Hunting Inheritance in
*Song of Solomon* and
*The Chaneysville Incident*

Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* and David Bradley’s *The Chaneysville Incident* consider what one successful black generation bequeaths to the next. Since such bequeathing cements status, these books contrast the defeat and even the murky hopefulness portrayed in other texts in this study. *Song* and *Chaneysville* cast post–civil rights black identity as a legacy of privilege. Notwithstanding such entitlement, these novels stress the costs of ascendency. Their protagonists’ lineages feature ancestors with prestige professions such as medical doctor, university professor, and undertaker; however, these status jobs are juxtaposed with more dubious employment, namely moonshiner and slumlord. If this mixture in work history proves worrisome, then the novels’ deeper dilemmas involve the censored archives that document racial violence. The repression of these archives suggests an intriguing interrelationship between cultural amnesia and social progress. This aspect of the characters’ situations evokes pregnant issues in post–civil rights African American literature.¹

¹. Brian Norman argues that when writers compose in a post–civil rights era while “their characters inhabit the terrain of compulsory race segregation,” the result is a narrative that “highlight[s] and explain[s] more elusive systems of racial disenfranchisement and division after the end of de jure segregation” (3). Recalling Ashraf Rushdy’s notion of the palimpsest narrative and Rudolph Byrd’s discussion of Charles Johnson’s fiction, in *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction* (2001) and *Charles Johnson’s Novels: Writing the American Palimpsest* (2005), respectively, Norman’s remarks illuminate the Black Archivists’ turn to black traditions and this study’s conclusions about those turns. More recently, Kenneth W. Warren,
The Black Archivists write books that exhume hidden experiences. From slavery to sharecropping, from segregation to urbanity, their novels correct incomplete or distorted narratives by filling out the record. Just as *Song* and *Chaneysville* include protagonists whose families court advancement by editing their experiences to hasten their ascendancy, post–civil rights novelists are tempted to sanitize black literary traditions. This sanitization takes place via avoided themes and neglected aesthetics. With *Song* and *Chaneysville*, the two earliest novels in this monograph, cultural editing’s threat to the ethics of swagger emerges. The matter of differentiating between ancestors and relatives is, as Ralph Ellison suggested, a tricky one. Despite this difficulty, Morrison and Bradley suggest that an engagement with black literature’s diverse heritages enhances a writer’s development. By promoting “racial sincerity,” “an epistemologically distinct rendering of . . . identity, solidarity, and reality,” the awareness of black literary archives prepares authors to embrace their protean pasts (J. Jackson 13, 12). Such embraces promote autonomy.

Delving into *Song* and *Chaneysville*’s portrayals of one generation’s efforts to bequeath its ethics to another, this chapter looks at how Macon “Milkman” Dead III and John Washington, these novels’ respective protagonists, reflect the complex inheritances that accompany civil rights advances and Great Migration benefits. Each man is either in line for or has already received a family fortune. While property and land define their primogeniture, Milk and John’s birthrights also include Emmett Till’s lynching, the Birmingham church bombing, and edited family histories. These paradoxical realities send the two men on treks from the urban North to rural homelands, and in the process, their trips replace bourgeois bequests with the notion of inheritance as a hunt. As these books trace their protagonists’ stalking of their estate, they also capture their novelists’ tracking of how the ethics of swagger can propel them...

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in *What Was African American Literature?* (2011), implied that the post–civil rights focus on segregation might also be a longing for a bygone solidarity.

2. Ralph Ellison, in “The World and the Jug” (1963), famously distinguished between literary “relatives” and “ancestors” (*Collected* 185). While critics have identified Ellison’s gesture as a reaction to Irving Howe’s condescension, only a few have delved into the novelist’s simultaneous insistence upon pluralistic blackness and mostly white literary ancestors.

3. By posing questions that “vary slightly” from those emphasized by “social constructionism and anti–essentialism,” John Jackson posits “racial sincerity, which should not be confused with racial authenticity” as a key element in African American identity (13, 12). I borrow Jackson’s phrase because it aptly describes the complicated strategies that the Black Archivists used to register and to validate their experiences of walking “around with purportedly racial selves crammed up inside . . . and serving as invisible links to other people” (15).
into the “mainstream” but not “oblivion.” The process for both characters and writers starts with affinity.

**Styles of Bequeathal**

Morrison and Bradley place Milk and John in families that are economically successful but emotionally stifled. While their abstemiousness might belie sexual stereotypes, it also suggests an important tension between social progress and affection. Milk and John struggle with their heredity because its obligations leave so little room for love. Although they find outlets for sexual release and socialization, the men resist genuine intimacy. These details may seem remote from the Black Archivists’ contests over literary traditions, but *Song* and *Chaneysville* imply that black writers’ problems with mainstream publishing stem from anxieties about profession. During the 1970s, when Morrison and Bradley established writing careers, many publishers were keen to capitalize on what they thought would be “a fleeting surge of black literature” (Williams xiii). This keenness gave authors a rare opportunity, but it also placed their art under intense commercial pressure. Facing this pressure, novelists thought more about commerce, creativity, and pleasure.

Morrison, in a 1976 interview, observed, “I went to some meeting recently and there was a great deal of despair . . . about what was happening in publishing and black fiction, the suggestion being that there was not much being published . . . now” and “that white publishers have decided that . . . we are no longer fashionable as we were in the late sixties or early seventies. I think part of that’s right” (Stepto 27–28).

Commenting on this situation, Bradley stated, “You’ve got to make money, not just because you got to live, but because publishers are into money—they’re not into ego—and if they ain’t making money on you,

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4. The words in this sentence are taken from the title of Julian Mayfield’s 1959 essay “Into the Mainstream and Oblivion.” There, Mayfield warns that the commercial rewards of appealing to a broad white American audience often entail a forfeit of racial sincerity. Morrison and Bradley both note the perils of the dance, but their choreography for evading those perils differs.

5. Morrison, in a 2004 foreword, revisited this situation from an editorial standpoint: “When there was a book that I thought needed doing, I found an author to write it. My enthusiasm, shared by some, was muted by others, reflecting the indifferent sales figures. I may be wrong about this, but even in the late seventies, acquiring authors who were certain sellers outranked editing manuscripts or supporting emerging or aging authors through their careers” (*Beloved* xvi). Morrison’s sense that during the 1970s black writing had to fight to find its place within the publishing world echoes Ernest Gaines’s sentiments. Gaines offers his views on publishing in Tom Carter’s “Ernest Gaines” (83–85).
you don’t get published” (Blake and Miller 38). Morrison and Bradley’s remarks suggest how market expectations condition literary liberty, and in Song and Chaneysville, these suggestions inform portrayals of freedom, labor, and love. These portrayals initially center on fin-de-siècle choices. By focusing on the post-bellum strivings of Milk’s and John’s ancestors, Morrison and Bradley render post–Brown v. Board black selfhood as a direct inheritance of late nineteenth-century decisions. Their portraits of black identity resemble the determinative strategies of naturalism, and in many ways, Milk’s and John’s forebears attempt to imbue their choices with fate-making energy. Despite their dynastic desires, their bequeathals are tangled. Song explores such tangling.

