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Traumatic and Healing Memory in Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* and Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*

A Thesis

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by

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Abstract

A comparative analysis of Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* and Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, with a focus on individual as well as collective memory work in historically marginalized indigenous and African-American communities, respectively. This represents a critical study of how the novels invoke progressive and redemptive models of remembering, as well as foreground the role of spiritual guides in the transformative process from trauma towards healing.

Traumatic memory, healing memory, memory work, cultural amnesia, identity, community.
Introduction

“The struggle against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.”

---Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (1997), Avery Gordon speaks about the ghosts that haunt us, literally and/or psychologically. These ghosts, whether actual or existing only in the mind, represent memories that haunt the subject in order to be acknowledged and processed; ghosts of traumatic memory that haunt to be remembered, that refuse to be forgotten. Gordon says of haunting, “Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into a structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition” (8). Gordon borrows a phrase from Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, “furniture without memories,” and uses it as a metaphor for the mental and emotional stagnation that can occur when a person refuses to acknowledge the traumas that haunt them (4). That person, she says, over time can become a “piece of furniture without memories,” a “sad and sunken couch that sags in just that place where an unrememberable past and an unimaginable future force us to sit day after day” (4). To avoid becoming that “sad and sunken couch,” the person must confront their ghosts and seek to understand their presence. They must acknowledge the ghosts of memory as a part of their reality, a part of who they are. They must understand that the ghosts don’t haunt to terrorize; they haunt to be remembered, to find a home, so to speak, within the person’s memory.
The sad, sunken couch, the piece of furniture without memories, is just what the male protagonists of Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* (1977) and Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977) are in danger of becoming if they don’t find a way to confront the memories of trauma haunting their past, present, and future. Tayo, the protagonist of *Ceremony*, is haunted by the shadow of his alcoholic mother, Laura, who flitted in and out of his early life, eventually abandoning him and making him a permanent orphan following her death. Tayo, a “half breed” Laguna Pueblo Indian living on a reservation near Albuquerque, New Mexico, never knew or met his father, one of the anonymous white men who come to the neighboring town of Gallup for seasonal work. He is raised by his aunt Thelma, who, angered by her sister’s destructive behavior and the repercussions it has on the family’s reputation in their community, works to ensure that Tayo feels unwanted and unloved. He is also raised by his uncle Josiah, who becomes a surrogate mother and father to Tayo, teaching him important life lessons, and serving as the only source of love and affection he has ever known. Tayo’s fragile sense of self is shattered during his participation in World War II when he witnesses his “brother” Rocky’s death in the Philippine jungle, the brother/cousin he promised Aunt Thelma he would protect. He is also traumatized by the killing of Japanese soldiers, which he is unable to participate in because he sees his beloved Uncle Josiah’s face in the faces of the Japanese soldiers. He returns to the reservation a broken man, barely human and wishing only to be “white smoke,” a hazy substance without feeling or memory, only to discover that Uncle Josiah, the one who could help him heal, has died (*Ceremony* 14).

Macon Dead III, or Milkman, the unfortunately nicknamed protagonist of *Song of Solomon*, is a young black man living in his own fog, disconnected from his family members whom he openly despises. The only son of a wealthy property owner and the daughter of the first
black doctor in the city, Milkman lives a privileged existence, thinking he does not need love or affection. Milkman’s only dream is to fly, to be free of everything and everyone that weighs him down. The Dead house is symbolically a dead house, devoid of love, and it is this house and the people residing within it—Milkman’s father, Macon, his mother, Ruth, and his two older sisters Lena and Corinthians—that Milkman dreams to flee. Milkman, a young man who seeks “to know as little as possible, to feel only enough to get through the day,” becomes the unwilling keeper of the memories of his family’s history (*Song of Solomon* 180). Milkman’s father, Macon, accuses his wife Ruth, Milkman’s mother, of having a strange, possibly incestuous relationship with her own father, a revelation that causes Milkman to remember the incident that created his nickname: his mother’s extended nursing of him when he “was old enough to walk, talk, and wear knickers” (78). Ruth in turn accuses Macon of trying to kill Milkman in utero, forcing Ruth to drink castor oil and puncture her womb with a knitting needle. Milkman’s paternal grandfather, Macon Dead, Sr., was murdered while trying to protect his property, a tragic event that shapes the entire family and their future in ways Milkman only begins to understand much later. There is also his father and his aunt Pilate’s estrangement following the death of their father over a matter both of them refuse to reveal. Underneath all these traumas is the untapped trauma of the misnaming that created the Dead family.
Chapter 1: 
Individual Trauma and the Undoing of the Self

Susan J. Brison argues that one of the major effects of trauma is that it destroys the trauma victim’s sense of self. She says the self is “undone” following trauma due to “a radical disruption of memory, a severing of past from present and, typically, an inability to envision a future” (39). Both Milkman and Tayo need to create a new sense of self, an identity that incorporates their respective pasts with their current realities so that they can then face the future. The past is filled with violence and tragedy but also the possibility of triumph, if they can only learn the full pattern, reconnecting with the past that has been detached from the full story.

As a motherless child in a matrilineal clan, Tayo already has a fragile sense of self. Louis Owens states:

The disappearance and death of his mother is an enormous loss for the half-white Tayo, for in a matrilineal culture such as that of the Pueblo, clan identity and a secure knowledge of one’s identity within the community is conveyed most firmly through the mother. Without that essential connection, and rejected by his mother’s sister, Tayo seems cut adrift at the borders of his culture. (102)

This fragile self is further damaged by Tayo’s status as a “half breed,” his light skin and hazel eyes a constant reminder of his mother’s transgression. “Since he could remember, he had known Auntie’s shame for what his mother had done, and Auntie’s shame for him…Years later, he understood what it was about white men and Indian women; the disgrace of Indian women who went with them” (57). Tayo has lived much of his young life as an outcast, unable to be a full participant in the religious and cultural practices of the Laguna Pueblo because of his unknown
father’s white heritage. This is evident in Aunt Thelma’s reluctance to seek the help of a medicine man when Tayo’s post-war sickness is obviously consuming him: “You know how they are. You know what people will say if we ask for a medicine man to help him. Someone will say it’s not right. They’ll say, ‘Don’t do it. He’s not full blood anyway’” (33). Being a half breed places Tayo on the borders of his community, not apart from it, but connected by the thinnest of threads. This fragile sense of communal connection is undone by the atrocities of World War II and Rocky’s and Josiah’s death.

Silko uses the imagery of tangled threads to describe the disrupted state of Tayo’s mind. “He could get no rest as long as the memories were tangled up like colored threads from old Grandma’s wicker sewing basket…He could feel it inside his skull—the tension of little threads being pulled and how it was with tangled things, things tied together, and as he tried to pull them apart and rewind them into their places, they snagged and tangled even more” (7). The tangled threads of Tayo’s mind are the intertwined memories of his mother, Josiah, Rocky, the Night Swan, the Japanese soldiers. He is unable to sleep because these ghosts of memory erupt in his head as competing voices:

Loud voices rolling him over and over again like debris caught in a flood…a man singing in Spanish, the melody of a familiar love song, two words again and again, ‘Y volvere.’ Sometimes the Japanese voices came first, angry and loud, pushing the song far away, and then he could hear the shift in his dreaming…and the voices would become Laguna voices, and he could hear Josiah calling him…they faded in and out until he was frantic because he thought the Laguna words were his mother’s, but when he was about to make out the meaning of the words, the voice suddenly broke into a language he could not understand. (5-6)
The familiar melody of *Y volvere*, a Spanish song linked with the Night Swan, a mysterious Mexican woman who plays a pivotal role in Tayo’s reconciliation of his white and Native American ethnicity, and Josiah’s quiet voice calling for Tayo have the potential to soothe and even cure Tayo’s mental turmoil, but the angry screams of the Japanese soldiers, forever connected with Rocky’s and Josiah’s deaths and pounding jungle rain, drown out the comforting voices. Tayo tries to pull them apart, to separate them so he can make sense of them, but like the tangled threads in his grandmother’s basket, trying to separate them only makes them tangle more. That the voices break into a language Tayo can’t understand further emphasizes the disharmony of his mind due to the conflicting memories.

Josiah was the thin thread connecting Tayo to the Laguna Pueblo community after his mother’s death. As Tayo’s primary teacher, Josiah teaches him all the practical tasks men are expected to do on the reservation: hunting, and raising and caring for the horses and cattle. But Josiah also teaches Tayo many important lessons about the workings of the natural world. Josiah knew how to accept the workings of the world—the drought, the rain, the destruction of land, the death of animals and humans. He didn’t experience anxiety over such things because he was connected with the land. Looking out over the withered crops, Tayo is reminded of the spring Josiah showed him during the last drought:

‘You see,’ Josiah had said…He pointed his chin at the springs and around at the narrow canyon. ‘This is where we come from, see. This sand, this stone, these trees, the vines, all the wildflowers. This earth keeps us going…These dry years you hear some people complaining, you know, about the dust and the wind, and how dry it is. But the wind and the dust, they are part of life too, like the sun and the sky’. (45-46)
Josiah tells Tayo never to curse the ways of nature, that swearing at them brings punishment to the land and its people. “The old people used to say that droughts happen when people forget, when people misbehave” (46). Tayo forgets this important lesson while in the Philippine jungle during the war, cursing the heavy jungle rain and praying for dry air because he blames it for killing Rocky.

When Tayo prayed on the long muddy road to the prison camp, it was for dry air, dry as a hundred years squeezed out of yellow sand, air to dry out the oozing wounds of Rocky’s leg, to let the torn flesh and broken bones breathe, to clear the sweat that filled Rocky’s eyes…Tayo hated this unending rain as if it were the jungle green rain and not the miles of marching that was killing Rocky. He would blame the rain if the Japs saw how the corporal staggered; if they saw how weak Rocky had become, and came to crush his head with the butt of a rifle, then it would be the rain and the green all around that killed him.

(11)

Away from Josiah, away from the land that has nurtured him, he forgets that you should never curse or blame the workings of nature. He sees this jungle rain as unnatural, “not the rain he and Josiah had prayed for,” but it is like Josiah told him, “Nothing was all good or all bad either; it all depended” (11). Tayo learns the repercussions of cursing the rain when he returns to the drought-stricken reservation; the earth dried up, dry as a hundred years. Josiah’s message was about the delicate balance of Earth, that one person’s actions, like Tayo cursing the rain, could upset that balance and endanger the world.

