Reading the Onomastic Text: 'The Politics of the Proper Name' in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

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> [l]et us activate the differences and save
> the honor of the name (Lyotard 1984, 82).

Critics of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* have concentrated on names' "meanings" in the novel and their role in defining various characters. The narrative implications of names, however, have been largely ignored. I address the relationship between naming and fictionality in the novel and regard the text as a maze of legends, tales, and histories of names and naming, where the main characters' search for these forgotten stories is a quest for identity.

Names play a crucial role in Toni Morrison's fiction, as the author herself has acknowledged.[1] Critics have insistently focused on Morrison's rich "denominative imagination," placing it against the background of the African-American tradition. Names constitute in Morrison "legacies" to be reconstituted (Fabre 1988, 109), and, to adapt Gérard Genette's remarks on the "poetics" of naming (1976), enshrine hidden denominations to be unearthed and assumed. Along these lines, I explore the fictional reverberations of these legacies in *Song of Solomon*. I am here particularly interested in how Morrison's characters trace names back to their always problematic origins as well as in the concrete, narrative implications of such a "genealogical archaeology" (Fabre 1988).

In *Song of Solomon*, names lie at the crossroads of the past and the present, the South and the North, fiction and reality, modern and archaic life-styles and social conventions. On the one hand, they stand as vivid

testimonies to a burdensome southern history, and on the other, they foreground the political and sociocultural condition of the black community in the Michigan town ironically named Mercy. As witnesses to the past, they epitomize an extensive logic of symbolic expropriation. Quite ironically, the *"proper* name" used to be a sign of an onomastic *impropriety*: African-Americans were given names by the *proprietor* (the slaveholder) without any concern for their identities. They were treated as objects, as mere pieces of "property." Morrison's novel shows how the descendants of slaves become their own masters by re-appropriating their "unsuited," initially "improper" names. This re-appropriation entails an enthralling fabulation around the semantic and phonic body of names, an epic search that constitutes the major source of fictionality in *Song of Solomon*. Socially and politically motivated, the exploration of names comes down to a twofold, challenging immersion: temporally, in a remote past, and ontologically, in a mythic reality surrounding and always complicating names' origins. Indeed, as Karen Carmean maintains, "for African-Americans, the issue of names/identity/heritage may be infinitely complicated by the loss of an original family name" (1993, 47). At the same time, as Lucinda H. Mackethan points out, *Song of Solomon* plays on names and naming in ways that "place the novel squarely within Black American literature's dominant tradition," whose works "enact quest for identity within a culture which systematically denies the black person's right to both name and identity as a means of denying his or her humanity" (1986-1987, 200).[2] Posed in such political terms, the quest and question of identity in Morrison's novel, as organically related to names and naming, inform the fundamental impulse of "look[ing] at names as signs registering something more important underneath" (Carmean 1993, 47). Onomastic hermeneutics and cultural investigation take place within a particular sociopolitical framework. A real "politics of the proper name," to recall Derrida's title (1988), undergirds Morrison's analysis of the name-named relationship or the concern with the narrative functioning of the sign-names, with their bearing on the plot structure, on the ties between characters, and so forth. Not only are African-Americans fascinated with the genealogy of the name, with the past that gave birth to it; whether

"handsome" or "ugly," "proper" or "improper," once "honored," proudly borne in the present and engaged in its transformation, "the name...has its whole future before it" (Derrida 1988, 31). It engraves itself on communal memory by ensuring the named's name (*renom* 'fame, reputation'). Thus, the named and the name become one.

The characters' modes of dealing with their forenames and surnames is one of the novel's key aspects. Even though all of these names represent *given* names (whether first names, family names, or nicknames), they often are, so to speak, re-assumed, assigned new meanings. As we shall notice, in many cases names have initially been the offspring of an arbitrary denominative act, the effect of an external will that has ignored the individuality of the person (or place) to be named. They have thus illustrated the Nietzschean definition of naming as an expression of power relations: *Die Mächtigen sind es, welche die Namen geben* 'it is the powerful people who name' (1978, 83). An outcome of this kind of naming, the "unsuitable name" disregards the named person's elementary right to convey (and *be*), through the name, him- or herself. The name is "incorrect," Morrison's characters suggest, because it does not result from an option (or from a self-conscious option), denying the named the right to have his or her individuality inscribed in the name.[3]

