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Title	Ethnographic self-fashioning : Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon as a passing narrative
Sub Title	トニ・モリスンの『ソロモンの歌』における民族誌的自己成型
Author	深瀬, 有希子(Fukase, Yukiko)
Publisher	慶應義塾大学日吉紀要刊行委員会
Publication year	2007
Jtitle	慶應義塾大学日吉紀要. 英語英米文学 No.51 (2007.) ,p.61- 83
JaLC DOI	
Abstract	
Notes	
Genre	Departmental Bulletin Paper
URL	https://koara.lib.keio.ac.jp/xoonips/modules/xoonips/detail.php?koara_id=AN10030060-20071215-0061

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Ethnographic Self-Fashioning: Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* as a Passing Narrative[1]

Yukiko Fukase

1

In the mid-1980s, redefinitions of ethnographic writing as a poetic and rhetorical tradition grew out of an expanding discourse between anthropology and literary theory, enabling an interrogation of the legitimacy and authenticity of ethnographic representations of the Other. Works by James Clifford, George Marcus, and Clifford Geertz questioned the existence of cultural truths independent of political and historical contexts. Victor Turner and Richard Schechner also opened theoretical space in ethnography for performance, expanding the field with their conceptions of ethnographers as actors who creatively play, improvise, interpret and re-present their roles and scripts.

Against this background, Zora Neale Hurston's ethnographic works have been reconsidered as a challenge to the invention and professionalization of modern ethnographic authority in the 1920s and 30s. At the outset of modern ethnographic fieldwork, the participant-observer role was understood to

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* An earlier version of this article appeared as chapter one in my Ph.D. thesis submitted to Keio University in 2006.

1 I borrow this phraseology from Stephen Greenblatt and James Clifford. Clifford has used the term Greenblatt's "self-fashioning" in chapter three ("On Ethnographic Self-Fashioning: Conrad and Malinowski") of *Predicament of Culture*. See Clifford 93.

afford an intensification of cultural understanding. "Open air" research at the risk of one's body was celebrated, in contrast to less interactive research methods. Notably, Hurston's non-objective writings, which reflected her heterogeneous relationships with Franz Boas, Rufus Osgood Mason, Alain Locke, and Langston Hughes, questioned the objectivity accorded by privileged race and gender status, exposing the power relationships between and interdependence of researchers and informants, particularly in cases in which both share the same or similar cultural backgrounds. In so doing, Hurston shed light on the arguments of subjectivity of native ethnographers.[2]

In *Women Writing Culture* (1995), a feminist inquiry into fiction as ethnography, Ruth Behar argues that "it is no longer social scientists (like Margaret Mead) who are shaping U.S. public understandings of culture, race, and ethnicity, but novelists such as Toni Morrison and Amy Tan" (20).[3] In light of this argument, it is worth considering more closely *how* the approach of the social scientist informs that of novelist in this regard; more specifically, a reexamination of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) reveals the novel, to use Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s term, as "Signifyin(g)" upon Zora Neale Hurston, whose work prefigures the contemporary praxis not only of postmodern experimental ethnography, but of contemporary

2 Wazir Jahan Karim defines "native researcher[s]" as follows: "non-western anthropologists doing 'anthropology at home' within their own community or outside, and western anthropologists researching on their own community" (249). In this view, "native" can signify both Western and non-Western researchers.

3 Works by writers of color have been regarded as literature without sociological investigations, as Hurston and Richard Wright's controversy over the representation of black folks suggests. In contrast, Maxine Hong Kingston's autobiographical novel *The Woman Warrior* (1976) was marketed nonfiction at first and won the National Book Award for that category. For more arguments about the boundary between fiction and nonfiction, see Visweswaran 187 n. 50 and Huang 146.

