

# The City and the Village in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*: Reading the Space in Search for Meaning and Identity

I want to draw a map, so to speak, of a critical geography and use that map to open as much space for discovery, intellectual adventure, and close exploration as did the original charting of the New World – without the mandate for conquest.

- Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*

Writing is, *after* all, an act of language, its practice. But *first* of all it is an effort of the will to discover.

- Toni Morrison, *Unspeakable Things Unspoken*

**Susana Vasconcelos  
Teixeira**

*Song of Solomon* explores the city and the village as language constructs, states of mind and locus of different reading practices, while it invites the reader to chart his/her own map of its fictional and textual territory. The space inhabited by the characters and the reader of Toni Morrison's text is characterised by its play with duplicity, multiplicity and the power to make invisible things visible, the power to speak the unspeakable or to search for *the ghost in the machine*<sup>1</sup>. It is thus a post-modern space of indeterminacy, fragmentation, irony, carnival, a "site for thinking about difference" (LUBIANO 1995: 95), an interstitial space where one feels unhomed by "the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world" (BHABHA 1994: 9). In this space both the characters' community and the reader are faced with a city of death, violence, materialism, oppressive written words, and denial, that paradoxically offers *a surplus of opportunity, freedom and voice to its black population*.<sup>2</sup> Bearing in mind the vital role of the word in the construction of American identity through the rhetoric of difference, we will explore *Song of Solomon's* linguistic territory, focusing on the difference that the original rhetoric apparently erased, mainly the ethnical gaps in the melting pot layers. Our aim is to track down the meaning of the urban and rural landscapes of Morrison's novel for the construction of the identity of its characters and for the

1 Toni Morrison's search for *the ghost in the machine* ('Unspeakable' 210) refers to the reassessment of the presence of Afro-Americans in American literature. We borrow this expression to signify the reclaiming of black folklore, the uncovering of hidden meanings by a deconstructive process within the dominant discourse and the recovering of the past through an imaginative work of memory.

2 Jocelyn Chadwick-Joshua refers to this paradox as *the rhetorical paradox of the city*, by which the urban space offers freedom to people of colour *while simultaneously constraining the depth and degree of that freedom* (168). The contradictions embedded in Morrison's urban landscape

relationship between the reader and the text. Being immersed in an African-American context, our investigation requires double-vision and the willingness to deconstruct cultural beliefs. What is at stake is to assess the meaning of the city and the village for *Song of Solomon* characters, but also the meaning of the urban and rural black experience for the reader, considering blackness as a form of knowledge, a way of dealing with reality and dreams:

You think dark is just one color, but it ain't. There're five or six kinds of black. Some silky, some woolly. Some just empty. Some like fingers. And it don't stay still. It moves and changes from one kind of black to another. Saying something is pitch black is like saying something is green. What kind of green? Green like my bottles? Green like a grasshopper? Green like a cucumber, lettuce, or green like the sky is just before it breaks loose to storm? Well, night black is the same way. May as well be a rainbow. (40-41)

The multiple meanings of dark pointed out by Pilate when Milkman first meets her can be inscribed in a more general practice of the black community known as *signifying*. Pulled by the urban vortex, the members of Not Doctor Street are locked into space, time and the pursuit of money, leaving behind the roots of common stories, songs and myths:

One enters the city at the risk of losing the self in a material realm, of being irretrievably drawn into the self-consuming vortex that awaits the urban pilgrim of Western literature. (LEHAN 1998: 239-240)

The urban entrapment is even more violent for the black man due to the invisibility bestowed upon him by the dominant culture. As immigrant, he is denied identity, he is only seen as a stereotype by the gaze of a hidden system that tries to forget that *invisible things are not necessarily "not- there", that a void may be empty, but is not a vacuum* ("Unspeakable" 210). Paradoxically, what the city casts off is what challenges it from within through the linguistic play of irony and double-consciousness. It is precisely with this signifying practice that we, the readers, are faced when we start reading *Song of Solomon*.

*Signifying* is rooted in the *signifying monkey poems* based on myths and forms of performance that the African population brought to the Western hemisphere when they were enslaved. These poems

are aptly summarised by Chadwick-Joshua in a transcription from Langston Hughes' *A Pictorial History of Black Americans*: "Harlem, like a Picasso painting in his Cubistic period. Harlem – Southern Harlem – The Carolinas, Georgia, Florida – looking for the Promised Land – dressed in rhythmic words, painted in bright pictures, dancing to jazz – and ending up in the subway at morning rush time – *headed downtown...Melting pot Harlem – Harlem of honey and chocolate and caramel and rum and vinegar and lemon and lime and gall. Dusky dream Harlem rumbling into a nightmare tunnel*" (60).