Milkman’s sense of self isn’t so much undone as it is underdeveloped. He is born in the aftermath of trauma. The legacy of slavery has essentially erased his history prior to his parents.
Milkman, at thirty-one, lacks maturity, but as Bev Hogue argues, much of his immaturity stems from his lack of knowledge about his history, and even more so the conspiracy to keep that knowledge from him: “At the start of the novel Milkman is triply exiled, alienated from his family name, his cultural heritage, and his true home; further he is so lacking in mature self-awareness that he walks through the first thirty years of life ignorant of his exile, unaware that he is not a whole man…but it is important to recognize how his family and culture silently conspire to keep him uninformed about his history” (123). This conspiracy begins with the creation of the Dead name. Milkman’s grandfather, newly emancipated from slavery, registers with the Freedman’s Bureau. The drunken white clerk incorrectly fills out the man’s paperwork, effectively renaming him Macon Dead. It may be that the clerk just didn’t care, but this act also points to what Arnold Rampersad, discussing Du Bois’s theory of the double consciousness, calls “cultural amnesia” (Grewal 61). Rampersad argues that “American culture demands of its blacks amnesia concerning slavery and Africa, just as it encourages amnesia of a different kind in whites” (Grewal 61). In this sense, the clerk could have consciously or unconsciously played into this conspiracy in wiping out Macon Dead’s pre-slavery existence. Macon Sr., an illiterate, doesn’t discover the new name until later, when he is on a wagon carrying ex-slaves and his future wife north. Milkman’s grandmother convinces Macon Sr. to keep the new name because “it was new and would wipe out the past. Wipe it all out” (54). This act, seemingly forward thinking, serves as the first step in the “radical disruption of memory” that haunts the members of the Dead family. As Catherine Carr Lee points out, “Losing the name of the ancestor causes the Dead family to lose history, community, and tradition as well; the past becomes ‘dead,’ and the loss of name damages the present understanding of the past” (46).
Macon and Ruth participate in this conspiracy by giving Milkman disjointed pieces of the family history with the intent to make him choose sides. Milkman, at twenty-two, takes a stand against his father’s physical abuse of his mother, knocking Macon down after Macon punches Ruth in the face. After this episode, Macon confronts Milkman with a story of him witnessing Ruth lying naked in bed with her dead father, sucking his fingers. “‘In the bed. That’s where she was when I opened the door. Laying next to him. Naked as a yard dog, kissing him. Him dead and white and puffy and skinny, and she had his fingers in her mouth’” (73). Macon claims he is telling Milkman this because Milkman needs to know the whole truth: “‘You have to be a whole man. And if you want to be a whole man, you have to deal with the whole truth’” (70). But he isn’t telling the whole truth; he gives Milkman a fragmented piece of a story that casts Ruth in an unfavorable light. Later in the novel, when Milkman confronts Ruth with this story, she offers her own counter-story: that Macon killed her father by hiding his medicine, that he tried to kill her and worse, he tried several times to force her to have an abortion when she was pregnant with Milkman. She claims that she clung to her father, even in death, because he was the only person who really cared whether she lived or died, that she has lived a lonely life “pressed small” by the greatness of the men in her life, first her father and then Macon (124).

These fragmented stories leave Milkman confused and frustrated. Walking into the cool night air after hearing his father’s outrageous story, Milkman doesn’t know how to feel. “He wouldn’t know what to feel until he knew what to think…Milkman tried to figure what was true and what part of what was true had anything to do with him. What was he supposed to do with this new information his father had dumped on him?” (75). After hearing Ruth’s equally disturbing story, Milkman concludes that he doesn’t want to know any of it. He even wishes for death to be rid of these traumas haunting him.
Above all he wanted to escape what he knew, escape the implications of what he had been told. And all he knew in the world was what other people had told him…Except for the one time he had hit his father, he had never acted independently, and that act, his only one, had brought unwanted knowledge too, as well as some responsibility for that knowledge[…]. He felt put upon, felt as though some burden had been given to him and that he didn’t deserve it. (120)

Milkman cannot understand these stories because they were not told to him to help understand; they were told to him to assign blame. Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr. says Milkman “lacks a connecting imagination” because his parents aren’t “effective informants”: “Their narration of their own parts of the mystery of his heritage is partial, egocentric, defensive” (194). Skerrett says Macon’s testimony is intentionally “misleading” and that Ruth’s counter-story is “an act of self-justification” intended “to leave Milkman incredulous” (194). Macon and Ruth speak only to embellish their own images and tarnish each other’s; neither really considers the impact their stories will have on Milkman. They do nothing to create an independent sense of self in their son, for neither of them really sees Milkman as having a self independent of them. Both Ruth and Macon are motivated by the desire to extend and expand their fathers’ legacies: Ruth wants Milkman to become a doctor like her father; Macon wants Milkman to continue on his path of accumulating property.
Chapter 2:
Collective Trauma and the Recreation of Communal Identity

Tayo and Milkman have been denied full access to the past that has shaped them because of their own families’ biases. Aunt Thelma distorts Tayo’s memories of his mother with her own disturbing stories, and Macon and Ruth focus more on their anger and resentment towards each other than on the legacy of their own fathers. These biases contribute to the traumas the protagonists face. In addition to their personal traumas, both Milkman and Tayo carry the burden of collective cultural traumas. Milkman, the grandson of a slave, is only one generation removed from slavery. He was, in fact, the first black baby born at the white Mercy Hospital which his own grandfather, the first black doctor in their city, was not allowed to enter. Milkman’s generation, though technically “free” within their segregated community, are still limited in what they can do and where they can go outside their collective. As Gordon states, “Slavery has ended, but something of it continues to live on, in the social geography of where peoples reside, in the authority of collective wisdom and shared benightedness, in the veins of the contradictory formation we call New World modernity” (139). Morrison’s inclusion of the Emmitt Till murder and the Birmingham church bombing serve as reminders that racially motivated violence and terror is very much a part of their contemporary reality.

For Tayo and his community, the wars have ended but the fight for sovereignty continues. They live hidden in plain sight on land “reserved” for them, having to bear witness every day to what was once theirs that is now being bought and sold and fenced in to keep them out. “Every day they had to look at the land, from horizon to horizon, and every day the loss was with them; it was the dead unburied, and the mourning of the lost going on forever” (169). Tayo and the other young Native American men have fought in World War II, some returning home
with Purple Hearts, only to be treated by whites with the same scorn and hatred as before. In a
1980 interview, Silko spoke about her inclusion of the atomic bomb testing done near Laguna
and choosing the Second World War for the time period of the novel: “The world was never the
same since then…The people were never the same after the Second World War…Going away to
fight that war was a real big break, and it marked the end of a time. It isn’t just the end of time
for Indian people, but marked an end of a kind of time in life for everybody” (Arnold 44). Silko
points out the impact of World War II on the world, not just those who fought in it or those
living at that time, but on future generations as well.

Ron Eyerman says, “Cultural trauma refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a
tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people who have achieved some degree of cohesion.
In this sense, the trauma need not necessarily be felt by everyone in a group or have been directly
experienced by any or all” (160). What we see in Song of Solomon and Ceremony are torn
communities whose inhabitants create competing solutions to move forward. As the self needs to
be reconstructed following trauma, so too does the community, and in these novels we see two
dominant reconstructions: one that seeks to forget the past and move on to the future, and one
which attempts to bring the past into the present to move on to the future. Eyerman classifies
these two reconstructions as “the progressive and the redemptive,” respectively (165). The
progressive model views the trauma of the past as “a starting-point for progressive development
and eventual inclusion in modern society” (165). It says, essentially, “it happened, we can’t
change it so we don’t want to dwell on it; we want to move on and forward.” It is optimistic in
the sense that it sees even a low point as a starting point, and the past is a burden slowing it
down. Eyerman defines the redemptive model as a restoration of “pride and glory…through
redemption in the home country,” whether that home country be the original birthplace of the
community or the adopted home country (165). This idea of finding redemption in the “home country” can extend beyond a physical home towards a spiritual concept of home as a place where one can create a more holistic sense of self. In the redemptive model the past holds tragedy but in being actively remembered it serves as a source of pride, a symbol of survival. It says, “it happened, it is a part of us now, for better and worse, and we must take it with us if we want to move forward.” There are risks in either model: the progressive model, in seeking assimilation, risks the loss of culture, the redemptive risks the creation of divisions along racial and cultural lines.
Chapter 3: The Progressive Model: Separating the Past from the Present and Future

In Silko and Morrison’s novels, the progressive and redemptive models are adopted by specific characters, who demand that others choose one of the two models. In Ceremony, Rocky, Tayo’s mother, Helen Jean, and Emo most represent the progressive model. These characters advocate leaving the reservation and immersing oneself into white society. Rocky sees his potential football career and joining the war as a way out of the reservation and a proof of allegiance to white America: “He had to win; he said he was always going to win. So he listened to his teachers, and he listened to the coach. They were proud of him. They told him, ‘Nothing can stop you now except one thing; don’t let the people at home hold you back.’ Rocky understood what he had to do to win in the white outside world” (51). Tayo’s mother Laura was also ashamed of her culture and encouraged by white people to leave the reservation. “Shamed by what they taught her in school about the deplorable ways of the Indian people; holy missionary white people who wanted only good for the Indians, white people who dedicated their lives to helping the Indians, these people urged her to break away from her home” (68). Rocky and Laura pay the ultimate price for their move into the white outside world. Rocky leaves with dreams of becoming a big hero, and returns to the reservation a corpse. Laura quickly learns the reality for an Indian girl in the white world.

She was excited to see that despite the fact she was an Indian, the white men smiled at her from their cars as she walked…She smiled and waved; she looked at her own reflection in windows of houses she passed; her dress, her lipstick, her hair—it was all done perfectly[…]exactly like the white girls. But after she had been with them, she could feel the truth in their fists and in their greedy feeble love-making. (68-69)
Afterwards, coupled with her shame of being Indian, she is ashamed to face her people, aware of “their pain at what she was doing with her life” (69). Finding herself stuck in a world that accepts her only as a sexualized object, a body, she turns to alcohol and prostitution, a downward spiral that eventually leads to her death.

