2019

# What's in a name? Rhetorical and Political Naming in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon

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# What's in a name? Rhetorical and Political Naming in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department: English

Major: English & African American Literature

Major Professor: Dr. Elon Kulii

Greensboro, North Carolina

2019

The Graduate College
North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University

This is to certify that the Master's Thesis of

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has met the thesis requirements of
North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University

Greensboro, North Carolina

2019

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# Biography

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Acknowledgements

I give honors to Noble Drew Ali who said, “In order to change the people, you must change their literature”. I would like to thank my committee members Dr. Elon Kulii, Dr. Hope Jackson and Dr. Kimberly Harper for challenging my thinking and encouraging me to continue my research, brining light to new narratives. Thank you to my first teachers, my grandmother and mother, for showing me the true value of love and knowledge. And to my partner and best friend, Julie Mlo, thank you for being such an inspiration and loving support on this journey called life.

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**Abstract**

This thesis aims to examine the usage and history of the various racial labels attributed to Black Americans and how the cyclical usage of *Negro*, *Black*, *Colored*, and *African American* are a haunting that Black people will most likely face again. As these terms do not fulfill a nationalistic identity, the quest for a satisfactory term still exists. To illustrate this journey, examining the novel *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison will expose how her text subtly charges the reader to embark on a journey of self-discovery. Not only is the reader charged to "know thy self", but they are exposed to an overlooked history of the African diaspora in the Americas—African Muslims or Moors. It is perhaps this overlooked American history that may offer new insights to the conundrum of the Black American identity.

# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

Reflecting on the history and accomplishments of the African diaspora in the Americas can be compared to a type of ritual sacrifice, albeit to foreign gods. The diaspora has survived the horrors of captivity, emerging from the depths of hellish realties stemming from the transatlantic slave trade and the legislative terrorism called Black slave codes. Black people have survived Jim Crowism and all of its systemic tentacles, being able to tell their stories although blood has been spilled for every increment of social progress on this land. However, the bargained success of Black people in the New World has catalyzed a new creation. Some have argued that establishing loyalties to Africa are strained, as Black people do not know the land and no longer have pure African blood. Others even see those who try and claim an African heritage as being in a weird space of cultural appropriators. In other words, there is a double consciousness not only in a White and Black dichotomy, but within the African diaspora. Furthermore, the sacrifice of the diaspora in the Americas interrupted the ability to retain the knowledge of ancient ancestry, which in turn enables Black people to exist in a state of collective amnesia. Knowledge of tribal names and languages are amiss, lost in generalities, unable to be fully grasped and absorbed into one's own identity. So now, many Black people cannot or refuse to remember and inquire about their own history.

There are only rumors and guesses for those Black people who take on the daunting task of searching for their individual and familial identity. This causes a nagging void and otherness when, as Americans, they exist in a melting pot of cultures where other people of color have come in search of refuge in a land that forcibly stripped away their various identities. The tension comes from recognizing that these particular people are able to recall history of land, languages

and lineages in their ancestral codex like the Chinese and European who have an intact and extensive recorded history. Now, this is not true for all people of color whose lives have been interrupted by colonialism and war, but they nonetheless retain a connection to a particular nation by specific name and identity. For Black Americans, imagining this void highlights the gapping hole in the historical narrative whether it is in American or world history—things are missing.

**Background**

In the preface of Joanne Braxton's book *Wild Women in the Whirlwind* she quotes Audre Lorde saying, "It's not that we haven't always been here, since there was a here. It is that the letters of our names have been scrambled when they were not totally erased, and our fingerprints upon the handles of history have been called the random brushings of birds" (Braxton 77). As Black people who reflect on phenomena such as the Transatlantic Slave Trade, they should begin to ask questions such as what would be the social and psychological implications of such disruption? Can people called *Black* find consolation within their history and how have they? What is a true home for the lineage of the kidnapped prisoners of war? What were they called before 1619? Are *Black* and *African American* suitable terms to encapsulate our history from Africa to America? Is it a suitable term for a nation within a nation?

Due to these questions, this thesis aims to examine the usage and history of the various racial labels attributed to Black people and how cyclical usages are a haunting that Black Americans will face again in the future, but perhaps just as or more critically than we have in the past. The notion of haunting comes from the novelist and Nobel Prize winner, Toni Morrison. In her novel *Beloved*, Morrison coins the trope "rememory" through the main protagonist Sethe, in which she says, "If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place-the picture of it-stays, and not

just in my rememory, but out there, in the world.... Some day you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up.... But no. It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else..." (35-36). Morrison explores the idea of shared group memory and trauma that is a constant living entity Black people interact with. However, in the novel *Beloved* certain characters refused or could not participate in rememory. This refusal or incapacity to remember is what this thesis aims to frame the various racial terms for Black people in America. A rememory that ought to be explored more deeply or else it remains a haunting without reconciliation.

In Barbara Christian's article "Fixing Methodologies: Beloved", she proposes a way Black Americans can recover from this "collective psychic rupture" of memory loss by reading African American literature, such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* through an African Cosmological lens (7). Christian believed many readings or critiques of *Beloved* missed its true essence and a more concise reading would highlight what she saw in Morrison's writing, which was her use of the African traditional religious beliefs, or ancestor worship (6). Christian's goals in her reading acknowledges the existence of an African cosmology, examines how that cosmology has been consistently denigrated in the West, and explores its appropriateness for texts that are clearly derived from it" (7). Through reading the novel with this lens and having memory, a central theme in *Beloved*, Christian's students were confronted with "the consequences of the refusal to remember" (8).

In this work it is a hope to show how, in context with African spirituality, Toni Morrison has made great efforts to show the symptoms and consequences of the collective amnesia through many versions of social dysfunction, but she also shows us what Black Americans should do on an individual basis. It should be considered that Morrison's novel, *Song of*

*Solomon,* should be read using a New Criticism lens to investigate and interrogate the Black collective amnesia and readings of the novel should not simply be correlated with biblical allusions and African folklore.

Using Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon*, highlighting the psychic rupture and refusal to remember, it is argued that Morrison and Christian map out how Black Americans should examine the questions of names and naming and follow the trail of historical information to highlight hidden and suppressed narratives. Morrison shows us in *Song of Solomon* the success and pitfalls of this specific path of self-discovery if we view the novel and the family of Macon Dead as a metaphor for the African American collective.

In this novel's case, Morrison shows the issues and consequences of the collective amnesia, while simultaneously making the reader investigate the meaning of names. By names and naming, the implication is not simply the process of naming children as seen by the tradition of the novel's family, but the consequence of having dead names. Examining the paths of inquiry suggested by this study of Morrison and Christian shows how this exploration in turn becomes a literacy practice. The writer of this thesis hopes to extend their work in future projects to highlight those in the African diaspora, such as "black" nationalist leader Noble Drew Ali, who interrogated the validity of racial terms/labels in search for a nationalistic term, which in turn made space for healing and pride--making the broken whole. He and others brought to light the historical narratives that were suppressed and unknown in order to achieve the goal seen by Barbara Christian's framework, which is to honor the ancestors as well as soothe the "rememory" of "dead" names.

This is not a new conversation, yet it persists, as the 2020 Census will allegedly allow Black Americans to describe where they come from.  In March of 20168 NPR covered a story on

this very issue in their show *All Things Considered*. One of the interviewees stated that where he's from in St. Louis, "you're either black or white", but since moving to Boston he had been asked whether he was of Haitian or Jamaican descent, which prompted him to look more deeply at his ancestral roots—something he had never done (Lo Wang, "2020 Census Will Ask Black People"). Seeing that in this present time, many Black Americans have yet to journey down the road of personal ancestry and historical restoration, I hope to revitalize the importance of why this inquiry continues to have such vital importance.

Throughout the text I will use terms such as *Black American, African American, Black, Colored* and *Negro*, although my ultimate aim is to deconstruct these terms to show their weaknesses. I use them because of their colloquial value and in order to maintain coherency. Chapter 2 aims to recount the history of the racial labels used for and by Black Americans and the various agendas surrounding their uses. The chapter will also examine certain groups of the African diaspora in the Americas that have been historically neglected by the mainstream historical narrative. Chapter 3 will be a close reading of the evidence seen in *Song of Solomon* that exhibit the consequences from the disruption of ancestral memory and self-determination.

# CHAPTER 2

## A Road Less Traveled

Up to the present time the labels used to identify Black people morphs depending on the rhetorical audience. During the PBS Digital Studios show *Say It Loud*, a specific topic for Black History Month was "Are you 'Black' or 'African American'?". The show randomly questioned people of African descent about which term they used and why. The results were intriguing. The prevailing opinion of those who were questioned identified as *Black* making the distinction between those with an African nationality. One gentleman specifically argued that the use of Black is sufficient because of his limited knowledge of African culture and using the conjoined term *African American* would somehow be a misidentification.

