RALPH STORY

An Excursion into the Black World:
The “Seven Days” in Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon

What was the basic goal of such desperate people, and what manner of men and women were these who threw themselves into the ocean “with much resolution,” rather than submit to slavery a long way from home? . . . The question then arises: after the struggle to break the oppressors’ hold upon our lives is stymied, is suicide another form of battle against that domination? Thousands upon thousands of Africans—we cannot know the number—took that path. For many, of course, it was the traditional pathway back to the homeland, for they believed that death would deliver them to the unseen but well-remembered shores. . . . Others, countless others, took some new occasion to leap over the side of the vessels.

Toni Morrison’s masterwork Song of Solomon (1977), perhaps the greatest novel ever written by an Afro-American, begins with the character of Robert Smith (adorned with blue wings) jumping from the roof of Mercy Hospital. To most Westerners, this act of suicide was probably interpreted as just that: a suicide, which also, for those moderately knowledgeable in Greek mythology, paralleled the flight of Icarus. Yet Morrison’s Smith, an insurance agent who bids goodbye to the world amidst “roses strewn about,” and before many curious onlookers, was also committing revolutionary suicide—an idea which most Western readers and even some contemporary Japanese have a hard time embracing despite the fact that in Japanese culture the idea

of ritualistic suicide has long been considered both noble and manly (see Mishima). Thus, in one descriptive passage Morrison unites both Eastern and Western trains of thought. More significantly, her novel reveals the complex realities of Afro-American life, history, and culture through her creation of a revolutionary group called the Seven Days. This article discusses the Seven Days movement and as a microcosm of the two primary ideological streams which have characterized Afro-American political thought in the twentieth century.

Smith’s suicide was linked to his involvement with the Seven Days, a revolutionary group that symbolically and as a literary device makes Solomon a truthteller of a great novel of magical realism (see Menton). The book clearly reveals the disparate and extremely complex ways Afro-Americans have thought about the quality of their lives; it also reveals what many of them have decided to do about it individually and collectively. In creating the Seven Days, Morrison reaches into the historical black community and its contemporary equivalent to reveal a dissonance which has always characterized the Afro-American world. This dissonance, tension, or Yin-Yang polarity unfolds principally through the relationship between Guitar Bains, spokesperson for the Seven Days, and his friend Milkman Dead, the middle-class protagonist of Solomon. Their socioeconomic differences, consequential socializations, and their divergent experiences are a microcosm for the two most distinguishable Afro-American ideological streams and their respective historical advocates, e.g., Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. As Harold Cruse wrote several decades ago, “... the present-day conflict within the Negro ethnic group, between the integrationist and separatist tendencies, has its origins in the historical arguments between personalities such as Frederick Douglass and as Martin R. Delany. ... the emergence of the Malcolm X brand of nationalism proves its persistence, despite the fact that both strains have undergone considerable change and qualification.”

Ultimately, however, Morrison’s Seven Days transcends this convenient, yet historically accurate, dichotomy of Afro-American ideological streams. For black folk “to love so much they would kill” is a profoundly radical idea yet one which can be clearly discerned in the poetical works of the Black Arts Movement of the late 1960s, especially the writings of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka. Acting out the credo embodied in the title of Huey Newton’s work Revolutionary Suicide and indirectly fitting the description for Jones’s “The End of Man Is His Beauty,” Smith clearly felt that “to fly away” was his only alternative:

Your world shakes
cities die
beneath your shape.
The single shadow
at noon
like a live tree
whose leaves
are like clouds

Weightless soul
at whose love faith moves
as a dark and
withered day.

With the revolutionary ideas of the late 1960s as a backdrop, the flight of Robert Smith is not only a death but also a ritualistic hari-kari decision. As a group committed to avenging the murders of black people, ultimately gave him only one way to end his life—by his own hands. And it is surely death that a black man faces when he murders a white person in America. On a figurative level, it is much like “death” to be a black American male, who, without employment, competitive educational credentials, or economic resources, becomes a statistic. These real men exist, secretly, beyond the reach or influence of mainstream culture. Much like them but with a political purpose, Morrison’s Robert Smith did not believe he would ever achieve justice, given the nature of American society. Note Guitar’s reasoning:

“Do we have a court? Is there one courthouse in one city in the country where a jury would convict them? There are places right now where a Negro still can’t testify against a white man. Where the judge, the jury, the court, are legally bound to ignore anything a Negro has to say. What that means is that a black man is a victim of a crime only when a white man says he is. Only then. If there was anything like or near justice or courts when a cracker kills a Negro, there wouldn’t have to be no Seven Days. But there ain’t; so we are.”