African-American women's literature as well.[4]

This study proposes that *Song of Solomon* can be understood as a narrative of the dark-skinned male protagonist Milkman's *passing*—passing not to dissimulate an elevated racial status but rather to further a transformation into an ethnographer. Recent epistemological understandings of passing as impersonatory performance differentiating racial and gender identity, such as Judith Butler's argument concerning Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), afford such a reinterpretation of Milkman; because his blackness is visible, Milkman cannot pass for white, but he nonetheless passes for a native in the course of becoming a kind of ethnographer in the field of fiction, much as Hurston disguised herself to gain the confidence of her rural black Southern informants.

Examined in light of Hurston's persona in *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), furthermore, Milkman's performance of passing—a product of the power dynamics of class, gender, and ethnic difference—informs Morrison's construction of his family story as a recasting of the "Flying African" tale. The "Flying African" tale, in which runaway slaves succeed in returning to Africa by literally taking flight through supernatural agency is an antebellum oral tradition that held out the possibility for African-Americans of liberation from the shackles in which

4 It is suggestive of a direct interest in ethnography, and a role for ethnography in her conception of literature, that Morrison assembled *The Black Book* (1974), a collection of historical documents drawn from three hundred years of African-American heritage, during the period when she was editing works by Toni Cade Bambara, Angela Davis, Gayle Jones, Gloria Naylor, Barbara Chase-Riboud, and many others. Morrison signaled a specific awareness of Hurston as follows: "[that] I had never read Zora Neale Hurston and wrote *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* anyway means that the [African-American women's literary] tradition really exists" (Naylor 213–14).

society confined them. For example, in Julius Lester's version, the slaves succeed in returning to Africa with the help of a witch doctor.[5] Significantly, Morrison situates Milkman's performance in the formation of African-American folklore, a folklore that is integral to multiethnic and multicultural America, itself essentially a product of colonial encounter and slavery. By representing Milkman as a figure passing as a native ethnographer, Morrison presents the story-making function, interpreting "ethnographic subjectivity" (Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* 93) as "self-fashioning" (Greenblatt), much as did Zora Neale Hurston in dramatizing herself in her works.[6]

2

Song of Solomon tells the story of Milkman's journey from Michigan to Virginia via Pennsylvania, a journey which begins as a search for gold but turns into a quest to reconstruct his family history. Milkman grows up financially secure but self-centered as an only son in the loveless Dead family. Dominated by his strict and business-oriented father, Macon, and distressed by his unstable mother and anti-social sisters, Milkman feels suffocated by his family.

For emotional comfort, Milkman turns to his aunt Pilate, from whom his father is estranged. At the outset of the novel, Macon comes to believe

5 Various versions of the "Flying African" tale are presented in *Drums and Shadows* (1940), *The Book of Negro Folklore* (1958), *Black Folktales* (1969), and *The People Who Could Fly* (1985). See also n. 14.

6 "Though it [ethnographic discourse] portrays other selves as culturally constituted, it also fashions an identity authorized to represent, to interpret, even to believe—but always with some irony—the truths of discrepant worlds. Ethnographic subjectivity is composed of participant observation in a world of 'cultural artifacts' linked (and this is the originality of Nietzsche's formation) to a new conception of language—or better, languages—seen as discrete systems of signs" (Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* 94–95). For more on "cultural artifacts," see Greenblatt 256.

that before their family moved to the North, Pilate hid away a store of gold that the two of them found while escaping from a white man who killed their father, Jake (Macon Dead Sr). It is in search of this gold that Milkman, wishing to be independent of his father and the family real estate business, sets off for the South.

During his search, Milkman matures into a collector of family folklore, skillfully locating himself within his own family history as, in effect, an ethnographer. *Song of Solomon* not only presents the sum of the stories told by the Southern blacks who become Milkman's informants, but also dramatizes the workings of oral tradition through its narration of Milkman's successes and failures in discovering and understanding oral history. In presenting Milkman's encounters with Southern blacks, Morrison examines how he gains useful, reliable information—first about the hidden gold, and later about his grandfather—by establishing credibility with his informants.

