon drives a Packard ritualistically on Sunday afternoons. The car only exists performatively, having "no real lived life at all," with the town calling it "Macon Dead's hearse" (33). In French, Macon's name translates to "builder." Kirby writes, "since Macon's name was created by a white man, he is made in their image. He tries to

obtain the typical, white American dream" (2). Greed-ridden, Macon is obsessed with building a materialistic American dream, and attempts to pass this down to Milkman: "Let me tell you right now the one important thing you'll ever need to know: Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too" (Morrison 55). This sentiment becomes ironic when the reader realizes Macon II does not even remember his own father's name (Kirby 2). When Milkman asks about his grandfather's name, Macon avoids the question (Morrison 54).

By not keeping his father's name in his memory, Macon cannot operate as McAdams and Cox's autonomous "storyteller of the self" (191) because he is unable to even reconstruct his past—much less imagine a future—thus leaving him dead in a purposeless present. Wehner argues that "In the Christian rebirth, the believer goes from darkness to light; in Milkman's rebirth, he goes from light to darkness" (83). He leaves his father's white ways for his family's black ways; therefore, Morrison is equating blackness with life and whiteness with death (Wehner 84). Finally, near the end of the novel, Milkman looks out the bus window at the road signs with newfound purpose, "wondering what lay beneath the names . . . How many dead lives and fading memories" (Morrison 329). The wording here is carefully chosen: Macon Dead's name signifies the state of his life.

Hagar is the character who perhaps most faithfully lives up to her biblical namesake. As the Bible story goes, Sarah gives her slave, Hagar, to Abraham when they are not successful at having a child. When Abraham and Hagar conceive their child Ishmael, Sarah becomes jealous and banishes the mother and son to wander in the desert (Genesis 21:14). In the same way, Milkman only views Hagar through the lens of sex (Kirby 2). When Milkman rejects Hagar, she angrily wanders the city, searching for Milkman so she can kill him. "Hagar" actually translates

to “flight” in Hebrew. However, contrary to Solomon, Pilate, and Milkman, Hagar is never described as achieving this magical release. One error she makes is her unknowing embrace of “the “Dead” identity, the one that tries to keep its past buried . . . [she] make[s] futile efforts to create an identity through Milkman” (para. 36). Not focusing on an identity of her own, she spirals into depression and death.

Pilate, possessing one of the most overtly Christian names in the novel, models some of the most explicit Christian themes. While most scholarship suggests that Pilate’s name represents Morrison’s rejection of Christian teaching, Anderson argues that Pilate’s Christian symbolism goes beyond her problematic name. Throughout the work, Pilate is linked to wine, trees, fruit, snakes, and rocks (Anderson 14). Pilate is a winemaker, and when Milkman visits, he smells bread baking, alluding to the idea of the Eucharist (14). Anderson states that in the same way “Holy Communion spiritually nourishes Christians, Pilate fulfills Milkman’s need for familial knowledge and acceptance” (14). Pilate encompasses Song of Songs 7:2, which sings, “Your navel is a rounded goblet that never lacks blended wine” *(NIV Bible)*. Kirby explains that “the name “Pontius” is derived from the Latin *pons,* which translates to “‘bridge’” (para. 41). Pilate acts as the first bridge for Milkman to cross over from his dead family into the life of personal identity, giving him a home away from home and modeling a healthy familial atmosphere. Significantly, when Milkman wonders what Reba’s last name is, he declares, “I'll ask Pilate. Pilate knows. It’s in that dumb-ass box hanging from her ear. Her own name and everybody else’s” (Morrison 89). Pilate knows everyone’s names in her immediate community; implying her possession of the power that Milkman seeks to attain. McAdams declares that “stories are never set in stone” (100), and coincidentally, Pilate is constantly described with rock imagery, reinforcing Biblical themes but also emphasizing the autonomy she has over her own life story.

Pilate's lack of navel is also a focal point of her character. Having no navel implies a supernatural birth and lack of contingency on other human beings, but also the virtue of selflessness. The practice of "navel-gazing" during meditation was popular in ancient Greece, and the phrase is also used to refer to when someone is acting in a self-absorbed manner. The fact that Pilate does not have a navel is a physical reflection of her selfless actions and implies that she has already reached union with God, which aligns with the fact that she knows and sings Solomon's song beginning on the sixth page of the book. In the end, then, Milkman must reject his father's white American Dream values in favor of his aunt's mystical autonomy: "Solomon challenges the individual, self-reliant model of male heroism constantly given by the Western tradition in that Milkman must continually rely on women: Pilate, Ruth, Hagar, Corinthians, Magdalene, Circe, and Sweet" (Wehner 96). Pilate models narrative autonomy and the sacramental action of communion throughout the narrative, symbolizing her elevated mystical status within the text.

