

And Make That Sound Sound Human:
The Role of Storytelling in the Novels of Toni Morrison

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Toni Morrison said in a 1983 interview that “classical music satisfies and closes....Jazz always keeps you on the edge. There is no final chord. There may be a long chord, but no final chord. And it agitates you” (qtd. in Brown 631). Agitation keeps the music alive, keeps the listener forever ‘on the edge’ in anticipation of that ‘final chord’ which never comes. An analogous agitation can also be seen in several of her novels, which resist playing a ‘final chord’ for the reader and establishing a fixed ending or clear meaning. Unlike the traditional Western model of storytelling, which ‘satisfies and closes’ much like Western classical music, these novels do not dictate to the reader but rather invite them in, engaging them in a process of storytelling that never truly ends, ‘keeping them on the edge’ into infinity. The agitation of the story apparently incomplete -- an agitation reinforced by this breaking from Western convention -- informs the storytelling process and ensures that the ‘long chords’ will keep on ringing, even after what might conventionally be considered the ‘end’ of the story.

This agitating refusal to play into traditional Western ideals of completion and closure allows Morrison to destabilize the Western dichotomy between storyteller and audience that firmly places the two in separate spaces. In doing so, she challenges this dichotomy’s implications for the role of stories in identity formation and explores interactive storytelling as a mechanism for creating, expressing, and changing individual and cultural identity and history. Although several critics have examined Morrison’s unique approach to the storytelling process and the challenge it poses to traditional Western conventions, few have analyzed how she confronts traditional ideas about the role of storytelling itself in society and the way it shapes the individual’s relationship with the community. In *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*, Morrison subverts traditional Western narrative structure and conventions to illustrate the

limitations and restrictive nature of absolute narrative authority. Her characters parallel this undermining of narrative authority in their own failed attempts to enclose their lives in traditional narratives and their subsequent attempts to defy or escape their restricted stories by writing new ones for themselves. Thus Morrison redefines storytelling as an interactive and continuous process that shapes the relationship between the individual and the community.

The novels do not provide traditional narrative closure, leaving questions and endings open to interpretation and continuation. Beloved's mysterious disappearance leaves her "disremembered and unaccounted for" (Morrison, *Beloved* 274), her status unknown to the other characters and outside the bounds of the narrative itself. At the same time, "she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her" (Morrison, *Beloved* 274). Beloved is a question left forever open that no one seeks to close, and that no one can close, for "they don't know her name" (Morrison, *Beloved* 274). She resists the closure a traditional narrative would bring her, and the narration itself defies the impulse to deliver that closure. She is perhaps reconfigured into the character Wild, a similarly elusive figure; after a long search Joe finally finds where she lives, "but where is *she*?" (Morrison, *Jazz* 184). The question remains unanswered, and Wild -- or Beloved, for the narrative never answers the question of her identity either -- remains out of reach. This textual interplay between the novels, which raises more questions than it resolves, casts doubt on the concept of closure as something that should or even can be achieved; it is, as critic Martha Cutter puts it, "a delusion, an impulse that must at all times and in all ways be deconstructed and undermined" (Cutter 62). Closure is impossible, and even were it possible it should not be sought, because closure means the death of the story; "to keep stories alive...they must go on and on" (Cutter 62). Closure, though perhaps an attractive 'impulse', must be denied

in order for the story to have a future instead of merely an ending. This is why Milkman's story is also left open and the result of his flight towards Guitar remains unknown -- as the text itself points out, "it [does] not matter" (Morrison, *Song* 341) what happens or who dies. The answers are not important; the questions are. Attempts to close them are thus not only futile but contrary to the nature and purpose of storytelling.

