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2

Cock

The survey says all groups can make more money
if they lose weight except black men . . . men of other colors
and women of all colors have more gold, but black men
are the summary of weight, a lead thick thing on the scales,
meters spinning until they ring off the end of the numbering
of accumulation, how things grow heavy, fish on the
ends of lines that become whales, then prehistoric sea life
beyond all memories, the billion days of human hands
working, doing all the labor one can imagine

—Afaa Michael Weaver, "American Income"

The very essence of the male animal, from the bantam rooster to the four-star general, is to strut. Indeed, in 19th century America, a particular type of exaggerated male boastfulness became almost a national style. Not for the Negro male.

—Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The Moynihan Report"

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.

—Langston Hughes, "Dreams"

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How might we configure the limits and lacunae of the black masculine as a mode or means of thinking gender? What does it call into being or put under erasure the moment it arrives on the scene? What texts, both inside and outside the realm of literary criticism, are available to the contemporary reader interested in parsing out the ways in which black boys and men move through text at the level of representation and symbol, which is also to say, what lessons do we glean from the US American literary canon about *what black men are,* how they live, or whether their living is always already a spectacular kind of dying? Further, if one were to respond to such a claim or question of black male social life as a form of death in the negative, how might we theorize and historicize the ways in which death has come to serve as the dominant frame for thinking black male experience in the US and abroad?[1] For the purposes of this chapter, I am interested in working through and against discourses that imagine little else for black men beyond the grave and furthermore in gathering such materials to think toward a theory of the black masculine that shatters prevailing, pathological assumptions about what such lives can bear or bear forth and ultimately aims to build something fresh from the shards.

Toni Morrison's oeuvre is a singular resource for such an endeavor. There is already an extensive body of work on the ways in which her characters open up new worlds for thinking identity across lines of perceptible difference, alternate realities that avail to us more transgressive models for race, gender, and disability in particular.[2] Though much has been written about Morrison's work in this vein, few scholars have explored the role of nonhuman actors, and nonhuman animals in particular, in Morrison's ongoing argument against strict, bounded markers of identity that leave no

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room for growth or play. Such characters abound in Morrison's fiction—Here Boy, Sethe and Denver's dog in *Beloved,* the horses ridden by the tribe of blind warriors in *Tar Baby,* and the flock of birds that follows the titular character of *Sula* all come to mind—but rarely do such animal characters take center stage as a means through which a given character becomes an object of analysis. In one of Morrison's novels in particular, *Song of Solomon,* I will argue, Morrison's emphasis on the presence and, most importantly, the *properties* of animals is notably gendered and provides a fertile ground for imagining a theory of the black masculine grounded in literary analysis.

Put somewhat differently, I am interested in the ways in which Toni Morrison uses animals, and birds in particular, to make a certain argument about how it *feels* to be a black man, how she deploys them in order not only to critique the limiting, violent ways in which black masculinity is structured from the outside but also to describe the means through which black men and boys bear such weight, how they comport themselves under the duress of everyday life as a perceived threat. Following Afaa Weaver's suggestion that "black men are the summary of weight," I would like to track the way that black masculinity as heaviness, as excess, as adornment, as vanity, as *exorbitance* moves through *Song of Solomon* in the bodies of birds, how these animals, rather paradoxically, come to signal a certain boundedness to earth, an unwieldy abundance that limits all possibility of escape or futurity.[3] Alongside Nahum Chandler and others, however, I would like to think imaginatively about what such exorbitance avails to us as a frame for imagining alternative black masculinities and to begin with the premise of abundance rather than absence.[4] Using some of Morrison's most well-known characters—Milkman Dead; his best friend, Guitar;

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and his father, Macon Dead II—as central examples, I will close read moments of interspecies interaction with birds in the text in an effort to elucidate the generous approach to thinking black masculinity, and black personhood in a broader sense, that Morrison's work provides.

By theorizing a Morrisonian vision of black masculinity as always already bound up with a certain heaviness, a haunting presence that doubles as a kind of beauty but also prevents something like flight or a legible form of social mobility, I intend both to contribute to an ongoing conversation around representations of black maleness and to trouble some of the arguments that have historically given coherence to that field. Following Morrison's lead, my aim is to make an argument for an unfamiliar, destabilizing constellation of masculinities, one that transcends and unmoors reductive ways of thinking the intersection of blackness and gender. Central to this argument will be an extended consideration of the social milieu into which Milkman Dead is thrown, a world that marks and mars him from birth as the carrier of numerous traits that differentiate him from other black men in the text. I am interested in exploring this distance, this discomfort, at the level of feeling and in examining what Milkman's experiences throughout *Song of Solomon* elucidate about the way real-world masculinities come to be formed and how they might be critically desedimented in the service of a fugitivity that might ease the weight of living while black and male and yet unburied, unfettered, unbowed.

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The opening scene of *Song of Solomon* betrays the novel's obsession with failed flights, its persistent concern with what happens when a body misapprehends its own, unbearable heaviness. The first

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example of such failure in the text is deeply ironic, even to the point of tragedy, largely because of its object, a salesman by the name of Robert Smith:

> The North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance agent promised to fly from Mercy to the other side of Lake Superior at three o'clock. Two days before the event was to take place he tacked a note on the door of his little yellow house:
>
> > At 3:00 p.m. on Wednesday the 18th of February, 1931, I will take off from Mercy and fly away on my own wings. Please forgive me. I loved you all.
> >
> > (signed) Robert Smith,
> >
> > Ins. Agent
>
> Mr. Smith didn't draw as big a crowd as Lindbergh had four years earlier—not more than forty or fifty people showed up—because it was already eleven o'clock in the morning, on the very Wednesday he had chosen for his flight, before anybody read the note. At that time of day, during the middle of the week, word-of-mouth news just lumbered along.[5]

My primary interest in this scene lies in what is underemphasized or altogether unsaid. First, there is the matter of Robert Smith's profession. That Smith, a man who is well versed in the manifold dangers of everyday life by virtue of his work as a life insurance agent—and who also, it is worth mentioning, has a small, yellow house that registers metonymically as a reflection of his own persistent caution or fear—would choose to engage in a public act of such exceptional risk is bizarre. This is not to say that one need work in life insurance to comprehend the dangers of jumping off

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a building, but the extremity of contrast is generative here, as it conveys, rather vividly, the depth of Smith's conviction. The note he leaves strengthens such a reading. Its ambiguous ending initially reads, perhaps, as a suicide note but also as a good-bye letter, and it is a reflection of the depth of thought that serves as prelude to his grand escape.

This is the second sort of jarring contrast we see at work in this primal scene: the clash between the morose, deeply personal nature of Smith's note, on the one hand, and the bombastic, rather colorful character of the act itself, on the other: an act that is publicized, ostensibly, for the sake of attendance and features unexpected flourishes, the most stark of which are the "blue silk wings" he dons in order to facilitate takeoff.[6] If Smith is going to fly, he will do so in style. Note also the contrast Morrison draws between Smith's declaration of his plans to fly and the slow, lumbering manner in which the news of his experiment travels. Dreams, the argument follows, take on a kind of weight when they are put into the world. To dream aloud is to invite critique or, worse perhaps, indifference. From the first scene, Morrison places this nexus before us: the conflict between a man's desire to fly, *his desire to be seen doing so,* and a social world that can opt in or out of bearing the burden of that spectacle. Smith's willingness to attempt this dangerous feat, one complicated by his aforementioned career choices, is inextricable from a certain refusal of invisibility, his silken wings, as well as the note he plasters to the front of his home, both operating as embodiments of his yearning for engagement, both objects working in different ways to ensure that his plan is successful both as a mode of egress and as a means of entertainment. An aesthete, Smith wants even his leaving to be beautiful.