are considered to be the source of the rhetorical act of signification, since they highlight the centrality of the signifier, they give examples of the black tropes subsumed within the practice of signifying and they remind us of the trinary relationship implicit in the interpretation of black texts: the texts that give the models of form, the texts that provide the models of substance and the text at hand. This trinary relationship is based on the monkey, the trickster figure who tells *lies*, who tries to demystify the lion's status as king of the jungle by offending him on behalf of the elephant, so that those two get annoyed at each other, the elephant being able to defeat the lion physically. The lion then turns on the monkey, not because of his defeat, but because of the trickster's signifying. The monkey's practice highlights the difference between the literal and the figurative, it stresses the materiality of the language and the free associations on the paradigmatic axis, which disturbs the traditional linearity of the syntagmatic chain. We can therefore conclude that the signifying monkey poems provide us with a different meaning for signification, which is mainly based on language games. These games characterise the Afro-American rhetorical techniques used by the black communities to write their own identities within the parallel discursive universe to formal literary tradition. In this universe the effort to acquire a singular voice is mainly based on the spoken language, including a wide range of strategies: rhetorical indirection, motivated repetition, figurative/ritual insult, homonyms and puns, all stressing *the way* something is said rather than *what* is said.

Henry Louis Gates Jr. thinks that the signifying practice is not only useful for the interpretation and critique of any Afro-American text, but also for the construction of the Afro-American literary history, which Gates believes to be based on intertextual relationships of parody, pastiche, motivated and unmotivated repetition, not only among black texts/authors, but also between a black text and a white one:

Several of the canonical texts in the Afro-American tradition seem to be related to other black texts primarily in terms of substance or content, whereas they seem to be related to western texts in terms of form. (GATES 1998: 122)

In *Song of Solomon* the characters signify upon each other and Morrison signifies upon our reading by confronting us with a rhetorical strategy – signifying – that deconstructs the western practice of reading based on signification as

3 Jennifer Fitzgerald, in «Selfhood and Community: Psychoanalysis and Discourse in *Beloved*» proposes a reading of *Beloved* through various discourses, pointing out the fact that discourse analysis highlights the different subject positions of which the characters avail themselves: **the discourse of slavery** which privileges humanity, autonomy and family relationships, in order to deny them to slaves; **the discourse of the good mother** which conceives of the mother as being inseparable from the child; **the discourse of masculinity** that inscribes male slaves as subjects of certain rituals traditionally identified as exclusively masculine; **the discourse of black solidarity** that prevails among the marginalized Afro-Americans; **the pre-Oedipal discourse**, by which the infant's identity is constructed through interactions with others, *aspects of whom have been internalized by the child as part of himself* (672).

Discourse analysis is also useful in the reading of *Song of Solomon* because in this novel the community is presented as a dialogistic structure, and not as a monologicistic one, being the multiple voices used as instruments to play with the subject/object position of the black community's members.

4 Italo Calvino's definition of multiplicity is relevant in the analysis of *Song of Solomon*, since the characteristics of this fictional text converge with those pointed out by Calvino: the impossibility of closure of any novel due to the fact that this genre is conceived as an *open encyclopaedia*. According

signified concept

signifier sound image

For black vernacular English, signification means the relationship between the signifier and the rhetorical figures, which implies *a text in motion*, a text characterised by the tension between Signification within the black American linguistic code and signification implicit in the white linguistic circle. According to Gates these two concepts are dependent on each other and the tension can never be solved. The black and white linguistic circles are also present in *Song of Solomon*, which is viewed by Mobley as a texture of multiple voices, a dialogic structure, from which three voices are highlighted: the narrative voice, the signifying voice and the responsive voices.

In Part I of *Song of Solomon* the city is introduced by an omniscient, objective narrative voice that lets us listen to Not Doctor Street voices trying to inscribe themselves in the linguistic world as subjects, not as objects of the dominant discourse. To do this they have to undermine the language of the latter and interact with people who make them feel loved, so that they can project love onto themselves and others.<sup>3</sup> The renaming of Mains Avenue as Not Doctor Street can be inscribed in this attempt to build one's own identity while apparently accepting to be located in the void by the white authorities discourse. Playing with a serious issue for black culture – the act of naming -, the black community tries to give meaning to a hostile world, shaping space into a particular place, making their own space intimate, fighting *against urban anonymity, against colorless names whites have given their streets* (Scruggs 1995: 170). The use of the negative – **Not** Doctor Street, **No** Mercy Hospital, Railroad Tommy's list of things that Afro-Americans are **never** going to have (59-60), the absent things in Pilates's house (**no** gas, **no** electricity, **no** curtains) – draws the contrast between the white city, the unnamed Detroit, and the black community within it. However, this contrast implies more than the simple dichotomy black/white, due to the complex structure of the fictional world made of invisible communities within invisible and visible worlds.<sup>4</sup>

It is this multiple universe that is conveyed by the narrative voice that creates distance through the apparent objectivity of a third person narration, while it foregrounds the vernacular by letting us listen to the voices of the characters in the crowd. Focusing on the Dead family, Mobley points out that the narrative voice allows the reader to listen to three categories of language, mainly the

authoritative discourse of the father, the silent discourse of the mother and the internally persuasive discourse of each child, but especially that of Milkman, whose gradual understanding of language the novel enacts. As far as the black community of Not Doctor Street is concerned, there is also a mosaic of different worldviews, which are portrayed by *the signifying voice* of some of its members and the blindness and deafness of others:

I define the signifying voice as the double-voiced mode of discourse in the text based on African American rhetorical strategies of repetition, the play of difference, insult, naming, indirection, circumlocution ... Although there are instances of female characters who speak in the signifying voice, it appears most often in *Song of Solomon* in male discourse at predominantly male gatherings. The importance of this voice is not only that it reveals the play of multiple voices in dialogue with one another within the African American community but that it reveals Milkman's alienation from his own voice and his inability to hear his connection to the language of others. (MOBLEY 1987: 55)

Milkman's alienation is signified upon by Railroad Tommy, whose lecture on the black man's fate controlled by the sign NOT is a good example of the signifying practice as the ironic use of language:

You *not* going to have *no* private coach with four red velvet chairs that swivel around in one place whenever you want 'em to. *No*. And you *no* going to have your own special toilet and your own special-made eight-foot bed either. (...) And you *not* going to have *no* breakfast tray brought to you early in the morning with a red rose on it and two warm croissants and a cup of hot chocolate. *Nope*. *Never*. (60, my emphasis)

In fact, the repetition of the word *not/never* highlights the rift between the black and the white universes, which is viewed by Milkman's blindness and Guitar's violent gaze as a barrier that can easily be blurred. The repeated *never* in Railroad Tommy's speech deconstructs the blindness and signifies on Guitar's disappointment, since the common practice of denying blacks the same rights that whites have shouldn't cause surprise any longer. Guitar's reaction sets him aside, just as Milkman's habit of watching instead of listening makes him an outsider.

Echoing the marginal position of the white population in relation to the renaming of Mains Avenue or Mercy Hospital, Milkman inhabits a city that is different from the urban space shared by the community who watches Robert Smith flying from Mercy to the other side of Lake

to Calvino, *one cannot think of any totality that is not potential, conjectural and multiple* (CALVINO 1990: 138; my translation).

Superior. Flying, as a special power of African People who flew to their homeland either by physically escaping from the place of white power, or by taking off the ground with their songs and vernacular discourse, makes Mr. Smith's act much more meaningful than the neutral voice of the narrator seems to imply. Therefore a thick line can be drawn between the community's mounted respect for the insurance agent's leap and the hospital people's assumptions:

They (hospital people) wondered if one of those things that racial-  
uplift groups were always organising was taking place. ... Some of  
them thought briefly that this was probably some form of worship.  
(6)

The same line is later drawn between Milkman's outside position and the *crisscrossed* conversations in Railroad Tommy's Barbershop about the murder of a young Negro boy:

A young Negro boy had been found stomped to death in Sunflower  
County, Mississippi. There were no questions about who stomped  
him – his murderers had boasted freely – and there were no ques-  
tions about the motive. The boy had whistled at some white woman,  
refused to deny he had slept with others, and was a Northerner vis-  
iting the South. His name was Till. ... Milkman tried to focus on the  
crisscrossed conversations. (80)

Trying to focus, to see, instead of trying to listen, creates a gap between Milkman and the other members of *his* community. The subject discussed by the men gathered at the barbershop – the murder of Emmet Till – opens space for the signifying voice on different levels, mainly the metalinguistic, the metafictional and the fictional types of signifying. By denouncing the selectivity that rules the print media controlled by the white population, one of the speakers signifies upon the word *news*, which can be considered a metalinguistic type of signifying, since he uses language to comment on how the white community (mis)uses language to put blacks aside. Morrison also signifies on the novel as fictional genre because the introduction of a historical fact in the novel – the murder of E. Till - erases the frontier between fiction and reality. The blurring of this frontier allows her to play with the meaning of fiction within a fictional context, exploring the possibility of enacting fictionally what should have been done in the real world. In fact, the Seven Days group can be viewed as an instrument to perform

that game on the intersection line between the two universes mentioned above. The other signifying voice is that of the narrator, whose rhetorical strategy denounces Milkman's position as an outsider. Only when Milkman is able to listen instead of just watching can he become an active participant in his own community, an active speaker and listener, able to make use of the responsive voice:

The responsive voice is the larger context from which the signifying voice is derived. It requires the active participation of speaker and listener, just as the signifying voice enables both the speaker and the listener to exchange roles and become speaking subjects. (MOBLEY 1995: 57)

While Milkman is controlled by the gaze and the specular instead of the oral and the aural, the city haunted by him is closer to the urban territory attached to the dead past of his mother's sickly love for her father and his father's inversion of the paternal love for the land. As a ghost, Milkman walks the streets in the opposite direction everyone else is heading to - "The street was even more crowded with people, all going in the direction he was coming from" (78) -, without being able to walk his own path, without coming to terms with his mirror image - "Milkman walked on, still headed toward Southside, never once wondering why he himself did not cross over to the other side of the street, where no one was walking at all" (78); "Milkman stood before his mirror and glanced, in the low light of the wall lamp, at his reflection. ... He had a fine enough face. ... *But it lacked coherence, a coming together of the features into a total self.*" (69, my emphasis). For all its alienation and emptiness, the space of the Dead family is more "urban" than the one shared by those who bring the village to the city by signifying on white authorities' language.