Not only are questions left unanswered, but unreliable narration undermines the credibility of the narrative itself and any answers it has given. Even Morrison's seemingly omniscient, objective narrators do not have all the answers, or else cannot or will not reveal those answers. Over the course of *Paradise*, the narration reveals that there are five women living in the Convent, and yet on the very first page the narrator claims that the nine men who come to raid the Convent are "twice the number" (Morrison, *Paradise* 3) of the women in it. This is not merely an arithmetic error on Morrison's part; as critic Catherine Rainwater argues, Morrison positions her narrators as "the locus of various kinds of uncertainty" (Rainwater 96) that destabilize the absolute authority that traditional narratives are founded on. In *Jazz* more than any other novel it becomes clear that this uncertainty is not merely an element but rather "a subject of her fiction" (Rainwater 96), as *Jazz*'s narrator is her most explicitly unreliable one, even admitting to being "careless" (Morrison, *Jazz* 160) and "unreliable" (Morrison, *Jazz* 160). The narrator of *Jazz* further undermines their credibility by exposing their own process of creation as one of "break[ing] lives to prove [they] can mend them back again" (Morrison, *Jazz* 219). They play with their characters' lives for their own gain instead of merely telling their stories, thus calling into question their credibility as narrator -- a question that they themselves pose, as they admit to "feeling a bit false" (Morrison, *Jazz* 219) about their "aching words that

set, then miss, the mark” (Morrison, *Jazz* 219). The narrator cannot capture the truth of the story, even though it is a truth that they have wholly fabricated; their conviction of their own omnipotence in the world they have created is, ironically, what makes them unreliable in their telling of it, and what exposes “how little [they] could be counted on...when [they] invented stories” (Morrison, *Jazz* 220). The instability of the narrative voice thus proves the danger inherent in trusting traditional sources of narrative authority, as well as the impossibility of reliable narration itself.

Narrative authority is further called into question by repetition that reveals the existence of multiple versions of the same text. The opening scene of *Paradise* portrays the raid on the Convent as a justified attack on “the devil’s bedroom, bathroom, and his nasty playpen” (Morrison, *Paradise* 17) by men who have “God at their side” (Morrison, *Paradise* 18). The scene later repeats itself, and is condemned as a “devour[ing]” (Morrison, *Paradise* 292) of the “blessed and clean...mission” (Morrison, *Paradise* 292) that the town represents. The initial version of the text, which exonerates the raiders’ behavior by framing it as a noble religious crusade, is revised to portray the raid as an apocalyptic corruption of religious ideals. This complicates the storytelling process by undermining previous tellings until history becomes, as critic Linda Krumholz says, “a densely layered palimpsest, a history simultaneously hidden and revealed” (Krumholz 29). Each new telling both further reveals and further obscures the truth by simultaneously elaborating on and undermining previous versions of the scene. Ultimately no true authorial version can be found, as the story is continually revised even as it is being written until the “original is...irretrievable” (Krumholz 29). Like the ‘true’ story of the Convent, original versions of texts cannot be recovered in *Song of Solomon* or *Beloved*. The song lyric “Sugarman

don't leave me here" (Morrison, *Song* 49), later replaced by "Solomon don't leave me here" (Morrison, *Song* 305) and finally "Sugargirl don't leave me here" (Morrison, *Song* 340), and the spoken refrain "Beloved, she my daughter. She mine" (Morrison, *Beloved* 200) and its revisions "She's mine, Beloved. She's mine" (Morrison, *Beloved* 209) and "I am Beloved and she is mine" (Morrison, *Beloved* 210) emphasize the absence of any single correct authorial version. These variations on a theme would seem to follow from an original version, but said original is never found, if it ever existed at all; only the possibilities offered by its many revisions remain. As texts fracture into multiple revisions with no clear authoritative version, narrative authority loses its credibility as every version of every text must be questioned.