Helen Jean, who appears briefly in the novel, functions as a contemporary version of Laura. She leaves the reservation in pursuit of a career and a better life. Like Laura and Rocky, the white world is a symbol of hope for Helen Jean. Unfortunately, a year passes and she finds herself in Gallup, a place she realizes is “worse than the reservation she had left,” a waste land for Native Americans and a seasonal tourist attraction for whites looking for an “authentic” Indian experience (166). Unable to find a decent paying job, working as a cleaning lady with a boss who sexually harasses her, Helen Jean looks to the men she meets in bars to “help her out” with a little money to send home (166). She accepts the occasional beatings, agrees to sleep with the men hoping that they will be too drunk to perform, and clings to the thin thread of hope that her situation is only temporary, that the promises of white America will come true for her, that she will become a source of pride for her community on the reservation. We only get a glimpse of Helen Jean’s life, but it parallels Laura’s life so closely that we can imagine how her story ends.

Emo represents the failure and the danger of the progressive model. He sought acceptance into the white world by fighting in World War II, proving his allegiance through his brutality towards the “enemies” of the United States: “He understood them right away; he knew what they wanted. He was the best, they told him; some men didn’t like to feel the quiver of the man they were killing; some men got sick when they smelled the blood. But he was the best; he was one of them. The best. United States Army” (62). He returns home a war hero with a Purple
Heart and a sack full of human teeth (teeth collected from a Japanese soldier he killed) to prove it. But the Purple Heart and the bag of teeth and his hero stories are all he has now. The country he was willing to fight and kill for has sent him back to the reservation. Bitter over this failed promise, Emo, like the other war veterans, gets drunk and curses the land and the whites and their failed promises: “‘You know…us Indians deserve something better than this goddamn dried-up country around here…What we need is what they got…We fought their war for them…but they’ve got everything. And we don’t got shit, do we?’” (55). Full of anger and bitterness, motivated to hate and kill by the Army, Emo has no memory of his people’s past or their resilience; all he can remember is his fleeting past as a hero loved and honored by the white world.

The type of remembering Emo and the other war veterans engage in is nostalgia for the glory days when they were war heroes, when they felt they “belonged to America” (43). They gather at bars and get drunk and tell stories of the “good old times” (43). Ceremony is about the power of stories; stories that can heal and stories that can destroy. In the opening of the novel an unknown male speaker says: “I will tell you something about stories…/They aren’t just entertainment…/They are all we have, you see/all we have to fight off/illness and death” (2). The veterans’ stories are not healing stories; they don’t fight illness and death because they don’t offer tangible solutions for healing. Their gatherings at the bar are a ritual, a ceremony, but they are an empty ritual; they tell the same stories every time, repeating them “like long medicine chants, the beer bottles pounding on the counter tops like drums” (43). David Rice writes of the veterans: “These men are haunted by the fact that their experience in the war has displaced the ethical and historical grounding of Native tradition. They mask their despair under a veneer of
barroom camaraderie and tales of the battlefront and sexual conquest in the various American West Coast cities where they shipped out” (116).

Their stories are about belonging, and “belonging was drinking and laughing with the platoon, dancing with blond women, buying drinks for buddies” (43). Their nostalgia for the past isn’t necessarily bad; it is the particular past they are nostalgic for that makes it dangerous. Leo Spitzer, citing French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, argues in support of nostalgic memory: “Nostalgia…frees individuals from the constraints of time—in effect, it enables a transcendence of the irreversibility of time—permitting persons to stress positive experiences and aspects of the past selectively” (91-92). The veterans’ nostalgia is not for the pre-colonial ancestral home. Theirs is a longing for the post-colonial white world, ironically a world that does not allow them to live in it as simply Americans. The stories they tell are dysfunctional because they express a longing for a home that was never really theirs. They aren’t calling up a past that can be “a substitute…for that which they had lost” or that can help them “gain some sustenance and stability in their present” (Spitzer 94, 95). This type of remembering doesn’t seek to create a space where they can be both Indian and American. The nostalgic memory they engage in does not allow them to strengthen the threads that connect them with the land and their community; it cuts away at them.

In Song of Solomon Milkman’s father, Macon II, most clearly serves as the progressive model. Macon was a witness to his father’s murder while trying to protect his property from dishonest whites who tricked him into signing his land over to them: “‘Papa couldn’t read, couldn’t even sign his name. Had a mark he used. They tricked him. He signed something…and they told him they owned his property. He never read nothing…Everything bad that ever happened to him happened because he couldn’t read’” (53). Witnessing his father’s murder
traumatized Macon greatly. Talking to Milkman, Macon recalls the feelings he experienced watching his father die: “The numbness that had settled on him when he saw the man he loved and admired fall off the fence; something wild ran through him when he watched the body twitching in the dirt” (50-51). As much as Macon clearly loves his father, he fails to grasp the fullness of his father’s life. He fondly recalls working with his father on their farm: “‘I worked right alongside my father. Right alongside him,’” and he vividly describes the land: “‘the oak and the pine. We had a pond that was four acres. And a stream, full of fish. Right down in the heart of the valley. Prettiest mountain you ever saw,’” yet he doesn’t attempt to recreate that life for himself as an adult (51). Traumatized by his father’s death, Macon abandons everything: his sister, his community, the South—everything that connects him with his family’s past. He cuts his roots and heads for the North to recreate himself as a successful businessman. Catherine Carr Lee notes that this move away from the “oppressive, enslaving, agrarian South” towards the “enabling, industrial North” creates an “isolating individualism that erases the memory of the South (and) destroys spiritual and moral identity” (44). This erasure of spiritual and moral identity is evident in Macon’s transformation from a boy who adored his father and his younger sister, Pilate (whom she recalls as a “nice boy and awful good”), to the ruthless businessman who rules over his family with an iron fist (40).

The driving force behind Macon is the accumulation of wealth through owning property. Ownership is everything to Macon. As Carr Lee notes, owning property “meant liberation” for Macon Sr., but Macon perverts this belief into “selfishness and endless acquisition” (53). He tells Milkman at an early age, “‘Let me tell you right now the one important thing you’ll ever need to know: Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you’ll own yourself and other people too’” (55). Macon prides himself on his cut-throat approach to business. Macon’s
pursuit of wealth doesn’t leave any room in his heart for sympathy towards others in need. The only thing he seems to love are the keys to the properties he owns, the keys he “fondles from time to time” to calm him (17). Valerie Smith blames Macon’s lack of sympathy on his “linear conception of time”: “To his mind, future successes determine identity and justify one’s actions in the past and in the present[…] He believes that the ends justify any means; as a result, he excuses his own corruption by considering only the financial profits it brings him” (36-37). In failing to consider his past and how it informs his present, Macon fails to see that, though he has inherited his father’s vision of property ownership as freedom, he has forgotten the importance of building and sustaining the community.

Through these characters, Morrison and Silko represent the progressive model, which rejects the past and the ancestral home as obstacles to the way of the future, as insufficient for complete selfhood. Macon tells Milkman that he cannot be a “whole man” until he can “deal with the whole truth” but he does not tell Milkman the whole truth nor does he acknowledge the whole truth of his own existence (70). This failure to acknowledge the whole of his past turns Macon into a cold, cruel man, incapable of expressing love for anyone and seemingly unaware of his own need for love. He remembers the land that his family cultivated only as something lost or dead. He fails to see that the land, like his past, is still alive. The same is true for Tayo and the other war veterans. The endless cycles of drinking and war tales keep them yearning for an intangible past. They use liquor as “medicine for the anger that made them hurt, for the pain of the loss,” medicine that cannot cure them and will eventually destroy them (40). They cannot be whole as long as they curse the land and blame themselves for losing it and continue to look outside their community for a sense of belonging. They don’t remember that they belong to the land, that—despite the challenges—the earth keeps them going, as Josiah says (45). The
progressive models in the novels see the past as it relates to the land and their ancestral home only as something painful, holding tragedy and loss, but as Tayo and Milkman learn through the help of spiritual guides and helpers, the past also holds the key to redemption.
Chapter 4: 
The Redemptive Model: Incorporating the Past into the Present to Create the Future

In the novels, the protagonists find healing by turning their traumatic memory into what Susan J. Brison calls “narrative memory” (40). She describes this process as “transforming traumatic memory into a coherent narrative that can then be integrated into the survivor’s sense of self and view of the world…and also by reintegrating the survivor into a community, reestablishing connections essential to selfhood” (39-40). For Tayo and Milkman, this transformation cannot be accomplished without the help of others. Alone they have tangled fragments of stories and memories. Frustrated by these memories that haunt and terrorize them, they seek to escape. Tayo drinks to create a “comfortable place inside himself” into which he can crawl and hide (40). Milkman wants to fly away—away from his family, his history, his own “pointless, aimless life” (107). They have no direction, the stories have no pattern, but the solution is not to run from the traumas but to find where they fit into the narrative circle so that it can be whole again. Citing Marx, Ron Eyerman notes, “The burden of the past weighs heavily on the present…but memory in the form of history and tradition is central to what we mean by society and to all social interaction…Memory provides individuals and collectives with a cognitive map, helping orient who they are, why they are here and where they are going” (161).

The spiritual guides and helpers in the novels work together to help the protagonists see and understand the pattern of the past, present, and future and also find themselves in this pattern. With these cognitive maps they can then effectively move forward while carrying the heavy load of the past.
There is much at stake for the protagonists in choosing the redemptive model. Tayo, already on the border of Laguna community life, risks complete alienation after Emo tells the elders that Tayo is crazy (228). They want to see him interacting with the community, not in seclusion in the desert. The elders expect Tayo to report to them and seek their counsel so that they can have proof of his wellness. They see his seclusion as avoidance of them and Laguna customs. Milkman, raised in his father’s image, is poised to inherit the business and likely become as feared and respected as his father. If this inheritance is a weight that keeps him from flying though, he will have to make an important decision. And though the redemptive model holds promise for individual and collective wholeness, it is the very communities they seek to help that may ultimately reject them. Despite what many in Milkman’s community think of his father, they grudgingly respect him for his wealth and status. They will likely regard Milkman as a fool if he rejects his inheritance. For Tayo, sadly the attitudes and behavior of the other vets like Harley and Leroy and even Emo are more acceptable to the community than Tayo’s solitude. Rituals of drinking and nostalgic storytelling are expected, despite how pitiful and hollow they are, while voluntary seclusion is seen as strange and antisocial. Milkman and Tayo will likely lose what little sense of communal belonging they have; but what they gain makes the healing journeys they embark on worth it.

