Living with Nature in the City: An Ecocritical Reading of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

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Abstract: *This paper seeks to do an ecocritical reading of Toni Morrison's* Song of Solomon. *Most slave narratives and African American novels have characters that move from the South to the North in order to escape slavery as well as make a better living. However, this novel is unique because Milkman undergoes a process of reverse migration – journeying from the North to the South. Also, the main character achieves a different kind of liberation. Although he is already a free man living in the 1950-60s America, Milkman is alienated from his historical roots because of the influence from his father Macon. The one who guides Milkman toward his ancestry is Pilate, his aunt, who lives in a totally opposite way from Milkman's father Macon. In this paper, I focus on Pilate's relationship to the environment – an ecocritical reading of the character. Pilate is important because she is the only guide for Milkman to achieve liberation. It is interesting that she, who is without a navel, lives in the Northern city, an urban environment, without any use of electricity and gas. Many studies on Pilate have already focused on her relationship to the physical environment, exemplified by her rural living style in the urban space; however, an ecocritical reading will provide various other aspects about Pilate. Pilate's Afrocentric way of living, exemplified by her natural way of living, is significant due to the fact that she reclaims the space that African Americans were exempt from. Black people in America could not claim a space for themselves other than living like the mainstream whites or like a radical extremist. Pilate's relationship to the environment is very unique she is able to have the agency to claim a space for herself as well as be rooted to her ancestry in the urban environment of the North.*

Keywords: *Ecocriticism, reverse migration, liberation, rural/urban, space*

Introduction

Nature, for most people, brings rest and peace from the cares of the civilized world. However, the African Americans' relationship to nature is a complicated one since they also view nature as work, violence, African homeland, and traditional culture due to their history of slavery and to their memories of Africa. In an interview, the African-American writer Toni Morrison comments on how her characters "represent certain poles, and certain kinds of thought, and certain kinds of states of being, and they are in conflict with each other, struggling for sovereignty or some sort of primacy" (*Conversations with Toni Morrison* 178). In *Song of Solomon*, the two poles in conflict with

one another are Pilate, representing earth, and Macon, representing property (76). If someone values earth more than property, then that person is more like Pilate, and if someone values property more than earth, then that person is more like Macon (178). While Macon owns the land by buying property, Pilate possesses the land without any economic transactions but by treasuring her African heritage. Even though Macon and Pilate come from the same background, they hold different relationships to the land, namely, land ownership and land possession, so I use ecocriticism in this paper to look at these two contrasting relationships that Macon and Pilate have, thereby further enriching the reading of the two characters' relationships to nature. Ecocriticism will be used since this criticism is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xviii). Here, the physical environment is "the material and tangible conditions in which we live," including the natural environment, built environment of houses and buildings, and socio-economic and cultural environment (*Public Health England*). This ecocritical reading will reveal that as Macon views nature as property, his relationship to nature is ambivalent, and as Pilate prefers coexistence with nature, her relationship to nature ties with treasuring her African heritage for the African-American community.

Macon Dead and Property

For Macon, the key to success and freedom is land ownership. He, for instance, believes that he was able to get married to the black doctor's daughter Ruth because "at twenty-three, he was already a colored man of property" (*Song* 23). As an African-American man, Macon is obsessed with owning a great amount of property because he has seen his father's farm property taken away by force and his father murdered by white people. Having seen not only his father deprived of the right to property but himself as well, just because he was a black man, and having difficulty getting rent money from his black tenants, Macon does not trust anyone except his money and his property (and even these are not entirely trustworthy since they can be taken from him). Macon influences his son to get money, telling him "Money is freedom ... The only real freedom there is" (*Song* 163). The kind of freedom that Macon is talking about is "positive" freedom. Positive freedom in this sense does not use the qualifier "positive" as a value judgment; rather, it means "acting … in such a way as to take control of one's life and realize one's fundamental purposes" (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*). With money and property, Macon can take control over many things as he is free to choose from many things, such as enjoying summer vacations in other places, e.g., beach houses, and using a car for transport rather than riding a bus or walking. As slaves, black people did not have any such freedom, so freedom to own property led to more choices to move around, to have education, to live better lives, much as the white people were always able to do.

