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## A NAME IS A STORY: THE SYMBOLIC FUNCTION OF NAMES IN TONI MORRISON'S WRITING

*Abstract.* In Toni Morrison's novels names are traces that refer not only to the narrated events, but to history and myths as well. Morrison's writing is dialogically related to those African American authors who marked the paths of the emancipation struggle. She uses names as symbols, as magnets toward which many forgotten life fragments and concealed meanings converge, thus inscribing her peculiar "signifying black difference" in the context of the African American tradition. Focusing on two of her novels – *Song of Solomon* and *Paradise*, both concerned with the significance as well as with the constraints of memory and history – I show the way in which names point to some of the most important conflicts internal to the black community, as well as to some precise historical events: the murder of Emmet Till, and the difficult migration of black people from the South, which brought some of them to seek refuge by building black towns in Oklahoma, once known as Boomer's Paradise.

"My name is John and I gotta go." This quote is from a kid I ran into while walking around in Port Jefferson, Long Island, with Oliver, my landlady's Cairn Terrier. He stopped, and asked me for the dog's name, and when I asked him, in turn, for his name, he seriously delighted me with this funny statement and ran away. But a name is enough to start telling a story: a name, an urge, an action, a void to fill. Toni Morrison knows it. She often uses names as magnets toward which many forgotten life fragments and concealed meanings converge. Her writing is carved in stone and steel and mostly in flesh, and you know that each breathing fleshy thing which comes to life in a social context usually receives a name, and attached to it its identity and a heritage of history and desire, which is not its own choice. And you also know that there is a time in the life of every child in which he/she starts to speculate on her name and decide if he/she likes it or not, and generally he/she does not like it at all. Like one's own past, a name needs to be renegotiated and accepted.

In Toni Morrison's work names sound like music, but, it's a music that always has the pattern of history behind. Names are for Morrison like refrains, or like riddles to be solved, or destinies to be accomplished or refused. Toni Morrison works with a primal concern: the task of literature includes "the private imagination interacting with the external world it

inhabits [*which*] mutates in figurative language the social conventions of Africanism [...] to articulate and [...] act out the forbidden in American culture.”<sup>1</sup> And she loves looking at history through the lense of subjective crises, thus reaching, as Paul Gilroy states, “a coexistence between *poetic* and *poiesis* which generates a special way to craft music and spoken words.”<sup>2</sup> She follows in the path of the African American *vernacular* tradition, made of repetition and constant re-signification, and in the path of the written tradition which Henry L. Gates considers out to be a collective work in progress, a never-ending process involving the African-American authors, who – while adding to, and modifying, what was there before them – always create a difference: “a signifying black difference.”<sup>3</sup> Toni Morrison’s writing is dialogically related to those African American authors who marked the paths of the civil rights movement, who first wrote about the metaphoric invisibility of African Americans – and invisibility and namelessness go together, as DuBois demonstrated in 1930, and Ralph Ellison in 1952.<sup>4</sup> These authors wrote about fear, and submission, and violence, and about lynching: a ritual sacrifice murder that Trudier Harris identifies as being a traditional element in African American literature, giving place to a ritual structure in which the writer stands for a high priest, in a rite which reminds the community of its own history. For most our names define our heritage. For many African Americans the heritage often defines (or explains) the name, and that heritage, when it comes from the shameful slavery period when blacks were named after their masters, is understandably not looked upon proudly. Can you imagine how important this issue can be when you write about people whose names were bestowed on them, when dropping names off and replacing them with an “X” meant a political claim to justice?

I want to give you few examples, quoting from the two Morrison’s novels I’m going to talk about:

Niggers get their names the way they get everything else – the best way they can.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> T. MORRISON, *Playing in the Dark. Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Cambridge and London: Harvard UP, 1992, p. 66.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. P. GILROY, *The Black Atlantic. L'identità nera tra modernità e doppia coscienza*. Roma: Meltemi, 2003, p. 101.

