Red Blues: The Musical Confluence of African and Native American Identities in Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon

Caleb R. Braley
University of Utah

How many dead lives and fading memories were buried in and beneath the names of the places in this country...

Tony Morrison, Song of Solomon (329)

A Failure to Acknowledge Hybridity

Back in 1986, during the most recent dual perihelion of Halley’s Comet and Neoconservative rhetoric in the United States, William Loren Katz published a revisionist history piece entitled Black Indians. Nine years after Tony Morrison originally treated the red-black connection in Song of Solomon, Black Indians caused uproar in the vanguard of the west. “Reading it on New York City subways, radio talk show host Gary Byrd was confronted by people upset by its cover, topic and title. Looking at the title, one infuriated rider shouted, ‘There were not!’” (Katz 1, emphasis original). Twenty-four years later, as I write these words, the confluence of African and Native American cultural patrimony remains an intellectual ghost town and an unexplored facet of the commonality of the American experience.

Pertinent to this discussion of American hybridity is the perpetual epistemic violence that negates the existence of an amalgamated past. Not only does this occur within the non-black, non-indigenous majority that typically crafts official histories, yet equally within subaltern groups and historically oppressed minorities who are grappling with an identity and its utterance. Tony Morrison enunciates this struggle through the Bildungsromanic vision quest that protagonist Milkman Dead undertakes in Song of Solomon. As Joyce Wegs explains in her study, of the novel “Morrison as a novelist takes on the role of a blues singer in order […] to explore how folk values buried in the past may contribute to a better future.
for all her people" (166). A previously negated hybrid identity is unearthed through a manifestation of folkways, as Morrison inquires into the past. The brilliance of her novel exists in that it stimulates reflection on experiences that heretofore were relegated to a subordinate status, providing an opportunity to re-imagine a past effaced by epistemic violence.

Authors such as Katz and Morrison must have listened carefully to the ways in which individuals conceived of themselves during their respective investigations of hybrid Americana. Katz cites a Black Seminole living in Brackettville, Texas, who told a researcher in 1943, "We's culled people. I don't say we don't has no Injun blood, 'cause we has. But we ain't no Injuns. We's culled people" (18). In order to conceive of the Native American influence on the development of blues music, one must first embrace an alternative construction of the birth of the American nation that takes into account the happenings and circumstances traditionally forgone by official histories. One function of racist and supremacist rhetoric espoused by the white hegemony is the alienation of African and Native American groups from one another and a dismissal of their common experiences within the emerging nation. Toni Morrison attempts to recover some of these experiences through the inclusion of indigenous thematics in her blues song [of Solomon].

Black Indians have played a significant role in American History. There were thousands of Black Cherokees, “many of them introduced to the Nation as slaves by Whites seeking to make bondage universal” (Katz 107). British colonists in the South introduced the practice of African slavery among the Five Civilized Nations in order to avoid the emergence of runaway slave colonies among the Indians—a phenomenon that occurred often in Spanish America. Approximately 1,600 Black Cherokees suffered on the famous “trail of tears.” Unbeknownst to many, the first man to fall in the Boston Massacre was a Black Natick Indian named Crispus Attucks. Furthermore, literary greats Frederick Douglas and Langston Hughes both claimed black and indigenous ancestry. When the Seminole Nation sent a delegation to Washington D.C. in 1825, a Black Seminole known as “Negro Abraham” joined the party as a linguistic interpreter and a representative of the Nation’s large black minority. Figures such as these have never received the historical reverence of canonized American historical figures such as George Washington and Benjamin Franklin yet nonetheless existed. When looking at the minimal shards that remain from Black Indian history, one cannot help but wonder...

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how many more of these red-black Americans lived gallant lives, and were never remembered. As reflected in *Song of Solomon*, people of color often do not have the luxury of admiring glorified representations of their ancestors in widely distributed canonical texts, as Whites can. Their stories survive only through folkways and traditions, and are embedded in music like the blues. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to Morrison’s narrative technique that protagonist Milkman Dead comes to know his mixed heritageaurally, through song.

