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Building Identity through the Fantastic in “Pkhents” and *Song of Solomon*

by

Veronica Yabloko

Senior Thesis

toward the completion of the Comparative Literature Major

under the Supervision of professors Sibelan Forrester and Peter Schmidt

4/30/2022

Swarthmore College

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I. Introduction

Soviet Russia in the throes of a cultural revolution and the United States in the midst of the civil rights movement: two epicenters of change on opposite sides of the world which had, perhaps, little in common on the surface. These vastly different settings were the stage on which authors Abram Tertz and Toni Morrison emerged – two revolutionary writers whose lives never intersected. And yet, despite the different worlds where they resided, these authors shared much in common; their reverence for the literary tradition which preceded them, their critical understanding of language and writing, and most importantly, their desire to break free of the chains tightened around them by their respective societies. Tertz and Morrison, both censored in their own ways, both pressured into rigid and unyielding roles, freed themselves via their writing; Tertz, through fantastical realism, or as he termed it “phantasmagoria,” and Morrison through magical realism. To create these fantastical masterpieces, however, both authors had to fracture their identity in two, existing under both the names bestowed upon at birth and the names they created to escape from the binds of their societies. Thus, Abram Tertz and Toni Morrison were not born but *created*. Only via the creation of their second selves could they realize the fantastical and magical visions they imagined.

It’s crucial to remember, however, that these identities were not created only out of amusement but by necessity. Tertz lived in a world which rejected any imagination or deviance from the Soviet blueprint, while Morrison lived in a world which rejected her very identity as a Black woman. To survive as artists, as authors writing texts which rejected the fundamental rules established by their surroundings, Tertz and Morrison were forced to fracture themselves into two separate beings: Chloe Anthony Wofford became both Chloe and Toni, while Andrei Sinyavsky became both Andrei and Abram. This fracturing became integral not only to their

identities, but also to their works and the characters they created, characters which we can only understand if we explore the societies that fractured our authors in the first place.

A. Early life and Career of Andrei Sinyavsky

Born on October 8th, 1925 in Moscow, Andrei Sinyavsky spent his childhood and young adulthood as the ideal Soviet citizen. With his father as a relatively high ranking member of the revolutionary Party, Sinyavsky became a devoted communist and revolutionary, his dedication to it approaching religious zeal. This zeal for communism endured all through his schooling years and was noted by his teachers and peers who marveled at his unshakable belief in the ideals of communism (Dalton). After serving briefly as an aviator, though never on the front lines, Sinyavsky attended Moscow University to study philology, a degree which he completed in 1949, three years after which he received the equivalent of a Ph. D. During his time as a student, Sinyavsky wrote extensively on other Russian authors, most notable of which was his dissertation on Maxim Gorky's work *The Life of Klim Samgin* (Markesinis, 23).

As Andrei Sinyavsky, our young author thrived. After finishing his graduate degree, Sinyavsky's career as a premier academic and literary scholar began. Sinyavsky started teaching Russian literature at Moscow University while working at the Gorky Institute of World Literature. Soon Sinyavsky began publishing articles commenting on and analyzing seminal Russian writers such as Mayakovsky, Gorky, Bagritskii, and Pasternak. Sinyavsky also gained renown for his work as a literary critic associated with "Новый Мир" (Novyi Mir), reviewing poets and authors such as Evgenii Evtushenko, Anna Akhmatova, Isaac Babel, and even Robert Frost. While in his early work as a literary scholar and critic Sinyavsky embodied the ideal Soviet scholar, quoting Lenin and Stalin in his earliest articles on Mayakovsky (1949), later in

his career Sinyavsky began to deviate from the demands of the Party, reviewing and praising more and more writers outside the acceptable norms¹ of Soviet writing and analyzing authors in a way which was greatly imaginative and unorthodox; in other words, completely unacceptable to Soviet standards (Markesinis, 22-23).

Parallel to his growth as a scholar and critic was Sinyavsky's gradual development into Abram Tertz. Sinyavsky's first works of writing differed greatly from the prose that would make him famous; in fact, he began with poetry written in the style of Blok, Mayakovsky and other imagists (Markesinis, 19-20). While his poetry was never published or referenced, he did highlight it in his autobiography, *Спокойной ночи!* (*Goodnight!*), even quoting from it in the last chapter, which focused on his transformation into Tertz.

His first publications as Abram Tertz came in the form of the essay «Что такое социалистический реализм» (“On Socialist Realism”) and novel *Суд идет* (*The Trial Begins*), both published in 1960. While it is impossible to trace the exact moment Tertz was created, there is no doubt that a large contributing factor was Sinyavsky's faith in the Party being destroyed after the arrest of his father in one of Stalin's purges in 1951 and the subsequent literal and ideological death of Stalin in 1953 and 1956 respectively, when Stalin's crimes were revealed to the public. Once Stalin's “Godly” status was destroyed, many believers in both him and the Party, Sinyavsky included, had their faith entirely shaken. Said Sinyavsky in his first essay and work as Tertz, “The death of Stalin inflicted an irreparable loss upon our religious aesthetic system...” (“On Socialist Realism,” 216). Perhaps this is the event which ultimately led Sinyavsky to fracture in two.

¹ Socialist realism was the official mode of art demanded by the Soviet regime. It emphasized realistic portrayals of the Soviet man (a good, communist worker) and discouraged excessive details beyond that which portrayed the “ideal” Soviet life.

However, Sinyavsky's faith in the communist party had started crumbling long before Tertz's first publication. While Sinyavsky the literary critic shone, Sinyavsky the artist watched as writers he admired, such as Anna Akhmatova and Mikhail Zoshchenko, suffered at the hands of Andrei Zhdanov, a prominent member of Stalin's inner circle who condemned all art and culture that deviated in any way from the strict Soviet standards. According to Sinyavsky, during that time he was forced to choose ideologically between his love for art and the politics of his country; needless to say, his love for art won (Markesinis, 11).

Soon, Sinyavsky's love for art, and specifically art as an exploration of pure creativity and imagination, turned him away from the Soviet regime. With his back to Stalin and his successors, Sinyavsky walked straight to the path of the Modernists and other literary 'revolutionaries' of the time. Inspired by Futurists such as Mayakovsky, Tertz's writing began to take on a fantastical quality, a quality which he would famously name *phantasmagoria*. This became central to his style as a writer and his longevity as an author. At the same time, Boris Pasternak became of huge importance to Sinyavsky. While Sinyavsky had long admired and studied Pasternak, at this point began to identify with him as a writer. Ideas such as the self-effacement of the writer and the rejection of the writer as a prophet, ideas emphasized by Pasternak, became integral themes in Sinyavsky's, or rather Tertz's, work (Markesinis, 38).

As these ideas crystallized, Sinyavsky began sending his manuscripts to be published abroad, a bold act of rebellion during the Cold War, and one which eventually got him arrested for crimes against the State (Markesinis, 21). It is his first publication which gives us the greatest insight as to why Sinyavsky created Tertz. «Что такое социалистический реализм» ("On Socialist Realism") detailed the restrictive nature of socialist realism, the only accepted genre of writing in the Soviet Union. And, in fact, both during and after Stalin's regime, variability

among writers was discouraged. The only writers *not* persecuted by the State were those who actively endorsed the views of the State via their writing; in other words, authors who focused their narratives on the ideal Soviet citizen, a hard working proletariat who valued the Soviet communal system and agreed unequivocally with the ideals of communism. Novels containing characters who deviated in any way from that mold, or prose which highlighted different ideas were dismissed and purged. Sinyavsky, unable and unwilling to accept these strict demands of the State, thus flourished in his second identity, that of the 'heretical' writer, Abram Tertz.

B. Early life and Career Toni Morrison

Six years after the birth of Sinyavsky and across the iron curtain, Chloe Ardelia Wofford, later to become the famed Toni Morrison, was born in a town not far from Cleveland, Ohio, called Lorain. Morrison's childhood was set on the background of a country still recovering from the Great Depression making her no stranger to economic strife; on one occasion after the Wofford's failed to pay rent, the landlord of the apartment set their home on fire. Both of Morrison's parents hailed from the South, a common setting in many of Morrison's novels. Her varied depictions of the South stem perhaps from her parents conflicting views on the South as both repugantly racist and beautiful in memory (Li, 1-2).

Morrison also spent a great deal of her childhood listening to stories passed down by her family. From her great-grandmother, she learned of life during slavery and the fear which permeated their everyday life. From her grandfather, Morrison learned of the continuing discrimination of the Jim Crow era. So impacted was Morrison by the stories shared by her grandparents, that she even based part of her novel *Song of Solomon* on her grandfather's life.

This tradition of oral storytelling left a deep impact on Morrison's work, which, in its own way, sought to continue this tradition (Li, 5).

Morrison excelled in high school and eventually became the second person in her family to go to university. She attended Howard University, one of the top historically Black universities in the U.S., where she studied English Literature, before completing her masters in English at Cornell University, where she wrote a thesis titled "Virginia Woolf's and William Faulkner's Treatment of the Alienated." The idea of alienated bodies and individuals would reappear in many of her works (Li, 13).

Post-graduation Morrison taught literature briefly at Texas Southern University, before returning to teach at Howard University. While teaching at both universities, Morrison developed a penchant for mentorship, which would endure throughout her entire career. After a divorce and the birth of her children, Morrison took time to return home and eventually pivoted into a career in publishing. She started a textbook division of Random House in Syracuse, before eventually moved up to the scholastic division in New York City. It was, however, during her time in Syracuse that she began to seriously write fiction. In an interview, Morrison explained that loneliness drove her to write; far from her family and her community, writing became a way for her to create both those things (Li, 18).

However, Morrison would not publish these works until many years later, instead focusing on her children and her career in publishing for the time being. Eventually, Morrison was promoted to trade editor at Random House and contributed to the editing and publication of emerging Black authors such as Henry Dumas, Gayl Jones, and Lucille Clifton. Morrison also contributed greatly to the publication of texts which would eventually become the foundation of many Black studies programs (Li, 22). Put simply, Morrison was dedicated to nurturing Black

voices, and in fact, was a great force behind much of the exceptional work that was published in the 1970's that focused on the Black female perspective.

At the same time as Morrison's career was growing, the Civil Rights Movement was in full gear. Violence against activists and the Black community continued throughout the 1960s, resulting in rising racial tensions but also rising collaboration between Black and non-Black communities fighting for equal rights. Morrison's primary concern during this time was that of the Black community: namely, valuing Black community and history even while fighting for integration. Again, Morrison emphasized nuance; the nuance of the Black community, of Black people, and of Black history. For example, she took issue with the slogan "Black is Beautiful," as she thought it diminished the value of Black people as not just beautiful but also skilled, resilient, and intelligent.

Even after the victory of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Black artists continued facing an increasingly complex social environment. As both a publisher and an author, Morrison became familiar with the criticism often launched at Black authors. Considering the political atmosphere and social hierarchy of the time, many African American critics took issue with some of the more negative portrayals of the Black community in both texts that Morrison edited and texts that she wrote. Critics argued that these texts promoted a negative view of the Black community. However, Morrison was committed to painting a nuanced image of the communities in these works, communities which included wise and strong characters like Pilate in *Song of Solomon*, and flawed, sometimes even abusive, but sympathetic characters like Macon Dead in the same novel. Through these characters Morrison showed that people are not as simple as 'good' or 'bad'; all *humans* are nuanced, and to get her readers and society at large to see Black people as *human*, she strove to show them in all their nuance.

Morrison also received a barrage of criticism calling her work too ‘narrow’. Critics patronized her choice to continue to write about Black protagonists, arguing that her choice to do so limited her capabilities as an author. In an interview with Charlie Rose, Morrison spoke of a question posed to her previously: could she imagine writing a novel not centered around race (“Toni Morrison Beautifully Answers” 0:00:19)? Morrison explained that the question was really asking when would she stop writing about Black people? When would she write a novel about white people? These kinds of ‘criticisms’ were launched at Morrison throughout her entire career, and endure even today.

