### "Solomon's Leap": Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon

Chapter	· January 2016		
DOI: 10.1057/978-1-137-58171-6_3			
CITATIONS		READS	
0		200	
1 author:			
1 autilot.			
	Leila Kamali		
	University of Liverpool		
	15 PUBLICATIONS 4 CITATIONS		
	SEE PROFILE		

# "Solomon's Leap": Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon

Toni Morrison's 1977 novel Song of Solomon illustrates the relationship with the time of narrative language, which is distinctive of African American fictional treatment of the cultural memory of Africa in the late twentieth-century period, and which I argue marks a significant contrast with the treatment of this theme in Black British fiction. In this chapter, I argue that there is a periodic stoppage of speech communicated in the narrative language of Morrison's novel, and that this is expressive of an approach toward a cultural memory of Africa fraught with the difficulty of finding ways to speak of Africa outside of the "othering" context of Euro-American imperialism.<sup>1</sup> In this novel, there is a silence, a curtailment of speech that occurs at the center of the remembrance of Africa—as a trope, it is inextricably attached to conditions of belonging in America, and its narration in language frequently encompasses moments of silence or speechlessness which indicate the reservation that occurs when approaching the expression of the cultural memory of Africa. The cultural memory of Africa is evoked, in these veiled moments, in ways that signal key historical figures and events from the Civil Rights movement and its relationship with Africa, culminating in a fascinating commentary upon the "other" history envisioned by Malcolm X shortly before his death, in which a fraternal sensibility provides the possibility of escape from the patriarchalist chokehold of the imperialist's language. This cultural memory, however, appears most clearly at a level of narrative which does not bear a linear

relationship with language, and which encompasses a rich and fluid communicability with the ancestral past. Thus is presented a powerful contrast with the way in which the cultural memory of Africa enters narrative language in Black British fiction, where the possibilities of narrative begin to emerge not through an engagement with the ancestral past, as such, because that past has been so heavily "deleted" by Britain's fiction of itself, but by the ways in which the past may be rewritten in the future, through a future-oriented textuality.

At the beginning of Song of Solomon, Morrison presents us with an image of a man flying through the air. The novel opens with "the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance agent['s] promise[...]" to "take off from Mercy and fly away on my own wings", as the agent Robert Smith "leap[s] from [the] cupola" of the "charity hospital", in the fictional Michigan town of Mercy.<sup>2</sup> Smith's flight recalls a complex perspective on the notion of flight to Africa in African American cultural memory, a history that speaks both to a common trope in folklore of African peoples throughout the Americas, the story of the "flying African", and to the entry of African Americans into aviation in the early twentieth century. Morrison reads the cultural memory of Africa in this novel through an extended focus upon the nature of Black male flying heroes, and I argue in this chapter that this focus speaks of Morrison's concerns with the cultural heroes of Black nationalism. The insurance agent's flight is figured long before Morrison's protagonist Milkman identifies the story of a "flying African" in his own ancestral past.3

The trope of the flying African is a cultural memory which, Olivia Smith Storey notes, "specifically refers to African born slaves flying from slavery in the Americas". It was first recorded in print in *Drums and Shadows*, a compilation of interviews with the Gullah residents of the Georgia coastal Sea Islands, whose cultural memory of Africa was retained in language for longer than in many African American communities. One of the testimonies, given by an individual named Prince Sneed of White Bluff, reads as follows:

Muh gran say ole man Waldburg down on St. Catherine own some slabes wut wuzn climatize an he wuk um hahd an one day dey wuz hoein in duh fiel an duh dribuh come out an two un um wuz unuh a tree in duh shade, and duh hoes wuz wukin by demsef. Duh dribuh say 'Wut dis?' an dey say, 'Kum buba yali kum buba tambe, Kum kunka yali kum kunka tambe', quick

like. Den dey rise off duh groun an fly away. Nobody ebuh see um no mo. Some say dey fly back tuh Africa. Muh gran see dat wid he own eye.<sup>5</sup>

Morrison comments: "My meaning is specific: it is about Black people who could fly. That was always part of the folklore of my life; flying was one of our gifts."6 The trope is repeated in a number of late twentiethcentury African American and Latin American novels, short stories, musical recordings, and films, but also "manifest[s] a recurrent pattern of imagery that is more vast and less knowable in oral genres". This trope most often figures "[t]he African, the American born or Creole, and the Overseer [...] look[ing] at each other from the three points of a triangle [...], examining and defining each other. [...] The African [...] runs away from a future limited to hard labor and to the psychological terror of becoming accustomed to slavery, a future represented by the Creole figure in the trope."8 In the traditional story of the flying African, the hopes and fears of the community seem to be pinned upon the figure in flight, who embodies the radical possibility of escaping enslavement in the New World, to "return" to a distant Africa whose presence in cultural memory appears and disappears according to how much "acclimatized" the African American community becomes to the watchful, frequently demeaning, gaze of a white hegemony. Thus the trope of the flying African is peculiarly representative not only of the cultural memory of Africa in African American tradition, but also of the way in which that gaze has been singularly caught within the troubled questions of belonging for African Americans in America.

In the same uncanny way that Walter Benjamin's "well-known 'angel of history' might be hovering in Song of Solomon", the figure of Morrison's insurance agent in flight recalls the myth of the flying African only as an ancient forerunner to a more modern phenomenon—that of African Americans entering into aviation in the early twentieth century.9 Both instances of flight evoke the sad feeling of hope cut through with hopelessness, epitomized by the notion that "African Americans hoped to enter this new arena [of aviation], in part to put to rest society's deeply held belief that Blacks were an inferior race". <sup>10</sup> This is an emotional tone which is particularly resonant with Abraham Chapman's description of the African American predicament:

The Negro in America has been denied a proper location and place, has been in perpetual motion searching for a proper place he could call home.

During slavery, the flight to freedom was the goal—the search for a home, a haven, the search for a possibility of secure belonging. After the Civil War, and to this day, this historical reality has expressed itself in the great migration from the South to the North and the patterns of flight and migration which are inherent in the spatial and plot movements in the novels of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin. This opposite reality, of uprooting and dislocation, gave the Negro writer, to use the language of [Cleanth] Brooks, a different "special focus upon the world", a focus of *denial* of a place, which we hear so clearly as far back as in the spirituals.<sup>11</sup>

The "possibility of secure belonging", set against the "opposite reality", of "denial of a place", is the dynamic which informs both the trope of the Flying African, and the history of African Americans in aviation. A deep pathos emerges from this dynamic juxtaposition of the intense exaltation of an imagined escape from oppression, to a longed-for "home" or experience of triumph, with the futile reminder of ongoing and insurmountable racial inequity in the USA.

If the legend of the flying African imagines the flyer as hero, African Americans entering aviation in the twentieth century provided ample opportunity for that hallowed cultural memory to be opened to ridicule by racist white patriarchy. It is thus that the cultural memory of Africa in this novel is so thoroughly imbricated in the dismissive discourse of racism that its very narration in language becomes a tremendously embattled negotiation. The first Black aviators emerged in the 1910s, and Morrison's narrative makes allusion to the first (white) aviator, Charles Lindbergh, who crossed the Atlantic in 1927, and comments that "Mr. Smith didn't draw as big a crowd as Lindbergh had four years earlier", and yet also recalls the tragicomic figure of the aviator Hubert F. Julian, "dubbed the 'Lindbergh of His Race'", who "in the spring of 1924, [...] announced he would pilot a plane alone from New York to Liberia". 12 The entry of African Americans into aviation during this period was frequently narrated in the national press at the time, in terms which evoked Black nationalist hopes of settlement in Africa, and not always in the most flattering light. Smith's "wide blue silk wings curved forward around his chest" seem to recall the occasion of Julian's "first leap over Harlem, [when] the daring parachutist had worn a bright red devil suit, complete with horns and tail", and as "Julian in many respects had become merged in the public mind with [Marcus] Garvey", who was similarly mocked for his "donning of academic robes". 13 As "white journalists [...] cast even [Julian's] most