In the course of Morrison’s meticulously revealing this society, she gives readers a glimpse of black rage, the certainty of which has, for a variety of reasons, tended to remain undisclosed. (The urban riots of the 1960s offered a dramatic piece of public testimony.)

The black community has always been extremely diverse socially, economically, and politically, yet until recently one would not have been cognizant of this rather obvious fact—a fact, I might add, purposely obscured by the media, reduced to insignificance historically by white novelists and film makers, and avoided by many black writers, social and literary critics.
and would-be political leaders. Only a few black novelists have dared to
expose the reality of the inner city, with all its diversity, to readers. Usually,
even a single black murderer in a novel (or short fiction) by a black writer has
been regarded as shocking. For example, Richard Wright's heroic figure
Brother Mann in "Down by the Riverside" (1938) jolted more than a few
American readers: "The flare flickered to and fro. His throat tightened and
he aimed... He fired, twice. The white man fell backwards on the steps and
slipped with an abrupt splash into the water. The flashlight went with him,
its one eye swooping downward, leaving a sudden darkness." And Bigger
Thomas, in Wright's Native Son (1940), shocked an even greater number of
literate Americans. Conversely, in the heart of the real black community, the
rage of some black folk and their willingness to defend themselves against
any attack or to strike back at whites for their hostile actions has always been
well known and understood; usually, however, it comes to the fore exclusively
amongst black folk and out of theearshot of whites, or even some of those
Negroes who are perceived to be loyal to them.

As Ralph Ellison said some thirty years ago, "There is no place like a
Negro barbershop for hearing what Negroes really think." The barbershop
is the one place in both Morrison's novel and actual black communities
where black males speak openly and candidly. In the late 1960s, black barbershops were also noteworthy for the political discussions which frequently took place within them. Morrison's Railroad Tommy and Hospital Tommy, two more members of the Seven Days, are therefore very realistic and believable. Through her creation of the Seven Days and her use of the barbershop as the group's informal meeting place, Morrison delineates a class and race history of Afro-American political thought so accurate that her genius in this particular area has yet to be fully appreciated.

The Seven Days can also be linked back to black secret societies of the
nineteenth century, an intriguing consideration, since their existence, unlike
that of many groups in the late 1960s, wasn't necessarily documented or even acknowledged:

In one instance a secret society was organized to overthrow slavery. In 1844 a Moses Dickson, who had for years worked on steamboats running from Cincinnati up and down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, determined to do something toward securing the freedom of the slaves. In 1844 he and eleven other free negroes met to form an organization for this purpose. After consulting together they decided to take two years to study over
and develop a plan of action. In 1846 the twelve met in St. Louis
and organized the Knights of Liberty.
Morrison's Seven Days, then, is a group grounded in both contemporary and nineteenth-century Afro-American history. There is, for example, the fact that Robert Smith, the first character we witness in Solomon, is an agent for the North Carolina Mutual Agency, a fictional insurance company very much like the real North Carolina Mutual and Provident Association which concomitantly began, as did most black insurance companies, as a secret society.

Morrison's strength, conveyed in Addison Gayle's assertion about the public black novelist John A. Williams, lies "in the synthesis of fiction and history. Other comparisons which can be made between the two novelists' work are that Morrison's Seven Days, like Williams' King Alfred Plan in The Man of the Creed I Am (1967), gives the novel an intriguing impetus: an unresolved question which, along with Morrison's extraordinary use of black myth and folklore, moves the narrative forward with drive and power, sustaining readers' attention, provoking their curiosity, and generating controversy. The intimacy of the folklore, the characters' names, flying kites, the quest for Afro-Americans to reconstruct their past, and the Seven Days give this work a fascinating tension as well as an edge of verisimilitude that combine to provide a completely original delineation of black life in the urban American North. In this respect, Morrison is one of the trailblazers of Afro-American literature. Song of Solomon fulfills the description Gayle provided for works by black novelists that "require a new look at, and approach to history":

The new approach to history [i]s necessary for the education of young Blacks growing up in twentieth-century America, a fact recognized not only by such prominent black historians as John H. Clarke and Lerone Bennett, committed to reinterpreting history in line with the black historians, adding to it those nuances particular to the writer of fiction—dramatizing facts, recreating situations and enobling men [and women] and events.

