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2002

Toni Morrison's Revisionary 'Nature Writing': Song of Solomon and the Blasted Pastoral

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Toni Morrison's Revisionary "Nature Writing": *Song of Solomon* and the Blasted Pastoral

Wes Berry

African American contributions to the genre of nature writing have been few.¹ As Elizabeth Dodd points out in the recent *PMLA* forum on literatures of the environment, "African Americans seem largely absent from this burgeoning literary, cultural, and critical movement." Exceptions include Alice Walker, whose collection *Living by the Word* contains several essays dealing with ecological issues, and Eddy Harris, whose travel narrative *Mississippi Solo* offers some of what one expects from the genre: attention to the details of landscape, excursions into spaces distanced from human population centers, and philosophical reflections about the relationships between humans and other-than-human nature.² Furthermore, Toni Morrison expands the possibilities of African American environmental writing by exploring through a black male protagonist the healing potential of southern woodlands; she accordingly forces a reeval-

1. Gracious thanks to Ann Fisher-Wirth and Jay Watson for reading drafts of this essay and offering skillful criticism.

2. Elizabeth Dodd, "Forum on Literatures of the Environment," *PMLA* 114 (1999): 1094; Alice Walker, *Living By the Word* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1988); Eddy L. Harris, *Mississippi Solo: A River Quest* (New York: Harper, 1988).

uation of African American attitudes toward "wilderness" and "wildlife." Her novel *Song of Solomon* examines the complicated interactions of an African American protagonist with southern fields and woodlands, as do texts by Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, Eddy Harris, and others. The significant difference is that Morrison's portrayal of a black man returning to the South, learning his family history and experiencing a newfound sense of rootedness in the place, relates an affirmative relationship of African Americans with landscape in a language recalling narratives of regeneration through wilderness in the American nature-writing tradition.

Many of the standard texts we consider to be "nature writing" are informed by what critic John Tallmadge calls the "excursion": "a simple neighborhood walk during which the curious naturalist merely records observations." Tallmadge cites Gilbert White's *Natural History of Selbourne* as an early text structured by this framework. Other practitioners of the mode include William Wordsworth, "for whom nature provided lessons in the conduct of life and the motions of the mind," Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Thoreau, Edward Abbey, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Annie Dillard, Terry Tempest Williams, and other Anglo-American writers. Eddy Harris's memoir of his Mississippi River quest is structured by such an excursion, going beyond the "neighborhood walk" by venturing within a riparian landscape packed with natural history, myth, more-than-human life, and unique human settlements. Most African American writing that gives intensive treatment to the nonhuman environment does so within the context of human communities. Jean Toomer's *Cane* paints detailed scenes of the Georgia landscape, but Toomer seldom writes about landscape for landscape's sake, chronicling instead how the nonhuman environment and human actions share a mutual influence. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* likewise deals with how human communities interact with southern landscapes, her primary topography being the "Glades" of Florida. Other examples include Dori Sanders's *Her Own Place*, chronicling the life of hard-working African American farmers in South Carolina, and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, a novel set in an island community between South Carolina and Georgia. These texts satisfy one of the tenets for an environmentally oriented work that Lawrence Buell outlines in his book *The Environmental Imagination*: "The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history." "Nature" is more than a mere backdrop; it is a force shaping and being shaped by human action. Accordingly, Af-

rican American writing about the more-than-human environment is seldom separated from cultural and historical contexts.³

In canonical nature writing, wilderness is often a destination, a playground where a person can be freed for a while from the mathematical progression of modern civilization. In the words of environmental historian William Cronon, wilderness generally "represents a flight from history": "Seen as the original garden, it is a place outside of time, from which human beings had to be ejected before the fallen world of history could properly begin. . . . Seen as the bold landscape of frontier heroism, it is the place of youth and childhood, into which men escape by abandoning their pasts and entering a world of freedom where the constraints of civilization fade into memory. . . . No matter what the angle from which we regard it, wilderness offers us the illusion that we can escape the cares and troubles of the world in which our past has ensnared us." Richard Slotkin concurs: "The characteristic American gesture in the face of adversity is . . . immersion in the native element, the wilderness, as the solution to all problems, the balm to all wounds of the soul, the restorative for failing fortunes." This motif of an individual recuperating from adversity and loss through immersion in "wild" or "natural" landscapes recurs often in contemporary Anglo-American writing. In nonfiction and autobiography about southern places, this pattern is manifest in *The Horn Island Logs of Walter Inglis Anderson*, in which the narrator, who has suffered from mental disease, undergoes a recuperative experience by immersing himself in the elements of an island off the Gulf Coast; and in *Crossing Wildcat Ridge: A Memoir of Nature and Healing*, Philip Lee Williams shares how North Georgia woodlands—trees, birds, insects, water, and other nonhuman life—advance his recuperation from open-heart surgery and depression. Environmental philosopher Barry Lopez writes: "That wilderness can revitalize someone who has spent too long in the highly manipulative, perversely efficient atmosphere of modern life