Although Macon has a certain amount of freedom by having more choices through money and land ownership, it is ironic that he sometimes feels "like the outsider, the propertyless, landless wanderer" (*Song* 27). He tells Milkman, "Let me tell you right now the one important thing you'll ever need to know: Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too" (*Song* 55). He has always believed that if a person owns something, then one can own oneself and others, but the reality was that he felt the opposite way. He feels like an outsider, specifically, to the black community and to his family. For instance, he would take a drive with his family in his Packard and drive around from Not Doctor Street, where black people mostly lived, and toward the wealthy white neighborhoods, especially to display his power. But the black people who view this with jealousy and amusement called his Packard "Macon Dead's hearse" because there was no life in it (33). This reflects Macon's heartlessness and apathy toward everything that he claims to own, including his family:

> Solid, rumbling, likely to erupt without prior notice, Macon kept each member of his family awkward with fear. His hatred of his wife glittered and sparked in every word he spoke to her. The disappointment he felt in his daughters sifted down on them like ash. (10)

Willis argues that Macon's relationship to human beings "have become fetishized by their being made equivalent to money. His wife is an acquisition, his son, an investment in the future; his renters, dollar signs in the bank" (97). For instance, when Mrs. Bains, one of his tenants came to talk about her overdue rent, no matter what the circumstances were for the lady, he wanted her rent money. Moreover, when Ruth tries to show him what she calls nature's beauty by drawing his attention to a table centerpiece composed of flowers, Macon ignores her and does not respond. He has no regard for nature's beauty but is only interested in owning land, which also signifies for him nothing but monetary value.

Yet, Macon's relationship to nature is in fact a complex one. Macon is heartless toward nature, but this seems to change when his childhood memories of the South come back. One night, when he comes near Pilate's house to see how they are doing, he keeps his distance and remains hidden from them. He overhears some melody that Pilate, Reba, and Reba's daughter Hagar are singing. Then, he thinks of his home, dry, with no song compared to Pilate's. He yearns for the song that was available in Pilate's house: "He wanted no conversation, no witness, only to listen and perhaps to see the three of them, the source of that music that made him think of fields and wild turkey" (29). Pilate's house is more associated with nature, and the singing reminds Macon of that connection. Although Macon disdains his sister, as he nears the house and hears the song that reminds him of life close to nature, "he felt the irritability of the day drain from him and relished the effortless beauty of the women singing in the candlelight" (29). Nevertheless, he maintains a voyeuristic gaze by just looking at them from outside the house instead of telling them that he was there, maintaining separation from his sister and making no effort later to bring any song into his own home, which is not surprising, for we have already seen that, however complex might be his relationship to nature, his general attitude was to treat it only in its instrumental uses.

Macon's relationship to the land in order to gain economic profit is partly due to his past. As a black man, who migrated to the North and who saw his father murdered by white people and his father's property taken away, Macon does his best to own a lot of things, including nature, to survive in America. Moreover, because black people, as slaves, had been denied the right to property for years, then for them, nature – especially in its connection to land – was a complex place associated with labor and violence. Slaves hated the land because they had to work there all the time, "plowing, sowing, and reaping crops for somebody else, for profit they themselves would never see or taste" (Cleaver 57). Consequently, black people, after getting free status, especially the black bourgeoisie, would "measure their own value according to the number of degrees they are away from the soil" (58). Macon, however, is one example of the black bourgeoisie who believes that liberation can be somewhat measured by owning and controlling nature instead of laboring in it.

Pilate Dead and Earth

Although Pilate has the same background as Macon, since they're siblings, she has a very different relationship to the land. Instead of owning land, Pilate "possesses" land without any desire to gain money. In contrast to the materialistic lifestyle that Macon adheres to, Pilate lives without the use of electricity or gas in an urban environment, operating under what Willis describes as "subsistence economics" (94). Pilate does not have any material desires except for her three treasures: a bag of bones, some rocks, and earrings with her name on them. Instead of apathy toward nature, Pilate has had deep attraction to nature almost her whole life as she loves to chew pine needles, has loved to ever since she was little, and has been smelling like a forest since then (*Song* 27). With "berry-black lips" (38), she also "look[s] like a tall black tree" (39). Inside her house, pine smell and fermenting juice from the wine-making permeates (39). While Pilate does not have conventional material possessions, she seems to possess the whole earth, more specifically, her nation America.