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Such flair or flash appears to be a rather recent development for Smith and is largely out of step with how he is characterized not too long after the text's opening scene:

> They kidded him, abused him, told their children to tell him they were out or sick or gone to Pittsburgh. But they held on to those little yellow cards as though they meant something—laid them gently in the shoe box along with the rent receipts, marriage licenses, and expired factory identification badges. Mr. Smith smiled through it all, managing to keep his eyes focused almost the whole time on his customers' feet. He wore a business suit for his work, but his house was no better than theirs. He never had a woman that any of them knew about and said nothing in church but an occasional "Amen." He never beat anybody up and he wasn't seen after dark, so they thought he was probably a nice man. But he was heavily associated with illness and death, neither of which was indistinguishable from the brown picture of the North Carolina Mutual Life Building in the back of their yellow cards. Jumping from the roof of Mercy was the most interesting thing he had done. None of them had suspected he had it in him. Just goes to show, they murmured to each other, you never really do know about people.[7]

What does it cost to be unknown or unloved? For Smith, such semianonymity was experienced alongside persistent abuse from his customers and fellow townspeople, an ire that is in some ways understandable given the regularity with which he asked them for money ("more regular than the reaper," according to one source).[8] This constant levying of funds, combined with Smith's relative quietude in other avenues of town social life—public romance, performances of exuberance in church, and so on—served to

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create a rift between Smith and the rest of the social world, a dehiscence that he sought to mend in this moment of audience engagement, this final request. Over and against a reading that might lead us to understand Smith's attempt at flight as the long-awaited break of a repressed figure in search of release, Morrison's robust characterization also leaves space for a vision of Robert Smith as a man dedicated to certain forms of order and restraint, one who did not break as much as he decided to break out, break free. It is not life as such that Smith wants to escape but rather the kind and caliber of life that is possible in the small Michigan town he wishes to be rid of. The townspeople are, ultimately, correct. One cannot "know about" another in any totalizing sense. Following Morrison's characterization of Smith as someone who never did anything more "interesting" than jump from the roof of Mercy Hospital, who never had a public relationship of any sort or bothered anyone beyond what was required by his job, a flock of critical questions rises to the fore.[9] Who or what convinced Smith that he could fly in the first place? And, once such a conviction had taken hold, what would this sort of a man feel the need to take flight from? At the textual level, no tenable answer to the first question appears. To the second question, however, his letter replies, albeit in muted tones: the love that Robert Smith describes, the love that is largely missing from the descriptions of Smith given by the townspeople—that is, that he is either bewilderingly dull or downright annoying—and can thus be described as an unrequited love, a love that pushed Smith to beg forgiveness not only for his leaving but also for his dull, dogged affection. In this way, Morrison provides the reader with an entrée into the affective economy of the text, one that will feature a web of relations marked by unreciprocated affection, by burden without release.

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Robert Smith's desire to fly is in many ways singular as it pertains to the ensemble of black male characters in *Song of Solomon*. The exorbitance he strains against is not rooted in vanity, a desire for revenge, or commitment to the accrual of material possessions—to be sure, these vices are primary sources of frustration for almost every other male character in the novel—but rather in his banality, the boredom and outright indifference he inspires in his neighbors and clients. In a sense, this popular perception of Smith as a forgettable figure seems almost preordained. Morrison is renowned for her flair when it comes to naming characters.[10] What are we to make of a figure so plainly plumed, one that walks with a common name in a textual universe full of color? Consider the following passage from later in the novel, long after Smith's demise:

> He closed his eyes and thought of the black men in Shalimar, Roanoke, Petersburg, Newport News, Danville, in the Blood Bank, on Darling Street, in the pool halls, the barbershops. Their names. Names they got from yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes, weaknesses. Names that bore witness. Macon Dead, Sing Byrd, Crowell Byrd, Pilate, Reba, Hagar, Magdalene, First Corinthians, Milkman, Guitar, Railroad Tommy, Hospital Tommy, Empire State (he just stood around and swayed), Small Boy, Sweet, Circe, Moon, Nero, Humpty, Dumpty, Blue Boy, Scandinavia, Quack-Quack, Jericho, Spoonbread, Ice Man, Dough Belly, Rocky River, Gray Eye, Cock-a-Doodle-Doo, Cool Breeze, Muddy Waters, Pinetop, Jelly Roll, Fats, Lead Belly, Bo Diddley, Cat-Iron, Peg-Leg, Son, Shortstuff, Smoky Babe, Funny Papa, Bukka, Pink, Bull Moose, B.B., T-Bone, Black Ace, Lemon, Washboard, Gatemouth, Cleanhead, Tampa Red, Juke Boy, Shine, Staggerlee, Jim The Devil, Fuck-Up and *Dat* Nigger.[11]

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What does the name Robert Smith bear witness to? What mistake or weakness, what flaw or yearning? If we are to read the preceding passage as a theory of naming for Morrison, then it becomes difficult not to see Robert Smith's very name as a gesture toward either blandness—that is, that Smith has never done anything that would make him worthy of a nickname—or a long-standing distance from the sorts of social spaces, and caring, playful relationships, that would serve as the condition of possibility for such naming, such proximity rendered in language. Both readings dovetail in a fashion that supports the earliest descriptions of Smith. This was a man of duty with little to distract him from it, not even the love he writes about in the note he leaves behind as a final farewell. Smith was loved without return and, in the process, disinvested in more than just the town and its capacity for a certain vision of social life but also, it would appear, in scientific law. He never frames his flight as anything other than just such an escape. All the reader is made privy to in the way of description is Smith's claim that the wings he will use as instruments of egress are "all his own."[12] Like so much else in his life, his wings are shared with no one.

Robert Smith's death looms large over the novel and serves as the connecting thread through which one can trace the critical role of animal presence, and animal symbolism, in *Song of Solomon*. Like so many of the characters that appear in the novel once his death becomes mere memory, Smith's very person was indelibly marked not only by his *inability to fly* but also by his steadfast desire to do so, even against conventional wisdom or scientific discourse. It is his yearning in the face of such facts, this exorbitant will over and against systemic boundaries that would ostensibly foreclose such dreams long before one could engage in the sort of

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behavior for which the townspeople most vividly remember him, that is of central concern. How does such yearning take hold? How do this novel's black men in particular—ones who live with constant reminders of their own limitations, physical, financial, and otherwise, and indeed the truth that their everyday lives are impinged upon by sociolegal restraints that function as persistent, undeniable limits—make up in their minds that this sort of *groundedness,* this exorbitant weight, is all they will ever know? It is in this sense, that is, as an event that opens a series of questions about how the novel's central, metonymic ensemble functions as a proxy for real-world experiences of antiblack violence, that Robert Smith's failed flight becomes an instructional moment not only for the reader but also for other characters in the text, none more so than Milkman Dead:

> The next day a colored baby was born inside Mercy for the first time. 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. To have to live without that single gift saddened him and left his imagination so bereft that he appeared dull even to the women who did not hate his mother. The ones who did, who accepted her invitations to tea and envied the doctor's big dark house of twelve rooms and the green sedan, called him "peculiar."[13]

This origin story—both that of Milkman Dead as the first black baby born inside Mercy (which, I think, Morrison intends as a kind of double entendre, a moment meant to index a geographical space of particular historical import within the narrative but also to have us consider the various forms of mercy that Milkman is shown

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throughout the text and how said mercy informs the way he comports himself) and that of Milkman's ongoing disappointment in the weight of his own body, that is, the unshakeable realization that he, not unlike Robert Smith, is built for pursuits other than flight—sets up the novel's central conflict.

First, the opening presents us with the question of what Milkman is to make of his own heaviness, how he is to manage a body that does not move the way he wants it to or is read in ways that run counter to his expectations and desires. Second, the reader is made privy here to the first time that Milkman must navigate the gaze of others, in particular, the women he encounters who find him to be "peculiar," a term that swings in its register between the negative and the affirmative throughout the text. Robert Smith, now dead as the name that sutures Milkman to his kin, is not especially helpful in either regard. He does not provide Milkman with the tools needed to navigate either the reality of his body or the social world that unwieldy body is forced to enter. From the outset, the first encounter that Milkman has with a man who might serve as the embodiment of his own future, Robert Smith, is one marked by catastrophe, by a public failure that ultimately ends in tragedy. The event leaves Milkman's imagination "bereft," robbing him of the joy that would naturally attend watching a man fly, as well as the possibility of such flight, such freedom, for his future self. Morrison's characterization of the Smith crash as an event that not only captures the attention of the community but also, in a slightly different register, captures any sense of potential or possibility, stealing it from Milkman before he is old enough to glean that sort of disappointment from personal experience, is critical. As presented, this is the first lesson Milkman ever learns about what it means to move through the world, the first time he

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projects his own experiences onto another and dares to see himself where he is not. In this sense, Robert Smith's death is not only a mirror for Milkman but also a kind of mirror stage:

> It suffices to understand the mirror stage in this context *as an identification,* in the full sense analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes [*assume*] an image—an image that is seemingly predestined to have an effect at this phase, as witnessed by the use in analytic theory of antiquity's term, "imago."
>
> The jubilant assumption [*assomption*] of his specular image by the kind of being—still trapped in his motor impotence and nursling dependence—the little man is at the *infans* stage thus seems to me to manifest in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, prior to being objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as a subject.
>
> This form would, moreover, have to be called the "ideal-I"—if we wanted to translate it into a familiar register—in the sense that it will also be the root-stock of secondary identifications, this latter term subsuming the libidinal normalization functions. But the important point is that this form situates the agency known as the ego, prior to its social determination, in a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual or, rather, that will only asymptotically approach the subject's becoming, no matter how successful the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve, as *I,* his discordance with his own reality.[14]

This passage from Jacques Lacan's "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function" avails to us a peculiar sort of second insight

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into the initial encounter between Robert Smith's legacy—his "mark," as Morrison terms it—and Milkman Dead, a protocol for imagining, at the level of trauma and psychological development, what transpires when an infant's birth is inextricably linked to a man crashing to his demise right in front of him. Though Lacan's analysis is useful for its metaphorical breadth, I would like to read against the grain of it here so as to honor the particularity of the mirroring that passes between Milkman and Robert Smith, as I think it contains elements of the Lacanian mirror stage but ultimately drives the subject of the stage, the child glaring into the mirror, in a slightly divergent direction than Lacan's theory, as presented here, can account for. Though there is undoubtedly a certain identification that takes place between Milkman and Robert Smith, I would argue that Milkman spends much of *Song of Solomon* actively disinvesting in the illogical, seemingly spontaneous activity we see from Smith in the book's earliest scenes.

Milkman, like his father, Macon Dead II, is exceedingly practical. His emotions are primarily invested in what can be held or owned. Milkman does not see an "ideal-I" in Smith but rather an *anti-ideal-I,* a portent, a warning of what happens when one seeks to elide or evade the law. The image of Smith's beautiful, crashing body haunts Milkman. It stands in as a representative of all that he seeks to avoid, the risk of loving anything too much, even one's own freedom, and the various kinds of leaping or leaving that might attend such love. Milkman's unceasing practicality, which could also be read as willful avoidance, though certainly not a lack, of something like creativity or daring, is a result of this origin steeped in blood, this cracked mirror image staring back at him from when he first entered the world. *Song of Solomon* is full of this sort of troublesome mirroring, replete with figures that look to

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elders and see versions of themselves they desperately seek to evade. Thus, the disappointment inherent to this version of the mirror stage lies not in the asymptotic approach of an ideal that never arrives but in the disappointment of a reflection that is inescapable, a model that is marked by failure, the anti-ideal-I that is always already a haunting presence that is nonetheless enfleshed. It is, to use Lacan's language, "a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual or, rather, that will only asymptotically approach the subject's becoming" primarily in the sense that these images, these living reflections, are fixtures from which characters like Milkman are always on the run. The images approach asymptotically, without ever reaching the body of the onlooker, because that is as close as Milkman and others will allow them. Robert Smith is indeed a mirror, the kind that Milkman has no interest in confronting. Given the persistence of Milkman's desire to fly, a desire that manifests itself in a number of palpable ways toward the conclusion of the novel, this rejection—that is, of Robert Smith as origin narrative, as the chaos from which Milkman's world emerges—is a reasonable strategy, one that allows Milkman to conduct a relatively safe, bourgeois lifestyle without the threat of reckless dreaming. In *Song of Solomon,* the figure of the anti-ideal-I is, from the outset, inextricably linked to images that are not mere extensions of psyche but living persons that Morrison's characters must contend with. For Milkman, the image of Robert Smith failing to fly—which is also, it should be noted, a failure to keep a promise he made in the note pasted to the front of his home—is just such a point of contention, as well as of fraught identification, throughout the novel.

The weight of Smith's failure lingers and ultimately manifests itself in ways that mark Milkman even beyond the supposed pe-

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culiarity that is often remarked on during his childhood. Beyond what the narrator refers to as a certain dullness—which registers here not just as the absence or suppression of intelligence but also as a lack of color or vibrancy, a doubling that is especially important given the splendor of Robert Smith's sartorial performance the day of his failed flight and only gains more traction as the novel picks up speed, its color palette widening all the while—there remains the issue of Milkman's wounded imagination, the ways in which the Smith crash serves as a swift, irrefutable education on the relationship between black men and the limits of law. As Milkman soon learns, the algorithm is relatively simple: bucking the law courts a quick death and ultimately makes one's life ungrievable.[15] It is this weight, perhaps, the weight that attends the realization that he is neither bird nor airplane that is eventually bodied forth as what the narrator describes, in the first instance, as a stylized gait:

> By the time Milkman was fourteen he had noticed that one of his legs was shorter than the other. When he stood barefoot and straight as a pole, his left foot was about half an inch off the floor. So he never stood straight; he slouched or leaned or stood with a hip thrown out, and he never told anybody about it—ever. . . . It wasn't a limp—not at all—just the suggestion of one, but it looked like an affected walk, the strut of a very young man trying to appear more sophisticated than he was. It bothered him and he acquired movements and habits to disguise what to him was a burning defect. He sat with his left ankle on his right knee, never the other way around. And he danced each new dance with a curios stiff-legged step that the girls loved and the other boys eventually copied. The deformity was mostly in his mind. Mostly,

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> but not completely, for he did have shooting pains in that leg after several hours on a basketball court. He favored it, believed it was polio, and felt secretly connected to the late President Roosevelt for that reason. Even when everybody was raving about Truman because he had set up a Committee on Civil Rights, Milkman secretly preferred FDR and felt very close to him. Closer, in fact, to him than to his own father, for Macon had no imperfection and age seemed to strengthen him. Milkman feared his father, respected him, but knew, because of the leg, that he could never emulate him. So he differed from him as much as he dared. Macon was clean-shaven; Milkman was desperate for a mustache. Macon wore bow ties; Milkman wore four-in-hands. Macon didn't part his hair. Milkman had a part shaved into his. Macon hated tobacco; Milkman tried to put a cigarette in his mouth every fifteen minutes. Macon hoarded his money; Milkman gave his away. But he couldn't help sharing with Macon his love of good shoes and fine thin socks. And he did try, as his father's employee, to do the work the way Macon wanted it done.[16]

The difference Morrison posits here between an interpretation of Milkman's limp as a physical disability born of ailment or physical injury (for example, the narrator's invocation of polio and Milkman's ongoing affection for President Roosevelt) and the limp as a product of Milkman's fears or desires—that is, the limp as the embodied performance of his yearning for sophistication or undeniable cool—is of paramount importance. Such overperformance, such compensation in the face of deep hunger for intimate relation, is an indelible component of Milkman's persona throughout the text.

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In the place of the vocalized expression of that sort of desire, what we see instead are the sorts of gestures that Morrison lists when she outlines the various ways that Milkman purposely diverges from his father so as to ease the pain of his distance. This is the conflict that an unapproachable, inimitable model such as Macon Dead II presents for Milkman. Up and through adulthood, all he can do is leap, and even that is done in vain. What remains in the interval between his initial mirror, his anti-ideal-I, Robert Smith, and the ideal he seeks to emulate, his father, Macon, is a space that never closes. Instead, that distance manifests itself as a weight that Milkman bears in his body. As Morrison characterizes their relationship, the distance between Milkman and Macon is enacted through both the heaviness implicit in the latter's everyday movement and also his sartorial choices and methods of self-care. This is an altogether different heaviness indexed by the incongruous movement of Milkman's legs, themselves a symbolic marker of difference between his own physique and that of Macon—who is described as having "an athlete's stride"—the heaviness of their irreconcilability, the impossibility of Milkman ever measuring up.[17] The singular weight of patriarchal lineage is one that Milkman, repeatedly, is unable to bear with any sort of ease or comfort. Even his nickname represents a departure from family tradition and is a source of great frustration for his father, who, though he never discovers its deeply troubling origin—that his mother breastfed the boy well into childhood—nonetheless regards the appellation with disgust, thinking it "dirty, intimate, and hot."[18]

One of the more compelling moments of Morrison's initial description of Milkman's gait is the imagery of him dancing, her claim that Milkman's affected walk was actually a source of pride

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and positive regard when he would attend parties or other public gatherings with his peers. This distinction is critical, not only for its resonance with a social model of disability in which disability is always already a social and environmental phenomenon and thus not so much an inherent trait as a mode of being in the world determined by one's direct surroundings, architecturally and otherwise, but also because of the backdrop against which it places Milkman's yearning for the acknowledgment and care of his father. When contrasted against the reality of Milkman's status as a figure of prominence in the local community, a young man who is adored and emulated by most of his peers, then, there is a slight shift in how we might read the negative affects that predominate his relationship with his father.

