

Just Information

Narrative and Identity in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon, Jazz and Love*

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Summary

In this thesis I intend to discuss male identity as constructed through narrative in Toni Morrison's novels *Song of Solomon*, *Jazz* and *Love*. In all three books, the characters are eager to shape their experiences through narratives. Through a contrastive perspective on the narratives presented in each novel, I will attempt to expose the assumptions that underlie a given narrative framing. For instance, I will ask whether Milkman's development in *Song of Solomon* mainly is indebted to the materialism of his father or the spirituality of his aunt. In investigating my chosen primary texts, Hayden White's discussion regarding narratives will be utilized. Arguing that narratives produce rather than reflect meaning, this perspective is useful when it comes to making sense of the narratives told in the novels. My discussion will be twofold in that I will discuss both how people define and are defined through narratives. While *Solomon* deals with Milkman's attempt to redefine his world, *Jazz* illuminates what happens when human subjects are defined from an exterior position. Discussing *Love*, I will attempt to discuss how the characters relate to the labellings imposed on them by their memory of the dead man at the novel's centre. The basic argument that will run through this analysis is that these narratives cannot, as Milkman's father claims, be understood as "just information". Rather, they are shaped by the assumptions of those telling the story. While there are many potential reasons for why these accounts differ, I will mainly focus on how the discrepancies can be understood as related to gender roles.

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Introduction

Early on in Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon*, Macon Dead sits down with his son to tell him of his past. He prefaces his account with the following words: "Nothing I'm about to say is by way of apology or excuse. It's just information" (70). Inherent in this claim is a belief in narrative's ability to represent the past just as it was, objectively and without interference by whoever is telling the story. The same claim regarding the possibility of objective representation is made by the characters in Morrison's *Love*, and by the diegetic narrator in *Jazz*. The basic argument that will run through this analysis is that these narratives cannot be understood as "just information", as they are shaped by the assumptions of those telling the story. While there are many potential reasons for why these accounts differ, I will mainly focus on how the discrepancies can be understood as related to gender roles.

Of the three novels I intend to focus on, *Song of Solomon*, published in 1978, is the one that most explicitly draws the connection between gender and narrative. Milkman Dead, the novel's protagonist, lives a careless existence that is fundamentally disconnected from all those around him. His family and friends attempt to communicate their concerns to him, but his way of relating to these narratives involves *not* relating to them at all. This does not change until Milkman himself goes South and sees the places he previously had only heard about. The accounts he is told are remarkably varied, emphasising differing aspects of the same events. The link between gender and narrative is thus twofold. Milkman only achieves a coherent sense of himself as a man (and human) upon hearing stories that themselves are informed by gendered assumptions.

Song of Solomon in many ways occupies a unique position among Morrison's novels. This is because of how the novel highlights the experiences of men. In most of her books, she puts the emphasis on the female characters. This tendency is especially apparent in *Sula* and *Beloved*, which mainly deal with the experiences of women. In her foreword to *Solomon*, Morrison describes that novel as "a stereotypically male narrative" (x). It is then natural to ask exactly what it is about the narrative that makes it "stereotypically male". Such a claim, that a narrative can be viewed as gendered, clearly goes counter to the one made by Milkman's father, who argues that a narrative can describe the truth divorced from the attitude and position of the speaker.

Much of the critical discussion of *Solomon* revolves around these issues. Particularly, there is a great deal of controversy regarding which character might be said to stand at the

novel's centre. While no character is given as much narrative space as Milkman, many critics argue for the profound significance of Pilate, Milkman's paternal aunt. And the question then arises as to whether she should be seen as an independent agent or as merely subjected to the dominant discourse. A problem about many of these discussions is that they tend to essentialise the positions through attempting to show why their preferred position is more "authentic" than any other. My way of avoiding this will be to place emphasis on the contexts of individual perspectives, asking why the narratives are framed as they are.

The specific narrative framings become even more significant in *Jazz*, first published in 1992. The surface plot of that novel concerns the troubled marriage of Violet and Joe Trace. The conflict is related to their attempt to come to terms with the fact that their present life in Harlem is very different from their Virginia past, a past that nevertheless remains an integral part of their perspectives on the present. However, they choose to emphasise different aspects of their past in their recollections. This goes to indicate the degree to which cultural memory can be conceived of as something individual, and the difficulty of finding some shared background. Personal experience turns out to be an essential aspect of how the characters in *Jazz* relate to their past. Just like in *Solomon*, it is well nigh impossible to arrive at a truth beyond issues of representation.

What I take to be the most noteworthy aspect of *Jazz*, and what I mainly will focus on when discussing that novel, is the highly unorthodox narrator. Blurring the distinctions between narrators in the first and the third person, the narrator of *Jazz* is actively involved in the shaping of the narrative. She even admits to not really knowing what happened, and makes it clear that she offers speculation and conjecture. As so much of the novel is explicitly reduced to the assumptions of the narrator, who might be said to invent rather than describe the events, the link to my perspective on *Solomon* manifests itself clearly. In other words, what I will attempt to illuminate is how *Jazz*, too, shows that there is no such thing as "just information". While I in my discussion of *Solomon* will focus mainly on how Milkman comes to achieve a coherent sense of identity, the focus in the chapter on *Jazz* will rather be on how the narrator attempts to identify the characters within the framework of her own assumptions.

The strange status of the novel's narrator has greatly influenced how critical discussion of the novel has played out. On the one hand, many critics emphasise the problematic status of the narrator. These often come to view the narrator as the most important "character" in the novel, and discuss the events that make up the diegetic action only as they reflect on the narrator. But, there are also those who mainly emphasise the action in the novel, and who treat the narrator as an unproblematic entity. As will be seen later, there

are gains and losses with each of these approaches. Given that they bring with them focus on so different aspects of the novel, this is of course only natural. In my discussion I will, through putting the emphasis on representation, attempt to strike a balance between these two perspectives. After all, a focus on representation must make room both for those who represent and for those who are represented.

The same concerns can be identified in *Love*, to be discussed in my third chapter. Bill Cosey, who is the central male character in that novel, is long dead when the diegetic action commences. The surface plot deals with the legal strife between Cosey's wife and granddaughter, a conflict that regards which one of them is the rightful heir of Cosey's property. Despite the fact that Cosey is dead, his continued presence is indisputable. He lives on in the memory of the various characters, each of whom argues that their own understanding of Cosey is most authentic.

The novel's utilization of the retrospective technique makes it suited for an investigation of the assumptions underlying each perspective. It is revealed that it matters whether Cosey's acts are understood from the perspective of a former employee or from that of his granddaughter. Briefly put, *Love* too shows how it is impossible to frame a narrative in a manner that is objectively true, removed from all issues regarding representation. *Love* continues the trend of the other two books in that it is concerned with how a seemingly dominant narrative is undermined through the presence of alternative accounts.

As *Love* is relatively recent (it was published in 2003), there has not been that much critical discussion devoted to it. Yet, much of the critical discussion that has taken place revolves around the issues I have outlined above. Most critics agree that the act at the centre of the novel is Bill Cosey's marriage to a girl aged eleven. Should this be understood as an instance of paedophilia, or is it more fruitful to say that Cosey saved a girl who otherwise would live a miserable life in poverty? *Love* might thus be said to destabilize conventional distinctions between right and wrong, through forcing us to relate to morally ambiguous acts.

Briefly put, I will attempt to show how the novels construct the link between gender identity and narrative. In all three, the characters attempt to pinpoint identity in a manner removed from the ambiguities denoted by narrative positioning. In my discussion, I will mainly place the emphasis on articulations of maleness and masculinity. The reason why I do this is that while there has been much focus on gender in the critical discussion of Morrison, comparatively little of this focuses on her male characters. For instance, Barbara Smith argues that Morrison's *Sula* can best be understood as a "lesbian" novel (175). Of course, any discussion of *Sula* that focused solely on the male characters would miss a great deal of the

depth of that novel. But, it seems equally unfortunate to simply label them as irrelevant. In my discussion I do not intend to discard a focus on the female characters (which anyway would be practically impossible), but rather to view them in relation to the male characters in Morrison's novels.

Especially since the publication of *Beloved*, the workings of the past and history have been among the core themes in Morrison's fiction. This is reflected in the critical discussion of her work. As so much has been written about Morrison's treatment of the past, it might seem strange that I intend to pursue yet another analysis along those lines. Yet, to me it seems that such a focus is justified through what I take to be a weakness in much of the previous discussion. While eager to discuss the past, many critics seem reluctant to ask precisely how it is presented narratively. And yet, it clearly makes a great deal of difference whether the past is presented through orally communicated stories or of it remains in the consciousness of the individuals. In addition to the attention to matters of form, there is a specific view of narrative that will recur throughout my discussion. Rather than to view the narratives as transparent windows into the past, I will argue that they communicate as much about the speaker as about the past they apparently are about. In the following, I will further account for the theoretical understanding of narrative that will serve as the basis for my discussion. Having done that, I will proceed by linking this to the question of (male) gender identity.

In his essay collection *The Content of the Form*, Hayden White extensively discusses the strengths and weaknesses of narrative in relation to representations of the past. In "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory", the second essay in the collection, he asks whether a narrative can objectively represent a series of events. Early on, he defines the position against which his discussion takes place. "The form of the discourse, the narrative, adds nothing to the content of the representation; rather it is a simulacrum of the structure and processes of real events" (27). Implicit in this claim is the belief that there is such a thing as "just information", and that it would be possible to describe events as they really occurred. The narrative is taken to be an exact representation of what happened, and it is thus not necessary to consider it any further. White identifies this attitude with what he terms "traditional historical theory" (27), and moves on to define it in contrast to more recent theoretical developments. As an example of the more modern conceptions of narrative he discusses Roland Barthes, whose theories of narrative involved "exposing the ideological function of the narrative mode of representation" (35). This comes closer to the view of narrative that I will utilize in this thesis. If it is impossible to separate a given narrative from

the specific assumptions informing it, one cannot assume that a narrative has the power to objectively stand for the truth.

Having removed narrative from the realm of one to one referentiality, White proposes a number of principles that can serve as “organon[s] of discourse formation” (39). Among the principles he mentions are logic and rhetoric. These principles are significant for how the concept of narrative plays out in the three novels I focus on. For instance, the narrator of *Jazz* assumes that the past is bound to repeat itself, and that there is no possibility for a happy ending to the relationship between Violet and her husband. The fact that the plot does not end as the narrator assumes highlights the faulty logic the narrator utilizes. But, as White makes clear, logic is not the only organising element that can structure a narrative. He identifies rhetoric as another principle that can contribute to the form a specific narrative takes (39). In other words, he argues that if a story is told in order to convince someone, this will have important consequences for the framing of that narrative. This mechanism will be seen time and again throughout my analysis, and supplies a fruitful perspective on the communicative acts that recur throughout all three novels.

In his essay, White discusses the idea that narrative can be understood as “an apparatus for the production of meaning rather than as only a vehicle for the transmission of information about an extrinsic referent” (42). The meaning resides in the narrative itself, not in whatever historical event the account supposedly reflects. Another significant aspect of the above claim is that it touches upon the centrality of narrative as regards identity formation. When the characters in Morrison’s novels seek to come to terms with their past, they frequently attempt to put their experiences in the form of narrative. For example, what happens in *Solomon* is that Milkman must place himself in relation to the stories he is told.

When discussing what he refers to as “the systems of meaning production” (44), White identifies a concept which will be essential in the following analysis. He terms this the “modes of emplotment” (44), to be understood as what turns a set of events into a narrative. In order to make this point, White compares narrative with the chronicle. His main point is that while a chronicle relies strictly on chronology, “narrative utilizes other codes as well and produces a meaning quite different from that of any chronicle” (42). This opens for the possibility that there might be several different narrative accounts of the same events, but that it still does not make sense to argue that they are identical. As will be seen later, a given event can be understood and interpreted in a wide variety of ways.

While White analyzes how events can be conceptualized in narrative, he does to no great extent discuss how these different narratives stand in relation to each other. That is, he

does not consider how mechanisms of power contribute to the advancement of certain narratives at the expense of others. These mechanisms are extensively discussed in *Naturalizing Power*, an essay collection edited by Carol Delaney and Sylvia Yanagisako. In their introduction, they state that the collection seeks to investigate “ways in which differentials of power come already embedded in culture” (1). Tying this to my discussion, it seems that this view of narrative can be utilized in at least two ways. First of all, it can be utilized in order to ask why a given narrative takes the specific form it does. For instance, my discussion of *Solomon* will to a large extent revolve around the highly edited nature of the family history Milkman comes to know in the course of that novel. And secondly, the perspectives are well suited to ask why one narrative gains prominence at the expense of another.

Delaney and Yanagisako argue that “Origin stories are a prime locus for a society’s notion of itself—its identity, its worldview, and social organization” (2). As I take it, the same thing can be said of any kind of stories. White’s insight should make this clear, as he shows how a narrative necessarily will reflect those who tell the story. Delaney and Yanagisako place themselves in the same theoretical position when they “propose to treat origin stories neither as false tales nor as possible windows into real true origins, but as *representations* of origin” (2, emphasis in original). One of the assets of viewing these stories as representations is that it becomes easier to relate to supernatural elements, such as flying slaves or the presence of ghosts. Rather than asking whether a given narrative is true or false, it becomes meaningful to ask questions regarding the assumptions that inform the account. Yanagisako follows up on these considerations in her book *Producing Culture and Capital*, where she shows how significant various “narrative conventions” (50) are when individuals attempt to position themselves in and through narratives.

In his essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, Stuart Hall discusses many of the same questions, though from a slightly different angle. His argument is structured around two ways of conceptualizing identity, both of which are relevant for the past as articulated through narrative in Morrison’s fiction. The first concept involves viewing “‘cultural identity’ in terms of one shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’” (110). This entails a considerable belief in the ability of narrative to be all-inclusive and encompass every aspect of the reality in question. As will be seen, such a search for a monolithic and objectively true past is operative in each of the three novels I will focus on. But what happens when we are confronted with conflicting narratives, each of which claims to be the most authentic and significant? This is the situation we face in *Love*, where the characters present radically

diverging accounts of the same events. In order to deal with this plurality, Hall presents a second conception of cultural identity. According to this view, “identities are the name we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (112). At this point, Hall speaks of identities in the plural, and thus indicates that it is impossible to reduce identity to something objective and uniform. It is equally significant that this second concept implies that the individual becomes significant not only as the discoverer of the past, but takes a more active role in the production of meaning. In this it is easy to recognise the perspective on narrative discussed by White, as he emphasised how meaning is created through the production of narratives.

As indicated, all the three novels turn narrative into a thematic concern, and it is thus easy to note the prominent metafictional element involved. In my attempt to show how the novel turns narrative into an important thematic consideration, I will make use of some of the insights Gerard Genette presents in his book *Narrative Discourse*. Particular attention will be paid to those aspects of his analysis concerned with the narrative presentation of the past. This narrative perspective entails a dual focus. First of all, it is necessary to pay close attention to the stories of the past that emerge throughout the novels, and ask how they relate to each other. And, secondly, it is equally important to be aware of the assumptions that inform each narrative as it is structured by a narrator. Arguably, these assumptions never appear more clearly than when compared with those that structure another narrative.

This mechanism is described by Genette as “double narrative” (56), and functions “to modify the meaning of past occurrences after the event, either by making significant what was not so originally or by refuting a first interpretation and replacing it with a new one” (56). This structure is significant mainly because it allows us to ask why such changes in focus take place. For instance, it will be seen that the form of Milkman’s reinterpretation of his family’s past has ramifications for the meaning emerging in that novel. This plurality of voices is to be found in all the three novels, and makes it difficult to arrive at any clear understanding of what “really” happened. Of course, following White, attempts to arrive at an unambiguously true account will always end in failure.

Closely related to this is what Genette refers to as metadiegetic narratives, defined as a narrative told by one of the diegetic characters. Among the possible functions Genette attributes to this is the explanatory function (232). A character seeks to explain a given situation, and thus proceeds by telling a story of it. The consequence of such a move is that, in agreement with the view of narrative discussed earlier, the past is moved from the realm of what can be objectively known to that which can only be represented. For instance, the past as

presented in *Song of Solomon* mainly comes through accounts told by the various characters. In addition to connecting narrative so closely to the narrator, this move also works to indicate the centrality of narrative for the individual's identity formation.

This brings me to the last Genettean principle that will guide me in this discussion. In his analysis of matters of narrative voice, Genette discusses the conventional distinction between narrators in the first and the third person. He finds this distinction to be misleading because, as he states, "the narrator can be in his narrative . . . *only* in the first person" (244). The point Genette makes here is that every story is told by an "I", even if that "I" stays in the background and is generally content to describe what she sees. This mechanism will become especially clear in my discussion of *Jazz*, as that novel plays with our expectations regarding what a narrator is supposed to be and do.

As indicated by the above discussion, narratives are characterised as much by what they exclude as by what they include. This principle can serve as a point of transition, as I now will turn to a consideration of how issues regarding gender relate to the above discussion. I will mainly focus on male identity, as the male characters in Morrison's fiction have not received the same amount of attention as the female ones. In the following, I will show how male identity can be seen as articulated in and through narrative.

In his book *Are We Not Men?: Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity*, Phillip Brian Harper offers an analysis of several aspects of African American culture. In many ways, his analysis is quite narrative in its nature. Through discussing phenomena ranging from poetry in the 1960s to the trial of O.J. Simpson, Harper shows how identity always is about a selective process of inclusion and exclusion. In his essay "Nationalism and Social Division in Black Arts Poetry of the 1960", he argues that the coherent identity that emerges through the poetry is characterised by those aspects that are excluded as much as by those included. For instance, he discusses "the establishment of intraracial distinctions" (45), distinctions that work towards establishing a hierarchical relationship within one group. For instance, as will be seen later, the past Milkman learns of in *Song of Solomon* is constructed in terms of male descent. This is well illustrated by the name "Macon Dead", a name that passes from father to son. This testifies to an understanding of history related to Hall's first conception of cultural identity. As discussed earlier, that view involved seeing history as a stable essence that could be recovered. What becomes clear, however, is that such a view of history excludes as much as it includes, in this case through the omission of significant female characters. The "dynamics of expulsion" Harper discusses

(39) are operative in all the novels, revolving around the status of those who, in some way or another, fall outside the dominant mode of representation.

Harper makes this point when he in his introduction states that his “book is also a critique of black ‘authenticity’ and the conformist demands that the concept implies” (ix). As he argues for the constructed nature of identity, it makes sense to discard the notion that any conception of identity can be inherently authentic. Yet, what does it mean that these ideas regarding the advanced position of maleness are allowed to take hold? In my attempt to answer that question I will turn to bell hooks’ discussion of masculinity in *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*.

The following phrase recurs several times in hooks’ book: “the culture of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (xi). hooks sees this mixture of oppressive forces as structuring the society African Americans find themselves in. Her project is to show how, through “the brainwashing that takes place in a culture of domination” (xii), black men and women come to define themselves according to externally imposed definitions. Of course, one can legitimately ask to which extent it is possible for anyone to define their identity totally individually, with no interference from exterior elements. Also, hooks’ tendency to talk of the “culture of domination” as if it were a straightforward and unproblematic entity takes some of the strength out of her analysis. Nevertheless, she offers some insightful perspectives on how black male subjectivity is impeded by various cultural forces. Quoting herself, hooks argues that black men “wanted to be recognised as ‘men’, as patriarchs, by other men, including white men. Yet they could not assume this position if black women were not willing to conform to prevailing sexist gender norms” (7). Clearly, hooks sees the suppression of women as one aspect of what makes it possible for African American men to assume a patriarchal masculine identity. This identity makes up part of the broader ideological machinery hooks spends most of her book analysing and labelling. A good example of what hooks would see as a worst-case scenario of black masculinity is supplied by Milkman’s father Macon Dead. His need to maintain his status as a powerful and independent man leads him to attempting to coerce his family into submission, as Macon views any non-conformity on their part as reflecting on him. This helps explain why he fears that the people who lend him money will find out that the “bootlegger” Pilate, living in disregard of the norms of the hegemonic culture, is his sister (*Solomon* 20).

In essence, then, hooks’ project is to show how dominant conceptions of black masculinity, defined according to traditional norms of maleness and patriarchy, often lead to more harm than good. In the following analysis I will keep this perspective in mind, utilizing

it in combination with the focus on narrative articulations I have delineated above. One brief example, which I will return to in my discussion of *Jazz*, will make this clearer. In her book *Narrative Conventions and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, Jennifer Lee Jordan Heinert makes the claim that the narrator of *Jazz* speaks with “the voice of the dominant culture” (61). The implication of this is that the characters of *Jazz* are defined from a supposedly omniscient voice with the power to arrange everything according to the specific standards this voice sets out with. This situation, with a central perspective that attempts (and always fails) to be all-inclusive, is characteristic of all the novels I discuss in this thesis.

In the above pages, I have outlined the theoretical basis for my discussion. In all three chapters, the starting point will be a consideration of how the novels treat identity as fashioned through narrative. Implicit in this is the belief that narration is an act, and that it is impossible to talk of a narrative as if it could transparently stand for the reality it represents. When the narrator of *Jazz* speculates regarding Joe’s possible motivations for killing Dorcas, she communicates as much about her own preconceptions as about the life and times of Joe Trace. Similarly, Milkman’s understanding of his ancestors as a long line of prosperous males takes on a new meaning when questions are asked regarding those not named in the genealogies.

The narrative principle discussed above serves as the basis for the methodology I will utilize in the three chapters that follow. Paying close attention to the metadiegetic narratives (and to the diegetic narrator in *Jazz*), I will attempt to articulate how they might be understood as reflecting differences related to gender. It is important to stress that I do not intend to view these discrepancies in terms of an essential difference between men and women. Rather, I intend to view them in terms of different positions within a narrative system. This will be made particularly clear in my discussion of *Love*. In that novel, the conflict is best understood in terms of differing positions within a system of kinship, and not as reflecting pre-given differences. Doing this, I will attempt to combine perspectives from the field of narrative theory with some insights drawn from masculinity theory. Recognising that so much of the previous writing on Morrison has dealt with these issues, I will too attempt to position myself in the context of this discussion.

I have subdivided my thesis into three main chapters, each of which is devoted to one of the novels. I start off with a discussion of *Song of Solomon*, as that novel arguably is the one that is most explicitly concerned with narrative. I will commence that chapter by looking into the structuring principles of some of the accounts Milkman is told. As I take it, the most significant stories are those narrated by his father and aunt. While they tell of the same events,

the narratives they produce are so strikingly different that a comparative analysis is very fruitful. I will then proceed by asking how Milkman himself relates to these stories, before asking how mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion are operative in the world view he comes to adopt.

The strange narrator of *Jazz* will be the starting point of my analysis of that novel. Through the use of a narrator that makes her own investment in the story told explicit, *Jazz* highlights how a narrative inevitably reflects the assumptions of the narrator. I will thus ask how the narrator attempts to make the events she witnesses/invents congruent with her preconceptions regarding maleness and masculinity. I will then attempt to show how the characters' own framings of the events stand in relation to that supplied by the dominant voice of the narrator. Having done this, I will return to the narrator and discuss how one should understand her effort to fashion a neat narrative of origin that places the ancestors of Joe and Violet at the centre.

