

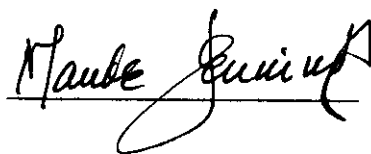
Fly Away Home:
Tracing the Flying African Folktale
from Oral Literature to Verse and Prose

An Honors Thesis

by

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Maude Jennings", written over a horizontal line.

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Abstract

This examination of the Flying African myth is divided into three areas of exploration. In Chapter I the creation of folklore, especially within the African-American community, is investigated alongside of several versions of the Flying African folktale recorded during 1939 and 1940 off of the coast of Georgia. The second chapter addresses the influence of specific elements of the Flying African folktale on the Black Aesthetic and African-American poetry of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including the transformation of the myth into verse form. Chapter III deals solely with Toni Morrison's fictional novel *Song of Solomon*, explaining how the novel functions as a return to oral literature via the transformation of the Flying African myth in written form. The three chapters work together to establish the significant literary influence of the Flying African folktale outside of the sphere of scientific study of African-American folklore.

On previous page: Photograph of a hunter from the village of Pia in northern Cameroon (Africa) costumed as a bird.

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Introduction

There has been an increase in interest in African-American folklore during the twentieth century among oral historians, sociologists, cultural anthropologists, and various folklore preservation societies throughout the United States. Most studies have explored aspects of folklore directly related to these fields, but outside of the scientific community's interests exists a rich history of poets and novelists who have delved much deeper into the emotional and individual significance of folklore. While I note the importance of scientific research in the following study, this research also serves as a base from which creative writers have built their poems, short stories, and novels.

Understanding what folklore is, alongside of its history, functions, and place in American culture, is necessary before examining the written literature that stems from early African-American oral literature. The recording of folktales in the early part of the twentieth century transformed an exclusively oral tradition into a written form, preserving it for future reference, but altering the art form by displaying it in an unnatural state. The Flying African myth is only one of hundreds of folktales born during slavery and passed from generation to generation in the years since. The most extensive collection of this myth was gathered in 1939 and 1940 by the Savannah Unit of the Georgia Writers' Project, a group funded by the Works Projects Administration. I have included these versions of the Flying African folktale in Chapter I so that the many elements of the myth can be fleshed out. Over the years, the myth has evolved differently in separate families and communities, even within the relatively small geographic area of the Georgian coast. From wings and birds to magic hoes and words, these published folktales serve as snapshots in the evolution of the story of the Flying Africans.

With the history and specific elements of the Flying African myth in mind, much of the poetry of African-Americans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries adopt new

significance. The myth is a manifestation of Black slaves' desire for flight away from the chains of institutionalized slavery and toward a land in which their forefathers were free men. Thus the desire for freedom becomes linked via the oral tradition to flight and all that this feat might encompass: wings, feathers, birds, magic, and singing, to name but a few. These elements were absorbed into the writing of many African-American poets, such as Nanina Alba, Margaret Danner, George Moses Horton, and Paul Laurence Dunbar, transforming the ideas embraced by the myth into a written art form. With the development of the African-American novel the folktale was expanded once more, bringing it closer to its origins as oral literature while transforming it into written literature. Toni Morrison's fictional novel *Song of Solomon* completes the transformation of the Flying African folktale without losing many the qualities unique to oral literature. As I trace the Flying African myth from its origins, through its influences on African-American poetry, and finally to its transformation in *Song of Solomon*, the value of oral literature within the world of written literature is revealed to be equal to, or perhaps greater to, its value to the social sciences.

Chapter I:

Defining Folklore and Examining the Elements of the Flying African Myth

The term *folklore* was first coined by William Thoms in an August 1846 article in the *Athenaeum*. He defined folklore as:

The generic term under which are included traditional institutions, beliefs, art, customs, stories, songs, sayings, and the like current among backward peoples or retained by the less cultured classes of more advanced peoples.

(Dorson xi)

Since Thoms's time, the search for and study of folklore has lead to more accurate and, in some cases, entirely different concepts of what should be included in a culture's collective folklore. In general, folklore is now defined as "verbal art" or "literature transmitted orally," but these simple definitions ignore all of the other elements in a culture that contribute to a lasting tradition (Hemenway 85). Francis Lee Utley, a well-known folklorist from the early twentieth century attempts to encompass not just the verbal elements of folklore, but also the sense of traditions that touch everyone in some way. Utley includes in his description "the arts and crafts, the beliefs and customs of our lumber camps, city evangelical storefront churches, back-alley dives, farmers' festivals and fairs, hill frolics, carnivals" and many more conditions of daily American life (85).

One cannot deny that folklore is an important component of any culture. Cultural historians often look to folktales as the most revealing aspect of folklore, especially when confronted with a group whose lore exists outside of the realm of written literature. The American Folklore Society, founded in 1888, focused the attention of many cultural historians, sociologists, and anthropologists in the early part of the twentieth century on the folklore of the United States' African-American population (Hemenway 86). By the time Zora Neale Hurston first set out to collect folktales in her native Florida in 1927, the emphasis of research in this new field was on repetition (86). These collectors sought recurrent forms of the same themes, in which differences between the various texts would reinforce the idea of a wide-spread tradition (Dorson xii). The new definition of

folklore included behavior replicated over time (Hemenway 86) within a specific regional or ethnic group (Bell 14).

In Bernard W. Bell's book *The Folk Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry* he describes folk art as "the creative expression of the people, by the people, for the people" (14). His statement echoes the ideals of American Revolutionaries when they sought to create a government run by and for the benefit of the American people. This is similar to the relationship of folklore to its people; the two elements are woven together in a way that each can be fully understood only in the context of the other. In this and many other ways folklore differs greatly from what is known as "high art." Both high art and folk art are concerned with the "truth of human experience," but folk art is more direct, popular, and deals with everyday reality (14). Unlike high art, folk art is not self-conscious, and is instead characterized by what Bell calls an "effortless grace in form and style" (14). Formal culture often is derived from a written heritage, but in the case of illiterate African-Americans enslaved prior to the Civil War, this written heritage is virtually nonexistent. Instead we find a rich traditional culture based on an oral heritage, especially in the form of popular folktales, music, and dances (Hemenway 86). Folktales originating in this period of our African-American history reflect "the common life of the mind existing at a level other than that of high or formal culture" (86). This is not the same as Thoms's definition of folklore originating within groups of "backward peoples" or among those members of the "less cultured classes" (Dorson xi). The modern view of folklore suggests that those whose cultures are not reflected in the formal culture of a society develop tales and traditions that address the common lives of those within the group.

The Black slaves in the ante-bellum South were torn away from their individual African cultures and forced to leave very rich, extensive pasts behind them when they were sold into slavery and transported across the Atlantic Ocean to the New World.

These Africans were not allowed to speak their own languages, practice their customs and religions, or learn how to read and write their new language, English, which they were forced to learn. Black Americans were forced into a closed society, allowing the development and maintenance of an oral tradition unmatched by any other group in the United States (Dance xvii). The large, subordinate Black culture created by the common ordeal of slavery and plantation life was rich with folklore, one of the few expressions of Black culture not suppressed by White owners (Dorson 330). This folklore was influenced by a combination of plantation life in the New World and the memories and habits brought with the slaves from their homelands (Hamilton x). The motifs are from African and European traditions, but are often adapted so that the characters are slaves, masters, and animals of the southern United States (Blake 249). The resulting folklore could be linked to African traditions, but because of the condition of slavery and inferior status of Blacks, this new folklore was distinctly different.

Folklore has always been a means of binding a group together and creating an identity not only for the group as a whole, but also for its individual members (Dorson xii). Folk art stresses communal ways of understanding and expressing the essential forces of life (Bell 14). As an oral tradition, African-American folktales were able to create unity among members of an ethnic group separated by large plantations. At the same time, folklore reflects the "functional unity" which individuals within a group can create for themselves (Abrahams 5). As the tales spread, a canon formed within the slave community that reached as far as the West Indies and Central America (Walters 4). In Roger D. Abraham's collection of narrative folklore *Deep Down in the Jungle* he writes that the narrative device allows for the creation of a "fictive playground" in which important conflicts can be fought (7-8). Thus the creation of a new folklore was not only a way of creating an articulate community of Black slaves, but also a way for these men and women to engage in imaginative quests, the physical pursuit of which was prevented

by their bondage. When reading or listening to folktales, one can sense the oppression and injustice of life in the ante-bellum South. These tales often answer a need "to fulfill their fantasies in a created world" (Dance xvii). Later examination of the Flying African myth will reveal how the fantasy of flying back to Africa and freedom is expressed in the form of a popular tale.

Although the forms of African-American folktales often remain relatively constant, it is important to remember that their functions can change over time (Abrahams 9). When a tale is recorded, it may appear as a fixed identity, but each is only a snapshot of the tale's never-ending evolution as it reinvents itself with each new teller (Blake 249). In the introduction to Virginia Hamilton's collection of folktales *The People Could Fly* she writes that "a tale naturally changes as it is told by one person to another" (xii). This characteristic of folktales is extremely important in understanding the ways in which a particular tale reveals something culturally and socially significant about its teller and listener. The stories often depend upon the individual storyteller's own imagination and understanding of the purpose behind the telling of a story. If a piece of folklore loses its function, it will fade and eventually disappear (Abrahams 9). One can therefore conclude that any surviving folklore remains significant within at least one community. Abrahams writes:

For any piece of oral literature to transcend the bounds of language and culture, a strong impulse must exist (usually in the form of an emigrating traditional storyteller) and an ability for that bit of lore to adapt itself (or more properly, to be adapted) to the values of the new group. (10)

Abraham uses the metaphor of the folktale as a living organism to explain how these stories must evolve in order to remain relevant to a population. He sees the folktale as both a receptor and an effector that lives and then either mutates, adapting to changes of or within an environment, or it dies. The living folktale must reflect the environment

at the time or risk obscurity (8-9). In her essay titled "African American Folktales" Susan L. Blake writes that "while African-American folk narrative comes out of slavery, it is not an artifact of the slave period but a living tradition" (249-50). As the folktales were passed from generations of slaves to generations of free women and men, undercurrents and functions of the tales shifted, becoming increasingly political and adapting to the voices and concerns of more urban folk (250). The relationships between tellers and listeners changed and a new discourse was created between the teller and the folktale collector.

The collecting and recording of folktales changed the ways in which they are able to function. Written folktales represent a very different interaction than direct tellings, that of the storyteller and the collector, who is often an "outsider" in the community in which the tale is normally told (Blake 249). Recording oral literature causes it to lose its "anonymity of authorship and [it] takes on a hybrid character" (Bell 14). Most folktales were written by the "black and unknown bards of long ago," as they are described in a poem by James Weldon Johnson, who passed their stories on to generations of slaves and their descendants (1). By placing the name of a storyteller next to his or her version of a folk tale, we freeze that tale in one place and one time, with a specific teller during a specific moment in his or her life, and a recorder whose own characteristics may affect the teller or even appear in the final text. The intrusion of the collector into the folk tale is common, even among respected and imitated collectors. One example of this is Zora Neale Hurston's inclusion of much of the language of her lay preacher father in her rendition of the story "John Calls on the Lord," adding her own personal twist to someone else's story (Blake 249).

