

TIME AS GEOGRAPHY IN *SONG OF SOLOMON*

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(Resumen)

En *Song of Solomon* vemos personajes con sentido de geografía, de localización, conscientes de su fracaso e identidad. Quien carece de este sentido de lugar, de un pasado, se encontrará perdido y confuso. Se analiza aquí el viaje hacia la búsqueda de identidad del personaje principal, Milkman, según las tres fases del tradicional "romance quest". Geografía y tiempo se unen para encontrar, al fin, la identidad en el pasado. La búsqueda culmina al aceptar su pasado, la tierra de los antepasados y su cultura, para poder así llegar a entender el futuro. Toni Morrison ve su triunfo como no sólo personal, sino el de la comunidad afro-americana que lucha por no perder su identidad cultural.

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One of the characteristics of Toni Morrison's fiction is the use of geography. Her characters, plots and themes are intimately related with the place where they live or take place. This relationship is deliberate on her part as she clearly states in an interview: "When the locality is clear, fully realized, then it becomes universal. I knew there was something I wanted to clear away in writing, so I used the geography of my childhood, the imagined characters based on bits and pieces of people, and that was a statement."¹ Morrison's background was special. Ohio has a curious location, it has a border with the South, the Ohio River, yet it also borders with the extreme North, Canada. Lorain, Ohio is neither the modern urban ghetto nor the traditional plantation South. Ohio seems to be a kind of no man's land in the history of black migration. Willis, through Morrison's character Polly Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*, sees Ohio as "the

¹ Charles Ruas, *Conversations with American Writers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985) 219.

site where images are produced out of the discontinuity between past and present."² In this sense, according to Dixon, Ohio is neither typically North nor South and Morrison "freely explores new physical and metaphorical landscapes in her fiction," where "...land gradation and moral codes have stages for enacting dramas of self-creation, racial visibility, and cultural performance in *Song of Solomon* and in *Tar Baby*."³

Morrison's concern for geography is reflected in her characters. In *Song of Solomon*⁴, two of the main characters, Guitar and Pilate, who act as guides for Macon (Milkman) Dead on his quest for identity, are concerned with geography. Guitar is Milkman's guide in the urban ghetto, trying to instill the latter with race consciousness. In one of these conversations, where the serious and the petty mix, Guitar sums up: "Goddam, Milk, I do believe my whole life's geography"(114). When the omniscient narrator comments on the difference between Ruth, Milkman's bourgeois mother and his Aunt Pilate, he/she highlights the geographical issue: "One well read but ill traveled. The other had read only a geography book, but had been from one end of the country to another" (139). Pilate has had virtually no education and her lifestyle is that of a wanderer with no material possessions, though she is in close contact with the past and her heritage, as will be seen later. The only things she does carry with her are linked to her past and geography; a bag with bones, which turn out to be her father's, and, as she says:"So I just took my geography book and a rock I picked up for a souvenir and lit out" (142). The only subject she enjoyed in school was geography, and she carries a rock from every place she has lived, and it seems that this predilection for geography "had marked her to roam the country, planting her feet in each pink, yellow, blue or green state" (148). Her identity is tied in with the localities where she has been. Although neither Guitar nor Pilate live on the land of their ancestors, both are very conscious that Michigan is not home but rather Guitar reminisces about his childhood "down home in Florida" (45).

By way of contrast, those characters who are not concerned with their ancestral

² Susan Willis, "Eruptions of Funk: historicizing Toni Morrison," *Black Literature & Literary Theory*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed. (Methuen, 1984; Repr. New York: Routledge, 1990) 264.

³ Melvin Dixon, *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature* (Urbana: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987) 141.

