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Shifting Identities in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

The characters in Toni Morrison's famous novel *Song of Solomon* cover the whole spectrum of the African American community. While Macon II is completely assimilated and tries to pass as a white man, behaving in many ways like a colonial mimic, his son Milkman starts off imitating values of the white community, only to end up in the deep South discovering his family and communal history. On the other side of the color and identity spectrum in the novel are Guitar Banes, who belongs to the militant wing of the African American struggle for civil rights, and the main female character, Pilate, who represents African Americans in search of their roots in African cultures. The identities of the characters shift as they struggle to reach some definition of who they are and where they belong.

Key words: identities, history of the African American community, *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison

Written in 1977, Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon* reflects a very particular time in the history of the African American community. Disappointed with the Civil Rights Movement, which promised so much and delivered so little, and still reeling in shock at the deaths of leaders such as Medgar Evers, Dr. Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, John F. Kennedy, and Robert Kennedy, African Americans were searching for a new definition of their identity both on the individual and the racial level. Morrison's characters embody different aspects of this search. Their shifting identities delineate an arch of the development of African American history from the 1930s to the 1960s – from the poverty of the Great Depression and Black Codes that enabled racial segregation to the Civil Rights Movement and the rise of the African American

middle class. On another, very important level, this novel also represents the personal journey of Toni Morrison. The novel opens on February 18, 1931, Morrison's birth date, and closes in 1963. In Duvall's opinion, the stages in the life of the main protagonist, Macon Milkman Dead, correspond to the stages in the life of his "real-life double," Toni Morrison:

> Milkman's story stops at the moment of a completed project of self-discovery, authenticity, and connection to his ancestors. … In short, Milkman is represented as having achieved an authentic identity at the very moment when Morrison begins her search for identity through her writing, and he undergoes the same self-examination crucial to other Morrison characters such as Soaphead Church, Sula, Pilate, and subsequently Jadine Childs in *Tar Baby*. (73)

The issue of identity, therefore, in its many different forms, is at the very locus of the novel.

Milkman Dead spends the first thirty-one years of his life in the lap of luxury. The grandson of the first black man in a Midwestern town who became a doctor, Milkman lives comfortably thanks to his grandfather's accumulation of wealth and the financial skills of his father, Macon Dead, who owns several houses and apartments and leases them to black tenants. Both Dr. Foster and Macon embody the upper-class stratum of the African American community, which up to the sixties could climb the social ladder only by copying the white middle class. Thus Dr. Foster lives in a twelve-room house, cultivates the air of a gentleman who refuses to mix with the rest of the black community, and becomes obsessed with the desire to have members of his family who are only light-skinned. But it is very easy to see through the elaborate façade he builds in front of his occupation and family. Neither he nor his patients are ever allowed to enter the city hospital; the only white patients he treats are white paupers who cannot afford any other form of medical aid. Moreover, his daughter Ruth harbors a relationship with him which verges on the brink of incestuous. Despite the fact that he hates his son-in-law

Macon for being black-skinned, he is quick to realize that Macon is wealthy enough to represent a catch for Ruth and a convenient solution to put an end to Ruth's sexual innuendoes.

Although Macon thinks that his father-in-law is the biggest hypocrite in the world for pretending to be white, his investment in acquiring the good graces of the white community is even greater than Doctor Foster's. He comes to the Midwest as a penniless orphan, but thanks to his savvy, he manages to become a real-estate proprietor. This, however, does not happen without consequences. He becomes his own censor, always careful to consider what white people might think of him. This consideration leads to his estrangement from his sister, Pilate, the only person in the world he loved beside his father. He despises her for being a poor, single mother and winemaker and for making it even harder for him to keep up appearances for his white bosses. Since Pilate features in the novel as an embodiment of African roots, Macon's hatred and shame of his sister points to his refusal to acknowledge his race. His abhorrence of his wife is also related to his reluctance to claim his origins. Macon marries Ruth because of her light skin color and prestige of being a doctor's daughter. In their lovemaking he especially enjoys to uncover her skin inch by inch. However, when he finds her on her father's death bed sucking his finger tips, Macon is so thoroughly disgusted that he starts questioning their whole life together, even whether his daughters are really his or his father-in-law's. In his mind, Ruth becomes connected with dirty sexuality and animalistic behavior, which he also relates to black inhabitants of slums who have no control over their lives. He starts hating his wife and his daughters with a vengeance, and for the next thirty years lords over them, stunning them into silence with his abusive behavior. He is a cruel landlord: he evicts poor families and makes his tenants live in horrible living conditions. In that respect, he resembles white people in their lack of care for the needs of the black community, but also black people who sold out to the whites in order to advance in life. In many ways, Macon resembles Homi Bhabha's mimic: he appropriates the behavior of the white community and practices camouflage in order to be accepted and allowed to climb the social ladder. Moreover, both his name and