In my third chapter I will discuss *Love*, a novel that is very different from the other two. Compared with the grand attempts to get to know a mythic past we find in *Jazz* and *Solomon*, the legal feud at the centre of this novel seems quite prosaic. Yet, it is to the same extent as the two other concerned with the form the stories of the past take. I will attempt to show how the characters' view of Cosey is shaped by the relationship they had to him when he was alive. The presence of so many different views goes a good way towards showing that there can exist no objective narrative truth outside of the assumptions that inform each account.

Chapter 1

Son of Solomon: The Gender of the Past in *Song of Solomon*

In one of the most frequently cited passages from Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon*, we encounter Milkman Dead looking at himself in the mirror. Musing on his appearance, he recognises that "it lacked coherence, a coming together of the features into a total self" (70). This situation stands in obvious contrast to the one at the novel's end, when he has arrived at a sense of a unified identity. For instance, he becomes aware of the rich history that lies behind his name. What the novel does is to chronicle Milkman's search for a way out of the identity crisis which haunts him. This search for a coherent identity is closely linked to narratives. Milkman is told of his past by several people, all of whom have their own specific angle they want to get across. Arguably, these stories constitute the core of the novel's structure. The starting point of my discussion will be a consideration of the metadiegetic narratives. I will always work from the assumption that they are told by people who occupy specific social positions. The questions asked have to do with the gendered assumptions that inform these perspectives. Secondly, I intend to understand these gendered narratives in relation to Milkman's quest for a coherent sense of (male) identity, and discuss how Milkman's knowledge of his family's past leads to a renewed understanding of his own being. While there are many possible reasons for why these accounts differ, I intend to mainly emphasise how the discrepancies might be understood as related to gender. I will thus ask questions regarding the reasons for different variants of the "same" story.

As it is a fact beyond doubt that Milkman experiences an identity crisis in the novel's first part, it seems fruitful to briefly account for the concept of "The Crisis of Masculinity". Michael Kimmel touches upon this in *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*. While critical of Robert Bly and the more radical reactions to this alleged crisis, he insightfully discusses what the movement is feeding on. He identifies the fear "that we have lost our ability to claim our manhood in a world without fathers, without frontiers, without manly creative work" (321) as contributing to the sense of crisis. While the above quote is taken from a discussion of the plight of white men in the 1980s, it too illuminates central aspects of Milkman's attempt to construct his identity. It is especially Kimmel's talk of "a world without fathers" that strikes me as suggestive, as it resonates with the situation Milkman finds himself in. While he interacts with his father, the communication between them is not based on mutual understanding. Rather, there is something that makes it difficult for Milkman to

comprehend his father's viewpoint. In the context of the novel, it does not seem to be that much of a stretch to extend the meaning of father so that it refers to the totality of his male lineage. Knowledge of this lineage will become essential if Milkman is to achieve a coherent sense of identity. It thus emerges that the search for a narrative of gendered origins is central in Morrison's novel.

In Milkman's case, the idea of "a world without frontiers" (321) has much to do with the total ease characterising his life. Thinking about this situation, Milkman realizes that "Boredom, which had begun as a mild infection, now took him over completely" (90). This feeling is not shared by any of the other characters. For instance, as will be seen shortly, his father makes sense of his life through the accumulation of property. As an indicator of the profound egoism that characterises Milkman, we can consider that he chooses to blame others for his aimless existence. For instance, the only problem Milkman sees about his affair with Hagar is that it makes him lazy. The fact that he turns her into an object does not occur to him until the very end of the novel, after he has developed and changed (*Solomon* 332). Given the static quality of Milkman's life, it is easy to see his journey southwards as a reaction to his previous way of life.

Yet, as hinted at above, it is the lacking sense of connection between men that more than anything defines Milkman's identity crisis. He feels disconnected from his father, mainly because he does not manage to mobilize the same level of obsession when dealing with property. While his father has always had to fight for it, Milkman has simply had the material goods handed to him. Thus, he is unable to see what it is that makes his father so passionate about money and material wealth. Milkman is equally unable to identify with his friend Guitar when they reach adulthood. Guitar is drawn further and further into the sect-like world of the Seven Days. What Milkman's father and Guitar have in common is that they are highly passionate about their respective endeavours, an enthusiasm Milkman does not share. Consequently, these models prove unsatisfactory to him, and he has to look elsewhere for the principles that will allow him to articulate his identity. This search for a coherent identity will be the guiding focus of this chapter, as I will ask how Milkman utilizes knowledge of the past in order to achieve a sense of self. However, as will be seen shortly, "knowledge of the past" is by no means an unproblematic entity.

When Milkman's father prefaces one of the stories he tells Milkman with the words "Nothing I'm about to say is by way of apology or excuse. It's just information" (70), we have every reason to be suspicious of his claim. Can anyone really be so freed from their background and outlook that they can narrate a story they are part of without spinning it in

their specific way? Had Macon's view been the only one presented in the text, it would naturally have come across as much more authoritative. As it is, we get to hear from many distinct voices in the course of the novel. This plurality works towards reducing the inherent authority of any single perspective. These voices can roughly be divided into two categories.

First of all, it is necessary to note that the action is presented through several focalisers. Consequently, we encounter a wide variety of viewpoints. What is significant about this variation is that while the characters mainly interpret the same events, they do so in very different ways. Through this, the picture of a family being torn apart by differing interpretations of the same events emerges clearly. Quantitatively speaking, Milkman's perspective is dominant. But, as I will argue later, his immaturity and childish behaviour works towards reducing the authority of his perspective.

Secondly, most of the characters are also allowed to present metadiegetic narratives where they articulate their understanding of the past. Genette defines a metadiegetic narrative as "second-degree narrative" (231), embedded within the first-degree, diegetic one. These are of greatest prominence in the older characters, partly for the reason that they have much more of a past to tell about. In fact, the question of access to the past will turn out to become very important in this discussion. But, as will be seen, the fact that a character is given space to narrate his/her past does by no means guarantee that character's individual autonomy. As the past mainly is brought across through such metadiegetic narratives, we do not have any objective access to the past as it "really happened". Rather, what we get is a mixture of recollections that communicate as much about the speaker as about that which is spoken of.

The focus on ownership we encounter in the stories told by Milkman's father indicates that there is no such thing as "just information" (70), that there always is a structuring principle. This is the case not only in the accounts told by Milkman's father, but in all the narratives encountered in the novel. For instance, the great discrepancy between the accounts of Pilate and Macon Dead makes it clear that there is no point in trying to decide which of them is true. This is because they emphasise completely different aspects of the past in their respective accounts. This situation resonates well with the perspectives Hayden White discusses in *The Content of the Form*. Part of what he discusses in this collection is "the ideological function of the narrative mode of representation" (ix). I take this to be related to an investigation of the assumptions that underlie a given narrative. It is important to remember that most of the analepses are explicitly communicated on the novel's diegetic level. For instance, when Milkman's father tells his son about his past, the emphasis cannot solely be put on the gendered aspect. It is equally necessary to consider the communicative

part of the equation. Clearly, it is just as significant that the story is told to persuade as that it is told by a man. The above points lead up to the assumption that there is no objective truth in any narrative account, and that they, as Delaney and Yanagisako have argued, rather must be understood as “representations” (2). But, it is also the case that some representations are more balanced than others, and thus can be given more weight. For instance, I will later argue that Pilate’s outlook is much more central to Milkman’s development than his father’s. They are both representations, but that Pilate supplies comes across as more reliable. Following this view, what the accounts exclude becomes just as significant as what they include.

Discussing how the frequency aspect of narrative time can be manipulated, one of the formulas Genette comes up with is “narrating *n* times what happened once” (115). The first example he gives of such a temporal ordering is the following: “Yesterday I went to bed early, yesterday I went to bed early, yesterday I went to bed early, etc” (115). This example is made mostly as an illustration, and Genette immediately goes on to show how a narrative might be enriched by having the same events narrated more than once. *Song of Solomon* supplies good examples of such mechanisms, as the novel centrally deals with differing interpretations of the same event. This plurality creates an interpretational challenge, as it is not always given which version of the events we are to grant the most authority and legitimacy. It is this Axel Nissen discusses in his article “Form Matters: Toni Morrison’s *Sula* and the Ethics of Narrative”. He describes that novel as “a perspectival relay race” (271). As *Sula* shows how any event might be understood in a number of ways, Nissen’s description is fitting. He argues that the act of interpretation becomes an aspect of both the form and the content of the novel. Clearly, much of the same can be said of *Song of Solomon*, as that novel too asks questions regarding the very basis for interpretation. Nissen argues that finding a novel’s dominant voice in is not simply a matter of identifying the character with the most lines. For instance, while recognising that Sula and Eva get “all the good lines” (278), Nissen sees Eva, not Sula, as occupying the ethical centre of that novel. This is mainly because she to a far greater extent than the other characters is able to step back and see the totality of the situation. This mechanism is also evident in *Solomon*. According to many critics, the perspective of Milkman’s aunt Pilate carries the most weight, even though Milkman is the novel’s protagonist (Wilentz 62). However, for most of the novel he does not really seem to stand for anything, and rather embodies a general carelessness. His aunt, on the other hand, has insight and knowledge that at times seems to border on the supernatural.

As most of the novel’s analepses are located on the metadiegetic level, narrated by the characters, there is no way of measuring the degree to which they conform to the truth. In

fact, given the plurality of voices and White's argument regarding "the ideological function of narrative" (xi), talk of any kind of "truth" becomes rather meaningless. How should one then view the following claim, made by Joyce Irene Middleton in her article "Orality, Literacy and Memory in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*": "The story of Milkman is a story about reconstituting the memory of the past and connecting it with the experiences of the present" (72). When the "memory of the past" turns out to be so changing and contextual it is not given that it simply can be reconstituted. Clearly, the crucial word in Middleton's claim is "memory", as she does not really claim that the past itself can be reconstituted, merely the subjective impression it makes in people's minds. It then seems necessary to ask precisely which version of the past it is that Milkman might be said to "reconstitute". This is because he stands at the receiving end of many narratives of the past, narratives that differ so much that it is difficult to believe that they refer to the same incidents. We see this in the accounts of their early life as told by Pilate and Milkman's father. In and of themselves, these metadiegetic narratives have equal status, as they both are attributed to a character in the story and located on the same narrative level. However, the accounts differ in that they include and exclude different aspects of the same events.

The importance of such mechanisms of exclusion is discussed by Philip Brian Harper in his essay collection *Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity*, where he discusses the problems surrounding identity formation extensively. One of his central arguments is that any conception of identity will exclude as much as it includes. For instance, in his chapter on "Black Arts Nationalism and Social Division" Harper identifies the establishment of "intraracial distinctions" (45) as significant. This is all about exclusion, about those who do not fit into whatever definition is currently most significant. For instance, according to the ideals set out by Milkman's father, a man should be judged by the amount of property he has been able to amass. This mechanism becomes even clearer in the case of Milkman's childhood friend Guitar, who has joined an organisation that seems to exclude every human who is not a single African American man nurturing an intense hatred of white people. I will now look into the narrative framings of Milkman's father, illuminating them through a comparison with the perspective embodied by his sister Pilate. Their respective outlooks offer a particularly interesting comparison, mainly because they embody radically differing interpretations of the same events.

Halfway through the novel, Milkman's father tells his son about the time following his father's death. While most of the story is told in the third person, I take the altered personal pronoun to be a stylistic choice made in order to integrate the lengthy analepsis into the main

narrative. It will later be seen that the same thing is done in Pilate's narrative of her early years. In his account, Macon focuses on the close relationship between himself and his sister when they were young. In the initial parts of this story they are described as being of more or less the same mind, having a shared enthusiasm for what nature has to offer. For instance, the first day following their escape from the Butler family's house is described in terms of the access to the outdoors. At one point, they are described as being "so grateful for open air even the field mice and the ticks were welcome bedmates" (168). The main significance of this passage lies in the difference between the perspective of Macon as narrator and as focaliser of the story. The focus on nature that characterises him when young is excluded by the focus on ownership and capital that marks him as an adult.

This discrepancy is related to an insight Stuart Hall arrives at in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", where the relationship between cultural identity and the past is discussed. Hall argues that "though we speak, so to say 'in our own name', of ourselves and from our own experience, nevertheless who speaks, and the subject who is spoken of, are never identical, never exactly in the same place" (110). In other words, there will always be a gap between the speaking character as narrator and focaliser of his story. We see this in the accounts of Macon and his sister, as they frame their accounts in distinctive ways. What I will look into in the following is how these discrepancies might be understood as informed by gendered assumptions, and to what extent they make any impression on Milkman.

Commenting on the difference between himself and his sister, Macon says that "Pilate can't teach you a thing you can use in this world. Maybe the next, but not this one. Let me tell you right now the one important thing you'll ever need to know: own things" (55). Directed at Milkman, this statement contains the message Macon Dead wants to communicate to his son. While his belief that what he says is "the one important thing" is dubious, his claim captures the difference he perceives between his own and his sister's view of the world. He perceives himself and Pilate as located on wholly different levels of existence. These differences play out in terms of how they live their lives on the novel's diegetic level, but I would argue that they are equally significant when it comes to their understandings of the past. The emerging question thus has to do with the preconceptions that inform these narratives.

Throughout the novel, we get a clear sense of how important his sense of self and independence is to Milkman's father. For instance, we learn that he would be willing to see to it that his sister was put in prison, were it not for his fear that she would "loudmouth him and make him seem trashy" (24). Discussing this in his article "The Long Strut: *Song of Solomon* and the Emancipatory Limits of Black Patriarchy", Rolland Murray argues that Macon fears

this because Pilate's "existence bursts through the fantasy of bourgeois autonomy he has created" (128). I take this need to maintain independence to be the overarching narrative principle which structures his accounts as they are told to Milkman. If this is the case, Macon's unwillingness to allow his son to see Pilate makes a great deal of sense. After all, Pilate's understanding of "the next world" seemingly has very little to do with the world of money and business as Macon sees it. In this it is easy to recognise the dynamic of exclusion Harper views as central to African American identity.

When Macon first tells his son of their family's past, we are presented with the two most significant elements in his attempt to create a coherent narrative of his past. Both of these have to do with the relationship to the hegemonic culture he sees himself as constantly up against. In *We Real Cool*, hooks defines this as "the culture of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (xi), a conglomeration of forces she sees as permeating society. In *Solomon*, this manifests itself in the question of literacy. This mechanism is discussed by Middleton, whose main thesis is that traditional literacy manifests itself as a symbol of all that is oppressive about the dominant culture (67). Describing how his illiterate father was tricked into "signing" a contract by white land-owners, Macon claims that "everything bad that happened to him happened because he couldn't read" (53). He thus views a thorough knowledge of the dominant discourse as a prerequisite for success in "this world". This emphasis on the written and officially sanctioned culture might then be contrasted with the alternative view Pilate represents.

Milkman's father is discussed extensively by Rolland Murray in the article quoted above. While Macon's understanding of the power inherent in literacy is significant, Murray argues that what primarily fuels Macon's understanding of the past is property (127). Milkman's father sees this as linked to his masculinity and independence, and believes the accumulation of property is the most meaningful endeavour a man can engage in. The primary symbol of this view of property is Lincoln's Heaven, the farm he and his father built up from scratch. Describing the life at the farm to his son, he says "I worked right alongside my father. Right alongside him" (51). The repetition makes it clear that he attaches great significance to the companionship which was involved. Towards the end of the novel, Milkman reaches a crucial insight regarding the motivation of his father. He recognises that his father "paid homage to his own father's life and death by loving what that father had loved: property" (300). We see this in Macon's initial description of the farm to his son. Having told about working with his father, he progresses by describing the farm in terms of real estate, listing the valuable parts of the property. In "The Politics of Space: Southernness and Manhood in

the Fictions of Toni Morrison”, Herman Beavers argues that, to Macon, the murder of his father is primarily meaningful in terms of the loss of valuable property, of how their material values were stolen from them (69).

Significantly, we also get to know that it is conflicts over material values that (at least on the surface level) lead to the estrangement between Macon and Pilate. Believing that Pilate stole the gold they found, Macon is unable to forgive what he sees as an act of betrayal. However, we later learn that she did not steal the gold. Arguably, Macon’s inclination to blame Pilate tells us more about him than about his sister, as he is unable to see beyond economic motivations. It is plausible to argue that this makes up part of the reason for why Milkman has such difficulties connecting to his father’s viewpoint. Never having experienced the need to struggle for anything, he cannot understand the need that fuels his father. For instance, after Macon has told his son about the early years of his marriage, Milkman sympathizes with his father’s situation, “but part of his sympathy came from the fact that he himself was not involved or in any way threatened by the stranger’s story” (75). What is especially noteworthy about this passage is that Milkman compares his father to a stranger, someone he does not really know. Thus, there exists a gap that makes it difficult for Milkman to meaningfully relate to the past as narrated by his father.

In *We Real Cool*, bell hooks comments on the perceived link between masculinity and property, a connection Milkman’s father bases his life on. Her main thesis, running through the whole book, is that the consequences of African American men’s attempt to conform to traditional masculine ideals are overwhelmingly negative. In this context, she quotes Margaret Wilkerson, a literary critic who has written on the link between male identity and capitalism. Wilkerson identifies the idea that “the possession of money and the things it can buy will make him a man in the eyes of his family and society” (quoted in hooks 16). It takes no great effort to see that this is relevant to an understanding of Milkman’s father. For instance, every Sunday Milkman’s father takes his family on a ride in the car. The narrator states that the trips “had become rituals and much too important for Macon to enjoy. For him it was a way to satisfy himself that he was indeed a successful man” (31). Macon literally puts his manhood on display, and constructs an image of himself defined by his access to material goods.

In spite of his material success, there are strong textual indicators that Macon Dead does not constitute an ideal in the novel. Rolland Murray discusses this in the abovementioned article. His central argument is that the novel shows how any movement towards independence founded on patriarchal notions will work towards the subjugation of someone else. For instance, he argues that Macon’s autonomy is founded on the suppression of those

around him (127). A good example of this is the position he occupies in his family. Described as keeping “each member of his family awkward with fear” (10), there is clearly something coercive about the basis for his authority. As will be seen later, the fear-inducing nature of his authority comes across as weak when compared to that radiating from his sister Pilate.

As discussed, the patriarchal hyper-masculinity of Macon Dead must be understood as a construct, related to performance. According to Rolland Murray, Macon’s “strutting” functions as a potent illustration of this performed identity (128). In order to illuminate this I will now move on to discuss the channels Macon’s perspective is mediated through. One of these, the explicitly communicated metadiegetic accounts, I have already discussed at some length. When considering these accounts, it is essential to keep their rhetorical nature in mind. Secondly, there is what Dorrit Cohn, in her book *Transparent Minds*, has termed psychonarrations, with the narrator describing the thoughts of the character (11). And thirdly, we have the omniscience of the narrator, who has the possibility to reveal what none of the characters know.

The clearest example of the first narrative channel is the various narratives Macon tells his son. As shown earlier, they are designed to build up the image Macon has of himself as independent and self-sufficient. When describing his conflicted relationship with his late father-in-law, he frames the story so that he becomes an independent man standing up to unfair resistance. These narratives serve the same purpose as the car-rides discussed earlier; they are meant to articulate Macon’s view of himself as an independent and self-sufficient man. We see this mechanism clearly when he tells Milkman about the early years of his marriage. In this account, Macon describes his father-in-law, a physician whose prominence stemmed from the fact that he was the first African American doctor in the city. Clearly embittered at him, Macon frames the doctor as failing in all the aspects of life that Macon himself emphasises. For instance, he attributes his father-in-law’s calmness to his habit of sniffing ether (71). What he does is to reduce the standing of his father-in-law in order to increase his own, for instance through making it clear that the doctor made a grave mistake when he would not lend Macon money to invest in land that later became valuable (72). In this account, it is clear that Macon sees himself (and wants his son to see him) as an independent entrepreneur, while those who oppose him are seen as lacking in both manhood and morality.

The psychonarrations are somewhat different. This is partly because they are not marked by the same self-conscious rhetoric we find in the explicitly spoken analepses. As *Solomon*’s narrator is not questioned in the same way as *Jazz*’s, we have little reason to doubt

the accuracy of the psychonarrations. A good example of this mechanism occurs early in the narrative, when Milkman's father goes to Pilate's house. We are told that he wanted "to see the three of them, the source of that music that made him think of fields and wild turkey and calico" (30). Middleton places much emphasis on this passage, and argues that Macon reconnects with his past through listening to his sister (67). The harmony he experiences upon seeing his sister indicates that his hyper-masculinity can be seen as only one aspect of his identity. It is clear that when "he felt the irritability of the day drain from him and relished the effortless beauty of the women singing in the candlelight" (29), he is taking on a perspective very different from the one he communicates to his son. What we see here is that while parts of his experience are excluded from the explicitly narrated accounts, they nevertheless are present on some level. This argument is strengthened by the fact that we also find traces of this sentimentality in his talks with Milkman. At one point, Milkman notices that his father's voice sounded "more southern and comfortable and soft" (53). Talking about his past, ideals different from those he attempts to communicate come to the surface.

There is an incident which even more clearly underlines the constructed nature of Macon's position. Thinking back on his courtship of his wife, he asserts that "It was because of those keys that he could dare to walk over to that part of Not Doctor Street . . . and approach the most important Negro in the city" (22). This manner of thinking is perfectly in line with what we have learned of the outlook of Milkman's father. But, the narrator then says something that significantly reduces the authority of Macon's analepsis. This statement, whose truth we have no reason to doubt, ends with stating that the doctor never told Macon the real reason why he allowed Macon to marry his daughter. Macon's belief that "the magic had lain in the two keys" (23) is thus revealed as a construct, a consequence of his focus on the link he sees between authentic manhood and property.

The basic premise of my above discussion of Milkman's father is that he embodies a generally recognisable attitude. Keeping his family "awkward with fear" (10), he is a perfect example of the patriarch hooks describes in her book. His sister, on the other hand, is far more difficult to place. In "'Unruly and Let Loose': Myth, Ideology and Gender in *Song of Solomon*", Michael Awkward discusses Morrison's claim that Pilate embodies the best of both male and female perspectives (488). I think there is a great deal of truth in this, given that it is very difficult to neatly pigeonhole Pilate and her outlook. In fact, in the following I will argue that this resistance to classification is a key aspect of Pilate's character, and what primarily sets her apart from the rigidity of her brother's views.

In many ways, Pilate is an exceptional character in the novel. To show why that is, it might be a good idea to briefly consider the conventions regarding women's behaviour she so clearly deviates from. As I take it, Milkman's mother Ruth embodies several aspects of this norm. The daughter of the first African American doctor in the city, she was taught to live up to the strict standards set up by her father. Telling Milkman about her childhood, she says that she "lived in a great big house that pressed [her] into a small package" (125). In this it is easy to recognise the mechanism of exclusion that was so important in my analysis of Milkman's father. Commenting on the passage quoted above, Rolland Murray describes Ruth's relation to her father in terms of her "investment in her father's symbolic authority" (124). Thus, Murray argues that Ruth fashioned herself according to the ideals defined by powerful men. Much of the same can be said of Milkman's two sisters, though most clearly in the case of First Corinthians. Having gone to college and received an education in order to marry someone "suitable", she seems trapped within the confines of the ideals of her father.