These multiple versions and interpretations are all validated as possibilities, and multiplicity of interpretation itself is valued over any singular narrative authority. The conflict over the motto on the Oven embodies the struggle between multiple versions of a text for absolute authority, but as Dovey points out, there can be no singular authorial interpretation of the motto, for "specifying it, particularizing it, nailing its meaning down, [is] futile" (Morrison, *Paradise* 93). The motto hovers in a state of multiple meanings, offering infinite possibilities for interpretation; trying to close the question of its meaning with a narrow, definite answer misses the point entirely. An absolute rigidity of interpretation is unnecessary and counterproductive; after all, according to Dovey, "the only nailing needing to be done had already taken place. On the Cross" (Morrison, *Paradise* 93). Interestingly, this singular point of fixed meaning is itself opened up to multiplicity of interpretation, as the major crucifix in the book is "uncluttered" (Morrison, *Paradise* 143) and "unencumbered" (Morrison, *Paradise* 143) as "no writhe or swoon of the body of Christ bloat[s] its lyric thunder" (Morrison, *Paradise* 143). This cross lacks the

literal image of crucifixion -- the 'nailing' of Christ -- and thus lacks the symbolic 'nailing' as well, the nailing down of meaning. The cross is left open and un-nailed, 'uncluttered' by fixed meaning and thus free to be interpreted; the cross becomes, as Krumholz puts it, "a symbol of doubleness, of human and divine love, of multiplicity and movement rather than purity and singularity" (Krumholz 26). Instead of assigning a meaning to the cross, Morrison makes it a symbol of multiplicity itself, and thus opens it and her narrative up to multiple interpretations rather than claiming overarching singular authority. Multiple versions of stories and histories also proliferate in *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*. *Beloved*'s ontological nature, which is never made clear, is further complicated by her description of her past life, which could read as a description of death or the Middle Passage or both (Morrison, *Beloved* 75). Similarly, Macon Dead's claim that Ruth Foster was in an incestuous relationship with her father (Morrison, *Song* 73) is later contradicted by Ruth herself, who accuses Macon of trying to kill her father (Morrison, *Song* 126), and neither version is resolved as true or false, instead left open to interpretation. These stories complicate other characters' understanding of interpretation; Denver says she sometimes thinks *Beloved* was her sister and "at times...think[s] she was--more" (Morrison, *Beloved* 266), while Milkman loses "clarity" (Morrison, *Song* 80) after hearing Macon's story and "question[s] everybody" (Morrison, *Song* 79). Characters' understanding of meaning as a singular, fixed thing falls apart, as no single version of an event or character seems to fully capture its nature or its truth. The lack of confirmation or denial of any of the many versions and interpretations of texts serves not to validate the interpretations themselves, but rather the multiplicity of interpretation itself.

Morrison's validation of multiplicity and implicit rejection of absolute, fixed authority is echoed by her characters' journeys through their own stories. They are trapped in limiting narratives, either by their own design to organize their lives or by the narrative itself and its drive to restrict them to their fixed roles and paths. They, like Morrison, must re-imagine the story as an open and fluid text with no absolute authority before they can break out of it and reclaim true ownership over their own stories.

Characters reframe their lives as traditional, even archetypal, narratives in order to create structure, but this structure begets myopia. Milkman and Joe both reimagine themselves as Biblical heroes, with Milkman seeing himself as "the Risen Son" (Morrison, *Song* 186) and Joe telling his lover she is "the reason Adam ate the apple and its core" (Morrison, *Jazz* 133) and fantasizing about "strut[ting] out the Garden" (Morrison, *Jazz* 134). They attempt to organize and glorify their lives by turning them into mythic tales that promise redemption and love. But these stories trap them, as Milkman becomes obsessed with his imagined narrative of the 'son' who must 'rise' above his father, while Joe's Eden-inspired love story consumes him until he sees no choice but to kill his lover. Their attempts, as critic Theodore Mason says, to "mediate the opposites of fluidity and rigidity by means of the story" (Mason 569) ultimately fail because the stories they create for themselves are too restricting for "a 'universe' characterized by extreme fluidity" (Mason 569). Their efforts to structure chaos by framing their lives as traditional narratives in a world that inherently resists such narrative organization only confines them in the end; their stories are too 'rigid', and thus they themselves become rigid and myopic in their fulfillment of them, trapped in their stories and unable to see outside of them. The Convent women also attempt to organize their lives into stories by drawing templates of