The prestige of the Dead clan has its roots in entrepreneurship. Though it is tempting to connect this impulse to bourgeois aspiration, the novel frustrates simplistic conclusions. It does so here through the differences between Macon Dead II and his sister Pilate. Although Milk’s father Macon operates a real estate practice, his exploitative methods and ruthless temperament mark him as a slumlord. He shares his business philosophy with his son: “Let me tell you right now the one important thing you’ll ever need to know: Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you’ll own yourself and other people too” (55). If Macon’s reasoning shows an alarming dehumanization, then his sister offers a powerful foil. Pilate’s most treasured possessions are an earring, a sack of rocks, and a geography book, yet she still needed a way to provide food and shelter for her daughter and her granddaughter, so “winemaking” and “cooking whisky” became her livelihood (150). Her bootlegging violated prohibition laws. While the illegality of her efforts distinguished them from Macon’s real estate ventures, both sister and brother rejected working for someone else. Their choices reprise their father’s example.

After the end of slavery, Pilate and Macon’s father Jake acquired a 150-acre farm, Lincoln’s Heaven. Pilate viewed this property as a spot where security “taught her a preferable kind of behavior” (150). Though Macon initially accepted the land’s tranquil influences, his father’s death transformed his convictions. Pilate and Macon saw Jake’s “sixteen year” journey to “get [his] farm to where it was paying” as a Reconstruction era success story. When some white men “tricked” their father into signing something and then “told him that they owned his property,” Jake

6. Susan Willis concludes that for “Milkman’s father, all human relationships have become fetishized by their being made equivalent to money;” (97).
began a five-night vigil that ended with him getting shot (53). His murder signaled the limits of black access to America’s constitutional rights.7 Only a few years before *Plessy v. Ferguson* minted the nation’s commitment to “separate but equal,” Jake strove to activate promises related to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. His fate becomes an enigmatic riddle that Pilate and Macon struggle to solve, and each child’s solution involves decisions about love.8

Macon’s real estate ambitions are born at the intersection of his father’s hustling and white power’s confiscations. Instead of questioning this gap between blacks and national values, he makes wealth an antidote for indignity and forges family as weaponry. His marriage to a woman from a storied background shows his outlook. Ruth Foster, Macon’s wife, was the daughter of one of the first blacks to practice medicine in the Michigan town where *Song* is set. Although Macon and Ruth wedded because they ostensibly “agreed on what was important,” the basis of that agreement seemed more about status than emotional fulfillment (70). Ruth proudly asserted her identity as her “daddy’s daughter” (67). Since she luxuriated in the fashion and fellowship that Dr. Foster’s stature secured, her allegiance appeared a byproduct of his rank. She no doubt enjoyed the fact that the Foster family was “the second . . . in the city to have a two-horse carriage,” but the crux of her devotion to her father was his unconditional love for her (197). When she sought this same love from Macon, she discovered that their marriage reflected profound discrepancy. He thought that his wealth would produce enduring satisfaction, and she felt that her elegance would burnish his dynasty. Each of them discovered too late that their superficial appetites concealed more elemental cravings. Because they could not share these cravings with one another, their marriage existed as a barren adornment. Macon’s sister rejected such arrangements.

Pilate abjures marriage, and her choice not only repudiates the institution’s capacity for distorting love but also reflects her general distrust

7. In “What America Would Be Like Without Blacks” (1970), Ralph Ellison compares the boldness necessary to see American culture clearly to the attitude of “Western pioneers confronting the unknown prairie.” Ellison’s imagery evokes his Oklahoma frontier upbringing and the optimism that inspires former slaves such as Jake to redeem the nation’s promises. Morrison’s portrayal examines the aftermath of such boldness, exploring how dashed hope circulates in subsequent generations. For more on black citizenship in the nineteenth century, see Ivy G. Wilson’s *Specters of Democracy: Blackness and the Aesthetics of Politics in the Antebellum U.S.* (2011).

8. In the 1976 essay, “A Slow Walk of Trees (as Grandmother Would Say), Hopeless (as Grandfather Would Say),” Toni Morrison described her grandfather John Solomon Willis who “lost all eighty-eight acres of his Indian mother’s inheritance to legal predators who built their fortunes on the likes of him” (*What* 3). Morrison’s grandfather not only inspires her portrayal of Jake/Macon Dead but also perhaps indicates the Solomon to whom her novel’s title refers.
of white strategies for organizing black sentiments. In her view, the alliances forged by Ruth and Macon may have their basis in a legitimate if misguided desire to expand black freedom; however, the legacy of Jake's death for her is a deep suspicion that white structures will never work for blacks the way they do for their creators. This outlook leads to an illustrative conjoining in Pilate's life. Where her brother separates the space of work and marriage, Pilate acknowledges no such division. For her, work is, like love, another instrument of pleasure that she should share with her family. This immediacy can be dangerous; however, it subjects conventional scripts of progress to careful scrutiny. In itself, such examination syncs with Pilate's spirit. Combined with her brother and her sister-in-law's views, it fleshes out her nephew's conundrum.

Milk symbolizes the post–Brown v. Board search for a coherent black selfhood. Although his identity should be shaped by “personal and collective history,” he finds that perversions, elisions, and ignorance mar his progress (Mobley 41). His father headlines this inhibition, but his mother and to a lesser extent his aunt are also complicit. Through their impediments, Milk sees the value and the limits of their respective visions. Macon, Ruth, and Pilate improvised a conditional independence within segregated America. While their efforts sufficed under Jim Crow, expectations shifted with the advent of integration. Milk inherited great expectations, but like African Americans in general, he did not instantly comprehend equality. This confusion reflected both inexperience and his family’s silences. Attempting to balance labor and love, a crucial task in black life after segregation, his weaknesses were crippling. Chaneysville’s John could empathize.

Where Milk’s father achieves status via real estate, John’s dad Moses Washington acquired land and a considerable fortune selling moonshine. This enterprise provided him and his family a comfortable life; however, his interest in the profession was less monetary and more ideological. Born in 1890, Moses grew up in Philadelphia, where his father Lamen was a wealthy undertaker. Lamen gave Moses a superb education; however, he actively dissuaded his son’s interest in his family’s past. Convinced that black liberty at the turn of the twentieth century lay in business acumen and strategic coalitions, he saw no value in dredging up

9. As a mortician, Lamen not only directly evoked Tyree Tucker in Richard Wright’s The Long Dream but also participated in an industry where segregation was encouraged by the earliest black professional organizations. For more on black undertakers, see Robert Boyd’s “Black Undertakers in Northern Cities during the Great Migration: The Rise of an Entrepreneurial Occupation” (1998) and Suzanne Smith’s “To Serve the Living: The Public and Civic Identity of African American Funeral Directors” (2008).
His priorities promised safety, but they also evaded America’s vexing racial legacies. Moses was not inclined toward such evasion, and following in the footsteps of Lamen’s father C.K., he pursued a life of illicit liquor sales and risky exploits. Framing a central tension in Chaneysville, Moses and Lamen’s disagreement also raises a key question related to the Black Archivists: is success in America predicated on emphasizing or ignoring the racial past? The question for this father-son duo involved transgenerational debates; yet, just as Macon looked for Ruth’s help, Moses implemented his freedom plans by taking a wife from the black elite.