Hurston's experience provides a context for understanding this process. Long before the 1970s, when the emphasis of ethnographic inquiry shifted from the aggregation and study of folklore materials to the examination of holistic processes of folklore creation in its cultural context,[7] Hurston explored the concept of performance as a means both of surviving in a racialized society, and of collecting folktales in black communities. Indeed, informed by her recognition that black life is "acted out" both in joyful and sad situations (Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression" 1020), Hurston developed her own performative practice, which she employed in her field research. For example, while investigating Southern black migrant

7 For a discussion of this shift in the conceptualization of folklore, see Ben-Amos and Dundes. For further discussion of Hurston as an experimental anthropologist and ethnologist, see Boxwell, Carby, Gordon, Harris, Hernández, Lawrence, Meisenhelder, Pavloska, and Wall.

workers, Hurston practices impersonation in order to bridge the gaps in educational and class backgrounds between herself and the black folks she is researching: “They all thought I must be a revenue officer or a detective of some kind. . . . I took occasion that night to impress the job with the fact that I was also a fugitive from justice, ‘bootlegging’” (*Mules and Men*, 60–61).

Unlike the Barnard-trained Hurston, who enjoys the tension between revelation and disguise, Milkman has no advanced academic training and does not consciously consider performance in this sense to be a necessity for penetrating a new cultural milieu. Nonetheless, Milkman role-plays, acting the part of a reliable person in order to obtain information, though the information he seeks initially concerns hidden gold rather than folklore. Upon first approaching an old black man in his father’s birthplace of Danville, Pennsylvania, Milkman impersonates an insurance adjustor, intentionally dissembling to signal reliability: “ ‘Say, I wonder if you could help me.’ He smiled as he spoke. . . . ‘I’m from out of town.’ . . . ‘I have some business to take care of here, an insurance policy, and I need to check on some property out there.’ . . . ‘Can you help me?’” (227–28).

To further his quest for the gold, Milkman subsequently pretends that he is searching for his grandfather’s remains. Milkman feels “something missing from the conversation” (228), but the old black man leads Milkman to an encounter with a group of Danville’s oldest folks that exposes important aspects of the process of folklore formation. First, Milkman’s conversations with these seniors, whom he encounters at the home of the local minister, Reverend Cooper, show that the relationship between collector and informant is flexible and multivalent. The local elderly people who gather in Reverend Cooper’s kitchen repeatedly inform Milkman about “various aspects” of his legendary grandfather, who owned a farm named “Lincoln’s Heaven” during the Reconstruction era (234). For these elderly

local people, Milkman, the collector of stories, serves "as the ignition that gun[s] their memories" as they talk at length about Milkman's grandfather (235). One conversation at Reverend Cooper's represents an instance of an informant using a collector of information as an igniter to create a new story. Even as the elderly informants regard Jake and Milkman as figures of mythic interest, Reverend Cooper is planning to become a legendary figure himself; the Reverend treats Milkman's visit as an opportunity to establish himself as a figure of local legend, the man who took care of Milkman and served as a reliable and authentic source in the formation of the Deads's family folklore: "Reverend Cooper wanted to get all the facts straight. Already he was framing the story for his friends: how the man [Milkman] came to his house first, how he asked for him" (230).[8]

The past that recurs in their telling, with Milkman as witness, emerges not as "exotic" but as "real" (231). Milkman's performance as an igniter of individual and communal stories is informed by the structure of the narrative discourse that conveys the encounters at Reverend Cooper's. In a description of Milkman's grandfather's economic achievements, shifts in the viewpoint

8 A similar case is also presented in *Mules and Men*. One informant, John French, enjoins Hurston to preserve his role as a figure within the story he is about to narrate to her when she retells the story:

> "Zora, Ah'm gointer tell one, but you be sho and tell de folks Ah tole it. Don't say Seymore said it because he took you on de all-day fishin' trip to Titusville. Don't say Seaboard Hamilton tole it 'cause he always give you a big hunk of barbecue when you go for a sandwich. Give ole John French whut's comin' to 'im." (47)

Thus, neither the informants whom Milkman interviews at Reverend Cooper's, nor the one from whom Hurston elicits a story on a porch in Eatonville are simply passive subjects responding to direction; they also use their interlocutor for their own purposes.

