

EARTH, WATER, AND BLACK BODIES: ELEMENTS AT WORK IN
TONI MORRISON'S LITERARY LANDSCAPE

by

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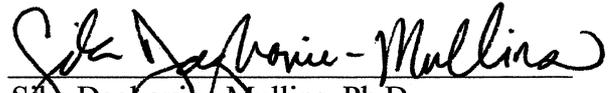
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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Sika Dagbovie-Mullins, Department of English, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

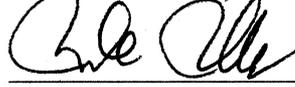
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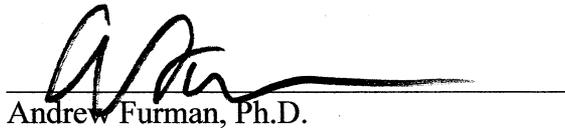
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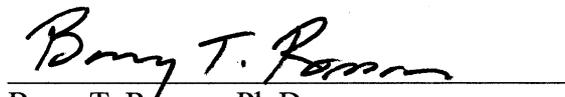
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ABSTRACT

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This project focuses on the natural elements earth and water as presented in the works of African American author Toni Morrison. The primary texts analyzed are *Sula*, *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. In the first two novels, Morrison alludes to the abuse of black bodies by drawing parallels between the destruction of trees and the negative effects of urbanization. I argue that environmental destruction and urbanization parallels the disenfranchisement and killing of black bodies. Water in *Beloved* connotes bondage because of its historical link to the Triangular Trade. However, considering Morrison's frequent mention of water and the fugitives' constant need to drink, I argue that ingesting water symbolizes a need for psychological freedom. All of the novels that I have analyzed emphasize the complex connections between African Americans and nature.

DEDICATION

To my family, I dedicate this thesis in gratitude for your generous support. Also, to the memory of my late father Joslyn and youngest brother Richard who died during my graduate studies, I dedicate this work. Both of you will live on in my memory forever.

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I. INTRODUCTION: EARTH AND WATER IN MORRISON'S WORK

Ecocritical scholar William H. Rueckert describes man as a creature with a tragic flaw. Nowhere is this flaw more evident than in his relationship with the environment where an anthropocentric spirit spurs him to “conquer, humanize, domesticate, violate, and exploit every natural thing” (Rueckert 113). The verbs “conquer,” “humanize,” “domesticate,” “violate,” and “exploit” conjure images of environmental violence. Such violence resonates in *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), and *Beloved* (1987). In her role as a literary activist, Morrison writes extensively about the landscape, illustrating human dominance and destruction of natural habitats. Whether it is deforestation and urbanization in *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*, giving a voice to the natural world in *Tar Baby* or the ambivalent nature of water in *Beloved*, Morrison often encourages environmental preservation and thus her novels invite ecocritical approaches to her work.

Ecocriticism and Its Evolution

According to Cheryll Glotfelty, in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, Ecocriticism owes its origin to William H. Rueckert. Rueckert in a 1978 essay entitled “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism,” defined ecocriticism as, “the application of ecological concepts to the study of literature” (xx). Likewise, Glotfelty in the same text defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the environment” (xviii). Rueckert as well as

Glotfelty illustrates a concise definition of the subject. Ecocriticism is not static so noticeable literary evolution has taken place since 1978 whereby the inclusion of theories, approaches, symbols, and nature images have broadened Rueckert's initial vision. As a result, there has been an increase in the interconnections between the literary text and the environment. This evolution is very significant when one considers how much the approach has advanced. With reference to this evolution, John Tallmadge and Henry Harrington write:

Ecocritics have begun a long migration from away from foundational theory towards the exciting and varied terrain of actual practice. In the process, they are reaching beyond the romantic Euroamerican canon and its nature writers like Muir and Thoreau towards other traditions, including those of oriental and Native American cultures. And they have begun to explore pluralistic and syncretic approaches, employing techniques of feminism, ethnic studies, biography, and postmodern analysis along with tools borrowed from geography, anthropology, and natural history. (x)

Tallmadge and Harrington's excerpt illuminate the change in the focus of ecocritics. They describe a movement that no longer focuses primarily on European and American traditional literature. The field has become flexible and new approaches are not only accommodative of other cultures but have scope for the inclusion of new approaches.

Ecocritical Approaches to Morrison's Texts

Despite the huge theoretical strides that have been made, ecocriticism with respect to black literature is still an emerging field. In reference to Morrison's work,

Elizabeth Ely Tolman mentions some ecocritical concepts that are fundamental as well as utilized successfully in Morrison's texts. In "Approaches to Morrison's Work: Ecocritical" Tolman writes:

An ecocritical approach demands not just a scientific envisioning of the environment but also a psychological, sociological, religious, and historical analysis of nature and its manifestations in the work at hand. Morrison weaves all of these strands together to produce a narrative history of African Americans, a history largely ignored by white society. (7)

One of the concepts mentioned that is readily perceived in Morrison's work is the psychological. The psychological impact within the texts is not limited to humans only but to the environment as well. One characteristic example occurs in *Sula* when deforestation overcomes the citizenry as the land in the Bottom is reshaped for the construction of the Medallion Golf Course. In this scenario, a black enclave is maliciously overtaken and displacement and destruction occurs. The citizens have not only lost their homes, but they are bereft of valuable trees and shrubs that have support their way of life. This incident illustrates the ricocheting impact of urbanization on people and the environment. A psychological impact on people is obvious in *Beloved* as well. Morrison's fugitives, having escaped the bondage of the plantation, often recall the atrocities of the past, which is disadvantageous to their new existence. One example is the character Sethe who in a moment of great trepidation kills her own child to save her. Killing a child in order to save her is ironic, but it can be argued that Sethe's recollection brought back glimpses of her own experiences and so to prevent the baby

from sharing a similar fate, her only choice was murder. Other fugitives also have similar insecurities about their past and water has become a vital aid in pacifying their troubled minds.

Some critics have drawn on ecocriticism when focusing on Morrison's work. Their findings are categorized according to the following general approaches: the relationship between African American history and nature in Morrison, spirituality and nature in Morrison, wildness and wilderness in Morrison, feminist ecocritical approaches to Morrison's texts, and the role of water in Morrison's texts. Like the psychological concept previously mentioned, each of these approaches enlarges the ecocritical engagement with Morrison's work.

Because black ancestry is an important backdrop in Morrison's work, the history and nature approach provides an analysis of African Americans, their history, and the environment that they occupy. Two concepts from this approach that I have analyzed in this thesis are (a) how African Americans value land and (b) how their experiences parallel the treatment of land. Literary critic Barbara Christian notes in "Community and Nature: The Novels of Toni Morrison" that, "As in the ancestral tradition, place is as important as the human actors" (65). In this terse quote, Christian reiterates the important concepts of "place," another cognate for land, which is vital to my argument. Christian further states that "Morrison's patterns are not just arbitrary, nor are they only a means of reinforcing her thematic emphasis, more importantly, her structural use of Nature is central to her rendering of her tales as fables, as stories which teaches a lesson about life" (73).

Christian's assessment addresses Morrison's ecocritical concerns because abuses in Nature are intended to teach valuable lessons. For example, the deforestation of the Bottom in *Sula* and the unnamed town in *Song of Solomon* are important lessons in environmental preservation because whenever there is deforestation the inhabitants are the ones who suffer most because their most prized occupation as custodians of nature in most cases is lost forever. In *Song of Solomon*, Macon Dead is a black middle class, entrepreneurial self-aggrandizing slumlord. His mission is to create tenement housing, amass wealth, and climb to the next rung on the social ladder. Not only does his action demonstrate a lack of consideration for the fragile environment, he totally disregards the ancestral connection in contrast to his father Jake who was killed because of an avid devotion to nature. Macon's aspiration appears as a successful venture for a man of black and Indian ancestry (two groups with similar experiences with nature and white autonomy) but his preoccupation with financial gains emphasizes his self-importance. With respect to environmental destruction, there are no winners and though his tenants may compensate him, the loss of green spaces can never be equated in monetary terms.

Barbara Christian is not the only critic who has discussed environmental issues and history in Morrison's texts. Kathleen R. Wallace and Karla Armbruster in "The Novels of Toni Morrison: 'Wild Wilderness Where There Was None'" also credit Morrison for her "profound engagement with the natural world" (211). Wallace and Armbruster further state that "Morrison's body of work also suggests that her African American characters are especially likely to understand how nature is interpreted,

mediated, and used because they themselves have so often dominated and oppressed through the whites' use of nature" (213).

While I draw on the analyses of Christian, Wallace and Armbruster, my focus in *Sula* and *Song of Solomon* center on the parallels between nature and African Americans. My historical framework discusses earth, land and soil as cognates because each is relevant to establish Morrison's African Americans' love of land and subsequent irreparable loss to urbanization. As a result, I argue that the abuse of nature parallels the abuse of black bodies, which is my focus in chapter one entitled "Earth, Nature, and Black Bodies: (Re) viewing History through an Eco-Lens in *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*."