Yet we have learned in the twentieth century that the collection of folklore is essential to understanding not only the creators of the stories, but also the changes in their heirs that are reflected in the subtle modifications of the texts and meanings.

Folklore can potentially provide great insight into a culture because it reflects the values and preoccupations of its creators and retellers with its form and function (Abrahams 5). The African-American culture that includes folklore creates artifacts not just of passing interest, but also as evidences of progress that are very valuable to understanding modern culture (6). Daryl Dance writes in *Shuckin' and Jivin'* that looking at folktales can "provide insight into the spirit of Black Americans -- into their loves and hates, their joys and sorrows, their values and concerns, their hopes and fears" (xvii). The universality of folktales that holds them in a group's collective consciousness also allows outsiders a chance to understand the basic elements of the tales that deal with the experience of being Black in this country. Exploring folklore lets us look at both history and the psychological reactions that African-Americans had to their own and ancestral experiences (xvii).

One method of procuring valuable insight from folktales is to concentrate on a specific theme or story, exploring as many versions of a particular tale as possible. This enables a researcher to find numerous possible pieces of the tale that can fit together in any combination to form a unique version of that story. Because the act of collecting folktales affects the way in which a story is told, the relationship between teller and collector must be clarified to understand why a tale may have been told in a particular fashion. The folktale may also vary depending upon the age, gender, location, beliefs, values, and history of a storyteller. Since no two people are exactly alike, folktales are rarely repeated in the same way twice. But this helps, not hinders, one analyzing folktales, because it provides the insight needed to understand how those differing characteristics manifest themselves in the folklore of a particular individual or community. By examining several versions of the same tale, we can better understand the unspoken meanings and lessons behind the spoken story.

The Flying Africans folktale is only one of hundreds of folktales originating in times of slavery in the United States. While wide-spread and commonly found by folktale collectors in the South, abundant versions of this myth were not recorded until the Savannah Unit of the Georgia Writers' Project, funded by the Works Projects Administration, collected stories from African-Americans along the Georgia coast in 1939 and 1940. The group traveled to towns and villages surrounding Savannah and to many of the islands found off of the Georgia coast and in the large rivers of the region. This area was chosen because of the "physical and cultural isolation" of its African-American inhabitants, which provided for the survival of many customs, both African and European (United States v). In each community the group of folktale collectors sought out the eldest members of the neighborhood and asked them to relate to the collectors anything African of which they knew, from food, crafts, and tribal customs, to hoodoo, conjuring, and myths. The collectors focused on survival as a theme for the many stories with which they were presented, including over twenty-five variations on the Flying African myth. Contained in this book, *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes*, is by far the greatest collection of Flying African tales ever published. Since 1940 various renderings of the myth have been published, but this collection allows the reader the most comprehensive view of the myth during a time when former slaves still lived and could tell how the story was told to them.

The general form of the Flying African myth remains relatively constant throughout the renditions collected by the workers for the Georgia Writers' Project. In each story, certain Africans transported from their homelands to the New World have the ability to fly, some escaping slavery by flying from the cotton fields back to Africa. This basic form is elaborated differently by each teller, but certain trends can be found between the various versions. These trends include: a married couple, Africans tricked onto a slave ship, a magic hoe, witnesses, magic power from Africa, wings, simply rising

off of the earth, magic words or passwords, spinning, the distinction between those who can and those who cannot fly, entire groups flying, and turning into birds. This list presents several contradictions, such as the variation in the number of people flying away and the method of flight, but each of these contradictions reveals how storytellers will adapt a basic myth for their own purposes and then pass this adaptation on to others as the "truth." Appendix A provides a list of twenty-one storytellers from this region. Included for each are the town or village in which they lived in 1939 or 1940, approximate ages, any other pertinent background information, and the elements of the Flying African myth that each included in his or her own version of the folktale or mentioned in passing comment.

The storytellers from Georgia ranged from middle-aged to well over one hundred years old. Several of the older men and women were born in times of slavery, and at least three of the men, Wallace Quarterman from Darien, Shad Hall from Sapelo Island, and Tony William Delegal from Brownville, were adults before they became free men. Those who had heard of the flying Africans indicated that the story was very popular, and that they had been told the story many times before. If the storyteller was specific in naming from whom they had heard the version which they were repeating, this source was almost always a relative. Three women and one man were told the story from their mothers, one man was told by his father, and three men and two women were told by one of their grandparents (usually the grandfather). This means that one half of the published versions of this folktale were passed on within a family. The story of the flying Africans becomes not only a part of the community's folklore, but also an important part of these persons' individual family histories. The tale was significant to the older generations of these families, and was therefore repeated several times to the younger generation with the purpose of continuing the tale for generations more. In the case of Carrie Hamilton, a seventy-year-old woman from Yamacraw, the story was a traditional one within her

family. She explained, "Muh mudduh use tuh tell me bout em [flying Africans] wen we set in duh city mahket sellin vegetubbles an fruit" (United States 29).

Many of the elderly storytellers in *Drums and Shadows* remembered hearing about the flying African story back when they were children. Seventy-five-year-old Henry Bates recalled, "Wen I wuz a boy I heah lots uh stories bout people flyin" (34). The folktale appears to have been commonly told to children by their elders, which Dorothy Johnson, an elderly woman from Springfield, emphasized. She commented to one of the folktale collectors, "Duh ole folks use tuh tell bout duh people wut could take wing and fly right back tuh Africa" (44). The inclusion of this long-deceased generation of storytellers in the tales of the book's generation remarks on the cyclical nature of folktales. The old tell the young, who in turn age and tell the next generation, and so forth. The Flying African folktale was important enough to the generation of slaves just before the Civil War that they repeated the story enough times to ensure its survival among African-American folklore after the institution of slavery was abolished. This suggests that the importance of the tale may not lie solely in its protagonists' successful escapes from slavery, but also in some deeper meaning that speaks universally to the free and enslaved alike. It is this aspect of the myth that eventually survives into the twentieth century, manifesting itself in the poetry of African-American writers outside of the villages and towns of Georgia's coastline.

But before examining the transformation of the Flying African myth, the varying elements of the stories and their significance need clarification. One of the most basic elements of the story, exactly who was able to flew back to Africa, is surprisingly diverse. Not all of the storytellers spoke of specific incidences of slaves flying away, but those who did usually fell into one of three categories: the single person flight, the couple flight, or the group flight.

Jack Wilson, from Old Fort, related to collectors the story of his own uncle, who would disappear from the plantation for weeks at a time and who could fly up into trees (7). In this case we have a specific slave with the ability to fly instead of the traditional nameless slave who flies to Africa and is never seen again. By adapting the tale to a single, known person, Wilson made his story much more believable and his further discussions of conjuring and magic are more credible since this is part of his own family history. When a single person appears in these flying tales, there is often a personal connection between the storyteller and the flyer. The storyteller uses this instance to illustrate the truth, or possibility of truth, behind the stories of the flying Africans. Charles Hunter of St. Simons Island told collectors that as a child he had known an African "root makuh" named Alexander that claimed that he and his family back in Africa could fly (177). Hunter professed to have never seen the African fly, but sounded convinced that the older man had the ability even if he did not display it. Again the personal tie to someone with the ability to fly is established in order to add credibility to the storyteller's belief in the folktale.

Rosa Grant's version of the Flying African folktale is so close to home that it appears to be a legitimate part of her family history. According to this sixty-five-year-old from Possum Point, her grandmother Theresa and mother Ryna were tricked onto a slave ship by a piece of red cloth and transported to the New World. This trick is recorded in many different folktales from all over the South, and is often considered at least based on a true story. Very unhappy as a slave, Theresa one day stopped working in the field next to her daughter and began to twirl around, stretching her arms out until she lifted off of the ground and could fly back to her homeland. Ryna was left behind, wishing that her mother had taught her how to fly (145). The flying African in this version of the story not only has a name, but a surviving heir who was given a first-hand account of the incident from her own mother. Grant's mother could have made up the

story to tell her daughter when she was a child to explain why her grandmother was not around, incorporating the myth that Ryna had probably been told as a child. But now the story has become part of a much larger tradition with the passage of it from Grant on to others.

As common as the single person flight, though, is the couple who flies away together. Three of the storytellers placed a married couple from Africa at the center of the myth. Two of these renditions are similar enough to warrant quoting them in full. The first was told by Mose Brown from the village of Tin City east of Savannah:

My gran use to tell me bout folks flyin back tuh Africa. A man an his wife wuz slabs an got treat so hahd, dey jis fret an fret. One day they wuz standin wid some udduh slabs an all ub a sudden dey say, "We gwine back tuh Africa. So goodie bye, goodie bye." Den dey flied right out uh sight. (18)

This version of the myth is strikingly familiar to that of Carrie Hamilton, the seventy-year-old woman from Yamacraw mentioned above. Yamacraw is west of the township of Savannah, and the families living there have generally been there for generations. Hamilton's rendition displays how even the wording of a particular folktale can be retained with multiple tellings:

[My mother] say dat deah wuz a man an he wife an dey git fooled abode a slabe ship. Fus ting dey know dey wuz sole tuh a plantuh on St. Helena. So one day wen all duh slabs wuz tuhgedduh, dis man an he wife say, "We gwine hack home, goodie bye, goodie bye," and jis like a bud dey flew out uh sight. (29)

Brown and Hamilton were situated on opposite sides of a bustling urban area, Savannah, and yet their stories echo each other not only in plot, but also in wording. This phenomenon attests to the collective consciousness that a common folklore creates for

African-American communities. This story of two African slaves disappearing from a plantation could have its base in a true occurrence of two runaways that were never found. The story may have been the way that the other slaves either explained the disappearance to their master or to themselves. Repetition of specifics in a folktale lends one to believe that these elements may be closer to the truth than others. The married couple turns up in one other rendition of the tale, but with a very different twist. In the story told to Serina Hall, an eighty-eight-year-old woman from White Bluff, the couple flies back and forth between the plantation and Africa because their children, born in the New World, are unable to fly (81). This tale sounds more like myth than reality, though the idea of returning to the plantation is seen in Wilson's story about his flying uncle.

Even more common than the stories of the flying couple are those in which an entire group of slaves rises from the field and flies away. Jack Tattnall, a man in his mid-seventies who lived on Wilmington Island, told how an entire group of unhappy African slaves one day simply rose into the air one by one and then flew back to Africa (108). Shad Hall, well over one hundred years old, was told as a child about a group of newly arrived Africans that were going to be whipped by their new master. The group ran to the river with the plantation's overseer close behind them, but before they could be caught they all rose into the air and flew away (169). Another woman, Priscilla McCullough of Darien, was often told by her mother the story of a group of slaves who one day formed a ring in the field in which they were working. The slaves began to spin faster and faster until each had risen into the air and then they all flew back to Africa, barely escaping the overseer. The overseer appears in three of the four stories about entire groups flying away together. He is the person from whom the slaves are fleeing, but he also represents the brutal institution of slavery with his sharp whip and profound hatred for his charges.