The disunity among names is united only at the end of the novel, when Milkman transitions from the narrative role of agent to author by learning the name of his great-grandfather and the significance behind Solomon's song. The song is first mentioned on the sixth page, and Milkman first hears it in Pilate's home when he first meets Hagar, but the words are insignificant to him until he is able to unlock their meaning. Immediately after discovering his family history, Milkman and Sweet go for a swim. She asks who he is exclaiming about, and Milkman, "his mouth and eyes full of water" (Morrison 328), responds "Solomon, that's who" (328). "Solomon" translates to "peace" or "rest" in Hebrew. Understanding Solomon's name, identity, and how it relates to his history, Milkman's memory can create a full narrative identity of the Me. Thus begins Milkman's role as author in his story, expressed in Christian terms.

Having just come to life, Milkman is continuing his sacramental journey with baptism and an acceptance of peace and salvation. Uttering aloud the name of Solomon establishes Milkman's past, and doing so in a baptismal setting is reminiscent of the tradition of baby christening, the act of giving naming babies at their baptism. Bovon draws attention to the fact that Christians place their hope in the saving power of Jesus' name (279). In Psalms, David proclaims, "Save me, O God, by your name" (*NIV Bible*, Psalm 54.1). By saying Solomon's name out loud, Milkman is expressing a symbol that acknowledges the spiritual reality associated with identity. Bovon writes further that names "are a gift from God that express an extralinguistic reality beyond what other words are capable of transmitting . . . If we neglect this extralinguistic reality [we] are vulnerable to losing a depth to our understanding of Scripture" (288). Therefore, by speaking Solomon's name out loud, Milkman is accepting this familial knowledge as saving and renaming his own origin story, clearly defining his role as author over his narrative identity.

INTERTEXTUALITY BETWEEN SONG OF SOLOMON AND SONG OF SONGS

While *Song of Solomon* and Song of Songs are not directly comparable, the fact that Morrison titled her work after the biblical book should not be ignored, and new insights can be gathered by analyzing the two side-by-side. The two books have been mentioned in past scholarship, but correlations have not been explored in-depth. In one article, Agnes Surányi clarifies that intertextuality is not free association with whatever one is currently reading, but a variant existing in the same matrix (116-117). I argue that the two books do exist in the same cosmos due to their similar narrative structure. Surányi comments that "the dialogue between the biblical lovers in the Song of Songs speaks to Milkman's relationship with Hagar" (124), but only addresses the topic in for one paragraph, failing to push the thought to its full potential. This

Christian intertextual comparison between format, content, narration, and themes adds depth to Milkman's search for narrative identity.

Disunity is tangibly present in Milkman's physical appearance from the beginning of the novel. Morrison writes, "He had a fine enough face. Eyes women complimented him on, a firm jaw line, splendid teeth. Taken apart, it looked all right…But it lacked coherence, a coming together of the features into a total self" (69). This commentary on Milkman's face can also be applied to the whole novel. While the narrative of Milkman is linear, the way the stories are told pulls the reader in and out of the past and present, causing time to feel circular. Similarly, Song of Songs has been categorized by scholars into three parts and contains repetitive imagery and allegory, but lacks a clear sense of narrative direction. Ann Matter writes the repeated images "suggests unification . . . hint[ing] at the possibility of an underlying structure" (49), and Waterman argues "the refrain involving the 'daughters of Jerusalem' has suggested some formal sense of unity" (117), but overall, Song of Songs "contain[s] no clear narrative development" (Matter 49). In the same way that Milkman's facial features make sense individually but lack a coherent sense of self all together, if *Song of Solomon* is a discordant representation of Song of Songs, its nonlinear fragments of stories must be pieced together in order to mimic the unified poetic picture.

