Dead Letter Office: Conspiracy, Trauma, and Song of Solomon’s Posthumous Communication

3 P.M.

Song of Solomon picks up where Mumbo Jumbo leaves off. That is, in repeating with a difference certain details and motifs of Ishmael Reed’s 1972 novel, Toni Morrison signifies upon what Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has called one of “the grand works of critical Signification” (238). While the writing of Mumbo Jumbo concludes, we read, at “3:00 P.M.” on “Jan. 31st, 1971.” Morrison’s famous “North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance agent” sets off from the roof of Mercy Hospital for “the other side of Lake Superior . . . [a]t 3:00 p.m. on Wednesday the 18th of February 1931” (Reed 218; Morrison, Song 3). If Morrison sets her watch by Reed’s earlier novel, she also rewinds the time back to the early years of the Depression. Yet even in that return to the past, Song of Solomon continues Mumbo Jumbo, a novel that, except for its epilogue, is “set” in a fantastic pastiche of the 1920s. With this opening example, I would like to suggest how an exploration of Song of Solomon and its many intertexts will evoke questions of narrative logic, historical time, and cultural memory. Because it is so densely allusive on so many different levels and in so many different modes, Morrison’s novel deserves to be read not only through its numerous intertexts, but also as a commentary on the significance of intertextuality as a literary, historical, and social process.

As her careful but parodic dating suggests, Morrison, like Reed, uses intertextuality to provide an alternative to dominant accounts of history, and, like Reed again, she does so by engaging both with texts of the black Atlantic and with Euro-American currents in Western literary culture. In particular, for my interests, both Song of Solomon and Mumbo Jumbo rewrite Thomas Pynchon’s paranoid postmodern quest classic The Crying of Lot 49. On the surface, Morrison’s novel seems far from Pynchon’s and Reed’s work, but in fact they constitute a complex constellation that can lead to a rethinking both of intertextual relations and of intersections among literature, history, and memory. Each novel involves a protagonist’s quest for a hidden truth that destabilizes his or her everyday world and turns out to involve coming to terms with some significant, but previously obscure, aspect of the past and its still operative influence on the present. Pynchon’s Oedipa sets out to “execute a will” and finds herself searching for proof of an elaborate postal conspiracy that recedes hundreds of years into the past. Reed’s Pa’Pa LaBas attempts to understand the wax and wane of the “Jew Grew infection” and ends up seeking

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the sacred "Text" of black culture and uncovering an epic battle that stretches back to ancient Egypt. Finally, Morrison's Milkman initially sets out after his Aunt Pilate's "inheritance," only to discover that it is not gold that is at stake, but an oral cultural document of familial and communal history. Despite broad narrative and thematic similarities—and a host of smaller-scale convergences—Morrison's work diverges significantly from the two other texts I have identified. While Reed in Mumbo Jumbo pushes Pynchon's paranoid and conspiratorial logic to the extreme, at once universalizing and shattering it, Morrison takes a different tack. She backgrounds conspiracy in order to explore a related, but significantly different, narrative logic, that of traumatic memory. While critics have in particular read Morrison's Beloved as a literary enactment of trauma, Song of Solomon also offers an opportunity to engage with contemporary legacies of traumatic memory.  

Exploring the intersections among these texts takes on particular significance because narratives of conspiracy and trauma have emerged in recent decades as two of the most powerful logics through which the subjects of postmodern U.S. culture register and reflect on history. The two narrative logics are often linked, both in "real life" and in popular culture. In two well-known examples, the trauma of Kennedy's assassination has given birth to rampant paranoid speculation, and Mulder's conspiratorial thinking on The X Files has supposedly been spurred by the traumatic abduction of his sister. Nevertheless, paranoid and traumatic narratives provide two distinct ways of thinking about the impact of the past on the present; they constitute autonomous forms of vernacular knowledge. While both logics attempt to locate the sources of power and violence in social life, they tend to establish relationships between past and present, victims and victimizers, and necessity and chance that are different from each other. Conspiracy theory collapses the past into the present, clearly identifies the opposing protagonists of its story, and purges historical occurrence of chance. Traumatic logic, on the other hand, destabilizes the binary relationships that anchor paranoid narratives, but, like conspiracy theory, also seeks an origin or event that would account for the suffering of the present. Thus, tracking the deployment of conspiracy and trauma in literary works constitutes an opportunity to think about the status of history in contemporary American life.

Focusing on discourses of conspiracy and trauma, my reading of Song of Solomon activates intertextual, "signifying(g)" chains connecting Morrison to Reed and Pynchon, and to Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History." 4 The novel's dense textuality helps make possible the book's engagement with history and memory, but it also renders the presence of the past tenuous and vulnerable. In the words of Patrick O'Donnell and Robert Con Davis, "Intertextuality is the simultaneous repression and remembering of the past" ("Introduction" xiv), since it at once activates linkages to earlier texts and strips those texts of their historical particularity. The simultaneous presence and absence of the past in intertextuality is, in turn, reminiscent of traumatic scenarios in which, as Cathy Caruth has put it, "a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence" (8). In some intertextual moments, the past flickers forth, as in traumatic flashbacks. But such flashbacks are also always moments of risk, as traumatized memory threatens to override or displace historical occurrence. Following Song of Solomon's intertextual web prompts recognition of how the novel processes the legacy of the past by textualizing the trauma of slavery. What the novel calls "posthumous communication" can serve as a site for rethinking the relationship among written texts, between written and oral memory, and between historical occur-
references and literary invention. Posthumous communication in Morrison's novel entails a confrontation with traumatic legacies, but it also provokes a critical reconsideration of the stakes of the memorialization of history. Finally, interrogating the "post" in posthumous reopens a discussion of the periodization of postmodernity. In particular, such an interrogation suggests that diagnoses of the waning of historical consciousness in contemporary culture may have missed the locations where it has continued to flourish — in depictions of the aftermath of traumatic events.