⁴ Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Signet-The New American Library, 1978). All further references to the novel will be to this edition, giving the page number in parenthetical notation.

geography and heritage, those who refuse to acknowledge and accept their past and their racial identity, are lost, confused. The Dead family are psychically, although not physically, dislocated from their home, as Rubenstein points out: "Instructively, Morrison describes their geographical location in terms that mirror their inner boundary confusions and psychological enclosure."⁵ Morrison makes this observation through her narrator's comments on landlocked people, who, when they realize their condition, seldom dream of flight. However in the description of the people of Michigan, symbolized by the Dead family, the narrator points out their confusion:

But the people living in the Great Lakes region are confused by their place on the country's edge--an edge that is border but not coast. They seem to be able to live a long time believing, as coastal people do, that they are at the frontier where final exit and total escape are the only journeys left. But those five Great Lakes which the St. Lawrence feeds with memories of the sea are themselves landlocked, in spite of the wandering river that connects them to the Atlantic. Once the people of the lake region discover this, the longing to leave becomes acute, and a break from the area, therefore, is necessarily dream-bitten, but necessary nonetheless. (163)

This restlessness possesses Milkman, who is lost, uprooted and confused. He doesn't have a place, as Guitar tells him: "You don't live nowhere" (103). It will be first Guitar and then Pilate who will guide him to his individual identity and his coming to terms with his past, finding a place for himself.

The motivating and organizing device for this search for identity is that of the quest: Milkman makes a journey to confront his past and origins, coming to terms with himself and his community.⁶ This quest takes on very much the form of the wish-fulfillment dream of medieval romance, described by Northrop Frye.⁷ In Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, he sees the quest as a search for truth, knowledge or identity, usually

⁵ Roberta Rubenstein, *Boundaries of the Self: Gender, Culture, Fiction* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1987) 151.

⁶ Dorothy H. Lee, "The Quest for Self: Triumph and Failure in the Works of Toni Morrison," *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*, Mari Evans, ed., Stephen Henderson, introd. (New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1984) 352.

⁷ Northrop Frye, "Theory of Myths," *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957).

marked by a nostalgia for the past. The main characteristics of the romance are the essential element of adventure which takes place in some kind of journey and the fact that the action is sequential. The quest has three main stages: that of the preliminary minor adventures and beginning of the journey, which Frye calls the "agon" or conflict; the crucial death struggle, called "pathos" and the recognition of the hero, the "anagnorisis". The conflict always takes place in our world, which is characterized by the cyclical movement of nature. In Frye's analysis romance always partakes of the two worlds, myth and realism, depending on the degree of displacement in the divine or human direction. Frequently, therefore, supernatural elements can take place as well as the more modern, moral direction in which the conflict between the divine and the demonic is substituted by one between innocence and experience. In Attebery's analysis of romance, he, too, insists that romance moves between the mundane and the supernatural, the real and the magical, and both extremes coexist and reverberate against each other.⁸ Although other critics may give the mode another name,⁹ Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* fits the structure of the romance quest and an essential element of it is the mysterious, magical quality, found particularly in nature. The presence of this supernatural quality of the landscape which contains the secrets and the mythic history of the people who live there is intentional on behalf of the writer. As she says: "It's an animated world in which trees can be outraged and hurt, and in which the presence or absence of birds is meaningful. You have to be very still to understand these so called signs, in addition to which they inform you about your own behavior."¹⁰

This mythic aspect is fully developed in the novel. Pilate is associated with nature, almost as a primal mother goddess, who did not have a natural birth, as her lack of a navel indicates. When Milkman sees her, she offers him eggs, symbol of rebirth, and apples, symbol of knowledge. Her description, sitting on the steps, with "One foot pointed east and one pointed west" (36), suggests the cyclical aspect of nature, the rising and setting of the sun, birth and death. She lives close to nature, eating fresh fruit, touching the earth with her bare feet, and observing the colors of the sky. The character

⁸ Brian Attebery, *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana Univ. Press, 1980).

⁹ Bernard Bell calls it Gothic Fable, but in his definition he, too, stresses the role of magic, mystery and unnatural events. *The Afro-American Novel and its Tradition* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1987) 269-70.