However, looking at the arguments in the PBS program exposes the current variety of opinions surrounding the use of *African American* and *Black*. The conundrum stems from the culturally intended meanings by Black Americans verses the meanings as seen by others in the African diaspora. Depending on the rhetorical audience, it makes a difference for some Black people in the United States to denote the difference between American "blackness" and those with African Nationality. But what difference does it really make if you say *Black* or *African American*?

The article "What is Africa To Me?", by Geneva Smitherman, quotes Jesse Jackson who says, "Black tells you about skin color and what side of town you live on. African American evokes discussion of the world" (123). However, Black Americans have been vocal on acknowledging their affinity for *Black* as it relates to their specific experiences within the African diaspora. So what is this differentiation that American Blacks feel from the term *African American*? The common denominator is that Black Americans think Africans born in

America should and are better suited for the term *African American* because of their known African national affiliations. Is the label *Black* sufficient? Why are some discontent with the term *African American*? Are Blacks not sprung from the same fount?

Smitherman frames the search of national identity by those of African descent in the Americas as a "sociolinguistic construction of reality" and that "language does play a dominant role in the formation of ideology, consciousness and class relations" (Smitherman 117). Ultimately, the many versions of racial terms are the expressions of this sociolinguistic reality creation and unique consciousness. Many Black Americans need the acknowledgement that their realities in the Americas are very different from others in the African diaspora and strongly feel the need to express this difference via language. However, I suggest the notion that the present sociolinguistic construction of their reality through the cyclical usages of *Negro*, *Black*, and *Colored* and currently *African American* has stagnated social and civil progress, failing to be satisfactory in certain contexts.

Another goal is the examination of these terms beyond our current social perceptions, connotative linguistics and emotional attachments. What new sociolinguistic realities immerge when we examine the labels *Negro*, *Colored* and *Black* in a severely overlooked rhetorical context that has been "perpetuated to validate a superior position for descendants of Europe in the United States, while assigning an an inferior status to descendants of Africa in the United States" ? (Bey 2). I posit that the use of *Negro*, *Black*, *Colored* and *African American* have been used not only as "legal masks" veiling the true access and agency to exercising rights in the United States of America, but these terms disallow members of the group to place themselves in world history beyond 1619. This issue then becomes a blinder to other historical narratives that might offer more pieces to our collective puzzle.

**Theoretical Background**

When setting the theoretical groundwork for this inquiry, it is important to see that reality has always been formed by the semantics of race. The recurrence of the debate around *Black* American collective self-identity has always strived to fulfill the longing questions of "who am I?" and "where are we from?" It is, I argue, the specificity of an utterance that helps fill in the gaps of identity if one is able to fulfill particular requirements. These requirements are made up by parameters that are at best described by historian John Henrik Clarke, a pioneer of Africana studies, founding chairman of Black and Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter University and the Carter G. Woodson distinguished Visiting Professor of African history at Cornell University.

Clarke says that the label of those persons of African descent in the Americas should have a term that immediately evokes land, history and culture ("Dr. John Henrik Clarke on The Importance of Nationality," 00:01:00-00:01:15). Now, this can be very challenging for some to think about, but no label used by *Black* Americans has fulfilled these requirements. Henrik Clarke adds further that all ethnic groups in this America have a nationality, and answering to words such as *Negro*, *Black* and *Colored* do not denote a nationality. Just like the interviewee from the PBS clip mentioned, it is inferred that many Black people lack certain knowledge and awareness to critically engage the semantics used about race, or how these terms exist in legal discourse. The first step in the critical engagement needed starts with the deconstruction of these terms as well as questioning if they fulfill the naming requirements. Furthermore, it is possible to see the need to examine neglected and little-known history of the African diaspora in the Americas to fill in the blanks.

In Barbra Christian's "Fixing Methodologies: Beloved", she discusses how the notion of memory relates to what is called a "Psychic rupture" stemming from the middle passage (7). The

traditional modality of ancestral remembrance by those in the African diaspora was to understand that "they do not disappear as long as someone remembers them, their name, their character" (11). However, the purposeful social engineering resulting in forgetfulness (the legal mandate for illiteracy) has only exacerbated the malformation of our "sociolinguistic construction of reality". Christian quotes the African Christian theologian John Mbiti who points out that ancestors are associated with "their land, the piece of Nature that they inhabit. The people are the land, the land is the people" (11-12). So, are there no people, land, histories or no other identifying terms at all that can connect and enable Black Americans to fulfill the requirements stated by Dr. Clarke? From what I know in my personal tradition of ancestral worship is that specificity is key to evoking or acknowledging the ancestors and using incorrect names can often create a *spiritual backlash.*

Adding to the notion of *spiritual backlash*, Jacqueline Jones Royster also quotes Mbiti discussing the African cosmological concept of time in her book "Traces of a stream: literacy and social change among African American women" which says:

> *Sasa*, which we might mistakenly represent as 'present' and *zamani*, which we might mistakenly represent as 'past,' actually situate individuals within a time-space continuum and help us to perceive a striking dimension of African systems of cosmology, which makes it possible to focus on history as a particular type of narrative within time...In this scheme, *sasa* becomes personal time, the time during which individual people exist physically in the world and also the time during which they are remembered, even after physical death, by the living. (79)

Royster says that it is the *zamani* time concept that represents "the collective or the community of spirits" where immortality is achieved. It is "[w]ith this model of a time-space continuum with its *sasa* and *zamani* dimensions, there is room to negotiate what constitutes history, or at the very least to negotiate what constitutes historical consciousness as a precursor for the 'making' of history" (Royster 80). So it is the collective history (*zamani*) and individual histories (*sasa*) that allow space to acknowledge our missing narratives.

**The Great Debate**

On the issue of specificity, we must examine the various labels used for *Black* identity and see how, perhaps the label debate has caused lasting confusion, steering Black Americans away from a term that evokes nationality. In the New World, *Negro* was the first label to be used, which is credited to the Portuguese and Spanish slave traders. The word *Negro* etymologically means "black," from Latin *nigrum*, which "early in the nineteenth century some blacks deployed 'Negro' as an alternative to 'African'" (Kennedy 75). In relation to the historical development of the term *Negro* as applied to people of African descent in the Americas, the inception of its use was simply to describe the appearance of Africans or Moors in Italy. "It is apparent from the evidence that the term *negro* or its equivalent was not used for a race or for a single stock of people or to point to ancestry or ethnicity. It was usually a simple description for perceived color or appearance" (Forbes 66). It is in the American context that the term *Negro*, *Black* and *Colored* become associated with a phenotypical caste system where Europeans, now considered *White*, is equated with citizenship or a higher status than that of *Black*, becoming equated with non-citizenship. This point is further sustained by the research of Dr. Jose V. Pimienta-Bey, Associate Professor of African and African American studies at Berea College who says, "English history reveals that 'white' was customarily used by royalists (the aristocratic caste/class) to symbolize themselves," and "was understood to designate purity as well as God-given authority" (Pimienta-Bey 263).

***African***

*African* was more commonly used by free Africans highlighting their legal status. Our earliest indication for this preference can be seen in the names of certain institutions: The Free African society, the African Free school, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African

society for mutual relief, and the Sons of Africa Society (Kennedy 73). In her article, "What is Africa to Me?" she says, "although the small number of 'free' Africans tended to refer to themselves as 'colored', the most frequently used label, for 'free' and 'slave' alike was African" (118). Using this particular term enabled them to identify "with Africa not because they had retained the cultural qualities of the people of that continent but because they sought the public acknowledgement and recognition accorded to those who could claim a legitimate national affiliation" (Kennedy 73).

Professor Patrick Rael writes in his book *Black Identity & Black Protest in the Antebellum North* that the use of the term *African* "invoked Africa not as a reflection of their cultural proclivities but as a claim to participate equally in the civic life of the nation" (Kennedy 73). From the language presented in these quotes, there was civic mindedness of Black Americans at the forefront of what their self-identification should be. Consequently, due to the popularity of the use of *Africa*, it declined "after the founding of the American Colonization Society (ACS) in 1816. The ACS was established by *whites* who sought to move free blacks in the United States to Africa. Although a few free blacks initially supported the ACS program, most resolved quickly to reject it. In order to make clear their self-identification as Americans and their repudiation of ACS-sponsored emigration, some blacks began to refrain from referring to themselves as 'Africans'" (73). The shortsightedness of using African as a self-identification term is that it cannot be a nationality. The term *Africa* denotes an entire land mass. The question of "where in Africa" remains, as the language of law is specific.