themselves on the floor and marking them up with exaggerated physical features and representations of personal effects; although this serves a therapeutic purpose, it also threatens to consume them, as they “had to be reminded of the moving bodies they wore, so seductive were the alive ones below” (Morrison, *Paradise* 265). By projecting their own narrative trappings onto what are essentially fictional versions of themselves, the Convent women can escape from the chaos of their real lives and create some structure for them. But these stories provide too much comforting structure, so much so that they become ‘seductive’ and seem more ‘alive’ than the actual women, who now see their bodies as something they ‘wear’. They lose themselves in their templates until they cannot see any other story except the ones they have written for themselves. The narrative organization they apply to their lives appears to free them and shape the world into something that makes sense, but in reality it traps them in a restrictive story and holds them there.

Characters rewrite history as a story that fits with their view of the world, but this limits them to a restricted view of history and of themselves. The Christmas pageant in the town of Ruby is a Biblical story serving as a thinly-veiled metaphor for an event in the town’s history, but “the holy families get fewer and fewer” (Morrison, *Paradise* 215) as the influential men in the town deem certain families “not good enough to be represented by eight-year-olds on a stage” (Morrison, *Paradise* 216). The men in power have total narrative control over the history of Ruby, using the story to glorify their ancestors and writing out people who no longer fit within the bounds of the narrative. The ‘eight-year-olds on a stage’ represent the only version of Ruby’s history permitted to exist, and thus everyone excluded from the pageant is shut out from the story. The men of Ruby, as Patricia Storage writes, “claim the perpetual overarching authority of

the creator at the moment of creation” (qtd. in Page 644), refusing to accept other histories and thus trapping both Ruby and themselves in their own story. By exercising sole narrative authority, they, as Storace argues, “stop the life of their work at the moment of writing” (qtd. in Page 644); history becomes fixed and immovable, and thus they cannot see outside their story to other possibilities of the past or the present. Similarly, Sethe closes herself in a new version of history when she convinces herself Beloved is “a body returned to her--just like it never went away, never needed a headstone” (Morrison, *Beloved* 198). Even as she tells herself the story of the ‘body returned’, she rewrites and reshapes it to fit in with a new, better history, one in which Beloved’s heart “had not for a single moment stopped in her hands” (Morrison, *Beloved* 198). Her version of history, which she comes to accept as the absolute, authorial version, prevents her from coping with her trauma and guilt by confining her to a single story in which no trauma or guilt exists. Her historical revision simultaneously validates her worldview and narrows it until she cannot escape from it. By rewriting history as closed stories with singular versions, characters attempt to fit the rest of the world into the stories they have written for themselves, but ultimately this only draws them further into their own narrative confinement.

Sometimes, however, Morrison’s characters escape from the closed, fixed narratives they tried to impose upon their own lives, allowing them to live more open stories. First Corinthians becomes trapped in a story of her own making that prizes her literacy and education above all, but this story starts to suffocate her, coming to represent “a smothering death” (Morrison, *Song* 200). She only breaks out of it when she runs to her lower-class lover’s car and begins banging on the window, desperate to “escape the velvet” (Morrison, *Song* 199) that represents both her economic status and the death that a story revolving around it ultimately brings. Although she

believes her literacy and status make her “pure” (Morrison, *Song* 199) and give her power, it is only after she breaks out of this, as critic Joyce Middleton puts it, “mask of abstraction” (Middleton 72) in her emotional, ‘impure’ display of love for a man of lower status that she can truly “assume ownership of her own language” (Middleton 72). Ironically, it is her language-obsessed story that prevents her from exerting agency over her ‘own language’, and therefore over her own story and her own life, just as Patricia Best’s obsession with documentation and written history prevents her from engaging with the world and controlling her own life until she finally “burn[s] the papers” (Morrison, *Paradise* 217). By ridding herself of the papers that both literally and metaphorically represent fixed, restrictive interpretations of stories and histories, Patricia destroys the narrative trappings that bind her in an obsession with the written word and thus frees herself to experience a new story, with less structure but more room for interpretation. Violet also comes to understand the importance of interpretation in breaking out of a closed narrative. When Felice questions her nostalgia for the country as opposed to the City she lives in now -- which acts as a restricting narrative force throughout the novel -- since in the country there are only trees to look at, Violet tells her to go look at a tree and determine if it is “a man or a woman or a child” (Morrison, *Jazz* 208), telling her she has to “make [the world] up the way [she] want[s] it” (Morrison, *Jazz* 208). By moving to the City, Violet has trapped herself in a fixed narrative pattern, but by making her own stories and interpretations out of the City’s fixtures, she can give herself some freedom from the story that now constrains her. She re-imagines the story’s trappings and, in doing so, frees herself from the closed singular narrative and turns it into “something more than what it is” (Morrison, *Jazz* 208).

