《東海大學文學院學報》
第41卷 頁171-198
東海大學文學院 2000年7月

Myth and Ethnic Identity in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

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Abstract

Myths, folktales, storytelling have been widely deployed in Toni Morrison's novel to highlight the specificity of African-American cultures. Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, while portraying her male protagonist's search for identity, presents the residual of African culture in diaspora (Wilentz xxix) . However, through the re-articulation of ethnic past and reenvisioning of the mythical traditions of African-American culture, Morrison refrains from romanticizing the past. This paper will focus on Morrison's *Song of Solomon* to illustrate, on the one hand, the diasporic aspect of ethnic writing, and to demonstrate the problematics of the essentialist construction of fixed, pure identity. It intends to show that for new generation of urban middle-class African-Americans, the search for cultural legacy is possibly, as Hall indicates, "mediated and transformed by memory, fantasy, and desire" (30) . What have been discovered from this search is not a affirmation of a pure African culture or a fixed ethnic identity, but a realization that there is the fusion of Native -American, African-American and Euro-American cultures and mixed lineage in African-American cultures.

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Key words: myth, ethnic identity, diaspora, search for cultural and ancestral legacy

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> Some of those Africans they brought over here as slaves could fly. A lot of them flew back to Africa. The one around here who did was this same Solomon, or Shalimar…… He has a slew of children,all over the place. You may have noticed that everybody around here claims kin to him.
> ---Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* 322.

Gay Wilentz, in her *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora* (1992), observes that "in presenting the dialectics of residual African-based culture and constantly emerging African-American society, authors Walker, Morrison, and Marshall (re) define their culture in broad diasporal strokes, uncovering aspects of their communal heritage veiled by hegemonic dominant discourse" (xxix). Wilentz's observation on Morrison is well put because like Alice Walker and Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison is also concerned with the diasporic African culture in American society. Her background as a wife of a Jamaican architect perhaps influences her outlook on the Africans in disapora(Coser 3), but it is, as Morrison herself puts it, her imagination and perception that inspire her to reflect on the connection between African and African-American cultures. ❶ In sequences of novels, Morrison not only reveals her profund thoughts on

❶See "Interview with Christina Davis" (1986) in *Conversation with Toni Morrison*, ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1994) 225.

the aftermath of slavery legacy, but manages to show the residue of African culture in the delineation of African-American communities.

As an African-American writer, Morrison, on the surface, seems to be concerned more about the racial relations between African Americans and the mainstream society than her connection with Africa, since she never forgets to remind the mainstream of the presence and contribution of African-Americans in American culture, society and history. Her efforts to enhance the visibility of African-Americans in the "racialized" American society are clearly shown in her critical essays collected in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*(1992), Where she problematizes the category of whiteness/blackness in American literary history and imagination. ❷ At the heart of Morrison's critique is her deep uneasiness for the demarcation or segregation of black/white as related to absence/presence. To Morrison, race really implies or entails some "unspeakble things unspoken." Like other African-American critics and writers--Ralph ellison, W.E.B. Du Bois, for instance-- Morrison yearns to arouse people's attention to the shaping effects of Black pressence in American heritage (Wonham 1-3). For all of this, Morrison's attempt to reconnect Africa and her people in diaspora is by no means less zealous than Marhsall's. ❸ The point is she is not so simple-minded as to believe that an essentialist or transcendental Africa exists for Balck Americans to identify with. As she told Christina Davis in an interview:

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❷Morrison has ever written, "It has occurred to me that the very manner by which American literature distinguishes itself as a coherent entity exists because of this unsettled and unsettling population [African and African Americans]. Just as the formation of the nation necessitated coded language and purposeful restriction to deal with the racial disingenuousness and moral frailty at its heart, so too did the literature, whose founding characteristics extend into the twentieth century, reproduce the necessity for codes and restriction. Through significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuance conflicts, through the way writers peopled their work with the signs and bodies of this presence--one can see that a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness." See Valerie Smith, "Introduction," *New essays on Song of Solomon*ed, Valerie Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995) 5.

❸The diasporic character of Paule Marshall's novel is well acknowledged. See Abnea P.A.Busia, "What Is Your Nations?" *Changing Our Own Words*ed., Cheryl A. Wall(New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1989): 196-211.

> You know, it was easy for Black Africans, Afro-Americans -- some of them -- to think about Africa almost the way the conquistadors thought about it, or as one big continent full of everybody in their neighborhood, instead of very distinct, very different, very specific, very widely divergent people and what connected them perhaps was their skins, but not really that. So that the enormous differences are more interesting to me than the similarities because it's too easy to get into the trap of the monolithic black person, you know, the classic, 'uni' person. (229, italics original)

Morrison's insightful remark about the diversities of African people and cultures reveals her recognition of complicated issues involved when we talk about linkages and divergence between African mother culture and African American diaspora culture. Hence she is able to enlarge her vision, concentrating both on the inter-ethnic (or inter-racial) relations between black and white in the States, and on "transnational" connection that African Americans maintain with the Africa.

Although Morrison, different from Walker and Marshall, rarely portrays explicitly any scenes or episodes of journeying back to Africa in her novels, she, however, dexterously appropriates an enormous number of African cultural signs and artifacts in her novels. From her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1972), to her highly acclaimed *Beloved* (1987), Morrison scatters here and there mythical or cultural references to African culture in the diaspora. *Song of Solomon* (1977) ends with Solomon's flight to Africa, making allusions to the mythical ancestor of African-Americans. Beloved opens with a tribute to the deaths of trancsported African slaves on the slave ships, showing the aftermath of slavery. And it is in *Tar Baby*(1981) that Morrison moves the setting of the novel to a small Caribbean island, portraying the loss of a European-eduated migrant black in a neoclolonial world. In *Jazz*(1992) migration along with urbanization stands out as the central motif.