The last of the group tales was told by Wallace Quarterman, a ninety-four-year-old man also living in Darien. He includes the overseer in his story, a man he calls Mr. Blue, who planned to whip a group of "foolish" new Africans on the plantation on which Quarterman lived. According to Quarterman's tale, the Africans said some magic words in their native language, rose into the sky, turned into buzzards, and flew away. The slaves left behind a hoe standing in the field, which is often an indication that magic has been used (150-51). The hoe appears in the stories of both Shad Hall and Prince Sneed, a White Bluff man well into his sixties. Hall connects the ability to make a hoe stand and work itself with the ability to fly, attributing both to Africans that "knowd how tuh wuk roots" (168). Sneed told the GWP workers that his grandfather once witnessed this magic in connection with flying. In his grandfather's story two Africans belonging to a man named Waldburg on St. Catherine's Island were caught lounging under a tree by the plantation slave driver, their hoes working by themselves in the field. When confronted the two slaves said some magic words and rose off of the ground, flying away (79). The hoe is a symbol of the hard agricultural labor that African slaves were subjected to in the cotton fields of Southern plantations. The desire for this difficult work to be accomplished without the sweat and blood of the slaves is demonstrated in stories in which the hoe continues working on its own.

Magic is an important feature of the Flying African myth. In almost every story the ability to fly is connected to either internalized magical power, magic words, or magical objects. Internalized power more often than not exists because the subject is African, meaning raised and captured on that continent and brought to the New World with an existing, non-European language and culture. In Charles Hunter's story, the reference to Alexander's family in Africa connects the ability to fly not just with magic, but with *African* magic. In another instance Jack Wilson's mother told him "bout slabs

jis brung obuh frum Africa wut hab duh supreme magic powuh" (7). Even Europeans often viewed the continent as a mysterious, magical place, as is apparent in Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*. Thomas Smith, eighty years old and living in Yamacraw in 1940, believed that the magical power given to Moses by God to turn his rod into a snake still resides in some Blacks in the twentieth century. He told collectors:

Dat happen in Africa duh Bible say. Ain dat show dat Africa wuz a lan uh magic powuh since duh beginnin uh histry? Well den, duh descendants uh Africans hab duh same gif tuh do unnatchul ting. Ise heahd duh story uh duh flyin Africans and I sho believ it happen. (28)

The idea of God's magic residing in the Black person's body and soul is one of the features of the Flying African myth that modern African-American poets have pursued in their works. Yet time and again the idea that only some African-Americans both have this power and know how to use it also appears in these stories. After Rosa Grant's grandmother Ryna was left behind by her African mother, the young girl grew to realize that "she guess she jis wuzn bawn wid duh powuh" (145). Ryna and the children of the flying couple in Serina Hall's tale were just a few of the many who were left behind because of their innate inability to fly. This idea of the chosen and proletariat reappears in Toni Morrison's transformation of the Flying African myth, the fictional novel *Song of Solomon*.

Often connected to the idea of African-born magic are the magic words and passwords included in many of the stories. I have listed these phrases and chants in Appendix B. In his testimonial, Jack Wilson told the collectors that "deah wuz a magic pass wud dat dey would pass tuh uddehs" (7). The magic words are spoken just before the Africans rise off of the ground and mark the transition from earth-bound slaves to powerful and free men and women. These magic words enable the slaves to rise in a divine vision of spiritual and physical release. They release a power repressed by the

condition of slavery, a power that is stronger and older than the chains of the White man. Slaves often turned to the use of magic, referred to as Voodoo, Hoodoo, or conjuring to provide the power and control that were denied to them in the New World. In his book *From Folklore to Fiction* H. Nigel Thomas writes, "It is not difficult to see why blacks as slaves in the New World had a deep need for sorcerers or conjurers. Insofar as the spirits of their ancestors failed to free them from slavery, they turned to conjuring" (40). Conjuring appears in the Flying African folktales as a means to achieve the ultimate desire of the Black slave, his freedom.

Not all of the storytellers in Georgia were certain about or willing to disclose the magic words that had been passed along to them by others telling the folktale. Wallace Quarterman simply substituted duck and turkey noises for the words of the Africans in his tale (United States 150-51). It is not clear whether he did not trust the collector to whom he was speaking, if he thought the words were inappropriate, if he had forgotten the words, or if they had just never been disclosed to him. The bird sounds are significant, though, because they coincide with Quarterman's twist on the story in which the Africans actually transform themselves into buzzards once they are in the air (151). In other instances the passwords have suffered from years of retellings and are no longer intelligible in either their original African tongue or their English translations. Like the game "Telephone," in which a message is passed from person to person until the end result bears little resemblance to its origin, we can see this unfortunate transformation in Serina Hall's rendition of the Flying African tale. She told collectors, "Duh magic passwud mean sumpm like dis, 'Who loss duh key Branzobo?' (81).

In spite of this demonstrated disintegration of the original words over time, one storyteller was able to give collectors a password still in its native tongue. Although his version may be slightly different from the original, many of the words resurface in an African song sung by another man in a different village. Prince Sneed related the magic

words to collectors as "Kum buba yali kum buba tambe, Kum kunka yali kum kunka tambe" (79). Many of these words appear in the African song of Tony William Delegal, a man from Brownville who was well over one hundred years old. Collectors recorded the song as

Wa kum kum munin	Kum baba yano
Kum baba yano	Lai lai tambe
Lai lai tambe	Ashi lai lai lai
Ashi boong a nomo	Shi wali go
Shi wali go	Dhum. (54-55)
Ashi quank	

The words *kum*, *baba* or *buba*, and *tambe* are found in both Sneed's magic words and Delegal's African song. Virginia Hamilton and Toni Morrison also noticed this connection and chose to include these words in their modern versions of the Flying African tale. The transformations of the magic words can also be found in Appendix B and will be discussed in more detail later.

Conjuring not only involves magic words, but also objects that either provide or channel the power needed for a certain spell. The magic hoe, discussed above, is the most commonly found object in this folktale, probably because the tool would logically be identified with field labor and its placement in the story's plot seems to be a natural affirmation of the tale's veracity. George Little, a root doctor from Brownville, claimed that the bones of a black cat are needed in order to work the magic for flying (58). This is a reflection of the European influences on African-American folk belief, since black cat bone has long been regarded by Western society as an object of witchery (Thomas 41).

In some versions of the tale conditions are placed on the workers of magic that must be fulfilled before they are able to fly. Wilson confirmed that belief in the magic was necessary, or the spell would not work (United States 7). This condition is shared with Western fairy tales, like the story of Peter Pan. Flight is not just a physical activity, but also one which requires mental and spiritual unity with the actual act. Some conditions are not quite as pleasant as simply believing, as Serina Hall pointed out in her story. The girl slave who wants to learn how to fly needs to not only learn the magic words of flight, but she also must kill a man by conjuring (81). This violent act reminds listeners and readers that the magic behind flight is not necessarily innocent or altruistic. Such violence also reflects both the brutality to which slaves were subjected and the violence which the entire South experienced during the Civil War.

The last element of the Flying African folktale that provides some insight into the cultures of enslaved, free, and modern Blacks is the method of flight. Most of the storytellers did not specify whether the slaves simply elevated off of the ground or whether they actually formed wings and flew away. Usually the phrase "take wing" was used, but occasionally more details were provided. Quarterman's flying Africans turned into buzzards, Grant's great-grandmother simply stuck her arms out and flew, and McCullough's slaves took wing and flew like birds (150,145, 154). In Hamilton's adaptation of the story she writes:

And they flew like blackbirds over the fields. Black, shiny wings flapping against the blue up there.

Then, many of the people were captured for Slavery. The ones that could fly shed their wings. They couldn't take their wings across the water on slave ships. Too crowded, don't you know. (166)

The slaves in her story forgot how to fly once they left Africa, and when they flew again in the New World, they no longer needed their wings. Hamilton internalizes the power to

fly, implying that the Blacks in the New World have gained a spiritual strength that enables them to fly without "training wheels," their African wings. Part of the new culture of American Blacks is the tremendous psychological strength and resistance that developed as a result of the hardships they faced in their new land. The ability to fly without wings, to rise into the air unaided, symbolizes an independence from Africa while recognizing the African heritage of the slaves.

The WPA study is merely a snapshot in the never-ending evolution of the Flying African myth, but it offers researchers a point of comparison with literary works that deal with this folktale either directly or indirectly. The folktale resurfaces in poetry dating back to the nineteenth century and continuing through the Harlem Renaissance into the late twentieth century. As the myth of flying imbedded itself into the many sub-cultures of African-Americans, poets pulled its many layers of meanings and lessons to the surface and turned the characteristics of one folktale into a host of themes uniquely African-American.

Chapter II:

Transformation of the Flying African Myth in African-American Poetry

The literary tradition of African-American poetry began with the 1746 publication of "Bars Fight," written by the Black slave Lucy Terry about an Indian raid on Deerfield that same year (Hughes and Bontemps xxi-xxii). Though still enslaved by White Americans, Terry and other African-Americans were taught by their owners the skills of reading and writing the English language. This education was prohibited by law in most states, but poetry, from slaves like Phillis Wheatley, George Moses Horton, and Jupiter Hammon, are lasting reminders that these laws detracted from our national literary and scholarly heritage by denying millions of other Blacks any schooling at all. Individual men and women recognized the intelligence and potential of the above poets, but each of the situations that produced such well-educated persons stands out as rare and unique. Thanks to these law-breakers and the perseverance of many poor and enslaved Blacks in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we have testaments, through poetry and other literary works, to the physical and psychological conditions of African-Americans during those time periods.

The "Black Aesthetic" began to form as early as the turn into the nineteenth century. During this era, most Black poets attempted to mirror the socially accepted White "dictum that poetry's province is to convey truth, to teach, uplift, reform, and, secondarily, to give pleasure" (Sherman 4). Common, accepted literary forms frame poems more often didactic than not. Yet within these poems we find Black voices that "speak from the unique perspective of an alien race in white society" (4). Poems about freedom, religion, and slavery reflect the poets' personal pain and empathy to degrees found only in African-American poetry.

In the cotton fields of Southern plantations, where literacy among slaves was much rarer than in Northern homes and businesses, the slaves developed sentiments

similar to their literate brothers and sisters about freedom, slavery, and religion. Instead of poetry these men and women created folktales, folk songs, and spirituals to convey their "unique perspective" on these topics. As more Southern Blacks found their way North, this folklore became recognized nationally rather than just regionally.