While Milkman's mother and sisters seemingly are subjected to conventional authority, the same cannot be said of Pilate. Biased though many of his views are, Macon identifies a key aspect of Pilate when he comments on her understanding of "the next world". This is only one way of commenting on Pilate's awareness of things that extend beyond the material world that concerns her brother. In her article "Civilisations Underneath: African Heritage as Cultural Discourse in *Song of Solomon*", Gay Wilentz argues that "It is only Pilate for whom storytelling is not self-dramatization, self-justification or ego-action" (64). Arguably, Wilentz goes too far in indicating that Pilate somehow is entirely freed from the constraints that limit the perspectives of the others. Yet, it nevertheless seems clear that the sense of injured righteousness we find in many of the other perspectives is lacking in Pilate's. A good example of this is the fact that she does not all seem interested in allotting blame, not even when Milkman and Guitar break into her house and steal what they believe is gold. In contrast to this accepting attitude is Milkman's father's, who holds that Pilate is not trustworthy and refuses his son to see her. The balance which characterises Pilate's outlook leads Wilentz to claim that "Pilate is unmistakably Morrison's preferred storyteller" (64). I think there is considerable truth in this, primarily because the development Milkman goes through in the last part of the novel entails the taking on of many of Pilate's ideas.

The first encounter between Pilate and Milkman is exemplary of the interaction between them, as most of the important themes that recur in Pilate's narratives are to be found here. During this meeting, Pilate asks Milkman and Guitar the following question: "What difference does it make if the thing you scared of is real or not?" (41). Through arguing for

the significance of that which cannot be reduced to property and solid objects, she establishes a view of reality far removed from the materialism of her brother. The following passage illustrates how Pilate views the standards her brother lives by: “I just know what I’m telling you: what, when and where”./ “You didn’t say where”. He was insistent./ “I did too. Off a fence”./ “Where was the fence?”/ “On our farm”/. . . “Where was the farm”?/ “Montour County”/ He gave up on ‘where’” (42). While Pilate answers every question, she never does it as Milkman and Guitar expect. I think it is safe to assume that Pilate’s brother would never have answered the question “where?” with “off a fence”. In fact, as shown earlier, he answers a similar question by describing the place where his father was killed in terms of its value as real-estate. Pilate’s description of the event is very different, with little or no emphasis given to the material surroundings. In fact, she quickly moves on to describe their seeing the ghost of their father. Later in the novel, when Pilate tells part of the same story to Ruth, she says that “I saw Papa shot. Blown off a fence five feet into the air. I saw him wigglin on the ground, but not only did I not see him die, I seen him since he was shot” (140). What is significant here is that Pilate opens up for the possibility that not all things are what they seem, and that some things are best understood through an alternative sensibility. In contrast to her brother, Pilate is able to see beyond the world of appearances. This ability allows her to interact with her father even after he has become a victim of white greed and aggression.

As shown in the above pages, most of the metadiegetic narratives are directed at Milkman. For the first 200 pages of the novel they constitute the access he has to the past. What I will do now is to look into the way Milkman himself responds to these accounts. It seems fruitful to once again turn to Hall’s essay, where he discusses different ways of conceptualizing cultural identity. His essay is structured around two different conceptions. According to the first of these, cultural identity can be understood “in terms of one shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’ “ (110). Following this, it seems that if that “one true self” is communicated, people will get access to their authentic history. Arguably, this is what happens in the first part of the novel. Several of the characters sit down with Milkman and attempt to explicitly communicate their respective understandings of the past to him. However, Milkman remains disconnected from these narratives, and they do not make any lasting impression on him. When his father tells him about the problems he faced in the early years of his marriage, Milkman reacts in the following way: “He was entirely sympathetic to the stranger’s problems, understood perfectly his view of what had happened to him—but part of his sympathy came from the fact that he himself was not in any way threatened by the stranger’s story” (74). It thus seems that receiving the narratives as a passive listener is not

sufficient for Milkman, especially not when the past is constructed so as to mean only one thing.

While the above perspective on cultural identity entailed an essentialisation of the past, the same cannot be said of the second conception discussed by Hall. According to this, identity must be seen as “the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (112). If the first conception essentialized the past, the second does the exact opposite, through recognising that “different” and “positioning” are key concepts when it comes to identity formation. This implies that identity is constructed rather than discovered, and thus opens up for a subjective and individualized view of identity. What happens in the second part of the novel is precisely that Milkman positions himself within the narratives he is told, finds a way to make them relevant to his experience. This has a great deal to do with Middleton’s claim that Milkman must “reconstitute the past” (72). However, simply to say that the past is reconstituted is incomplete. What must be asked is precisely which/whose version of the past it is that is rediscovered. For instance, does Milkman’s journey come to reflect the materialism of his father or the spirituality of his aunt?

At first, it seems that Milkman’s quest is guided by his father’s ideals. The initial purpose of his journey southwards is to find the gold he believes his father and aunt left behind many years before. Upon setting out, Milkman views this treasure as what will be needed in order to break out of the unsatisfying life he has led up to then. He thinks that the gold will finally make him independent of his family, and thus resolve his identity crisis. In short, he sees access to material wealth as supplying him with the means to achieve transcendence. While he clearly experiences a renewed sense of identity upon going south, it seems to me that this renewal has little to do with material values. It is through his emerging sense of connection to his ancestors that he experiences growth.

The first stop on his journey is Danville in Pennsylvania. While there, he talks to people who knew his grandfather, father and aunt when they, many years earlier, lived in the area. Like in the first part, Milkman is told the story of how his grandfather was killed while protecting his property. However, his reaction upon this hearing is very different. He does not remain detached and uninvolved, but becomes angry. “Milkman wondered at his own anger. He hadn’t felt angry when he first heard about it. Why now?” (232). “Why now?” is in fact a very good question, and a satisfying answer to that question will go a long way towards explaining Milkman’s development. Just before he experiences the anger mentioned above, Milkman offers the following explanation for his change: “Maybe it was being there in the

place where it happened that made it seem so real” (231). What happens is that Milkman comes to view the past of his family as increasingly connected to his own situation. When this happens, it seems to me that the primary narrative takes on what I would propose to call “analeptic contagion”. In other words, the present takes on the properties of the past. Following this, the present (as well as the past) is subjected to resignification. Yet, the question remains as to which version of the past he comes to identify with.

As mentioned above, it initially seems that Milkman adopts the ideals of his father. In Danville he becomes something of a celebrity because of his male ancestors, whose business ventures are well remembered there. To them, “the tall, magnificent Macon Dead” (235) has become an image of what Murray describes as “the potential power of individual male autonomy” (126). This resonates well with the link between property and manhood as understood by Milkman’s father. Just like Macon, the men in Danville emphasise the value of property. However, things change once Milkman leaves Danville and has to find his way in the wilderness. Going in search of the cave where he believes the gold is hidden, the things he had previously relied on grow increasingly useless. Wandering through the forest wearing his three-piece suit, he consistently chooses the less convenient route. His nice clothing and material wealth is of little use to him in this context, and the achievements of his kin totally immaterial. It is easy to get the sense that time somehow stands still. The fact that Milkman damages his watch upon crossing the river is a subtle indication of the “time travel”-like aspect of his journey. This tendency is underlined further when he goes to Shalimar in Virginia. There his money does not earn him any respect. If he is to gain people’s respect in Shalimar, it is not sufficient to own things. The reality he comes to recognise thus runs counter to what he has been taught by his father.

Tying this development to the idea of “analeptic contagion”, it seems clear that Milkman’s quest is characterised by the alternative sensibility that marks Pilate’s perspective. For instance, his visit to Circe is characterised by a strange mixture of realism and fantasy. Milkman himself notes that the Butler house, former home of the people who killed his grandfather, “did look like a murderer’s house. Dark, ruined, evil” (231). It is probable that Milkman’s father would have looked at the house in terms of its value as property, and not personified it. This tendency is made even clearer when Milkman goes into the house and encounters Circe. Describing her, the narrator states that Circe was “so old she was colorless” (240), and yet spoke with “the strong, mellifluous voice of a twenty-year-old girl” (240). The whole encounter is characterised by the transgression of boundaries, transgressions that have been revealed as central to Pilate’s perspective (for instance through her refusal to separate

between cousins and siblings). In a sense, then, Milkman might be said to rediscover himself in Pilate's world. This claim is strengthened by the fact that Milkman almost literally travels back in time while there, as Circe confuses him with his father. Pilate's perspective thus becomes very real to Milkman, and to a great extent shapes his own understanding of the world he comes to know. As indicated, he eventually interprets the present in terms of what it meant to his ancestors. The changes his outlook goes through are made clear during his stay in the small town Shalimar.

What he must do in order to gain the respect of the men in Shalimar is manifested when some old men take him hunting. It becomes clear that few of the things Milkman has learnt earlier will be of any use at that point. For instance, he is told to leave his money behind, as the coins make too much noise. What happens is that he increasingly has to rely on an awareness closely related to Pilate's emphasis on sensory perception. During the hunt, Milkman has only himself and his own abilities to guide him. At one point he muses that "all he had started out with on his journey was gone" (277). Thus, he has to rely on something else. And in fact, this "something else" comes to save his life. While resting, "he tried to listen with his fingertips, to hear what, if anything, the earth had to say, and it told him quickly that someone was standing behind him" (279). He thus manages to stop Guitar from killing him. What saves him is thus his growing awareness of a reality beyond the one his father has taught him is the only one worth knowing. In sum, I will conclude that the reality Milkman gets to know in the second part of the novel is closely connected to the perspective Pilate embodies. This opens up for a seeming contradiction. How are we to understand a situation where the past is framed as being *about* men, while it is mainly framed and narrated *by* women? It is to these questions, regarding the specifically gendered aspects of the myths Milkman gets access to, that I now will turn.

I have argued that Hall's second conception of cultural identity is the most relevant when it comes to understanding the development Milkman goes through. This is mainly because of the great potential inherent in the word "positioning", as it implies an interactive and changing view of identity. In the case of Milkman, I take it that he positions himself in at least two ways. First of all, he comes to reposition himself through getting access to the places he until then had only been told about in a different context. Going south, Milkman far more directly sees the past as relevant to his present situation. For instance, Milkman experiences great happiness upon learning that the "Sugarman" he has heard Pilate singing about actually is his ancestor Solomon. He is thus able to place himself within the narrative of his family. While this initially is a totally positive experience to Milkman, his positioning changes

towards the end of the novel. Awkward touches upon this second sense of positioning when he discusses the death of Hagar, which Awkward sees as shattering “the male monomythic sequence” (492). Through the story of Hagar it is made clear that mythic transcendence is not for everyone. At the end of the novel Milkman himself realizes this. In Awkward’s words, Milkman “begins to see a clear connection between his act and that of his mythic forebear” (496). When he has returned to Michigan and learnt that Hagar is dead, he muses that “While he dreamt of flying, Hagar was dying” (332). As shown, the fact that something/someone will be excluded from any given narrative is one of the central arguments of the novel as a whole.

The novel’s second part begins with a reference to the story of Hansel and Gretel, which I take to be an indication of the myth-like characteristics of the novel as a whole. A. Leslie Harris comments on this in “Myth as Structure in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*”, where the central argument is that the story of Milkman is a quest narrative (70). It is hard to argue with this, given the common mythical theme of the independent-minded man going out to seek his fortune. This link between maleness and myth is commented on by Stephen M. Whitehead in his book *Men and Masculinities*, where he argues that the “mythology of man leaving home to engage in a heroic project maintains a resounding presence in most societies” (119). Clearly, Milkman’s quest can well be seen in relation to such a view of myth. But, as Awkward argues, what *Solomon* does is to illuminate that which is shunted to the sidelines and denied representation in the grand narratives of the men who leave home in order to fulfil their potential. This theme has been prominent throughout my analysis, for instance in my discussion of the mechanisms of exclusion that characterise so many of the metadiegetic narratives in the novel. As I will show in the following paragraphs, the importance of these exclusions only increases as the narrative progresses.

Up until now I have talked a great deal about the context of Milkman’s renewed sense of belonging, without really accounting for the narrative he comes to know. Briefly put, what Milkman rediscovers is the story of his family’s past. In addition to the renewal of old stories he has been told many times, he also gets to know accounts that are new to him. These mainly deal with the life of Solomon/Shalimar, Milkman’s great-grandfather, who is remembered for his escape from slavery through literally taking flight and returning to Africa. As Awkward has noted, what is significant about this is that the story is specifically defined as being about what *men* do (484). For instance, when her husband takes flight, Shalimar’s wife Ryna goes mad with grief. Shalimar is the one allowed to act, while his wife is only allowed to react. As will be seen, this gendered bias manifests itself in Milkman’s conceptualization of the past.

Investigating these dynamics, it once again is fruitful to turn to Stuart Hall's essay. Commenting on his second concept of cultural identity, Hall claims that identity is "Not an essence but a positioning. Hence, there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental 'law of origin'" (113). In essence, he argues that there is no stable foundation for any unified and unifying identity. When identity becomes social, issues of power obviously come to the forefront, as who is represented within a given narrative will depend upon who it is that speaks and from where this speaking takes place. But, if the past is framed as a story of male succession, what happens to perspectives supplied by women? *Solomon* is well suited for an investigation of this question, as the plurality of perspectives is such an important part of the novel's structure. For instance, should one view Pilate's position as merely that of the helper who guides the mythic hero on his way to transcendence, or should she, as Wilentz argues, be understood as a "custodian of the culture" (63), the transmitter of a message which (maybe erroneously) is thought to move from man to man, with no role played by women (63)? In the following I will look into how this "man to man"-idea is both presented and problematised in the novel.

Macon Dead I-Macon Dead II-Macon Dead III. Looking for the structuring mode of emplotment in the novel, it is difficult to ignore the suggestion of continuity supplied by the male side of Milkman's paternal kin. To me it seems that the transmission of the family name indicates that what passes through the generations is framed as passing from father to son, with little room given to the female aspect of descent. An indication of this is that though Milkman learns that his paternal grandmother was a Native American, this in no way seems to change his perception of his ancestry. Another pointer is the fact that Milkman achieves a sense of identity specifically through getting to know his paternal kin. Our knowledge of his maternal reaches no further back than to his grandfather, and does not seem to be relevant to his identity. When the past is framed in terms of a line of men who succeed each other, this clearly tells us a great deal about the gendered assumptions that inform the narratives.

It can be argued that, in the second part of the novel, Milkman lives out the past that his family at best has a partial access to. A good example of this is his father's musing on his unknown ancestors. Macon imagines a "young man with onyx skin and legs as straight as cane stalks, who had a name that was real" (17). Perceiving that he is missing something in his image of the world, he longs for something that "could never be known" (18). This metaphor is then echoed in the last part of the novel, when Milkman is right in the middle of his process of "reconstituting the past". He is "Walking the earth, walking it like he belonged on it; like his legs were stalks, tree trunks, a part of his body that extended down down down

into the rock and soil” (281). As the second quote explicitly deals with re-connecting with the past I think it is plausible to view the two quotes as connected through their similar use of imagery. It is also fitting that the metaphor is circulated from father to son, as this contributes to the sense that the novel’s dominant narrative of history is related to myths of manhood and male generational succession. Throughout this analysis it has been made clear that the concept of history which Milkman gets to know cannot be said to be neutral or objectively true. Rather, it is framed in such a way as to conform to cultural ideas regarding the prominence of male descent and agency.

As shown, issues of exclusion then come to the forefront. While I have mainly discussed what the narratives include and exclude, it is equally pertinent to ask what is excluded from the communicative setting. For instance, what does it mean that we very rarely get to see Milkman’s father tell any of his lengthy accounts of the past to anyone but his son? This strikes me as an example of how communication and the flow of information might be seen as gendered. An illuminating example of this occurs when Milkman and his father talk after the failed theft at Pilate’s house. What is striking about this scene is that it is focalised through Milkman’s sister First Corinthians. She comes home late one evening, and overhears her father and brother talking in the kitchen. Listening to them, “She wondered if this part of the night, a part she was unfamiliar with, belonged, had always belonged, to men” (202). The main significance of this incident is that, like so many other elements in the novel, it is marked by exclusion. It is Milkman and his father who talk, while his sister is excluded and only gets access to the situation through eavesdropping. Yet, it is equally relevant that First Corinthians does not seem to be particularly interested in whatever it is her father and brother are talking about. The secrecy and low voices are manifestations of Macon’s belief that what he tells is so significant that no one can be allowed to know what they speak of. First Corinthians’ lack of interest can thus be seen as an ironic commentary on the perceived primacy of the communication between the two men.

It seems to me that any consideration of how the past operates in the novel ought to take into account the elements discussed above, aspects that have to do with matters of narrative framing. When Deborah Guth discusses the meaning of the past in three of Morrison’s novels in her article “A Blessing and a Burden: The Relation to the Past in *Sula*, *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*”, I take it that she fails to consider this. While it is true that Milkman’s “repossession of the past” (584) is an essential aspect of the novel, the claim only takes us halfway there. As shown earlier, this is mainly because there are several conflicting accounts of the past. Thus, Guth fails to take into account notions of power and

representation. The same might be said of Middleton's analysis, as she is so preoccupied with the liberating aspects of orality that she does not pay attention to the power structures inherent in a past framed in terms of male transcendence. However, this is precisely what Michael Awkward does in his article. The opening premise of his analysis is that *Solomon* is informed by "afrocentric and feminist politics" (483). Awkward's main argument is that what Morrison does is to "produce narratives which clearly demonstrate her advocacy of afrocentric ideology, while simultaneously condemning myth's general failure to inscribe the possibilities of a full female participation as subject in the story of black American self-actualisation and cultural preservation" (487). In other words, he seeks to look into how the myths are gendered.

There is a seeming contradiction running through the above discussion. On the one hand, the past is framed so that it comes across as a story of men and male succession. The transmission of the name "Macon Dead" is probably the clearest manifestation of this, though by no means the only one. But what are we to make of the fact that this past is primarily presented by women? In order to get to the bottom of this it is necessary to operate with a distinction between the medium and the message. If we choose to view the message as the idea that maleness is dominant, and that Milkman's family history is captured in Macon Dead-Macon Dead-Macon Dead, we have identified what seems to be the basis for the novel's structure. However, this idea of male succession becomes a bit more difficult to defend if one considers that Milkman's knowledge of the past mainly comes through women. The medium thus contradicts the message. And, as shown earlier, the reality Milkman recognises on his journey southwards is indebted to his aunt's perspective to a far greater extent than to his father's. The pressing question then has to do with whether Pilate should be seen as subjected to the dominant ideas of patriarchy, or if her part in these narratives serves to indicate just how artificial the idea of transmitted maleness is¹.

Apart from Milkman, there is probably no character in the novel who has been subjected to as intense scrutiny and debate as Pilate. It seems that this has much to do with her important role in regard to Milkman's search for knowledge of the past. After all, she is the one whose perspective most resembles the one Milkman adopts towards the end of the narrative. Middleton points to this when she shows how there is a link between Pilate's insistence on orality and the mediation through oral sources (such as children's rhymes) that make up the clues Milkman has to solve in order to reconstruct the narratives (72). The

¹ I briefly touched upon this in my term paper "Narrated History and Ethnic Identity in *Song of Solomon*" in the spring term 2009

question which then presents itself is related to the status of these analepses vis-à-vis the dominant discourse of masculinity.

Writing about the role of Pilate in her article “Self, Society and Myth in Toni Morrison’s Fiction”, Cynthia A. Davis argues that in mythic narratives “woman gets meaning from or gives meaning to man” (339). She further describes Pilate as occupying a quite passive role in relation to Milkman, as she gives him the means to achieve transcendence, but does not herself participate in the quest. Milkman is the one who, once he has been given sufficient information, must explain the significance of the past to Pilate (339). An example of this is the words she and her brother were told by the ghost of their father, “You can’t just fly off and leave a body” (208). These words turn out to mean something very different from what Pilate assumed. At first she believes her father criticised them for leaving behind the man they killed. However, it is Milkman who discovers the true meaning of the phrase. He understands it as a reference to the grief his grandfather felt upon being left behind. Of course, it does not really make sense to talk of “true” and “false” meanings. However, it remains that the most authoritative interpretation is the one Milkman supplies. According to this view, then, Pilate should best be understood as subjected to the dominant discourse of maleness.

There is, however, at least one other way of viewing the role of Pilate, illustrated by Gay Wilentz’s article “Civilizations Underneath: African Heritage as Cultural Discourse in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*”. In her article, much of the focus is on the female characters, with Pilate being seen as the most significant one. She argues that it is “Milkman’s relationship with Pilate, his female ‘ancestor’, which transforms his search for gold into an acknowledgment of his heritage. It is Pilate’s role as an African woman to be ‘the custodian of the culture’” (63). While her article is problematic in its essentializing view of African culture, there is something to be said for acknowledging Pilate’s role as a transmitter of culture. Wilentz even goes as far as to argue that Pilate is the focal character of the novel (63). Initially, this might seem like a something of an exaggeration. It makes better sense, though, when considering that the claim has to do with the important position Pilate indirectly occupies in the second part of the novel. As he journeys southwards, Milkman takes on Pilate’s perspective as regards spirituality and the function of the past. A good example of this is supplied by the hunt Milkman participates in while in Danville, which in many ways can be said to constitute the major shift in Milkman’s perspective. While hunting, “He tried to listen with his fingertips, to hear what, if anything, the earth had to say, and it told him quickly that someone was standing behind him”(279). Such an activity seems like an echo of the things Pilate has told him, for instance her discussion of the many different shades of the colour

black. The defining feature of both these events, and many more beside them, is that they demand an alternative sensitivity. The prominent role of Pilate in the narrative thus works to undermine the notion that everything transmitted is mediated through males and maleness. We see this when Milkman sets out on his journey south, as the information he receives mostly come from women and children, groups excluded from the grand narratives of male succession Milkman comes to learn of. The fundamental question as to which source Pilate's analepses should be attributed remains, and makes up part of the text's ambiguity. It is clear that the various metadiegetic narratives are juxtaposed with the dominant idea of patrilineal descent, which seems to be the organising principle of the novel's plot. Through that juxtaposition the ultimate narrative authority of Milkman's focalisation is questioned.

While Pilate's perspective contributes to destabilizing the idea of male narrative privilege, there is another character who far more directly questions Milkman's narrative authority. This is Milkman's sister Magdalena, and significantly, her reinterpretation takes place immediately before Milkman embarks on his journey south, and thus invites a critical interpretation of the narrative to follow. As Magdalena's speech to Milkman involves a renewed perspective on past events, it seems like a good idea to return to Genette's terminology, specifically his concept of repeating analepsis. One of the functions Genette attributes to repeating analepses is the "refuting a first interpretation and replacing it with a new one" (56). The fact that it comes at such a late point in the novel signifies that it clearly is significant. Lena's claim that Milkman has lived well at the expense of his sisters might cause us to think back and reinterpret earlier events on the basis of her views.