> In 1806 a black congregation named itself the African Baptist Church of Boston. In the 1830s, with its officers declaring that 'the name African is ill applied to a church composed of American citizens,' the congregation renamed itself the 'First Independent Church of the People of Color. (Kennedy 73)

Not long after widespread use of African begins, calls from European Americans for Black American deportation ensues, soon after, Black Americans begin to focus on the variance of "blackness" as some did not identify with being African.

***Colored***

If Black Americans aren't necessarily African, what other terms could they use? The term "Colored" and "Persons of color" began to be used as a solution as early as 1827 according to the first issue of *Freedom's Journal,* announcing that the editors "would champion the interests of free persons of color" (Kennedy 73). Speakers of the day such as Frederick Douglas in his speech, "What Are the Colored People Doing for Themselves?" and *David Walker's Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* most likely further popularized the usage of *Colored*. The abolitionist William Whipper adamantly rejected the use of "Colored" saying, "we have too long witnessed the baneful effects of distinctions founded in hatred and prejudice, to advocate the insertion of either word 'white' or 'colored'" adding that the debate for a racial label will never stop if we do the same (74). Whipper suggested the use of "oppressed Americans" (74). The journalist Samuel Cornish rebutting Whipper stated, "Oppressed Americans! Who are they?" adding, "You are COLORED AMERICANS. The Indians are RED AMERICANS and the white people are WHITE AMERICANS, and you are as good as they and no better than you" (74). Cornish finished his rebuttal with a warning that following Whipper's suggestion would "rob us of our nationality" (74). Consequently, the use of "Colored" began to die down in the 20th century, "By the 1930s use of 'colored' by the black vanguard--professor, editors, writers, agitators--had strikingly waned (though it remained for two decades a thoroughly respectable term) (75). Thoughts on its waned usage,

> Perhaps its demotion stems at least in part from the apprehension that 'colored' constitutes an attempted linguistic dilution of blackness, a rhetorical analogue to hair

> straighteners, nose thinners, and skin lighteners--signals of shame of or alienation from blackness. (75)

It is already evident that the move from terms like *African*, which was an effort to orientate self-identity as a nationality, to terms like *Colored,* that had to do with respectability politics, in no way fulfills the stated requirements by Dr. Clarke. It is a verb, something to be painted or dyed. However, during this time some Black Americans championed the use of *Colored* and that other various labels should be reclaimed. At the National Emigration Convention of Colored people in 1854 a resolution stated that, "Negro, African, Black, Colored and Mulatto, when applied to us, shall ever be held with the same respect and pride; and synonymous with the terms, Caucasian, White, Anglo-Saxon, and European when applied to that class of people" (74). It is a clear shift from nationalistic thinking and language to the issues of emotions and pride. Interestingly, as mainstream usage for *Colored* abounds, reviewing the legal definition of colored reveals, "It has also been held that there is no legal technical signification to the phrase 'colored person' which the courts are bound judicially to know" (Black 354).

### ***Negro*** **Again**

Smitherman states that "the shift away from *colored* to *negro*, and the subsequent campaign for its capitalization, began at the turn of the century and hit its full stride during the period of the two world wars" (Smitherman 120). During this time period an interesting supporter for the term was W.E.B. Du Bois. He responds to a letter from a high school student stating his unrest with the usage of 'Negro. In a 1928 issue of *The Crisis* Du Bois responds:

> Do not...make the all too common error of mistaking names for things. Names are only conventional signs for identifying things. Things are the reality that counts. If a thing is despised...You will not alter matters by changing its name. If Men despise Negroes, they will not despise them less if Negroes are called 'colored' or 'Afro-Americans. (Kennedy 76)

The linguistic trap Du Bois is stating is a simplistic dismissal. We use words to describe other words and concepts. Although we use language rhetorically, giving agency to name ourselves, the overall intended meaning may not transfer adequately to other audiences. If the reality of things counts most, the thing's dissatisfaction with what it is called also matters. Many scholars during the 1960s felt that pride could be acquired through the usage of said term as well. Benjamin Quarles, a distinguished "Negro" historian said,

> I see nothing wrong with [Negro]...Words change in their context. We have many words historically that once were terms of denigration. For instance, the Friends were sometimes called Quakers in derision. Instead of dodging the word, they adopted it and made it their term of great respect and meaning…[Y]ou will begin to see the same evolution of the world 'Negro' as Americans of African descent move into their rightful place in American society. (Kennedy 77)

It is also important to note that it may have been to the benefit of the American hegemony for the resurgence of the term Negro, as "...[Negro] had come into widespread linguistic currency among European Americans, especially those in the North, the seat of capital and political power" (Smitherman 120). Interestingly, we see a shift from efforts toward denotative definitions with a national connection to connotative definitions of terms that allude to slavery. I would speculate the reason would be to stir the discourse in the "Black" American populous away from any civil inquiry or nationalistic self-identity.

***Black***

The popularization of the term "Black" began during the 1960s as a counter to the use of "Negro". The strong call for "Black Power" by Stokely Carmichael backed by the funk of James Brown's song "I'm Black and I'm Proud" helped to solidify its usage further. This new ideology caught on as, "the move from *Negro* to *Black* signaled an ideological shift, a repudiation of whiteness and the rejection of assimilation. The failure to embrace Blackness and to capitalize on the strengths of Black Culture and the Black Experience was reasoned to have stagnated the

progress of the Civil Rights Movement" (Smitherman 121). Nonetheless, Black has become the most common usage now. Another term that also took prominence with *Black* is *African American*. This term isn't entirely new as there have been previous variations such as *Afro-American* and *Afra-American*. Some have viewed the usage of African American as paradigm shift (122). It was an acknowledgement of the double consciousness and "It is a recognition that we've always been African and American…", spoken by Dr. Dorothy I. Height, president of the National Council of Negro Women (Smitherman 80). It was a feeling of making a firmer connection with the African Diaspora.

***Personal Paradigm Shift***

Consequently, there are people like the writer of this thesis who have always wondered and tried to understand the logic of racial terms. The usage of *African American* has been inadequate in quelling the feeling of having a place in the global family. Smitherman states that the "term provides the security of 'I am somebody' by reaffirming the origin and cultural continuity of our African heritage" (123). However, the question remains, which lands, and names should the focus be? While growing up in the 1990s, it seemed that when it came to teaching newly named African Americans about cultural connections to Africa, it was limited to the regions of Egypt, Ghana or Nigeria. Personally, I could count how many American children were there. I would read the label on the black Crayon and I knew that the connotative definition used for my group's self-identity didn't match the denotative definition. This did not make me feel like *somebody* when other ethnicities in my class and around the world did not call themselves colors. If they did it was usually at the influence of U.S. culture.

Thinking to myself, describing the physical and visual representation of my skin would not involve the color *black*. *Black* isn't a noun no matter how many connotative definitions have

been made. The word *black* stems from the Old English word *blac*, which means pale and dark (Donald, 41). On the other hand, when thinking of *African American*, this term denotes a claim of attachment to two landmasses, one of which I've never visited. Thus, some people feel that the term is better suited for people born in America from parents of an African nationality (Nigerian, Ghanaian, Cameroonian).

I argue that we cannot be from the entire continent of Africa or America, as America is comprised of two continents, North and South. As a result, we are left with *Black*, *Negro*, *Colored*. None of these denote a specific geographic location. The affirmation supposedly felt from this term did not reach me. This fact leaves many to quickly throw out any other terms and simply call ourselves American, which is still a misnomer as we are specifically located in the United States on the Northern half of the Americas. So, what do we call people who look like me and who live in the United States? What solutions might be provided for those who feel these terms are inadequate? Malcolm X said:

> If you call yourself 'white,' why should I not call myself 'black'? Because you have taught me that I am a 'Negro'! …[I]f you ask a man his nationality and he says he is German, that means he comes from a nation called Germany. If he says his nationality is French, that means he came from a nation called France. The term he uses to identify himself connects him with a nation, a language, a culture and a flag. Now if he says his nationality is 'Negro' he has told you nothing--except possibly that he is not good enough to be 'American.'...If Frenchmen are of France and Germans are of Germany, where is 'Negroland'? I'll tell you: It's in the mind of the white man! (Kennedy 76)

Instead of feeling like the term *African American* brought me closer to Africanness, I felt further outside. Resentment about the disruption of my history and finding my place in the great drama of world history was limited, seeming miniscule. Where could I get the files of time that would allow me to paint a better picture in my mind about what happened to us?