... [Needed are books which deal] with aspects of the racial past and suggest, in so doing, that time and circumstances demand that black people look inward, for paradigms of positive import.

The device Morrison uses to make Solomon resound historically is the series of interchanges between Guitar and Milkman.

The class differences between Milkman and Guitar are made obvious by Morrison early in the novel. Milkman, as a stalwart member of the black bourgeoisie, has lived a life in pursuit of material and sexual pleasure. His "membership" in black middle-class society can even be detected in his
hidden disdain for black women of the underclass like Hagar: "He seldom took her anywhere except to the movies and he never took her to parties where people of his own set danced and laughed and developed intrigues among themselves." Guitar, on the other hand, a member of the black working class, has evolved in the opposite direction; he has, by the time both of them have reached their thirties, developed a consciousness that has spurred on his active membership in the Seven Days and simultaneously made him antipathetic to the world from which Milkman hails and the life middle-class blacks like Milkman represent:

"Look, Milk, we've been tight a long time, right? But that don't mean we're not different people. ... I know you. Been knowing you. You got your high-tone friends and your picnics on Honoré Island and you can afford to spend fifty percent of your brainpower thinking about a piece of ass. You got that red-headed bitch and you got a Southside bitch and no telling what in between.

It is only a matter of seconds before Guitar really lets Milkman see the differences between them in stark, candid terms:

"You're welcome everywhere I go. I've tried to get you to come to Honoré—"

"Fuck Honoré! You hear me? The only way I'll go to that nigger heaven is with a case of dynamite and a book of matches."

Guitar has discovered his mission as a member of the Seven Days. Unlike Milkman, he has come to reject not only the values and attitudes of the black middle class but also the life of the black working and lower classes as well, symbolized by the Southside where "one lived knowing that at any time, anybody might do anything. Not wilderness where there was system, or the logic of lions, trees, toads, and birds, but wild wilderness where there was none." Guitar's organization is "logical" and reasonable, in sharp contrast to the "wilderness" so much a part of "ghetto life." Members of the Seven Days have even transcended ego and the need for glory or martyrdom: "... it's not about other people knowing. We don't even tell the victims. We just whisper to him, "Your Day has come." The beauty of what we do is in secrecy, its smallness. ... We don't discuss it among ourselves, the details. We just get an assignment. If the Negro was killed on a Wednesday, the Wednesday man takes it; if he was killed on Monday, the Monday man takes that one."
The central message conveyed by Morrison’s Seven Days via the Milkman-Guitar dialogue is that if more than just a handful of courageous, righteous, and sacrificial black men and women had been willing to “love” enough to avenge the murders of their people, virtually giving up their lives, then the overt and covert oppression of black folk might have ended long ago. “Love” for the Seven Days is like the love of one soldier for a countryman who has died in combat. It forces the reader to consider black people as if they have been engaged in a protracted struggle against superior and unpredictable adversaries: “No Love? No Love? Didn’t you hear me? What I’m doing isn’t about hating white people. It’s about loving us. About loving you. My whole life is love.” Ultimately, the challenge Guitar (speaking for the Seven Days) extends to Milkman is that he and his comrades are no longer willing to wait for justice for black people or for the quality of life to improve for the race. The members of the Seven Days have rejected all racial uplift strategies that preceded them and do not see evolutionary progress as meaningful: “It’s not about you living longer. It’s about how you live and why. It’s about whether your children can make other children. It’s about trying to make a world where one day white people will think before they lynch.” It becomes clear to Milkman that Guitar, as a representative for the Seven Days, will no longer regard his childhood friend in the same manner. Their differences are political and classical and automatically make them frightened antagonists: “Milkman rubbed the ankle of his short leg. ‘I’m scared for you, man.’” Guitar responds, “‘That’s funny. I’m scared for you too.’”