From the onset of colonization in the seventeenth century until the emergence of blues music, approximately three centuries later, Black, White and Native American traditions interlaced and coalesced into a new culture in the American South. These interactions occurred through plantation owner-slave labor relations, displacement of indigenous groups by Whites obsessed with “Manifest Destiny” eager to claim new territories, and in various capacities among subjugated Black and Native American groups that also interacted with poor Whites trying to make a living on the frontier. These interracial junctures in the history of the South require further extensive investigation; by mentioning them in this context I merely intend to pose the question as it relates to the research in this article—what interactions and common experiences did these three racial groups (that tend to be compartmentalized according to a binary system) share? In my inquiry into these common experiences, a man known as the “Father of the Delta Blues” (Palmer 47) serves as a microcosm for this cultural and ethnic hybridity.

When the first blues recordings started to appear during the 1920’s, two fathers of the blues came to be known: Robert Johnson and Charley Patton. While Johnson is better known for his deal with the devil at Dockery Plantation and the canonization of his *Cross Road Blues* and *Traveling Riverside Blues* through interpretations by Eric Clapton and Led Zeppelin respectively, most blues histories start out with Patton. Considered the “Father of the Delta Blues,” Patton “wasn’t what you’d call a colored fellow” (Palmer 47), he was of mixed heritage—white, black and Cherokee, according to most accounts. While genealogical analyses are not available, Patton himself reveals to the listener in *Down the Dirt Road Blues* that “I been to the Nation, but lord I couldn’t stay there.” According to my analysis, the term “the Nation” refers to the Cherokee Nation, Indian lands now known as Oklahoma, where Patton may have traveled to claim land based on his Red ancestry and been denied. There is,
unfortunately, no reliable source confirming that Patton actually traveled there.

The fact that the father of the Delta blues was a Black Indian correlates strongly with Toni Morrison’s treatment of blues in *Song of Solomon*. Milkman Dead, like Patton, has an indigenous grandmother and is negated acceptance at practically all junctures—in White society, Black society in Detroit, and Southern Black and Indian society in Shalimar. The literary construction of Milkman could be based at least in part on the ramblings of southern bluesmen. Through a comparison of Milkman Dead and Charley Patton, it becomes evident that for Morrison, “music in general and the blues in particular function as signs that call attention to the historical alliances of Africans and Indians as well as to the silences and omissions that have sometimes resulted from a shared history of dispossession, slavery and oppression” (Pasquaretta 279).

Through an extension of Pasquaretta’s analysis and a historical scrutiny of blues, it becomes clear how Blackness and Indigeneity meet at a musical juncture in *Song of Solomon* in order to express hybrid identity, cultural inheritance, and to function as a microcosm for a large-scale vision quest. Morrison is working on a project—the (re)construction of a national identity, especially as that identity pertains to African Americans. Yet the accessibility of her prose to a much more diverse audience and the invocation of biblical and panoramic literary devices such as the Bildungsroman suggest that the introspective spirit transmitted through Milkman Dead in *Song of Solomon* is intended for an audience that is not uniquely African American.

**A Historiographic Construction of Blues**

In 1820 the Treaty of Doak’s Stand\(^4\) between the Choctaw Nation and the United States ceded the lands now known as the Mississippi Delta\(^5\) to the latter and opened the area for settlement. A sanctioned Indigenous exodus was followed by a White invasion, which brought along enslaved Africans as a source of labor for the plantation economy, despite the abolition of the African slave trade thirteen years earlier. Article 4 of the treaty serves to clarify the tone of the negotiations and treatment of indigenous nations during the period:

>“The boundaries hereby established between the Choctaw Indians and the United States, on this side of the Mississippi river, shall remain without

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alteration until the period at which said nation shall become so civilized and enlightened as to be made citizens of the United States” (Kappler 1).