African-American and African literary scholars have manifested strong interest in finding out the connection, affinities and continuum between

Morrison and African writers in terms of African tradition, heritage and cultural discourses.❹ Of course, Morrison's works are, as well acknowledged, rooted in the African cultural tradition and the African American experience. Actually Morrison has seriously taken it as her mission to instruct younger African-American generations to recognize their ancestral past and affirm their cultural identity, so she never relinquishes her responsiblities to golrify the "sacred text" (Heyman 301) of their African heritage.

However, in order to resist the cultural domination of the Euro-American society, Morrison wisely and widely appropriates African myths, African American folklores, and even Euro-American biblical allusions. This is because Morrison, as Craig H. Werner suggests, fully apprehends that myth functions "both as a tool of Euro-American power and as a reservoir of historical knowledge capable of resisting that power" (153). Nevertheless, Morrison not only glorifies and echoes those myths but revises them.❺ And it is in the glorification and "excavation" of African myths and African-American folklores that Morrison entices the younger generation to see and realizes the beauty of their repressed culture; it is also in rewriting the myths of Euro-American tradition that Morrison creates what Werner calls "counter-myth".❻

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❹Gay Wilentz, for instance, attempts to discover how African cultural values and personal history are transmitted from one generation to another in the domains of African and African-American "matrifocal" societal structure. For detailed analysis in this aspect, see Wilentz, *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora*(Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992) xi-xiv; Carol Boyce Davies, however, deconstructs African female subjectivities from the perspective of migration theory; she explores the manifestation and embodiment of mobility and resistance in Black women's writing in the United States, arguing that identity is in flux; see her *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*(London and New York: Routledge, 1994)130-150.

❺Critics have acknowledged and studied how Morrison revises the mythical tradition. See Craig H. Werner, "The Briar Patch as Modernist Myth," 150-156; Marilyn Sanders Mobley, *Folk Roots and Mythic Wings in Sarah Orne Jewett and Toni Morrison: the Cultural Function of Narrative* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State UP, 1991) 1-26.

❻According to Werner, "counter-myth" is the strategy Afro-American writers employ to enter into the dominant discourse. On the surface, they appear to endorse Euro-American myths, for instance, their racial myths about the blacks, but actually in manipulating Euro-American myths "of Afro-American character and/or universal literature" they seek to subvert those myths. The best example of this employment of counter-myth is Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* See Werner, "The Briar Patch as Modernist Myth," 153.

Of all the novels, one of the most obvious mythical revisions Morrison demonstrates is her rewriting of flying myths in *Song of Solomon*. There Morrison seemingly makes the archetypal motifs of flight and quest the focuses of her novel; nevertheless, Morrison does not follow the traditional Euro-American modes of narrative; instead, she makes black folktales, African legends and African values the distinctive elements of the novel. In her skillful juxtapositions of the vernacular myths of the flying African and the Native American "bird" clan with the classical myths of Icarus and Daedalus, Morrison overrides the Euro-American mythical tradition. Besides, her constant allusion to the Christian bilblical stories in "naming" her characters (Hagar, Pilate, for instance) is not only ironic in design but subversive in intent. Hence in her brilliant dramatization and reconsturctions of myths, Morrison depicts the desire (for love, for freedom), anguish, and loss of her characters who are entrapped in the intersection of the modern and the folk, the presence and the past, the real and the fiction (Mobley 18).

To Morrison, the use of mythopoesis, folkoric tales in fragmentary storytelling form seem to serve well at the site of memory. This is because the construction of mythical patterns and the insertion of storytelling skills into the fiction serves for her functional writing strategies to sustain, to restore in a sense the collective memories of the African-American people whose narrative power, in her view, has diminished with the loss of African-American music and oral tradition. In her famous essay, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Morrison laments, on the one hand, the loss of oral tradition and emphasizes, on the other hand, the significance of ancestral figure to the black community and history.

Song of Solomon, which opens with the surrealist flight of the insurance agent, Mr. Smith, and ends with the flight of Milkman Dead, is resonant with the myth of the flying man. With the weave of the flying myth, the novel also has the political context inscribed into the personal histories, spanning the history of black Americans from slavery to Reconstruction to the 1960s. Underlying this socio-political history is the recurrent motif of flying. ❼ The flying stories of Milkman's African-

❼Critics have focused on the study of myth in Morrison's novels. See for instance, Jacqueline

born great-grandfather, Solomon(Sahimar, Sugarman) constitutes the core of the novel. Solomon, who was a salve, was said to have liberated himself from slavery by flying back to Africa. Hence this act of flight, which metaphorically suggests runaway, escape, freedom and liberation, is resonant with rich meanings for African-Americans who have, for centuries, been struggling for survival and liberation from Euro-American domination.

Flying in the modern African-American community of the 1960s, however, has a new meaning. Unlike Solomon's flight for freedom, Mr. Smith's flight is suicidal, because his leap in public is to fly away from the stifling insurance business and to conceal his membership of the Seven Days, a black political group organized to kill the whites. To conceal his attempt of self-destruction and to impress people of his heroism, Robert Smith utilizes the act of legendary flying Solomon as his disguise. In setting the supposedly sublime and "mythical flight" of Robert Smith against the busy but trivial "modern" city life, Morrison exposes the absurdity, incongruity and tragedy of Solomon-like flight. ❽ In this sense, Milkman's flight in the end is also fairly ambiguous. He may be, as critics suggest, a reincarnation of his great-grandfather, reproducing the history, or his attempt is suicidal, too.