The event resignified is seemingly trivial, and occurs when Milkman is very young. By accident, he pees on his sister Magdalena, who understandably gets upset. This event is narrated with no specific focalisation, and besides Magdalena's anger we do not know how any of the characters interpret the event. When they are both adults the story is told once more, but this time from the perspective of Magdalena. The main difference between the first and second narrations of this event is that, in the second, it has been turned into a metaphor. In response to Milkman's question "What is all this about peeing on people", his sister says that "You've been doing it to us all your life" (214). What she then goes on to do can best be described as a criticism of Milkman's privileged mode of emplotment, a privilege she attributes to "that hog's gut that hands down between your legs" (215). This is without doubt the incident where the narrative privilege of masculinity comes under most direct attack, as Magdalena very explicitly links Milkman's position as privileged to his gender. In Murray's

words, this rewriting contributes to the “diminution of [Milkman’s] phallic authority” (130) through explicitly reducing Milkman’s authority to an aspect of his physiology.

If the narrative privilege of Milkman is criticised by Magdalena towards the end of the first part, the harmful consequences of this position are shown towards the end of the novel’s second part, when the narrative of Milkman’s quest for his family identity is juxtaposed with Hagar’s attempt to fashion herself in terms of Milkman’s ideals. Michael Awkward has commented upon the significance of this narrative being told right towards the culmination of Milkman’s quest, for instance by claiming that “The structure of Morrison’s novel encourages a contrast between Milkman’s (male) monomythic quest for self and community, and his cousin Hagar’s deathward march towards what Susan Willis has identified as reification” (492). Though many of his views are decidedly twisted, Milkman’s childhood friend Guitar makes good sense when he tells Hagar that “you think because he doesn’t want you anymore that he is right—that *his judgment and opinion of you are correct*” (305, emphasis added). What is questioned here is precisely Milkman’s narrative authority, his right and ability to construct, and make other construct the world in his image. It is of course somewhat ironic that this comes from Guitar, as he is as adamant as anyone in his belief that he represents the one true path².

On the basis of the above discussion, it is possible to see how the idea of narrative evolves in the course of the novel. This has everything to do with “the ideological function of the narrative mode of representation” (ix) discussed by White, an angle that has been present throughout my analysis. As shown, the perspective is at first implicit rather than explicit. Through the juxtaposition of various narratives the hope that we will ever get to know what “really” happened grows increasingly faint. When Milkman goes south it becomes more explicit, as we are forced to consider those who are shunted to the sidelines of representation. Hagar remains the best example of this, as her tragedy derives from the fact that she attempts to exclude everything she believes Milkman dislikes. The resolution of Milkman’s identity crisis thus entails the exclusion of several other perspectives.

Early on in this chapter I discussed the notion of “the Crisis of Masculinity”, a crisis Michael Kimmel sees as feeding on the fear of “a world without fathers, without frontiers” (321). Through this analysis I hope it has been made clear that the search for fathers (shorthand for male ancestors) and the longing for some sense of adventure are key aspects of the novel. While Milkman starts off discontent and with no clear sense of his identity, the

² My discussion of Hagar and Magdalena draws on perspectives developed in a term paper in the spring term 2009

meaning of his family's past become increasingly clear to him as the narrative progresses. The text puts equal emphasis on the exclusion is involved when the past is presented in terms of maleness and fathers. As most of the access we get to the past comes through the numerous metadiegetic narratives, we only get the past according to a given perspective. Among the many possible reasons for these variations, I have put most emphasis on the gendered aspects of difference. If the narrative is about a search for fathers, what happens to the mothers? Through a comparison of the viewpoints of Milkman's father and aunt, I have attempted to show how each account excludes some of the elements that the other includes. The novel shares this preoccupation with the link between narrative and identity with *Jazz* and *Love*, to be discussed in the two following chapters.

Chapter 2

“It’s not a thing they do”: Constructed Masculinity in *Jazz*

In my above discussion of *Song of Solomon* I emphasised the link between narrative and identity. The knowledge that came to Milkman was presented to him in a specific manner, told as if the story (and history) was solely concerned with the transcendent acts of men. However, towards the end of the narrative Milkman came to realize that much was excluded from a narrative that framed the past as a male entity. Rather than argue that this narrative framing was “false”, my main argument, following Hayden White, was that it should be understood as a representation. Morrison’s novel *Jazz* invites a similar analysis, as that novel too is concerned with the link between narrative and identity. Analysing *Solomon*, I placed most emphasis on the metadiegetic narratives. *Jazz*, on the other hand, demands that equal attention is paid to the diegetic level. This is mainly because of the diegetic narrator, who is explicitly present in a way third-person narrators rarely are. Constantly drawing attention to her position as the architect of the story, *Jazz*’s diegetic narrator turns out to be just as problematic as the metadiegetic narrators in *Solomon*. What I will attempt to show in the following is how the seemingly dominant narrative in *Jazz* is revealed as a construction. In my previous analysis, the dominant narrative was represented by the discourse of patriarchy and the idea of the maleness of descent. In *Jazz*, on the other hand, it is the diegetic narrator who embodies the system of power. The focus will still be on representations of masculinity, though from a different angle. I will start off by considering the novel’s strange narrator, and move on to discuss how the narrations of the events reveal assumptions regarding gender.

As the narrator is such an important entity in *Jazz*, I will commence by discussing the main features of the voice that describes, orders, and sometimes invents the events. The potentially problematic status of narrators in general is discussed by Genette in *Narrative Discourse*. Arguing that the conventional distinction between first and third-person narrators is inaccurate, Genette establishes his own typology. While I will not adopt those terms here, his criticism of the conventional pair is worth dwelling on. His main point is that “the narrator can be in his narrative . . . *only* in the first person” (244, emphasis in original). While this might seem like nothing but a pedantic attention to pronouns, what he is getting at is that there always is a subjective voice behind a given narrative. In many cases it can be quite easy to forget the narrator, especially if she stays in the background and does not make herself known. This was the case in *Solomon*, where we were given no reason to doubt the diegetic

voice. The narrator's omniscience could be taken for granted, mainly because her truth-claim was not contradicted by figural perspectives. In *Jazz*, on the other hand, it is very difficult to take the narrator's ability to comprehend the whole as given. Rather, she is explicit about her own investment in the structuring of the narrative, and never allows us to forget that the story told is inseparable from her specific assumptions and limitations. For instance, she prefaces one of her accounts with the words "If I remember right" (71), a qualification that does away with all presumptions of omniscience.

In the above paragraphs I used the word "her" when referring to the narrator. Given "her" special status, this designation must be further accounted for. One way of defending this choice is to argue that, unless otherwise indicated, we can attribute the same gender to the third-person narrator as to the author. This is not to indicate the oneness of author and narrator, but is rather a convenient solution to a problem all who write about third-person narrators must relate to. Yet, the narrator of *Jazz* is in no way conventional. One indication of this is that critics writing on the novel tend to disagree on the nature of the narrator. In *Sexual Healing*, her master's thesis on *Jazz*, Felice Blake Kleiven uses "s/he" when referring to the narrating instance, and thus in a way bypasses the entire problem (30 passim). Jennifer Lee Jordan Heinert, in contrast, argues for viewing the narrator as the voice of the book itself in *Narrative Conventions and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. She thus progresses by referring to the narrator as "it" (61). Yet another stance is occupied by Andrea O'Reilly, who is adamant in her belief that the narrator should best be understood as a "she". To me, the very fact of this disagreement seems to indicate that there is something inherently ambiguous about the narrator.

In her article "In Search of My Mother's Garden, I Found My Own: Mother-Love, Healing and Identity in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*", O'Reilly claims that "The narrative of *Jazz* opens with a specifically maternal discourse" (377). This discourse, which O'Reilly thus views as maternal, is represented by the words "Sth, I know that woman" (3). While her article is problematic in its totalizing and essentialising view of motherhood, I think O'Reilly is correct in arguing that the novel's opening points towards a female speaker. This connection might not seem so obvious at first sight, but it makes a good sense upon considering the understanding of orality that emerged through the analysis of Pilate's role in *Song of Solomon*. In her discussion of the theme of orality in that novel, Middleton argued that it to a great extent was linked to Pilate and the perspectives she embodied (67). Wilentz's perspective on *Solomon* is also worth remembering here, as she described Pilate as a "custodian of the culture" (63), a storyteller who orally transmitted stories of her people's

past. Against the background of the great significance Morrison attributes to the woman storyteller, I think it is quite plausible to argue for the female-like (if not female) orientation of the narrator. Yet, as indicated above, not everyone is convinced by this argument. Heinert argues that it is in fact the book itself that is talking to the reader (57). The ending of the novel invites such an interpretation, as it clearly can be conceived of as the book itself speaking to the reader. Convincing as this argument is, it seems to me that a great deal is lost through the omission of the gendered aspect of the voice.

The above point should make it clear why I choose to place such emphasis on *Jazz*'s highly unorthodox narrator, who remains indeterminate throughout the novel. Yet, for all this ambiguity, many critics (after discussing the matter in a footnote) argue that the narrator somehow seems to be female. As discussed, Middleton and Wilentz both emphasise what they perceive as the authenticity involved in oral transmission among African Americans, as contrasted with the dominant discourse. What I will tentatively argue is that, like Heinert suggests, the novel's voice might be understood as that of the narrative itself. This seems to me like a way to account for the seemingly gendered nature of the narrator, given that the act of storytelling is closely linked to African American women in the critical discussion of Morrison's work. What *Jazz* shows, however, is that even this perspective entails certain limitations, and is unable to account for everything it attempts to explain. The most obvious example of this is the narrator's erroneous foreshadowing, her belief that the narrative will end with another act of violence.

Part of what makes it difficult to know what to make of the narrator's voice is its inconsistency, as it changes throughout the novel. Caroline Rody comments on this in her article "Impossible Voices: Ethnic Postmodern Narration in Toni Morrison's *Jazz* and Karen Tei Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*", where she shows how the narrator is both personified in the manner of a first-person narrator and supposedly omniscient like the traditional third-person narrator (622). The gendering of the voice is thus not wholly consistent, and it is not always fruitful to view the voice as gendered. The significant point is that while the subjectivity of a first-person narrator is explicit and can be taken for granted, it is easy to assume that a third-person narrator has access to an objective and unproblematic truth. In "Traces of Derrida in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*", Philip Page discusses this through arguing that the fundamental ambiguity and uncertainty is part of the novel's structure, and that "the narrator is knowledgeable *and* limited, reliable *and* unreliable" (62, emphasis in original). The question of to which degree the narrator should be understood as gendered clearly falls in under this same ambiguity. Through the discussion above, I have attempted to

show why I choose to talk of the narrator as a “she”, as well as some of the problematic aspects of that choice. In the following, I will take up the thread from my chapter on *Song of Solomon*, and ask to which extent it is possible for a central voice to account for a diverse reality. The investigation of the assumptions underlying this dominant voice will be significant in the following analysis.

Having argued that there is something distinctive about *Jazz*'s narrator, it now seems necessary to indicate what it is about the narrator that is so unusual. Philip Page has argued that *Jazz* “straddles the conventional dichotomy” between narrators in the first and the third person (60). Put one way, we have a first-person narrator who in no way is part of the diegetic action. This appears to be a contradiction, as we expect a first-person narrator to, at least on some level, be involved in the diegetic action. Apparently, then, *Jazz*'s narrator should be understood as a third-person narrator. Yet, the “I” of the narrator is still very much present from the novel's very first sentence; “Sth, I know that woman” (3). Here, the focus is not solely on the woman described. It is equally significant that the narrator wishes to emphasise that she knows who Violet is. In this initial description of Joe and Violet, going on for four pages, the narrator's presence is unquestionable. For instance, commenting on Violet's attempt to get back at her cheating husband, the narrator says that “whether she sent the boyfriend away or whether he quit her, *I can't say. He may have* come to feel that Violet's gifts were poor measured against his sympathy for the brokenhearted man in the next room. But *I do know* that mess didn't last two weeks” (5, emphasis added). Page argues that while Violet's affair is the subject of discussion, the narrator remains a very strong presence (60). This is because we mainly get the narrator's conjecture and assumptions. Qualifying phrases such as “he may have” and “I can't say” work towards reducing the truth-claim of the interpreting voice.

In the above quote we get two kinds of information. The only thing the narrator claims to know is that Violet's affair only lasted two weeks. The narrator then mentions several possible reasons for why the affair ended, without giving preference to one or the other. This highlights the interpretative nature of the narrator, as all she can supply is her own subjective impression of the events she witnesses/invents. From this, it should be clear that *Jazz*'s diegetic narrator should be treated in much the same way as the metadiegetic ones were in my discussion of *Solomon*. That is, the claims made by the narrator should be seen as specifically situated and as stemming from a particular perspective. The most pressing question is thus not whether a particular story is true or false. Rather, we should ask why the story was told in that specific way.

When accounting for the narrator's views, it seems well nigh inevitable to bring in Heinert's claim that the narrator is the embodiment of "the dominant culture" (61). While she mainly discusses this in relation to race, it is equally fruitful to discuss the narrator in terms of her attitude towards masculinity. As will be seen later, the narrator seems to embody quite specific attitudes towards maleness. Drawing the connection back to *Solomon*, I will thus argue that *Jazz* too illuminates how subjects are drawn into a specific narrative structure. While *Solomon* showed this through illuminating how Milkman is placed within his family history, *Jazz* makes the connection by showing how the narrator attempts to reduce the characters so that they go on accord with her preconceptions.

White's discussion of narrative, with the prominence given to "modes of emplotment" (44), was essential in my discussion of the distinct form of the past Milkman came to know. It will turn out be equally significant here, as we are rarely allowed to forget that what we get is an interpretation. For instance, four pages into the novel the narrator tells of how the second "scandalizing threesome on Lenox Avenue began. What turned out different was who shot whom" (6). What is noteworthy about this claim is that it is in fact erroneous. When Felice enters the life of Joe and Violet towards the end of the novel, no one is killed. In many ways this seems absurd. If the narrator is wrong, how can the reader know which of the claims made by the narrator are to be trusted? It seems to me that it is necessary to grant the narrator a certain amount of authority, in order to treat the text as a coherent entity. And yet, we must never forget that we are dealing with *a narrative*, and that a narrative is characterised as much by what it excludes as what it includes.

This point has been made by several critics. For instance, in "Toni Morrison's *Jazz* and the Racial Dreams of the American Writer" Michael Nowlin discusses the narrator's "acknowledged failure to represent [the plot] according to the measure of her own textually determined fatalism, a failure signaled by her characters' power to evade a narrative logic of repetition and retribution" (164). What he gets at here is the virtual impossibility of accounting for everything within the confines of a central perspective. It then becomes interesting to investigate precisely what this "narrative logic" consists of, and how it is contrasted with other perspectives. According to the narrator's initial model of interpretation, a happy ending was not possible. Rather, she was sure that another murder would be committed, and that the novel could only end in tragedy. It is then relevant to consider Heinert's argument that the narrator speaks with "the voice of the dominant culture", and that the fact that she is revealed as mistaken undermines the authority of that perspective. Heinert follows up this claim through arguing that this revealed unreliability forces us to relate to "the

authority of the individual's point of view" (61). It thus seems like the characters move from a position where they are spoken *of* to one in which they get to speak for themselves. This same mechanism is too identified by Kleiven in her thesis on *Jazz*. She argues that "A character's ability to gain discursive power and space within the narrative, therefore, is a fundamental principle in interpreting *Jazz*" (39). This situation is clearly reminiscent of the one encountered at the end of *Solomon*, with Milkman coming to terms with the limitations of the perspective he has gotten to know. In *Jazz*, the narrator recognises that her former belief that "my view was the only one that was or that mattered" (220) leads to a partial blindness which renders it difficult to grasp the nuances of the world she describes.

Given that the omniscience (or, at least, reliability) we traditionally associate with third-person narrators is absent in *Jazz*, it becomes difficult to know what to make of the narrator's access to the characters' minds. For instance, how should we relate to the fact that the narrator at some points discusses the thoughts of the characters as if her access was entirely unproblematic, while at others she admits to not knowing what the characters are thinking? It would be a mistake to reduce all the claims made by the narrator to ambiguity, as this would make it very difficult indeed to relate to any part of the novel. Yet, we still cannot fully trust the narrator. Attempting to navigate between these two opposites, I think it is fruitful to operate with a three-fold division. The textual level that we do not have reason to doubt is the narrator's description of the physical surroundings, as well as the actions of the characters that interact on the novel's diegetic level. Yet it is necessary to remember that the events and the background cannot be said to be meaningful in themselves. They are only relevant as interpreted by the various characters and the narrator. We too have to grant authority to the lengthy psychonarrations that occur throughout the text, as they constitute most of our access into the minds of the characters. The same goes for the sections that qualify as what Cohn has termed quoted monologues (12), as they make up an alternative to the interpretations attributable to the narrator. The passages we have most reason to be suspicious of are those where the narrator alludes to her own unreliability. This might happen either through her saying that she does not know what happened, or by admitting that what she has to offer is simply speculation. The most significant instance of this is the story of Golden Gray. It is prefaced by the narrator's claim that though she does not know what happened, "it's not hard to imagine what it must have been like" (137). In the following analysis, I will place great emphasis on the relation between these various kinds of narrative information, and discuss how the varying presence of the narrator has ramifications for the accounts that are told.

The general point of the above discussion, derived from the analyses of critics who emphasise the paradoxical status of the narrator, is that the authority we are accustomed to attribute to a novel's central voice is a matter of convention, and not given on beforehand. This is reminiscent of my main argument in the discussion of *Solomon*. In that analysis, I attempted to show how the seemingly dominant idea of the fundamental maleness of descent was subverted through the presence of alternative interpretations. When a narrative proves to be so incomplete, either through omission or downright mistakes, we have good reasons to be suspicious of its aspirations to be all-encompassing. This resonates well with Nissen's discussion of *Sula*, where he argued that the perspective given the most space is not necessarily the most authoritative one (282). This is clearly the case in *Jazz*, where the dominant model of interpretation time and again is revealed to be inadequate. Kathrine J. Mayberry discusses this in her article "The Problem of Narrative in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*", through arguing that "Traditional narratives can be regarded as a literary inscription of the dominant values of a hierarchical system: like the culture in which it evolved, traditional narrative is based upon a series of discriminatory logics that empower a dominant voice to promote, demote, include, exclude, and finally, at the end, to emerge victorious over the other voices or characters in the novel" (298). In this, it is easy to recognise the mechanism of exclusion that proved so significant in my analysis of *Solomon*. There I attempted to show how the narrative Milkman gained access to was a highly selective and biased account.

What I now will turn to is a discussion of how the character's framings of the events can be understood relative to that supplied by the not-so-omniscient narrator. In the following I will mainly focus upon the self-conceptions of Joe and Violet, referring to other characters when that is called for. In attempting to analyse the ways in which the past is presented through thought I will make use of the typology Dorrit Cohn sets forth in *Transparent Minds*. The reason for why I depart from my Genettean framework here is that his analyses of the ways in which thought can be presented are not among the stronger aspects of his analysis. However, his discussion of time and order can well be brought in to illuminate various aspects of the presentation of thought, as the past very often remains a profound presence in the minds of Morrison's characters. The fact that the past mainly comes across through thought has important consequences for how the past is framed. Instead of asking how the characters frame their past in narratives directed at others, it becomes necessary to consider what this past means to them, and why they often choose not to communicate this past to the people they interact with.

Discussing how thought can be presented in third-person narratives, Cohn describes three narrative modes. As I take it, all of these are relevant for a consideration of *Jazz*. The first of these is psycho-narration, where the narrator narrates the thoughts of a given character. This technique is primarily tied to more traditional forms of narrative, where the omniscience of the narrator was generally taken for granted. The second is quoted monologues, where the narrator directly transcribes the thoughts of the character. The third mode, narrated monologue, can best be described as a mix between the two above, with the narrator retaining the third-person address, but adopting the specific idiom of the character (11-14).

Cohn defines psychonarration as “the narrator’s discourse about a character’s consciousness” (14). According to Cohn, this type of narrative implies a narrating instance characterised by “superior knowledge of the character’s inner life and his superior ability to present it and assess it” (29). If there is one thing *Jazz*’s narrator is not in possession of, it is “superior knowledge” of the thoughts of the characters. For instance, towards the end of the novel the narrator admits that she still does not know the true reason underlying Joe’s tears, beyond that they were for more than Dorcas (221). This lack of “superior knowledge” has both practical and theoretical implications for the analysis of *Jazz*. First of all, it becomes difficult to know what to make of the text, as the information we get is littered with modal qualifications. Yet, I think it is necessary to grant authority to the psychonarrations, contradictory though they are. For instance, when the narrator says that Joe “lies in bed remembering every detail of that October afternoon when he first met her” (28), it does not seem particularly fruitful to argue over whether or not the narrator could know it. The absence of any “superior knowledge” on the part of the narrator becomes significant seen in light of the discussion of narrative omniscience critics like Heinert and Mayberry view as so central to *Jazz*. They argue that such a privileged position involves a great deal of power at the expense of accuracy. This will be made clearer a bit later, when I will account for the narrator’s general tendency to interpret what she sees.

We might well say that psychonarration is characterised by the narrator’s attempt to account for everything within the confines of a central, dominating voice. As seen, Heinert argues that the authority attributable to this central perspective is reduced in *Jazz*, with the emphasis shifting to the individual perspectives. I have already discussed one manner in which this happens, through the narrator’s admitted unreliability. Another manifestation of this is that the narrator at times leaves the stage and allows the characters to speak for themselves, something they had not been allowed to do when subjected to the narrator’s dominating discourse. The clearest instance of this is probably the monologues of Joe, Violet

and Dorcas, enclosed in quotation marks and set away from the rest of the text. Philip Page argues that this plurality is part of the novel's attempt to redefine conventional distinctions (60). These sections, which Cohn terms quoted monologues, might thus be seen as representing an interpretation of the past very different from that supplied by the diegetic narrator. This revision of seemingly authoritative narratives is characteristic of all the novels I discuss in this thesis.

In his book *Toni Morrison*, Linden Peach argues that the plot of *Jazz* is delineated in the opening sentences, and that the remainder of the novel consists of various attempts to explain the events (114). I think there is much to be said for such a view of the book, as it allows questions regarding differing interpretations of the same events to come to the forefront. For instance, it seems fruitful to ask how the narrator makes sense of what happens, and how this emplotment stands in relation to the characters' own understandings of the events. Just like in *Solomon*, the situation is marked by a seemingly dominant perspective. However, this dominant perspective might very well be subverted through juxtaposition with other accounts. I have placed such emphasis on the status of the narrator because she clearly embodies a specific and quite recognisable attitude towards the novel's diegetic action. Central to this action, then, is Joe's murder of Dorcas.