Despite its brutally racist and ethnocentric qualities, this excerpt does speak to the different treatments that Indians and African Americans received during America’s adolescent nineteenth century. Andrew Jackson was actually negotiating with Choctaw leaders, and the treaty acknowledges the concept that in some abstract capacity, Indians could be citizens. No such concessions were offered to southern Blacks until much later in the century. What type of treatment was offered to individuals whose ethnicity could not be clearly defined, such as Charley Patton?

Eighty-one years later, after the region had exploded agriculturally, crumpled under the weight of civil war, and then begun to reemerge with a modified form of plantation economy known as sharecropping, a researcher named Charles Peabody traveled to the heart of the Delta to excavate Indian mounds in Clarksdale, Mississippi. In doing so, he inadvertently became the first blues historian. Peabody noticed the spontaneous, improvised call and response music that emanated from the black workers he had contracted, and he took notes. He published his comments regarding these folkloric phenomena now commonly termed “field hollers” in the Journal of American Folklore in 1903 and thereby initiated the White and Western construction of the blues as the music of the Other.

Ever since, scholars, musicians and aficionados have been itching to define exactly what the blues is. Scholarly and commercial institutions have tailored the lives of blues musicians in order to make them more presentable to mainstream western culture, and have carefully constructed the notion of genuine blues people and blues music. Any analysis of blues history must be wary of the “discovery” of the blues by external entities. In his historiography Deep Blues, Robert Palmer does well to avoid these pitfalls, stating himself that, "the music has never needed interpreters or popularizers; it’s always been strong enough to stand on its own" (17). His novel identifies various forebears to the blues:

"Blues is a musical idiom that has drawn on numerous sources, including jump-ups, field hollers (which it most closely resembles melodically), songster17 ballads (from which it borrowed some imagery and some guitar patterns), church music (which influenced the singing of many blues musicians), and African-derived percussive music (which furnished some rhythmic ideas)” (Palmer 43).
It is apparent that this music emerged from hybrid oral tradition mixed with contemporary musical influences. For all intents and purposes herein, I will treat blues in the following way: as a music that emerged between the turn of the century and the 1920’s among plantation subaltern cultures in the Mississippi Delta. Blues is characterized by any variance of slide guitar\textsuperscript{18} style, repetitive thematic verses incorporating call and response, subject matter dealing with wandering, as well as the trials and tribulations of oppressed peoples in the United States. 

The aforementioned Charley Patton, King of the Delta Blues, is the case in point as we examine this musical phenomenon. The blues emerged out of a juncture—between plantation owner, sharecropper and displaced Indian, holiness and devilry, wandering and permanence, north and south, man and woman—and Patton embodied it, borrowing musical techniques and subject matter from all of these cultural backgrounds. The recurring theme of the crossroads in blues music is no coincidence.

Patton was a person of mixed race, and his grandmother was an Indian with some black ancestry.\textsuperscript{19} His father was a man of God and initially despised Patton’s guitar playing, viewing it as the work of the Devil. By all accounts, Patton was an excessively mischievous soul, escaping his family frequently as a youth to perform with a group called the Chatmons, with whom he played contemporary numbers ranging from ragtime\textsuperscript{20}, Tin Pan Alley\textsuperscript{21}, vaudeville\textsuperscript{22} and minstrel show\textsuperscript{23} music that undoubtedly affected his formation as a musician. While his proclivity for showmanship must have been innate, his father’s decision to move to the Dockery Plantation in search of better economic opportunities was the single event that solidified his destiny as a bluesman. On the plantation, he met a man named Henry Sloan, who played a different style of music, and very well may have been the first “real” bluesman. Patton latched on to Sloan, quickly developing into an artistic genius and a walking controversy as his blues techniques developed. Reputedly, he avoided fieldwork like the plague, played parties to earn his keep, and was known for his drunken revelry, mistreatment and abandonment of women, not to mention incessant wanderings. In this way, he is the archetype of the black male performer, continually flying away from his strife and leaving grounded women behind to suffer. Palmer concludes that Patton,

“Created an enduring body of American music, for he personally inspired just about every Delta bluesman of consequence, and some blueswomen as well. He is among the most important musicians the

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twentieth century has produced...yet we know little about his formative years, and practically nothing about how he learned his art” (Palmer 57).