<sup>3</sup> H.L. GATES, *The Signifying Monkey*, cit. in: S.B. OLORUNTO, *Studying African-American Literature in Its Global Context*. “VCCA Journal”, 7 (1992), (I), URL: [www.findarticles.com](http://www.findarticles.com) (5 Jul. 2003), p. 5

<sup>4</sup> The relationship between “invisibility and namelessness” established in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) had been previously underlined by Du Bois in *Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Cf. C. WEST, *The Cornel West Reader*. (C. West Ed.). New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999, p. 103.

<sup>5</sup> T. MORRISON, *Song of Solomon*. London: Picador, Pan Books, 1989, p. 88. From now on the novel will be indicated in brackets as *Song*, followed by the page number.

Surely [...] he and his sister had some ancestor [...] who had a name that was real. A name given to him at birth with love and seriousness. A name that was not a joke, nor a disguise, nor a brand name (*Song*, 18)

The chauffeur had picked her up for Norma like a stray puppy. No, not even that. But like a pet you wanted to play with for a while [...] but not keep. Not love. Not name it.<sup>6</sup>

The first two quotations come from one of Morrison's first novels, *Song of Solomon*, published in 1977, the third from *Paradise*, published in 1996, whose chapters are all titled after some of its women characters' names. Both novels are about the significance as well as the constraints of memories and history, but as Jill Matus says, while *Song of Solomon* is about a wake-up call to history, *Paradise* is about waking up "from history"<sup>7</sup> Both novels focus on the controversial and opposing strategies of the black nationalist and the assimilationist ideals, both focus on the struggle of the civil rights movement and its legacy. Both contain Christian metaphors of sacrifice and redemption drawn on as tools for critical knowledge. Both offer examples of women's communities, blamed and made marginal by the law of the father, functioning as paradigms for a gender conflict which breaks the romanticized cohesion of the black community, showing the way in which every racial conflict is often gendered, through the obsession with racial purity, that always involves the control of women's sexual lives.<sup>8</sup> I started to read *Song of Solomon* as an assignment for a PhD seminar in my first course year, and I ended up reading it, and about it, and writing about it, in the following five months. Solving Morrison's riddles, signifying her words, I was driven into the tradition of *trickster songs* and *tales* that are so crucial in the surviving and empowering processes of the African American slaves,<sup>9</sup> and so central to Toni Morrison's construction of meaning. In her novels the act of making sense is always intended to be a collective effort, in which the author and the readers, as well as the characters, are engaged.<sup>10</sup> She brought me through the entire African American history, and the struggles of a community, that you will barely be able

<sup>6</sup> T. MORRISON, *Paradise*. New York, Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1998, p. 138. From now on the novel will be indicated in brackets as *paradise*, followed by the page number.

<sup>7</sup> J. MATUS, *Toni Morrison*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1988, p. 161.

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. M. SWEENEY, *Racial House, Big House, Home. Contemporary Abolitionism In Toni Morrison's Paradise*. "Meridian: feminism, race, transnationalism", 4 (2004), (II), pp. 53-55.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. H.L. GATES, *The Signifying Monkey*, op. cit. in: S.B. OLORUNTO, *Studying African-American Literature in Its Global Context*, op. cit., p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. P. PAGE, *Furrowing all the Brows: Interpretation and the Transcendent in Toni Morrison's Paradise*. "African American Review", (Winter 2001), URL: [www.findarticle.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2838/is\\_4\\_35](http://www.findarticle.com/p/articles/mi_m2838/is_4_35) (23 Aug. 2005), p. 1.

