

# Auditory Narrative in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

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This article primarily explores the centrality of sound and listening in Toni Morrison's literary text. Drawing on theories on sound cultural studies, narratology, and cultural identity, this essay analyzes Morrison's representation of sound and its significance on characterization, plot, and theme in *Song of Solomon*. Morrison's literary sounds—voices of oral storytelling, the sound of music, and the protagonist Milkman Dead's listening experiences are deeply rooted in African American sound culture. A close analysis of her sound writing in *Song of Solomon* helps to give the reader a glimpse of the soundscape of African American culture as well as the vital role listening plays in African American survival, endurance, and cultural identification.

*Keywords:* sound, listening, black music, cultural identity

## Introduction

In their introduction to *The Cambridge History of African American Literature*, Maryemma Graham and Jerry Ward (2011) write, "African American literature comprises orature (oral literature) and printed texts simultaneously... The role of utterance or speech is not necessarily secondary to the role of writing or inscription" (p. 2). This argument points out the truth that African American literature is characterized with an oral tradition in which speaking and listening play the major role. The centrality of oral tradition in literature reflects the auditory cognitive orientation of African Americans and the significance of the African American sound culture. Prominent African American writers such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison, state with remarkable pride that their writings are definitely influenced by African American sound culture. Ralph Ellison believes that basically his "instinctive approach to writing is through sound" (Porter, 1999, p. 278). Toni Morrison, the most representative African American writer attaching great importance to sound and listening, writes, one of:

the major characteristic of black writing is to be both print and oral literature: to combine those two aspects so that the stories can be read in silence, of course, but one should be able to hear them as well. (Morrison, 1984, p. 340)

Morrison shows her preoccupation with sound and creates some of the most musical pieces in American literature. This essay approaches her art of sound and primarily explores the centrality of sound and listening in *Song of Solomon*, with a particular focus on how Morrison represents sound in her narrative and what role listening plays in the novel's characterization and theme.

### Voices of Oral Storytelling as Linguistic Agency

When the Africans were brought to America as slaves most of them were kept illiterate on purpose, so “speech carried extra weight as the means to communicate” (Miller, 2016, p. 10). The African slaves created their own language—Black English, to tell their stories and express the emotions of their souls. Black English is an oral language which combines auditory and visual styling to create meaning, what Kristeva describes as “beyond and within, more or less than meaning: rhythm, tone, color, and joy, within, through, and across the Word” (Conner, 2000, p. 13). Toni Morrison, a towering figure in African American literature, makes oral narrative the central form in one of her most renowned novels, *Song of Solomon* (1977). In this novel, the protagonist Pilate Dead is a speaker with a powerful voice because she has the power of the Word, “nommo”—the African concept that constitutes “the driving power... that gives life and efficacy to all things” (Morrison, 1977, p. 21). With her “nommo”, Pilate establishes her power and position, teaching people to know themselves and their place within their community. The first time she meets Milkmen and Guitar, she talks to them in a way teaching them how to speak their language and how to listen:

“Hi.”  
 The woman looked up. First at Guitar and then at Milkman.  
 “What kind of word is that?” Her voice was light but gravel-sprinkled.  
 Milkman kept on staring at her fingers, manipulating the orange. Guitar grinned and shrugged. “It means hello.”  
 “Then say what you mean.”  
 “Okay. Hello.”  
 “That’s better. What you want?”  
 “Nothin. We just passin by.”  
 “Look like you standin by.”  
 “If you don’t want us here, Miss Pilate, we’ll go.” Guitar spoke softly.  
 “I ain’t the one with the wants. You the one want something.”  
 “We wanna ask you something.” Guitar stopped feigning indifference. She was too direct, and to keep up with her he had to pay careful attention to his language.  
 “Ask it.”  
 “Somebody said you ain’t got no navel.”  
 “That the question?”  
 “Yes.”  
 “Don’t sound like a question. Sound like an answer. Gimme the question.”  
 “Do you?”  
 “Do I what?”  
 “Do you have a navel?”  
 “No.”  
 “What happened to it?”  
 “Beats me.” She dropped a bright peeling into her lap and separated an orange section slowly. “Now do I get to ask a question?”  
 “Sure.”  
 “Who’s your little friend?”  
 “This here’s Milkman.”  
 “Do he talk?” Pilate swallowed a piece of the fruit.  
 “Yeah. He talk. Say something.” Guitar shoved an elbow at Milkman without taking his eyes off Pilate.  
 Milkman took a breath, held it, and said, “Hi.”  
 Pilate laughed. “You all must be the dumbest unhung Negroes on earth. What they telling you in them schools? You say ‘Hi’ to pigs and sheep when you want ’em to move. When you tell a human being ‘Hi,’ he ought to get up and knock you down.” (Morrison, 1977, pp. 36-37)

