

What will love need  
tomorrow?



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In the late 20th century, a push and pull existed within the black community, the likes of which had rarely been seen before. People were celebrating the successes of the civil rights movement and the end of Jim Crow, but oppression and racism still ran rampant throughout the country with no sign of subsiding any time soon. Faced with a present still discouragingly marred with oppression and suffering, many black luminaries of the time turned to the future through writing about prophesy. Prophesy's function within black art and culture has been outlined perhaps best by Dr. Cornel West, an American theological philosopher and activist who also focuses on race and class. On the subject of prophesy, he writes " Prophetic modes of thought and action are dotted across the landscape of Afro-American history. these modes consist of protracted and principled struggles against forms of personal despair, intellectual dogmatism and socioeconomic oppression that foster communities of hope" (West 38). Using West's definition, and keeping in mind the circumstances of the black community during the 1970's, it becomes clearer why the black community turned to prophesy. The prophetic modes of thought West discusses are especially apparent in books and albums from late 20th century black luminaries such as Stevie Wonder, Toni Morrison, Marvin Gaye, and Octavia Butler, whose works carry on the African-American prophetic tradition in their implementation of hope, despair, God, love, and liberation.

Toni Morrison begins her 1977 novel *Song of Solomon* with a prophecy that not only sets the tone for the rest of the work, but succinctly communicates the work's purpose. As the book opens, she writes " The North Carolina Mutual life Insurance agent promised to fly from Mercy to the other side of

Lake Superior at three o'clock" (Morrison 3). The opening lines are highly detailed, but wholly unhelpful as far as understanding the text is concerned as the reader does not know who the insurance agent is, where or what Mercy is, how the agent is flying, which direction over Lake Superior they are flying in, or even what day at three o'clock the agent intends to fly on, rendering the one concrete detail offered in the first sentence useless. The reader is given no other information to contextualize the novel's opening lines and is instead forced to grapple with being thrown into the vivid world Morrison has begun to paint. However, the *in medias res* opening Morrison employs to begin the story firmly establishes it as a work of fiction that deals with prophecy and borders on magical realism, as the opening lines read as a literal prophecy. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a prophecy as "An instance of divinely inspired speech or writing; a revelation from God or a god; a prophetic text" (OED 1b) and also as "The interpretation and expounding of the Bible" (OED 5b). Morrison's cold open satisfies both definitions, as only the omniscient 3rd person narrator knows what the first lines mean upon first encountering them, making them seem divinely inspired, and the opening lines necessitate the reader stopping to make an attempt at interpretation. Beginning the novel with a prophecy immediately immerses the reader into a world that is simultaneously clear and also impossible to fully grasp, which is an atmosphere Morrison carries throughout the rest of the novel, therefore making the lines both literally prophetic in terms of the events of the novel and tonally prophetic in terms of the direction the novel will take.

Stevie Wonder begins *Songs in the Key of Life* in much the same way Toni Morrison begins *Song of Solomon*: setting the tone for the rest of the work by leading off with a prophecy. His lead-off track, “Love’s in Need of Love Today” opens with an acapella gospel choir, which conjures the feeling of being in church and establishes Wonder as a priest-like figure. The first lyrics of the song and the album read “Good morn or evening friends / here’s your friendly announcer / I’ve serious news to pass on to everybody. / What I’m about to say / could mean the world’s disaster / could change your joy and laughter / to tears and pain” (Wonder 1976). The song is already rooted in religion through the gospel choir, so the charismatic “friendly announcer” as well as the high-stakes of the news bringing the “world’s disaster” is highly reminiscent of a preacher reading from the biblical book of Revelations, an entire book which prophesizes the end times. It is also important to note that the opening lines of “Love’s in Need of Love Today” transcend time, as Wonder makes sure to wish the crowd a “good morn or evening” and much like Morrison’s first lines, he does not specify a day, so the song, and moreover the song’s prophetic message, exist outside of concrete time. It makes sense that both artists begin their works with literal and tonally prophetic messages with ambiguously positive and negative implications as they were both writing at the nexus of new black liberation and continued oppression that existed in the mid to late 1970’s. Laura Dubek notes the temporal importance of *Song of Solomon*’s publication date in writing “It is into this space—a crossroads in the freedom struggle—that Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* enters” (Dubek 91). While the opening lines of *Song of Solomon* appear to simply be predictive of a future where a man will potentially fly, they in fact describe the suicide of Robert Smith. The lines are do not