3. John Tallmadge, "Beyond the Excursion: Initiatory Themes in Annie Dillard and Terry Tempest Williams," in *Reading the Earth: New Directions in the Study of Literature and Environment*, ed. Michael P. Branch et al. (Moscow, Id.: University of Idaho Press, 1998), 197; Jean Toomer, *Cane* (1923; rpt., New York: Norton, 1988); Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937; rpt., New York: Harper, 1990); Dori Sanders, *Her Own Place* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1993); Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day* (New York: Vintage, 1988); Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 7.

is a widely shared notion." These southern texts by Anglo writers testify to this belief.⁴

In novels and memoirs by minority writers, however, "wilderness" is bound up with cultural memory to an extent that it is seldom just a place to escape to. In *Mississippi Solo*, Harris makes clear that his canoe voyage on the Mississippi River is more than a jaunt through the countryside to explore its natural history. He is also concerned with the human history of the river, including the settlements dotting its banks. Other texts written by African Americans represent the complexities that individuals may confront in realizing "healing potential" in landscapes fraught with historic violence. In Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children*, for instance, chirping night crickets (a pleasant music for some who live in rural households where windows are left open on summer nights) become for minority protagonist Big Boy a surprising sound: at once a part of a pastoral imagery of butterflies, bees, sweet-scented honeysuckle, and twittering sparrows, but also a sound intermixed with the shouts of a lynching mob. Additionally, Harris's *South of Haunted Dreams* offers an account of "fronting" southern landscapes that, from the perspective of black history, pose both physical and psychological challenges. This travel narrative operates under the rubric of masculine exploration, with Harris, the solo quester, traveling into exotic southern landscapes that he imagines as potentially threatening, a type of *Heart of Darkness* on a BMW motorcycle. Harris brings along with him his cultural memory, which shapes how he experiences the physical environment.⁵

Likewise, in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, undomesticated spaces are a mixed blessing. In Hurston's novel, when the matriarch of a plantation threatens to whip Nanny and sell her child, Nanny flees into a swamp. She recalls her fright to Janie: "Ah knowed de place was full uh moccasins and other bitin'

4. William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness: or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: Norton, 1995), 79–80; Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1973); Walter Inglis Anderson, *The Horn Island Logs of Walter Inglis Anderson*, ed. Redding S. Sugg Jr. (Rev. ed.; Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985); Philip Lee Williams, *Crossing Wildcat Ridge: A Memoir of Nature and Healing* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999); Barry Lopez, *Crossing Open Ground* (London: Picador, 1989), 82.

5. Richard Wright, *Uncle Tom's Children* (1940; rpt., New York: HarperPerennial, 1993), 28, 55; Eddy Harris, *South of Haunted Dreams: A Ride Through Slavery's Old Back Yard* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993).

snakes, but Ah was more skeered uh whut was behind me. . . . Ah don't see how come mah milk didn't kill mah chile, wid me so skeered and worried all de time. De noise uh de owls skeered me; de limbs of dem cypress trees took to crawlin' and movin round after dark, and two three times Ah heered panthers prowlin' round." Nanny perceives this swamp with complicated emotions; it terrifies her but also offers her sanctuary from the wrath of the "Mistis." Morrison's *Beloved*, furthermore, explores how Paul D. constructs an imaginary barrier between himself and rural southern landscapes—both "wild" and domesticated—as a means of coping, of staying sane in places where he lacks the freedom to own a piece of land. He escapes from slave bondage several times and travels in Georgia, Alabama, North Carolina, Kentucky, Delaware, "and in all those escapes he could not help being astonished by the beauty of this land that was not his. He hid in its breast, fingered its earth for food, clung to its banks to lap water and tried not to love it. On nights when the sky was personal, weak with the weight of its own stars, he made himself not love it. Its graveyards and low-lying rivers. Or just a house—solitary under a chinaberry tree; maybe a mule tethered and the light hitting its hide just so. Anything could stir him and he tried hard not to love it." By emphasizing Paul D.'s schizoid attraction to and dissociation from the land, Morrison forces us to consider how the impulse to possess land may be more complex for historically marginalized people.⁶

Paul D. reminds one of Ralph Kabnis, a character in Toomer's *Cane*. Toomer's Georgia is a place of "pain and beauty," a "land of cotton" where the white folks get the boll and blacks get the stalk. Southern nights entice northern intellectual Kabnis. The hills and valleys are "heaving with folk-songs," "a radiant beauty in the night that touches and tortures." He is attracted to the deep-rooted African culture and simultaneously repulsed by a place where humans burn and hang other humans. Rural Georgia offers "the serene loveliness of . . . autumn moonlight," but also "loneliness, dumbness, [and] awful, intangible oppression" that can drive one to insanity. Eldridge Cleaver summed up such African American ambivalence to rural landscapes thirty years ago in an essay entitled "The Land Question and Black Liberation":

From the very beginning, Afro-America has had a land hang-up. The slaves were kidnapped on their own soil, transported thousands of miles across the ocean and set down in a strange land. They found themselves in

6. Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 17–18; Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1988), 268.

a totally hostile situation and America became a land from which black people wanted only to flee, to escape such evil soil and those vicious creatures who had usurped it.