Contrasting with the dead love of Ruth, the frozen greed of Macon Dead II and the artificiality of the flowers made by Lena and Corinthians, Pilate's house is open to Nature, without the enclosed compartments in which the Dead members are kept as in an insane asylum. As a refuge for Ruth, Milkman and Macon, Pilate's place in Darling Street is the physical embodiment of the *Beloved Community* lurking in the invisible world of the Afro-Americans. Nevertheless, it is also the place that feeds Hagar's possessive love for Milkman without being able to release her from the oppression of the negative side of mass culture, the oppression of the cosmetics that leave her body in the rain.<sup>5</sup> Faced with a society that rejects Reba's libertinism and Pilate's general otherness<sup>6</sup>, Hagar is lured by the *white shell* of the dominant culture

**5** After 1930s black American writers were more aware of the negative effects of mass culture on black city dwellers, raising the question whether this culture could help build the *Beloved Community* or whether its materialism and diabolic magic would overwhelm black sensibilities. Morrison's view of the city focuses upon the local, the particular, the intimate and the provincial, moving back and forth between the individual and communal realization. In this perspective, the market-driven mass culture is critically analysed because it cuts off the individual from a local culture and identity.

**6** Pilate's otherness inspires respect and fear from those who meet her: "Ruth had been frightened of her the first time she saw her .... (Ruth was still frightened of her a little. Not just her short hair cut regularly like a man's, or her large sleepy eyes and busy lips, or the smooth smooth skin, hairless, scarless, and wrinkleless. For Ruth had actually seen it. The place on her stomach where a navel should have been and was not. Even if you weren't frightened of a woman who had no navel, you certainly had to take her very seriously.)" (138).

and, unlike her lover, she isn't able to get rid of it, being drawn by the nefarious form of love that also involves other characters:

Ruth Foster's seemingly incestuous attachment to her father, Hagar's all-possessive love for Milkman, Guitar's convoluted definition of love as justification for The Seven Days – all project the possible deleterious effects of love. (OTTEN 1993: 656)

Morrison's urban world is therefore an ambiguous one, torn between the duplicity of the ironic language used by the black community to deconstruct the discourse that denies their identity and the ambiguity that characterises this community perceived as multiple, complex, not as a single, monologicistic structure. It is this multiplicity that accounts for the existence of different categories of outsiders, such as Pilate, the compassionate and encompassing *love giver*; Guitar, the dyonisian figure whose rebellious instruments echo the violence of the white urban world, in the same way that *Not Doctor Street*, in spite of masking humble effacement, is always a second-hand name. The daring image of Guitar is gradually replaced by an image of self-destruction caused by the blind revenge of The Seven Days actions. Stimulated by the psychological violence imposed by the denial of their identity, both Macon Dead II and Guitar reiterate the oppressor's value system, blurring the frontiers between the insiders and the outsiders, the good and the bad, the white and the black:

Morrison works the grey areas, avoiding the comfortable absolutism and resolution that can satisfy or reassure most readers. There is an underlying strain of cruelty and violence that can erupt in her most sympathetic and victimised characters and compel them to inflict frightful destruction on seemingly innocent people. They seem capable at once of enormous criminality and unmitigated love. (OTTEN 1993: 651)

The multiplicity and ambiguity dismissed by the urban ethnocentrism and logocentrism<sup>7</sup> are perceived by the reader of *Song of Solomon* through the play of different voices inside the fictional world and in the text. However, the meaning of this perception isn't fully understood until Milkman starts his ritual of initiation in Part II. Macon Dead III is born in a world controlled by the gaze of the other, i.e., the look of the dominant culture which his father wants him to accommodate to, and the look of Guitar that he (mis)uses to

<sup>7</sup> Ethnocentrism and logocentrism refer to the central position of the white population (ethnocentrism) who controls the urban mainstream through the use of language as a system that manipulates reality (logocentrism). Moreover, the centrality of the word in the construction of one's own identity is signified upon by the black community by speaking itself into being, i.e., by repeating the same words spoken/written by the white authorities in such a way that the repetition becomes revision, repetition with a difference: *Not Doctor Street*, *No Mercy Hospital*. Although these names are second-hand made, they are still useful for the deconstruction of the white discourse that denies identity to the black myths and legends, dismissing the black English vernacular as primitive language without any power over reality.



define himself, thus escaping the responsibility of self-invention.<sup>8</sup> As an outsider, Milkman is faced with mysterious and unreadable signs, mainly his family's past history, the origin of his nickname and of his relatives' names, and his relationship to the black and white communities, which he passes by without achieving any kind of identification. Bartleby seems to haunt the urban space of *Song of Solomon's* first part, since its refusal to be part of the system – *I would prefer not to* – is reiterated by Milkman's indifference to everything that doesn't affect him directly:

Apparently he thought he deserved only to be loved – from a distance, though – and given what he wanted. And in return he would be... what? Pleasant? Generous? Maybe all he was really saying was: I am not responsible for your pain; share your happiness with me but not your unhappiness. (277)

In fact, having discovered at the age of four the same thing that Mr. Smith had realised – that only birds and airplanes could fly -, he lost all interest in himself. Christened Macon Dead III, and later renamed Milkman because his mother nursed him late into childhood, this character spends his life searching for the wings that will finally give him the power of flight. The inability to fly, which widens the gap between Milkman and the community due to the psychological effects of such a *flaw*, is exacerbated by another handicap perceived by this character at the age of fourteen, when he "noticed that one of his legs was shorter than the other. ... It bothered him and he acquired movements and habits to disguise what to him was a burning defect." (62). Due to this deformity that was mostly in his mind, Milkman felt he couldn't measure up to his father's standards, which makes him differ from Macon as much as he could, though inwardly he becomes similar to him: **a dead man**. The search for his father's material dream – gold – opens up the path for Milkman's departure from the urban context of the newspaper report, the amorality, the mysterious, the alien, the anonymous and the mass culture, and leads him to the rural south inhabited by storytellers, communities who share moral principles and a folk culture, and where space is made into a place by the familiarity of having the same roots. A central issue of this quest is the search for the meaning of names, because the power to name is the only and real power one can achieve in the African-American world. As a member of this world, Milkman is faced with the deliberate refusal of his people to accept names bestowed upon them arbitrarily. Reacting against this violent act of oppression from the white authorities, the black

<sup>8</sup> See Cynthia A. Davis *Self, Society and Myth in Toni Morrison's Fiction*:

"The Look of white society, supported by all kinds of material domination, not only freezes the black individual but also classifies all blacks as alike, freezing the group. They become a 'we-object' before the gaze of a 'Third'." (DAVIS 1999: 10)

community renames *reality* ironically and gives themselves meaningful nicknames: Railroad Tommy and Hospital Tommy are named after their respective careers; Guitar Bains is named after his love for this musical instrument; Empire State acquires his amusing nickname because *he just stood there and swayed*. Each new member of the Dead family is given a name chosen randomly from the Bible: Pilate, Hagar, First Corinthians and Magdalene are a few of unusual names chosen by this practice, but only Pilate gives meaning to her name, by subverting the original meaning – Christ-killing – and becoming the tree that hangs *in some princely but protective way over a row of smaller trees* (18). Guided by Pilate's spirit<sup>9</sup>, in spite of her physical absence in Part II, Milkman undertakes his quest as an escape from Hagar's destructive love, from the difficult relationship between his parents and from his dependency on Guitar, whose haunting presence was becoming more and more threatening due to his distorted vision of love and revenge. In fact, The Seven Days secret organisation subverts the meaning of the biblical seven days needed to create the world by compromising with the Devil in several blind killing actions in retaliation for black deaths. These crimes belong to the underground world, where the Dionysian figure, the man in the crowd, the mysterious man lives, disrupting the city from within:

<sup>9</sup> Both Linda Krumholz and Trudier Harris underline the reversal strategies used by Morrison in her approach to black folklore. As Krumholz argues, the vital role played by a woman – Pilate - in Milkman's quest differs from many mythic and novelist analogues. According to Harris, Morrison's primary folkloristic technique is the inversion of folkloric traditions: the North is not a freer place for black people; the image of the middle class respectability is not applicable to blacks; isolation and insanity can work as balms for individual ills; as far as *Song of Solomon* is concerned, the Odyssean journey is subverted by replacing the hero with an anti-hero, the nurturing mothers with witchlike characters and by merging the good and the bad. (see KRUMHOLZ 1993: 551-574)

In its size and anonymity, the city allows the flowering of vividly personal sensitivities, which explains why one feels at once aroused by the city and submerged and powerless in its vastness. (GRANA 1971: 70)

There are always two cities at work: one visible, the other invisible; one of the surface, the other underground or hidden; one a realm of mastery and control, the other of mystery and turmoil. (LEHAN 1998: 273)

Living in the interstitial space between the surface and the underground, Milkman flies away from peoples' nightmares and heads towards his father's boyhood home in Danville, Pennsylvania, stepping in a suspended time and mythical place appropriately introduced by Hansel and Gretel. Lured by the chocolate house in the forest that would satisfy their hunger, these two fairy-tale characters evoke both the urban entrapment of materialism and the greed guiding Milkman at the beginning of his journey through the rural south. The image of Circe, the old woman locked in space and time due to her wish of revenge against the white family responsible for the death of Milkman's grandfather, echoes The Seven Days killings.