of the third-person omniscient narrative function to evoke the voice and presence of the dead, including that of Jake himself, as in the following passage:

> Sixteen years later he [Jake] had one of the best farms in Montour County. A farm that colored their lives like a paintbrush and spoke to them like a sermon. "You see?" the farm said to them. "See? See what you can do? . . . Here, this here, is what a man can do if he puts his mind to it and his back in it. Stop sniveling," it said. "Stop picking around the edges of the world. Take advantage, and if you can't take advantage, take disadvantage. We live here. On this planet, in this nation, in this county right here. *No*where else! . . . and if I got a home you got one too! Grab it. Grab this land! . . . and pass it on—can you hear me? Pass it on!" (235)

In this scene, the speech of Milkman's elderly informants describing the farm is followed by the speech of the farm speaking itself, and in the informants' telling this voice substitutes for Jake's own speech. Jake's direct speech is thus effectively woven into the narrative such that Jake's own voice speaks directly not only to his people but also to the reader. Notably, Jake insists that it is important not only to make use of what he and his contemporaries have, but also "to pass it on" to the next generation.[9] The narrative thus

9 Jake's address in the voice of the farm, introduced suddenly into the third person omniscient narrative, can be considered an apostrophic moment when "a fictive, discursive event" is produced (Culler 153); Jake presents the communal suffering of African-Americans unable to forget their loss while being addressed by the "anthropomorphized other" (Johnson 189). In this regard, Jake's voice speaking directly to the community brings to mind the preaching of ex-slave Baby Suggs:

not only relates direct conversations between the collector of information, Milkman, and his informants, the elderly local people at Reverend Cooper's, but also uses structural shifts in the narrative discourse to connect directly with the past, conveying the black diaspora consciousness emerging in the multi-directional interactions of Jake, his people, his descendents, and contemporary readers.[10]

Johannes Fabian's argument that "*geopolitics* has its ideological foundations in *chronopolitics*" affords further insight into the significance of the narrative structure of this passage (144). In Fabian's view, the "denial of coevalness" (25) in anthropology is a strategy for "keeping [its] Other in another Time" (144).[11] Therefore, the recognition of coevalness, in contrast, is the experience of contemporality, of actively sharing the same time and

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> "And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up. And all your inside parts that they'd just as soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. The dark, dark liver—love it, love it, and the beat and beating heart, love that too." (*Beloved* 88)

10 Jake's address in the voice of his farm presents the black diaspora consciousness that emerges from the tension between living "here" and remembering "yonder," and this tension is articulated in the shift that occurs in the narrative discourse, as discussed above. Importantly, Jake's apostrophic calling across temporal and spatial borders invokes the absence of the vanished or vanishing Native American, represented by his wife. Although Jake tries to assert his hold on "Lincoln's Heaven," his claim to the place is not so nativist as to appropriate the Native American voice. Jake's address signifies rather a diversity of conflicts in the diaspora consciousness, through which both Native Americans and African-Americans seek their places, though these are never identical with their origins. Clifford explores the diasporic aspect of the tribal claim against dominant assimilationist discourse. See *Routes* 250–54.

11 In *Conjuring the Folk: Forms of Modernity in African American* (2000), David G. Nicholls claims that folks in the South are not excluded out of modernity, which traditionally has identified folk as *ex post facto*.

acknowledging others as contemporaries. In apostrophic callings such as Jake's address in the voice of the farm, Morrison constructs the coevalness of the Other by bringing the past of Milkman's ancestral experience into the present of the experienced text.

3

Despite his family's Southern heritage, Milkman meets with both hospitality and hostility because of his Northern middle-class background; his navigation of his encounters with rural Southerners exposes gender and racial considerations in the process of folklore formation. Early in his journey, Milkman finds the trip enjoyable, and based on his early efforts regards highly "his ability to get information and help from strangers, their attraction to him, their generosity"; moreover, Milkman decides that "southern hospitality [is] for real" (260). However, on the first day of his visit, as he is standing on the porch of a small restaurant in Shalimar, Virginia, his lack of understanding of Southern culture and of his own social position both exposes him to physical danger and affords an exploration of his power over the local people.