It seems that in Morrison's novel the presence of myth and folk practices, as Valerie Smith points out, "never offers and escape from the sociopolitical conditions that have shaped the lives of African Americans" (6), but it is "cultural, dislocation, migration, an urbanization" that

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de Weever, *Mythmaking and Metaphor in Black Women's Fiction*(London: Macmillan, 1992); Patrick Bryce Bjork, *The Novels of Toni Morrison: The Search for Self and Place Within the Community*(New York: Peter Lang, 1992); for detailed analysis of flying motif in *Song of Solomon*, refer to Peter Bruck, "Returning to One's Roots: The Motif of Search and Flying in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," *The Afro-American Novel Since 1960*, ed. Peter Bruck and Wolfgan Karrer (Amsterdam: Gruner, 1982), 289-305; also Leslie Harris, "Myth as Structure in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," *MELUS*7.3(1980): 69-76; Dorothy H. Lee, "*Song of Solomon* To Ride the Air," *Black American Literature Forum*16(1982):64-70.

❽Although Toni Morrison insists that the supernatural and magic such as ghost and flying man are the striking features that characterize African American cultures, I'll consider that the parallelism here ironically discloses the incongruity of modern philosophy of life. Critics have talked a great deal about Morrison's use of supernatural elements in ⌣er novels, see Wendy Harding & Jacky Martin, A World of Difference (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood P, 1994) 120-27.

"provide the inescapable context within which her explorations of the African American past are located" (6) . In other words, the internal migrations and historical displacement of the black people are the focuses of Morrison's concern. The recuperation of myth is only a strategy for Morrison to reinscribe the past into the present, to represent the classical myth in the contemporary condition.

Critics almost reach a consensus that Morrison's *Song of Solomon* is mainly concerned with the genealogical search of a black male for cultural legacy and self-identity (Fabre 105-14; Bruck 289-305) . It is the novel in which archetypal heroic figure learns to see the future through discovering the past. ❾ Of course, in Milkman's case, developing the sense of history is inseparable from his discovery of self, but the novel is not as simple as that because Morrison creates a world full of twists and turns, and contradicitions. Milkman's quest, as critics observe well, is "caught in the ambiguities" (Fabre 107) , because the search is neither chronological nor linear, neither highly motivated, nor self-propelled; it is, instead, a quest journey full of ironies and turnabouts. The ambiguous ending of the novel, above all, "questions the validity of both [Milkman's] means of achieving his goal and the search itself," as Richard Heyman suggests (381).

The novel, though ostensibly structured on archetypal patterns of heroic quest, is ambiguous and controversial in that Morrison seems to have deliberately created an open text by turning Milkman into an "antihero," who goes through a process of constructing and deconstructing reality (Hardy & Martin 120-1; Heyman, 381-2) . Leading a way of life proven, ultimately, to be both constructive and deconstructive to himself and others, Milkman actually oscillates between a folkish, mythical world represented by Pilate and his kin in the South, and a capitalist world represented by his father, Macon Dead. Milkman'sjourney into the South helps him construct his disoriented self through a realization that he needs to identify with and to commit himself to his people as well as his

❾Susan Willis, for instance, says: "Milkman comes to realize that only by knowing the past can he hope to have a future." See Willis, "Histories, Communities, and Sometimes Utopia," Specifying: Black Women Writing and the American Experience (London: Routledge, 1987) 93.

indigenous culture, but the journey also brings in the death of Pilate, a cultural bearer and representative of African griot. Pilate's death is surprising and astounding to readers who might think a peaceful and happy reunion with ancestors is an indication of recognition of ancestral roots.

The designs of contradictoriness, which render the text open, seem to reveal Morrison's ambivalence towards the conflictual world in which the city-bred African-American males are snared. The dualities of individualism versus community; capitalism versus pastoralism; patriarchy versus matriarchy; materialism versus spiritualism are detectable in her fictional world; yet the world Morrison constructs is not so clear-cut. Conversely, the world is so ambiguous that it holds, as Smith says, "multiple connections and tensions that bind these ostensible opposition within the lives of individuals and communities" (13).

I

Song of Solomon is Morrison's most explicit and astute critique of Western individualism, materialism and capitalism (Hardy & Martin, 120; Willis, 3-25). On several occasions, Morrison discloses her discontent with the blacks who are entirely weighed down by Western values of material success and economic affluence. In an interview with Davis, Morrison observes that the twentieth-century city-bred African-American youths are confronted with the choice of whether to "join the twentieth century with all its terror" or to "live in some mythological world in private" (232). But whether the urbanized African-American youths can escape from the enthrallment of hegemonic values and withdraw into their folkish, mythological world remains unknown. Snared in the tangle of twentieth-century ideologies, African-American youths indeed have hard time negotiating between or among conflicting values they encounter.

To Morrison, the lives of the Dead family in *Song of Solomon* are exemplary of this surrender to the white middle-class values and hierarchical ideology of capitalist culture. The Dead family, just as their surname suggests, have no real sense of past and do not show any interest in human connection. Of course in the novel, Macon Dead's lack of interest in ancestral knowledge or lineage has been treated

sympathetically by Morrison as the result of misnaming and dispossession by the dominant white people. Macon Dead's seemingly unpardonable coolness is shown as the survival strategy of African-Americans who are turned into victims by histories. For African-Americans, slavery had deprived them of education and the power to comprehend the world through written language; migrancy, furthermor, as Iain Chamber once notes, compels one to "encounter the languages of powerlessness and the potential of intimations of heterotopic futures"(6).

