



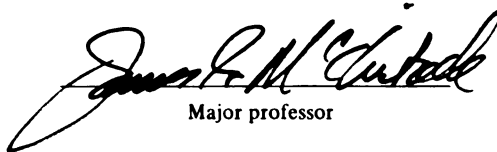
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THE ISSUE OF THE SELF TRACED THROUGH:
AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY,
20TH CENTURY AFRICAN-AMERICAN NOVELS,
AND AN AESTHETIC THEORY
presented by

Marina Margherita Manetti

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THE ISSUE OF THE SELF TRACED THROUGH:
AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY,
20TH CENTURY AFRICAN-AMERICAN NOVELS,
AND AN AESTHETIC THEORY

By

Marina Margherita Manetti

A THESIS

Submitted to
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for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

THE ISSUE OF THE SELF TRACED THROUGH: AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY, 20TH CENTURY AFRICAN-AMERICAN NOVELS, AND AN AESTHETIC THEORY

By

Marina Margherita Manetti

The thesis presents studies in the issue of the self, the issue being the problematic of articulating distinguishing self-descriptions in a contemporary context. The study relates this issue to researches and reflections on African-American history from the period of the transatlantic slave trade to contemporary events. The historical studies lead to investigations in 20th century African-American novels. Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God, and Toni Morrison's Sula are discussed in turn. The discourses set in motion by the historical researches and novels culminate in an aesthetic theory that posits the artist/self as social critic. This aesthetic perspective is used in a study of Toni Morrison's novels Sula, Song of Solomon, and Beloved.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION.	1
II. THE ISSUE OF THE SELF TRACED THROUGH RESEARCHES AND REFLECTIONS ON AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY	3
The Contemporary Relevance of an Eboe African's Autobiography	3
Who is De-humanized?.	10
A Social Activist Reading	19
A Report on an Event in M.S.U.'s 1990 Black History Month	28
A Slave Speaks.	34
III. THE ISSUE OF THE SELF TRACED THROUGH INVESTIGATIONS IN A SELECTION FROM 20TH CENTURY AFRICAN-AMERICAN LITERATURE	
Indistinguishable "I"s.	42
The Self in Desire.	57
<u>Sula</u> : Janie's Child.	62
IV. AN AESTHETIC THEORY: THE ARTIST/SELF AS SOCIAL CRITIC.	73
Between Eros and Thanatos: The Art of Toni Morrison.	74
BIBLIOGRAPHY.	95

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

What follows are my studies in the issue of the self. The issue arose in response to a proposal to make a distinguishing description of another. With my repeated frustrated attempts at formulating a distinguishing description of another came my increasing realization that I could likewise articulate not a single non-trivial distinguishing description of myself. The discomfort this aroused has led me to investigations...investigations into history, into language, into literature, into art, into aesthetic theory.

The structure of this thesis will mirror the structure of my inquiry. My first attempts at identifying distinguishing descriptions relied on ready-made historically and socially designated categories such as race and ethnic origins. Thus the second chapter treats searches into my historically and socially given identity, that of an African-American. Searches in these territories aggravated the problem of the self. The problem began to appear much more complex and all encompassing. Borrowed language and ready-made categories would not suffice in articulating non-trivial distinctions. Leads towards answers were more likely to be found in art, the

productions of culture.

My third chapter presents the question of the distinct self as handled by three 20th century African-American novelists. One novel, Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, addresses the evolving question directly. The other four novels, one by Zora Neale Hurston and the other three by Toni Morrison, though less explicit nonetheless lend themselves to the discourse of the self. Together, these examples of African-American literature intimate surprising directions.

The question of distinction-making increasingly appears at the base of creative initiative. As an outgrowth of my historical and literary studies I propose in chapter four an aesthetic theory of the self/ artist as social critic. Three novels by Toni Morrison are read from this aesthetic perspective. The reading demonstrates how this aesthetic theory can incorporate my findings. I maintain that this aesthetic theory can embrace continuing and ever unresolved discoveries in art.

CHAPTER II

THE ISSUE OF THE SELF TRACED THROUGH RESEARCHES AND REFLECTIONS ON AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY

Initial attempts at formulating a distinguishing self-description gravitated around racial and ethnic classifications. Being an African-American I asked myself what that classification meant. In what does an African-American identity consist? Is it to be found in sources of the African past? Is it to be found in the American slave history? Reconstruction? the Civil Rights Era? Were answers to be ultimately found in the future? in contemporary events? or in the past? Texts covering several of the aforementioned periods are consulted and reviewed. Finally a report is made on an event in M.S.U.'s 1990 Black History Month and a reflective essay on the heritage bequeathed to me by the transatlantic slave trade concludes the chapter.

The Contemporary Relevance of an Eboe African's Autobiography

My searches in history begin in the pre-colonial African past. The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African, written by himself (1789) offers a glimpse of a likely West African origin to African-Americans. I discovered this Eboe African's

autobiography to have poignant contemporary relevance. Given the campaign launched by more than four hundred fifty years of racist propaganda Olaudah's story needs still be heard.

The transatlantic slave trade begun in the 1520's and ended in the 1870's determined the lives of untold numbers of people. At the time, and even today, relatively less technologically sophisticated peoples have been saddled with the epithets of savage, uncivilized, barbaric, primitive. The lie comes undone, time and again, in the 1789 Narrative by Olaudah Equiano presenting an encounter of two 18th century worlds: African and European. Told from the perspective of an Eboe-African, subject to the transformation from free person to slave in the transatlantic traffic, the narrative offers: 1. a first hand account of life in an Eboe village before the slave experience. 2. scattered evidence as to how and what Eboe or African tradition survived the transatlantic transfer. 3. a poignant portrait of the process of enslavement, the transatlantic voyage, and slavery in the Americas. All three components have far reaching implications to participants in American society. The following pages discuss each of the three components and their relevance.

The narrative opens with a description of life in an 18th century Eboe community. Written as an adult British citizen who had once lived in Eboe society until the age of adolescence, the sketch plays a vital role in dispelling insidious myths still operant today about pre-colonial Africa. Olaudah introduces features of Eboe tradition that later find

their analogue in his presentation of non-Eboe peoples. An implicit comparison emerges, often complementary to the Eboe and deprecatory to the non-Eboe. From the portrait one might characterize Olaudah's people as exceedingly graceful and beautiful (6, 8), gentle (6, 12), cleanly (6, 12), and Eboe women members, especially, as modest and chaste (6, 8)---by Olaudah's assessment, an all in all harmonious and attractive society. In contrast other peoples, particularly British subjects employed in some capacity in the transatlantic slave trade, were described as ugly of countenance (6, 31), brutal and cruel (6, 27, 29, 32), poor in hygienic practices (6, 40), and the women as immodest (6, 40) and too slender. (6, 40)

Indeed, Olaudah makes the following statement about the moment of transition from an African to a European world:

The change I now experienced...was a change indeed from a state of bliss to a scene which is inexpressible to me, as it discovered to me an element I had never before and till then had no idea of, and wherein such instances of hardship and cruelty continually occurred as I can reflect on but with horror. 6, 23

Thus Olaudah's first impressions of Europeans (British), derived from his encounter on the slave ship, are truly horrific. (6, 26) Olaudah related witnessing early in the voyage the fatal beating of a white man after which Olaudah expected nothing less than the same treatment. He believed the whites were fiends or bad spirits (6, 25) capable of casting spells and exercising magic. (6, 28) They inspired in him a despair, anguish, terror and horror (6, 25) he had never before fathomed. Olaudah became convinced that they practiced

cannibalism. (6, 26,36) The absence of mercy and frequent incidents on the slave ship of brute cruelty (6, 27) made Olaudah and others repeatedly seek the comfort of death, an intention not lost to the Europeans who actively took measures to prevent mass or individual suicides.

With Olaudah's assimilation of British ways (6, 43), a process undoubtedly facilitated by his newly acquired religious convictions (6, 44), his narrative perspective shifts. With this shift in perspective British society begins to manifest redeeming features: at the account's close the society of mainland Britain approximates, even surpasses in some respects (eg. the absence of slavery) (6, 39), the merits of Olaudah's initial eulogy to the Eboe society.

In general the comparative portrait of Eboe and British 18th century society far from belittles the first. Though technologically less advanced, Eboe society can certainly be construed from Olaudah's accounts as the more socially sophisticated---the Eboe being the more gentile, refined, even gracious of the two. The portrait is capable of inspiring pride in any who might possess an Eboe ancestry or heritage---a pride sorely needed among people whose heritage has been systematically denigrated and destroyed.

However systematic the eradication effort, a heritage is not easily destroyed without a trace. Evidence exists in the Narrative of the survival of Eboe or African traditions in the transatlantic transfer to the Americas. Hence one can appreciate the ultimate relevance of a West African history

and tradition that is intimately woven into the fabric of the American identity.

In the Americas of the West Indies, especially, a demand emerged for Eboe or Benin slaves in particular. (6, 8) With the demand came the supply and on entering the slave ship Olaudah found amongst the shackled wretched some of his own nation. (6, 27) On his arrival at the Barbados Olaudah reports: "some old slaves from the land...told us we were soon to go on land where we should see many of our own country people...." (6, 31) Thus the West Indies provided an opportunity for Eboe forcibly uprooted to associate, congregate, and sustain traditional practices. Olaudah bears witness to this preservation of customs in his account of Kingston, Jamaica. There numbers of Africans

assembled together on Sundays...[and] each different native of Africa [would] meet and dance after the manner of their native customs: they bury their dead and put victuals, pipes, and tobaccos, and other things in the grave with the corpse... 6, 131

in very much the same manner as he earlier described in Eboeland. (6, 13) Later when Olaudah himself decides to purchase slaves he easily finds available men from among his country people in a Guinea-man ship docked in Jamaica. With large numbers of people transferred to locales in close geographic proximity, the likelihood of their traditions being preserved increases. Olaudah's narrative sustains evidence that such traditional survivals indeed existed. And if so, in the West Indies, the same is likely to hold for the U.S. which

shared many of the same slave population pools.

The tenacity of traditional practices can be perceived in observations of Olaudah himself. Despite having largely English companionship throughout the narrative and actively striving to assimilate a multitude of English ways (6, 39) his first action upon having survived a shipwreck bears an uncanny resemblance to the libation practices commonplace among his native people (6, 5,11): despite there being a shortage of provisions (6, 111) he planted limes, oranges, and lemons on shore. (6, 110) At another point Olaudah describes fortune-telling as being highly revered in his native land (6, 12-13) and though he states that he considers it a superstitious practice (6, 13) we later read of Olaudah managing to find and hear out the prophesies of a fortune teller in Philadelphia. (6, 90) Olaudah is affected by her words despite his profound Christian religious convictions.

The Narrative thus offers evidence of the persistence of tradition over years. This persistence is demonstrated both in Olaudah---a man isolated from contact with his people and at an early stage intent on assimilating the habits and manners of a Briton (6, 39)---and in Olaudah's description of slave populations in the West Indies.

Finally the Narrative itself carries in it a prophesy of doom for a civilization founded on the maximization of profits irrespective of human cost. Olaudah's portrayal of the process of enslavement, the transatlantic passage, and slavery in the Americas is filled with accounts of a humanity lost.

His denunciations of every stage of the process are violent and recurrent. (6, 62,70,71,73,74, etc.) Olaudah places the initial act of enslavement and dislocation to the coast onto the slave ship squarely in the hands of Africans. From the slave ship to the Americas and West Indies, British and French ministers of torture reign. Slight variations exist between French and British slaves' conditions. (6, 118) The general scenario in the West Indies, however, is one wherein every black, slave or not, exists in the absolute absence of any legal right. Blacks enjoy a degree of security only insofar they make themselves indispensable to a white owner. Since most blacks at the time have replaceable labor functions nearly all are utterly dispensable. Olaudah's experience illustrates a case extremely rare and 'privileged.'

Olaudah's privileged position does not shield him from the realities of slavery. The Narrative is replete with incidents of cruelty unbounded. (6, 26,27,29,30,32,34,66,68, 69,71,83-4,130,etc.) Olaudah reports instruments of torture, branding (6, 68), thumb screws (6, 68), iron muzzles (6, 68), incidents of rape (6, 69), whipping, fatal beatings. Olaudah takes care to remind the reader that the incidents and instruments he relates constitute quotidian realities in the slave experience of the West Indies and the United States.

Olaudah's transatlantic passage account is singular in its being told from the perspective of an enslaved captive in the hold. The hold "was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself..." (6, 28) The stench, the heat, the

sickness, the over-flooding necessary tubs in which children often fell, all increased slave mortality. And so human life fell victim, as Olaudah phrases it: to the imprudent avarice of its purchasers. (6, 29)

On the whole Olaudah's presentation of the slave trade succeeds in piquing the modern conscience steeped as it is in the tradition of maximizing business profits no matter the price in human suffering. Hence from a variety of angles: historical, personal, social---The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African published in 1789 bears contemporary relevance and far-reaching implications to all who partake of American society.

Who is De-humanized?

That Olaudah tried until the end of his life to return to his native land tells that he ultimately preferred an African over a European society. Equiano's narrative speaks with pride of his African ancestry and critically of the American history in slavery. Both his pride in his African heritage and his criticism of the American heritage are statements, even today, too seldom heard.

Many historians search the past for answers to the question of how their ancestors (and they, insofar as their identity is rooted in their ancestors') submitted to the condition of being slaves. For these researchers the shame of being enslaved rates among the worst of humiliations. The questions that spur my search into history are others: 1. how

slave owners, rabid racists, or oppressors survive the humiliation of their own bestiality and 2. what is the emerging portrait of my African-American identity.

Partial answers to these questions can be found in three books: A Rage for Order by Joel Williamson, The Struggle for Black Equality by Harvard Sitkoff, and From Brown to Bakke by J. Harvie Wilkinson III. Together these books provide a rather complete overview of U.S. black and white race relations from emancipation to the 1977 Bakke supreme court decision. Williamson details the reconstruction and post reconstruction years of 1865-1915, Sitkoff, the civil rights years of 1954-1968 and Wilkinson III---the supreme court's mandates and their implementations in the years 1954-1977. The following paper presents a reflective analysis of these works in relation to my above stated questions.