The Flying African myth explored in the previous chapter encompasses many themes quickly adopted by Black poets in the nineteenth century. According to E. Ethelbert Miller in his introduction to *In Search of Color Everywhere: A Collection of African-American Poetry*, "Freedom has always been a theme found within African-American literature" (5). The myth deals primarily with the theme of freedom, but it is also important to note that this is one of only a handful of myths involving people flying in African-American folklore. In the nineteenth century the theme of flying is introduced to the Black literary aesthetic in manners similar to its handling in Black folklore. While many of the poets who wrote of flying may not have had in mind the Flying African myth, or, for that matter, have even heard the folktale, the connection between flight and the plight of American Blacks was firmly established in their minds. The same ideas that formed the myth inspired poets to write about flying as both a return and as an escape.

Black poets and their works evolved with the Civil War, Reconstruction, the Harlem Renaissance, the Great Depression, both World Wars, and the Civil Rights movement. Throughout these evolutions, though, flight remains a constant theme, metaphor, or desire of Black American poets. An idea that began as a common myth permeated the African-American culture in such a way that the myth was largely forgotten, obscured by the popular survival of its various themes and aspirations. In Gwendolyn Brooks's introduction to the anthology *The Poetry of Black America: Anthology of the 20th Century*, she quotes a passage from a 1950 *Phylon* essay she wrote, stating that the Black poet has certain advantages, such as "ready-made subjects -- which

he may twist as he wills. Great drives. And that inspiring emotion, like tied hysteria, found only in the general territory of great drives" (xxx). The folktales of the South were largely based upon the Black experience in America and created the "ready-made subjects" that Brooks discusses and that Black poets incorporated into their own works.

The topic most closely related to the Flying African myth that poets, ranging in periods from pre-Civil War times up into the late twentieth century, have used in their works is flight. Usually flight is symbolic of larger concepts related to physical, spiritual, creative, social, or economic freedom. In African-American poetry flight may represent either an escape from an unpleasant situation or a return to a better situation, although the first appears more frequently than the latter. Also within these poems are certain elements easily related to the Flying African myth, including references to Africa, slavery, wings, birds, and singing. The last three elements on this list are largely poetic metaphors used repeatedly by African-American poets to connect their race to nature's free-flying creatures.

Singing, in particular, is often written about in respect to African-American slaves and blues or jazz singers. This is appropriate, as Steven C. Tracy explains in *Langston Hughes and the Blues*, because "both the writers of the Harlem Renaissance and the blues recording artists of the 1920s were working with African-American folklore; indeed, they owed much of their success to it" (12). In 1917 James Weldon Johnson wrote a moving tribute to the slaves who composed with their voices the African-American folk songs and tales still popular today. He finds inspiration in a long-deceased songwriter, who "feeling the ancient faith of prophets rise / Within his dark-kept soul, burst into song" (J. Johnson 29). Johnson records the ability of slaves to rise above their conditions to find hope in the heavens:

What merely living clod, what captive thing,
Could up toward God through all its darkness grope,

And find within its deadened heart to sing
These songs of sorrow, love and faith, and hope? [. . .]
O black slave singers, gone, forgot, unfamed,
You - you alone, of all the long, long line
Of those who've sung untaught, unknown, unnamed,
Have stretched out upward, seeking the divine. (17-20, 45-48)

Johnson's tribute acknowledges the contribution of slaves to the oral literature of Black communities. The slave sang to free his spirit, "though still about his hands he felt his chains" (12). This became a symbol of pride for African-Americans, that the most oppressed of all God's creatures could still find the strength within his Black body to look to the heavens and sing. The simple act of singing takes on greater meaning in this context, and is transformed into an exhibition of inner strength and longing. Jean Toomer also addresses "late minstrels of the restless earth" in his extensive poem "The Blue Meridian," written in 1923 (Toomer 112). Singing is a way for the Black to soothe his pain, just as the speaker in the poem explains, "I sing because I ache" (121). Yet there is an irony in this act that Countee Cullen recognizes in his 1925 sonnet "Yet Do I Marvel," in which he ponders the attributes given by God to all of his creatures. The poem ends with Cullen's amazement: "Yet do I marvel at this curious thing: / To make a poet black, and bid him sing!" (Cullen 13-14). The Black man is subjected to terrible treatment and yet, with so little to rejoice, is given the power of song. It is through their voices that African-Americans were able to free themselves fully, a tradition retained today in Black communities, churches, and choirs all over the United States.

A strong tradition of song combined with the desire for freedom created a perfect cultural palette for the creation of a myth that places the Black man in the sky, as free as a bird in the wild. The Flying African tale fulfills the desire of the Black slave to fly away from the horrors of slavery, if only in his imagination. Slaves looked upon the

birds surrounding them with envy, because at the end of the day the birds could fly to another field or even another continent, but the slave was forced to remain in one place. Like birds with clipped wings, slaves could only look at the sky and dream of being so free, a dream that did not disappear with slavery.

Life for African-Americans in this country has been filled with uphill battles, even for the basic rights promised to all citizens in the United States Constitution. Although freed from the bonds of slavery at the conclusion of the Civil War, Black men and women still faced the long roads to social, economic, and creative freedom. They had not reached the status of free and wild birds, though the potential to soar filled their hearts and minds. In 1893 the great poet Paul Laurence Dunbar composed a poem on this subject that has inspired every generation of African-American poets and writers since. "Sympathy" compares the experience of being Black in America with that of a caged bird, who "beats his wing / Till its blood is red on the cruel bars" and sings "a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings" (Dunbar 8-9, 20). Dunbar cries "I know why the caged bird sings!" in recognition of their similar plights (21). The bird's cage is made of metal, but Dunbar's is made of a no less formidable substance: racial prejudice. The poet identifies with the bird because both have the ability to fly, one physically and the other socially and economically, but neither can do more than sing through their miseries and beat against their respective cages. The Black person desires to be free, but within the racist society of early twentieth century America, this remains a dream. In Askia Muhammad Touré's tribute to Southern Black tenant farmers, the 1963 poem "Floodtide," she writes that through all the sorrows of these women and men, "they sing their songs, / and carry on" (Touré 121-22). Like the caged birds, these farmers are tied to their land and can only sing to release themselves from their exhausting lives.

Black women have also identified with the caged bird, though in their poems it is a combination of race and gender that contributes to their isolation and repression within

society. "The Heart of a Woman," written in 1918 by Georgia Douglas Johnson, compares a woman's heart to a "lone bird" that flies freely during the day (G. Johnson 2). But this is only a temporary and superficial freedom, as Johnson describes in the poem's last stanza:

The heart of a woman falls back with the night,
And enters some alien cage in its plight,
And tries to forget it has dreamed of the stars,
While it breaks, breaks, breaks on the sheltering bars. (9-12)

If Black men were restricted in their economic and social mobility, Black women were virtually prohibited from taking part in the classic American Dream. These women faced the hurdles of both racism and sexism, identifying themselves with caged birds much as Dunbar and the shackled slaves of the ante-bellum South did. Even as recently as 1969 female Black poets have recognized the barriers that they face in a society dominated by White males. That year Lucille Clifton wrote "If I Stand in My Window," in which she describes her naked breasts pressed against the window of her own house as "black birds pushing against glass" (Clifton 5). The glass separates both Clifton and her figurative "black birds" from the outer world, trapping them in what amounts to a glass cage.

Birds have symbolized flight and freedom as long as men and women have inhabited the Earth. That African-American poets have looked to birds for inspiration or in longing is neither surprising nor new. Yet the frequency of references to birds as metaphors for Black persons suggests that more Black poets have made deeper, personal connections to these flying creatures than White poets in the United States. Birds symbolizing the power of flight can be found in countless poems written by Blacks since the 1800s. In Effie Lee Newsome's "Arctic Tern in a Museum," written sometime before 1940, the poet reflects upon seeing the titular stuffed bird in its display case. She thinks of the bird's long trips "from antarctic to arctic / On through the leagueless skies" and

sees "but one message- / One single symbol- / Flight" (Newsome 9-10, 16-18). The poet reveres this creature for its ability to fly, and stares in wonder at its fragile form. This fascination with birds flying reappears in Helene Johnson's poem "Fulfillment," in which she numbers watching "a young bird, veering, learn to fly" as a moment that fills her soul with contentment (H. Johnson 3). In her 1985 poem "Balittai Calls Mama" Marilyn Nelson Waneik finds a moment of repose in "the wild cry of geese" outside of her window and away from the demands of her household (Waneik 135). Listening and watching birds offers these women a chance to escape into the world of flight for a brief moment, much like the slaves who could enter that ephemeral world through the telling and retelling of the Flying African folktale.

African-American poets often focus on birds as symbols of not only flight, but more importantly, of freedom. In North America many African slaves experienced for the first time the sight of large, graceful birds everywhere. In Africa, the largest bird of the land is the ostrich, but it cannot fly. The buzzard is common, but eats the flesh of rotting corpses. The jungle birds, while beautifully plumed and wonderfully musical, are generally small and not very brave. It is not surprising that African slaves looked to the predatory eagles, powerful yet elegant swans, and intelligent ravens with awe and respect. These creatures epitomized a world of freedom, individual and collective strength, and beauty. Charles Lewis Reason, born free in 1818, spent most of his life teaching in the colored schools of New York City and fighting for abolitionism and civil rights (Sherman 41). In 1846 he published the poem "Freedom," in which he captures beautifully the symbol of freedom for both America and its Black inhabitants. Reason writes of freedom:

We view Thy stately form, loom o'er
The topmost of the seven hills!
While 'round Thee glittering eagles soar-

The symbol'd rise of freeborn wills. (Reason 25-28)

The American eagle inspired African-American poets in the nineteenth century much as the powerful bird inspired the revolutionaries of the previous century. In Joseph Cephas Holly's 1853 poem "A Wreath of Holly" he longs to "soar on eagle's wings like Terrance, / The chainless hearted Roman slave" (Holly 15-16). The reference is to a Roman slave who was released by his master and became a widely known comic dramatist. The "eagle's wings" that Holly desires are the wings of freedom from the oppression all around him.

Other powerful birds are also used in African-American poetry, like the geese in Waniek's poem and the swans in George Moses Horton's "Liberty and Slavery," written in 1829. Horton was the first Black man to ever publish a complete volume of poetry in America and was nicknamed the "Colored Bard of North Carolina." Born into slavery, some of Horton's poetry reflects his strong anti-slavery sentiments, but even these are masked by poetic language and lyrical verses (Sherman 17-18). In "Liberty and Slavery" Horton writes:

Dear Liberty! upon thy breast,
I languish to respire;
And like the Swan unto her nest,
I'd to thy smiles retire. (33-36)

The poet places himself in the protective arms of freedom like his swan in her cozy nest. Liberty is the resting place of strong and majestic creatures, both man and bird alike.