inherently carry any negative implications, but they are eventually tainted by the tragedy that follows, just as the socio-political atmosphere of the time was simultaneously positively and negatively charged. Wonder's opening lines depict a world on the brink of ruin, but his prophecy is conditional, as he makes it clear that is prophecy "could be the world's disaster" implying it also might not be, and also includes the lines "Hate's goin' round / breaking many hearts / stop it please / before it's gone too far," suggesting that it is still possible to reverse the process of love dying (Wonder 1976). In both cases, the unsolidified implications of their opening lines draw several connections to the state of the black community at the time. While the civil rights movement of the 1960's had enjoyed much success, progress towards equality and liberty was (and still is) desperately needed. The content of *Song of Solomon* and *Songs in the Key of Life* reflect Morrison and Wonder's respective attempts to reconcile those optimistic feelings of forward momentum and progress with a society that was by no means socially aware when it came to issues of racial injustice. The reconciliation is significant because as both works begin, prophesy functions as a way to acknowledge the good and bad aspects of the time in order to continue to work towards continuing positive social change.

Using prophesy as a jumping off point, Wonder's next song discusses the importance of recognizing a higher power being at work in the universe and submitting to it. In the chorus of "Have a Talk with God," Wonder suggests to the listener, "When you feel your life's too hard / just go have a talk with God" (Wonder 1976). Through the song, Wonder returns to the religiosity he conveyed in "Love's in Need of Love Today" but rather than returning to a

prophetic warning about the state of the world, he steers the listener towards the solution to the problem. As biographer James Perone points out, “The lyrics suggest that prayer to ‘the only free psychologist that’s known throughout the world’ can help one through any problem” (Perone 65). In asking the listener to turn to God to help them through their problems, Wonder encapsulates the optimism and realism of the time into a singular message: there are problems in the world, but everything is possible through the supernatural, and more specifically through God. It is imperative that Wonder establishes God as a force in the universe for his message relies on keeping faith to get to the other side of difficult times, which he implicitly posits is possible. The possibility of full belief and acceptance of prophesy is also predicated on the acceptance of some kind of supernatural power, so opening the listener’s mind to God inherently also opens the listener to Wonder’s messages and prophesies. Similarly, Morrison builds her argument that healing during difficult times is possible through prophesy and the supernatural, but she makes the opposite case from Wonder’s. Rather than suggesting that turning to God or the spiritual can help, Morrison contends that people are simply lost without their spiritual side. Though she does not admonish those who are not spiritual, she simply does not entertain any sort of atheist or aspiritual ideas. Morrison’s strongly held convictions are made clear in the scene when Milkman is talking to Freddie about how Freddie’s mother died. Milkman asks “‘How’d she die?’ ‘Ghosts.’ ‘Ghosts?’ ‘You don’t believe in ghosts?’ ‘Well’—Milkman smiled—‘I’m willing to, I guess.’ ‘You better believe, boy. They’re here’ (Morrison 109). Milkman laughs the encounter off, but given the elements of magical realism found throughout the rest of the novel, Morrison makes it clear that Milkman is foolish to

ignore Freddie's warning. By extension, Morrison communicates to the reader that prophecy, another supernatural force, both as a source of hope and as a precautionary device, is at the very least worth noting and should never be dismissed, even though it requires a leap of faith.