During slavery itself, black people learned to hate the land. From sunup to sundown, the slaves worked the land: plowing, sowing, and reaping crops for somebody else, for profit they themselves would never see or taste. This is why, even today, one of the most provocative insults that can be tossed at a black is to call him a farm boy, to infer that he is from a rural area or in any way attached to an agrarian situation. In terms of seeking status in America, blacks—principally the black bourgeoisie—have come to measure their own value according to the number of degrees they are away from the soil.

Security and terror, sublimity and alienation—African American attitudes toward southern landscapes are packed with conflict.⁷

* * *

Literary critic Gurleen Grewal notes that *Song of Solomon* resonates alongside novels "that have documented and refashioned ethnic identities in the United States since the 1970s": Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, and Peter Najerian's *Voyages*. In such novels, "characters' self-hatred and angry confusion are related to a historic dispossession and to a psyche cut off from ancestral or communal wellsprings; their narratives chart a moving and powerful repossession of selfhood, articulating personal well-being in terms of the collective." *Song of Solomon* examines a similar theme through the character of Milkman Dead, a young midwesterner who travels alone to a rural community in the Blue Ridge Mountains, the locus of his paternal ancestry. Milkman's trip to the South has been the subject of a significant amount of critical inquiry. Most critics have focused on the final section of the novel, framed by Milkman's searching for mythical gold and his ultimate enthusiasm for discovering the oral history of his family. Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos views Milkman's flight to the South in quest of gold as an "archetype of the hero leaving home to seek his fortune," and his subsequent "ego

7. Toomer, *Cane*, 107, 84–86; Eldridge Cleaver, *Eldridge Cleaver: Post-Prison Writings and Speeches*, ed. Robert Scheer (New York: Random House, 1967), 57–58. Granted the apparent shortage of African American narratives of regeneration through landscape, if landscape is understood in the traditional sense of wilderness, still there is another subgenre where regeneration is achieved through what Wendell Berry calls "kindly use" of the land. Here the pattern is not so much one of escape and relinquishment as it is one of "settling in," of domestic cultivation and farming. Dori Sanders's *Her Own Place*, a novel tracing the life of Mae Lee Barnes, a female farmer in South Carolina who is loyal to her farm and community, is one contemporary African American novel modeling this alternate mode of regeneration through work and benevolent use of the land.

death" as a point of maturation. She writes, "Milkman can connect authentically and deeply with women and his own anima only through and after this ego death." Gurleen Grewal points out that Milkman is raised with little historical perspective and is thus "representative of every person's existential predicament: that of being born to a time and place in medias res. . . . Milkman has grown up within the specific cultural discontinuity created by migration from the South to the urban north and by the black middle-class's repudiation of a stigmatized past." His trip to Virginia brings a reversal of this existential condition through a newfound awakening to family history and through his connection to a human community. "The entire novel is about the interdependence of individuals and the insurance of mutual life; redemption cannot be individual," Grewal writes. This statement brings to mind farmer-writer Wendell Berry's emphasis on holistic health care, his belief that "the community—in the fullest sense: a place and all its creatures—is the smallest unit of health and that to speak of the health of an isolated individual is a contradiction in terms."⁸

Milkman Dead certainly undergoes a change in attitude while visiting his ancestral homeland, and yes, this shift is linked to his establishing roots—an understanding of familial cultural continuity—where none existed before. My intrigue, however, lies in the echoes of American "nature writing" that I detect in Morrison's prose. To what extent is Milkman's "regenerative moment" in the Virginia woodlands a sincere expression of natural mysticism or, conversely, a parody of the American gesture of escaping into the wilds to soothe the wounds of the soul?⁹

Milkman is a dynamic character whose growth Morrison charts by illustrating his progressive awareness of the landscapes he moves within. Scenes that immerse Milkman in unfamiliar territory, that show him struggling as an uninitiated visitor to sylvan lands, are reminiscent of literature in the American naturalist tradition. Like ecologist Anne La-

8. Gurleen Grewal, *Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle: The Novels of Toni Morrison* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 63, 66, 73; Karla F. C. Holloway and Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos, *New Dimensions of Spirituality: A Biracial and Bicultural Reading of the Novels of Toni Morrison* (New York: Greenwood, 1987), 93; Wendell Berry, *Another Turn of the Crank* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1995), 90.