This process of inquiry never stopped, and I began a journey which led me to view myself and the historical narratives around Black people like I never had before. Every now and

then, I get an urge, a strong desire to look back. I have had this deep desire to somehow make my way back to Daufuskie Island, which my lifeline descends. As it would be, this is my maternal line as my grandmother was born in Beaufort, SC and raised on Daufuskie Island. Thanks to the technological advent of the Internet and YouTube, I can get fixings to quench this call. I am fortunate that I have a family who, in their efforts to preserve our memories of the low country, I can see pictures of aunties and cousins. My relatives have preserved the only schoolhouse in which, my cousin Tanny, Ms. Francis Johnson, the only school teacher on the island for years, whom also taught generations of children have grown up keeping her in their memories. During one particular session of remembrance, I watched the film *Daughters of the Dust* by Julie Dash, released in 1991, two years after being newly named *African American*. Many may remember the film as being the first independent Black film to be released theatrically. However, something stood out to me that I didn't catch the previous times I have viewed the film. There was, I found out, A Muslim man praying facing the rising of the sun. I had seen this film before, but I could not for the life of me remember seeing him. I do not remember hearing his song of praise as he lifts his hands in prayer. I did not remember him. I learned that he was a *Moor*.

***Who are Moors?***

The oldest African American church in North America is First African Baptist Church, located in Savannah Georgia. Built in 1777 by slaves, the balcony pews are etched with what the church claims to be cursive Hebrew writing ("First African Baptist Church in Savannah, GA", 00:00:10-00:00:21). The immediate question is, "How did they (Slaves) know Hebrew? How would they know Arabic?" Answering that question requires researching the history of the particular Africans brought to the Lowcountry of the United States, which is the coastal areas stretching from South Carolina to Florida.

From the onset of colonial powers trafficking captured African's to the Americas, many had been identified as *Moors* or *Blackamoors*. A *Moor* is a noun, a native of North Africa, of a dark complexion (Donald 329). Etymologically, the term *Moor* is a variant of the Latin *Maurus* or the dark skinned people of Mauritania (Partridge 415). It at last becomes synonymous with African Muslims. Consequently, the term *Moor* immediately refers to a specific region, culture and people. Behind the term *Moor* lies the history of the Islamic conquest of Spain in 711 AD and their expulsion during the Spanish Inquisition in 1492 (Sertima 1). Nearly 800 years of history. In American history, Moorish pirates were fought against by the U.S. navy during the Barbary wars of 1801-1815. Unbeknownst to many Black Americans is how this world history connects to their own American history.

The term *Moor* had been so popular at one point that it was commonly used to identify any African or dark-skinned person (Sertima 6-7). Interestingly, the history of the Moors is not taught in many American school curricula. It is an obscure thread in the tapestry of American history as the usage of *Moor* can be found in the state history of South Carolina. In the South Carolina state archives, any researcher can find the published transcript of the South Carolina General Assembly in 1790 where a group of Moors profess their political status.

The petition referenced as "Free Sundry Moors", by Francis, Daniel, Hammond and Samuel on behalf of their wives Fatima, Flora, Sarah, and Clarinda, recounts the history of their capture from Africa. The petition recounts how this group of Moors were made prisoners of war by an opposing African king and a "certain captain Clark had them delivered to him on a promise that they should be redeemed by the Emperor of Moroccan Ambassador then residing in England, in order to have them returned to their own Country". Consequently, they were sold as slaves in South Carolina, eventually being able to purchase their own freedom. This group of

Free Moors demanded, “not be considered subject to a Law of this State (now in force) called the negro law” (Journals of House of Representatives). In order to understand the bold stance of these “Free Moors”, it would be best to research the Barbary Treaties 1786-1816, or the commonly known Treaty of Peace and Friendship 1786. Within this treaty Article 6 states:

> If any Moor shall bring Citizens of the United States or their Effects to His Majesty, the Citizens shall immediately be set at Liberty and the Effects restored, and in like Manner, if any Moor not a Subject of these Dominions shall make Prize of any of the Citizens of America or their Effects and bring them into any of the Ports of His Majesty, they shall be immediately released, as they will then be considered as under His Majesty's Protection. (Treaties and other International Acts)

With that in mind, the research done by Michael A. Gomez, the current Silver Professor of History and Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at New York University, has been the primary source for the history of Muslims in colonial and antebellum America. He has gathered information from “both sides of the Atlantic” that, “provides a reasonably clear picture of the political and cultural milieu out of which American-bound captives emerged”. He assesses the “ethnic and cultural makeup of the African supply zones; the appearance of Muslim names in the ledgers of slave owners and in the runaway slave advertisements in newspapers; reference to Muslim ancestry in interviews with ex-slaves and the descendants of Muslims; stated preferences for certain “types” of Africans by the slaveholding community…” (Gomez 674).

When it comes to *Black* American knowledge of the types of slaves brought from Africa to the Americas, it is doubtful the history of the continent’s Islamization factors into their understanding. One may realize that they will have to teach themselves about the great expansion of Islam into Africa and how Tariq the Moor ushered in eight centuries of Moorish rule in Spain from 711 AD to 1492. Another realization to be had is that many enslaved Africans in America were Muslims. Islam had been in Africa as early as the 9th century, “as a consequence of Berber and Arab commercial activity” (674).

> Some subsaharan African (or 'Sudanese') merchants living in the *Sahel* ('shore' or transition zone between the desert and the savanna) and the savanna began to convert, so that Islam became associated with trade, especially long-distance networks of exchange. In some societies, political rulers also converted to the new religion with varying degrees of fidelity, so that Islam became a vehicle by which alliances between commercial and political elites were forged. (674)

By the 16th century, Colonial Europeans looking to trade goods as well as the transatlantic slave trade made way to much of the coastal areas of north and west Africa. One region heavily frequented for slaves, especially those brought to the Caribbean and low country, were from Senegambia an Islamized territory:

> This is an immense area; if operating in the interior, traffickers in human cargo had several outlets for their trade. They could, for example, sell their captives along the Gambia or Senegal Rivers; they could direct their caravans to other points along the West African coast; or, they could deal their cargoes into the transsaharan slave trade. (675)

Islam, if not its presence had extended as far as Ghana, which is known for possessing the "door of no return".

Zeroing in on the Muslim slave demographic, Gomez's book *Black Crescent: The Experience and Legacy of African Muslims in the Americas* states, "to be sure, the Muslim presence in the American South antedates the arrival of the English (Gomez 144). And to understand how that is, the researcher must remember the Spanish and French historical narratives in American history, while recognizing British-American narratives have obscured the Moorish historical presence. Gomez mentions in his research, *Mandingo, Wolof, Hausa* tribes and that the name "Sambo", the same that was presented in history as a derogatory caricature, was in fact an African-Islamic name (147). The African Muslim presence in hidden in plain sight.

When examining the legal book, *Negro Law of South Carolina* (1848) by chief justice of South Carolina John Belton O'Neall, a shocking piece of information is revealed in chapter one, section four. It states, "The term negro is confined to slave Africans, (the ancient Berbers) and

their descendants. It does not embrace the free inhabitants of Africa, such as the Egyptians, Moors, or the negro Asiatics, such as the Lascars" (5). Immediately suspicious is the legalese and semantic games used to determine who qualifies as a *Negro*. Berbers are Moors, but they were no longer legally recognized as such by the U.S. courts. The title of the chapter is, "The Status of the negro, his Rights and Disabilities". More research must be done to untangle this legal history.

Some may be suspicions of the authority of the text, but it was a law book published in 1848, supplied to and for the South Carolina Supreme Court. Interestingly, Gomez confirms this history, "The May 24, 1775 edition of Savannah's *Georgia Gazette* ran a notice for three missing men, including twenty-two-year-old Sambo, reportedly 'of the Moorish country.' This association with the Moorish country may be a reference to Sambo's Muslim identity than to his actually having hailed from North Africa, but it should be borne in mind that Moors, or Arabo-Berbers from Mauritania and elsewhere in North Africa, were in fact imported into North America as they had been into Spanish-held territories…" (147). Black Americans have gained knowledge of the types of ethnic groups were trafficked to the Americas but should now inquire about the legal ramifications of why Moors, with a term that relates to land, culture and history, was changed.

# CHAPTER 3

## Names Have Meaning

Drawing from several theoretical frameworks such as critical race theory, post colonialism and black feminist theory, along with close readings from Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon*, this thesis offers an view on the mental and spiritual healing needed for Black Americans and gives insight into the "sociolinguistic reality" Black Americans have constructed (Smitherman 118). Barbra Christian argues that the novel *Beloved*, as well as other novels by Toni Morrison, should be read through an African cosmological lens—exposing how Black Americans have had a disruption in their ancestral and spiritual grounding via the middle passage which, in turn, causes a disconnect in the very way they exist. Christian expresses how the African tradition of remembrance must be part and parcel to the current reading of Morrison's texts in order to grasp the nuances that make her work unequivocally African American.