Yvette Stanton, Moses’s spouse, came from a family that had been free almost sixty years before the Emancipation Proclamation. Her father, Professor Stanton, taught at Howard University. Though these facts marked her as a fortunate child, her priorities were complex. She told her son John, “Don’t ever forget, that white people are the ones that say what happens to you. Maybe it isn’t right, but that’s just exactly the way it is. And so long as you’re going to their school . . . you have to be quiet, and careful, and respectful. Because you’ve got your head in the lion’s mouth” (119). Yvette preaches respectful submission to white authority, yet her attitude bespeaks cagey emulation rather than overt self-hatred. When asked about her marriage, she felt unsure whether her husband had given her love: “Moses didn’t love the way most people would think a man should love,” but she knew that the couple had been “allies . . . We didn’t want the same things, but what we each wanted was close enough” (308). Their shared desire fuels their son’s redemption of integration’s possibilities even as he denies the fusion. In John’s friendship with Jack Crawley, the basis of such denials becomes obvious.

Unlike Milk, who lives until his thirties in the same house with both of his parents, John loses Moses when he is ten years old. His father’s death creates a vacuum, and to fill that void, Moses, before he dies, recruits his best friend Jack. If Pilate epitomizes antiestablishment thinking in Song, then Jack exists as her counterpart in Chaneysville. He not only reprises her unmarried state but also echoes her suspicions about white society. With this echoing, Jack completes a tutelage that Moses


11. Philip J. Egan offers the most thorough account of John’s relationship with his mother in “Unraveling Misogyny and Forging the Self: Mother, Lover, and Storyteller in The Chaneysville Incident” (1997).
started during John’s infancy. Yvette states that when John was a baby, his father loved to watch him tear apart toys. Once he found a doll that John could not destroy; he laughed while his son cried, a combination that maddened her. She explained, “The sound the two of you made, him laughing and you crying. I couldn’t stand it” (196). Moses, with the dolls, was preparing John for the day when he would challenge America’s white Western ethos, and although Jack’s stratagems originated in different rituals, they had the same aims. These goals produced conflict between John’s mentor and his mother.

Reminiscent of Lamen, Yvette tried to funnel her son toward bourgeois assimilation. Moses objected to these gestures while he was alive, but after he died, she felt certain that the field had been won. Through Jack’s efforts, she saw John getting infected with his father’s habits. His hunting and drinking may have aroused her ire, but more than either of these, his determination to tear apart his family’s history truly frightened her. Having watched Moses disappear into his attic filled with books, records, and a folio, Yvette believed that studying this archive equated to spending his life “going crazy” (196). She rightly sensed that insanity could follow John’s exposure to the truth; nonetheless, her belief that freedom could be attained without engaging such truth isolates a serious concern in post–civil rights black identity. This concern returns to the intersection of labor and love and invests this linkage with practicality and fantasy.

Moses, Yvette, and Jack are like Macon, Ruth, and Pilate, preoccupied with harvesting the freedom that their ancestors sowed. Although joined by the desire for a harvest, these elders contrast in their estimates of how such work should be done. Chaneysville’s trio in particular discounts affection’s place in the job. Because of this discounting, they often stress pragmatism to the neglect of imagination. John’s pursuit of his family’s past has often been analyzed as a tension between reason and fancy. On the surface, this tension looks like a contrast of work and procrastination. America’s slow racial progress adjusts this perception. The span from Lamen’s nineteenth-century striving after liberty to his grandson’s

12. In late twentieth-century African American literature, destroying dolls repeatedly symbolizes the confronting of white expectations. For example, Claudia McTeer in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* “destroyed white baby dolls” (22). Where the racial implications of Claudia’s act were explicit, John is being trained even as an infant to encounter the world as a creation that he must resourcefully deconstruct. The popularity of representing such deconstruction via a doll may reflect Kenneth Clark’s sociological studies in the 1940s. For discussions of Clarke’s doll tests, see Saul Feinman’s “Trends in Racial Self-Image of Black Children: Psychological Consequences of a Social Movement” (1979).
twentieth-century resumption of that work suggests that freedom, even for middle-class blacks, involves deferral. If these delays in part reflect an incomplete grasp of democracy’s possibilities, then they also suggest intricate suppressions that originate in both white expectations and black traditions. John faces these suppressions, and as he researches them, he not only recalls Milk but also the Black Archivists. Through this conflation, Morrison and Bradley’s commentary on post–civil rights black literature crystallizes.

Milk is a scion, and John holds a PhD. Despite these attributes, both men still “lacked coherence” (Morrison, Song 69). Their plights exemplify a post–Brown v. Board black middle class whose accomplishments do not create stable identities. While members of this group suspect that cultural ignorance handicaps them, mainstream success distracts from the ache of lost histories. This success soothes them temporarily, but they wonder whether their pasts hold better options for selfhood. In Song and Chaneyville, this wonderment ties Milk and John to post–civil rights novelists who espy the black literary tradition. These writers weigh whether integration proffered a facile pluralism that overlaid more nuanced sites of memory.13 Persuaded that such evaluations were worthy, Morrison and Bradley leveraged their knowledge of the mainstream publishing industry to advance the effort.

While editing books for Random House from the 1960s to the 1980s, Morrison derived “huge joy” from helping other black writers navigate the space between “white established publishers” and the development of their “art form[s]” (Stepto 29). Bradley worked at J. P. Lippincott during a shorter window from 1974–76; nevertheless, in that interim, he learned how to “deal with the political nonsense” that dogged works by blacks (Bradley, “Novelist” 29). Because of their jobs as editors, Morrison and Bradley not only augmented black literary archives but also meditated on creative work, assimilation, and pleasure. These meditations informed Milk and John’s attempts to fashion identities that were “open to experimentation” yet cognizant of their forebear’s sacrifices (Bakerman 35). At crucial points in each man’s life, these efforts entail relocating.

13. In her 1987 essay “The Site of Memory,” Toni Morrison suggests that while authors of nineteenth-century slave narratives had to veer their writings away from representing too much of the interior of black life. She believed that as a late twentieth-century novelist, her job was to “rip the veil drawn over proceedings too terrible to relate” (What 71). Thus, although going back to the site of memory paid homage to earlier black cultural experiences, the trip also served as a corrective, a provision of new perceptions for a new day.
Archival Sites

Milk was born on February 19, 1931, and for his whole life, he dwells in a city roughly an hour away from Fairfield, Michigan. During 1963, he embarks on his first trip to his paternal family’s home space. The circumstances surrounding this trip are zany. Convinced that his sister has kept some gold that they glimpsed after Jake died, Macon commissions Milk and his friend Guitar to rob her. This robbery miscarries; nonetheless, Macon remains convinced that a treasure exists. Sending Milk from Michigan to Virginia, he hopes to secure the loot. John’s travels lack such distance but are equally dramatic. From his birth in 1948 until 1966, he lives on the Hill, the black section of his Western Pennsylvania hometown. When he leaves to attend college, he separates from his mentor, his mother, and his brother Bill. Because of Bill’s death in the Vietnam War and his mother’s hand in that event, John’s departure stretches to more than a decade. Thus, his 1979 return acquires poignancy.