To African-Americans, the act of naming, misnaming and unnaming carries ultimate significance to African-Americans. ⑩ Macon Dead, for example, is rendered powerless in affirming his own identity due to external constraints. Macon Dead inherits his name from his illiterate father who is given the surname, Dead, by a thoughtless Yankee in the Union Army. The families agree to carry this surname and pass it on to their offspring because in so doing they might erase their past as slaves.

This loss of one's familial identity is aggravated by the loss of cultural identity. The multiple losses are clearly manifested in Macon Dead's inability to resist against the capitalist ideology of the Euro-American society; he internalizes the white value of upward mobility after he moves to the North, believing that owning property is a avenue to win back dignity for his deceased father. As a child, Macon Dead witnesses the murder of his father by the greedy white men who take away their land by tricking his illiterate father to sign a document. Macon Dead and his sister Pilate are expelled from their property as runaways. The aching experience of being "put outdoors" breeds in him a hunger for property, for ownership. He becomes acquisitive, possessive and accumulative; hence, his wife, his daughters and son are his possessions to display his social status. The car ride which he always takes on Sunday afternoons with his family is daily ritual to show off his power as a prestigious black.

Lost and engulfed in the capitalist ideology, Macon Dead has to establish his new identity as a prestigious black businessman in countering

⑩For detailed analysis of this subject, refer to Marianne Hirsch, "Knowing Their Names: Toni Morriosn's Song of Solomon," *New Essays on Song of Solomon*69-92.

macro socioeconomic society. However in the micro society of African-American community, Macon Dead tries to maintain his subjectivity and authority as an African-American father who has complete control over his family. Hence despite his admiration for the Euro-American values of progressiveness and despite his renunciation of his sister Pilate, Macon Dead finds it hard to renounce his cultural identity, for he clearly understands the attraction of Pilate's culture to himself and to Milkman although he reiterates that Pilate cannot teach anything to Milkman. It is after being challenged by Milkman to tell familial past stories which have been repressed in his memories that Macon Dead retrieves his lost identity as the son of a slave.

To Morrison, Macon Dead's yield to white capitalist values reflects the repercussion of African-American migration to the urbanized inner city. To African-Americans, the migration to the north constitutes one of the most important historical events in their local history. Between 1930s and 1950s a large number of blacks moved from the rural South to the urban North to seek job opportunities; they left their cultural roots behind in the South. In order to move upward on the social ladder of success, they submitted themselves to white capitalist ideas that only material accumulation could guarantee them with a prosperous well-being. Their obsession with materialism gradually estranged them from their cultural values that emphasized spiritualism and commualism. Marrison kennly acknowledges the impact of migration on the African Americans; she knows that for African-Americans generational migrations from Africa has brought in the loss of cultural knowledge to a certain degree. Such a sense of loss is further exacerbated by the internal migration that takes place in the United States. ⓫ Song of Solomon shows the adverse impact of incessant materialist pursuits on middle-class African-Americans like the

⓫Historically, a great black migration from the South to the urban North began during the First World War. Migration is a recurrent motif in Toni Morrison's novels. From *The Bluest Eye to Jazz,* Morrison deals with the loss and maladjustment of black figures in the North. Morrison's lament for the cultural dislocation of her people is demonstrated in her sad remarks about her people: "Now my people, we 'peasants,' have come to the city, that is to say, we live with its values. It's confusing....My people are being devoured." See Mobley, *Folk Roots and Mythic Wings* 23.

Dead's family; at the same time, it reveals the woe of the black people who are compelled to abdicate their real familial identity in the period of slavery.

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison writes out the displacement and the "unhomely lives"(9) that African-Americans experience in slavery and racism. In African- American history, the imposition of slavery and the (in) voluntary black migration indeed change the destiny of black people at different times of history. The experience of being "exiled" from one's "homeland" or "village" is deeply linked with the painful experience of dispossession and dislocation - of losing land and losing geographical sense of where one is located. Once being deprived of land, the de-propertied and displaced African-Americans lose their direction of life. Macon Dead, for instance, lost not only his direction of life but his self after being rendered homeless by the white intruder/colonizer, who not only killed his father, Jake, but took over his land.

Land, to Jake or to African- Americans, means the property which should be passed on to the next generation. To Macon Dead, the loan or the farm his father owned was the site of his childhood memory: "the well, the apple orchard, President Lincoln; her foal, Mary Todd; Ulysses S. Grant, their cow; General Lee, their hog. That was the way he knew what history he remembered. His father couldn't read, couldn't write; knew only what he saw and heard tell of. But he had etched in Macon's mind certain historical figures, and as a boy in school, Macon thought of the personalities of his horse, his hog, when he read about these people"(52). Of course, ironically speaking, remembrance of his local place is entangled with his memory of white historic figures - the memory of which is ideologically imposed on him through the dominant system of education.

In African-American history, "migration for women," as Hazel Carby states, "often meant being behind" (751). Whereas for African-American men, migration to the North implies "escape/flight/movement" (Davies 134), to African- American women mobility entails hardship. In the novel, migration for Pilate means not only being deserted but being disavowed. Because of her unnatural physicality (that is, her lack of navel), Pilate faces the challenges from her community about her identity as a normal black female.