Morrison’s work was also critiqued for her focus on the Black female perspective. Indeed, many of Morrison’s novels revolve around female protagonists, pushing male characters out of the center of the plot or making them antagonists of the work (*Love, Beloved, and Sula* are some examples). This led author Charles Johnson to criticize her portrayal of Black men as “bad,” while Stanley Crouch spoke against *Beloved* for moving “males into the wings” (Streitfeld). While Morrison was interested in the Black female perspective, as her later novel *Song of Solomon* proved, she wasn’t interested *only* in that perspective; Morrison was interested in exactly what she grew up listening to: stories about community, heritage, and family.

C. The Creation of Identity via the Fantastic

The creation of a second identity in these restrictive contexts becomes a sort of natural response. Feeling rejected in one’s birthed identity in a world which accepts only one particular kind of identity is an idea which presents itself repeatedly in the works of Sinyavsky and Morrison. For even though they existed in greatly different societies, they were dealing with very similar demands: demands to be one specific kind of author writing only mainstream and

accepted ideas. But Sinyavsky, or rather Tertz, and Morrison created literature that was exceptional by virtue of their deviations.

Equally notable is the choice both authors made to include magic, or the fantastic, into their work. While deviating from the laws that governed the literatures of their respective societies, they also deviated from the laws of physics. Morrison's characters learned how to fly, while Tertz's characters floated over an orchestra of colors. This reversal of power represented each author's desire to challenge the power structures imposed upon them. As each author experienced their birthed identity being rejected, fractured, or even destroyed, they found freedom in the fantastic.

The central question then becomes that of duality, namely how a dual identity is formed in response to trauma? How can identity be severed or destroyed as a result of trauma? And perhaps also, in what ways identity perseveres even in the face of trauma? For even when Sinyavsky and Morrison alter their identities, even when their names, perhaps the 'titles' of their identities, were altered, both authors held on dearly to their lineage, their history, and the literary heritage which tied them to authors who preceded them.

Thus, it becomes crucial to investigate authors with whom Sinyavsky and Morrison engage in their exploration of identity through both their characters and their own lives. For instance, Sinyavsky's dialogues with Pushkin and Pasternak, two authors with completely different styles and goals, shaped the essence of who Tertz the author was. On the other hand, Morrison's childhood of storytelling and her interaction with African American legends became immensely relevant to her texts. In other words, both authors valued the literary lineage that came before them. Or perhaps, more simply, they appreciated and learned from the storytelling that preceded them.

Through Abram Tertz's story "Pkhents" and Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon*, however, it becomes clear that Andrei Sinyavsky and Chloe Wofford did not exist separately from their authorly identities. On the contrary, through their works as Tertz and Morrison they built their own identities outside the limitations of their respective societies. Using magic and fantastical imagery in conjunction with their literary and personal ancestral lineage, both authors imagine a reality where their identities – personal, cultural, and authorial – can emerge in an honest and authentic way.

In the first part of this essay, I will investigate Tertz's short story "Pkhents" and its criticism of the repressive Soviet regime. Tertz creates an alien narrator who rejects many of the fundamental ideals of the Party and whose body exists outside the bounds of socialist realism, and more generally, outside the reach of the Party. Through his narrator, Sinyavsky also expresses more personal sentiments, such as his difficulties living in a society which rejected his true nature and frowned upon his scholarly contributions. However, via several mechanisms in the text, including the text's genre, the narrator's peculiar point of view, and the characters' referential names, Sinyavsky explores and builds his own identity as individual and author.

Following that, I will explore how Morrison embarks on a similar journey in her novel *Song of Solomon*. Although the novel follows the development of a singular male protagonist, I will demonstrate how his transformation is representative of a shared cultural evolution of identity. Using the oral storytelling as the primary mechanism for this transformation, Morrison emphasizes the importance of revisiting one's ancestral lineage and trauma in developing a sustainable identity. In doing so, Morrison not only revisits her protagonist's past but remembers her own, while simultaneously encouraging the reader to engage in their own act of

remembering. Through the ideas of history and memory, Morrison builds her identity and highlights the identity of her community.

In the final part of my analysis, I will underscore the importance of studying these texts in conjunction with one another. Sinyavsky and Morrison's texts demonstrate the universal nature of the human spirit and the vitality of cross cultural literary study. While the authors experienced different environments with completely different principles, they created works that underscored the same ideas. Considering the limited scholarship on the similarities of African American and Russian literature, it is more important than ever to compare and study the artistic and philosophical resemblance of these works.

II. Tertz: Expressions of Identity Through Phantasmagoria

Through his works as Abram Tertz, Sinyavsky could criticize and break free of the limitations placed on him as Andrei Sinyavsky. Where Sinyavsky pushed boundaries by writing about more fringe authors, Tertz broke all boundaries by writing about protagonists and themes which either ignored or opposed the Soviet purpose. Sinyavsky voiced in his writing, both as Tertz and later, as Sinyavsky, his teleological belief that writing did not require a purpose, and that creating for creation's sake was just as important of an endeavor (Tertz, *Goodnight!*).

Sinyavsky believed that writing without any capital P for purpose, was a tradition deeply ingrained in Russian literature. Most controversially, Sinyavsky asserted that even Pushkin wrote without purpose, citing *Evgeny Onegin* as an example of “a novel about nothing” (*Strolls with Pushkin*, 57) and calling his verse a “means of eroding the novel” (*ibid*, 60). In these assertions Sinyavsky is not arguing that Pushkin's novel has no meaning; rather that its meaning is self-evident. The novel does not exist for any purpose beside itself.

All these ideas were, of course, incredibly offensive to the dominant literary practice of social realism. Writing that did not promote or foreshadow Soviet ideals was seen as anti-Soviet and, as such, was often subjected to harsh criticism by Zhdanov and other propagators of the Soviet aesthetic. One of the core elements of socialist realism was that it “acknowledge[d] no alternatives to itself” (Peterson, 13). It was for this reason that authors such as Anna Akhmatova, and eventually Abram Tertz, were condemned for writing about topics that did not overtly oppose Soviet ideals, but rather excluded those ideals from their narratives. To do so was almost as heretical as to actively oppose the Soviet philosophy.

Morrison's writing, similarly, engaged with the literary conventions of her time in a tangential way. Though her work included stories where race was an important aspect of the

narrative, many of her novels were not actually *about* race. Yet, much of the criticism she received seemed to misunderstand that, construing her work as centering around race rather than in dialogue with the implications of race in society at large.

Similarly, Sinyavsky was frustrated with the limitations placed upon writing by his society. These frustrations found their expression via Tertz in the unusual narrator of “Pkhents,” his last short story sent to the West before his arrest in 1965. The story focuses on an alien who, after crashing onto Earth, is forced to disguise himself as a hunch-backed human. In doing so, he lives in immense pain and discomfort because of how he must contort his body. The story is filled with the mundane, but using defamiliarization and “phantasmagoria,” Sinyavsky shows the mundane in a completely new way, all the while illustrating the misery of the narrator. What results is a surprisingly autobiographical story with a completely new coloring of the ordinary.

“Pkhents”: The Alien as a Vehicle for Autobiography

As the story progresses, it becomes quite evident that “Pkhents” is as much a story about an alien as it is a story about an alienated Sinyavsky. The originality of this autobiography is also what makes it tragic: Sinyavsky chooses to express his experience of life through the body of an alien. What makes this work particularly notable is *how* Sinyavsky does this. First, the very fact that Sinyavsky uses a work of science fiction to reflect upon his own life on the fringe of Soviet society is of great import to the Russian literary tradition. Sinyavsky is one of many Russian authors who used science fiction and fantasy as a form of dissidence. The genre of the text, in conjunction with Sinyavsky’s manipulation of language and the symbolism of the physical bodies, make for an exceptionally unique autobiographical text that gives us insight into Sinyavsky’s perception of his own identity and the way he builds that identity through the text.

Science fiction holds a vital place in the Russian literary tradition. For as long as Russia has experienced repressive regimes, authors have looked to science fiction as an expressive outlet. Science fiction often operated as a mechanism for “the ideology of its time – even closer...than mainstream literature” (Nudelman, 38). Considering that the majority of Russian and Soviet regimes held strict rules about what could or could not be published in the mainstream, science fiction became a way to veil contrary or unorthodox perspectives – anything that deviated from the demands of the governing regime. The “fantastic world” thus became representative of “real changes” (ibid).

The use of the fantastic as an analogy for the real is not novel; however, science fiction differs from other genres in its explicit efforts to shake the reader's faith in their everyday life (Suvin, 209). Unlike realism, science fiction does not strive to illustrate a vignette of life and explore its meaning; instead, it uses the strange and unknown to highlight the “false securities” of life (ibid). This is especially true of science fiction in the 20th century. In the West, authors like H. G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, and George Orwell wrote about dystopian worlds and the future failures of mankind as a way to shock the reader and highlight the flaws that while exaggerated or hyperbolized in their fictional worlds, certainly existed in real society as well. In the East, authors like Evgeny Zamiatin and Chinghiz Aitmatov created seemingly distant worlds whose occupants faced cruelties not unlike those faced in Soviet Russia and its satellites. In other words, science fiction of the 20th century was somewhat inherently rebellious and dissident, thus, it was often kept out of the mainstream in Russia.

Science fiction briefly found its way into mainstream Russia in the early 1920s and the start of the Soviet regime. Because of the “enthusiasm for social reconstruction” that occurred following the Russian revolution and the implementation of the Soviet power, more radical

authors such as Zamiatin and Mayakovsky were briefly accepted into the mainstream, though Zamiatin's work was eventually banned in the Soviet Union during the Stalinist era. In fact, Zamiatin's work *We* was one of the foremost examples of science fiction as a method of dissidence, and his work was looked to by many subsequent dissident writers as a model.

While there is no written documentation on the explicit influence of *We* on Sinyavsky's work, Sinyavsky's love for modernist writers is well documented. Some of Sinyavsky's favorite writers, and writers who he drew the most influence from, were Babel, Olesha, and modernists Mayakovsky and Zamiatin (Markesinis, 47). Seeing as *We* was Zamiatin's most well known work, it is no leap to assume that Sinyavsky was inspired by that work. And it is easy to see that influence in his works; specifically in *The Trial Begins* and in "Pkhents". At its core, *We* is a novel about an extreme police state. The text is a dystopian science fiction about a utopian society ruled over by a single all-knowing ruler who is unanimously re-elected every year. All citizens wear an identical uniform, lead identical lives, and share all resources. The central tenet of this utopian society is that happiness and freedom are incompatible (Zamiatin, *We*).

If this plot sounds familiar, it's because Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* is almost certainly influenced by Zamiatin's work. Both novels take place in a society which attempts to create a utopia by suppressing human emotion and replacing diversity with uniformity; in essence, turning a dynamic society into a mechanistic one. Both works are prophetic. Zamiatin's work specifically predicts the social dynamics of Soviet Russia. His illustrations of uniformity and the principle of happiness and freedom being incompatible, become the foundations of Soviet propaganda. After all, the basis of Soviet communism was that all men are equal, and therefore, all men must work equally – some Soviet propaganda proselytized to "smite the lazy worker" (Epatko) – and all men should be rewarded equally. What did that mean in the context

of Soviet Russia? That men should not strive for their own individual happiness, but for the happiness of the whole society; in essence, they must give up their freedom for the happiness of the whole. Other details, such as the police “guardians” who kept watch over every action of the citizens, parallel the actions of Stalin’s regime – for example, his secret police who instilled fear into citizens and arrested those who did not follow his demands (Zamiatin, 30).