By breaking out of the restrictive stories characters have locked themselves in, they may reclaim agency over their lives and open themselves up to new possibilities.

Characters defy not only the stories they have written but the path that the narrative itself has laid out for them by making unexpected choices that allow them to write new endings. The narrator initially insists that Joe and the other characters are “bound to the track” (Morrison, *Jazz* 120) of the narrative, which “pulls [them] like a needle through the groove of a Bluebird record” (Morrison, *Jazz* 120). In the narrator’s view, the characters are trapped in a narrative cycle of violence that “spins” (Morrison, *Jazz* 120) them around, forcing them to repeat the past and refusing to let them break out. But in the end, Joe, Violet, and Felice surprise the narrator by breaking out of the violent cycle and instead forming a supportive relationship. Even though the narrator is “so sure...that the past [is] an abused record with no choice but to repeat itself at the crack” (Morrison, *Jazz* 220), the characters still manage not to replay the pattern, thus defying not only the paths they have set but the narrative path itself, “danc[ing] and walk[ing] all over” (Morrison, *Jazz* 220) the narrator’s expectations of them. Sethe similarly manages to free herself from a narrative loop that seems bound to repeat itself. When a white man approaches her house, mirroring the circumstances of her earlier killing of Beloved, the narration echoes the earlier scene as well, as both times Sethe hears “wings” (Morrison, *Beloved* 163, 262) of “little hummingbirds” (Morrison, *Beloved* 163, 262) sticking their “needle beaks right through her headcloth and into her hair” (Morrison, *Beloved* 163, 262). Despite this repetition of the narration, which suggests that the cycle will repeat and the hummingbird wings will “beat on” (Morrison, *Beloved* 163) as they did after Beloved’s death, Sethe manages to free herself from the loop by targeting the white man she perceives as a threat to Beloved instead of Beloved

herself. She writes a new ending to her story, stopping the cycle and silencing the hummingbird wings at last. As critic Caroline Brown argues, these characters' "ever-evolving actions confound and foil the narrator's attempts to contain" (Brown 637) them. The characters defy the narrative's circular intent and thus take the authorial power away from the narrator and claim it for themselves, "seiz[ing] the word" (Brown 637) and their own lives in the process. As characters break out of their cycles, the narrative loses control over them and they become the architects of their own endings.

With characters now participating in the storytelling process, the idea of authorship grows to encompass more than merely the storyteller. Morrison continues to shift the dynamic between storyteller, audience, and character by extending the responsibility of authorship to the audience as well. This shared process creates and is driven by love -- for the self, for others, and for the story.

The process of creation is an act of love for both creation and creator. Both Piedade and the narrator of *Jazz* understand creation as an expression of love, as the narrator of *Jazz* claims to "have loved only you" (Morrison, *Jazz* 229), where the 'you' remains ambiguous -- perhaps the audience, perhaps the story itself -- and Piedade's musical storytelling of "memories neither [she nor Consolata] has ever had" (Morrison, *Paradise* 318) expresses feelings of "coming back to love begun" (Morrison, *Paradise* 318). Piedade and *Jazz*'s narrator create out of love -- for others, for the audience, for the very act of creation -- and use the act of creation to express this love. This love can only be properly expressed via the story; it is the only medium through which *Jazz*'s narrator may express the love they have "longed, aw longed to show" (Morrison, *Jazz* 229), and "there is nothing to beat" (Morrison, *Paradise* 318) the "solace" (Morrison, *Paradise*