By all accounts, Milkman never registers the love of his friends as love. Like the affective labor of so many of the women in his life—as he is rather abruptly reminded by his sister Lena later on in the novel—their desire for relation is unimportant, even invisible to him.[19] Perhaps unsurprisingly, Morrison has remarked elsewhere on her ongoing interest in this well-documented experience of invisibility, or at least *the description* of this unique sort or sense of nonbelonging in white civil society as a kind of invisibility, on the part of black men. In a 2013 public conversation with Junot Díaz at the New York Public Library, Morrison went as far as to offer a bit of counter-Ellisonian critique toward this point, saying simply, "Invisible to whom? Not to me."[20] Yet and still we see the product of that *feeling-invisible* bodied forth in how Milkman behaves, the cavalier way that he treats those who are not his father, who, even when he is an object of anger, is always deemed worthy of engagement. Even when Milkman is in conflict with his father, he accounts for him, and it is this accounting, this singular focus,

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that strikes me as a Lacanian drive toward an ideal self, an endeavor that is ultimately fruitless and produces an ongoing psychic injury that is bodied forth in the way that Milkman, quite literally, moves through space. The effect of his initial disappointment in Robert Smith and the subsequent disappointment of his father's coldness is to deeply wound Milkman, as the failings of both men come to register as imposed, immutable limits on his own range of possible lives. That Milkman's feelings, indeed his very capacity for feeling, become manifest in such a profound and in this case readily visible way is part of a long-standing thought pattern in Morrison's work. *Song of Solomon* in particular is replete with characters that appear, almost, to feel *too much* in a given moment and indeed feel various emotions with such depth and power that everyday living becomes untenable labor. As Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth remind us,

> Affect is in many ways synonymous with *force* or *forces of encounter*. . . . At once intimate and impersonal, affect *accumulates* across both relatedness and interruptions in relatedness, becoming a palimpsest of force-encounters traversing the ebbs and swells of intensities that pass between "bodies" (bodies defined not by an outer skin-envelope or other surface boundary but by their potential to reciprocate or co-participate in passages of affect). Bindings and unbindings, becomings and un-becomings, jarring disorientations and rhythmic attunements. Affect marks a body's *belonging* to a world of encounters or; a world's belonging to a body of encounters but also, in *non-belonging,* through all those far sadder (de)compositions of mutual in-compossibilities. Always there are ambiguous or "mixed" encounters that impinge and extrude for worse and for better, but (most usually) in-between.[21]

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Song of Solomon's cast of characters amend and augment such a working definition of affect, as it is the social performance of their mutual affectedness, the intractable ways in which they are *publicly affected* by their feelings toward one another, that is of paramount importance. For Morrison, belonging or nonbelonging to the world is a matter of recognition, and care, of whether or not we can ultimately belong to those we desire to belong to, whether we can experience the goodness of loving and being loved back.[22] Affect is always on the move throughout *Song of Solomon,* but it is constantly working in both public and private space, always blurring the line between the inner life of a character and the way they are presented or present themselves to their fellow townspeople, friends, or family. Time and time again, we see the sheer force with which unrequited love unspools the central characters' lives, few in as drastic a fashion as a secondary character named Porter, whose initial appearance in the text is its own argument for the singular power of nonbelonging to warp one's relation to the public sphere. While leaning out an attic window, drunk and cradling a shotgun tightly but not too well, Porter speaks not only to his condition but also to that of many characters to follow:

> Tears streamed down his face and he cradled the barrel of the shotgun in his arms as though it were the woman he had been begging for, searching for, all his life. "Gimme hate, Lord," he whimpered. "I'll take hate any day. But don't give me love. I can't take no more love, Lord. I can't carry it. Just like Mr. Smith. He couldn't carry it. It's too heavy. Jesus, you know. You know all about it. Ain't it heavy? Jesus? Ain't love heavy? Don't you see, Lord? You own son couldn't carry it. If it killed Him, what You think it's gonna do to me?"[23]

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Porter elaborates for us here, early in the text, a corroboration of Robert Smith's final claim, reiterating that it was love, and not a desire to die, that led to Smith jumping off the roof of Mercy. Porter goes as far as to pray for the removal of said love, calling it an unbearable burden, heaviness fit to kill. Like Robert Smith before him, Porter seeks out higher ground to make such a proclamation about the workings of love as force, as mass, itself a gesture toward the desire for ascension that marks both these men in their grandest moments of recognition. It is not the weight of love alone that Smith and Porter can no longer bear but also the peculiar burden of their social position, the daily anguish of being cast low while dreaming of a life marked by transcendence. Porter's great insight here is that the black men in the novel experience these weights not as counterbalancing forces but in fact as dual obstacles to the forms of flight that occupy their dreams. To configure love in such a fashion, not solely as a liberating force but also as a potential antipode to such a force, is to conjure an expansive set of questions about the nature of kinship, about what it means to desire that which can destroy just as easily as it can make or mend.

It is the weight that attends this double bind that produces not only Porter's misery, and Smith's desire to fly, but also Milkman's limp and obsession with appearance. His profound alienation from any robust engagement with the social world beyond what the people he encounters daily *can do for him* is in no small part a result of the ways in which his attempts at fulfilling his desire for love, as well as his desire to love, have ended in tragic failure: his love for flight reduced to a dead man broken against concrete, his love for his father devolved into rote obedience. Rather than delight in the manifold joys of the social, Milkman chooses

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instead to seek out a certain kind of patrilineal security, any stable reminder that he has roots, a place set aside for him, something that is his and only his, that can be owned and never taken. It is primarily in this sense, that is, in his relationship to private property and what he imagines private property makes possible, that Milkman most resembles his father. Their singular obsession with what they believe that ownership can provide, the world for which it serves as both lock and key, is what binds them. And it is the contrast between Milkman, Macon, and the women in the novel that makes the most prominent instances of bird imagery, and all that such imagery suggests in this text, especially poignant.

Put differently, more even than gender as a category of social difference, what separate the men and women in *Song of Solomon* are their expressed relationships to private property, what they believe that property ownership, as well as other forms of possession, opens up or forecloses as it pertains to the value of life as such, which is also to say, how property functions as a marker of their individual and collective personhood. The most compelling example of this divergence is found in Milkman's aunt and Macon's only sibling, Pilate Dead, and is on grand display during the first detailed interaction between Pilate and Milkman. After a brief exchange in which Pilate admonishes him for saying "hi" (which, according to Pilate, is something one only says to "pigs and sheep when you want em to move") instead of "hello," the reader is granted a sketch of his initial impression of his aunt, the outcast and local legend:[24]

> Shame had flooded him. He had expected to feel it, but not that kind; to be embarrassed, yes, but not that way. She was the one who was ugly, dirty, poor, and drunk. The queer aunt whom his

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> sixth-grade schoolmates teased him about and whom he hated because he felt personally responsible for her ugliness, her poverty, her dirt, and her wine. Instead she was making fun of his school, of his teachers, of him. And while she looked as poor as everyone said she was, something was missing from her eyes that should have confirmed it. Nor was she dirty; unkempt, yes, but not dirty. The whites of her fingernails were like ivory. And unless he knew absolutely nothing, this woman was definitely not drunk. Of course she was anything but pretty, yet he knew he could have watched her all day: the fingers pulling thread veins from the orange sections, the berry-black lips that made her look as though she wore make-up, the earring. . . . And when she stood up, he all but gasped. She was as tall as his father, and head and shoulders taller than himself. . . . She opened the door and they followed her into a large sunny room that looked both barren and cluttered. A moss-green sack hung from the ceiling. Candles were stuck in bottles everywhere; newspaper articles and magazine pictures were nailed to the walls. But other than a rocking chair, two straight-backed chairs, a large table, a sink and stove, there was no furniture. Pervading everything was the odor of pine and fermenting fruit.[25]

In a sense, Pilate's home operates as an extension of her persona: the smell of fruit, its general unkemptness, and the emphasis on the beauty of interpersonal interaction over respectable presentation all serving as contributing factors to the sense of surprise that Milkman feels upon their first meeting.