What, then, is the narrator's attitude towards Joe? As a starting point, it seems fruitful to consider that the first thing we know of Joe is that "He fell for an eighteen-year-old girl with one of those deepdown, spooky loves that made him so happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going" (3). The novel thus begins with a description of an act of violence. More significant than this, however, is that the narrator, four pages into the novel, assumes that the past is bound to repeat itself. While the narrator does not say who will do it, she is certain that the novel will end with another act of violence. To me it seems that this works towards indicating a specific view of black masculinity, one that on the surface of it is linked to violence and sexuality. The best example of this occurs in the first pages of the chapter mostly made up of the monologue where Joe describes his seven changes. Here we see the visual nature of the narrator, as it is made clear that what we get is the narrator's interpretation of what she sees. Having described what she sees of the city, the narrator progresses by describing how "anybody passing through the alley next to a certain apartment house on Lenox might have looked up and seen, not a child but a grown man's face crying along with the glass pane. A strange sight you hardly ever see: men crying so openly. It's not a thing they do" (118). The main significance of this passage lies in that it is presented through external focalisation. We do not get to know what Joe is thinking of. Rather, we get a description of

how he appears to those who observe him. The narrator indicates that what strikes the passers-by as strangest is that Joe is crying, because that is a thing men are not supposed to be doing. The narrator then moves on to speak through her own voice, through explicitly referring to her “own opinion”. For the next two pages, before Joe takes centre stage, it is made very clear that what we get is the narrator’s highly subjective impression of Joe. For instance, the narrator says that she “imagine[s] him as one of those men who stop somewhere around sixteen. Inside” (120). In this passage, the narrator is highly critical of Joe, for instance through stating her belief that Joe used Dorcas as his “personal sweet—like candy” (121). The authority of this view of Joe, which at the time seems quite convincing, is significantly reduced towards the end of the novel. At that point, Felice indicates that Dorcas might have used Joe just as much as Joe used Dorcas. What this suggests, then, is that the narrator’s understanding of the events is only one among many possible interpretations.

Looking closer at this view of masculinity, it becomes clear that it is linked to the distinction between the urban North and the rural South. This relationship is established early on in the novel, when we learn that Joe and Violet migrated from Virginia to New York. Given that the novel explicitly thematises the extensive migration of African Americans from the Southern to the Northern United States, it is no great wonder that the distinction between the North and the South carries great signification. To a large extent, it corresponds to the relationship between the present and the past. The North is where they are now, while the South is the place of origin they must learn to relate to meaningfully. This mixture of spatial and temporal categories echoes the one we find in *Solomon*, as that novel too makes the connection between space and time. However, the two novels differ in that while Milkman journeys southwards and sees the places constituting his family’s past, the characters of *Jazz* only have access to the South through memory. Furthermore, it is significant that, in *Solomon*, the past of Milkman’s family is a fundamentally unknown entity which he must discover. In *Jazz*, the past comes across very differently. First of all, the characters never actually go South. All of the diegetic action takes place in Harlem, and their Southern past is only mediated through the characters’ recollection of it. A consequence of this is that the past in its main articulations cannot be understood as an unknown entity the characters must discover.

Before asking how the characters relate to this spatial/temporal distinction, I will account for how the narrator makes sense of it. Throughout the text it seems clear that the narrator is predominantly linked to the city. Anne-Marie Paquet-Deyris discusses this relationship in her article “Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* and the City”, where she argues that the city is the background against which the narrator’s interpretation of the events must be understood

(221). Four pages into the novel, the narrator states that “I’m crazy about this city. Daylight slants like a razor cutting the buildings in half. In the top half I see looking faces and it’s not easy to tell which are people, which the work of stonemasons” (7). Two aspects of this quote strike me as immediately significant. First of all, it makes the narrator’s fascination with and connection to the city explicit. The description of the city-life goes on for four pages, with the narrator evoking scenes typical of life in the city. Not content to describe what she sees, she too attempts to explain why people act in the manner they do. Secondly, the narrator seems to have a certain awareness of the bias her chosen perspective entails. As I take it, the narrator’s admitted failure to tell human faces from stonework indicates the limitations of the perspective she has taken on. This is made even more explicit when the narrator muses that “a city like this makes me dream tall and *feel* in on things” (7, emphasis added). The narrator does not say that she is in on what happens, but rather that she feels as if she is. Again it is made clear that the narrative as a whole is closely linked to the position and attitudes of the narrating instance. Yet, even though the narrator is primarily linked to the city, the Southern countryside remains a powerful presence.

Through much of the novel there runs a comparison between North and South. For instance, commenting on the city, the narrator describes “sidewalks, snowcovered or not, [that] are wider than the main roads in the town where they were born and perfectly ordinary people can stand at the stop, get on the streetcar” (10). The comparison involved strikes me as noteworthy, as the narrator describes the city specifically in terms of what it is not. Given the violence at the centre of the novel, the narrator’s description of a “husband hunting an open market” (11) too is significant. It appears that the concept of “analeptic contagion”, which proved so useful in my discussion of *Solomon*, might be put to equally good use when considering the manner in which *Jazz*’s narrator attempts to make sense of the acts of the characters. Given that the narrator identifies herself so closely with the city, how can we trust her interpretation of the acts of people who maintain the countryside as an important reference? Of course, we have every possible textual indicator that we do *not* have to trust the narrator’s version of the events. But, it still seems fruitful to ask how this dominant voice attempts to make sense of the past in the countryside in relation to the present in the city

When the narrator, at the end of the novel, realizes that her predictions have gone wrong, she describes herself as having believed “That the past was an abused record with no choice but to repeat itself at the crack and no power on earth could lift the arm that held the needle” (220). In other words, the narrator started off believing that the past determined the present, and that it would not be possible for the diegetic characters to break out of the pattern

of their past. As indicated, the prime instance of this is the narrator's belief that the novel will end with another act of violence. In this regard, it becomes relevant to consider bell hooks' analysis of the link between black masculinity and violence, discussed in *We Real Cool*. She holds that "Most black males are being encouraged through their uncritical acceptance of patriarchy to live in the past, to be stuck in time" (60). This analysis fits remarkably well with the narrator's understanding of Joe. If we, following Heinert, choose to view the narrator as embodying a system of power, it clearly makes a great deal of sense to understand Joe as defined from a position external to himself. As mentioned earlier, a weakness in Heinert's analysis is that she never defines exactly what she refers to when she speaks of "the dominant culture". hooks, on the other hand, is very clear about what it is that constitutes the dominant culture. Defining this as "the culture of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (xi), her book is a discussion of how these various social forces impede constructive and healthy identity among African Americans. If we view these elements as constituting the dominant culture, it does not seem so strange that the narrator assumes that the narrative can only end with a repetition of the violence described at the novel's outset. Having discussed the attitude of the narrator, I will now consider how the characters themselves frame their relation to the past.

In "Traces and Cracks: Identity and Narrative in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*", Carolyn M. Jones credits Morrison for recognising that "passing things, history and the people who make and endure it makes an impression, leaves a trace" (483). In *Jazz*, these traces are linked to the individual's recollection of the past. For instance, Jones argues that Joe frames his murder of Dorcas in analogy with his search for the woman he believes to be his mother (484). This points towards the impossibility of representing the past as a grand narrative that has the power to account for every aspect of reality. Arguably, the narrator attempts to do just that, but her attempted omniscience is time and again proven to be illusory. It thus becomes relevant to once again bring up Stuart Hall's discussion of cultural identity. Had *Jazz* been dominated by an authoritative narrator who convincingly could account for every aspect of the past, it would have made sense to make use of Hall's first concept, and view identity "in terms of one, collective true self" (110). As it is, the seemingly dominant voice in *Jazz* makes countless mistakes, and thus reveals the distance between her predictions and the actual outcome of the events. It then makes more sense to utilize Hall's second view of cultural identity, which opens for the importance of individual positioning.

As seen in my discussion of *Solomon*, allowing for the importance of individual positioning renders it meaningless to speak of any narrative as objectively true. Yet, this does

not mean that these narratives become unimportant. Caroline Brown discusses this in her article “Golden Gray and the Talking Book: Identity as the Site of Artful Construction”, where she places *Jazz* in the context of Morrison’s *Beloved*. She argues that “It is this past, discarded but ever-present, that becomes the ghost, the beloved, of *Jazz*” (640). The main importance of this is that the relation to the past is analysed in terms of something as subjective as love. As will be seen, this mechanism is even more pronounced in *Love*, to be discussed in the next chapter. The seeming contradiction involved in Brown’s claim that the past is both present and absent at the same time is illuminating. As Joe and Violet are physically located in an environment far removed from their Virginia origins, it makes sense to view the past as something that is over and done with. And yet, it seems equally clear that the past never leaves them. What I will account for in the following is how this past continues to function in the present.

Given that Joe’s search for a coherent identity is linked to the way he relates to the past, yet another connection to *Solomon* manifests itself. Discussing that novel, I argued that Milkman’s troublesome attempt to “find himself” could well be linked to Michael Kimmel’s discussion of the “crisis in masculinity”. Kimmel argued that the talk of crisis has to do with men’s feelings that the past has become inaccessible. This perspective seems very fitting for a discussion of Joe’s predicament, as the attempt to reconnect with the past is such an important aspect of his character. We can thus speak of analeptic contagion in *Jazz* too, as Joe attempts to resolve the problems that haunted him in his early years in the South.

Joe’s vision of the past is closely linked to the rural South, which was all he knew prior to his northwards migration. This relationship is discussed by Herman Beavers in his article “The Politics of Space: Southernness and Manhood in the Fictions of Toni Morrison”. Beavers’ opening claim is that “For so many of Toni Morrison’s male characters, the South is a duality, oscillating between a place of origin and a curse. As such, the South takes up permanent residence in the memories of the men who people her fictions” (61). The focus on origin is reminiscent of that found in *Solomon*, and will be dealt with a bit later. For now, Beaver’s claim that the past remains embedded in Joe’s consciousness is what mainly is significant. This has important consequences for the communicative aspect of the novel, as it is a vital point that, for most of the novel, Joe does not speak of his past to any of the characters. The exception to this is Dorcas. In fact, when attempting to persuade Malvonne to let him use her apartment, he claims that he mainly wishes to speak with Dorcas. Significantly, the scenes where he tells Dorcas these things are not presented scenically. Rather, it is the narrator who, in her own words, describes the “Important things like how the

hibiscus smells on the bank of a stream at dusk” (36). This smell is closely linked to Joe’s search for his mother, a search that arguably is the defining act of his early years.

Commencing in the third person, this passage gradually moves closer to Joe’s idiom, culminating with Joe directly addressing his absent mother with the words ”and I’ll know don’t you know I have to know” (37). In this passage, then, the voice gradually shifts from the narrator to Joe, indicating just how important his search for his long-lost mother is to him.

The manner in which Joe chooses to identify Dorcas with his long-lost mother has been well-documented by critics. This connection is made almost explicit towards the end of the novel, when Joe’s search for his mother is directly juxtaposed with his attempt to track down Dorcas. And, to make this point even clearer, the chapter ends with the question “But where is *she*” (184, emphasis in original), a question that might refer to either Wild or Dorcas (and thus refers to both of them). What mainly is significant about this is that it opens up for an explanation of Joe’s murder of Dorcas that is very different from the one that might be derived from the view of black masculinity criticised by hooks, that the black man is a sexualised predator out to kill. Kleiven touches upon this when she argues that “Morrison complicates her construction of Joe Trace by problematizing traditional forms of masculine identity” (17).

The core argument of Beaver’s analysis is that the Southern background contributes to “corrupting and creating the integrity” (61) of the characters. It thus cannot be understood as uniformly positive or as uniformly negative. Yet, it still seems that Beavers places most of his emphasis on the negative ramifications of the migration. For instance, he argues that “the intentions of Morrison’s Southern men become subsumed by the cultural forces that construe the conventional household and employment within the workings of capitalist and patriarchal ideology” (67). It is difficult *not* to hear an echo of hooks’ analysis in this claim, as her central focus is on how healthy identity formation is impeded by the various cultural forces at work in American society. In the novel, this effect is mainly achieved through the narrator, who attempts to explain the behaviour of the characters through the lens of her own specific assumptions and beliefs. As shown, her outlook is closely linked to life in the city. Beavers’ way of claiming this is by stating that “Joe Trace goes from subject to object” (66). I think there is a great deal to be said for this interpretation. This is mainly because of the narrator’s interpretation of Joe, an interpretation that proves unable to account for all the nuances of his character. But, it too seems that Joe interprets himself and his own actions using the city as a framework. Going to deliver an order at an apartment, Joe frames his reaction to the attention he receives in the following way: “They made him feel like the singing men in spats. The

young ones who clustered on the corners wearing ties the color of handkerchiefs sticking out of their breast pockets” (70). From this it emerges that Joe frames himself in a decidedly urban manner, identifying himself with the young men in the city. This self-description on Joe’s part becomes even more significant when we note that it is mirrored sixty pages later, towards the end of Joe’s monologue. Joe notes that “One wore spats, and one had a handkerchief in his pocket same color as his tie” (132). Joe thus describes these two young men in almost exactly the same manner as he envisioned himself earlier in the novel. According to Beavers, Joe attempts (and fails) to reinvent himself as an independent subject in terms of the city’s ideals’. Yet, it seems quite clear that Joe’s past too is very important to keep in mind when considering Joe’s emplotment of his past and present.

In order to further illuminate the play between past and the present in *Jazz*, I will briefly account for the novel’s clearest manifestation of the mechanism. Carolyn M. Jones has argued that Violet Trace thinks of herself as really being made up of two different persons, labelled as “Violet” and “that Violet” (485). This divided personality is made explicit many places in the novel, such as when Violet thinks of her behaviour at the funeral. She describes how the men “carried *that* kicking, growling Violet out while she looked on in amazement. She had not been that strong since Virginia, since she loaded hay and handled the mule wagon like a full-grown man” (92). Violet is a skinny woman who lives in Harlem, and does not have the same abilities as “that Violet”. This serves as a near-perfect illustration of how the interaction between past and present is shown to be problematic. “That Violet”, connected to her past in Virginia and the early years in New York, seems to signify all that she feels disconnected from. Interestingly, she also perceives Joe in something of the same way, as being fundamentally split. Musing on Dorcas’ potential reasons for going out with Joe, she asks herself whether she saw “Not the fifty-year old man toting a sample case, but my Joe Trace, my Virginia Joe Trace who carried a light inside him, whose shoulders were razor sharp” (96). She seems to attribute their faulty relationship to the fact that they both seem to be more or less stuck in the past, unable to communicate their needs to each other. This clearly correlates with Brown’s claim that, in *Jazz*, the past itself, subjected to the individual’s framing, functions as the beloved (640)

In the above quote it is clear that we are no longer dealing with is psychonarration, as witnessed by the use of the first person in the narration of Violet’s thoughts. In fact, this lengthy segment attributed to Violet contains several speaking positions. It commences with psychonarration, framed by the words “whenever she thought” (94). What follows seems to be a case of consonant psychonarration, where the narrator chronicles the thoughts of Violet.

This is followed by a passage it at first is very difficult to pinpoint, as for more than a page there is no direct reference to the person who does the speaking. However, this changes when Violet once again explicitly re-emerges through the question “While I was where? Sliding on ice trying to get to somebody’s kitchen to do their hair?” (95). This gradual move towards quoted monologue can fruitfully be linked to the ideas regarding the dominant voice of the novel, ideas which are very significant in Heinert’s analysis. The voice of the narrator must here give way to what Dorrit Cohn has termed quoted monologue, which testifies to a greater independence in relation to the dominant voice which structures the narrative. After a couple of pages of such monologue the text switches back to the third person, but now in a manner which lies somewhere in between psychonarration and quoted monologue. Cohn labels this technique “narrated monologue”, defined as the “transformation of figural thought-language into the narrative language of third-person fiction” (100). An example of this would be the following comment, made after a description of Violet’s mother: “Her mother. She didn’t want to be like that. Oh never like that” (97). It is especially the last phrase which indicates that what we get is a transcription of Violet’s thoughts. Subsequent to this, the narrative moves back to what must be termed interior monologue, chronicling Violet’s thoughts in her own words.

Discussing *Solomon*, I argued that knowledge of the past was linked to communication and interaction. Milkman went from a state of ignorance of his family’s past to an awareness of the mythic endeavours of his ancestors. This knowledge came through narratives that became meaningful to him as he went South and saw places he until then had only been told about. The basic situation in *Solomon*, then, is that the past is an unknown entity Milkman gains access to through interaction with other people. The relation to the past in *Jazz* is very different. Rather than something unknown to be discovered, the past is already in place in the consciousness of the characters. Among the many manifestations of this is the way the characters use imagery from their traumatic pasts to describe the present. If the narrative of the past in *Solomon* aspired (yet failed) to be all-inclusive, *Jazz* frames the past as very much an individual matter. This, then, seems to signal both the importance and the difficulties of communication. It is important because there is no other way to get access to a character. It is difficult because there is no guarantee that they will understand each other.

Commenting on the married life of Joe and Violet, the narrator describes it in terms of “A poisoned silence [that] floated through the rooms like a big fishnet that Violet alone slashed through with loud recriminations” (5). At this point, communication is only possible in terms of accusation and argument. A good example of the isolation involved in this is their

ritualized way of relating to the picture of Dorcas. Put on the mantelpiece by Violet, the picture is a perfect illustration of the troublesome communication between the two of them. According to the narrator, “If the tiptoeer is Joe Trace, driven by loneliness from his wife’s side, then the face stares at him without hope or regret and it is the absence of accusation that wakes him from sleep hungry for her company” (12). Joe’s perception of the picture is influenced by his feelings of guilt. Significantly, Joe does not share this perception with anyone, least of all with his wife. Violet supplies the following interpretation of the picture: “The girl’s face looks greedy, haughty and very lazy. The cream-at-the-top-of-the-milkpail face of someone who will never work for anything” (12). Joe and Violet thus present incompatible interpretations of the picture of Dorcas. This episode nicely illustrates a theme that runs through every chapter of my analysis. While Joe and Violet observe the same physical object, this does not tell us a great deal. It is much more fruitful to ask why they choose to interpret the picture as they do, and how their respective backgrounds influence the perspectives they take on. When considering their observing the picture, it is too vital to consider that each of them does it in isolation. The narrator is very explicit about the fact that they “take turns”, and do not look at the picture of Dorcas jointly. It is thus easy to get the sense that they, just like the narrator, are confined within the limitations of their respective points of view. Kleiven points to this through arguing that “the novel becomes a memorial for Dorcas, where each character narrates how s/he has been influenced by love or hate of her” (80). As will be seen, this structure recurs in *Love*, another novel that features an ambiguous portrait.

Part of what makes this situation so difficult is that Joe and Violet clearly have a need to communicate their concerns. However, faced with “the poisoned silence” described by the narrator, this becomes difficult. At one point, the narrator describes the situation in the following way: “Twenty years after Joe and Violet train-danced on into the City, they were still a couple but barely speaking to each other, let alone laughing together or acting like the ground was a dance-hall floor. Convinced that he alone remembers those days, and wants them back . . . he coupled himself elsewhere” (36). In this passage we see how spatial and temporal categories are brought together. The South is linked to the past, and this whole relationship is confined within Joe’s memory. His relationship with Dorcas is thus framed as a reaction against the futility Joe sees in attempting to communicate with Violet. Commenting on Joe’s time with Dorcas, the narrator describes how he could “tell his new love things he never told his wife” (36). Something of the same might be said of Violet. Thinking about Joe’s affair, she wonders if Dorcas saw “Not the fifty-year-old man toting a sample case, but

my Joe Trace, my Virginia Joe Trace who carried a light inside him” (96). Just like Joe, she utilizes her memories of the past in her attempt to make sense of the present.

The centrality of communication becomes even clearer towards novel’s end, when Felice, who up until then has been at the margins of the story, takes centre stage. I think it is safe to argue that, among the many voices encountered in the course of the novel, Felice’s comes across as among the most authoritative. She brings Joe and Violet the insight that Dorcas probably used Joe to the same extent that Joe used her. Asked by Felice about his relationship with his wife, Joe answers that “We working on it. Faster now, since you stopped by and told us what you did” (212). Communication has thus been a prerequisite for the healing of their relationship. Felice describes how Joe, upon being brought food by his wife, thanks her “As though he appreciated it. When my father says thanks, it’s just a word. Mr. Trace acted like he meant it” (207). This is very far removed from the earlier situation, with Joe and Violet taking turns to silently stare at the portrait of Dorcas.

What has emerged as the most prominent theme in the above discussion is the manner in which the narrator and the characters attempt to delve into the past in order to make sense of the present. This clearly is reminiscent of the situation encountered in *Solomon*, where the quest for a coherent identity was closely linked to knowledge of the past. The critical point made in *Solomon* was that this identity is not objectively true and unproblematic. This could be seen in that many aspects, such as the role played by women, was omitted from the grand narratives. Omissions and exclusions have too been highly relevant in the above analysis of *Jazz*, as the diegetic narrator chooses to tell her story in a very specific manner. What I will do in the following is to move towards my conclusion through discussing the concept of origin as it emerges in the novel. As will be seen, the origin the narrator and the characters attempt to return to is just as tied to individual perspectives as every other narrative in the novel.

As a pathway into this discussion it seems fruitful to consider the epigraph at the beginning of *Song of Solomon*. While this might seem a little out of place, it is a good way of illuminating how the two novels relate to similar questions. The epigraph reads as follows: “The father may soar/ and the children may know their names”. In this brief quote there are three very significant things going on. First of all, it is made explicit that the “soaring” is reserved for men. They are thus the only ones who are allowed to go out and attempt to achieve transcendence. Secondly, the epigraph emphasises the importance of cultural memory, as the task of the children is to stay behind and remember those who left. And thirdly, it is important to consider the group not even mentioned in the epigraph, the mothers.

The epigraph thus also brings up the question of origin, showing how it can never be all-inclusive and account for every aspect of the past.

In *Jazz*, the question of origin revolves around the ancestors of Joe and Violet, who constantly hover in the background of their perspectives. As shown, Joe's desperate attempt to exactly define the identity of his mother is a very significant element in his search for a coherent identity. The same can clearly be said of Violet, as she struggles to come to terms with her mother's suicide. It seems very clear that this situation is very far removed from one where the past is structured in terms of its essential maleness. In fact, Joe identifies himself specifically in terms of what is not there. His last name, Trace, is a clear indication of this. Upon hearing that his parents left "without a trace", Joe believes that "the 'trace' they disappeared without was me" (124). His search for his mother might thus be understood as his longing for an identity that in no way is ambiguous, but rather is a fundamentally true and unproblematic relation to the past.

A fruitful way of thinking about this is supplied by Stuart Hall's two conceptions of cultural identity. As seen in the previous chapter, the first of these conceptions involved viewing the past as an essence, as something which, given enough effort, could be recovered and utilized by an individual (111). This is what Joe attempts to do, for instance through his asking Wild to give him a sign which will let him know whether she is his mother or not. Through having that question answered, he will be able to pinpoint his identity beyond all uncertainty, and thus view it as objectively true. What I have attempted to show, however, is that there is far too much representation and ambiguity involved in the way the characters relate to their past for it to be understood as objectively "real". A central principle of the text is that the meaning of the past, as understood by the characters and to the narrator changes throughout the text. This then points towards a belief in the futility of trying to search for an inherently true narrative of the past.

