Black Community

in

Toni Morrison’s

*The Bluest Eye, Sula and Song of Solomon*

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D-Essay

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Abstract

Using the novels, *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*, the purpose of this essay is to examine Toni Morrison’s characters in the setting of the black community with emphasis on gender, participation in society and the class differences which exist within the black collective. All of the characters in the narratives exist in communities which are defined by the racial barriers formed by the surrounding white societies. Due to her concern with the inter-relatedness of race, gender and class as they are lived by the individuals, Morrison gives her characters physical and psychological qualities which enhance their chances for survival and fulfillment, thus leading to the survival of the black community. Through her characters in *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison portrays the black community with reference to blackness and the inner struggles of the individual as well as the class differences and social structures within the collective. It can be concluded that the black community is an important part of today’s society as the contemporary individual must embrace his/her culture and heritage, which is found in the unity of the collective.
Introduction


All the characters in Morrison’s novels exist in communities that are defined by the racial barriers formed by the surrounding white society. These barriers are both topological and psychological. The dominant white society violates, denies and sets the rules for these borders causing black communities to suffer from confusion and anxiety. On the one hand, Morrison’s characters have physical and psychological qualities which enhance their chances for survival and fulfillment, thus leading to the survival of the black community. On the other, just “being black” in her novels does not promote unity within the community as there also exists racialization and class differences within the black collective.

Although all of Morrison’s novels give the narrator’s continuous thoughts concerning “place” and “self”, her earlier works are, according to Oumar Ndondo’s article, *Toni Morrison and her Early Works: In Search of Africa*, more focused on something that she nostalgically calls “village literature” and which “highlight the presence of the African continent” (26). Ndondo further states that although Africa is not actually mentioned in Morrison’s earlier works, there are too many references to the continent to ignore Morrison’s “attempt to reconnect with the experience of her people [and] the African community at large” (27). Morrison’s link with Africa
is prominently displayed as she scrutinizes the village, or communal life in her earlier works and therefore this D-essay, with its focus on setting and the black community, examines the author’s first three novels.

Further, critics argue that while Morrison’s earlier works, *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and *Song of Solomon* are decidedly modernist in theme, plot and method; her later novels represent the postmodern movement of twentieth century literature. All three narratives examine the individual’s consciousness and reality and thus identify a new affiliation to his or her history. This is often accomplished by exploring the same occurrence through different perspectives. Morrison also uses myth, a distinctive modernist tool, in her novels to further entice her characters into a relationship with their past. Whereas modernism is concerned with identity, influence, conviction and harmony, postmodernism deals with diversity, division, politics and pop culture. According to M. Kubitschek, *Toni Morrison: A Critical Companion*, “Postmodernism… [is] central to Toni Morrison’s later fiction. [The qualities of postmodernism] are intimately connected in *Tar Baby, Beloved*, and *Jazz*” (19). Therefore, as Morrison’s novels are classified under two different literary movements of the twentieth century, it is again fitting that this essay focuses on the first three narratives and their shared modernist approach.

This D-essay will thus examine the characters of Morrison’s first three novels, *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and *Song of Solomon* in the setting of the black community with emphasis on their interactions, conflicts with, and participation in society as well as the class differences which threaten the unity within the collective. This paper will also investigate the family as an institution, the African-American way of life and the search for and discovery of self as they are presented in the novels.
The Novels in Brief

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison examines beauty and value from the perspective of the black community and how black society imposes an incongruous white standard on its constituents. Pecola Breedlove is a young African American girl coming of age during the 1940s. She longs to be loved and accepted by her own community as well as in a world which rejects and diminishes the value of the members of her own race and defines beauty according to an Anglo Saxon cultural standard. Pecola’s yearning manifests itself in her tragic aspiration to have blue eyes. The narrative is told from a third person omniscient perspective by a neighbor, Claudia MacTeer, who relates the heartbreaking story of Pecola’s upbringing as well as the community’s responsibility for her ultimate demise. The novel thus causes the reader to reflect upon participation within the black community and the consequences following any deviations from the established cohesiveness of the black society.

*Sula* further investigates the repressive white society’s influence on the black community and examines the corruptive forces which compel the members of the black society to reject and alienate one of their own people. The life of Sula Peace, while growing up in the black community of Medallion in the 1920s, is shaped by her experiences with family and friends. A strong sense of feminine identity is displayed in this independent young woman and when she returns to Medallion as an adult, she is feared and treated as an outcast because of her refusal to conform to the anticipated norms found in black society. Sula’s best friend from childhood, Nel Wright, assumes the traditional role of wife and mother as an adult and yet, risks losing her own identity in the process. Therefore, the focus of *Sula* is the workings and struggles of the internal black society while it simultaneously centers on an in-depth analysis of the marginalized roles of blacks and women within the black community.
*Song of Solomon* is an enchanting and moving narrative depicting the black experience and a quest for black identity. It focuses on the character of Milkman Dead and his inner struggle with his white middle-class image and his African- and Native-American roots. Milkman’s father, Macon, promotes materialistic ideals and Milkman seems to inherit these qualities along with a predisposition to treat those around him badly. In contrast, Milkman’s aunt, Pilate, has a different set of values which include love, affection, respect and loyalty. Her care and nurturing contribute to Milkman’s eventual search for his racial identity. The first part of the novel takes place in the northern community and depicts Milkman’s personal past while the second half of the novel occurs in the southern community and explores his ancestral past. Hence, the novel examines the connection between culture, family, heritage and identity within the traditions and boundaries of the black community.

The Black Community and White Society

In all of Morrison’s novels, the black community is, from one perspective, largely defined by the dominant white society and its standards. Yet, although the boundaries are set by the white society, the black community may subliminally resist those rules. Morrison thus creates a setting, or background, for each of her novels in order to introduce her characters. While the physical setting initially dominates in *Song of Solomon* and *Sula*, Morrison begins *The Bluest Eye* with a psychological setting by using an excerpt from a children’s reader.

Morrison chooses to open *The Bluest Eye* and certain of its other chapters with a reference from the childhood primer Dick and Jane. “Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy” (Morrison, *Bluest 1*). These excerpts from this
well-known American textbook reader serve as a backdrop for the setting for the novel in a number of ways. First, the familiar words from the Dick and Jane story establish the ultimate “whiteness” that defines the lives of members of the black community. Morrison wants the reader to understand that these and other images available to the black society serve to internalize racism by illustrating that to be glad, contented and successful means that one must be a part of white, middle class suburbia. Secondly, Morrison also uses the Dick and Jane citations to expand on the appalling fact that this “cheerful and perfect” white family was an accepted part of the educational learning systems in the US through the mid 1970s when the books were finally removed from the classroom. However, many parents and teachers still remember these books fondly as exceptional learning tools. Finally, the telegraphic sentences serve as a reminder that just as spaces and functional words are omitted, so is the distinctiveness of the black society as it completely submits itself to the white ideal. Furthermore, the novel is divided into the four seasons of Fall, Winter, Spring and Summer, which inform the reader that “to everything there is a season” and that the actions occurring in this narrative are a part of the inevitable cycle of life and the dominate “whiteness” of society which will eventually repeat itself.

Following the initial psychological backdrop of the novel, the reader finds that *The Bluest Eye* takes place in Morrison’s home town of Lorain, Ohio. Lorain is known for its steel mills and shipyards and is located on Lake Erie. In the novel, the black community of Lorain is separated from the upper-class white community, also known as Lake Shore Park, a place where blacks are not permitted, unless they are employed by a white family. This further emphasizes the perspective that the boundaries of black society are set and defined by the dominant white community. Claudia and Frieda MacTeer go in search of Pecola at Lake Shore Park where Pecola’s mother Pauline works for a white family, known as the Fishers. “The lakefront houses
were the loveliest. Garden furniture, ornaments, windows like shiny eyeglasses...[the] sky was always blue” (Morrison, *Bluest* 105). The girls are thus subliminally testing the white geographical boundaries. However, their stay is short-lived as Pauline is furious at Pecola for tipping over a pan of blueberry cobbler, “Crazy fool...my floor, mess...look what you...work...get on out...her words were hotter and darker than the smoking berries and we backed away in dread” (Morrison, *Bluest* 109). As the novel progresses, Morrison shows that there are always devastating consequences when the boundaries of racism are tested.

Unlike the black communities in *Song of Solomon* and *Sula*, Lorain in *The Bluest Eye* is marked by blatant differences in the economic standing of its members. There are middle class families such as the Peals and the characters of Geraldine and her son Louis Junior; the lower-middle class Mr. Henry Washington and the MacTeers; and finally the lower class Breedloves. These differences exert pressure on the members of the black society and its future and are displayed in the attitudes of the people towards one another. When Geraldine arrives home to see Pecola in her house she “saw the dirty torn dress, the plaits sticking out on her head...the cheap soles, the soiled socks...the safety pin holding the hem of the dress up...She had seen this girl all of her life...they were everywhere...Get out, you nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house” (Morrison, *Bluest* 92).

The plight of this black community is further exemplified by social pressures which are inscribed in the characters’ consciousness and reflect white supremacy and the constant inequality that exists. The social pressures include racial tension and the necessity of the black community to know its place. Although these pressures are mainly of a psychological nature, they may be enforced by physical violence. This is shown in *Song of Solomon* as the men listen
to news on the radio of a young Negro man named Emmett Till. For merely whistling at a white woman, he is brutally murdered by white supremacists.

The black character of Pauline is known as Polly in the white Fisher household. She is renamed by the daughter in the Fisher family thereby giving dominant power even to the youngest member of the white society. She is degraded by her white doctor when giving birth as he states, “these here women you don’t have any trouble with. They deliver right away and with no pain. Just like horses” (Morrison, Bluest 125). Further, as Miss Alice and Mrs. Gaines are talking, they realize the constant gender inequality that exists in the black community, “Everybody in the world was in a position to give them orders. White women said, ’Do this.’ White children said, ’Give me that’. White men said, ’Lay down.’ The only people they need not take orders from were black children and each other” (Morrison, Bluest 138).