Although Christian discusses the aspect of African cosmology in Morrison's novels and how Black Americans lost the memory of their ancestors, their names and their attributes, this chapter asks the reader to consider the novel *Song of Solomon* as a textual metaphor for the effects of this tremendous loss, which created a dead status or existence. As a reaction to this "deadness", the protagonist, Milkman, goes on a journey. Although the inception of his journey was in the error of greed, it ultimately leads to truth and knowledge of the self. A close reading and analysis of *Song of Solomon* may open a window to show how some people labeled *Black* in America have soothed the wounds of lost knowledge of self to reach a sense of clarity in respect to their ethnic identity. Through the power of research, curiosity, and critical thinking one may come to interrogate the racial labels via multiple rhetorical contexts. The resulting research may unfold historical narratives unheard of before, building a better understanding of history.

Barbra Christian discusses the psychic interruption of the ancestral remembrance of Black Americans and how critical discourse around the novel was missing a major component of Morrison's work within their conversations—African cosmology or ancestral worship. Christian feared that Morrison's novel *Beloved* would be buried underneath critical discourse that never truly got to the root of it being a true African American literary text (Christian 6). *Beloved*, in Christian's view, is a discourse that interrogates how the African belief system has been denigrated in the West, which of course contains the theme of memory, having been previously discussed through the theories of psychoanalysis and Marxism (7). For Christian however, these theories did not and could not express what she saw as African cosmology within Morrison's work. In fact, for African ancestral worship to work, it entirely depends on the community's efforts to remember. For Christian, *Beloved* explores the deeper territory of African Americans. And how are African Americans recovering from this monumental collective psychic rupture (7)? This question could only be fully addressed by an intimacy, or a direct experience that hadn't been addressed during the time Christian was writing.

Christian set out to answer what she saw in Morrison's texts, having her reading of the novel informed by her Caribbean culture's practice of ancestral veneration. Though Barbara Christian's article discusses the particular elements in *Beloved* that exhibit the connection to African cosmology, the particular angle of this thesis revolves around the aspect of memory, and how the ancestors "...do not disappear as long as someone remembers them, their name, their character. Mbiti states: 'So long as the living dead is thus remembered, he is in the state of personal immortality" (Christian 11). For the purpose of analyzing *Song of Solomon* and the inquiry of racial labels, it is suggested that the limited awareness of certain histories of the African diaspora in the Americas and how they relate to world history prior to 1619, perhaps,

keeps Black Americans in a perpetual state of amnesia. And, because of these complications, many Black Americans cannot even imagine, remember or inquire about their ancestry in context with world history. Therefore, their ancestors are done a disservice. This idea will be developed more in depth in a later portion of this thesis.

As seen in Chapter two, the psychic rupture for Black Americans has caused the re-usage of terms/labels in an effort to heal the lost memory of what they were once called. This chapter discusses the wandering and search for a group racial label in connection to the novel *Song of Solomon* as a metaphor for being in a state of the "wilderness", a theme that has been extracted from the novel. Additionally, with the theme of the "wilderness", a close reading of particular scenes and character analysis is offered to exemplify how the wilderness is directly connected, in my opinion, to the psychic rupture from Black American ancestral knowledge.

When reading the novel *Song of Solomon,* one may pick up on the themes of natural versus unnatural when analyzing characters Pilate, Milkman and Macon Dead Jr. These are all characters that have journeyed to gain some type of knowledge of self, whether it be seen in the contrastingly different motivations behind the lifestyles of Pilate and Macon Dead Jr., or the odyssey of Milkman, which evolves into a journey of identity and the unearthing of family history, although his initial motive was material gain. These characters all have made an effort to transmute their familial dysfunction into clarity, which will be read as flight—knowledge of self and what makes living worthy of struggle.

However, the reading of flight used in this study is not centered on the folkloric myth of flying Africans as others have written about. The interpretation of the last sentence of the novel can be viewed differently. "For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it" (Morrison 337). Inspiration is taken from the etymology of words such as

"spirit"; it having the connotation of "the breath of life, to breathe" in metaphysical circles. In other words, what is ridden is a state of mind and consciousness as breathing and meditation, in many spiritual traditions, acts as a bridge from the physical to the divine. Some characters were more successful than others at what is read as flight, such as Pilate and Milkman, as the text explicitly tells the audience, and that is, to me, because of the condition of their inward reality (Morrison 336-337).

Flight in this context then is the actualization of knowledge of self and how it is the director of life. It is what we allow and disallow ourselves in relation to what we know. It is the old battle of natural versus unnatural, or material versus immaterial. Simply, flight is the consciousness, or knowledge, of what is good for a human being versus the ignorance of what is detrimental. Thus, the tension of the novel can be placed within these boundaries in order to highlight how Morrison engaged the audience in these themes and motifs as it relates directly to the Black American experience of duality, or binary opposition in postcolonial theory.

**Character Analysis*: Macon***

*Song of Solomon* has diametrically opposing characters, the siblings and head of the novel's two households, Pilate Dead and Macon Dead Jr. Macon Dead Jr. is a metaphor for the Black American who has chosen to emulate and adopt values spawned from foreign European cultures. Macon Dead, Jr. has internalized Eurocentric values that harbor literal and metaphorical death and this death hovers over all of the land. It was a governmental agency responsible for the erasure of the Dead family's name, and it is the internalization of the "American Dream" and its notions of success that Macon Dead adheres to. So here the literal is the name Dead and the metaphoric is the internal reality Macon Dead possesses. It is also posited that the city is a

metaphor for the wilderness as it is an unnatural place in relation to the origins of the characters Pilate and Macon.

Macon has chased the semblance of success through capitalistic America, only to have dissatisfaction and a strange tension with his family. Not only does he have this strangeness, he is also cold and as "dead" as his surname. Macon Dead Jr. works as a landlord who is characterized as being unforgiving and unsympathetic to his tenants as well as his family. The very presence of Macon Dead disrupts whatever calm is in the atmosphere:

> Solid, rumbling, likely to erupt without prior notice, Macon kept each member of his family awkward with fear. His hatred of his wife glittered and sparked in every word he spoke to her. The disappointment he felt in his daughters sifted down on them like ash, dulling their buttery complexions and choking the lilt out of what should have been girlish voices. Under the frozen heat of his glances they tripped over doorsills and dropped the salt cellar into the yolks of their poached eggs. The way he mangled their grace, wit, and self-esteem was the single excitement of their days. Without the tension and drama he ignited, they might not have known what to do with themselves (11).

The very weight of Macon's presence is a smoldering wave of destruction as his entire household is burdened by his overall aura. His children are paralyzed, or rather arrested, by the fear of their father. Consequently, the burdening presence that emanates from Macon is his own internal turmoil. In fact, he actually does not know how to exist without his pain and he objectifies every member of his family for their value is only found in what they are able to accomplish. They are simply material goods in his material world.

His wife, Ruth, is only attractive for animating materiality, "For the nourishment of his outrage he depended on the memory of her underwear; those round, innocent corset eyes now lost to him forever" (17). Their intimacy exists in a stark silence and its cessation in quickened climax (16). Ruth is not admired for the beauty of her body because she carries a memory of disgust within the mind of her husband, which stems from her obsessive need to be wanted. This need manifests in ways that blur the lines of intimacy and incest, at least in Macon's opinion

(23). It is not her beauty that Macon finds tantalizing; it is her delicate, soft white underwear she animates and represents Macon's deep desire turned fetish for normalcy, purity and material success. This perspective is not to downplay the intricacies of Ruth and her story, but her characterization is not the focal point. Macon knows that Ruth is an oddity, yet he maintains their union for the status she brings, and he perpetually places her in a state of punishment. So, it seems that she is a tool used for acquiring his material success in exchange for both their internal turmoil. It cannot be avoided that performing his sexual obligation removes Ruth as a person, leaving her to remain a commodity. Their union is simply an act of commerce. Even further, from Ruth's perspective, his ambition may have killed her father.

Other examples of this cold business mindedness is seen with Mrs. Bains, a tenant who sought leniency from Macon, as she could not afford to make current her past due rent because of the strained responsibility of raising her grandchildren. She tells her grandchildren, after being denied any sympathy from Macon, these words of wisdom, "A nigger in business is a terrible thing to see…" (Morrison 22). The reader may reason that Macon should be more reasonable and sympathetic towards his tenants, understanding their conditions. He is not an owner of any ideal properties, although he desires to be; yet he finds solace in being an "owner", gaining calmness from stroking the master keys of his properties (17). Macon Jr. even goes as far as to suggest to his son, Milkman, that he should, "...own things. And let the things you own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too" (55). An example of this ownership mentality can also be seen when Macon goes to retrieve his rent from a suicidal tenant, Porter. As Porter threatens to shoot himself, Macon says, "'Put that thing down and throw me my goddam money!' Macon's voice cut through the women's fun. 'Float those dollars down here, nigger, then blow yourself up!'" (25). Porter then aims his gun at Macon proclaiming that he is one that really needs killing

(26). What is seen through Macon is that he has co-opted the behavior of oppressive capitalism, or Eurocentric values, as being the only way to be a successful "Black" man. This way of thinking has allowed him to disregard life as sacred and he is certainly known by others in his community to be quite horrible.