In Rage Williamson investigates the makings of the southern racist mind. He unfolds a psycho-historical portrait of the white southern mind in reactionary turmoil ever since Nat Turner's 1831 revolt. Hence, the primary instigational event of Nat Turner's uprising sets American race relations into motion.

By Williamson's account slavery began in the 1730's and existed till 1831 as a human relation based largely on economics. (24, 14-5) During this early phase the possibility existed of finding free blacks engaged in a diverse array of classes and functions in American society. Also, blacks as well as whites were relatively free to make race signify what

they individually willed.

With Nat Turner's revolt in 1831, Williamson argues, the questions of race could no longer be left to individual discretion and radical steps were taken to block the future possibility of any slave rebellions. More stringent laws were enacted, free and slave blacks' activities were severely restricted, black and white relations became rigidly codified. Williamson asserts that in this last generation of slavery spanning the years 1830-1865 slavery ceased being simply an economic relation and became in large measure a racial question. (24, 11)

Efforts on the part of property owning and/or legislative powers to fix and secure the existence of the slave-based economy resulted in their production and dissemination of race stereotypes. Consequently, the myth was created of a black nature modelled along the lines of the Sambo figure---complacent, submissive, childlike, and innocent---and the station of the black was uniformly relegated to the bottom of the existent socio-economic hierarchy. White male masters occupied the apex position in the social pyramid, while white female mistresses took a close second. The free white males---propertyless or of modest means---existed somewhere between the two extremes, occupying the most poorly defined and most ambiguous station in the social fabric. Any deviation from this organizational image would henceforth represent, for the white southern majority a tendency toward chaos, imbalance, and dys-functionality. For Williamson the repercussions of

the 1831 revolt ultimately crystallized into the southern rage for order evident with each socio-material upheaval ever since Nat.

The traditional historical narrative, however, depicts the black as a powerless recipient of the white's oppressive power. In his curious twist to the traditional tale Williamson posits a black initiative emerging from the slave class as the motivating impetus to a cyclic historical chain reaching clear into the twentieth century. This rendition in part holds Williamson's response to the question concerning the "passive" submission of blacks to slavery. Williamson begins his history with a triumphant moment of black resistance, black initiative, black power and self-affirmation. The rest which follows is simply white reaction in the face of fear. Hence the actor in Williamson's history is the black.

The passive re-actor is the white psyche---a psyche which Williamson dissects in detail thereby demonstrating a second level of black self-possession and empowerment. For Williamson, a black historian, claims a mastery and knowledge of the weaknesses, the fears, the workings of the white psyche---to degrees which elude the whites themselves. When the horrifying accounts of Radicalism (24, 122-6)---the southern ideology operant from 1889-1915---are related in subsequent chapters, they all read as manifestations of a reactionary fear that has gotten out of control. Hence, they function, ironically, as testimonies of a tremendous power

potentiality in blacks as perceived by whites.

The portrait of Robert Charles (24, 133-41)---black militant in 1900 New Orleans---emerging in the midst of this expose of white hystericism can be characterized as nothing short of mythic splendor. History, a third time, becomes again the property of the black race---competent, fiercely proud, and self-willed.

Williamson thus, approaches the question of blacks' submission to oppression by denying it. In his rendering of three---Nat Turner, Robert Charles, and himself---unmistakable and unforgettable instances of blacks in control, and that, in the context of a white race embroiled in a psycho-neurosis. The black race thus loses its traditional characterization as submissive. That characterization is properly relegated, according to Williamson's analysis, to the status of ideological myth as seen in the Sambo. The Sambo together with numerous other material, legal, and ideological structures was produced and propagated by pathological minds grounded in reactionary terror.

In Rage blacks, past and present, constitute primary actors in the wielding of history. And by institutionalizing their bestiality, thereby making it the rule rather than the exception, whites were able to live with their pathology. Rabid racist southerners all but self-destruct in their boiling rage for order.

Sitkoff in The Struggle for Black Equality takes a similar though more broad-based approach. Rather than suggest

the multifarious and ongoing black resistance struggles in a few carefully selected figureheads, Sitkoff describes the concerted effort of organized peoples. Though he dedicates much of his work to relating the evolution and development of grassroots organizations he does not neglect to interweave his histories with the careers of leaders and the evanescent protests of martyred individuals. For Sitkoff the members of the "oppressed" class, born of the events described in Williamson's work, behave in anything but submissive patterns. Starting with the NAACP's creation in 1910 clear until the race riots of 1965-1968 the black resistance struggle progressed taking on discretely new stages. Each stage enlightened with the lessons of its antecedent yielded groups of people who articulated both an analytic appraisal of their current historical moment and a praxis for its confrontation and transformation. Until 1954 battles were consistently fought in the legislative arena, courts and legal system. With the 1954 Brown decision, the struggle took an increasingly grassroots base. Black people throughout the U.S. took history into their own hands together with whomever cared to embrace the struggle. Blacks self-empowered and self-possessed demanded the recognition of their equality forcing established power---personified in state functionaries such as Gov. Orval Faubus of Arkansas, Gov. Patterson of Alabama, police commissioner of Birmingham "Bull" Connors, as well as, institutions in every sphere of U.S. society---to its knees time and again. By studying current realities insights

can be gained into the past and though Sitkoff does not directly address the issue of ancestral submission to slavery his depiction of the sixties generation suggests that though a condition of oppression may exist it need not constitute an act of submission. Beneath a state of oppression resistance has always and ever been, on all levels, in many forms, and at many fronts.

Yet this living struggle of past generations against dead institutionalized society crystallizes in victories that are perceived as few and far between by posterity. For posterity views the traces left by this struggle through a dense screen made of both time itself and the myths designed by established power to bury them. Sitkoff places his emphasis not so much in glorious universally acclaimed prizes but in the slow relentless engagement with and commitment to the process of struggle. State officiaries, rabid racists, oppressors---all persons standing for the maintenance of a defunct status quo do not, in Sitkoff's portrait, survive their humiliation. They are the dead core within which the repressive state is grounded.

Wilkinson III, on the other hand, tells the tale From Brown to Bakke from the perspective of a state emissary, the exact functionary so suspect in Struggle.

Implicit in Wilkinson III's work is the assumption that history is a largely top-down phenomenon wherein leaders, officers, people of power---high in the socio-political hierarchy act...and on their actions hinge the turnings of

history. Common citizens and grassroots organizations figure marginally in his account or not at all. Relative to Williamson and Sitkoff, Wilkinson III takes the most traditional and conservative rendition of his chosen history. His actors wrestle with questions of objective truths: justice, the right, the legitimate, the fair. The question of how ancestors submitted to the 'humiliation' of bondage lies outside his realm of inquiry.

Though Wilkinson III ventures no comment on that score From Brown to Bakke does demonstrate the aloof indifference sustained by priests of power with respect to such questions. Wilkinson III, a black man, is first and foremost an exemplar of the powerful. In his book the tacit assumptions regarding the legitimacy of state apparatuses went unquestioned and were everywhere markedly evident and repellent. Legitimacy for Wilkinson III appears derived from the authority rendered by power. The common people largely figure only insofar as they enter the judicial sphere by formally voicing their grievances or insofar as they behave as uncooperative subjects retarding the enactments of supreme court mandates. With respect to the question of how oppressors survive the humiliation of their own bestiality Wilkinson III offers an example of the rhetorical linguistic formulations behind which it is possible to shield oneself from the insistent and indicting voices of an anguished people.

In short the three authors of Rage, Struggle, and From Brown to Bakke give voice to distinctly different responses to

the questions posed at the outset of this paper. Of the three Wilkinson III's rendition is the most conservative account: in his top-down model he characterizes the people as passive recipients of history. The powerful in his model are the status-bearing state functionaries.

Rage and Struggle, however, challenge the traditional historical narrative by positing new occupants to the category of the empowered; from the ranks of the slave class, the masses, and the black race come the initiatives that turn the tides of history. I greatly appreciate Rage in that it starts to dispel my massive ignorance concerning post-civil war and pre-civil rights African-American history. Williamson frames a context within which I can embed the civil rights history contained in Struggle. I enjoy Williamson's insightful portraits of unforgettable personalities. In this mosaic of detail emerges an image of southern society as a whole. I am very intrigued with Williamson's model of the historical process---a process wherein fictional imagery, products of imagination and the psyche, constitute vital sources of human and historical impulses. Yet in the language choices evidenced in Rage I find blatant support for a conservative ideology. Repeatedly sentences as what follow arise:

it [the proslavery argument] was a weirdly beautiful flower, the black orchid of antebellum Southern intellectual culture. 24, 15
 the black flowers of the proslavery argument thrived marvelously in the Old South. 24, 24
 With the dark abyss before them, white society began to disintegrate... 24, 38
 freed from the darkest and most brutal slavery on the southwestern frontier. 24, 50

In all of these black and dark signify negative or pejorative states. They attest to a complicity, voluntary or not, with racist ideology.

Sitkoff does not evidence such lapses. Struggle takes a sympathetic view of civil rights workers describing them as active agents of heroic proportions. As the true subjects of history the object of the activists' relentless attack came always in the form of the conservative state and its apparatuses---the police, the criminal justice system, conservative social attitudes, and politicians.

In the last analysis though Wilkinson exhibits little that strays from conventional accounts of African-American history, Williamson and Sitkoff demonstrate a focused interest in reconstructing that history so as to challenge traditionally accepted models. By their work African-American ancestors emerge in their resistance and social activism as America's singularly most vital source. With this activist heritage self-pride, worth and meaning acquire renewed significance in the African-American identity.

A Social Activist Reading

How then, as an African-American social activist, does one read American history texts spanning the last quarter of a century? Black Lives, White Lives by Bob Blauner and Blacks and Whites: Narrowing the Gap? by Reynolds Farley can be read as source books in the articulation of contemporary strategies for social change. What do these studies forbode for the

future of race relations in America? What suggestions do their collective experiences offer to current activists? What issues do they neglect? Each speaks to distinctive, as well as, on some levels, contradictory directions for activism. The following pages discuss each in turn, and within each discussion, attempt to sketch the contours of a viable contemporary activism in light of the information gained by the two studies.

In a series of interviews conducted over the three decades of the 60's, 70's, and 80's Black Lives, White Lives highlights shifting racial attitudes in a society experiencing significant turbulence---a turbulence bred in large part by activist efforts. Thus Blauner's book documents the ultimate impact of the efforts exerted by Martin Luther King Jr., SCLC, Freedom Summer, Freedom Riders, SNCC, CORE, race riots, Black Panthers, and organizations throughout the country. In these interviews sixteen blacks and twelve whites give voice to their assessments of the racial and social change undergone from 1967-1986.

Blauner stipulates in his conclusion that the most significant legacy left to American race relations by Black Power might be the firmly founded belief in "a right to dignity and fair treatment...now so widespread and deeply rooted...that people of all colors would vigorously resist any effort to reinstate formalized discrimination...." (2, 317) Numerous interviews of blue collar white workers seem to substantiate Blauner's claim to significant changes in

American race relations.

In terms of economic and social change, however, blacks as well as whites re-interviewed, experience improvement in their own circumstances during the seventies. Yet, Blauner notes, though the blacks "reported extremely positive changes in their own lives..." they coupled their reports "with a skeptical, even negative, assessment of the progress of black people as a group...." (2, 163) Whites, instead, "were much more positive about racial changes...." (2, 163) Blauner explains this discrepancy saying that the whites focused on the few "success" stories while blacks focused on the "poor, jobless, in jail, or on drugs---struggling folks rarely seen by whites in the course of their daily lives, but whom successful blacks know as friends, neighbors, or even relatives...." (2, 163) Of the sixteen blacks interviewed two, Richard Simmons and Larry Dillard, had had direct experiences in the criminal justice system. Both had lives wherein drugs, weapons, and illegal traffic played large parts. Though only two of sixteen blacks shared these characteristics the other blacks acknowledged their high incidence in and significance to the overall black experience in America.

The condition of the underclass persists in America despite the activism of the sixties and seventies and the attendant favorable change it elicited in the lives of most blacks interviewed. The strategies of the sixties and seventies decayed with time into ideology and orthodoxies

saturated with rhetoric fashioned along racial lines. They did little, Blauner summarizes, to "put food on the tables or money in the bank...[or] keep teenagers in school or get drug dealers off the street...." (2, 318) Thus the underclass did not diminish its numbers and the interviewed who experienced positive changes came by and large from among the labor force of California---a state which, Blauner recognizes, has "employment and educational levels of blacks...above the national average...." (2, 6)

Hence Blauner's researches lend themselves to a skewed perception of the overall black experience in America. Attention needs to be given to the under-represented sectors of black America, those existing outside the labor force and alluded to time and again by interviewed blacks. Blauner finally addresses a need for a new politics. He speculates that it will be "non-confrontational [and]...aimed at developing long term coalitions as well as meeting specific needs in the black community...." (2, 318) Blauner further characterizes the "politically aware blacks..." as having "perspectives beyond race and a narrow domestic purview...." (2, 318) Yet the need for the "new politics" Blauner stipulates, can not be recognized if the voice of the underclass remains so meagerly represented.

All in all Black Lives, White Lives documents tangible improvements in the state of attitudes on race relations in America in the wake of the sixties and early seventies civil rights and Black Power movements. It also illustrates

consistent socio-economic gains for blacks in the American labor force. Blacks and Whites: Narrowing the Gap? elaborates the gains accrued to that sector in greater detail.

Reynolds Farley opens his survey with a discussion of three prevailing views concerning the changes in the socio-economic status of blacks in America since the sixties. He calls the three views: the "optimistic" view, the "pessimistic" view, and finally, the "polarization hypothesis."