According to Cynthia Davis’ essay, Self, Society and Myth in Toni Morrison’s Fiction, “All of Morrison’s characters exist in a world defined by its blackness and by the surrounding white society that both violates and denies it” (Davis 27). The setting for Sula is a small town in Ohio, located on a hillside known as “Bottom”. Here again is evidence of the oppressive white society manipulating and mistreating the black community as a white slave owner promises his slave fertile “bottom” land as well as his freedom. However, the slave is deceived into believing that the land on the hillside is “rich and fertile...the bottom of heaven [and is] the best land there is” (Morrison, Sula 5). The white community establishes itself in the rich and fertile valley while the black community is forced to live on the boundary, or margin, of the white society. Nevertheless, and despite this “nigger joke” (Morrison, Sula 4), the black community identifies with the designated area, which leads to their acceptance of and consent to live in a degraded situation, “The black people watching her [dancing] would laugh and rub their knees, and it would be easy
for the valley men to hear the laughter and not notice the adult pain that rested somewhere under
the eyelids, somewhere under their head rags and soft felt hats, somewhere in the palm of the
hand somewhere behind the frayed lapels, somewhere in the sinew’s curve” (Morrison, *Sula* 4).
Morrison baits the reader with binary opposites as she continues to play with the geographical
location of “Bottom” being the hillside area instead of the lower fertile valley; “Bottom” as the
less advantageous place to live both for social and economic reasons and yet, which becomes an
attractive area for the white community in the 1960s as ironically; the community of “Bottom” is
turned into the Medallion City Golf Course which is not located on the flat valley, but rather on a
hilly area of land where “the soil slid down and …the wind lingered” (Morrison, *Sula* 5). Finally,
Bottom is not a recognized municipality in itself, but has boundaries which are defined by the
white society of Medallion and according to Morrison, “it wasn’t a town anyway: just a
neighborhood” (Morrison, *Sula* 4).

Nel, lifelong friend of Sula, chooses the role of wife and mother and remains true to her
hometown and her roots while accepting her status in society. These social rules were the
accepted values infused from childhood where she “sat on the steps of her back porch
surrounded by the high silence of her mother’s incredibly orderly house…waiting for [her] fiery
prince” (Morrison, *Sula* 51). However, her fiancé Jude also attempts to attain the social role of
family breadwinner and lines up for a job on the New River Road. “It was after he stood in lines
for six days a running and saw the gang boss pick out thin-armed white boys from the Virginia
hills and the bull-necked Greeks and Italians and heard over and over ‘Nothing else today. Come
back tomorrow,’ that he got the message” (Morrison, *Sula* 82). Jude realized that not only was
his opportunity of employment as well as his hopes and dreams in the hands of the dominant
white employer, but also that his masculine identity was connected to his work situation and
therefore tensions and frustration arose which eventually led to him pressuring Nel into “settling down”.

In *Song of Solomon*, the reader is absorbed into the black community, an entity unto itself, but yet never far removed from the white world. The first pages of the novel describe “Not Doctor Street” and “No Mercy Hospital”. These names are used within the African-American community but are unofficial and not recognized by the white city rulers who instead identify them as Mains Avenue and Mercy Hospital. This “hidden” or underlying resistance is based on a fear resulting from a history of the negative effects of racism. Morrison explains in her speech delivered at Howard University on March 2, 1995, that racism may come in different forms and that it “can only reproduce the environment that supports its own health: [which include] fear [and] denial” (Morrison, 1995). Thus, racism is not entirely to be blamed on those who oppress, but also on those who are oppressed. In order to understand how this hegemony functions, one must examine the meaning of racial formation and its impact on racial identity.

According to Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s, *Racial Formation in the United States*, there are three different interpretations of race. They include scientific, religious, and political perspectives. Racial formation is the process by which the above interpretations stipulate the significance and composition of racial categories. The racial category of “black” evolved with the intensification of racial slavery. With slavery, a perception emerged which formed racial identities for both slaves and colonists. Slaves found themselves in a hierarchical system under the command of the colonists. As Elijah Anderson points out in his article, *The Emerging Philadelphia African American Class Structure*, “Along with slavery…came a white supremacist ideology that defined black people as less than human, as genetically inferior to the country’s majority. Even after emancipation, this ideology persisted, all but negating the prospect of
equality between the races” (55). Milkman Dead, in *Song of Solomon*, has a family name which is given to them by a “drunken Yankee in the Union Army…who couldn’t have cared less” (Morrison, *Song* 18). By giving the family a new name, the white society denies them their black culture and slave origins and thus, by isolating their individualism, destroys their ethnic and spiritual identities. The name is accepted with resignation but also signifies the attitude of the black middle class towards slavery by giving them the opportunity to “wipe out the past” (Morrison, *Song* 54). This is an example of the white society wielding authority over the submissive and consenting black community.

In fact, the group, or collectivity is the basis for *Song of Solomon* as there is no main character in the text. Although Milkman has a strong role in the novel, Pilate, as well as Macon among others, can also be seen as main characters. These characters acquire their individuality through their interrelation with each other. Morrison’s approach is that the entire community cannot be represented by any single character. The author uses group dialogue to represent the social collectivity and to communicate its values. Porter, an intoxicated man in *Song of Solomon*, is encouraged by a group to express his emotions. Later in the novel, Morrison uses group dialogue again as a circle of men at the General Store are angry concerning their rejected attempts at hospitality and verbally assault Milkman. This leads to a bloody scuffle.

**Dealing with Social Pressures in the Black Community**

In all three novels, social pressures lead to frustration. Porter, as mentioned in the above example, exposes the average daily living conditions of the black community. His drunkenness expresses an intense frustration in the form of an insane need to be accepted and loved (Morrison, *Song* 26). Porter’s character is an expression of the general deterioration and the self-
destructive atonement of the whole community. Porter, while sitting on the attic window of his house, is not ridiculed for his behavior by his friends, but rather good-naturedly accepted as if this type of behavior was the norm. Instead of being condemned, his outward display of emotion and frustration is shared and understood by the group.

Eva, in *Sula*, is frustrated by her son’s drug addiction. Plum adhered to the social expectations of his country and served in the war. However, upon returning home, his life revolved around drugs and alcohol, presumably to dull the pain of his horrific experiences. Although Eva loves her son, she is at a loss as to how to quiet his “demons” and therefore douses him in kerosene and sets fire to him. Nevertheless, the black community does not condemn Eva for this transgression, nor for her daughter Hannah’s death, despite the ambivalent circumstances surrounding it.

Morrison also shows that social pressures lead to internal frustrations in *The Bluest Eye* as Pauline becomes disillusioned with her married life with Cholly, as well as being mother to Sammy and Pecola. Her frustration with her black life is assuaged only when she visits the picture shows and can lose herself in her white fantasies. The tension that she feels gives her strength to change and “it was her good fortune to find a permanent job in the home of a well-to-do family whose members were affectionate, appreciative and generous. She looked at their houses, smelled their linens, touched their silk draperies, and loved all of it” (Morrison, *Bluest* 127). Her transformation is complete when her name is changed to Polly.

The characters in Morrison’s novels, then, reach their fullest potential and development within the boundaries of the community. In contrast with European-American literature, where characters are made heroes as they distance themselves from society because of their ideas or
innovations, the characters in African-American literature are made distinct because of their
determination and contribution within their society (Mbalia 90). Thus, the characters’ survival
depends upon them existing within the boundaries of the community. While there is some
criticism concerning this theory surrounding the character of Sula who is said to have achieved
her individuality outside the community, her adult identity is actually an effect of her childhood
upbringing and experiences in the black society. Her return to Bottom and her “roots” shows her
ultimate need for a little control in an otherwise racist world.

Physical Demarcations

While there is no main character in Song of Solomon, the members of the collectivity are
highly unique individuals. By giving her characters different physical and psychological features,
Morrison defines blackism, which is the racialization and class difference within the black
community. Paradoxically, these characteristics also contribute to the foundation of the survival
of the black community in that the interpretations or misinterpretations of these characteristics
affect the characters’ role in society and their perceptions of self. Blackness, birthmarks, and
other physical demarcations, while being symbols of individuality and exclusion, are used by the
author to symbolize the participation of her characters on a deeper communal and racial level.
Pilate is born without a navel. She delivers herself at birth and has no living mother, no tie to her
past and is not accepted by her community. This woman is an outsider and people reject her as
“something God never made” (Morrison, Song 72). At the same time, she is an individual who
has had to start with nothing. She “threw away every assumption she learned and began at zero”
(Morrison, Song 149). Because Pilate is not dependent on anyone, she is psychologically
portrayed as a strong, self-invented black woman. Physically, Pilate represents the prototypical
African woman; she holds herself tall and has black skin and wine-colored lips. Macon remarks, “If you ever doubt we [were] from Africa, look at Pilate” (Morrison, *Song* 54). Pilate, her daughter Reba and granddaughter Hagar live in an area of town called Southside. This is quite appropriate, as she is Milkman’s first connection to his southern origins. One could say that she is Milkman’s guide, or “pilot” in his search for his legacy. Macon, as the representative of “Northern” materialism, tells Milkman “Pilate can’t teach you a thing you can use in this world. Maybe the next, but not this one” (Morrison, *Song* 55). At the same time, it is Pilate in all her blackness that encourages Milkman to drop his father’s white ideals and adopt his true black heritage.