When Milk and John exchange urban towns for ancestral homelands, they not only enact a rejuvenating ritual of past great migrants but also predict the demographic shifts that will take place by the end of the twentieth century. The timing of their movements is significant. While Milk travels in 1963, John visits in 1979. These dates frame a transition from the civil rights movement to the start of urban blight. On one level, this span marks a shift from the South to the North as ground zero for discussing black social ills. This shift critiques liberal attempts to corral American prejudice in a single region, and it insists that viewing black history holistically corrects such myopia. In another corrective, Milk and John’s trips put a major modernist trope against the backdrop of black existence. Song’s and Chaneysville’s depictions of the hunt clarify Morrison and Bradley’s outlook on artistic innovation. By examining Milk’s search for his paternal heredity, the outlines of her perception take shape.

Song’s original hunting expedition involves detective work. While this situation emphasizes Milk’s confusion, it also makes disorientation a basis for self-discovery. Milk ostensibly arrives in Virginia to track down some gold. After a few days, he concludes that his family’s saga constitutes a better legacy. This conclusion not only contrasts the greed that sent him southward but also deflates his ennui. However, before he can fully embrace the chase, he must see what a familial past represents. His

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grandfather promotes this vision. To Macon and Pilate, Jake reveals black orientation in America. Each child perceives him as an anchor, but each senses his hold uniquely. Remembering his father, Macon noted how “something wild ran through him” when “he saw the man he loved and admired fall off the fence” and lie “twitching in the dirt” (50–51). His affection rapidly succumbed to ambition, and Jake lived forever as a monument to lost dignity. Although his sister also witnessed this scene, she reacted differently. Pilate insists that she did not “see [her father] die” (140). Sustained by his traversing of the material and the spiritual worlds, she counts Jake as a lifelong “mentor” who counsels a “deep concern for and about human relationships” (150, 149).

Milk's confrontation with his father's and aunt's perspectives colors his journey through the South and defines his investigative work as the pursuit of a moral compass. Though Macon and Pilate have decided what the Dead past means to them, he scrambles to fit events to his identity. As he collects information, he recognizes that he cannot make sense of his clan’s southern details. His liberation from that bafflement occurs when he participates in a literal hunt. Critics have correctly identified the sexist dimensions of Song's male bonding ritual, and it is certainly defined by phallic power, ribald competition, and, at the end, whoring. These distorting effects are difficult to overlook, yet Milk's epiphany here is the recognition of his impotence. He cannot discover his prey; he mishandles his weapon and in a crowning blow becomes utterly lost in the woods. These markers of defeat should disqualify him from any insight, but in this debilitated state, he hears the voice that allows him to construct Jake as the son of Solomon and Ryna. This detail clears the way for his personal claiming of his great-grandparents and for his accurate deciphering of Jake for both Macon and Pilate. Given his father and aunt's tough experiences with tenderness, it is telling that Milk's insights arise from studying love.

Milk's great-grandfather Solomon inspired awe as the man who literally flew away from bondage. Legends tout his actions; however, his decision also contains less flattering resonances. Marianne Hirsch writes, “Solomon’s . . . flight, a heroic return to Africa, offers his descendants a mythic form of transcendence with which to identify, an admirable and

15. Preceding Beloved by more than a decade, Pilate and Jake's interactions show Morrison's engagement with African cosmology. La Vinia Jennings's Toni Morrison and the Idea of Africa (2008) offers the most expansive account of Morrison's attention to African cosmology. Her readings of Pilate in the context of Bandoki and Banganga, witches and healers, are especially insightful. Ashraf Rushdy also offers intriguing observations in Remembering Generations.
legendary rejection of his slave condition, a revolutionary rebellion. But his flight can also be seen as an act of paternal irresponsibility and abandonment” (77).

Milk’s grappling with this ambiguous freedom displays his deeper appreciation of messy humanity. Such appreciation arrives courtesy of his great-grandmother. Solomon’s rejection of slavery took courage and inventiveness, yet it drove Ryna, the mother of his children, “out of her mind” (324). When he committed to his world-beating gesture, she was left behind companionless. Ryna’s Gulch, a landmark in rural Virginia, captures her mindset. Encountering the area’s sounds during his hunt, Milk asks about them and is told: “Folks say a woman name Ryna is cryin in there. That’s how it got the name” (274). By empathizing with Ryna, “the black lady still crying in the gulch,” Milk not only adds branches to his family tree but also discovers the burden of those who are left in love’s wake (304). This belated discovery adjusts his outlook on self-definition and alerts him to love’s place in the work of liberty. Through his interactions with Sweet, the early impact of these adjustments appears.

Milk’s sister Lena suggests that since his birth, “everything in [the Dead household had] stopped for him” (215). Although her remarks predate his southern sojourn, they capture how his atrophied caring linked with his inheritance. He addresses this situation in part via a prostitute. After the humiliation of the hunt, he is sent to Sweet, a woman who as her name implies offers pure pleasure. Her profession exists in euphemism, but the fifty dollars that Milk gives her implies much. Despite such crudity, their trysting “constitutes a significant moment in his maturation” (Leak 113). Jeffrey Leak admits that Sweet helps Milk express “reciprocal” intimacy, but he warns that their coupling conveys a desperate attempt by rural black men to control “pussy” and “dick,” two

16. Joseph Skerrett argues that by being able and then choosing to fly away, Solomon begins the process of “denying the finality of death through the continuity of art” (201). If African cosmology informs Morrison’s characterizations, then the myth of Icarus and airplanes also illuminate Milk’s attraction to flight. See Robert Hayden’s “O Daedalus, Fly Away Home” (1943), Richard Wright’s Native Son and The Long Dream, and Ralph Ellison’s “Flying Home” (1944) for prior explorations of the black male fixation on flight.

17. Describing black women in Song of Solomon, Trudier Harris observes, “The success of Milkman’s journey depends in large part on the string of female bodies, figuratively and literally, that he leaves along his path. The women form a long line of mothering and nurturing that culminates in Milkman’s renewed sense of himself; they become sacrifices on the altar of his possibilities” (Fiction 107).

18. Solomon’s flight evokes freedom and abandonment, two evocations that are reflected in the larger black literary tradition. See Percival Everett’s Suder (1980), August Wilson’s Fences (1983), and Sterling Brown’s “Long Gone” (1929) for depictions that explore black manhood and ambivalent notions of leaving.
things that they cling to as manageable markers of “black masculinity” (112, 113). While Leak’s warning deserves heeding, his overall assessment downplays what Morrison presents (113). Milk, in making love to Sweet, detects not just the possibility of climax but also and more importantly the sublimity of sharing. With that simple detection, his lineal pursuits come full circle.