Faith is an important aspect of Cornel West's outline of the function of prophecy within Afro-American art, but it is worth noting before continuing the discussion of faith that West believes faith is predicated upon the presence of love in one's life. He leaves his definition of love open-ended, writing " Love—the foundation upon which faith and hope must be built. Love—as basic as the birth of a new day, yet as complex as the varied conditions under which we find God's children living today" (West vii). The looseness of his definition is important as it allows for faith to be predicated on any form of love, be it familial, romantic, platonic, or spiritual. He implies that without love, even having faith in something as easily anticipated as a sunrise is impossible. To West's point, in order to further illustrate prophecy's importance within society, and specifically black culture, Morrison and Wonder both turn away from the spiritual in favor of showing prophecy's role in love. In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison explores love through the parable of the snake that Macon tells Milkman with regards to Pilate. Macon tells Milkman there was once a man who " saw a baby snake, bleeding and hurt... The man felt sorry for it... and took it home. And he fed it and took care of it until it was big and strong... Then one day the snake turned on him and bit him." He goes on to say that the man asked the snake why the snake bit him, to which the snake replies " But you knew I was a snake, didn't you?" (Morrison 54-55). Macon Dead uses the parable in an attempt to convince

Milkman that Pilate is a bad influence on him, not because of any particular action she might take or words she might say, but simply because it is in her very nature to betray (as far as his experience is concerned). The prophecy turns out to not apply to Pilate as Macon intended; however, several characters in the book do follow the course of the prophecy and “bite” those closest to them. Guitar ends up betraying Milkman because his ideals drive him to turn against a friend, and Milkman turns against Pilate in trying to get the gold. The parable delivered by Macon may not come to pass the way he envisioned it coming to pass, but it holds true nonetheless, indicating that prophesy transcends the will of man and functions as a pseudo-omniscient force within the novel and in life.

Stevie Wonder’s song, “Summer Soft,” tells the story of lovers who were not meant to be together and at different times betray each other, showing the transcendental nature of prophesy in a similar way to how Morrison shows prophesy through the snake story. In the lead-in to the first chorus, Wonder sings “And so you wait to see what she’ll do / is it sun or rain for you? / but it breaks your heart in two / when you find it’s October / and she’s gone” (Wonder 1976). Wonder’s use of the present tense throughout the line coupled with his knowledge of what will happen before it happens establishes his prediction as prophesy. The woman will inevitably not stay with the man, and he will be ruined. Though the man’s fate is still unclear to him, it is not unclear to Stevie Wonder. As the song continues, Wonder returns to the same line, but in the inverse. In the lead-up to the second chorus, Wonder sings “And so you’ll wait to see what he’ll do / is it sun or snow for you? / But it breaks your heart in two / ‘cause you’ve been fooled



by April / and he's gone" (Wonder 1976). The change in weather patterns from "rain" to "snow" and the temporal displacement between the two sections, with the latter taking place six-months later, as far away on the calendar as possible, indicates that even the force of time, which is typically depicted as being all-powerful particularly through its ability to heal all wounds, is no match for the power of prophesy. Much like the snake story, the inevitability of heartbreak that comes through Stevie Wonder's prediction adds a certain amount of dread to the idea of prophesy. While in earlier parts of the album, prophesy has been discussed in terms of healing love or healing through God, here the listener understands that it can have a destructive nature as well. The duality of prophesy's powers (that it can have a constructive and destructive role in the world) is significant because it again shows Wonder reconciling the good and the bad to show both sides of the all-powerful, and moreover, both the good and the bad felt by the generation.

Stevie Wonder's song "As" brings the listener to the climax of the album in an all-encompassing seven-minute jam that covers the inner-workings of the universe and leads into the very message of the album. He opens with a vow reminiscent of a wedding vow and in some ways seemingly more powerful, but still quite separate, as he sings "As around the sun the earth knows she's revolving / And the rosebuds know to bloom in early May / Just as hate knows love's the cure / You can rest your mind assured / That I'll be loving you always" (Wonder 1976). The vow from Wonder captures the might of prophesy he discusses throughout the album through the imagery of universal forces like the planets' pull on one another and the inevitability of