¹⁰ Ruas, 223.

of Milkman also has a marked mythical quality. His birth is full of premonitions and symbols. Firstly, he is born in February, the season when life begins anew. His birth is provoked by Robert Stone's death flight, as a ritual death brings new life. The two virgins, his sisters, frantically collect the red flower petals, symbolizing Milkman's redemptive nature. Pilate sings her song, tying him to his past. Together with the magical circumstances of his conception and birth, all contribute to "su función rehabilitadora del mito tribal expresada en términos de la simbología del vuelo."¹¹ Morrison also connects Milkman's birth to another myth: that of the phoenix. He is born out of the "ashes" of Robert Stone's ritual death. Robert, a member of the Days, is too tired to continue the task of his tribe. And again, the same image appears at the end of the novel, with Milkman's rebirth, this time to a new, understanding life. His rebirth comes out of the "ashes" of his grandfather, Jake, just discovered and properly buried, as well as those of Pilate, who has led him through his journey. Just as the bird takes Pilate's earring with her name, enabling Pilate to fly, her death enables Milkman to dispossess himself of the last thing he had, his body, and to take the liberating flight of Solomon and of his people. Milkman's quest, however, is not only his, that of an individual, as Carabí observes, but that of his whole race, thereby giving him even more the mythical quality of the hero of a nation.

El peregrinaje mítico de Milkman Dead simboliza la trayectoria de autoafirmación del pueblo afro-americano que debe remontarse a sus orígenes, a la tierra de sus antepasados más próximos, el Sur de los Estados Unidos, para reconocerse en ellos y convertirse en intérprete de su pasado con un lenguaje propio.¹²

Dixon, too, sees Milkman's story as a "bildungsroman of entire communities and racial idioms rather than the voice of a single individual."¹³

The main part of the novel concerns itself with the journey. The "agon", according to Frye's structuring of the romance, begins with the first years of Milkman's life, in the urban North, in a home that fits the name of the family, Dead. There is no life in the house, not even in the car: "the Packard had no real lived life at all. So they

¹¹ Angels Carabí, *Toni Morrison: Búsqueda de una Identidad Afroamericana* (Barcelona: PPU, 1988) 153.

¹² Carabí, 150.

¹³ Dixon, 164.

called it Macon Dead's hearse" (32). The house "was more prison than palace" (9), which contrasts dramatically with Pilate's home which emanates life and love, and actually has a spiritual, magical quality "whose basement seemed to be rising from rather than settling into the ground" (27). The life in the house seemed to have restorative virtues which Macon senses as he stands, looking in: "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" (29-30). In this world, Milkman is an outcast, accepted neither by the whites nor the blacks, "his velvet suit separated him from the other children. White and black thought he was a riot and went out of their way to laugh at him..." (267). The urban world only contributes to his confusion, and all he desires is to own things and to have a good time, as he tells Guitar: "But I know where I'm going. ...Wherever the party is" (106). Despite his apparent security, Milkman silently acknowledges his sense of being lost during his conversation with Guitar:

Looks like everybody's going in the wrong direction but you, don't it? Milkman swallowed. He remembered that long-ago evening after he hit his father how everybody was crammed on one side of the street, going in the direction he was coming from. Nobody was going his way. (106)

Milkman is always wanting to GO somewhere, to escape. His solution is a plane ticket, to move. Morrison remarks on this as being a characteristic of masculinity:

I think Song is more expansive...I had to loosen up. I could not create the same kind of enclosed world that I had in previous books. Before it was as if I went into a room and shut the door in my books. I tried to pull the reader into that room. But I couldn't do that with Milkman. It's a feminine concept--things happening in a room, a house. That's where we live, in houses. Men don't live in houses.¹⁴

One of the first images we have of young Milkman is that of the ritualistic family drive. The rational dominant note would be that of driving, of mobility, of passing landscape, however in Morrison's description, the geography is much more linked to

¹⁴ Mel Watkins, "Talk with Toni Morrison," *The New York Times Book Review* (Sept. 11, 1977): 50, qtd. in Carabí, 147.

time. Little Milkman, trapped between his parents in the front seat, can see no landscape, only "the winged woman careening off the nose of the car" and "the laps, feet, and hands of his parents"(31). The only way to see something was to kneel and face backwards, yet the implication of only seeing what had passed, makes him uneasy: Milkman does not want to see the past.