Spirituality in nature is another approach critics have taken with respect to Morrison's novels. Presented from two distinct perspectives, namely ecotheology and cultural practices, the discussion of spirituality in Morrison's work is diverse. Ecotheology outlines the interrelationship between religion and environmental concerns while the cultural aspect explores the ancestral traditions of a particular group within the environment. To accentuate the goals of ecotheology, Valerie Brown in "The Rise of Ecotheology" reports that the infringements against nature from a theological perspective are comparable with sin. His All Holiness Bartholomew I, the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church, made this assertion according to Brown in a 1997 speech. According to His All Holiness:

To commit a crime against the natural world is a sin. For humans to cause species to become extinct and destroy the biological diversity of God's creation; for humans to degrade the integrity of the Earth by

causing changes in its climate, by stripping the Earth of its natural forests, or destroying its wet-lands; for human to injure other humans with disease; for humans to contaminate the Earth's waters, its land, its air, and its life, with poisonous substances – these are sins.

This didactic excerpt emphatically underscores the importance of the interrelationship between human beings, spirituality, and the environment in the pursuance of an ecological balance.

Kimberly N. Ruffin in *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions* proposes an ecotheological approach to African American texts. Although Ruffin's text does not critique Morrison's prose, this approach is applicable in that Morrison recalls the traditionalist African view of the earth as a sacred entity. Historically, traditional Africans revered the earth by performing sacred ceremonies such as sacrificing to polytheistic deities. Morrison's African American characters do not partake in that ancient ritual but the wanton deforestation that is depicted in *Sula* as well as *Song of Solomon* can be read as sacrificing nature to the gods of urbanization.

Kokahvah Zauditu-Selassie elaborates on the importance of culture, folkways and spirituality in *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*. In her essay "Women Who Know Things: African Epistemologies, Ecocriticism and Female Spiritual Authority in the novels of Toni Morrison" and her book *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, Zauditu-Selassie mentions that a resilient African spiritual connection is maintained by Morrison's African American characters. This practice is presented in *Sula* and *Song of Solomon* by the use of plants and roots. With reference to *Sula*, blackberry and nightshade are the important plants. Framed by the narrator's lament of

their destruction at the beginning of the novel, as well as Zauditu-Selassie's argument, blackberries and nightshades signify an ongoing cultural practice. Her theory that, "The inclusion of nightshade and blackberry, plants associated with pharmacopoeia used by "root workers" and healers, represent both cultural sign and archeological evidence that members of the community practice African spiritual traditions." ("Women Who Know Things" 46), emphasize not only cultural use but evidence that the residents of the Bottom continued to practice the spiritual tradition of their ancestors.

Similarly, the working with herbs resonates in *Song of Solomon*. Pilate, the novel's "negro mama" "fixes" her brother Macon in order to *guarantee* the birth of a male heir.¹ In her critical role, Pilate restores a sexless marriage by giving Ruth "funny things to do and some greenish-grey grassy-looking stuff to put in [her husband's] food" (*SOS* 125). This plan succeeds and within two months, Ruth not only gains Macon's romantic attention but also is pregnant with their son. Pilate not only aids in the conception of Milkman but also watches over the early growth of the child much to the dislike of her brother who early in Ruth's pregnancy insisted that the fetus be aborted. Pilate practiced her African cultural heritage and according to Zauditu-Selassie Pilate's "decisive role [facilitates] his [Milkman's] conception by 'fixing' his father through the preparation of 'roots'" ("Women Who Know Things" 48).

With respect to Morrison's novels, the wilderness motif has been successfully utilized before. Coupled with "wildness," Kathleen R. Wallace and Karen Armbruster present an integrative approach to *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby*, and *Beloved* in "The

¹ Elizabeth D. Blum in "Power and Control: Slave Women's Perceptions of Wildness in the Nineteenth Century" mentions the "negro mama." She quotes Deborah Gray White who defines the term "negro mama" as an older black slave woman who provides "a defense for slaves and some white families against illness" (257).

Novels of Toni Morrison: “Wild Wilderness Where There Was None.”² They posit that:

... our purpose is not simply to draw attention to Morrison’s lyrical description of the green world but rather to suggest how her complex representation of African American experiences with nature can productively complicate American environmentalist discourse and the practice of ecocriticism. (211)

Wallace and Armbruster’s mention of “green world” is a significant concept with respect to Morrison African American characters and the land that they occupy.³ Defined as place of catharsis where characters in turmoil can enter and confront inner conflicts and find solutions by literary critic Northrop Frye, the green world concept is essential. However, Morrison’s fugitives have little access to this kind of environment because they are either transients or fugitives. Furthermore, Wallace and Armbruster’s mention of this accessibility to nature is limited “...because Morrison’s novels focus on the human as part of the communities, her characters rarely encounter the natural world in the extreme, unpeopled form...” (215). I concur with both authors; however, I propose a metaphorical interpretation of wilderness instead of the literal. In proposing the metaphor of wilderness in *Beloved*, I explore it as a state of mind to illustrate the fugitive’s sense of uncertainty rather than as a terrestrial space, arguing that the traumatizing effects of the past has resulted in anxiety and bewilderment. Having crossed the Ohio River, new challenges confront Morrison’s fugitive slaves and in the

² Wallace and Armbruster notes that to their knowledge (as a group) their ecocritical approach to nature and the environment in Morrison’s novels is a first (227).

³ The “the green world” is a literary concept attributed to literary critic Northrop Frye. Frye described the “green world” as a space of catharsis. *Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton UP, 1957 (pp. 182-4).

“free state” of Ohio. With the exception of Baby Suggs who enters as a freed slave, Sethe, Paul D, and the infant Beloved are escapees with uncertain futures. Therefore, with the use of various scholarly materials, I examine dehydrated black bodies in a psychological wilderness with water as their main source of catharsis. Based on that assumption, I contend that water is a likely source of psychological freedom despite its connotation to bondage.

A feminist ecocritical approach is also one of the perspectives from which Morrison’s novels are taught and studied.⁴ This concept, according to Jessica Gama, “uses the age old connection between women and nature as a bridge to strengthen both the feminism and ecological movement” (49). Gama in “‘Without Leaving the Ground, She Could Fly’: Ecofeminism and Soul Fulfillment in Toni Morrison’s *Pilate*” analyzes *Song of Solomon* via a feminist approach. In Gama’s analysis, she identifies Pilate as the embodiment of ecofeminism. Pilate maintains a matriarchal household and engages in wine making which does not harm the environment. Gama reads this act as working in harmony with nature. Gama also mentions Pilate’s brother Macon Dead who is the foil for his sister. Unlike Pilate who works with nature, Macon seeks to create tenement housing at the expense of green spaces.

Similarly, Stacy Alaimo does a feminist reading of *Song of Solomon*. She also contrasts Pilate and her mercenary brother Macon Dead. “In Playing Nature: Post Modern Natures in Contemporary Feminist Fiction” Alaimo describes Pilate as an “earth mother” because of her refusal to dominate and control the environment.

⁴ Greta Gaard advocates for academics to become activists and bring an awareness of the need for social and ecological justice to every class that is taught in “Hiking without a Map: Reflections on Teaching Ecofeminist Literary Criticism.” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literary Studies in Literature and Environment* 3.1 (1996): 155-182.

According to Alaimo, Pilate embodies the philosophy of ecofeminism in which women are perceived as the preservers of the environment while men exhibit tendencies to dominate and destroy. My approach to *Song of Solomon* does not apply a feminist approach, however Stacy Alaimo's assessment of Macon Dead's character is important to my argument because he represents men who dominate and destroy elements in nature instead of advocating for preservation.

With respect to the study of *Beloved* and water, few scholars have engaged the novel from an ecocritical perspective. However, Anissa Janine Wardi's in *Water and African American Memory an Ecocritical Perspective* (2011) has presented very insightful analyses into the subject. In her text, Wardi describes Morrison's presentation of water as "a site of danger and a space of absolution, [as well as] a carrier of African diasporic metaphors" (*Water* 65). These assessments of Morrison's text especially the "diasporic metaphors" is essential to my argument in that like Wardi and others, I argue that *Beloved* is a carrier of her African history and her recollections puts the past into sharp focus. Wardi in "'Loud with the presence of plants and field life': *The Ecology of Resistance in Toni Morrison's Tar Baby*" has also analyzed Morrison's *Tar Baby* from a post-colonial perspective pairing "the novel with water and other natural elements" (2).