Trudier Harris argues that porches described in African-American stories function as "the primary stages for interactive storytelling, for the passing on and receiving of oral traditions" (xii). Actually, Hurston describes the porch—the literal threshold of the South—as a topos of the American South; the porch is a place for "play-acting" for both men and women (*Their Eyes Were Watching God* 70). For Milkman, however, the porch is not a site for self-expression and performance but rather a place that reveals his psychological and geographic removal from the South: his right to pass into the South is challenged by the local people on the porch in Shalimar.

Interestingly, few women appear on the porch to perform creatively

in *Song of Solomon* as they do in *Mules and Men* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Moreover, women who appear on porches are highly sexualized by Milkman's gaze: "They sat on porches, and walked in the road swaying their hips under cotton dresses, bare-legged, their unstraightened hair braided or pulled straight back into a ball. He wanted one of them bad" (263). Furthermore, Milkman's observations of the local women center on their physical characteristics:

> Wide sleepy eyes that tilted up at the corners, high cheekbones, full lips blacker than their skin, berry-stained, and long long necks. There must be a lot of intermarriage in this place, he thought. . . . Visitors to Shalimar must be rare, and new blood that settled here nonexistent. (263)

In Milkman's view, Shalimar is a closed rural community which seems to have maintained its racial and ethnic purity intact. Through his detached observations, Milkman distances himself from the Shalimar locals, trying not to identify with them, much like an ethnographer maintaining a critical distance from his research subjects.

Whereas Milkman is represented as sexualizing his prospective subjects, Hurston presents herself as a "collector as sexual being" (Harris 23). Harris discusses Hurston's sexual attractiveness as generating romantic feelings in the local men she encounters: "From the very first day and very first chapter in Eatonville, . . . Hurston the single, attractive woman writes herself as much a prize to be won as the folklore she collects" (25). In Harris's view, Hurston succeeds by appealing to the pride of her male subjects in both their sense of gender superiority and their competence in "the seducer-of-female role," and she allows them to "assume the role of introducing her to people

who will serve as her informants" (29–30). In Harris's words, "undertones of sexuality become the servant of creative and scholarly access" (30), though with this strategy Hurston risks stirring conflict not only among the local men but also between herself and other women in the town (*Mules and Men* 35).

Hurston argues that her education at Barnard enabled her to investigate and reevaluate her culture through the "spy-glass of Anthropology," (*Mules and Men* 1) yet in presenting herself as a subjective, sexualized participant, she casts doubt on the ethnographer's ability to represent a culture objectively, as well as on the highly sexualized images of black women at that time. In contrast, Milkman, with no strategy of using his own sexuality to collect folklore, behaves like an ethnographer who has no doubt of the clarity of the "spy-glass."

Unlike Hurston's strategic performance, Milkman's sexualized attention to women of the town offends the local men, exposing Milkman first to verbal and then to physical challenge. "Milkman senses that he'd struck a wrong note. About the women, he guessed. What kind of place was this where a man couldn't even ask for a woman?" (265), and Milkman is subsequently challenged. Yet the angry reaction of the young men he encounters at the restaurant comprises a test of Milkman's right to be in the town, a test which Milkman passes by winning a fight with one of the men. After the fight in the restaurant, however, no one joins him on the porch to support him; rather, people stare at him in silence:

> He walked outside, still panting, and looked around. Four older men still sat on the porch, as though nothing had happened. . . . Three young women with nothing in their hands stood in the road looking at him. Their eyes were wide but noncommittal. . . . Nobody said anything. . . .

> Nobody came toward him, offered him a cigarette or a glass of water. . . . Under the hot sun, Milkman was frozen with anger. (268–69)

For Milkman the porch thus becomes a locale where difference provokes conflict; to use Barbara Johnson's term, the porch is a "threshold of difference" (172–83). Thus, Milkman learns that the warm receptions he enjoyed in the Southern towns he visited before coming to Danville were superficial, and that Southern hospitability does not always extend to the outsider.[12]

Milkman pursues a different strategy. Through another initiation-like experience, a hunting trip with several of the old men of the town, Milkman begins to feel that Shalimar is "his original home" and moreover to establish his reliability, thereby gaining the status necessary to participate in conversations with these local men (270).