Applying the structure of Song of Songs to *Song of Solomon* reveals key similarities, drawing attention to which characters speak and in what manner. Song of Songs is a lyric poem praising the righteousness of married love. Song of Songs does not fit easily into other narrative accounts of the Hebrew Bible—even "allegorical interpretations of books like Genesis or Kings assume a level of story-telling" (Matter 49). Being attributed to King Solomon, the book holds an affinity to wisdom literature, however, it is the only book that "tells no sacred history, makes

no theological or moral points, and does not mention God" (Matter 49). The same is true of *Song of Solomon*. Song of Songs is written in the form of a dialogue between the husband king, his wife the Shulamite, and a responding chorus of the daughters of Jerusalem. While the poem is a dialogue, the wife dominates the conversation, speaking seventy-one of the total one hundred and seventeen verses (Waterman 173). Following Milkman's narrative pilgrimage, one can read *Song of Solomon* as a dialogue between Milkman and Hagar with Pilate's community as chorus. While the woman is the primary narrator in Song of Songs, the gender dynamic is flipped in Morrison's work with Milkman's perspective being privileged over Hagar's.

Pilate's house of women provides a direct parallel to the daughters of Jerusalem, representing a functioning unit and modeling McAdams and Cox's communion to Milkman when he visits them. Sometimes in the background, other times in the forefront, the women are a constant force in the story, but Milkman does not value or heed their voices until his spiritual awakening at the end of the book. At the beginning of the story, Macon Dead is passing Pilate's house when "he heard the music. They were singing. All of them. Pilate, Reba, and Reba's daughter, Hagar . . . Surrendering to the sound, Macon moved closer . . . he relished the effortless beauty of the women singing in the candlelight" (Morrison 29). This female chorus invites the reader in alongside Macon. The association of Pilate's female community with music solidifies their role as a supporting chorus to the central couple in Morrison's narrative.

The allegorical ideal of communion and mutual love in Song of Songs is emphasized when contrasted with *Song of Solomon*'s themes of violence, excessive self-love, and rash love. Song of Songs finds the relational balance between asceticism and hedonism, highlighting healthy commitment and reciprocity. In contrast, Morrison stated that as she wrote this novel, she consulted her dead father in her head, needing his assistance to write about men's attraction to

violence (David 73). Milkman's predisposition to violence is represented in the fact that every independent act he takes in his bildungsroman story contains violence, including when he strikes his father and shoots his gun at Guitar. Man's perspective and predisposition to violence is one reason for this skewed relationship compared to Song of Songs. Another contribution to this failed love is selfishness. Professor Mia Kim writes how "Song of Solomon shows the characters who fail in love due to the lack of positive self-love. Milkman and Hagar are the ones having excessive love of themselves" (91). The two possess disordered Augustinian love, and by prioritizing their selfish desires, they are prevented from the mutually beneficial love Song of Songs praises. In contrast, the Song of Songs lovers' love is unforced and mutual. Throughout Song of Songs, the Shulamite woman refrains about the absence of her lover repeatedly, and the need for love to be mutual and happen spontaneously is repeatedly emphasized. Song of Songs "shows the repetitive pattern of balanced and unbalanced love, and tells the significance of mutual love" (Kim 92). Three separate times, the daughters of Jerusalem are given the charge to "not stir up or awaken love until it pleases" (*ESV Bible*, Song of Songs 2.7, 3.5, 8.4). Incongruent with this biblical charge is Milkman's relationship with his cousin Hagar, whom he lusts after at twelve, sleeps with at seventeen, and is "on-again-off-again" (Morrison 98) with until thirty-one years old. Milkman describes Hagar as "the third beer," "the one you drink because it's there, because it can't hurt, and because what difference does it make?" (91). Their relationship is erratic from the start, directly contrasting the pure and appropriate relationship of the biblical lovers. Disordered loves result in an improper relationship between Milkman and Hagar that cannot bring the correlative happiness modeled in Song of Songs.