You've Got Mail

Let's return to Morrison's insurance agent, poised on top of Mercy Hospital, for it is in Song of Solomon's opening scenes that Morrison establishes a signifying relationship to Pynchon and Reed and initiates a revisionary reflection on historical discourse. Assessing the audience that has gathered to watch Mr. Smith's promised flight, the narrator comments: "Only the unemployed, the self-employed, and the very young were available — deliberately available because they'd heard about it, or accidentally available because they happened to be walking at the exact moment in the shore end of Not Doctor Street, a name the post office did not recognize" (4). The narrative then provides a mini-genealogy of street names that weaves together references to the northerly migration of African Americans in the early part of the century, to World War I, and to the tense, if comic, interaction of power and vernacular knowledge. As we follow the translation of Mains Avenue into Doctor Street and finally into Not Doctor Street, we receive not only a history lesson and a synecdochal version of the narrative as a whole, but also a subtle re-circulation of a dominant motif of postmodern American fiction. In order to grasp how narrative rhythms reproduce historical and social ones, the remainder of this passage is worth quoting at length:

Town maps registered the street as Mains Avenue, but the only colored doctor in the city had lived and died on that street, and when he moved there in 1896 his patients took to calling the street, which none of them lived on or near, Doctor Street. Later, when other Negroes moved there, and when the postal service became a popular means of transferring messages among them, envelopes from Louisiana, Virginia, Alabama, and Georgia began to arrive addressed to people at house numbers on Doctor Street. The post office workers returned these envelopes or passed them on to the Dead Letter Office. Then in 1918, when colored men were being drafted, a few gave their address at the recruitment office as Doctor Street. In that way, the name acquired a quasi-official status. Some of the city legislators, whose concern for appropriate names and the maintenance of the city's landmarks was the principal part of their political life, saw to it that "Doctor Street" was never used in any official capacity. . . . they had notices posted in the stores, barbershops, and restaurants [saying that the street] had always been and would always be known as Mains Avenue and not Doctor Street.

The back-and-forth of the struggle for recognition and the elicitation of hegemony takes a final turn at this point, as the narrator remarks of the legislators' message: "It was a genuinely clarifying public notice because it gave Southside residents a way to keep their memories alive and please the city legislators as well. They called it Not Doctor Street, and were inclined to call the charity hospital at its northern end No Mercy Hospital" (4).

In this opening scene, the novel's canny narrative voice threads its way through different historical moments in the collective life of a Michigan African American community, and through the disjunctive relations of this community with the anonymous white town legislators and the employees of the hospital. Indeed, the virtuosity and
understated humor of this voice as it moves through time, space, and social location almost covers over the various forms of violence that the scene also reveals. 1896, for example, is not only the date of the doctor’s arrival in town, but also of the Plessy v. Ferguson decision that enshrined segregation under the doctrine of “separate but equal.” While Mr. Smith struggles to keep his composure at the top of the hospital, the narrative perspective remains below, but also balances conflicting social forces.

Central to the passage is the narrative’s self-reflexive foregrounding of modes of communication, its similarity to the “word-of-mouth news” that, like the story’s opening, “just lumbered along” (3). Following the path of the vernacular, the narrative digresses into a ruminaton on the intersection of community and communication, and introduces the theme of the productivity of naming that occupies so much of the novel.5 Communication by marginalized groups, the narrative suggests, involves contingency and collective agency as well as recognition and misrecognition. The novel’s own strategies of intertextual reference turn out to mime the act of creative renaming chronicled in this passage by the narrator, as the novel also shares the vernacular’s complex and ambivalent relationship to authority.

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Going Postal

Focusing cultural conflict through questions of postal address, Morrison targets the institution central to The Crying of Lot 49. The “Not Doctor Street” passage calls for a short genealogy of the post in Pynchon’s and Reed’s postmodern novels—a digres-

sion that will allow us to reapproach Song’s opening. Pynchon’s novel, with its elaborately staged postal conspiracies, fantasizes a series of underground communications networks outside the “government monopoly” of the U.S. Post Office (Crying 52). Like Morrison’s “word-of-mouth” news and the

“Grapevine Telegraph” of Mumbo Jumbo’s Harlem (20), Pynchon’s Tristero and W.A.S.T.E. movements receive their impetus from marginal figures and dissident forces. Morrison’s “quasi-official” mailing addresses, like Reed’s narrative of “Jes Grew’s Communicability” (18), signify on Pynchon’s hyperbolic meditation on the power/knowledge nexus of information distribution. But these three alternative communications systems also move in different directions. Lot 49’s postal undergraduens are of ultimately indeterminate social location, both because their existence is always hovering just beyond confirmation and because their politics refuse consistent mapping on any known political geography. Throughout the novel, Oedipa seeks to strip away “the breakaway gowns, net bras, jeweled garters and G-strings of historical figuration” that make up the “unique performance” of the conspiratorial mail deliverers, the Tristero (54). But her journey into what one of her paranoid informants sees as “a parable of power” (54) leaves her uncertain where “figuration” leaves off and “power” begins—or even where the two intersect.