My approach builds on the scholarship of Wardi, adding the viewpoint that water symbolizes freedom despite its association with bondage. To substantiate my claim, I argue that the frequent mention of water and the characters excessive need to drink is symbolic of their desire for psychological freedom.

Chapter Two, entitled “Water, Bodies, and Wilderness: Psychological Dehydration in *Beloved*,” is an analysis of the drinking motif which is indicative of a hidden yearning for freedom from a psychological wilderness that slavery has created. Water is also one of the most essential and versatile liquid. Life begins as two drops of liquid interacting with each other enabling conception and gestation. Likewise, water is the entity into which the developing human embryo grows. Brenda Peterson writes, “Water is...the first liquid we experience. We spend our formative nine months afloat in an amniotic sea so rich it recreates the primal ocean as we move again through all stages of evolution...” (qtd. in Wardi, *Water* 29). Based on these observations, it is not coincidental that humans constantly gravitate to water. *Beloved*'s fugitive slaves, have been desiccated by southern tyranny and having escaped via the Ohio River are on a journey to psychological freedom via water.

Earth, Water, and the Classical Influence

In this thesis, I have selected two common elements namely, earth and water, and make environmental connections in *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Beloved*. While the scientific concept of earth and water is not my focus, the contribution of the Greeks Empedocles, Plato and Aristotle are important to my study. According to Peter Kingsley in “Empedocles and His Interpreters: The Four Elements Doxology” the four elements are described by Empedocles as “the simplest natural substances” (235), while Aristotle described them as “being the root of all things” (Lloyd 165). Both definitions are important in that earth and water create the base for my argument.

The element earth, though not the central focus of the novels, is a recurring natural motif in *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*. For example, *Sula* chronicles the destruction

of the Bottom. It has been annexed to the city of Medallion hence its loss as a geographical location. The rocky enclave that once housed the indigent black community will become the ideal place for the construction of luxury apartments to accommodate the rich and famous who will compete on the Medallion Golf course. The use of indigenous plants and herbs is also lost because they have been torn out from their roots. Thus, the Bottom succumbs to ‘white’ urbanization at the expense of its geographical, agricultural, and cultural identity to a sport that only the elitist few will enjoy.

Likewise, water is not the central focus in *Beloved*. However, I have noted its repetitive use and advance the claim that water is symbolic of freedom because no one would repeatedly request and persistently drink to enhance their bondage.

All three novels share environmental concern – the physical in *Sula* and *Song of Solomon* and the psychological in *Beloved*. As Barbara Christian states, “Morrison’s patterns are not just arbitrary, nor are they only a means of reinforcing her thematic emphasis, more importantly, her structural use of Nature is central to her rendering her tales as fables, as stories which teaches a lesson about life” (73). This is important in that it reflects the black experience about which Morrison writes. As a result, this thesis seeks to add another dimension to the argument on environmental destruction and urbanization as projected in *Sula* and *Song of Solomon* as well as the psychological freedom that water offers in *Beloved*. I posit that the elements earth and water are significant and have obvious connections with literature, nature, and the black body.

II. EARTH, NATURE, AND BLACK BODIES: (RE) VIEWING HISTORY THROUGH AN ECO-LENS IN *SULA* AND *SONG OF SOLOMON*

People and nature are valuable partners in any ecological setting. As a result, the manner in which one is treated affects the other. This reflection is evident in Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) and *Song of Solomon* (1977) in which uprooting, erosion, deforestation, urbanization have parallels with her African American characters. Both settings (the Bottom in *Sula*, and the unnamed town, as well as Jake Dead's Montour County farm in *Song of Solomon*) are fictional places where the ecological balance shifts and as a result, the lives of the characters as well as the natural landscape are impacted. *Sula* and *Song of Solomon* reveal Morrison's enthusiasm for preserving history of the African American community as well as her close affinity with nature imagery.

Morrison writes with environmental passion. John Burroughs, acclaimed nature writer reasons, "unless you can write about Nature with feelings, with real love, with more than hearty affiliation and comradeship... it is no use" (qtd. in Buell 190). Burroughs' claim is obvious in the manner in which Morrison treats her natural subjects. Trees and plants become symbols and because of their transformation, succinct parallels are created between environmental issues and her disenfranchised African American characters. By her efforts, nature speaks for the marginalized.

Earth and its cognates, land, and soil are important natural elements and one has to have a relationship with either to be able to calculate the value. Land provides

sustenance for both the physical as well as the cultural way of life. It also aids in the production of herbs and roots both of which are necessary for the continuance of the cultural aspects of a black community. Land is a commodity and possessing it is vital for economical as well as the cultural survival. Earth and soil likewise, provide ancestral connections, which are equally important. Elizabeth D. Blum quotes Sondra Yvonne Millner:

Considered sacred by many African cultures, land continued relationships among current, previous, and future generations. Africans retained a strong sense of community, even after death, and believed separation from gravesites of ancestors brought diseases to living family members. Performing certain ceremonies kept the ancestors strong, while the ancestors concurrently promised to keep the land fertile and the community healthy and prosperous. (249)

Earth is also the final resting place where bodies are interred but even in death, the connection is never severed because as Alberto Chavez asserts, "... when one of us dies that person is gathered up in the womb of the earth" (63). Soil is transportable and whether it is containerized or swallowed, it represents the maintenance of connection with the African motherland. Therefore all three, earth, land, and soil are important. Barbara Christian, in "Community and Nature: The Novels of Toni Morrison," underscores the importance. She claims, "Land is a participant in the maintenance of folk tradition. It is one of the necessary constants through which folk dramatize the meaning of life, as it is passed on from one generation to the next" (65). Two of the salient points of Christian's hypothesis are that physical and spiritual connection is

necessary for survival especially among Morrison's African American characters as well as the larger African American community. The physical involves procuring land (the commodity) to ensure survival for the present and future inheritance while the spiritual aids in maintaining ancestral connections. Karla Holloway also writes about the importance of earth. She states, "*Sula* embodies the essential African archetypes of fire, water and ground" (69). Holloway introduces ground, which is another cognate for earth. Her example emphasizes the importance of the element to the African American community as presented by Toni Morrison.

The callous destruction of the land in *Sula* and its manipulation in *Song of Solomon* are rooted in racial oppression. Hegemony or "domination or authority over others" is obvious in the texts and is racially, financially, and socially motivated. (O'Reilly "Hegemony"). Similarly, environmental manipulation and destruction occurs because of the same entities, highlighting the fact that whomever or whatever destroys people's livelihoods also destroys nature as well. This dual impact is noticeable among Morrison's African American characters. Characters lose their livelihood because of destruction or manipulation of nature within their communities. In this chapter, I argue that the exploitation of earth and its cognates, land and soil are synonymous with the treatment of black bodies in *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*.

Sula begins and ends with vivid images of earth and land, establishing the importance of locale. The novel begins with the phrase "that place," referring to the infamous Bottom, a neighborhood that once "stood in the hills above the valley town of Medallion" (3) and one of the final chapter references "...the curved earth..." (173).

This mound is located in “the colored part of the cemetery” (173) and marks the final resting place of the protagonist Sula as well as the other “colored” folk.

Location also sets the parameters for black and white segregation, which enables the creation of the first black enclave in the white town of Medallion. This segregated community is Morrison’s backdrop where nature is subjected to the jaws of urbanization. The new infrastructure, which changes the locale, is not the creation of a new community. It is a golf course for the affluent whites that Morrison herself describes as “a manicured place where the likelihood of the former residents showing up is almost nil” (Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken” 2316). Collectively these are the segregated locations where Morrison’s characters live and die.

Historically, the domination of blacks has its beginning in infamous Transatlantic Slave Trade. African men and women were captured, shackled, shipped, sold, whipped, overworked, and killed. Despite being stripped of their dignity, the slaves, like the uprooted residents of the Bottom, possessed both a physical as well as a spiritual will and their connection to the land from which they were taken has not weakened. To maintain the strong African spiritual connection with the land as well as their ancestral home, African women found ingenious ways to preserve their culture. As Elizabeth D. Blum states in an essay entitled “Power, Danger, and Control: Slave Women’s Perception of Wilderness in the Nineteenth Century,” “slave traders reported cases of women swallowing African soil as they left their native land on the perilous journey across the Atlantic” (259). This act was not a ritual to ensure a safe passage across the shark infested Atlantic Ocean or protection from future hardships. It was the slaves’ only means of ensuring a spiritual connection to the motherland – one that could

not be severed or wrestled from them before being huddled below the decks of filthy cargo ships or after they landed on foreign shores. Similarly, the black residents in the Bottom attempted and maintained a cultural connection by the use of nightshade and blackberries both of which thrived there.