Wild songbirds also have their place in African-American poetry, especially in reference to the voices of Black slaves, laborers, and poets. In 1915 James David Corrothers wrote "Paul Laurence Dunbar," an elegy for the renowned dialect poet who "came, a youth, singing in the dawn" and died young of tuberculosis (Corrothers 1). In the poem Corrothers compares Dunbar's use of dialect to gain public recognition with

the low flight of the meadow-lark whose "flooded lyrics half the hilltops drowned" (24-25). The power of this songbird is his ability to spread his song across the land, much as Dunbar was recognized and read all over the United States. Langston Hughes, touted as a "champion of the oral tradition," also wrote of another well-known poet in the same manner (Tracy 8). In "Frederick Douglass: 1817-1895," written by Hughes in 1967, he gives the dead poet a voice and lets him cry out to the world:

Hear my voice!

Oh, to be a beast, a bird,

Anything but a slave! he said. (Hughes 15-17)

In Hughes's representation of Douglass, the latter finds more freedom in the lives of animals than in the meager existence of a slave. From the perspective of an enslaved man, any freedom at all, even the simple-minded freedom of birds and beasts, is desirable. The poem reflects the values attributed to Hughes in Tracy's book, demonstrating

[. . .] his reliance on the oral tradition, and his commitment to the 'deeper questions of life' - questions about freedom, identity, existence, and man's relation to others in his environment. (8)

Joshua McCarter Simpson was a freeborn Black man, but he often adopted the voices of his enslaved brothers in his moving poetry. In "The Twilight Hour," published by Simpson in 1848, the creatures and elements of the forest speak of their freedom to the poem's enslaved protagonist. The stanza in which the wild nightingales speak to the slave alludes to the freedom of Black Africans in comparison to Blacks in America. Simpson writes:

"We are free," said the Nightingales, joining their chorus;

(While over me gently they poised on the wing;)

Our parents and kinsmen were all free before us,

And we will the anthems of liberty sing." (Simpson 13-16)

The reader is reminded by the word "kinsmen" of the African tribes from which Black slaves were taken before transporting them to America. The nightingales taunt the poem's protagonist with their freedom, the envy of all enslaved Black men and women. The bird was still the envy of African-Americans one hundred and twenty years later when James A. Randall, Jr. wrote the poem "When Something Happens." The poet is confronted by the conditions of second-class citizenship as a Black man in America, where he has been "called a bastard / over a period, say, / of several centuries" (Randall 1-3). In his frustration Randall claims to "become almost a bird for want / of flying" (6-7). He wants to break free of the social status forced upon him and climb to heights that, given a chance or a pair of wings, he knows are attainable. The bird metaphor acts as another symbol of freedom, though in this case Randall writes not of physical freedom, but of social liberty.

Many African-American poets have addressed the theme of the physical act of human flight. The image of Black women and men lifting into the air on powerful wings is very poetic in nature and is quite popular in twentieth century poetry. Several parallels can be drawn between the images in these poems and the Flying African myth, including references to Africa, the memory of wings, and even magic words. In some cases poets refer directly to the folktale, while in others only the influence of the myth is felt within the work. Many African-American poets view folklore as "a resource upon which one can draw if one wishes to get in touch with one's past and memory (self) while still maintaining a social and aesthetic distance" (Tracy 14). References to Africa and African ancestors are common in later poems, like in Imamu A. Baraka's (LeRoi Jones's) 1969 poem "Ieroy." Baraka describes Black angels hovering about his mother's head "carrying life from our ancestors, / and knowledge, and the strong nigger feeling"

(Baraka 4-5). The winged representations of Baraka's ancestral spirits resemble the flying Africans of the folktale whose African-based knowledge allows them to fly.

In Claude McKay's poem "Outcast" he feels the influence and pull of his African ancestors within his own soul, their "words felt, but never heard" (McKay 3). McKay then connects singing to African tradition in the fourth line of the poem, "My soul would sing forgotten jungle songs" (4). The poet longs for his lost and wandering spirit to return to its homeland. In "Toward Guinea: For Larry Neal, 1937-1981" Houston A. Baker, Jr. writes that the Black man's soul indeed returns to Africa in "a bright reunion / Of ancestral sound" after the body has died (Baker 12-13). Baraka also seeks a return to his African roots, but writes in the 1972 poem "ka'ba":

[. . .] We need magic
now we need the spells, to raise up
return, destroy, and create. What will be
the sacred words? (20-23)

This is a direct reference to the versions of the Flying African myth in which magic spells are used to raise slaves up from the ground and enable them to fly all the way to Africa. Baraka uses the myth as a metaphor for the future of African-Americans, who must find solidarity and strength from their African roots in order to raise themselves up in American society.

In two notable instances, poets Nanina Alba and Robert E. Hayden wrote poems concerning another myth of human flight, the story of Icarus and Daedalus. According to Greek mythology, the architect of King Minos's legendary labyrinth, a man named Daedalus, sought escape from one of the king's towers in which he was imprisoned. The clever man build wings out of feathers, thread, and wax and then took to the air with his son Icarus. Ignoring his father's warnings, Icarus flew too close to the sun, melting the wax and causing him to plunge to his death into the sea. But careful Daedalus arrived

safely in Sicily (Bulfinch 128-29). In Alba's poem "Be Daedalus," written in the 1960s, she encourages the reader to "make wings, / Make even feathered wings" (Alba 12-13). She warns against the carelessness of Icarus and emphasizes the wisdom of Daedalus's decision to "avoid the parching sun that brings / Death as its tax" (4-5). Alba uses this myth in much the same way as Baraka uses the Flying African myth, to encourage her African-American audience to find a way to raise themselves up in our society. Yet Alba adds that extra warning, that reaching for the unreasonable can only harm the cause. Alba's poem also includes subtle references to the Black slaves forced to work in the hot Southern sun, dreaming of flying away. The statement "suns can be brutal things" recalls the conditions of the plantation cotton fields and the overall brutality of the system of slavery (6).

Hayden's 1966 poem "O Daedalus, Fly Away Home" also invokes the spirit of the Greek myth, but he uses it explicitly in reference to the Flying African myth. The action of the poem is set at night under the "Georgia pines" where a dance with a "coonskin drum and jubilee banjo" keep time for the revelers (Hayden 1,2). The speaker invites a woman named Malinda to dance with him, which flows into an invitation to build wings and fly back to Africa:

Night is an African juju man
 weaving a wish and a weariness together
 to make two wings.
O fly away home fly away
 Do you remember Africa?
O cleave the air and fly away home. (6-11)

Hayden clearly connects African magic with the ability to fly, especially for the specific, intended purpose of returning to Africa, his "home," from the United States. This is a response to the "Back to Africa" movements that flourished throughout most of the

twentieth century. The most famous of these movements, led by the magnetic Marcus Garvey in the 1930s, fostered a great amount of pride in Black communities during a time when many did not feel that Blacks had very much of which to be proud. Since Garvey's time, the connection of American Blacks to Africa has been a point of self-respect and pride for the descendants of people brought to this land against their wills. It is with this confidence that Hayden refers to the Flying African myth in the next part of the poem:

My gran, he flew back to Africa,
just spread his arms and
flew away home. (12-14)

Just as Rosa Grant from Possum Point, Georgia told the story of her Grandmother Ryna sticking her arms out and flying back to Africa, the speaker of Hayden's poem applies the Flying African myth to his own grandfather. Hayden recognizes that the old folktale he had probably heard as a child painted a more poetic and romantic picture of the return to Africa than would getting on a boat and sailing there.

By including the wings of "a wish and a weariness" the poet creates a method of flight symbolic on several levels. The wish reaches as far back as the Africans working in Southern cotton fields who would gaze into the sky and dream of flying away. This particular wish remains a constant desire even after freedom came for African-Americans because it served as a metaphor for a release from the oppression and restrictions placed on them by American society. The term "weariness" also encompasses the entire history of Blacks in America, from their tired and aching bodies during the days of slavery to their exhausted hearts after years of struggling to gain equality as free women and men. From these negative effects of oppression can be sewn the wings of hope for a better future. Like the fragile feathers and string of Daedalus's wings, the weariness of the American Black's figurative wings is held together by a substance as delicate as wax, a

wish. Hayden draws together Greek mythology, African-American folklore, and current issues of Africanism faced by his people to sculpt a poetic image of man in flight. It is a flight from tyranny, slavery, and injustice to freedom, equality, and self-rule. In the words of the traditional African-American folk song "Take This Hammer," Hayden's protagonist awaits the day that he can instruct those left behind in Georgia, "You tell him I was flyin' - huh! / Tell him I was flyin' - huh!" (Traditional 7-8).

The connection to Africa and an African-ness only attainable and maintainable on the African continent often manifests itself within Black American poetry. One of the major themes derived from circumstances contributing to the Flying African myth is the possession of bird-like wings. These are natural wings that are part of a person's anatomy, not scientific constructs like those that Daedalus made. African-American poets Laini Mataka and Margaret Danner explore the idea of natural wings in their poetry, in which they make connections to both Africa and oppression. In the 1980s Danner published "Far From Africa: Four Poems." In the first of these poems, "Garnishing the Aviary," Danner presents the metaphor of birds in an aviary shedding their plumes for feathers resembling, though not matching in splendor or exoticism, their "former preen" (Danner 4). These birds symbolize the African-Americans in the United States that are finally coming into their own after years of conflicting identities between their colorful African heritage and the image of simplicity and inferiority imposed upon them by White society. Although written in the 1980s, this poem addresses an issue originating during the Harlem Renaissance. In *Langston Hughes and the Blues* Tracy writes, "The essential problem of the Harlem Renaissance was that of establishing African-American identity, considering both the African and African-American heritage" (17). Danner writes of her race's African heritage:

[. . .] The initial bloom;
Exotic, dazzling in its indigo, tangerine

Splendor; this rare, conflicting coat had to be shed. (5-7)

The colors recall images of tropical birds in the jungles of central Africa and the colorful traditional costumes of many native African tribes. Yet these colors reflect the African, not the American, and in this country new shades are needed to express the uniqueness of African-American culture.

Danner also writes of "these lengthy dreaded suns of draggling plumes," alluding to the hundreds of years of cultural oppression to which Blacks in America have been subjected and to the self-deprecation common among those who felt that they could not rise above their lowly conditions. The new feathers that have pushed to the surface "blend in more easily with those on the wings / Of the birds surrounding them" (14-15). The poet suggests that African-Americans have found a compromise between their African past and the White America in which they now live, "garnishing / The aviary, burnishing this zoo" (16). The feathers of old decorate and add to the beauty of the aviary in which all Americans live, supplementing primarily European traditions and sentiments with those of Africa.