springtime. It is at this point in the album that Wonder has truly found a compromise between the unstoppable and seemingly supernatural forces in the universe and the positive and negative forces at work therein. The unstoppable nature of time he points out with the line “ the rosebuds know to bloom in early May” also carries with it the beautiful imagery of a flower. There has been a push and pull throughout the album over the devastating potential prophesy has as well as the extraordinary potential for good it carries, but the first section of “ As” is the first time both forces are seen working together in harmony. As the song continues, Wonder delves into laws of nature that his love transcends, going even beyond comparing it to naturally occurring unstoppable forces. In reference to loving the person in the song, he sings, “ Until we dream of life and life becomes a dream / Until the day is night and night becomes the day / Until the trees and seas just up and fly away / Until the day that  $8 \times 8 \times 8 = 4$  / Until the day that is the day that are no more” (Wonder 1976). At this point, rather than just falling in line with the already impressive laws of the universe, Wonder predicts that his love will now and for all time break boundary between dream and reality, day and night, and mathematical laws to boot. Towards the end of his climactic song “ As” Wonder distills the album’s meaning to him as much as possible. He takes on a much deeper voice to set this new speaker apart from the lover he plays in the earlier part of the song and sings, “ We all know sometimes life’s pains and troubles / can make you wish you were born in another time and space / but you can bet your life times that and twice its double / that God knew exactly where he wanted you to be placed” (Wonder 1976). By taking on the role of a different speaker with a raspier, seemingly aged voice, Wonder establishes with some dominance that the message he is

conveying through the lines are worth being noted well. He invokes God for the first time since the second track on the album, which is particularly powerful to the listener as it becomes clear that the balanced and unstoppable ebb and flow of the universe that Wonder has been commenting on throughout his album is perhaps God. Wonder has purposefully not personified God until this moment so that the listener may understand his vision of who God is rather than letting their previous knowledge of God influence how they listen to the album. The line “ God knew exactly where he wanted you to be placed” also brings the question of predestination into the fold, but in a way that suggests it is a positive force only meant to help those who feel lost. Within the scope of the entire album, bringing God back into the fold serves as a comment on the condition of the black community, specifically as a message to keep faith and know God has a plan.

Morrison likewise carries the theme of God’s plan, or predestination, through *Song of Solomon* in the form of the characters’ names and the impact their names have on their destinies. For instance, Milkman, whose nickname came about because he was being breastfed longer than people thought he should have been, struggles throughout the entire book with uncovering his family history in order to discover more about who he is. In other words, he feels malnourished and disconnected from those who came before him and struggles with identity, like a child weened too early. Milkman’s name also evokes the historically promiscuous archetypal image of the milkman, a situation described as “ A woman cheats on her husband with the milkman, or some other man who visits her home on a regular basis... The image of the milkman was very popular in older works, and persists even though in

many places milk has not been delivered to people's homes in decades" (TV Tropes). Just like the archetypal image of the milkman, Milkman struggles with monogamy throughout the novel, and although Morrison never explicitly treats his name as a prophetic device, the course Milkman's life takes seems too fitting for his name (bestowed on him very early in life) to have not influenced it or been prophetic in some way. It is no coincidence that Milkman's name bears prophetic significance in his life, as Milkman is not the only character whose name has a prophetic function in the novel. Guitar's nickname came from him always having wanted to play the guitar, but he never learned, showing the reader that his soul is lost, or that he never really found his true calling. Ruth, whose name is literally a synonym for mercy, is one of the few characters who is kind to Milkman during his early childhood, and Pilate, the most powerful female character in the novel, shares her name with Pontius Pilate, the man who infamously killed Jesus Christ. Negative connotations aside however, it would take a powerful man to kill the son of God, and strength Pilate shows through the novel aligns with the symbol of strength Pontius Pilate can be made out to be. With every main character in the novel, their name holds a special prophetic significance in their life, and through their prophetic names Morrison communicates the importance of identity and understanding one's self in the present before one can hope to understand the future. However, while identity and the present are paramount as a foundation in prophesy, equally as important is the imaginative aspect of prophesy. The prophesy Morrison deals with in Song of Solomon is effective in understanding the present, but the present often leaves a great deal to be desired. This is especially true for the African-American community in the 1970's, which had suffered a great deal already,

and though it had enjoyed a few recent triumphs, it was still largely oppressed and in need of liberation.