Fig. 3.1 Hubert Fauntleroy Julian, the African American aviator known as "The Black Eagle", in France, on his way to London to enter the London to Melbourne air races, 1934. ©Bettman/Corbis

heroic exploits in terms of updated minstrel comedy", and after his highly publicized 1924 attempt to fly from New York "around the world and to Africa" ended as the "plane ... 'hopped off' for four miles and then 'flopped' right down into Flushing [B]ay", even the Black newspapers made comments such as "No old boat and no defective airplane will ever take them to Africa—or to Flushing Bay (Fig. 3.1)".14

This battle with the belittling and emasculating forces of white patriarchy plays an instrumental hand in a history which protagonist Milkman discovers when he travels South and learns about his grandfather Macon Dead, who "had come out of nowhere, as ignorant as a hammer and broke as a convict", who "with nothing but free papers, a Bible, and a pretty Black-haired wife", had managed to cultivate "one of the best farms in Montour County. A farm that [his community remembers] colored their lives like a paintbrush and spoke to them like a sermon". 15 Again, the sheer joy of triumph over adversity is glimpsed as the message which Macon Dead's farm seems to impart to his African American community is this:

Here, this here, is what a man can do if he puts his mind to it and his back in it. [...] We live here. On this planet, in this nation, in this county right here. Nowhere else! We got a home in this rock, don't you see! [...] Grab it. Grab this land! $^{16}$ 

These words echo those of a traditional Negro spiritual called "I Gotta Home in Dat Rock", which is cited by Chapman to show that the tension between security and insecurity in the American landscape is a "theme [which] is expressed time and again in [...] different spirituals". The poignancy that is felt in this song is similar to that which is seen as the story of Macon Dead unfolds to reveal his ultimate defeat by whites: "But they shot the top of his head off and ate his fine Georgia peaches. And even as boys these men began to die and were dying still." Yet even as the men tell stories, "they came alive [...], they hooted with joy". Memory of the African American past may be suffused with sadness, but can at least, it seems, be sung or spoken about. When the same forces converge upon a glimpse toward a "return to Africa", even if that return is figured only symbolically, the narration becomes fraught with moments of speechlessness.

The flying man Robert Smith is shown in *Song of Solomon* to have been known by his community—"He came to their houses twice a month to collect one dollar and sixty-eight cents", but like Benjamin's speechless angel, his presence is apparently shrouded in silence—he "said nothing in church but an occasional 'Amen'. He never beat anybody up and he wasn't seen after dark, so they thought he was probably a nice man."<sup>20</sup> Even in her critical commentary upon the novel, in "Unspeakable Worlds Unspoken", Morrison seems to suggest that Smith's flight is accompanied by a failure of language:

The note [Robert Smith] leaves asks for forgiveness. It is tacked on his door as a mild invitation to whomever might pass by, but it is not an advertisement. It is an almost Christian declaration of love as well as humility of one who was not able to do more.<sup>21</sup>

As Smith's silent flight leaves memories of "return" to Africa figured, but not openly named, the notion that Smith also regards his community with a sense that he was "not able to do more" is implied, and Smith's few words appear as a sign of language which is traumatized by the past, and cannot fully narrate the historical memory toward which it gestures.

As the novel opens by remembering the basic trope of the Flying African, it does not explicitly narrate a link to that memory. While the possibility

of the mythical flight's African destination is mentioned by Prince Sneed in his rendition of the oral history, Morrison's opening tableau mentions only "the other side of Lake Superior" as Smith's destination, and even in her own separate critical commentary upon the novel, Morrison claims that Smith's "flight [...] toward asylum" may be toward "Canada, or freedom, or home, or the company of the welcoming dead". 22 If the novel is, as John N. Duvall would have it, "obsessed with names and naming", Morrison's opening scene is nevertheless characterized by a clear reluctance to name any memory of Africa, the narrative paying a great deal of attention, instead, to the "half a hundred or so people gathered there" to watch Smith's flight, from the "unemployed", to the "very young children", to the "dark-jacketed business and personnel clerks". 23 If this novel's "favoured ontology" is, as Linden Peach alleges, "distinctly African", the figure of Robert Smith's flight is representative of the novel's tendency to remember the trope of the flying African in such a way as to make any associated memory of Africa entirely indistinct.<sup>24</sup>

Commenting on an earlier recorded version of the trope of the Flying African, Julius Lester's "People Who Could Fly", Michael Awkward notes that "[A] young witch doctor is himself struck by an overseer [and then] instructs "Everyone" to escape: "He uttered the strange word, and all of the Africans dropped their hoes, stretched out their arms, and flew away, back to their home, back to Africa." Awkward comments:

What is striking about this traditional version of the myth, particularly in comparison to its updating in Song of Solomon, is the communally beneficial nature of the witch doctor's employment of the (liberating Black) word. [...] In Song of Solomon, the empowered Afro-American's flight [...] is a solitary one; [...] the liberating Black word—is not shared with the tribe.<sup>25</sup>

Morrison, Awkward suggests, offers "a radically transformed version of this legend which suggests the immense, and in many respects injurious, changes that have occurred over the course of the history of Blacks in America". 26 This "change" which Morrison's text embodies in the approach toward remembering a mythical return to Africa, then, is made visible through a curtailment of language, a closure of the capacity to name.

Morrison uses the memory of African American entry into aviation, like her reworking of the myth of the flying African, to make commentary upon the negotiation of African American community in the Civil Rights era by charismatic Black patriarchal leaders, and the ways in which a "liberating Black word" may fail to be "shared with the tribe". In a scene in which Milkman, at the age of 13, is thrown out of "Feather's pool hall" with his friend Guitar, for being "Macon Dead's boy"<sup>27</sup>:

The half-dozen men there playing pool turned around at the sound of Feather's voice. Three of them were air force pilots, part of the 332nd Fighter Group. Their beautiful hats and gorgeous leather jackets were carefully arranged on chairs. Their hair was cut close to the skull; their shirt cuffs were turned neatly back on their forearms; their white scarves hung in snowy rectangles from their hip pockets. Silver chains glistened at their necks and they looked faintly amused as they worked chalk into the tips of their cues <sup>28</sup>

These men represent African American aviators during the Second World War, who are described by Von Hardesty and Dominick Pisano as follows:

Between 1941 and 1945, the "Tuskegee Experiment", as the training of Black fighter pilots became known, was proof that Blacks in great numbers could be trained and mobilized for the sophisticated task of combat flying. In the air war over Europe, the 99th Fighter Squadron joined three other all-Black fighter units to compose the 332nd Fighter Group.<sup>29</sup>

Morrison presents these pilots in clearly admiring terms, which speaks of the sense of excitement which she claims to associate with the notion of Black male "flight":

That has always been to me one of the most attractive features about Black male life. I guess I'm not suppose to say that. But the fact that they would split in a minute just delights me. It's part of that whole business of breaking ground, doing the other thing.<sup>30</sup>

The sense of excitement represented by Black male instances of leaving the tribe, and thus serving as examples of hope being triumphant, speaks to the fact that the Tuskegee Experiment was conducted in a climate where "those in charge both expected and wanted African Americans to fail". Indeed, as the young Guitar and Milkman encounter "the owners of the barbershop, Railroad Tommy and Hospital Tommy", and Guitar complains to them that Feather "wouldn't even let me have a bottle of beer", Railroad Tommy gives an exquisite litany of "some other stuff you are not going to have", and finishes with 32

"and you can join the 332nd if you want to and shoot down a thousand German planes all by yourself and land in Hitler's backyard and whip him with your own hands, but you never going to have four stars on your shirt front, or even three [...]"

Guitar opened his eyes wide with horror and grabbed his throat. "You breaking my heart!"