his family life betray another important aspect of mimicry – its hollowness. Since the gaze of the colonizer and of the colonized always rests on the surface, the essence of the mimicry can never be revealed. According to Bhabha:

> In mimicry, the representation of identity and meaning is rearticulated along the axis of metonymy. As Lacan reminds us, mimicry is like camouflage, not a harmonization of repression of difference, but a form of resemblance, that differs from or defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically. Its threat, I would add, comes from the prodigious and strategic production of conflictual, fantastic, discriminatory 'identity effects' in the play of a power that is elusive because it hides no essence, no "itself." (128)

Morrison is quick to reveal the hollowness of Macon's life just as she does with Dr. Foster. In comparison to Pilate's house, which is full of warmth and song, Macon's house is devoid of any life or light. At times, Macon yearns for some other kind of life, for more connection with his people, for "some ancestor, some lithe young man with onyx skin and legs as straight as cane stalks" (17). His surname, Dead, encapsulates the severance of any ties with his roots. It was given after the Civil War to his father, Macon I, who was an ex-slave, by a drunken white soldier. Thus with one stroke of the pen, the entire previous history of the family, which the names embody, was canceled. Using the Dead family as an example, Morrison points to the process the slaves had undergone after being kidnapped from Africa. Their identity was stripped away when their names were taken from them, as well as their families, their language and their culture. A similar process of misnaming happened during Reconstruction. Freed slaves either kept their master's surname (having none of their own to suggest their origin), or they were given names by their liberators. The significance of names features largely in the history of the African American community because it shows the level of its autonomy. One needs only remember the deliberation on choosing a new name described in the slave narratives written by Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and Booker T. Washington to realize how crucial it was for ex-slaves to be able to fashion

a new name according to their wishes. In the 1960s, the African American community's search for different modes of identity was once again reflected in the search for names. Important figures in African American political and cultural life like Malcolm X, Elijah Mohammad, and Amiri Baraka renounced their slave names, i.e., the names given to their families during slavery, and adopted Muslim names in an attempt to distance themselves from Anglo-American identity and forge a new one. The search for the meaning of the family name captured in the story of four generations of the Dead family illustrates this larger search for black identity. In Cowart's opinion,

> the larger significance of the theme of names and naming complements the theme of history. True names are indispensable for a sense of identity, that great goal of all who, when their humanity is denied, must struggle for a sense of their own value as human beings. To know oneself and one's real worth, one needs at least to know one's name. (99)

Morrison uses dramatic events in the life of Milkman's paternal grandfather to portray a crucial period in American history during and immediately after the Civil War, when black slaves thought that their hour of freedom had finally arrived. Unfortunately, they were soon disappointed. After Lincoln's assassination and the advent of the era of Reconstruction, liberated slaves did not get 40 acres of land and a mule, as Lincoln had promised, which would enable them to build new lives. Thus, ironically, Macon's beautiful farm is called Lincoln's Heaven, and his horse, Lincoln. Just like many of the black people at the time who had managed to rise above poverty, Macon is killed by members of a rich white family in front of his children, who are scarred for life. Macon II resolves never to love anybody the way he loved his father and concentrates all his efforts on amassing a fortune, something his father was never allowed to do. The killing of Macon I has profound effects on the black community, as well. For them, Macon is a larger-than-life hero who started with ten leased acres of forest, which he cleared and turned into fertile soil and within a year acquired ten more. His feat captures the elation of freed