In *Ceremony*, the redemptive model is represented in Josiah, the Night Swan, Ku’oosh, Betonie, and Ts’eh. These characters encourage active remembering of the past as necessary for Tayo to reconstruct his sense of identity in a way that can heal him and hopefully the community and help them all move forward. All of them work under the guiding spirit of “Ts’its’tsi’nako, Thought-Woman, the spider” who, with her two sisters, “created the Universe/ this world/ and the four worlds below” (1). Ts’its’isi’nako is, as Laguna Pueblo/Sioux critic Paula Gunn Allen
notes, the “creative and life-restoring power” who spins the stories of the Universe into existence, and “those who cooperate with her designs serve her and, through her, serve life” (118). Josiah, the Night Swan, Ku’oosh, Betonie, and Ts’eh all work to “make manifest that which (Ts’its’tsi’nako) thinks” by guiding Tayo towards the story “ending” that completes Ts’its’tsi’nako’s design. They seek to heal Tayo by reconnecting him with the life-giving stories that have been circulating since “time immemorial,” the stories that have the power “to fight off illness and death” (94, 2).

Josiah is the ghostly figure haunting Tayo. It is understandable that Tayo would miss Josiah and be depressed by his loss, but Josiah’s presence in Tayo’s mind is greater than that. Tayo believes that Josiah was there with him in the Philippine jungles, and that belief paralyzes Tayo when he and the other soldiers are ordered to kill the Japanese soldiers:

Tayo could not pull the trigger…In that instant he saw Josiah standing there; the face dark from the sun, and the eyes were squinting as though he were about to smile at Tayo. So Tayo stood there…and he watched his uncle fall, and he knew it was Josiah; and even after Rocky started shaking him by the shoulders and telling him to stop crying, it was still Josiah lying there. (7-8)

Though Tayo, to his knowledge, does not participate in the killings, he feels “a swelling in his belly, a great swollen grief that was pushing into his throat” (8-9). He doesn’t know it, but Josiah is dead or will soon die back home on the reservation. In witnessing the deaths of the Japanese soldiers, Tayo feels he has been an accomplice in Josiah’s death: “Josiah had been there, in the jungle; he had come. Tayo had watched him die, and he had done nothing to save him” (19). Tayo cannot comprehend why, but he knows Josiah’s presence in his mind holds more
significance than just grief over losing him. In the tangled voices of his nightmares, he hears Josiah calling him. In the dry earth, in the wind, in the room he shared with Josiah, in the things he knows Josiah has touched, he is forced to remember Josiah. He cannot escape him.

Josiah is dead but, to echo Avery Gordon, something of him lives on (139). Something of his life has been left unfinished and, as Gordon notes, “such endings that are not over is what haunting is about” (139). The ghost has wants, she says, and haunts to “force a reckoning,” to make the haunted person “confront an event in their past that loiters in the present” (139). The cause of Josiah’s death is never explicitly stated, but Tayo believes that Josiah died because he didn’t have anyone to help him find his stolen cattle (124). Josiah’s cattle are a special mixed breed that he purchases because he believes they will “grow up heavy and covered with meat like Herefords, but tough too, like the Mexican cows, able to withstand hard winters and many dry years” (80). The cattle prove to be harder to tame than the cows they are used to, wandering far from the ranch, heading south. While Tayo was away, Josiah was left to keep track of the cattle; and, in one of their wanderings, they were stolen. Tayo won’t know until later when he meets Betonie and Ts’eh, his spiritual guides, but Josiah wants Tayo to find the cattle and return them to the ranch. He remembers Josiah telling him about the cattle: “Cattle are like any living thing. If you separate them from the land for too long, keep them in barns and corrals, they lose something…When you turn them loose again, they go running all over. They are scared because the land is unfamiliar, and they are lost” (74). He remembers these words but he doesn’t comprehend the full meaning of what Josiah is telling him until he begins the healing process. Tayo has also been separated from the land and he, like the other young vets, has lost something, something vital, and he must find it for himself and for the community. Through the spiritual guides and helpers, Tayo is able to make this connection.
Ku’oosh is the first medicine man Tayo sees. Old Grandma sends for him despite Auntie’s opposition because she doesn’t believe the “white doctors” have helped Tayo at all and she fears he will end up back in the hospital (33). Though Ku’oosh refuses to do a ceremony for Tayo, telling him, “There are some things we can’t cure like we used to…not since the white people came,” he is able to start Tayo on the healing process by tending to his belly (38). The main physical sign of Tayo’s trauma is his excessive vomiting and crying. Brison notes that “traumatic memories…are more tied to the body than are narrative memories…In the aftermath (of trauma) body and mind become virtually indistinguishable” (42). Any time Tayo remembers the war or Rocky or Josiah, he is filled with so much grief that he cries and vomits and sometimes passes out. When Tayo returns home, he vomits constantly, unable to keep down food and too weak to stand up on his own. It is clear that if he continues on this way he will likely die. Ku’oosh helps Tayo towards healing by giving him something to calm his stomach. He gives Tayo special herbs to brew into tea, but he also gives him a story.

As the male speaker at the opening of the novel states, the belly is the place where stories are kept. “He rubbed his belly/I keep them here.../Here, put your hand on it/See, it is moving/There is life here/for the people” (2). Jude Todd argues that Tayo’s vomiting is necessary to rid his belly of all the lies he has been fed throughout his young life.

He was fed lies by his Auntie about what a horrible person his mother had been. He was fed lies by schoolteachers who taught him that the traditional Laguna stories are worthless superstitions. He was fed lies as a soldier, told that he could distinguish ‘us’ from ‘them’ and that it was all right to kill ‘them.’ He was fed lies by the white doctors who insisted that he must think only of himself if he was to get well. And he was fed lies by nearly everyone about his inferiority because of his mixed-race heritage. (157)
Todd likens these lies to “harmful drugs that have weakened Tayo’s capacity to survive, feel, and think” and says, “He must retch them out of his stomach to make room for the healing stories that will rebalance his life” (157-58). At first Tayo is embarrassed by Ku’oosh’s soft spoken dialect and “childish” language, but when he begins to tell Tayo about a cave, “a deep lava cave northeast of Laguna,” Tayo sits up at attention (34). This cave Ku’oosh describes sparks Tayo’s individual and collective memory. It is a cave he and Rocky used to sneak off to when they were children, and it is also a sacred place where the elders used to perform scalp ceremonies. It was a place “for warriors/who killed/or touched/dead enemies” (37). “They had things/they must do,” Ku’oosh says, “otherwise…/everything would be endangered” (37). This story allows Tayo to remember a time when he felt connected with the natural world in a place where many before him went for healing and restoration. Ku’oosh reminds Tayo that “this world is fragile,” as fragile as a spider’s web, and that one person’s actions can upset the delicate balance of it (35). Tayo cries when Ku’oosh leaves, flooded with grief over how his actions have “injured” the fragile world (38). Ku’oosh cannot tell Tayo what needs to be done to restore the balance, but he does make Tayo realize that he is accountable for the imbalance and therefore accountable for its restoration. Once Tayo accepts this into his body, he is able to take in food and stop vomiting. He even begins to sleep through the night without dreams (39). Purged of all the lies, Tayo and his belly are now able to take in and digest the healing stories.

Tayo meets the Night Swan shortly before he and Rocky leave for the war. His encounter with the Night Swan is brief; he spends only a few hours with her. Josiah sends Tayo to her home to deliver a thank-you note for the cattle she persuaded him to buy. Tayo is intimidated by the Night Swan. He knows she watches him, and he (like the other men in the town) feels her sexual power. Though Tayo comes to her as a messenger, it is she who gives him a message that
will help him later to reconcile what he sees as two conflicting racial identities. The Night Swan tells Tayo she has been watching him because of the color of his eyes, the marker of his mixed blood status. “I always wished I had dark eyes like other people,” he tells her, “When they look at me they remember things that happened. My mother” (99). This is something Tayo has never been able to tell anyone. Although he doesn’t know the Night Swan, he feels comfortable telling her these things because she is an outsider like him. She tells Tayo not to be ashamed of his hybrid identity; that his hazel eyes and light skin are signs of change and that change is inevitable and must be dealt with. She says:

‘They are afraid, Tayo. They feel something happening, they can see something happening around them, and it scares them. Indians or Mexicans or whites—most people are afraid of change. They think that if their children have the same color of skin, the same color of eyes, that nothing is changing…They are fools. They blame us, the ones who look different. That way they don’t have to think about what has happened inside themselves.’ (99-100)

Louis Owens argues that Silko creates the character the Night Swan to “lay out her rationale for the power of the mixed blood to introduce a new vitality into the Indian world” and further that “Silko makes it clear that the evolution of Indian people and culture is a part of this cosmic ceremony designed to ensure both spiritual and physical survival” (105). This is reflected in the Night Swan’s parting words to Tayo: “You don’t have to understand what is happening,” she tells him, “But remember this day. You will recognize it later. You are part of it now” (100). Tayo never sees the Night Swan again, but he does remember her and her words. He recognizes them and begins to understand what he is a part of when he meets Betonie.
Betonie is an unorthodox medicine man living on the outskirts of Gallup, a place considered unrespectable for a medicine man to reside. He is also, as Tayo discovers when he looks in Betonie’s eyes, a mixed blood. “My grandmother was a remarkable Mexican with green eyes,” he tells Tayo (119). Betonie, like Tayo and also the Night Swan, is alienated from Indian society. “There are stories about me,” he says, “They say I’m crazy. Sometimes they say worse things” (123). Betonie is criticized by the community for altering the ceremonies but he, like the Night Swan, believes in change. He tells Tayo, “At one time, the ceremonies as they had been performed were enough for the way the world was then. But after the white people came, elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies. I have made changes in the rituals. The people mistrust this greatly, but only this growth keeps the ceremonies strong” (126). Betonie warns Tayo, “Things which don’t shift and grow are dead things” (126). Betonie fears that if the ceremonies aren’t changed they will no longer be effective and then the people they are intended to help will die.