In this conversation, what Pilate speaks is exactly the language of Black English. Her light yet gravel-sprinkled voice and her direct but forceful way of speaking deeply astound both her nephew Milkman, who keeps silent most of time and has to “took a breath” before talking, and Guitar, who feels “to keep up with her he had to pay careful attention to his language” (Morrison, 1977, p. 37). Her way of speaking the Black language not only gives them a lesson about the black language, but also shows her pride in her own language by questioning and making fun of Milkman’s school and of his teachers. Pilate’s voice has profound impact on both boys. While listening to Pilate’s talk, Milkman undergoes a shift in his views on Pilate: he feels no embarrassment or shame of Pilate for her ugliness, poverty, and dirtiness, which are teased by his classmates. As the conversation goes on, Milkman and Guitar feel more and more relaxed, “she’d changed the rhythm on them” (Morrison, 1977, p. 40). Both boys want to be with her, the lady who “looked like a tall black tree” (Morrison, 1977, p. 41). “Her voice made Milkman think of pebbles. Little round pebbles that bumped up against each other. Maybe she was hoarse, or maybe it was the way she said her words, with both a drawl and a clip” (Morrison, 1977, 50). Deeply attracted by her voice, both boys “sat in a pleasant semi-stupor, listening to her go on and on...” (Morrison, 1977, p. 52).

While Pilate Dead is a powerful speaker, her brother Macon Dead is failed speaker who loses the ability to speak the black language as well as the ability to listen to others for his purposeful separation from the black community. Macon’s incompetency as a speaker is illustrated in his storytelling. When Macon warns his son to stay away from Pilate and her family, he and Milkman have a long conversation about Pilate. Although Macon keeps explaining, “Pilate is no good. She’s a snake, and can charm you like a snake, but still a snake” (Morrison, 1977, p. 89), Milkman feels disappointed at his father’s explanation and believes “his father had explained nothing to him” (Morrison, 1977, p. 91). Milkman’s response to his father’s storytelling indicates Macon’s incompetency as a speaker. Furthermore, taking pride in his material wealth, Macon distances himself from the other poor blacks and becomes an outsider of his community. He loses the ability to participate in his community’s oral tradition: “when he was just starting out in the business of buying houses, he would lounge around the barbershop and swap stories with the men there. But for years he hadn’t had that kind of time, or interest” (Morrison, 1977, p. 52). Macon’s refusal of the oral tradition further leads to his lack of perception and feelings and his isolation from the community, which is exemplified in his conversation with Mrs. Bains, one of his tenants. Whiling having a dialogue with Mrs. Bains about the rent, Macon pays dead ears to Mrs. Bains’s voice. With money—rent as his only care, Macon shows no concern to his tenant and contends in a rather cold and firm voice that he needs to take his money on time. His lack of empathy to the hardships of Mrs. Bains and her family reveals both his inability to listen to others and his rejection of the African American community.