slaves, their yearning to claim America for the first time as theirs and not as a foreign land to which they were brought in bondage. He showed them what they can be and thus features in the novel as the personification of the American Dream. His achievement reflects all the potential of African Americans after the Civil War that was so cruelly blighted. Thanks to his efforts, they can hear the land speaking to them in what can be considered a manifesto of marginalized communities who are seeking their rightful place in the U.S.: "We live here. On this planet, in this nation, in this country right here. Nowhere else! We got a home in the rock, don't you see! Nobody starving in my home; nobody crying in my home, and if I got a home you got one too!" (237). Therefore, with Macon's death, the dream dies in every black person in his community, but in the country as well. His killers walk away unpunished, Black Codes segregating the black and white communities are enforced and nothing changes for the next hundred years. Morrison is personally invested in this episode, since her grandfather suffered a similar fate. His eighty acres of land were taken from him by whites, and as his life was under threat, he was forced to move from the South to the North just as Macon's children do.

Macon's grandson, Macon III, however, like many young African Americans is completely unaware of this painful legacy. Following his father's example, he grows up alienated from the black community and hating his Aunt Pilate for her poverty and unpolished appearance. More importantly, he despises his name, surname, and nickname, which points to his deep-seated ambivalence toward his racial identity. This all changes when he meets Pilate, "the woman who had as much to do with his future as she had his past" (35). She looks like a tall, black tree, feeds Milkman a perfectly cooked boiled egg and shows him the sky. For the first time, he is perfectly happy. Pilate starts telling him stories from the family's past, enabling him to claim his name and his ancestry. With her songs, food, and belief in other-worldly phenomena, such as ghosts, she imperceptibly connects him to his African legacy.

However, Milkman's strongest link to the black community is his best friend, Guitar, who serves in the novel as Milkman's mirror image. If Dr. Foster and Macon are on one end of the spectrum, then Guitar is surely on the

other. He grows up in the South, surrounded by an extended family. After his father is killed in a factory owned by white people, the family does not receive any compensation and moves to the North. Guitar is thus one of many orphans in the novel whose leaving of family land and tradition is necessitated by the white people's violence. However, unlike Macon II, Guitar does not turn to money to compensate for his pain, nor does he become alienated from his community. He grows up on the streets of the black ghetto and knows all its inhabitants, their language, and the origins of their names. He knows how to address them, trade jokes, or show respect. Yet he does not go unscathed. His hatred leads him to become a member of the Seven Days, a militant black organization which selects white victims similar to black ones killed by whites and murders them in a similar way. He explains to Milkman that he cannot just sit and watch black people getting killed. He believes in retaliation and keeping the balance even. The Seven Days capture another important piece of African American history. It was founded in the 1920s, after many black soldiers, who participated in the First World War and experienced a different way of life in Europe without racial segregation, came home in the South and refused to tolerate the denigration of blacks any longer. Their attitudes led to a series of murders and lynchings of black people in an effort by the white community to intimidate blacks and keep the status quo. Morrison creates the Seven Days to show that blacks did not take racial crimes lying down and to emphasize an inherent danger of the repeated violence of the white community which breeds violence among African Americans. Other African American writers, like Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, also exposed this vicious circle of violence in their novels. But Morrison, at the same time, manages to capture another historical moment. In the 1960s, Guitar's logic echoes the arguments of Malcolm X, Bobby Seal, Stokely Carmichael and other leaders of various organizations which gathered around the idea of Black Power, black self-reliance and the right of black people to defend themselves against white violence and racism. They rejected Dr. Martin Luther King's strategy of non-violence as inefficient and tolerant of white dominance. Morrison was well aware of the arguments of the Black Power leaders, since Stokely Carmi-

chael was her student while she taught at Howard University. She is quick to show, however, the underside of militant movements. When Milkman tells Guitar that random killing of innocent white people makes the members of Seven Days equal to white murderers, Guitar is deeply offended. Nevertheless, randomness indicates alienation from the whole human race. The goal of the members of the Seven Days is not to take revenge on those who killed black people and were acquitted by white juries, rather it is to kill any white person. Their weapons are silence and time, and they have no agenda to scare white people with their murders or even make them known. Guitar insists that they are guided only by their love for the black community, but it quickly becomes apparent that arbitrary murders make them unhinged. The novel opens with the suicide of one of the members, Robert Smith. Porter, another one, also tries to kill himself and later quits the organization. From an impassioned young man, Guitar turns into a deranged serial killer. Moreover, false argumentation behind the Seven Days is exposed in its treatment of women. For the members, black women are just objects, and they do not want them to be possessed by white men. In that respect, their behavior mirrors white murderers who lynch black men under the guise of protecting white women. In Cowart's opinion,