Farley regards the "optimistic" opinion as the most accurate of the three. Its basic tenets sustain that great racial progress has been attained through the "civil rights revolution": racial discrimination has either decreased or been eliminated; skin color has lost significance or become insignificant. Farley argues his support for this position by stating that the most important indicators of progress or improvement, namely---educational attainment, occupation of the employed, and earnings of employed workers---have all shown significant positive changes. The most startling change he documents claims that black women have achieved parity with white women in their labor force earnings and 'the cost of being black' has for all practical purposes disappeared in the female sector of the American labor force. (7, 196) In summary, Farley maintains that since the sixties racial differences have declined substantially in all areas of vital import.

Thus Farley stands critical of the "pessimistic" view.

This view, according to Farley, argues that the changes brought on by the civil rights movement were, by and large, superficial changes; that family income, poverty, and unemployment statistics in the seventies have all decreased or remained the same. Farley admits: that his statistical findings on levels of unemployment from the mid-fifties to the mid-seventies have changed little, that growing proportions of adult men are exiting the labor force, and that black women show no major changes in either employment or participation in the labor force. Yet, Farley argues, the indicators which show no improvement are indicators of lesser import.

Farley's final statements criticize the third, "polarization hypothesis," as well. Farley states that the "polarization hypothesis" maintains that blacks have become increasingly polarized into an elite and an underclass as a consequence of the civil rights movement. Though the integration of schools, income of families, poverty-expansion of government services, and residential segregation all show mixed indicators and substantiate this third stance, Farley argues that this gap has always been in the black community only that in the sixties the elite has grown larger and more visible and so too the underclass.

Farley concludes that relative to the indicators upholding the "optimistic" view, the indicators substantiating the "pessimistic" view and the "polarization hypothesis" are insignificant; hence, in light of the scoreboard on black progress the view holding that black gains are widespread and

significant is the most accurate. Farley states in short that there has been a "revolution" in race relations in the U.S.--- in the sixties and seventies the economic status of blacks increased, poverty decreased, and differences between races on many indicators decreased.

In the eighties and nineties and on, these positive trends promise to continue, according to Farley's projections, because they are grounded in the real legislative gains realized by the sixties civil rights bills and constitutional amendments. Furthermore, Farley argues, racial differences will continue to shrink because: 1. the legal status of blacks has fundamentally changed; the political power of blacks has greatly increased as evidenced by the growing numbers of blacks in political office. 2. blacks are now irreversibly intolerant of the sort of racial discrimination in existence before the civil rights sixties revolution. 3. a large majority of whites accept the voting rights of blacks, equal opportunities for blacks in jobs and education, and the 1960's civil rights law prohibiting segregation.

Though Farley predicts a continuation of positive trends exhibiting decreasing racial differences, he qualifies this prediction stating that the rate of decrease depends heavily on both the rate of economic growth in the U.S. and the strength of the future civil rights movement. Obstacles to decreasing racial significance include economic depressions and federal administrations giving low priority to civil rights issues.

Blacks and Whites: Narrowing the Gap? has been called the most authoritative statement released thus far on the state of black America. Farley identifies his data sources as being none other than those of the U.S. Bureau of Census. (7, 37) But more than the sources of his data, the Bureau constitutes as well, the source for the terms and limits of Farley's discourse. Farley adopts the Bureau's definition of the unemployed. It is as follows:

a person is classified as unemployed if he does not have a job but made a specific effort to find work within the last four weeks. Such efforts are broadly defined...People are also unemployed if they are waiting to be recalled to their jobs or if they intend to begin a new job within a month.
7, 37

But what of the imprisoned or the persistently frustrated workers who have given up the search for employment? Of these Farley states, "A person who spends six months earnestly searching for a job, finds nothing, and then gives up the search will be classified as out of the labor force rather than as unemployed...." (7, 38)

Thus most of Farley's statistics and charts refer to a limited sector of the population. His discussions on the employed, their occupations, and the improvements experienced therein, say nothing for a whole other sector of the black population. For, though Farley's statistics render optimistic comparative studies of white men, black men, white women, black women, often "these data refer to full-time, year round workers...." (7, 60) Only in passing, Farley acknowledges that "blacks are much more likely than whites to be unemployed

or out of the labor force...." (7, 65) When Farley introduces a comparative discussion of all workers' earnings, not just the full-time year round workers, he admits that "the annual earnings may seem rather low..." but, he explains, that is "because they refer to all people who were employed at any time during the year..." (7, 65) Hence, significant differences emerge when the sporadically employed, or the "out of the labor force" sectors of the populations, are drawn into the discourse. And these sectors Farley, like Blauner, by and large neglects---down-playing them out of existence.

Consequently Farley's survey grounds itself in a general neglect of a significant sector of the black population. For as Salim Muwakkil of In These Times reports "on any given day, 23% of all black men in the age group 20-29 are either in prison or jail or are on probation or parole...." (17, 6) Muwakkil prints that this statistic compares with 6.2% of white men of the same age group and 10.4% for hispanic men. And in the face of these stark figures Farley's "optimistic" assessments appear a tasteless joke. The consistent lack of attention shown the "out of the labor force" sector of the black population, by black intellectuals and potential black leadership, plays directly into the hands of political agendas like Farrakhan's---a Nation of Islam leader condemned by many as a racist demagogue. Yet he alone seems to speak to the interests of the black underclass. And among blacks, Muwakkil reports, "Farrakhan is a hit with the young....[for] this controversial leader's soaring rhetoric has become a staple

sample in the rap music subculture...." (18, 6)

The preceding discussion suggests that the primary concern of an African-American social activist be to work with and address the vital concerns of the underclass as articulated by that class. And how might that voice be heard?

A Report on an Event in M.S.U.'s 1990
Black History Month

While pondering over the question of the underclass I attended, during 1990's Black History Month, "American Pictures," a slide program by a Danish photographer called Jacob Holdt. I attended this contemporary event with a mixture of hope and great reluctance; the hope was that it would suggest strategies for a contemporary activism; the reluctance lay in the fear that this would be another instance of classic poverty scenarios beautified through photographic techniques and thus rendered marketable for consumeristic tastes and coffee table browsing purposes. I was mistaken on both counts.

Holdt's pictures clearly lacked the polish of a professional photographer, and I was grateful; with the exception of a few photos (which he blew up into large posters for popular sale potentially as room decor) most of his shots showed shabby squalid settings that looked as though they were taken with minimal thought to aesthetic appeal. The camera eye looked to capture aspects of "misery" and "abject poverty" and succeeded in doing just that. After extended reflection, however, on the photo collection and Holdt's language in

presenting it I have grown convinced that Jacob Holdt ultimately does great harm to the class of people he has chosen to take as subjects. The next few pages present a reflective essay containing a general description of the event, a description of an incident which I found particularly indicative, and finally my critical analysis of Holdt's entire presentation together with the question it raises as to the possibility of African-American activism in the U.S. today.

The "American Pictures" presentation, all of which Jacob Holdt prepared, extended beyond four hours and was accompanied by music together with tape recorded readings. The readings consisted of collected quotes and Holdt's own thoughts. The music included splices of American popular music some of which I'd heard before. In the 60's Holdt had made a journey across the U.S. from the Canadian border to and through the American southern states and later revisited the urban U.S. in the 80's. He had taken hundreds of slides of what he called the American "underclass" documenting in this manner the conditions of its existence. Throughout the years since he made numerous appearances before largely middle class audiences, and wherever invited, showing his pictures. His object he said was to subject all to the experience, for some violent, of his pictures, so that at some level all might "share" for four hours the life experience of the beings there photographed. At intermission he answered questions, took comments, sold both a book containing his journey, narrated and illustrated, and large individual posters of some of his

more popular shots.

Mixed in the consistent spectacle of other's anguish and torment came some slide scenes of luxuriant living. Holdt explained that after spending extended periods in conditions of extreme deprivation he would seek the refuge of well-to-do lifestyles. One such sojourn at a mansion had followed an incident that had greatly endangered Jacob's life. What had occurred was the following: Holdt had entered into amorous relations with a southern black woman sharecropper who was hosting him. In so doing he had grossly violated certain southern racial codes. The woman's home was consequently bombed and her brother died in the flames. This signaled Jacob's exit. He regrouped among the upper classes enjoying in their mansion the time, privacy, protection, and general health and nutrition necessary for serious writing and continuance of his journey. For inevitably, he said, boredom would set in and he would again feel the urge to experience life on the edge.

I found Holdt's narration of this incident and his subsequent words and actions following very revealing. The incident placed in stark relief a basic difference between Holdt's experience and that of the "underclass" whom he visited. It clarified, as well, the true relation Holdt bore them. The basic difference I recognized in their respective experiences was that Jacob Holdt entered and exited the "underclass" conditions of existence at will. By contrast the "underclass" members had no such choice. This fact

fundamentally distinguished Holdt's experience from theirs.

Jacob pretended to "share" the experience of the "underclass" and even to be the agent of our sharing in their experience. I have reached the conclusion that no such sharing is possible. Every act, gesture, word, expression, feeling that Jacob Holdt performed or experienced was grounded in his consciousness that he could leave his situation when things got rough enough. Thus though Holdt was spatially in "underclass" circumstances, he was in a very real sense always out of them. His material and survival interests were radically distinct from those whose company he held.

Jacob's "sharing" statement clouds realities to which the middle class especially sorely needs exposure. In their efforts to purge themselves of their perceived unfair privilege, middle class born individuals (as myself) are not infrequently afflicted with a missionary fever. Jacob Holdt typifies a severe case of this pernicious middle class disease---a disease which prior to his presentation I had been very much in danger of contracting. In his prescriptions for introspective meditation and "racism workshops" wherein we ought to learn to better love and understand each other---the "underclass," the racists, ourselves, one and all---Holdt persistently neglects fundamental material and structural realities and targets cosmetic aspects. In this way he guards against even the faintest possibility of a subversive consequence to his pictorial collection.

My response to the specific account related above and the

whole of Holdt's presentation was finally outrage. Holdt had engaged in a sort of extra-terrestrial adventure. In the final analysis Holdt had behaved like a classic tourist. His travels were the diversionary sport of a bored middle-class kid. The people on whose behalf Holdt professed to now speak had paid for his passing fancies with their lives while Holdt took a break.

Though Holdt might have thought that he in some measure returned the price they paid by his revelatory presentations to the unenlightened middle class---I recognized, in the final analysis, that he had managed to make himself a decent living. With a book out, a podium from which to speak and be heard, some, maybe many even, might admire him, respect him, even regard him as a model. He presented himself as a simple, unassuming, benevolent heart, with an uncanny ability to understand, love, embrace, relate to all peoples and at their level. However, I saw him as being essentially specialized in survival techniques, careless, and finally dangerous.

A question remained: How did this presentation function in the U.S. and as an event in Black History Month? How did people respond? Were they activated or paralyzed? Were they sensitized or numbed? Were they surprised, curious, bored, shocked, mystified, traumatized, enlightened? How did I respond?

More than anything this mad display frightened me and I thought it would likewise frighten at very deep levels any who would see it. Fundamentally in the course of the show the

point was driven home beyond a doubt that there is no limit to the wretched depths one can reach in the U.S. of America. No institutional or legal guards exist, today, against entry into that spectacle of desperation. The show presented photographs of marginalized beings who were either unwilling or unable to learn the socially sanctioned behavioral motions of mainstream America. The final reactionary message transmitted by the photo collection remained: behave yourself...or else. The meritocracy emerged unscathed.

Jacob Holdt's presentation demonstrates both that the voice of the underclass can not be translated by an individual outside its ranks and that the existing resilience of the meritocracy suggests the whole project of formulating a distinguishing self-description may be an impossibility; I can not speak for another nor can I speak for myself. For if my "I" has been forged in a reward-oriented hierarchy that hierarchy determines, by a combination of fear and rewards and chance factors, the configuration of the "I's" identity. "I" has hitherto not acted as a free agent and to the extent "I" has not, it can not be proud nor ashamed of the chance factors by which its identity constituted. The ready-made categories of (eg. African-American, woman, of middle class origin, etc.) are not of my choice or making. Thus my searches in an African-American heritage for thoughts toward formulating a distinguishing self-description approach a frustrated, bitter, even ironic close.

A Slave Speaks

At this point in my investigation, from the center of a reward-oriented-hierarchy, I find myself none other than a slave speaking. For if I ask myself what inheritance has been bequeathed by the transatlantic slave trade the single answer that stands in starkest relief is: this country's current modus operandi. Studies in our historical heritage, one grounded in a slave institution, enable a recognition of this traditional and paramount operating principle. They at some point inevitably also entail studies of quotidian realities analogous to those permeating contemporary American life. These historical studies expose political structural orderings reproduced in the U.S. today. Finally, studies of our slave institution have stimulated me to conduct investigations into contemporary language within which, I have concluded, lies the blueprint for our material reality. The studies taken together kindle concomitant longings.

I stand in a state of infinite gratitude to the American transatlantic slave trade. Because of my extended studies in that phase of American history I fully recognize the foundational heritage of this great country of mine; above all, the history of the American slave trade teaches that there has been an unbroken tradition of profit maximization---and that nothing, absolutely nothing, can challenge that objective without negating the American heritage to its very marrow.

There is no telling how much frustrated energy I would

have expended attempting to order my apparent social political universe according to the foolish, not to say erroneous, teaching of the American constitution which says that human life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness hold highest and unquestionable priority. Difficult to imagine are the convoluted exercises in logic to which I would have had to subject myself had I attempted to reconcile our constitution's teachings with the fact of starvation, ghettos, prisons, police brutality, and homelessness in one of the world's richest countries. Besides attempts at rationalization, my other options would have included either: being blind to the street people on my doorstep or recognition of my country's having gone irreversibly amok. The first possibility would have entailed my virtual sensory shutdown while the second would have signified that life had become devoid of meaning---in a context of total chaos one's activities lose functional meaning. The heritage bequeathed to me by the American slave trade stations the almighty dollar in its rightful central position about which all things properly turn.