to contain in the racial discourse. This was a fantastic journey through the lands and seas of the critical points in history in which, to quote Piero Boitani, history intersects myths.<sup>11</sup> In *Song of Solomon*, the myth is right in the plot, in the melting of the mythical journey of Ulysses with the Black Christian Tradition, and the African and Native American ones. The myth is there to perform an act of re-memoration. The mythological inscription begins right away in the title, referring to *Il Cantico dei Cantici*, or *Song of Solomon*. It is contained in the words of Ismael quoted at the beginning,<sup>12</sup> and carries on its presence through the characters' names – Circe, First Corinthia, Magdalena called Lena, Ruth, Hagar, Reba and Pilate: genealogies of strong women which help to locate the multiplicity of meanings embedded in the narration. Names which signify both the novel's motivation, and its textual content.<sup>13</sup>

At the core of her novel, Toni Morrison puts a historical event: the murder of Emmet Till that took place in Money, Mississippi on August 28<sup>th</sup> 1955. Fifty years ago. Even though Emmett's death is directly mentioned only once in the novel, it floats like a ghost through every single page. Emmett, called "Bobo", stands for the thousands of men and women wrecked through the cruel and ghastly lynching ritual, that made more than 5,000 victims, mostly in the South of the United States, which was still going through a major transitional crisis: namely, the abolition of slavery (which was the engine of its economic structure) and the broadening process of national industrialization.

At the core of *Paradise* there is a historical event too, and it is related to the one just mentioned: the migration of black people from the South, which occurred after 1865, and the renewed persecution of blacks which let some of them to seek refuge by building black towns, especially in Oklahoma, and generally in the West. Both novels deal with a past heritage of violence and annihilation; both deal with crucified people becoming crucifiers.<sup>14</sup> While in *Paradise* there are people going back to an old abandoned black town to build it up again, in *Song of Solomon* there is a young man who gets involved in a quest for roots that goes beyond his will.

Toni Morrison's use of names symbolizes the events that each character

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. P. BOITANI, *L'ombra di Ulisse. Figure di un mito*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 1992, p. 31.

<sup>12</sup> "The father may soar, and the children may know their names" say the *Song of Solomon's* opening words, paraphrasing a passage from the Ismael's prophecy: "They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint." Isaiah 40:29-31.

<sup>13</sup> Cfr. E. NICOLE, *L'onomastique littéraire*. "Poétique", 54 (avril 1983).

<sup>14</sup> Cfr. M. SWEENEY, *Racial House, Big House, Home. Contemporary Abolitionism In Toni Morrison's Paradise*, op. cit., p. 52.

has to face in the narrative,<sup>15</sup> but they are also intended to be traces that, once followed, can lead one into different levels of her signifying process. I will now briefly take you through some of them.

In *Song of Solomon* the main character's name is Macon Dead III, called Milkman. Dead is the family name that his grandfather, a former slave, got from a drunken cracker and, obviously enough, it refers to the civic death that black people had to face even once slavery had been abolished. But Milkman has a sister whose name is First Corinthia, and the novel begins with a quotation from Ismael. So the readers are led to have a look at the Bible and soon discover that Paul in his letter to the quarelling Corinthian churches, St. warns them about the dangers of their irresponsible demeanour, telling them that since they were behaving as children they had better rely on milk as nourishment. As one goes on reading, he/she will soon discover that Milkman's best friend Guitar is part of a secret organization whose aim is to kill white people in revenge, each time an innocent black person is killed. Milkman's father, instead, was always trying to get rid of his past by firmly sticking on the assimilationist ideals. So, what the novel is about, historically speaking, is actually a serious confrontation within the black community. Going back to the family issue, one discovers that Milkman's father has a sister, that she is poor and lives at the town's margins with her daughter Reeba (Rebecca) and her niece Hagar, and that she sells alcohol as a job. An "overachiever and betrayer of a possible black patriarchy", as Wanheema Lubiano would define her,<sup>16</sup> she has got a sack full of bones pending from the ceiling of her home. She has no navel, and came to life out of the dead body of her mother. Her name is Pilate, such a strange name for a woman. And she also wears a strange earring, a kind of metal box containing the very piece of paper on which his father, an illiterate former slave, had copied down, from the Bible, the name he wanted to give her. He chose it because of the solidity of its letters, but when he discovered what the name sounded like, he was further convinced about his choice, and I quote this dialogue between him and the midwife:

[...] "Pilate. You wrote down Pilate."

