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Memory and Oblivion:
River Symbolism in *Sula, Song of Solomon,* and *Beloved*

Shoko Oki

In Toni Morrison's novels, the dead people who appear as ghosts or supernatural beings often have a significant influence on the lives of living people, and are deeply linked with the river as part of the setting. Morrison selects the setting of her novels deliberately, and she told Robert Stepto about the characteristics of Ohio, in which Medallion in *Sula* and Cincinnati in *Beloved* are located: "It's an interesting state from the point of view of black people because it is right there by the Ohio River, in the south, and at its northern tip is Canada. And there were these fantastic abolitionists there, and also the Ku Klux Klan lived there" ("Intimate Things" 12). For the slaves, the river was the line to cross to reach the Free State. For example, in *Beloved,* Sethe, who is in the last month of pregnancy, barely escapes with her life from the plantation in the slave state Kentucky, and tries to get across Ohio River to seek shelter at her mother-in-law's house in Cincinnati. As she lies unable to walk on the bank of the Ohio River, she thinks, "I believe this baby's ma'am is gonna die in wild onions on the bloody side of the Ohio River" (31). At this critical moment, the river plays the role of the border between freedom and vassalage, life and death. I would like to discuss in this essay, from the perspective of African-American history, how this river symbolism is used in Morrison's works.

I Sula

As Maureen T. Reddy points out, *Sula* has "three protagonists: Shadrack, Sula / Nel, and the community of black people who lived in the Bottom" (3). First of all, I would like to illustrate the way in which the river symbolism links these three plots to each other. The river in the Bottom represents at once the townspeople's hope to get economic freedom and their broken spirit. In 1927, in the postwar economic boom, the government plans to construct a road to the river and a bridge to connect Medallion, including the Bottom, to the town on the other side of the river in expectation of greater trade. The men in the Bottom apply for employment, but the white boys, Greeks and Italians are hired instead. In addition, since 1937, a tunnel under the river has been under construction, but Bottom's people still have not reaped any economic benefits from the business, in spite of a promise to employ black workers. Having their hope frustrated again, and what's more, in the face of unprecedented destitution, they at last explode, and parade to the tunnel in a kind of delirium:

> Called to them to come out and play in the sunshine — as though the sunshine would last, as though there really was hope. The same hope that kept them picking beans for other farmers; kept them from finally leaving as they talked of doing; kept them knee-deep in other people's dirt; kept them excited about other people's wars; kept them solicitous of white people's children; kept them convinced that some magic 'government' was going to lift them up, out and away from that dirt, those beans, those wars. (160)

Here, they think back on their history and on the way that American society has exploited them since the era when their ancestors were slaves or serfs. They begin to break the tunnel

"where their hope had lain since 1927" (161), but as they go further into it, the meltwater rushes in. The Bottom's people drowned in the tunnel's water are reminiscent of the slaves who fail to reach the other side of the river, freedom, and who die "on the bloody side" (*Beloved* 31).

The river shows contradictory aspects in the story about a shell-shocked veteran of World War I, Shadrack. In the field of France, young Shadrack marches along a river with his comrades for several days. One day, as soon as he crosses it, his company faces a barrage of attacks, and he sees the head of a comrade near him shot off. The shocking scene inflicts irrecoverable damage on his mind, so that he does not know who he is. His fear of losing his identity is so great that "he let his mind slip into whatever cave mouths of memory it chose. He saw a window that looked out on a river which he knew was full of fish" (10). Shadrack, "with no past, no language, no tribe, no source, no address book [. . .] and nothing nothing nothing to do" (12), depends on the memory of the river in his hometown as the sole clue of who he is and where he is to return. Witnessing the death on the riverside deprives Shadrack of his whole memory, but at the same time, the river reconnects him to his home. Returning to the Bottom, he lives in a shack on the riverbank, and institutes National Suicide Day in order to make "a place for fear as a way of controlling it" (14). Every year on this day, he marches along the street telling the people that this is "their only chance to kill themselves or each other" (14). The people of the community never respond to his frantic call, except for the last National Suicide Day, when the catastrophic flood in the tunnel kills them.