The aforementioned “juncture” from which blues emerged manifests itself through Patton. Further exploration of his life story confirms that he never seemed to fit in anywhere in his life—he remained an outcast from his family, his lovers, the common plantation society, from Blacks, Whites, even from the Indian nation. Perhaps he never really visited the “Nation,” as he claims in *Down the Dirt Road Blues*. He may have merely been enunciating, within the hollow remnants of a previous indigenous nation, the feelings of isolation from the various ethnic groups to which he might have pertained, but was denied access. As I elaborate in my analysis of *Down the Dirt Road Blues*, Patton’s inability to affirm his hybrid identity could have been the seed that determined the tone and cadence of the blues as it wandered from the Mississippi Delta to Chicago, and eventually to a global listenership. Considering Patton’s overwhelming influence on the evolution of blues and the indigenous thread in his subject matter, it is evident that the confrontation with unacknowledged hybridity played a significant role in the development of the infamous tone of blues music.

**Nuances of Indigeneity and Negritude**

While Palmer’s *Deep Blues* is a powerful and insightful work, certainly deserving of all of the accolades it has received, it is guilty of a classical western theoretical flaw. Palmer’s identification of the blues as a purely Black genre constitutes an oversimplification of ethnicity—my own investigation into Patton’s blurry past covered in the previous section speaks to this matter directly. If the father of the genre could not be classified according to the prevalent binary coding system, what does that say about ethnicity in the genre, and in the American nation?

When viewing oppression and racial politics in the United States, critics must remind themselves that, “in their conquest of the New World, Europeans were determined to use both dark peoples” (Katz 7). Exploitation was multi-faceted and often designed to alienate two groups from one another, but it was not always successful, as Paul Pasquaretta mentions in his study of the red-black connection in Toni Morrison’s text. As the abrupt compartmentalization of ethnicities that is now a defining
Many peoples of African descent, slave and free alike, spoke indigenous languages, sang indigenous songs, wore indigenous styles of clothing, and married indigenous people. For many blacks, Indian Territory represented a possible safe haven from racism and slavery. In some cases, as with the Seminole in Florida, escaped slaves were fully integrated into the nation as coequal members. During slavery, a colored person could achieve a greater degree of liberty if he or she could pass for an American Indian” (Pasquaretta 283).

Milkman Dead’s vision quest is precisely about reclaiming this stolen knowledge, conquering epistemic violence and finding one’s roots. An embodiment of the red-black connection in and of himself, Milkman accomplishes what Patton never could in his ramblings, and thus takes after heroes such as Frederick Douglass, Langston Hughes, Crispus Attucks, Negro Abraham and Okah Tubbee in the recovery of a hybrid concept of self that does not conform to binary constructions of identity.

The red-black connection has followed a continuous strand since the not well-known first attempted colonization of North America by the Spanish Lucas Ayllón in 1526. Black and red peoples have continuously interacted in varying capacities, ranging from maroon colonies to slave hunters to co-equals in Indigenous Nations to posses in the “wild west” to co-inhabitants of lands annexed by the manifest destiny obsessed United States. In the musical sense, following the Civil War, Black minstrel and Indian medicine show performers sang original pop tunes and Tin Pan Alley facsimiles, tunes that were assimilated into black folk tradition and culture with an indigenous influence.