Through their invocation of the vernacular of black culture, Song of Solomon and Mumbo Jumbo would seem to solve the problem of Lot 49’s undecidable relations of power and community by locating their countercultures squarely within African American contexts. Yet Mumbo Jumbo, like Pynchon’s
early novel, also uses the post to perform indeterminacy. In *Lot 49*, actor/director Driblette asks, "Why . . . is everybody so interested in texts?" (78). Reed responds by explicitly linking the notion of textuality to the "hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate" after which Oedipa unsuccessfully quests (*Crying 24*). In *Mumbo Jumbo*, the "Text" sought by Jes Grew, Reed's equivalent of the countercultural underground, turns out to be written in hieroglyphics—it is an anthology of Egyptian dance steps choreographed by Osiris and transcribed by Thoth, the god of writing. For Pynchon, the hieroglyph hints at, but ultimately frustrates, hermeneutic operations, leaving the interpreter faced with a social text whose key either has been irrevocably lost or never existed in the first place. In his savvy rewriting, Reed renders that pictographic form multiply significant: The reference to hieroglyphics at once gestures toward Africa, suggests the vèvè emblems of vodoun, satirically extends Pynchon's use of the muted postal horn, and self-reflexively calls upon Reed's own image-text collage form. Reed seems to avoid the binary logic that immobilizes Oedipa by suggesting that, while meaning may not be transcendent, it may still be available to black artists in the heterogeneous cultural heritage they inherit and transform.

Yet a further similarity to Pynchon emerges when we realize that the hieroglyphic text in *Mumbo Jumbo* is also a kind of letter, having been sent into circulation in the mail in an attempt to defuse Jes Grew: "It's dispersed. Untogether. I sent it out as a chain book," recounts the evil Templar Knight Hinkle Von Vampton (69). PaPa LaBas, the novel's protagonist and "detective of the metaphysical" (212), uses his "2 heads" to follow the Text's trail. That PaPa LaBas's "father ran a successful mail-order Root business in New Orleans" (23) indicates that, for Reed, the institution of the post is susceptible to multiple influences. Less a system of communication than of prophylaxis or "communicability," Reed's post can serve as a material site of either discipline or resistance. Nonetheless, the desire for the healing presence of the Text in *Mumbo Jumbo* proves as ironic as Oedipa's quest for the Word. When PaPa LaBas finally locates Von Vampton and the Text, there is nothing to be found but a *mise-en-abyme* of empty boxes (196). The Text has been burnt by the proto-Nation of Islam adherent Abdul Hamid, as we learn in a hand-written letter from Abdul included in the text (200-03). The inclusion within the printed novel of the hand-written letter recounting the Text's destruction reinforces the association of the self-reflexivity and indeterminacy of textuality with the post.

Because *Mumbo Jumbo* has not staked its claim, as *Lot 49* sometimes seems to do, on the possibility of transcendent meaning, the Text's absence resonates differently than does Oedipa's inability to locate the Tristero. Faced with the Text's disappearance and the seeming dissipation of Jes Grew, LaBas optimistically predicts, "We will make our own future Text" (204). Given Reed's refusal to make the Text "present," it is probably not wrong to read LaBas as invoking not a future presence, but a notion of the Text as futurity itself. Gates provides a powerful, poststructuralist reading of this scene: "Reed's open-ended structure, and his stress on the indeterminacy of the text, demands that critics, in the act of reading, produce a text's signifying structure. For Reed . . . figuration is indeed the 'nigger's occupation' " (237). What is the relationship between Reed's act of critical "figuration" and Oedipa's "G-strings of historical figuration"? Is the critical performance, alluded to by Gates, different from the mysterious performance of the Tristero, an underground movement shrouded by "a new mode of expression . . . a kind of ritual reluctance"
(Crying 71)? While figuration is ambiguously related to power in Pynchon, since it could as well serve Pierce's monopolistic conspiracy as produce any challenge to it, in Reed the performative and poetic functions are clearly aligned with the liberating forces of disorder.

The paradox of Reed's novel is that, despite its relentless skepticism about all claims to authority, it seems to believe in its own metaphor of cultural revolution far more fully than ought to be possible; it thus skirts the question of the origins of its own cultural authority. Mumbo Jumbo simultaneously is the Text about which it tells and, in its exuberant improvisations and idiosyncrasies, is the result of the authoritative Text's impossibility. Mumbo Jumbo's schizophrenic relationship to questions of cultural authority both extends the incommensurability and indeterminacy already present in Pynchon's novel and relocates its attack on authority in the context of an epic culture war that it traces back to Egypt. In moving back to Africa, in however ironic a form, Reed takes a step beyond Lot 49's narrative of the battle of Thurn and Taxis and the Tristero, a European conflict over communication that emigrates to the United States. Mumbo Jumbo's Egyptian myth is far from an uncritical example of Afrocentrism, but it takes on enough consistency within the world of the text to constitute an alternative starting point, if not a pure origin, of culture—a concept put into question by the claim that "Jes Grew has no end and no beginning" (204). Through the figure of the conspiratorial Atonist Path, which battles Jes Grew over the centuries, Reed hyper-inflates Western hegemony, but only in order to hyper-deflate it. This two-step shuffle opens a space for the future of cultural production, but, like Lot 49, Mumbo Jumbo is also unable to locate this space in the present. In the end, Reed's politics are simultaneously paranoid and utopian, and thus also reveal the links between paranoid and utopian modes of thinking history.

Angels of History

In its questioning of origins and ends, Reed's novel is close to both The Crying of Lot 49 and Song of Solomon. But in its playful Pynchonian suggestion that "beneath or behind all political and cultural warfare lies a struggle between secret societies" (18), Mumbo Jumbo moves further from Not Doctor Street. On Not Doctor Street power relations lie closer to the surface, even if secret societies are not altogether absent. Mr. Smith, after all, is a member of the underground black resistance group the Seven Days. While the mythic structures that infuse the other two novels are by no means absent from Song of Solomon, Morrison does not appeal to a vision of epic and timeless battles over communication and culture. The parable of Not Doctor Street can be seen, in other words, not only as a metaphor of the struggle for recognition but also as a pointed response to the paranoid or pseudo-paranoid logic of Pynchon and Reed. The latter writers structure their narratives through a binary logic of conflict between forces rendered as fundamentally exterior to each other, although Lot 49 also raises the even more paranoid possibility that there is no exterior at all.