The act of crossing the river is repeated again in the story of the friendship between Nel and Sula. In their girlhood, Nel and Sula play with a boy in their neighborhood, Chicken Little, at

the riverside, and he slips from Sula's hands and into the river. Nel and Sula expect him to come back up soon, but he does not:

> A figure appeared briefly on the opposite shore. The only house over there was Shadrack's. Sula glanced at Nel. Terror widened her nostrils. Had he seen? The water was so peaceful now. There was nothing but the baking sun and something newly missing. Sula cupped her face for an instant, then turned and ran up to the little plank bridge that crossed the river to Shadrack's house. There was no path. It was as though neither Shadrack nor anyone else ever came this way. (61)

In the light of the symbolism of the river, "something newly missing" reminds us of the collective losses through African-American history. Like Shadrack, Sula witnesses the unacceptable, unwatchable scene of death from the riverside, and from then on, she has "no center, no speck around which to grow" (119). When Sula grows up and when the townspeople come to refer to her and Shadrack as "[t]wo devils" (117), the river separates Sula, who is on the other side of the river, from Nel, who stays on this side of it and grows up to be a "good woman" (138) of the community.

However, the river represents not only the opposition between good and evil but also the dissociation between witnessing and understanding. Sula tries to look at everything positively, to such a degree that people recognize the birthmark over her eye as a sign of Sula's watching her mother burn to death. Patricia McKee points out, "[h]er capacity to 'just look' depends on experiencing no emotions or intentions that connect her to objects, and no meaningful links either between one experience and another" (48). Actually, although Sula has experienced many things

during her life, she cannot "order and focus experience" (14) like Shadrack. Nel, meanwhile, avoids looking at things which cause her mental distress, for example, a "gray ball" (109) which represents her empty life. Nel thinks that Eva did not attend Sula's funeral because of her "determination not to let the eyes see what the heart could not hold" (171). However, this determination is not Eva's but Nel's. Losing both her husband and Sula through their adultery, Nel is left with "just her brain raveling away" (111). Morrison, in the interview with Robert Stepto, agrees that Sula and Nel are "two sides of the same person, or two sides of one extraordinary character," and "this character is nevertheless fractured into Sula and Nel" ("Intimate Things" 13). In that case, it is the river that splits "one extraordinary character" into two; Sula, the eye, and Nel, the "brain raveling away." This dissociation represents the difficulty of remembering the shock of the death at the river in their girlhood.

Next, I would like to discuss personal/collective memory and oblivion from the point of view of the embedded structure of the society. In the last chapter, "1965," we are shown Nel remembering dead Sula along with the death of the community at the Bottom. Sula, on her deathbed, thinks about Nel, who leaves her without reconciliation, as follows: "So she will [. . .] never remember the days when we were two throats and one eye and we had no price" (147). As Sula predicts, Nel never remembers her at the beginning of this chapter, even if she remembers "some beautiful boys" or "the whores" (163-64) in her happy girlhood. However, visiting Eva discharges her repressed memory. Eva confuses her with Sula and asks her about Chicken's death, "You was there. You watched, didn't you?" (168). Thinking about Eva's words, Nel remembers that she witnessed the death at the river with Sula. When she cries for Sula and says, "We was girls together" (174), she remembers and misses Sula, with whom she

once shared "one eye," after a long period of oblivion.

In this chapter, we are also shown the disintegration of the Bottom's community resulting from the postwar economic change and its attendant forgetting. Nel does not keep up with change in the community and is oblivious of its members: "Load, how time flies. She hardly recognized anybody in the town any more" (164). The fact that the land around the river, which causes catastrophic death, is bought up by white people also suggests the community's loss of shared memory. Given this oblivion, we can see the connection between Sula and the Bottom. The relationship between community and Sula as pariah, reminds us of that between American society and the black community, which the novel represents as background. The community of the Bottom, which is not permitted to join the government's business, is itself a pariah in American society. Philip Novak suggests the relationship between them as follows: "Nel's circling sorrow models the reader's relation to the whole of the Bottom community, whose distinctiveness Sula paradoxically symbolizes. To grieve for Sula [. . .] is thus to grieve for an African American cultural past [. . .]" (191). Moreover, when the promise of the chant "Shall we gather at the river" which the community's people sing at Sula's funeral is fulfilled at the flood in the tunnel, the river connects the personal loss with the collective loss. The impact and depth of the loss at the river separates Sula and Shadrack from Nel and the Bottom's community. However, at the same time, the river is the place where the eyewitnesses to the loss are reunited.