Whether the target is information or live game, Milk’s hunting failures closely connect to getting lost. This lostness, from childhood, carries an unpleasant vulnerability, yet during his southern swing, such disorientation defines his life. In one sense, his state reflects the immensity of his family’s legacy. Daily epiphanies send him spiraling, and succumbing to the motion, Milk cannot find himself. Although this idea allies him with the songwriter who “once was lost,” his situation more closely recalls Jesus’s suggestion that “whoever wants to save his life will lose it” (Luke 9:24). Milk’s bourgeois upbringing sprouts inanities. While these markers suffice to pass the time, he suspects their inadequacy. As he moves about the South, he senses that his middle-class life foregoes empathy. This neglect of generosity emerges as the hole within his clan’s soul, and once he finds himself with it, he concludes that lostness proves the best remedy. If John has too much training to copy Milk’s dilemma literally, he nevertheless notes that tracking in the spaces of the spirit confounds even veteran hunters.

*Chaneysville’s* chapter titles mimic the index cards of the professional historian; therefore, from the outset, John’s investigative work, while analogous to Milk’s, bears traces of the expert. Although his bachelors and doctorate in history suit him for intellectual foraging, in 1979, when he returns to the Hill, his readiness for a physical hunt remains uncertain. The numerous texts that fill his family’s history suggest that logic may be what he needs to corner his quarry, but a detail regarding his father’s moonshining hints at complication. Moses valued the time that brewing liquor gave him to figure things out. That figuring, as his attic library confirms, sometimes took the form of reading and note taking, but just as often, it involved outdoor activities such as calculating on his feet and constructing maps in his mind. This tension between John and Moses’s hunting strategies first emerges when the former is fifteen and home sick from high school. During that illness, John discovers his father’s archive and begins chasing after his paternal ancestors. He then enjoyed Old Jack’s tutelage in woodcraft and thus was confident of his skills. When he rejoins the pursuit over fifteen years later, ailment again haunts his efforts, and this time, John has not been in the woods for more than ten years.
John returns to the Hill because a sickly Jack asks for him; thus, his trip gets framed as a caretaker’s journey. Once he arrives though, his mentor positions him anew as a student. John’s earliest meeting with Jack occurs after Moses’s funeral when he visits the older man’s cabin and learns via toddies and storytelling about his father’s life. As the two reunite in 1979, their bonding resumes this familiar pattern. Jack’s health arouses John’s concern, and in the younger man’s mind, the threatening weather and the Spartan conditions make escape an urgent matter. Jack prioritizes a selfless need for deathbed instruction. When Moses, his best friend, told him to teach John how to be a man, Jack took the charge as an obligation and a labor of love. Thus, for him, the necessity of squeezing out one more lesson trumps the unlikely comfort of hospitalization. John’s schooling does not prepare him for this sort of reasoning, but Jack’s mindset recalls an earlier moment burnishing his point.

After Jack had been arguing with teenage John about whether physics or spirits produced the noises that he heard on the wind, he tells his young charge a story about the runaway slaves whose plight gives Bradley’s novel its name. He says, “I ain’t never heard ’em that often—maybe five, six times in ma whole life . . . I only ever heard ’em when I was on the trail a somethin’ else, an’ I’d be listenin’ for whatever I was after, jest settin’ there lettin’ the sound come to me, an’ then I’d hear ’em” (63). Mocking John’s belief that Western rationalism could unlock the mysteries of black identity, Jack counsels receptiveness as a key tool in tracking down one’s history. A young John resists this counsel preferring an existence where “African American and European American epistemologies” exist in “bipolar opposition” (Kubitschek 762). By 1979 when he confronts a dying Jack, he still embraces a “rationalistic . . . sense of himself,” but he starts to appreciate how black “communal literacy” plays a part in his life (Byerman 129; Kubitschek 762). Ironically, his maternal grandfather spurs him toward Jack’s model of hunting with the head and the heart.

When John was a boy, he despised Yvette’s father, Professor Stanton,

19. Analyzing Chaneysville’s portraits of mortality, Ashraf Rushdy concludes: “Bradley takes a Western idea of death as a rupture signifying the unalterability of the past and acccents it with an African belief system in which death is part of a continuum from being born to becoming an ancestor. In that model, dying and death itself are part of a process of gaining knowledge about the past . . . But that African belief also holds that dying is never done, never completely and wholly in the past” (Remembering 98).

20. In 1969, David Bradley’s mother Harriett was commissioned to chronicle the lives of Bedford County, Pennsylvania’s black inhabitants. During her research, she discovered the legend that sits at the center of The Chaneysville Incident. For more on her role in the novel’s genesis, see Blake and Miller (25–26).
because he would not allow John to read the books in his private collection. Stanton’s archive included first editions and autographed copies by black writers, works that no library in Western Pennsylvania and few in the world could boast; however, his insistence that John could not “comprehend” the texts alerts his grandson to the failings of fetishistic archiving (129). Moses says that John checks out books that he is not supposed to and will reread them five or six times to figure out their meaning. By invalidating his grandson’s tenacity, the Professor disables or at least defers historical excavation. He understandably wants to preserve his collection so that its treasures can be appreciated by posterity, but his preservationist zeal alienates the very boy by whom the legacy would be most deeply appreciated. Stanton’s mindset and the black bourgeois conformity that it betrays inspire John’s determination to become a part of the scholarly fraternity. At a key moment, its tendency to turn black cultural experience into a museum rather than a dynamic happening sparks liberating intellectual experimentation. This experimentation successfully hybridizes John’s notion of hunting.

Because Jack has painstakingly taught him the discipline, John’s humiliation as he is hunting does not stem from ignorance; rather, it issues from his alienating practice of the enterprise. Solitude seems integral to the hunt, but key scenes from *Chaneysville* suggest camaraderie as normative and needful. Jack and Moses embroider their friendship with zigzagging hunting expeditions throughout the county. Along with their cut buddy Uncle Josh White, this duo gained fame not only for being “ornery” but also for an unbreakable, woods-welded fellowship (78). Their togetherness never diminished their individuality, and it provided life-saving support during crises. If John received such delicate care through Jack’s loving instructions, then he may have misapprehended the tender offices because they were surrounded by a distracting misogyny. It is possible that as John lounged in his Philadelphia apartment, he acknowledged Jack’s gifts to him, but without question he notes these treasures while he tends a frail old man who is embarrassed by being bathed and fed by someone whom he helped raise. In these interludes of convalescence, John fully comprehends how human contact becomes an indispensable weapon. This comprehension points him toward a clearer conception of his family’s past. His clarity mirrors that of the Black Archivists.