At the onset of the twentieth century, during the same time period when blues emerged, a new music of Indigenous subject matter had come into the limelight of American mainstream culture. Sonic manifestations of indigeneity rapidly infiltrated the majority of genres, and while these representations were superficial caricatures produced by the White hegemony, they did reach a wider audience through this medium. Such songs were common in vaudeville, Tin Pan Alley, bandstands, jazz clubs and dance halls. As a response to their superficial representation in the increasing accessible media, “dozens of all-Indian bands traversed the country, performing Indianness to access new audiences and to express pride in their heritage in the midst of the government’s campaign of allotment and assimilation” (Troutman 208). Indians were being
persecuted by the Office of Indian Affairs, which tried to strip them of their religious ceremonies, music and dance with restrictive policies in the 1920's. This attempt to de-culture Indigenous Nations is reminiscent of the prohibition of drums of any kind among African slaves in the southern United States, which led to the implementation of the guitar as the main blues instrument. Despite the continuous attempts by the White hegemony to smother rhythm, syncopation and dance, their efforts would be in vain. According to Pasquaretta:

“The influence of Native Americans on the development of the blues is evident in a white missionary’s description of a Cherokee dance in the early nineteenth century. The writer describes lines of men and women dancing all night, ‘laughing,’ ‘hallooing,’ and ‘yelling,’ as the leader sings extemporaneously about his exploits. Many of the things described in the report, including the steady rhythm, the call and response between audience and leader, and the improvised lyrics are also features of African American musical traditions” (Pasquaretta 284).

Native American traditions may have survived through blues music. The historical negation of hybrid identities, similarities of the experiences of red and black peoples, and the haunting overtones of Patton’s *Down the Dirt Road Blues* provide an incentive to at least entertain this notion. In the first pages of *Deep Blues*, Palmer describes legend Muddy Waters’ vocal style as “chantlike” (4). So many scholars and historians have studied the blues and easily identified the links to African traditions and slave experiences. Palmer lists jump-ups, field hollers, songster ballads, church music and African percussive music as the sources for blues. Did not roaming songsters ever hear indigenous chants? What of Native American percussion and dance? Could maroon slaves have experienced the music of Indigenous Nations and then returned to the fields with new inspirations for their hollers? Would not blues players have lived and encountered indigenous subject matter in their formative years?

A lack of historical documentation could prevent insight into these issues indefinitely. Yet there is one more aspect of the blues that is fit to mention, as it is quite relevant to this inquiry. In the documentary *Feel Like Going Home*, a film designed to raise awareness of the blues and its contribution to American culture, executive producer Martin Scorsese repeatedly emphasizes the figurative subversive language of the blues. The viewer learns that while a bluesman seems to be singing about a woman that has done him wrong, the subject matter of his blues is usually much
more panoramic. The woman functions allegorically as the ‘bossman,’ or the White hegemony, in some cases the entire matrix of domination that has fallen on the shoulders of the subaltern. A less literal examination of the subject matter of blues lyrics could yield responses to these burning questions about indigeneity. Importantly, blues songs function the same way as Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* as they relate to a subaltern discourse—both perform as counter-discursive texts that reclaim ownership of tradition and artistic technique while allegorically reconstructing identity. This subversive use of language is the mechanism that authors and blues musicians alike implement in their endeavors to enunciate a subaltern voice.

**Down the Dirt Road Blues: An Aperture for Revisionism**

*Down the Dirt Road Blues* by Charlie Patton

I'm goin' away, to a world unknown
I'm goin' away, to a world unknown
I'm worried now, but I won't be worried long
My rider got somethin', she's tryin'a keep it hid
My rider got somethin', she's tryin'a keep it hid
Lord, I got somethin' to find that somethin' with
I feel like choppin', chips flyin' everywhere
I feel like choppin', chips flyin' everywhere
I been to the Nation, oh Lord, but I couldn't stay there
Some people say them oversea blues ain't bad
(Spoken: Why, of course they are)
Some people say them oversea blues ain't bad
(Spoken: What was a-matter with 'em?!)
It must not a-been them oversea blues I had
Every day seem like murder here
(Spoken: My God, I'm no sheriff)
Every day seem like murder here
I'm gonna leave tomorrow, I know you don't bid my care
Can't go down any dirt road by myself
Can't go down any dirt road by myself
(Spoken: My Lord, who ya gonna carry?)
I don't carry my, gonna carry me someone else
Source: Lyricstime.com

Immediately apparent in my reading of this song are the haunting overtones and Amerindian cadence that emanate from Patton’s percussive guitar style. His bellowing, whooping vocals draw attention to form
before content; and the airy, leathery texture accentuate the nuances of his
guitar work while functioning as a supplement to the rhythm. Patton
clearly plays the guitar as a percussive as well as a melodic instrument. The
prolonged enunciation of his syllables facilitates the chantlike delivery of
his verses, as in “I’m goin’ awa—a—a—y,” and underwrites their linguistic
significance.