In the community’s attempts to “define” Sula upon her return, she is seen as evil, “The presence of evil was something to be first recognized, then dealt with, survived, outwitted, triumphed over. Their evidence against Sula was contrived, but their conclusions about her were not” (Morrison, *Sula* 118). Sula’s presence, or role, in the community is defined by society’s perspective concerning her birthmark, which is initially described as “a stemmed rose [which gave] her otherwise plain face a broken excitement” (Morrison, *Sula* 52). The girl is seen as having a strange exterior beauty, but with an unpredictable and vivacious core, just as a rose is beautiful to the eye, but can cause pain and unpleasantness to the one who touches its stem. As Sula’s character evolves into an independent, confident and sexual woman, so has her birthmark become darker and is described as Hannah’s ashes, symbolizing suicide and death, as well as a copperhead, bringing to mind the snake and sin associated with the Garden of Eden. Morrison, however, credits Sula with the virtue and integrity of remaining true to herself and her desires and ambitions. Further, her lack of falseness, coupled with the independence of her character is in direct contrast with the community’s sense of pettiness and dependence and is what causes
them to hate her and see her as an outsider. While physically in the community, Sula refuses to adhere to the norms and conventionality of its members, such as marriage and childbirth.

The character of Shadrach, in Morrison’s *Sula*, has not been given a physical demarcation, but rather a mental one. Shadrach, saved from the biblical “fiery furnace” survives World War I and returns to Bottom with severe headaches, hallucinations concerning the “monstrosity” of his hands, and with no sense of identity, “Twenty-two years old, weak, hot, frightened, not daring to acknowledge the fact that he didn’t know who or where he was” (Morrison, *Sula* 12). Out of his own horrifying experiences with death, Shadrack cares enough about the people in his community to institute National Suicide Day, in order that they need not be anxious about death, but rather, have the chance to embrace it once a year. The community accepts this eccentric man for his role in society and even “stopped remarking on the holiday because they had absorbed it into their thoughts, into their language, into their lives” (Morrison, *Sula* 15). Thus, Morrison uses the “mark” of insanity and eccentricity of the character of Shadrach to bring a deeper understanding of the fear of death to the black community and therefore enhance its survival.

Another type of physical demarcation is that which is caused by self-mutilation. In contrast with deformity, such as a birthmark, or deficiency, as will be noted below in the case of Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*, self-mutilation is the character’s confrontation with society’s repressive social demands. Susan Willis, in her article *Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison*, explains that it is a means of escaping the societal forces of “white domination” and a method of reaching freedom. She states that “self-mutilation brings about the spontaneous redefinition of the individual, not as a alienated cripple – as would be in the case of the bourgeois society – but as a new and whole person, occupying a radically different social space” (Willis
Both Sula and Eva Peace exhibit this violence towards self and in doing so, strengthen their status in the black community. Sula, when threatened by the white domination of four teenage boys, responds by using a knife and cutting off the top of her finger in a display corresponding to the act of male castration. This act shows her repudiation of white dominance and refusal to accept the lower status of a black woman. Although the details surrounding Eva Peace’ loss of her leg are not quite conclusive, the narrator hints that this act of self-mutilation was done in order to obtain insurance money which would enable the woman to provide for her children. She confronts the “white laws” of society and uses them to her own benefit and therefore achieves her own financial independence. Eva, the biblical mother figure, is seen as “creator and sovereign” and her status in society in heightened because of her sacrifice, “and adults, standing or sitting, had to look down at her. But they didn’t know it. They all had the impression that they were looking up at her, up into the open distances of her eyes, up to the soft black of her nostrils and up to the crest of her chin” (Morrison, *Sula* 31). Although Eva’s role is one of dominance in the black community, she is not a threat, but instead is admired.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Pauline Breedlove has a limp, caused by a rusty nail which penetrated her foot when she was a child. The nail, which biblically symbolizes sins and rebirth, causes her a physical disability which lays the foundation for her perception of self as a child. “This deformity explained for her many things that would have been otherwise incomprehensible: why she…had no nickname: why…nobody teased her: why she never felt at home anywhere, or that she belonged anyplace” (Morrison, *Bluest* 111). Pauline’s constant struggle with her role in society, and her eventual search for physical beauty, leads her through many changes which impact the survival of the culture of the black community. While other women conform to the white standard of beauty and straighten their hair, Pauline does not; nor does she attempt to
change her dialect to the conventional way of the “white” vernacular. Although she “merely wanted other women to cast favorable glances her way” (Morrison, *Bluest* 118), she realizes, with the loss of her two front teeth, that she herself will never achieve physical beauty and instead, experiences a “rebirth” in her identity. She finds a new status in the community “and her process of becoming was like most of ours” (Morrison, *Bluest* 126) which involved great virtues and high morals. Thus, Pauline becomes representative of the black feminine community by her speech and actions, “Holding Cholly as a model of sin and failure, she bore him like a crown of thorns, and her children like a cross” (Morrison, *Bluest* 127). This rebirth, caused by the “rusty nail” and associated with “thorns” and the “cross”, could seemingly be seen as Pauline’s ultimate assimilation into the community, however, Morrison takes the character a step further as she finds work with a wealthy white family. This employment, coupled with her enjoyment of watching “white” movies, create fantasies of beauty that can only be found in the white ideal. Pauline again goes through a metamorphosis where she despises the blackness and everything about that community. Her “cross” is actually her skin color and the limitations of being a black woman.

Pecola Breedlove is the central figure in *The Bluest Eye*. Her physical deformity is her “ugliness”, a perception that is shared by the community and that forms the girl’s own identity. She is a “‘winged, but grounded bird’ and is always the victim, whether it be schoolboys that are taunting her “Black e mo”, the verbal abuse of her mother, the tormenting by Junior, or Geraldine insulting her by calling her “black”. Pecola does not fight back. Growing up in a world where the predominant message is the white ideal of Shirley Temple beauty, Pecola is “a little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes” (Morrison, *Bluest* 176). Blue eyes are synonymous with “whiteness” and Morrison’s character
believes that the quality of “love” is found within the white society. Her presumption of this is constantly being reinforced because of the lack of love that she receives from her own community. This lack of acceptance causes her to associate “ugliness” with “blackness” and she therefore mistakenly believes that she could “breed love” to her own unborn baby if only her eyes were blue.

Blackness as Color

Morrison uses different shades of “blackness” in all her characters to explain diverse class differences within the black community and the opportunities afforded those with lighter skin versus those with darker skin. While this topic will be discussed in detail later on in this paper, it is sufficient to note here that Morrison even associates superior education and class with lighter skin in the character of the paradoxical Soaphead Church, a “cinnamon-eyed West Indian with lightly browned skin” (Morrison, *Bluest* 167). Soaphead Church comes from a well-educated and powerful family of mixed blood who purposely “married ‘up’, lightening the family complexion and thinning out the family features” (Morrison, *Bluest* 168). The Church family demarcation is actually their obsession with “whiteness”. Whiteness, to Church, is synonymous with cleanliness, which is even the case concerning *The Bluest Eye* characters Pauline Breedlove and Geraldine who strive to keep everything in their lives as neat and spotless as possible. Being “a very clean old man”, he is repulsed by dirt and human physicality, and considers himself to be superior because of his mixed blood as well as because of his relationship with God. The character is a paradox as he works with people, and yet hates them; he says that he knows God, and yet has no spiritual calling; and finally, he believes that he has every right to be corrupt. Although the people of the community do not trust him, they still find “their way to
his door” where he counsels them concerning “dread”. Thus, the character of Soaphead Church with his light skin and Anglican features causes the reader to correlate the qualities of education, higher standing and cleanliness with whiteness, despite the extreme negativism and falseness that surround him.

While Sula is described as having “heavy brown” skin color, Nel is the color of “wet sandpaper – just dark enough to escape the blows of the pitch-black truebloods and the contempt of old women who worried about such things as bad blood mixtures and knew that the origins of a mule and a mulatto were one in the same” (Morrison, Sula 52). Morrison shows, in her description of Nel, how the different shades of black affect the community. Whereas those with lighter skin are seen as having a better status, the author gives credit to those with darker skin as “truebloods”. Morrison means that acceptance and tolerance should be the foundation of relationships and shows this through the friendship that is formed between the two girls, despite their differences in skin color. The participation and interaction of these characters on a deeper level is a basis for the survival of the black community.

Nel’s mother, Helene Wright, is aware of the differences in color in the black society and although she doesn’t want her daughter to be as light-skinned as she is, she urges her daughter to “pull her nose” in order that it would grow more narrow. Although Helene grew up in New Orleans, she escaped the segregation of the area and married the right (Wright) man and established a good life for herself and her family in Medallion. She is forced to return to New Orleans when her grandmother is taken ill and she brings ten-year-old Nel with her. Throughout her trip to the South, she is continuously reminded of her lower-class status as a black person when she is removed, for example, from the train’s White Only car and when she is not permitted to use the restrooms. Morrison uses these illustrations to explain the predicament of
the black community and the treatment they receive, depending upon the society and setting they find themselves a part of. Helene’s “lighter” color afforded her a higher status when in the black community, but after having crossed the boundaries into the white society, even her long brown dress couldn’t “cover” her blackness and she was scorned and humiliated and “all the old vulnerabilities, all the old fears of being somehow flawed gathered in her stomach and made her hands tremble” (Morrison, *Sula* 20).

Morrison also gives different grades of “blackness” in skin color to her characters in *Song of Solomon*. Milkman’s family, with the exception of his father, is fairly light-skinned while Pilate’s family is a darker black. The grades of darkness and lightness in skin pigment lead even here, at least in part, to class differences within the black community. Milkman’s grandfather, on his mother’s side, was a light skinned black and was part of the more genteel class with greater privileges. Milkman’s sisters, Lena and Corinthians, are light skinned like their mother, Ruth. Even the name of “Milkman” indicates a black identity “whitened”.