Death, Betonie says, is one of the goals of the witchery. Witchery, what he also calls the “destroyers,” are the counterforce that seeks to destroy the planet by causing people to separate and forget their connections to each other and to the land (128). Once they cease to see their connections with each other, they can kill each other, until eventually there will be no one left. Whereas everyone else has refused to believe Tayo’s story of seeing Josiah with the dead Japanese soldiers in the Philippine jungles, Betonie sees it as confirmation that Tayo recognized the witchery and worked against it. “It isn’t surprising you saw him with them,” he tells Tayo, “You saw who they were. Thirty thousand years ago they were not strangers. You saw what the evil had done: you saw the witchery ranging as wide as this world” (124).
The Native Americans’ loss of the land, Betonie tells Tayo, is also the work of the witchery. It is a tool to keep them in an endless cycle of guilt and blame.

It was planned that way. For all the anger and the frustration. And for the guilt too. Indians wake up every morning of their lives to see the land which was stolen, still there, within reach, its theft being flaunted. And the desire is strong to make things right, to take back what was stolen and to stop them from destroying what they have taken. But you see, Tayo, we have done as much fighting as we can with the destroyers and the thieves: as much as we could do and still survive. (127-28)

Betonie claims they have not been successful in reclaiming the land because they focus on blaming whites and reassert ownership when it is the Western concept of ownership they should be fighting against. “The deeds and papers don’t mean anything,” he tells Tayo, “It is the people who belong to the mountain” (128). The problem in the struggle is that they are fighting over ownership of the land, not to reassert the land as owner of the people who borrow from it. The witchery keeps them in this cycle by making them “believe all evil resides with white people” (132). As long as they believe that, they will “look no further to see what is really happening” (132). They will separate themselves from whites and accept whatever happens as inevitable. By believing that whites have all the power, they make themselves powerless and direct their anger at themselves. Tayo recognizes this in the vets drinking rituals, how they “blamed themselves for losing the land the white people took” (43). As Silko argues, “It is important that Tayo discovers that the Destroyers and the destructive impulse don’t reside with a single group or a single race, and that to manipulate people into war or other conflicts is a human trait; it is a worldwide thing. It’s not just one group of people, that’s too simple” (Arnold 36). As
Tayo learns from Betonie, the enemy isn’t whites or Indians or any other racial group, the enemy is this force that seeks to destroy all human connection.

Betonie helps Tayo regain a sense of power by giving him a story about the creation of white people. He says white people are “only tools that the witchery manipulates” and that Native Americans can “deal with” them because they were created by Indian witchery (132). He tells the story of a witch who created white people as he/she told the story of their creation. “As I tell the story/it will begin to happen” (135). They are, as the witch says, created in caves away from the earth, sun, plants, and animals—completely disconnected from all living things (135). Created away from everything, they fear everything, including themselves, and what they fear, they destroy (135). “They will take this world from ocean to ocean,” the witch says, “they will turn on each other/they will destroy each other” (137). They will not stop until they “lay the final pattern.../lay it across the world/ and explode everything” (137). Although the story is truly terrifying, it ultimately serves as a tool of “empowerment through self-responsibility and cultural awareness and reconnection” for Tayo (Burlingame 2). Burlingame argues that it “enables (Tayo) to move beyond victimization into self-determination, and it reaffirms for him his belief in Laguna Pueblo ideologies” (8). Tayo is at a crossroads when he goes to see Betonie; he wants to believe in the ceremonies and the beliefs of the Laguna culture, he wants to believe Josiah’s words about the earth taking care of them, but he is also being influenced by Emo, who curses the land and sees progress only in leaving the reservation and the old Indian ways. Betonie’s story reaffirms Tayo’s connection with his ancestral land by reminding him that the Native peoples existed on the land before the whites and that separating from the land and the community in pursuit of individual progress is not a solution; it only serves to make the witchery more powerful.
Betonie performs a hoop ceremony for Tayo to “bring him back” to his ancestral home. “Come home, happily/return belonging to your home/return to long life and happiness again/return to long life and happiness” (143). Betonie cuts Tayo’s scalp and moves him through several hoops to cleanse him of the evils of the war. The ceremony is not yet complete though. “The rainbows returned him to his/home, but it wasn’t over./All kinds of evil were still on him” (144). That night Tayo dreams of Josiah’s cattle. He now knows why Josiah is haunting him. “He wanted to leave that night to find the cattle; there would be no peace until he did” (145). Betonie draws a map of stars for Tayo in the sand and directs him toward Ts’eh, who will then direct him towards the cattle. “Remember these stars,” he tells Tayo, “I’ve seen them and I’ve seen the spotted cattle; I’ve seen a mountain and I’ve seen a woman” (152). Betonie is able to decipher the Night Swan’s message to Tayo and connects her with his own grandmother, a mysterious woman who came to his grandfather to help him change the ceremonies to fight this new evil that is trying to destroy the world. He takes Tayo’s stories and connects them with his own to create a pattern. He recognizes Tayo as the “help” the people have been waiting for, the person who can defeat the witchery, if only Tayo can find this woman who can help him retrieve the cattle (125). He leaves Tayo with a chilling command: “This has been going on for a long long time now. It’s up to you. Don’t let them stop you. Don’t let them finish off this world” (152). Betonie completes the lesson of accountability that Ku’oosh started with the story of the cave; if one person can tear away the “delicate strands of the web” of the world, then one person can repair those delicate strands—if s/he is guided by the spirits that created the Universe (38).

Ts’eh is a supernatural spirit guide who may be a human form of Ts’its’tsi’nako, Thought Woman, and is also linked with Kochinnenako, Yellow Woman, a popular female hero in Laguna Pueblo stories. Gunn Allen notes the Yellow Woman tales usually “highlight her
alienation from the people: she lives...at the edge of the village...or she is in some way atypical...In many ways Kochinnenako is a role model...She is, one might say, the spirit of Woman” (227). The Yellow Woman is “different,” Gunn Allen says, in the sense that her behavior may be “improper or nonconformist,” and though her stories often close with her having helped her people in some significant way, they also sometimes “come to a tragic conclusion” from her “inability to follow the rules or perform a ritual in the proper way” (227). This links the Yellow Woman with the Night Swan and Tayo’s mother, and also Tayo and Betonie--all characters marginalized because they bend or break the rules governing their communities.

Guided by the memory of the star map Betonie drew in the sand, Tayo finds Ts’eh at an arroyo on the outskirts of Laguna. Tayo doesn’t learn her name or origins until later, but he quickly recognizes her as the woman in Betonie’s vision when she tells him to look up at the stars. “He felt a chill bristle across his neck, and it was difficult to swallow...He had watched the sky every night, looking for the pattern of stars the old man drew on the ground that night...He looked up at the sky: Old Betonie’s stars were there” (178). They make love, and afterwards Tayo dreams about the cattle. As she whispers to him as they make love again, he sees them “scattered over the crest of a round bare hill, running away from him, scattering out around him like ripples in still water” (181). Robert M. Nelson describes Ts’eh as a “more-than-human being who represents the land’s own life, who knows How Things Work and who is willing to share this knowledge with the People” (143). Nelson says Tayo and Ts’eh’s lovemaking is meant to symbolize the “connection between the woman and the land” and that it is “an event during which her body takes shape in Tayo’s consciousness as a landscape, while his sense of his own relationship to her takes shape in the language of geographical awareness” (149). Within her, as
he grapples with his fear of being lost, he finds himself and he locates the cattle. Ts’eh helps Tayo restore his balance; he has a feeling of wholeness he has never experienced before, a real sense of belonging. Standing outside in the cold morning air as he prepares to leave, he breathes deeply and smiles. “Being alive was all right then: he had not breathed like that for a long time” (181). He no longer wishes to be white smoke, a thing with no past, present, or future, he is now a living, breathing human being, seeing the world and his place within it. He is no longer a shell of a person; he is alive in the present with a fuller sense of the past. Strengthened by his encounters with the spirit guides and helpers, Tayo is now prepared to reclaim the lost cattle.

After Tayo brings the cattle back to the family ranch, he meets Ts’eh again. Reclaiming the cattle has not completed the ceremony. There is still the drought and Emo. Ts’eh teaches Tayo about the roots and plants that bring rain and restore the land. She shows him there are roots with “the color of the sky after a summer rainstorm” that can be planted in places that have not had any rain for a while, and delicate plants that, when picked at just the right moment, bring light, “the light of the stars, and the moon penetrating at night” (224, 227). This lesson informs Tayo that Josiah was right, the earth does provide—if you work patiently and faithfully to find its resources. And she tells him the secret to defeating the destroyers. “The destroyers,” she tells Tayo, “they work to see how much can be lost, how much can be forgotten. They destroy the feeling people have for each other” (229). The destroyers want to end the story with violence and death. “The violence of the struggle excites them,” Ts’eh tells Tayo, “and the killing soothes them. They have their stories about us—Indian people who are only marking time and waiting for the end. And they would end this story right here, with you fighting to your death alone in these hills” (232). Her words echo the words of the male speaker at the opening of the novel: 

Their evil is mighty
But it can’t stand up to our stories.

So they try to destroy the stories

Let the stories be confused or forgotten.

They would like that

They would be happy

Because we would be defenseless then. (2)

The solution then lies in remembering, loving, and living: remembering the ways of the ancestors and how they connected with the land; loving one’s self and knowing that one is loved by other; and living actively in the world. As Rachel Stein notes, Betonie and Ts’eh teach Tayo that the witchery story “is its own trick: if one sees ‘no life’ in the natural world, the witchery will ascend, but if one proclaims the spiritual life animating the natural world, then the witchery is defeated” (208). Tayo has to see the value in the land and his own life. The way to fight the witchery is essentially not to fight, at least not in the way they expect him to. Tayo can defeat them just by surviving. But this solution, as Tayo learns, is not easy. Ts’eh, as avatar of Ts’its’tsi’nako, commands Tayo to “remember […] remember everything” (235). He will need to remember everything he has learned and remember the feeling he had when he was with her—the feeling of connection with the land and the spirit world—to counter the force of the witchery.

In Song of Solomon, Pilate and Macon Sr. serve as the redemptive figures. While all other characters have stories and memories they disclose to Milkman, Pilate’s and Macon Sr.’s stories have the strongest impact in leading him towards wholeness. Pilate and Macon Sr. represent the importance of ancestors in shaping the self. Morrison describes the ancestors as a “sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom” (343). Much of Pilate’s contentedness in life stems
from her active relationship with her father. In carrying her past with her throughout her life, she is able to keep her father with her as a guide, figuratively and also literally, as she and the readers come to learn later. Milkman has this in Pilate, and also, as he learns, in Macon Sr. When he acknowledges the importance of these ancestors in his life, he triumphs over the tragedies of the past.