Mataka also uses this ornithological approach to discussing her race, but she takes her poetry in a different direction, addressing continuing oppression and the unfortunate loss of African-ness within Black American individuals. In "Ornithology," published in 1988, Mataka writes that it is "so hard to remain terrestrial when the skin remembers / being a bird" (Mataka 4-5). The poet's "heart soars back and forth in its / ribbed cage," an image that recalls the poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and Lucille Clifton with their similarly caged birds (5-6). This poem addresses the wild bird within the individual that yearns to break free from its skeletal cage and rise to its former glory. Mataka suggests that many Black people still have "wings," but they have been tied down for so long that they have forgotten how to fly. She writes:

it is so hard to be earthbound

wings dragging beside u on the ground

u cld lift them if folks wld just get off of 'em. (9-11)

Here Mataka introduces to the reader the oppressor of African-Americans, a dominant White culture that thrives on keeping other races from raising themselves up. She implies that Whites fear the potential power that they see behind the enforced weakness in Blacks, and therefore conspire to "slaughter the bird" in African-Americans (20). The White media encourages Blacks "to hate the sky," to prefer stagnation over flight, and to turn in their wings, burning those that are not turned in (20-23). Thus figurative flight is not an unattainable dream as Blacks may be encouraged to believe, but a natural state for the entire race that is oppressed by an unnatural identity forced upon Blacks in America. Mataka uses the common folklore concerning flying in Africa to appeal to the reader's desire for comprehensive freedom, much as the Flying African myth appealed to slaves longing to escape from the cruel chains of slavery. At the end of "Ornithology" Mataka asks the reader "wanna fly?" as though somewhere, buried within the poem, were the secret to escaping oppression on one's own "wings" to join all "of the most magnificent birds in all / the worlds where luv and freedom are a way of being" (31, 28-29).

The Flying African myth, created long before any of these poems, spread throughout African-American culture an idea of flight popularized by poets during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although many of these poems do not directly address this folktale, the influence of folk culture on the African-American literary aesthetic is still felt throughout the works. As Black writers began to experiment with other literary forms outside of verse, more possibilities opened up for the development of the Flying African folktale within a work. The second half of the twentieth century witnessed a flourish of fiction novels written by Black Americans, including Alice Walker, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison. Authors discovered ways to further transform folklore within the rich and detailed worlds of their texts, taking the work of

African-American poets to the next level and returning folktales to their roots as oral literature.

Chapter III:

Transformation of the Flying African Myth in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

Folklore is constantly in motion, changing with each generation in subtle and significant ways. When it is captured in a photograph or in a written text, folklore is fixed in one time and one place, removing it from the functional lore that continues to flow and adapt itself to different circumstances. While this process of recording folklore is helpful in the analyzation and comparison of various occurrences, the interruption of the lore's natural evolution disarms much of its significance and power. The folktales captured in *Drums and Shadows* provide insight to the customs and beliefs of their storytellers, but our view of the stories are one-dimensional, and any further exploration and comprehension is impossible. The poets discussed in the previous chapter seek deeper meaning in the elements of the Flying African myth, but within the confines of relatively short poetry, these writers can only sufficiently explore one or two aspects per poem. Verse form, unless epic in length and action, cannot fully transform the folktale into a written form that invokes all of the history, both psychological and physical, passion, and human elements of this myth that are experienced in the oral telling and retelling of the tale over the span of hundreds of years. This is an ambitious undertaking for any writer, even one of tremendous skill, knowledge of folklore, and experience in transformation. Yet several authors have attempted to transform folklore into written form while retaining its oral/ aural qualities. Because of its length and potential for extensive character and plot development, the novel is considered the most natural written form for the transformation of folklore into literature.

In 1977 African-American author Toni Morrison presented to the world her own transformation of the Flying African myth in the form of the novel *Song of Solomon*. The book was an instant success, and remains one of the most widely taught contemporary novels in colleges and universities in the United States. In 1978 the novel received the National Book Critics' Circle Award, one of many distinguishing awards given to Morrison to recognize the novel's great achievements in literature (Smith 9). Morrison

wanted the novel to have "the ability to be both print and oral literature: to combine those two aspects so that the stories can be read in silence, of course, but one should be able to hear them as well" (Morrison, "Rootedness" 341). She received from her family a deep understanding and appreciation of African-American resistance to injustice, cultural practices, and traditional folklore (Smith 5). Born on February 18, 1931, Morrison grew up in Lorain, Ohio, but her maternal grandparents had migrated north from Alabama and her father had grown up in Georgia, providing a familial community rich with the folklore and tradition of the Southern United States (5-6). Through her novels, Morrison passes this rich tradition on to her readers, specifically to those in the Black community, directing her writing to be "communicative of the community's links to its past" (Walters 15).

Folklore is prominent in most of Morrison's novels because she feels that this is one of the few means of getting these stories out to the widely dispersed Black community. In her essay "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" Morrison writes, "We don't live in places where we can hear those stories anymore; parents don't sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological stories that we heard years ago" (340). In *Song of Solomon* Morrison seeks to contextualize the myth while remaining dynamic, producing a new cultural form revolutionary in structure and intent (Walters 4-5). From her Afro-centric and feminist point of view, Morrison changes the emphases of the traditional myth to raise relevant questions about community, heroism, and oral memory. The author's transformation of the Flying African myth also revives interest and pride in African-American cultural history, celebrating the folk heroes that Morrison sees as missing from the oral memories of today's Black community. She emphasizes through Milkman's journey how the legend is not a static product as portrayed in folktale collections, but a process that is "still very much alive within the culture and still offering important contributions to culture development" (5).

In Morrison's investigation and reinvention of folklore she delves much deeper into its nuances than scientific collectors of folktales, relics, and customs. She "looks beyond the actual superstition to the human needs it responds to" and tries to understand the circumstances that create and perpetuate a story within the Black community (Thomas 40). Morrison recognizes that these myths often act as metaphors that "summarily embody elusive aspects of reality" (40). Her use of folklore in a novel offers an extensive work in which the subtleties and specific elements of the lore can be thoroughly investigated and more intimately portrayed. As a contemporary storyteller, she transforms recorded versions of the Flying African folktale from stagnant artifacts into a living, developing tale that expresses "the nuances of African American oral and musical culture and [reclaims] black historical experience" (Smith 2). Morrison emphasizes orality so that readers can feel within their bodies the unique sound of African-American language (Middleton 29). Orality is especially important when writing a novel that is meant to transform oral literature into a written form without losing the qualities unique to folklore. *Song of Solomon* transcends the medium of the printed word to involve the reader in the discovery and telling of a complex sequence of events that blurs the line between local legend and family history.

The dynamics of the Dead family are important in tracing the development of the novel's protagonist as he uncovers his family's history and his own identity within both his family and his community. Milkman has been raised in an upper middle class household ruled by the iron grip of his materialistic father, Macon Dead II. This patriarchal figure controls the women of his household, his wife Ruth and daughters First Corinthians and Magdelene, by keeping them in a state of perpetual fear. Pilate Dead, Macon's younger sister, lives in a shack across town with her illegitimate daughter Reba and equally illegitimate granddaughter Hagar. While Macon places his faith in social status and material wealth, Pilate finds more comfort and satisfaction in "spiritual values

such as compassion, respect, loyalty, and generosity" (Smith 12). Milkman's father is disgusted with the lifestyle choices that his sister has made and forbids his family from coming in contact with her entire household. This atmosphere of tension and trepidation envelops the Dead household in a shroud that promises to kill the spirit of any who do not escape, necessitating Milkman's journey and First Corinthians's flight from her oppressive father.

Macon Dead II has learned "to ignore and suppress the inner, cultural voices of survival from his past," an ability that he has also taught his only son (Middleton 27). Milkman's initial materialism and conception of time as linear comes directly from the teachings of his father, and it is not until he learns to value time as a cyclical process through his search for identity that he can fully escape Macon's influence. Occasionally, though, even this hardened man desires the intimacy, rituals, and music that are triggered by his oral memory. In one example, Macon does not return to his own house, where there is "no music," and instead walks to his sister's home, where he listens to "the effortless beauty of the women singing in the candlelight" (Morrison, *Song* 28-29). Macon feels himself "softening under the weight of memory and music," yet does not allow himself entry into the mystical and ancestral world that his sister inhabits (30). The cultural tensions between the emotional and spiritual wealth of Macon's childhood on his father's farm and the materialistic and intellectual wealth of his adulthood are established early in the novel. Milkman is also drawn to Pilate's world, but he chooses to enter fully, and eventually surrenders all of the values fixed in him by his father for the acceptance of Pilate's values.

Milkman's search for identity takes him away from the oppressive atmosphere of his father's house and back to the South, the home of his forefathers. *Song of Solomon* addresses the "loss of cultural knowledge through generational migration" (Middleton 33). As the Dead family has moved farther away from its geographic, historical, and

spiritual roots, it has lost touch with the cultural knowledge of its ancestors and remains in a state of limbo between the world to which they naturally belong and the world in which they aspire to create. The situation recalls Margaret Danner's poem "Garnishing the Aviary" from "Far From Africa: Four Poems," in which Blacks must reinvent themselves to find a compromise between their African past and current status in the United States. In the first part of the novel Milkman is ignorant of his own history, and is thus unable to find and understand his own role in his community and family. He is "destined for a life of self-alienation and isolation" before his journey into the South and into his past (Smith 11). Only after this journey does Milkman cease to be isolated from the "life-sustaining knowledge of his past" and begin to act with full consciousness (Middleton 36). He finds completeness in the knowledge of his great-grandfather's story, which fills a gap in his oral memory that Milkman has felt since his first longings toward Pilate's household and flight. In her essay "From Orality to Literacy: Oral Memory in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," Joyce Irene Middleton writes:

[Milkman's] allegorical flight is inward for we have seen him find self-knowledge, especially the oral nature of his ancient roots, and we have seen him acquire a deep value for life and for human relationships.

(36)

The "unwitting search for identity" that Milkman undergoes begins as a search for material goods, a treasure of hidden gold (Smith 11). Yet the gold is not there, and is unable to liberate him from the constraints of his past and responsibilities at home. Only after the discovery that the fortune does not exist is Milkman able to open his eyes and mind to the greater question of his own past. In order to "reestablish a oneness with the ancestral past" the protagonist must seek what is known as a *griot* in African cultures (Thomas 177). Pilate is the first griot that Milkman encounters, but he is unable to understand that she has been teaching him his entire life not only who he is, but also who

he was and who he could be. This is the role of the *griot*, to pass ancestral knowledge on to younger persons in the forms of stories so that they might have a sense of personal, familial, and community identity. According to Morrison, the historical and personal past is often manifested in an "advising, benevolent, protective, wise Black ancestor" with a strong "racial memory" ("City Limits" 39, 43). Unfortunately, Milkman is initially unable to fully utilize the *griot* in his own family, and must look elsewhere for the direction that he desperately needs. He finds this in Circe, the ancient Black woman who had attended to Pilate's birth. Circe tells Milkman toward the end of their conversation, "You don't listen to people. Your ear is in your head, but it's not connected to your brain" (247). Milkman has not been listening for the stories all around him, and it is not until he reflects upon his conversation with Circe, in which he finds out more about his Indian grandmother Sing, that he realizes that he must first learn how to listen before he can truly understand anything. The art of listening was not taught to the Dead children, yet the skill has been lying dormant in Milkman's soul his entire life, awaiting the proper instruction to send him on his way. Listening becomes extremely important as Milkman pieces together his family history from the song that he had grown up hearing his aunt sing.