During one such conversation, a celebration with the old men after the hunting trip, Milkman tells them "the purpose of his visit to Shalimar" (283)—to find out something about his grandparents. While the men respond that they know nothing about them, a female character Vernell interrupts and redirects the flow of male conversation in order to pass on important information about his grandmother to Milkman. In her only appearance in the novel, as she is serving Milkman and the other men, Vernell overhears that Milkman is searching for a relative named Sing, whom he believes to be his grandmother. Vernell breaks into the lively male conversation to give

12 Unlike Milkman, Hurston well understands that Southern hospitality is not always available, but must be earned through performance. Asked, "Where you gointer stay, Zora?" Hurston answers, "With Mett and Ellis, I reckon" (*Mules and Men* 7). Hurston attempts to invoke hospitality by pretending to be vulnerable and dependent on the local people, enabling them to take pride in offering help to her. See Harris 6.

Milkman a clue to further his search: " 'You all hush. You say Sing?' she asked Milkman" (283). Vernell tells Milkman that her grandmother had a friend named Sing who was "Indian" —"light-skinned, with straight black hair"—but that Sing's family had not approved of their friendship (284). Furthermore, Vernell tells Milkman about Susan Byrd, a Native American who is believed to be related to Sing, but suggests that Susan may not be helpful because the Byrds "never was too crazy 'bout colored folks. Susan either"(284).

4

Milkman pays two visits to Susan to determine whether or not she is related to his grandmother Sing, and during his interviews with her he at last fully confronts the essential detail of his grandmother's life story: that of her interracial marriage.

Milkman has been informed of his grandmother's Native American heritage at least three times before meeting Vernell,[13] but it is only through his meetings with Susan that he integrates this information into his

13 The first intimation of his grandmother's ethnicity reaches Milkman in Michigan. Macon tells Milkman that his mother Sing was "light-skinned" and "looked like a white woman," and emphasizes that neither he nor Pilate takes after her in terms of whiteness at all (54). However, this knowledge does not lead Milkman to ponder the racial and cultural hybridity implied either by his Native American grandmother's ethnicity or his biological mother's light-skin (54). Milkman next hears of his grandmother's lightness from an elderly men whom Milkman meets at Reverend Cooper's in Danville (234), but Milkman is more interested in the story of his father's childhood than in this story of his grandmother at this point. Finally, a woman named Circe, who helped Macon and Pilate escape from the white murderers of their father, informs Milkman that his grandmother was "mixed. Indian mostly" (243), but Milkman considers the information Circe provides in relation to his cousin Hager, whom he had abandoned after a long relationship when he departed for the South.

understanding of his family history. Susan's ambivalent notion of passing for white, wherein the act of passing is one to be concealed, despite its frequent occurrence in her family, while at the same time Milkman's being too black to pass is viewed as shameful, makes it possible for Milkman to ponder his blackness.

During Milkman's first meeting with Susan, unexpected interruptions make it difficult for him to obtain the information he wants, though ironically, these interruptions lead to his obtaining the information he needs. Grace, Susan's other guest, interrupts the conversation between Milkman and Susan with her own inaccurate knowledge of Susan's family genealogy, but this interruption spurs Susan, who is eager to correct Grace's inaccurate recollections, to give a revised version of her family genealogy in order to prevent Milkman from misunderstanding. Responding to Grace's interruption, Susan says:

> " . . . [I]f you let me finish a sentence you might learn something you don't know too." . . . "My mother's names was Mary. . . ." Susan turned to Milkman. "My father, Crowell Byrd, had a sister named Sing." "That's must be her! My grandmother! Sing. Did she marry a man named—" . . . "She didn't marry anybody that I know of." Susan interrupted them both. (289)