As the white society dominates the black, “white” is considered the norm and black is considered unclean. Hagar stares into the mirror, the white standard of beauty, and says “no wonder”. The mirror is revealing her unclean “self” and a less than perfect image. To keep Milkman as her boyfriend, Hagar thinks that she must make herself appear more perfect and less black. “I look like a groundhog, where’s the comb?” (Morrison, *Song* 309). Hagar immerses herself in the white images of beauty as she takes a bath, goes to the beauty shop, and buys new clothes in order to be loved by Milkman. One can draw parallels between Hagar’s low self-confidence and her love for Milkman by comparing the novel and the biblical Song of Solomon. Hagar’s shame concerning her appearance is found in Song of Solomon 1:6, “look not upon me, because I am black”. Milkman is her lover and his Native American ancestry, his hair, his eyes,
and even his name are also described in Song of Solomon 5:10-12, “My beloved is…the chiefest among ten thousand…his locks are wavy and as black as a raven…his eyes are as the eyes of doves by the rivers of waters, washed with milk”.

While Morrison makes the reader aware of the grades of blackness and how they affect the characters, she also, via the biblical reference to Song of Solomon, implies the beauty of the race. Song of Solomon 1:5, states, “I am black, but comely.” Milkman meets the beautiful and sensuous woman Sweet in Shalimar and he “soaped and rubber her until her skin squeaked and glistened like onyx” (Morrison, Song 285). According to Malin La von Walther, Morrison “redefines female beauty by demanding that it be grounded in racial identity. Blacks must love and desire racially authentic beauty rather than imitating other races’ forms of beauty. To do anything less is to deny oneself” (Walther 782).

“And the children might know their names…”

Besides the physical features of the characters in Sula, The Bluest Eye and Song of Solomon, the people in the novels display depth through true psychological characteristics. There are individual characteristics, such as names and personality, and characteristics shared by the entire black collectivity, such as family dynamics, healing, storytelling, hate, and their African American legacy which are interesting to note when examining the black community.

Names, which play an important role in all of Morrison’s novels, are individual and psychological characteristics, causing the reader to draw conclusions about the characters. In a similar manner, according to Melville Herskovits, in The Myth of the Negro Past, names are of great importance in the traditional societies of West Africa. They are identified with the individual’s essence and may change with time depending on growth and other occurrences.
African names provide a link with the African past and were often used by American slaves (191). Sula, for example, is short for Nkusula, a greeting in African folklore. The Bible, a strong influence on black people, is Morrison’s source for many of the names in *Song of Solomon* such as Hagar, Ruth, Corinthians and Magdalena. However, the Bible is also rendered as a “white book” and adopting names from the Book has often been distorted throughout history, as shown with Pilate’s name. The name of Pilate is associated with Jesus’ death, but, in contrast, with Milkman’s redemption. “This is the reason for all the misnaming; a whole group of people have been denied the right to create a recognizable public self – as individuals or as a community” (Davis 31). Pilate’s name is written on a paper and enclosed in a small box which she hangs from her ear. The importance and positioning of her name is not only to strengthen her own self identity, but serves as a link to her legacy.

Milkman receives his nickname after a man witnesses the young boy at his mother’s breast. Because Milkman has not lost his proper name and his heritage, he is unable to form meaningful ties with his family and his community. As he visits Montour County and comes in contact with “his own people”, the nickname Milkman is forgotten as he is better known as “Macon Dead’s son”. Later, in order to become alive, or “un-Dead,” Milkman must regain “the name that was real”. He comes to understand that “names had meaning…When you know your name, you should hang on to it, for unless it is noted down and remembered, it will die when you do” (Morrison, *Song* 329). Milkman returns from the south and considers the different names of the men in Shalimar, “Their names. Names they got from yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes, weaknesses. Names that bore witness” (Morrison, *Song* 330).

Names, as stated above, are used by the author to show the characteristics and function of the individual. Out of the many unusual names in *Sula*, one notes with special emphasis the name
Ajax, which refers to cleanliness. Ajax, the cleaning disinfectant owned by the Colgate-Palmolive Company, is known for removing spots. Sula falls in love with Ajax and this is her cleansing from the community surrounding her. Society has seen her as an evil enigma: the outcast who vies the rules of the community. When she finally falls in love, she is following in the footsteps of the other women and therefore regains some of her standing. As she experiences love, Sula feels pure and clean. When Ajax leaves her, her status is returned to one of alienation. Sula Peace doesn’t find her own “peace” until her deathbed.

Further are the three “Deweys” who come to live with Eva Peace. These three boys come from different families and have different physical characteristics but, in spite of their real names, Eva “classifies” them and renames them the “Deweys”. Despite their obvious differences, their teacher “could not tell them from one another…they spoke with one voice [and] thought with one mind” (Morrison, Sula 39). Their individuality is lost as they become part of a collective identity, showing their complete assimilation into the black society.

Names are significant in The Bluest Eye because they represent the state of the black society. Morrison uses irony in the name “Breedlove” because the community of Lorrain does not “breed love”, but rather sows the seeds of hatred of self and racialization. The dominating motion picture industry is an ever-present reminder of the white ideal of loveliness and when Claudia and Frieda are addressed as “Greta Garbo” and “Ginger Rogers”, it reinforces unattainable white beauty. Further, Maureen confuses Pecola’s name with Peola in the movie Imitation of Life concerning a woman who is black, but pretends that she is white. The implication here is that all black women find beauty in the white ideal. Lastly, Soaphead Church, named for his “tight curly hair…pomaded with soap lather” and his spiritual affiliation with Supreme Being, is a metaphor for cleanliness and purity and a symbol of the “white” people’s
God and the “perversions of a world driven by race as a determinant of love” (Beaulieu, 82). As stated earlier, Soaphead’s family, despite their attempts to “lighten” their skin through intermarriage, their adoration of the words of colonial powers, and their loathing of their own African roots, can never attain “whiteness” and therefore are seen as perverted and repulsive. Soaphead sees himself equal with God and understands Pecola’s wish of “breeding love” and he is a product of inbreeding. Morrison shows, through the character of Soaphead, that obsession with race and color distorts the power of real love.

Survival and Staying Intact in the Black Community

Self-awareness, a strong personality and being able to relate to oneself and others in both white and black communities are the psychological keys for the survival of the black community. As stated previously, the characters acquire their individuality through their interrelation with each other. “In Morrison’s fictions, identity is always provisional; there can be no isolated ego striving to define itself as separate from community…Individual characters are inevitably formed by social constructions” (Rigney 55). As previously stated, the character of Eva in Sula acquires her respected position in society of mother and monarch through her interrelationship with both the white and black communities. The above quote also applies to the character of Pilate in Song of Solomon, previously described as a strong and independent woman, as she moves “just barely within the boundaries of the elaborately socialized world of black people” (Morrison, Song 149). She has the ability to adapt to any situation in which she finds herself. When good friends Milkman and Guitar are arrested, Pilate performs her “Aunt Jemima act” to help them get them both released. Milkman realizes that “she was both adept at it and willing to do it – for him”
Ranström

(Morrison, *Song* 209). Pilate’s ability to relate to others is also shown as Ruth visits Pilate because “she needed Pilate’s calm view, her honesty and equilibrium” (Morrison, *Song* 135).

As stated above, the black community shares a number of basic psychological features in all three novels. These characteristics are evident through the family dynamics and the basic fundamental functions of song, healing, hate, and heritage for Morrison’s African American characters. It is difficult to separate and examine these characteristics as they continuously connect to each other and thus, are interdependent.

**Family**

In *Song of Solomon*, the reader is introduced to the two contrasting families of Macon Dead and Pilate. However, if one is to examine the family as an institution, one should look at the roles of men, women and children in the black community. The epigraph to *Song of Solomon* states, “The fathers may soar, And the children may know their names”. There is no mention of the women – wives – mothers in this epigraph who are left to teach the children their names as the fathers fly away. The women are left to shoulder the responsibilities of family to make sure that traditions and culture continue to be furthered through future generations. The woman’s role as storyteller is depicted in Pilate, as she encourages Milkman’s curiosity in his African roots. Pilate instills a past in her children while Macon removes the black identities of his children. When Macon, the father figure, relates stories to Milkman, they are negative and self-serving. It is this loss of black selfhood that starts Milkman on his journey to find his black heritage. Besides being storytellers, the women are given the roles of caretakers and nurturers as exemplified in the responsibility Pilate shows for her nephew, Milkman, when she “had told him stories, sang him songs, fed him bananas and cornbread, and on the first cold day of the year, hot
nut soup” (Morrison, *Song* 210). Thus, Pilate gives nourishment to Milkman, both physically with food and psychologically, with information about his black legacy. Milkman is also provided with “white” nourishment as he is breastfed by his mother Ruth. Unfortunately, Milkman is in greater need of psychological sustenance which would include his black heritage. Finally, when discussing the roles of women in the black family, an important role is that of the older woman, or grandmother. She is the middle of her family and the hub of the community. She represents the past, as a type of Earth Mother who imparts feminine spiritual wisdom and embodies the mystical, the ancient, and the traditional. According to John Mbiti, “the traditional concept of family, according to the African peoples, is the one that includes the living, those yet to be born and the departed” (qtd in Holloway and Demetrakopolous 161). The older woman, or ancestor figure, is portrayed in *Song of Solomon* by both the characters of Pilate and Circe, Milkman’s helper in Part II. The role of the ancestor figure will be discussed in greater detail further on in this essay.