In Song of Solomon, however, the systems of communication and address are subject to negotiation. As street names as well as personal names mutate, lines of force are established and displaced, but the geography of these negotiations remains a shared, if also divided, space. In Morrison's tale, the postal service is not the ominous object of conspiratorial fantasies, but "a popular means of transferring messages" and a source of connection for mobile and geographically dispersed African American communities.
Although the passage at first seems to suggest that postal literacy stands in opposition to the “word-of-mouth” of the vernacular, it ultimately reveals that official, literate culture can be vernacularized by being brought into relation with its other. Letters addressed to Doctor Street might end up in the “Dead Letter Office,” but they also might reach their destination, as the vernacular street name takes on “quasi-official status.” The notion of the “quasi-official” suggests a negotiated public space that seems to have no place in the binary or monological visions of Reed and Pynchon.

Yet, insofar as the struggles for hegemony described on and over Not Doctor Street serve as a synecdoche of cultural struggles and processes in the novel as a whole, it is worth asking what alternatives Song of Solomon offers to the more agonistic visions of Lot 49 and Mumbo Jumbo. In the guise of the Seven Days, Morrison seems to reject the possibility of resistance based on exteriority that exists in Reed and Pynchon, even as she recognizes the impetus for such movements. The ruminations on Not Doctor Street begin with the narrative’s contemplation of the audience that has gathered to watch Mr. Smith’s ill-fated flight. Smith has been a member of the Seven Days, an underground group dedicated to keeping a “balance” or “ratio” between blacks and whites by retaliating in kind for every unpunished murder of a black person (154-55). On the one hand, Morrison’s critique of racial revenge in this passage is clear: While the Seven Days seems to work outside the dominant system, the group’s emphasis on “ratio” and “reason” represents not an alternative but a mimesis of the system’s instrumental logic. The attempt to exist outside or below the surface of everyday life merely reproduces what it seeks to undermine. The price for such mimetic calculation is the breakdown suffered by Smith (and others in the group) and the escalation of violence within the black community, indicated by the fratricidal turn of Guitar and Milkman’s friendship and the calculated violence of Hagar’s ultimately self-destructive pursuit of Milkman. The novel suggests that conspiratorial politics, which takes their impetus from traumas rendered to the black community, end by repeating those traumas in ever more ghastly scenarios of acting out. The task that the novel sets itself might then be seen as the fashioning of a non-paranoid response to trauma that nevertheless takes its inspiration from the same social energies present in the Seven Days.

Although embedded in this scenario of escalating violence—as is much of the novel, despite its gentle humor—Smith’s flight is also, on the other hand, represented as a “promise” and an act of love and contrition. In Morrison’s own, well-known reading of the novel’s opening, “the agent’s flight . . . although it carries the possibility of failure and the certainty of danger, is toward change, an alternative way, a cessation of things-as-they-are” (“Unspeakable” 225). The stakes of the “cessation” identified by Morrison can be usefully elucidated with reference to Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” According to Benjamin’s non-orthodox version of Marxism,

A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop. . . . Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a constellation [Konstellation] pregnant with tension, it gives that constellation a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. . . . In this structure [the historical materialist] recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. (262-63; translation modified)

Benjamin describes a two-step process in the awakening of Messianic hopes. First, the writer constructs a constellation that activates awareness of the present and its relationship to some
significant past. Next, that constellation undergoes a shock, which in turn allows the historian to “blast open the continuum of history” (262).

Appealing to the historical vision of Benjamin provides further resources in the attempt to find in Song of Solomon an alternative to the binary and paranoid logic of the Seven Days and of literary predecessors such as Pynchon and Reed. Like Benjamin, Morrison creates both intra- and intertextual constellations of citations that call forth signs of the oppressed past. She finds, in other words, an alternative way to reclaim the lost generations that concern the Seven Days and that are the focus of the paranoid history of Mumbo Jumbo’s Egyptian excavations. Recognizing that the paranoid style draws too straight a line between past and present—both Pynchon and Reed present visions in which the past seems eternally present in the same configuration—Morrison’s novel follows Benjamin in producing a traumatic shock that disrupts historical narrative at the same time that it renders the past all the more salient to the present.

Morrison’s remark on the “danger” at stake in flight evokes further aspects of Benjamin’s critique of historicism: “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. . . . Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious” (255). In depicting Smith’s flight and the strategies of the Seven Days, which suggest myths and desires embedded in African American culture as well as non-African American texts like Benjamin’s “Theses,” Morrison is clearly doing something other than presenting the past as it really was.7 Her literary historicism might be seen rather as an articulation of historical fact, communal memory, and intertextual allusion that weaves these elements together into a new form of transgenerational transmission. Like Benjamin’s memory constellations, Smith’s tragic flight is indeed “pregnant with tensions” and danger, and it augurs the birth of Milkman Dead, who arrives the next day in Mercy Hospital: “Whether or not the little insurance agent’s conviction that he could fly contributed to the place of [Mrs. Dead’s] delivery, it certainly contributed to its time” (5). The narrative figures Milkman’s birth with a word, “delivery,” that carries both the communicative and Messianic moments that constitute Morrison’s intervention into the thinking of history—and it is indeed the Dead who are at stake in this intervention.