Denominative acts occur in *Song of Solomon* both naturally "correctly" and unnaturally; that is, by neglecting the named person *as* a subject. To be appropriately named amounts to bringing out one's personality or "essence." The "right" name would socially put forth this essence, its unique force. *Le pouvoir d'essentialisation* 'the essentializing power' of the proper name (Barthes 1971, 160) appears, according to such a denominative logic, as tautological: power manifests as naming, rightly naming essentializes in the sense that it refers the name back to a person's essence, but, at the same time, doubles this indicial value by a symbolic and political one as it points to that person's authority on his or her essence, on his or her self, finally. Now, in a more recent sense of the term, when accomplished by an *external* denominative force, essentializing passes over and even symbolically does away with the organic differences whose interplay generates the other's being (Suleiman 1990, 126, 203), reduces his or her identity to a misrepresented representation, harmonized with the namer's beliefs,

interests, etc. And, as Morrison's names show, "representational politics" is always at stake in naming, misnaming, or renaming.

Far more emphatically than in other texts dealing with onomastic worlds, the theme of the name in *Song of Solomon* ties in with the issues of power, authority, autonomy and cultural difference. Self-denomination, that is, the capacity to name your place and your being, is a marker of self-determination. Naming yourself means defining yourself and ultimately "owning" yourself since "definitions belong to the definers—not the defined," as Morrison stresses in *Beloved* (1987, 190). This may, in fact, explain why the whole existence of the African-American community in Mercy revolves around the magic of names. Topological metaphors are central tropes in *Song of Solomon*, shedding a revelatory light on the people living in the neighborhood, on their will to bring forward, sometimes ironically, placenames that express their life. As early as in the novel's first page, we are offered an example of what might be called denominative autonomy. The urban axis of the zone inhabited by blacks, which bears a specific relevance to this type of allegoric independence, is a street called

> Not Doctor Street, a name the post office did not recognize. Town maps registered the street as Mains Avenue but the only colored doctor in the city had lived and died on that street, and when he moved there in 1896, his patients took to calling the street, which none of them lived in or near, Doctor Street. Later, when other Negroes moved there, and when the postal service became a popular means of transferring messages among them, envelops from Louisiana, Virginia, Alabama, and Georgia began to arrive addressed to people at house numbers on Doctor Street. The post office workers returned these envelopes or passed them to the Dead Letter Office. Then in 1918, when colored men were being drafted, a few gave their address at the recruitment office as Doctor Street. In that way, the name acquired a quasi-official status. (3-4)

But this status does not last for long because "some of the city legislators, whose concern for appropriate names and the maintenance of the city's landmarks was the principal part of their political life, saw to it that 'Doctor Street' was never used in any official capacity" and consequently "had notices posted in the stores, barbershops, and restaurants" in Southside (the black neighborhood), stating that the much

disputed artery "had always been and would always be known as Mains Avenue and not Doctor Street" (4). Responding to the official pressure to change a name legitimated by local human realities, residents call the avenue "Not Doctor Street." They resist political authority by ironically using not the officially accepted denomination, but the negation of the initial name ("*Not* Doctor Street"). This negation *affirms* the original name, puts it forward forcefully at the same time that it affects submission to the city legislators.

There are two possible attitudes toward names in *Song of Solomon* (and other texts by Morrison [Stein 1980]), reactions which occur when names are viewed as "improper." In the first case, the name exists, in fact preexists, as a sort of *datum* which might be or might be not accepted by its bearer, by those who claim a specific relation with the place a toponym designates, and so on. It carries a meaning in which the Southside people, for example, cannot recognize themselves. Consequently, they rename the street, or come back to its initial name, which in fact is the same thing. The renaming through which they redefine both the word and themselves sets forth their personality, brings about a spectacular change of nominal status: it is only now that the placename becomes a *proper* placename; it responds to the authoritarian denominative logic of the "legend" laid down in the city map by ironically setting off the residents' own legends, myths, and ancient stories of names. The previous, inconvenient logic has confined the name to a narrow definition. As this definition actually marked off the African-Americans' identity, renaming strives to reincopororate this identity, have it reinscribed in the name. To be sure, being yourself is creating your name or the name of the place where you live.