"Like a riverboat pilot?"

"No. Not like no riverboat pilot. Like a Christ-killing Pilate. [...] You don't want to give this motherless child the name of the man that killed Jesus, do you?"

<sup>15</sup> Cfr. G. SCARPA, *Toni Morrison: la memoria, i fantasmi e la scrittura*. "ACOMA", 1 (1994).

<sup>16</sup> Cfr. W. LUBIANO, *Black Ladies, Welfare Queens, and State Minstrels: Ideological War by Narrative Means*. In: *Engendering Power. Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas and the Construction of Social Reality* (T. Morrison Ed.). London: Chatto & Windus, 1993, p. 363.

"I asked Jesus to save me my wife." [...]  
 "He give you your baby."  
 "Yes. He did. Baby name Pilate." (*Song*, 19)

Let us just hold to the pun between Pilate and pilot. It is not enough, still. You have to know that Pilate shows up at the very beginning of the novel, singing a song which is in fact a riddle containing the very key of the whole Dead family's history and of the novel too:

*O Sugarman done fly away*  
*Sugarman done gone*  
*Sugarman cut across the sky*  
*Sugarman gone home* (*Song*, 5)

You have also to know that, fulfilling her sister in law's desire, she aided and abetted her to let Milkman be born, and that she went through all the country to follow the traces of her family's past. There is enough to demonstrate that, opposing her brother's historical amnesia, Pilate represents the task of the writing's commitment as Toni Morrison intends it. Born motherless, and without a navel, Pilate was haunted by her father's ghost which ordered her to recover the bones of a white man that she believed she had killed. Now think about it, what do all these traces mean if not the fact that in this character all the threads of the oral history intertwine, asking to be re-written in a different form? What are her haunting nightmares if not stories that ask to be formulated into words through a re-enactment, which requires love and passion? According to Plato love is as dangerous as writing is, for both imply the overcoming of lost and limits. "Writing is an orphan turning all around" Ugo Volli writes, pointing out that oral memory was for Plato much more reliable than written words, opposing to its exteriorization, the lively teaching presence of a talking body.<sup>17</sup> Such an illusion! In *Song of Solomon* the lively teaching bodies' remembrances work only in terms of self-indulgence. Pilate is the only one who spreads traces all around, seducing people with so many fancy departures from the stiffness of facts. She holds, as Volli would say, "the benefit of reality reversal that fiction enfolds [...]" the gift of *direzione* and of meaning"<sup>18</sup> which belongs to the narration. Faithful to her "pilot's" task, Pilate takes Milkman through his identity quest. It is not a coincidence that Pilate is so concerned with Milkman's birth, then. Like an author who creates the character befitting a story, Pilate participates in

<sup>17</sup> Cfr. U. VOLLI, *Figure del desiderio. Corpo, testo, mancanza*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2002, p. 329.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 298. (translation mine)

giving birth to the only one who will follow the traces that she spreads around. The only one who will make the Logos alive. Milkman takes on the forms of Esu-Elegbara,<sup>19</sup> Hermes Trismegistos, Ulysses and Jesus Christ. He becomes a syncretic figure for different mythologies, in order to narrate an historical inheritance so terrifying that it could destroy its inheritors, and so powerful that it could sustain them. He narrates a fall and a flight.