It was like flying blind, and not knowing where he was going--just where he had been--troubled him. He did not want to see the trees that he had passed, or houses and children slipping into the space the automobile had left behind. (31-2)

This linkage of time to place is a constant feature in Milkman's journey. Although his trip is a physical one, from Michigan, to Danville, Pennsylvania, to Shalimar, Virginia, back to Michigan and again to Shalimar, it is also a journey "through history and myth."¹⁵ As Willis explains: "Milkman's quest is a journey through geographic space in which the juxtaposition of the city and the countryside represents the relationship of the present to the past."¹⁶ The romance quest is usually a journey through a mythical space in search of an ideal, a treasure or knowledge. Morrison creates yet another variation, "she alters the direction of cultural history away from simple chronology and toward a single, charged moment of multiple discoveries by emphasizing Milkman's embrace of cultural and familial geography."¹⁷ Already as a child in the city, Milkman senses this importance of time and the past/passed: "It was becoming a habit--this concentration on things behind him. Almost as though there were no future to be had" (35). But again and again he strives to reject it "He just wanted to beat a path away from his parents' past, which was also their present and which was threatening to become his present as well" (180-81). Milkman's alienation from black culture is expressed in his hollow, daily monotony as a result from trying to cling to the white, bourgeois, urban values that his parents have given him. He fails to accept his role as a member of his race and thus his friendship with Guitar is severely strained. When his alienation becomes so strong, he is psychologically forced to leave the city and set out on his quest.

¹⁵ Dixon, 142.

¹⁶ Susan Willis, *Specifying--Black Women Writing: The American Experience* (Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1987) 95.

¹⁷ Dixon, 165.

Allured by the promise of the gold buried in the cave, Milkman undertakes his journey into the past, in search of his self. He believes that the gold will liberate him from his father's domination and emotional blackmail. He will soon come to realize the fallacy of this, however he will learn a much greater lesson. The airplane ride exhilarates him, touching again on the recurring theme of flight. When he is riding the bus to Danville he observes the landscape, but with the eye of an urban dweller, not understanding its meaning, nor caring. Even his "dead" father had raved about the beauty of the countryside where he had grown up, but Milkman is indifferent:

For a few minutes he tried to enjoy the scenery running past his window, then the city man's boredom with nature's repetition overtook him. 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... And the names of junctions, counties,...Everybody had to do his act, he thought, for surely anybody who was interested in Dudberry Point already knew where it was. (228)

His conditioning has made him incapable of appreciating the landscape or nature. It has no meaning for him. This is the same situation that Mark Twain reflects on in *Old Times on the Mississippi*: Easterners and city dwellers only see "pretty pictures" when travelling the river. When he undertakes learning to be a steamboat pilot, he learns to see beyond, the river becomes a "wonderful book" in which each line can hide a menace. "The passengers could not read the esoteric language of this book (so far they were concerned, in fact, it was written in a 'dead language'), but it delivered its most telling secrets to him."¹⁸ Like Mark Twain, it will take Milkman a learning process, his quest, to be able to "read" the book of nature and the significance of places. And, using Morrison's symbolism in the names, it will be Pilate, with her interest in geography, nature, the past and life, who has stimulated Milkman to undertake the journey, she acting as his cultural mentor, spiritual guide, or "river pilot".

¹⁸ Leo Marx, *The Pilot and the Passenger: Essays on Literature, Technology, and Culture in the United States* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988) xv.

In Danville a process of deculturization begins, still being part of the "agon".¹⁹ When he first meets Reverend Cooper, he begins to understand the links between place, people and heritage: "It was a good feeling to come into a strange town and find a stranger who knew your people. All his life he'd heard the tremor in the word:...But he hadn't known what it meant: links" (231). He begins to take an interest in the stories he had heard from his father and Pilate and only half believed: "Or maybe it was being there in the place where it happened that made it seem so real" (233). The image of his grandfather becomes real as does the importance he had attached to the land. Macon Dead, grandfather, had been the farmer they had all wanted to be, who had changed the wilderness into one of the best farms in the county and had died protecting his farm. His farm, a symbol personified, seemed to have said to the others:

Grab this land! Take it, hold it, my brothers, make it, my brothers, shake it, squeeze it, turn it, twist it, beat it, kick it, kiss it, whip it, stomp it, dig it, plow it, seed it, reap it, rent it, buy it, sell it, own it, build it, multiply it, and pass it on--can you hear me? Pass it on!
(237-8)

While in Danville, Milkman also learns the irrelevance of clock time. Danville, and later more so, Shalimar, preserve the values of the rural South which contrast so strongly with Milkman's ideas from the urban North. In Danville, his watch becomes increasingly useless: "Come back at noon. He could just as easily have said twenty minutes, and now that he was alone, assaulted by what city people regard as raucous silence, he wished he had said five minutes. ...it would be foolish..." (222). The passing of days is as irrelevant as that of hours, the rhythm of life was different: "...but it was supposed to be ready yesterday. ...Milkman waited four days for the car to be ready" (236). In his visit to Circe, chronological time has no meaning, she was so old she was colorless, yet her voice was young. For her, time meant the farm, the family and Macon Dead's children. Milkman reflects: "...as though seventy-two, thirty-two, any age at all, meant nothing whatsoever to her" (243). Before leaving Danville, significantly, his watch ceases to work; city time, the time of the Industrial Revolution where schedules had to

¹⁹ Carabí divides Milkman's journey into 6 phases which also fit into Frye's 3 stages of the quest: Frye's "agon" would include the phases of initiation, alienation and deculturation; the "pathos" contains the steps of confrontation and absorption; the "anagnorisis" includes the final phase of reconciliation. See Carabí, 150.

be met, was of no significance here.

Another step in the process of deculturization is the gradual dispossession of his urban commodities.²⁰ When he arrives to Danville, what strikes the villagers are his clothes, "--and the driver, a black man, showed the same interest in Milkman's clothes that Nephew had shown" (256). As he leaves Circe's house and enters the woods, he has to cross a stream. Being in a hurry, lured by the promise of gold, he does not bother to study where he should cross. He takes off his city wear, leather shoes and socks, to wade the stream. He soon loses his footing and is immersed, as a symbolic baptism or cleansing ritual. However, this first immersion only serves to rid him of some of his urban finery. Yet his descent into the past will mean stepping out of the reified and fetishized relationships, as Willis notes.²¹ However at this point, he is still too obsessed with the gold to learn anything. The subsequent trek through the woods, shows him a different aspect of nature from that of the city park or the "civilized" woods, which were for recreation, or the "pretty pictures" of Mark Twain. "He had no idea that simply walking through trees, bushes, on untrammelled ground could be so hard. Woods always brought to mind City Park, the tended woods on Honore Island where he went for outings as a child and where tiny convenient paths led you through" (252). He was now learning the view of the pilot, of the hidden menaces and difficulties of making his way through the wilderness. He now began to appreciate the labor of his grandfather in clearing the land and farming it. His contact with nature awakens in him new sensitivities and he is capable of a full range of sensual perceptions. In his wet clothes, he reaches the cave: "It was like candy and sex and soft twinkling lights. Like piano music with a few strings in the background" (253). His urban upbringing, nevertheless, with the emphasis on material values, still dominates: "To win. there was nothing like it in the world" (253). He enters the dark cave, as if descending into hell, and finds nothing. As a result of his fright at the bats and his disappointment, he runs. His fine shoes, symbols of his urban commodities, now broken, hinder him, but nature seems to yield, to make things easier as he, still quite unconsciously, is beginning to learn: "Quite suddenly, it seemed to him, he was at the creek again, but upstream where the crossing--about twelve feet here and so shallow he could see the stony bottom--was laid across with boards. ...The woods on the other side had a pathway" (255). Milkman finally leaves Danville, following the trail of the gold to Virginia. But he has already lost many of the

²⁰ Carabí, 251.

²¹ Willis, 272.

material values, that kept him from seeing things. Like the peacock Guitar and he had seen, that could barely fly: "Too much tail".