Nevertheless, there is an important difference between the mythical world of Circe and the entropic environment of the secret organisation: the former takes revenge in a particular context; the latter acts arbitrarily. The search for gold in the cave gradually ruins Milkman's shoes and clothes, starting the process that Guitar had earlier evoked: "Can't nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down." (179). Having found nothing in the cave, Milkman heads towards Shalimar, in Virginia, Pilate's birthplace, where he finally breaks free from *the white shell of the egg*<sup>10</sup>, from the white ideological vision, "the blindness of looking at externals for meaning." (KRUMHOLZ 1993: 560). This release process implies a three-phase ritual of initiation, that includes the fight with a local man, hunting with older men and the skinning of a cat. Contrasting with the lights of the city and invoking Pilate's lack of electricity and gas, the hunt for the wild-cat takes place in the middle of darkness, making the initiator learn a new, preliterate, natural language that blends the «acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time with neither taking precedence over the other.» ("Rootedness" 342). The skinning of the cat evokes the past horror of lynching, castration and mutilation, while it challenges Guitar's violence towards the white community. Receiving the cat's heart can therefore be interpreted as a symbol of Milkman's rebirth as a black man who comes to terms with the past in order to understand the present, and who learns to think by himself by listening" instead of just seeing, by *reading blind* in the tradition of his ancestors.

The recovering of the past in the rural South implies a process of dismantling imposed cultural constructs and of reconstructing a different worldview from the obscured remains. In the suspended time of Circe's environment, Milkman is faced for the first time with the ambiguous relationship between Life and Death, being forced to dismiss the western mode of thinking – *either/or* – and to embrace the *both/and* perspective of the Afro-American culture:

She was old. So old she was colorless. So old only her mouth and eyes were distinguishable features in her face. ... Milkman struggled for a clear thought, so hard to come by in a dream: Perhaps this woman is Circe. But Circe is dead. This woman is alive. That was as far as he got, because although the woman was talking to him, she might in any case still be dead – as a matter of fact, she *had* to be dead. Not because of the wrinkles, and the face so old it could not be alive, but because out of the toothless mouth came the strong, mellifluous voice of a twenty-year-old girl. (240)

**10** According to Krumholz the egg is a symbol of Milkman's ritual rebirth, being present in vital moments: the fight with Saul is presaged when "a black rooster strutted by, its blood-red comb draped forward like a wicked brow." (268); the rooster and the peacock represent male pride, vanity and greed due to their inability to fly. When Milkman and Guitar plan to steal Pilate's gold, they see a peacock. Contrasting with the cock, the egg *signifies ungendered potential*, being also *related to females since they contain and nurture the egg* (KRUMHOLZ 1993: 559). Pilate is associated with this symbol because Milkman remembers her as an "old black lady who had cooked him his first perfect egg, who had shown him the sky." (211). This association uncovers hidden meanings, mainly the fact that Pilate is the true ancestor in the urban setting and that her spirit guides Macon Dead III in his quest. The vital role played by a woman in a traditionally male oriented mythological context results from a reconceptualization of myths by Morrison.

**11** Circe points out Milkman's difficulty in listening when she remarks that he doesn't listen to people:

"Your ear is on your head, but it's not connected to your brain." (247).

Once again the past is reclaimed because the ambiguity Life/Death is rooted in the African History when white slave traders saw Africans committing suicide by jumping into the sea, while black slaves saw their brothers and sisters flying back to their homeland. The new mode of *reading blind*, replacing sight with sounds, allows Milkman to realise that Circe didn't want to preserve but to destroy the system that had oppressed her; he understands that his father had felt love and respect for his own father; he perceives language as a shifting structure and not as a fixed and transparent code. This linguistic mobility accounts for the new meanings of words: Charlemagne turns out to be Shalimar pronounced Shallehone, like Solomon, the original version of Pilate's song *Sugarman*; Milkman's grandmother's name Byrd is Bird, which reveals her Indian origin; in the children's song, Jay is Jake, his grandfather, the child carried away in flight to be dropped, whose father is Solomon, the flying African; Jake's command to Pilate – Sing – is a direct reference to his wife's name, so Pilate's song refers not only to her father's ancestors through the lyric, but also to her mother through the act of singing; Jake's cautionary remark to Pilate - "You can't just fly off and leave a body" - turns out to be an appeal to his own father, Solomon, not to leave him behind when he flew home to Africa, thus *cleaning off* Pilate's earlier interpretation of the warning as an order to retrieve the body of the man killed by her brother. All these shifts in meaning make clear that language can be used not only to name and explore, but also to *hide, distort, mock and signify absence* (GUTH 1993: 584).