Patton then speaks of his rider, referring to his woman, his latest
fling perhaps, who is hiding something from him. But if viewed
allegorically through the framework that blues great Taj Mahal suggests in
Scorcese’s film (a viewpoint corroborated by Robert Palmer in Deep Blues),
Patton’s “rider” might function as an analogy for a struggle more
panoramic than his lover’s treachery. If the “rider” were constructed as
Patton’s courtship with a society that estranged him, the mysterious entity
would be his true identity, and his affirmation of a hybrid identity through
blues music would be the “somethin’ he’s got to find that somethin’ with.”

Applying the same allegorical analysis to the following phrase begs the
question, “chips of what flying everywhere?” Patton could be referring to
chopping wood to ease his stress, yet as he was known as a scrawny man
who avoided manual labor at all costs, the phrase is likely metaphorical.
There is a strong possibility that he is making a reference to a splintered,
fractured identity.

As previously mentioned, regardless of whether or not Patton
actually visited the Nation, his phrase, “I been to the Nation, oh Lord, but I
couldn’t stay there,” speaks directly to the complex identity politics of the
red-black connection. Patton’s race was a point of contention among his
contemporaries, some of whom claimed he “looked like a Mexican32,” while
his famous colleague Howlin’ Wolf33 hypothesized that he was a full
blooded Cherokee. Not seen as Black by his African friends, he certainly
did not qualify as White and was rejected by the Indian Nation. Moreover,
Patton was accused of not being his father’s son on account of his skin
color. It is no small wonder he chose “carry him someone else,” roaming
from town to town, woman to woman in order to hide from himself.
While misogynist and irresponsible at best, Patton’s agony as embodied in
his music planted the seed of the Delta blues and “inspired just about every
Delta bluesman of consequence” (Palmer 57). This agony and subsequent
artistic production was at least in part a result of a struggle with personal
racial hybridity, which positions the entanglement of the red-black
connection squarely in the heart of the father of the Delta blues.

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When compared with other contemporary Patton songs, the hybridity manifested in *Down the Dirt Road Blues* becomes more apparent. Recordings like *High Sheriff Blues* and *Mean Black Cat Blues* both exhibit similar vocal styles, but are characterized by a more relaxed cadence. *High Sheriff* lacks the powerful soundboard\textsuperscript{34} percussion particular to *Down the Dirt Road Blues*, while *Black Cat* contains a soft tapping style. *High Sheriff Blues* talks rather literally about Patton’s experience with a “Mr. Will,” who jailed him, while *Black Cat’s* content is highly allegorical in my reading,

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It’s a mean black cat lord, clawing at my door
It’s a mean black cat lord, clawing at my door
I’m going down to Louisiana where I won’t hear it whine no more
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The black cat can be interpreted as a woman with whom Patton had become entangled, or in a similar figurative pattern to my previous analysis of *Down the Dirt Road Blues*, as the cruel reality disturbing Patton’s psyche. The identification of blackness with negativity and the Other may constitute a negation of certain aspects of Patton’s racial composition in this case.