"Well, now. That's something you will have—a broken heart." Railroad Tommy's eyes softened, but the merriment in them died suddenly.<sup>33</sup>

Railroad Tommy reflects, as Philip Page argues, "the pervasive sense of denial of access, hope, rights, and privileges that dominates the Black community"34; the knowledge that regardless of what the African American airmen might achieve, the possibility of a sense of "secure belonging" will never be available to them. With the voicing of this painful truth, Railroad Tommy's speech, appropriately enough, falters and dries up. While the image of Black aviators, figuratively linked to the memory of flight to Africa, can inspire deep admiration and hope, such hopes are frequently and painfully dashed by the realities of oppression and inequality suffered by the majority of African Americans, and not addressed by the flying hero.

### "THE WHOLE TRUTH": NARRATING AFRICAN AMERICAN AND AFRICAN PASTS

Morrison draws attention to the relationship between signs (both linguistic and symbolic) and historical memory in this novel as highly problematic, a difficulty of narrative continuity frequently appearing between the two. In the novel's opening scene, what accompanies Smith's flight instead of a named memory of Africa, or even a "liberating Black word" issued by the flyer, is a "singing lady"'s lyric: "Sugarman cut across the sky/Sugarman gone home...". 35 This song snippet appears early in the novel without any context; its orator, who we later discover is the protagonist Milkman's aunt Pilate, is described as wearing "a knitted navy cap" 36 and is "wrapped [...] up in an old quilt instead of a winter coat". 37 Pilate has a "brass box dangling from her ear", 38 her name "copied [...] out of the Bible [and] folded up in that earring", 39 and as Anne Pankhurst argues, this "earring [as] the means of identifying Pilate", can be understood "as a metonymic means to identify a person". 40 Metonymy may also be used to describe the way in which the insurance agent's flight is associated with the snippet of a story told by Pilate's song, which is "listened [to] as though it were the helpful and defining piano music in a silent movie". 41 Pilate's name is "housed" in her earring, and the novel goes on to show that she carries around a bag of bones without fully understanding whose bones they are. As in Reed's novel, the relationship between language and memory in Song of Solomon may well be imagined to correspond with Kristeva's notion of the semiotic. Susan Huddleston Edgerton, in her critique of Morrison's later novel Beloved, draws upon this realm where "the semiotic and the Symbolic are in a particular (Kristevan) dialectical relationship to one another", and comments that the power of the semiotic is that it "threatens the Symbolic order by threatening to do away with difference. The one becomes the other and the word becomes the thing". 42 Morrison has commented that "I want [the reader] to respond on the same plane as an illiterate or preliterate reader would", 43 and Song of Solomon is constantly negotiating a realm of knowledge which is conscious, which is continuous with language, but which does not always enter into that which is named. Morrison uses language to gesture to that space of knowledge, which I argue is a territory we could ascribe to a "memory of Africa", and I suggest here the reasons why she takes this nonlinear approach to signification.

Early in the novel, Morrison throws down the gauntlet for her questing hero Milkman, with his father Macon's sad contemplation of a lost ancestral connection: "Surely, he thought, he and his sister had some ancestor, some lithe young man with onyx skin and legs as straight as cane stalks, who had a name that was real. [...] But who this lithe young man was, and where his cane-stalk legs carried him from or to, could never be known. No. Nor his name."44 This wished-for onyx-skinned ancestor is endowed with sufficient ambiguity for him to represent either an Afro-Southern or an African past, and as Milkman journeys into the southern past, he finds that the memory of where his ancestor Solomon flew *from* is triumphantly signaled, as "the whole damn town is named after him". 45 By contrast, the question of where his legs might have carried him to remains, by the end of the novel, only half-answered. If Milkman discovers, in the South, "Names that bore witness", 46 the witnessing that is being done is largely of an American history of hardship and survival—that memory of Africa, which defines the ever-present trope of flight, remains largely unnamed. Similarly, as Pilate is described at one point "decid[ing] how she wanted to live", 47 we are told that "Her mind traveled crooked streets and aimless goat paths", 48 in a phrase which is a clear echo of a line from Jean Toomer's novel Cane: "The Dixie Pike has grown from a goat path in

Africa."49 Yet as recourse is made to information both intertextual and extratextual to suggest Pilate's Africanness, it is noticeable that Toomer's explicit reference to Africa is, in Morrison's text, omitted, leaving a phrase which, like "true to the palm oil that flowed in her veins", 50 is suggestive rather than descriptive of Africanness.

When Milkman journeys to the South on a quest for the gold he imagines to be his family "inheritance", what he discovers instead is a history of his ancestral past, revealed to him through pieces of stories about a half-Indian grandmother called Sing, and the "flying African" Solomon himself, through "real names of people, places, and things. Names that had meaning."51 Morrison might almost have placed the terms "real" and "meaning" here as a tease to her questing reader, as what follows does not resemble what Fredric Jameson describes as the "temporal unification of past and future with one's present" through "the sentence, as it moves along its hermeneutic circle through time", 52 but is something altogether more remarkable:

Names that bore witness. Macon Dead, Sing Byrd, Crowell Byrd, Pilate, Reba, Hagar, Magdalene, First Corinthians, Milkman, Guitar, Railroad Tommy, Hospital Tommy, Empire State (he just stood around and swayed), Small Boy, Sweet, Circe, Moon, Nero, Humpty-Dumpty, Blue Boy, Scandinavia, Quack-Quack, Jericho, Spoonbread, Ice Man, Dough Belly, Rocky River, Gray Eve, Cock-a-Doodle-Doo, Cool Breeze, Muddy Waters, Pinetop, Jelly Roll, Fats, Leadbelly, Bo Diddley, Cat-Iron, Peg-Leg, Son, Shortstuff, Smoky Babe, Funny Papa, Bukka, Pink, Bull Moose, B.B., T-Bone, Black Ace, Lemon, Washboard, Gatemouth, Cleanhead, Tampa Red, Juke Boy, Shine, Staggerlee, Jim the Devil, Fuck-Up, and Dat Nigger.<sup>53</sup>

With this litany of names, Morrison gives a palpable sense of a sweep of history spanning African American life in the Southern states of America, through the Great Migration, and into the Northern towns, a history in which, as the First World War led "northern industry [...] on a massive campaign to recruit Black workers[,] emigration from the Deep South jumped from 200,000 in the decade 1890–1900 to half a million in 1910–1920", and grew "during the twenties and thirties" to "about 1,300,000", until "by 1940, over 2,000,000 Blacks had migrated".<sup>54</sup> Concurrent with this massive movement of people is a history of trauma and bitter injustice, palpable in the novel in a manner suggested by Melissa Walker:

The year 1931 appears in the opening lines of the novel. That year nine African-American youths boarded the Chattanooga-to-Memphis freight train only to find themselves accused of rape and their lives in jeopardy. The Scottsboro case [...] became a cause celebre of the 1930s, keeping the issue of racial injustice before the public for years. [...] Though [such] outside events are not specifically mentioned in the text, [...] they inform the context and have consequences in the novel.<sup>55</sup>

Morrison's list of names, as Walker's commentary seems to suggest, indicates a history which is *known* in the novel, but which is not openly narrated. A whole African American history, stretching back at least through the twentieth century, if not earlier, is seemingly contained in names whose meaning is felt even as the memories of their lives remain unspoken. If such a "sentence" constitutes what Jameson calls "the breakdown of the signifying chain", it does *not* seem to "reduce [...] experience [to] a series of pure and unrelated presents in time". <sup>56</sup> Jameson's contention that "If we are unable to unify the past, present, and future of the sentence, then we are similarly unable to unify the past, present, and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life", <sup>57</sup> in this case, simply does not apply. Nevertheless, even as linear narration becomes interrupted in the face of traumatic memory, there is indeed discernible in Morrison's rollcall of names the quality described by Jameson as

[a] heightened intensity, bearing a mysterious charge of affect, here described in the negative terms of anxiety and loss of reality, but which one could just as well imagine in the positive terms of euphoria, a high, an intoxicatory or hallucinogenic intensity.<sup>58</sup>

Such "intensity" *is* in evidence as Morrison approaches the memory of the African American past, but this does *not* arise from the evocation of the past as "speech in a dead language",<sup>59</sup> as Jameson imagines it. Despite its only partial signification in language, the past in Morrison's novel is vibrantly alive.