Alone in the woods, Milkman finally opens himself to the experience of feeling rooted:

... he found himself exhilarated by simply walking the earth. Walking it like he belonged on it; like his legs were stalks, tree trunks, a part of his body that extended down down down into the rock and soil, and was comfortable there – on the earth and on the place where he walked. And he did not limp. (281)

This village experience allows Macon Dead III to meet his ancestors, filling in the urban gap and reshaping his worldview:

What is missing in city fiction and present in village fiction is the ancestor. The advising, benevolent, protective, wise Black ancestor is imagined as surviving in the village but not in the city. ... The city is wholesome, loved when such an ancestor is on the scene, when

neighborhood links are secure. The country is beautiful – healing because more often than not, such an ancestor is there. ("City Limits, Village Values" 39)

When the heart of the prey is torn out, the word love is deconstructed, being the range of its objects widened in order to include Hagar's destructive passion, Guitar's systematic murder, Ruth's sickly affection and the loving kindness masking white destruction. At the same time all these love expressions are stripped of their false meanings and contextualised in their original site – the urban, violent, schizophrenic and alienating world of Milkman's previous life, where one loses the transcendental signifier:

The postindustrial city also takes its meaning from the complex handling of international capital and from the multinational corporation. Urban activity becomes more abstract and 'unreal' as *power operates from hidden sources*. Such a city is at once *a physical reality and a state of mind*: to read the city is to read an urbanized self, to know the city from within. Once we lose the transcendental signifier, the totalizing process is called into question and the city turns into a place of mystery: chance and the unexpected dominate, a romantic sense of the uncanny becomes exaggerated, and the *city takes on the meaning of pure text, to be created by each individual and then read*. (LEHAN 1998: 287, my emphasis)

It is the need to read his own text of the urban space that leads Milkman to the rural South, where he searches for the transcendental signifier, the ancestor, trying to take control of his life against the hidden power of the dominant discourse in the city. The search for roots turns out to be an imaginative trip of the collective memory, having as its central figure the same-but-different repetition: while Milkman learns to fly like Solomon, Hagar commits suicide, following Ryna's footprints. The reiteration of his ancestors' fate allows the initiator to grasp the meaning of his nickname as a testimony to his mother's need for love after her father's loss, as well as the true origin of the surname, Dead, as a projection of his father's greed. The uncovering of these hidden layers of meaning makes Milkman feel responsible for the pain he has caused others, contrasting with the anonymity of urban powers, the hidden hand of white authorities and of The Seven Days. This epiphany<sup>12</sup> is disturbed by the shadow of death brought by Guitar's attempt to kill his *brother*, which echoes Macon and Hagar's similar threats to Milkman's life. More than finally understanding the meaning of his name, Macon Dead III is able to give meaning to it,

<sup>12</sup> See IBITOKUN 1991: 411: "There are many African novels that are built along this spatial form (Epiphanic Spatiality). ... This spatial aesthetic in African fiction flourishes on the eve of independence when the black Africans are rejecting the values on which the West has built its civilization. The protagonist is, at first, enthralled by or forced into Western civilization and becomes part of it. But at some point in his time his mind becomes intrigued and critical". Although Milkman's fate follows the pattern of the protagonist of this kind of African fiction, the end of the novel differs from the one referred to by Ibitokun, since the time spent in the urban environment can't be simply described as a waste of time: "It is at the moment of epiphany that the ironic message becomes more biting because the protagonist understands too late that he has wasted part of his precious existence in life".

**13** The fact that Milkman returns to the city is relevant because it clarifies Morrison's perspective on the role played by the urban environment in Afro-American life. As Hakutani and Butler argue, Toni Morrison stresses the importance of the **village within the city**, the community values sustained by black neighbourhoods, which can overcome the sense of alienation that the American city has often induced in many black writers (HAKUTANI and BUTLER 1995: 11). Therefore, the anti-urban drive of American Literature, which has also been shared by Afro-American writers suspicious of city life, is not entirely advocated by Morrison. Her position follows the main tradition of black texts that conceive of the city as a space of vitality and educational possibilities necessary to achieve a better life. Contrasting with the lynching, slavery discourse and sharecroppers of the country, the city is represented as a place of deliverance, with all the ambiguities and paradoxes that such a deliverance implies.

becoming the true nurturer of his people, the ancestor that will replace Pilate/*Pilot* in the city landscape. After recovering the past stories and identities, Milkman returns home<sup>13</sup> to face the consequences of his earlier actions and to give Pilate the peace she couldn't have unless she found her place. Leaving behind the geography book, which would no longer be needed, the placeless black woman can now bury her father properly and meet her fate, because her lesson has already been passed on to the new ancestor. Repeating the blindness of the past, Guitar kills Pilate in the same way that he had killed a doe instead of a deer, but this time the mistake is fruitful: Pilate can finally fly away, while Milkman sings for her, taking her place as the singer, the ancestor "who defies the system, provides alternate wisdom and establishes and maintains and sustains generations in a land." ("City Limits, Village Values" 43).