The chorus functions as an audience whose participation in the lovers' erotic encounters also facilitates the participation of the reader. The "daughters" are likely a group of young

women listening to the Shulamite's dating advice ("Who are the daughters"). The couples' actions in both works do not occur in a vacuum; the chorus of both books are aware of and comment on their actions. Song of Songs can be divided into three parts consisting of the courtship, the wedding, and maturing marriage—which also parallels McAdams and Cox's narrative identity development of the Me. First, in the courtship section, the woman is playing the role of actor, representing an adult well-adapted to acting in social roles who is longing to be with her lover. She has a dream that she loses him and searches the city "for the one [her] heart loves" (*NIV Bible*, Song of Songs 3.2). With the help of city guards, she finds him. When she wakes up, she repeats the theme of not forcing love. In the second stage—marriage—the wife has a second dream in which she and her husband are having marriage troubles. In the agent stage, "Selves not only act; they initiate action" (McAdams and Cox 181). The wife's initiated action, insulting her husband, causes him to walk out. She searches the city a second time for him, but now the guards beat her instead of helping search. The third section leaves the husband and wife secure in their true love: "I belong to my beloved, / and his desire is for me" (*NIV Bible*, Song of Songs 7.10). Having a past, present, and secure future, the lovers are established in their authorial identity. *Song of Solomon* can also be read to follow this three-part pattern, but rejects the Song of Songs relationship reconciliation found in the third part in favor of the narrative of biblical Abraham and Hagar. Song of Songs has traditionally been interpreted allegorically, representing the relationship between God and Israel or the Church in general. The tradition of reading Song of Songs allegorically lends itself to the idea that *Song of Solomon* should also be understood to function symbolically.

Similar to the lover in Song of Songs, Hagar also leaves home twice: the first, she runs away (*NIV Bible*, Genesis 16.12), the second, Abraham and Sarah banish her—doomed to

wander in the desert. In the same way, when Hagar wanders the city, she does find Milkman, but is never reconciled to him, and her story ends in death. Likewise, Milkman correlates to Solomon, who is described as an Abraham-like figure throughout the book. Solomon "had a slew of children, all over the place . . . everyone around here claims kin to him" (Morrison 322). Similarly, Hagar is driven "out of her mind" in her love for Milkman, paralleling Ryna's feelings for Solomon: "You don't hear about women like that anymore . . . the kind of woman who couldn't live without a particular man. And when the man left, they lost their minds, or died or something. Love, I guess" (323). Deepening the complexity of her biblical allusions, Morrison rejects a direct comparison to the Song of Songs lovers and plays on Hagar's name.

SONG OF SOLOMON AS MYTH: MAGICAL REALISM AND CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM

By employing magical realism in the narrative, Morrison both elevates *Song of Solomon* to the level of mystical myth found in Song of Songs and simultaneously reflects the worldview of indigenous African religions. McAdams expounds that "identity itself might be conceived as an internal story, or personal myth" (100). Magical realism mimics Christian mysticism in an African American context, providing the language for Milkman's rebirth of identity as a spiritual journey. This writing style effectively communicates the previously mentioned holistic nature of many African societies. Authors Julio Cortázar and Gabriel García Márquez express that this surrealist reality they describe existed long before the literary style formed in Europe (Simal 314). While traditionally a Latin American genre, magical realism in Morrison's novel portrays well the African acknowledgment of the spiritual realm that the West often fails to see. Albanian professor Albert Sheqi defines magic realism's origins and use in literature. The term originated in 1925 to describe a distinct form of surrealistic painting (Sheqi 8). Subsequently beginning to appear in literature in the 1950s, flight being one of the main manifestations of the genre (9). A

book containing magical realism "resembles a cobweb. The author starts several lines which are gradually interconnected and all end in the center. The reader remains then trapped in the complexity of the plot lines and finds it difficult to come to reliable conclusions" (13). The spiderweb of Morrison's narrative represents in format Milkman's lack of linear, coherent identity and symbolizes the metaphysical journey Milkman must endure in search of his identity. Thus, magical realism allows for synthesizing the natural and supernatural in a "magic reality" (Simal 314). Magical realism functions as the vehicle for Morrison's biblically-adjacent text to drive home the spiritual atmosphere of Milkman's quest for identity.

The magical realism in Morrison's text imitates the Christian mysticism within Song of Solomon. Mysticism has a long tradition throughout history, deriving from nature mysticism, Neoplatonism, and Christian Platonism (Starr 31) with the goal of unification with God. Milkman, experiencing multiple instances of magical realism, can be said to function as a mystic in the text. A mystic is one "who has been or is being initiated into some esoteric knowledge of divine things," but "possibly he is one whose eyes are still shut" (Starr 31). The novel consists of Milkman's initiation into the esoteric knowledge of his family history, but whose eyes are not opened until he has undergone narrative rebirth. Also, in the same way magical realism is deeply tied to Latin American culture and communicates African American holistic ideals, Christian mysticism "is not so much a philosophy or system of thought as a culture of the soul" (31), a "'realization of the presence of God in the soul and in nature'" (32). Thus, mystical texts such as Song of Songs are said to be so due to their spiritually allegorical function. Starr asserts that mysticism is the "essence of Christianity," and "a life for living men. It is not a living death, but a dying life" (33). Milkman's journey consists of him going from his living Dead identity to living as a real human being. To have union with God, the mystic must be purified of selfishness