Singing, Healing, and Magic

The black community stays intact and healthy through song, healing, conjuring, storytelling and laughter. Black folk songs draw on history and give voice to decades of struggles and suffering. Poland, in *The Bluest Eye*, shows her desires for a better life by singing the blues:

I got blues in my mealbarrel

I got blues up on the shelf

I got blues in my mealbarrel

Blues up on the shelf
Blues in my bedroom

‘Cause I’m sleepin’ by myself  
(Morrison, Bluest 50)

The song, *O Sugarman*, weaving its way through the text of *Song of Solomon*, depicts the heart of the black community in its longing for freedom. The reader is introduced to this song, and the theme of flight is set for the novel, as Pilate sings the folk song at Milkman’s birth. *O Sugarman* is the song which Milkman first hears as a “meaningless rhyme” that holds the secret of his ancestry and his obsession with flight. “It is through song that the children receive the archetypal imagery of their race, and it matters not whether a loving mother or a rejecting mother sings these songs, so long as the children hear them” (Holloway and Demetrakopolous 109). Macon’s household is without song, but as he hears Pilate sing, he feels “himself softening under the weight of the memory and the music” (Morrison, *Song* 30). Guitar’s yearning for the black traditions of song is also evidenced as he longs to play the blues. In *Sula*, the black community is drawn together by their fate of being situated on the hillsides and strive for survival by using music and the lightheartedness that it brings, the “people in the valley houses could hear singing sometimes, banjos sometimes [and they might see] a dark woman in a flowered dress doing a bit of cakewalk, a bit of black bottom, a bit of ‘messing around’ to the lively notes of a mouth organ (Morrison, *Sula* 4).

Other fundamental functions within the black community are healing and conjuring which are a significant part of all of Morrison’s novels. Claudia, the narrator of *The Bluest Eye*, is nine years old when she falls ill and is forced to bed by her mother. The forlorn figure is comforted by the caring of her mother’s “large and rough hands” as she spreads Vick’s salve on Claudia’s body and even makes her swallow the liniment. Morrison’s use of Vick’s salve illustrates an interesting point: Vick’s, a company dating back to the late 1800s, was a medicine
against croup and pneumonia, and its menthol aroma effectively cleared the bronchial tubes when inhaled. The prominent magazine ad for Vick’s in the late 1940s, when *The Bluest Eye* is set, featured a blond, blue-eyed little girl with red rosy cheeks and further reinforces the “white” image for health and beauty at a time in history when blacks struggled with their identity. Further, although this product is composed of, among other ingredients, “oil of juniper tar from Bedouin haunts of North Africa”, the instructions on the package specifically state that this product is not to be consumed, but rather to be externally applied. Claudia’s mother, however, over exaggerates the “white” guidelines regarding the “black” liniment, and becomes Morrison’s anagram “slave” to this salve by forcing Claudia to ingest the ointment, therefore compelling the girl to consume the “white ideal” of blond, blue-eyed beauty.

Circe, the older black woman mentioned above in *Song of Solomon*, is the healer and provider of the truths of Milkman’s past. Circe introduces Milkman to the legacy of his Native-American roots as she tells him about his grandmother, an Indian named Sing. Milkman struggles with the mystery of how to reconcile the old woman’s wrinkled face and the fact that she “had to be dead [with the fact that] out of the toothless mouth came the strong, mellifluent voice of a twenty-year-old girl” (Morrison, *Song* 240). Further, Pilate’s methods of healing and conjuring place a special emphasis on physical and spiritual needs. Pilate gives Ruth a greenish-gray powder to help “reinstate [Ruth and Macon’s] sex lives (Morrison, *Song* 131) and later she also scares Macon from trying to abort Ruth’s child by placing a male doll with a chicken bone between its legs in his chair. Although he eventually succeeds in burning it, Macon has learned to leave Ruth alone. These incidents show the importance of healing and conjuring as a part of the black community, as Morrison states, “I wanted to use black folklore, the magic and
superstitious part of it. Black people believe in magic…It’s part of our heritage (qtd in Watkins 50).

According to Eugene Genovese in his book, *Roll, Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, the Conjurer “helped build an inner and autonomous black world for his brothers and sisters” (Genovese 222). Ajax’ mother, in *Sula*, was “an evil conjure woman [who] knew about the weather, omens, the living, the dead, dreams and illnesses and…was stubborn in her pursuits of the occult” (Morrison, *Sula* 126). She uses a combination of “plants, hair, underclothing, fingernail pairings, white hens, blood, camphor, pictures, kerosene and footstep dust” to aid the members of the society from all that ails them, both physically and psychologically. Thus, the black community is brought together through their unified belief in the “supernatural”.

**Storytelling and Laughter**

Another influential function of the collectivity is storytelling. Tales are related by the characters to gain control over their situation and make their own happy endings. Sister and Brother Pilate and Macon Dead tell two different versions of their family history. As Gay Wilentz points out in her article on the African heritage as discourse in *Song of Solomon*, “Morrison’s use of African modes of storytelling and orature is a way of bridging gaps between black community’s folk roots and the Black-American literary traditions” (61). This is also the case in *The Bluest Eye* with the character of Cholly who is abandoned at birth on a junk heap. Aunt Jimmy provides a home for the baby, but a “nice old man” called Blue Jack bestows a past upon the young man through the art of storytelling, “Blue used to tell him old-timey stories about how it was when the Emancipation Proclamation came. How the black people hollered, cried,
and sang. And ghost stories...[and] women...and fights” (Morrison, *Bluest* 133). Cholly loves Blue Jack and compares him to God, but then realizes that God was a “nice old white man”.

The psychological function of laughter is also used to help the black community stay intact and healthy. Marie, China and Poland, three whores in *The Bluest Eye*, find humor in the situation when Pecola asks them about their boyfriends, “All three of the women laughed. Marie threw back her head. From deep inside, her laughter came like the sound of many rivers, freely, deeply, muddily, heading for the room of an open sa. China giggled spastically. Each gas seemed to be yanked out of her body by an unseen hand jerking an unseen string. Poland...laughed without sound”. (Morrison, *Bluest* 52). Laughter makes life’s indignities and fears bearable as shown by the conversation at the barbershop in *Song of Solomon*: “The men began to trade tales of atrocities, first stories they had heard, then those they’d witnessed, and finally the things that had happened to themselves. A litany of personal humiliation, outrage, and anger turned sicklelike back to themselves as humor” (Morrison, *Song* 82).

Hatred

The effects of hate also bring the community together as shown by Guitar’s actions against the white community. He hates whites and becomes a member of a group which avenges the racist killings of black people. As stated above, the white society has denied the blacks their full human rights and has placed limitations on them, both economically and politically. The “Seven Days,” an underground warfare group is the political consequence of the black community’s dissatisfaction with the white judicial system. Guitar explains how the group works:
There is a society. It’s made up of a few men who are willing to take some risks. They don’t initiate anything; they don’t even choose. They are as indifferent as rain. But when a Negro child, Negro woman, or Negro man is killed by whites and nothing is done about it in their law and their courts, this society selects a similar victim at random, and they execute him or her in a similar manner if they can. (Morrison, Song 154).

Because blacks are excluded from the legal system, these men have established their own judicial process. The methods of execution are similar, thus reminding the reader of the biblical “eye for an eye” admonishment in Exodus Chapter 21. As the black community has set up their own “court system”, they have reinforced their unity and strength as a collectivity. Interestingly, the name “Seven Days”, according to Gurleen Grewall in her novel, Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle, is ironic because it symbolizes creation and yet promotes destruction (Grewall 87).

Although hate brings the community together in Sula, Morrison shows the devastating consequences of an insurgence against the white community. The hatred of Sula by the women of Bottom threatens to split the internal community as her presence symbolizes bad omens and deficiency. Her death is lauded and means a return to normalcy, and there is even positive news of a tunnel that will provide jobs for the unemployed black workers of the community. However, after months of poverty and sickness while waiting for the New River tunnel to be built, the citizens, in their hatred towards the empty “white” promises of hope and prosperity and their frustration at the oppression that they have lived under for far too long, parade to the construction site and plunder and destroy the area. The horrifying consequence is the collapse of the tunnel and the deaths of many of the people of the community. Morrison shows in the novel, the uselessness and terrible outcome of a black rebellion against the dominating white society.
African Legacy

One of the central themes of the African-American community, as well as a fundamental element in Toni Morrison’s novels, is the ever-present theme of the African legacy. The author uses historical facts and details concerning the past to teach her readers about the rich and complex heritage of the African American culture. She “reminds” her readers of the past through fragmented images of flight, ancestral villages, and the African family unit. Morrison’s purposeful descriptions, while not letting the reader forget the horror and humiliation of slavery, often revert back to an earlier time of myth, closeness, and order.

Morrison uses the image of “flight” as a means of escape in her novels. In *The Bluest Eye*, Maureen flees from the girls as they taunt her, “flying across the street against the traffic” (Morrison, *Bluest* 73) and poor Pecola is compared to fragile bird with a “pleated”, or broken wing, who is unable to flee from her confinement of ugliness. Morrison uses imagery in *Sula* as Eva Peace is described as ”swinging and swooping like a giant heron, so graceful sailing about in its own habitat but awkward and comical when it folded its wings and tried to walk” (Morrison, *Sula* 46) as she maneuvers herself down the flight of stairs to her son, Plum. He imagines her as having a “great wing of an eagle” as she pours kerosene over him. Eva is giving Plum the chance to flee and the freedom from his pitiful life as a cocaine, or “white lady”, addict. “Flight” is seen as the resistance of the black community to the restraints of the white boundaries.

Of the three novels however, “flight” is a dominant theme in *Song of Solomon* and reveals itself as a lifelong fascination for Milkman. As he is born, Robert Smith, in inconspicuous insurance salesman, makes himself a pair of blue silk wings and leaps to his death as he attempts to fly. He desires freedom from his depressed state. As Morrison notes in *Playing in the Dark*, “The desire for freedom is proceeded by oppression” (Morrison, *Playing* 62). This is
true in the portrayal of Solomon, Milkman’s great-grandfather on his father’s side, who was a member of the tribe of “Flying Africans” who had freed themselves from slavery – who had flown away from oppression and dominion. The theme of flight indicates an escape from the harshness and degradation of racism and the opportunity for oppressed slaves to liberate themselves physically and spiritually from slavery. Milkman’s yearning to fly is a connection to his ancestral past and the importance it held for Solomon and the other enslaved Africans. Milkman, entangled in his father’s materialistic values of control, sits on the airplane, heading south, and thinks that, “In the air, away from real life, he felt free, but on the ground…the wings of all those other people’s nightmares flapped in his face and constrained him” (Morrison, Song 220). For Milkman, flight symbolizes escape from his present situation to a future where he would feel at peace with his own individuality and his place within the community.