318) found in Piedade's storytelling song. Creators further use love to shape the stories they write; the love *Jazz's* narrator has for Golden Gray drives them to "alter things" (Morrison, *Jazz* 161) through their storytelling. They tell his story so that they may "contemplate his pain and by doing so ease it, diminish it" (Morrison, *Jazz* 161), and so that they may "be the language that wishes him well" (Morrison, *Jazz* 161). Their love for their own character fuels the creative and narrative process and drives them to change the story and use the language of the story itself to make things better for him. Creation is thus an endeavor of love for *Jazz's* narrator, and in their hands this love has the power to, as Brown says, "propel the individual, whether character or reader, beyond the limits of the self" (Brown 640). Love's power to open up the individual to ideas heretofore unknown thus explains the equally transcendental power of storytelling. To create a story is, therefore, to create a space for love and the transcendence it brings, and to use that love to further the creative process.

This process of creation is an interactive one, shared between the storyteller, the characters, and the audience. Morrison ends her novels with a somewhat ironic call for continuation and interaction with audience, storyteller, and story, warning the audience of the dangers of "ma[king] up...tales, shap[ing] and decorat[ing] them" (Morrison, *Beloved* 274) only to "quickly and deliberately forg[e]t" (Morrison, *Beloved* 274) them. The power and thus responsibility of keeping the story alive rests not just in the storyteller but in the audience as well, the audience whom *Jazz's* narrator begs to "make" (Morrison, *Jazz* 229) and "remake" (Morrison, *Jazz* 229) the story and whom *Beloved's* narrator cautions that the novel "is not a story to pass on" (Morrison, *Beloved* 275). Morrison's narrators task their audiences to become active participants in the process of creation, to not 'deliberately forget' or merely 'pass on' the

stories but to ‘make’ them and ‘remake’ them. After all, as *Jazz*’s narrator implores the reader, “look where your hands are” (Morrison, *Jazz* 229); they are on the cusp of creation, ready to continue the storytelling process and keep the story alive. As critic Philip Page argues, Morrison’s call to the audience “opens rather than closes” (Page 648) the storytelling process, changing the traditional Western dynamic between storyteller and audience to make storytelling an endless collaboration instead of a finite, one-sided creation. Just as in the ending of *Paradise*, all those involved in the story -- the storyteller, the characters, and the audience -- must come together to do “the endless work they were created to do down here in Paradise” (Morrison, *Paradise* 318). Morrison figures Paradise as a space of continuous creative collaboration -- an analogue for the story itself, and a re-imagining of a place traditionally portrayed as closed and artificially complete. To achieve Paradise in storytelling, Morrison suggests, dialogue must be initiated and an interactive process of creation must take place, to keep the story going and to keep it forever open and alive.

This shared storytelling serves as an exorcism of trauma via the process of sharing itself. As Paul D and the chain gang he belongs to perform their work, they sing of “the women they knew; the children they had been...of mules and dogs and the shamelessness of life...of graveyards and sisters long gone” (Morrison, *Beloved* 108). Their singing is a form of storytelling that helps them work through their trauma by allowing them to share the stories of their lives with themselves and with each other. Their musicalized storytelling resembles the blues, which is according to Ralph Ellison “an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive...to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it” (qtd. in Eckstein 275). Like the blues, their musical stories keep their traumas alive and allow them to live and relive