The functioning of historical memory in a way which resembles the trope of "possession" dramatized by Ishmael Reed in *Mumbo Jumbo* alongside more linear means of knowing history, is apparent in a scene where Macon Dead introduces a history to his son, explaining "if you want to be a whole man, you have to deal with the whole truth".<sup>60</sup> In an instance of what Philip Page identifies as "individual characters fail[ing] to interpret things around them",<sup>61</sup> Macon proceeds to give a strictly linear

account of his relationship with his wife, beginning, ironically enough, with "I married your mother in 1917",62 and ending with "Tonight".63 Like the unfortunate "Atonists" of Reed's novel, Macon can be seen to misidentify the "whole truth" as a history which is constrained within the bounds of linear time. As Joseph Skerrett comments, "Macon [...] thinks that Milkman's access to his "information", his rational, cause-and-effect "tale of how come and why" will clarify reality for Milkman. But Milkman [...] sees no place for himself in this history". 64 Part of the "truth" which is revealed in this scene, in fact, appears not in the words which Macon speaks to his son, but in the narration which accompanies his tale, and which works in a manner in the text which is entirely nonlinear, to reveal a memory of Africa.

Some pages before this scene takes place, Macon is shown to have said to Milkman: "If you ever have a doubt we from Africa, look at Pilate. She look just like Papa and he looked like all them pictures you ever see of Africans. A Pennsylvania African. Acted like one too. Close his face up like a door."65 At one point during Macon's telling of the tale of his marriage, then, the omniscient narration comments that "his face looked like Pilate's. He closed the door."66 And again, a few pages later: "Macon looked up at his son. The door of his face had opened; his skin looked iridescent."67 What Morrison achieves here, while appearing to offer a simple narration of the past as recalled by the character's telling, is also what she calls "urg[ing] the reader into active participation in the nonnarrative, nonliterary experience of the text". 68 While witnessing the character's interpretation of the past, Morrison is simultaneously able to manipulate the reader's own memory, positioning the faces of Pilate, then of Macon Dead Sr., and then even of the second Macon Dead, as a succession of "doors" which lead to some sense of a memory of Africa. Morrison constructs her text here in a way which offers the reader a sense of creating links in his own memory, because, as she says, "I want to subvert [the reader's] traditional comfort so that he may experience an unorthodox one: that of being in the company of his own solitary imagination".69 Macon may be the embodiment of patriarchal values, and yet, Morrison's narration suggests that attention to another narrative, beneath and behind his spoken words, points toward the "presymbolic", in which difference between patriarchal and other ways of "knowing" may be done away with, in which the very perspective of patriarchal power that Macon appears to represent when he says "[o]wn things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too"<sup>70</sup> may be discredited. Milkman, of course, betrays little sensitivity to this realm, coming away from the conversation saying to himself "'What the fuck did he tell me all that shit for?' He didn't want to know any of it. There was nothing he could do about it. The doctor was dead. You can't do the past over."<sup>71</sup>

On one of only three or four occasions in which the novel actually *names* a memory of Africa, Milkman and his friend Guitar are described as "Breathing the air that could have come straight from a marketplace in Accra". If Karla Holloway and Gay Wilentz claim, respectively, that Pilate is "reminiscent of an African queen", and is a "female "ancestor" [...] whose scent is of African ginger" such critiques betray a failure to register the fact that Pilate's characteristics are rarely, in the novel itself, openly *named* as African. Where a memory of an African American history, spanning the history of slavery and the move from the South, then, is seen to be contained in names whose meaning is felt without always being spoken, the memory of Africa is similarly discernible in the text, but is even less frequently named. As Melissa Walker suggests, the novel's approach to the African American domestic history might be seen to be characterized by historical traumas that can barely be narrated:

Walking through the streets meditating on what he has been told, [Milkman] suddenly notices that hordes of people are walking on the other side of the street in the opposite direction. Readers will soon know what Milkman does not know, that crowds are gathering to protest the murder of Emmett Till, an event that has the Black community in an uproar. [...] Milkman remains absorbed in his own personal world, in this scene literally walking against the tide of history.<sup>75</sup>

Milkman, like Mr. Smith and like Benjamin's "angel of history", can be seen to "fly in the face of" this history, embodying a speechless reaction of terror at what cannot be undone. The memory of Africa occupies a position in the novel which forms part of this aspect of terror.

## "I LOVED YOU ALL": MORRISON'S CULTURAL NATIONALISM AND THE GAZE TOWARD AFRICA

Robert Smith's flight is also watched by a "cat-eyed boy [who] listened to the musical performance with at least as much interest as he devoted to the man flapping his wings on top of the hospital".<sup>76</sup> This boy is Guitar, "five

or six years old"<sup>77</sup> at the time of Smith's flight, and later a member of the same secret organization, the Seven Days, which we discover motivated Smith's leap. According to Guitar.

[i]t's made up of a few men who are willing to take some risks ... [W]hen a Negro child, Negro woman, or Negro man is killed by whites and nothing is done about it by their law and their courts, this society selects a similar victim at random, and they execute him or her in a similar manner if they can. 78

If Reed's flexible scheme remains perplexed by the difficulty of representation of any contemporary Africa, Morrison can be seen to show the circumstances in which African American writers find themselves in this discursive position. The relationship between language and the memory of Africa functions in this novel to reflect the author's conceptualization of African American identity which, despite first appearances, and unlike that broad American trend which forgets the past and forgets all that is outside of the American territory, is keenly aware of its problematic relationship with life outside of America.

As Pilate speaks an ancestral memory of an African past, Guitar may be understood to represent a gaze toward a more contemporary Africa. The staging of Guitar and Pilate as diverse witnesses to Smith's flight might be considered to dramatize a particular historical confrontation which occurred in the midst of the Civil Rights movement, between the politics of Black Power, and the politics of Black feminism, which will be discussed further in Chap. 4, and which was sometimes characterized by a particular tension around the subject of ancestry, as described by William Van Deburg:

Instead of treating members of this group, out of hand, as "the enemy", it was suggested that they be seen as potential allies. Perhaps these oldsters weren't very well versed in the latest styles, but they understood adversity and could relate countless stories of the struggle against it. None could deny that they composed a fair share of the "Black masses" for whom the revolution was being waged. Moreover, they were to be valued as living repositories of African-American folk wisdom. As noted by poet Alice Walker, they "knew what we/Must know/Without knowing a page/Of it/Themselves". If, on the surface, some might seem a bit Tomish, it nevertheless was possible that they could become invaluable assets to the movement, instructing the younger generation in familial love. Certainly, the capacity "to love, to protect, to cherish, our young, our old, our/own", could not be considered the least important attribute to any activist seeking to promote group solidarity and empowerment.79

The implicit criticism is that "oldsters" may not situate themselves in the context of relating African American oppression to global, and particularly African, struggles against colonial and former colonial powers. When Guitar, as a twelve-year-old, approaches Pilate with his young friend Milkman, she admonishes him for not "say[ing] what you mean", <sup>80</sup> so that he "ha[s] to pay careful attention to his language". <sup>81</sup> The tension between Guitar's perspective and Pilate's is palpable as he witnesses Pilate's "Aunt Jemima act" for police; Milkman "remember[s] how Guitar glared at her as she walked away from the car", <sup>83</sup> and "anger [is] like heat shimmering out of his skin". <sup>84</sup>

Guitar's equal attention, in the opening tableau, to the song sung by Pilate, the novel's "culture bearer", and to the function of Smith's flight, may be seen as indicative of his attention to two different forms of cultural work that are carried out to try to protect the African American community against the diverse forms of violence which are perpetrated against it. As Smith's flight remembers the tale of the flying African through unspeaking action, Pilate remembers the tale through speaking song, and Guitar, along with the rest of the community, is shown to witness the function of speech to enact a preservation of tradition, alongside the function of the unspoken to register trauma. These are the two functions of memory in Morrison's communities.