The shame that Milkman experiences is a direct product of Pilate's presence. Her everyday life doubles as a critique of his own. Put somewhat differently, Pilate's willingness to carry on as she

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does works in direct opposition to all that Milkman has been taught to hold dear. Her house does not serve as a marker of hard-earned wealth or middle-class status. Rather, her home is a living space in every other sense of the term. It is a venue for gathering and flourishing, for fleshly abundance with no regulatory force in place to curtail its song. That Pilate's house is also a house full of women—she lives with her two daughters, Hagar and Reba—is of central importance here; the absence of a dominant patriarch comes to index the absence of the desire for patriarchal codes of honor, order, and power. Hence, the black feminine comes to mark the possibility of another orientation in and toward the social world altogether in *Song of Solomon,* Pilate's unwieldy, unruly household providing the reader with a view of what an alternative domesticity might look like, one centered around invention and the production of pleasure instead of regulation or the maintenance of the current social order.

In contrast to a character like Macon Dead II, who has built his entire life on charging others to live, going from house to house demanding that he be paid on time so that he might continue to amass his fortune as others struggle to live from day to day, Pilate stands out as a fugitive from normative ways of thinking about what counts as honest work or labor worth living into. Much to Milkman's surprise, she is poor and yet unashamed, unkempt and yet willing to comport herself with an indifference that belies her class position. The material wealth that Macon has spent his life pursuing—and, indeed, has trained his son to pursue with similar tenacity—holds no weight for Pilate. This lack of interest in material wealth and its trappings is bodied forth in both her self-presentation and the home she keeps, a home that is largely devoid of saleable

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commodities but fit to burst with laughter, luck, love.[26] She mocks the world that Milkman comes from not out of envy but out of what might be better described as a kind of confusion. Her insight into the restrictive character of a life centrally concerned with accumulation serves to destabilize the appeal of such a lifestyle for both Milkman and the reader. Her every move indexes the possibility of another world.

At no point is the clash between Macon Dead II's hypercapitalist ethos and the lovely chaos of Pilate Dead's life philosophy more palpable than in Macon's eventual plan to rob his sister once he discerns—calling, in that moment of realization, on a long-past skirmish-turned-lethal with an elderly stranger in a cave—that the aforementioned "moss-green sack hung from the ceiling" is actually filled with a dead man's gold. From the outset, the heist appears to be a doomed mission, though it is not without its share of wonder:

> Milkman stared off into the sky for inspiration, and while glancing toward the rooftops of the used-car places, he saw a white peacock poised on the roof of a long low building that served as headquarters for Nelson Buick. He was about to accept the presence of the bird as one of those waking dreams he was subject to whenever indecisiveness was confronted with reality, when Guitar opened his eyes and said "Goddam! Where'd that come from?"
>
> Milkman was relieved. "Must of come from the zoo."
>
> "That raggedy-ass zoo? Ain't nothing in there but two tired monkeys and some snakes."
>
> "Well, where then?"

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> "Beats me."
>
> "Look—she's flying down." Milkman felt again his unrestrained joy at anything that could fly. "Some jive flying, but look at her strut."
>
> "He."
>
> "Huh?"
>
> "He. That's a he. The male is the only one got that tail full of jewelry. Son of a bitch. Look at that." The peacock opened its tail wide. "Let's catch it. Come on, Milk," and Guitar started to run toward the fence. . . .
>
> "How come it can't fly no better than a chicken?" Milkman asked.
>
> "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."
>
> The peacock jumped onto the hood of the Buick and once more spread its tail, sending the flashy Buick into oblivion.[27]

In contradistinction to the failed flight that opens the novel, what Morrison presents here, through the body of the white peacock, is an image of flight that occupies a kind of middle ground, a "jive flying," an airborne strut that conveys pride while also operating as a performance of irreparable limitation. In a symbolic register, the white peacock in this scene enacts a confidence that belies its position in the social world of birds, its weighted, belabored ascension a mere shadow of other birds' capacity for flight. As Guitar so astutely points out in the preceding passage, the peacock is a bird that wants to soar, and tries with all its might to achieve liftoff, but never succeeds.

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In this scene, the peacock operates as an evocative stand-in for any number of male characters the reader encounters throughout *Song of Solomon,* the conflict between its desire for flight—that is, flight as both egress and ascension—and all that weighs it down serving as the grounds for such symbolic slippage. For Milkman and Guitar, mocking the peacock and chasing it—at one point, Milkman even jokes that they should eat it—doubles as a moment of unconscious self-critique, as many of their criticisms of the peacock could just as easily be directed at their own lives. Milkman and Guitar too are figures that try over and over to achieve flight only to fail in one way or another. For Guitar, such freedom is bound up with seeking redress for the extrajudicial killing of African Americans through his work with the Seven Days, a secret society devoted to killing one random white person for every black person unjustly slain. For Milkman, the metaphor is much more direct. Not unlike his father, Milkman is weighed down by both his desire for material wealth as and the various material comforts that he already has available to him, comforts that have helped produce the exact sort of vanity Guitar sees in the peacock. Not unlike Robert Smith, the white peacock is yet another anti-ideal mirror against which Milkman is forced to engage, consciously or otherwise, with the full weight of what holds him back, with how untenable his dreams appear against a world ruled by the law of gravity, the law of graves.

The white peacock is also, in this vein, a representative of the normative white masculinity that Guitar and Milkman desire for themselves. Guitar's joke about catching and eating the peacock seems to support such a reading of this scene. His desire to consume the animal is also his desire to simultaneously mesh with it

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and destroy it, to make it a part of his body, have it pass into and fill him. By the passage's end, the white peacock is all Milkman and Guitar can see, its white tail having sent "the flashy Buick into oblivion." Their desire for what the peacock represents, even as they mock it, blots out all else. The tension implicit in such desire, in the pair's jeering, which is inextricable from both the discomfort and the awe they feel in the presence of such a beautiful creature—think here about Guitar's implicit claim that such a wondrous animal could never have come from their local, underfunded zoo, a zoo that boasts only a couple of monkeys and some snakes, common beasts, nothing worthy of visitation or praise—is illuminating. The pair's resentment for the peacock is also a kind of reverence. Because they cannot touch it, cannot become it, they mock its freedom to move, its capacity for flight. Think here of how the Buick is sent "into oblivion," by the expansive reach of the peacock's tail, how the peacock's beauty obscures the Buick, this ideal commodity, as a site of desire altogether. In lieu of the car, Milkman and Guitar yearn either to consume or denigrate the white peacock, to dominate it. This yearning that is also refusal, hatred, adoration, and envy reflects well the forms of aspirational masculinity that Milkman enacts and embodies throughout the text. At every turn, there is an ongoing struggle between the complexity of what he feels and the narrowness of the world available to him, which makes this performance always seem like an act of desperation or survival tactic. Rather than appear as yet another illusion inspired by the ongoing conflict between "indecisiveness" and "reality" that marks Milkman's young adulthood, the peacock serves as a grand reminder of the young men's joint purpose, the heist that will make it so that they too might be visible, dazzling, valuable enough to send anything else beautiful into oblivion:

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> But the bird had set them up. Instead of continuing the argument about how they would cop, they began to fantasize about what the gold could buy when it became legal tender. Guitar, eschewing his recent asceticism, allowed himself the pleasure of waking up old dreams: what he would buy for his grandmother and her brother, Uncle Billy, the one who had come up from Florida to help raise them all after his father died; the marker he would buy for his father's grave, "pink with lilies carved on it"; then stuff for his brother and sisters, and his sisters' children. Milkman fantasized too, but not for the stationary things Guitar described. Milkman wanted boats, cars, airplanes, and the command of a large crew. He would be whimsical, generous, mysterious with the money. But all the time he was laughing and going on about what he would do and how he planned to live, he was aware of the falseness in his voice. He wanted the money—desperately, he believed—but other than making tracks out of the city, far away from Not Doctor Street, and Sonny's Shop, and Mary's Place, and Hagar, he could not visualize a life that much different from the one he had. New people. New places. Command. That was what he wanted for his life. . . . He screamed and shouted "Wooeeeee!" at Guitar's list, but because his life was not unpleasant and even had a certain amount of luxury in addition to its comfort, he felt off center. He just wanted to beat a path away from his parents' past, which was also their present and which was threatening to become his present as well.[28]

The figure of the anti-ideal-I shows up not in the crashing body of Robert Smith here but in the form of Milkman's parents. During a moment of intense, shared clarity with Guitar about what he would do if he had all the material resources he had ever wanted,

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all Milkman can think of is the possibility of plotting an escape route from the life he has now. Rather than some grand purchase or marker of individual wealth, what Milkman seems to want more than anything else is a trap door, an accessible point of egress that will allow him to avoid the image he sees staring back with startling clarity from the white peacock's inimitable glow: a life marked by material comfort but a lack of meaningful relation.