Grace is excited to learn that Milkman may have Southern roots, but Milkman ignores her reaction to press Susan for more information. Milkman learns both that Sing may have passed for white, and that passing was not unusual among the Byrds. Susan finally concludes that Sing was not Milkman's grandmother: " '[I]f she's his grandmother she'd be too dark to . . .' Susan Byrd hesitated. 'Well, too dark to pass. Wouldn't she?' She flushed

a little" (290). Milkman pretends to be uninterested in this reference to his grandmother's ethnicity, moving on to question Susan regarding places where Sing may have lived, and ultimately leaving Susan's place with the comments that it was not important for him to find the family history, and that he is "just passing through" Shalimar (292).

Soon after leaving Susan's, however, Milkman remembers her response to blackness and has ambivalent feelings:

> She [Susan] had actually blushed. As though she'd discovered something shameful about him. He was both angry and amused and wondered what Omar and Sweet and Vernell thought of Miss Susan Byrd. He was curious about these people. He didn't feel close to them, but he did feel connected, as though there was some cord or pulse or information they shared. (292–93)

For the first time Milkman feels "angry" about someone's implicit denigration of blackness. Yet, at the same time, he feels at ease in Shalimar; he is "amused" as he considers what other black people in Shalimar would think about Susan's internalization of racial hierarchy. Thus, in the course of research, Milkman's sense of belonging to Shalimar becomes unstable. While Milkman regards Shalimar as his "original home," he keeps a critical distance from his informants. Such ironical self-consciousness of his standpoint in the field is what postmodern anthropology explores against researchers' unquestionable autonomy and coherence which modern anthropology deliberately believed.

Additionally, after his first visit to Susan, he happens to hear a song which he has heard Pilate sing before. As he listens to it again, Milkman catches his grandfather's name and other names familiar to him in the lyrics.

This leads Milkman to believe that there are still "many many missing pieces" of his family history which Susan can pass on to him, and he returns to speak with her a second time (304).

During this second interview, surprisingly, Susan quickly admits that Sing was both undoubtedly Milkman's grandmother and her own aunt, though Susan continues to show fear that the people of the town will learn of the Byrds's black heritage. Although Susan considers Sing and Jake's interracial marriage a cause for shame for the Byrds, importantly, she introduces the story of Milkman's great-grandmother Ryna who was abandoned by her husband, Solomon. During Milkman's second visit, Susan informs Milkman that his grandfather Jake was one of Ryna and Solomon's children. Solomon was nicknamed the "Flying African" because he made a literal flight to Africa, fleeing his Southern home to return to his home continent back, but abandoning his family to do so. Jake was raised by Sing's mother because Ryna went mad when Solomon abandoned her and their children.

As many critics have observed, Morrison revises the "Flying African" tales, which tell about communal flights back to Africa, to create not only the story of an individual male flight to Africa, but also a tradition of women as storytellers who honestly face the predicaments that complicate heroism.[14] Thus, Morrison emphasizes that Solomon's desertion of his family is irresponsible.

However, Susan's notion of ethnic hybridity has gone unexamined in

14 For more on the use Morrison makes of the tale, see Awkward, Blake, hooks, Lee, Metting, and Traore. Interestingly, Traore considers *Song of Solomon* a combination of Morrison's own family history and elements from the oral accounts of ex-slaves collected in *Drums and Shadows*, but Traore overlooks Morrison's Native-American heritage. For more on Morrison's Native-American great-grandmother, see Dowling 54; and McKay 141.

this regard. A reexamination of Milkman's second interview with Susan sheds light on Susan's thought, foregrounding the unmasking of Milkman's blackness in the scene as a convergence of Susan's ability to expose; her desire to enact racial and ethnic hierarchy, difference, or hybridity; and to speak against male-centered myth.