But Zamiatin’s text was more than just prophetic, it was truly dissident. What made it especially dissident was the portrayal of the State – it is no far leap to conflate “The Benefactor” with Lenin and subsequently Stalin – and the dialogue regarding revolution. Zamiatin dared to suggest that there can be no “last revolution” even after the great Russian Revolution and the ongoing international Communist revolution. Based upon the emotional leanings of the writing, the reader is likely to side with the revolutionaries in the text, who revolt against a leader more like Lenin or Stalin than the Tsars that preceded them. So, it becomes quite clear why the Soviet regime banned this text; it inflamed the passions of its reader in a non-patriotic borderline anti-communist way, and it did so quite explicitly.

Under the pen of Tertz, Sinyavsky also quite explicitly criticized the Soviet regime. One of his first publications, *The Trial Begins*, depicted the strict police surveillance that was quite normal in Russia at the time. *The Trial Begins* utilized a method which Sinyavsky famously described in “On Socialist Realism”: phantasmagoria. He defined phantasmagoria as, “[an] art with hypotheses instead of a Purpose, an art in which the grotesque will replace realistic description of ordinary life” (Tertz, “On Socialist Realism” 218). Using fantastical realism/phantasmagoria as a lens, and his own method titled phantasmagoria, Tertz explores and subverts the idea of the perfect Soviet man. The protagonist who represents this ideal is corrupt and unlikeable, selling out his own son to the State. The innocent son, Seryozha, is attacked and

imprisoned by the State despite the fact that he is a young school boy. And the idea of love in this Soviet world is completely perverted and reduced entirely to the vanity of a sociopathic mistress. Tertz attacks Soviet life and ideals while also employing many of the same tactics as Zamiatin: absurdist and magical mechanisms serve to highlight the shortcomings of the Soviet regime. It is also worth mentioning that both Zamiatin and Sinyavsky smuggled their works for publication in the West – a heretical crime during the Soviet regime.

During the 1930s, science fiction in the Russian literary tradition stagnated, primarily because of the rise of Stalinism. While previously science fiction had been an outlet and representative of emerging ideology, during the 1930s only one ideology was acceptable: that which was supported and proselytized by Stalin and his party. Few authors dared to “commit treason” against Stalin’s regime, and those that did, faced severe punishment and had their works suppressed. The only science fiction works that did enter the mainstream were those that actively promoted the agenda of the Party, such as Alexander Belyaev’s *Amphibian Man* (1928) and *Professor Dowell’s Head* (1925), texts which both highlighted the heroism of the communist protagonist and the evil of the capitalist antagonist.

During the 1950s and 1960s, however, science fiction was revived as a mechanism for dissidence. After Stalin’s death and during the subsequent thaw, authors could once more express differing ideologies, although only to a limited extent. One author whose work began to enter the mainstream at this time was Mikhail Bulgakov. Arguably the most influential piece of fantastical work published adjacent to Sinyavsky was Bulgakov’s work, *The Master and Margarita*. Though written in the 1930s and 1940s, Bulgakov’s text was published decades later in 1966, towards the end of the post-Stalin thaw. Bulgakov’s novel, which was a commentary and criticism of Stalin’s powerful hold on Russia, became *the* symbol of Soviet dissident

literature despite, or perhaps as a result of, its strange format, fantastical plot, and heretical depiction of Jesus and Satan, which was really a *double* heresy since Soviet authors were not supposed to involve religion in their works. Even critics of fantastical literature in favor of socialist realism defended his text for its exceptional contribution to Russian literature (Peterson, 109-110). After the publication of *The Master and Margarita*, fantastic fiction and science fiction rose to prominence in the 1970s, a rise which Sinyavsky contributed to as well. Bulgakov was also greatly influenced by Zamiatin, thus, it is unsurprising that Bulgakov and Sinyavsky's works share many similarities ("Bulgakov and Zamyatin").

While "Pkhents" is not a utopian novel or a novel with as much magical imagery as Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, "Pkhents" is most certainly a work of science fiction. The crash landing of an alien on Earth, an alien more similar to a cactus than a human at that, is a shocking and fantastical – or perhaps *phantasmagorical* – idea. Situated in the context of ordinary Russian society, the text operates similarly to other utopian works in that it highlights the flaws of that society by providing an unusual perspective. Thus, "Pkhents" exists firmly within the context of dissident fantastical literature. The fact that Sinyavsky situates autobiographical moments in this text reflects his own belief that he does not fit within the margins of Soviet ideals. Furthermore, by framing these moments in a science fiction text, he places not just his work, but his *identity* within the lineage of literary dissidence via the fantastical.

Science fiction was so important to Sinyavsky that he wrote about it under his own name too. In an article titled "No Allowances: Concerning the Modern Science Fiction Novel" (Без скидок: О современном научно-фантастическом романе) and published in 1960, Sinyavsky lamented on the current state of science fiction ("Без скидок (О современном научно-

фантастическом романе)"). The article details Sinyavsky's disappointment in authors' lack of imagination and creativity in the formerly fantastical genre (*ibid*). In particular, Sinyavsky argued that modern science fiction was too concerned with reality and practicality, instead of the "fantastic elements" that had come to "define the genre" (Reese, 440). Many of his complaints regarding the deterioration of science fiction mirror his criticisms in his most famous text as Abram Tertz, "On Socialist Realism" («Что такое социалистический реализм»). Sinyavsky, or rather Tertz, comments that a "true Soviet writer" has no "freedom of speech" or "freedom of individual[ity]" ("On Socialist Realism," 164). He attributed this to the all-purveying idea that all writing must be in service to "that sole Purpose," referring to the purposes of the party (On Socialist Realism, 163). Of course, as Tertz, Sinyavsky could be more explicitly critical and political than he could be in works penned under his own name. Nonetheless, Sinyavsky refused to be completely subservient to the Party even in his scholarly articles.

To place himself in the lineage of dissident science fiction works, Sinyavsky had to completely fracture himself and to create an entirely new and alien body. Through this body, Sinyavsky is able to distance himself from the larger Soviet body. For just as the Party demanded conformity to the socialist aesthetic, it also demanded the transformation of each Soviet individual into the perfect "socialist new human," the proletariat worker (Conn, 164). The idea of the "socialist new human" demanded not only a change in ideology, but also a change in physicality. Just as "indulgence" in material was frowned upon as a sin of the bourgeoisie, so too was indulgence in "food, sleep, and shelter" frowned upon (Naiman, 210). Thus, the Party strove to police not only the actions and thoughts of the larger Soviet body, but also the literal bodies of the Soviet people. The ideal man was one who did not rely upon food, sleep, or shelter except in their most bare and minimal forms; meaning, the ideal man was hungry, sleep deprived, and

cold. This, of course, lent itself to the Party's desire to control thought and action. After all, what thoughts can a sleep deprived, starving man act upon?

Situated in this context, the body of the narrator in "Pkhents" takes on two important meanings: on the one hand, it allows Sinyavsky an escape from his identity into the spirit of Abram Tertz and narratively into the outlandish body of an alien; on the other hand, it frees Sinyavsky from the physical demands of the Soviet body – largely because our narrator, who goes by Andrei Kazimirovich, does not exist merely in opposition to "socialist new human"; his alien body exists outside any Soviet power. His existence outside the reach of the Soviet 'cult' manifests in his rejection of all the bodily needs and desires of the Soviet man. Andrei "hardy ever go[es] into the kitchen" since he has no need of human food, he rejects the advances of the young Veronica since he has no sexual attraction to humans, and the only thing he really needs is water (Tertz, "Pkhents" 219).

At the moment Andrei rejects Veronica, however, her body takes on a much greater symbolic meaning. Even through the lens of the disgusted narrator, Veronica still symbolizes femininity and fertility (Conn, 196), ideas which, though not entirely central to Soviet socialist norms, certainly supported the vision of a proletarian world, created via procreation and the propagation of socialist ideas. Andrei's rejection of her body becomes an instance of his rejection of the Soviet state. Instead, he observes her body with morbid curiosity, which, via his complete defamiliarization of her body, yields a frightening image of her femininity, completely rid of its connection to the proletarian dream.

Andrei's disgust with the human body does not end with Veronica's femininity; he finds the human body itself "irredeemably ugly"; so ugly that if he were a human, he would never shed his clothing (Tertz, "Pkhents" 225). The only bodies bearable to him are those with hunchbacks,

a form which he adopts to blend in. This mundane preference, too, is distinctly in opposition to the “socialist new human,” for central to the ideal socialist man was the ability to work. Much of the imagery in Soviet propaganda revolved around strong, young men dressed in the gear of workers (Conn, 202). To create a character who himself was neither young nor able bodied and who preferred and idealized other disabled bodies, completely perverts the ideals propagated to the Soviet people.

Finally, Andrei’s body is the ultimate subversion of the socialist man. His true form is greatly different from a regular man’s body; he compares himself to a “potted palm” with extra “limbs” that unfold after a long day (Tertz, “Pkhents” 238). With eyes all over himself, he only needs to “raise [his] hand and [he] can see [him]self from the ceiling, soaring and hovering over [him]self as it were” (Tertz, “Pkhents” 239). Andrei calls his body his “homeland,” the closest thing he has to the “harmony and beauty” of his home planet which he has lost (ibid). This comment in itself is quite radical, the idea of self as homeland as opposed to thinking of oneself in service of the larger Soviet homeland. Perhaps Andrei’s ultimate perversion of the socialist ideals is his independence; all he needs is water. That means that Andrei does not rely upon the society around him. He has no need for food, trade, or commerce. He can operate on his own. Ultimately, he is so unhappy in society that he chooses to live in isolation and to kill himself rather than to conform to his surroundings. What could be a more radical idea?

The narrator’s body, however, is not just a subversion of the socialist man; it is representative of Sinavsky’s experiences in Soviet Russia. Once the narrator begins sharing his story, the text starts to feel distinctly autobiographical. The narrator shares a similar and “human” background; the narrator invents himself as “Andrei Kazimirovich Sushinski...Half-Polish, half-Russian” – it’s no coincidence that Sinyavsky and the narrator share their first name

(Andrei) and that Sinyavsky was part Polish (Tertz, “Pkhents” 232). Andrei the narrator works as a bookkeeper – not an author, but certainly adjacent to one – and emphasizes that he did not come to Earth with any “ulterior motive” (ibid, 233). Despite that, he recognizes that there is no place for him in human society. Living as Andrei, he is already an outcast and hunchback, forced to lock his door and shutter the windows when he wishes to stretch out his limbs and show his natural form. If he were to reveal his true identity, he would either be charged with a crime or studied as a specimen; either way, he would be confined. In other words, there is no way for him to live truthfully and freely. He must lie for any semblance of freedom, and he must hide for any moment of truth.

Though our two Andrei’s differ in great and substantive ways, at their core, they share the same struggle for Sinyavsky, too, was forced to choose between freedom and truth. And Sinyavsky, too, would be confined if he revealed his true identity, even though like our narrator, he had no “ulterior motive”. As he pointed out in his trial of 1966, he meant no harm to the State; he was just “different” (Nepomnyashchy, 64). Virginia Lee Conn commented of the narrator, “His human disguise allows him to exist at the edges of society without the requirements of fully entering into it; he can, himself, be both despised and simultaneously tolerated to exist” (205). Yet, this statement seems to apply most not to Andrei Kazimirovich Sushinski but to Andrei Sinyavsky. As himself, albeit only part of himself, Sinyavsky existed on the edges of society, both despised and tolerated; tolerated for his scholarly contributions and ostracized for his controversial choices as a scholar (for example, choosing to review less normative and more controversial works).