The Bottom is a natural habitat for the growing of nightshade and blackberries. In the opening lines of *Sula* the narrator reminisces, “In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion Golf Course...,” signifying a irrefutable loss (3). Research shows that nightshade has both medicinal as well as cultural properties. According to the article, “Nightshade,” the plant “has been used medicinally since ancient times and as stimulant, narcotics, pain reliever, poisons, and antidotes for such agents as opium and snake venom.” This list illustrates a variety of uses ranging from folk medicine and natural healing to the use of stimulants and narcotics.

Blackberries are also naturally adapted to the Bottom and their usefulness seems to outweigh those of nightshades depending from which angle one views their worth. According to “Blackberry Herbal Use History and Folklore” we are told that blackberries:

were in olden days supposed to give protection against all ‘evil runes’ if gathered at the right time of the moon. Since ancient Greek physicians prescribed the herb for gout, the leaves, roots and even berries have been employed as medicinal herb. The most common uses were for treating sore throats, and wounds.

Blackberries, like nightshade, have many uses in common. However, there is one exception with respect to blackberries in that it is used as prevention against “evil runes” or evil spirits, which alludes to witchcraft. Witchcraft may have been passed down from different generations of slaves. The only allusion to evil at work in the novel is Sula (the protagonist) being referred to as a witch. However, Kokahvah Zauditu-Selassie (described as a priest of Obatala in the Yoruba Spiritual tradition and a Mama Nganga in the Kongo spiritual system), states that “Morrison is one of the ancient mothers whose fertile prose and careful craft cultivate a literary ‘garden’ where haints, mojos, fixing folks and root-workers are unashamedly part of the spiritual landscape” (“Women Who Know Things” 39). Blackberries and nightshade are part of the spiritual landscape and the mere fact that they are missed, suggests their importance to a cultural way of life. Zauditu-Selassie further asserts, in *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, “the community participated in *working roots*, and both of these plants are used by spiritual adepts in the practice of ritual and making of *minkisi* or spiritual packets” (50-51).

Unlike Zauditu-Selassie’s cultural reading of *Sula*, my approach differs. My argument is centered on the motif of blackness and I argue that *blackberries* have historical parallels with black bodies bearing in mind their forceful removal from the landscape. In discussing the motif, I make the case that Chicken Little and the angry residents who stormed the bridge and drowned thereafter are the Bottom’s black berries. With respect to the residents, the deprivation suffered at the hands of white supervisors is the case for their execution and the collapsed tunnel is the figurative scaffold that executed them.

Nightshade is a compound of “night and “shade” which is indicative of blackness. This compound word refers to not only things that are nocturnal, but also a useful parallel between the plant and the dark skinned African American. The uprooting image is consistent with the uprooting of African slaves and them being “replanted” on the North American continent. Generations later, their ancestors residing up in the Bottom are themselves uprooted at the whims of urbanization and they are left to fend for themselves.

Morrison comments on nightshade and blackberry confirm that they represent two different perspectives in the novel. In “Unspeakable Things Unspoken” Morrison, contrast nightshade and blackberry as “A familiar plant and an exotic one. A harmless one and a dangerous one. One produces a nourishing berry; one delivers toxic ones. But they both thrived there together, in that place when it was a neighborhood” (2317). Morrison’s contrast between the two plants is in reference to the two girls Sula and Nel who represented two different perceptions in the novel. Her analogy, however, is also justified with respect to the Bottom because obviously two opposing force operate there as well. These two forces are the black residents and the white entrepreneurs. Both are foils; the blacks work in harmony with nature while the whites enter, deforest, and redevelop according to their personal specifications.

The manner in which these plants are removed is systematic with the treatment of black bodies. According to the narrator, the plants are torn out from their roots implying that they will never grow in that space again. This act is indicative of violent extermination. This analogy extends to blacks African slaves forcefully removed (torn out) from their homeland and replanted in the American soil. As Houston Baker

confirms, “Slaves replanted in American soil tradition had their roots in West Africa” (qtd. in Myers 6). However, unlike their ancestors, the black bodies in the Bottom are not destined to be replanted in any central location so there is a scattering of black bodies across the landscape.

Blackberries and black men are synonymous. Blackberries and bushes alike are crushed in the hasty removal. Similarly, when African slaves became cargo their self-esteem was crushed on the shores of their homeland. Here in the Americas, they were treated like bushes on the plantations. Some were pruned by the slave masters’ whip, others hung from trees, asphyxiating, while blood oozed from castrated genitals, and others succumbed to cruel masters who only stopped the vehement flogging when the black body expires at their feet. These images are parallels of the uprooted and discarded plants up in the Bottom.

A blackberry tree has fruits at varying stages of maturity. Likewise, black bodies exist at different stages as well. Chicken Little is a young blackberry that has been crushed up in the Bottom. In *Sula*, Chicken Little, a neighborhood boy, is tossed in and drowns in a river at the hands of his insensitive playmates. The fact that Sula and Nel the perpetrators conveniently forgot to mention his accidental drowning is shocking but the manner in which his bloated black body is handled is unimaginable. Mistaken at first for the body of an “old black man” (63) the white bargeman after assuming that the child was killed by his incompetent black parents, retrieved the body appallingly from among weeds. According to the narrator, he “prodded the body loose, netted it and hauled it aboard” (63). Acts of disrespect continue as the white bargeman dumps the body “in a burlap sack and tossed him next to some egg crates and boxes of wool cloth,

to be removed later in fear of the malodorous stench. He “dragged the sack away and hooked it over the side, so that Chicken Little’s body was half in and half out of the water” (63). The body of this black seven year old is treated just like the nightshade and blackberry bushes. In this example, Morrison uses well-chosen phrases such as “netted and hauled,” “dumped the body,” “tossed him,” “dragged the sack,” and “hook it over the side.” If those crude acts were not enough, at the internment they “sank him between his grandfather and his aunt” (66) in the colored part of the cemetery. These vivid images elicit utter disgust and beg the question why is this young black body treated so callously at death? He did not kill himself. He died at the hands of utter disrespect for human life and ironically, the culprits themselves are young blackberries.

In addition to the killing of black bodies is the erosion of hope among African Americans. Erosions take the form of the lack of restitutions promised to the downtrodden. With respect to the environment, there are no initiatives mentioned aimed at replanting valuable trees but laws were enacted to protect the dispossessed. Compensation have become like the ‘good white farmer’s’ broken promise in which the outcome does not reflect the terms of the agreement. Interestingly, the acreage of the Bottom is not mentioned but it bears symbolism to the “broken promise of ‘forty acres and a mule’ (Myers 10). Myers contends that Reconstruction was designed to grant close to a million acres of public land to freemen [but] was later removed from the Freedmen’s Bureau Bill, similar to the removal of trees and shrubs (11).

Environmental destruction is rampant in *Song of Solomon*. Its chief perpetrator is Macon Dead, the son of a black man who was shot and killed because he loved the land. Similar to the “good white farmer” in *Sula*, Macon Dead is his black counterpart.

Described as a “very strange Negro” [who] “behaves like a white man, [and] thinks like a white man” (*SOS* 223), Macon’s desire for wealth drives him to secure land and envelop green space with condominiums built for low-income blacks. Due to his entrepreneurial spirit, Macon has strayed very far from his earthy roots. He lacks environmental judgment with respect to the “earth soggy with black people’s blood” (*SOS* 159). In order to understand his father’s devotion to the earth and Macon’s lack thereof, Morrison sets up two contrasting geographical locations, one in the North and the other in the South, which incidentally are black communities. Jake Dead resided in the South (Montour County, Georgia) and as a former slave; he embraced the agrarian spirit that enabled him to lease as much as ten acres of land in one year. He is described as:

The farmer they all wanted to be, the clever irrigator, the peach tree grower, the hog slaughterer, the wild-turkey roaster, the man who could plough forty acres in no time flat and sang like an angel while he did it. He had come out of nowhere, as ignorant as hammer and broke as a convict, with nothing but free papers, Bible and a pretty black-haired wife. (*SOS* 235)

Jake’s utilization of the land demonstrates the concept of “good use”⁵ which reflects his African heritage as opposed to his son’s and the Butler’s “anthropocentric vision.”⁶ Ironically, Mr. Butler, a rich white man, did not have similar intentions towards the land, as Jake and subsequently murdered Jake and took ultimate possession.

⁵ Elizabeth D. Blum uses the term in reference to the use of land based on the influences of the African predecessors in contrast to the whites who dominate it (249).

⁶ “The compulsion to conquer, humanize, domesticate, violate, and exploit every natural thing” (Rueckert 113).

The Butler's old house (now occupied by Circe) is a reflection of (Butler's) character as well as his attitude to nature. The path to the house is consistent with the forest in the Hansel and Gretel fairytale. The exterior is covered in "layers of ivy grown so thick he [Milkman] could have sunk his arm in it up to his elbow... [and from where he stood] the house looked as if it had been eaten by a galloping disease, the sores of which were dark and fluid" (*SOS* 221). These ghastly images of festering and oozing sores as well as the vines that festoon the house in overgrowth reflect nature's revenge. This is a perfect example of how an embattled nature orchestrates revenge.