Hence, I need not flounder about in befuddled thoughts of confusion. I am currently able to clearly see my everyday world as it is. Since written accounts of slavery have already equipped me with visions of analogous realities, my sensory apparatus operates free of certain ideological obstructions. I see that people living in the street do indeed starve and freeze to death outside my door as slaves once did in the slave quarters of the antebellum slave states.

I do not open my home to those in need, and that is reasonable by the law of maximizing profits.

In the slave era newspapers' classifieds publicized the sale of ailing slaves for the purposes of vivisection and scientific inquiry alongside announcements of the traveling circus. (3, 127) Correspondingly, today, I go to discotheques and dance hour upon hour while simultaneously human beings are utilized in crowded lecture halls to demonstrate the efficacy of the latest U.S. exports in torture technology. (4, 4,48) I see this as necessary since I know that, true to the American tradition, new markets must be aggressively promoted and exploited to sustain corporate competitive viability (4, x) and---in the larger scheme of things---our American capitalist economy, upholding our democratic way of life.

Reports of whippings, mutilations, tortures of every kind executed at picnics, between meals, and daily occurrences (24, 122-126) over two hundred years of American history, have forced images into the realm of the otherwise inconceivable. Such events, however, are no longer perpetrated by masters on slaves. America today presents the spectacle of the new and improved slave state. The profit-maximizing machine has evolved to such an advanced state in contemporary America that slave masters are now obsolete; law abiding wage earners constitute the modern American "slaves without masters." Concerted protest has been so ineffective that the march into work places, which significantly reduce life expectancies and qualities of life, advances uninterrupted. Thus good citizens

continue to pay for their labor; their bodies, blood, and skins---radiated, poisoned, gassed, mutilated---systematically and by slow increments transform into high rates of production.

While the previously mentioned parallels delineate a continuity in the practice of ascribing low value to human life and health many continuities in stratified social orderings evidence another aspect of a vibrant heritage grounded in the American slave era. The lower classes and poor in wage labor jobs, ghettos, the quicksands of drug addiction, and prisons mirror the slaves' lives devoid of choice one hundred years ago. The house niggers of old can be found in persons now occupying salaried administrative professional and managerial positions. And the landowning aristocracy finds its analogous counterpart in the invisible super rich who run the multi-nationals. The hierarchical structure which vertically arranges social strata along a line wherein orders run uni-directionally from top to bottom tenaciously persists.

I am indebted to the American transatlantic slave trade for the historical heritage it bequeathed. It enabled: the recognition of my country's current modus operandi, a clarity in the perceptions of my physical reality, a delineation of my surrounding political structural orderings. Yet the source of my greatest debt lies in a fourth factor: studies in the American slave trade lead to contemplations of the slave-master relation and, consequently, contemplations of language.

The slave-master relation inevitably stimulates investigations into the essential nature of language--of terms such as slavery vs. freedom, justice vs. injustice, inequality vs. equality, the undesirable vs. the desired society. Such investigations expose the hegemonic control of semantics, syntax, and grammar by language. Stock phrases are received as unquestionable truths, adjectives, loaded with commonplace tacit assumptions, accompany nouns blissfully unchallenged, subjects dominate objects, and essays embody hierarchical structurings unimpeded. Ultimately the inquiry into slavery exposes the blueprint for our material reality, the genetic medium of our heritage, as residing in our language.

To name the most recent and graphic example to my knowledge of a witness to this material legacy, I mention Gayle Jones. In Jones' novel Corregidora the central character is a young woman, fourth generation descendent of two generations of rape and incest perpetrated by a portuguese slave trader (incidentally her simultaneous great grandfather and grandfather) upon her great grandmother and grandmother. She is the first of her family since her great grandmother to be both conceived outside a context of rape, incest, and slavery, and to experience "freedom." When the young woman reports the contemporary phrases that her male lover uses to address her the reader hears in those words the exact replica of those used by the late portuguese ancestor toward her great grandmother. (10, 10,60) To subvert this legacy in language would require poetry.

My struggles against my inherited linguistic constructs has kindled a longing for some thing else. Heeding this longing I formulate intentions of a life---a life work designed so as to most radically negate the American heritage with which I have grown so intimately acquainted. In my contemplation of that most heinous of human countenances, the slave institution, arise thoughts of other social designs--- designs wherein human desires and freedom from want constitute the foundational premises of any society worthy of the name.

Only in social contexts free from want and grounded in desires can justice, equality, and freedom begin to accrue meaning. In such societies the nurturing of imaginative creative faculties and the facilitation of cooperative networks and projects take center stage. Then selves might emerge unhampered except by the constraints posed by a self and the ever present problem of its culturally-enabled articulation. For today the U.S. citizens can only be said to constitute a body politic of slaves, of undifferentiated cloned masses.

In conclusion what has the African-American history of enslavement revealed to the project of articulating distinguishing self-descriptions? How does the process of enslavement impinge on the articulation of the self today? How did it in the past? Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, a Moslem born in 1790 to a scholarly class in Timbuktu and made a slave in 1804 in the midst of the late 18th and early 19th century Ashanti revolutionary war, provides a description suggesting that the

process entails social death. He writes:

On that very day they made me a captive. They tore off my clothes, bound me with ropes, gave me a heavy load to carry, and led me to the town of Bonduku, and from there to the town of Kumasi, where the king of Ashanti reigned, whose name was Osei [Bonsu]. 1, 162

For Abu Bakr the moment of enslavement entails loss of support systems, lineage, village, age, grade or cohort systems. Enslavement pulls one out of networks of social identity.

So too, in today's highly bureaucratized and hierarchically structured orderings, the community is destroyed and social identity is lost. Is this process accompanied by the total destruction of self-pride, self-worth and meaning? And if so, can pride, worth and meaning rise from the ashes?

In An Anthropological Approach to the Afro-American Past Sidney Mintz and Richard Price maintain that by a 'peculiar irony' those values emerge in an even more resplendent form. They state:

While the greatest shock of enslavement was probably the fear of physical violence and of death itself, the psychological accompaniment of this trauma was the relentless assault on personal identity, the stripping away of status and rank, the treatment of people as nameless ciphers. Yet by a peculiar irony, this most degrading of all aspects of slavery seems to have had the effect of encouraging the slaves to cultivate an enhanced appreciation for exactly those most personal, most human characteristics which differentiate one individual from another, perhaps the principle qualities which master could not take away from them. Early on, then, the slaves were elaborating upon the ways in which they could be individuals--a particular sense of humor, a certain skill or type of knowledge, even a distinctive way of walking or talking, or some sartorial detail, like the cock of a hat or the use of a cane. 12, 26

Mintz and Price notice "in early Afro-American cultures a fundamental dynamism..." (12, 26) Richard Price elaborates further on this notion of a distinctive African-American cultural dynamism in his introduction to the anthology Maroon Societies. Price proposes:

tenacious fidelity to 'African' forms is, in many ways, an indication of a culture finally having lost meaningful touch with the vital African past....[O]ne of the most striking features of West African cultural systems is their internal dynamism, their ability to grow and change. The uniqueness of the more developed maroon societies rests firmly...on their fidelity to 'African' principles---whether aesthetic, political, or domestic---rather than on the frequency of their isolated 'retention'....With a rare freedom to extrapolate African ideas and adopt them to changing circumstance, maroon groups include what are in many respects both the most meaningfully African and the most truly 'alive' of all Afro-American cultures. 19, 29-30

Though Price writes specifically of maroon societies his statement bears relevance to the current project of articulating distinguishing self-descriptions. Both Mintz' and Price's insights suggest that the 'search' for distinctions might better be described as a project in 'generating' distinctions. On generating distinguishing descriptions artists/writers/African-American 20th century novelists speak with particular eloquence.

CHAPTER III

THE ISSUE OF THE SELF TRACED THROUGH INVESTIGATIONS IN A SELECTION FROM 20TH CENTURY AFRICAN-AMERICAN LITERATURE

Indistinguishable "I"s

In a spirit consonant with the preceding chapter Invisible Man questions the actuality of freedom in contemporary America. To all believers in their own free agency the book reverberates as an unnerving statement. America teaches its youthful citizens to tacitly assume the existence of freedom and, ironically, that the degree of freedom one can exercise bears direct relation to the degree of power one has attained. Invisible Man teaches instead: the greater the power one has the less freedom one can exercise.

Every society has a mythology about the passage into adulthood. Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man is a narrative that de-mystifies that mythology and its rituals in America. The rituals have as a primary component the recognition of power and its hierarchically structured institutional form. Power is exposed for what it is: organized violence. As such, power negates the individual and prohibits the possibility of freedom.

The avenues of indoctrination in America being effective,

many and multifarious, the peculiar lesson offered by Invisible Man is not easily apprehended. Hence, the book employs a number of strategies to jolt the reader out of a somnolent state and into an appreciation of the real possibilities of freedom available to an individual caught in the American power structure.

The following paper discusses the tactics Invisible Man utilizes to assure its statement's reception. The text personalizes the individual's experience of America by examining the three largest, most accessed, institutional frameworks through the eyes of an individual participant, the protagonist: "I". The reader vicariously experiences their worst nightmare in detailed narrations of I's traumatic and explosive expulsion from each of the three institutions. Each expulsion functions decisively in "I's" life experience. His potentially fragmentary experience is integrated by an ongoing description of his introspective and evolving consciousness. By the personalization of the systemic, the vicarious rendering of crucial traumas, and the explicit integration and synthesis of a single individual's experience, Invisible Man conspires to make audible/visible its disturbing and needed statement.

The novel opens with an individual, "I," who speaks to the reader in a direct self-conscious address. The "I" appears very concerned with the question of his visibility or invisibility and the question of freedom. At first what is meant by "invisibility" is not clear nor particularly relevant

to the reader. What is clear however, is that the realization of invisibility, or the protagonist's conscious realization of his own invisibility, has a tremendous impact on the protagonist. Ultimately the realization functions as a turning point in "I's" life---a turning point which finally leads him to lead the mode of life he describes at the novel's outset.

The peculiarity of the fellow piques one's curiosity. One can not call this fellow a model citizen in any sense. For though he intentionally consumes tremendous amounts of electricity, he does not pay a single utility or rent bill. He seems to lurk the back alleys at night assaulting and battering persons who do, men dressed in conventional citizen's apparel. All the while he roams he obsessively discourses with himself about his being invisible to the object of his abuse.

Reality and conceptual constructs and images appear of equal status or validity to "I." This main character's solipsistic reasonings go round and round effecting an apparent paralysis both in thought and action, until "I" embarks on an account of his transformative stages from belief in his visibility to an awareness of his "true" state of invisibility----a realization which he holds of all encompassing significance to his life and life choices.

The protagonist states that the transition from belief in his own visibility to consciousness of his invisibility occurred by way of his past actions. With this "I" begins a

narration of a series of discrete experiences each transpiring in distinct power spheres and each punctuated with traumatic events, turning points in the life of "I."

The event which launches the "invisible man" into the first power sphere he calls "the battle royal." A group of prominent white community leaders assemble a group of teenage black youths, one of whom is the protagonist. The whites have their way with the youths by way of the classic instruments of power. Using a combination of terror (in the form of a blond nude dancing white woman---sufficient reason for the black youths' immediate lynching), torture (beatings and electrocutions), and baits (in the form of gold coins, a \$5 bonus prize, one scholarship, and the promise of a wage) the youths are manipulated by the white men to their own diversionary distraction. A brief, violent, sensationalistic incident, the battle royal displays the stark reality of "I's" world in a microcosm. The entertainment hour culminates in the protagonist's making a speech and thereby earning a means of entry into the first institutional power sphere extensively examined by the text: a southern university for blacks.

The description of the first sphere enables an unusually privileged and penetrating look at the very apex of an institutional power hierarchy. After three years attendance, the protagonist experiences abrupt expulsion from his beloved Alma Mater. The immediate circumstances of his expulsion and the subsequent rash reaction on the part of the protagonist elicits from Dr. Bledsoe, the institute's president, a

profoundly revealing response.

"I" learns in the course of one day that power concerns itself only with its own perpetuation and maintenance. To the exclusion of all else Dr. Bledsoe, the top of the academic institute's hierarchical pyramid, cares for the preservation of his power position. He openly admits: "I'll have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am." (5, 141) Sustaining the trustees' money-attracting-image, of himself and his school, and thereby preserving his position as its director, is Dr. Bledsoe's overriding concern. Dr. Bledsoe's each and every word, gesture, expression is dictated by the requisites of his successfully marketed image. "I" watches in shock when in preparation for an encounter with an important trustee Dr. Bledsoe pauses before a mirror and literally sculpts his face into the mask appropriate to his designed prize winning image. (5, 100)

In response to "I's" threats of exposing Dr. Bledsoe's duplicity and exploding the false image which earns the school's material backing, Dr. Bledsoe exposes more than prudence would normally allow. He shows the futility of "I's" threats. Bledsoe brazenly reveals that those who control the media control, absolutely, what becomes truth, and power dictates, absolutely, the contents of that truth. (5, 140-1) He further reminds a naive unwitting "I": "This is a power set-up...and I'm at the controls....When you buck against me, you're bucking against power." (5, 140) Bledsoe finally

echoes what "I" has just recently heard from a dangerously talkative WWII black vet committed to an insane asylum: "You're nobody son. You don't exist." (5, 141) Power admits no recognition of individuals. The final shocking and apparently paradoxical revelation Bledsoe makes is that for all his power he is powerless to change a thing. "I didn't make it," Bledsoe states "and I know that I can't change it." (5, 141)

Following his expulsion "I", equipped with a mere \$50 and seven identical letters written by Bledsoe allegedly recommending "I" to the services of various trustees, takes a bus into the large metropolis of New York. In New York "I" completes his crash course on Bledsoe's power sphere when out of sympathy the son of a trustee, by the name of Mr. Emerson, reveals to "I" the true perfidious content of Bledsoe's letters. Having reached the end of his means "I" grasps desperately at a work lead suggested randomly by the young Mr. Emerson.