The narrator's physical form is also symbolic. It is worth examining his body when he finally unfurls himself: he has at least two extra limbs, a “third hand” and “fourth...hand,” “eyes

in [his] hands and feet, on the crown of [his] head and the nape of [his] neck” (Tertz, “Pkhents” 238). These eyes, though, grow “dimmer” from the constraints of the clothing he wears, with one eye already blind from the “friction of [his] right shoe” (ibid). Living among humans has caused him to deteriorate; and yet, his body is still “beautiful...proportionate! Elegant!” (Tertz, “Pkhents” 239). With all its maladies – “two fingers ha[d] withered” – his body is still far better than the repugnant human body (ibid).

On the one hand, this description further highlights the subversion of the ideal socialist man; our narrator, with all his deformities – a missing eye, two withered fingers – is still more beautiful than a human; an outright insult! On the other hand, his body alludes to a greater idea: that of truth. The narrator operates within the human world appearing just like them, albeit with a hunchback. He uses two hands and has two eyes. In his effort to conform, an effort he must make if he wishes to survive in society, he damages his body, limbs and eyes that give him greater motor and perceptual abilities. His limbs become weak and contorted. His eyes grow dimmer. To live in this society, he is forced to sacrifice all that makes him different – all that makes him strong.

And his eyes, in particular, are of note, for in his natural state he has eyes all over his body. The idea of a creature covered in eyes is not new; in fact, it is deeply embedded into many mythologies, including Greek mythology. Argus Panoptes, “panoptes” meaning “all seeing,” was a watchman for Hera who always had eyes open in every direction (“Argus Panoptes”). Our narrator is no warrior-watchman, but the presence of eyes all over his body suggests that he is all seeing, or at the very least, he is closer to all seeing than humans are; and if that is true, if this narrator is all seeing, then what does that say of the poor humans? Is it true that humans are “irredeemably ugly” and that “shame...is man’s fundamental virtue” (Tertz, “Pkhents” 225)?

Perhaps, but that is beside the point. Our narrator has reason to despise humans and to be repulsed by their ugliness relative to his kind. Nonetheless, his sight is clear enough to *acknowledge* the ugliness in people and that is precisely the point.

Thus, through this alien narrator, Sinyavsky can express not only his experiences on the fringes of society, but also his thoughts and feelings on the kind of people Soviet socialism has engineered. A people whose defining characteristic is their uniformity, whose beauty lies in their bodies being components of a larger body, that scorns those who are unlike them as freaks. Sinyavsky shouts through the narrator, “I’m not a freak, I tell you! Just because I’m different do you have to be rude? It’s no good measuring my beauty against your own hideousness. I’m handsomer than you and more normal. Every time I look at myself I have the evidence of my own eyes for it,” again referring to the narrator’s many eyes, his propensity for truth (Tertz, “Pkhents” 237).

“Pkhents” is not just a science fiction story about an alien, it is a story that can be read autobiographically, and it is perhaps the most truthful Sinyavsky has ever been. Through the alternative identity of Abram Tertz, Sinyavsky can present a truly honest work that was both shocking and stunning in the context of social realism. It is Sinyavsky, opening all his eyes, dimmed by the constraints of the Party, and looking at himself, perhaps also understanding that the road for him would end in confinement, as it did after his trial in 1965. But Sinyavsky did not simply hold up a mirror to himself, for a mirror could not capture how fractured his identity really was. Instead, Sinyavsky created a marked distance between himself and his autobiography, twice removed from his identity, by both name and form.

“Pkhents” appears to be all about an alien, Andrei Kazimirovich Sushinski; but Andrei Kazimirovich Sushinski is really a representation of dissident writer Abram Tertz; in turn,

Abram Tertz is really a representation of a *part* of Andrei Sinyavsky; and Andrei Sinyavsky, who is the only real person among the three, is really just a Russian scholar – except he’s not. He is an alien and a writer and a dissident and a radical and a scholar; but he’s only allowed to be one of those things as Sinyavsky. So, he instead builds his full identity through his work as Tertz, rejecting the body of the “socialist new human” and creating his own, while also imbuing the surrounding text with his lineage. What’s even more ironic, as Nepomnyashchy points out in her analysis of “Phkents,” is that “Sushinsky,” our aliens pseudonym, sounds remarkably similar to Sinyavsky (65). In this text filled with autobiographical moments, Sinyavsky chooses to use a slight subversion of his real name as the protagonist’s legal, but “forged” identity, suggesting that Sinyavsky’s identity as a literary scholar is forged as well (ibid).

While alluding to this forgery, Sinyavsky also weaves that which is true and not forged – his literary and artistic forefathers. Gogol, Tolstoy, even Pushkin find their way into the text. Gogol is alluded to via “the specter of a burned manuscript” while Pushkin is both directly referenced and embedded into the narrator’s human name – “Sushinsky” can be interpreted as a combination of Sinyavsky and Pushkin (Nepomnyashchy, 65). Gogol and Pushkin were both hugely important to Sinyavsky; during his time incarcerated in a Soviet labor camp, he wrote and smuggled out *Strolls with Pushkin* (Прогулки с ПУШКИНЫМ) and *In the Shadow of Gogol* (В тени Гоголя), texts which demonstrated his dialogue with the authors. Malevich, a symbol of the Russian avant garde, not far from Sinyavsky’s great influence Mayakovsky, is also named in the text. “Kazimirovich,” the narrator’s patronymic may be an allusion to Malevich, whose first name is Kazimir. By embedding his name into the patronymic, Sinyavsky suggests that Malevich is an artistic parent to his work (ibid, 203). Both Malevich and Mayakovsky were futurists, and artists in the early Soviet era who refused to alter their art in service of politics. Sinyavsky wrote

at length about the influence of Mayakovsky and the futurists on his work in some of his later, more overtly autobiographical texts (Reese, 440).

In her analysis, Nepomnyashchy takes this one step further, asserting that Sinyavsky isn't just documenting his artistic fathers but also pointing towards the inadequacies of language and literary reception. The narrator's assertion that his existence would be turned into a caricature of its actuality – “ladies would begin to paint their lips with green lipstick and order hats in the shape of cactuses” (Sinyavsky 245) – serves as a metaphor for the “parodies of themselves” that authors are turned into (Nepomnyashchy, 72). Nepomnyashchy explains, “canonization transforms the writer from a representing subject into an object of representation; the line between reality, fiction and myth...is erased” (ibid). The narrator touches upon this idea when speaking of his death, imagining in horror what would happen if his body were to be found by humans (Sinyavsky, 245). This “corpse,” argues Nepomnyashchy, “suggests an image of the writer, divorced from himself, transformed into the body of the text” as the readers “kill the body by seeking in it some ‘educational’ value” (73). And so, via this short story, Sinyavsky not only navigates and builds his identity as Sinyavsky and Tertz, but also, more broadly, as an author and artist. How does one understand and interpret art, which is by its nature foreign and divine?

Once we frame “Pkhents” as Sinyavsky’s gesture of building identity, smaller details start to make more sense. For example, Sinyavsky’s contortion of language via the narrator becomes a representation of his struggle as a Soviet author. One of the more unusual moments in the text is when Veronica begins spewing incoherent nonsense to the narrator. In her rant condemning Andrei for rejecting her, she begins with full sentences, then breaks down to short phrases, finally just repeating “man...human...humanity...man to man,” evoking the Soviet propaganda of the time (Tertz, “Pkhents” 241). Veronica’s language breaking down in this

manner suggests the uniformity and robotic nature of Soviet language, all Soviet language pointing back to the brotherhood of the proletariat, man to man, «человек-человеку» (Conn, 202). However, as often as our narrator faces the stilted Soviet language, he ultimately rejects it. The text ends with the narrator's cry for his native language: "PKHENTS! GOGRY TUZHEROSKIP! GOGRY! I am coming back to you. GOGRY! GOGRY! TUZHEROSKIP! TUZHEROSKIP! BONJOUR! GUTENABEND! TUZHEROSKIP! BU-BU-BU! MIAOW, MIAOW! PKHENTS!" (Tertz, "Pkhents" 245).

How can this gibberish mean anything to Sinyavsky's identity? In the first place, this gibberish is representative of a higher truth. It is the narrator's attempt to connect with his true self. Thus, if the narrator is a representation of Sinyavsky, his cries are a representation of Sinyavsky trying to reach his true self. But what do these words mean? It has been suggested that "Pkhents" is just a subversion of Tertz, propounding the idea that Tertz is a more truthful or higher version of Sinyavsky (Nepomnyashchy, 67). And while Tertz was only one part of Sinyavsky, it is quite possible that Sinyavsky saw Tertz as a higher version of himself. Tertz, after all, was named after Abrasha Tertz, a "legendary bandit whose exploits are celebrated in an Odessa thieves' song" (Sinyavsky, *Strolls With Pushkin* ix). Tertz was an author who followed in the footsteps of Pushkin, Gogol, and the futurists, creating art for its own sake. Tertz was a rebel and unafraid to write his thoughts, no matter the consequences; so perhaps he was a higher version of Sinyavsky.

The other aspect of this gibberish that is relevant is its complete independence from the Soviet Russian grasp. Because it has no meaning, apart from "bonjour" and "gutenabend," it is impossible for it to be in dialogue with the Soviet language or for it to be subverted by socialist propaganda. The insertion of Western language, French and German, serves as a protest and a

reach for transcendence. On the one hand, inserting Western ideas in any form actively opposed the demands of the Party. On the other hand, including some sort of grasp towards the international suggests that this higher truth Sinyavsky is reaching for cannot be limited to one language. Moreover, if the Soviet language is uniform and robotic, the language of our narrator is the exact opposite – it is strange and unpredictable. Its importance is not its meaning or purpose, but its symbolism: the narrator’s reach for his home, for himself. And in this way, it exactly parallels the importance of this text: not its meaning or purpose, but Sinyavsky’s reach for himself.

Moreover, this gibberish returns us to the concept of art as a divine ideal. Just as Sinyavsky fought against the idea that fictional writing could be constrained to only represent Soviet ideals, Sinyavsky held in great disdain the idea that art must have some greater purpose or didactic meaning. Many of Sinyavsky’s later works, in fact, strove to capture a purposeless narrative; a narrative which instead existed for its own sake. Most famously, *Strolls with Pushkin*, was “written in defense of pure art” with an “agenda of aimlessness” (Markesinis, 101). His careless and playful tone when referring to the hero of Russia, Pushkin, generated a great amount of pushback; however, he maintained his defense of pure art, “writing for its own sake” without “social obligations” or a “historical mission” (Markesinis, 126). Though “Pkhents” was written long before *Strolls with Pushkin*, it contains the same idea, the idea of art that does not claim to have purpose but strives to transcend. This gibberish then becomes an attempt to “embody the divine,” which, of course, is impossible (Nepomnyashchy, 75). However, Nepomnyashchy argues, in emphasizing “language’s inability to represent” the divine, Sinyavsky “does not negate the possibility of literature, but rather affirms it in terms of paradox” (Nepomnyashchy, 74).

Consequently, the narrator's outcry of gibberish comes to represent three distinct things: Sinyavsky's own reach for transcendence, his assertion of independence from Soviet Russia, and his belief in art for art's sake. But these three lines do not embody these ideas in their full maturity. On the contrary, being one of his earliest works as Abram Tertz, "Pkhents" does not contain any of Sinyavsky's ideas fully matured. Instead, this text consists of Sinyavsky's first reach towards his identity as a writer in a society, which not only limited and scorned his ideas but *criminalized* them. The crash landing and impending death of the alien narrator, with all its irony and complex allusions, thus serves as the birthplace for many of the ideas that would come to define Sinyavsky/Tertz.