Jake, on the other hand, not only loved his land, he had a personal relationship with his farm. As a result, the land spoke to him:

Take it, hold it, my brothers, make it, my brothers, shake it, squeeze it, turn it, twist it, reap it, beat it, kick it, kiss it, whip it, stomp it, dig it, plough 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!" and he listened. (*SOS* 235)

Jake is a freed slave who has had the good fortune of being in possession of arable land. Like his African ancestors, he communes with it. The land speaks to him as indicated by Morrison's use of explicit verbs. He is African American and culturally aware of the significance of being in possession of land. As previously stated by critic Barbara Christian, possessing land ensures economic as well as cultural sustainability. In contrast to the residents in the Bottom, Jake is able to enjoy the bounties of the land. Therefore, Morrison's comments personify the relationship between Jake and nature.

In addition, Macon Dead is Morrison's black character who represents white hegemony and lives in the North. Macon has a different perspective with respect to land

use than his father. Macon is enthralled by power and he dominates over everything especially women who, according to Margaret Atwood illustrate, a “demonstrable relationship between the ways in which men treat and destroy women and the ways in which men treat and destroy nature” (qtd in Rueckert 117).

Women and nature have a significant connection hence the cliché mother nature and if Macon hates the mother of his children, then he hates nature as well. Atwood’s assertion is a typical example of the relationship between Macon and the women in his life whether they are wife, sisters or tenants. His treatment of Mrs. Bains, for example is typical of Macon’s distorted mind. One of his tenants, Mrs. Bains is unfortunately three months delinquent with her rent and Macon threatens with eviction. Her explanation of “relief check ain’t no more’n it take to keep a well-grown yard dog alive – half alive” is met with the acerbic remark, “Can they make it in the street, Mrs. Bains? That’s where they gonna be if you don’t figure out some way to get me my money” (*SOS* 21). His reaction to the poor black woman’s pleas for compassion is equivalent to the chopping down of a tree. He also demonstrates contempt for his wife Ruth: “He sought out and married the most prestigious girl in town, the doctor’s daughter, and then had children predominantly to parade them around like accessories” (Gama 51). Marrying the daughter of an affluent black doctor ensured Macon’s niche on the social ladder and having succeeded, he works hard to maintain that position. His misogynistic attitude is also reflected in the manner in which he reviles his sister Pilate. Claiming that he hates her, Macon describes Pilate as “this raggedy bootlegger” and her household as “a collection of lunatics who made wine and sang in the street “like common street women! Just like common street women!” (*SOS* 20). Macon Dead, landlord and

slumlord not only rattles his keys but also the nerves of others including his own wife and sister.

Macon's insatiable entrepreneurial nature and destructive spirit reflects what Stacey Alaimo describes as "exploitative materialism" (138). Exploitive materialism evokes the image of one's insatiable desire to accumulate vast possessions. The accumulation of wealth is Macon's objective as he seeks out suitable land and builds more tenement housing oblivious to the depletion of green spaces. One typical example is a ride around the town one afternoon with his family in his luxurious Packard, another of his status symbols. As the family approaches the countryside he is asked "Are we going to have a summer place, or are you just selling property?" to which he answers indignantly "I'm not selling anything. I am thinking of buying and then renting" (*SOS* 34). Macon has ventured into another neighborhood as indicated by the mention of a "summer place." This trip is to facilitate his intended purchase of property and rent to more affluent black people. This new venture enlarges his territory at the expense of the land. In that exchange Morrison showcases a man who has become so trapped in his financial pursuits that he has no time to consider the beauty of a cluster of trees or a serene lake or pond.

Loss of trees within the environment symbolize catastrophe. According to Paula Willouquet-Marciondi, "Trees represent the stability and attachment to place which is being lost through colonization, territorial expansion, and environmental degradation" (212). I concur with Willouquet-Marciondi because all of the above occurs in both novels especially in *Sula* when whites reclaim the Bottom. Territorial expansion is associated with colonization and the loss of the Bottom to the town of Medallion is an

example. Environmental degradation has also occurred because an entire neighborhood in uprooted resulting in an irreparable loss of cultural and folkways.

Black men and women are figurative trees and they are important fixtures in the landscape. Like literal trees, they produce seeds and fruit and are dismembered and killed as well. One special tree that has succumbed to dismemberment is *Song of Solomon* Mr. Bains. Ironically, Bains works at a mill and tragedy befalls him when he is murdered. The narrator recalls the gruesome manner of his body's position during his funeral:

He... was sliced in half and boxed backwards [...] the two halves, not even fitted together, were placed cut side up, in the coffin. Facing each other. Each eye looking deep into its mate. Each nostril inhaling the breath the other nostril had expelled. The right cheek facing the left. The right elbow crossed over the left elbow. (*SOS* 225)

Much attention can be given to the gory details in this excerpt but if one looks beyond the hideous physical images, it becomes obvious that Bain's segmented body is Morrison's metaphor for lynched and dismembered black bodies. As a metaphor, the image represents racism's malicious destruction of the environment. Bains was killed by a white mill worker but his carefully stacked body parts have been divided (his symmetrical torso and all its appendages displayed "cut side up") reflect the manner in which newly cut logs are placed to dry in the sun. This logging image also resonates in "Charles Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* (1899). In "Other Nature: Resistance to Ecological Hegemony in Charles Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman*," Jeffrey Myers recall the story of Julius McAdoo, a slave who was changed into an old pine tree by his

wife in an effort to escape from his master who intended to “lend” him to another plantation owner. As the narrative goes, “this old pine is cut down for lumber” (5). Myers comment that the action of the master symbolizes “both dismemberment of the body of a slave and the exploitation of the land in the form of logging” (5). Bains’ experience mirrors Julius’, with the only difference is that Bains is not a slave. Macon Dead shares similar characteristics with the mill foreman who sees people in terms of money.

The foreman’s callous reaction to the death of Bains is similar to the pricing of a tree. The compensation to his family is a mere forty dollars. (Forty dollars might have been the cost of a tree.) In the foreman’s mind forty dollars is sufficient to “tide them over” a family that has lost its breadwinner. Symbolically, the foreman is one of the ‘Macon Deads’ of the town who insatiable appetite for wealth empowers lumber mills to take the life of an innocent black man.⁷ William Rueckert describes such insensitivity as a tragic flaw and sadly, like the characters in a classical drama, it is the environment and the impoverished within that suffer ruin and sorrow.

The earth and land trope as well as the black body in *Sula* and *Song of Solomon* are very important symbols to the understanding of how the destruction of nature affects human relationships. In addition, it is important to note the preservation of the environment in both texts is more important to African Americans because they have more of an interdependent relationship than the affluent. Urbanization is a creation of the wealthy and powerful and destroying a man or a whole community is not important

⁷ Roberta Rubenstein in “Pariahs and Community” uses Macon Dead as an eponym to illustrate “greed acquisitiveness, and dominion” (141).

to those in power. Morrison implores us to pay attention to the physical landscape because if it is in turmoil then one's wellbeing will be as well.

III. WATER, BODIES, AND WILDERNESS: PSYCHOLOGICAL DEHYDRATION IN *BELOVED*

Water and human beings have had a very long and sustaining relationship. W. C. Proctor writes, “It was along the banks of rivers that the earliest human races made their way and picked up their living as they followed the current through otherwise pathless wilds” (231). While Proctor’s mention of a “pathless wild” is literal, the image has great metaphorical significance for Morrison’s fugitive slaves in that “pathless wilds” connotes a physical location that offers no visible outlet so those who traverse within must create their own escape route. The Fugitive Act that mandates their return upon capture binds Morrison’s transients in *Beloved*. As such, the successful escapees must be resourceful in the creation of that path to freedom and water is a suitable choice.

Historically, water has been a constant companion for slaves. The history of African Americans begins with the transatlantic voyages between West Africa and the Americas. These trips connote bondage because the Atlantic Ocean, in its capacity as conveyor, has transported the ill-fated millions who were shackled and packed into cargo holds during the infamous Triangular Trade. Referenced in the novel by means of stream of consciousness, Morrison through her mouthpiece Beloved recalls the travesty at sea. “She was about to smile at me, when the men without skin came and took us into the sunlight with the dead and shoved them into the sea” (*Beloved* 253). In this excerpt Beloved as spokesperson for the unfortunate millions, recalls the infamous journey

across water. She recalls seeing men without skins, indicating the white crewmembers that shoved the dead unceremoniously into the sea interring the “Sixty million and more” to whom the novel is dedicated.