Pilate's bond to the earth is associated with an African myth that partly inspired Morrison to come up with a character who represents earth, a character who has a navel-less stomach. Pilate was born right after her mother died, but she comes out of her mother's womb without a navel. Her "stomach was as smooth and sturdy as her back, at no place interrupted by a navel. It was the absence of a navel that convinced people that she had not come into this world through normal channels; had never lain, floated, or grown in some warm and liquid place connected by a tissue-thin tube to a reliable source of human nourishment" (28). Though she has a mother and a father, being navel-less means, literally, she was born of her own self. An African myth tells the story of how the female womb is similar to the mythical womb of the earth in the sense that they both produce and create life (*Conversations: Toni Morrison* 20). Around 10,000 BC, Africans thought that the female womb created life and that men took no part in giving birth to babies. This was so because of the time gap between the sexual act and the actual birth of a baby. Thus, African men thought that life originated in the female womb. However, after the domestication of sheep (and also of the women), the men realized that they took part in the womb's impregnation. But before this realization, Africans centered on the female womb as creating life, symbolically connecting the womb with the earth's womb. As an African-American female character close to the earth, Pilate is able to create life according to the myth, and because she does not have a navel, she is the beginning of everything (*Conversations: Toni Morrison* 20). Her ability to produce life is shown through taking part in giving birth

to her nephew Milkman. Ruth, wanting to have a baby, pleaded with Pilate for help, so Pilate gave her and Macon some herbal medicine so that they could make love to each other. Consequently, Milkman was born. Pilate, as a self-created individual, helping give birth to other human beings, signifies the earth's life-giving force.

By not using any convenient technology that often comes to rule one's life and by not having a kind of order that a modern individual with an urban setting usually lives under, Pilate as a character, indicates freedom in the "negative" sense, but again not in the sense of a negative value judgment. "Negative liberty is the absence of obstacles, barriers or constraints. One has negative liberty to the extent that actions are available to one in this negative sense" (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*). If one lives with technological conveniences, one is restricted in the way that the person has to pay for the extra bills and maintenance in managing the house. Pilate does not have nor need to make a lot of money since she does not need to pay for electricity or gas:

> She had no electricity because she would not pay for the service. Nor for gas. At night she and her daughter lit the house with candles and kerosene lamps; they warmed themselves and cooked with wood and coal, pumped kitchen water into a dry sink through a pipeline from a well and lived pretty much as though progress was a word that meant walking a little farther down the road. (*Song* 27)

In addition, Pilate's house had no planning, no account of money spending. They were not restricted to a set meal time or a set way of how to live:

> No meal was ever planned or balanced or served. Nor was there any gathering at the table. Pilate might bake hot bread and each one of them would eat it with butter whenever she felt like it. (29)

Pilate is free to do what she wants to do with a least amount of restrictions. She does not have to decide on what to eat or ever plan ahead of time. She is free because nobody tells her what to do, and nobody has the right to tell her what to do.

In addition to her exercising freedom, Pilate's natural space is a place of "refuge" and "freedom" for the African American community (Alaimo 139). This co-existence of nature brings balance to life. The African American scholar bell hooks writes about how the African Americans have always been a people rooted to the earth. Through ecological movements, she calls for a restoration of the black psyche to a proper relationship with the land:

> For many years, and even now, generations of black folks who migrated north to escape life in the south, returned down home in search of a spiritual nourishment, a healing, that was fundamentally connected to reaffirming one's connection to nature, to a contemplative life where one could take time, sit on the porch, walk, fish, and catch lightning bugs. If we think of urban life as a location where black folks learned to accept a mind/body split that made it possible to abuse the body, we can better understand the growth of nihilism and despair in the black psyche. And we can know that when we talk about healing that psyche we must also speak about restoring our connection to the natural world. (hooks 39)

In *Song of Solomon*, Pilate is the one who brings this healing back to disrupted African Americans living in the North.