21. John Washington’s antipathy toward the Professor inspires sympathy; yet, it also evinces a bratty sense of entitlement. While he, a precocious boy, had “read and reread every book the County library had to offer,” he still was a youth subject to accidents, forgetfulness, and an incomplete sense of a rare book collections’ worth (129).
Morrison’s and Bradley’s engagement of hunting evokes mainstream American modernists such as Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner. Although these writers’ ideas about masculinity inflect Song’s and Chaneysville’s portraits of Milk and John, their authority regarding woodcraft and gender ideals gets challenged in the black novels’ focus on recovery and communion. Morrison’s and Bradley’s challenges originate in their sensitivity to artistic prescriptions, the perceived need to make black writing “as close to perfect copies of white [writing] as possible” (Washington xlvi). While the admonitions toward emulation rarely emerged that bluntly, the reality was a publishing landscape that sought to fit black topic texts into white avant-garde categories. Ernest Gaines revealed that by 1993, black writers were attacking this attempt, but Morrison and Bradley show that such responses originated earlier. Revoicing modernist hunting’s noncollaborative epistemology, these writers place disoriented protagonists in reach of an edifying communality. Their rescues lack tidy edges and neat corners, yet they insist that entering black archives does not entail becoming a victim of your history. This insistence surfaces in Song’s and Chaneysville’s incorporation of black literary precedents.

With a major character that is an undertaker, a real estate mogul, and a part owner of a bar, Richard Wright’s The Long Dream not only anticipates the father-son and entrepreneurial plots of Song and Chaneysville but also prophesies black bourgeois disillusionment as a danger in integrated America. Published in 1959 while its author was living in Paris, The Long Dream prompted some reviewers to ponder whether “Wright’s expatriation had caused him to lose contact with the [post–Brown v. Board] realities of [American] race relations” (Kinnamon viii). Medgar Evers’s murder, Malcolm X’s death, and Martin Luther King’s assassination all suggested that Wright’s meditations on black psychosis heralded a resentment that would erupt in the tumultuous 1960s. If these tragedies rocked America’s landscape shaking up black complacency, then Morrison and Bradley by the 1970s considered how impugning stylists such as Wright and Chester Himes had enervated the ethics of swagger. Their considerations were less about cults of charisma and more about intricate conversations that moved beyond signifying to produce ballasts amid post–civil rights absurdity. Song’s and Chaneysville’s treatments of love assay such movements.

22. Chester Himes’s The Third Generation (1954) joins Wright’s The Long Dream as a significant intertext for both Chaneysville and Song of Solomon. See Lawrence Jackson’s forthcoming biography Chronicles of the Absurd: The Life and Times of Chester Himes, 1909–1984 for a more thorough exploration of Himes’s underappreciated legacy.
The Fullest Inheritance

As Milk and John strive to merge the hope of integration with the truths of their family’s histories, both men contemplate how at a key moment, a division between work and love surfaced in their ancestors’ approach to freedom. They conclude that the divorce of labor and intimacy diverts their forebears from liberty, a conclusion that reflects broader convictions. By stressing material wellbeing’s inability to replace emotional satisfaction, Morrison and Bradley imply that black freedom is most vulnerable to racial oppression when it overlooks empathy. Milk and John’s experiences reflect this finding, and their searches for love within their family archives turn up troubling emotional distances. While this remoteness begins with their parents, both men discover that stifled emotional connection may be racism’s most pernicious byproduct. The irony is that in seeking to remedy dehumanization, Milk and John’s families often neglected the very quality that held the possibility for healing. To remedy this oversight, Song and Chaneyville’s protagonists must reread their romantic pasts.

Milk’s grasp of love’s tie to liberty begins with his parent’s marriage. His perception in fact may be more acute since his conception marks both the last time that his parents slept together and the final act in their bitter estrangement. Because of that convergence, Macon and Ruth treated him as a “plain” on which they “fought” out their disputes (132). This warfare accelerated Milk’s flight south, but like Paul D with Beloved, it also drew him back to the obligations of empathy. His parents’ defining wounds bespeak the various forms of racial terror. Whether in the clarity of a father shot from a fence post or the convolution of hypocritical elitism, the wake of white terror overwhelms the Dead marriage. The agony is not the environment that spawns such truths but the misapprehension that promotes it. Macon and Ruth are each convinced that the appurtenances of freedom are in fact freedom itself. Just as Alice Manfred’s fight against Jim Crow blinds her to its insidious attack on affection, Macon and Ruth convince themselves that the epic labors of empire building dwarf the quiet rituals of soul tending. Milk’s great-grandparents, Ryna and Solomon, alert him to this mindset’s pitfalls, but his grandparents suggest an alternative.

While Milkman’s paternal grandfather is originally called Jake, the pencil slips of a drunken Freedman’s Bureau agent get him rechristened Macon Dead. Jake laments the mix-up, but he sees it differently when his future wife Sing admires the name. While his illiteracy stamps him
as a former slave, a man defined by the whims of racism, Sing adjusts his situation both with education and, more tellingly, with her reading of his possibility. She believes that Jake should keep his name because it is “new and would wipe out the past” (54). Although she died before Lincoln’s Heaven took its finest form, her outlook on freedom spurred her husband’s efforts even beyond his death. Their intertwining of love and liberty not only inspires his work but also their daughter’s. In fact, through Pilate’s interpretations of the utterances of Jake’s ghost, his work becomes hers.

Jake appears to Pilate shortly after her daughter’s birth and says, “Sing, Sing . . . You can’t just fly on off and leave a body” (147). Pilate interpreted his message as a call to go back and take full responsibility for a man that she believes she and Macon murdered, but Milk, by piecing together Solomon’s story, discovers that Jake is sharing with Sing his forlorn reaction to his father’s flight. This scenario proves noteworthy on two fronts. First, Jake talks to Sing about his feelings. Even in the throes of hewing a life out of Reconstruction’s unshaped options, he notes that the work of liberty involves inventories of the heart. His love for his wife allows him to confess the pain of his father’s absence. Second, Jake’s ghost reveals that even beyond the grave, the sweetness of his marriage to Sing still persists. His confession of that sweetness’ value to Pilate can only be decoded after Milk witnesses it as well. With this witnessing, his apprehension of tenderness enlarges. Such enlargement means that his past intimacies must be reviewed as well.

The defining tenderness in Milk’s adult life is his relationship with Hagar, Pilate’s granddaughter and his second cousin. Initially, their liaisons consist of sex fuelled by his adolescent lust and her quirky curiosity. Eventually though, his attraction cools, and she, wielding a Carlson carving knife, walks the street every thirty days determined to murder him. She cannot kill him, and eventually her pining for him leads to her death. When Milk contemplates his role in Hagar’s mental unhinging, he feels ashamed of his callousness. His affair with Hagar begins in adoring glances and homemade wine, but after two decades, their desire devolved into commodity. This devolution sends them careening toward alternative fates. Using a Dear John letter as a Christmas gift, Milk insists that although separation would “deeply hurt him after all these years,” he nevertheless recognized that “you couldn’t be selfish with somebody you loved” (98). Feigned concern launches his Dixieland adventure. In a crude irony, Hagar’s identity voyage entails a shopping spree downtown, an outing that marks irrecoverable “psychic illness” (Rushdy, Remembering
Pilate unknowingly carries her father’s bones for most of her life, and she must properly dispose of them to access “mercy” (317). To resurrect Jake’s legacy, Milk must figuratively shoulder Hagar’s body. Accepting her burden shows how a family history littered with failed bonds can eventually fuse liberty and love, and this becomes a crucial lesson for the last member of the Dead clan.