The Ohio River has an ambivalent role in the transportation of slaves as well. It is both a bridge to freedom as well as conveyor signaling the fugitives’ dreaded return trip to bondage. As the fugitives’ bridge to freedom, this waterway has facilitated freedom not only in its liquid state but also in its frozen state as well. During the warm seasons, the Ohio River enables swift moving watercrafts and floating chunks of ice in winter as means of escape. Floating chunks of ice and an occasional frozen river are important images in African American narratives. For example, Eliza, a fleeing slave in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* escaped her pursuers by jumping unhesitatingly onto floating chunks of ice in the Ohio River. Similarly, Margaret Garner, a fugitive slave along with her immediate family walked across the frozen river to her short-lived freedom. Garner’s story is significant to the plot of *Beloved* because Morrison’s creatively adapts it as her backdrop to the novel.

The Ohio River plays as significant role in the underground railway. Ann Hagedorn in her book *Beyond the River: The Untold Story of the Heroes of the Underground Railway* makes noteworthy reference to the frozen Ohio River:

In the winter of 1838, the Ohio froze for nearly ten days. Ice floating down the river bore against Kentucky and Ohio shores. As the level of water fell day after day the temperature plummeted, the ice spread, and what was once a river separating the North from the South, free state from slave, became a glassy road that seems almost to connect them. (1)

Hagedorn, a historian, vividly describes the impact of the frozen Ohio. Her image creates a fictional picture of nature, which has the ability to connect not only geographical regions but assist the fleeing slaves.

The Hudson River is a place for great inspiration. Toni Morrison's inspiration for *Beloved* is arguably as result of her interaction with the Hudson River. According to the Introduction, Morrison writes:

A few days after my last day at work, sitting in front of my house on the pier jutting out into the Hudson River, I began to feel an edginess instead of the calm I had expected. [...] I couldn't fathom what was so unexpectedly troubling on a day that perfect, watching a river that serene. (xvi) [...] I husband that moment on the pier, the deceptive river, the instant awareness of possibility, the loud heart kicking, the solitude, the danger. And the girl with the nice hat. (xix)

The Hudson River is a significant aqueous parallel for *Beloved's* Ohio River.

Geographically its course is similar to the Ohio River in that the Hudson flows from North to South ferrying hundreds from bondage to freedom.

Frances F. Dunwell, author of *The Hudson: America's River*, writes about the compelling creative force that the Hudson exudes. She states that:

There is a certain magic about the Hudson River, something that captures the imagination and creates a sense of possibility. The River has a personality, energy and resplendent beauty, a kind of magnetism that attracts visionary people and inspires them to do extraordinary things.

That is its nature and disposition. The Hudson nurtures those who are attuned to its voice. (xiii)

Morrison and Dunwell are attuned to the power of water and their inspirational thirsts have been quenched after interacting with the Hudson. Similarly, the fugitives who successfully crossed must have felt a sense of attachment to the water as it ushers them to freedom while at the same time being cognizant of the dangers that lurk ahead.

Water is a very significant element and is a valuable symbol for Morrison's African American characters. It symbolizes psychological freedom to those who are willing to exercise faith by ingestion. As a result, Sethe, Beloved, and Baby Suggs' psychological success begins with a cup of transforming water. As I will discuss, Paul D has rejected water, Sethe embraces its transforming power, and Baby Suggs describes it as medicine, while Beloved's rebirth, survival, and demise are expedited by water. The outcomes are determined by acceptance or rejection based on the psychological state of mind of a particular character.

Water and wilderness are important symbols especially with reference to *Beloved*. While water provides transportation, sustenance, and catharsis, wilderness often connotes discomfort and disorientation. Transformation is guaranteed but is contingent upon a character's ultimate goal. The wilderness motif has also been used extensively in the Judeo-Christian theology in both Old and New Testaments to introduce the concept of wandering. The Biblical characters to whom the concept applies were physical wanderers. Morrison's fugitive characters are psychological wanderers – uncertain of their future as they carrying heavy mental baggage from the Southern plantations into the free state of Ohio. Mental issues are hindrances and

alleviation must be found to prevent hopelessness. Water is the obvious solution and it is available in copious amounts.

The physical wilderness needs a constant supply of water to ensure the growth of its vegetation. A lack of water results in prolonged drought and subsequent death within the natural habitat. Similarly, Morrison's transients are in a psychological wilderness and must drink in order to survive. They need water to irrigate their discontented minds and a lack of the substance results in thirst. Thirst is the first sign of imminent dehydration, which if not treated, culminates in human death. According to Peter Swanson:

One could say that each of us – every man, woman and child – is a small river; ebbing ...flowing ... seeking replenishment, A 1 –percent deficiency of water in our body makes us thirsty, 5 percent causes a slight fever; at 10 percent we become immobile. A 12-percent loss of water and we die. There is no option, no alternative, no substitute. From the elderly to the young, the rivers within each of us need a continuous supply of clean, fresh water. (qtd. in *Water* 4)

Using Swanson's scale of thirst levels in conjunction with Morrison's fugitives, Paul D is on the verge of psychological death, Sethe is feverish and Beloved is immobile. Morrison repetitive thirst image is significant and through "fragments, glimpses, and memories" (Hunt 119), there is repeated mention of water, the need to drink, and the frequency of its ingestion. As a result, I posit that water symbolizes freedom despite its connotation to bondage during the Transatlantic Slave Trade; the need for its frequent

consumption in *Beloved* highlights the fact that Morrison's fugitive characters are not truly free.

Water is the source for liberation but success is determined by individual need. As E. Delorus Preston Jr. states in "The Underground Railroad in Northwest Ohio," "Once the slaves had crossed the Ohio River, they were in free territory ... placed the river between themselves and their pursuers but not their past experiences" (410). Preston's mention of past experiences connotes mental baggage. As such, there is the immediate need for Morrison's fugitives to drink in order to initiate the process of freedom.

Although a footbath is not consistent with drinking, Paul D's refusal to accept water is significant. I have included this character to illustrate how his blatant disregard for psychological aid greatly affects his avenue to freedom. Paul D is Morrison's epitome of a slave: named by his owner, cuffed and, muzzled, has also worn the leg iron, been savagely beaten, and sold to a chain gang. After a life of utter misery, Paul D reunites with Sethe, a fellow Sweet Home slave, who made a courageous escape eighteen years earlier. Ecstatic to see an old friend, Sethe greets him with the offer of a cool footbath by asking, "You want to soak them?" Sethe's offer is rebuffed on the pretext that one "Can't baby feet. A whole lot more tramping they got to do yet" (*Beloved* 8). This refusal might appear justified when one considers the excuse that he has other places to go, but there is more behind these words than modesty. His refusal is significant; it denotes rejection of a therapeutic lifeline. Paul D needs to detox his feet but also irrigate his mind of the horrible past experiences that are locked inside the

tobacco tin inside his chest. The tobacco tin and its contents represent his painful past experiences.

Paul D's problems began on the Sweet Home plantation under Mr. Garner. Garner often bragged that, "Now at Sweet Home, my niggers is men every one of em. Bought em thataway, raised em thatway. Men every one" (*Beloved* 12). This façade stimulated Paul D's false sense of existence believing that: Of all the Blacks in Kentucky, only the five of them were men. Allowed, encouraged to correct Garner, even defy him. [...] In their relationship with Garner was true metal: they were believed and trusted, but most of all they were listened to. (*Beloved* 147) Garner's death changed everything and Schoolteacher and Brandywine introduced him to the real meaning of slavery. Their lessons in cruelty totally eroded his self-concept and Garner's good intentions were lost forever. As a result, Paul D has created a psychological cocoon, encased himself, and has forgotten the meaning of freedom. He has been enslaved all of his life, and become cynical so what difference will water make to him? As dismal as this act of refusal may appear, it has some positives because as Anissa Wardi observes, "Although Paul D refuses the water on the grounds that he has more travelling to do, this opening meeting, mediated through water, returns the reader to the curative properties that water provides" (*Water* 65) especially with reference to Sethe in *Beloved*.

In order to enter Sethe's psychological wilderness, one has to understand the issues that overwhelm her. She recalls the death of her mother, life at Sweet Home, fixates on the stealing of her milk as well as the infanticide for which she has mentally imprisoned herself. What are the indicators of her inner sorrow? Her eyes, the windows

to her weary soul, indicate the magnitude of her psychological distress. Best described as a woman whose eyes are “like two wells into which he [Paul D] has trouble gazing into” (*Beloved* 10). Sethe is dehydrated and her thirst illustrates a psychic loss and denial of self. According to Barbara Schapiro in “The Bonds of Love and the Boundaries of Self in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” [Sethe’s] “eyes reflect the psychic loss and denial of self she has experiences on all levels in her life” (200). Slaves were accorded no self-worth; they were treated as the whims of their masters

As a young child prior to being sold to Garner, Sethe is introduced to her biological mother and as an adult, the pictures still haunt her. Sethe recalls:

She picked me up and carried me behind the smokehouse. Back there she open up her dress front and lifted her breast and pointed under it. Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin. She said, ‘This is your ma’am. This,’ and she pointed. ‘I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happened to me and you can’t tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark.’ (*Beloved* 72)

The meeting between mother and child is brief but like the circle and the cross, the image of a slave mother, one with whom the young Sethe has no maternal bond, is burnt indelibly into the child’s subconscious. The unnamed woman possess the signs of slavery. She is branded to show that she is property, owned which is a reminder to the young Sethe that all slaves are property, and hanged – a frequent punishment for slaves. Noting the sign of the cross is also significant because as an adult, Sethe will be faced with the constant threat of the Klu Klux Klan brandishing burning crosses.