Furthermore, Morrison weaves Milkman’s Native-American ancestry into the theme of “flight” as Milkman ties “the red man’s house” in O Sugarman to his Grandmother Singing Byrd (her native-American name being related to the element of flying). Susan Byrd, Sing’s niece, confirms that Singing Byrd’s brother was named Crow Bird (which is yet another link between the Native-American ancestry and flying). She also relates that Milkman’s black grandfather Jake “according to the story…was flying…You know, like a bird” (Morrison, Song 323). Morrison thus connects the theme of “flight” with both Native- and African-American legacies. Milkman receives this astounding revelation while sitting in a “gray wing-back chair” (Morrison Song 320), thus providing the reader with a hint of Milkman’s own wings and eventual flight as well as his acceptance of his mixed black and white, or gray, roots.

Morrison combines the psychological and physical aspects of the black community as the African-American way of life is continuously depicted in all three novels. In a 1981 interview
with Thomas LeClair, Morrison states, “I write what I have recently begun to call village literature, fiction that is really for the village, for the tribe…my novels ought to…clarify the roles that have become obscured; they ought to identify those things in the past that are useful and those things that are not; and they ought to give nourishment” (Morrison, *Conversation* 119). The “village” that Morrison is discussing is a synonym for Africa and her references in her novels to the South, slavery and myths refer the reader’s imagination back to the African culture and lifestyle. Morrison demonstrates her own rediscovery of her African heritage through the “village” qualities which she gives to the families in her narratives. Pilate’s home, in *Song of Solomon*, reminds the reader of an African village hut as she uses candles instead of electricity and cooks with wood and coal. Her home bears the scent of African ginger and this introduces Milkman to the sensory world – the tastes, smells, sounds and sights – of his African roots. Ruth describes the security found within the house as a “safe harbor” (Morrison, *Song* 135).

Because of the impact of slavery and separation of parents and children on the basic family unit, “different alternative family units developed” (Beaulieu 144). The family unit is a necessity because it is the foundation for self, identity and community. Paradoxically, the survival of the community is therefore based on unity and harmony in the family. Thus, while Morrison is faced with the modern challenge of portraying family structures which are seen to be in a state of disorder – the poor MacTeers, the hygienic Wrights, and the “deceased” Deads – she simultaneously and notwithstanding manages to depict the strengths of the African family (Ndongo 25). In *Sula*, Eva, Hannah, and Sula and in *Song of Solomon*, Pilate, Reba and Hagar, are three generations of women who, despite divergence, gain strength from each other and display an innate sisterhood, as do the whores Poland, China and Miss Marie in *The Bluest Eye*. Their “community” develops because of a lack of a male figure. Morrison depicts the women in
*Song of Solomon* eating eggs – a sign of fertility and womanhood. Further, the economically and sexually independent women depicted in Morrison’s novels are a consequence of the effects of slavery, as stated earlier, when families were split and the mother would remain with the children.

The African family is community-based and the nurturing quality is not contained within the nuclear family, but is rather the responsibility of the entire community. The Deweys are cared for by Eva in *Sula* and Pecola is taken in by the MacTeer family in *The Bluest Eye*. In the article, *Living Together: African Community-Based Values in Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon*, Adamo Soro examines the traditional West African attitudes towards “illegally-born” children, in other words, those born out of wedlock. The African view is that all children are a “blessing” and should be cared for. When Pecola is impregnated by her father Cholly, Claudia wants the baby to survive, “More strongly than my fondness for Pecola, I felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live” (Morrison, *Bluest* 190). Together with her insight into the internalization of the white ideal of beauty, Claudia understands her African legacy and therefore embodies the sentiments of the survival of the black community.

The *asili*, or physical ancestor figure is important in all families as it is this person who repeats the myths and legends of the past and gives the family members their heritage. They are portrayed by M’Dear in *The Bluest Eye*, Circe in *Song of Solomon*, and Eva is *Sula*. Morrison further uses the relationships with her other characters to the ancestor figure to maintain the positive connection with African history and her belief that “the relationship between character and ancestor…directly correlates with that character’s success in navigating life” (Beaulieu 5). According to West African tradition, ancestors are universal and their existence connects the souls of the long-ago with the souls of the present. Although they have passed on, their presence
is ever near to the living as there is no division between the spiritual and the material. Therefore, there is a reverence for the dead which is passed on through the generations of the black community as both Ruth and Pilate talk to their deceased ancestors. Ruth goes to her father’s grave to speak to him and Pilate comments about her father, “It’s a good feeling to know he’s around. I tell you he’s a person I can always rely on” (Morrison, *Song* 141).

**The Importance of the Individual**

Finally, the psychological aspect of an individual’s behavior and its effect on the community is of importance when examining the representation of black society in Morrison’s novels. West African culture is based on the fundamentals of harmony in nature. The behavior of an individual causes positive or negative consequences which may affect the “cosmic order”. Soro writes, “…the individual is bound to pattern his behavior on the prescription of the tradition because he knows that his misdeeds will affect the whole community, not just himself alone. So, he somewhat feels responsible for the welfare of the group” (Soro 299). Best friends Sula and Nel accidentally cause Chicken Little’s death by drowning. They tell no one of their involvement in his death. The girls attend the funeral and, while Sula cries, Nel “felt convicted and hanged right there in the pew” (Morrison, *Sula* 65). Morrison writes of “a space, a separateness” (Morrison, *Sula* 64) and of “something newly missing” (Morrison, *Sula* 61) between the girls. Hidden falsehoods had entered the friendship between Sula and Nel and their friendship would never be the same; the community was affected by the tragedy in their faith and solidarity towards God when they “danced and screamed…to acknowledge [God’s will] and confirm once more their conviction that the only way to avoid the Hand of God is to get in it” (Morrison, *Sula* 66).
Divisions within the Black Community

As noted previously, the physical or actual communities in the novels exhibit a village quality in which the residents have joined together in a tribal unit to guarantee their ultimate survival. However, when examining the black society of the narratives, one can divide the black community into four main classes. These coincide with the social organization of the black community presented in the Philadelphia Negro by W.E.B. Du Bois in 1899. Du Bois, a noted black intellect, architect of the Civil rights movement and founder of the NAACP, developed a typology of four classes: the well-to-do; the decent hard workers, the “worthy poor”, and the ‘submerged tenth” (Anderson 55). Although the situation has changed greatly today, mainly due to the civil rights movements and black migration northwards, Morrison has used these four topologies of classes as a basis to describe four very different communities in, for example, *Song of Solomon*. This paper will first examine the four different physical communities in relation to *Song of Solomon* and then focus on the class differences that arise between the topologies in all three novels.

According to Du Bois, the class of the well-to-do constituted the upper-class of the black community. They were usually the descendents of slave masters and were allowed a limited education at white schools. They made up the early African-American professional class such as doctors, lawyers, and small business owners, and therefore maintained a higher status among other blacks. The well-to-do usually had a lighter complexions (due in part to mixed racial marriages and white slave owners raping generations of slave women), and although this meant more prestige in the black community, it also conferred upon them the privilege of better communication with the white society (Anderson 57). In *Song of Solomon*, the Fosters and Macon Dead family represent the well-to-do with their lighter complexions, fine house,
professions and automobiles. These families live in a northern city in Michigan located on the shores of Lake Superior where even the name of the lake is a reminder of their distinguished status.

The decent hard workers, according Du Bois, were those who were doing quite well despite their humble origins and who served the community as ministers, teachers, and storekeepers. Their complexions were browner than those of the well-to-do but they constituted a positive society and they were proud of their accomplishments within the black community (Anderson 58). In *Song of Solomon*, the small farming community of Danville, Pennsylvania, fits the above description. Milkman travels to Danville in search of his grandfather’s gold and encounters the Reverend Cooper, who gives him information about his heritage and, even more importantly, a sense of belonging to a larger family. Milkman meets others whose tales of the past also contribute to his own understanding about his past and present. Milkman listens to the men in this community describe his grandfather with awe and respect as if he was the epitome of the decent hard worker. His grandfather, Macon Dead I, through his own determination and resolution, succeeded in keeping his own autonomy despite the laws and unwritten rules established by the white community.

He had come out of nowhere…ignorant…and broke, with nothing but free papers, a Bible, and a pretty black wife, and in one year he’d leased ten acres, the next ten more…You see?...See what you can do? Never mind you can’t tell one letter from another, never mind you born a slave, never mind you lose your name, never mind your daddy Dead, never mind nothing. Here, this here, is what a man can do if he puts his mind and back in it…We got a home in this rock, don’t you see! (Morrison, *Song* 235)
In his ignorance, Macon Dead I was actually a wise man as he worked at a craft that his forefathers had excelled in for generations; he “invested” labor in real estate. His decent belief in the Bible was the basis for his life as shown in Matthew 7:24, “The wise man built his house upon the rock”.