Milk’s southern travels begin as an extension of his father’s agenda; however, they soon take on Pilate’s concerns. She detects the ways in which her brother uses greed to blunt the pain of Jake’s death. While she laments Macon’s materialism, she still tells Milk that “hadn’t been for your daddy, I wouldn’t be here today” (40). Her remembrance of how he carried her “in [his] arms” when she was a baby forever obligates her to him (51). When Pilate tells Hagar and Milk that they should treat one another as brother and sister, she is not anticipating their incestuous affair or disregarding their precise kinship; rather, she is warning them that social conventions may erode their concern for one another. Her granddaughter’s death and her nephew’s hand in it confirm her suspicions. Demonstrating the dangers of lapsed empathy, Hagar’s demise bespeaks Milk’s cultural forgetfulness. When he drives his aunt south to put down her father’s bones, he offers a comfort grounded in healing memory. This generosity permeates Song’s conclusion even as violence punctuates its expression.

Guitar, Milk’s ace, is a member of the Seven Days, a militant black organization committed to taking one white life for every black one claimed by racial terror. When the plot to rob Pilate founders, he tracks Milk through Virginia, hoping to find the treasure and fund the Days’ latest endeavor—a response to the Birmingham bombing. As Pilate buries her father, Guitar, aiming for Milk, shoots and kills her. His action shows how the “deadly retribution” unleashed on “an oppressive and unjust society” produces another warped chase after freedom (Jordan 206). Where Guitar embraces a love of liberty that claims his beloved’s lives, Milk taking up his aunt’s refrain—“If I’d a knowed more [people], I woulda loved more”—decides that surrender is the saner reaction (336). His final act in the novel, a leap into nothingness, carries vestiges of his great-grandfather Solomon’s flight; however, it truly signals a liberation.

23. Susan Willis argues that Pilate’s house “demonstrates the insufficiency of the agrarian social mode to provide for its members once they are transplanted to urban consumer society” (108). Thus, Hagar’s purchases could be viewed as emblems of disconnection between the rural South and the urban North. Although these regional incompatibilities are evident in Morrison’s portrayal, W. Lawrence Hogue has correctly suggested that if Pilate cannot teach “agrarian values to her . . . granddaughter, then she cannot pass them on to Milkman” (49).
work that attends to caring. Believing that generosity forms his family’s finest legacy, Milk’s gesture is less suicidal and more sacrificial.\textsuperscript{24} Thus, he perfects what he mangles with Hagar—selflessness. John’s love lessons also conjure altruism, but his curriculum requires metaphorical rather than literal leaps.

Just as Milk’s survey of freedom and devotion commences with his parents, John’s musings on love start with Yvette and Moses’s unorthodox affections. His mother contents herself that she “had what [her husband] gave” her (308). By which perhaps she means that she had two sons, a comfortable life, and a staunch partner in the fight against Jim Crow humiliation. The dignity of Yvette’s existence buffered her from certain ravages of racial prejudice, but her “emotional barrenness” fed “stoicism” and precluded intimate fellowship (Egan 276). As John studies his parent’s marriage, this lack strikes him, and when he places it beside the romances, including his own, in his family’s archives, he senses that his mother’s imperfect consolation results from a misjudgment of love’s role in freedom work. John’s research on C.K., his paternal great-grandfather, sparks this insight.

C.K. Washington’s escape from slavery and his Tubman-esque exploits begin as a solo project, a commemoration à la Macon and Pilate of his father’s ambition, but by the 1840s, Harriette Brewer spurred a transformative collaboration.\textsuperscript{25} Together with Harriette, a woman who possessed “the strongest moral sense he had ever encountered,” he plotted and executed the theft of slaves (355).\textsuperscript{26} They teamed up to promote the social good; however, their efforts exposed other aspects of liberation. Tying activism directly to passion, the couple united racial rescue and personal pleasure, a combination that C.K.’s son Lamen and his grandson Moses deeply misunderstood. Lamen parlayed his father’s racial advocacy into bourgeois gentility. Making his living by handling dead bodies, he

\textsuperscript{24} Ashraf Rushdy argues, “What is significant about Morrison’s achievement is the way she has recast Milkman’s ‘flight,’ which would be a suicidal move according to one set of values, into a liberating act according to the set of values the novel endorses” (\textit{Remembering} 78). If Rushdy supports a nonsuicidal view of Milk’s flight, then Jeffrey Leak captures the importance of his unselfishness: “At novel’s end we find Milkman engaging in sacrifice for another human being, an endeavor with which he is unfamiliar for most of his life. He progresses in his relationships with women and his understanding of history and myth. But, as with John, Milkman teaches us that even when one’s consciousness experiences growth, the struggle does not end, for one must give witness to this growth or rebirth amongst kith and kin, and, yes, enemies as well” (131).

\textsuperscript{25} See Maha Marouan “Interpolating Harriet Tubman: Representing Gender and Heroism in David Bradley’s \textit{The Chaneysville Incident}” for more on Harriette and C.K.’s slave stealing.

\textsuperscript{26} Klaus Ensslen writes that C.K. led “the fugitive slaves of the local legend alluded to” in \textit{Chaneysville’s} “title to their heroic self-immolation” and “fought his own war against the system of slavery” (280).
neglected the transactions that fed his comfort. His son Moses exhumed America’s absurd racial history, but his copying of C.K. lacked the crucial perspective afforded by a colluding romantic partner. Perceiving this deficiency, John, as an adolescent, experiments with shared freedom work. The results are dismal.

Mara Jamison is the daughter of Linda Jamison, a black prostitute whose patrons are all white men. When Linda prepares Mara to enter the family business, the younger woman asks John to sleep with her and thus spoil her for the trade. This plan tries to thwart the exploitative effects of white male sexual desire, and in some ways, it recalls C.K.’s antics. Despite echoing an earlier freedom fighter, John and Mara, like Moses and Yvette, discover that their rote coupling lacks revolutionary power. Klaus Ensslen speculates that the couple fails because John “resist[s] being victimized” (291). Thus, though Mara confronts a heinous fate, John will not join her vulnerability; instead, he reduces the danger to the possibility of “losing [her] body to a white man” (Leak 105). John’s bitterness blocks his compassion, and this leads him to mistake togetherness for intimacy. As Pilate showed Milk, there are no gimmicks that deliver freedom. One must shoulder the burdens of empathy until caring signals deliverance. If Mara could not tutor John toward taking the weight, then in the final phases of sorting his family’s legacy, he enlists his girlfriend Judith, a woman whose whiteness formidably endangers their success.