One highly significant ramification of the problematic situation regarding cultural memory becomes apparent when one considers the second part of the epigraph, "and the children may know their names". This is quite clear in the case of *Solomon*, where the memories regarding succession lie inherent in the transmission of the family name. In *Jazz*, however, we are faced with a situation far removed from the one we find in *Solomon*. As far as I can tell, the only father in the novel who is unambiguously named is Vera Louise's father, Colonel Wordsworth Gray. However, he only makes one brief appearance, and is of no great significance for the plot. The three other father's who in some way or another are significant are Golden Gray's father Hunter's Hunter and the unnamed fathers of Joe and Violet. In fact,

Joe's father does at no point make an appearance. He is briefly mentioned through Joe's stating "I never knew my own daddy" (124), but is not mentioned again. Though he in fact makes some appearances, Violet's father also remains unnamed. It seems to me that this consistent absence of fathers is just as noteworthy as the equally consistent absence of significant mothers was in *Solomon*. One of the questions the novel asks regards what it is that happens when the children *don't* know the name of the fathers. This of course ties in well with the sense of rupture and dislocation so central to the concerns of the novel as a whole

Faced with this strange absence of significant male characters, it is easy to simply discount them, and rather place the emphasis on the novel's mothers, who are visible in the text to a far greater extent than the fathers are. This leads Andrea O'Reilly to focus almost exclusively on motherhood in her article "In search of my mother's garden, I found my own: mother-love, healing, and identity in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*". The title of the article is self-explanatory, with its focus on achieving a coherent sense of identity through knowing and being loved by one's mother. She quotes Deborah McDowell, who argues that "the memory of the lost mother is the motor force of *Jazz*" (369). This is obviously true, and at one level it is thus not possible to argue with it. Both Joe and Violet have had to grow up without their mothers. Yet, O'Reilly's singular focus on motherhood is problematic because it seems to entail something of a simplification, especially when one considers how she brings up and dismisses a focus on fathers. She introduces her comments on fatherhood by referring to "contemporary writings from the so-called men's movement" (375), before she flatly states that their perspectives are irrelevant to an analysis of *Jazz*.

In spite of this, O'Reilly acknowledges that there is one character in the novel who, as she terms it, "suffers from father hunger" (375). This is Golden Gray, described by O'Reilly as "a conceited, selfish, spoiled child more interested in finding out his father's skin than in being a son to the father he never knew" (375). What she disregards in this characterisation is the high degree of ambiguity which surrounds the way Golden Gray is characterised in the novel. The tale of Golden Gray is explicitly reduced to the imagination of the narrator, as she starts off that whole narrative by claiming that, though she doesn't know the story, "it's not hard to imagine what it must have been like" (137). Following this, the part of the story that deals specifically with Golden Gray is introduced with the narrator stating "I see him in a two-seat phaeton" (143). The fact that the story is introduced by a reference to the narrator's specific position relative to those events works towards emphasising the vital role played by the narrator as the inventor of the plot, not solely as its transcriber. It is this very explicit narrative presence Jones refers to when she describes the story of Golden as "the most

consciously narrated part of *Jazz*”(487). This conscious narration is made explicit through how the narrator repeats various aspects of the narrative, and makes frequent references to her own unreliability. A consequence of this is that the narrator seems to have great trouble making up her mind as to what to think of Golden Gray. Having made the description which O’Reilly makes use of to describe him, the narrator later asks herself “What was I thinking of? How could I have imagined him so poorly? Not noticed the hurt that was not linked to the color of his skin, or the blood that beat beneath it. But to some other thing that longed for authenticity” (160). It thus seems that one of the possible motivations the narrator attributes to Golden Gray is a longing for authenticity through reaching into the past.

While, in the embedded story, Golden Gray looks for authenticity, the embedded story itself might be understood as the narrator’s attempt to make sense of Joe and Violet’s situation. In this story, their ancestors come together in what seems to be a rather remarkable series of coincidences. Heinert has argued that “the all-too-convenient events of the plot contrast with its dubious construction and calls its veracity—at least its narrative veracity—into question” (68). She further argues for viewing it as a metaphorical plot. Such a view brings it very close to seeing the narratives as “representations of origin”, which is what Collier and Yanagisako argued that narratives of origin should be understood as. One of the assets of such a view is that it considers the issue of the “truth” of the narrative to be fundamentally irrelevant. The question which then needs to be asked of the story of Golden Gray is what it can tell us about the ability to delve into the past to make sense of the present.

I think that what needs to be considered in order to make sense of the story of Golden Gray is that Joe and Violet look to their Southern past for a stable essence on which they can base their identities. We see this in that the characters who will figure prominently in the story of Golden Gray make brief appearances in the mental frame of reference of Joe and Violet. For instance, Violet attributes parts of her troubles to the fact that she is unable to live up to the image Golden Gray as embodies. Golden supplies the link between their respective searches, as he knew both Violet’s grandmother and Joe’s mother. However, there really seems to be little that tastes of essentially true identities in the story of Golden. In fact, Jones argues that Golden has “no ‘authentic’ self” (488), torn as he is between his white mother and his black father. In a sense, he too experiences a profound sense of rupture, though his is not between life in the south contra life in the north. The lack of stability in the past as remembered is also indicated by the problems the narrator has when it comes to making up his mind regarding Golden Gray. Is he white or black? Are his actions justified, or are they not?

Through the raising of these questions, the past the characters look to in search for answers is exposed as closely tied to ideology and cultural preconceptions.

Towards the end of the novel, Violet articulates the core concern the novel revolves around. Talking to Felice, she asks her the following question: “What’s the world if you can’t make it up the way you want it” (208). It is clearly significant that Violet asks this question towards the end of the narrative, as we up until then have seen what might happen when the characters are defined, rather than allowed to define themselves. In one way, it might be argued that what *Jazz* does is to take the analysis in *Solomon* several steps further. While the emphasis in *Solomon* mainly was on Milkman’s appropriation of the discourse, *Jazz* shifts the emphasis to those who are defined within this system. Consequently, whatever stereotypical picture we might have of Joe as a violent African American is rendered unconvincing. This is mainly because of the novel’s strange narrator, who clearly embodies a very specific attitude towards the characters she describes. What the characters then must do is to attempt to break free from the seemingly rigid confines that have been set up for them by the narrator.

These confines, then, have much to do with the status of the past as constructed by individuals. This was also the case in my analysis of *Solomon*, where I focused on how alternative narratives might work towards undermining the novel’s central discourse of male succession. In this analysis I have argued that the same set of problems are investigated from a raised angle in *Jazz*, as the diegetic narrative is treated in the same way as the metadiegetic ones were in *Solomon*. That it, it is treated as a highly subjective and interpretative version of the events. For instance, this becomes clear when considered in relation to the idea of origin stories as “representations of origins”, representations which tell as much about those doing the representing as about those represented. The representative nature of the narrative is of course made explicit when the events do not conform to the blueprints set forth by the narrator. These concerns will recur in my third and final chapter, where I will discuss Morrison’s novel *Love*. Like in the two other chapters, I will attempt to illustrate how identity is formed through narrative.

Chapter 3

“Unique claims”: Views of Male Power in *Love*

In my readings of *Jazz* and *Song of Solomon* I placed much emphasis on the question of the moral status of male acts of transcendence. Milkman left his family behind in his attempt to understand the lives of his ancestors, and Joe killed his girlfriend in an attempt to re-connect with his past. The novels do not make it clear how we ought to feel about these events, and ambiguity is in fact thematized in both novels. Much of the same can be said of Morrison's *Love*, published in 2003. It is structured around the memory of Bill Cosey, an African American businessman who is long dead when the diegetic action commences. At one point, one of the characters states that Cosey could be seen as “a good bad man, or a bad good man” (200). The act which most contributes to this ambiguity is his marriage to the eleven-year old girl Heed. The various characters understand this act differently, depending on the positions they occupy vis-à-vis Cosey. I take the attempt to understand the acts of Bill Cosey to be the central concern around which the novel turns. A discussion of this attempt necessitates a dual focus. First of all, it becomes necessary to account for how the past is presented narratively. In *Love*, the past comes across as just a problematic an entity as in *Jazz* and *Song of Solomon*, but the narrative structure that brings out this ambiguity is quite distinct. And secondly, it is also necessary to consider the specifically gendered aspects of the framing of the past. For example, to which degree is it possible for women to achieve a coherent sense of identity when they appear to be dominated by a central male presence?

As the novel mainly features women, it might seem strange to place emphasis on how maleness is articulated. Yet, I think the women's constant preoccupation with understanding Cosey's legacy warrants such a focus. After all, maleness as understood by women is just as interesting a subject as maleness as understood by men. This perspective has also been present in the two other novels, for instance in Magdalena's reinterpretation of Milkman's male privilege in *Song of Solomon*. We see it clearly in *Love*, for instance through the various chapter-headings. They all refer to some position occupied by Bill Cosey, such as “portrait”, “husband” and “benefactor”. The novel then illuminates the ramifications of each of these positions, and exposes them as not quite as straightforward as they appear (Sweeney 449). For instance, it seems quite clear that the various kinship positions must be understood in terms of what they exclude as much as by what they include. This is because each event is understood from a great many angles, and it is rarely possible to exactly pinpoint how any of Cosey's acts

should be understood. Thus, when his tombstone reads “Ideal Husband. Perfect Father” (201), we get a value-judgment which depends on a specific positioning in relation to Cosey, and which is inherently ambiguous.

In *Song of Solomon*, the ambiguity was mainly brought out through contrasting metadiegetic narratives told by the characters in their own voices. Due to the thematic significance attributed to the act of storytelling in that novel, such a structure made good sense. The situation we encounter in *Love* is quite different, as most of the story (with the exception of the passages attributed to L) is voiced directly by the narrator. The ambiguity is brought out through varied focalisation, with the narrator telling the story according to the perspective of several of the characters. Among the different types of focalisation Genette presents in *Narrative Discourse*, there is one especially well suited for an understanding of *Love*. He defines multiple focalisation as a narrative situation “where the same event may be evoked several times according to the point of view of several . . . characters” (190). There is a clear link between such a focalisation and what Genette terms repeating analepses, where already narrated events are brought up again and function “either by making significant what was not so originally or by refuting a first interpretation and replacing it with a new one” (56). This is exactly the situation which we encounter in *Love*, where the deeds of Bill Cosey are seen from several angles. What all these perspectives have in common is that each claims to be most prominent and significant, while trivializing all others.

The central question I will ask of the text is *why* things that were not emphasised in one character’s focal perspective are focused on in another’s. A good example of the relevance of such considerations is supplied by two of the accounts of the circumstances surrounding Heed’s marriage to Bill Cosey. When she first tells Junior of her marriage, Heed does not mention her age at the time of the wedding. This indicates that Heed does not see the age difference between herself and her husband as significant. While she briefly mentions that her mother was opposed to the marriage, she gives this little weight contrary to her memory of “Almost thirty years of perfect bliss” (62). This view is contrasted with that of Christine, who tells Junior that Heed was eleven when she married Cosey. Christine focuses on what she perceives as the loss of her friend, as her former playmate now in fact has become her grandmother. It gradually emerges that Heed’s marriage to Christine’s grandfather is the event at the core of their conflict. More specifically, their strife has to do with the span between their respective understandings of this act. It seems that they both understand the other to have betrayed the bond between them. Just like the characters in *Solomon*, Heed and Christine

attempt to fashion narratives in which they alone have valid claims. The question which then emerges has to do with the differences between the focus of their respective accounts.

It then becomes necessary to consider matters of representation, of the possibility of presenting another person in an objectively true manner. This is because Bill Cosey is solely presented through the memories of the characters, and we never get direct access to him in the way that we get to characters such as Heed or Christine. Commenting on the portrait of her husband, Heed expresses her belief in its ability to objectively pinpoint her late husband's identity: "That's him. It was painted from a snapshot, so it's exactly like him. What you see there is a wonderful man" (26). Initially, it seems quite mysterious why Heed should think that a portrait painted after a photograph should be seen as more true than if it had been painted using Cosey himself as model. However, on a thematic level it makes much sense, especially when considering that the painting is a representation of a representation, capturing Bill Cosey in one very specific position among many possible. Thus, Heed is totally justified in arguing that "what you see there is a wonderful man", if the focus is put on the positioning involved. As so much emphasis is put on the different roles he occupies, it is fair to say that from the perspective Heed occupies at that specific point in the novel, he comes across as a good man. A portrait is a very fitting metaphor for this dynamic, as one of its defining characteristics is that it, literally, can show only one side of what it portrays. In a similar manner, attempts to either demonize or glorify Bill Cosey are doomed to failure, precisely because he cannot be contained within a unified interpretation.

Halfway through the novel, the narrator articulates the conflict at the core of the novel. This strife marks both the diegetic action and that which we only get access to through the explicitly figural accounts of the various characters. The central insight is that "each had a unique claim on Cosey's affection" (98), and the characters are seemingly incapable of seeing the legitimacy of any perspective but their own. Probably the best example of this mechanism is supplied by the relationship between Heed and Christine. On the surface level, their conflict revolves around an ambiguous phrase in what they presume to be Bill Cosey's authentic will (the implications of the will being a forgery will be dealt with later). The will states that the house and the money will go to Cosey's "sweet Cosey child" (88). Both Heed and Christine perceive themselves to be the referent of the will, and the narrator admits that they both have a point. Stating that "biologically speaking, Christine was the only 'child' left" (88), the narrator admits that Christine has a strong claim. However, the narrator grants equal weight to Heed, who in fact "called her husband Papa" (88). Thus, each has a valid claim for viewing themselves as the referent, and they are both unwilling to grant that the other has a point. In

“A Laying on of Hands: Toni Morrison and the Materiality of ‘Love’ “, Anissa Janine Wardi argues that the will is significant not only because of the financial values involved, but too because it will pinpoint which of them Cosey loved best (210). In this regard, there are two gender-related issues it seems fruitful to consider. First of all, it is necessary to ask how the perspectives of the characters must be understood in relation to the specific roles they occupy relative to Bill Cosey. Here it is not sufficient to operate with a distinction between male and female perspectives, as the novel points to the wide variety of perspectives attributed to the women we meet. Secondly, it is necessary to ask what this situation tells us about maleness and masculinity, as the memory of one man has the power to create such conflict and strife.

Megan Sweeney discusses this plurality in her article “ ‘Something Rogue’: Commensurability, Commodification, Crime and Justice in Toni Morrison’s Later Fiction”. Part of what she focuses on is what it is that gets left out of legal definitions and not allowed representation in the dominant narratives (449). What *Love* does, then, is to illuminate the limits inherent in any set perspective, as it never will get close enough to grasp the nuances of each particular case. This principle will be recognised from *Jazz*, as that novel too dealt with the limitations inherent in any system of labelling. As stated above, Heed’s description of the portrait of her husband, freezing him in one specific position, captures this dynamic well. What is at issue is thus contrasting and conflicting representations.

As a pathway into the discussion of the gendered aspects of the presentation of the past I will briefly account for the novel’s basic narrative situation. The novel utilizes the retrospective technique, and most of the significant events have already occurred. What we get access to on the diegetic level is their dramatic culmination. This is reminiscent of the situation encountered in *Jazz*, where the diegetic action begins after Joe’s murder of Dorcas. However, just like in *Jazz*, this does not signify that the past is over and done with. On the contrary, the characters are very much concerned with the meaning of the past, and constantly bring it up in order to justify their present situations. Thus, when Heed tells Junior that she intends to write a book about her husband’s (and her) family, this is not as far removed from the truth as it might seem. After all, what she wants Junior to help her do is to create a counterfeit will which will identify her as the inheritor of her late husband’s estate. In other words, she wants to create a document which puts the primacy of her bond to her husband beyond all doubt.

As shown, these retrospective glimpses of Cosey are by no means objective and unproblematic. Rather, they are told by characters who were involved in the events and have their own agendas. It thus is necessary to ask why their accounts take the specific form they

do. In that regard, Hayden White's idea concerning "modes of emplotment" becomes relevant. The story of Bill Cosey is told from a great many positions, according to many different criteria. For instance, Vida, who used to work at Cosey's hotel, chooses to blame Heed for the unsuitable marriage. Vida's husband, on the other hand, has quite a different perspective on Bill Cosey, which he arrives at based on his recollections on the fishing trips they went on together. He is one of the few characters who acknowledge some of the ambiguity which surrounds the man, and does not insist upon providing a unified interpretation which can account for every aspect of him. In fact, he explicitly states that some aspects of Cosey's character lead towards one view, while others point towards a different assessment (45). This clearly points to an obvious limitation in any character's view of Cosey, as each perspective is reducible to what that character saw or heard.

In *Solomon*, the emplotment of the metadiegetic narratives could often be viewed as rhetorical tools utilized to convince the listener that that specific version of the past came closest to the truth. The situation we encounter here is quite different, as many of the flashbacks solely occur in the minds of the characters, and are never spoken. For instance, the novel's fourth chapter, titled "Benefactor", begins with the narrator stating that "Heed eased down into the froth" (71). With the establishment of this external setting, the narrator then proceeds with what Dorrit Cohn has termed psychonarration, defined as the narrator's description of the thoughts of a character (11). For the following ten pages, the narrator confines herself to Heed's perspective, rarely giving us access to information Heed does not have. The fact that Cosey is referred to as "Papa" several times during these pages further strengthens the idea that what we get are Heed's thoughts. And, as the authority of the narrator is not questioned here as it was in *Jazz*, we have no reason not to trust her knowledge claim. What is worth noticing about these psychonarrations is that they are framed as if they were directly addressed to someone who needed to be persuaded of the righteousness of Heed's cause. In this account, Heed frames herself as having stood more or less alone in her conflict with Christine and May. For instance, thinking about the fact that she ended up with the house and the money, Heed states that "She had fought them all, won" (74). The polemical framing of this section becomes especially when compared to one preceding it, where Heed tells Junior of her marriage. Here the analepsis is explicitly addressed to Junior, and has the main purpose of emphasising Heed's connection to her husband. Telling Junior about the will her husband left behind, she says that "his will left me the most, though to hear some people, a wife shouldn't be provided for . . ." (62). Just like in the psychonarration, Heed here frames the past in terms of her rights as Cosey's wife.

However, it is equally significant that there are other analepses that function very differently. For instance, towards the end of the lengthy psychonarration of Heed's bath-tub meditations, there is a section that breaks significantly with those that precede it. Told in a child-like manner reminiscent of fairy tales—it begins with the words “Once a little girl wandered too far” (78)—its form indicates that there is something different about this passage. We later learn that the story told is of Heed's first meeting with Christine, a harmonic meeting which stands in sharp contrast to the animosity characteristic of their adult interaction. The distinctiveness of the passage indicates that the memory is located on a different level than the account of her marriage, and the fact that Heed connects the experience to “skin memory” (77) marks it as different from what came before. I will come back to this very significant passage a bit later, and for now it suffices to note that not every psychonarration is marked by the same conscious level of rhetoric.

When articulating the narrative of her past in relation to Bill Cosey, Heed emphasises that she was married to him. Christine, on the other hand, places equal stress on her biological connection. According to Christine, this link makes her an authentic Cosey. This strife falls in nicely with one of the most enduring debates in anthropological theory, which has to do with whether alliance (marriage) or descent should be viewed as the most vital aspect of social structure. While the context of *Love* is very different from that of the societies studied by Levi-Strauss, one of the main sources of tension in the novel is related to the same argument about alliance and descent. Heed understands her relation to Cosey as defined by their marriage, while Christine puts equal emphasis on the fact that she is related to him by blood. What I now will discuss is how their differing attitudes towards Cosey might be understood as stemming from their kinship position relative to him.

The chapter where we get the first extensive analepsis focalised through Heed is named “Benefactor”, and we thus get an indication of the position Cosey should be understood in terms of in that chapter. What this suggests is that his marriage to Heed is, at least by her, understood as an act of benevolence. The question of the moral status of an old man's marriage to a girl aged eleven thus does not become relevant for her, at least not until the very end of the novel. Rather, she sees the marriage as an act of kindness. “Knowing she had no schooling, no abilities, no proper raising, he chose her anyway while everybody else thought she could be run over” (72-73). The above quote indicates that Heed views her life as commencing upon her marriage. Heed's claim that there was nothing worth remembering about her life prior to her marriage indicates a considerable amount of self-contempt, testifying to the tremendous narrative authority she grants to the memory of Bill Cosey. This

resonates well with Sweeney's perspective, as she focused on the ways the official cultural blueprints have of fitting everything within a rigid framework.

The narrative authority Heed initially attributes to her late husband becomes clear when she recognises that few of the people she interacted with in the early years of her marriage have succeeded with their lives. She claims that those who made it did so because they "had never mocked or insulted Bill Cosey's wife" (73). Rather than simply say "her", she chooses to emphasise her specific connection to him. Of course, as she is spoken of in the third person, it is really the narrator who refers to her in this way. However, I take the whole section to be so closely tied to Heed's perspective that it involves no significant stretch to attribute the specific wording to her. This narrative strategy is defined by Cohn as consonant psychonarration, with the narrator taking on the character's own idiom when describing her (30). In Heed's conception of herself as "Bill Cosey's wife", the age-difference between them is not all that significant. She focuses on her affinal connection to her husband, a link which makes her a part of his family. However, at times the discord becomes apparent, and it is difficult not to get the sense that there is something distinctly off in their relationship. For instance, when commenting upon Heed's being left alone while her husband attended to business, The narrator states that this was not something "Heed minded, because she had coloring books, picture magazines, paper dolls to cut out and clothe" (128). One of the things this brief quote does is to remind the reader of just how young Heed was upon her marriage. Just before, the narrator has described their honey-moon, where Heed is taken shopping. Discussing this, Sweeney notes that Heed's "ill-fitting clothes signal the disproportionality of an eleven-year old girl acting as wife to a fifty-two-year old man" (450). Significantly, May is quick to note the discrepancy between Heed's attire and her young age. Seeing Heed coming home from her honeymoon, she asks Heed "What in God's name have you got on? You look like a, a . . ." (127). While May thinks Heed's attire is unsuitable, the reason is not that Heed is forced into a position she is not ready for. Rather, May chooses to see the event as evidence of Heed's attempt to become something she is not.

As shown, Heed's is not the only view on the marriage we encounter in the course of the novel. Among the various other perspectives we get, I take those represented by Christine and May on the one hand, and L on the other, to constitute the most significant contrasts. While Heed sees her legitimacy as stemming from her marriage, that claim is not recognised by May and Christine. In Christine's account of Cosey's funeral, the narrator describes her as "seing Heed's false tears, her exaggerated shuddering shoulders; watching townfolk treat her as the sole mourner, and the two *real* Cosey women as unwelcome visitors" (98, emphasis

added). While Heed puts emphasis on the fact that her husband chose her, May and Christine do not see the situation, with Heed being the mother-in-law of a woman some thirty years her senior, as legitimate. Their claim to being the only remaining “real Cosey women” clearly testifies to this, as they see their connection to Cosey AS the only legitimate one. From their perspective, Heed’s grief is illusory, and solely linked to her need to frame herself as the one legitimate heir. But, it must be remembered that May, who is most explicit about her dislike (even hatred) of Heed, cannot claim a blood-link to Bill Cosey, either. Just like Heed, she is only related to Cosey through marriage. Then, it seems, there must be something else about Heed which leads to her being disliked by those who see themselves as the “real Cosey women”.