Morrison’s intuitive and experiential understanding of the urban. Northern black community is strengthened and enhanced by her consciousness of Afro-American history and culture and the internal and external forces which have swirled within and without its citizenry. Her character Macon Dead, for instance, is representative of the Booker T. Washington school of racial progress through land ownership but updated and made believable by his tangible material success and the practical legacy he tries to give to his son. Dead’s individual power is contrasted with the collective strength and heart of the Seven Days, whose members are his antithesis: Guitar and Milkman are also at opposite ends of the class/race spectrum. Guitar belongs to the wider black community, and as his movements throughout the community (from Feather’s pool room to Tommy’s barbershop to Mary’s bar) illustrate, he has accumulated his knowledge of the world and self through conscious thought and worldly experiences. Guitar is street; Milkman is house. Guitar, moreover, has learned about the tragedy of black life in America from the personal tragedy of his father’s murder and from those men who stand in opposition to what Milkman’s father, Macon Dead, represents. In short, Guitar joins the Seven Days because of his experiences
and his life, as if Morrison were suggesting that it takes just such experiences and tragedies for black men to embrace a revolutionary praxis. Milkman, on the other hand, ends up rejecting his background and the world his father has created for him by setting out to rediscover his racial past—a noble quest but one which is only individually rewarding. Those who form the Seven Days assume a racial position and outlook on their lives as opposed to Dead, Sr’s class (material) view. They understand their history and know that not even money will prevent their people from being heartbroken:

“...you not going to have a governor’s mansion, or eight thousand acres of timber to sell. And you not going to have no ship under your command to sail on, no train to run, and you can... shoot down a thousand German planes all by yourself and land in Hitler’s backyard and whip him with your own hands, but you never going to have four stars on your shirt front, or even three.... Well now. That’s some thing you will have—a broken heart.” Railroad Tommy’s eyes softened, but the merriment in them had died suddenly. “And folly. A whole lot of folly. You can count on it.”

Railroad Tommy and the others in the Seven Days have realized they will never be millionaires nor will most of their people. They have, in essence, rejected the “integration of the individual” as a beneficial approach to success for the black masses and instead adopted a more radical and extreme collective posture. Yet unlike Milkman’s father, they have an empathy and passion for black people that can be discerned in Morrison’s deft recreation of the impact of Emmett Till’s 1956 murder on the “Days” as they are gathered in the barbershop:

In a few seconds it was over, since the announcer had only a few speculations and even fewer facts. The minute he went on to another topic of news, the barbershop broke into loud conversation. Railroad Tommy, the one who had tried to maintain silence, was completely silent now. He moved to his razor strop while Hospital Tommy tried to keep his customer in the chair. Porter, Guitar, Freddie the janitor, and three or four other men were exploding, shouting angry epithets all over the room. Apart from Milkman, only Railroad Tommy and Empire State were quiet.

Morrison, cognizant of how the Emmett Till murder outraged the national black community, uses this historical event to show the racial soli-
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darity of the "Days." She also demonstrates that their actions, though violent, are no more extreme or bizarre than the actions of the two white men who killed the adolescent Till for saying "Bye, baby" to a white female. The "Days" are political murderers who kill, like most zealots, for the love and quest of a greater good for their people. Porter, a member of the "Days" who "cracks up," is described by Guitar as having gotten so depressed and despondent as a result of his mission that he went temporarily berserk: "It was getting him down. They thought somebody would have to take over his day. He just needed a rest and he's okay now." Despite his bizarre behavior, Porter, in the same desperate but compassionate way Guitar talks to Milkman, professes his love for his people: "I love ya! I love ya all. Don't act like that. You women. Stop it. Don't act like that. Don't you see I love ya? I'd die for ya, kill for ya. I'm saying I love ya. I'm telling ya. Oh, God have mercy. What I'm gonna do? What in this fuckin world am I gonna dooooo?"

Morrison's unique, omniscient sense of the black community of the urban North is conveyed in her precise and exact rendering of the male figures in the Seven Days. Unlike the black male fiction writers who preceded her, Morrison, in *Song of Solomon*, has not chosen to depict an estranged, disconnected, solitary "native son" who murders or an "invisible man" who runs from the South and goes to the white world to plead his case but ends up in contemporary ambiguity in a basement with 1,369 lights. Instead, Morrison has focused her vision on the community and its men—separate, distinct individuals who come together as a collective entity yet remain complex, whole characters. Morrison's global understanding of the black world makes her much like her great predecessors in terms of her grasp of "the people," but she has widened the Afro-American literary tradition by creating a larger-than-life work which embraces black culture, history, and folklore, while simultaneously making the experience of reading her work insightful and inspirational.