In addition, as a contrast to Macon, Pilate, with the least amount of material possessions, values human relationships. Ruth, Macon, and Milkman all find comfort in her house. She is a "natural healer" (*Song* 150), and even though she does not have much, she provides essential things to others. She is the one who is the source of Milkman's birth. Also, since she treasures the *Song of Solomon*, a song of their ancestor, she preserves the African oral tradition for the black community, which is in danger of losing touch with the past. The community members are reminded of Africa, and Southern memories are also kept alive by the presence of this ancestor-figure character Pilate. Both places – the South and Africa – remind the other blacks of a life closer to nature. Morrison intentionally places an ancestor figure in the urban city, arguing that the success of a character depends on the presence of the ancestor, a timeless figure ("City Limits" 43). Pilate literally seems to be timeless because she

continues subsistence living in the midst of urban development. Also, her rural lifestyle is treasured by the black people in the North, for they had migrated to the North and left their homes behind in search of better living. Pilate is able to provide life for black people in old ways, by treasuring her Southern and African heritage.

In other words, Pilate views nature, not as an object, but as a "living entity, an embodiment of [the] past" (Christian 68). Similar to Native Indians, African American folk tradition is deeply tied to the natural landscape. Because African Americans migrated to the North, change in living place meant loss of folk tradition that the Southern land represented. Barbara Christian states:

> As in the ancestral African tradition, place is as important as the human actors. For the land is a participant in the maintenance of the folk tradition. It is one of the necessary constraints through which the folk dramatize the meaning of life, as it is passed on from one generation to the next. Setting, then, is organic to the characters' view of themselves. And a change in place drastically alters the traditional values that give their life coherence. (65)

The connection between the folk culture and the Southern region of America is what sustains the lives of the African Americans. Land is as important as the people because land participates in the continuation of the folk culture (Christian 80). Because of the people's tie to the land associated with the traditional culture, the break away from that land effects loss of traditional values, the folk culture. Therefore, through Pilate, Morrison connects nature with culture instead of the strict division because African-American culture in itself cannot be maintained without a tie to nature.

Finally, by claiming possession and by transcending the physically-defined realm of culture, Pilate remaps the space that the African Americans have been denied: "Pilate had taken a rock from every state she had lived in – because she had lived there. And having lived there, it was hers – and his [Milkman's], and his father's, his grandfather's, his grandmother's" (*Song* 329).While most people associate a certain place to be their own because of the community and the culture they build and share through a certain place tied with the culture, Pilate is able to create her space wherever she goes even if she had not formed a community of people in the place. She is able to claim possession, as is shown by her taking a rock from the places that she has lived in. Before she settled down at Detroit, Michigan, just for her granddaughter Hagar, close to her brother Macon, Pilate moved about different places, possessing each in her own way. Her possession does not stop at herself. She attributes the possession to her family and past generations of Deads as well. She transcends the physical environment because she has the agency to create her place wherever she goes. While it is normal to create and associate with an urban culture in an urban environment and rural in a rural environment, Pilate transcends this notion by creating a rural environment in an urban setting. This connects to how she represents the earth and how she can go back to the beginning of America's frontier past to remap the space for her fellow African Americans. African Americans, because of slavery and racial discrimination, could not find a space to own and possess in America. However, because of the ancestor figure Pilate, African Americans can reclaim the space that they, for generations, toiled and built their homes in but were denied the rights to ownership. Pilate's possession of the earth places her in the center of life as the beginning, beginning of the U.S. especially, which holds significance to her community of African American people.

Conclusion

Ecocriticism of Morrison's *Song of Solomon* reveals that Macon's land ownership and Pilate's land possession both show the complex relationship that African Americans have with nature. As polar opposites, one vies for supremacy over the other and vice versa. Although Macon privileges the right to property by claiming ownership to the land, he has lost touch with his African ancestry and heritage. By contrast, although Pilate lives without modern conveniences, she is able to maintain and preserve the African heritage for herself and for the black community of the Northern city, which have left the Southern home to pursue a better life.

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