Guitar explains: "If it ever gets to be too much, like it was for Robert Smith, we do that rather than crack and tell somebody."85 In spite of an alarmingly dismissive tendency in much Morrison criticism toward Guitar's political stance, 86 I suggest that Morrison is inquisitive toward the perspective represented by the Seven Days, which she clearly positions as having learned something from both the nurturing matriarch who incorporates the past by speaking about it, and the militant patriarch who acknowledges the unspeakable nature of the past through silence. After all, as Pilate's dying words, at the end of the novel, are "I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would of loved 'em all. If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more."87 Robert Smith declares "I loved you all",88 and Guitar himself cries "It's about loving us. [...] My whole life is love."89 Love is shown to inform both a nurturing protectiveness and a defensive violence in this novel, and the two are of course shown to overlap at times—for instance, as Pilate is shown stabbing a man who harms her daughter Reba. 90 Love, in this novel, is shown to inform both communicative speech, and shocked silence. Ralph Story comments:

For Black folk "to love so much they would kill" is a profoundly radical idea yet one which can be clearly discerned in the poetical works of the Black Arts Movement of the late 1960s, especially the writings of LeRoi Jones/ Amiri Baraka. 91

Like Harry Reed, I consider Morrison's position to be "a simultaneous affirmation and criticism of Black cultural nationalism", 92 and would suggest that Guitar's position is not opposed to Pilate's, but rather continuous with it, just as silence is continuous with interrupted speech. To note that this is the condition that Morrison observes in her characterization of Guitar and the Seven Days is not to say that she endorses violence. Morrison, writing in the middle of a period of American history which saw considerable violence, is doing something more important than showing approval or disapproval of violence—she is showing how violence comes about under conditions of oppression, and its effect upon the survival of a culture and a community. Guitar is like Frantz Fanon's "native who [...] is ready for violence at all times", for whom "from birth it is clear [...] that this narrow world, strewn with prohibitions, can only be called in question by absolute violence".93

Morrison takes ample opportunity to evoke sociopolitical history in the novel, but it must be said that these evocations lie largely in the African American domestic realm. On perhaps the only occasion that a perspective showing awareness of the world outside of the USA is explicitly evoked in the novel, it is articulated, significantly enough, by Guitar. An exchange between Milkman and Guitar bears extended citation:

"... Bet you thought tea grew in little bags."

"Oh, Christ."

"Like Louisiana cotton. Except the Black men picking it wear diapers and turbans. All over India that's all you see. Bushes with little bitsy white tea bags blossoming. Right?"

"Gimme the tea, Guitar. Just the tea. No geography."

"No geography? Okay, no geography. What about some history in your tea? Or some sociopolitico—No. That's still geography. Goddam, Milk, I do believe my whole life's geography."

[...] "Oh, Jesus."

"He's a Northerner too. Lived in Israel, but a Northerner in His heart. His bleeding heart. His cute little old bleeding red heart. Southerners think they own Him, but that's just because the first time they laid eyes on Him, He was strung up on a tree."94

Guitar's speech pattern here is wholly fractured here, into questions which he answers himself, and parts of stories which never come to resolution. Though this speech pattern may be expressive of the fact that Guitar is trying, in veiled ways, to raise his friend Milkman's awareness of his secret membership of the Seven Days, it is also indicative of a certain failure of language that arises when a perspective on the world outside of the USA is sighted. Melani McAlister explains how the Middle East as a site of identification appeared in African American popular expression as "the story of the biblical Exodus was actively invoked as part of the civil rights struggle from the 1940s on", but that "Black culture in the United States turned toward other models, beyond the exodus/Zionist model, attending particularly to the complex religious affiliations that also linked African American identity with the Arab and Islamic Middle East". 95 As Guitar refers to Jesus and Israel, with some perceptible lack of reverence, he may be seen to signal a turn toward an alternative, Islamic identification, particularly as Milkman comments: "You sound like that red-headed Negro named X."96

### THE MEMORY OF AFRICA AS SITE OF RESPONSIBILITY

Where, in the approach toward memory of the American past, a certain rupture occurs between one name and the next, preventing a spoken narration of the total history in which they reside, in the approach toward the memory of Africa, the rupture more frequently occurs somewhere between language and the prelinguistic. The difference between a memory that can be named, however provisionally, and a memory whose naming appears more difficult, is, as Susan Huddleston Edgerton puts it, "a difference but, Kristeva argues, not a distinction", in the same way that the "already-signifying space of the mother[,] the 'semiotic chora', [...] is also 'the place of the maternal law before the Law'". Morrison recognizes this "difference without distinction" when she comments:

The gap between Africa and Afro-America and the gap between the living and the dead and the gap between the past and the present does not exist. It's bridged for us by our assuming responsibility for people no one's ever assumed responsibility for. They are those that died en route. Nobody knows their names, and nobody thinks about them. In addition to that, they never survived in the lore; there are no songs or dances or tales of these people. The people who arrived—there is lore about them. But nothing survives about ... that.

I suspect the reason is that it was not possible to survive on certain levels and dwell on it. People who did dwell on it, it probably killed them, and the people who did not dwell on it probably went forward.98

A whole history of an African American past, then, may be contained in songs, dances, or tales, and although stories are lost with the Africans who are lost, their memory is still present, but must be engaged with through what Morrison describes as "assuming responsibility".

This notion of "assuming responsibility" for the difficulty of narrating the historical past *must* therefore explain Morrison's reluctance to situate a memory of Africa squarely at the center of her language. This begins to be explained as the author comments that in the early part of her writing career, she "would do no research" in the area exploring links between African and African American literatures, "because [she] distrusted the sources", which to her contained a "scholarly vocabulary used [...] to describe how we say and how we are [which] is a code designed for destruction".99 In light of the historical role played by Africa, as a canvas upon which various imperial projects have been drawn, and the uncomfortable resonance between such projects and what has been, in effect, an American imperialism at home, Morrison identifies language itself as one of the sites in which such imperialism has occurred. For the African American writer, then, language becomes a troublesome currency with which to deal with the memory of Africa. Morrison writes, in *Playing in the Dark*:

I am using the term "Africanism" [...] as a term for the denotative and connotative Blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people. As a trope, little restraint has been attached to its uses. 100

The suspicion of a neocolonial taint to any scholarship that might claim to identify the "African" in African American culture, Morrison comments, has led her to

rely heavily and almost totally on my own recollections and, more important, on my own insight about those recollections, and in so doing [I] was able to imagine and to recreate cultural linkages that were identified for me by Africans who had a more familiar, an overt recognition (of them). 101

As Morrison makes clear her intention to name only that which she knows—the stories and songs of her own African American community—the act of naming for her performs the important function of acknowledging that which has too often been perceived as a ""discredited knowledge" that Black people had". <sup>102</sup> In later chapters, we shall see, a Black British approach to cultural memory has less certain foundations of community and tradition as reference points to rely on, and leads to narrative language taking on a more improvisational, future-oriented dimension. These African American authors, meanwhile, reference what is known in the African American past, even if that knowledge is partial, and their narration is therefore "possessed" by the spirit of the past.

The approach toward naming a memory of Africa is stalled by the complexities of an African American sensibility which feels its "third world" status in the midst of the first world. As Morrison writes, in her "Introduction" to Camara Laye's *The Radiance of the King*:

Such a beautiful word, Africa. Unfortunately its seductive sound was riven by the complicated emotions with which the name was associated. Unlike starving China, Africa was both ours and theirs; us and other. A huge needy homeland none of us had seen or cared to see, inhabited by people with whom we maintained a delicate relationship of mutual ignorance and disdain, and with whom we shared a mythology of passive, traumatized otherness.<sup>103</sup>

The African American gaze toward a memory of Africa, as Morrison sees it, struggles, through language alone, with the demands of two equally pressing, and almost impossible tasks; first, to differentiate itself from the mythology promoted by a hegemonic and imperialistic Euro-American perspective toward Africa, and second, to avoid the confirmation of *African American* "otherness" which such a perception of Africa would encourage. The memory of Africa is approached in *Song of Solomon*, I suggest, in ways which attempt transcendence of these extremely troubled politics of language.