and sensuality. Milkman progressively loses both of these traits the more he learns about the song of Solomon. The love of God energizes mystical purification: "Holiness is the prerequisite for the sight of God . . . purification removes the obstacles to our union with God. It furnishes the antidote to selfishness and sensuality" (32). Similarly, the closer Milkman moves to his communal memory, the better functioning member of his community he becomes, symbolized in his selfless act helping an old man lift a crate.

Magic realism provides the vehicle for Milkman's spiritual awakening to take place. In order to address magical realism, one must first turn to the early stages of Milkman's narrative identity. As Wehner points out, the academic conversation tends to focus on *Song of Solomon*'s controlling narrative of flight, but misses the opportunity to read the text as conversionary or as a metaphor of rebirth (78). At four years old, Milkman enters the first narrative identity stage of actor when he discovers "that only birds and airplanes could fly" and loses "all interest in himself" (Morrison 9). Milkman rises from actor to agent in his progression of self when he is thirty-two—similar to the age when Jesus started his biblical ministry. While Milkman is debating if he should break into Pilate's house in search of the rumored gold, Guitar tells him, "'You got a life? Live it! Live the motherfuckin life! Live it!' Milkman's eyes opened wide . . . All the tentativeness, doubt, and inauthenticity that plagued him slithered away without a trace, a sound" (Morrison 183). Guitar's speech awakens untapped desire in Milkman for agency from his father. McAdams and Cox state that "observers always expect that there must be something . . . inside the actors' heads, something motivational, something about desire and want" (181). Milkman is spurred to enter the agent stage of identity because "Guitar believed it . . . made it into an act," therefore allowing Milkman to feel "a self inside himself emerge, a clean-lined definite self" (183). McAdams and Cox explain that agency "means that a self has some

modicum of ownership over subjective experience" (181). Leaving for Virginia in pursuit of the gold, Milkman becomes a "goal-directed agent" (McAdams and Cox 181). When he discovers there is no gold, he instead begins investigating his familial background. With this occurrence, Morrison exemplifies the truth of the biblical Solomon's words in Proverbs 16:16, which declare, "How much better to get wisdom than gold" (*NIV Bible*). In fact, in the book *Dangerous Freedom: Fusion and Fragmentation in Toni Morrison's Novels,* Philip Page mentions that "by not accepting the name 'Solomon,' the Dead family is throwing away nuggets of wisdom that could be gleaned from their history" (Kirby 2). Transitioning from actor to agent prepares Milkman for his authorial chapter, symbolized through mystical language.

Milkman begins to enter his author identity stage when Guitar jumps him in Shalimar. A stage of life that should occur in the early twenties, Milkman begins in his early thirties (McAdams and Cox 179). As Guitar attempts to kill him, Milkman sees stars, hears music, and thinks he has "drawn the last sweet air left for him in the world" (Morrison 279). But then, he takes another, and "it was a living breath this time, not a dying one" (279). After this, he immediately "did not limp" (281). The language surrounding this event is incredibly mystical, worded in such a way that it sounds as if Milkman died and resurrected, or was already dead and entered life for the first time in that moment.

Hearing the children singing the Song of Solomon is the final key in Milkman's identity reincarnation. After uncovering more information from Susan Byrd's home, Milkman insists he and Sweet go swimming. Discovering that flight is possible and that his great-grandfather was a famous flying African, his interest in himself and family is rejuvenated full circle from when he was four years old. Bathing in the water of Shalimar, he takes sacramental action, is saved by Solomon's name, and reincarnates the myth of flight. When Milkman sings Solomon's song,

Sweet asks him where he learned the children's game that she herself played growing up. Milkman responds, "'Of course you did. Everyone did. Everybody but me. But I can play it now. It's my game now'" (327). Knowledge of his history grants him the ability to sing—recalling the fact that Pilate's chorus has sung since the beginning of the novel—and finally hold author status over his future. While typically associated with juvenility, flight functions as the perfect synthesis of African myth (such as Solomon the flying African) and Christian symbolism (childlike faith). McAdams and Cox declare that in this stage "the I becomes a storyteller of the self. The I authors a life narrative that integrates the reconstructed past, perceived present, and imagined future" (191). The mystical language and significance placed on Milkman's actions after his rebirth emphasize the shaping of his narrative identity. In this phase, information from his past can inform Milkman's present and allow him to imagine a future. Milkman becomes the author of his life.