> Members of these organizations espoused violence to acquire political power – and sexism to recover or reconstitute black manhood. Ron Karenga, for example, openly preached the idea that the role of black women was properly to'complete' or 'complement' black men. … Morrison's point is unmistakable: Violence by its own nature fails to discriminate; it rebounds on the heads of the perpetrators and their people. She allows the reader a certain amount of sympathy and even satisfaction at the idea of secret militancy, but gradually she reveals the real cost of such short-term gratification. (103)

Morrison also focuses on the gap between rich and poor in the African American community. While the poor are heavily invested in the racial struggle, the rich do not get involved, since their interests are not endangered. Thus, despite his friendship with Guitar and lessons about black militancy,

Milkman still largely functions as a separate unit, especially in relation to other African Americans. Although American history is at a turning point, Milkman does not understand why discussions about John F. Kennedy and Elijah Mohammad are important. He does not stop to consider the consequences of the struggle of African Americans to win civil rights because he has never encountered any racial oppression. Listening to other black men trading stories of the insults, humiliations, and beatings they suffered under the rule of white people, Milkman is bored since he does not have any such stories. When all of Southside erupts in anger at the brutal killing of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till, who dared to whistle at a white woman, Milkman remains impassive. Symbolically, while all blacks are rushing to Southside to discuss news with each other, Milkman is the only one in the streets who moves in a different direction. He is aware that "his life is pointless, aimless and that it was true that he did not concern himself an awful lot about other people. There was nothing he wanted bad enough to risk anything for, inconvenience himself for" (107).

Milkman takes a plane to Virginia, retracing Pilate's journey to the North. Return to the South has an almost ritualistic, mythological dimension. In the airplane, Milkman is exhilarated, free from all the constraints in his life, mistakes he has made, people he has hurt. On the surface, the purpose of his trip is to find gold that Macon and Pilate found in a cave where they escaped after their father had been killed. But as it turns out, Milkman recovers a "treasure" in the form of a lost past, a lost myth, a lost name (Cowart 97). Milkman arrives in a small southern black town where everybody knows his father and grandfather. He is able to claim his family name for the first time, to enjoy sharing stories about his family. He confronts his fears of black women personified by witches when he meets Circe, an ancient woman who helps him by revealing another piece of the puzzle: his grandfather's and grandmother's real names. He also finds out that his grandmother Sing was an Indian and resolves to learn more about her and his grandfather Jake. In Wilentz's opinion:

> The American South, in spite of its iniquitous history of racial segregation and slavery, has become for many African American writers a source of heritage, one's familial home. This may seem, and perhaps is, ironic, but the fact remains that this is where Afro-America began and where the relationship to one's African roots is the strongest. Morrison is no exception, and Milkman's trip south – this time to Virginia – finally leads him to an understanding of himself, his family, and his culture. Milkman's growing comprehension that rural life differs extensively from the life he has known in the city starts when he visits his grandfather's community in Pennsylvania. … Milkman's appreciation that people may be more important than material goods, that family and community are strengths and that knowing one's heritage is a power separate from the power of money affects him in both conscious and subconscious ways. (124-25)