"I" thus falls into the realm of an industrial work force at a Liberty Paints Plant. In this zone "I" unexpectedly enters a second power sphere composed of the mentioned but never seen Mr. Sparland, owner of Liberty Paints, managers, unionized and non-unionized workers, and student scabs.

The text presents this hierarchical institutional pyramid in a startling view from an office at its bottom. On "I's" first day of employment he is sent to a basement of the plant to work under a tiny old black man by the name of Lucius

Brockway. There "I" learns that this seemingly inconsequential individual is absolutely essential to the day to day proper functioning of the entire Liberty Paints Plant. Brockway was present and participating at the time of the plant's physical foundation and retained the secret mysterious formula to the white paint which established the Company's fame and fortune.

The examination of the second institutional power sphere demonstrates that the features characterizing power at its apex hold, almost without qualification, to those positioned at its base. Though bearing the title and wage of a commonplace worker Brockway's identification with the plant and its owner, Mr. Sparland, appears total. Brockway sustains an uncompromising hatred for anything that threatens the interest of Mr. Sparland, Liberty Paints, or his apparently measly and personally coveted position in the plant. Hence the mere thought of unions send Brockway into a blind rage. Upon "I's" simple and unwitting mention of a union, Brockway explodes into an uncontrolled demoniacal fury and he violently assaults "I." Brockway subsequently schemes to kill "I" and nearly succeeds. Their violent exchange leads to "I's" critical injury, loss of consciousness, and commitment to a factory hospital. At the hint of a threat posed to Brockway's position in the hierarchy of power, "I" is eliminated.

Evidently "I" threatens the entirety of the Liberty Paints power sphere sufficiently for it to necessitate the partial removal of his brain functions. Awakening with

amnesia in a factory hospital "I" finds himself wired into a contraption that effects his lobotomy by electrocution. The contraption physically immobilizes "I" in a mechanical electrical encasing.

In this second microcosm of his world "I" apprehends a sense of his being locked into a historical determinism. When asked his mother's name the thought "a machine my mother?" crosses "I's" mind. At first "I" comfortably dismisses that thought as the product of a demented brain. (5, 235) Yet the thought is further corroborated by other aspects of his condition. "I" is not only unable to identify his mother's identity but he is also incapable of identifying his own. Individuals mass produced by the inertia of history's momentum are unlikely to exhibit distinguishable identities.

The text of the Invisible Man here brings to the conscious fore a thought at once disturbing and liberating namely, the indistinguishability of the "I" historically bred, socially conditioned, and privately unquestioned. The thought casts doubt on realities commonly taken as bedrock and catalyses a process of liberation in the questioning it provokes. "I" recognizes, in this lobotomy machine, the complete interdependence of conceiving a personal identity and realizing freedom: "When I discover who I am, I'll be free." (5, 237)

The machine finally completes the procedure. The factory hospital staff rips off the electrodes and "I" is delivered. In a final image, reminiscent of the severing of an umbilical

cord, the last electrical cord is ripped from "I's" stomach.
(5, 238)

Released to the streets of New York "I" staggers into the arms of Mary. Nurtured by Mary's care "I" recovers fully. The hospital experience remains the second major turning point in "I's" experience for "the obsession with [his] identity... developed in the hospital returned with a vengeance. Who was I, how had I come to be." (5, 253)

Mary reactivates the voices of his old familiar social conditioning. By sustaining great expectations of "I" as a future leader of the race, a young man of promise, responsibility, and achievement, (5, 249,252) Mary instills in "I" an identity. That identity, fettered to an ideology of power, conditions "I" into a susceptibility for a third power sphere. In his quest for work "I" stumbles upon the institution by which he can in part fulfill Mary's images of him as a "race leader." (5, 308) Thus the text introduces the third, and last examined, sphere of power: a political organization called the Brotherhood.

Allegedly a group committed to harnessing and organizing popular resistance against oppression, "I" believes that the Brotherhood provides him with opportunities: to glimpse at how the country/world operated, (5, 298) to go to the top, (5, 346) and to achieve power and authority. (5, 372,397) The Brotherhood enables "I" for the first time to fully participate as a functionary in the day to day normal operation of a power sphere. The text thereby exposes the

Brotherhood's mechanism of operation as identical to that of any other power sphere.

Far from setting itself apart from the system it professes to attack, the Brotherhood mirrors all the characteristic aspects of power and uses traditional power ploys to attain its objectives. The monetary incentive is the first strategy used to lure "I" into the Brotherhood's sphere of influence. Once hired the Brotherhood further garners "I's" commitment and loyalty by positing itself as the vehicle by which "I" can realize his aspirations of leadership. The Brotherhood rigorously trains "I" encouraging him to believe that he is given the greatest opportunity to develop his potential. (5, 381) "I" is given a name, a function, a place in history without which "I" perceives himself doomed to anonymity. All that the Brotherhood asks in exchange is total discipline, blind obedience to whatever assignment "the committee" discharges.

"I" is assigned to head the Harlem District. Under "I's" direction the district becomes one of the Brotherhood's strongest. (5, 412) "I" develops an effective partnership and a deep friendship with the Brotherhood's leader of the Harlem youth, a young man by the name of Tod Clifton. Upon "I's" being accused of opportunistic motives the Brotherhood immediately withdraws "I" from his post in Harlem and assigns him to a downtown district to work on the "Woman Question." In the course of a month the Harlem District deteriorates into perfect chaos. The Committee reassigns "I" to his Harlem

post, tells him Tod Clifton has mysteriously disappeared, and gives "I" orders which he knows will inevitably further alienate the district's people and erode their trust in the Brotherhood. At a time when local issues are seething under the pressure of a depressing economy "I" is to discontinue agitational work in Harlem and to emphasize national and international issues.

When "I" turns to the committee to contest the order "I" finds all doors closed to him. Here "I" learns the strict top-down uni-directionality of the flow of information in the hierarchical structuring of power. In this information shutdown "I" stumbles unexpectedly upon Tod Clifton. Thus initiates a sequence of events which culminates in "I's" third and final turning point.

Clifton had abandoned the Brotherhood for the unlicensed street sale of grinning, dancing, paper Sambo puppets. Evidently Clifton had read the Brotherhood's new assignments, and probably "I's" re-stationing, as an incontestable betrayal of Harlem's people. Clifton's Sambo dolls, symbolizing his bitter reassessment of his past role and "I's" current role in the Brotherhood, make "I" react in violent shock and anger. Shortly thereafter "I" witnesses a police officer provoke and then slaughter an unarmed Clifton, while taking him into custody.

In a state of despair and anguish, and still unable to reach Brotherhood headquarters, "I" independently steers the Brotherhood's Harlem district contingent toward organizing a

large funeral march in memory of Tod Clifton. The widely publicized incident of police brutality draws great masses of people and "I" dedicates to Tod Clifton, his beloved friend, a moving oration and burial.

Upon returning to the Brotherhood's Harlem office "I" encounters his long absent superiors. They inform "I" that Tod Clifton, a member singled out as a traitor by the Brotherhood, should not have received a hero's funeral. They deride and chastise "I's" recent decisions and actions. Brother Jack, the highest ranking superior of "I's" acquaintance in the Brotherhood finally openly reminds "I" that I was "not hired to think" (5, 458) but that "the committee does the thinking" and "I" was solely "hired to talk." (5, 459) "I" is then told to receive further instruction from the organization's theoretician, Brother Hambro.

In the haunting backdrop of this confrontational incident and the implications it holds for "I," he retroactively makes major reassessments of his role in the Brotherhood. Tod Clifton's Sambo puppet images strongly. As he heads towards Brother Hambro's quarters "I" begins to sense his participation in a sellout. (5, 469)

Black nationalists in the Harlem District view "I" as a collaborator/traitor. As he crosses the district "I" tries to escape their revengeful wrath by disguising himself in sunglasses and a hat. He finds not only that his disguise is taken for a man called Rinehart, but that Rinehart has an

amazing array of contradictory personalities, ranging from Reverend to pimp, that he plays in various quarters of the Harlem district. In each context people's expectations elicit behaviors in "I" that are foreign to "I" and appropriate to Rinehart.

The Rinehart incidents bewilder "I" and the reader with the ideological nature of identity. For all practical purposes the identities of "I" and Rinehart have collapsed into one and the same identity. The Rinehart experience teaches that appearance is essence and essence, thereby, becomes a variable concept. Freedom gains accessibility since individuals exist devoid of an ultimately fixed nature. Through Rinehart "I" glimpses into a very real world of pure contradiction, chaos, and possibility---one for which he cannot account and which he conveniently neglects until this moment.

Upon reaching the Brotherhood's theoretician, Hambro, "I" hears again repeated the message of Harlem's dispensability to the Brotherhood's master plan. In this he remembers Tod Clifton's dispensability and he recognizes implicitly his own. At this point "I" grasps the Harlem community's, Clifton's, and his own betrayal by the Brotherhood. He plots in revenge to destroy the Brotherhood in Harlem. (5, 499)

The Brotherhood enables "I's" articulation of necessary components of power. When "I" resolves to destroy the organization his first considers organizing a splinter group. Not having the money, intelligence apparatus, communication

system and inter-organizational ties needed (5, 499) "I" quickly discards that option and decides to make his next move independently.

"I" then attempts sabotage by falsifying whatever data the organization requests of him. "I" soon learns, however, that options are not available to individuals within power hierarchies. A choice and its opposite fall equally into the comprehensive engineerings of power. (5, 469,541) As planned by the Brotherhood Harlem plummets unimpeded into a race riot, and suffers casualties at the hands of the police. "I" recoils in horror and hatred toward the Brotherhood when he discovers his complicity even at his moment of absolute rebellion.

Between Clifton's death and the absence of possibility and freedom it revealed in the Brotherhood, and the possibility suggested by Rinehart's world, "I" opts to venture into the chaos of the uncharted. Previously abhorrent and implausible, the alternatives outside of power structures appeared inaccessible to "I." In this last sixth of the book, on the force of Clifton's and Rinehart's revelations, "I" articulates a consciousness of his state of invisibility and plunges outside the third power sphere to freedom.

The Invisible Man offers a new definition of freedom. Though mentioned in the novel's outset the definition becomes increasingly clear in the final pages. Freedom "ain't nothing but knowing how to say what I got up in my mind. But it's a hard job." (5, 11)

The apparent labyrinth life posits renders the task of articulating oneself even more difficult. The Invisible Man attempts to collapse those apparently infinite possibilities into a showcased countable number. The text provides an almost clairvoyant panorama of trends and movements emerging shortly before and after the novel's publication. One recognizes: the "black is beautiful" trend, the black power movement, black nationalists, rastafarians, the communist movement. These "alternatives" form the backdrop to the plot of the novel: the ongoing analysis of institutionalized power.

Unless one is made wise to its complex structures and inner workings one can lose one's self in the mazes of power. As the "insane" WWII vet tells "I" the "game has been analyzed, put down in books. But down here they've forgotten to take care of the books and that's your opportunity." (5, 152)

Ralph Ellison takes up that opportunity and simultaneously offers it to us in the Invisible Man. The text features portraits of power---"the game"---in the images of Dr. Bledsoe, Lucius Brockway, and Brother Jack. Through "I" the story of "they"---"the force that pulls your strings until you refuse to be pulled any more" (5, 152)---is told. Power is thus de-mystified and thereby deactivated.

"I" learns the constitution of the strings that bind him. Shackling concerns with pride, sincerity, truth, with real and eternal essences, with living up to others' expectations, and

belief and trust in outside authority, give way to new values as "I" goes through stages of liberation.

Invisible Man attempts to relocate individual authority not in some outside power, but in the powerhouse of the individual grounded in contradiction---for contradiction increasingly emerges at the core of "I's" self-description. As the Rinehart experience opens the door to the ideological nature of identity freedom gains accessibility. The question to which this work is an answer is: how can one live or how can one realize the ever elusive state of freedom? Ellison shaped one answer into Invisible Man. To us he retorts: "Next time you got questions like that, ask yourself!" (5, 12)

The Self in Desire

Zora Neale Hurston is one African-American woman who did ask herself. Her novel Their Eyes Were Watching God challenges notions of the benign folk, conventional lives, and conventional notions of God. In an associative and transitive manner all three are linked with each other and with Hurston's death images. The book warns that the above constitute obstacles to a full life. That if instead we dare listen to the treasures latent in ourselves, and defy prescriptive formulas, life's horizons will extend and cloak us in a mantle of delights.

The benign folk, whom Hurston has been repeatedly accredited as celebrating (see back cover of the Illini books edition), often receive negative death-like portrayals in

Their Eyes. In contrast, the creative act of writing, or refiguring commonly accepted truths, as Hurston does, generates life. Hurston's version of her creation story begins as follows: "So the beginning of this was a woman and she had come back from burying the dead." (2, 9) Death and the dead constitute a recurrent theme in Their Eyes. The dead are soon associated with beings having "their eyes flung wide open in judgement." (2, 9) The people, introduced soon afterwards, bear a striking resemblance to these, Hurston's death images. "These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long." (2, 9-10) Much like vacant skulls they, too, like the dead with eyes flung wide open, "sat in judgement." (2, 10)

Hurston, careful to never tell something without the understanding to go with it (2, 19), explains that the bossman dictated their daily existence as beasts of burden. The envy the people held out against any who escaped that condition would consequently know no bounds. Janie, the novel's protagonist who suffers at their envy, remarks bitterly to her only remaining friend, "'de rest of 'em...dey's parched up from not knowin' things. Dem meat skins is got tuh rattle tuh make out they's alive. Let 'em console theyselves wid talk.'" (2, 284-5)

Talk the folk did:

[t]hey passed nations through their mouths, [and]
[t]hey made burning statements with questions, and
killing tools out of laughs. It was mass cruelty.