That Benjamin’s well-known “angel of history” might be hovering in Song of Solomon is suggested by another passage in the novel in which Morrison seems to call more directly upon the “Theses” (and recalls Smith’s winged presence). The “time” of Milkman’s delivery refers not only to the moment of birth, but also to his capacity to experience temporality. The question of temporal experience comes to the fore in the description of the Dead family’s outings in their Packard. In Benjamin’s dialectical image of the angel of history, the angel’s “face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.” The angel is caught in a “storm” that “irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress” (257-58). In the novel this notion of progress is represented by “Macon Dead’s Packard [which] rolled slowly down Not Doctor Street” and which the locals called “Macon Dead’s hearse” (32-33). Like Benjamin’s angel, Milkman is propelled into the future facing backwards:

For the little boy it was simply a burden. Pressed in the front seat between his parents, he could see only the
winged woman careening off the nose of the car.... it was only by kneeling on the dove gray seat and looking out the back window that he could see anything other than the laps, feet, and hands of his parents, the dashboard, or the silver winged woman poised at the tip of the Packard. But riding backward made him uneasy. It was like flying blind, and not knowing where he was going—just where he had been—troubled him. He did not want to see trees that he had passed, or houses and children slipping into the space the automobile had left behind. (32)

Milkman’s fragmented vision—of laps, feet, and hands; of trees, houses, and children—recalls the “wreckage” that piles up at the foot of Benjamin’s helpless angel, but unlike that angel, the young Milkman has not yet even the desire to “make whole what has been smashed.” He cannot easily “awaken the dead” (Benjamin 257), for the Packard’s journey is itself an allegory of the Dead Letter Office; that is, of the sealed and stagnant space where the Dead family’s misaddressed desires fester and die. But in ultimately seeking to escape from the Dead Letter Office of the family home, Milkman will eventually open up the possibility for historical revision—a partial redemption of the past that Benjamin calls “a weak Messianic power” (254). While it is important to note Benjamin’s stress on the “weak” redemptive power—which marks his distance from a more strictly utopian theory—it is also important to see how Morrison complicates and ironizes the notion of Milkman’s “delivery” and, thus, his Messianic potential.

Milkman’s birth is a delivery of the Dead and a reminder that the opposition implied in the Not Doctor Street passage between Doctor Street and the Dead Letter Office is only apparent. By the moment of the novel’s beginning, the eponymous Doctor has long since been displaced from his house and position by Milkman’s father, Macon Dead: Doctor Street has become the Dead Letter Office. While, on the one hand, this signifies an apparent decline in the fortunes of the black community, on the other hand, the Benjaminian reference might suggest a belief in the revolutionary potential of the memory of the dead. But it is not clear how to read this reference, since the novel repeatedly ironizes the name Dead and associates it initially not with memory but with a radical break from the past. The story of the coming into being of the name Dead inverts the counterhegemonic negotiation that produced Not Doctor Street. In this case, the vulnerability of official discourse to contingency only contributes to the degradation of the freed slave Jake. In an act of dispossession that echoes his former slave status and foreshadows his later loss of life and property, Milkman’s grandfather Jake receives the name Macon Dead accidentally from a drunken government official. Instead of dispensing with it, however, his future wife urges him to keep it: “Mama liked it. Liked the name. Said it was new and would wipe out the past. Wipe it all out” (54). Through this intra- and intertextual loading of the name Dead with multiple meanings, Morrison suggests the degree to which the textualization of history produces contradictory effects. “Fanning the spark of hope in the past” involves risk and danger—danger that the past will be “wiped out” at the same time it is “articulated historically.”

The name that both Morrison and Benjamin give to this risky danger is memory. In the Dead Letter Office of history, letters do not always arrive at their destination, but those that do carry an ambiguous legacy of cultural memory. The legacy of memory is ambiguous because, like the names Dead and Not Doctor Street and like the process of intertextuality that the novel employs, memory both “wipes out” and preserves, negates and affirms the past. Recall that the naming of Not Doctor Street “gave Southside residents a way to keep their memories alive and please the city legislators as well” (4). If the joke is on the legislators, the renaming represents as much an accommodation to their authority as
a challenge. In other words, keeping the memory of the great doctor alive distracts from or becomes, in John Brenkman’s words, “a consolation or compensation for the absence of political participation” (71). The present relations of power in the city are conveniently forgotten at the same time that a cultural legacy is celebrated. But the narrative voice also reminds us of this forgetting through its ironic account, even as it further supplies us with enough information to know that the snobbish and haughty Doctor Foster was himself an ambiguous figure for memorialization. The history-studded Not Doctor Street passage, where dates such as 1896 and 1918 immediately call forth nodal events in American life, is also a pageant of memory and forgetting—an overdetermined space in which the loss and gain of cultural legacy and political power intersect.

Not simply a paean to memory and transgenerational cultural transmission, Song of Solomon explores moments in which history gives way to acts of memory and forgetting that are themselves not easily accommodated in Manichean conceptual frameworks. In exploring traumatic aftereffects, the novel demonstrates not only that history is susceptible to complicated acts of memory and forgetting, but, conversely, that memory and forgetting have their own history—particularly in situations in which trauma and memory are transmitted across generations. In the opening chapters of the novel, the echo of enslaving economic and social conditions is heard in repetitive intratextual variations of the word proper. These echoing associations cluster, in particular, around Macon Dead, Jr., Milkman’s father and “a colored man of property” (23). Having watched his father be murdered by greedy white farmers intent on stealing his land, Macon internalizes and hyperbolizes his ex-slave father’s ethos of work and property ownership. In the traumatic aftermath of the death of his father, Macon attempts to pass on a lesson to his own son, Milkman (Macon Dead III): “‘Let me tell you now the one important thing you’ll ever need to know: Own things. And let the things you own other things. Then you’ll own yourself and other people too’ ” (55). By depicting how Macon’s father “died protecting his property” (51), the text creates a degree of sympathy for this slippage from ownership as resistance to slavery to ownership as slavery’s repetition in the “free market” of capitalism. But the text also insists on just how far this traumatic memory goes in distorting Macon’s access to the present: It turns him against his previously beloved sister Pilate, whom he now sees as having “cut the last thread of propriety” and thus being unworthy of association with a “propertied Negro” (20); and it poisons his relationship with his wife, whose allegedly “inappropriate” (23) relationship with her father leads to Macon’s paranoid presupposition of an incestuous relationship (73-74). In linking property and propriety in a discourse in which the Not Doctor Street passage has already suggested the importance of proper and “appropriate” names, Song of Solomon subtly encodes slavery’s legacies in the familial and social life of twentieth-century African Americans. While the novel depicts much of the black community subverting the power of the proper name—as in the signifying of Not Doctor Street and No Mercy Hospital—other characters, like Macon, remember slavery but forget its lessons, or are unable to translate its lessons into the new arena of economic and social relations of the post-slavery era.