By adopting a new mode of reading, Milkman is able to come to terms with multiplicity instead of thinking only by western binaries; he can now invent himself through the work of imagination (i.e., he can now fly), while feeling rooted at the same time; and he can embrace the magical context of black folklore, which makes greater sense than *the insanities, grotesqueries, and ironies of the realm of «normality» and order* (BYERMAN 1999: 84). Milkman's new mode of reading learnt in the country is reiterated by the reader's new strategies in the second part of *Song of Solomon*. In Part I we need irony to break through the language barrier due to the dual-consciousness and critical points of view that characterise the black community. In the city inhabited by this community, the idea of a shared American identity is perceived as an illusion, because the urban space is defined as dual, full of riddles and linguistic plays, a centrifugal vortex, in which life and death are artificially divided. In contrast to these reading practices, the southern rural African-American landscape of Part II replaces irony with epiphany, heightening the importance of natural perception, of symbolism and of the supernatural presence of the ancestors. Just as Milkman is lead to deconstruct earlier assumptions, the reader is invited to replace an Enlightenment approach with a multicultural one, which implies a reassessment of one's concepts of Life and Death. At the end of *Song of Solomon*, the question one should ask is not whether Milkman lives or dies, but whether he dies or flies. Just as the city offers the black community freedom, while paradoxically denying it, the reading practice of Part I offers the reader a vision of its fictional

world but it hides invisible cities behind. The latter can only be seen with the awareness of a different cultural background present in the Afro-American folklore, popular culture and myths, without which signifying will be just a second-hand instrument to create identity:

*By privileging voice over vision, sound over sight, and hearing over seeing, this novel (Song of Solomon) illustrates the ways in which our current cultural moment is engaged in what James Clifford refers to as a rejection of visualism privileged in Western literate cultures. The focus is therefore, as he argues, on "a cultural poetics that is an interplay of voices, of positioned utterances. In a discursive rather than a visual paradigm, the dominant metaphors... shift away from the observing eye and toward the expressive speech" (MOBLEY 1995: 63; my emphasis)*

The reader of Morrison's novel is thus asked to question Western notions of autonomy and individuality endangered by the urban entropy and to consider, instead, how the notion of community as a dialogic structure offers him/her "new ways to read black texts and new ways to hear and respond to the multivocality that has made us who we are and who we are becoming." (MOBLEY 1995: 63). Accepting the ambiguity of the end of *Song of Solomon* is to embrace one of the main characteristics of black stories – their openness, the fact that they are always being retold. By passing on these stories, one is reminded of the city's dual face as the facilitator of the melting down of cultural and ethnical differences and of the anthropological genocide. The negative side of the urban world – Macon's greed, Ruth and Hagar's horrific love, Guitar's blindness, Milkman's selfishness – can only be erased if the search for the *Beloved Community* is recentered in the particular, domestic life, as well as in popular culture. The invisible hands of this community will resist the breakdown and create a *where*, a home, that can overcome Milkman and Pilate's placelessness. By recovering History through imagination, Milkman flies to meet his people, not to escape as Solomon, the *forefather* of Ellison's *invisible man*, seems to have done:

In the conflict between Macon and Pilate over the land, over history, and over Milkman, Pilate wins because she has shown Milkman a way out of the hibernation advocated by Macon's inertia. In this way, too, Milkman's struggle enlarges the orbit of geography for Afro-American identity and cultural performance beyond the cave of hibernation promoted in Ellison's *Invisible Man*. (DIXON 1999: 136)

The idea of a black utopian city is brought into reality within the tangible, often terrible conditions of black urban life under the shadow of Poe's destructive city, Melville's city of man inseparable from the city of death, and Faulkner's endangered wilderness. Situated between Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier and the wasteland of Eliot, the city of *Song of Solomon* needs to retrieve the *village values* of the ancestors that can only be tested outside of urban conformity. The testing ritual is mainly performed through language, from the black American vernacular **Signifying** to the experience of a preliterate linguistic code, in the postmodern context of indeterminacy, fragmentation and irony. The ambiguity of the quest is clear at the end of the novel that "allows for multiple and troubling interpretations: suicide; 'real' flight and then a wheeling attack on his 'brother'; or 'real' flight and then some kind of encounter with the possibly 'killing arms of his brother'." (LUBIANO 1995: 111). Morrison's text refutes the idea of an untroubled self, dismissing the final closure that Calvino also finds impossible in an "open encyclopaedic novel". As Wahneema Lubiano argues, Milkman's climatic leap is both a move forward and a journey back: "back to the behaviour of a slave ancestor, back to nothingness, back to death." (112). This ambiguity reinforces the relationship between the reading of the text and the reading of the city<sup>14</sup>, since both are constructs that must be continuously re-examined. From Defoe to Pynchon, the ways of reading the city through the crowd offer clues to ways of reading the text, as we have proved in our analysis of Space and Meaning in the city and the village of *Song of Solomon*. Morrison's text is above all a story being told about the meaning of being black (black as a form of knowledge, a worldview) in our urban world, and we, as readers, are invited to listen, to fill in the gaps and to *pass on*:

Story is the human frame for experience: with such a premise, who can say where the story will end? (LOHAFFER 1989: 216)

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<sup>14</sup> See Carlos Rotella's analysis of the relationship between *cities of feeling* and *cities of fact* (ROTELLA 1998). According to Rotella the former are created by ideas, language and images, while the latter are shaped by the circulation of capital, material and people. From our analysis of *Song of Solomon*, we can conclude that this novel focuses primarily on cities of the inner landscapes of black city dwellers.



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