Bradley contends that the main reason he made Judith white is because nobody wants “to hear two niggers sitting around complaining about white folks” (Blake and Miller 29). While his quip betrays both irreverence and audience awareness, it also conveniently sidesteps the controversy of black–white romance. Morrison, as early as 1971, identified a “growing rage of black women over the unions of black men and white women” (What 26). If Bradley noted that some folks would not want to hear blacks discussing whites, he definitely knew that other people, among them a few black women, would be ticked off by a black man and a white woman who had recently made love talking about almost anything. Instead of supporting his contention that Judith is “peripheral,” Chaneysville makes her essential, but that centrality stems less from her prodding of John’s storytelling and more from her vivid illustration of the always already politicized dimensions of black existence (Blake and

27. One of the more humorous slave-stealing plans that C.K. Washington pulls off is to “liberate a whorehouse” (358). Because a fifteen-year-old John discovered his father’s library, he might have been familiar with C.K.’s methods and his character.
Miller 29). Her ability to cull intimacy from that morass inspires John’s reciprocity.

The insinuating energy of racial realities means that who you love is partly the work of black liberty. Because Judith embodies this permeation, she gives John the complementing perspective that Harriette offers C.K. The former couple’s labor is not the same as the latter’s, yet its concepts ally. John and Judith’s fantastic story of Harriette and C.K.’s reunion affirms this alliance. When John finds himself out of “facts” about Moses’s attempts to comprehend C.K.’s death, Judith cajoles him into using his imagination (391). Many scholars have noted how this collaboration, one that weaves a romance and a hunting plot, affirms the pair’s commitment.28 While these readings persuasively explain John and Judith’s “fictional reconstruction of the unfinished story-line of history,” their tendency to make her a stand-in for a broader “white reading audience” denies a crucial facet of this exchange, namely its desperate singularity (Ensslen 285). Improbably, Jack Crawley prepared John to recognize the immense importance of that feature, and he did so in the last conversation they ever shared.

As soon as Jack hears that John lives with a white woman, he feels compelled to give his pupil one last story. This account limns the border between fancy and logic conveying the costs of braiding love and black freedom work.29 When Uncle Josh, a black man who could pass for white, proposed to Clydette, a white woman, local Ku Klux Klan members bound, tortured, and prepared him for execution. Moses and Jack saved his life, but after their rescue, he said almost nothing for the rest of his days. Jack revives Josh’s vulnerability to highlight racial prejudice’s indifference to love’s earnestness. Just as he did not want John’s book learning to blunt his survival instincts, he does not want John’s relationship with Judith to consign him to the silence that enshrouded Josh’s

28. Phillip J. Egan’s “Unraveling Misogyny and Forging the New Self: Mother, Lover, and Storyteller in The Chaneysville Incident”; Cathy Brigham’s “Identity, Masculinity, and Desire in Bradley’s Fiction” (1995); Klaus Ensslen’s “Fictionalizing History: David Bradley’s The Chaneysville Incident” (1988); Missy Dehn Kubitschek’s “‘So You Want a History, Do You?’: Epistemologies and The Chaneysville Incident” (1996); and Jeffrey Leak’s Racial Myths and Masculinity in African American Literature (2005) all address the epiphany of John and Judith’s collaboration. Maha Marouan and James Coleman believe that the benefits of this collaboration are temporal and the foundation of John and Judith’s relationship is quite shaky. See “Interpolating Harriet Tubman” and Black Male Fiction and the Legacy of Caliban (2001) respectively.

29. Scholars have inveighed against the racist and sexist aspects of this tale. While there can be no gainsaying Jack’s antipathy toward nearly every female in Chaneysville, his attitude contains textures that are often overlooked, and his last story poignantly exemplifies the broad contours and the specific crevices within his perception of women and romance.
life. His story does not impugn the sincerity of interracial love; however, it suggests that no matter how much time passes, the ghosts of bygone experiences still ride the wind, shaping the lives and the attitudes of the living. He may not bless John’s relationship, but he clarifies the harrowing that will enliven it. By providing that clarification, Jack lays the burden of liberty on his mentee.

Who Profits?

*Song* and *Chaneysville* have been exposed to more than a quarter century of scrutiny, and despite this attention, the novels still prove difficult to grasp.\(^{30}\) At the center of that difficulty is what to do with the texts’ massive archives. Persuasive analyses have identified the African cosmology implicit in the novels’ assorted corpses, skeletons, near dead, and ghosts, but Milk’s and John’s hunts for their family legacies produce libraries and living legends. Behind these men’s epic amassing, Morrison and Bradley place a fundamental question: Can black freedom accommodate love? These novels meditate on this query using a privileged generation that has inherited the sacrifices and the suggestions of their elders. Through these portrayals, *Song* and *Chaneysville* also comment upon post–civil rights novelists’ confrontations with black literary traditions.

The family violence that Macon and Yvette hide signals the forgetfulness that America charges for bourgeois comfort. Given the aesthetic concessions that black novelists were counseled to make, this repression connects to the shifting white estimates of Chester Himes, Ann Petry, and Gwendolyn Brooks. These writers skirted the stylistic demands for racial reconciliation and chronicled the psychoses that haunted even successful blacks. Milk and John’s reliance upon Pilate and Jack suggest that while the perceptions of these elders should not cramp their autonomy, their spirits will not be displaced by mainstream mandates. The love lessons in *Song* and *Chaneysville* indicate a graceful empathy as the condition of intimacy. With the cultivation of a burden bearing concern, the novel’s protagonists discovered a durable basis for fellowship. This depic-

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\(^{30}\) Jane Campbell’s *Mythic Black Fiction: The Transformation of History* (1986); W. Lawrence Hogue’s *Race, Modernity, Postmodernity*; Ashraf Rushdy’s *Remembering Generations*; and Jeffrey Leak’s *Racial Myths and Masculinity in African American Literature* have all talked about both *Song* and *Chaneysville*. In addition, Madhu Dubey’s *Signs and Cities*, Dolan Hubbard’s *The Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination* (1996), and Valerie Sweeney Prince’s *Burnin’ Down the House: Home in African American Literature* (2005) have engaged *Song* while James Coleman’s *Black Male Fictions and the Legacy of Caliban* treats *Chaneysville*. 
tion explains why communion becomes one of the Black Archivists’ most treasured resources.

Milk and John represent the fitful progress of the late twentieth-century attempt to correct the distorted black identity within the American imagination. Shaped by bourgeois respectability, intellectual activism, and pragmatic reform, these men’s complicated projects demand refined fixes. Milk’s materialistic maneuvering hits a dead end, and John’s rationalistic tendencies offer no panacea. These developments do not mark their missions as untenable; rather, they figure them as incremental. This disposition also surfaces in Morrison and Bradley’s artistic approaches. Just as John and Milk scan their pasts and presents, noticing missteps, exulting in fractional triumphs, and lamenting the incompleteness of it all, Bradley and Morrison discover that black artistic independence must necessarily be gradual and partial. For both parties, the road is not pure ascent; it harbors twists, turns, and a few cadavers. What both the characters and the novelists make clear, though, is the reward of prior and persisting failures. Failure carries artists beyond experimental technique to the humanizing possibilities of disappointment. Within that sphere, Song and Chaneysville’s string of bodies are signposts pointing to richer life. John Edgar Wideman probes narrative’s negative capacities for richness in Sent For You Yesterday and Philadelphia Fire.