Still, what more can we make of the white peacock's whiteness? How do we read the clear, chromatic distinction between the animal figure positioned here as a representative of the "jive flying" that characterizes black male social life and its implicit relationship to failure, on the one hand, and the transcendent white masculinity that circumscribes that life and provides a context wherein such failure registers as failure for the two black male characters in the scene, on the other? How does the peacock's whiteness complicate its viability as a symbol for black men's experience of patriarchal masculinity, their straining against it and striving toward it? Here, Frantz Fanon's insight on white gaze and black male experience is instructive: "I arrive slowly in the world; sudden emergences are no longer my habit. I crawl along. The white gaze, the only valid one, is already dissecting me. I am fixed. Once their microtomes are sharpened, the whites objectively cut sections of my reality. I have been betrayed. I sense, I see in this white gaze that it's the arrival not of a new man, but of a new type of man, a new species. A Negro, in fact!"[29] Fanon's recourse to the language of both *validity* and *fixedness* is helpful here and further elucidates the symbolic work of the peacock in this scene. The fixedness that Fanon describes, an immobility produced by the intractable gaze of white civil society, is inextricable from the wonder that Milkman and Guitar experience in this moment, the way that the white pea-

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cock arrests their line of vision, demands their attention, and ultimately spurs them to dream of obtaining wealth unlike anything they have seen before. It is the validity of the white gaze, which is also to say, the seeming inescapability of whiteness *as a primary source of legitimate validation* for Milkman and Guitar, that anchors this scene. Once confronted with the singular white object, the two forget themselves and ultimately get lost in the fantasy of having what, to their minds, whiteness has within it: riches, social access, the capacity to provide for their families.

What would necessarily attend such a reading is an engagement with what it means that the white peacock, even as a metaphorical stand-in for whiteness, cannot fly any "better than a chicken." In this sense, Morrison's white peacock is a signifier that comes with a critique of the signified built right in. From the moment the peacock appears, the notion of whiteness as pure transcendence is already unsettled. The white peacock flies no better than any other bird and is thus a fraught, imperfect site of aspiration. It too is laid low by vanity.

Milkman's experiences with his family throughout *Song of Solomon* reflect this broader obsession with prestige and the wages of whiteness.[30] In lieu of a more nurturing familial experience, what Milkman received instead was an inviolable set of rules about the proper relations between men and the world as an ongoing conflict rooted in property and possession, in domination as a desirable mode of relation, and value as that which is found in human lives only to the extent that those lives can be leveraged for material gain or social status. In Milkman's case, such ways of thinking are legible primarily through the figure of the inheritance. For his entire life, the relationship between his parents, as well as between his father and the other residents of Not Doctor Street, was

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always a hierarchy grounded in the accrual of material goods. Even his parents' marriage was, in a sense, always at its core an attempt by his father to move up in the world, to soar as best he could. The consequences of this weight, as well as this general orientation toward personal worth as an object that can only be attained through market relations, is made manifest in the moment when Milkman is called on by the peacock's presence to indulge in his wildest dreams and can come up with nothing worth telling. Rather than imagine a world made new by access to unlimited capital, Milkman can only praise the vision that his best friend calls forth. This moment doubles as a critique, one might imagine, of Morrison's broader argument in *Song of Solomon* about what a single-minded commitment to the pursuit of material wealth can make of a person.[31]

Thus, when a passerby early on in the novel says of Macon Dead II that "a nigger in business is a terrible thing to see," the criticism is less about Macon himself and more about a relentless critique throughout the novel of material wealth as a useful marker of one's beauty, intellect, or value. For Morrison, there are any number of other ways of thinking about value that have little or nothing to do with monetary gain, approaches that are exemplified in the way that Pilate Dead carries out her everyday life. Indeed, the ongoing conflict between Macon and Pilate can be thought of as a matter not only of personal disagreement between two siblings, with much of the ill will, of course, residing on Macon's side of things, but also of philosophical irreconcilability, a clash of values embodied in their personal (for example, the way that Pilate raises Hagar and Reba versus the way Macon raises Lena, First Corinthians, and Milkman) and professional (Pilate as self-employed purveyor of wine versus Macon as landlord) lives. Milkman's yearning for

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something more, something beyond what he has been raised to see value in, establishes him as a point of intersection between Macon and Pilate. He desires the sort of freedom that Pilate's lifestyle makes possible but is also wedded to the comfort and social cachet of Macon's approach.

For Milkman, the desire to shirk his parents' present is also the desire to forgo the false promise of the nuclear family and upper-middle-class social status in favor of the unknown. As Morrison later makes clear, doing so will require that he go in search of something other than the lifestyle, and the legacy, that he has inherited from Macon. It will require him to seek out new modes of thinking relation beyond what patriarchy promises, something other than birthright or dominion. Rather tragically, Milkman's quest for this sort of freedom, which is ultimately nothing other than freedom from the life his father has chosen, is inextricable from a plan that his father has laid out for him, a plan to steal the gold he believes Pilate has hanging from her ceiling. That this sack of gold turns out be little more than a bag full of human bones is a compelling, perverse turn. That said bones once belonged to Milkman's godfather shifts the entire narrative in a wildly different direction. Now, instead of Milkman plotting a line of flight away from his father's past, he will give all of himself to grasping a fuller picture of it. Rather than seek his own fortune, he will take on a different sort of journey altogether, an odyssey in the name of the Father.

The metonymic relationship between flying and black fatherhood in *Song of Solomon* is an elaborate one for Morrison, a coupling intended to convey a familiar message that might initially ring as

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dangerously close to something like pathology but nonetheless displays radical potential for the way it allows us to read the ways that gender, blackness, and kinship are at work in the text. In a 1977 interview with Mel Watkins, Morrison states, "This book was different. . . . Men are more prominent. They interested me in a way I hadn't thought about before, almost as a species. I used what I knew, what I'd heard. But I had to think of becoming a whole person in masculine terms, so there were craft problems. I couldn't use the metaphors I'd used describing women. I needed something that suggested dominion—a different kind of drive."[32] This line of thinking is further developed later on in the interview:

> That's why flying is the central metaphor in *Song*—the literal taking off and flying into the air, which is everybody's dream. My children used to talk about it all the time—they were amazed when they found they couldn't fly. They took it for granted that all they had to do was jump up and flap their arms. I used it not only in the African sense of whirling dervishes and getting out of one's skin, but also in the majestic sense of a man who goes too far, whose adventures take him far away . . . black men travel, they split, they get on trains, they walk, they move. I used to hear those old men talk about traveling—which is not getting from here to there, it's the process—they even named themselves after trains. It's a part of black life, a positive, majestic thing, but there is a price to pay—the price is children. The fathers may soar, they may triumph, they may leave, but the children know who they are; they remember, half in glory and half in accusation. That is one of the points of *Song:* all the men have left someone, and it is the children who remember it, sing about it, mythologize it, make it a part of their family history.[33]

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What do we make of the seeming paradox that Morrison lays out here? After leading off with the claim that the abundance of male characters in *Song of Solomon* pushed her to deploy an entirely different type of metaphors than she had in her first two novels, *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula,* metaphors implicitly tied to what we might think of, following Morrison, as a certain drive toward *dominion,* Morrison then pivots toward a characterization of the men in her novels as marked by an insatiable wanderlust. Though these dual visions of the male characters in *Song of Solomon* are in no way irreconcilable, they do present a compelling conflict. How does one singularly concerned with escape also live a life driven by the desire for dominion? And what does dominion mean for the specific subset of men whose lives Morrison is committed to exploring, men with very little access to traditional methods of accruing social status or power?