However, juxtaposing a quote highlighting the inner dialogue of Macon Jr. with an earlier mode of calmness when stroking his keys, we see Milkman in service to his father. Having his son work for him created an emotional response, cuing the audience into knowing that Macon has an inner conflict. The emotion is that he, Macon, no longer felt like a peddler, as he was not the one walking around the community collecting rent (63). Nonetheless, he is the very same peddler he purports not to be. Perhaps this is Morrison's way of highlighting the neurosis created in the African American middle class as some succumb and perpetuate the same ills of capitalism that have led to current crises like pollution and gentrification for their bottom line. The American robber baron has always seemed to strive for the silver lining even at the expense of his or her own community.

***Pilate***

The question remains, why did Macon choose this path of living compared to that of his sister Pilate? The disdain Pilate receives from her brother Macon stems from a similar objectification to that of his wife Ruth. Macon's treatment of Pilate exposes the embedded Eurocentric values that Macon has adopted; yet they are the same values he himself cannot fulfill. Pilate exemplifies the Black American who resists foreign values in an effort to maintain her own identity while existing in a world of conformity. She maintains her own narrative despite the guise of the outside world. She lives in a shanty house, refusing to pay for electricity and gas (Morrison 27). She is literally living "off the grid" in all her naturalness. She does not

care about the particulars of materiality, even the likes of shoes. If it doesn't feel right, Pilate sticks to what she knows and remembers.

Macon Jr. warns Milkman that anything that he learns from his aunt Pilate is of no benefit to him in this life, perhaps the next, but the more important thing is the success to be had in this physical world (Morrison 55). It is clear that Macon Dead Jr. has chosen that his external existence is his only reality, keying the audience into viewing Pilate as a metaphor for otherworldliness as she was deemed a product of unnatural birth. However, once again Macon Dead's façade is interrupted in a scene where he purposefully walks by Pilate's house. Here we get one of the first glimpses of his sister's lifestyle. What is interesting about this scene is that Macon is essentially drawn to his sister's home. In the dark of night, he sits by her basement window listening to his nieces and sister sing:

> Surrendering to the sound, Macon moved closer. He wanted no conversation, no witness, only to listen and perhaps see the three of them, the source of that music that made him think of fields and wild turkey and calico…Near the window, hidden by the dark, he felt the irritability of the day drain from him and relished the effortless beauty of the women singing in the candlelight(29).

The narrator allows the audience to view Macon in a much softer light than has been seen in the earlier portions of the novel. So, it is a striking contrast that it is within the cover of darkness that Macon allows his affection for his sister to surface. He finds solace in their voices and he is made natural again if only for a moment. Further in this scene it is written, "As Macon felt himself softening under the weight of memory and music, the song died down. The air was quiet and yet Macon Dead could not leave. He liked looking at them freely this way. They didn't move." (30).

It is the "weight of memory" of his childhood and home that unlock his heart. It is not that Macon is completely dead inside; it is that he has chosen to live within Eurocentric

American society as an absolute, which had been mistranslated as loving the things his father loved, "He loved these things to excess because he loved his father to excess. Owning, building, acquiring--that was his life, his future, his present, and all the history he knew. That he distorted life, bent it, for the sake of gain, was a measure of his loss at his father's death" (300). Sadly, it is because he believes Pilate took gold from a man in a cave that he withholds himself to be natural with his sister.

The double consciousness within Macon Dead disallows him to be natural or the kind of natural of his origins. This two-ness is visible in chapter two after the narrator recounts brief family history and the memory of Milkman's birth. Focusing on Pilate's exterior Macon describes what particular things about Pilate he finds an embarrassment,

> Why can't you dress like a woman?' He was standing by the stove. 'What's that sailor's cap doing on your head? Don't you have stockings? What are you trying to make me look like in this town?' He trembled with the thought of the white men in the bank—the men who helped him buy and mortgage houses…(20).

In the gaze of others, specifically those of white men, Macon cannot bear the embarrassment being attached to someone he positions as "abnormal". He trembles at the very thought, evoking the anxiety one faces when thinking about how others judge from superficial means. However, the underlying issue for the interrogation of Pilate's aesthetic is that she does not care to play the same social cards as Macon. We see that he has objectified Pilate, disavowing her from her womanhood simply because of her dress. He does not see Pilate as an individual, but as an appendage that cannot expose him as being "lesser" than. Her lifestyle and logic about the world are inherently something he cannot possess. She is natural and cannot be bound or understood by the unnatural thought process he possesses. This stems from Macon's need for security and predictability in a world that demands the assimilation of African Americans. Macon has chosen

to assimilate to European society, climbing up the social ladder of the elite African American community via Ruth as a means to mirror the security and freedom he desires. Pilate's lifestyle is not predicated on the outside world, or what others outside of herself think. She is charged to walk according to an internal compass.

***Milkman***

However, it is Milkman who defies his father's request to disassociate himself with his aunt. Milkman has a connection with his peculiar Aunt Pilate who teaches him how to fly. And since childhood, he has wanted to fly after witnessing Mr. Smith, the man with the blue silk wings. Milkman was disappointed to learn that he could not fly, as his only definition of flight existed according to physicality. It was through Milkman's association with his aunt that his inner world blossomed with knowledge of self. Dr. Sima Farshid of the Islamic Azad University says about Milkman that, "the second part [of the novel] recounts the story of his quest that begins with his search for material legacy but conveniently turns into a genealogical quest into the heart of the mysterious South and brings about a blissful discovery for him" (Farshid 331). Milkman realizes that materiality isn't enough for him and allows himself to venture into unknown territory. So, the quest begins to answer how a person can be free in such a limited existence.

**A Different Kind of Flight**

As much as the theme of flight has been discussed in many readings of the novel *Song of Solomon*, for the purposes of this chapter's argument, flight is two-fold. On one level flight could be associated with escape, but what if flight is looked at as flying freely inwardly? Pilate's name is an obvious allusion to Pontius Pilate of the Bible, and the novel's title is also obviously connected to the biblical book of Solomon. Perhaps we can examine Pilate as the homonym of

*Pilot* as assumed by her father at birth (Morrison 19). Pilate of the Bible will always be the villain who is partly responsible for killing Jesus, so there is a guiltiness associated with it. However, *Pilot* is someone who has control of a vessel and knows how to navigate.

Knowing Morrison is purposeful, it is plausible she considered various connotations that would be evoked by her character's name. Morrison goes as far as to even describe Pilate wearing a sailor's cap and is knowledgeable of scripture, which signifies her possible awareness of her names. Viewing Pilate as a boat pilot and a flying person, we must examine the accounts of her life that show her as a person of flight and a navigator. She, unfortunately, is isolated because of her physical difference and this isolation may be the symbolism that needs to be examined to understand her characterization. She was self-created, self-born as is believed about those who are born without a navel. Pilate recounts the day she learned that not having a navel was something wrong, as the root doctor told her, "...it's for people who were born natural" (Morrison 143).

Interestingly, it was through nature that Pilate taught herself the anatomy of the human body. She saw navels, compared to her body, as another marker of difference between men and women. Morrison writes Pilate's view of the navel as being a, "...little corkscrew thing right in the middle, the little piece of skin that looked like it was made for water to drain down into, like the little whirlpools along the edges of a creek" (143). Here Pilate deduces that navels correlate with some type of force because it is something she's observed in nature. What comes to mind is the energy system of chakras found in Buddhism and Hinduism. In this belief system, the solar plexus is one energy center located in the region of the navel. The solar plexus is behind the saying "follow your gut" as some believe it to be the second brain. It is known scientifically that the area of the belly is where another nerve center is located, and other than the brain, is

associated as the center for willpower and self-control. Here is Pilate, a person without a drain and a person known for her equilibrium. It is perhaps because of her physical difference that she was able to move away from societal pressures and expectations.

In chapter five of the novel *Song of Solomon*, we learn the great majority of Pilate's life experience as she details being orphaned, wandering around the country hoping to find family in Virginia. She becomes nomadic, collecting rocks in every state she stepped foot in. However, she compromises with people by hiding her belly. The concealment of her truth made her able to find and hold onto intimacy on an island community off the coast of Virginia. During her time there Pilate has a daughter, Reba. Consequently, Pilate begins to reflect on her navel and the stigma it brought, "It isolated her. Already without family, she was further isolated from her people, for, except for the relative bliss on the island, every other resource was denied her: partnership in marriage, confessional friendship, and communal religion." (Morrison 148).