Like Walter Benjamin's "angel of history", who is speechless as he apprehends historical memory as "wreckage upon wreckage", Robert Smith's flight remembers, without specifically naming, repeated instances from African American history in which the trope of flight has been associated with the notion of "return" to Africa, and acts, Michael Rothberg suggests, as part of the novel's "textualizing [of] the trauma of slavery". <sup>104</sup>

In Morrison's scheme, while speech and silence are certainly figured as complementary parts of language, speech is most frequently positioned as having the capacity to preserve tradition, while silence occurs as a response which articulates the importance of traumatic memory. In these terms, Benjamin's angel may be imagined to have been rendered silent by the repeated traumas of history, illustrating effectively a memory that cannot be narrated, that can barely be figured in language. Elaine Scarry shows that "not only is physical pain enormously difficult to describe in words confronted with it, Virginia Woolf once noted, 'language runs dry'-it also actively destroys language, reducing sufferers in the most extreme instances to an inarticulate state of cries and moans". 105 The trauma of painful memory can have a similar effect, and while the memory of an African American history situated in America can, it seems, be assimilated into language in Morrison's novel, the memory of Africa, which exists, as it were, "beyond" the lives lost on the Middle Passage, and implicated as it is within a complexity of imperialist dynamics, is less easily spoken.

When Milkman tells his lover Sweet that Solomon "went back to Africa", 106 her immediate response is "Who'd he leave behind?" This reaction is most frequently read by critics as drawing attention to a gender question—the fate of women left behind to care for children. Hovet and Lounsberry comment that "Morrison persistently ... forc[es] the reader's eye back down to those the flyer left behind", 108 highlighting the author's effort to draw attention to the broader effect of the African's flight upon the African American community. Even when Milkman is told the story of Solomon's flight, by his distant cousin Susan Byrd, the memory of Africa, to which Solomon may or may not have flown, is barely hinted at before the narrative focus is once again bounced back, almost compulsively, toward the African American community:

He flew. You know, like a bird. Just stood up in the fields one day, ran up some hill, spun around a couple of times, and was lifted up in the air. Went right on back to wherever it was he came from. There's a big double-headed rock over the valley named for him. It like to killed the woman, the wife. 109

Even as Susan Byrd speaks, a vast unexplored imaginative space beyond the "double-headed rock" is palpable; attention is almost drawn to it by the refusal to name it. Yet the possibility that "wherever it was he came from" might encompass an ancestral Africa is barely mooted, as the attention is drawn back immediately to the wife left behind. What we see here

is, again, the preoccupation with the condition of oppression which the wife, and the rest of the African American community, cannot escape as easily as the flying African seems to.

### MALCOLM X AND AFRICAN FILIALITY

Guitar's view reveals a whole internationalist spectrum to the novel, which Morrison would be uncomfortable broaching through the language of the colonizer. Like Guitar himself, she encodes it. If Morrison can be understood to be signifying on Malcolm X's contribution to history, such a move is once again enacted by the sign of flight. As Milkman takes an airplane, from Michigan to Pittsburgh, the text reads as follows:

The airplane ride exhilarated him, encouraged illusion and a feeling of invulnerability. High above the clouds, heavy yet light, caught in the stillness of speed ("Cruise", the pilot said), sitting in intricate metal become glistening bird, it was not possible to believe he had ever made a mistake, or could. Only one small thought troubled him—that Guitar was not there too. He would have loved it—the view, the food, the stewardesses. But Milkman wanted to do this by himself, with no input from anybody. This one time he wanted to go solo. In the air, away from real life, he felt free, but on the ground, when he talked to Guitar just before he left, the wings of all those other people's nightmares flapped in his face and constrained him.<sup>110</sup>

In contrast to Milkman's experience of air travel, which he luxuriates in for its capacity to make him feel his solitude and independence, Malcolm X, in his *Autobiography*, describes a key, and unprecedented, experience of community for him as he flies from Cairo to Jedda, to take the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca:

The co-pilot was darker than [the captain] was. I can't tell you the feeling it gave me. I had never seen a Black man flying a jet. That instrument panel: no one ever could know what all of those dials meant! Both of the pilots were smiling at me, treating me with the same honor and respect I had received ever since I left America. I stood there looking through the glass at the sky ahead of us. In America, I had ridden in more planes than probably any other Negro, and I never had been invited up into the cockpit. And there I was, with two Muslim seatmates, one from Egypt, the other from Arabia, all of us bound for Mecca, with me up in the pilots' cabin. Brother, I *knew* Allah was with me.<sup>111</sup>

If we can imagine Morrison to be signifying on Malcolm X's jubilant experience of flight, some subtle conclusions can be drawn. First, as Malcolm depicts a flight that occurs completely outside the USA-in fact, from Cairo toward Jedda—Milkman's experience of air travel, by contrast, represents a domestic flight within the USA. Significantly, Malcolm's experiences on the flight teach him something about how the common faith of Islam can enable community across national, racial, and linguistic boundaries, and as he is shown "honor and respect" he has never known before, the possibility of life outside of American racism. If Milkman experiences "honor and respect", it is, by contrast, of the variety which is provided upon payment of an airfare—the solicitations of air stewardesses.

Of particular interest in this intertextual dialog which may be perceived between Morrison's novel and Malcolm X is the way in which the ending of Morrison's novel may be read as responding to that concept of "brotherhood" which was in the end central to the perspective which was revealed to Malcolm X toward the end of his life. The notion of "brotherhood" is a feature which, of all the flights depicted in Song of Solomon, is introduced only by Milkman's final flight at the end of the novel. Milkman says "Over here, brother man! Can you see me?" 112 and the narration tells us that as he flies "toward Guitar", "it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother". 113 It may not be true that Guitar "cannot progress beyond th[e] "fascist" [...] position and remains fixed in pain, anger, exasperation, and racial hatred", 114 for after all, as Morrison has commented, "it is important that Guitar put[s] his gun down". 115 Malcolm X, during his stay in the Middle East, penned an open letter in which he wrote the following:

America needs to understand Islam, because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem. Throughout my travels in the Muslim world, I have met, talked to, and even eaten with people who in America would have been considered 'white'—but the 'white' attitude was removed from their minds by the religion of Islam. I have never before seen sincere and true brotherhood practiced by all colors together, irrespective of their color. 116

He goes on to comment: "The single worst mistake of the American Black organizations, and their leaders, is that they have failed to establish direct brotherhood lines of communication between the independent nations of Africa and the American Black people."117 Here is the possibility of visualizing a relationship with Africa in the present, that escapes what Johannes Fabian calls "the time-distancing discourse of evolutionism" that allows an "understanding of such terms as primitive". 118

Yet Morrison's hopes for the untapped potential represented by Malcolm does not mean that she espouses Islam as panacea. Nada Elia is concerned with what is perceived as Morrison's failure to name African resources for her story, and suggests some serious implications to Morrison's "poetic liberty" as she remembers the stories told in *Drums and Shadows*, inherited from "Muslim Africans who lived in Sapelo Island off the coast of Georgia". 119 Elia notes a "confluence of names" 120 between those remembered in one interviewee's narration of the Flying Africans trope, and those which Morrison represents as the names of Solomon's numerous children, which include "*Belali Shalut/Yaruba Medina Muhammet* [...]/ Nestor Kalina". 121 If Kimberly Benston says the song "allud[es] to a crazyquilt of cultures, regions, religions, and affiliations", 122 Elia's objection relates in particular to Morrison's perceived failure to acknowledge the Islamic (and African) etymology of the names of Solomon's children, and of the occurrence of the Flying Africans trope itself:

[A] nod of acknowledgement remains insufficient, especially if [the Islamic genealogy is] used primarily to lend one's narrative a touch of the exotic and mysterious. [...] Morrison does not address the Muslim genealogy, and is, at best, "curiously coy" about her borrowing the stories of Belali's descendants. 123

However, any "coyness" that Elia may perceive in Morrison's refusal to "name" cultural sources is not unique to the author's approach to Islam—it is, rather, a feature of her approach toward the cultural memory of Africa in general. Morrison is not inclined to name the memory of Africa in the way that Elia suggests she should, because of the very great difficulty in the relationship with language. To Morrison, an African Islamic inheritance may be just as patrilineal as any Euro-American imperialist inheritance. Keith Cartwright's attention to the presence of Islam in the ancient Senegambian context itself may give a clue as to why Morrison does not rush to acknowledge an Islamic connection:

Practitioners of indigenous African religions—and women in particular—found themselves excluded from the new literacy, and as illiterates, found access to authoritative readings of power increasingly limited to realms marginalized by orthodox Islam <sup>124</sup>

If Islam may once, in the African context, have constituted a "new literacy" which threatened traditional forms of oral storytelling, so we might see replayed that scenario set out at the very beginning of Morrison's

novel—of "city legislators" writing over a Black community's own oral history—and it is therefore no wonder that Morrison hesitates to champion the Islamic genealogy of her tale.

If Morrison does not openly embrace Islam in her novel, then, the notion of brotherhood that Islam reveals to Malcolm X might nevertheless be seen as infinitely attractive to her. Brotherhood, this vital concept arising for the first time in the flight which characterizes the novel's ending, is something which is capable of completely dismantling the endlessly oppressive triangular dynamic that ordinarily typifies the African American trope of flight and keeps the African American male, in particular, in a terribly vulnerable position. William Van Deburg writes that "during the Black Power era, pan-Africanists of all stripes echoed the Muslim leader's view that Black Americans had erred in neglecting to establish 'direct brotherhood lines of communication' with African peoples". 125 Morrison's play upon this perspective introduced by Malcolm X can reveal her sensitivity to the space that might have been opened up, in that "blind spot" in African American memory, if the more international basis of identification recommended by Malcolm had been espoused; a relationship with Africa which moves free of the tensions of imperialist representation. This space of mutual respect which enables the possibility of apprehending human commonality even amid the gulf of cultural difference that may be felt to exist between people living in America and in Africa, is a space that is explored further in Chap. 4, in the work of Alice Walker. Where Morrison's articulation of the "unspeakable" allows a generous spaciousness around the traumatic histories which affect identification with Africa, and which cannot always be described, Walker's corresponding lack of appreciation for the value of acknowledging what cannot be articulated, leads her to speak for, and speak over, African experience as part of the otherwise vital work of enunciating oppressed African American women's subjectivities.

#### Notes

- 1. Marion Berghahn's Images of Africa in Black American Literature (London: Macmillan Press, (1977) analyses in detail this othering function of imperialist views of Africa, and its effect for African American writers.
- 2. Toni Morrison, Song of Solomon, (London: Vintage, 1998 [1977]), 3, 4.
- 3. Ibid., 322.

- 4. Olivia Smith Storey, "Flying Words: Contests of Orality and Literacy in the Trope of the Flying Africans," Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History, 5.3 (2004). https://muse.jhu.edu/article/175971
- 5. Georgia Writers' Project, Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986 [1940]), 79.
- 6. Thomas LeClair, "The Language Must Not Sweat: A Conversation with Toni Morrison," in Conversations with Toni Morrison, ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie, 122. Reprinted from New Republic, vol. 184 (March 21, 1981): 25-29.
- 7. Smith Storey, "Flying Words."
- 9. Michael Rothberg, "Dead Letter Office: Conspiracy, Trauma, and Song of Solomon's Posthumous Connection," African American Review, 37.4 (Winter 2003), 508.
- 10. Betty Gubert, "Aviators, African American," in Africana: The Encyclopaedia of the African and African American Experience, eds. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999), 152.
- 11. Abraham Chapman, Introduction to Black Voices: An Anthology of African-American Literature, ed. Abraham Chapman, (New York: Signet Classic, 2001 [1968]), 40–41.
- 12. Morrison, Song of Solomon, 3; Ann Douglas, Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s, (London: Picador, 1995), 458; Jill D. Snider, "Great Shadow in the Sky': The Airplane in the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 and the Development of African American Visions of Aviation, 1921-1926," In The Airplane in American Culture, ed. Dominick A. Pisano, (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2003),
- 13. Snider, "'Great Shadow in the Sky'," 128, 137, 132, 129.
- 14. Douglas, Terrible Honesty, 457; Snider, 'Great Shadow in the Sky',
- 15. Morrison, Song of Solomon, 235.
- 16. Morrison, Song of Solomon, 235.
- 17. Chapman, Introduction to Black Voices, 40-41.

I got a home in dat rock,

Don't you see?

Poor man Laz'rus, poor as I,

When he died he found a home on high,

He had a home in dat rock,

Don't you see? Ibid.

- 18. Morrison, Song of Solomon, 235.
- 19. Ibid., 236.
- 20. Morrison, Song of Solomon, 8.

- 21. Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," Michigan Quarterly Review, XXVIII.1 (Winter 1989), 28.
- 22. Morrison, Song of Solomon, 3; Morrison, 'Unspeakable Words Unspoken',
- 23. John N. Duvall, The Identifying Fictions of Toni Morrison: Modernist Authenticity and Postmodern Blackness, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), 74; Morrison, Song of Solomon, 6, 4, 5, 6.
- 24. Linden Peach, "Competing Discourses in Song of Solomon (1977)," in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon (Modern Critical Interpretations), ed. Harold Bloom, (Chelsea House Publishers, Philadelphia, 1999), Reprinted from Modernist Novelists: Toni Morrison. St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1995.
- 25. Michael Awkward, "Unruly and Let Loose: Myth, Ideology, and Gender," in Bloom, ed., Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon, 97. Reprinted from Callaloo 13.3, (Summer 1990).
- 26. Ibid., 96.
- 27. Morrison, Song of Solomon, 56, 57.
- 28. Ibid., 57.
- 29. Von Hardesty and Dominick Pisano, Black Wings: The American Black in Aviation, (Washington D.C.: National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution, 1983), 3.
- 30. Robert Stepto, "Intimate Things in Place: A Conversation with Toni Morrison," in Conversations with Toni Morrison, ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie, 26. Reprinted from Massachusetts Review, 18 (1977): 473-89.
- 31. Kwame Anthony Appiah, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Tuskegee Airmen," in Africana, eds. Appiah and Gates, 902.
- 32. Morrison, Song of Solomon, 58, 59, 59.
- 33. Ibid., 60-61.
- 34. Philip Page, Dangerous Freedom: Fusion and Fragmentation in Toni Morrison's Novels, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 91.
- 35. Morrison, Song of Solomon, 6.
- 36. Ibid., 5.
- 37. Ibid., 5–6.
- 38. Ibid., 36.
- 39. Ibid., 53.
- 40. Anne Pankhurst, "Recontextualization of Metonymy in Narrative and the Case of Morrison's Song of Solomon," in Metonymy in Language and Thought, eds. Klaus-Uwe Panther and Günter Radden, (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1999), 387. Chris Baldick defines metonymy as "a figure of speech that replaces the name of one thing with the name of something else closely associated with it". Chris Baldick, The

- Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 135.
- 41. Morrison, Song of Solomon, 6.
- 42. Susan Huddleston Edgerton, "Re-membering the Mother Tongue(s): Toni Morrison, Julie Dash and the Language of Pedagogy," Cultural Studies, 9.2 (May 1995), 350-51.
- 43. Toni Morrison, "Memory, Creation, and Writing," Thought, 59.235 (December 1984), 385.
- 44. Morrison, Song of Solomon, 17-18.
- 45. Ibid., 328.
- 46. Ibid., 330.
- 47. Ibid., 149.
- 48. Ibid.
- 49. Jean Toomer, Cane, (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1993 [1923]), 10.
- 50. Morrison, Song of Solomon, 149.
- 51. Morrison, Song of Solomon, 329.
- 52. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and the Consumer Society," in The Anti-Aesthetic, ed. Hal Foster, (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), 26, 27.
- 53. Morrison, Song of Solomon, 330.
- 54. Stokely Carmichael, and Charles V. Hamilton, Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America, (London: Penguin Books, 1969 [1967]), 156–57.
- 55. Melissa Walker, Down from the Mountaintop: Black Women's Novels in the Wake of the Civil Rights Movement, 1966-1989, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 135-36.
- 56. Jameson, "Postmodernism and the Consumer Society," 27.
- 57. Ibid.
- 58. Ibid., 27-28.
- 59. Ibid., 17.
- 60. Morrison, Song of Solomon, 70.
- 61. Philip Page: "Macon widely misinterprets Pilate, thinking of her as a snake who bites the man who feeds it (Morrison, Song of Solomon, 54.) Guitar wrongly concludes that Milkman's desire to go to Danville is designed to betray him and then erroneously assumes that the box Milkman helps load onto the train must contain the gold (Ibid., 259 and 299.) Even Pilate, despite her sensitivity, misinterprets her father's ghost when he bids her to remember Sing, and she draws the wrong conclusion about the bones she finds in the cave." Page, Dangerous Freedom, 95.
- 62. Morrison, Song of Solomon, 70.
- 63. Ibid., 74.
- 64. Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr., "Recitation to the Griot: Storytelling and Learning in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon," in Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction,

- and Literary Tradition, ed. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 194.
- 65. Morrison, Song of Solomon, 54.
- 66. Ibid., 70.
- 67. Ibid., 74.
- 68. Morrison, "Memory, Creation, and Writing," 387.
- 69. Ibid.
- 70. Morrison, Song of Solomon, 55.
- 71. Ibid., 76.
- 72. Ibid., 185.
- 73. Karla F.C. Holloway, "The Lyrics of Salvation," in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon, ed. Bloom, 68. Reprinted from New Dimensions of Spirituality: A Biracial and Bicultural Reading of the Novels of Toni Morrison, Karla F.C. Holloway and Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 1987).
- 74. Gay Wilentz, "Civilizations Underneath: African Heritage as Cultural Discourse in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon," in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon: A Casebook, ed. Jan Furman, (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 141-42. Reprinted from African American Review, 26 (1992). Wilentz continues, "African values and African culture, exemplified in Pilate, are privileged in the text [...] Pilate has all the qualities Morrison associates with an ideal African woman: She has stature, strength, presence. [...] she constantly has a 'chewing stick' between her lips, much like a West African market woman [...] Pilate's house resembles one in an African village compound". Morrison, Song of Solomon, 145.
- 75. Walker, Down from the Mountaintop, 39.
- 76. Morrison, Song of Solomon, 8.
- 77. Ibid., 7.
- 78. Morrison, Song of Solomon, 154.
- 79. William L. Van Deburg, Modern Black Nationalism: From Marcus Garvey to Louis Farrakhan, (New York: NYU Press, 1997), 271.
- 80. Morrison, Song of Solomon, 36.
- 81. Ibid., 37.
- 82. Ibid., 209.
- 83. Ibid., 208.
- 84. Ibid., 207.
- 85. Morrison, Song of Solomon, 158.
- 86. Critics remark, variously, that "[a]lthough he is a self-declared avenger of his people, the love of Black life is eventually twisted into a love of power", Jan Furman, "Male Consciousness: Song of Solomon", in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon, ed. Bloom, Reprinted from Toni Morrison's Fiction (University of South Carolina Press, 1995) 201; that Guitar is "driven mad by material

greed for gold and by internalized racism", Joyce Irene Middleton, "From Orality to Literacy: Oral Memory in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*", in *New Essays on Song of Solomon*, ed. Valerie Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 36; that "Guitar's claim to kill for love [...is] not about love but something else indeed—male power and possession", Duvall, *The Identifying Fictions of Toni Morrison*, 89, 91; that "[i]nstead of love, Guitar becomes co-opted by his hate into the evil practices of the dominant social system he wishes to escape [...] and therefore, like Macon, Guitar exemplifies the dialectical reversal", Page, *Dangerous Freedom*, 93.

- 87. Morrison, Song of Solomon, 336.
- 88. Ibid., 3.
- 89. Ibid., 159.
- 90. Ibid., 93.
- 91. Ralph Story, "An Excursion into the Black World: The 'Seven Days' in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*", in *Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon*, ed. Bloom. Reprinted from *Black American Literature Forum*, 23.1 (Spring 1989), 86.
- 92. Harry Reed, "Toni Morrison, Song of Solomon and Black Cultural Nationalism," in *Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon*, ed. Bloom. Reprinted from *The Centennial Review*, 32.1 (Winter 1988), 75.
- 93. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London & New York: Penguin, 1990 [1961]), 29.
- 94. Morrison, Song of Solomon, 114-15.
- 95. Melani, McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945–2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 87, 123.
- 96. Morrison, Song of Solomon, 160.
- 97. Huddleston Edgerton, "Re-membering the Mother Tongue(s)," 350–51. Citing Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-bind*, (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1993) 46.
- 98. Marsha Darling, "In the Realm of Responsibility: A Conversation with Toni Morrison," in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie. Reprinted from *Women's Review of Books* 5, (March 1978), 247.
- 99. Christina Davis, "An Interview with Toni Morrison," in Conversations with Toni Morrison, ed. Taylor-Guthrie. Reprinted from Presence Africaine: Revue Culturelle Du Monde/Cultural Review of the Negro World, 1145 (1988), 225.
- 100. Toni Morrison, Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination, (London: Picador, Macmillan Publishers Ltd, 1993 [Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1992]), 6–7.
- 101. Davis, "An Interview with Toni Morrison," 225.
- 102. Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," in *Black Women Writers* (1950–1980): A Critical Evaluation. ed. Mari Evans, (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984), 342.

- 103. Toni Morrison, introduction to The Radiance of the King, by Camara Laye, (New York: New York Review Books, 2001), xi.
- 104. Rothberg, "Dead Letter Office" 502.
- 105. Elaine Scarry, The Body in Pain, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4. Citing Virginia Woolf: "'[L]et a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry.' [...] Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned." Virginia Woolf, "On Being Ill," in Collected Essays. Vol. 4, (New York: Harcourt, 1967), 194.
- 106. Morrison, Song of Solomon, 328.
- 107. Ibid.
- 108. Grace Ann Hovet and Barbara Lounsberry, "Flying as Symbol and Legend in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, Sula, and Song of Solomon," CLA Journal, XXVII.2 (December 1983), 134.
- 109. Morrison, Song of Solomon, 323.
- 110. Morrison, Song of Solomon, 220.
- 111. Malcolm X and Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 436.
- 112. Morrison, Song of Solomon, 337.
- 113. Ibid.
- 114. Page, Dangerous Freedom, 105. Page cites William E. Cross, Jr., Shades of Black: Diversity in African-American Identity, (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1991), 205.
- 115. Charles Ruas, "Toni Morrison". In Conversations with Toni Morrison, ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1994), 111.
- 116. Malcolm X and Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 454.
- 117. Ibid., 461.
- 118. Johannes Fabian, Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002 [1983]), 39.
- 119. Nada Elia, "'Kum Buba Yali Kum Buba Tambe, Ameen, Ameen': Did Some Flying Africans Bow to Allah?" Callaloo. 26.1. (Winter 2003), 183.
- 120. Ibid.
- 121. Morrison, Song of Solomon, 303.
- 122. Benston, "Re-Weaving the 'Ulysses Scene'," 104.
- 123. Elia, "'Kum Buba Yali Kum Buba Tambe, Ameen, Ameen'," 189.
- 124. Keith Cartwright, Reading Africa into American Literature: Epics, Fables and Gothic Tales, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2004 [2002]), 29.
- 125. Van Deburg, Modern Black Nationalism, 149.