### **Sound of Music as Cultural Memory**

As a significant form of the African American oral tradition, African American music—work songs, spirituals, folklores, blues, jazz, and rap, has profound influence on African American literature. There is a long and respected tradition among African American writers in applying either the symbolic or the structural elements of music in literary texts. Frederick Douglass expresses his utter astonishment since he came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. In the final chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois repeats and varies Douglass’s theme, saying that “They that walked in darkness sang songs in the olden days—Sorrow Songs—for they were weary at heart” (Du

Bois, 1995, 264). Toni Morrison shares Du Bois's view that the Negro folk song represents, relieves, or expresses the slave's sorrowful emotion and she further argues that art, especially black music, is "a dynamic and live form of cultural expression" (Tally, 2007, p. 40).

Morrison fully demonstrates her understanding and interest in music by drawing heavily on African American music in her work. Folk song figures most prominently and constitutes part of the plot in her *Song of Solomon*. One of the central threads of the story is a folk song named "O Sugarman don't leave me here". The song accompanies the protagonist Milkman Dead's birth and initiation and guides him to the truth about his origins. The song is first sung in the opening chapter by a shabby and eccentrically dressed women called Pilate, one of the crowds watching the insurance's agent's failed attempt to fly from the roof of No Mercy Hospital:

O Sugarman done fly away  
 Sugarman done gone  
 Sugarman cut across the sky  
 Sugarman gone home... (Morrison, 1977, pp. 32-33)

While Pilate is singing, Milkman's mother, Ruth Dead begins to feel labor pains. Pilate's voice sets the background of the birth of Milkman. Pilate's singing also attracts great attention from the crowd. Some listened silently, some "were transfixed" (Morrison, 1977, p. 32), while some "listened as though it were the helpful and defining piano music in a silent movie" (Morrison, 1977, p. 33). The crowd's acceptance of Pilate's voice and presence suggests "the process by which community is created out of the context of shared experience" (Smith, 1995, p. 52). Meanwhile, with the complete story taken into account, the reader may find that the words of Pilate's song also inform a connection between the anticipated "flight" of the insurance man and the legendary flight of an African ancestor.

The song appears again the first time Milkman visits Pilate's house with his friend Guitar. After having a simple talk with the two boys, Pilate begins to hum, soon joined by her daughter Reba and her granddaughter Hagar. They hum together in perfect harmony until Pilate takes the lead:

O Sugarman don't leave me here  
 Cotton balls to choke me  
 O Sugarman don't leave me here  
 Buckra's arms to yoke me... (Morrison, 1977, p. 151)

When the two women got to the chorus, Hagar raised her head and sang too. The singing is circling around Pilate's poverty-stricken house and it brings great consolation and enjoyment to the lonely Milkman. When the women are singing, Milkman responds. He loses his breath, he nearly falls into a faint under the weight of his own emotion and "for the first time in his life he experiences with another human being the bittersweet pain of love and loss—and connection" (Small-McCarthy, 1999, p. 182). Music "melts the lonely heart, creates a sense of community" (Small-McCarthy, 1999, 181), and draws Milkman closer and closer to Pilate, the mentor who guides him to the quest of his cultural identity.

Music conveys cultural memory. Feeling tired and irritable one evening, feeling like "an outsider" and like a "landless wanderer" (Morrison, 1977, p. 27), Macon finds himself turning away from his own house, thinking sorrowfully, "There was no music there" (Morrison, 1977, p. 29). Instead of going to his house, he unconsciously walks toward the home of Pilate, his only sister, who sings eloquent blues in a powerful contralto. When he comes near Pilate's home, Macon overhears Pilate, her daughter Reba, and Reba's daughter Hagar sing in

harmonious concert. At first only listening, and then later peering through a window in the dark, Macon begins to muse upon the ceremonial scene in Pilate's home:

They were singing some melody that Pilate was leading. A phrase that other two were taking up and building on. Her powerful contralto, Reba's piercing soprano in counterpoint, and the soft voice of the girl, Hagar, pulled him like a carpet tack under the influence of a magnet. Surrendering to the sound, Macon moved closer. He wanted no conversation, no witness, only to listen and perhaps to see the tree of them, the source of that music that made him think of fields and wild turkey and calico... (Morrison, 1977, p. 29)