9. Ann E. Imbrie, "What Shalimar Knew": Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* as a Pastoral Novel," *College English* 55, no. 5 (1993): 473–90, addresses how the novel develops patterns of such archetypal pastoral literature as *The Winter's Tale* and *As You Like It*, and thus is likewise concerned with the excursion motif—the restorative sojourn from the "civilized" place and into the "natural" world.

Bastille—who details in her memoir *Woodswoman* how she fronts harsh, dangerous winters while relocating to a remote cabin in the Adirondack National Park, gaining a heightened awareness of her own limitations and strengths¹⁰—Milkman becomes more self-aware through his encounters with the “other” realm of woods, streams, and caves. During the early stages of Milkman’s southbound journey, he is a passive observer of his surroundings. On a Greyhound bus approaching Danville, Pennsylvania, Milkman tries to appreciate the scenery he has heard his father rave about, “but Milkman saw it as merely green, deep into its Indian summer but cooler than his own city, although farther south. . . . For a few minutes he tried to enjoy the scenery running past his window, then the city man’s boredom with nature’s repetition overtook him. Some places had lots of trees, some did not; some fields were green, some were not, and the hills in the distance were like the hills in every distance. . . . His eyes were creasing from the sustained viewing of uneventful countryside.”¹¹ A few pages earlier, at the beginning of the second section of the novel, Morrison emphasizes the disjunction or radical shift from urban space to rural by showing Milkman bungling through this strange territory, blind to the multiple species and local life surrounding him. In the countryside outside of Danville, Milkman “was oblivious to the universe of wood life that did live there in layers of ivy grown so thick he could have sunk his arm in it up to the elbow. . . . Life that burrowed and scurried, and life so still it was indistinguishable from the ivy stems on which it lay. Birth, life, and death—each took place on the hidden side of a leaf” (220). But of course, Milkman is not concerned about what occurs on the underbelly of a leaf, the “universe” of wood life—insect and animal communities—because he is forever moving, negligent of even the human communities he encounters.

We first encounter Milkman’s lack of interest in the landscape early in Part II of the novel as he rides the bus into Danville, and we appropriately perceive the first stages of his heightening perception as he rides the Greyhound bus away from that place. After his uncomfortable experience in the country, Milkman has a changed vision: “The low hills in the distance were no longer scenery to him. They were real places that could split your thirty-dollar shoes” (256). Milkman’s excursion through the fields and woodlands of Pennsylvania in quest of gold provides substantial comic

10. Anne LaBastille, *Woodswoman* (New York: Penguin, 1976).

11. Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Plume, 1987), 226–27. Subsequent references to this work are given parenthetically in the text.

relief. He falls into a creek, tears the sole of a leather dress shoe, agitates bats in a cave with his "hollering," and is thereafter driven, shoe sole flapping, from the cave. This disjunction between the protagonist and the landscapes he encounters forces him to reevaluate his character and opens him to new possibilities. Or, as ecocritic Scott Slovic writes about literary naturalists, "it is only by testing the boundaries of self against an outside medium (such as nature) that many nature writers manage to realize who they are and what's what in the world."¹²

Milkman's rejuvenation involves much more than a bonding with so-called "nature"; it also involves his growing respect for a human community and its history. Before making the trip to Pennsylvania, Milkman "had never had to try to make a pleasant impression on a stranger before, never needed anything from a stranger before, and did not remember ever asking anybody in the world how they were" (229). His compassion for human others has been slight, as evidenced by his careless attitude toward members of his family. For example, he breaks his long-term relationship with Hagar by sending her a terse note and some money. He steals from his aunt Pilate. He has been the recipient of a privileged childhood, without having to give much in return. His older sister Magdalene chastises him for his selfishness, suggesting that he has "peed" on people since childhood: "'You've been laughing at us all your life. Corinthians. Mama. Me. Using us, ordering us, and judging us: how we cook your food; how we keep your house. . . . You have yet to wash your own underwear, spread a bed, wipe the ring from your tub, or move a fleck of your dirt from one place to another. And to this day, you have never asked one of us if we were tired, or sad, or wanted a cup of coffee. You've never picked up anything heavier than your own feet, or solved a problem harder than fourth-grade arithmetic'" (215). Milkman's southbound journey places him in difficult situations—for instance, his bungling excursion into the Pennsylvania countryside—that force him to reevaluate his attitudes toward others.