We will go back to Milkman in a while. Now let us focus on *Paradise*. Heaven is one of the many key words for connecting the two stories. In *Song of Solomon* "Lincoln's Heaven"<sup>20</sup> is the name that Milkman's grandfather gave to the land he owned, once he became a free man, and was also the cause of his murder which was ordered by a powerful white landlord. In *Paradise*, "Haven" is the name of a black town founded in Oklahoma, following the defeat of "Fairy", the first attempt at a black settlement. "Ruby" is the name of a third try to build the town again in 1954 (the very year in which *Brown vs Board of Education* put an end to school segregation policies) allowing only the "eight-rock" of blackness purity that is to say only the unmixed black descendants of the "Old Fathers" to join it. "Convent" on the contrary is both a name and a place identifying an ethnical heterogeneous community of women growing up at the margins of Ruby.

"Seneca" is the title of one of the chapters in which the Old Fathers terrible journey is recollected. Seneca is also the name of one of the women living in the Convent, the one who, before entering it, underwent a period of deliberate subjection, which Seneca, the philosopher, considered to be the worst form of slavery. In fact, Seneca's *De Consolatio ad Marciam* provides a key to the novel's interpretation. The suggestion is more than patent: "Consolata" is actually the name of another among the women who found a safe haven in the Convent, and some among them have to cope with the death of a beloved child, and I could go on listing similar traces, but a quick look at the text of the Roman philosopher text will offer a brilliant full interpretation for *Paradise*, and for the novel's paratactic style of antithesis and repetition. But there are so many other hints to take into

<sup>19</sup> A Joruba god Known also as Esu, Esu-Elegbara corresponds in his functions to the Greek god, Hermes, and the Roman one, Mercurio. All of them are, in fact, language originators and *principii individuationis*. They also govern those who break the laws in order to highlight contradiction and find new forms of coexistence for the entire community. Cfr. J. CAMPBELL REESMAN, *Trickster Lives. Culture and Myth in American Fiction*. (J. Campbell Reesman Ed). Athens and London: The University of Georgia P., 2001, p. xxvi.

<sup>20</sup> The allusion is to the US President who signed the *Emancipation Proclamation* in 1863. Known as 13th Amendment, it was included in the Constitution on December 18<sup>th</sup>, 1865 (two years later) thus enacting the slavery abolition.



account. Among the Old Fathers mentioned in the Seneca chapter, there's Zacharias. Now, Zacharias' prophecy is about the reconstruction of a Temple, and about the obstacles Jews encountered in re-establishing their lives in Judea, when returning from their exile in Babylon.

Seneca is also a Native Indian word, too. It comes from an Iroquois term which means "people of the standing rock, or stone".<sup>21</sup> Seneca is an Indian Iroquois tribe, the one that had to move from Ohio to Oklahoma where it encountered The Five Civilized Tribes which had established the land of *Ukla-Huma* which means red person. And here it comes, another meaning to be found behind the reconstructed black town of Ruby. Later, in 1862, the Homestead Act put Oklahoma under the unassigned lands, managing through the Indian Appalachian Act to cut out those who were there already, thus preventing them from taking possession of the lands before the established term (fixed to begin two years later). Indians were among those who attempted to get the land before the term of the Act began, and were among the participants in the so called Boomer Movement when Oklahoma became known as the Boomer's Paradise.

Black people established their towns there. As early as 1865, they started to come from everywhere toward this kind of Promised Land, and resisted the racial pressure until 1920-30. "The problem in *Paradise* is how to live in a world where formal racist barriers have been dismantled," writes Richard Shur,<sup>22</sup> but where "race [...] functions as a [cultural] border, as a limit." It is through the use of a reversed logic, like in a mirror, that the racial scars are worked out in *Paradise* as well as in *Song of Solomon*. Ruby's inhabitants, who came back to restart the Old Fathers' dream, consider the racial mixing of the women in Convent as being the wilderness where evil and death are confined. Let me now point to the final lines of *Paradise* that picture "Another ship [...] but different, heading to port, crew and passengers [who] rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in Paradise." (*Paradise*, 318) Let me play with the assonance between Convent and Convention, still having Seneca in mind, and we are lead to the Seneca Falls Convention, the first feminist convention, which gave birth to the Declaration of Independence of Women and to the Declaration of Sentiment, this last one signed, among others, by Fredrick Douglass, a former slave. That may, perhaps, shed a different light on the earthly heterogeneity of Convent compared with the crystallized homogeneity of the recreated town of Haven. Let me

<sup>21</sup> Cfr. NETSTATE. URL: [www.netstate.com/states/intro/ok\\_intro.html](http://www.netstate.com/states/intro/ok_intro.html) (25 Jul. 2005).