II *Song of Solomon*

The protagonist of *Song of Solomon*, Milkman Dead, lives in a small town bordering on Lake Superior in Michigan. The geography of the Great Lakes region and its psychological effect on the

inhabitants are described, as can be seen in the following quotation:

> [. . .] the people living in the Great Lakes region are confused by their place on the country's edge — an edge that is border but not coast. They seem to be able to live a long time believing, as coastal people do, that they are at the frontier where final exit and total escape are the only journeys left. But those five Great Lakes which the St. Lawrence feeds with memories of the sea are themselves landlocked, in spite of the wandering river that connects them to the Atlantic. Once the people of the lake region discover this, the longing to leave becomes acute, and a break from the area, therefore, is necessarily dream-bitten, but necessary nonetheless. (162)

The lake reminds the black people of the possibility of flight, and their longings for "final exit and total escape" seem to belong to the slavery era. It is noteworthy that Morrison selects the district facing Lake Superior as the locale of this novel, given the fact that some fugitive slaves cross the river to reach the free state and escape further to Canada by getting across the Great Lakes. The "final exit and total escape" of the people in the above quotation can also be achieved by crossing the Atlantic. This hints at the myth of Milkman's great-grandfather, Solomon: he flew over the Atlantic to escape from plight of slavery and to go back to his home, Africa, for good. From this point of view, the "memories of the sea" which the river passes on are memories of the Middle Passage; the journey from Africa in slave ships.

Robert Smith is one of the people in Milkman's town, and he tries to leap over Lake Superior at the beginning of the novel. He posts a notice on the door of his house in advance: "At 3:00 p.m. on Wednesday the 18th of February, 1931, I will take off

from Mercy and fly away on my own wings. Please forgive me. I loved you all" (3). As the narrator says, "Mr. Smith didn't draw as big a crowd as Lindbergh" who made the first solo non-stop flight across the Atlantic Ocean, his flight from the roof of the hospital with the blue silk wings is not as heroic as those of Lindbergh or Solomon, and results in his death. In *Song of Solomon*, the gesture of flying is repeated, and Morrison says that this novel is based on folklore about slaves going back to Africa by flying over the ocean: " [. . .] it [*Song of Solomon*] is about black people who could fly. That was always part of the folklore of my life; [. . .] Perhaps it was wishful thinking — escape, death, and all that. But suppose it wasn't. What might it mean? I tried to find out in *Song of Solomon*" ("The Language" 122). Milkman's flight at the end of the novel seems to be different from Solomon's and Smith's as escape or death, and to be the aim of Morrison's writing.

It is worth considering why Smith's flight failed. Publicly, Smith has been an insurance agent, but privately he has been an assassin belonging to a secret society, the Seven Days. Its aim is to take revenge for the lynched on white people whom the members select at random, secretly in a similar manner. Smith has been devoted all his life to love for all black people, expressed by assassinating white people. The fact that he selected "Mercy" as a springboard is suggestive. Mercy Hospital, the charity hospital, is known as "No Mercy Hospital" (4) among the black community because no black woman has been allowed to give birth inside its wards. Smith's mercy for the one side, black people, means no mercy for the other side, the white people selected as victims.

Moreover, Smith's love is destructive to himself too. Another member of the Seven Days, Porter, shouts to the community's people, "I love ya all. [. . .] I'd die for ya, kill for ya," repeating

Smith's last word, "I love you all," and speaks for Smith, "I'll take hate any day. But don't give me love. I can't take no more love, Lord. I can't carry it. Just like Mr. Smith. He couldn't carry it. It's too heavy [. . .]" (26). Because Smith never had his own family and stoically avoided relationships with the community's people on a personal level in order to keep the secret of the Seven Days, the people to whom Smith left his will, "Please forgive me. I loved you all," do not understand what it means, and no one mourns his death. Even for the Seven Days, he is just a man taking charge of one day of the week, and he is replaceable by another member. He is trapped by the reversed racism of the Seven Days and his fallen body turns into a "doll-broken body (all the more doll-like because there was no blood)" (198). Because there is nobody to receive his will, his flight results in a fall into the void.