Like her brother, Pilate has been living in a sense of rootlessness, always searching for a place of belonging after her father dies. The rocks she carries as a remembrance of a place to which she has been are indicators of her nomadic life and incessant search. Having been working with the migrant roots workers for three years, Pilate moves from here to there with a hope to find the hometown of her mother in Virginia, but in vain.

But regardless of this physical dislocation, Pilate however tries to maintain a strong sense of who she is and where she is from by keeping such memorable emblems as a geography book and an earring box with her name. This way of retaining her subjectivity in "mobility" differentiates her from her brother, Macon Dead, who is submitted to white values after moving to the North. Pilate does not assimilate herself into the mainstream society in order to "make herself at home"; instead, she maintains a sense of history and continuity by preserving her inheritance.

In a certain sense, Pilate, a migrant from the South, is a "stranger" in the urbanized Northern town.⑫ Connected neither to the white nor to the black community, Pilate, who lives on the border of the community, is not welcomed by the black community because of her physical eccentricity. Like Sula in *Sula*, she is a pariah to the community. Expelled to the outskirts of the community, Pilate is a liminal figure in the black community. However, it is her border living that sustains her individuality and it is her presence as a "stranger" to her brother and community that poses a threat to the "uncreated conscience" of her brother. Her presence is a reminder that the Macons are from Africa. Just as Macon Dead once told Milkman: "If you ever have a doubt we from Africa, look at Pilate. She look just like Papa and he looked like all the pictures you ever see of Africans. A Pennsylvania African. Acted like one too" (*Song of Solomon* 54) . Ethnicity, as scholars indicate, marks acquired sense of one's belonging to a particular group as a result of cultural affinities (De

⑫Farah Jasmine Griffin, "*Who Set You Flowing?": The African American Migration Narrative*(New York: Oxford UP, 1994) 294; Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity*(London and New York: Routledge, 1994) 6. According to Chamber, a stranger, "cut off from the homelands of tradition, experiencing a constantly challenged identity," is "perpetually required to make herself at home in an interminable discussion between a scattered historical inheritance and a heterogeneous present" (6).

Vos 14). Macon Dead's remark arouses Milkman's self-awareness of being a descendant of an African.

It is well acknowledged that Pilate's presence in the novel is of utmost significance mainly because she displays the residue of African culture in American society.⓭ A herbalist and conjure woman, Pilate fills her world with cultural signs and artifacts. Her food, midwifery, music, clothes show the legacy of ancestry. Unlike other African-American women Morrison portrays in her novels -- Pauline in *The Bluest Eyes*, for instance -- Pilate is not affected by Euro-American standards of physical beauty. Wearing long dresses with unlaced brogans, knitted hats, and keeping herself clean but unkempt, Pilate does not estrange herself from people because of her own physical idiosyncrasies. Although repudiated and excluded by her community, especially by her brother, Pilate still acts as a sage who offers help to those who are in need; for she helps Ruth, Milkman's mother, to conceive him by giving her "some green-gray grassy-looking stuff" to put in her husband's food.

A griot, Pilate transmits the cultural knowledge and generates in the younger generation a sense of communal bond and cohesion. In the novel, storytelling and the blues songs are drawn upon to articulate the experiences and history of the African-Americans in collectivity. The song Pilate sings tells the stories about African-Americans who escaped slavery by flying back to Africa. However, what it reveals more sadly is the yearning of a woman who, in resistance to the destiny of being abandoned, beg "Sugarman", her husband, to stay. The song stirs Milkman's and Guitar's nostalgic feelings and romantic aspirations for a remote world, though both of them may not have exact ideas about the meanings of the song when Pilate sings:

0 Sugarman don't leave me here

Cotton balls to choke me

⓭For Pilate's significant role in the novel, refer to Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr. "Recitation to the Griot: Storytelling and Learning in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon," *Cojuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, eds. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985) 192-202, and also Wilentz, 28.

0 Sugarman don't leave me here
Buckra's arms to yoke...
Sugarman done fly away
Sugarman done gone
Sugarman cut across the sky
Sugarman gone home. (49)

If songs, as African-American cultural critics like Houston Bake insist, reveal the soul of the people, songs of course appeal to the primordial sentiments of the ethnic members and boost their ethnic consciousness. Yet that sentiment, Morrison seems to be aware of, might be rekindled, but the sense of ethnic identity should be constructed in the cognitive process of knowing the history and culture of one's ethnicity.

To Morrison a society that values progress and pragmatism makes people lose their imagination, the ability to put stories into forms. Milkman's life is dull, and uninteresting because he is not able to believe in the magic of myths and because he is not attracted by stories. "When the little boy discovered - that only birds and airplanes could fly - he lost all interest in himself. To have to live without that single gift saddened him and left his imagination so bereft that he appeared dull" (*Song of Solomon* 9). When he, in the North, listened to the stories of his father, aunt, friend and mother, Milkman only felt that stories about his familial history sounded unreal, fragmentary and fictional. But when placed in the site of his relations, Milkman got the chance to impose coherence on the fragmentary stories he heard before; the stories told by the man in the South prompted him to see the implicated credibility and authenticity of his familial past:

Milkman felt a glow listening to a story home from this man that he'd heard many times before but only half listened to. Or maybe it was being there in the place where it happened that made it seem so real. Hearing Pilate talk about caves and woods and earrings on Darling Street, or his father talk about cooking wild turkey over the automobile noise of Not Doctor Street, seemed exotic something from

another world and age, and maybe not even true. Here in the parsonage, sitting in a cane-bottomed chair near an upright piano and drinking homemade whisky poured from a mayonnaise jar, it was real.(231)