The novel’s politics are, unlike those of The Crying of Lot 49 and Mumbo Jumbo, decidedly non-paranoid and non-utopian. The logic of traumatic memory fragments the master narratives of conspiracy theory because its play of recollection and forgetting refuses to recount the past as a coherent tale of twinned forces. Like Benjamin’s, Morrison’s strategy is not opposed to, but rather draws from, an
engagement with historical trauma. The "weak Messianic power" of this strategy should not be confused with Reed's utopianism. Reed's novel cannot make its utopian longings present because of its relentless deconstruction of all forms of authority—including those that seem to be propounded by the Text itself. Morrison, on the other hand, encodes hopes for a different future by insisting on the present as a necessary site of enunciation for what she calls "posthumous communication."

Posthumous Communication

Song of Solomon is not the story of the transcendence of the after-shocks of slavery; on the contrary, it tells the tale of their discovery and conversion into a workable cultural heritage. By detecting the echoes of a past not their own, readers, like Milkman, can reweave the text of slavery from the perspective of the present. Morrison makes clear that the textualization of slavery encompasses simultaneous remembering and forgetting, but also creates the grounds for new forms of communication. The novel's association of the "Dead" with both letters and family names draws attention to the fact that communication in Song of Solomon is primarily figured with or through death. As in Benjamin's "Theses," the possibility of the future comes by way of a present-day redemptive approach to the past. In the narrator's description of the relationship between Ruth Foster Dead and Pilate Dead, a moment of community between the two women is produced through the concept of "posthumous communication":

They were so different, these two women. One black, the other lemony. One corseted, the other buck naked under her dress. One well read but ill traveled. The other had read only a geography book, but had been from one end of the country to another. One wholly dependent on money for life, the other indifferent to it. But those were the meaningless things. Their similarities were profound. Both were vitally interested in Macon Dead's son, and both had close and supportive posthumous communication with their fathers. (139)

As in Lot 49, which uses Pierce's demise to interrogate a crisis of social and paternal authority, the death of "founding fathers" plays a significant role in Song of Solomon. Yet, while Pierce's death does not ultimately free Oedipa from the constraints of her atomized existence, the ghostly fathers and Messianic son of Morrison's novel authorize a collective of women. This passage constructs a transient community by holding in abeyance differences in degrees of literacy, privilege, conventionality, and economic position that are otherwise central both to the characters and the narrative. The notion of "posthumous communication" troubles the terms of a novel that is frequently read through binaries such as orality/literacy, insider/outside, past/present, and official/folk or vernacular culture. It suggests the need for a notion of transgenerational transmission beyond oppositional logic—a logic that the examples of Pynchon and Reed demonstrate strays quickly toward the paranoid. This notion is less utopian than Messianic, in the sense developed by Benjamin. Unlike Reed's utopian Text, which cannot actually be made present, posthumous communication is grounded in an actually existing present—however transitory—in which the dead and the living, the self and the other, commune.

The practice and presence of intertextuality provide a way to understand Song of Solomon and its notion of revisionary historical transmission beyond fixed paradigms. The title itself embodies this commitment to cultural transmission. It sets up an ironic allusion to the Hebrew Bible only in order to displace that intertext in favor of a textually sanctioned reference to black oral tradition and the blues. This displacement of one of the grounding texts of the Western literary and cultural canon
has led many critics to read the novel as the reclamation of an autonomous black or African-centered tradition, a tradition that in the novel passes primarily through a woman, Pilate. But can posthumous communication of the sort proposed in Song of Solomon be located so easily in a single tradition?

At the climax of the novel, Milkman comes upon a group of children “playing their endless round games” (301) and singing the “Song of Solomon” that Milkman recognizes as a version of the “old blues song Pilate sang all the time” (302). By this point, Milkman has acquired enough knowledge to be able to decode the song and to find in it a story of familial and collective history. Although neither the children nor Pilate herself even realizes it, the song is a repository of cultural memory that stretches back across several generations of the history of what has become the Dead family. In a gesture that critics have understandably read as elevating the orality of the African American song over the scriptural authority of the biblical verses, Milkman finds his literacy disabled and is forced back into an oral tradition. Seeking to preserve the song in writing, “Milkman took out his wallet and pulled from it his airplane ticket stub, but he had no pencil to write with, and his pen was in his suit. He would have to listen and memorize it” (303). Further evidence of the novel’s mimesis of oral culture lies in the way the narrative draws attention to the existence of multiple variations of the song, a well-known characteristic of oral “texts.” For example, the children’s song concludes, “Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone / Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home” (303). However, in Pilate’s version, introduced in the novel’s opening scene, she substitutes the name “Sugarman” for “Solomon” (6). This depiction of the changing same of black culture constitutes a powerful metaphor of African and oral reiterations in contemporary African American culture. The fact that this depiction is itself found in a novel qualifies it as another posthumous communication; that is, a mode of connection that joins the oral and the literate, the past and the present, the official and the folk.