The worthy poor were described as those of a much darker complexion who were working, but barely making ends meet. They usually worked as laborers in factories and construction. The women in the family were usually employed as domestics in white homes. “Such people emphasized strong family values…[and] tended to have a strong, almost ritualistic sense of place…Their communities were organized around the idea that black people were discriminated against by the wider society…” (Anderson 59). In Song of Solomon, the men of Shalimar, located in the rural hill country of Virginia, fit the description of the worthy poor. They represent a meager, but close-knit community. When Milkman is at the General Store in Shalimar, he insults the men by his lack of response to their initial friendliness. “He hadn’t bothered to say his name, nor ask them theirs, had called them ‘them’…[The toothless, poverty-stricken men were] waiting around the general store hoping a truck would come looking for mill hands or tobacco pickers…[they] looked at his skin and saw that it was as black as theirs, but they knew he had the heart of the white men” (Morrison, Song 266). As Milkman is visiting Shalimar, the connections of his ancestral past and present remind him of Pilate’s house in Southside, a community within a community, representing strong family values and an emphasis on heritage. As stated above, the wives of the worthy poor were usually employed as domestic help. Corinthians, in the novel, leaves her father’s well-to-do status and takes a job as a maid to a white woman. This step down in the black community awards her an identity and reality in her own black heritage.
The submerged tenth, usually of dark complexion, represented the very poor. They worked only occasionally and struggled to make ends meet. They were often put down by the more established members of the black community and, according to Du Bois, were usually engaged in shady or illegal occupations (Anderson 60). Guitar and the Seven Days are examples of the submerged tenth. They are a group of men who are poor and turn to drink and narcotics and thus create their own justice through violence. Murder and robbery are commonplace to Guitar and stem from his father’s death. Guitar’s father, the breadwinner of the family, was killed at the factory where he worked. The boss placed little importance on the death of his employee, and Guitar explains that the boss “came by and gave us kids some candy” (Morrison, Song 61). Thus, Guitar grows up without a father figure and is not taught morals or the value of human life.

Du Bois’ four topological societies are the basis for the tensions which are found in the black community and relate to class differences, racialization, the African-American’s identity, and conformity to the collectivity. The survival of the black community is threatened by the existence of class differences and racialization. Racialization can be described as “the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group” (Omi and Winant 2). In other words, the interpretations of race, which extend over the borders of culture, society, relationships, and color are found in every existing individual, establishment, and collectivity. This means that the people’s racist presuppositions are found everywhere. Pilate questions these presuppositions and asserts her basic belief in human relationships as she says, “I mean what’s the difference in the way you act towards ‘em? Don’t you have to act the same way to both?...Then why they got two words [black and white] for it ‘stead of one, if they ain’t no difference?” (Morrison, Song 44). Edward Shils states,
Differences in pigment symbolize or indicate contemporaneous differences between present wealth and power and present poverty and weakness…it is correlated with past events too – above all, with past events of humiliation, injury, and insult…cultural derogation and individual affront…Color is the short-hand that evolves all griefs and grievance. (qtd in Halloway and Demetrakopolous 151)

In *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison portrays racialization and class differences most prominently in the character of Milkman. However, the struggles concerning class differences have continued through the generations even before Milkman was born and can even be a result of an individual purposely detaching himself from the collectivity or living his life on the periphery of the community.

Dr. Foster, Milkman’s grandfather on his mother’s side, was part of the creole elite. His lighter skin afforded him greater privileges. He was the only black to live in a white neighborhood and the black community “named” his address Doctor Street reflecting their own pride and sense of achievement through him. Dr. Foster’s economic standard and power is dependent upon his black clientele, but at the same time, ironically, he “didn’t give a damn about them…Called them cannibals” (Morrison, *Song* 71). However, the doctor was forced to minister to those that he held in contempt as he, despite his affluence, was not accepted within the white community. “During his entire professional life he had never been granted hospital privileges and only two of his patients were ever admitted to Mercy, both whites” (Morrison, *Song* 5). Morrison illustrates a paradox in the novel as Dr. Foster is the unwilling link between the white community and the black masses. The black community believes that they are establishing a worthy place, via the doctor, within the dominant class. In essence, the black community is using Dr. Foster as a contact with the white community: “Never mind that he probably didn’t deserve
their honor – they knew what kind of a man he was: arrogant, colorstruck, snobbish. They didn’t care about that. They were paying their respect to whatever it was that made him be a doctor in the first place” (Morrison, Song 329). On the other hand, the white community is also using the doctor to maintain segregation by allowing him to be the “middle man” in the hierarchy between whites and blacks, and in so doing, keeping the blacks “in their place”.

Dr. Foster cares for his light-skinned daughter and raises her separately from the black community. Ruth takes on the “white” standards of materialism that her father deems appropriate which is shown when Ruth reveals, “I lived in a great big house that pressed me into a small package. I had no friends, only schoolmates who wanted to touch my dresses and white silk stockings” (Morrison, Song 124). Although Ruth talks about the confinements of her younger years she passes these materialistic standards to her own children, Lena, Corinthians and Milkman.

Milkman is upper-middle class and is never really accepted into the black community despite his yearning for acceptance. Due to the actions of his parents, Milkman is not acknowledged within the black community. He is, as mentioned earlier, the first black baby to be born at Mercy Hospital, a “white institution.” This is fitting as his parents see themselves as more “white” than their black neighbors. It is also ironically appropriate that the black boy who is born into a white world is given the “white” nickname of “Milkman”. Ruth and Macon Dead keep their children apart from the other children and dress them differently to emphasize their separateness (Morrison, Song 217). The children are used as status symbols for Macon: he dresses them up and drives around in his huge Packard, mainly in front of lower-class black people.
Macon Dead II, like his father, invests in real estate and rents out housing to the lower-class black community. He strives to accumulate wealth and is thus striving for the white bourgeois standards of living. His preoccupation with money and control is exhibited as he refuses to allow Mrs. Baines, a woman whose husband has recently been killed, an extension on her rent. As Macon holds the keys to his property, he has lost the keys to his own identity, his family and his community. Like Dr. Foster, Macon Dead is also a middleman between the black community and the white capitalists. His authority and economic status are based upon both the “black” rent money and the “white” capital. “He trembled with the thought of the white men in the bank – the men who helped him buy and mortgage houses – discovering that this raggedy bootlegger was his sister” (Morrison, *Song* 20). Macon’s position in real estate is precarious, as is his position within the black community. He would rather that there existed more upper-middle-class black families and his dream is to invest in property for “a nice summer place for colored people [with] beach houses” (Morrison, *Song* 33). Finally, Macon Dead is also shown as the perfect capitalist by his obsession with the gold that is buried in his father’s property. Milkman joins in the search for gold but this undertaking evolves into a quest for knowledge about his African-American roots and thus an identity based on those roots. Macon, portrayed as the fortune seeker, is the opposite of his sister, Pilate, who doesn’t care about ownership. Morrison relates this contrast to the biblical figure, Solomon. King Solomon was known for his wealth and wisdom and while Macon stands for the wealth, Pilate stands for wisdom. The family quarrel between Pilate and Macon depicts the struggle between black identities and allegiances. She emphasizes her past and is proud of herself and her history while he would rather concentrate on his “white accomplishments”. This contrast is also depicted as the difference between the northern urban black society and the southern past.
Further class differences in the black community of the narrative are represented through the relationship between Milkman and Guitar, and later, Saul. The tension between Milkman and Guitar signifies the struggles between the middle class and the working class. Guitar is constantly reminding Milkman of his flaws and cowardice. Representing the submerged tenth working class, Guitar knows the importance of taking risks. He goads Milkman by saying, “You got a life? Live it! Live the motherf**kin’ life! Live it!” (Morrison, Song 183). Later, as Milkman is visiting the South, he meets a man named Saul and gets into a fight with him. Saul is angry that Milkman would just buy a new car because his car broke down and forces him to realize the difference in social class that separates Milkman from the blacks of the South.

Blackness and Racial Differentiation

While Morrison’s Sula concerns itself with the survival of the black community in reference to the white “Other”, such as the stereotypical reaction of the white bargeman who finds Chicken Little’s body and immediately thinks that his black parents were to blame, there are racial and class differences within the black society of Bottom which are portrayed through the Wright and Peace families. Morrison, as stated previously, uses different shades of “blackness” to depict class differences within the black community. However, the families rebel internally against the stereotypes awarded them by racialization and therefore over bridge the typical class differences within the black community.

Wiley and Helene Wright are a middle class black family. Helene, whose name means light, or fair-skinned, is born to a Creole mother and is therefore a person of color with lighter skin. She is raised Catholic and is described as “impressive” and dignified. She takes being a mother seriously and because of her skin color and economic status, she belongs to the well-to-
do. However, when visiting New Orleans, Helene denies knowing the Creole language, and thus denies her roots in a lower social order. While Helene would prefer being addressed by her more distinguished and refined name, “the people in the Bottom refused to say Helene. They called her Helen Wright and left it at that” (Morrison, *Sula* 18). Thus, although the prominent difference is skin color and economic status was important to her, the lower classes did not recognize racialization in her case.

Helene fears for her daughter Nel, whose “skin had dusk in it [and] she had [inherited] the broad flat nose of Wiley and his generous lips” (Morrison, *Sula* 18). Helene discourages Nel from learning Creole and encourages her to be “lighter” by “pulling her nose”. Nel, on the other hand, accepts her blackness and whispers, “I’m me…Me” after experiencing her mother becoming “custard” when in conflict with the white society. When Nel marries Jude, a waiter at the Hotel Medallion, her status changes to the decent hard workers. Nel believes in the community and accepts the traditional role as wife and mother in order for the community to survive.

Eva Peace is dark-skinned and Morrison originally situates this character below poverty level as her husband BoyBoy leaves her with “$1.65, five eggs, three beets and no idea of what or how to feel” (Morrison *Sula* 32). Eva, because of her sacrifice and ingenuity, has financially provided for her family by building a house and receiving a monthly disability income, thus raising her economic status from the submerged tenth to the worthy poor.

BoyBoy, however, raises his economic status even higher and is portrayed as a “picture of prosperity and good will...[while] talking about his appointments and exuding an odor of new money and idleness” (Morrison, *Sula* 35). Despite his money, his skin color remains the same
and Eva notices that “underneath all of that shine she saw defeat in the stalk of his neck and the curious tight way he held his shoulders” (Morrison, *Sula* 36). BoyBoy has left “the Bottom” and now lives in the big city, but has lost his identity and pride in the process. Interestingly, Eva sees BoyBoy as diminishing in status and refers to him as the only “colored person” she’s ever hated. Further, after this episode, Eva also leaves “the bottom” floor of the house and moves “upstairs” as she accepts her identity and individuality.