III. Morrison: Community & Identity Building via the Oral Tradition

Like Sinyavsky, Morrison found a sense of freedom in her texts that she could not enjoy in her daily life; namely, freedom from the white gaze. For while Morrison's texts were certainly scrutinized by the white gaze, they were written outside of that gaze. To write outside the white gaze was a radical idea at the time and certainly no easy feat. More specifically, everywhere Morrison turned, critics and readers alike tried to superimpose the white gaze upon her works; thus, while Morrison could express herself freely in her writing, outside of her writing she would be forced to defend her works' position outside the white gaze. Most famously, Morrison explained on the Charlie Rose show why being asked if she would ever write a text "*not* centered around race" was actually a question cloaked in racial biases ("Toni Morrison Beautifully Answers"). She graciously elucidated to Charlie Rose that the question implied that she ought to write about something else, that to write outside the white gaze about Black people was somehow less than writing about white people (ibid).

Morrison would be forced to justify her positionality as an author over and over again. In other words, while Morrison's artistry could not be denied, her identity as an author was dismissed and degraded as either too racialized or not racialized enough. In her review of Morrison's novel *Sula*, Sara Blackburn wrote, "Toni Morrison is far too talented to remain only a marvelous recorder of the Black side of provincial American life...she might easily transcend that...limiting classification 'black woman writer' and take her place among the most serious, important and talented American novelists now working" (Blackburn). In her suggestion that Morrison *could* be an important writer she simultaneously implied that being a black woman writer and a serious or important one were two mutually exclusive positions, while also suggesting that Morrison's writing lacked importance because it merely recorded Black life. In

other words, Blackburn wanted Morrison to create work firmly *within* the white gaze instead of outside of it. On the other hand some critics, such as Charles Johnson, chastised Morrison for playing too much into the white gaze. Johnson, himself Black and an exceptional writer, called Morrison's work "offensive, harsh," and "a triumph of political correctness" (Streitfeld). However, as Morrison explained in much of her critical writing, her concern was not illustrating bodies in a politically correct manner, but in a manner which captured the nuance of the human experience.

Though fighting off these different forms of criticism, Morrison was able to maintain her voice as an author, a voice in great part shaped by her childhood and young adulthood. Years of exchanging stories with her family imbued Morrison with an appreciation for the oral tradition and, more specifically, its role in shaping the community (Li, 5). Just as Morrison learned of her heritage via spoken stories, many of the characters in her texts developed their identity via the passage of spoken stories. Moreover, many of Morrison's texts explored African mythology and folklore, utilizing those stories to build identity. It is also worth noting the ways in which Morrison illustrates the physical body and its defects or imperfections. Through these depictions of the body and emphasis on generationally preserved oral stories, Morrison builds both identity and community in her novel *Song of Solomon*.

Song of Solomon: Revisiting the Past to Build the Future

There are several histories intertwining in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*: the history of Morrison's family, the history of the fictional Milkman's family, and the history of the "legend of the flying Africans" (Iyasere, 44). These three threads did not exist independent of one another, instead often interacting with and enriching each other and all told via oral storytelling.

The effect of these stories on identity and community – the identity and community of Milkman and Morrison, even the identity and community of African Americans – is given physical manifestation via the bodies of the characters in the text; Milkman’s limp and Pilate’s navel hold important meaning to tying the past with the future. The very idea of past and future is one central to the concepts of identity and community, and it is an idea which Morrison holds closely in this work. Slowly but surely, as she rebuilds Milkman’s past for the sake of his future, she constructs her own past for the sake of her identity.

Integral to the text’s greater meaning is the legend of the flying Africans. Born from a rather tragic event, namely the suicide of a group of enslaved people, the legend is one that was passed orally for generations; a legend that remains relevant even in today’s pop culture (Hallock, 2021). While there are many different versions of the legend, the general story remains the same: a group of Nigerians brought to America to be enslaved revolt and regain their freedom, flying back to Africa. But the legend is worth exploring in greater depth to better understand its role in Morrison’s text and its relevance to African American history, memory, and community.

The legend can be traced back to a recorded historical event: the uprising of a group of Nigerians who refused to be enslaved. The location, called Igbo’s Landing since many Africans brought there were of Igbo descent, was St. Simons Island in Georgia and the year was 1803; an entire group of people brought to be traded as slaves chose the marshes of Georgia over a life enslaved (Allison, 2019). They were officially declared dead by drowning but unofficially heralded by generations of island residents as free Africans who flew back home. Details such as whether they flew or walked over water back to Africa are varied, but their freedom is uncontested: in some way, somehow, they escaped (ibid).

Just as Morrison emphasizes geography in much of her work, the geography of this legend is important too. Namely, it helps explain how the legend survived and grew to become so important to the African American oral and literary tradition. St. Simons is a relatively isolated part of a group of islands stretching from the Carolinas to Florida. Being detached from the mainland slowed the forced assimilation of African customs seen in other states and allowed certain cultural customs to survive. This is also in great part due to the Gullah-Geechee people of the island who preserved the story and whose preservation of the legend led to its documentation in the 1930s. At that time, the Works Project Administration during Roosevelt's New Deal funded a project to interview formerly enslaved people and document the oral history derived from those interviews.

Documented in those interviews are some of the core tenets of the legend; the Africans' flight back home and the singing immediately preceding their flight. The detail of singing is one that persists in all iterations of the legend, including Morrison's text. While the lyrics of this song can vary, a single chant in a Bantu dialect remains the same: "Come booba yalle, come booba tambee" (Song of Solomon, 264). Though the literal meaning of those words has been lost, their symbolic meaning has not. Uttering the chant summons the same sort of magic Morrison reaches for in her works.

In addition to symbolizing freedom for enslaved Africans during the slave trade, some historians have suggested that the legend can be tied to language used by runaway enslaved people. Flight is no doubt an idea tied to freedom; thus, it was used as an idea of resistance and a hope for liberation by many enslaved individuals. The song and chant so vital to this legend was also tied to the hymn "Oh Freedom!", a song spread especially during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s (Hallock, 2021). During the 1960s, when the legend was retold, the

Bantu dialect was replaced by this hymn (ibid). In other words, over the span of two centuries, the legend of the flying Africans has been tied to many movements of Black liberation. In pop culture of recent years, this legend has been tied to visual art, literature, including that of Morrison's of course, and even to pop star Beyonce, whose music video of "Love Drought" evoked images of the legend, showing a procession of Black women marching into the water and raising their hands for freedom.

These small details are not just ornaments to the legend at hand here; they play a vital part in understanding the state of African American history in the 20th century and the importance of the legend to African American culture today. Notably, the kind of project involved with documenting African American oral tradition in St. Simon was both uncommon and, in many cases, incomplete. This becomes an important point to Morrison's texts: African American history is both poorly documented and poorly funded. While this was especially true in the 20th century, it remains a problem in the 21st century, a problem Morrison was deeply interested in and which underscores the importance of Morrison's texts today. African American history is closely tied with the larger African American memory; but as Morrison points out, memory can be both emotionally difficult to engage with and factually unreliable.

Song of Solomon explores in great depth the importance of history and memory in building identity, and it does so via a familiar mechanism, that of the *Bildungsroman*². The story follows Macon Dead III, known to the reader more commonly as Milkman. As the story unfolds, we get to learn every aspect of Milkman's life, though not in chronological order. In fact, much of the text happens in a strange order. The reader is thrown quite abruptly into the text the day before Milkman's birth. Later in the text, the reader learns all about the months leading up to his

² A German word which literally translates to "education-novel". This novel follows the growth of a protagonist's morals and perception of the world, usually during the protagonist's youth.

birth, and only at the end of the novel do both Milkman and the reader learn about his familial ancestry and the context of many of the events presented to us earlier in the text. In other words, time is presented in a non-linear, unorthodox way, not dissimilar to the abnormal way our memory works. After all, our recollection of the past and hopes for the future rarely present themselves in linear ways.

To simplify the text to its bare bones, it follows the identity creation of Milkman. Milkman only truly learns and discovers who he is in the last chapters of the book. So what purpose then have all the previous chapters? One way to view this text is that the majority of the chapters are all just context, the history and memories required for Milkman to build his identity and discover who he really is. In that case, the form of the book follows its argument: a vast and long-spanning dive into one's past is necessary for one's future. For without understanding our memory and our history, we cannot understand ourselves.

The question then becomes, what aspects of memory and history must be explored to understand ourselves? What must Milkman learn to build his identity? And what does Morrison emphasize to build hers? There are no exhaustive answers to these questions, and based upon Morrison's philosophy of writing, namely that her texts were not complete and stationary but open and evolving, it seems she is merely providing suggestions. Morrison suggests that identity formation requires the exploration of generational trauma, an understanding of one's ancestral history, and an attention to the stories of our predecessors. Based upon her care for the stories of characters besides Milkman, she also suggests the importance of the *individual* experience of trauma and listening to others' traumas. This contributes greatly to her building of community in the text.

Milkman's first attempt at claiming his identity comes quite early in the text. Upon first meeting Pilate, his aunt, he is angered by her claim that there are only "three Deads alive," shouting in response "I'm a Dead! My mothers a Dead! My sisters. You and him ain't the only ones!" (Song of Solomon, 38). However, at this time, Milkman has no real understanding of his name or its meaning. He "wonder[s] why he was suddenly so defensive" as "he had always hated that name" (ibid). Milkman feels some sort of pull to protect his own name, but he has not yet learned the depth of this name, the history and trauma behind it, so he cannot even comprehend his reaction. The syntactical play here is also notable; in claiming his name he shouts a statement that could be interpreted differently if heard and not read: I'm *dead*, my mother's *dead*, my sisters as well. This suggests that the reader may be engaged in an act of remembering, too; they are remembering the lives of all these *dead* characters.

But at this point, Milkman is not remembering anything; he is neither concerned with his history or the generations of trauma endured by his family. And so, he has no real identity. He uses others for what they can give him, then tosses them away, and in doing so he almost loses his entire family. But this disregard for others is not unpunished; it manifests quite literally in his limp, or rather, not a limp but a "suggestion of one", for without any regard or care for his history and the generational memory of his family he is crippled (Song of Solomon, 62).

Milkman's "limp" comes about around the age of 14. He notices that "one of his legs [is] shorter than the other" by about "half an inch," so he "never [stands] straight" always "slouch[ing]" or "lean[ing]" (ibid). The cause of his limp, namely that one of his legs simply didn't grow enough, suggests some sort of stunting. His growth has been stunted just as the development of his identity . The age at which this happens, fourteen, suggests that something has precluded him from becoming an adult. Put simply, his body has refused to complete its

transformation into a completely grown adult by stopping the growth of his leg just as his identity cannot complete its evolution. Something has gotten in the way of his maturation, and Morrison shows us exactly what it is.

In the rest of the first part of the novel, Milkman damages – almost beyond reparation – every relationship he has. He “yank[s]” his father “out of his chair and knock[s] him into the radiator” (SOS, 67), he insults his mother, accusing her of “spending a night every now and then with [her] father” (SOS, 123), he destroys the only loving relationship Corinthians had, and, in Lena’s own words, has led his sisters to see him as “a sad, pitiful, stupid, selfish, hateful man” (SOS, 216). But after each of these moments, his family still gifts him with the one thing he needs most: memories. After Milkman assaults him, Macon Dead explains to him exactly where his feelings of rancor towards Ruth come from. When Milkman confronts Ruth about his father’s words, she unveils to him her life and memories and explains her positionality. When Lena confronts Milkman for his selfish behavior, she illustrates for him all the ways he “pissed” on their lives (ibid). Each of his family members forces him to look at his past, his father’s past, and his mother’s past. Whether he likes it or not, Milkman carried the burdens of those pasts too.

But for years, Milkman rejects this past. After his father bares to him perhaps his most vulnerable secret, that his own wife seemingly preferred her father to her husband, that as far as he perceived she may have even preferred to lay with her father, Milkman’s response is “What the fuck did he tell me that shit for?” (SOS, 76). Milkman “didn’t want to know any of it” (ibid). He listens to his mother, but even after her lamentation on all she has done for him, he continues to use her and his sisters for all they do for him; and after Lena wrings him for his behavior, he leaves without even a trace of an apology.