When the "Sugarman" song is introduced in the first chapter of *Song of Solomon*, readers are unaware of its ultimate significance to the protagonist's story. The first version of the song can be found in Appendix B, along with the complete version as deciphered by Milkman at the end of the novel. As he deciphers Pilate's song Milkman also deciphers his own ancestry, which he must piece together in order to understand his own identity. His greatest achievement in the novel is "learning to complete, understand, and sing the song Pilate has only partially known" (Smith 12). The first time that Milkman hears Pilate, Reba, and Hagar sing "O Sugarman" together, he nearly faints "from the weight of what he [is] feeling" (Morrison, *Song* 49). The pure emotion that the

women pour into the song is unfamiliar to the heart of a man raised under the iron hand of Macon Dead II. Although the song disappears from the text for over two hundred pages, the memory of it and the emotional impact of listening to it remain embedded in Milkman's heart and unconscious, leading him unknowingly in his journey.

The scene in which the familiar tune resurfaces is pivotal for both the development of the novel and the spiritual growth of its protagonist. In the town of Shalimar, spelled Solomon, Milkman encounters a group of children playing what appears to be a traditional children's game, full of spinning, rhyming, screaming and falling down. Milkman reflects on the fact that he "was never asked to play those circle games, those singing games, to join in anything" as a child, but now takes the time in his adulthood to listen to the nonsense lyrics that would usually have washed over him. Though he only listens to these words after learning more about his family history, including additional information about Sing Dead, and about the existence of Solomon's Leap. Straining to understand the children's words, Milkman is able to decipher that his grandfather Jake (Macon Dead Sr.) was "the only son of Solomon" (303). Within the song he finds references to Sing's mother Heddy, Solomon's wife Ryna, and the Byrd family, and comes to the conclusion that "these children were singing a story about his own people!" (304). Milkman must employ the listening skills that Circe encouraged him to find within himself. He cannot resort to written language as he has been taught, but is forced to commit the song to his oral memory much as his illiterate ancestors learned their folktales and songs. His external, contrived memory, the written form, is not an option because Milkman does not have a pencil with which to write down the lyrics, though this is his first impulse (Middleton 34). As Milkman listens to the story of his ancestors unravel Pilate is reconstructed as the *griot* figure that she always was, not the crazy woman in her brother's version of the family history (Mobley 60). Yet these revelations produce more questions than answers for Milkman, and he is driven back to

Susan Byrd's house to learn the true story of his ancestors. What he hears clarifies the lyrics, but is much more incredible than he ever expected.

Throughout *Song of Solomon* Morrison makes numerous references to flight and birds, but the underlying meanings of all these images become coherent only with the introduction of the story of Solomon, the Flying African. Susan Byrd reveals to Milkman that his great-grandfather "was one of those flying African children," one of many slaves brought over from Africa with the ability to fly who took to the air and returned to their native land (321). Susan Byrd recognizes the story as an African-American folktale, commenting that it is "just some old folks' lie they tell around here," and yet she relates the story of Solomon flying away from Ryna as a strict historical account (322). Morrison blurs the line between fact and fiction even within the plot of her text, suggesting that behind a simple folktale may lie a family or a community's tumultuous history. Here Milkman discovers the link to his past that explains who and what he is. In Marilyn Sanders Mobley's essay "Call and Response: Voice, Community, and Dialogic Structures in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*" she writes:

Pilate's song and the children's song become one at the same time that they comment on one another and engage in dialogue with one another to connect young and old, familiar and unfamiliar, past and present, present and future. In part, the novel enacts the process, therefore, by which Milkman gives up the individualism that weighs him down and comes to understand the connection between language, identity, and community.

(61)

Thus the inward flight that Middleton speaks of in her essay is not one of seclusion or mere self-analysis; the flight extends beyond Milkman's physical being and into the farthest reaches of his spirit, wherein lies the knowledge for which he has been seeking.

The completed song explains why Milkman has been fascinated, perhaps even haunted, by flight since birth. On the eve of his birth a Black insurance agent named Robert Smith announces that he plans to "take off from Mercy [Hospital] and fly away on [his] own wings" (3). When Ruth Dead arrives outside of the hospital with her young daughters and sees Smith with his "wide blue silk wings" flapping in the wind, she immediately goes into labor (5). It is as though the unborn child yearns to witness this extraordinary event, to learn whether or not a man is able to fly. During this scene readers are introduced to Pilate, "the singing woman," whose voice acts as a musical soundtrack for the event as she sings "O Sugarman done fly away/ Sugarman done gone" (6, 8). This establishes Pilate as an "alternative narrative voice" early in the novel and stresses her ultimate significance to the development of plot and identity (Moblely 51). Milkman's first conscious contemplation of flight occurs at age four, when his mother is caught nursing him and he is dropped from her lap onto the floor. Morrison writes:

Mr. Smith's blue silk wings must have left their mark, because when the little boy discovered, at four, what Mr. Smith had learned earlier- that only birds and airplanes could fly- he lost all interest in himself. To have to live without that single gift saddened him and left his imagination so bereft that he appeared dull.... (9)

Later in the novel, upon witnessing for the first time the children's game that holds the key to his family's history, Milkman recalls that "he got up off his knees at the window sill, grieving because he could not fly" (264). The atmosphere of the Dead household suppresses the instinct to fly that resides within the family history, yet Macon Dead II cannot prevent his son from finding this lost ability outside of the house.

In another scene midway through the novel Milkman and Guitar encounter a white peacock that Milkman first believes is a "waking dream" (178). But Guitar sees the bird perched atop a building before it flies down to into a car lot near by. Morrison

writes that "Milkman felt again his unrestrained joy at anything that could fly," but Guitar sees only a nice meal in the large bird (178). There is an important distinction made between Milkman and Guitar in this and other scenes. While the Dead family has flying in its blood, Guitar does not feel the same affection toward flight as his friend. While Milkman is from the line of Africans who could fly, his friend is not, another underlying reason why a rift is created between the two. The appearance of the peacock also lends occasion for important advice from Guitar. He explains to Milkman that the male peacock is not able to fly very well because of all of his ornamentation, continuing to say, "Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down" (179). This is the price of freedom, to abandon all of the material goods that he desires and let himself soar. In the final line of the novel Milkman attributes to his great-grandfather the knowledge that "if you surrendered to the air, you could ride it," but he owes this wisdom as much to Guitar as to his ancestor (337).

Milkman first feels the exhilaration of flight at the beginning of Part II, when he takes his first airplane ride down South. In the "glistening bird" he feels invulnerable, on his own for the first time in his life. Morrison writes:

This one time he wanted to go solo. In the air, away from real life, he felt free, but on the ground, when he talked to Guitar just before he left, the wings of all those other people's nightmares flapped in his face and constrained him. (220)

The initial impulse to fly is derived from a fear of responsibility and the reality of his home life, yet once in the air Milkman discovers a sensation worthy as an act in and of itself. He is reluctant to leave the air, "unwilling to give up the elegance he had felt on the flight" (226). It is not until Milkman discovers that flight is in his blood that he "understands his yearning toward flight as a way in which his ancestral past makes itself known and felt to him" (Smith 13). Earlier in the novel Guitar tells Milkman that "any

man, any woman, or any child is good for five to seven generations of heirs before they're bred out," so the blood of Solomon, removed only by three generations, still courses through Milkman's veins (154). In the town of Solomon, his ancestors seep into Milkman's dreams, urging him to make the connection between Pilate's song, the children's game, and his great-grandfather's flight. In his dream he is flying, floating over the Earth and the dark sea, unafraid because he knows somehow that he cannot fall. Below Milkman some unseen watcher applauds him, an ancestor, perhaps Solomon or even Pilate, who approves of his ability to let go of his earthly ties and soar. Upon waking, Milkman "still [feels] the sense of lightness and power that flying had given him," and is one step closer to oneness with his ancestral past (Morrison, *Song* 298).

When Milkman finally makes the connection to his great-grandfather, his exhilaration surpasses that of flying, for this ancestral knowledge satiates his thirst for identity and a male figure that he can be proud of much more than an airplane satisfies his need to feel free. Milkman tells the woman Sweet, "He didn't need no airplane. He just took off, got fed up. *All the way up!* No more cotton! No more bales! No more orders! No more shit! He flew, baby. Lifted his black ass up in the sky and flew on home" (328). Milkman celebrates Solomon's heroism, but Sweet follows up his extensive ravings with two extremely important questions that change the emphases of Morrison's version of the tale. Sweet asks "Where'd he go, Macon?" to which Milkman, still in a state of sheer elation, replies that home was Africa, not Georgia. She follows up this question with another, one rarely contemplated by those finding significance in the Flying African folktale. "Who'd he leave behind," she asks, to which he replies, "Everyone! He left everybody down on the ground and he sailed on off like a black eagle" (328).

Sweet reminds readers that an element of the Flying African myth often forgotten is that in each instance someone, a family member or friend, is left behind to tell the

story. Wendy Walters writes, "Each tale must have leaving structured into it: for it is certainly not the dominant culture, as represented by driver, overseer or master, who will pass on this legend of resistance to future generations" (19). Usually those who return to Africa are natives of that continent, and those left behind are American-born. Just as Rosa Grant's great-grandmother Teresa flew away and left her daughter Ryna standing in the field, so does Milkman's great-grandfather Solomon leave his wife Ryna and twenty children behind him. He attempts to take the infant Jake with him, but accidentally drops the tiny baby on his way. Both Rynas are left to mourn the loss of their loved ones that choose Africa over their own company. In an ironic twist of heroism, the women and children are left behind to tell the story of the Flying African to future generations. These unsung heroes, Ryna, her children, Susan Byrd, Circe, the playing children, and Pilate, all pass the story of Solomon on to his great-grandson, but do not participate themselves in the glory and triumph of the tale. By including them in the "social whole" of the novel, Morrison shifts the emphasis of the tale from the one who flew to the ones he left behind (Walters 18).