<sup>22</sup> R.L. SCHUR, *Locating Paradise in the Post-Civil Right Era: Toni Morrison and Critical Race Theory*. "Contemporary Literature", 45 (2004) (2), pp. 287-289. MUSE (25 Jul. 2005).



add that Seneca was also the name of a village located between what is now "82nd and the 89th Streets and Seventh and Eight Avenues" in New York City, an area which is now part of Central Park. From 1825 to 1857, it was "Manhattan's first significant community of African American property owners and by the 1840s, it had become a multi-ethnic community of African Americans, Irish, and German immigrants, and perhaps a few Native Americans".<sup>23</sup> And you may get my point, about how far can you travel following a single name in Toni Morrison's novels, and about how many different and contrasting paradises America encloses apart from the First Pilgrims' one.

Let us go back to *Song of Solomon*, now, as a conclusion. The novel's climax is to be found in the arrival of Milkman, a Chicago boy following the traces of his family's past, up to a little village store in the South, where he gets involved in a fight with some black men who consider Milkman too different from them to be allowed to look at their women. The same situation, but quite in reverse, in which Emmett Till, called Bobo, found himself in Money Mississippi, when at the village grocery store he dared to whistle at a white woman: he a black boy, fourteen years old.

Milkman's fight ends with him gaining the respect of the men and being invited to a night hunting, which is a further re-enactment of Emmett's tragedy, even though still reversing everything upside down, Toni Morrison makes him the pray of Guitar, his best friend. Milkman survives – Emmett didn't – and the night hunting ends with a bobcat as the pray. A bobcat – Bobo, can you catch the assonance? Bobo, just like Emmett Till, called Bobo. Just like Bobo, the character in Richard Wright's short story *Big Boy Leaves Home*, who is lynched because he could not run as fast as his friends did. Emmett too, could not run away, and his murderers, soon after being found innocent by a legitimate jury, owned up to the murder in a popular magazine.

In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman traces his past all the way back to Solomon his ancestor, solving Pilate's song riddle and discovering that Solomon was a "flight African", one of those slaves who chose to kill themselves in order to be free. One of those magic men that the African mythology considered able to fly, one of those who "flew back to Africa, just spread his arms and flew away home" as in a line from Robert Hayden's poem, "O Dedalus Fly Away Home". Milkman too ends up flying, directly, after Guitar kills Pilate with a bullet which was aimed at his best friend.

<sup>23</sup> New York Historical Society. *The Seneca Village Website*. URL: <http://projects.ilt.columbia.edu/seneca/frame.html> (10 Aug. 2005).

Milkman flies, jumping from a rock and carrying Guitar with him, thus putting an end to the law of revenge. Like John – the little boy I mentioned at the beginning of my talk – he gotta go. Whether he is flying from a rock back to Africa or going back to the non-essence of a fictional character, he leaves us full of questions and further desire, I hope. The same kind of feeling we have when we read the last page of a novel and we close the book.

Epilogue:

Soon after I arrived in Long Island, NY, last May, the round face of Emmett Till was smiling at me from a page of the *New York Times*. I was thrilled to discover that after fifty years someone had found a transcript of the trial, after the official papers had been missing for so long. The case is now formally reopened for further inquiries. In the same newspaper these days, about the Mississippi Burning trial which ended with the indictment of a now eighty years old former member of the Ku Klux Klan, and also about archaeological excavation to be carried out in New York Central Park to bring back to light the remains of the old black town of Seneca and this, in a time of war, is good news.

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