For these men, it appears, flight or, to use Morrison's term, *travel* is the primary means by which to achieve something resembling power or possession. For these ostensibly failed men, men who can never own much of anything, can never quite live into dominance or dominion as a viable mode of relation, travel, and the absence from the home that naturally attends travel, perhaps also becomes a means of asserting control, of offering proof that they *matter,* in every sense of the term. In a related vein, that Morrison frames her concern with black male characterization as a matter of species is a fascinating choice and would appear, on the surface, to reify a certain kind of gender essentialism. What such a reading would necessarily elide, however, is what Morrison's framing of black gender study as *species thinking* elucidates about the undeniable relationship between the practice of taxonomy and what Alexander Weheliye writes about the law's tendency

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to "recognize the humanity of racialized subjects only in the restricted idiom of personhood-as-ownership."[34] If personhood is tethered to ownership, of both one's body and various forms of nonhuman, nonliving property, then what do we call the men whom Morrison cites as her primary inspiration for the men in *Song of Solomon,* men who own little or nothing? How do we understand their personhood, over and against a world that categorically denies it and indeed enforces such denial through everyday forms of violence and surveillance?

The movement that Morrison gives voice to here, the desire to travel, to avoid being seen or held down, avails itself as a potential mode of thinking fugitivity through the pathology of the absent black father, who, as we see from the characterizations of black fathers that abound throughout *Song of Solomon,* is cast as absent even when he is present or is present in forms of orature or spectral matter *even when he is physically gone.* The black men in *Song of Solomon* trouble traditional ways of thinking about the dichotomy of absence and presence and ultimately unsettle prevailing stereotypes about black paternity, including those that appear to animate Morrison's earlier quoted commentary. Even a generous reading of these comments would have to account for the framing of *Song of Solomon* as a text in which "all the men have left someone" and its connection to an antiquated discourse of black fatherhood as a paradox of sorts, a social institution that is in persistent peril and through which many of the other, myriad problems that come to represent the lived experience of blackness in the United States can be traced and ultimately explained. The oft-cited 1965 study *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,* commonly referred to as the "Moynihan Report," is illuminating in this regard:

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> In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well.
>
> There is, presumably, no special reason why a society in which males are dominant in family relationships is to be preferred to a matriarchal arrangement. However, it is clearly a disadvantage for a minority group to be operating on one principle, while the great majority of the population, and the one with the most advantages to begin with, is operating on another. This is the present situation of the Negro. Ours is a society which presumes male leadership in private and public affairs. The arrangements of society facilitate such leadership and reward it. A subculture, such as that of the Negro American, in which this is not the pattern, is placed at a distinct disadvantage.[35]

This excerpt, taken from "The Tangle of Pathology" portion of the report, lays out a number of the document's core principles. Moynihan's argument here certainly includes elements of Morrison's characterization of black men as habitually absent from their children's lives—though she ascribes such absence to a yearning for adventure rather any sort of reaction to structural violence—but, in stark comparison to Morrison, Moynihan's critical aim then lands squarely on the black women who are forced to care for the family units that these particular men leave in their wake.

Though Moynihan is certainly concerned with what he calls "desertion" *as such*—a concern that, it should be noted, is vividly illustrated in passages such as the following: "As a direct result of this high rate of divorce, separation, and desertion, a very large

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percent of Negro families are headed by females. While the percentage of such families among whites has been dropping since 1940, it has been rising among Negroes"—his primary interest lies elsewhere, specifically in the irremediable danger of the matriarchal figure.[36] For Moynihan, black mothers not only represent the foreclosure of the possibility of black inclusion on a broader social scale, hence the "distinct disadvantage" he invokes toward the end of the passage, but are also directly culpable for a much deeper set of interpersonal conflicts between themselves and the black men in their lives. The "crushing burden" that Moynihan describes operates in this passage and beyond as subtext, as yet another explanation for the flight of the black men who serve as the report's central object of concern. There is a legible desire throughout the report to interrogate and ultimately repair what Moynihan deems to be the broken order of things in black households. This desire, one imagines, is linked to a larger concern not only about the collective future of black men specifically but also about the unique threat to prevailing gender norms that the presence of these particular black women present. This pervasive fear is architectonic: the threat of black women as the heads of black American households not only is what holds much of Moynihan's argument together but also, at the level of feeling, seems intended to generate the concern that we see conveyed in the document's title, the concern that necessarily attends any call for national action. The document itself doubles as an extensive performance of white male anxiety over what black families mean for the very notion of family as a stable object, how black families, if left unchecked, might erode the conceptual underpinnings of the nuclear family as a national institution.

For Moynihan, then, the black male subjects of the report are rendered powerless, and ultimately broken, not only by unrelenting

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and largely invisible systems of structural violence but also by the black women closest to them:

> The effect on family functioning and role performance of this historical experience [economic deprivation] is what you might predict. Both as a husband and as a father the Negro male is made to feel inadequate, not because he is unlovable or unaffectionate, lacks intelligence or even a gray flannel suit. But in a society that measures a man by the size of his pay check, he doesn't stand very tall in a comparison with his white counterpart. To this situation he may react with withdrawal, bitterness toward society, aggression both within the family and racial group, self-hatred, or crime. Or he may escape through a number of avenues that help him to lose himself in fantasy or to compensate for his low status through a variety of exploits.[37]

The vision of black men presented in this portion of the Moynihan Report is far afield of what Morrison describes. Still, what remains worthy of note here is Moynihan's gesture toward the psychic toll that the capitalist character of white civil society takes on black men, a toll that Morrison not only accounts for but posits as a central conflict in *Song of Solomon,* though without resorting to the sort of imprecise theorizing on grand display in the Moynihan Report. Morrison sees pride, and even vanity, where Moynihan sees only despair and despondence, men who are unable to *strut,* which is, for him, "the very essence of the male animal."[38] Again, black masculinity appears here as a problem of species, of how to account for these men who are not men, men who are "holes," to use Lewis Gordon's language, and thus not only nonhuman but also devoid of meaningful content.[39] Though critical differences abound, it should be noted that Morrison and Moynihan alike respond to the

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same phenomenon: the despair produced by the promise of a normative masculinity, the promise that is by its very nature unrealizable and especially so for black men like the ones Morrison describes, men who must daily confront the reality of their own social and economic fixity, a fixity that doubles as a kind of disqualification from the province of the properly masculine.

For Moynihan, the crisis of black masculinity must be the primary object of our critical energies. Everything else, from disparities in educational attainment to underemployment, is posited as either a direct cause or result of this phenomenon. Morrison too sees black men's desire for an elsewhere, and the flight from home that is commonly cast as its direct product, as an issue that profoundly affects black social life, and yet, in stark contrast to Moynihan, she posits this leaving as "a positive, majestic thing" rather than as a pervasive social ill.

Placing Moynihan to the side for a moment, what are we to make of such a claim on Morrison's part? How do we reconcile the waves of critical attention devoted to the supposed ubiquity of the black absentee father with Morrison's contention here that fathers' search for another life might be a much more complex affair, one greeted with a certain ambivalence even by their children, who remember them "half in glory and half in accusation"?[40] Morrison's argument that the children of the men in question turn their lives into stories, and myths in particular, once they leave is worth our attention and is echoed in David Marriott's *On Black Men.* Marriott writes,

> Hence the mark that the black father leaves, a mark that is both ineffaceable and irremediable. Typed, in the wider culture, as the cause of, and cure for, black men's "failure," his father's appar-

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> ently lost, and untellable, life is the story that the son must find and narrate if he is to begin to understand how, and why, blackness has come to represent an inheritable fault. . . . "What is wrong with black fathers? What is wrong with black men?": these questions loom over postwar American culture, part of a more pervasive anxiety about the decline of paternal authority, the so-called "crisis" of masculinity in contemporary cultural life. A monumental crisis: for black men, the despair of living knowing that life itself is always in question, interfered with, disrupted.[41]

In Marriott, as in Morrison and Moynihan, the black father appears as a figure of tremendous social import on the national scale. Through the body of the always already absent black father, social anxiety is eased or elevated, policy changes come into being, prisons are built. For Marriott, it is the role of the son to tell the father's story and to use that narrative as a means through which he might navigate a world that hates him just as it hated his father, that calls his father's presence an illusion, his absence an inevitability. The question remains: What becomes of black women when black families, and black social life in a broader sense, are conceived of primarily in these terms? How might we craft a mode of reading and being together in the world that can account for the divergent ways in which white-supremacist patriarchy acts *differently,* though always simultaneously, even and especially under the guise of material benefit, on black men and black women?