Macon Sr. is the ghostly figure in the novel. When he first appears to Pilate and Macon in the woods shortly after his murder, they are frightened by him, unsure of his intent and purpose. Recalling the story to Milkman, Pilate says:

We saw him sitting there on a stump. Right in the sunlight. We started to call him but he looked on off, like he was lookin at us and not lookin at us at the same time. Something in his face scared us. It was like looking at a face under water. Papa got up after a while and moved out of the sun on back into the woods. We just stood there looking at the stump. Shaking like leaves. (43)

This first encounter is never explained but it is likely that Macon Sr. was still in a state of trauma himself, perhaps as terrified of what has happened as his children are of seeing him, for, as Gordon points out, “The ghost is haunted too” (139). He doesn’t appear to Pilate again until several years later when she is a young woman giving birth to her own child. Only then does he become a regular “benevolent and instructive” presence in her life. As Pilate says of her father, “He’s helpful to me, real helpful. Tells me things I need to know…It’s a good feelin to know he’s around. I tell you he’s a person I can always rely on. I tell you something else. He’s the only one” (141). When he visits Pilate he gives her a message, “Sing. Sing,” he tells her, “You just can’t fly on off and leave a body,” a message that takes on several meanings in the text (147).
Pilate interprets the first part of the message as a literal command for her to sing. Alone with a newborn baby in a foreign land, singing “relieved her gloom immediately” (147). As he repeats this message to her over the years, she interprets it as him telling her “to just keep on singing” (208). “Sing,” as we learn later when Milkman meets Circe, isn’t just a plea for song though, it is the name of Milkman’s grandmother. Macon and Pilate never knew their mother’s name because after her death, Macon Sr. forbade anyone from saying it (43). Grieving over his wife’s death, Macon Sr. made a selfish decision to help him cope with the loss. Hearing her name is a source of sadness for him. But by depriving his children of it and the knowledge of their mother, he cuts their connections to her so that all they have left are fragments of her face and her blue hair ribbons. Calling out his dead wife’s name then stands as a way to correct the errors of the past. But “Sing” is also literally a command to sing. The song Pilate sings often, “O Sugarman don’t leave me here,” is actually the song of the Dead family’s ancestors: Solomon and Ryna, Milkman’s great-grandparents, and Jake, the grandfather who became Macon Dead Sr. For Milkman, the song is a nonsensical children’s rhyme until he learns the names of his ancestors and hears the song in his ancestral home. Then it becomes his legacy.

Pilate understands the second part of the message as Macon Sr. advising her to go back to the cave where she and Macon hid, and where Macon killed a seemingly deranged man, and collect the bones of the dead man. She tells Macon, “He meant that if you take a life, then you own it. You responsible for it. You can’t get rid of nobody by killing them. They still there, and they yours now…It’s a better thing, a more better thing to have the bones right there with you wherever you go” (208). Though Pilate is correct in her understanding of her father’s message, her interpretation is incomplete, which explains Macon Sr.’s constant repetition of it. There is something more to be done with the bones, and something more to be made of Milkman. We
learn in the course of the novel that the bones Pilate has been carrying with her all those years are in fact her father’s. Macon Sr. haunts to name the bones and bury them properly, but also to protect his legacy. Milkman, frustrated and feeling weighed down by the burden of his family’s troubled history, wants to break away, just as his father did as a young man. Throughout the novel there is a play on the word ‘dead.’ The Dead family is spiritually and emotionally dying, and Macon Sr. is in many ways responsible for its death in taking on a new name that wiped out the past. If there has been a conspiracy to keep Milkman uninformed of his history, as Hogue argues, Macon Sr. has unwittingly played a major role in that conspiracy (123). He comes back to right some of the wrongs of the past and uses Milkman as the vehicle to accomplish this task. Milkman wants to fly, but he needs to fly back to the past, to the ancestral home, before he can fly forward. As Grewal notes, “Buried beneath the ‘Dead’ name is a wealth of knowledge that could free the Dead to live…Pilate’s sack of bones links gold to the metaphoric wealth—the spiritual, cultural, ancestral lore—of the past. Buried beneath his own name is a usable past that propels Milkman to a visionary flight instead of a blind one” (64).

Milkman needs a lure, a real, tangible, profitable lure, to go back to the past. That lure comes in the prospect of gold, the gold that caused Pilate and Macon’s irreparable split. In a world where a person can be born without a navel, where flowers can devour people, and a woman can live well over a hundred years, it is entirely possible that the gold only exists as a lure to bring the Dead’s back home. This same lure brings Milkman to Pilate’s house to meet “the woman who had as much to do with his future as she had his past,” and into the arms of Circe, the woman who gives him the names of his grandparents, the name to the bones, and the songs that hold his family’s story (36). This lure stirs Macon’s memory and causes him to persuade Milkman onto the journey; and the same lure turns Guitar from trusted friend to sworn
enemy, shadowing Milkman throughout his travels. Macon, Milkman, and Guitar all want the
gold for different purposes. Macon tells Milkman that “Money is freedom…The only real
freedom there is,” and Milkman, believing that, sets out to find the gold (163). Macon Sr. needs
to bring Milkman back to complete the circle, returning his bones to the earth and his family to
the ancestral home. In the land of his ancestors, Milkman finds something that is completely
weightless and has no financial value, yet has the power to set him free; he finds himself in the
songs and the stories of his people.

Pilate, guided by her nurturing, instructive ancestor, serves as Milkman’s spiritual guide
and helper. Like Ts’eh, Pilate has a “more than human power” (Harris 92). She uses magic to
help Ruth seduce Macon and conceive Milkman. When Macon discovers he has been seduced
and tries to force Ruth to have an abortion, Pilate again uses magic to scare him away, placing a
male doll with a red circle on its belly and a chicken bone stuck between its legs, implying a
threat to his male organ (125, 132). This magic serves to protect Milkman, similar to the
mountain lion and the snow Ts’eh brings to the mountain to protect Tayo while he retrieves the
cattle. Pilate is a wanderer, and when she finally settles down, it is on the outskirts of the town.
By the time she finds her brother and arrives in his city, she has given up trying to fit in with
black society. Born without a navel, this peculiar trait causes the people who discover it to reject
her as “something God never made” (144). To the people her power is almost unlimited, she is
“believed to have the power to step out of her skin, set a bush afire from fifty yards, and turn a
man into a ripe rutabaga—all on account of the fact that she has no navel” (94). As Harris notes,
“Her flat stomach becomes the metaphor for her ‘otherness’” (92). Rather than trying to force her
way into a society that will not accept her as she is, she creates a space for herself on the border
of the town where she can live on her own terms.
When she realized what her situation in the world was and would probably always be she threw away every assumption she had learned and began at zero. First off, she cut her hair. That was one thing she didn’t want to have to think about anymore. Then she tackled the problem of trying to decide how she wanted to live and what was valuable to her. When am I happy and when am I sad and what’s the difference? What do I need to know to stay alive? What is true in the world? (149)

A helper and a healer, Pilate negotiates a space where she can still be a part of things and be of assistance to people, since she has “a deep concern for and about human relationships” (149). Her skill as a healer is often attributed to the fact that she is “someone not like them,” but Pilate knows it is because “she paid close attention to her mentor—the father who appeared before her sometimes and told her things” (150).

These eccentricities set Pilate apart from society and lure Milkman to her house in the first place. The stories he has heard about the mysterious woman without a navel and the fact that Macon has strictly forbidden him from going anywhere near her leaves Milkman “spellbound,” a feeling that is only heightened when he first sees her (36). He is physically and spiritually drawn to her: her long black dress, her towering height, the strange brass box hanging from her ear—“nothing—not the wisdom of his father nor the caution of the world—could keep him from her” (36). In their first encounter she stirs up a sense of belonging in Milkman by excluding him from the Dead name, a name he has never at all liked or fought to claim. When Guitar asks Pilate if she is Macon’s sister, she responds, “The only one he got. Ain’t but three Deads alive” (38). Milkman’s reaction surprises even himself: “I’m a Dead,” he screams at Pilate, “My mother’s a Dead! My sisters. You and him ain’t the only ones!” (38). It isn’t clear whether or not Pilate is actually excluding Milkman, but Milkman becomes defensive nonetheless, for reasons he can’t
explain. “He had always hated the name, all of it…Now he was behaving with this strange
woman as though having the name was a matter of deep personal pride, as though she had tried
to expel him from a very special group, in which he not only belonged, but had exclusive rights”
(38-39). What she tries to instill in Milkman in that scene is ironically the same feeling Macon
does: pride in ownership. But what Pilate wants him to own is not property or people but his own
name, the thread that connects him to his people’s history, just as the spiritual guides of
*Ceremony* want Tayo to “own” his hybrid ethnicity.

Naming is an important theme in the novel, and Pilate’s fierce protection of her name
serves as an example of how to own your name, no matter how that name came about, because it
is yours. Discussing this theme in the text, Lucinda MacKethan says:

Names define values in the novel because of the crucial ways that they both reveal and
conceal true knowledge and true identity. The members of the novel’s family received the
richly ironic surname ‘Dead’ during Reconstruction times…From that time forward, all
of Solomon’s children inherit his struggle. They find that their names, being ‘gifts’ of
questionable value from others out of love or hate, ignorance or accident, must be made
their own. (186)

Pilate accomplishes this by taking the scrap of paper on which her father wrote her name, the
only word he ever wrote, and placing it inside a brass box that belonged to her mother, then
hanging it from her ear as an earring. Pilate understands the tragedy in not knowing either of her
parents’ names, and for that reason she keeps her own name close to her, only surrendering it
when her father’s bones are properly buried. She carries it with the understanding that “to know
one’s name, to tell it, accept it, insist on it are measures of one’s freedom and selfhood and fate”
(MacKethan 187). Earlier in the novel Macon walks down the street thinking about names, and how his family must have an ancestor “who had a name that was real. A name given to him at birth with love and seriousness. A name that was not a joke, nor a disguise” (17). Macon accepts his name, and even continues the tradition by passing it on to his only son, but he does so with resignation, not pride. He doesn’t own it and he doesn’t see any freedom or pride in it. Milkman finally understands the importance of owning his name, all of it, including his nickname, when he learns his ancestors’ names: “No wonder Pilate put hers in her ear,” he thinks, “When you know your name, you should hang on to it, for unless it is noted down and remembered, it will die when you do” (Song of Solomon 329). In this sense it isn’t about the official, publicly documented name, but about the “names that had meaning…that bore witness” to the people: Not Doctor Street, Solomon’s Leap, Ryna’s Gulch, Jake Solomon—and also Milkman (329-30). Harris says Milkman’s nickname “suggests dependence and immaturity that will eventually lead to strength. It suggests nurturing by the women in his life, and it anticipates the time he will move beyond the need for that nurturing” (91). After Milkman completes the journey he can take ownership of his name because, with Pilate and Macon Sr.’s teaching, he is now a “single, separate Afro-American person—-independent and idiosyncratic—while also connected to a family, a community, and a culture” (Skerrett 196).