Other Patton recordings such as *I Shall Not Be Moved* and *Mississippi Boweavil Blues*, exhibit a country twang, hints of bluegrass and a lively meter and melody that might have been influenced by Tin Pan Alley songs that Patton performed with the Chatmons. These recordings are markedly different—Patton does not invoke the “chantlike” melodies, the depth of the vibrato in his voice or the percussive soundboard techniques previously mentioned. These songs also lack the allegorical characteristics of *Mean Black Cat* and *Down the Dirt Road Blues*. This is an important variation. Patton seems to employ such techniques in songs whose subject matter deals with the suffering associated with oppression. This subject matter is that which inspired future blues musicians, and these techniques (bellowing, chantlike, inflected vocals, allegory in lyrical content, repeated verses leading to a refrain) are the ones that contributed most significantly to the development of the musical characteristics of the genre. Thus, according to my analysis, Patton’s lyrical and physical expression of his red-black heritage through his music was the element that most meaningfully influenced the evolution of the blues.
The Blues Song of Solomon/Milkman the Bluesman

It is no coincidence that Toni Morrison juxtaposes Milkman’s contemplations of Indigenous lore and famous bluesmen near the culmination of her novel, as the protagonist returns to his home propelled by a new life force and enlightenment. She paints his autumn journey in a deliberate prose:

“He looked out the window. Ohio, Indiana, Michigan were dressed up like the Indian warriors from whom their names came... He read the road signs with interest now, wondering what lay beneath the names. How many dead lives and fading memories were buried in and beneath the names of the places in this country. He closed his eyes and thought of the black men...Their names. Names they got from yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes, weaknesses. Names that bore witness. Macon Dead, Sing Byrd...Muddy Waters, Pinetop, Jelly Roll, Fats, Leadbelly, Bo Diddley...”

(Morrison 330-331)

This is a crucial moment in the novel, as Milkman processes what he has learned about names, and how significant their misconceptions can be. His grandfather Jake nearly lost his heritage when his name was mistaken for Macon Dead. In a similar fashion, Jake’s ghost appeared to Pilate to tell her “sing!” Jake was telling her, embrace your Indian heritage, know your ancestor, or conceivably just crying out to his lost wife, which Pilate witnessed due to her spiritual proximity to him. In either case, Pilate heard something different—sing the blues. And so, she proceeded to do so throughout her life. This crucial misconception solidifies the essential theme of naming in Song of Solomon, and as relevant to this analysis, reinstates a long-forgotten linkage between African & Native American experiences, and their manifestation in blues music.

Notwithstanding Toni Morrison’s expertise (or lack thereof) on Delta Blues, a comparison of Milkman and Patton is in order. According to Joyce Wegs in her analysis of Morrison’s blues language, “Milkman Dead only gradually becomes a real blues man, for he needs first to find his own identity and then to find a sense of community with his people” (173). Milkman follows the trajectory that a tortured bluesman like Patton might have been able to if the proper spirits appeared to him, and if he had lived later in the century when African Americans were more free. Both figures are kin to an Indigenous grandmother who has faded from the picture, and a Black father who has accepted the white man’s ways. Both feel estranged.
in their communities, unsatisfied with mundane life and are implored to wander by their restless spirits. Both drink irresponsibly and dispense with women as they see fit. The parallels are many, and are due to the construction of Milkman as an archetypal black male instead of a direct and deliberate correlation.

The significant derivative of this comparison, which historicizes Milkman’s persona, is Morrison’s intention with the protagonist’s journey. While Patton dies alone, "Milkman finally realizes that a genuine bluesman does not really fly solo since he is connected musically to the other musicians, to their shared pasts; only as each bluesman adds his personal history to the shared past may he be said to launch into a solo flight" (Wegs 178). In the transition from the birth of the Delta blues in the early 20th century to the inflection of blues in Song of Solomon, a metamorphosis of the meaning of blues to the subaltern occurs. In Patton’s case blues is the manifestation of his suffering and often a vehicle for his own destruction; that nonetheless planted the seed that inspired and shaped a generation. Further inquiry into the fates of blues greats will confirm that this tendency was not unique to Patton. Distinctly, in Song of Solomon, blues function as “the vehicle through which characters come to a truer recognition of themselves and their history” (Pasquaretta 287). In both cases, while blues may not cure one’s ills by itself, blues music is essential in the healing process.