It is worth noting again that it is Susan who relates the tragic irony of Solomon's heroic flight to Africa, despite her reluctance to reveal the ethnic hybridity of her family. And it is through Milkman's repeated visits to the Byrds that the Deads's family story is subjected to examination in light of the dynamics of their ethnicity, a subject both the Byrds and the Deads had previously ignored or concealed.[15]

5

Passing is both a performance of self-fashioning and an ethnographic praxis. Werner Sollors claims that passing narratives are "allegories of modernization":

> Stories of passing may appeal to modern readers' fascination with the undecidable, or they may indirectly offer the assurance of some firmness in at least one social identity—that based on racial ancestry—in a world of fluidity. (250)

The rise of the passing novel in African-American literary history from the late nineteenth century to the 1920s and 30s thus paralleled the examination of ethnographic subjectivity which the establishment of modern ethnography

15 Juda Bennett claims that in having Milkman refuse to look at photographic proof of Sing's appearance, Morrison refuses to provide visible proof of Sing's ability to pass, and thus represents passing as a forbidden desire (210).

at that time entailed. As Vashti Crutcher Lewis argues, the figure of the black passing for white is absent from the works of Hurston, including even *Their Eyes Were Watching God* with its mulatta protagonist Janie (132–34). Rather than describing black characters passing for white in her works, interestingly, Hurston offers the example of *herself* passing for a native ethnographer.[16] Hurston's example reflects an important resonance in the establishment of modern ethnography and a "new" African-American subjectivity.[17]

Song of Solomon is a record of Milkman's journey in the footsteps of Hurston as she dramatizes herself in her ethnographic works. This examination of Milkman's performance as a collector of family history has centered on the multi-directional interactions between Milkman, the collector who ignites his informants' recollections, and his informants, who in turn appropriate Milkman to forge their own pasts and futures. By describing the flexible and multivalent communication out of which folklore is created, Morrison's text qualifies as meta-ethnography: Morrison creates fiction as ethnography in the political and historical context through the very act of writing.[18]

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16 "The high point of fiction of passing was in the years from 1912 to 1931" (Sollors 381–85; 509 n.144). Concerning the veracity of Hurston's narrative of passing, Sollors interestingly points out that the form of James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), "in which true autobiographic and ironic and satiric impulses coalesced," is "a literary hoax" and "constitutes in itself an act of passing" (264–65).

17 Barbara Christian cogently argues that Hurston was "new," breaking with her contemporaries, Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen with their novels focusing on black characters passing for white (57). To say more, Hurston's newness is her experimental anthropology which challenges the traditional sense of modern subjectivity.

18 Near the end of the novel, Pilate is shot. As she lies dying, she asks Milkman to sing to her an old family song that names his relatives. During his ethnographic journey, Milkman had heard the song from his childhood and learned for the first time that it

Furthermore, *Song of Solomon* presents related passing narrative: that of Milkman passing as a native in his ethnographic quest. It is unclear whether Sing passed for white or not. Juda Bennett discusses that Morrison is more interested in conceiving, debating, and fantasizing passing than in describing its practice (210). Although the novel offers no definite representation of blacks passing for white, Milkman's journey to collect his family folklore represents him as differentiating himself from those in his "original" community even as he imitates them: that is, as *passing*. Milkman succeeds in entering the black rural community, which he ultimately comes to consider his "original home," first by passing tests of his understanding of black rural life, and secondly by learning the story of his Native American heritage from Susan, who thus "dilutes" Milkman's blackness. In other words, both Milkman's and his grandparents' racial and ethnic hybridity are made visible by Susan's "extenuation" of Milkman's blackness. Milkman's recognition of his "original home" as a place where he is continuously differentiated arises from the process of recasting his ancestral history. *Song of Solomon* thus not only presents the passing on of family folklore by the women left behind, but also represents Milkman's rewriting of the passing narrative itself. Milkman's passing narrative—his narrative of passing as a native ethnographer—is at the heart of his narrative of discovering his cultural heritage.

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was about his family. However, Milkman had nothing with which to write the song down, and had therefore committed it to memory. As a result, he was able to sing the song to Pilate as she requested just before her death. Notably, Milkman never records the story he retrieved over the course of his journey; instead, Morrison writes it down meta-fictionally.

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