A major part of this “something else” is related to class, and reminiscent of Murray’s claim that patriarchy and capitalism in *Song of Solomon* lead to more harm than good. At one point the narrator states that local people, even if they managed to get together enough money, were not allowed to rent rooms there. Heed is identified as being of such origin, connected to the slum-like area of Up Beach, a district marred by the smell of fish from the nearby canneries. To May and Christine, being a Cosey clearly entails more than just a name. For instance, when Junior tells Christine that Heed wishes her to write a book about her (Heed’s family), Christine asks herself the following question: “What family, Christine wondered. That nest of beach rats who bathed in a barrel and slept in their clothes. Or is she claiming Cosey blood along with Cosey land?” (89). To Christine and May, the name alone is not sufficient, and marriage does not turn Heed into a Cosey. From their point of view, this is made clear when Heed attempts, and fails, to live up to the etiquette of Bill Cosey’s household. Christine’s belief in the supremacy of her social position becomes highly explicit when she attempts to tell her lawyer why she sees herself as the lawful heir of her grandfather’s estate. When the lawyer does not completely see eye to eye with Christine, Christine responds by calling her “cannery trash” (95). All those who do not conform to her ideas of what is proper and right are relegated to the category of trash. A near perfect illustration of Christine’s perception of her status is the fact that, while she essentially is Heed’s servant, she still wears twelve diamond rings on her fingers in order to emphasise her class status. According to Christine, the fact that she has become a servant communicates much more about the person she works for than it does about herself.

The above-mentioned connection to Murray’s analysis of *Song of Solomon* is so significant that it is worth elaborating on a bit further. The two novels share a preoccupation with powerful male characters of questionable morality. A central argument in Murray’s

analysis is that the prominent position Milkman's father (and Milkman himself, for that matter) has carved out for himself is dependent on the subjugation of those around him (127). This situation is clearly mirrored in Bill Cosey and the story of his success. The prominence of his hotel is to a large extent attributed to the musicians who entertained there. They came mainly because they were treated as guests, and not as servants. Thus, had it not been for racism, there would have been no special reason for the musicians to seek out Cosey's hotel. And significantly, upon the arrival of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s the hotel went into serious decline. Commenting on this in her article "*Love* and the survival of the black community", Mar Gallego argues that "the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement and the end of segregation bring about the decline of the resort" (93). To me this seems to be something of a simplification, as several other reasons for the hotel's demise might be conceived of. The question is raised rather than answered, and it is ultimately up to the reader whether the demise of the hotel should be attributed, as May thinks, to the advances of the Civil Rights movement, or to actions of the eccentric women who ran it after Cosey's death. It is clearly equally legitimate to argue that Cosey in fact ruined it himself, through the conflict he inflicted upon his descendants. It seems that this is the position occupied by Gallego, who argues that "African Americans' adoption of a patriarchal model is reckoned as the greatest source of conflict in the text" (94). The unreliability of the multiple perspectives which strive for dominance makes it very difficult to really be certain about anything that has to do with the life of Bill Cosey, but it will later be seen that the above point comes to take on considerable credibility.

In my discussions of *Solomon* and *Jazz*, one of the key arguments had to do with the question of individual agency relative to what Heinert termed "the dominant culture". The former novel conceptualized this in terms of patrilineal descent, while, as Heinert argued, the narrator embodied this system of power in the latter (61). In *Love*, the structure of power is represented by the character of Bill Cosey, whose authority is such that he still wields influence twenty-five years after his death. His position as a powerful African American man can clearly be understood in terms of the perspectives hooks discusses in *We Real Cool*. As shown, "the culture of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (xi) is a major part of her analysis, constituting the background she defines black masculinity in relation to. It is especially racism, capitalism and patriarchy that are operative in *Love*, functioning as principles that have the power to encompass every other aspect of the text. Part of what makes Cosey's rise to power so remarkable is the racism he had to overcome in order to establish his hotel. His access to money is too a highly significant element in the story of his ascent, as his

access sets him apart from those who had less. This is an essential aspect in Vida's recollections of him, as she emphasises how he used his material wealth to help those around him. When talking about Up Beach, where Vida and her husband used to live, she says that "It was a plantation. And Bill Cosey took us off of it" (18). Plantations are closely connected to racism and slavery, and through his access to money he is able to facilitate their upward mobility.

This class perspective makes it clear that the position he occupies is inseparable from his access to money and material goods. It is this position that enables him to marry Heed. When Christine and Heed are reconciled towards the end of the novel, Heed says that she was traded for two hundred dollars and a pocket book (193). If this incident is contrasted with the one above, the ambivalence which surrounds Cosey should be made clear. While he in a sense allowed Vida and Sandler to escape from what might be seen as a form of slavery, his marriage to Heed can easily be understood in terms of trading with human lives, and thus reminiscent of yet another form of slavery. These mechanisms are discussed by Megan Sweeney in her article, where she shows how Morrison's novels deconstruct the idea of commensurability. Her main argument is that "the logic of commensurability fails to account for human complexity" (463). Sweeney makes the point that this reduction of subjectivity is operative in *Jazz*, too (444). As shown, that novel to a great extent dealt with how the central voice attempted (and failed) to account for everything within a specific framework. When discussing the somewhat paradoxical nature of Bill Cosey's (absent) presence, it is necessary to keep in mind that it cannot be reduced to one thing. In fact, one of the ramifications of the novel's fragmented structure is that it does not at all make sense to talk of any unified description of Cosey. Rather, what we get is a plurality of possible interpretations, different ways of interpreting a number of morally ambiguous acts.

The character who most directly embodies the legacy of Bill Cosey is May. Just like Cosey himself, Christine's mother is solely presented through the memories of the characters. While it is easy to discount May as crazy, I think she offers an illuminating example of what might happen if the categories of race, gender and class are pushed to their extremes. Describing May, L says that "She gave herself every opportunity to recount how Mr. Cosey came from a long line of quiet, prosperous slaves and thrifty freedmen" (136). Immensely proud of the family she married into, she has nothing but contempt for Heed's Up Beach origin. The narrator describes how, upon hearing of Cosey's second marriage, May and Christine "went wild just thinking about his choice of an Up Beach girl for his bride. A girl without a nightgown or bathing suit" (75). What May does here is to establish intraracial

distinctions on the basis of class. As discussed earlier, such distinctions are a vital part of the mechanisms Harper identifies as operative in American society. There is a clear connection between this and what we saw in my earlier discussion of Milkman's father. The essence of this is the now-familiar point that all assumptions are characterised by what they exclude as much as by what they include.

While most of the perspectives we get on Cosey are explicitly tied to the self-righteousness of the women who remember him, there is one character who occupies a rather different position. Her judgments of Cosey come across as very different from those attributed to characters such as Heed and Christine. I refer to the italicised sections which occur throughout the novel, passages attributed to the character L. Sweeney argues that L's being given both the first and the last word of the novel in itself marks her perspective as particularly significant (447). The fact that the passages are in italics serves to indicate that there is something about them which sets them apart from the main narrative. Writing about *Love* in her article "A Laying on of Hands: Toni Morrison and the Materiality of Love", Anissa Janine Wardi argues that there is an echo of *Jazz*'s narrator in these sections. I think there is a great deal of truth to this, mainly because, as Wardi claims, they are both "straightforward, opinionated and knowledgeable about their communities" (207). However, is it really plausible to claim that the narrator of *Jazz* is knowledgeable? After all, she is repeatedly revealed as prejudiced, and quite often downright mistaken. I take it to be more accurate to say that the narrator of *Jazz* presumes to be knowledgeable, but is over and over again proven to be mistaken.

L, on the other hand, who at times takes over the narration completely, strikes me as immediately reliable. This is because her point of view is characterised by a balance lacking in the outlooks of any of the other characters. For instance, towards the end of the novel she passes the following judgment on Cosey: "You could call him a good bad man, or a bad good man" (200). What sets this judgment apart is that it does not insist on turning Cosey into either a devil or a saint, but rather opens up for the possibility that he in fact was both good and bad. That there are many aspects to a character has been made clear by the novel as a whole, but none of the characters, with the exception of L (and to some degree, Sandler Gibbons), seem to arrive at this insight. Of course, the ultimate narrative authority of L only becomes clear in the last two pages of the novel, when she admits that she killed Bill Cosey and forged the will at the centre of the conflict between Heed and Christine. She is thus revealed to stand at the centre of the plot in more ways than one. She is both the character who reveals the greatest degree of insight into what motivates the different characters, and the

one who in fact puts the diegetic plot into motion. Of course, the fact that she commits both murder and legal fraud goes some way towards making L a quite problematic character too. It might be suggested that this points to the novel's discussion of what it is that separates right from wrong. Wardi places this in the context of Morrison's concern with "acts of protection and love, which are nevertheless morally suspect" (212). Might it be that the crime at the centre of the novel is committed by Bill Cosey, not by L? This question brings in a new aspect of the ethical dimension of the text, as it is indicated that Bill Cosey might be just as guilty of a transgression as the feuding women are. Sweeney makes this claim when she defines L's project as "extra-legal" (458), thus connected to a morality outside of that represented by law. I take this to centrally have to do with exclusion, with what is shunted to the sidelines in the dominant narrative of the morally ambivalent patriarch.

With the emphasis placed on L's perspective, it becomes clear that *Love* shares *Jazz* and *Solomon*'s emphasis on the significant position occupied by women in African American culture. In this regard it becomes relevant to draw a connection to Morrison's *Sula*, published more than thirty years before *Love*. As will be seen shortly, there are many points of contact between the two novels. Discussing *Sula*, Nissen argues for the significance of Eva Peace's perspective. By way of making this point, Nissen argues that Eva makes a great number of very difficult choices, such as deciding to kill her son who has come back from the war a mental cripple (267). Nissen holds that the defining characteristic of Eva is that, as she herself states, she "never would've watched" (281). The same can clearly be said of L, who views the damage Cosey is able to inflict on his surroundings as much greater than that which will result from her choice to kill him rather than to let him drive the family further apart.

While I have pointed to some of the thematic concerns *Love* shares with *Song of Solomon* and *Jazz*, I think it is safe to say that the most obvious interconnection is to *Sula*. At the centre of that novel stands the friendship of two women who grew up together, a friendship that collapses when they are confronted with the rigid norms of society. For instance, when Sula sleeps with Nel's husband, Nel understands this act as constituting a blatant betrayal, and breaks off her friendship with Sula. Writing about *Sula* in "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism", Barbara Smith defines the forces of obligatory heterosexuality and patriarchy as prominent in the destruction of Sula and Nel's friendship, as they are driven to channel the feelings they have for each other towards men (179). The base premise of Smith's discussion is that the system of patriarchy denies the primacy of the bond that exists between women (178). At this point it seems obvious that this analysis is just as central for an understanding of *Love* as of *Sula*. In her discussion of the points of contact between the two

novels, Wardi argues that “Heterosexual relationships destroy both sets of friendships” (213). This assessment strikes me as very accurate, given that the friendship of Heed and Christine is disrupted upon the entry of Bill Cosey. Upon Cosey’s marriage to Heed, the relation between her and Christine is transformed from an egalitarian one between two equals to a hierarchical one, with each claiming primacy. What Smith defines as the lesbian aspects of the relationship are thus displaced, at the expense of “the pressing needs of men” (*Love* 92).

What then emerges is the contrast between what social conventions demand that people do, and what they really want to do. It is this contrast we have to keep in mind when considering what to make of Heed’s marriage. The text provides few clear answers, and we thus have to make up our minds as to who should be blamed for the situation. Yet, as suggested by L’s perspective, it might even be possible that there is no right or wrong answer, and that all we get is a plurality of possibilities. Regardless of the value judgment arrived at, Heed’s marriage clearly must be central in any attempt to get to the centre of the novel’s conflict. What I will do in the following is to look into how the marriage might be understood as an embodiment of patriarchal values, as well as how the text as a whole might be said to undermine these values.

In *We Real Cool*, under the chapter-heading “gangsta culture”, hooks discusses the conception of crime among African Americans, and argues that the “media teaches young black males that the patriarchal man is a predator, that only the strong and the violent survive” (26). When considering Cosey, it becomes necessary to deemphasise certain aspects of this quote, primarily hooks’ assertion that this only goes for *young* men. It also necessitates a somewhat extended meaning of the word “violent”, allowing for psychological as well as physical violence. This violence might well be linked to “the pressing needs of men” (92), which Christine takes to be present in most of the places she has been. If we view this “pressing need” as indicative of the idea of power emphasised by hooks, much of the novel comes to make great sense. This need to assert power is well illustrated by Heed’s recollection of Christine’s graduation party. Picking up the wrong glass at one point during the dinner, Heed reveals her ignorance of social etiquette. Humiliated, she throws a glass at her husband. She remembers her husband’s response in the following way: “Papa rose and grabbed her arm. Then, with a kind of old-timey grace, he put her across his knees and spanked her” (126). This incident illustrates both the power and the ethical ambiguities which mark their marriage, as the discord between Heed’s age and the position she occupies becomes very explicit. Though they are married, she is treated as if she were a child. What occurs can thus be defined as a mixing of roles, with his role as a husband being mixed with

other roles. Heed's calling her husband "Papa" is the most prominent instance of this. What is crucial to remember when considering these events is that Heed does not seem to blame her late husband for any of this, but rather targets Christine and May for making fun of her. At this point, then, the value system of Bill Cosey functions as the central principle which structures the recollections of the past. It is then fruitful to ask questions regarding what falls outside the dominant representation, and might be said to work towards contradicting (or, at least revising) the scheme of things Bill Cosey represents.

In the context of this revision it becomes fruitful to bring up the idea of compulsory heterosexuality. As stated, Barbara Smith sees this to be at work in Morrison's *Sula*, a novel centrally concerned with the nature of female friendship. *Love* shares this concern, and several incidents in the novel point towards an implied contrast with Heed's relation to her husband. For instance, when Heed muses on "the loss of skin memory, the body's recollection of pleasure" (77), she focuses on two events, both of which occur at the beach near Cosey's hotel. The first of these is her wedding night, which she describes as "Undressing. No penetration. No blood. No eeks of pain or discomfort. Just this man stroking, nursing, bathing her" (77). What I take to be most central here is that Heed is described as the passive party, as these things are done to her by "this man". Pleasurable as Heed's recollection of it seems to be, it is still marked by social difference. Immediately following this, her first meeting with Christine is described. The narration of their encounter marks it as very different from her wedding night. "Once a little girl wandered too far—down to big water and along its edge where waves skidded and mud turned into clean sand. Ocean spray dampened the man's undershirt she wore. There on a red blanket another little girl with white ribbons in her hair sat eating ice-cream" (78). The child-like wording, with phrases such as "down to big water", indicates the simplicity and innocence of the focal perspective. This contributes to setting it apart from the attention to convention and rules characterising most of the novel. However, what I take to be of primary importance is that they are equal ("a little black girl" and "another little black girl"). This marks the account as different from both the previous description of Heed's wedding night and the novel as a whole. What we see here is interaction characterised by a striking absence of attention to custom, with all inequality between the two of them wiped out. The social differences are deemphasised because, in that context, they are irrelevant. It then becomes necessary to ask what it is about the society they live in that leads to such radical changes in their relationship, and allows this friendship to turn into the intense hatred expressed on the diegetic level.

It is clear that parts of the conflict between Heed and Christine are attributable to matters of inclusion and exclusion. One of the dominant mechanisms of exclusion in *Love* deals with what the dominant idea of compulsory heterosexuality does to other relationships. As mentioned, the various chapter headings give a good indication as to which role Cosey should be seen as occupying in that part of the text. However, what are we then to make of the fact that the chapter labelled “Husband” does not solely concern Heed’s relation to her husband? It seems to indicate that Bill Cosey’s role as a husband goes far beyond his specific relation to his wife. What this does is to assert the apparent narrative privilege of Cosey as the occupant of each of these roles. A highly illuminating instance of the exclusion at the core of the novel is the scene which centres on Christine’s birthday party. It is worth remembering that that specific conflict also had its origin in an act of exclusion. We see that in that Heed’s way of doing things was not considered valid by her husband, who proceeded by punishing her. As a response to this attempt, Heed sets fire to Christine’s bed. Subsequently, May and Cosey argue about whether it is Christine or Heed who should literally be excluded, made to go somewhere else “for a week or two” (135). When May asks Bill Cosey why he thinks Christine should leave, he says “I’m not married to Christine. I married Heed” (135). Through the marriage of her former friend and her grandfather, Christine becomes excluded. On a larger scale one might say that exclusion is the predominant dynamic of the novel, through it focus on how the genuine and deep-felt relation between Heed and Christine is excluded from a social universe driven by rigid norms of race and gender. This situation is clearly far removed from the egalitarianism that characterised the interaction between Heed and Christine when they first met.

Part of the great narrative authority attributable to L stems from how she, in the last pages of the novel, articulates her understanding of the bond between Heed and Christine. Commenting upon the friendship that might emerge between children, she says that “If such children find each other before they know their own sex, or which one of them is starving, which well fed; before they know color from no color, kin from stranger, they have found a mix of surrender and mutiny they can never live without” (199). Discussing this passage, Gallego holds that “This kind of love is thus seen as the perfect paradigm, transgressing racial, gender, or class barriers, and disregarding family and community restrictions” (98). All of these markers of difference, structured around the memory of Bill Cosey, are operative in the novel. The friendship of Heed and Christine is literally disrupted through the entry of Bill Cosey. The marriage that follows is seen by Christine as an act of betrayal, and in their own language she calls Heed a slave who was bought with a candy bar (129). Significantly,

subsequent to Heed's marriage they choose to blame each other, rather than the person who actually came between them and disrupted their friendship. This points to the tremendous narrative authority they initially give to the memory of their husband/grandfather. Through having a claim which, in terms of convention, takes primacy over the bond that exists between Heed and Christine, Bill Cosey comes between them and disrupts their emotional bond. The question which emerges here thus has to do with how the past should be interpreted, how each event should be labelled. Was Heed saved from a life in poverty, or was she sold to a man who did not see the morally dubious aspect of marrying a girl aged eleven?

Here it is fruitful to return to the perspectives Sweeney adopted when discussing *Love*. At one point she argues that law is just as important a thematic concern to the novel as love (449). This ties closely in with the view of Cosey as the novel's main marker of social difference, as issues of race, class and gender inevitably come to the forefront. However, as seen by the preceding analysis, the novel as a whole seems to point towards a deemphasising of this official world of laws and regulations. Recognising this, Sweeney views the "rewriting of legal fictions" (455) as operative in the texts. As I take it, the two key elements in Sweeney's analysis are "rewriting" and "fictions". When the legal framework is established as constructed by human beings rather than framed as unchangeable, this opens up for the rewriting of the concepts revealed to be fictional. In the novel, these concepts are rewritten in both a literal and in a metaphorical sense. Of course, L literally rewrites a legal document when she changes the will, and phrases it in so as to give both Heed and Christine valid claims to the inheritance. However, there also occurs a rewriting in a larger sense, as the dominant idea of compulsory heterosexuality comes to be rewritten through the illumination of a radically different way of thinking about love. The need for rewriting seems to stem from the realisation that there are many things which are shunted to the sidelines of any given discourse.

With the primacy given to the relationship between Heed and Christine, how should one understand Heed's marriage to Bill Cosey? If the perspective Adrienne Rich advocates in her essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" is to be adopted, it seems quite clear that the marriage can best be understood as related to coercion and sexual violence. Briefly put, Rich argues that insofar as heterosexuality is represented as the only viable form of sexuality, it always carries connotations of rape (242). L's claim that the more deep-felt bond between Heed and Christine is disrupted by the entrance of Bill Cosey can obviously be understood as pointing towards this. If this is taken together with the fact that Heed is eleven

when she gets married, it does not become difficult to argue that there is something in the marriage that points towards the legitimacy of viewing it as related to issues of rape.

The novel's treatment of the question of rape is discussed Tessa Roynon in "A New 'Romen' Empire: Toni Morrison's *Love* and the Classics". Her main focus is on how Morrison utilizes Greek and Roman myths in her fiction in general, and in *Love* in particular. Attaching great significance to the novel's many acts of sexual transgression, Roynon argues that "the novel is structured around acts of rape and unified by anxiety about rape" (33). Amidst all the acts of obvious sexual transgression lies the marriage at the centre of the novel. While Roynon places this marriage together with more obvious acts of rape, she later argues that Cosey "does not in fact rape Heed" (45). It seems that one of the effects achieved by putting the obvious acts of rape and sexual violence alongside a more ambiguous one is to question to which extent it is fundamentally different. The ambiguity surrounding Cosey is never resolved, and as L states, it is possible to view him as either "a good bad man or as a bad good man" (200). The question at the forefront of the novel then has to do with the question of how the acts of an old man with the power to do whatever he wanted should be interpreted.

While the question of whether or not Cosey's marriage to Heed should be understood in terms of sexual violence is never fully resolved, there is another act of sexual violence in the novel that clearly is a rape. At a party, Romen is involved in the gang-rape of a girl. While not directly related to my discussion of gendered narratives, its obvious link to the other act of sexual transgression in the novel marks it as significant. Its function is comparable to that of the story of Golden Gray in *Jazz*. While seemingly disconnected from the main narrative, it yet illuminates central aspects of the novel's thematic concerns. The questions asked by the subplot of Romen have to do with the nature of sexual violence, as well as with the connection between masculinity and sexuality.

This link is made explicit throughout the narration of the rape, which begins with this question: "Maybe his girlish tears were worse than the reason he shed them. Maybe they were a weakness the others recognised and pinpointed even before he punked out" (46). Romen's choice to set the girl free and help her out rather than to join in the rape is thus perceived by himself, and by his friends, as an act of weakness. Prior to this, Romen has believed that raping the girl would make him "become the Romen he'd always known he was: chiselled, dangerous, loose" (46). This clearly resonates very well with the view of black masculinity hooks criticises throughout *We Real Cool*. In her chapter on sexuality, she argues that the dominant conception of black masculinity involves seeing it as linked to a hyper-sexuality

that is out of control (67). Consequently, many black men attempt to live up to this supposed ideal. What mainly is significant about this view of sexuality is that it is linked to performativity. While Milkman's father constructs his manhood through the accumulation of property, Romen attempts to fashion his identity through a posture of aggressive sexuality.

Yet, in spite of this perceived link between sexuality and masculinity, Romen does not rape the girl. When he sets her free, the narrator states that Romen "watched in wonder as his hands moved to the headboard" (47). The choice of words here is highly suggestive, indicating that Romen does this without being fully conscious of his actions. Yet, while he does not seem to be wholly aware, what he does is nevertheless the right thing. Later thinking about this, Romen arrives at the conclusion that it was "the real Romen who had sabotaged the newly chiselled, dangerous one" (47). This split between two different versions of Romen is highly significant, and supplies a good way of thinking about different ways of relating to sexuality.

If Romen initially feels "girlish" because of his choice not to rape the girl at the party, this changes when he starts going out with Junior Viviane, who is four years older than him. Throughout the novel, she is linked to sexuality. This is clear from the very beginning of the novel, when she is seen through the focal perspective of Sandler Gibbons, Romen's grandfather. Seeing her, he pays close attention to her physical appearance. For instance, the narrator describes how Sandler "scanned her legs and reckoned her knees and thighs were stinging from the cold her tiny skirt exposed them to" (14). His focus on her appearance is explicitly commented on by his wife, who is amused by the fact that the first thing Sandler says about Junior was that she wore a short skirt (15). This tendency is even clearer in Romen, who thinks of Junior in terms of each specific body part, and thus might be said to reduce her to an object of his desire (114). What is most significant about his affair with Junior is the status he gets from having an affair with an older woman. Describing the effect this "new Romen" had on people, the narrator describes how they were seeing "something capable in his manner" (114). To Romen, then, access equals status. At this point it is easy to see a connection to the plot revolving around the memory of Bill Cosey. At one point, it is claimed that he wanted a young bride so that he could shape and mould her according to his standards, and thus make her fit within his framework.