Accordingly, Milkman's "journey back", like any kind of return to the ancestral grounds, is a "homing" passage. It is because the South in Morrison's novel has its positive meaning. It is, as Farah Jasmine Griffin suggests, "a site of African-history and culture"; "a site of racial redemption and identity"; "a place of cultural origin" and "home of the ancestors" (11)

Indeed, in this second part of the novel the Southern rural African-American folk culture is represented clearly "by a heightening of natural perception, a richness of symbolism, and the supernatural presence of natural and ancestral spirits" (Krumholz 569) . But if the recovery of cultural roots is, as Hall suggests, "mediated and transformed by memory, fantasy and desire" ("New Ethnicities" 443) , Milkman's return to his native culture is, metaphorically speaking, a journey tinted with desire, fantasy and memory. When Milkman embarks on his journey into the South, he is literally activated by greed for the gold, which is said to be left in the cave. In other words, his journey to the South is triggered by his desire to seek material goods, and in this sense he is no different from the acquisitive Euro-American merchants who expolre Africa out of avarice.

But in another sense, Milkman's search for the gold is also a re-activation of migratory journey which his black forebears had before. At the age of thirty-one, Milkman, under the command of his father, starts a journey of search for the gold left at the Hunting Cave. Ironically, Milkman's journey parallels Pilate's in youth, though both journeys suggest different ideas and destination in mind, geographical journey from Detroit, Michigan, to Danville, Pennsylvania, and finally to Shalimar, Virginia leads Milkman into the historical places where his father grew up and his grandfather was born. Geographical search turns out to be a genealogical journey. The journey from the present to the past, from the city to the country gradually lifts him off the sense of boredom and alienation which he experiences in the northern urban culture, giving him the sense of certainty that he experiences in Plilate's house.

But it is in the song and the stories he hears on the way of his journey that Milkman gains redemption and identity. After watching children outstretching their arms to play flying game, Milkman realizes how he has been cut off from his native culture since a kid simply because of his middle-class status. Listening to the singing of the popular rhyme, Milkman recalls Pilate's song and realizes the similarities, connections and identities between two songs. The song revives his memories, driving him to examine his past relationship with people, especially the female figures like Ruth, Hagar or Corinthian; he starts to feel ashamed of his indifference to their suffering.

With the guidance of several female informants or storytellers, Milkman comes to realize his personal responsibility through an understanding of the collective history of his people. From Circe, a mythical, timeless healer and deliverer who saved Pilate and Macon Dead after their father was killed, he learns the story of Jake, his grandfather and his mixedblood Indian grandmother, Sing Byrds. From Susan Byrds, the sister of Milkman's grandmother, Milkman learns the tragic stories of his ancestors who are afflicted by slavery and intermarriage. African-born slave, Solomon, flew back to Africa, leaving his wife, Tyna, and twenty-one children behind. The sense of being deserted left Ryna desperate; Tina went insane when she found that she was not able to cope with the situation of living without man and with the prospect of rearing children alone. The only son of Solomon, Jake, was saved and raised by Heddy Byrds, the Indian woman, and later married the Indian woman, Sing Byrds, Pilate's mother, Milkman's grandomother.

In a process of unraveling the riddle of his familial history and decoding the meaning of the song, Milkman discovers the fusion of Native American, African-American and Euro-American cultures. He also discovers that the mixture of Indian names such as Sing Byrds with American-sounding name - Singing Bird - is aimed to disguise the real identity of the Indianness (*Song of Solomon* 303-4) .

From an ignorance of what "links" means to an acknowledgement of his connection with others, Milkman becomes more compassionate than before. But Milkman's transformation comes only after he divests himself of the

material decorations on his body. In his geographical home, Shalimar, Virginia, Milkman undergoes the important initiatory rite through hunting in the dark Blue Ridge Mountains. In that symbolic journey, Milkman gradually discards the possession which the urban culture endorses, reaching a sense of unity with nature and the culture of the South. It is this act of discarding material goods that frees him from dominant capitalist society, urging him to recognize an alternative way of living.

To Milkman, or to Morrison, Shalimar, Virginia, appears to be an all black community, but actually not quite so. It is a world of neiher gender difference nor color difference because intermarriage, as Morrison implies, seems to have leveled the differences, making all the same. As Milkman ponders: "There must be a lot of intermarriage in this place, he thought. All the women looked alike, and except some light-skinned redheaded men…… the men looked very much like the women. Visitors to Shalimar must be rare, and new blood that settled here nonexistent" (*Song of Solomon* 263). It is apparent that the Solomons community which Milkman discovers represents a utopian world in which the Manichean opposition of black/white, man/woman is blurred; there goes no asymmetry, contestation or disparity, but equality and harmony.

Milkman returns to Michigan with a new identity, a new knowledge about his legacy and a new perception of the African-Americans in American society, both in the North and in the South. It is likely that Milkman finally sees the significance of the past in his personal history. But the name of his African-born ancestor -- "Solomon" -- can by no means be assumed as "a transcendent signified of the black rural Southern folk" (Heyman 389). Nor can it be taken for granted as the beginning of his ancestral identity, because the African origin his great-grandfather stands for has been mediated by the experience of slavery and ethnic interaction. Thus if Milkman's final attempt to fly is a symbolic act to mirror his great-grandfather in flying back to Africa to recover his pure identity, Milkman's attempted flight to affirm that original, pure, unmediated African culture or existence in his fantasy or memory may be disappointing to him. For the fantasized Africa without mediation is no longer existent. Just as Hall points out in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," the so-called original "Africa" has been trasformed by "four hundred years of

displacement, dismemberment, transportation" so whether the African presence can be taken as a signified origin of the identities of African diaspora is doubtful (221).