In this scene, Macon is completely seduced by the music which gives him great enjoyment and brings the suppressed memories of his past into his conscious mind. Macon "softens under the weight of memory and music" (Morrison, 1977, p. 29). Meanwhile, he achieves a sense of emotional fulfillment by recalling the personal history "he does not... reminisce much about" (Morrison, 1977, p. 51), as Visvis writes, "by returning him to the land of his childhood, song allows Macon Jr. to engage in emotionally satisfying nostalgia" (Visvis, 2008, p. 259).

Although there are minor changes in lyrics each time the song appears, the melancholy mood of the song remains the same—blues. The sorrow of the singer's "O Suharman don't leave me here" resonates throughout the novel. Mendi Lewis Obadike emphasizes the role of this blues mood, arguing that "the sadness of having been left is partially responsible for Macon Dead's miserliness, Ruth Dead's loneliness, Milkman Dead's selfishness, even for Pilate Dead's misunderstood message from the dead." (Beaulieu, 2003, pp. 227-228). The blues mood is also exemplified in Morrison's depiction of Ryna, Solomon's wife, who is left behind during Solomon's flight to Africa and dies as a result of overwhelming grief. Ryna's sorrow is remembered not only through the song "O Sugarman don't leave me here" sang by the children in Shalimar, but also through the sound of the wind whipping through the landscape. The memories conserved in the song not only include detailed information about a story (Solomon left behind his wife and son Jake) but also the feelings of the community in which the story took place—the sorrow of the black slaves and their longing for Africa.

### **Milkman: From a Listening Zero to a Listening Hero**

*Song of Solomon* begins with Milkman's complete isolation from his family and the black community, but ends with his open embrace of an African American heritage. Morrison demonstrates this through the protagonist Milkman's transformation from a passive listener with "deaf ears" to an active listener with "fresh ears" to the stories of his family's history. In Part I of the novel Macon's mental and physical abuse has reduced his wife and his children to lifeless, who beings with no sense of themselves. Influenced by his tyrannical and totally materialized father, Milkman becomes selfish and shows no interest and concern to his sisters and his mother. Except his childhood friend Guitar, he has no communication with others although he endures unbearable isolation. He pays deaf ears to his family and knows nothing about them. He lacks the ability to listen to others. When Macon tells him the story of Pilate and warns him to stay away from her, he feels disappointed and thinks his father explains nothing. When Macon tells him his mother's obsessive relationship with Doctor Foster, his maternal grandfather, he doubts it and thinks that his father is lying to gain his authority in the family. When his elder sister Corinthians asks to have a talk with him, Milkman finds it awkward for in his memory he and his sisters haven't had a talk for years. Even after Corinthians makes a long speech about her sadness and disappointment over the family, Milkman feels blank in his brain and goes to sleep without saying anything to comfort his sister. Milkman's lack of listening skills is further illustrated when he meets Circe, the midwife who delivered his father and aunt and later guides him to his origins. During their talk, Circe tells Milkman, with love

and criticism in her voice: "You don't listen to people. Your ear is on your head, but it's not connected to your brain" (Morrison, 1977, p. 247).