On the subject of understanding the future through prophecy, scholar Michael McCormack writes “ black artists and intellectuals have dared to imagine, and at times, “ prophecy” alternative futures. Indeed, such work has been and remains of critical importance for African American and diasporic communities” (McCormack 10). McCormack’s point is crucial in understanding prophecy’s role in the African-American community, as oftentimes, unlike what was seen with *Songs in the Key of Life* and *Song of Solomon* prophecy can be used in an imaginative way, not necessarily for fixing the present or healing from the past, but inventing a better a future. As Cornel West continues his writing on the function of prophecy in black art and literature, he outlines a cycle which he believes encapsulates its progression through various works. West defines the cycle of black prophetic practices as “ initial moralism, inescapable opportunism, and combative pessimism” (West 48).

If *Song of Solomon* and *Songs in the Key of Life* focused on God, love, and hope, then Marvin Gaye’s album *What’s Going On* and Octavia Butler’s novel *Parable of the Sower* complete the cycle West writes about by centering around the socioeconomic oppression, intellectual dogmatism, and despair West believes leads to combative pessimism. However, it is important to note that despite the shift in focus from hope to despair, from love to death, and from liberation to oppression, West maintains the works are equally valid, and praises both sides heartily. He writes “ *What’s Going On*... set standards of Afro-American popular music that remain unequaled. Only

Gaye's marvelously talented pupil, Stevie Wonder, has attempted to exceed such standards by fusing the spiritual richness of Afro-American music, the sense of social engagement, and the love ethic of Jesus" (West 175), showing that despite their, at times, contradictory points of view, West puts them on equal footing because both works are rich in terms of their inclusion of and deep respect for the spiritual and prophetic.

Marvin Gaye leads off his seminal and critically-acclaimed 1971 album *What's Going On* with the titular track, "What's Going On?" Leading off with such an all-encompassing question is highly effective in dropping the listener into a world of confusion and disorientation. By shaking the listener's sense of stability, Gaye forces the listener to immediately question their own futurity. After all, if the present is so turbulent and unknowable, what could the future look like, and will it even arrive at all? After establishing the present as a murky and opaque place, Gaye delivers a few words of clarity, singing "You know we've got to find a way / to bring some lovin' here today" (Gaye 1971). Gaye's simultaneous diagnosis of and prescription for the situation plaguing the nation is that the country has become loveless, and consequently, using Cornel West's definition of faith, has become Godless as well, as love is the foundation of faith. Gaye goes on to sing "Talk to me / so you can see / what's goin' on" (Gaye 1971), establishing himself as a prophet who is not only able to see "what's going on" but spread the message of the solution, which in this case is faith. His lead-off track is not only recognized as one of the greatest songs of all-time, but it is an extremely effective beginning to his concept album as he is able to

succinctly communicate the problem and effectively establish himself as a prophetic figure all in a three-minute period.

Octavia Butler opens *Parable of the Sower* in a similarly effective way and also immediately establishes the speaker of her novel as a prophet. Before the actual text of the story begins, the reader is presented with the lines “ All that you touch / You Change. / All that you Change / Changes you. / The only lasting truth / Is Change. / God / Is Change” (Butler 3). Redefining God within the first few lines of the story certainly stands out, and also instantly establishes the book as having elements of the prophetic as it has historically been the prophet’s job to not only interpret the word of God, but God Himself. The reader soon learns that Lauren, the protagonist of the novel, is the author of the inscriptions at the beginnings of chapters, and understands that Lauren is not only a prophet, but a powerful one capable of redefining the Judeo-Christian conception of God in only a few short lines. It is also significant that Lauren defines God as change. Change is oftentimes viewed with at least some degree of fear and trepidation because people tend to crave some semblance of stability, but the fact of the matter is change is neither good nor bad; it simply is. If change is neither good nor bad, and God is change, then according to Lauren’s opening assertion, God is neither good or bad. This conclusion draws a stark contrast to the classic refrain which summarizes western notions of God “ God is good all the time; all the time, God is good” but firmly establishes the world Lauren lives in as being very different from the present and makes it clear to the reader that she is not bound by any tradition that has come before. She truly is a trailblazer and a prophet.