In the 1940s depicted in the novel, the general feeling towards biracial children was one of aversion and distaste. Three young black boys come to live with Eva, “Dewey one was a deeply black boy with a beautiful head and the golden eyes of chronic jaundice. Dewey two was light-skinned with freckles and a head of tight red hair. Dewey three was half Mexican with chocolate skin and black bangs” (Morrison, *Sula* 38). These biracial children are not accepted by the white or the black society and are therefore placed with the darker-skinned Eva. Their mixed heritage affords them a non-identity which “remains a mystery”, however, as Eva names them all “Dewey”, the three form one common identity.

Sula desperately tries to raise her status, despite the color of her skin, and returns to the community after an absence of ten years. During that time, she has gotten a college education and raised her economic standing. However, after her actions of sending Eva to a rest home and sleeping with Jude, the people despise her because of her independence, and the fact that she challenges the collective identity of the community. They imagine her committing the ultimate betrayal to the community: that of having sex with a white man. As Sula lies dying, Nel tries to make her see the reality of her blackness and says, “You can’t have it all Sula…You are a woman and a colored woman at that” (Morrison, *Sula* 142). Sula replies to her friend Nel
concerning the hopelessness of the feminine black situation and racialization by saying, “I know what every colored woman in this country is doing…Dying” (Morrison, Sula 143).

In *The Bluest Eye*, the author portrays racialization through the women of the community. Du Bois’ four social classes are again symbolized by skin color and economic wealth. At the apex of the hierarchy is Maureen Peal, a light-skinned mulato girl with long braids and green eyes. Although she has a protruding dog tooth, people are captivated by her “beauty” and cuteness. The fact that she comes from a wealthy family supports the bond between race and gender as her lighter skin promotes a wealthier status image. Claudia and Frieda position Maureen as straddling both races and yet, cannot understand their feelings of inferiority when she is around. They rebuff her attempts at friendliness and call her Meringue Pie, a sweet confection which is white on the outside and brown on the inside. Maureen finally runs away saying, “I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly Black e mos” (Morrison, *Bluest 73*). Further, while the [blacker] teenage boys are enchanted by Maureen’s “whiteness”, they are then forced to face their own blackness and therefore taunt bystander Pecola in self-hatred. Thus, Pecola Breedlove becomes the victim for the entire black community’s apprehensions and sense of worthlessness.

Next in the hierarchy is Geraldine, who is somewhat darker than Maureen. Geraldine, a middle-class black woman, is concerned with the beauty of cleanliness and perfection in her household. She upholds the white standard of beauty and is preoccupied with white middle class aspirations such as potted plants and lace doilies. Although she and her family are black, she separates herself from lower-class blacks and instructs her son, Junior, that she “did not like him to play with niggers…the difference between colored people and niggers…colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud” (Morrison, *Bluest
Junior, in his blackness, is not permitted to play with blacks, and is shunned by whites. His frustration is thus directed at his own black community for not fostering him as a member, but his anger is vented towards his mother’s black cat with the blue eyes. When Geraldine finds Pecola in her house, she feels that the blackness that she fears and despises has entered her home. Morrison uses this family as an example of the anxiety and the animosity that can exist within the family unit concerning grades of blackness in society.

Mrs. MacTeer, Frieda and Claudia’s mother, is positioned as third in the social hierarchy. She is a strong presence who loves her children and would do anything for them, but she is not averse to “whippings”. Together with the income from their boarder Mr. Henry, and Mr. MacTeer’s salary, Mrs. MacTeer is able to stay at home and take care of the children. Her love for her family is unconditional and her kindness extends to include Pecola. However, when Pecola drinks three quarts of milk, she gets angry and complains unceasingly about the Breedloves and their lack of responsibility. They were “slack enough to be put…outdoors [and] that was criminal” (Morrison, *Bluest* 17). Thus, Mrs. MacTeer elevates her own hierarchal status over them.

Finally, occupying the lowest position in the caste system according to skin color are the Breedloves. They “lived [in a storefront] because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly. Although their poverty was traditional and stultifying, it was not unique. But their ugliness was unique” (Morrison Bluest 39). In a novel concerning the white ideal of beauty, Morrison compares ugliness to being black and further parallels blackness with “despair, dissipation and violence” (Morrison Bluest 38). Morrison further explains how each of the characters accepted their blackness and dealt with it: Sammy, Pecola’s brother, “adjusted his behavior to it; chose his companions on the basis of it” (Morrison,
Bluest 39) meaning that he used his blackness as a weapon of violence and intimidation; Pauline uses her blackness as a function of her “martyrdom” and recognition of her inescapable reality. However, Pauline’s fantasies of “whiteness” are shared by Pecola, who longs for a “mask” of whiteness to cover her ugliness.

Conclusion

With reference to the DuBois’ “color line” which divides the rich and poor, North and South, white and black, and light and dark, Morrison writes in Playing in the Dark,

Deep within the word “American” is its association to race. To identify someone as a South African is to say very little; we need the adjective “white” or “black” or “colored” to make our meaning clear. In this country it is quite the reverse. American means white, and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen after hyphen. (Morrison, Playing 29)

Race can thus be discussed in terms of identity and collectivity. However, these topics are intertwined with each other as one’s individuality is inseparably linked to the community as a person cannot survive without others or his legacy. Morrison examines the skills of survival while concentrating on matters of self and cultural distinctiveness within the black community. As Beaulieu argues, “In order to survive, Morrison’s characters need to choose whether to exist in the shadows, submerging their identities, or to fight back, proving that they have a self worth respecting” (170). Morrison uses characters in each of her novels to illustrate the challenges associated with the struggle for an identity. While Pecola’s racial identity is completely dependent upon the white image of beauty and which ultimately leads to her decline into insanity, Claudia reacts to these feelings of inferiority by fighting back. She discards the Shirley Temple image and dismembers the white dolls that she is given. She questions why being
“white” is synonymous with being beautiful. Thus, her survival is due to her refusal to internalize the loss of self and feelings of degradation and inadequacy that is an already accepted part of her society. Sula’s acceptance of her individuality is a choice that she has made while Nel has allowed herself to be formed by the opinions and expectations of others. Sula’s acceptance of self symbolizes her “peace” with her blackness and with her own racial identity. Milkman’s racial identity, his “role” in life, and his individuality, also tie in with the meaning of blackness. Catherine Carr Lee states, “Central to both his maturation and his healing is Milkman’s recognition that the cultural past of the African-American South continues to create his twentieth century present in ways that are not constraining but liberating” (Lee 109). Milkman feels like an outsider when he visits the community of Shalimar. He realizes that he must shed his immaturity and distrust and enter a responsible adulthood. In so doing, Milkman can begin to unravel the secrets of his African American ancestors. When Milkman gets into a fight with Saul, he recognizes that he is on his own, that neither his father nor money can help him and he sheds his “white trappings” for the black community underneath. Lee compares the bobcat hunt and initiation of Milkman to a “rite at the hands of the elders and wise men of African tribal cultures” (118). The hunters in Shalimar advise Milkman to shed his city clothes in exchange for clothing better suited to the hunt. By doing so, Milkman is shedding his present self in order to earn the ways and wisdom of the ancestral community. Interestingly, the clothes that Milkman dons are World War II army fatigues which reinforce his American roots and, at the same time, refer to war as a time in a young man’s life in which he makes the transition to manhood. Milkman makes the transition to manhood as he accepts and understands the real meaning of being both black and American. Morrison shows the significance and great importance of this combination through the birth of Milkman, the first black baby to be born at Mercy Hospital surrounded by
the American colors of red (Ruth’s basket of rose petals), white (the falling of snow) and blue (Mr. Smith’s silk wings).

Collectivity includes the dependence of individuals upon each other for the survival of the black community and Morrison realistically exposes both achievements and disappointments of the collectivity in her novels. The community reinforces the identities of its members through belief and heritage and individuals must remain a part of the collectivity in order to be innately complete. Claudia, although she abhors the white ideals which are internalized by her community, she is accepting of her heritage and blackness. *The Bluest Eye* chronicles Claudia’s memories and affiliation with the poverty and racism of the community and her survival as a “complete” individual and part of society. Sula rejects and is rejected by the community as her life does not conform to their traditions. However, Sula’s identity is actually formed by the collectivity and her existence is only possible because of her love/hate relationship with its members. Sula’s eighteen year absence from the collectivity is only briefly mentioned because she did not exist when she was apart from the black society. Morrison forcefully portrays the importance of collectivity in both the beginning and ending of *Song of Solomon*. In the very first line of the novel, the name of the insurance company “Mutual Life” indicates that the black community must live together in support and nurturing. The story closes with Milkman making a famed leap to meet Guitar. Although there are many interpretations about the ending of the story, this writer is convinced that, as Guitar lays down his rifle, he is smiling and accepting his friend Milkman. Milkman narrows his eyes, as it is difficult to see in the dark, and leaps in love with his arms outstretched toward his black “brother”, united and secure in the knowledge of their heritage and legacy.
In conclusion, the characters in *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Song of Solomon* are shown in the setting of a society which is constantly weighed down by the heritage of slavery and racial brutality and is profoundly rooted in customs that have formed and influenced the African-American culture. Toni Morrison portrays the black community with regards to blackism and the inner struggles of the individual as well as the class differences and social structures within the collectivity. Morrison also emphasizes the importance of the black society as every contemporary individual must negotiate his/her culture and heritage, which are found in the unity of the community. The characters of Claudia, Sula, and Milkman form their present identities through the understanding of their African-American heritage and achieve individual fulfillment within the collectivity. The author guides us toward the conclusion that by honoring a mixed heritage and constantly challenging racial interpretations over a period of time, at personal, as well as social and cultural levels, new racial identities and meanings will be formed, both within and outside the black community.
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