After his initiation into the rugged Pennsylvania countryside, Milkman travels to the Blue Ridge Mountains. The journey ultimately liberates Milkman, allowing him a sense of independence from the long arm of his wealthy, domineering father. Before he adopts a newfound responsibility to self and others, however, Milkman encounters and overcomes

12. Scott Slovic, *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing: Henry Thoreau, Annie Dillard, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, Barry Lopez* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1992), 4.

multiple challenges. For instance, upon arriving in the town of Shalimar, Virginia—a “no-name hamlet . . . so small nothing financed by state funds or private enterprise reared a brick there” (259)—Milkman confronts economic need and the violence stemming from it. He is a conspicuous stranger: “His manner, his clothes were reminders that they [the poor locals] had no crops of their own and no land to speak of either. Just vegetable gardens, which the women took care of, and chickens and pigs that the children took care of. He was telling them that they weren’t men, that they relied on women and children for their food. And that the lint and tobacco in their pants pockets where dollar bills should have been was the measure” (266). Shalimar is not the “home” that Milkman expects. He assumes the locals will treat him with respect, as they have in other small towns en route to Shalimar. Indeed, his positive experiences with people in the early stages of his journey prompt him to wonder why black people ever left the South: “Where he went, there wasn’t a white face around, and the Negroes were as pleasant, wide-spirited, and self-contained as could be” (260). In the impoverished hamlet of Shalimar, however, Milkman encounters men who challenge him to a knife fight. His ancestral “home” appears to offer little more than a dilapidated service station and easily offended, unemployed rustics.

Some local men invite Milkman on a nighttime hunting trip, an episode that sets up the ego dissolution that several critics associate with growth or maturity.¹³ Morrison seems to be intentionally pushing readers to connect Milkman’s experience with the motif of relinquishment common in American literary naturalism, by using a language of land-based mysticism familiar to the genre. Before examining a key passage, however, I wish to consider for a moment Annie Dillard’s discourse on “seeing” in her staple of American nature writing, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Like Wordsworth in his poems on childhood, Dillard romanticizes infancy as a time of hypersensitive perception. She accordingly la-

13. In addition to Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos’s psychoanalytical reading of Milkman’s “ego death,” Joyce Irene Middleton’s “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), focuses on how the scene highlights Milkman’s initiation into African American “cultural oral memory”: “Milkman’s immersion in this auditory experience awakens his dormant listening skills to new language experiences and ways of knowing.” His experience in the woods “move[s] him to use his preliterate imagination to reclaim his unlettered ancestors’ skill for listening,” an ability that saves his life by enabling him to sense Guitar’s presence and thus avoid being strangled by him (35).

ments the passage of innocence that accompanies adult knowledge and the consequent loss of "newly sighted" vision that follows our immersion in language systems. "Form is condemned to an eternal danse macabre with meaning," she writes. Dillard therefore desires to see "the world unraveled from reason, Eden before Adam gave names." She is unable as an adult to see the "color patches" she believes she saw as an infant. "My brain then must have been smooth as any balloon," she reflects. "I'm told I reached for the moon; many babies do. But the color-patches of infancy swelled as meaning filled them. . . . The moon rocketed away." To be able to reclaim this rare privileged vision, one must relinquish one's ego, Dillard suggests. One must "hush the noise of useless interior babble." But of course few individuals are privy to this gift, because "the mind's muddy river, this ceaseless flow of trivia and trash, cannot be dammed. . . . Instead you must allow the muddy river to flow unheeded in the dim channels of consciousness. . . . The secret of seeing is to sail on solar wind. Hone and spread your spirit till you yourself are a sail, whetted, translucent, broadside to the merest puff." Dillard's prose is fanciful—the skeptical reader may call it ridiculously abstract, akin to Emerson's metaphor of the transparent eyeball—but nevertheless it conveys the idea that dissolution of the ego is a necessary stage toward an experience of natural mysticism.¹⁴

Bearing in mind Dillard's words, consider Toni Morrison's description of Milkman when he falls behind on the nighttime hunting trip in the Blue Ridge Mountains. The other hunters, in pursuit of a bobcat, leave Milkman behind. He is winded. He cannot keep up with their pace. He wants to rest a while under a sweet gum tree, long enough at least to allow his heart to drop back down into his chest. There he rests, his mind filled with existential ponderings, when suddenly, without warning, he experiences a momentary reprieve from his ego: "Under the moon, on the ground, alone, with not even the sound of baying dogs to remind him that he was with other people, his self—the cocoon that was his 'personality'—gave way. He could barely see his own hand, and couldn't see his feet. He was only his breath, coming slower now, and his thoughts. The rest of him had disappeared" (277). Milkman's thoughts, however, remain. Indeed, unlike with Dillard, who views spiritual perception as the world detached from language and reason, Milkman's mystical moment is bound up with language. It is for him a new language—the voices of people and animals tied to their regional landscape.

14. Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974; Toronto: Bantam, 1975), 31–32, 34, 35.