In contrast to the story of Smith's flight, that of Solomon's is handed down to posterity, including Milkman, in the form of blues made by the kin who mourn his absence. Before Milkman tours through the south, however, he does not know Solomon or even his grandfather, Jake, because his father, Macon, never tells him of his bitter past. Milkman's lack of autonomy and passive attitude to his own life are represented in the scene of the Deads' drive in his childhood. Macon drives his luxurious car "to satisfy himself that he was indeed a successful man" (31), and the destination of this drive is the summer resort for rich black people. Turning his back on "the silver winged woman poised at the tip of the Packard" (32) which ushers his whole family, Milkman directs his attention backward, which suggests that Milkman has a feeling that he is cut off from the past, his roots. However, "riding backward made him uneasy. It was like flying blind, and not knowing where he was going — just where he had been — troubled him" (32). He presently flies with no sense of direction not

knowing whether he is heading for the future or the past, but his body is carried irresistibly away to his father's destination. When Milkman grows up, he sets off towards the south in quest for gold, which is supposed to promise him freedom from the troublesome relationship with those around him, including his father.

Catherine Carr Lee points out that in the traditional slave narrative "the protagonist moves from an oppressive, enslaving, agrarian South to an enabling, industrial North," "leaving behind family, friends, and even names" (44). Discerning *Song of Solomon* from such a narrative, she argues, "Milkman will have to move against the tide of black migration north in order to transcend his aimlessness, to live for something other than superficial satiation and pleasure"(45-46). Actually, when Milkman moves to the South, he knows the names of his grandparents and great-grandparents and recovers connections with his family, his friend and his roots. And significantly, his journey is framed by the river which appears before him at the turning point.

Milkman's quest for buried gold in Pennsylvania begins with his wading in the river which raised Jake's body. He was killed by the white people who attempted to take away his land, and his ghost has appeared since the floods. Given the symbolic meaning of the dead at the river, for Milkman to soak in the water of the river is an effectual initiation into the past. Moreover, this river leads him to "memories of the sea," that is, to memories of his ancestors who experienced the Middle Passage. After Milkman crosses the river and finds that there is no longer any gold, he goes further south, to Shalimar, Virginia where Solomon had flown. Instead of the gold, Milkman finds out his spiritual roots in the myth of Solomon's flight there.

Though he starts for home with this unexpected fruit, he has still things to learn, and is supposed to soak himself in the water of the river again as preparation for another journey. Before

leaving Shalimar, he dives into the river in the valley with Sweet and talks to her proudly about his heroic ancestor. However, Sweet's question, "Who'd he leave behind?" (328), throws new light on the Solomon myth and makes Milkman discovers another story of abandoned people, Solomon's wife and his twenty-one children including Jake. Visiting his aunt, Pilate, on the way back to his home, Milkman faces the bitter fact that Hagar died in delirium after she was brutally abandoned by Milkman, that is to say, that "[w]hile he dreamt of flying, Hager was dying" (332), and he looks back at the relationships with those around him from which he wanted to fly off. In this way, crossing the river twice during the journey, Milkman resituates himself in both vertical and horizontal relationships, and regains the sense of direction of flight. This is represented by Milkman's flight at the end: he flies from the ledge, "Solomon's Leap," from which Solomon is said to have flown away, towards his "brother man" (337), Guitar, with whom Milkman tries to re-establish relations.

During the journey, Milkman goes forward tracing Pilate's footsteps and making use of the information which she gave him, for example, a child's song and the words of Jake's ghost. Given Pilate's important role in Milkman's journey, her name is figurative, because Pilate is a pilot who leads Milkman to memories of the river, and further to that of the sea. Pilate is a marginal presence both in the genealogy of the Deads and in the community, because Pilate was born right after her mother died and she has no navel. Wherever she goes the community's people reject her because of her physical peculiarity. Pilate, born of the dead, is disconnected from the roots which everyone is supposed to have. The nature of her disconnectedness is further specified in the description of the navel of the woman whom Pilate meets in her wandering life: "Pilate saw the little corkscrew thing right in the middle, the little piece of skin that looked like it was made for

water to drain down into, like the little whirlpools along the edges of a creek" (143). Here, the river as symbol for the navel suggests the connection of the individual to the social mother body which shares the communal memory passed down from generation to generation.