II

Song of Solomon reveals Morrison's sophisticated reflections on the relations between African-Americans and Africa. At the same time, it also displays Morrison's observation on the intricate relations between the black and the white in the domestic America. In her presentation of this subtle ethnic relation, Morrison, however, does not accentuate on the racial tension which exists in history. Of course, Morrison does show extremely sympathetic concern for the unspeakable misery which agonizing racism imposes on the African-Americans in history. But in her portrayal of the interaction between the black and the white, Morrison still expresses her disapproval of the revengeful sentiments the African-Americans harbor to the white. The oppositional stance the Seven Days take against the dominant society, for instance, appears disastrous. To Morrison, the Seven Days are the representatives of violent separatists who live in the shadow of white supremacy, unable to (or unwilling to) heal, recover or liberate themselves from the traumatic memories of white oppression, so they porject their hatred and hostility to all whites. Tied down by this hatred, the members of the Seven Days can never "fly away on their own way" or "insure" a beneficial "mutual life" for themselves or for others.

As opposed to the members of the Seven Days, Pilate manifests humanitarian love for any individual regardless of his/her race. Under the guidance of the spirits of her deceased father, Pilate believes that she can appease the ghost of the murdered white by carrying his bones. Whatever motives this carrying of "white" bones may imply, Pilate's act represents her acknowledgement of the presence and influence of the "other" race in her life; it also shows her respect for the deceased. Just as Linden Peach puts it, "it does not matter whether the bones are of [Pilate's] husband……or of a murdered white man……or of her father. The bones are a symbol of an obligation to a past event and to relationship"

(74).

It is indeed this human relationship that Pilate highly treasures in her life whether it's the relations with the black or the white. In fact, Pilate's lack of navel, the main reason for which she is expelled from her community, precipitates her ambiguous connection with her ethnic group. On the one hand, she is the symbol of priestess, and the transmitter of cultural knowledge -- i.e. the bearer of her ethnic culture, but, on the other hand, her mythical lack of navel symbolizes her distance or separation from matrilineage. ⓮ Unlike politically militant Guitar or the Seven Days, Pilate is not so political or essentialist as to oppose her culture against that of the white; rather, she directs her attention to her own self-sufficient, micro-communal world, because only in so doing can she define her self and make fluid the reality she is creating (Lubiano 112).

Pilate's singing on the day when Robert Smith takes his flight is especially intriguing. On the one hand, her singing, "O Sugarman done fly away/Sugarman done gone/Sugarman cut across the sky/Sugarman gone home" provides the background for legendary Solomon's leap; the singing, on the other hand, expresses a female perspective and desire to stop the black man from escaping from their familial responsibility while selfishly seeking personal independence. The singing is also a reminder that tragedy should not be repeated by itself, that modern black men should figure out a way to reinvent themselves rather than replicate the past in the present. ⓯ It is on the day when Robert Smith makes Solomon leap that Milkman is delivered with the aid of Pilate. With the juxtaposition of birth and death, the modern and the mythic, Morrison highlights the significant birth of a new being like Milkman.

Critics tend to glamorize the role Pilate plays. It is indeed true that Pilate is a stout ancestral figure that Morrison highly admires and

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⓮An interesting clue of this separation from matrilineage may be suggested in Pilate's failure to locate the homeplace of her mother even when she travelled to Virginia.

⓯For further discussion about black man's flight from familial responsibility as opposed to black woman's reinvention of self, refer to Linda Krumholz, "Dead Teachers: Rituals of Manhood and Rituals of Reading in Song of Solomon," Modern Fiction Studies 39.3&4 (Fall/ Winter 1993): 555-6.43

intends to elevate; however, Pilate also has her limitations and blindness. One of the mistakes she commits is that she fails to figure out the fact that the sack of bones she carries with her is the bone of her dead father and that "sing" is the name of her mother. She, however, needs the assistance of younger generation, Milkman, for instance, to find out the truth and reality about her ancestral identity.

In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman, Guitar, Hagar, First Corinthians might be regarded as representatives of what Hall terms emergent new ethnicities. Because they oscillate between the dominant white culture and the ghettoized native cult, they maintain rather contradictory and ambivalent attitudes toward these two cultures. Since their identifications with either the dominant or the native culture are rather weak, they keep a spiritually deprived life. Even if the female figure like Hagar, Pilate's daughter, is immersed in an entirely ethnic world with a strong trace of cultural heritage, she still feels discontented and lost. One of her weaknesses is that she does not know how to strike a balance between the dominant and the native cultures. As Ruth observes: "there was something truly askew in this girl. That here was the wilderness of Southside. Not the poverty or dirt or noise, not just extreme unregulated passion where even love found its ways with an ice pick, but the absence of control" (*Song of Solomon* 139) . As a result, because of her lack of self-control and because of her inability to deal with(or resist against) the dominant Euro-American values of female beauty and heterosexual love, Hagar has to kill herself to escape from the disrupting reality.