A mood come alive. Words walking without masters;
walking altogether like harmony in a song. 9, 10

Oppression and envy are so widespread that they effect an order in feelings analogous to the constraining dictates of harmony and rhythm in sound. The analogy recurs in a passage found much later in the book; the talk of crowds is described as "a tongue storm [which] struck the Negroes like wind among palm trees. They talked all of a sudden and all together like a choir and the top parts of their bodies moved on the rhythm of it." (9, 276)

Hurston turns the picturesque image of the benign southern folk, leisurely socializing on their summer porches, on its head. She references in these opening passages the frustration and dehumanization that constitutes the common lot and the consequent envy that destroys selves along with potential loves. The words of the masses lack intent, or selves as masters. Their voices are sound emissions from minds obliterated by oppressive relations, envy, and ignorance. "Rhythm," "harmony," the people---far from benign ---represent for Hurston mob rule.

In its passing judgement the rule of the mob assumes many features associated with conventional images of a static and feared God, authority, nature and power--all negative images of death in the language of the novel. When Janie, who in her unconventional life choices intentionally transgresses the dictates of her society, subsequently re-enters her social circle, she comments, "'Well, Ah see Mouth-Almighty is still

sittin' in de same place.'" (2, 16) Thus she links the image of the people engaged in gossip on the porch with conventional images of Almighty God sitting on Judgement Day.

Hurston, furthermore, gives the people on the porch names that liken them to dead inert matter. We read of "Pearl Stone," "Lulu Moss," and when Janie tries to live the life prescribed by them she complains, "'Ah'm stone dead from standin' still and tryin' tuh smile.'" (2, 128) Stone, moss and death evoke static sterile images. Like the people death "stands watchful and motionless all day...waiting..." (2, 129) Janie concludes early that "[t]he familiar people and things had failed her..." (2, 44) and when a man named Joe Starks comes and speaks, to her mind, "for far horizons....for change and chance," (2, 50) Janie jumps at the opportunity.

From the first this man had conjured images of white men in Janie's mind. Only later, long after having married him, did she consciously link him to power, authority and oppression, for he took from her her voice and forbid her speech. He wished her silent and motionless on a high chair sitting and overlooking the world. (2, 98) The deathlike inertness of the people becomes an accusation Janie hurls at her husband who comes to represent its fountainhead; as Joe Starks, her rich and powerful husband, lays dying on his deathbed, Janie says, "'You changes everything but nothin' don't change you---not even death.'" (2, 133) Later still, she found that since she slept with authority, or the bossman, in the town mind she was part of authority and, consequently,

she too, incurred the town's envy and awe. (2, 74)

In the Florida town of Eatonville Joe Starks, for the most part, played the role of almighty God admirably well. He took on the expression "I god" upon entering it. And his voice reverberated the echoes of a section foreman. (2, 58) Joe Starks became the town's first mayor, owned the town's land, houses, store, hired the town's people. He even brought the town light---electrical that is. And the townspeople philosophized on their condition: "'he's de wind and we'se de grass. We bend which ever way he blows.'" (2, 78)

The wind, as an image of an oppressive force commanding submission, later in the novel takes on the shape of a hurricane where connections are unmistakably made between the hurricane and the power of God. As a monstrous hurricane knocked on the door of a house sheltering Janie, her last lover, Teacake, and their common friend, Motor Boat, their eyes came to staring at the door: "[s]ix eyes were questioning God." (2, 235) As the wind raged with triple might, "their eyes were watching God." (2, 236) In these passages God and death and fear merge.

The connections implicitly suggested by the above related incident and passage, the narrator explicitly expounds in an earlier passage when she writes, "All gods who receive homage are cruel. All gods dispense suffering without reason. Otherwise they would not be worshipped. Through indiscriminate suffering men know fear and fear is the most divine emotion." (2, 215) The pecking-order that defines the

natural order of the chicken yard, defines the order of people in relations of oppression, and likewise defines the order sanctioned by the God image of conventional worship.

In the course of the novel the people, conventional lifestyles and conventional images of God become synonymous with death. Yet, Their Eyes Were Watching God is riddled with hints and suggestions of possible life springs. From the book's outset Hurston distinguishes the life of men, characterized by eternal denial and frustration, from the life of woman, grounded in wants acknowledged and desires pursued. Janie, the novel's protagonist, slowly, slowly gives her inner voice of woman supremacy. She comes to the realization that, "[i]nside...were resurrection and life" and "outside...[were] the things of death." (2, 136-7) Janie pursues her dreams. And, after she is released from her "self-crushing love" (2, 192) with Teacake, Janie finds the sanctum of the heavens in her inner being. As she drapes the horizon of the world about her shoulders (2, 286) she reaches the ultimate consciousness "that she was the world and the heavens boiled down to a drop." (2, 119) Janie, a black woman, emerges divine.

Sula: Janie's Child

Just as one cannot make another free, so too, the gift of a self can not be given. Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937) and Toni Morrison's Sula (1973), nonetheless, strive to at least impart the issue of the self to their readers and thereby catalyze the formation of a self. Sula

can be viewed as the consequence of one reader, namely Toni Morrison, taking up the frightening proposal at the core of Their Eyes. The proposal asks the reader to make a life project of articulating an intentioned thought and self where initially there is none.

That Sula is a composed response to that proposal and an extension of the discourse set in motion by Their Eyes can be inferred from aspects shared by the texts on a variety of levels. Similarities can be found in the central characters, Janie Mae Woods and Sula Mae Peace, their respective lovers, Tea Cake and Ajax, the relations the lovers bear each other, the modes of presenting these characters, and numerous residual phrases that accompany both the characters and the texts. Similar dilemmas and issues underlie both Janie's and Sula's struggles---struggles around which both novels revolve and which consequently bestow Their Eyes and Sula with a similarity of structure and content. A fundamental dichotomy posited in the form of Janie and her closest friend, Phoebe Watson, and Sula and Nel Wright respectively, epitomizes an inescapable choice confronting every social being.

Taken together the shared aspects of both works function to seduce and then provoke the reader into a disturbing thought: that the power of language, tradition, habit, conspire to erase the potentiality of the self. If one consciously intentions otherwise, as Hurston and Morrison did, a self can be forged in experimental composition, in art. Ignorance of this condition of our existence entails one's

self-effacement.

Far from ignoring that ominous condition, the central characters of Their Eyes and Sula demonstrate a painful awareness of it. In their choices to ground their existences in self affirmation, Janie Mae and Sula Mae inevitably assume a few shared features. Both opt for living as opposed to vegetating in the hell of mere existence. To opt for the choice of life necessitates explicit statements of intent. Janie makes that statement when she declares, "Ah done lived Grandma's way, now Ah means tuh live mine." (2, 171) She thereby disregards convention and ventures into territories unsanctioned by tradition. When generous, Janie's peers call her her own woman. (2, 170) They remark, at first at least, that she is a born orator. (2, 92) Later, however, one fellow states that he'd rather be shot with tacks than to hear Janie's words said in reference to himself. (2, 123) Sula is, no less than Janie, "a woman with a lot of lip." (16, 103) Her life comes also described as her own. (16, 127) Towards her life's end Sula reports that, contrary to her contemporaries, "I sure did live in this world." (16, 143)

Life becomes, for Janie and Sula, synonymous with change, experimentation, and the playing out of imagination. Janie follows where change and chance beckon (2, 50,54,55) and Sula's life is characterized by the experimental. (16, 118) Consequently, both women have Mae as their middle name, allusions to the eternal springtime they bear. Hence Janie, nearly forty, recurrently elicits comments as to her youthful

appearance (2, 14, 150, 166) and although Sula was near thirty she also "did not look her age." (16, 115)

Just as Janie and Sula exhibit similarities, their lovers display conspicuous resemblances to each other. Tea Cake and Ajax typically excite feelings of infatuation in the women they court. To Janie Tea Cake "looked like the love thoughts of women." (2, 161) A tall (2, 144) dark man (2, 208) of purple lips (2, 145), Tea Cake is an inveterate gambler. (2, 187) Ajax a black (16, 124), very black (16, 135), man of five feet eleven inches (16, 135), whose haunting sweetness would provoke women into murderous battles (16, 125), is first introduced in Sula as a "pool haunt of sinister beauty." (16, 50) The minimal strokes used to sketch both their personas suffice to render evocative and reflective images of the two.

The texts present both men as standing somewhere outside the margin of official society. As risk takers and gamblers, they refuse to settle into staid lives with families, permanent jobs, and duties. Even their names skirt official sanction. For Tea Cake and Ajax relinquish their formal names, which appear only once in the novels as Verigible Woods and Albert Jacks respectively, in favor of ones responsive to their input.

In response to their entry, the dance of courtship loses its ritualistic elements and gives way to poetry. Courtship takes on new meaning after having read the tales of Tea Cake's and Ajax's imaginative seductions of Janie and Sula. Tea Cake begins to court Janie with a game of checkers (2, 146) and

mimes of an invisible companion and an imaginary lamppost (9, 149). He follows these initial ventures with guitar serenades (9, 152), fishing (9, 154), strawberries (9, 162), picnicking (9, 164). Then come hunting, movies, dancing, planting flower beds, teaching how to drive a car, and playing games of coon-can and the Florida flip (9, 166-7). Ajax courts Sula with no less fine a fantasy when he appears with a string of delightfully odd gifts. (16, 125) Unforgettably tender is the jar of butterflies he lets loose in their bedroom. (16, 127) Like Tea Cake, Ajax shows attentiveness to all of Sula's senses. The reed whistle (16, 131) pays homage to her ears, the blueberries (16, 134) to her tongue and, most importantly for Sula, the "genuine conversations" (16, 127-8) paid homage to her mind.

The conversations between Sula and Ajax take on the same significance as the playing of checkers for Janie and Tea Cake. In Their Eyes checkers is a game played by equals. Prior to Tea Cake Janie had never experienced, in her relations with men, an invitation to a partnership of equals. So too, Sula had encountered, time and again, "the same language of love, the same entertainments of love, the same cooling of love" (16, 120-1) but never one who "talked to her" (16, 127) and not down to or at her. (16, 127-8) Hence, in both novels Janie's and Sula's significant others emerge from a courtship of equals.

Janie's and Sula's relations to their lovers show other important correspondences. Both find their loves in persons

of an age, by most traditional standards, too young or too old. Sula is twenty-nine (16, 123) and Ajax is thirty-eight. (16, 124) Janie is near forty (9, 122) while Tea Cake is near thirty. (9, 12) Yet despite the approximate ten-year gap in age, their respective loves represent their twin spirits. One learns that "nobody wouldn't marry Tea Cake...lessen it's somebody jes lak him" (9, 156)---and Janie, at some level, is just like him. Sula consciously seeks a "version of herself" (16, 121) and Ajax gravitates towards Sula on rumors of her perhaps being much like him. (16, 127)

Janie's and Sula's relationships to Tea Cake and Ajax mirror each other, in contradistinction to the life enhancing features described above, in one final and ironic respect: both women meet their death in their most ardent loves. Tea Cake and Ajax function in both novels as vehicles of death. For Janie dies through Tea Cake and Sula feels (16, 130), intuit (16, 135), and finally smells the loam (16, 137) through Ajax. In the wake of both their lovers' departures, Janie and Sula retreat from experiential life: Janie into a life lived by comparisons and Sula into the earth and legend.

Numerous other fragments and residues riddle Sula's text and further acknowledge its tribute to its predecessor, Their Eyes. The pear trees and blossoms that recur thematically throughout the text of Their Eyes (9, 24-5, 43, 112, 161) likewise find mention in the early and final pages of Sula. (16, 3, 147) "Overhalls" an image which achieves a certain level of prominence in the opening of Their Eyes (9, 10, 14,

17) somehow finds its way into the opening page of Sula as "cover alls." (16, 4) "The people all saw her" (2, 9) in Their Eyes is echoed in the phrase "black people watching her" in Sula. (16, 4) The description of the humor of blacks up in the Bottom (16, 4) seems to obliquely refer to the renowned Matt Bonner's yellow mule jokes in Their Eyes. Each of these fragments in Sula when taken alone makes no strong reference, yet taken together they resonate the chords tuned by the text of Their Eyes.

What resonate most strongly are the issues and dilemmas vicariously brought to the reader in the form of Janie's and Sula's struggles. Their Eyes narrates each stage of Janie's metamorphosis from a child (2, 26) to a woman (2, 44) and beyond. Sula, too, tells the story of "that little girl Sula who grew into a woman." (16, 6) In some manner each story presents a disquieted individual, her departure from her longstanding community, and her return to it. Consequently, Their Eyes and Sula reveal a similar content and structuring.

One of Janie's and Sula's earliest troubles centers about the discovery that betrayal often lurks in things familiar. Janie's grandmother, obedience, and marriage had taught Janie at an early age that "the familiar people and things" would fail her. (2, 44) And when Janie later experiences a troubled time "she did not reach outside for anything." (2, 137) Sula learns likewise when, at age twelve, she overhears her mother say, "I love Sula. I just don't like her." (16, 57) The experience teaches Sula that there is no other that one can

count on. (16, 118-9) This lesson leads to another which instructs that "there [is] no self to count on either." (16, 119)

Their realizations culminate in Janie's decision to look "towards way off" beyond the horizon (9, 44) for her answers and Sula's decision to live "an experimental life." (16, 118) These women finally center themselves in their pleasure and whim. Janie sets her trust in a jewel she finds inside herself (9, 138) and aims to "have the rest of her life to do as she please[s]." (9, 137) Sula recognizes her self as residing solely in "her own mood and whim." (16, 121) That being so, Sula sets out to discover her essence intimately and facilitate others intimacy "with their own selves." (16, 121)

Their quests, aims and realizations motivate them to embark on journeys: Janie leaves her town in a blue satin wedding dress (9, 10) and Sula, dressed as maid of honor to Nel, glides "a slim figure in blue...toward the road." (16, 85) Those journeys bring them to the limits of human experience and are subsequently followed by returns.