The scenes were more than frightening; they prompted the young Sethe to urinate profusely. Barbara Schapiro hypothesizes that, “One might rather expect Sethe to experience thirst upon seeing her mother, but that thirst is so extreme, so potentially violent and destructive, that the more urgent need is void, to empty herself completely of this unmanageable hunger and rage” (198-199). Schapiro mentions insatiable thirst, which is a depletion of water. Could this be a psychological reaction? Yes it is and from Schapiro’s hypothesis, one visualizes a dazed child. The young Sethe is caught between the two extreme emotional responses of drinking and urinating. Her young body chooses the latter as a means of illustrating her fears. This moment of fear is not limited only to her childhood reaction. Remembering it as an adult traumatizes Sethe. She is agitated and in the company of her daughters Beloved and Denver and “she had to find something to do with her hands because she was remembering something she had forgotten she knew. Something privately shameful that had seeped into a slit in her mind right behind the slap on the face and the circled cross” (*Beloved* 73). This moment triggers her need to be psychologically free.

Furthermore, the memories of Sweet Home traumatize Sethe as well. She often reminisces on the rape and the stealing of her milk, the brutal beating she suffered at the hands of Schoolteacher’s nephews, which has carved a tree on her back, and the disappearance of her husband, Halle Suggs. Deprived of all self-worth, Sethe heads north in the direction of the Ohio River because like her children who have successfully crossed into the state of Ohio, she intends to do likewise.

The Ohio River is a significant place. It is a place where the waters of the North and South converge, a place where the past and the present collide, and *the place* where

a future begins or dies. For Sethe as well as all fugitive slaves, the Ohio River is all of the above and as a result, they sacrifice everything in order to reach this Jordanic border. Sethe's arrival is different from other transients. Her feet are excessively swollen and she is ready to give birth to a new generation of African American women. As she writhes in pain in a leaky boat on the Ohio River, "her own water broke loose to join it" (*Beloved* 98). Anissa Wardi described the moment as the "conflation of catharsis and danger" (*Water* 65) because it signals the beginning of a new experience for mother and daughter but warns of impending danger. After the birth, insatiable thirst overcomes Sethe and to quench it she drinks directly from the Ohio like an ascetic drinking from the holy Ganges. As the only fugitive recorded as drinking directly from the River, her actions are symbolic. The first attempt satisfies her feverish body's need for rehydration but asking Stamp Paid, the waterman, for more is celebratory. I hypothesize that Sethe celebrates; the emancipation of her children and herself as well as the other Negroes who have crossed successfully, those who sought freedom and perished in the river, those who seek freedom and will attempt the crossing in anticipation of a new experience in Ohio. According to Wardi, "the consumption of the Ohio, the river of freedom, signals Sethe's embodied emancipation" (*Water* 66); the anticipation of a new life in the 'free' state. As the water passed through her body, revitalizing her organs, Sethe's arrival at 124 Bluestone Road ushers in a new chapter in her life.

A characteristic aquatic moment in the novel is the resurrection of Beloved. In anticipation of this moment, Sethe's body reacts similarly after she had seen her dead mother. She voiding excessively which is reminiscent of childbirth; a second childbirth and one in which the baby will drain its mother not only of urine but of emotional fluid.

According to Kathleen Marks in *Toni Morrison's Beloved and the Apotropaic Imagination*, "Sethe gives birth to Beloved – Beloved is also capable of sucking life-giving water out of Sethe and consuming it for herself" (77). Mark's assumptions are correct because Beloved almost consumed her mother had it not been for Denver and members of their community. Barbara Schapiro also points out Beloved's consumption of Sethe; she quotes Marks stating, "The dynamic suggests a mother ...being drained by the child's greedy, excessive need" (198). I concur with both critics because at the end, Beloved's role is inverted and Sethe becomes the doting child while Beloved assumes the role of parent. This change is in no way an implication that the role that water changes from liberation to bondage. The role of the water does not change because after all the mayhem that ensued, Sethe is freed by water motifs.

With respect to the intake of water, Beloved's drinking is episodic. The readers' first image of her is that of a very dehydrated nineteen year old. When she arrives at 124 Bluestone Road, her first request is for water because according to the narrator, "She said she was thirsty" (*Beloved* 61). To satisfy her insatiable need to rehydrate, Beloved "gulped water from a speckled tin cup and held it out for more. Four times Denver filled it, and four times the woman drank as though she has crossed a desert" (*Beloved* 62). Gulping water is a significant act in that it represents the urgency with which the water is swallowed. Wardi also comments on the urgency of drinking (guzzling) as well as the quantity of water ingested. She states, "After surfacing from the stream, Beloved guzzles remarkable quantities of water, a consumption echoed later in the text as she fills herself from a pail of water. Here, Morrison reveals a hunger or longing for liquid

that transcends thirst” (*Water* 68). “Gulping” and “guzzling” are indicative of Beloved’s dehydrated state emphasizing the image of urgency of her freedom.

Beloved also drinks to free herself of the yoke of African history. She carries the burden of men, women and children who have been enslaved and is haunted by the images of the Atlantic Slave Trade. According to Anissa Wardi in “Inscriptions in the Dust: *A Gathering of Old Men* and *Beloved* as Ancestral Requiems,” “Beloved is an embodiment of African American history, symbolizes not only Sethe’s and her own tragic past, but the collective horrors of slavery as well. She is both the enslaved African American chained on the slave ship in the Middle passage” (45). By means of stream of consciousness which itself is a fluid image, Beloved not only sees bodies being disposed of but envisions first hand experiences. She sees her mother Sethe and tries to get her attention but to no avail. Beloved explains:

She was about to smile at me when the men without skins came and took us up in the sunlight with the dead and shoved them into the sea. Sethe went into the sea. She went there. They did not push her. She went there. She was getting ready to smile and when she saw the dead people pushed into the sea she went also and left me there with no face or hers.

(*Beloved* 253)

The water of Atlantic is the setting draped with images of enslavement, death, and hopelessness. These are conveyed through Beloved’s vision and her resurrection commemorates the fate of those who perished on the ill-fated journeys as well as those continue to live in a psychological wilderness environment. Her incessant drinking of

water is aimed at symbolically satisfying the thirst for freedom. Therefore, Beloved lives for the past, and the present and the future.

Unfortunately, Beloved's characteristics have been transformed from daughter to mental slave master. The doting Sethe is traumatized and Denver is enslaved until the aid of the community is solicited. Scholars have associated Beloved's end with evil because of the manner employed to rid the community of her presence. Linda Krumholtz describes the community intervention in ending Beloved's psychological rampage as "a purgation ritual, a baptismal cleansing, and rebirth and psychological clearing" (70). Krumholtz mentions three methods of cleansing associated with water namely purging, baptism, and psychological clearing. Purgation connotes ridding the body of harmful substances, which Beloved had become as she infested her mother's psyche. Baptismal implies immersion or coming in contact with water. This act is symbolic of change and renewal that Sethe desperately needs. A psychological clearing suggests a cultural intervention. Beloved, Sethe, and Denver operate within a cultural sphere and as such the exorcism of evil becomes a community affair. Beloved has evolved into a bad spirit and must be removed not only from 124 Bluestone Road, but from the entire community.

Similarly, Wallace and Armbruster state the importance of women in the exorcism of Beloved. They state, "Sethe's revitalization would not have occurred without the intervention of the women of the community, who rallied around her in hybrid ritual of exorcism after Beloved nearly drained the life from her" (224). Wallace and Armbruster's mention of hybrid rituals indicate Sethe's need to confront the wounds of her past and free herself. She fixates on the killing of the infant Beloved and

over compensates as a means of appeasing for her past actions Beloved discovers her mother's inability to free herself of the past and uses it to her advantage. Wallace and Armbruster as well as Krumholtz emphasize the need for community involvement. They maintain that the community rallied around Sethe. This effort is necessary because Beloved's slave tendencies incite the community's involvement because when one household is affected, the entire community becomes vulnerable. According to the narrator when the exorcism finally occurred, an intense feeling of renewal "broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash" (*Beloved* 308). This image emphasizes the power of water to grant freedom. Sethe is free, free from the control of a daughter that she loved and compromised her own happiness to protect. Sadly, Beloved is exorcised from the community and she must return to the dark waters from whence she came.