Males like Milkman Dead and Guitar Brians also exemplify modern black youths caught in a tangle of conflicting values. Milkman lives in the state of uncertainty, because he is both induced by his father's admonition on the value of material possession and attracted by his aunt's idyllic life of material deprivation. For Milkman, a not so mature man, not knowing how to handle the situation tactfully, pretension of indifference becomes a survival and negotiating strategy; he disguises his sense of instability within the confine of his own world, showing no concern for communal relationships. Guitar's contradictions, however, are exhibited in his ambivalence towards white system of values and his separatist temperament. In contrast to Milkman's seeming indifference, Guitar is an ardent

supporter of "Black Nationalism," highly appreciating the folk values of his ethnic group. Actually, it is Guitar who leads Milkman into the idyllic world of Pilate; but Guitar is also a militant "racist," harboring deep resentment against the whites and bearing the strongest "race" consciousness. Like Macon Dead, Guitar also represses his "unspeakable" pain of witnessing the death of his father. A migrant from the South, too, Guitar represses his memory of his familial past, considering "eye-for-eye" as the ultimate goal in his confrontation with the whites. A member of the Seven Days, Guitar buries his self in a violent and radical resistance against the white society. In his view, it is the pervasive white control that makes the blacks keep a stifling life. As he told Milkman: "White men want us dead or quiet -- which is the same thing as dead ····· They want us, you know, 'universal', human, 'no race consciousness'" (Song of Solomon 222)

Guitar's obstinate adherence to fixed polarity of good versus evil, white versus black, induces him to make very big blunders in his life. In the end, he kills not only those white people he hates, but his loved friend and the spiritual mentor of his community. Overwhelmed and obsessed by an exclusively restrictive concept of his ethnicity or definition of "African-Americanness," Guitar fails to realize the inadequacy or problematics of such essentialist conception of ethnic identity.

Unlike Milkman, who finally comes to construct his sense of ethnicity and self through deciphering the history reinscribed in songs, Guitar gives himself to irrational racial sentiments. Whereas Milkman in the end realizes the significance of reciprocity and human relations after having love with Sweet, Guitar is driven mad by his suspicion about human bond and friendship. It is his disbelief in the mutual love that kills Guitar Brians himself and his "beloved." It is also his inability to recognize the fluidity of human relations that drives him to the extremity. Thus in the novel what Morrison indicates is, as Gay Wilentz remarks, "the dead-end of both the mainstream assimilation and radical separatism"(86) .

III

Song of Solomon skillfully utilizes a universal mythic pattern of

quest, ceremony and ritual to demonstrate the universal desire for liberation, yet Morrison does not stop at celebrating the universality; instead, in her revision of the myth she foregrounds the particularities of African-American culture and history; she reinscribes the contemporary desire of African-Americans for flight and libations from oppression into the classical, archetypal search pattern. She reveals the predicament of the "unhomely" African-Americans in the slavery and internal migration periods; simultaneously, she writes out the dilemma of urbanized African-Americans.

Morrison fully recognizes the dilemma she encounters as an African-American writer in America. On the one hand, she is keenly aware that it is difficult for the African-Americans to cut out umbilical cord from their African mother; on the other hand, they can not reduce their "Americanness." As she says: "So much of what is true about Afro-Americans is not only the African but the American -- we are very much that are and trying to separate those things out can be very difficult, if you want to separate them out. We are a brand new human being in this country" (Davis, 225; italics mine).

It seems that what Morrison is extremely concerned with is to seek out a survival strategy for "brand new" African-Americans living in the culturally dominant Euro-American society. However, Morrison advocates neither assimilation into nor separation from the mainstream society although there are implicit and explicit comments on mainstream values. Morrison does not seek recourse in Afrocentric celebration of cultural or racial purity for African-Americans, either. Conversely, she seems to acknowledge the fusion of Native American, African-American and Euro-American cultures and mixed lingeage in African-American cultures, and she manages to demonstrate that fusion in her novel. Through the unveling of Pilate's Indian matrilineage, Morrison undermines the Afrocentric belief in cultural and racial purity. Moreover, she refuses to confirm the absolute or transcendent presence of the African ancestry or tradition although Pilate seems to represent that ancestral figure. Of course, through the delineation of Pilate's lifestyle and character, Morrison provides both African-Americans and non-Americans with an alternative

vision of the world.

If the bird which appears at the end of the novel symbolizes the maternal ancestor of Pilate -- Sing Byrds, the coming of the bird to take away Pilate's earring (which bears witness to her identity as Pilate Dead) after she dies suggests not only Pilate's reunification with her Indian mother but Morrison's acknowledgement of Native-American presence in African-American history. As Milkman comments, what Pilate achieves is her power to fly even "without ever leaving the ground" (*Song of Solomon* 340) . Pilate is indeed spiritually free in terms of her relation with her African culture. But her death seems to announce the demise of a pure African culture. Pilate's song must be passed on but in a different new male voice, the voice of a new generation, who acknowledges the fusion of cultures and ethnicities.

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《所羅門之歌》中的神話與族裔屬性

張月珍*

提　要

莫莉生小說喜運用神話、傳說及說故事的質素，來突顯非裔美國文化的特殊性。其小說《所羅門之歌》在刻劃男性角色追尋身份的過程中，同時呈現殘留、離散的非洲文化(Wilentz xxix)。然而，在重述其族裔的過去，及重現非裔美國文化的神話傳統時，莫莉生並未將過去浪漫化。本文探討莫莉生小說《所羅門之歌》中所呈現的離散文化面向，將建構純粹固定屬性之本質取向問題化，以指證說明對在都會成長，屬中產階級，新一代的非裔美國青年，其身份及文化屬性的追尋可能因爲「記憶，幻想，欲望所中介及轉換」。從此追尋中，所發現的並非肯定純粹的非洲文化，或固定的族裔屬性，而是認知到非裔美國文化中所攙揉的印第安文化及歐美文化。

關鍵詞：神話　族裔屬性　離散性　祖先文化資產的追尋

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