All that jewelry weighs it down. Like vanity. Can't nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down" (179-80). He has lost his suitcase and toilet accessories, his suit and shirt are torn and his shoes and watch broken. On this bus ride--the contrast with the first one is noticeable--he is beginning to be a "river pilot" and see new meanings in the landscape and geography which has come alive for him: "The low hills in the distance were no longer scenery to him. They were real places that could split your thirty-dollar shoes" (259). He comes to a realization about himself. All the sentimental reasons he had used to justify his search for the gold, were all pretences. He had always wanted to own everything, and solve everything with money, buying happiness; that is what Guitar had tried to tell him. And now he acknowledges it: "There wasn't any gold, but now he knew that all the fine reasons for wanting it didn't mean a thing. The fact was he wanted the gold because it was gold and he wanted to own it. Free" (260).

The "pathos" begins with his accidental arrival in Shalimar. It is ironical that he hadn't given any importance to signs before because "anybody who was interested in Dudberry Point already knew where it was" (228). Yet he is interested in Shalimar but doesn't know where it is and it has no sign. The first indication that he is in a different world is that "The women's hands were empty. ...These women walked as if they were going somewhere, but they carried nothing in their hands" (262). They did not need to carry their accessories, their symbols of belonging with them because they belonged, and they knew it. The values of the Old Plantation South and the roots of the American experience of the Black race were intact in Shalimar. As Angels Carabí explains:

Existe un sentido ancestral de interrelación entre las personas y el lugar que habitan. A diferencia del espíritu del norte, mercantilista y desligado de su historia y de su tierra, el lugar que se habita no se posee, sino que es vivido por sus gentes. El individuo, al ser parte de su entorno, está influenciado por lo ocurrido en el pasado y en el presente. Es necesario desplazarse a la tierra de los antepasados para conectar con las leyendas míticas que tuvieron lugar en el inicio de los tiempos.²²

²² Carabí, 168-9.

This is the spirit that meets Milkman in Shalimar. The women carry nothing, their attitude towards life is not mercantilistic, as Milkman's. They belong and are a part of their geography; Macon Dead owns the land he rents out, but he does not live on it nor is he a part of it. Land is for him a simple commodity and investment. The people in Shalimar contrast sharply with those in the urban North. The initial southern hospitality surprises him: "All that business about southern hospitality was for real. He wondered why black people ever left the South" (263). But it is soon dispelled.

As such, Milkman's arrival presents the confrontation between urban values and rural ones. They start being friendly towards Milkman but then change, as if they had been insulted. "In fact they had been. They looked with hatred at the city Negro who could buy a car as if it were a bottle of whiskey because the one he had was broken. And what's more, who had said so in front of them. He hadn't bothered to say his name, nor ask theirs..." (269). The tension mounts beginning with a banter and reaching a verbal duel, ending in physical violence. Milkman is entering upon his death struggle, decisive for his quest. Just when he is beginning to appreciate the land of his ancestors and its people, his people turn against him: "In his own home town his name spelled dread and grudging respect. But here, in his 'home,' he was unknown, unloved, and damn near killed" (273).

In view of his courage in the fight, the local men decide to subject him to a ritual hunt, in the manner of an initiation rite, and see his reaction. This is the crucial phase of the "pathos". He is made to shed completely his urban attire-protection, even his money, the very symbol of his aim in life, by changing clothes and introduced to the dark, menacing woods to prove himself. The woods are terrifying for Milkman, who still identifies more with white, urban values. However, for the black community, the wilderness is not the reign of terror and evil as portrayed in most anglo fiction, but a place of refuge and of conversion experiences since slavery.²³ He breathlessly tries to

²³ For mainstream American attitudes toward nature and the land see Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1967); Leo Marx, *The Pilot and the Passenger: Essays on Literature, Technology, and Culture in the United States* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988); Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1964); Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York: Vintage Books, 1950); James Oliver Robertson, *American Myth, American Reality* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980); Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment. The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (New York: Atheneum, 1985).