As with Ike McCaslin in Faulkner's "The Bear," Milkman's material possessions will not help him in the woods, but hamper him. "His watch and his two hundred dollars would be of no help out here, where all a man had was what he was born with, or had learned to use. And endurance." Like young McCaslin, Milkman must abandon his material possessions before he can learn the language of the woods—the distinctive, complicated communications between hunting dogs and men, and the subtle tracks on tree bark and the ground that hunters read. He thinks there may be an ur-language shared by rustics, "[l]anguage in the time when men and animals did talk to one another, when a man could sit down with an ape and the two converse; when a tiger and a man could share the same tree, and each understood the other; when men ran *with* wolves, not from or after them" (278). Milkman feels a sudden rush of brotherly love under the sweet gum tree in the Blue Ridge, and believes he may finally understand his country companions and his friend Guitar's nostalgia for the South. He admires for the first time these bobcat hunters, men like Calvin who can communicate with dogs and "read" the earth: "It was more than tracks Calvin was looking for—he whispered to the trees, whispered to the ground, touched them, as a blind man caresses a page of Braille, pulling meaning through his fingers" (278).

Withdrawing from the hunt for just a brief time opens Milkman to this flood of thoughts and raises his awareness of these alternate modes of perception; Milkman therefore reminds one of Thoreau, Dillard, Edward Abbey, Barry Lopez, and other naturalists who believe one may discover rare perception when distancing oneself from the white noise of dominant society. Lopez, for instance, suggests that places like the Inner Gorge of the Grand Canyon offer incomparable respite from the pain of the world. Down in the belly of the canyon, an individual may experience a "stripping down, an ebb of the press of conventional time, a radical change of proportion, an unspoken respect for others that elicits keen emotional pleasure, a quick, intimate pounding of the heart."¹⁵ In like manner, while alone in the bucolic quiet of the Virginia night, Milkman begins to "merge" with the woodlands of his ancestors: "Down either side of his thighs he felt the sweet gum's surface roots cradling him like the rough but maternal hands of a grandfather. Feeling both tense and relaxed, he sank his fingers into the grass" (279).

However, for Milkman there is no escape to the "original garden," for his moment of "union" with the dirt and sweet gum is interrupted when

15. Lopez, *Crossing Open Ground*, 52–53.

a man tries to strangle him. Morrison bursts Milkman's pastoral moment with violence: "He tried to listen with his fingertips, to hear what, if anything, the earth had to say, and it told him quickly that someone was standing behind him and he had just enough time to raise one hand to his neck and catch the wire that fastened around his throat" (279). Milkman's childhood friend Guitar, having tracked him from the city, unleashes on Milkman his history of racial frustration. As Grewal notes, "Guitar's problem is a baneful race politics sowing discord with hate." Earlier in the novel, we learn how Guitar attempts to check hate crimes against black people by murdering white people. He wants to keep the ratio of black to white in balance. Before Milkman begins his trip south, Guitar reminds him about the links between racial oppression and the control of land holdings: "The earth is soggy with black people's blood. And before us Indian blood . . . and if it keeps on there won't be any of us left and there won't be any land for those who are left. So the numbers [the ratio of black to white people] have to remain static" (158). Guitar's statement recalls Eldridge Cleaver's point about the "deep land hunger" of African Americans: "Suffice it to say that Afro-Americans are just as land hungry as were the Mau Mau, the Chinese people, the Cuban people; just as much so as all the people of the world who are grappling with the tyrant of colonialism now, trying to get possession of some land of their own." Both Guitar's and Cleaver's remarks remind us that unbuilt landscapes and "wild" places are far from being ahistorical. Morrison seems to be emphasizing this point, forcing readers to consider Milkman's potential regeneration in the woods within the context of black-on-black crime, or, perhaps, to connect the wire around his neck with the lynchings that have bloodied southern ground.¹⁶

In *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature*, Melvin Dixon reads Milkman's experience with the southern landscape as authentic regeneration. He believes Milkman "develops a more effective relation to the land when he confronts the wilderness. . . . Milkman's participation in the hunt gains . . . fraternity and friendship [of local men]. . . . Milkman has to earn kinship by enduring the woods, the wilderness. Like the fugitive in slave narratives, he has to renew his covenant with nature to secure passage out of the wilderness that had invited him in." Dixon reads the southern woodlands he calls "wilderness" as a proving ground for meaningful livelihood. Similarly, in *Reclaiming Community in Contemporary African American Fiction*,