On this front, I want to turn to a 1984 conversation between James Baldwin and Audre Lorde held in the pages of *Essence* magazine:

> *JB:* Do you know what happens to a man when he's ashamed of himself when he can't find a job? When his socks stink?

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> When he can't protect anybody? When he can't do anything? Do you know what happens to a man when he can't face his children because he's ashamed of himself? It's not like being a woman . . .
>
> *AL:* No, that's right. Do you know what happens to a woman who gives birth, who puts that child out there and has to go out and hook to feed it? Do you know what happens to a woman who goes crazy and beats her kids across the room because she's so full of frustration and anger? Do you know what that is? Do you know what happens to a lesbian who sees her woman and her child beaten on the street while six other guys are holding her? Do you know what that feels like?[42]

What emerges from the dynamic tension of Baldwin's and Lorde's positions in this passage is a toolbox for rethinking a number of the central conflicts not only in *Song of Solomon* but in Morrison's entire corpus, conflicts staged over gender and energized by the central question of what it means not only to suffer but to suffer solely *because* one is black and not yet dead, because of a black feminine or black masculine identification that is marked as a site of danger in need of regulatory force. What the conversation between Lorde and Baldwin here brings to the fore are the ways in which either position is rendered incommunicable, at least in part, because of the scale at which the particular forms of violence being discussed take place.[43] The kinds of ongoing, structural violation described by both authors stand out from this passage as an impasse that appears too high to get over, too wide to get around. As both their conversation and the repeated inter- and intragender conflicts in *Song of Solomon* make plain, there is a deep-seated anguish here that must be accounted for in a conversation about the tragic in-

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terplay between black social life and antiblack social systems, the need for a more robust language with which to analyze the sorts of interpersonal turmoil that both Lorde and Baldwin describe.

What becomes clear by the interview's end is that Baldwin and Lorde—operating here as representative figures of sorts, though certainly not in any totalizing or comprehensive fashion—do not and perhaps *cannot* fully comprehend each other's struggles at the level of experience, largely because there is a fundamental difference at play in terms of how their respective battles against patriarchy are structured, a difference that requires something other than an uncomplicated vision of black empowerment that would elide gender particularity in the name of racial uplift. What the conversation between Lorde and Baldwin emphasizes, and in its best moments enacts, is an empathy that Moynihan simply cannot fathom, an empathy that materializes as an ongoing engagement with the everyday experiences of black women and black men and ultimately produces a space of radical co-laboring within the conversation itself, an exchange that is something other than and in excess of the violent division Moynihan describes.

Baldwin's invocation of the ways in which predatory capitalism operates in the everyday as a persistent assault on the pride of black men signals a return to the set of questions Morrison implicitly lays out in describing the men who inspired *Song of Solomon*. For the black men who cannot derive their sense of pride from traditional modes of accruing and maintaining wealth, there must be alternative means of producing self-esteem and dignity, modes that, for Morrison, are often linked to movement, changing names, being, in every meaningful sense, untouchable. This tension between black fatherhood and flight, which is at its core a conflict staged over names, the family name, the name of the son who my-

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thologizes the father, renaming him and thus making him his own, is in no place more vivid in *Song of Solomon* than in the text's final movement, during Milkman's journey to Shalimar, the small town where he hopes to unearth the family history that has eluded him up to this point in the novel. Milkman succeeds in this goal, ultimately decrypting an old fable that all the town's children sing en route to coming upon, in a conversation with a local resident by the name of Susan Byrd, the backstory of the charismatic black male figure around whom the entire town, and in some ways the entire text, has been built:

> "Why did you call Solomon a flying African?"
>
> "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. He had a slew of children, all over the place. You may have noticed that everybody around here claims kin to him. Must be over forty families spread in these hills calling themselves Solomon something or other. I guess he must have been hot stuff." She laughed. "But anyway, hot stuff or not, he disappeared and left everybody. Wife, everybody, including some twenty-one children. And they say they all saw him go. The wife saw him and the children saw him. They were all working in the fields. They used to try to grow cotton here. Can you imagine? In these hills? . . . Well, back to this Jake boy. He was supposed to be one of Solomon's original twenty-one—all boys and all of them with the same mother. Jake was the baby. The baby and the wife were next to him when he flew off."

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"When you say 'flew off' you mean he ran away, don't you? Escaped?"

"No, I mean flew. Oh, it 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 on back to wherever it was he came from. There's a big double-headed rock over the valley named for him. It like to killed the woman, the wife. I guess you could say 'wife.' Anyway she's supposed to have screamed out loud for days. And there's a ravine near here they call Ryna's Gulch, and sometimes you can hear this funny sound by it that the wind makes. People say it's the wife, Solomon's wife, crying. Her name was Ryna. They say she screamed and screamed, lost her mind completely. You don't hear about women like that anymore, but there used to be more—the kind of woman that couldn't live without a particular man. And when the man left, they lost their minds, or died or something. Love, I guess. But I always thought it was trying to take care of children by themselves, you know what I mean?"[44]

Here, in Susan Byrd's retelling of an age-old local myth, we hear an echo of Porter's lament earlier in the novel, his desire to be released from the heaviness of love lest it crush him. By the end of her account, Susan Byrd's vision of Solomon's life reads not only as a moment of clarification but as an encapsulation of the novel's larger themes: black men's pride, their desire for flight, and how both complicate and contaminate the possibilities of a more normative vision of black fatherhood. As is the case elsewhere in Morrison's oeuvre, there is a profound empathy for black men in this

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moment from Morrison, an empathy that does not require her to put black women's experiences under erasure.

In this scene of origin, the moment when Solomon is finally unveiled, he is depicted as both singularly elegant and thoroughly delinquent, "hot stuff" to the point that an entire town desires to be associated with him, but ultimately selfish enough to leave everyone he loves behind in the name of self-possession. Not unlike Milkman, Solomon, it would appear, values his own mobility more than he does the loved ones whose invisible labor makes his very life possible. It is this willingness to pursue freedom at all costs that is Milkman's true inheritance from Solomon and Macon and Robert Smith alike, all of whom did not hesitate to put their own desires—whether it was for love or property or an elsewhere they could neither name nor touch—before the direct needs of their families. Ryna, Ruth, Lena, First Corinthians, Hagar, Pilate: all lose their lives in one way or another, either to the grave or to a kind of quiet, internal death, for the sake of the men whose failure to fly—desperate as they might be for an exit, an exhale—constitutes the grounds of their identity. For Morrison, this is the central conflict of the black masculine: this love that feels like heaviness, this sense of always being watched. From this angle, the oft-repeated claim throughout the book that "everybody wants the life of a black man" appears not only as a claim about a social world in which black men are made hypervisible as both objects of sexual desire and threats to the safety of the public at large but also as a gesture toward the inner life of the black men in the novel, black men who feel wanted but never fully known.[45] In *Song of Solomon,* what emerges from such yearning is a tendency toward abandonment and a persistent choosing of certain forms of male kinship (friend-friend, father-son, even stranger-stranger) over relation-

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ships to and with women that might extend beyond the erotic or the extractive.[46]

When Milkman is finally able to walk without limping, we are led to believe that he has been transformed by the pride he feels after the doe hunt, a pride derived from the company and praise of other men.[47] The natural continuation of this metaphor, the moment he learns to fly, is also linked to his relationship with other men in the text, not only Solomon but also Guitar. Juxtaposed against the specter of Pilate's dead body, herself slain at the hands of a man who desired Milkman's life more than he ever cared about hers or that of most other women outside of a certain sense of intraracial possession,[48] Milkman is able to soar, if only to fly "into the killing arms of his brother."[49] Even in this final scene, a moment predicated on the seeming impossibility of a black male kinship bond that does not necessitate some form of violence—either from civil society or from within the bond itself—there is nonetheless the trace of love, the heartbreak that drove Guitar, not unlike Hagar, to want to take Milkman's life once he suspected him of betrayal. For Morrison, the black masculine is composed of all these divergent elements operating in dynamic, dangerous tension. It is this fear and this joy, this pain and this hunger, that anchor the black masculine, though they do not represent its totality. To the very end, these figures are complicated to the point of contradiction. They are ugly—and beautiful too.[50]

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