An earlier reflection that men would sleep with anything, "...although men fucked armless women, one-legged women, hunchbacks and blind women, drunken women, razor-toting women, midgets, small children, convicts, boys, sheep, dogs, goats, liver, each other…", Pilate realizes that the issue of her navel is not with her, but with other people (148). It is acknowledged through the omniscient narrator that the spectacle of her navel was not as serious as it was made to be as, "it needed intimacy, gossip, and the time it took for curiosity to become drama" (149). It is superstition and ignorance around her physical appearance that essentially enables her to navigate her life. This lack of external autonomy whether autonomy inward or outward brings the novel to the threshold of the "wilderness", a thing and place of unrest.

***The Wilderness***

In an environmental studies anthology entitled *Symbolic Landscape*s, edited by Gary Backhaus and John Murungi, the chapter titled, "Wilderness as *Axis Mundi*: Spiritual Journeys on the Appalachian Trail" the theme of the wilderness is approached as a sojourn of spiritual transformation:

> Early Christian Monastics retreated to the wilderness to solve the problem of communication. Rather than becoming entangled in a world of corruption, an interruption of communion, they followed the example of Jesus and sought a place where they could communicate without interruption. In this case the symbolism of the land of milk and honey relates to communion and shifts from arable landscape to wilderness, which has become the place where clear communication takes place between human beings and the divine (Redick 75).

The "pilgrim is in a strange and forbidding place where sustenance for the lived-body is thin. Just as the resources for sustaining the lived-body are not enough in the wilderness, the spirit looks to find peace in an analogous place, a place of uninterrupted communion" (75). It is a communication problem in the inner world that inhibits a person to smoothly transition through the states of the wilderness. It is also however, the wilderness in which we can hear our inner voices clearly. Perhaps, it is this inner dialogue that is divine communication.

Again, it is in chapter five of *Song of Solomon*, we see Pilate arrive at the wilderness where she could have chosen a path for her life that many have traveled before. It is the path of those who do not possess the psychological control of their lower self or desire. Ruth recognizes the wilderness in Hagar as she is also in the same state when she confronts her for the attempts to kill her only son Milkman. Ruth describes the wilderness as being a part of her community:

> That here was the wilderness of Southside. Not the poverty or dirt or noise, not just extreme unregulated passion where even love found its way with an ice pick, but the absence of control. Here one lived knowing that at any time, anybody might do anything. Not wilderness where there was system, or the logic of lions, trees, toads, and birds, but wild wilderness where there was none (Morrison 138).

Prior to the beginning of this scene, Ruth establishes the inner communication needed to assess herself and family. Her "passions were narrow but deep. Long deprived of sex, long dependent on self-manipulation, she saw her son's imminent death as the annihilation of the last occasion she had been made love to" (134). Ruth has chosen to externalize her needs, placing the burden on Milkman to bring her the intimacy she craves. Consequently, learning that her intimacy had been threatened by the likes of Hagar, her anger consumed her. However, the internal and divine communication has started to peak as Ruth expresses her need to speak with Pilate because she could depend on her "honesty and equilibrium" (135). What makes the barren path of the wilderness dangerous is that the person going through the sojourn has lost autonomy of the self. The person is "an impulse, a cell…" to be manipulated by external stimuli (Morrison 137). There is no critical understanding of their behavior and how it it destructive. Thus, it is the ebbing and flow of emotions that become destructive to host and victim.

It is through Pilate's recounting her life story that we see a character choose not barrenness, but flight. Pilate details her inner world at the threshold of the wilderness:

> Although she was hampered by huge ignorances, but not in any way unintelligent, when she realized what her situation in the world was and would probably always be she threw away every assumption she had learned and began at zero. First off, she cut her hair. That was one thing she didn't want to think about anymore. Then she tackled the problem of trying to decide how she wanted to live and what was valuable to her. When am I happy and when am I sad and what is the difference? What do I need to know to stay alive? What is true in the world? Her mind traveled crooked streets and aimless goat paths, arriving sometimes as profundity, other times at the revelations of a three-year-old. Throughout this fresh, if common, pursuit of knowledge, one conviction crowned her efforts: since death held no terrors for her (she spoke often to the dead), she knew there was nothing to fear (Morrison 149).

In this passage, before the reader's eyes, one learns the process Pilate took to shed herself of societal norms and preconceived notions about who and what she should be. Pilate comes to the realization that her differences will always attract assumptions and speculation that have real repercussions for her lived life. Her destiny will always be tied to her body, let alone her external

reality, unless she takes hold of herself as much as she can. For example, the omniscient narrator explains that the loss of intimacy and isolation navigated Pilate to the threshold of the wilderness as she noticed herself taking offense to her treatment by members of her community. This annoyance could have resulted in another outcome such as overwhelming anger and resentment, but she arrives in the wilderness and performs the exercises needed for a person to pass through it as unscathed as possible. So, she starts at zero, acknowledging that the knowledge she has may not be truly her own and the beliefs people have about her are not their own either. She wants to think for herself based on her own intelligence.

Her first step to self-ownership was to cut her hair, an obvious symbol of feminine beauty. Cutting her hair eradicates the burden of keeping the hair presentable to people who might otherwise care less. Otherwise, it is a new opportunity to find beauty in new forms. This first step of aesthetic ownership is often an enormous gatekeeper for internal freedom. This dynamic can be seen in many young people struggling to answer the same questions Pilate presented herself: How do I want to live? What are my values? What do I want?

Pilate begins to evaluate the subtleties of her inner life, taking responsibility of her inward wellbeing. More importantly, Pilate also asks, “what is true in the world?”. These are questions that do not get ironed out in a few days. These are internal questions that have to be constantly revisited and adjusted. It is the ability to present oneself with self-reflexive questions along with the capacity to be honest that is vital. Pilate’s “...mind traveled crooked streets and aimless goat paths, arriving sometimes at profundity, other times at the revelations of a three-year-old. Throughout this fresh, if common, pursuit of knowledge, one conviction crowned her efforts: “since death held no terrors for her (she spoke often to the dead), she knew there was nothing to fear” (149).

Facing her wilderness made Pilate resilient and able to nurture knowledge she may not have otherwise obtained if she did not have such a dynamic internal communion. She becomes fearless as she knows now how to live for herself. It is this internal dialogue and ability to take the reigns of one's own life, despite the circumstances, that creates flight. Reflecting on the myth of the flying African still has similar motivations for flight, freedom. Pilate's flight within the context presented also shows the choice between being natural and artificial. Pilate could have chosen to continue to hide her belly for the sake of keeping intimate relationships and community. However, this would not be natural for her.

*The Sojourn*

In the case of Milkman, his flight was of course initiated by his aunt Pilate, being exposed to her unconventional way of life and thinking. Reviewing certain portions of the text, it is seen that the narrator again notifies the audience that the character Milkman was able to start a similar inner-self-reflexive dialogue. Milkman realizes, after being commissioned by his father to steal back the gold assumed to be in Pilate's possession, he must assess his life:

> Deep down in that pocket where his heart hid, he felt used. Somehow everybody was using him for something or as something. Working out some scheme of their own on him, making him the subject of their dreams of wealth, or love, or martyrdom. Everything they did seemed to be about him, yet nothing he wanted was part of it (Morrison 165).

This study argues that Milkman is the metaphor for the Black American transmuting into the *Moor* who sojourns to reclaim lost family history. This is an arduous journey that requires self-evaluations about the kind of values and beliefs that are held and how oppressive forces have influenced realities. When one is able to read between the lines of their life events to connect what may not always be obvious, they can navigate and determine for themselves what is truly valuable.

The identity of Black Americans has gone to and fro, ever on a quest for self-determination. However, when brought to the threshold of the wilderness, many members of the Black community are faced with asking some of the same questions as the character Milkman.

Milkman has to thoroughly interrogate what is expected of him from society and his family. He was told by his father to own things and people too, in other words material success is the only success. From the progression of Milkman's arc, the reader picks up hints that he desires autonomy as he wanted "to beat a path away from his parents past" having analyzed their individual stories and life choices (Morrison 180). In the eighth chapter of the novel there are clear examples of Milkman's self-reflexive inner dialogue centered on this urge. He takes a good look in the mirror, owning his own faults within several relationships.

Ultimately, while Milkman appears to be navigating through the threshold of the wilderness, he has also begun a journey for gold that changes orientation toward looking for his family history. He is in a forced isolation as he ventures into new territory. Milkman, a young man venturing alone for the first time rides the Greyhound after his flight lands at the Pittsburgh airport to Danville, Pennsylvania (226). As he rides, he starts paying attention to certain details he never noticed before:

> Some places had lots of trees, some did not; some fields were green, some were not, and the hills in the distance were like the hills in every distance. Then he watched signs--the names of towns that lay twenty-two miles ahead, even seventeen miles to the east, five miles to the northeast. And the names of junctions, counties, crossings, bridges, stations, tunnels, mountains, rivers, creeks, landings, parks, and lookout points (226).