and share them and, by doing so, exorcise them. Their singing and re-singing of the stories of their lives allows them to work through their trauma, not by forgetting it or by deriving some moral lesson or structure from it, but, as Ellison puts it, by “squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism” (qtd. in Eckstein 275). Sharing this lyricism makes the trauma collective and therefore bearable. Similarly, Pilate and the Convent women seek to work through their pain by sharing it with others. Pilate talks to every attendee of her granddaughter’s funeral, “telling in three words the full story of the stumped life in the coffin behind her” (Morrison, *Song* 322-323), and eventually “trumpet[s] for the sky itself to hear” (Morrison, *Song* 323), and the Convent women engage in “loud dreaming” (Morrison, *Paradise* 264) in which they share “half-tales and the never-dreamed” (Morrison, *Paradise* 264) with each other. The simple act of shared storytelling helps characters reach catharsis. By sharing their pain and thus reliving the past in a way that leaves them “no longer haunted” (Morrison, *Paradise* 266), characters convert their individual trauma into collective memory. Storytelling allows this sharing and subsequent exorcism of trauma to occur, as it creates a shared space between storyteller and audience and enables the two to interact.

The connection built by shared trauma and the storytelling process builds empathy and community between the storyteller and the audience. Many characters in Morrison’s novels are self-centered because they have immersed themselves so deeply in their own personally constructed narratives that they fail to acknowledge other stories. But when these self-centered characters engage in the storytelling process, whether as audience or as storyteller, they recognize the stories of others and begin to build community. Milkman, one of the most self-obsessed characters in *Song of Solomon*, hears one story many times but “only half listen[s]

to” (Morrison, *Song* 233) it, until one storyteller forms a connection with him and he feels “a glow” (Morrison, *Song* 233) while listening. This newfound empathy for the stories of others empowers him to tell stories of his own that make his audience “c[o]me alive” (Morrison, *Song* 238). Milkman is able to participate in the storytelling process in multiple roles because his obsession with his own single story has been eroded by, as Mason puts it, “the power of the story properly considered” (Mason 576). The stories he has fully listened to and ‘considered’ have opened him up to other people and allowed him to form bonds with them that strengthen and further the storytelling process. Through the “historicity of comprehension” (Mason 576), he can listen to and tell stories that build community on a foundation of shared empathy. Similarly, the ‘loud dreaming’ that the Convent women participate in builds connections between them by forcing them to “step...into the dreamer’s tale” (Morrison, *Paradise* 264) and thus fully engage themselves in someone else’s story. Their storytelling allows them to understand one another and create a sense of community because they all must participate in the storytelling process and thus they all must ‘step into’ the story. They build bonds based on their ‘loud dreaming’, “in spite of or because their bodies ache” (Morrison, *Paradise* 264) and they can share that trauma through the interactive storytelling process and collectively engage in the formation of community that comes from it.

By building community and history, storytelling also forms the foundation for the creative process of identity construction. When the folksong game reveals the story of Milkman’s family to him, Milkman revels in his new knowledge because it means that he “can play it now. It’s [his] game now” (Morrison, *Song* 331). It is not just his game; rather, it is his story, one that he can use to shape his identity, which previously he had never truly had a sense

of. The story told in the folksong game helps him perceive himself as both a participant in that story and as an individual separate from it, allowing him to come to an understanding about himself and how he relates to history. Understanding his place in history gives him a sense of self tied to his community, and from that he can begin to ‘play the game’ of individual identity formation. Golden Gray, and the narrator that attempts to define him, also use stories to mediate the process of identity construction. According to the narrator, Golden Gray “thinks his story is wonderful” (Morrison, *Jazz* 155), but the narrator “know[s] better” (Morrison, *Jazz* 155); just as Golden Gray attempts to create a story for himself that will help to solidify his identity, the narrator also tries to perpetuate the story they have written for him and overlay it on his. Golden Gray considers himself to be “a knight errant...unscrew[ing] the spike from the monster’s heart and breath[ing] life back into the fiery nostrils” (Morrison, *Jazz* 155), and through this fairy-tale-esque rendition of his encounter with Wild, he creates for himself an identity he finds pleasing and comforting. At the same time, the narrator is also trying to construct an identity for him in a narrative context using their own story, repeatedly describing him as “young” (Morrison, *Jazz* 155) and decrying “his self-deception and his grand, fake gestures” (Morrison, *Jazz* 155), but ultimately they find to their surprise that they “don’t hate him at all” (Morrison, *Jazz* 155). The narrator’s construction of Golden Gray, who is, as Brown says, “actively and mindfully being produced” (Brown 634), does not create a definitive identity for him but instead complicates it and the entire process of identity construction, revealing “the ambivalence and contradictions of creative production” (Brown 634) of both stories and identities. Golden Gray and his narrator’s simultaneous construction of his identity through their own stories, like

Milkman's use of history to imagine an identity for himself, reveal the creative structures that identity formation is based on as well as the difficulties inherent in the creative process.