Baby Suggs' contact with water is very brief but has great symbolism. She is a freed slave but in essence, it is only a document that states such while her mind grimaces in turmoil. She carries a heavy mental burden and attempts to escape *Beloved's* psychological wilderness by drinking water.

Her ingestion occurs at the Bodwins, a brother and sister slave abolitionist. Upon arrival, Baby Suggs is offered food by a Negro slave girl. She is not hungry, but is thirsty. According to the narrator, "Baby... drank every drop although it tasted like serious medicine" (*Beloved* 169). Equating water to the taste of serious medicine emphasizes the severity of the problems that surrounds her.

As a veteran slave, Baby Suggs has worked laboriously in Carolina and to a lesser degree in Kentucky. Having been part of the institution for about sixty years, she

has witnessed and experienced much suffering. Her broken hip is an example and she walks like a three-legged dog (*Beloved* 166). Additionally, a “slave life busted her leg, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue” (*Beloved* 102). Significantly, it is her busted tongue that registers the taste of medicine.

Baby Suggs, like *Beloved* is a representative of history. She represents fellow slaves who have been traumatized. According to the narrator “Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn’t run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized” (*Beloved* 28). With reference to medicine and *Beloved*, Ann Folwell Stanford writes about its importance with reference to the novel. In “Death is a Skipped Meal Compared to This: Rememory and Body in Morrison’s *Beloved*” Stanford writes, “Medicine makes no appearance in this novel, and yet it is an important text for medicine in considering the role of history and ongoing oppression on sick bodies” (85). Sick bodies are everywhere in *Beloved*. Baby Suggs is an incapacitated body. Hundreds of slaves who live on the Southern plantations and others who have escaped to Ohio have problems wrestling with the past. In order for freedom to be a reality, Baby Suggs as well as thousands that she represents must come to terms with their vulnerability and this begins with a cup of water.

Water not only tastes like medicine; it is medicine. It has curative and preventative properties and Baby Suggs is aware of both but the former is what she desires most. She seeks a alleviation in the form of psychological freedom. Even though freedom might be temporary, Baby Suggs drinks in anticipation.

Therefore, *Beloved* begins and ends with water, which is an indication of Morrison's preoccupation with the element and the essential role that it plays in human lives. As illustrated, water is a vital part in the human- nature connection because when physical or psychological thirst occurs water becomes a practical answer. Although there is no evidence that the characters overcame their psychological issues, drinking allows them to temporarily confront critical past experiences. Wardi states "... encounters with water often function as both confrontations with traumatic memory and the rites of healing" (*Water* 19). I agree with Wardi's views because there is a lot of trauma in *Beloved* and the repetition of the need to drink or the refusal to be washed is significant to the healing process.

In addition, water is associated with medicine and thus the indirect reference to healing. Healing is important because as Ann Folwell Stanford reiterates, "*Beloved* insists that along with the social and cultural context, the legacy of historical trauma must not be forgotten" (85). I concur with Stanford because hearing others' story help in the process of healing and Morrison's neo slave narratives are not meant to open old wounds but rather an attempt at revisiting history.

IV: CONCLUSION: EARTH AND WATER: SYMBOLS OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Toni Morrison's forthright interaction with nature and nature images is fascinating. Her setting and tropes create great visual images and in the process reveal her immeasurable interest in African American history and traditions. Setting and tropes are important building blocks to a successful ecocritical reading of any text and Morrison's work. Her work shows how a beleaguered environment becomes analogous with a disenfranchised people.

The plot of *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Beloved* are rich in earth and water elements. They are part of Morrison's ecosystem along with black bodies, herbs, and trees. These elements "intertwine ecology with nature and landscape with race" (Wardi, "Loud with the Presence of Plants and Field Life" 11). Interestingly, it is Charles Darwin who said, "Plants have minds and are conscious of their existence, feel pain and have memories" (qtd. in Buell 193). Darwin, as a naturalist, advanced a reason for preservation and so does Morrison. In the novels mentioned, she does not personify the elements but the hostile manner in which the landscape is cleared connotes references to violence implying images of intense pain.

With reference to *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*, I have employed the words soil, earth, and land as cognates. As previously mentioned, soil has a spiritual connection with traditional African and female captives often swallowed mouthfuls of soil prior to

being huddled into cargo holds as a sign of maintaining a spiritual connection with their homeland. Earth enables cultural and folklore practices by way herbs and roots as observed among the residents of the Bottom. In addition land, is commodity and having access to it gives Morrison's African American characters a sense of ownership of self. Therefore, all three aspects are important as collectively they give African Americans spiritual, cultural, and economic independence, which is key to understanding their relationship with nature. Carolyn M. Jones in "Southern Landscape as Psychic Landscape in Toni Morrison's Fiction," substantiates the importance of the African American being close to nature. She writes, "The landscape of the South, in the beginning so alien to African slaves, became, for most part, neither legally not economically their own, but, became spiritually their own through their own labor under most difficult of circumstances" (37). Jones takes us back to the beginning when African slaves worked a land they never owned or inherited but forged a spiritual connection. The same spiritual attachment is evident in the free slave's barter for the Bottom and subsequent feeling of loss by the community when the land was reclaimed. These concepts illustrate the strong bond between Morrison's African American characters and the environment.

The preservation of green spaces is important in maintaining a relationship with nature. Deforestation for commercial gain is a common occurrence in both novels. The Bottom is subjected to urbanization as land is cleared of valuable trees and plants in preparation for the creation a golf course. Likewise, the unnamed town in *Song of Solomon* also feels the pressure of urbanization as land is cleared for tenement housing. From an ecocritical perspective, I have forged parallels between the destruction of trees,

nightshade and blackberries with the killing of black bodies in both novels, arguing that like crushed berries, black men have oozed and died. Similarly, trees that were once scaffolds upon which black bodies were lynched have themselves become victims of agrarian lynching when land is indiscriminately cleared to facilitate the resolve of white and black entrepreneurs alike. Morrison may not be canonized as an environmentalist, but her response to such wanton destruction of the environment is a clear indication of her passion for its preservation. To this end Kristen Hunt writes, “Although Morrison does not address environmental issues directly, her work enhances and complicates discussions about nature, showing that literature can be a powerful method of redressing both the past and current oppression” (126). I concur with Hunt and have argued that urbanization of the Bottom in *Sula* and the unnamed town in *Song of Solomon* is Morrison’s comment on this microcosm within the larger society. Simply put, people and trees grow together, form lasting relationships, and when this bond is suddenly broken, the environment is in jeopardy.

Beloved, a neo-slave narrative has water as its major symbol. Water is significant for environmental preservation and psychological healing. It bonds with earth, people, and landscapes in an effort to heal and nurture. Morrison’s fugitive characters in *Beloved* need psychological revitalization because as fugitives they are in a state of uncertainty. Their uncertainty I have equated to a wilderness experience.

Water has facilitated various philosophical interpretations such as being “... a site of danger and a space of absolution, [and] as a carrier of African diasporic history” (Wardi, *Water* 65). Veering from the collective interpretations, I have generated a nature study looking at water and wilderness as vital tropes in the African American

experience. I have interpreted Morrison's frequent mention of drinking and the constant need to drink as indicators of a desire for freedom, despite water's connotation to bondage. No evidence exists that transients have escaped the phantoms of the past, but arresting them by drinking water symbolically makes life more bearable.

Sula, *Song of Solomon*, and *Beloved* clearly reveal Morrison's penchant for nature. She herself said in "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" that:

[The novel] should be beautiful, and powerful, but it should work. It should have something in it that enlightens; something in it that opens the door and points the way. Something in it that suggests what the conflicts are, what the problems are. But it need not solve those problems because it is not a case study; it is not a recipe. (199)

Sula, *Song of Solomon*, and *Beloved*, therefore, are Morrison's subtle contribution to the ongoing environmental debate in which she advocates that we collectively respect nature rather than exploit it. Because of the vision of ecocriticism, every act that is undertaken has a parallel with nature. As a result, exploitation of the land and excessive logging has great symbolism to disenfranchisement and dismemberment of blacks. Likewise, water in *Beloved* has healing properties and I have argued that despite its connotation to bondage, psychological freedom is achievable even on a temporary basis.

Finally, Morrison's African American characters yearn for freedom, freedom to have an equitable share of the earth as well as mental freedom from atrocities of the past. The environment too cries for freedom because according to Wendell Berry, "the psychic wounds of racism have resulted inevitably in wounds in the land, the country

itself' (qtd. in Merchant 380). The wheels of progress appear to turn slowly but Morrison's fictions are aimed at initiating change.

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