keep up with the hunters but, "At last he surrendered to his fatigue and made the mistake of sitting down..." (278). The exhaustion together with the forboding atmosphere makes him reflect on himself and the purpose of his trip. He realizes his mistakes: "Ignorance, he thought, and vanity" (279), and even goes over his attitude during all of his life: "Apparently he thought he deserved only to be loved--from a distance, though--and given what he wanted. ...Maybe all he was really saying was: I am not responsible for your pain; share your happiness with me but not your unhappiness" (280). He realizes that nothing he has is of any use to him out in this wilderness, "where all a man had was what he was born with, or had learned to use. And endurance. Eyes, ears, nose, taste, touch--and some other sense that he knew he did not have: an ability to separate out, of all the things there were to sense, the one that life itself might depend on" (280-1). At last he is able to perceive that these men communicated with nature: "And if they could talk to animals, and the animals could talk to them, what didn't they know about human beings? Or the earth itself, for that matter" (281). He finally comes to his epiphany, feeling a sudden rush of affection for his people and "really understood" Guitar.(282). He begins to feel the land as a part of him, of his family, as an ancestor: "Down either side of his thighs he felt the sweet gum's surface roots cradling him like the rough but maternal hands of a grandfather" (282). He attempts to listen to what nature is telling him, when his final bout with death takes place: Guitar attacks him from behind. Milkman comes out victoriously, managing to scare Guitar away, since he is now a man, a real match for him. His maturity and victory are reflected in his new relationship with the landscape:

Really laughing, and he found himself exhilarated by simply walking the earth. Walking it like he belonged on it; like his legs were stalks, tree trunks, a part of his body that extended down down down into the rock and soil, and were comfortable there--on the earth and on the place where he walked. And he did not limp. (284)

Milkman is accepted and invited to the ritual skinning of the cat, partaking of the heart. The whole scene is like a litany.

Milkman can now learn to accept his past and his people. He begins to really

For a highly suggestive analysis of geographic metaphors in Afro-American culture see Dixon, *Ride Out the Wilderness*.

want to know who he is, and no longer cares about the gold. He begins to feel that he belonged. "But there was something he felt now--here in Shalimar, and earlier in Danville--that reminded him of how he used to feel in Pilate's house" (296). His sense of place, of geography is growing. There is a meaning to place, something of him belongs there and now he can feel it. It is when he has learned this, that he became whole, losing his limp. His trip South has taken him back to his roots geographically, but also in time. He is eager to discover, not the gold which is now irrelevant, but what his grandfather's name really was and who his grandmother was. His past is a riddle to him, unknown as that of the people he belongs to but from whom he is estranged. He finally finds the answer in the folklore of those people, the people he had tried to deny, in the songs they had handed down, generation to generation; he finds the answer to his identity in the past, as songs are the unwritten history of many marginal cultures. "These children were singing a story about his own people!" (307). He tries to piece the missing parts of his family's story and "He was grinning. His eyes were shining. He was as eager and happy as he had ever been in his life" (308). His quest is almost complete. With the discovery of his ancestors and their relationship to the local geography, history and folklore, Milkman is ready for the full baptismal ritual that will bring his rebirth to a life of maturity, knowledge and responsibility. The baptism is symbolized with a geographic image: "I want to swim!...Come on, let's go swimming. I'm dirty and I want waaaaater!...I need the sea! The whole goddam sea!" (330).

His rebirth, with the mythical overtones, prepares him for the final stage of his quest, that of the "anagnorisis" or the recognition of the hero, and according to Carabí, the reconciliation. He knows that now he can love and accept the responsibility of loving. He returns home, up North to Michigan. But his trip on the bus is very different from the one coming South. Now he is the experienced pilot who knows the hidden menaces, who can "read the book" and see its inner beauty and meaning, not just the "pretty pictures" that the passengers see. He observes the rich variety of the colors of nature and the changes made by the seasons. He is in tune with the land. "He read the road signs with interest now, wondering what lay beneath the names. ...How many dead lives and fading memories were buried in and beneath the names of the places in this country" (333). Milkman now realizes the importance of names and why Pilate carried hers in her ear, they are symbols of one's being, and so is geography: "Pilate had taken a rock from every state she had lived in--because she had lived there. And having lived there, it was hers--and his, and his father's, his grandfather's, his grandmother's. ...Names that bore witness" (333). As a final act of reconciliation, after he accepts his