As storytelling builds individual and communal identity, it also shapes the relationship between the two. Characters who spend their lives telling stories ultimately discover that the history they have built needs to be grounded in their present identities and feel disoriented and isolated without this grounding. Paul D finds himself with "more yesterday than anybody" (Morrison, *Beloved* 273) and "need[ing] some kind of tomorrow" (Morrison, *Beloved* 273), and *Jazz*'s narrator, after realizing their faults, wants "to close [themselves] in the peace left by the woman who...scared everybody" (Morrison, *Jazz* 221). They have created histories, but not identities, and thus they seek out community and storytelling to secure their place in the world, as Paul D "wants to put his story next to" (Morrison, *Beloved* 273) Sethe's story, and *Jazz*'s narrator seeks out their own character to form a connection with her, pleased when she "is not afraid of [them]...hugs [them]. Understands [them]. Has given [them] her hand" (Morrison, *Jazz* 221) and content that "now [they] know" (Morrison, *Jazz* 221). By 'putting stories next to' each other, people create context for their individual stories and identities. This allows both characters and narrators alike to reexamine and redefine their identities as they relate to their place in the community and in the world. When people 'know' each other's stories, they can develop the relationship between those stories and their own stories and identities. 'Knowing' is also a key factor in the ending of *Song of Solomon*, where Milkman finally achieves flight "for now he kn[ows] what Shalimar knew" (Morrison, *Song* 341). His flight is the realization of his journey towards understanding and engaging in the stories of others and the storytelling process, and towards, as Middleton says, "reconstituting the memory of the past and connecting it with the

experiences of the present” (Middleton 72). His appreciation for and participation in the stories of the past connects him to his family history and builds community between him and others, allowing him to finally piece his identity together and lose the self-centered, constricting narrative he had built for himself that previously weighed him down. His self-actualizing leap into flight, the culmination of his own story, cannot happen until he “learn[s] how to listen” (Middleton 72) to the past and the stories it contains, until he knows, and opens himself up to know, ‘what Shalimar knew’. The stories of the past and of the community are irrevocably intertwined with the stories of the present and of the individual, and it is through stories that the relationship between them can come to fruition and people can truly learn, as it were, to fly.

Morrison’s subversion of Western narrative conventions undermines the authority traditionally assigned to a single storyteller, paving the way for her characters to escape from the stories they and others have constructed and begin to write new ones. Storytelling becomes an interaction -- between storyteller and audience, past and present, individual and community, story and identity -- that, driven by love, self-perpetuates long after the story itself has ‘ended’. Morrison’s examination of storytelling as a vehicle for building and connecting cultural and individual identity shines a clarifying light on the oft-downplayed role of the storyteller. Storytellers have played an essential role in creating community for thousands of years, and for good reason. Stories affect how humans see themselves, how they see others, and how they connect the two. Stories are, in many ways, fundamental to the human experience of the world. Humans reshape the world into stories so they may understand it, learn from it, and ultimately change it.

Without this understanding of the important cultural role of the storyteller, stories fall flat and fail to capture the truth of human experience. Like *Jazz*'s narrator, who loves the idea of the story as represented by the City but, in trying to "speak its loud voice and make that sound sound human" (Morrison, *Jazz* 220), ultimately "misse[s] the people altogether" (Morrison, *Jazz* 220), storytellers must ground themselves in the humanity of the storytelling process if they are to tell a true and meaningful story. A story without love, a story that dictates and does not engage, a story that plays a 'final chord' for the audience and relieves their agitation -- such a story cannot survive for long. And even if it did, it would never truly 'sound human'.

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