Another link between the two accounts is that they both open up for the possibility that there might be some problematic aspects to the relationship. We see this clearly when Sandler sits down to have a talk with his grandson. When asked by his grandfather about what he and Junior had been doing, the answers Romen provides can be divided into two categories. First,

he answers each question briefly. However, following each answer, presented in quoted dialogue, the narrator fills in with information that Romen himself does not provide. For instance, when his grandfather asks him about the sex, Romen answers that “it did get, you know. Rough, I guess you’d say. Know what I mean?’ He pushed—no, slammed—her against the wall after she squeezed his privates. . . .”(153). Only parts of this information is divulged by Romen. When his grandfather at long last comes to the heart of the matter, he gives Romen the following advice: “Don’t worry about whether backing off means you a wimp” (154). According to this scheme, then, it is far more important to do the right thing than to at all costs live according to the ideals of a dominating masculinity. At the end of the novel, it is clear that Romen has taken the advice of his grandfather. When Junior tells him that she has left Heed and Christine injured at the hotel, Romen “found himself scooping up the car keys” (195). At this point, he realizes that the Romen who did what he thought was right was “hipper” (195) than the one who could not abstain from sex,

It is clearly not incidental that the story of Romen is given such prominence in the novel. It deals with issues of free will and coercion in relation to sexuality, concepts that are vital in any discussion of the novel’s themes. As seen, the presence of acts which unambiguously can be defined as sexual violence leads us to ask to which extent they really differ from other forms of sexual violence. For instance, what should we make of the fact that Heed never really had any say regarding the choice of her husband? It clearly is not easy to know how to interpret these events. One of the many questions that emerge from a reading of the text has to do with the ultimate status of the women in relation to Bill Cosey. In other words, what does the text tell us about gendered agency? Should the women be understood as merely walking in the tracks laid down for them, or is there some other way of viewing the events that make up the book? In looking into this question it is crucial to remember that the attitudes of Heed and Christine change radically in the course of the novel, and that they towards the end seem to achieve an autonomy that they lacked earlier in the novel. Before this change takes place, each of them has been obsessed with attempting to prove that she is “the sweet Cosey child” which, according to the forged will, should receive most of Cosey’s estate. What they utilize here is the official and public world of legally sanctioned truths, battling over whether bonds of marriage or “blood” should be given primary importance. Put this way, the possibilities of any independent agency seem rather slim, with the women being at the mercy of the influences of the morally dubious patriarch. Viewed in this manner, it is easy to see a prominent echo of Hagar’s story in *Solomon*, as what she does is to conceive of herself according to Milkman’s ideals.

However, it seems clear that while the above is a part of the reality of the text, the novel's message is in no way reducible to this bleak image. This has much to do with the position L occupies. Unlike the narrator, she is explicitly gendered as female. The balance which characterises her view greatly enhances her reliability. The fact that the single most authoritative voice in the novel is constructed as female obviously works towards reducing the narrative authority of Bill Cosey's absent presence. What more than anything indicates her authority is her ability to influence the action. Saying "I had to stop him. Had to" (200), she acted on her belief through killing Cosey and forging the will.

Towards the novel's end, L chooses to describe the marriage as involving a theft. The main reason for viewing this statement as valid is that it fits very well with the understanding Heed and Christine come to adopt towards the end of the novel. Abandoned by Junior, they are left isolated in the hotel where much of the retrospective action of the novel takes place. In many ways, this scene can be understood as an echo of their first meeting, where the egalitarian relationship between Heed and Christine stood at the centre. The initial encounter was interrupted by Christine's mother May, whose attention to matters of race and class greatly contributed to the breach between them. The influence of this becomes clear when one considers that much of the discussion between Heed and Christine is framed in terms of legal discourse, and the significance of Cosey's will is what stands at the centre of the strife between them. This has been noted by Sweeney, who argues that the novel shows just how incomplete and insufficient formal definitions are (463). The rupture this strife has caused is so deep that, on the level of the diegetic action, Heed and Christine do not exchange a single word before they find themselves at the hotel towards the end of the novel. It is highly significant that they have to return to the scene of the past in order to reinterpret the events which led to their estrangement.

Early on in this section, which is labelled "Phantom", the narrator asserts that "They both had expected a quarrel" (185). As it is, this quarrel does not materialize. When they start speaking, the narrator says that "Language, when finally it comes, has the vigor of a felon pardoned after twenty-one years on hold" (185). The choice of words here is suggestive, indicating that the means of communication have been imprisoned. This might be understood as pointing towards how communication has been impeded between Heed and Christine, hindered by bitterness and the memory of their husband and grandfather. That the communication between them should be understood as somewhat unique in the context of the novel is indicated by the absence of quotation marks in the final dialogue. For the 184 pages that precede it, speech has consistently been put in quotation marks. Why the sudden change?

It seems to me that it must be understood as a return to the intimacy which marked their initial interaction, as exemplified by their first encounter. The brief sentences and rapid movement from one character to the other work towards emphasising their shared experience. This analepsis gains its authority because its context is not marked by the obsessive need to distribute blame characteristic of the earlier flashbacks, for instance those told to Junior. Here they focus on what their respective situations had in common, for instance that they both were at the mercy of adults who decided their fates based on their own ideas of what was best for them. While Heed dies, what they seem to have found at the end of the novel is a renewed sense of their identity defined according to the value they have for each other, not to the schemes of Bill Cosey.

The focus on communication I have indicated above points to another significant thematic interconnection with *Sula*. Writing about *Sula* in his article “Form Matters: Toni Morrison’s *Sula* and the Ethics of Narrative”, Nissen argues that *Sula* presents a picture where communication and interaction are essential if the characters are to achieve a meaningful understanding of the situations they find themselves in (277). For instance, for as long as Christine sees herself as betrayed by Heed they will not make much headway. It is thus interaction and communication that allows for a more balanced perception of reality, as evidenced by the breakthrough that occurs when Heed and Christine finally communicate their respective understandings of the past. What has impeded this in the past is the portrait-like perspective each adopted when referring to Cosey. What is needed is for each perspective to be revised by another, so that the finer nuances might emerge.

In the above analysis, the subject of masculinity might seem to have been somewhat on the periphery. But, as illustrated by the story of Hagar’s death in *Song of Solomon*, a character does not actually have to be present in order to make his or her presence felt. In fact, *Love* might be said to be a continuation of Hagar’s story, with one highly significant difference. While Hagar is driven mad by her attempt to fashion herself according to Milkman’s perception, the women in *Love* actually come to transcend the limits imposed upon them by the narrative authority of Cosey. Thus, the focus of *Love* is not so much on masculinity in itself as on the influences it has on those subjected to that authority. To some extent, the text seems to follow hooks’ analysis, in showing how patriarchal masculinity intersects with other social forces, having to do with things such as race and class. In fact, in the case of *Love* it becomes quite difficult to accurately state where one begins and the other ends. Rather than seeing them as entities which can be clearly separated, what the text does is to show how, for instance, a certain economic system might lead to the exclusion of those

who do not conform to the racial ideals of those with the power to define. This then constitutes the manner in which *Love* might be said to deal with maleness and masculinity. The focus is on the ramifications the definitions have for those who are defined. This issue has also been present in my other analyses, such as through Joe's refusal to go along with the course of action *Jazz's* narrator sees as most probable or Hagar's attempt to conform to Milkman's ideal of womanhood in *Song of Solomon*.

Yet, it seems clear that there is room for alternative viewpoints, too. Sweeney pointed to this through emphasising how the legal fictions are rewritten and give room for alternative interpretations. All in all, I take the idea of rewriting to be highly significant when it comes to making sense of the themes and structure of the novel. Through the varied focalisation, with each event understood from several viewpoints, it becomes impossible to establish precisely what each event means. Rather than seeking to discover this true meaning, it is fruitful to ask which preconceptions underlie each perspective. By taking such an approach I have attempted to show how powerful the legacy of Bill Cosey is, with the ability to shape events many years after his death. Yet, the novel illustrates that there remains room for a great deal of revision. This is most explicitly illustrated by the fact that the will which Heed and Christine argue about was in fact set down by a woman, a woman who was able to recognise that both of them had legitimate claims "on Cosey's affection". Yet, what emerges towards the end of the novel is that the legal claims Heed and Christine have on the Cosey estate weaken when compared with the claims they have on each other.

Conclusion

In *Beloved*, the slave-owner who is only called "schoolteacher" reprimands his slaves for talking back to him. He does this because "definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined" (225). As slaves, Sixo, Paul D and the others are supposed to stay put within the frameworks established by those in power. According to this set of definitions they are slaves, not humans, and therefore this treatment of them is justified. What *Beloved* then goes on to do is to show how the characters attempt to regain a subjectivity the system of slavery had attempted to deny them. In other words, they attempt to take back the power of definition. Morrison shows that even these regained definitions are not unproblematic. This is partly because of the extensive reach of what Morrison in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* refers to as the "racial" nature of American society (xii). In her novels, Morrison illustrates this by pointing to the power the dominant (white) discourse has when it comes to shaping society. While there are few white characters in her novels, it is nevertheless difficult not to get a sense of the white power that is so central to American social structure. Thus, any individual's attempt to fashion an identity must somehow be understood relative to this power. But, it is equally necessary to consider that African American discourse is in no way freed from the constraints of representation. It is this I have attempted to illustrate in the above chapters, through showing how maleness defines and is defined within specific social contexts.

In all the three novels I have discussed, the power to define reality is tied to narrative. In discussing these configurations, Hayden White's claim that narratives do not reflect, but rather produce meaning has been essential. By keeping this principle regarding representation in mind, it has been possible to maintain a dual perspective on the novels. It has been necessary to treat each event as if it were true. For instance, it would have constituted a grave mistake to discard the mythic stories of Milkman's great-grandfather Shalimar because it is not possible for a human being to fly. Fanciful though the events are, they nevertheless make up part of the reality that Milkman gets to know. The same can clearly be said of both *Jazz* and *Love*. Briefly put, the subjective framing does not make the events described unimportant. In fact, I would argue that the main significance of the events resides in this subjectivity. This point has been convincingly made by Delaney and Yanagisako, as their main argument is that any origin narrative (really, any narrative) must be understood as a representation, and not as

objectively reflecting upon a given reality. Keeping this perspective in mind, I have sought to investigate which presumptions underlie the many different and differing narratives.

As the main focus of my discussion has been representation, it seems necessary to confront the inevitable question of “representations of what?”. The focus has been on representations of masculinity. In my discussion of all three novels, one of the key questions raised had to do with how acts of transgression committed by men could be understood. *Love* conceptualised this ambiguity through presenting a large number of differing interpretations of Bill Cosey’s acts, and through this raised many questions regarding the moral status of the deeds of the dead patriarch. That novel made it clear that it is futile to attempt to define Bill Cosey (or any man, for that matter) accurately through the use of only one perspective. In that novel, it is arguably the character L who comes closest to an accurate description of Cosey, precisely because she recognises that it is impossible to convincingly position him as either good or bad. Rather, what must be recognised is that his position as a wealthy man led him to do both good and bad things. These differing interpretations could to some degree be explained on the basis of the kinship positions the various women occupied relative to Cosey. For instance, Heed (initially) sees her marriage to Cosey as an act of benevolence on his part, allowing her to escape from the poverty of her earlier years. A completely opposite view of the marriage is represented by May, who understands the marriage as a negation of the class-ideals she sees as separating Cosey from his wife. However, the perspective on Cosey that comes to carry most weight is that which Heed and Christine adopt jointly towards the end of *Love*. Recognising the ways in which their friendship was disrupted through the entry of Bill Cosey, *Love*’s treatment of maleness might thus be said to reside in an analysis of its effects upon those who are subjected to that authority.

On the basis of the extensive rewriting that occurs, it is plausible to ask how the novel’s configuration of power should be understood. Powerful though he is, it is not Bill Cosey who is revealed as the character who most directly influences the action. L, who continues to speak even after her death, both kills Bill Cosey and destroys the original will, only to replace it with a forgery of her own making. In a way, she takes on the narrative privilege which previously had been associated with Bill Cosey. Through asking questions regarding these mechanisms I have attempted to relate to the insight from *Beloved* mentioned above. Briefly put, what *Love* does is to expose some of the (negative and positive) consequences of Bill Cosey’s power to define which human relationships are held to be the most important. The final trick of the novel is that these definitions are revealed as constructs, and we have to look at the margins to arrive at a more nuanced understanding.

I found many of the same mechanisms to be at work in *Jazz*. It differed from the other two novels in that it placed much of the narrative rhetoric at the level of the diegetic narrator. While we are accustomed to granting a narrator in the third person a considerable amount of authority, it is impossible to do that in *Jazz*. Genette came close to defining the mechanism at work when he stated that “the narrator can be in his narrative . . . *only* in the first person” (244). I argued that this could very well be linked to Hayden White’s idea regarding how meaning is produced through narrative. *Jazz* highlighted this through having a narrator that explicitly admitted to not knowing what “really happened”. When the narrative to such an extent is reduced to hearsay and speculation, it clearly communicates as much about the narrator as about the characters. Through tying this to White’s mode of emplotment, as well as considering the gendered aspects of the presentation, I attempted to take the analysis a bit further than many critics. For instance, I emphasised that while Heinert’s claim that the narrator speaks with the voice of the dominant culture is significant, it is necessary to accurately define what exactly this “dominant culture” refers to. In my discussion I especially emphasised how the narrator might be said to embody certain assumptions regarding masculinity. For instance, upon seeing Joe sitting by the window crying, the narrator comments that this is not something typically done by men. The narrator structures her narrative according to her own preconceptions, and is consequently surprised when the entrance of Felice does not lead to another murder. As something of a counterweight to the assumptions the narrator stands for, we are also presented with the characters’ own narratives, where they, in their own words, describe their pasts.

Commenting on the story of Golden Gray, Carolyn M. Jones holds that it is “the most consciously narrated part of *Jazz*” (487). In my above discussion, I attempted to show how the idea of conscious narration is significant when it comes to understanding how narrative operates in the novel. Both the narrator and the characters are very much aware of the fact that they tell stories, and their own investment in the narratives often remains explicit. As discussed, this is never clearer than in the story of Golden Gray. The narrator commences this story by admitting that she does not know what really happened, and that what we get is speculation. The main ramification was that we were forced to relate to the narrative as it reflected the narrator’s assumptions. By thus emphasising the subjective articulation involved in narrative, *Jazz* represents yet another way of relating to the crucial insight from *Beloved* discussed above. While it is true that “definitions belong to the definer” (225), *Jazz* shows that those definitions are not exhaustive. Just as in *Love*, it is to some extent possible to transcend the boundaries that seemingly place everyone within a set and rigid framework.

While many of these concerns could also be found in my discussion of *Song of Solomon*, I argued that *Solomon* discussed the questions from a different angle. *Jazz* and *Love* discussed the dominant narrative mainly in terms of what happened to those subjected to it, but *Solomon* arguably puts the focus on how Milkman comes to take on the assumptions of the dominant culture. If I once again return to the quote from *Beloved*, it seems clear that, in this novel, the focus is predominantly on the definers. Through accessing knowledge of his family's past, Milkman is put in a situation where he has to redefine his surroundings according to his new insight. It is clear that Milkman is defined too, as his position is only possible because of his position within a very specific kinship system. Equally, it is by no means possible to reduce all the information Milkman receives to a homogenous entity. Just like the other two novels, *Solomon* frames narratives of the past as closely connected to individual perspectives. This is nowhere made clearer than in the great discrepancies between the past as narrated by Milkman's father and aunt. His father emphasises the importance of material values, viewing property and money as all that is necessary for a man to be able to deem himself a success. Milkman's aunt Pilate, on the other hand, advocates an awareness of spirituality and a reality that goes beyond the solely material concerns of her brother. Comparing these narrative perspectives, I argued for the prominence of Pilate's position. This is mainly because Milkman's southwards journey unquestionably is characterised by the adoption of Pilate's viewpoint.

Thus, what I have seen as most significant about *Solomon* is how that novel shows how human actors both define and are defined through narrative. As in the other two, the past is very rarely presented except as it makes sense to the characters in the present of the novel. Yet, I think *Solomon* sets itself apart due to the way in which the metadiegetic narratives so organically spring out of the diegetic level. The need Milkman's father has to justify himself is expressed through his actions on the diegetic level. The metadiegetic narratives spring out of the diegetic one, and this illustrates just how significant narrative is for characters who want to tell their surroundings of the most significant events from their pasts.

Throughout this discussion I have utilized Stuart Hall's two conceptions of cultural identity. Essentially, his two conceptions revolve around whether or not cultural identity can be reduced to an essence that can be shared by all those who are of similar origin. Was identity understood as a homogenous entity, this would implicate that all African Americans share the same identity, and that whatever variances that might exist simply point to superficial differences. Had each of the novels framed the past as a solid entity that all the characters related to in a similar way, this would have made good sense. And one might say

that each character presumes to tell *the* authoritative story which, unlike any others, captures the essence. However, it seems clear that it is impossible to reduce the past to a shared truth in any of the novels. After all, when we are faced with several incompatible narratives, they cannot easily be reduced to a shared core. Recognising this, Hall states that “there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental ‘law of origin’” (113). This is the base premise I have worked from in each of the three preceding chapters. Through explicitly referring to the “politics” involved, Hall makes it clear that it often is a difficult and arduous job to arrive at some sort of a master narrative, and that it never will be able to escape the implications of representation. *Solomon* probably represents the clearest instance of this, as the information Milkman accesses clearly takes a very specific form, with its downplaying of the role played by women. The necessity of considering the politics involved is too made clear by the situation encountered in *Love*. That novel’s crucial insight was that it is misleading to talk of “male” and “female” perspectives. This is because of the great variety that exists even amongst women. As seen, Cosey’s acts are understood very differently by his wife and granddaughter.

This critique of essentialism is one of the defining features of the three novels I have discussed. Each presents narratives that claim to be more authentic than any other, but that ultimately are exposed as constructs. This point echoes the central claim Harper makes in his book. In his introduction, he explicitly states that he offers a critique of the notion of cultural authenticity. By showing how identity is created through social practises, he, just like Hall, undermines the notion that it is possible to talk of identity outside of representation. However, it seems to me that there is a tendency among critics to downplay this, and rather focus on which narrative is most real. A good example of this is Wilentz’s discussion of African elements in *Song of Solomon*. She mainly emphasises Pilate, and sees her as embodying the “true” culture. The arguments Wilentz puts forth can thus be understood in terms of Hall’s first conception of cultural identity, viewing it as a stable essence that can be recovered. Morrison comments on this in *Playing in the Dark*, through saying that “I do not want to encourage those totalizing approaches to African American scholarship which have no drive other than the exchange of dominations—dominant Eurocentric scholarship *replaced* by dominant Afrocentric scholarship” (8). Implicit in this claim is the belief that there is no way outside of representation, and that an Afrocentric mode of enquiry will be just as biased as a Eurocentric one.

This criticism of essentialist thinking extends to the treatment of masculinity in the three novels. I have followed hooks in arguing that a specific view of black masculinity is communicated through “the culture of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (xi). All the novels illustrate that this image of masculinity is socially constructed. For instance, I argued that *Jazz*’s narrator presumed to know what motivated the characters, only to be proven wrong time and again. At the end of the novel, the narrator reveals her ignorance through stating that she still does not know why Joe cried. Expecting Joe to conform to dominant stereotypes regarding maleness, she is unable to explain his behaviour when it does not conform to her preconceptions. In *Solomon*, Milkman’s development involves his positioning himself in the framework of his family’s highly edited history. The crucial insight he arrives at towards the end is that several perspectives are excluded from the narrative of his family. In essence, then, all three novels illuminate the degree to which masculinity is shaped through narrative framings.

Through these narrative framings, there emerged something of a contradiction, which was expressed most clearly in *Solomon*. The past was told as if it were mainly concerned with men, but the narrative that Milkman finally connected to was reconstructed from fragments mostly told by women. Clearly, such a situation does not resonate very well with the image of the past as a male entity. The same could be said of *Love*. Bill Cosey is long dead when the diegetic action commences, and cannot intervene when Heed and Christine, in the final pages of the novel, are able to find back to the relationship they had prior to the entry of Cosey. The situation in *Jazz* is a little more complicated, mainly because the narrator is not explicitly gendered in the same way as the diegetic characters. But, I nevertheless argued for the legitimacy of viewing the narrator as gendered.

Given that all three novels share the preoccupation with narrative, it is necessary to consider the meta-fictional element involved. Like Pilate, L and the unnamed narrator of *Jazz*, Morrison clearly finds it necessary to relate to the past through narrative. Yet, it appears that she is aware of the many potential pitfalls involved in the creation of narrative. As she states in *Playing in the Dark*, she does not see it as her mandate to reveal one totalizing model as inadequate only to replace it with another model that, though different in focus, might very well be just as biased (8). Rather, it seems that what is emphasised is the degree to which all narratives are situated. By placing such emphasis on orally transmitted stories (it is, for instance, difficult to escape the notion that *Jazz*’s narrator is speaking rather than writing), we get a sense of how narratives are both important and problematic. It is the negative implications of these narratives that escape Middleton. In her article on orality in *Solomon*,

Middleton refers to an interview in which Morrison stated the following: “I am not experimental, I am simply trying to create something out of an old art form in my books” (quoted in Middleton 64). What she shows is how this art form both reflect and shape the perspectives of those who, either as speakers or as listeners, relate to the stories.

The importance of storytelling is underlined when Violet, towards the end of *Jazz*, asks Felice the following question: “What’s the world for if you can’t make it up the way you want it?” (208). In my discussion, I have attempted to show how this radical independence might be difficult to achieve, given the structures of power at work in the novels. For instance, it would be difficult to argue that Milkman freely constructs his identity. I argued that Milkman’s development rather must be understood as connected to dominant ideas regarding descent. In spite of this, it seems clear that there is a high degree of flexibility involved, and that to some extent it is possible to bypass the dominant definitions. It is probably *Love* that most directly manifests this, through the fact that Heed, Christine and L all find ways to bypass the social structures that Bill Cosey stands for.

While carrying connotations of freedom and independence, I have attempted to show how this same independence also brings with it certain limitations. If we argue that people to a certain extent can fashion their own identity, the creation of “grand narratives” becomes suspect. I have discussed this through attempting to illuminate the perspectives that are sidelined from the narratives that attempt to be all-inclusive and contain within them all that can possibly be represented. At this point, it is clear that we once again have returned to Hall’s second perspective on cultural identity, which has its main asset in that it is capable of accounting for profound differences. Each of the novels reveals the tendency these narratives have of presuming to be more inclusive than they really are. *Jazz*’s narrator is clearly the best example of this. The authority of a third person narrator is not usually questioned. What *Jazz* does is to expose the subjectivity that lies behind any narrative framing, regardless of how accustomed we have been to grant it authority.

All in all, then, all three novels examine narrative configurations that, in one way or another, deal with the link between narrative and male identity. For instance, through exposing the world Milkman gets to know as a construction characterised by exclusion as much as by inclusion, it becomes very difficult to hold that he gets to know an “authentic” reality. In fact, the very notion of authenticity is revealed as bringing with it more harm than good, in its attempt to reduce human complexity to a set of pre-given assumptions. The novels then illustrate how this plays out in practise, and how some people resist the definitions that are imposed on them.

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