As *What's Going On* continues, Gaye further cements himself as a prophetic figure, but distinguishes himself from traditional prophets as well. The second song on the album, "What's Happenin', Brother?" tells the story of a veteran of the Vietnam war returning home only to find most of the familiar elements in the life he once knew have been stripped away and the quality of life in general in the states is either just as bad as or worse than how he left it, leading him to question why the war was worth it in the first place. In one of the song's opening lines, Gaye sings "I'm just getting back, but you knew I would" (Gaye 1971). Underneath the line's machismo (inherent anytime one presents their return from war as inevitable) is the idea that Gaye knew all along his fate was to return from Vietnam. Furthermore, his return conjures images of the prodigal son, but in the inverse. Rather than leaving of his own volition and being pleasantly surprised upon returning that he is still welcome, he was likely drafted and forced to leave, and upon returning he is shocked to find that America is still a far from ideal place. However, where Stevie Wonder offers a solution (i. e. having a talk with God, focusing on love) Marvin Gaye is a total loss, as the song's title "What's Happenin', Brother?" suggests. It is not a mere greeting; Gaye literally does not know what is going on. The combination of his lack of solution and reversed biblical role despite already having been established as a prophet leads the listener to question their own futurity, falling in-line with the combative pessimism Cornel West talks about in his prophetic cycle.

Butler similarly takes away the reader's sense of security and forces them to come face to face with the reality of the situation through the observations of a prophetic character without that character necessarily offering a



solution. At one point in the book, while contemplating a nearby city that has become privatized, Lauren thinks “ Maybe Olivar is the future – one face of it. Cities controlled by companies are old hat in science fiction. My grandmother left a whole bookcase of old science fiction novels...In real life, that’s the way it will be” (Butler 124). Through this passage, Butler instills a sense of despair in the reader by invoking cyclical time. She allows the reader to believe that cities like Olivar are only possible in science fiction, when in actuality coal-mining cities that function in similar ways to Olivar were present in the US over one-hundred years ago. Even though the concept is presented as a dystopian future, in reality America has already gone through it. In presenting an aspect of the past as science fiction, Butler shatters the illusion of the novel and takes away the sense of security that that comes with reading science fiction. Because Lauren has already been established as a prophetic character, the reader feels a certain degree of despair knowing that the situation has come to pass before and will likely come to pass again. Butler uses Lauren’s prophetic status to alert the reader of the danger that lies ahead should society not change its course.

Marvin Gaye furthers the sense of despair he established through the first two songs on the album by prophesizing the inevitability of pain with “ Flying High in the Friendly Skies”. He writes about the ultimate futility of using drugs as a means of escape, singing “ Flyin’ high in the friendly skies / without ever leaving the ground. / Rest of the folks are tired and weary / and have laid their bodies down. / I go to the place where danger awaits me / and it’s bound to forsake me” (Gaye 1971). Gaye’s stance on escaping danger is pessimistic to say the least, and contrary to Morrison and Wonder’s focus on

the cessation of suffering, Gaye predicts it as natural law. He even compares it to the inevitability of day turning to night through the lines “ In the morning I’ll be alright, my friend / but soon the night will bring the pain” (Gaye 1971). Gaye is again much less focused on a solution, and more focused on spreading word of their being a problem. His focus is equally as valid as Morrison’s or Wonder’s; it simply fulfills the last step of West’s prophetic cycle.