Lacking the ability to listen, Milkman fails to find meaning and establish real connections in his life. Dissatisfied with his middle-class life, he sets out on a journey to the South for the gold inheritance his father has told him about. During his Southern journey, he begins to learn to listen and through listening he learns his cultural roots and establish a connection with the larger African American community. When he comes to "heart and soul of Shalimar, Virginia" (Morrison, 1977, p. 263), Milkman discovers that "even the name of the town sounded like Solomon: Shalimar, which Mr. Solomon and everybody else pronounced Shalleemone" (Morrison, 1977, p. 305). This sentence indicates that in Shalimar, Milkman begins to pay close attention to the significance of sound in black cultural expression. Later, as he watches and listens to a group of children playing in a ring game and singing a folk version of the blues song that Pilate sang before, at first he takes it as a meaningless children's jump-rope chant for he cannot understand the meaning of the song. As he listens further, "he imagines a stage of childhood that passed him by, grows homesick and more understanding and forgiving toward the members of his family, especially considering the trials that they have suffered" (Small-McCarthy, 1999, p. 182). More importantly, as he tries to find out the family history, Milkman meets people such as Circe, King Walker, Sweet, and Susan Byrd, some of whom are his family members in Shalimar, Virginia. He listens to the valuable stories told by those people and learns about his culture heritage and consequently, himself (Beaulieu, 2003, p. 318). The African cultural art of listening and remembering is central to Milkman's success in decoding the secret to the children's game song:

"Come booba yalle, come booba tambee," it sounded like, and didn't make sense. But another line—"Black lady fell down on the ground"—was clear enough. There was another string of nonsense words, then "Threw her body all around." The verse ended in another clear line. "Twenty-one children, the last one *Jake!*" [Morrison's emphasis]... Now Milkman understood... And Milkman memorized all of what they sang. (Morrison, 1977, pp. 305-306)

As the scene shows, at this critical moment, Milkman cannot simply write the song down. To decode the song, he must listen carefully and memorize the lyric by heart, as Joyce Irene Middleton notes, "Milkman must commit the song to his personal oral memory, just as his slave and African ancestors had done, not to an artificial, external memory—a written record" (Middleton, 1993, p. 66). This time, Milkman listens with fresh ears and eventually he succeeds in unlocking the secret to the children's song: the chant tells the story of Milkman's enslaved great grandparents, who produced 20 children before the father, Solomon, flew back to Africa and the mother, Ryna, grieved to death. Milkman's transition to a keen listener is further demonstrated in the scene of the ceremonial hunt in Shalimar. The hunt takes place in a pitch darkness where everybody is invisible, even to themselves. In such an environment that sound reigns oversight, Milkman discovers "the finely tuned listening and communicating skills of his partner, Calvin, and the other men on the hunt" (Smith, 1995, p. 34):

All those shrieks, those rapid tumbling barks, the long-sustained yells, the tuba sounds, the drumbeat sounds, the low liquid howm howm, the reedy whistles, the thin eeeee's of a cornet, the unh unh unh bass chords. It was all language... No, it was not language; it was what there was before language. Before things were written down. (Morrison, 1977, p. 281)

Morrison artfully depicts this acoustic scene to emphasize the musical sensibility about African American language. Milkman's careful observing of the woods, hunters, killing, his immersive listening to animals and the sound of the wind whipping the landscape, activate his listening imagination to uncover his ancestor's skill for listening: "an intuitive and sensual ability to converse with animals and with nature" (Smith, 1995, p. 35). Thus,

the ritual hunt represents Milkman's transition to a listening hero through a brand-new auditory experience which "awakens his dormant listening skills to new language experiences and ways of knowing" (Smith, 1995, p. 36).

### Conclusion

*Song of Solomon*, one of the most representative Morrisonian sonic novels, illustrates sound as a conveyor of ideas, memories, and cultural values, and listening to empower and to preserve. Pilate's storytelling and singing, in sharp contrast with Macon's literate yet invalid utterances, demonstrates the distinctiveness of African American sound culture, as Smitherman argues, "in the black sound system lies in those features which do not so readily lend themselves to concrete documentation—its speech rhythms, voice inflections and tonal patterns" (Smitherman, 2000, p. 17). Significantly, it is not until Milkman begins to listen actively and attentively to the sound from the African American community that he becomes a listening hero and learns about his ancestral heritage. Through Milkman's initiation, which is dependent on his reclaiming of the listening skills of his ancestors, Toni Morrison represents the soundscape of African American culture and highlights the vital role listening plays in African American survival, endurance, and cultural identification.

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