It is seen throughout part two of the novel how Milkman begins to pay close attention to particular details such as the geography and terrain, like his aunt Pilate who carried a geography book. He looks at names and understands that these details signify lived experiences and expressions. He also surrenders and acknowledges the peace of mind that comes to him on this journey as he gained the same feelings he had at Pilate's house when he was in Shalimar and

Danville looking for gold, and ultimately family history. He says to himself that, “Ever since Danville, his interest in his own people, not just the ones he met, had been growing” (293). He started to see the reflection of his father and aunt in the people located in a place he would have known. However, the threat for Milkman became Guitar as Guitar’s focus was on the wealth to be obtained by materiality. Milkman reflects the inward resolve Pilate also obtained through her wilderness sojourn, “I can’t let him direct and determine what I do, where I go or when. If I do that now I’ll do it all my life and he’ll run me off the earth” (294).

Milkman’s genealogical journey can be tied to the current state of Blacks in scenes within chapters twelve and fifteen. It can be noticed that when Milkman had a moment of inner reflexive dialogue, expressing his life’s dysfunction, he is presented more information about his family--a gift. He, in chapter 12, listens to the children singing and realizes that “everybody in this town is named Solomon…” (302). This description is similar to how the research process may feel to Black Americans. The process can be filled with learning negative history that doesn’t truly edify the self. However, this particular journey in history can lead to paths rarely discussed or heard. Such can be said about the history and term *Moor*. It is a term that holds weight in world history, tying personal and American histories closer together. But, to gather those connections requires a search that many Black Americans have not done. Milkman however shows how we should approach this journey.

Milkman becomes curious as to why everyone in Shalimar is named Solomon and begins to listen to the children singing the song *Sugarman* in order to decode its contents. He sits, listens, memorizes and meditates on the song and the names they say. What should be observed from this scene is the function of Milkman as the decoder of a historical text. He, at this point in

the novel, realizes that the song contains names that have been morphed through time, hidden behind mispronunciations:

> He sat up and waited for the children to begin the verse again. 'Come booba yalle, come booba tambee," it sounded like, and didn't make sense. But another line--'Black lady fell down on the ground'--was clear enough. There was another string of nonsense words, then 'Threw her body all around.' Now the child in the center began whirling, spinning to lyrics sung in a different, faster tempo: 'Solomon 'n' Reiner Belali Shalut… (302).

Curiously, looking at the lyrics to the song, Morrison uses Yoruba words juxtaposed with Muslim names and objects. She purposefully places another aspect of the African diaspora in the view of the reader, using the names Belali, Medina, Muhammet and the word "Saraka cake", which refers to a food eaten during the Islamic month of Ramadan (Gomez 157).

The late professor of English at East Carolina Univesrity Gay Wilentz, however believed that,

> "….nothing in the novel suggests that the family's ancestry is connected to Muslims, and Cartwright's only evidence is that he relates the novel's Flying African theme to one story of a "Fulbe Muslim," Flying African, in the oral narratives taken from the work Drums and Shadows (87). In fact, there is much more evidence in the novel to argue a case for (1) coastal Ghana and the Akan, since Pilate's home evokes the aroma of a marketplace in Accra; (2) the Yoruba, since they are named in the words of the song the children sing; and (3) the Igbos, since the majority of stories of Flying Africans tend to include this Nigerian ethnic group. Nevertheless, I am not making these suggestions to privilege a different ethnic group; rather, there is much evidence to support the concept that Wolof and Mande groups are more closely linked to the other coregional West African societies than they are to Islamic Arabic societies (Wilentz 645).

Whether from a lack of knowledge or a willful denial, the very groups Wilentz uses to argue for the lack of an Islamic presence in Morrison's novel are the same tribes that prove the Islamic presence in the Americas, specifically the Wolof. This fact is discussed in the book *The Black Crescent* by Michael Gomez, in which we learn of the same Saraka cake mentioned in the "*Sugarman"* song is material anthropological evidence that Morrison was indeed knowledgeable and purposeful in adding both an African and Islamic presence in the text. Wilentz, when writing

his article “What is Africa to Me?” may not have been fully aware and out of place to speak definitively about what Morrison meant.

Also unknown to critics like Wilentz is the knowledge on just how purposeful Morrison was in her writing. In a lecture titled, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature”, Morrison describes the very methodology she undertook to construct not just a chapter’s opening, but every sentence of her novels. Morrison on writing the opening to her first novel, *The Bluest Eye,*

> The problem presented itself this way: to fashion a door. Instead of having the text open wide the moment the cover is opened (or, as in The Bluest Eye, to have the book stand exposed, before the cover is even touched, much less opened, by placing the complete ‘plot’ on the first page--and finally on the cover of the first edition), here I was to posit a door, turn its knob and beckon for some four or five pages. I had determined not to mention any characters in those pages, there would be no people in the lobby… (Morrison 151).

Here we see the methodical thinking of Morrison in making every scene and character placement meaningful. Everything has its purpose to how she wanted her stories to unfold. So it is faulty to say that the names used in the *Sugarman* song have no careful placement and purpose. Morrison uses the names *Belali*, *Medina*, *Muhammet* with intent. In Morrison’s own words, it took her three months to write four pages in *Sula* (Morrison 152). One must ask why there is an effort to downplay the Islamic connection to Black American history and literature.

## Chapter 4

## Concluding Connections

There are several aspects in the character Milkman, as well as his journey, that should be viewed as directives. First and foremost, Milkman acknowledged his inner curiosity to learn more about his family history, which led him to another road of self-discovery. From this journey of discovery, one finds an inner solace and confidence to face the world. So too does the Black American need to examine the histories of their ancestors in various contexts, discovering narratives that have been overlooked and overwhelmed by mainstream conceptions. And upon examination, placing the ancestors in multiple world histories could expand a sense of value beyond the fetters of slavery.

Morrison speaks of her novel *Beloved* as a prayer, a memorial, "a fixing ceremony for those who did not survive the Middle Passage" (Christian, 11). Consequently, the author of this thesis bids the reader to look at *Song of Solomon* as an arrow pointing to a path that requires Black Americans to go on a treasure hunt--A journey of the self. Lost are many of the memories of the ancestors, their names and attributes, but there are always remnants. And recognize that the performance of their current identity, often emulating the values Western culture has gotten Black Americans material progress, but has also left many dead in an ontological sense.

Macon Dead, the father of Milkman in *Song of Solomon* has chased the semblance of success through Western values only to have dissatisfaction and dysfunction within his family. His warped values allowed him to advise his son to own things and possibly people too (Morrison 55). However, the reader should meditate on the details of when Milkman gets to Shalimar. He hears children chanting a song filled with names, like Belali and Solomon. He stops to listen and sets out to decode its context and content. He sits and listens. He listens and

decodes. He writes down and meditates on the song (Morrison, 302). He studies and journeys to learn more about his history. Black Americans must be bold enough to listen to the many songs of the many life experiences had by the African diaspora in the Americas. Then they must arrange the tunes to their own specifications. Desire to have as many notes as possible.

Now, when it comes to singing that song or absorbing new information into the *Black* identity, be aware of those who may not recognize the value of certain narratives. They are the Guitar to Milkman, full of assumptions and lacking information. Specifically, this thesis is partly a response to a few academics who seem to have an issue with Black Americans learning about Moors. It is a response to a professor who told a colleague who wrote a paper about the Moorish influence in Europe that his information was wrong, failing his paper. It is a response to a professor at Tennessee State University who advised a student against writing about Moors because it was a "touchy" subject. Black history is world history and it must be taught as such beyond slavery. Examining this resistance is necessary as it may shine a light on why Moors are not in the common knowledge of Black Americans. It is perhaps the historical knowledge of the legal discourse that comes with the term *Moor* in American history.

With the understanding that the term *Moor* is attached the legal history of the United States of America, Black Americans should pay more attention to not only the social implications of their group identity, but also pay closer attention to the political history and weight carried by terms such as *Negro*, *Black*, and *Colored*. Perhaps, the social turmoil currently experienced in the Black community with the Police and judicial system is directly perpetuated with legal interpretations from terms the *Black* community accepts, but have no standing at law.

This study bids Black Americans to view their history socially and legally with such objectivity to analyze the external forces that have created their current political status. With

such objectivity, they can view the mishaps and understand whether or not what is used to identify themselves actually evokes clarity in legal and social discourse.

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