One passage not addressed in academic conversation is when Milkman has his revelation while hearing the children chanting Solomon's song. This moment is reminiscent of Saint Augustine's mystical experience described in *Confessions*. As Milkman stands outside listening to the children playing their game, his scalp begins to "tingle" (Morrison 302). This external stimuli spurs Milkman to action in uncovering transformative knowledge; it leads him to union with his past and therefore his identity. In the same way, the mystic Saint Augustine is outside when he hears a voice repeatedly chanting, "'Pick up and read, pick up and read'" (Augustine VIII.29). He thinks perhaps it is children playing a game, but anyway responds to the call. This revelation leads him to the Bible, and subsequently, his Christian salvation— "all the shadows of doubt were dispelled" (VIII.29). The connection between the two figures solidifies further given the fact that both were thirty-two years old when this event took place. Milkman's Augustian

experience furthers the idea that knowledge of his history is the key to communion and ordered love.

In the end, the disunity in names, intertextual parallels, and the metaphor of myth are all unified by Milkman's pilgrimage for communion. In the middle of the novel, Guitar solidifies the theme of communion when he tells Milkman:

> *'Everybody wants a black man's life' . . . 'Not his dead life; I mean his living life.' . . . 'It* is *about love. What else but love? Can't I love what I criticize?' . . . 'It is about love. What else?' . . . .'What else?' . . . 'What else? What else? What else?'* (Morrison 281)

Guitar's repeated chant posits love as the meaning of life. The theme of communion in *Song of Solomon* is further confirmed by the image Milkman sees as Guitar attempts to kill him in the woods of Shalimar. Milkman's "life flashed before him, but it consisted of only one image: Hagar bending over him in perfect love, in the most intimate sexual gesture imaginable" (Morrison 279). Since Milkman lacked an established identity before his authorial rebirth, he had no significant life to have flash before his eyes, except for his relationship with Hagar. This imagined image reveals Milkman's desire for but inability to attain a perfect love.

While I believe Christianity plays a complementary role in *Song of Solomon*, it should not be ignored that the image Morrison paints of Christianity is often problematic. Anderson chimes in, "It is no secret that African Americans have a complicated history with Christianity, a religion that, historically, has allowed both their participation and their exploitation" (15-16). My analysis finds the rebirth and flight metaphors useful in the application of narrative identity theory, but does not wish to simplify the complex issues raised by Solomon's flight at the

subsequent cost of his family's suffering. The Bible "'is handed on unread" (Wilkson as cited in Suranyi 121) in Song of Solomon and Morrison's biblical intertextuality is often double-edged, but being aware of their associations can facilitate new perspectives on the originally referenced text (Suranyi 116). Christianity provides advantageous metaphors for Milkman's communal narrative journey for personal identity to be expressed. At the beginning of the novel, it is shown how Macon's dead name cuts his family off from the spiritual and physical reality of their ancestry, whitewashing himself in an attempt to attain a consumeristic American dream. In order to unify his own narrative amid a community of discordant names, Milkman most importantly must know Solomon's name, its background story, and speak it out loud to give it sacramental significance. Analyzing the intertextuality of Song of Songs establishes Milkman and Hagar as the central couple of *Song of Solomon* and Pilate's household of women as the daughters of Jerusalem chorus. Comparing the two reveals the underlying theme (or lack) of mutual love as central to both texts. Finally, the magical realism in *Song of Solomon* mimics the Christian mysticism in Song of Songs to provide the language for Milkman's allegorical identity rebirth, establishing Milkman as a mystic within his own story. Discovering communal memory shapes Milkman's personal identity, confirming Locke's theory that it is consciousness on which identity is founded. On this journey, Milkman must transition through two stages of personality narrative identity—actor and agent—before dying, being reborn, baptized, and redeemed as the author of his own narrative identity.

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