Critics of different ideological persuasions have agreed that the song of the novel’s title is ultimately a savv sign of African cultural autonomy in the Americas. In her valuable study of “oral-literate tensions” in Song of Solomon, Joyce Middleton describes Milkman’s discovery of the significance of the song in this way: “If he wants the knowledge, he must commit the song to his personal, oral memory, just as his slave and African ancestors had done, not to an artificial, external memory—a written record” (34). While Middleton clearly celebrates both Milkman’s acquisition of new arts of memory and the novel’s assertion of an authentic African American cultural tradition connected to the legacy of resistance to slavery, Emily Budick, writing in the context of a discussion of African American and Jewish American literary relations, finds a more troubling subtext. “The text,” Budick suggests, “may be doing more than reclaiming black cultural integrity and its place within the constellation of ethnic cultures by which America has constructed itself. It may also be claiming autonomy, even priority. . . . In this possible motion from claims of coherence and integrity to assertions of autonomy and anteriority, the problem of the book—in particular vis-à-vis Jewish culture—emerges” (189). In the displacement of the biblical text Budick finds that the novel “put[s] itself in direct conflict with Jewish, as opposed to Christian or Judeo-Christian, culture. And although American Jews, in the twentieth century, certainly do bear responsibility to their fellow African American citizens (and vice versa), they constitute neither the dominant culture in America nor the primary cause of black slavery” (196). Middleton’s and Budick’s readings raise complex and difficult political
and methodological issues that go beyond the scope of this essay. For present purposes, it is sufficient to say that both critics capture important partial truths about the novel: The novel does indeed at times elevate oral memory over what appears as “artificial, external memory,” and this elevation does contain a potentially troubling, if possibly inadvertent, displacement of Jewish culture. Yet, a complete genealogy of the song also throws into question the assumption of cultural autonomy that underlies both of these readings.

As the preceding discussion has sought to demonstrate, the workings of intertextuality in Song of Solomon are more complex than the readings put forth by Middleton and Budick would allow. The “Song of Solomon” is not only a reference to the Bible and to black oral culture, but, surprisingly, to Pynchon’s literary work as well. The song around which Morrison’s novel turns borrows its structure from a marginal moment in The Crying of Lot 49. In the midst of a nocturnal search after the concealed hieroglyphic meaning of the post horn, Oedipa happens upon a circle of children in their nightclothes, who told her they were dreaming the gathering. . . They knew about the post horn, but nothing of the chalked game Oedipa had seen on the sidewalk. You used only one image and it was a jump-rope game, a little girl explained: you stepped alternately in the loop, the bell, and the mute, while your girlfriend sang:

Tristoe, Tristoe, one, two, three, Turning taxi from across the sea . . .

"Thurn and Taxis, you mean?"
They’d never heard it that way. (118-19)

Lot 49’s song is similar to the last verse of the Song of Solomon as performed by the children and Pilate not only semantically, but also especially insofar as it seems to encode the variations of memory attendant on orally transmitted transatlantic history. While it could be argued that Pynchon’s novel merely serves as one more white Western text for Morrison to displace in her assertion of black cultural autonomy, the existence of multiple intertexts makes this position increasingly difficult to sustain. The supposition of a binary relationship between “artificial, external” scripture and “autonomous” orality gives way to the vision of a network of intersecting texts. In this case, the network connects works that already thematize the transmission of texts and messages—a fact that casts further doubt on binary, supercessionist models of intertextuality.

But the question remains as to why Morrison’s text repeatedly returns to Pynchon’s and Reed’s shadowy postal and cultural conspiracies in order to bring forth its own posthumous communications, and what effects these references have on the cultural work of Song of Solomon. The preponderance of the post in these novels—as address, as site for the transfer of messages, as locus of authority, and as contact with the dead—asks to be read on multiple levels. While most obviously a metaphor for the institutional arrangements of power in communication, the post also stands as a figure for the delay inherent in all writing—à la Derrida—and especially in intertextual exchange. The network established between the postal and the posthumous thus suggests the salience of belatedness and transgenerational haunting for these works, especially Song of Solomon. This reading of the temporal dimension of the post also explains Morrison’s return to and extension of the timeframe of Mumbo Jumbo, with which I began. The establishment of that constellation—3 P.M.—disrupts the homogeneity of the present, and thus of Reed’s more nationalist imagining. By marking the textual and historical “now-time” as a site of multiple intertextual and transcultural links, Morrison reimagines literary tradition and cultural history beyond linear chronology and paranoid, oppositional logic. She interrogates the post in order to propose an alternative account of the relationship between present and past. This interrogation might in turn be read as a sub-
merged periodizing gesture, a sign that *Song of Solomon* is engaged in processing the various “posts” that intersect in the contemporary era—for instance, here, the post-modern and the post-slavery.

Evidence for such an hypothesis might be found in Morrison’s remarks on the continuing significance of racism in contemporary American culture. In her essay on “The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” Morrison suggests that the “trauma of racism is, for the racist and the victim, the severe fragmentation of the self, and has always seemed to me a cause (not a symptom) of psychosis—strangely of no interest to psychiatry” (“Unspeakable” 214). In this passage, Morrison connects a certain version of trauma to one of the dominant motifs of postmodernism. Her formulation recalls Fredric Jameson’s symptomatic reading of postmodernism as a schizophrenic fragmentation of the signifying chain, and brings with it the reminder that the category of race is absent from Jameson’s influential diagnosis of the “cultural logic of late capitalism.” The absence of Morrison’s insight on links between fragmentation and racism from Jameson’s account suggests that bringing questions of racial trauma to bear on postmodernism will demand a rethinking of Jameson’s periodizing hypothesis. Indeed, it calls for a rethinking of periodization as such. The turn toward trauma in literature and theory in recent years takes part in a return to history and an interest in historical cognition that had seemed to be missing in accounts of postmodernism, such as Jameson’s, which stress the waning of a “sense of history” in contemporary culture. Indeed, while Morrison’s writings reflect the “pastiche” of styles Jameson equates with the evacuation of historical depth, they could also be seen as taking part in the same paradoxical task that Jameson sets for himself at the opening of his theorization of the postmodern: “an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place” (ix). *Song of Solomon’s* intertextual pastiche is precisely the site of a return of and to history—but the concept of history has now been reconfigured by memory, trauma, and transgenerational, transcultural legacies. This rethinking of the concept of history is also what ultimately allies Morrison with Benjamin.