The returns like the departures share common features. As Janie walks through her town "the porch couldn't talk for looking." (9, 11) The description of Janie's reception narrated in the opening pages (9, 9-10) of Their Eyes makes oblique allusions to the people of Janie's community being dead and blind. Their sharp tongued words, besides being cruel are devoid of intent. When Sula's return also brings people to their porches, there are mostly stares. (16, 91)

The "they" and "them" representing the people in Sula are described as dead, blind, and violent in the words they direct toward the wayward community member. (16, 120) Sula's people, like Janie's, are characterized as having no time to think. (16, 6) The descriptive modes employed in narrating the returns contrast sharply the communities' death and violence with Janie's and Sula's vibrancy and characteristic complete absence of malice.

The descriptive narrations of the returns allude to a polarity between the aspirations and desires of the self-determined individual vs. the conformist establishment. This polarity finds explicit articulation in the narrated conversations held between the central characters and their lifelong closest friends.

One conversation reveals that the form of life traditionally aspired to nearly kills Janie (9, 128) whereas, Phoebe Watson, her closest friend, sees that mode of life as heaven. (9, 172) While Janie ventures out into the big world and acknowledges afterwards, "Yessuh! De Grand Lodge, de big convention of livin' is just where Ah been dis year and a half y'all ain't seen me." (9, 18)---Phoebe has stayed put alongside her husband. Janie ultimately reflects, "Ah done been tuh de horizon and back and now Ah kin set heah in mah house and live by comparisons." (9, 284)

Nel Wright correspondingly represents, in shared discussions with Sula, Sula's perfect opposite. Whereas Sula's hell is its lasting forever, Nel's hell is change. (16,

108) Hence life which is essentially rooted in change is rejected by Nel and embraced by Sula. (16, 120) Upon Sula's return after ten years absence (16, 85) Nel's neglected curiosity erupts with the question, "'Tell me about it. The big city.'" (16, 99) Yet in the end Sula backs herself into a trap of infinite recursion, for she finds herself repeating, "There aren't any more new songs and I have sung all the ones there are. I have sung them all. I have sung all the songs there are." (16, 137) Having exhausted all available alternatives, Sula takes ill and dies.

Hence the texts of Their Eyes and Sula describe the contradiction that emerges between any self-affirming individual and their community as inevitable and irreconcilable. The antipodal relations of Janie and Sula to their closest and oldest friends epitomize that contradiction, and set in relief the fundamental dilemma confronting us all.

Dangers hazard both alternatives. The reality of life's transformation into mere existence unavoidably awaits the conformist. Janie and Sula illustrate the limits reachable by a self-affirming individual who restricts their experimentation to experiential life: one exhausts the performable possibilities and then retreats from life into various shades of death. The protagonists of Their Eyes and Sula portray the nascent stirrings of artists---yet, as Sula ventures to explicitly state artists---"with no art form." (16, 121)

As artists with no art form neither, in the final analy-

sis, is able to survive. Both trust in their lovers to attain and sustain life, and thus life employs their loves to betray them both. Therein lies the tragedy of the novels. The standing challenge to their readers all remains: to forge oneself in an ongoing process of composed realization; to be an artist-composer with a medium, an art form. Composition alone bears witness to the radical proposal at the heart of these works.

CHAPTER IV

AN AESTHETIC THEORY: THE ARTIST/SELF AS SOCIAL CRITIC

My researches in history and investigations in literature conspire to link the process of generating distinctions to resistance, and to the possibility of a self in opposition. I want to describe the process of art production as a response to an artist's perception of a gap, something missing, a need unanswered. Artistic production, thus, brings into being what is not and, more importantly, what would not be without the artist. While giving form to a longing for something else, for a product of the imagination, for a lie---art play a vital role in the process of self formulation. Provoked by an irritation with that which is, the artist's work of art explores experimental premises and utopian alternatives. Thus emerges the transformational function of art. Art functions as a threshold from the undesirable reality into the desired.

Art productions function as statements challenging that which is...in their proposal of what is not yet. Schooled and trained in a linguistically and sensually transmitted aesthetic and ideology, a witness to an art work will perceive it as a challenge to both their concept of art and the world that generates that concept. An art production distinguishes

itself as a system in opposition to the system which it denies and which in turn denies it. Insofar as one engages in resistance, an artist/self emerges. Thus between the work of art and the status quo the witness of both hears the artist's yearnings for something else. I describe artists as social critics. Their work exposes and subverts current reality's assumptions. Works of art offer a new logic or vision, possibilities of another world.

Between Eros and Thanatos:
the Art of Toni Morrison

In Sula (1973), Song of Solomon (1977), and Beloved (1987), Morrison conjures from the language realities against which contemporary society falls painfully short. In the midst of these compositions listeners hear a recurrent calling to a life in art. Her statement---relentless, uncompromising, radical---demands response. The following pages are that---a response to a discourse traced in and between the lines of her aforementioned novels.

Where the discourse is taken up is itself arbitrary the point being: contemporary society and any who adopt its premises, is warped. The warping can be observed in a variety of institutions. The institutions Morrison consistently criticizes include: the economic order, the nuclear family, and social mores. Though Toni Morrison claims in a interview that she "has never intended to try to solve social problems," she concedes that her fiction examines and clarifies them."

The clarifying voice of social criticism finds expression in Morrison's many and various characters. Guitar, in Song, gives a telling analytical commentary of the economic order to which he is bound. As he attempts to explain to his closest friend, Milkman, the motivational sources of lynching he identifies, as an aside, the motivational source of the majority of whites' actions: "'profit...is why they do most things.'" (15, 157) Guitar believes that the white race does what it does, by and large, for the sake of profit. He locates the maximization of profit---the first commandment of laissez faire free market economics---at the heart of the white race. Son of a man butchered in a sawmill while working in conditions unfit for any human, Guitar learns early the costs of a profit maximizing America. And for blacks having ambitions of a capitalistic nature Guitar's grandma forewarns: "'[a] nigger in business is a terrible thing to see. A terrible, terrible thing to see.'" (15, 22) Yet, Guitar notes, even among the white race some drone of its diseased core. Guitar states, "'Their writers and artists have been saying it for years.'" (15, 158)

Morrison's social criticism goes beyond an indictment of the capitalist economic system. In Song she examines, as well, the nuclear family structure of the American middle-class and finds it painfully wanting. Milkman, the novel's central character, is born into a black upper middle class household. As an entrepreneuring young black youth his father, Macon Dead, traveled the road from rags to riches. In

the process, as his name suggests, Macon Dead forsook all that was living in his being---turning, inevitably, into the nigger in business so terrible to see. The household Macon constructs upon a marriage of convenience ranks among the most joyless ever portrayed. When at the age of twelve Macon's son, Milkman, visits the home of his father's sister, Pilate, against his father's explicit instructions, the descriptions of Milkman's experience expose the aridness of his own home. Milkman felt---in the presence of his aunt, her daughter, and her granddaughter---"[m]ore alive than he'd ever been" (15, 44) and "it was the first time in his life that he remembered being completely happy." (15, 47) Contrary to his own household, which includes his mother and two elder sisters, the women of Pilate's home "laughed out loud." (15, 47) And in subsequent pages we discover that among the regular occurrences of Milkman's home are beatings his mother receives at the hands of his father. (15, 63) Throughout Song the emergent portrait of the nuclear family is of an institution racked by hatred, violence, frustration, resentment, and poisonous recriminations.

Well, one might argue, even if the nuclear family results hopeless, refuge might yet be found in the wholesome values of society at large. But the voices of Sula, Song, and Beloved contrive to spell out the futility of that possibility. In these three novels social mores come under close scrutiny and they, too, are found short. Assumptions underlying meritocratic paradigms, assumptions regarding guilt as

individual, traditional lifestyles, traditional conceptions of the self and others---all come under attack.

The attacks come unannounced, discreetly and in quiet moments. While engaged in the not infrequent solitary activity of talking to himself, Milkman, in Song, stumbles upon one of his habitual phrases and stops to notice and reject. "He didn't deserve...It sounded old. Deserve. Old and tired and beaten to death. Deserve." (15, 279-80) Such passages create a space for the consideration of alternatives. As Milkman stops to notice so the reader is forced to notice the welter of social mores lodged in the vehicle of language. For social meritocratic orderings certainly do dictate a category of deserved beings set off from the undeserved. And according to such orderings the meeting of a human being's needs follows their having met specified conditions qualifying them as deserved.

Thus the language lays the groundwork for the justification of communally sanctioned ostracism and the denial of the satisfaction of human needs. The community of Sula, in Sula, and Sethe, in Beloved, regard responsibility and guilt as being conditions individually shouldered. Both communities conveniently identify the locus of evil in these two lone women figures and, consequently, they exorcise evil from their midst by scapegoating and marginalizing both. In their respective communities Sula and Sethe epitomize evil. As individuals they do not conform to the qualifying requisites of the deserving and according to meritocratic orderings they

ought both be eliminated. Far from constituting a transgression of social mores, the condemnation and elimination of Sula and Sethe consecrates that social code in a baptism of their human blood. For, ultimately, the chances of survival outside society are slim indeed; and Sula's and Sethe's banishments signal a communal willing of their deaths.

Sula and Beloved present narrative perspectives from the respective angles of Sula and Sethe. Both are central characters who are socially marginalized and both receive sympathetic and attractive narrational treatments. Yet their communities shun them labeling them unfit for social interaction, Sula because she refuses to marry or want to, and Sethe, allegedly, for having chosen to slay her children rather than see them re-enslaved. The compassionate renditions, Sula and Beloved give of their central characters, lead readers to question a social order that regards guilt as individual and thereby disciplines and punishes.

adopt some aspects of Sula's world view. Nel wonders whether the deweys, dead since twenty-four years prior, "had gone off and seeded the land and grewed up in these young people" she noticed about her. (16, 163) The deweys, indistinguishable in name, had consequently become equally indistinguishable by sight. Nel's musing implies both the living death and cloning of her community's young generation.

Song makes a similar deadly assessment of traditional lifestyles. Milkman's mother, Ruth Foster, typifies the fate of a woman who opts for the "safe," conventional, path. Milkman at one point looks on her as one of the unhappiest women in the world. (15, 104) And in a poignant, fantastic, and unforgettable tale Milkman describes how he watches his mother suffocate under tulips while she is engaged in the seemingly innocuous activity of tending to them. (15, 105) The image finds its twin in an old folk verse oft repeated in the course of Song. In the tune Ryna, a slave woman on a cotton plantation and a mother of twenty-one sons, pleads with her fleeing husband Solomon: "O Solomon don't leave me here/ Cotton balls to choke me/ O Solomon don't leave me here/ Buckra's arms to yoke me." (15, 307) Choked and yoked among the fields of cotton Ryna, who turns out to be Milkman's great grandmother, plummets into the comforting refuge of madness. At least one hundred years distance Ryna from Ruth, Milkman's mother, and yet the inhuman conditions that characterize their quotidian existence remain.

Deathlike existences also circumscribe the lives of

Sethe's community. Within the floating imageries and clauses of Beloved's poetic pool one can link the mark of death to the townsfolk. Among the textual meditations transmitted by Sethe's resurrected daughter, Beloved, one reads of: "the little hill of dead people" and "those able to die...[being] in a pile." (13, 211) When, at the novel's end, women of Sethe's town group together and approach her home they are described in similar language. The townswomen are "the pile of people...[who] make a hill...[a] hill of black people, falling." (13, 262) Like Sula and Song, Beloved's texts make unmistakably allusive parallels between the townspeople and death-images. Conventional or traditional lifestyles in Morrison's novels consistently forebode barren fates.

The question arises as to how individuals become enmeshed in their conformist trappings. Song relates an answer to that question to traditional conceptions of self and others. Throughout the novel flight symbolizes the fantastic, the mythical, the once forsaken dream, as well as, a route of escape. And, in a discussion between Milkman and his friend Guitar, we learn from Guitar why a peacock can't fly: "'Too much tail. All that jewelry weighs it down. Like vanity. Can't nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down.'" (15, 179-80) The vain self-concept---wanting to maintain prescribed appearances at all cost---prohibits flight. Social pressure makes its claims on the individual, and the individual, out of a sense of vanity, most often abides by its coercive tenets.

One character who refuses to abide in Song is Pilate. And the night she shuffles into a police station playing an Aunt Jemima song and dance for the cops so as to gain the release of Milkman, her nephew, and his friend Guitar, Pilate flies away unscathed by her performance taking Milkman and Guitar with her. On the other hand Guitar---an indoctrinated member of a militant black secret society---can only look at Pilate playing Aunt Jemima with "jeweled hatred in his eyes." (15, 211) Guitar's "jeweled" hatred references back to the weighty vanity that obstructed the peacock's flight. In the process of committing himself to a society's membership Guitar necessarily dons its ironclad and gilded precepts.

Commitment to any society's membership entails submission to prescribed orders. The familial social context is no exception. When Milkman confides that his family and lover provoke in him an acute and unbearable sense of entrapment Guitar rejoins:

"They [everybody] want your life, man.

 they want your living life.

 It's the condition our condition is in.

 And black women, they want your whole self.

 They want your full attention." 15, 224

Guitar maintains that society lays claim to our individual lives. And, in the above discussion, he even goes so far as to state that it is not unusual for love relations to impose demands so complete that they prohibit the possibility of music; they prohibit the possibility of art.

By and large, the social order depicted in Morrison's novels amply substantiates in real terms the warranted basis of paranoid neuroses. Material, social, and ideological realities conspire to enslave the individual and proscribe even the remotest possibility of freedom. The past, transmitted by custom and tradition, proves inviable. And the only promise born by the future is the individual's most certain death.

Toni Morrison's compositions never fail to situate death at stage center. While she prophesizes contemporary society's doom, Morrison takes it upon herself to remind the reader of their personal impending disaster. Try as we might to put our anxieties concerning death in the back of our minds, Morrison shuffles them back to the front. Sula, Song, and Beloved, consistently weave a theme of death throughout their pages and sound a death toll in their final chords.