16. Grewal, *Circles of Sorrow*, 71; Cleaver, *Eldridge Cleaver*, 63.

Philip Page notes that Milkman's night in the woods serves the function of connecting him with his heritage: "Milkman is guided not only by ancestor figures but also by Calvin, Small Boy, Luther, and Omar, who initiate him during the hunt and offer him the bobcat's heart, thereby inducting him into his past and his racial identity and midwifing his rebirth in harmony with himself, his family, his community, and nature." These evaluations seem apt, for after Milkman's interrupted merging with the southern woodlands, he appears renewed. Walking along with the local hunters, Milkman "found himself exhilarated by simply walking the earth. Walking it like he belonged on it; like his legs were stalks, tree trunks, a part of his body that extended down down down into the rock and soil, and were comfortable there—on the earth and on the place where he walked" (281). Perhaps the exhilaration he feels is a case of "death makes life sweet," a type of euphoria expressed by those who have recovered from life-threatening cancers and car wrecks, or even by those awakening from realistic nightmares to find their bodies warm and breathing; or maybe Milkman's elation is the result of a real transformation, a shift in attitude from one who feels disconnected from other people and places to one who, for the first time in his life, understands a sense of membership in a community. In the land of his ancestry, Milkman appears to experience rootedness, a sense of connection with the locals "as though there was some cord or pulse or information they shared. Back home [in the city] he had never felt that way, as though he belonged to anyplace or anybody" (293). One cannot, of course, neatly separate from "culture" to escape into "wilderness." Morrison recognizes this and accordingly brings Guitar, a stalking history of racial bigotry who confounds the archetypal moment of ego dissolution in the wilderness, back into the story.¹⁷

Is Morrison parodying conventional nature writing by suggesting that the archetypal "flight" into the woods and wilderness is much more complex for historically oppressed people? Consider, furthermore, how early in his travels Milkman hears from the local men in Pennsylvania stories about his grandfather, the magnificent Macon Dead—a model example of one who turned a piece of land into a profitable farm and therefore strived to establish a sense of history where none existed before. The farm

17. Melvin Dixon, *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 167; Philip Page, *Reclaiming Community in Contemporary African American Fiction* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 15.

owned and worked by Milkman's grandfather served as an inspiration for how to establish a sense of place and worth. It spoke "like a sermon" to the other poor men in Montour County:

"You see?" the farm said to them. "See? See what you can do? . . . Here, this here, is what a man can do if he puts his mind to it and his back in it. Stop sniveling," it said. "Stop picking around the edges of the world. Take advantage, and if you can't take advantage, take disadvantage. We live here. On this planet, in this nation, in this country right here. Nowhere else! We got a home in this rock, don't you see! Nobody starving in my home; nobody crying in my home, and if I got a home you got one too! Grab it. Grab this land! Take it, hold it, my brothers, make it, my brothers, shake it, squeeze it, turn it, twist it, beat it, kick it, kiss it, whip it, stomp it, dig it, plow it, seed it, reap it, rent it, buy it, sell it, own it, build it, multiply it, and pass it on—can you hear me? Pass it on!" (235)

For these newly freed ex-slaves, the land is a commodity, property with which one needs to forge an identity and family history rather than to escape it. Furthermore, after this "sermon" on the land, in a descent from the sublime moment that is even more poignant than Milkman's interrupted merging with the sweet gum tree, the narrative shifts. In the next paragraph following the command to "Pass it on!" we read: "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" (235). White men murder Milkman's grandfather and take his farmland, thereby destroying not only a family's longevity in the place but also the will of the male progenitors who would shape the future of African American existence in that particular region. These African American subjects are deprived of agency unwillingly, in contrast to the tradition of ego dissolution in American nature writing, where subjects *desire* relinquishment of selfhood.

Where does Milkman's experience of "self" giving way under the sweet gum tree stand in relation to these violent, involuntary removals of selfhood? Where does his potential regeneration stand vis-à-vis the "classic" dissolutions of ego in American wilderness writing? Milkman's ego dissolution in/on unowned land provides a marked contrast to his father's attitude toward property as the material to confirm one's societal status. Macon Dead promises to Milkman an inheritance of property: "You'll own it all. All of it. You'll be free. Money is freedom. . . . The only real freedom there is" (163). Milkman's journey southward begins as a quest for such material prosperity, before he realizes spiritual benefits

from intense interaction with a local culture and undeveloped woodlands. In place of his father's version of freedom, Milkman discovers he can be rejuvenated through nonmaterial means, or as Valerie Smith puts it, "through [Milkman's] story, Morrison questions Western conceptions of individualism and offers more fluid, destabilized constructions of identity."¹⁸

The quest for a destabilized or alternative mode of identity from that offered by dominant Western culture is shared by writers of American naturalism. I have noted how Annie Dillard seeks to experience "the world unraveled from reason." In *Desert Solitaire*, Edward Abbey describes a kindred desire to escape Western modes of perception. About his self-imposed isolation in a Utah wilderness area, Abbey claims: "I want to be able to look at and into a juniper tree, a piece of quartz, a vulture, a spider, and see it as it is in itself, devoid of all humanly ascribed qualities, anti-Kantian, even the categories of scientific description. To meet God or Medusa face to face, even if it means risking everything human in myself. I dream of a hard a brutal mysticism in which the naked self merges with a nonhuman world and yet somehow survives still intact, individual, separate. Paradox and bedrock."¹⁹ Milkman's climactic moment of "merging" with the sweet gum is just that—a "moment" of ego-dissolution, after which he must mobilize his mental and physical capacities to repel/thwart his would-be murderer. Abbey's merging with the desert landscape is likewise tentative. Perhaps he drops some of his civilized mannerisms during his season in the wilderness, while getting closer to the more-than-human world, as when he crawls on his belly in an attempt to observe two gopher snakes entwined together in a courtship dance; but Abbey nevertheless remains intact, of (arguably) sane mind, or as he puts it, "individual, separate." Even though the experience with more-than-human nature is temporary, it nevertheless seems worthwhile to consider, as Abbey, Dillard, and Morrison do, these moments when an individual can sample a mode of "being" not grounded in material culture.