Pilate is also an aviator who teaches Milkman how to fly "without ever leaving the ground" (336), that is, to achieve self-realization in relationships with others. Milkman comes to understand her way of life, in which "her alien's compassion for troubled people ripened her and [. . .] kept her just barely within the boundaries of the elaborately socialized world of black people" (149). Pilate, a pariah doubly, helps Milkman, who is the son of a man of influence in the community, to get rid of long-time oblivion over the generations, and urges him to the spiritual growth which is represented by his flight. As in *Sula*, the pariah plays a central role in the structure of the story in this novel, as it does also in *Beloved*, which I discuss in the next chapter.

III Beloved

Beloved is a story about people who go through slavery, and the characters are forced to live with the pain of being cut off from the relationship even with their own families. Baby Suggs looks back on her slave life, and thinks that she has "never had the map to discover what she was like" (140). She thinks on the possibility of her life and selfhood which might have been created in the relationship with her people: "Was she a good friend? Could she have been a loving mother? A faithful wife? Have I got a sister and does she favor me? If my mother knew me would she like me?" (140). The characters who are deprived of their "Beloved" suffer for haunting memories of the past which threaten to break down their self, and therefore, they have difficulty talking about their whole story. Among others, Sethe has

an unspeakable past: she killed her baby daughter when she was a runaway slave and was caught up with by her pursuers because she did not want her child to live a slave life like hers. A strange girl, Beloved, however, urges the characters to retrace and narrate each of their pasts, and thus the novel is constituted by their fragmentary memories.

Many critics have discussed Beloved's identity, and she is often regarded as more than the child killed by Sethe. Of these critics, Deborah Horvitz persuasively argues that Beloved is "the embodiment of specific members of Sethe's family," and at the same time, "she represents the spirit of all the women dragged onto slave ships in Africa and also all Black women in America trying to trace their ancestry back to the mother on the ship attached to them" (93). As Horvitz analyzes it, Beloved's monologue in part two includes the description of the infernal slave ship in which she was tucked. Beloved is haunted by the memory of being left by her mother, who committed suicide by throwing herself into the sea, and says, "the woman with my face is in the sea," "she goes in the water" (211). Thus, Beloved, who walks out of the stream in back of Sethe's house at 124 Bluestone, has the memory of the river which connects with the Middle Passage.

This will lead us further into a consideration of the connection between personal and collective space in Beloved's womb. Beloved seduces Paul D in the cold house, saying, "I want you to touch me on the inside part and call me my name" (116). Paul D, in spite of himself, has sex with Beloved because of "the desire that drowned him there and forced him to struggle up, up into that girl like she was the clear air at the top of the sea" (264). Beloved interrupts his plans to make a new home with Sethe by removing Paul D from 124, and urges him to recollect his bitter past alone, which is concealed in the "tobacco tin

buried in his chest" (72). When he returns to 124 and calls at the cold house at the end of the novel, he remembers his experience there: "Coupling with her wasn't even fun. It was more like a brainless urge to stay alive. [. . .] And afterward, beached and gobbling air, in the midst of repulsion and personal shame, he was thankful too for having been escorted to some ocean-deep place he once belonged to" (264). Beloved has the memory of the Middle Passage, and for Paul D to touch her womb is the necessary process to "stay alive." Here, as with the navel in *Song of Solomon*, Morrison associates the womb, which represents the fundamental and individual human relationship between mother and child, with the sea, which represents the source of the African American collective memory. Although Paul D returns from the sea of memory, the past, the characters in the novel, especially Sethe, are always at risk of being swallowed by it.

Let us now move on to the problem of both motherhood and the past in the relationship between Sethe and Beloved. When Sethe hears Beloved singing the lullaby she had made up and sung for her children before, she feels "the settling of pieces into places designed and made especially for them," and looks at "Beloved's profile: the chin, mouth, nose, forehead, copied and exaggerated in the huge shadow the fire threw on the wall behind her" (175). As fragmented parts of Beloved's body are put together into a coherent figure in Sethe's recognition, Sethe's fragmented memories are put together into a coherent story, a mother's story testified to by a daughter's return. Sethe thinks, "I don't have to remember nothing. I don't even have to explain. She understands it all" (183), but Sethe continues to retrace her sealed past, now without feelings of remorse. For Sethe, "the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay" (41) since the painful past memories are too fresh to pass with time, as Sethe tells Denver (35-36). But when Sethe's memories erupt and she

does not even have to remember them, the past catches up with her. The frozen river on which Sethe and her two daughters skate suggests the stay of time in which the present and the past blend together. Then 124 becomes "the no-time" (191) place in which Sethe is "wrapped in a timeless present" (184), and she and Beloved are more fixated on each other, cutting off Denver from them.