As many critics note, Pilate functions as “the life-ensuring mother figure for Milkman” (Grewal 68). Ruth is not able to truly mother Milkman because he has “never been a person to her, a separate real person. He had always been a passion” (131). She only realizes him as a “man who had flesh on the outside and feelings on the inside” when she discovers that for the second time in his life, someone is trying to kill him and then only because she sees his “imminent death as the annihilation of the last occasion she had been made love to” (133, 134).
She isn’t really to be blamed for her selfishness though because she herself has never been fully nurtured by anyone. Pilate, who has been nurtured by a loving, instructive ancestor, has to stand in for Ruth and be the guiding figure for Milkman. As Harris states, “Ruth is too bound by her father’s memory and Macon’s oppression to develop the imagination or acquire the freedom that Pilate has. It is this new mother, who spiritually attended at Milkman’s birth, who must guide him beyond the peacock plumage of materialism that binds him to earth and teach him how to fly” (91). Ruth fights for his life, she prays for his survival, but always with a sense of his life as a symbol of her “single triumph,” whereas Pilate fights for him for the survival of the Dead legacy (133). Unfortunately Milkman learns the importance of Pilate’s role in his life too late to really share this with her. But it is the fact that he learns it (along with the names of the bones and the message Macon Sr. is trying to send) that signifies his triumph in the closing of the novel. “Regret would always outweigh the things he was proud of having done,” but the circle has been restored: Macon Sr. is returned to the earth, Pilate surrenders her name to the air to live on, and Milkman flies (335).
Chapter 5:
Rituals of Communal Remembrance

Milkman and Tayo both have rituals they must complete to fully restore their wholeness. They have been guided along the way by the ancestors, but to achieve wholeness there are steps they must take alone, with only the stories and lessons they have learned to help them along the way. The rituals aren’t just for their individual healing, they are vitally important for the communities at large. Eyerman says that individual memory develops “the self and personality,” but the individual is always part of a community, and the community must have a collective memory for “it is the collective memory which orients a group, providing the temporal and cognitive map” (161). Eyerman defines collective memory as “recollections of a shared past which are passed on through ongoing processes of commemoration, officially sanctioned rituals which remember a group through calling upon a common heritage, with a shared past as a central component” (161). He states further that “cultural memory unifies the group through time and over space by providing a narrative frame, a collective story, which locates the individual and his and her biography within it” (161).

The ritual that remembers the group in *Ceremony* is the painting of the she-elk on the face of a cliff. The she-elk represents renewal of the community, painting her on the cliff ensures their survival. “The priests who painted her each year always cried when they stood back from the cliff and saw her. ‘A’moo’ooh! A’moo’ooh! you are so beautiful! You carry all that life! A’moo’ooh! With you, the cliff comes alive” (*Ceremony* 230). Ts’eh and Tayo complete this ritual as the last step before Ts’eh leaves him to fight the witchery. When they find the she-elk painting, it is almost completely washed away. “Nobody has come to paint it since the war,” Ts’eh tells Tayo (231). Painting the she-elk together revives Tayo’s memory of the land’s
continuance: “As long as you remember what you have seen,” she tells Tayo, “then nothing is
gone. As long as you remember, it is part of this story we have together” (231). This painting
will serve as a tangible sign of Tayo’s supernatural experience with Ts’its’tsi’nako. “You have
seen her,” the elders say when Tayo returns to the reservation, “We will be blessed again” (257).
The ritual Tayo participates in “reestablishes the Pueblo as the geographical (and hence spiritual)
center of a visible world, a particular landscape that contains, within itself, the power to heal and
make whole and sustain life in the face of those destructive forces…that cohabit the universe”
(Nelson 166). The ritual of painting the she-elk, the symbol of survival, then, is a counterforce to
the witchery, which seeks to destroy by making the people forget.

The ritual of remembrance in Song of Solomon is the song of Milkman’s great-grandfather, Solomon, and his wife Ryna, who cries out in anger when her husband, refusing to
be a slave anymore, flies away, leaving her with twenty-one children to care for alone.

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.
Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone
Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home (303).

The song tells the story of Solomon’s flight and includes the names of him and his wife and all
their children: “Solomon and Ryna Belali Shalut/ Yaruba Medina Muhammet too./ Nestor Kalina
Saraka cake./ Twenty-one children, the last one Jake!” (303). Milkman realizes that the song he
hears the children singing in Shalimar is a slightly revised version of the song Pilate has been
singing all her life. This is the story of his people; this is his legacy and inheritance. It reminds
him of the connections to his family: Ruth, Macon, Lena and Corinthians, Pilate and Hagar. He realizes that they are all different, complex people but they have this shared past that must not be forgotten. With no pen or paper to write it down, Milkman has to rely on his memory to record the words. As Bev Hogue notes, this knowledge is “ephemeral” and must be “absorbed into his body” to produce “a visceral sense of history as present and living, an understanding not available through official or structured channels of knowing” (125). By taking the story into his body to be stored in his memory, he completes the ritual and he can now bring that knowledge home to his family.
Chapter 6: 
Achieving Balance through Reconnection with the Natural World

What Tayo and Milkman ultimately achieve on their healing journeys is balance. Both *Ceremony* and *Song of Solomon* promote a cyclical, as opposed to linear, concept of time. This is evident in the fact that both novels open and close with the same image. *Ceremony* begins and ends with the refrain, “Sunrise.” *Song of Solomon* opens with Robert Smith’s flight from Mercy and closes with Milkman’s leap towards Guitar. That they end where they began, but with significant improvement, suggests that the protagonists have healed and balance has been restored. Before their journeys, their worlds are in danger: the fragmented stories, the torn minds of the protagonists, their physical and spiritual imbalances—these things need to be repaired or the circle will be broken.

Tayo achieves balance by reconnecting with the ancestral land of the Laguna Pueblo. Tayo is able to do this by finding Josiah’s stolen cattle and bringing them back to the reservation. Tayo finds the cattle on the mountain Betonie saw in his vision. He finds them fenced in on a white rancher’s land. Tayo has been confident in locating and retrieving the cattle up to this point, but when he discovers they are on a white rancher’s land he becomes hesitant: “If he had seen the cattle on land-grant land or in some Acoma’s corral, he wouldn’t have hesitated to say ‘stolen.’ But something inside him made him hesitate to say it now that the cattle were on a white man’s ranch” (190). He begins to make excuses for how the rancher got the cattle, ready to accept that the rancher unwittingly bought the stolen cattle from the real thieves. Tayo realizes in that moment that he is hesitant to accuse the white man from stealing because of the “lie he had learned by heart—the lie which they had wanted him to learn: only brown-skinned people were thieves; white people didn’t steal, because they always had the money to buy
whatever they wanted” (191). Realizing this, Tayo cuts into the fence “as if cutting away at the lie inside himself,” and takes the cattle back (191). The lie disconnects Tayo from the ancestral land because it makes him believe that it is the Native Americans’ fault that they lost the land. He recognizes this as a tool of the witchery to make them feel powerless, to keep them angry but without purpose or direction. Tayo’s mind has been a tangled web of stories and memories, with the cattle roaming restlessly through his head; now that he has the cattle his mind and body are at ease. “The spotted cattle wouldn’t be lost any more, scattered through his dreams, driven by his hesitation to admit they had been stolen, that the land—all of it—had been stolen from them…The silence was inside, in his belly; there was no longer any hurry” (192).

The true test of Tayo’s reconnection comes in his final confrontation with Emo at the uranium mine, near the site where the first atomic bomb was dropped. Standing on a hill realizing Harley and Leroy have betrayed him for the witchery, Tayo cries, feeling sick and weak, all the strength and confidence he had with Ts’eh and with the cattle gone. He loses “the feeling Ts’eh had given him” and begins to doubt the ceremony. But he realizes this feeling comes from the ground he is standing on, land altered by the witchery: “He knew why he felt weak and sick; he knew why he had lost the feeling…this was their place, and he was vulnerable” (243). The mine is the home of the witchery’s pattern; its “ceremonial sand painting” is drawn in a “monstrous design” that has been working to destroy humanity (246). Seeing the pattern, Tayo understands why the voices of the Japanese soldiers tangled with Josiah’s and Rocky’s voices in his dreams. The tangling of Tayo’s mind is a tactic of the witchery to keep him in a state of trauma and make everyone around him believe he is crazy. Recognizing the pattern, he cries “the relief he felt at finally seeing the pattern, the way all the stories fit together—the old stories, the war stories, their stories—to become the story that was still being
told. He was not crazy; he had never been crazy. He had only seen and heard the world as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions through all distances and time” (246). This recognition signifies Tayo’s healing. “His recovery from illness involves nothing less than the recovery of his own story and the reintegration of this story with a larger encompassing story not only of his people in their ancestral lands, but of all people in our ancestral home which is earth” (Rainwater 119). Tayo realizes that he is a part of this great encompassing story, the story that is still being told, just as the Night Swan and Ts’eh told him.

As a part of the story Tayo can control the outcome. “He had only to complete this night, to keep the story out of the reach of the destroyers for a few more hours, and their witchery would turn, upon itself, upon them” (247). To defeat the witchery Tayo has to watch his friend Harley die. His instinct is to attack Emo, to kill him and save his friend, but if he does this he will complete the destroyers’ ritual of death.