Though undoubtedly a harbinger of death, Toni Morrison functions just as capably as an intimator of life. Sula, Song, and Beloved certainly compel readers to come face to face with both the ephemeral nature of their lives and the spectacle of squalor posed by a conventional existence, but this juxtaposition causes an engagement and disturbance of the reader which is precisely Morrison's authorial aim. (11, 18) She reasons that only by upsetting the "coolly objective viewing of fictional data....and mak[ing] one respond 'as an illiterate or preliterate reader would'" (11, 18-9) will space be made for the entry of imagination and fantasy. Typically

banished and confined to the realms of the literate and preliterate, imagination and fantasy hold out the only promise of hope for the individual and society. In the course of her novels one finds oneself looking to some of the most exquisite human images ever conjured by a pen. With these riveting images as mediators Morrison's novels whisper strategies for life and liberation.

This promise and these whispers can only be heard after having fully appreciated the paucity of alternatives posed by conventional society. Only after one finds oneself trapped between a rock and a hard place do childlike fantasies suddenly stir and begin their healing. In conditions of awakened fantasies there arises "a willingness to use that which dominant culture calls 'discredited knowledge,' discredited because those who know it are." (11, 37) Only now can one begin to hear Pilate's words to Ruth Foster, Milkman's mother. Ruth initiates:

"Nobody lives forever, Pilate."
 "Don't?"
 "Of course not."
 "Nobody?"
 "Of course, nobody."
 "I don't see why not."

 "You think people should live forever?"
 "Some people. Yeah."
 "Who's to decide? Which ones should live
 and which ones shouldn't?"
 "The people themselves." 15, 140

Like Ruth Foster looks to Pilate, other folks look to Milkman, Pilate's nephew and protege, for "[s]ome word from him that would rekindle the dream and stop the death they were dying."

(15, 238)

Morrison's words in Sula, Song, and Beloved, generate a context wherein the knowledge born by Morrison's central characters sounds and enlightens prophetically. Her characters amply qualify as beings typically discredited by dominant culture. Often times they live "on the edge of or outside the limits of the community" (11, 25); they live within an extended family structure; they exist outside the economic order. Morrison's marginalized figures, nonetheless, emerge heroic---the sacred tabernacles of the, all too elusive, flame of life.

Eva Peace and Sula in Sula, Pilate and Reba in Song, Baby Suggs and Sethe in Beloved---to mention just a few---all seem to exist outside or at the edge of the capitalist economic order. One can safely say that the idea of maximizing profit has never entered their minds. They simply have no interest in such thoughts. Their concerns are elsewhere and of a nurturing sort. As Milkman learns to walk in the ways of Pilate he, too, finds himself eminently capable yet completely uninterested in the affairs of capital, business, and property. (15, 107-8) Were he to pass his life tending to such matters "he'd lose his mind." (15, 107) The capitalist ambition has no "exotic" attraction for Milkman. (15, 108, 304) And the capitalist economic order is of no consequence to those multifarious characters in Morrison's novels who have no stake in it.

What are of consequence to Morrison's personages are

human relationships. Pilate "gave up, apparently, all interest in table manners or hygiene, but acquired a deep concern for and about human relationships." (15, 150) Distinctively human relationships develop between members of extended, and usually three generation, households. Extended families exist in all three of Morrison's novels.

In Sula Eva Peace, Sula's grandmother, lives with her daughter, Hannah, her granddaughter, Sula, and three children, the deweys, who Eva had on separate occasions drawn off the street and into her household. Nel, too, found refuge in Eva's house. For, in contrast to her own household where she lived as an only child with a mother who had succeeded in driving her daughter's imagination underground, (16, 18) Nel finds in Eva's home an ambience affording Nel the space to dream. (16, 29) In Song Milkman's escape to his aunt Pilate's home is born of yearnings resembling Nel's. In Beloved the golden days of Sethe's dwelling remain those wherein it was occupied by a three-generation household including: grandmother, Baby Suggs, her daughter-in-law, Sethe, and three grandchildren. Sula, Song, and Beloved present the extended family---a deviant structure by dominant cultural standards---as a promising locus for the nurturing of life; Morrison's stunningly beautiful characters, her testimonies to the possibilities of life, flower only in the midst of the extended family.

Morrison's central characters' rejections of dominant cultural institutions do not stop with the economic order and

the nuclear family structure. Characters like Sethe, Pilate, and Sula living on the edge or outside society consistently embrace other social mores: they repudiate society's meritocratic assumptions; they hold guilt to be communal; they choose unconventional life courses; they often are devoid of egos.

These other values and meanings appear as asides in the dialogues found in Sula, Song, and Beloved. When Paul D., Sethe's lover, pressures Sethe to turn out a young homeless woman Sethe retorts: "'Well, feel this, why don't you? Feel how it feels to have a bed to sleep in and somebody there not worrying you to death about what you got to do each day to deserve it.'" (13, 67-7) Far from maintaining the traditional meritocratic ideology---wherein people must earn their keep---Sethe upholds another. She sustains that human needs ought to be unconditionally satisfied. A premise such as Sethe's would generate a radically different social order.

Just as merit is not held as an individual attribute---since all are deserving---Morrison's novels do not retain guilt to be an individually shouldered condition either. Guilt is communal not individual. Sula recounts the drowning of a child by the name of Chicken Little. As a young girl Sula accidentally flings the child into drowning water and Nel witnesses the incident. Yet, Eva Peace holds Nel just as responsible for Chicken Little's death as she holds Sula who actually threw him. When Nel objects Eva responds, "'You. Sula. What's the difference? You was there. You

watched...'" (16, 168) Song reiterates the same perspective, but this time through the voice of Pilate. As a child, Pilate and her teen-age brother, Macon, had witnessed the murder of their father by covetous whites. On making their escape from the assassins they hid in a cave. There they encountered an old white man slumbering. Upon his waking Macon slew him. Macon slew the man out of a mixture of fear, hatred, and revenge and Pilate watched. As far as Pilate was concerned, however, she was as responsible for the killing as Macon. "The fact that she had struck no blow was irrelevant. She was part of her brother's act, because, then, she and he were one." (15, 148) Both Nel and Pilate bear the burden of crimes committed in their presence.

Even the apparently heinous crime of infanticide, allegedly committed by the escaped slave woman, Sethe, ultimately receives a communal indictment in Beloved. Sethe's neighbors could have prevented Sethe's and her children's recapture, yet out of spite and envy they refuse to send this mother warning. (13, 138,157)

Communal guilt has powerful implications for a reader. Viewing the spectacle of others' plights grants readers voyeuristic pleasures. Communal guilt removes the secret and safe vantage point from the voyeuristic audience. In the context of the novel this species of guilt indicts all participants in a crime, whether they be actors or spectators; in the context beyond the novel this sort of guilt, retroactively, indicts the readers' past roles in their

society's crimes.

The reader might ask: "What manner of humans are these who convey such heavy and disquieting messages?" How do they provide answers to the questions they raise? And if they find conventional lifestyles untenable, what forms do their lives take? In particular, who are: Sula, Pilate, Milkman, Sethe, and Baby Suggs?

The novel Sula suggests that Sula, at least, is an artist---an "artist with no art form." (16, 121) The narrating voice goes on to say:

[h]ad she paints, or clay, or knew the discipline of the dance, or strings; had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor, she might have exchanged the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her with all she yearned for. 16, 121

Instead of channeling her whims and yearnings, and alleviating her state of boredom, Sula dies leaving a corpse midway through a "giant yawn that she never got to finish." (16, 172)

Milkman, too, is a being exceedingly bored and preoccupied with whim. Consequently, he takes paths rarely traveled and eventually comes to the realization that "[n]obody was going his way." (15, 78,106) It is Pilate who "had told him stories, sung him songs." (15, 211) And it is upon Pilate's songs and stories that Milkman had been nurtured. They offered Milkman alternative life strategies denied by the surrounding dominant culture. The creative acts of storytelling and singing, in turn, answer Pilate's own needs. "To sing, which she did beautifully, relieved her

gloom immediately." (15, 148) As a singer and storyteller, Pilate regenerates her own life force.

The novel Beloved also acknowledges the life-generating, nurturing, power of the creative act of storytelling. It was "a way to feed...[,]storytelling," (13, 58) and Sethe, recurrently, indulged in it. Baby Suggs, on the other hand, made of her heart another form. She took on the calling of a preacher, for after slavery finished with her body, "she had nothing left to make a living with but her heart---which she put to work at once." (13, 87) Thereupon, Baby Suggs, told those who would listen "that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it." (13, 88) Imagination holds the key to whatever grace and beauty one might hope to attain.

Hence---Baby Suggs, Sethe, Pilate, Milkman, Sula---all depict artistic beings, be they preachers, storytellers, singers, or even, curious and whimsical, restless wanderers. As Morrison expounds in her autobiographical essay, "A Slow Walk of Trees (as Grandmother Would Say) Hopeless (as Grandfather Would Say)," artists, such as those rendered in her novels, "know who they are because they have invented themselves and know where they are going because they have envisioned it." (14, 164) They are their own makers and cannot be contained in the caskets embodied by traditional/conventional lifestyles.

Besides living unconventional lifestyles, upholding communal notions of guilt, and rejecting meritocratic

assumptions, Morrison's artistic spirits constitute social anomalies living outside society for, yet, another reason. They are devoid of egos.

Sula acquires the loss of her ego and assumes "an experimental life---ever since" two experiences: the first, in which she overhears her mother say that she loves but does not like her, and the second wherein Sula experiences the death of a human being, a child, at her hands. (16, 118) "The first experience taught her there was no other you could count on" if not your mother and "the second that there was no self to count on either" if you are to die. (16, 118-9) By way of both these experiences, and their accompanying implications, Sula emerges with "---no ego." (16, 119) Having no ego, Sula can afford to play out a life of experimentation; with no ego at stake, Sula has nothing left to lose.

For Milkman, in Song, the loss of ego occurs upon the culmination of a long and tortuous journey. The journey entails the progressive shedding of his external attributes. Near his journey's end Milkman finds himself "alone...[H]is self---the cocoon that was 'personality'---gave way....He was only his breath...and his thoughts. The rest of him had disappeared. So his thoughts came unobstructed..." (15, 280) Only after being relieved of his social mask, his personality, the weight of his ego, does Milkman experience the freedom of thoughts unobstructed. This state of liberation, new to Milkman, is one old and familiar to Pilate. Pilate, long ago, learned how to don "whatever would be useful to her," (15,

211) and to whomever she directed her wholehearted generosity. (15, 92) At the end of Song Milkman realizes that Pilate is a being able to fly, and that he, too, can fly once he "surrender[s] to the air" (15, 341)---once he gives up the incapacitating weights constituted by vanity and ego.

Beloved again treats the subject of persons devoid of ego. Both grandma Baby Suggs (13, 140) and Denver (13, 123), Sethe's daughter, are described as having "no self." Beloved, however, handles the subject from a slightly different angle emphasizing the component of pain involved in the ego's loss.

Great as the loss of ego appears the returns result even greater. Shedding one's limiting social mask constitutes the portal of fire by which one can overcome the enslaving social order. Once empowered with the liberating force so generated, the possibilities arise for the emergence of characters exhibiting the caliber of distinction displayed by Morrison's attractive images. Explicitly, Morrison's images illustrate directions one's life course can take once creative energies are released. Implicitly, they offer strategies for liberation.

The strategies for liberation repeatedly implied throughout Sula, Song, Beloved, entail the rejection of the past and the future, a forging of the present in the here and now, and the grounding of lives in: desire and pleasure-filled sensuality, imagination and fantasy, and art.

Sethe, in Beloved, is forever plagued with a haunting past. And her "brain was not interested in the future.

Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day." (13, 70) Sethe, ultimately, turns to Baby Suggs for some tender word of guidance and advice. For turn as she might to the past, the past only offered "news nobody could live with." (13, 95) And the future "was a matter of keeping the past at bay. The 'better life' she believed she...was living was simply not that other one." (13, 42) Milkman's struggles in Song mirror those of Sethe. "He just wanted to beat a path away from his parents' past, which was also their present and which was threatening to become his present as well." (15, 180-1)

Denver, daughter to Sethe and nurtured on Sethe's stories, was interested in the present alone. (13, 119) In "giving blood to the scraps her mother and grandmother had told her" Denver became equipped with material for generating her own compositions. (13, 78) Morrison engages in a similar process when she writes. She dismisses the past and appropriates its goods. For "names...loaded as they are with historical connotations---are inverted [in Morrison's work] and used in ways which are 'empty of traditional symbolic import.'" (11, 108) Morrison and her characters relentlessly struggle to defy the past in the forging of their present.

Rather than accept the hegemonic power claimed by the past in the vehicle of language, Morrison's people hark back to preliterate states---states where desire, imagination and fantasy freely reign. When partaking in song even the townswomen of Sethe's community ventured into preliterate

spheres and "took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound..." (13, 259)---a material sensual in nature, an object of desire. "The voices of the women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words" (13, 261) and would free the living from the impositions borne by language.

When Milkman in Song discovers at the age of four that only birds and airplanes can fly he becomes seriously impaired. Milkman's discovery deprives him of his imagination and causes him to lose all interest in himself. (15, 9) Thereupon, only a woman of Pilate's nature would save him. (15, 140) Milkman finally comes to locate the essence of life in the fantastic realm of the pre-linguistic. He determines that "it was not language; it was what was there before language" (15, 281) just as Nel, in Sula, determines at a moment at the limits of revelation, that "[t]hey were not dead people. They were words. Not even words. Wishes, longings." (16, 171) Wishes, longings, desire, sensuality, imagination, fantasy---comprise the raw material of art---the raw material of experimental life, of living life, of a distinct and distinguishable self.

Such is the only life apparently worth living by Morrison's standards. Although "she finds the whole process of putting pen to paper 'frightening, dangerous, and very, very hard'" (20, 104) Toni Morrison continues to heed the words of Pilate's father; she refuses to simply "'fly on off

and leave a body'" (15, 209)---hers or any other's. Morrison's prophetic urgings signal a relentless calling to lives in art. And for those like Toni Cade Bambara, who let themselves hear her, they find in Morrison one more "'inspiration to develop, to fly.'" (22, 56)

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