However, with the melting of the snow, the firm mother-daughter relationship gets off balance, and mother's story loses its effect on the daughter's story. Beloved accuses Sethe of "leaving her behind" like an unreasonable child, and Sethe pleads "for forgiveness, counting, listing again and again her reasons" in vain (241-42). As Denver observes, "Sethe didn't really want forgiveness given" (252) because she understands her daughter's story well. As a child, Sethe herself was left by her mother, who joined a plan to escape. When Beloved's story is Sethe's, Sethe is at a deadlock in the endless chain. While Beloved gets fat and becomes like a "pregnant woman" (261), Sethe wastes and becomes like a "teething child" (250). When Sethe brings the theory of possession into the relation with her daughter, thinking, "[. . .] when I tell you you mine, I also mean I'm yours" (203), she faces the risk of being taken into Beloved's womb, which represents both the past and motherhood.

The powerful impact of the abandoned baby ghost, Beloved, on not only 124 but also the neighborhood gives 124 a chance to escape its isolation from the community. The clarity of Sethe's profile after she kills her child shocks the people and prevents them from singing to support her: "Was her head a bit too high? Her back a little too straight? Probably. Otherwise the singing would have begun at once, [. . .]. Some cape of sound would have quickly been wrapped round her, like arms to hold and steady her on the way [to the prison]" (152). For the next

eighteen years, 124 was isolated from the community because Sethe's impenitent attitude of needing no help aroused the community's antipathy. Now, Denver's request for help from the neighborhood leads to cohesion in the community, and the women gather together in front of 124 to pray and exorcise the baby's ghost:

> [. . .] the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (261)

As the way to the community comes back to Denver (245), the song, which the community's people did not sing for Sethe before, comes back to her. The women's collaborative work creates the "deep water" in which Sethe cleanses her past sin and revives. Mistaking Bodwin for the chaser eighteen years ago, Sehte rushes to him as though she is trying to undo the past. The ice pick which Sethe holds suggests her will to break the frozen current of time and to get rid of the past. The conversation between Paul D and Sethe at the end of the novel suggests her possibility of self-recognition and rebirth: "You your best thing, Sethe. You are." His holding fingers are holding hers. "Me? Me?" (273). The relationship between Sethe and Paul D who "wants to put his story next to hers" (273) is different from that between Sethe and Beloved in which each of them tries to take in the other's story. As Denver accepts the words, "Take care of yourself" (252), and discovers "the little *i*" in the community again, Sethe discovers a "Me" which is at once independent but not isolated from others.

In Morrison's novels, as we have seen, the dead people buried in oblivion, who could not reach the other side of the river, arise from the river, and prompt the living people to remember themselves. At the end of *Sula*, remembering Chicken's death at the river, Nel feels the sign of her dead alter ego, Sula, on her eyes, and meets her again: "Suddenly Nel stopped. Her eye twitched and burned a little. "Sula?" she whispered, gazing at the tops of trees" (174). In *Song of Solomon*, Jake's body, which was buried in the bank of the river, floats up at the heavy rain and his ghost talks to the living like Beloved, as though he does not want to be buried in oblivion. The main characters of *Beloved* waver between remembering and forgetting their past. Sethe and Paul D want to wipe out their bitter past and to face the future, but Beloved, the dead from the Ohio River (or the sea of the Middle Passage), forces both of them to remember their pasts. Moreover, the embedded structure of the story, which consists of Beloved, the inhabitants of 124 and the community, reminds us of the memory of the pariah shared with the larger community, American society.

Morrison told Bonnie Angelo about Beloved, referring to the river in Africa and the Middle passage as follows:

> There were travel accounts of people who were in the Congo — that's a wide river — saying, "We could not get the boat through the river, it was choked with bodies." That's like a logjam. A lot of people died. Half of them died in those ships. [. . .] I thought this had got to be the least read of all the books I'd written because it is about something that the characters don't want to remember, white people won't want to remember. I mean, it's national amnesia. ("Pain of Being Black" 257)

Appropriately, Morrison's remark above is reflected in the conflict between memory and oblivion not only in *Beloved* but also in *Sula* and *Song of Solomon.* Her works against "national amnesia" pilot the reader into the memory of African-American historical experience.

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