Morrison’s focus on the power of traumatic memories does not make for a straightforwardly historical novel. For, in fact, the memories at issue in the novel and its composition are really “postmemories,” to adopt the term used by Marianne Hirsch to describe the aesthetics and life-worlds of children of Holocaust survivors (*Family Frames*). Like second- and third-generation Holocaust texts that explore the delayed impact of the events on those who were not there, *Song of Solomon* is not primarily the story of a traumatic event. Rather it concerns the delayed effects of a series of traumatic events associated with slavery and its aftermath on Milkman Dead, the grandson of a freed slave. Similarly, although Morrison no doubt drew on her own memories in constructing the rich historical milieus of the novel, she has emphasized that the book was a response to the perceived void left by the passing of her father’s generation: “For the first time I was writing a book in which the central stage was occupied by men, and which had something to do with my loss, or my perception of loss, of a man (my father) and the world that disappeared with him. (It didn’t, but I felt that it did.) So I was re-creating a time period that was his—not biographically his life or anything in it; I use whatever’s around. But it seemed to me that there was this big void after he died, and I filled it with a book that was about men” ("Site" 123). Despite the dedicatory evocation of “Daddy” that frames the text, however, the novel’s relationship to the world of men is complex and ambivalent. Using “whatever’s around” turns out to include the creation of a signifiyin(g) relationship to texts from a masculine,
“paranoid style” of postmodern fiction. The world of men that Morrison recreates is a world in which masculine literary authority is simultaneously invoked and displaced. Morrison’s novel fills a void that is not so much historical as, rather, the “felt” void of memory and postmemory. By taking its place in a void filled with the delayed effects of trauma, Song of Solomon does not itself become posthis-
torical, but rather takes part in a genre of historical novel that concerns posthistorical experience and the claims of postmemory. Perhaps contemporary historical thinking dwells in the intertextual space of posthumous communication, a space where diverse experiences of belatedness—such as the postmodern, the post-slavery, and the post-Holocaust—intersect.

1. For two important essays that take up the “signifying” practices of Morrison’s novel, although not in relation to Reed, see Mobley; Lubiano.
2. On Reed and Morrison, see Weidmann, who focuses on generic similarities and not strictly intertextual connections. On Reed and Pynchon, see Mikics. Hutcheon mentions all three novels in passing.
3. For an exemplary reading of Beloved in the context of trauma theory, see Morgenstern. Bouson has recently provided a survey of all of Morrison’s novels through Paradise in relation to the thematic of shame and trauma; however, her discussion of Song of Solomon leans more in the direction of exploring dynamics of shame than traumatic memory, as I do below.
4. Benjamin shows up with increasing frequency in the most recent Morrison criticism. Unlike the other critical essays I have found, this one suggests that the link between Benjamin and Morrison goes beyond thematic connections, and I argue that Song of Solomon bears a strong intertextual relationship to Benjamin’s writing (although I do not presume to decide whether that relationship is intentional on Morrison’s part). On Morrison and Benjamin, see McKible; Grewal; Pérez-Torres.
5. On the vernacular in this scene, see Mobley 50; Middleton 19-39, esp. 27.
6. For a related, but less forgiving, critique of Reed’s relationship to history, see Mason.
7. For a sophisticated account of Morrison’s revisionary use and critique of traditional African American myths, see Awkward 137-53.
8. In aligning Morrison with a Benjaminian “weak Messianic power,” I am importing a discourse which, in complicated ways, is simultaneously Jewish and Marxist into a text which, in complicated ways, is neither. While I believe such a move is authorized by the novel’s culturally hybrid intertextuality, I also follow Derrida in thinking of the messianic as “a structure of experience rather than a religion” (168). Both utopian and messianic discourses are oriented toward a qualitatively different future; however, they bear different relationships to the present and past. Unlike the utopian, which literally has “no place,” and thus no place for present or past in its articulations, Benjamin’s concept of the messianic is grounded in a present that is more than a transition between past and future. The possibility of a future is predicated on a constellation between past and present that breaks apart the continuity of chronological progression. It is this messianic temporal structure of experience that Morrison’s novel shares with Benjamin.
9. For readings that focus on the specifically African or African American vernacular dimensions of the text, see Lubiano; Middleton; Mobley; Skerrett. These critics offer richly varied notions of vernacular traditions. For an account of Song of Solomon in relation to debates among African American critics about the vernacular, see Brenkman, who also supplies a useful bibliographic essay.
10. See Middleton 34; Mobley 60-61.
11. On the tension between the novel and oral culture, see Brenkman.
12. Hirsch has also written an excellent essay on Song of Solomon which works a related terrain in its exploration of family dynamics in the novel and in contemporary culture (see “Knowing Their Names”).


CONSPIRACY, TRAUMA, AND SONG OF SOLOMON’S POSTHUMOUS COMMUNICATION
Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995. 3-12.
—. "Knowing Their Names: Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon." Smith 69-92.