He would have been another victim, a drunk Indian war veteran settling an old feud…At home the people would blame liquor, the Army, and the war, but the blame on the whites would never match the vehemence the people would keep in their own bellies, reserving the greatest bitterness and blame for themselves, for one of themselves they could not save. (253)

This is the ending the witchery wants, and it also perpetuates the “myth of the vanishing Indian,” as Lori Burlingame points out (11). Burlingame argues that Silko subverts this myth by “insisting upon the vitality, strength, and adaptability inherent in her mixed-blood protagonist. She replaces the tragic mode in fiction about Native peoples with one that rejects victimization and affirms empowerment and recovery” (11). It also subverts the Western idea of the hero as
someone who sacrifices his life for the struggle. Tayo recognizes that this is not the sacrifice because if he dies then no one will know what really happened and nothing will be done for the community or the greater world. Tayo knows that he must survive; he must live to tell the tale to complete the circle. He is the hope of his people. He is now a whole man because he knows the whole truth. The stories are within him, in his belly; they hold the promise of life for his people. He has to live to bring the stories back to the people.

Milkman also finds healing and a restoration of balance in the land of his ancestors. His transformation begins in the woods in Shalimar during the bobcat hunt with some of the local men. Milkman’s journey up to that point has been fruitless. He arrived in Danville in a clean suit and expensive leather shoes with an empty suitcase waiting to be filled with the gold. By the time he gets to Shalimar, which he discovers almost by accident, his clothes and shoes are ragged and worn down and he has no gold or any prospects of finding it. Feeling as if he has nothing left to lose, Milkman agrees to join the bobcat hunt. “Even if he could have come up with a way to get out of the hunt, he wouldn’t have taken it…He had stopped evading things, sliding through, over, and around difficulties. Before he had taken risks only with Guitar. Now he took them alone” (270-71). In making this decision Milkman is taking steps towards wholeness. He is allowing himself to be totally vulnerable. Making the trip to Danville, going into Circe’s decrepit house, crawling into the cave; these were all actions he took because he thought they would lead him towards the gold. He joins the hunt with no expectations, not knowing where it will lead.

Sitting in the middle of the dark, unknown woods, Milkman begins to retrace his steps, wondering how he got to this strange place so far off from his original plan (275). “He had come here to find traces of Pilate’s journey, to find relatives that she might have visited, to find anything he could that would either lead him to the gold or convince him that it no longer
existed. How had he got himself involved in a hunt, involved in a knife-and-broken-bottle fight in the first place? Ignorance, he thought, and vanity” (275-76). Milkman realizes he has been fleeing from responsibility and accountability his whole life. He has been blaming others for their attitudes towards him, feeling as though he never did anything to deserve anyone’s hostility or anger. In the woods he hears his complaints for what they are: “Old and tired and beaten to death” (276):

Now it seemed to him that he was always saying or thinking that he didn’t deserve some bad luck, or some bad treatment from others…That he didn’t even ‘deserve’ to hear all the misery and mutual accusations his parents unloaded on him. Nor did he ‘deserve’ Hagar’s vengeance. But why shouldn’t his parents tell him their personal problems? If not him, then who?…Apparently he thought he deserved only to be loved—from a distance, though—and given what he wanted…Maybe all he was really saying was: I am not responsible for your pain; share your happiness with me but not your unhappiness. (276-77)

Like the “lie” of the land in Ceremony, Milkman recognizes this as the lie he has been telling all his life to justify his selfishness. Completely alone in the natural world, he feels “his self—the cocoon that was ‘personality’—give way” (277). Relieved of this false sense of self, Milkman is able to connect with the land around him and hear what it has to say to him. This realization comes just in time to save his life. “Feeling both tense and relaxed, he sank his fingers into the grass. He tried to listen with his fingertips, to hear what, if anything, the earth had to say, and it told him quickly that someone was standing behind him and he had just enough time to raise one hand to his neck and catch the wire that fastened around his throat” (279). Guitar almost
succeeds in killing Milkman. Milkman survives, and walks, without limping, out of the woods “exhilarated by simply walking the earth…like he belonged on it” (281).

Milkman’s final test comes in his confrontation with Guitar at Solomon’s Leap. Returning to Shalimar with Pilate to bury Macon Sr.’s bones, Guitar, who has been shadowing Milkman through the whole journey, kills Pilate, most likely because he assumes she is Milkman. Holding Pilate’s lifeless body in his arms, Milkman realizes that Pilate is the example of what it truly means to fly. “Now he knew why he loved her so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly” (336). Milkman thought Solomon’s flight was the example: to take off, without wings, without an airplane, and fly away from it all, but the lesson Pilate gives him in the cellar with the box of Hagar’s hair is that flying away is not the answer (328, 332). Solomon flew away, but he left behind his wife and twenty-one children “who sang about it and kept the story of his leaving alive” (332). Pilate’s lesson teaches Milkman that Solomon’s flight was something to be mourned, not praised. “You can’t just fly on off and leave a body” is Macon Sr.’s message—not just to Pilate, but also to Milkman and his own father.

Milkman’s flight at the close of the novel is different from Solomon’s though. Guitar is in need of an ancestor too, he has no nurturing figure to guide him. If he had an ancestor like Pilate to instruct him, he might not have turned to the Seven Days as a solution to right the wrongs of the past. Sitting on the ground holding the woman who fought for his life and was always there to guide him, Milkman knows Guitar is ready to take his life as soon as he stands up. He could try to crawl away and hide, but he chooses to stand up and surrender his life and his legacy to the friend who needs it more than him. “Guitar,” he shouts, “You want my life?...You need it? Here,” and with those words Milkman flies towards “the killing arms of his brother” (337). Guitar has been trying to kill Milkman throughout the journey, but when Milkman stands up to
face him, Guitar puts down his gun and faces Milkman. “My man,’ he whispers to himself, “My main man” (337). Guitar puts down his gun and stands up to embrace Milkman because he is proud of his brother. Milkman has passed the final test of his initiation; he is whole. Earlier Milkman had a dream he was flying, and in his dream “somebody was applauding him, watching him and applauding” but he could not see who it was (298). When Milkman takes flight at the end, there is really a chorus of people applauding him: Pilate, Macon Sr., Solomon, and also Guitar. They are proud of him because he has completed the circle. The novel opened with Robert Smith’s flight away, and closes with Milkman’s flight forward. Discussing the closing of Song of Solomon, Grewal says:

Structurally the novel’s end parallels the flying at the novel’s beginning, though the two flights are diametrically opposed, the difference between them being the difference between despair and courage. Milkman’s flight is reflective of spontaneous generosity arising from self-mastery…Here, the theme of the biblical Song of Solomon, ‘love is strong as death,’ merges with the African American motif of flight, redefined as engagement rather than escape (75).

The novel doesn’t end in death; it ends in the anticipation of an embrace. Both Milkman and Guitar have the stories now. It doesn’t matter who or if anyone dies. They are both the keepers of the Dead legacy. Either one or the both of them will return whole and healed by the stories of their people.
Chapter 7:  
_Ceremony and Song of Solomon: The Ideal of Community and Individual_

_Ceremony and Song of Solomon_ both define how to live actively and productively in the world—how to be an individual while also remaining connected to the community. Silko and Morrison use their art to create and promote an idea of community that nurtures and instructs its members into a wholeness of being. In the novels there are two communities: communities that love and work together to keep the threads of connectedness strong, while also providing space for the individual to grow, and communities that hate and do not support one another, but instead work to keep each other down and restrict growth and progress. The type of community the novels promote is in many ways a community of the mind--a community that is more so felt than seen.

The spiritual guides lead Milkman and Tayo only so far. The healing patterns are completed only when they learn how to act as individuals. Tayo at the uranium mine, Milkman at Solomon’s Leap—in these places they learn how to act alone, but with the spiritual guides forming an imagined community to give them confidence and strength. The Night Swan, Betonie, Ts’eh, Pilate—they all serve as models of how to live in the world, how to live as conscious individuals in a world where many prefer amnesia to memory. They understand that the self, like the world, is fragile, and in the margins of society they find a space where they can be, if not totally free, at least comfortable in the delicate web of the world. And there are the ancestors, Josiah and Macon Sr., who lure Tayo and Milkman towards those characters who understand what it means to be different and who have reconciled their otherness with the demands of society. Together the spiritual guides and ancestors work to introduce the life-giving stories to the protagonists.
The stories are a part of the imagined community that supports and instructs the protagonists. As the stories unfold, Milkman and Tayo find their own place within them, the stories provide a space where they belong. Silko has pointed out that this is a central purpose of the oral storytelling tradition she grew up in—to incorporate the listener into the story being told, to weave them into the web of stories. “That’s how you know you belong,” Silko says, “If the stories incorporate you into them…It’s stories that make this a community. People tell stories about you and your family…and they begin to create your identity” (Arnold 12). Morrison also asserts that she provides “places and spaces” for her readers/listeners in her storytelling, for as she says, if what she writes “isn’t about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything” (“Rootedness” 344).

The struggle for Milkman and Tayo is accepting their place in these stories that they and many others would rather forget. The stories are painful because they bring back memories of a painful, often violent, past. The stories also remind them that times and attitudes have not changed as much as the progressive figures would like to believe. Silko and Morrison use the examples of the atomic bomb testing and the Emmitt Till murder as reminders that the wars have never ended. Tayo’s and Milkman’s communities are suffering from a cultural amnesia. Everyone wants to forget the tragedies of the past in an effort to create a more promising future, but the present in many ways isn’t much different from the past. Cultural amnesia still exists in even greater form today. We are constantly presented evidence of the traumas of the past, yet many still deny the connection. The lessons Tayo and Milkman learn still have value today. Their stories still need to be told.

Despite these grim circumstances, the novels close with hope for the future. One person can tear away the delicate strands that support the world, but one person can also repair those
strands. The stories impart lessons that stress the importance of nurturing, instructive communities that create individuals who know they are responsible for maintaining the delicate balance of the world. The stories remind the listeners of the powerful role the ancestors play in our lives. Morrison and Silko, both brought up in cultures with oral storytelling traditions, see the novel as a space where the stories can be safely stored and shared. In oral storytelling culture, listeners become participants in the story; they become responsible as keepers of the story. As readers of the novel, then, we become the keepers of Tayo’s and Milkman’s stories. We are now responsible for their stories’ survival. We assume the responsibilities of the novels’ protagonists: we have to remember the stories now because we are now a part of them too. It then becomes the duty of the readers to pass these stories on. Even if we can reach only one, that may be the one that maintains the circle of stories that have always been moving and growing, bringing life for the people.
References


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