However, Milkman *is* impacted by the memories of his family. He cannot help but be transformed by it. His father's story forces him to "think of his mother as a person, a separate individual" (SOS, 75). His mother's explanation prompts him to think about what his mother has done for him, and only subsequent to that explanation does Milkman think about the concept of "remembrance" (SOS, 126). And Lena's confrontation with Milkman comes right before his journey to learn his history, to remember. These memories start to build him, or at the very least they give him the tools to build himself. In this first part, even *before* he embarks on his journey through memory and history, Morrison points towards that which is integral in building identity. Just as Milkman's family gives him the tools he needs to embark on his journey, Morrison touches upon the tools necessary to build her own community and identity, memory and more specifically the *act* of remembering.

These ideas become all the more pronounced in the second part of the novel when Milkman embarks on a journey of self discovery. His journey essentially follows his own ancestral lineage; first, he visits the sites of Macon and Pilate's lives, then he visits Circe who raised them, finally he visits the home of his grandmother, along the way learning all about his father, his father's parents, and even their parents. That is all to say, on Milkman's journey to discover his identity, he learns all about the identities of those who preceded him--their memories, their histories, and their trauma. And only through this, through the act of *remembering*, can he begin to grow.

Milkman's journey begins with him on a flight to his father's past: the city he grew up in. It is notable that his journey begins with flight, just as the entire novel begins with flight and just as the Nigerians' journey to Africa from Igbo's landing begins with flight. The first leg of his journey takes him to the home of Reverend Cooper who greets him with the phrase, "I know

your people!” (SOS, 229). Upon hearing this phrase, Milkman feels eased and comfortable, while the Reverend immediately invites him into his home. It is as though Reverend Cooper has just said “I know you!”. And, in essence, this *is* what he just said. Through Reverend Cooper, Morrison has voiced one of the main themes of her text – that knowing one’s people is the same as knowing oneself or, more precisely, that one is a prerequisite for the other. The sense of belonging, of being known, makes Milkman “beam,” and how can he not? Through these simple words of the Reverend, Milkman begins to forge a connection with his past.

Milkman’s connection is subsequently built by stories of his family’s past, or rather, his inherited past. As he sits in the home of the Reverend, Milkman drinks up memories the man has of his father and aunt while also drinking the home brewed beverage the Reverend’s wife provides. Through their act of hospitality Milkman learns tenfold what he knew before of his family. And all through the mechanism of the oral tradition; all in the very way Morrison was taught by her family – sitting around the table, sharing stories.

Milkman’s intimate conversation with the Reverend is only the beginning. In the context of the novel, the Reverend’s home is just a pit stop on Milkman’s journey; he knocks on their door in the hopes of ascertaining a way to find Circe. Circe – who seems to float between life and death, youth and age, past and present. Milkman is perplexed upon seeing her: “Circe is dead. This woman is alive...she might in any case be dead – as a matter of fact, she *had* to be dead...the face so old it could not be alive, but...the strong mellifluent voice of a twenty-year-old girl” (SOS, 240). It is precisely this quality about her that makes her so vital to Milkman’s growth. Circe is a manifestation of the values Morrison expresses through the text; she is in a way the embodiment of time and identity, for she is suspended in time and memory. Ultimately, it is unclear how she is suspended there, whether it is through her own memory, the memory of

the estate around her, or others' memories of her. But her very suspension emphasizes the power of memory to manifest physically, and memory's power over death. Or perhaps, more accurately, the unknown and ambiguous nature of death, tying back again to the flight from Igbo's landing. Does Circe exist in death or in freedom? Has she found a way to fly away from her former life and into one that transcends? Has she merged past and present, and does that mean she has achieved a sort of "nirvana" of identity?

Regardless of what the answer may be, Circe is undoubtedly firmly connected to the past and deeply rooted in memory, and she shares this mystical aspect of herself with Milkman via, once again, storytelling. Circe tells how Pilate "borned herself" out of her own mother's dead body (SOS, 244). She tells Milkman of his grandmother, "Sing Dead" (SOS, 243), and how both she and Milkman's grandfather came from Virginia (SOS, 244). Milkman even learns his grandfather's name, his real name, the one he had before white men gave him a new one: "Jake" (SOS, 248). And though this is only part of his name, it's more than Milkman has ever known of his grandfather, and it is another piece of the puzzle. Thus, Milkman learns more than he's ever known about his ancestral past and all via the mechanism of the oral tradition.

Joyce Irene Middleton explores at length the oral tradition in her essay, "From Orality to Literacy: Oral Memory in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*". She highlights "the central role of memory...to preserve cultural knowledge" since enslaved people were prohibited from learning to read (Smith, 21). While many enslaved people learned to read regardless, the oral tradition remained an important mechanism for the sharing of knowledge. Middleton points to the discourse between literacy and the oral tradition in her essay, highlighting how Macon's father lost his property because of his illiteracy (Smith, 25). Thus, Macon "associates literacy with property, ownership, and material success" and distances himself from oral memory, represented

in the text by Pilate's many stories and songs (ibid). Yet, even Macon cannot resist the power of Pilate's songs, "softening under the memory and music" and "surrendering to the sound" of Pilate's voice when he passes her house (SOS, 29). Middleton explains, "his oral memory stirs his desire for song, warmth, intimacy, and rituals" (Smith, 27). However, Macon's internalization of white materialistic values, that of property and ownership, creates a rift between his "boyhood rituals and freedoms" and his values as a man (28). It becomes Milkman's responsibility to revisit those memories which Macon has suppressed if he ever hopes to rediscover his cultural heritage.

So Milkman embarks on a journey following Macon and Pilate's memories. On this journey, he begins to distance himself from the assimilated white values Macon has internalized. As Linden Peach points out in his analysis of the novel, "Milkman travels by plane, by bus and then by foot – emblematic of the way in which he sheds layers of his former cultural [assimilated] identity" (68). Milkman loses "clothes, watch, suitcase and shoes," all symbols of vanity and the materialistic values Macon has passed down to him (ibid). Peach argues that the "loss of the watch is especially significant because Milkman loses the Western concept of time which is essentially linear" (69). The idea of non-linear time is crucial to Morrison's text, as evidenced by Circe's strange, time-less suspension. Just as Circe does not fit into the Western idea of time, Morrison's narrative does not follow a linear pattern. On the contrary, the reader travels between present and past in strange loops, which ultimately motivate the reader to go back in time in the text – just as Milkman goes back in time to visit his ancestral past.

Milkman travels south to Virginia, a place where both Pilate and Milkman's grandparents spent an extended time, and finally, both Milkman and the reader are introduced to the name "Solomon" (SOS, 260). In fact the whole town echoes of Solomon; stumbling upon

Shalimar, Milkman comes to learn it's pronounced "*Shalleemone*" not far at all from the sound of "Solomon" (SOS, 261). His first interaction is with a man named "Mr. Solomon" (SOS, 262) in "Solomon's General store" (SOS, 260). Stepping outside he hears children singing a familiar song:

*"Jay the only son of Solomon
Come booba yalle, come booba tambee
Whirl about and touch the sun
Come booba yalle, come booba tambee"* (SOS, 264)

This is where all the threads Morrison has woven into the text begin to come together. For only after hearing this chant, only after being touched by the song the flying Africans sang, a song altered by Morrison's own ancestral past, can Milkman be reborn in freedom like them.

Subsequently Milkman, or more accurately Macon *Dead*, nearly dies twice. First, by the hands of the young men in Shalimar, and then by Guitar. The first attempt is enough to snap something into place in Milkman. He reflects that, actually, people had been trying to kill him his whole life. "His own father had tried...[Hagar] came every month to kill him" (SOS, 270). Then, in Shalimar, a young man "pulled a knife and tried to kill him...and he still wasn't dead" (ibid). Finally, he proclaims, "My name's Macon; I'm already Dead" (ibid). Now, having learned at least part of his ancestral past, Milkman *can* claim his own name. Unlike in his youth, when he screamed at Pilate that he, too, was a Dead, now Milkman knows, at least in part, what it means to be a Dead. And this proclamation, this shout that he is already dead and cannot be killed, is what enables him to survive Guitar's attempt on his life. Because only *now*, after hearing story after story, after experiencing a fraction of how his parents and theirs lived, after nearly dying just as his grandfather did, does Milkman begin to *listen*.

He listens to his own selfishness for the first time and sees how trite and vain it is. His thoughts of what he "deserve[s]" sound "old and tired and beaten to death" (SOS, 267). He

listens to the sounds around him, that of “the dogs, the men...signaling one another...talking to each other” (SOS, 277). He listens and appreciates not language, but “what there was before language” and he understands that the older and wiser Calvin “whispered to the trees, whispered to the ground, touched them...pulling meaning through his fingers” (SOS, 278). And Milkman learns to do the same. He “listen[s] 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 his hand to his neck and catch the wire that fastened around his throat” (SOS, 279). Milkman survives only because he listens to the earth around him. In other words, *listening* saves him.

But listening in this case is not just referring to the didactic idea of listening to one’s elders, or listening to others; it’s referring again to the oral tradition. In this moment, Morrison nods not to the storyteller, as she has been through Reverend Cooper and Circe and Macon and Pilate, but to the listener and all that the listener can gain if they only pause and listen to these stories. And the listener in this case is not just Milkman, it is all African Americans searching for an identity which is complicated and unrecorded and laden with emotional trauma. The listener is not just Milkman, it is the reader of this very text who Morrison implores to open their ears and hear the language beyond that which is spoken, the language of shared experiences and deep human memory, the language of suffering and death and flight and freedom and love. It’s notable here to remember that Morrison is *not* writing this for a reader who is white. She writes this text outside the white gaze and she writes this text knowing her experience as a Black woman, writing from her ancestral memory, and encouraging other Black readers to *listen* and *remember*.

The act of remembering is one which is underscored even more after Milkman survives Guitar's attempt on his life, for his brush with death seems actually to connect him more with his life. He "[finds] himself exhilarated by simply walking the earth...like his legs were stalks, tree trunks...and he did not limp" (SOS, 281). Upon learning to listen, Milkman's growth is no longer stunted. He can finally begin to mature and now, prompted by his maturation, he can begin to remember.

So what does Milkman remember? Names, the real names and identities of his family, and by extension, himself. He "remembers" these names also via the oral tradition, but this time, through song, the song that has been echoing throughout the novel, throughout Morrison's life and throughout the myth of the flying Africans. Except this time, the song contains all the intimate details of Milkman's ancestral past.

*"Jay the only son of Solomon
Come booba yalle, come booba tambee
Whirl about and touch the sun
Come booba yalle, come booba tambee*

*Left that baby in a white man's house
Come booba yalle, come booba tambee
Heddy took him to a red man's house
Come konka yalle, come konka tambee*

...

*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" (SOS, 303)*

It's notable that in this discovery of his ancestral past, "Milkman cannot...cannot write the song down...he must commit the song to his personal, oral memory, just as his...ancestors had done"

(Smith, 34). Milkman experiences an unprecedented thrill when he hears the names of “his own people” (SOS, 304). “Heddy” was the grandmother of Susan Byrd, another family member Milkman meets, and thus, Sing’s mother, making Sing Dead actually Sing Byrd, “No – Singing Bird!” (SOS, 304). Milkman’s grandmother, a Singing Bird – is that not an apt pseudonym for the myth of the flying Africans? Are they not, too, Singing Birds flying to freedom?