Although *Parable of the Sower* and *What’s Going On?* focus more on the negative aspects of the present and future through their prophetic messages, it is important to note that change is possible rather than precluded through their apparent negativity. *Earthseed* as a text stems from a post-apocalyptic landscape and is rooted mostly in Lauren’s observations, so the ideas in *Earthseed* would in theory be rather dire. However, in discussing the negativity around her, Lauren writes that it “ won’t let me alone, won’t let me forget it, won’t let me go... And in time, I’ll have to do something about it... In spite of the poisonous rottenness outside the way where I might be exiled, I’ll have to do something about it. That reality scares me to death” (Butler 26). Even though Lauren is acutely aware of her awful circumstances, and is perhaps too aware given her hyperempathy syndrome, it is through this awareness that she predicts that she will be able to create tangible and positive societal change. In creating a character who generates change through awareness, Butler is able to further her own beliefs about humanity’s direction and point out the importance of spreading awareness. As scholar Marlene Allen posits that “ Butler connects Lauren to the long line of black heroes and heroines in African American literature

beginning with the earliest slave narrators and simultaneously advocates for the enlightenment and insight that science fiction can provide as a prophetic tool for change” (Allen 1354-1355).

Despite the fact that Parable of the Sower paints a hopeless picture for the direction of the nation, it does not paint a hopeless picture for the future of the nation, and prophesizes that from the ashes of the old, something new and conceptually better can rise, specifically through the phoenix metaphor surrounding Earthseed, as Lauren’s original community was literally burned down by pyros, but as tragic as it was, it was the only way Earthseed could have ever come to fruition. What’s Going On?, despite the harsh picture of reality it conveys, has also been lauded for raising awareness in an attempt to create a better future. Gaye’s song “ Mercy Mercy Me” outlines catastrophic environmental issues years before they were even popularized in the scientific community, including massive fish die-offs, smog, birth defects, and landfills. At one point in the song, Gaye sings “ How much more abuse from man / can she stand?” (Gaye 1971). Again, he does not necessarily offer a solution to the problem, but the foresight required to raise such issues years before they became issues is prophetic in and of itself. Even though Gaye does not present a solution to the problem, going through the trouble of writing and recording an album about the state of the world and the necessity of change itself reflects going back to the beginning of West’s prophetic cycle, initial moralism. Gaye finishes his album with his most all-encompassing and dire warning yet in an attempt to again generate change through the power of prophesy. In the final track of his album, “ Save the Children,” Gaye sings, “ When I look at the world / it fills me with

sorrow. / Little children today / really gonna suffer tomorrow. / Oh, what a shame. / Such a bad way to live. / Who is to blame / when we can't stop livin'?" (Gaye 1971). The lines read as the combative pessimism Cornel West writes about, and while they do prophesize about the future, the prophecy does little more than to bemoan what Gaye perceives as humanity's fate. However, he later follows these lines with " There'll come a time / when the world won't be singin' / flowers won't grow / bells won't be ringin' / who really cares? / Who's willing to try? / To save a world / that's destined to die?" (Gaye 1971). The lines are presented as an almost defeatist prophecy about the path the world is on. In a combination of his warnings through the rest of the album, Gaye predicts the ecosystem will fail and society will become loveless and in-turn, faithless. However, rather than the lines being a defeatist prophecy, they can just as easily be read as a form of Socratic prompting. Through his prophecy, Gaye is asking the listener " who is willing to try" not rhetorically, but Socratically, hoping to prompt the listener to say that they are willing to try. By presenting saving the world as a challenge worth taking up rather than an inevitability, Gaye returns to the first part of West's prophetic cycle and opens the door for prophesy to not only effect the present, but to potentially save the world.

In what are now considered to be some of the greatest works of literature and music of the 20th century, Toni Morrison, Stevie Wonder, Octavia Butler, and Marvin Gaye demonstrate how prophesy can be used to overcome despair, dogmatism, and even oppression of the mind and body in order to imagine a better tomorrow. They effectively communicate prophesy's function within the African-American community by illustrating its power

over and impact on religion, love, identity, the environment, and society's concept of the future. Furthermore, they illustrate the prophetic cycle outlined by Dr. West and in doing so collectively prophesize that if anything is assured about the future, it is that people will always be looking ahead and speculating their own futurity, as well as mankind's. Together they posit that prophesy is not only inevitable, but necessary in order to properly chart a course to a destination that may not ever be known, but will continually be an improvement over the last.

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