Furthermore, the codification of lineage that is embedded in both Down the Dirt Road Blues and the actual Song of Solomon further qualifies this comparison. First, there is a phonetic codification; a passive listener may find Patton’s crooning unintelligible, or may fail to derive ‘Solomon’ from Shalimar or better yet Shalleemone (Morrison 302). In both songs, the pronunciation and transmutation of language serve to mask hidden meanings. The second level of codification is literary; the figurative language of both songs requires the listener to engage and investigate in order to unearth allusions to effaced lineage. I propose that, just as the Song of Solomon acquires a new meaning for Milkman as he casts off the layers of codification and discovers the reality of his hybrid lineage, Charley Patton’s blues can acquire a new meaning for the listener who is willing to ask what is hidden beneath the code.

In my reading of Song of Solomon, Morrison asks us to do exactly that, suggesting that this process is not uniquely reserved for the characters in the novel. A reexamination of ourselves and our pasts is necessary as we move forward, and blues music functions as an ideal microcosm for such
an interrogation. We ought to find out what memories are buried in and beneath the names of this country—what fragments of a hybrid past can still be discovered that were not already incinerated by epistemic violence. The Red-Black connection illuminates an immense problematic for our contemporary society, one that has already been poignantly enunciated in Katz’s text that so irritated New York subway patrons during the 1980’s: “the Black Indian story has been treated as though it were a massive slave rebellion. Its final burial came at the hands of a later white generation who shaped a heritage for books and movies that ended all claims but white ones” (16).

Taking into consideration the profound impact of the blues on modern music, on a global scale, Morrison’s suggested investigation is meritorious. There are voices to be heard; voices of folks who do not possess Morrison’s prize-winning literary prowess, but nonetheless have a story to tell about how their individual heritage contributes to the patrimony of a shared and hybrid history.

Notes

1 The Red-Black connection term is coined in Pasquaretta’s article in order to refer to any historical interchange between African Americans and Native Americans.
2 As discussed in Gayatri Spivak’s Can the Subaltern Speak?
4 Pasquaretta 279.
5 Katz 107. Cherokees, Chickasaws, Choctaws, Creeks and Seminoles.
6 Cimarrón was the term applied to runaway slaves in the Spanish colonies, typically “maroon” in English.
7 Katz 10. He was an African American with Native blood.
8 Katz 56. From the beginning of its interest in Florida, the U.S. was astounded and infuriated by the easy mixture of races in the Seminole Nation.
9 Palmer 3: Johnson was the second great blues legend, reputedly a no-good rambler. He was poisoned to death by any and all accounts. He has been called the most influential of all bluesman.
10 Rumor has it Johnson made a deal with the devil in order to acquire his guitar skills.
11 Palmer 50. Dockery Plantation was attractive to blacks for fair treatment. Charley’s father Bill Patton was one of them. Some call it the birthplace of the blues.
12 See section: Down the Dirt Road Blues: An Aperture for Revisionism

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The Mississippi Delta is the northwest section of Mississippi between the Mississippi and Yazoo rivers. It is actually not a delta but a floodplain.

The term "songster" in this sense refers to a wandering musician, often African American, of the type that first appeared in the late 19th century in the southern United States. However, the term can generally be applied to either a writer or singer of any type or genre of song.

Slide guitar or bottleneck guitar is a blues-specific guitar method. The guitarist slides the object against the strings.

Ragtime was a musical genre popular at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Vaudeville was a theatrical genre of variety entertainment in the United States and Canada from the early 1880s until the early 1930s. Each performance was made up of a series of separate, unrelated acts grouped together on a common bill.

The minstrel show, or minstrelsy, was an American entertainment consisting of comic skits, variety acts, dancing, and music, performed by white people in blackface or, especially after the Civil War, black people in blackface.

The soundboard is the top of a guitar body.
35 Pasquaretta 284. “Sing Byrd functions as a sign that connects the blues tradition with the Indian tradition.”
36 Palmer 89. According to his death certificate, Patton expired in a house at 350 Heathman Street in Indianola, MS. The document only mentions a random name unknown to friends and family.
37 Pasquaretta 288. “While it may not heal by itself, music is necessary to the process of healing.”

References