But that is not Milkman’s only connection to the flying Africans. After discovering his Sing and Susan’s connection, he returns to Susan Byrd’s home to find that his grandfather, Jake, “was one of those flying African children...one of Solomon’s children” (SOS, 321). Thus, both Milkman’s grandmother and grandfather are intimately connected to the legend of the flying Africans, which means Milkman is intimately connected to this legend. Now, after learning of his ties to Solomon, to the flying Africans, Milkman can claim his identity fully. And so, Milkman’s final act in his journey for identity is not remembering his ancestors, but remembering their gift: remembering to *fly*.

It is with Milkman’s jump to freedom, his attempt to fly, that the novel ends. But in fact, the novel doesn’t only end with flight, it begins with flight, just as Milkman’s journey begins with flight. Flight is everywhere in this novel, but it’s not just a symbol of freedom; it is a symbol of history and memory. On the one hand, Milkman’s jump off of Solomon’s leap – Solomon, the flying African who flew back home – is a clear allusion to Igbo’s landing and the legend of the flying Africans from Nigeria. Thus, Milkman’s flight, and arguably Robert Smith’s flight at the beginning of the novel, can be read as a historical reference. On the other hand, the emotional epiphany Milkman experiences immediately before his flight would suggest that there is an important individual aspect at play, one which is more in line with the idea of memory; and

as laden as the text is with historical references, memory seems to be the more important theme here.

The key in each of these moments of flight is what precedes the flight: the symbolic presence of freedom and the sound of song. Pilate's death is one that feels least like flight; it is both shocking and sudden. But what both precedes and succeeds her death elucidates that it is not death, it is flight. Immediately before her death, Pilate is able to finally make peace with her father's death, laying him to rest literally and metaphorically. Doing so gives her a freedom from the weight she carried, manifested by her earring which she "yank[s]...from her ear, splitting the lobe," and earring which is really just a "snuffbox with the single word Jake ever wrote" (SOS, 335). For as much as this earring connected Pilate with *her* ancestral history, the violence of that history also weighed her down in her life.

This seemingly contradictory sentiment, that one's ancestral history is both freeing and burdensome, is one of the core ideas of the novel. For accompanying each of Milkman's epiphanies, each of his rekindled connections to his past, are moments of violence. Upon entering the town of Shalimar, or Solomon, Milkman gets into a fight with the local men, who have noticed the assimilated white values he carries with him. Milkman attempts to defend himself, but "his face got slit, so did his left hand, and so did his pretty beige suit, and he probably would have had his throat cut if two women hadn't come running in screaming" (SOS, 268). Even after he is accepted by the older men in town who invite him to go hunting, an undertone of violence persists since he is being hunted by Guitar (SOS, 269). And in two of the most important moments of the novel, when Milkman connects with the earth (SOS, 279) and when he attempts to fly (SOS, 337), Guitar is attempting to murder him. In these scenes which highlight ancestral wisdom and freedom, Morrison also illustrates the violence that still lives on

via racism, including internalized racism within the Black community. For as freeing or necessary as it may be to connect with one's ancestral past, this past is not stagnant or immobile – the violent legacy of slavery still permeates the present.

Morrison illustrates the repercussions of leaving this trauma unprocessed and the advantages of acknowledging said trauma especially poignantly in the last scene of the novel when Pilate dies. Moments after Pilate releases the historical burden she carries, Guitar shoots Pilate. Pilate's last words are a request for Milkman to "sing" (SOS, 336). So Milkman, who is really Macon Dead, who is really the grandson of Solomon who leapt and the Bird that would Sing recites the song that has been echoing throughout this novel:

*"Sugargirl don't leave me here
Cotton balls to choke me
Sugargirl don't leave me here
Buckra's arms to yoke me" (ibid)*

And Milkman continues singing "louder and louder," waking the birds who take to the air, one of whom "dived into the new grave and scooped something shiny in its beak before it flew away" (ibid). Milkman then has an epiphany, realizing that "without ever leaving the ground, [Pilate] could fly" (ibid). Only in these moments after Pilate's death, after learning about his ancestral past, after connecting to and *remembering* the lives of Solomon, Sing Byrd, and Pilate, does he leap into the air and understand that "if you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it" (SOS, 337).

These moments also prompt the reader to remember. For in many ways, Pilate's death and Milkman's subsequent leap into the air are reminiscent of the opening pages of the book. In the same way that Milkman's flight ends the novel, Robert Smith's flight opens the novel. The very first page reads of his intent to fly: "I will take off from Mercy and fly away on my own wings" (SOS, 3). Dressed in blue, the color of water and a subtle nod to the flying Africans at Igbo's landing, Mr. Smith leaps from the top of Mercy Hospital as Pilate sings, "Sugarman cut

across the sky/Sugarman gone home...” (SOS, 6). Looking at the end of the novel as a parallel, Milkman becomes Pilate, singing the departed to freedom. And because of this parallel, Milkman and the reader remember *together*; the reader recalls the start of the novel and Milkman recalls the power of his ancestors as both the reader and Milkman simultaneously understand that flight is freedom.

But why is remembering so important? It is important in understanding and building identity, that much is clear. But why exactly does it have such an impact on our identity? Part of its importance, Morrison demonstrates, is related to trauma, more specifically, the necessity of acknowledging and processing past trauma. In the first part of the text, Milkman is completely unaware of his ancestral trauma. He neither knows, nor cares to know, the difficulties of his parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. And because he has not acknowledged their trauma, and by extension his own trauma, he is unable to empathize with others’ trauma. Instead, he is stuck in the same imitation of that trauma, along with his father. Milkman’s father, deeply scarred from the death of his father, spends the rest of his life imitating those who killed his father. The white men who killed Macon Dead I, a murder witnessed but not adequately processed by Macon Dead II, asserted ownership over Macon I’s land, and in murdering him, ownership over Macon I, too. Thus, Macon II spends his whole life imitating their ownership in an attempt to “escap[e] from that system” (Rico & San, 151). The more “keys” to properties Macon II collects, the more power he feels he has (SOS, 22). To acquire this power, however, Macon II becomes ruthless to the other members of his community. He refuses to grant any extensions to tenants of his, even at the expense of their well-being (*ibid*), and he shows no empathy for Porter when he threatens to kill himself (SOS, 25). In other words, just as Milkman

shows no empathy in the first part of the novel since he is disconnected from his ancestral trauma, Macon II is unable to feel empathy since he has not properly processed his trauma.

Only once the trauma is acknowledged, recognized as such, and faced, can the individual break the cycle of imitation; and this is exactly what Milkman does in the second part of the novel. Learning all about the difficulties of Macon II and Pilate, the hardships faced by Macon I and Sing Byrd, the abandonment of his grandfather by Solomon, Milkman can finally begin to empathize and break the cycle of trauma. For in his own way, Milkman was imitating his ancestral trauma, too; abandoning Hagar just as Solomon abandoned his family, focusing on ownership and material just like Macon II and ignoring his community like Macon II.

This exploration of Milkman's ancestral trauma and identity is not divorced from Morrison's own identity; in fact, Morrison actually places her own ancestral memory into the text via the most central name in the text: Solomon. Morrison's maternal grandfather was named John Solomon Willis (Iyasere, 41). Morrison's maternal grandparents were sharecroppers who eventually migrated north. Thus, Milkman's ancestral journey mirrors that of Morrison's in many ways. However, by placing her own name in the story of the flying Africans, Morrison performs her own act of remembering: she places herself into the collective memory of African American culture. She claims her link to her ancestral past just as Milkman does and just as she encourages the reader to.

In so doing, Morrison underscores an integral part of African American culture and ancestry; specifically, the importance of collective memory and the "trauma of rootlessness" (Rico & San, 154). From the forceful removal of Africans from their homes and the separation of families during slavery, many African Americans cannot trace their ancestry. Milkman's journey through his ancestry, with all its details and specificities, is really a representation of collective

memory and an attempt to find roots within African American culture. As Middleton underscores, “where the written word renders African American history invisible” conversely “the oral tradition” allows for the “convey[ing] of cultural values” (36). This is accentuated by the mechanisms of collective memory that Morrison employs; her use of the most famous African American legend: that of the flying African; her use of the folk song, an oral tradition used extensively in the community. In other words, though Milkman is the protagonist of the story, he helps to illuminate the position of Morrison, of Black individuals, of those suffering from the trauma of rootlessness in America.

And so, like Sinyavsky in his text “Pkhents,” Morrison is rebuilding her identity in *Song of Solomon*. However, it seems important to Morrison, unlike Sinyavsky, that the reader does the same. Morrison’s text is circular in many ways; the folk song of “Sugarman” repeats over and over, subsequent scenes of flight always mirror previous flights, the same locations are visited in non-linear ways. All these mechanisms force the reader to remember just as Milkman does. Every iteration of the folk song triggers the memory of its first appearance, each flight seems to flashback to the memory of the previous one, our secondary visits to Virginia and Danville make us recall the first; this is a text that wants the reader to flip back a hundred pages and recall a preceding scene. This, combined with Morrison’s goal to write outside the white gaze for the Black reader, highlights Morrison’s real purpose; not just to show the importance of memory but to make the reader engage in actively remembering and, hopefully, in remembering that ancestral history that is shared by much of the Black community.

IV. Building Dialogue between African-American and Russian authors

Tertz's short story "Phkents" and Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon*, while vastly different, express similar sentiments, in that they both explore how identity forms in the wake of repressive circumstances. As the protagonists of the texts reflect upon their identities, both authors draw parallels to their own experiences within their respective societies. What results are texts which illustrate the difficulties of living in those societies while also building their own identities outside the bounds of those societies. In other words, through these fantastical works, Sinyavsky and Morrison could engage in a real search for meaning that was harder to reach while limited by Soviet Russia and Jim Crow America, respectively.

While Soviet Russia and Jim Crow America may seem vastly different on the surface, the two created parallel circumstances for our authors. As a scholar, Sinyavsky's emphasis on imagination and creativity over the proselytization of Soviet values made him a target of vehement disapproval. While Morrison, stuck in a literary environment which demanded that she writes for a white audience, faced criticism from every angle; her work was too focused on race, or too politically correct, or too concerned with the white gaze, or not concerned enough with it. Put simply, both authors refused to pander to the mainstream demands of the time, instead pushing at the edges of the mainstream until it moved to them. However, before their work was accepted – and eventually lauded – Sinyavsky and Morrison faced great challenges.

It is worth spending a bit of time on the most famous challenge Sinyavsky faced: his public trial and subsequent incarceration. The trial began in February of 1966 – six years after Tertz's ironically prophetic text *The Trial Begins* (Суд идет) – and lasted four days (Hayward, 26). Sinyavsky was tried for his writings as Tertz alongside "dissident" author Yuli Markovich Daniel for his works as Nikolai Arzhak (ibid). While the authors were construed as dissident,

treasonous, and heretical, both authors were explicit in their testimony that they did not write these fantastical texts as a betrayal against their country, but rather as a declaration of love for their country, which they saw sinking under the repression of the time (Hayward, 13-14). Their trial was the “first time in the history of the Soviet Union that writers had been put on trial for what they had written” and though called a trial, the proceedings were neither balanced nor just (Hayward, 26). While it was by no means unusual for authors to be exiled or incarcerated for their writing, Sinyavsky and Daniel were the first to be imprisoned “after a trial in which the principal evidence against them was their literary work” (ibid). It is worth noting that by putting these two authors on trial, the Soviet government invited Sinyavsky and Daniel into the company of other exceptional Russian authors who faced incarceration or exile (such as Alexander Pushkin, Mikhail Lermontov and Fyodor Dostoevsky), *and* solidified their place permanently in Russian literary history; Daniel in particular gained a great amount of fame as he was virtually unknown in the Soviet Union prior to the trial (Hayward, 15)

Between the arrest of Sinyavsky and Daniel in September of 1965 and their subsequent trial in February of the following year, a great amount of inquiries were made to the state of the authors and their whereabouts (Hayward, 21). These were ignored until November, when the Secretary of the Union of Soviet Writers, Alexey Surkov, confirmed their arrests (ibid). The public was not alerted to the arrest of these two writers until January of 1966 when a propaganda article was published condemning both authors as anti-Soviet threats to the government (Hayward, 22). The article, written by Stalin Prize winner (and Soviet lackey) Dmitri Eremin set the example for how the “case” would be handled (ibid). Sinyavsky and Daniel were accused of “consciously intend[ing]...to subvert and weaken the Soviet system” (Hayward, 22). This was an accusation which could be turned into a criminal case under the charge of “sacrilege”, a part of

the criminal code which encompassed any “agitation or propaganda carried out with the purpose of subverting or weakening the Soviet regime...the dissemination for that said purposes of slanderous inventions defamatory to the Soviet political and social system, as well as the dissemination...of literature of a similar content” (Hayward, 23).