Interesting questions arise when we consider a hybrid literature such as *Song of Solomon* that illuminates the lives of African American subjects while making use of British and Anglo-American narrative conventions,

18. Valerie Smith, "Introduction," in *New Essays on "Song of Solomon,"* 13.

19. Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* (1968; New York: Touchstone, 1990), 6.

or, conversely, literature by writers of the dominant culture that appropriates the conventions of, say, Native American or African American art.²⁰ We may ask such questions as: How innocent (or not) is a writer's use of the themes, subjects, and narrative forms of the other culture? To what extent does a writer appropriate the conventions of the other uncritically? Is the writer sincere in the use of these conventions, or is she merely co-opting them for parodic effect? Lawrence Buell raises such questions when he notes how Native American poet Simon Ortiz mixes both "Native" and "Anglo" narrative conventions in his verse and therefore practices a "hybridized art." It would be wrongheaded, Buell asserts, to think of Ortiz as having been "colonized" by the time he spent at a writing program at Iowa or as "using western lyric conventions of persona and aesthetic distance to deconstruct them."²¹ My initial reading of *Song of Solomon* was, perhaps, wrongheaded in this sense: I believed Morrison's use of such conventions as the moment of ego dissolution in the woods to be a parody of the mystical "nature writing" dominated by Anglo-American writers. A more constructive approach to Morrison's fiction, however, may ask how her "hybrid" art takes risks by placing an African American protagonist in a situation where he "finds" himself after losing his material well-being, after his magnificent ego is broken down, and is therefore a shift from what we expect from African American writers—namely, narratives that reinforce the importance of asserting and gaining subjectivity.²² By echoing emphatically the language of

20. Writing about Third World literary traditions, particularly those of the Maori of New Zealand, C. Christopher Norden in "Ecological Restoration and the Evolution of Postcolonial National Identity in the Maori and Aboriginal Novel," in *Literature of Nature: An International Sourcebook*, ed. Patrick D. Murphy (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998), notes the critical richness of cross-cultural intertextuality. Noting that Maori writer Witi Ihimaera's novel *Tangi* may evoke in some readers echoes of Emerson, Whitman, and other American transcendentalists, Norden writes: "An interesting question regarding Native novelistic and poetic traditions concerns the degree to which particular writers have intentionally evoked and played off of either transcendentalist rhetoric, for models of spiritual connectedness, or . . . Anglo-American modernist writers for models of alienation from nature, community, and traditional culture" (274). Inquiries about the extent of such intertextual influences may, as I hope this essay has, continue to reveal fresh ways of viewing nature writing and the position of minority writing against or within it.

21. Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, 20.

22. Demetarakopoulos's affirmative reading of Milkman's "ego death" in *Song of Solomon*, for instance, deviates from the focus upon ego consolidation often emphasized in African American literature and scholarship. Consider *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which foregrounds the growth of Janie into a confident, independent woman. Through her oral autobiography to Phoebe, Janie affirms the value of her sexuality, voice, and sense of self-

ego dissolution in such canonical environmental texts as *Desert Solitaire* and *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Morrison may be giving voice to a progressive “nature writing”—one that sincerely considers the spiritual possibilities of human interaction with more-than-human life-forms, but that does so within a complex web of cultural and historical contexts.²³

worth. Likewise, a primary concern of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* is Celie’s acquisition of voice, her ability to assert her selfhood after years of forced silence and abuse by violent men. With the help of Shug, Celie realizes she is a valuable inhabitant of this earth.

23. Rachel Stein’s *Shifting the Ground: American Women Writers’ Revisions of Nature, Gender, and Race* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997) is one of a growing body of texts offering provocative criticisms of minority literature and its position in relation to canonical American nature writing. Stein’s study includes discussions of textual production by Emily Dickinson, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and Leslie Marmon Silko, as she explores her fundamental question: “[H]ow do their revisions of the intersections of nature, gender, and race shift the ground of problematic aspects of American identities and allow the writers to reimagine more fertile social/natural interrelations?” (4). Other texts considered to be a “new wave” of American literary ecology—shifting the focus of nature writing from the “pastoral impulse” to considerations of complex social problems bound up with our conceptualizations and use of what we call “nature”—include Karen J. Warren, ed., *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997) and Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy, eds., *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998).