Milkman is unable to recognize his great-grandfather's irresponsibility, even after Sweet pointedly asks about those who Solomon left behind to continue laboring as slaves. Only after he hears of Hagar's death does Milkman make the connection between his own responsibility toward Hagar and Solomon's toward Ryna and their children. This moment of revelation has been creeping up on Milkman throughout the entire novel, and most readers are able to recognize the connection long before he does. After Milkman awakens from Pilate's violent reaction to his return North, he deciphers on his own what has occurred and who is to blame, something which he could not have done before his journey:

While he dreamt of flying, Hagar was dying. Sweet's silvery voice came back to him: "Who'd he leave behind?" He left Ryna behind and twenty

children.... And Ryna had thrown herself all over the ground, lost her mind, and was still crying in a ditch [Ryna's Gulch]. Who looked after those twenty children? Jesus Christ, he left twenty-one children. (332)

Women and children play key roles in *Song of Solomon*, not just as the unsung heroes of the legend, but also as those who sing its praises (Walters 19). Women serve as guideposts along Milkman's journey, the informants that enable him to look in the correct direction for his next clues to unlocking his past. Children act as the preservers of the story by capturing it in a song and by passing it on to their own children and grandchildren. Milkman realizes after recognizing Solomon's irresponsibility toward his own family that despite this fact, his children kept the memory of their father and his feat alive. Milkman recognizes that "Shalimar left his [children], but it was the children who sang about it and kept the story of his leaving alive" (322). Once again Morrison emphasizes this aspect of folklore that is not commonly addressed, much as Virginia Hamilton recognizes the role of children in her version of the myth, "The People Could Fly." Hamilton's story ends with the lines, "They say that the children of the ones who could not fly told their children. And now, me, I have told it to you" (172). The millions of slaves who never had the chance to fly away find pride, hope, and spiritual freedom in the tale of their empowered ancestors. Yet in Hamilton's tale we do not find the bitterness lurking beneath the sweetness of the Flying African myth that we find in *Song of Solomon*. The liberation and exhilaration of the myth is tempered by the sounds of Ryna's wails echoing in Ryna's Gulch and by the chorus of the children's song, "O Solomon don't leave me here / Cotton balls to choke me" (303).

Eventually both the myth and the protagonist come full circle, ending in the place which they began, with Pilate Dead. If the blood of the Flying Africans resides inside of Milkman's body, then it consumes Pilate's. Her connection to the past remains unbroken throughout the novel, and Milkman and the readers receive clues along the way that

Pilate, too, knows how to "fly." In Shalimar one man responds to a question about Pilate with, "Pilot Dead. She do any flying?" (283). Milkman brushes off the question, but as he looks at her still form, lying peacefully where it falls in the final scene, he realizes "why he loved her so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly" (336). Even Pilate's name becomes significant in this final scene:

[. . .] the father's writing of Pilate's name symbolizes the energy and familial bonding between the father and his daughter and, in the scene of her death, the eternal, spiritual life of the woman named Pilate, when the bird flies away with her earring. (Middleton 26-27)

Even in death Pilate flies on the wings of a bird, where she has always belonged. Pilate, not Solomon, is the true hero in Milkman's changed eyes. She stays by her family's side through hard times while Solomon abandoned his entire family for the selfish fulfillment of his own desires. Morrison alters the significance of the myth by placing Pilate at its center in Milkman's tribute to his dying aunt. As Pilate lies dying, she asks Milkman to sing to her. In recognition of her heroic standing in his own heart, Milkman changes the words to Pilate's song "O Sugarman" and instead sings

Sugargirl don't leave me here
Cotton balls to choke me
Sugargirl don't leave me here
Bukra's arms to yoke me (336)

By placing a feminist twist on her transformation of the Flying African myth, Morrison demonstrates how folktales can be transformed into literature without becoming static. *Song of Solomon* accomplishes that which transcribed folktales and even poetry cannot: to demonstrate how a folktale functions within a society on the community and personal level to formulate the perceptions and identities of all those that come in contact with the story. Morrison examines all aspects of this version of the

Flying African folktale, from its origin to its lasting influence. *Song of Solomon* succeeds as "both print and oral literature," crossing the boundary between two forms previously portrayed as mutually exclusive (Morrison, "Rootedness" 341). Morrison brings the Flying African folktale back to life, as the functional, evolving story it began as so long ago.

Appendix A: Variations of the Flying African Myth from Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes

Storytellers	Storytellers' Backgrounds	Elements of Flying African Tale
1. Jack Wilson	elderly man, owns small junk shop in Old Fort (NE of Savannah)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -story told by mother -magic power comes from Africa -magic password needed -must believe in magic -Uncle could fly
2. Paul Singleton	born into slavery on plantation near Darien, lives in Tin City (E of Savannah)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -story told by father -many would fly back to Africa -would "take wing"
3. Mose Brown	elderly man living in Tin City	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -story from grandfather -man & wife -said goodbye & flew
4. Martha Page	80 years old, grandfather from Africa, lives in Yamacraw (W of Savannah)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -story from grandfather -some people in Africa could fly
5. Thomas Smith	80 years old, lives in Yamacraw	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Africa is land of magic -magic of Moses in Blacks -believes story
6. Carrie Hamilton	70 years old, lives in Yamacraw	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -story told by mother -man & wife -tricked aboard ship -St. Helena plantation -said goodbye and flew
7. Charles Singleton	88 years old, lives in Springfield (W of Savannah)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -heard many stories of flying folk -con man selling wings
8. Dorothy Johnson	elderly woman, lives in Springfield	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -story told by old folks -people "take wing"

note: All information about storytellers accurate in 1939 and 1940. Most of the storytellers are now deceased.

Appendix A: Variations of the Flying African Myth from Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes

9. George Little	root doctor, lives in Brownville (W of Savannah)	-believes story is true -need magic knowledge -man flew from prison in Springfield recently -need bone of black cat
10. Prince Sneed	over 60 years old, lives in White Bluff (SE of Savannah)	-story from grandfather -owned by Waldburg on St. Catherine -two African slaves -hoe working itself -magic chant -grandfather witnessed
11. Serina Hall	88 years old, was a slave on St. Catherine's Island, lives in White Bluff	-story told by mother -man and wife -flew back and forth, plantation to Africa -children couldn't fly -daughter must learn password and kill a man
12. Jack Tattall	over 70 years old, a river man, lived entire life on Wilmington Island (in Wilmington River)	-many from Africa could fly -group in field flies back one by one
13. Peter McQueen	middle-aged man, lives on Wilmington Island	-folks (witches) can fly even now (1940)
14. "Uncle Jonah"	87 years old, born into slavery, lives in Sunbury	-boatload from Africa kept in cabin -reached Sunbury and saw it wasn't Africa -"took wing" & returned
15. Rosa Grant	65 years old, grandparents are from Africa, lives in Possum Point (on Altamaha River)	-great-grandmother Theresa tricked onto boat with red cloth -in field with daughter Ryna -twirls, raises arms, flies -didn't teach Ryna how to fly

note: All information about storytellers accurate in 1939 and 1940. Most of the storytellers are now deceased.

Appendix A: Variations of the Flying African Myth from Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes

16. Wallace Quarterman	born July 14, 1844 and lives in Darien	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Ryna thought she was not born with the power -Africans to be whipped by overseer Mr. Blue -stuck hoe in field -strange words -turned into buzzards and flew away -knows many witnesses
17. Priscilla McCullough	born ~ 1862 into slavery and lives in Darien	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -story told by mother -slaves in field form ring and spin faster & faster -one by one "take wing" and fly back to Africa
18. Lawrence Baker	over 70 years old and lives in Darien	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -story from grandmother -would "take wing" if unhappy on plantation
19. Shad Hall	over 100 years old, lives on Sapelo Island (in "Golden Isles" off coast)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Africans who can work magic hoe can also fly -group going to be whipped runs to river -rise & fly to Africa -on Butler Island
20. Charles Hunter	very elderly man, lives on St. Simons Island (off GA coast near Brunswick on mainland)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -knew as child African conjurer Alexander -claimed he and family in Africa could all fly -never witnessed
21. Henry Bates	75 years old and lives in Currytown	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -some slaves could fly off any time that they wanted to

note: All information about storytellers accurate in 1939 and 1940. Most of the storytellers are now deceased.

**Appendix B: Magic words, passwords, chants, and songs
connected to the Flying African myth**

From the WPA's *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the
Georgia Coastal Negroes*

1. This is an African song sung by Tony William Delegal, a man over one hundred years old living in the tiny village of Ogeecheetown near Brownville, Georgia. Delegal was a slave on the plantation of Major John Thomas in Harris Neck. The song, of which Delegal was unable to give an English translation, is very close to the chants and magic words appearing in many versions of the Flying African myth.

Wa kum kum munin	Kum baba yano
Kum baba yano	Lai lai tambe
Lai lai tambe	Ashi lai lai lai
Ashi boong a nomo	Shi wali go
Shi wali go	Dhum. (54-55)
Ashi quank	

2. This password is from Serina Hall's version of the Flying African folktale and is taught to the daughter of the couple who are able to fly as one of the conditions of flight.

"Who loss duh key Branzobo?" (81)

3. In Wallace Quarterman's version of the tale he inserted nonsense words where magic words should have been. This may be because he did not trust the folktale collector or because he forgot or never knew the words. The bird sounds which he did insert are still significant, though, considering that in his tale the Africans are transformed into buzzards.

"quack, quack, quack" (150-51)
"gabble, gabble, gabble" (150)

4. In Prince Sneed's story the two Africans resting in the shade say these magic words before rising off of the ground and flying away. Some of the words are very similar to those in Delegal's African song.

Kum buba yali kum buba tambe
Kum kunka yali kum kunka tambe (79)

* * * *

From Virginia Hamilton's *The People Could Fly*

5. Virginia Hamilton writes her own version of the Flying African folktale, choosing to include some of the magic words that she has picked up from other versions of the tale.

**Appendix B: Magic words, passwords, chants, and songs
connected to the Flying African myth**

In each instance it is the African slave Toby who whispers these words that cause others to rise off of the ground and fly away to freedom.

"Kum... yali, kum buba tambe" (169)

"Kum kunka yali, kum... tambe!" (170)

"... buba yali... buba tambe..." (171)

* * * *

From Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon

6. The song about Sugarman develops throughout the novel. The chorus is sung in the first chapter, but we do not hear any other stanza until the next chapter.

O Sugarman don't leave me here
Cotton balls to choke me
O Sugarman don't leave me here
Buckra's arms to yoke me...

Sugarman done fly away
Sugarman done gone
Sugarman cut across the sky
Sugarman gone home. (49)

7. On his journeys in the second part of the novel, Macon (Milkman) Dead keeps encountering children singing a song very similar to the Sugarman song that he has heard Pilot sing in his past. Variations of lines are listed below the line included in the version Milkman records.

Jake the only son of Solomon
Come booba yalle, come booba tambee
Whirled about and touched the sun
[Whirl about and touch the sun (264)]
Come konka yalle, come konka tambee
[Come booba yalle, come booba yalle (264)]

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

Black lady fell down on the ground
Come booba yalle, come booba tambee
Threw her body all around
Come konka yalle, come konka tambee

Solomon and Ryna Balali Shalut
Yaruba Medina Muhammet too.
Nestor Kalina Saraka cake.

**Appendix B: Magic words, passwords, chants, and songs
connected to the Flying African myth**

Twenty-one children, the last one Jake!

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

8. When Pilate is shot by Guitar at the end of the novel, she asks Milkman to sing to her as she lies dying in his arms. Milkman now recognizes that Pilate has made far more sacrifices for her family than Solomon ever did, and that she is the true hero of the song she knows so well. The final version of "O Sugarman" is turned into a tribute for the fallen heroine.

Sugargirl don't leave me here
Cotton balls to choke me
Sugargirl don't leave me here
Bukra's arms to yoke me (336)

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