This vague section of the criminal code was, of course, the perfect way for the Soviet regime to criminalize the actions of any citizen who caused trouble for them, especially because admission of intent could easily be coerced by the Party’s favorite methods of justice – torture and punishment. At the same time, the Party would mobilize the Soviet public against the individuals in question. In the case of Sinyavsky and Daniel trial, nearly every single published account of the authors or the trial, in the time preceding and during its performance, was a thinly veiled – or completely overt – attack on the authors (Hayward 24-25). The totally ubiquitous portrayal of Sinyavsky and Daniel as sacrilegious criminals successfully convinced the people of the Soviet Union of their guilt (Hayward 30). However, there was huge backlash from the West, including from communist leaders in the West such as John Gollan and Louis Aragon (Hayward, 29). Nonetheless, both Sinyavsky and Daniel faced sentences in labor camps (Hayward, 35), Sinyavsky receiving the maximum sentence, perhaps because he refused to plead any guilt (Hayward, 29).

As translator Max Hayward so eloquently puts it, “what [was] so tragic about this trial [was] not only that the two men [had] been tried and sentenced for heresy, sacrilege and blasphemy, but that the trend toward an improvement in the administration of justice, the frequently expressed desire to do away with ‘distortions of justice’ as part of Stalin’s legacy – all this [had] received a severe setback” (32). The shadow of Stalin’s reach affirmed its power once more, while law and justice lost their meaning as prosecutors quoted works of fiction as fact.

On the other side of the world, the United States were stuck in a shadow of its own, that of slavery. For the majority of Morrison's childhood and young adulthood, the Jim Crow system was still in place and impacted the lives of Black individuals. Racism continued to manifest itself in violent ways, and a revival of the Ku Klux Klan in the early 20th century led to membership in the millions in the 1920s ("The Ku Klux Klan"). Lynchings were still occurring across America (NAACP). At the same time, Black intellectuals, artists, and activists were increasingly publishing works about the issues facing African Americans. While Morrison was a child, W. E. B. Du Bois was writing extensively on segregation and Jim Crow laws in the North (Lewis, 102). Brilliant writers such as Richard Wright were publishing works and being applauded for their storytelling (Lewis, 100). As Morrison became an adult, the seeds of the civil rights movement were sown, with landmark victories such as *Brown v. Board of Education* (Lewis, 198) and disturbing acts of racial violence such as the murder of Emmett Till (Library of Congress). Later into Morrison's adulthood, civil rights marches, sit-ins, and numerous other protests were happening across America (Lewis, 229); Martin Luther King Jr.'s words were heard and spread throughout the world, and, finally, legislation to forward the progress of equal rights, such as the Voting Rights Act of 1965, was passed (Lewis 232).

Morrison was not silent in the wake of these events. In the first place, her texts spoke to many of the issues underscored during the civil rights movement. Even when not directly addressing race – famously, her short story "Recitatif" left the racial identities of the characters' ambiguous to underscore the importance of trauma – Morrison was always cognizant of and responded to the legacy of slavery in America. As a writer, Morrison had a unique perspective, a perspective she seemed well aware of, which prompted her to talk about the ways in which Black people were being depicted and the language which was being used by protesters. Morrison felt

strongly that “maintaining the unique vitality of the black communit[y]” was important “in the face of integration” (Li, 16). She also believed in upholding the multifaceted worth of the Black community. She shared this belief when the slogan “Black is beautiful” became popular, arguing that to reduce Black to *only* beautiful took away from the strength, intellect, and resilience (among other values) of Black individuals.

Morrison’s greatest works of ‘activism’ – although to call it activism is to simplify what was likely a combination of activism, a love for literature and a love for her work – were her efforts and successes in publishing Black voices and several works regarding African American culture and history. For example, with Morrison’s help, *Contemporary African Literature* was published in 1972, while in 1974 she helped publish the autobiography of Angela Davis (Li, 22). That same year, Morrison published *The Black Book*, an “archive of African American life”, which was largely an endeavor driven by Morrison (Li, 26).

These are just a few examples of Morrison’s commitment to the Civil Rights Movement; and in these cases, Morrison used her passion for language, community, and history to promote the spread of egalitarian ideas. And is this not, in essence, what Sinyavsky did, too? Both writers lived in societies where *ideas* were the most dangerous weapons undermining the authority of the status quo. The two authors decided that their culture, history, and the integrity of their respective literatures were principles worth sharpening their weapons for. And so, despite the radical differences of their environments, Sinyavsky and Morrison were fighting for similar things; freedom from the watchful Soviet eye, freedom from the white gaze, freedom of expression, freedom to be heard. Of course, there are vast differences between Sinyavsky and Morrison’s plights, but it is worth studying their works in tandem not to compare their plights, but to compare how two authors, who likely knew little or *nothing* of each other, used fantastical

ideas and calls to their legacy – in such a similar manner no less – to spread ideas freeing themselves from their oppressive surroundings.

Moreover, while there is minimal scholarly writing on the connection between African American and Russian authors or literature, there are many indications that the two are already in dialogue. For example, many African American writers such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin – and Toni Morrison – cite Dostoevsky as an important influence to them (Bloshteyn, 2022). Furthermore, it was not uncommon for African American writers to find comradery in, or to identify with, the plight of the peasant as depicted in Russian literature. Wright described having a hard time finding literature he identified with until he came upon the Russian novel (ibid). Ernest J. Gaines spoke similarly of his experience with Russian literature, explaining that he found no writing which encapsulated his experience in American literature; only in Russian literature did he find real depictions of peasants as opposed to the caricatures of the lower class in the American works he read (ibid).

In his book *Up from Bondage: The Literatures of Russian and African American Soul*, Dale Peterson discusses at length the parallels between writing produced by African American and Russian scholars and authors. He draws a link between the Harlem Renaissance and Russian Romantic artists, asserting that “the cultural leaders of the Harlem Renaissance fully shared the ambition of Russian artists like Turgenev or Mussorgsky to make a universally resounding and technically distinctive mode of expression arise from the neglected speech and song of a denigrated peasantry” (Peterson, 3). He goes on to argue that Russian and African American artists shared “similar strivings...to give visibility and voice to a native culture that had been hidden from view and held in bondage to narrow Western standards of civility and literacy”

(Peterson, 6). Of course, in the case of the Russian authors during the Soviet era, authors were held not to Western but Soviet standards.

Peterson specifically argues that what many African American artists and Russian authors had in common was their goal to depict the real soul of their respective communities. He argued that the similar art produced by the two was partially a result of “the long delayed emancipation of Russian serfs and American slaves” (Peterson, 60). Following that emancipation, both societies had a “feudal underclass, the illiterate Russian *narod* [common folk] and the Black folk of the American South” (ibid). But this ‘underclass’ was large, distinct, and culturally rich; thus, authors such as Dostoevsky and Du Bois began writing texts documenting this culture and identity. Peterson points to *The House of the Dead* by Dostoevsky and *The Souls of Black Folk* by Du Bois as two texts which strove to and successfully accomplished that task (61).

While the styles of “Pkhents” and *Song of Solomon* greatly vary from the style of Dostoevsky and Du Bois’s earlier works, they nonetheless parallel each other in a similar manner. Both texts are deeply concerned with how the identity of their protagonists have been eroded by an unforgiving society that asks its people to sever ties with their history and exist only for the present society’s demands. At the same time, just as Dostoevsky and Du Bois’s texts contain autobiographical moments, Sinyavsky and Morrison weave their own identities into the text. What’s particularly notable about Sinyavsky and Morrison is the fact that they ended up using such similar techniques.

Yes, it is undoubtedly true that “Pkhents” and *Song of Solomon* are very different texts; yet, they share a number of the same mechanisms. Both Sinyavsky and Morrison use subversions of the human body to move their narrative forward – Andrei Kazamirovich’s cactus body and

Pilate's navel-less stomach. Both texts manipulate language as the characters (and authors) reach for transcendence – the many varied spellings and pronunciations of Solomon and the gibberish repeated by our alien narrator. And most notably, both authors build a world that very clearly parallels the real world but which contains a magic, an element of the fantastic, that is unexplainable.

These authors, on opposite sides of the world, created remarkably similar works; or perhaps more accurately, works which highlighted similar core principles using a variety of shared mechanisms. By virtue of this fact alone, these texts, and perhaps all of Sinyavsky and Morrison's works, are worth studying in conjunction. But more broadly, these similarities tell us about the nature of creativity born out of repression and perhaps even the nature of the human spirit in the face of oppression.

I do not mean to imply that these authors faced oppression of the same scope or quantity; nor do I mean to suggest that the oppression each author faced should be scaled against the other. Regardless, these authors found a way to channel what was discouraged in their societies into exceptional works. Their multiplicity, which was so frowned upon by Jim Crow America or Soviet Russia, found expression in fictional works bursting with fantastical imagery, exploding with magic and phantasmagoria.

Was this a result of their repressive surroundings? Or was it an inevitable consequence of their spirit, which even the most oppressive regime could not suppress? These questions are not ones I will pretend to know the answers to. Nonetheless, they scratch at the surface of what many great works strive to explore: the human condition. And while we may never reach a full understanding of what it "means to be human" per se, looking at these works can bring us closer to comprehending the human condition. For the very fact that texts with such similar

concerns were created around the same time in completely different societies – societies whose principles were so different they were at war with one another – certainly suggests something, perhaps something impalpable, about the human spirit.

Morrison and Sinyavsky are not the only African American and Russian authors whose works share great similarities. As Peterson points out, there are many such authors worth comparing and studying for the common ground and illustration of “cultural self-consciousness” that both literatures present (7). So why haven’t there been more scholarly works on the remarkable similarities between both literatures? There is a multitude of possibilities; however, I believe one of them is that the iron curtain of the Cold War still exists.

Russian literature is popular in the West, that is true; yet, in many ways Russian literature is not viewed as universal but foreign. Dostoevsky’s works are strange and dark, Nabokov’s works are stigmatic and abstract, Tolstoy’s works are romantic and distant. They are born from a society which imprisons its writers, condemns its artists, and murders its dissidents, while American literature is born from freedom and the fight to liberate oneself from oppressive power. But as history has made evident, America does all those distinctly “Russian” things and Russia does contain those who fight for freedom and liberation, as “American” – note my written sarcasm – as those concepts may be.

But the human spirit is not American. Nor is it Russian. And the human spirit is not limited to freedom or liberation; it contains stigma, darkness, the grotesque, and the abstract. Was it not this which Sinyavsky strove for when he first composed his alien narrator? And which Morrison illustrated when she created the murderous, yet greatly sympathetic, Guitar? Their works are *obsessed* with the human spirit, with what it means to be human, with *identity* in all its glorious, grotesque beauty. They were not concerned with principles; they were concerned with

history, legacy, love and shame; the things which make us distinctly human. Their works will remain relevant for as long as those ideas are relevant – for as long as we are human.

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