responsibility for Hagar's death, Milkman takes Pilate "home" to Shalimar, to bury the first Macon Dead, Jake's bones. Milkman and Pilate are accepted in Shalimar as part of the family and the second "anagnorisis" takes place (the first being with Pilate and Macon): "In Shalimar there was general merriment at his quick return, and Pilate blended into the population like a stick of butter in a churn" (339). Jake's bones are buried in Solomon's Leap, next to Ryna's gulch, the "only" son of the song, with his father and mother symbolically designated by features of the land. Pilate leaves her name with her father, and also her life, as Guitar mistakenly shoots her. A bird, the same recurring motif, "dived into the new grave and scooped something shiny in its beak before it flew away. Now he knew why he loved her so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly" (340). And to continue with the bird motif, Milkman, now rid of his vanity and urban accessories, like the peacock, is ready to fly. He meets Guitar in flight, as the phoenix, rising again out of the "ashes" of his race: first his birth out of Robert Stone's death; and now rising out of the "ashes" of Hagar, Jake and Pilate. The acceptance of his past, tied intimately with the land of his ancestors, has enabled him to be born again, having achieved his quest for identity, and now he is able to fly, to fly and be a full person, as his race will be able to fly when it accepts its cultural heritage, and its past.

Song of Solomon is Morrison's carefully drawn map of ancestral landscape that reclaims and resurrects moribund or hibernating personalities.²⁴ Toni Morrison tries to keep alive the culture of the black people. "The novel has to provide the richness of the past as well as suggestions of what the use of it is."²⁵ This novel, as well as others of Toni Morrison, may focus on individuals such as Milkman, Polly, Pecola or Sula, but, as Willis points out,

The salvation of individuals is not the point. Rather these individuals, struggling to reclaim or redefine themselves, are portrayed as epiphenomenal to community and culture; and it is the strength and continuity of the black cultural heritage as a whole which is at stake and being tested.²⁶

Morrison sees the obliterating influence of social change which is affecting black

²⁴ Dixon, 158.

²⁵ Ruas, 238.

²⁶ Willis, 270.

culture and her novels are an attempt to reclaim that culture and the black community. In her interview with LeClair, she comments on the role of the novel for the arising middle class of the industrial revolution; and in the same way she hopes to give meaning to the contradictory values of the traditional tribe and those of the modern city for the arising black middle class, just as music once did for the illiterate black slave. She feels that "place" can give coherence to the dilemma.²⁷ Her use of natural imagery and geographic metaphors represent the rural south which is the reservoir of a culture that has been uprooted by migration and social change. And only by knowing the past, can Milkman, or the black community today, hope to have a future.

Morrison isn't the only writer to call for this return to the past in order to face the future. Another black writer had the same message, James Baldwin. The relationship between the people, their past and the land is echoed in many of his novels: "a landscape is not a landscape at all, merely a reflection of the sensibility of the people who live in it-"; and one must learn to accept one's past and heritage, like Milkman, to become whole: "...I do not know now if one ever sees more than that. If one ever does, it can only be because one has learned to read one's history and resolved to step out of the book."²⁸ In this message transmitted by Milkman's quest, Toni Morrison sees time as geography, the journey to the cultural past is equated with the journey to the land of the ancestors. According to Dixon "She extends the geographic imagery and enriches the acts of deliverance established so far in Afro-American letters."²⁹ The wilderness, the underground and the mountaintop are all reflected, landscapes used symbolically by the slave narratives and continued in Afro-American literature, as Dixon studies. But Morrison has added more. She has incorporated supernatural elements to her geography and to her novel, creating a place for the rich black folklore and mythology, and she has seen the irrelevance of clock time for any true purpose, equating time with something larger, with geography, and with a cultural heritage that modern, urban America threatens to block out and substitute with clock time.

²⁷ Thomas LeClair, "Interview with Toni Morrison," *The New Republic* (Feb. 7, 1981): 28, rpt. in *Entrevistas a Narradores Norteamericanos de Hoy*, eds. Thomas LeClair, Larry McCaffery (Buenos Aires: Grupo Editor Latinoamericano, 1986) 289.

²⁸ James Baldwin, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (New York: Dial Press, 1968) 184, 189.

²⁹ Dixon, 166.

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