Milkman gets lost in the forest and sits under a tree. He feels its maternal branches cradling him as a grandfather which symbolizes his fusion with nature and his heritage. It seems to Milkman, as he sinks his finger into the soil, that he can understand men like his father, Guitar, and others he met, who have been so hurt by white people that they were maimed and lost this connection with the land. He can feel the earth talking to him, and suddenly he perceives the danger he is in precisely at the moment when Guitar tries to strangle him. Guitar's carefully hidden resentment towards Milkman for leading a protected life rises to the surface during their quest for gold. Convinced that Milkman is trying to cheat him out of Pilate's gold, Guitar becomes obsessed with killing Milkman to even the score between them. As he fights for his last breaths of air, Milkman surrenders to death. His neck muscles relax and allow for enough space between the cord for him to draw another breath, grab a gun and shoot. Guitar escapes. Milkman thus literary rises from the dead and enters a new life. He stops limping because, once he has faced his shortcomings, he is on the path to finding his true self. As he remembers Guitar's arguments, but also his attempt on his own life, Milkman realizes that Guitar has gone mad with hatred. He concludes that the four black girls who were killed by the bomb planted by whites in Alabama "deserved better than

to be avenged by that hawk-headed raven-skinned Sunday man who included in his blood sweep four innocent white girls and one innocent black man" (334).

Rejecting the corrosiveness of Guitar's teachings, Milkman instead turns to Pilate's belief that a man is always responsible for the life he takes because life is precious and people are responsible for it. Milkman's awareness of the community, the culture, and the natural world around him leads him to reassess his family as well as his own selfishness. He sees all of his extended family in a different light and is sympathetic to both his father's distorted ambition and his mother's pathetic helplessness. His understanding encompasses both those he has hurt and ignored and those who have been out to "kill" him (Wilentz 125-26). Milkman takes Pilate back to Virginia to bury the bones of her father and lay to rest both his body, and metaphorically the painful history of the Dead family. Although his retelling of what he has learned does not lead to family reconciliation and reunion, there is some comfort both for Macon and Pilate in the knowledge that their ancestors live on in stories and names of places such as Solomon's Leap and Ryna's Gulch. When Pilate is killed by Guitar's bullet intended for her nephew, Milkman honors her by reinventing Solomon's song. Instead of saying "Solomon, don't leave me here, cotton balls to choke me, buckra's arms to yoke me," he sings "Sugargirl don't leave me here" (340), inserting thus the matrilinear line in the previously patriarchal one. Milkman realizes that, of the people he knew, Pilate was the only one who could fly without leaving the ground. She makes the ultimate connection between love for the family and community by saying as she is dying, "I wish I'd known more people. I would of loved 'em all. If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more" (340).

Knowing that Guitar is on the opposite hill waiting to shoot him, Milkman offers him his life. Guitar acknowledges his courage by calling him his "main man" (341) thus also finally acknowledging the journey Milkman has travelled from an immature boy to a man Guitar has to respect even if he wants to kill him. Milkman leaps of the cliff, knowing just like his forefather Solomon, that if you surrender to the air, you could ride it. In this flight, he

lays claim to his roots, honoring Solomon and accepting his perception of reality. Of course, it might be said that Milkman, desperate with grief after Pilate's murder, actually commits suicide, just like the Africans who apparently leaped from slave ships and flew back to Africa, but only killed themselves by jumping into the ocean. Morrison does not escape this possible interpretation, since the novel opens with Smith imitating flying men and jumping off a building to his death. But for her, flying is more than just wishful thinking. She rather makes her readers choose whether they are going to adopt a Western view of reality and believe that all these people committed suicide, or whether they are going to allow for another interpretation, for an African outlook which would imbue some men with the amazing ability to fly and thus defy the imprisonment of slavery. As Wilentz puts it, "Morrison compels us to question Western concepts of reality and uncover perceptions of reality and ways of interpretation other than those imposed by the dominant culture" (61). Yet Milkman's flight contains in itself another aspect. If Guitar represents the black ghetto, with all its violence, desperation, and wildness, but also its joy, humor, and abandonment, then it could be said that, by leaping towards him, Milkman accepts both sides of his personality – the one that belongs to his father and the other one that belongs to Guitar, Hagar, and ultimately Pilate. Just as Guitar accepts both his names – the nickname given to him by the black community and surname given to his family by the white master – Milkman at the end learns to live with the conflicting sides of his identity. Once he can embrace Hagar and Guitar as his bane (as Guitar's name itself suggests), Milkman does not have anything to weigh him down. He calls Guitar his brother man and surrenders to the air. At the end of the novel, flight does not serve as a means of escape from the brutality of slavery or meanness of poverty, but as a celebration of belief in heritage and freedom of choice.

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