The second attitude involves reexplaining and even recreating the meaning of proper names, of names that cannot or should not be changed. From the novel's first pages, the reader is struck by the characters' odd family names, given names, or nicknames. Most of these were assigned at random to African-Americans by different individuals and institutions, as unavoidable symbols of *domination* and (or *as*) *denomination*. Blacks got and, according to Guitar, may still be "get[ting] their names the way they get everything else—the best way

they can" (88). This procedure skips the named person's autonomy and/or real identity. Ontologically, politically and semantically, the name bespeaks both misjudgment and abuse. One cannot emphasize enough that the semiotics of naming is frequently in Morrison also a semiotics of oppression, a reaction to that initial misnaming perceived as violence, abuse, disregard. In this view, names could be read, written, uttered, or manipulated in *Song of Solomon* as a deprivation of humanity and independence, a foremost sign of the latter being, symbolically, the inscription of the former through "personalized" names. Remarkably, the greatest challenge the named may take entails an "appropriative" interpretation of the arbitrarily given name, its filling with the unmistakable, human content of a proud, responsible life. The proper name may have been originally imposed by mistake or abuse, but it can be eventually reappropriated, relegitimated. It might seem meaningless at first, but, as Morrison's characters show, one can make it meaningful. In fact, a careful reader of *Song of Solomon* may discover that there are actually no "meaningless"[4] names in the novel. Once you know your name, though it may appear nonsensical or even ludicrous, you are responsible for giving it a *sense*. In this light, living esentially means living up to your name as it is stands and sounds, that is, living "in the name of the name," honoring it, "put[ting] one's name on the line (with everything a name involves)" (Derrida 1988, 10, 7). Indeed, "You should hang on to it, for unless it is noted down and remembered, it will die when you do" (333), Guitar tells Milkman. It could have been picked up at random by owners or, later on, by parents but you can ennoble it, make it appear as the only one fitting you, a sign that bears "witness" (333).[5]

The complex anthropological value of onomastic signs is clearly underscored in *Song of Solomon*. Let us recall, for instance, the long list of proper names the narrator provides through Milkman toward the end of the novel:

> He closed his eyes and thought of the black men in Shalimar, Roanoke,
> Petersburg, Newport News, Danville, in the Blood Bank, on Darling
> Street, in the pool halls, the barbershops. Their names. Names they got
> from yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes, weaknesses. Names that
> bore witness. Macon Dead, Sing Byrd, Crowell Byrd, Pilate, Reba,

Hagar, Magdalene, First Corinthians, Milkman, Guitar, Railroad Tommy, Hospital Tommy, Empire State (he just stood around and swayed), Small Boy, Sweet, Circe, Moon, Nero, Humpty-Dumpty, Blue Boy, Scandinavia, Quack-Quack, Jericho, Spoonbread, Ice Man, Dough Belly, Rocky River, Gray Eye, Cock-a-Doodle-Doo, Cool Breeze, Muddy Waters, Pinetop, Jelly Roll, Fats, Lead-belly, Bo Diddley, Cat-Iron, Peg-Leg, Son, Shortstuff, Smoky Babe, Funny Papa, Bukka, Pink, Bull Moose, B. B., T-Bone, Black Ace, Lemon, Washboard, Gatemouth, Cleanhead, Tampa Red, Juke Boy, Shine, Staggerlee, Jim the Devil, Fuck-up, and *Dat Nigger*. (333-334)

"Angling out from these thoughts of names was one more," the narrator goes on, Guitar's name, which originates in a childhood episode "down home in Florida" (45). Guitar is a distinct figure in the story, important because he is the one who is looking for a vindictive way out of the social and denominative confines. He holds a significant opinion on his name. When Milkman refers to Guitar's name and the violent solution the latter has embraced, Guitar replies that to him names make no difference. There would be no point, he insists, in calling himself "X," like the famous "red-headed Negro" (161), just to once again stress his "independence" from the system of oppression his actual patronym (Bains) carries over from the past. "I do accept it" [my name], he insists. "It's part of who I am. Guitar is *my* name. Bains is the slave master's name. And I'm all of that. Slave names don't bother me; but slave status does" (161). Guitar tolerates the name that had originally designated his very lack of freedom, but tries to give it a new meaning by bestowing on his life a new sense.

In fact, most of the proper names listed above are nicknames, names essentially received, imposed by others. Results of a "blind" (71) or "foolish misnaming" (18), some of these were grabbed by relatives, masters or various authorities from lists and texts that bore no direct relevance to the named or were only a "joke," a "disguise," a "brand name" (17). Macon Dead, for instance, is an utter denominative aberration, a "name scrawled in perfect thoughtlessness by a drunken Yankee in the Union Army" (18), who mixed the person's place of birth and status of parents (they were "dead").[6] The name was recorded as such in the register of the Freedmen's Bureau, which, ironically, was supposed to list the liberated slaves, to actually *mark* their liberation. In

a way, though, the new name does suggest the recently acquired
freedom by "wip[ing] out the past" encapsulated in the former slave's
patronym. Unlike Fabre (1988, 108), I would contend that it is only
through these new, albeit often odd names, that formerly disenfranchis-
ing patronyms become really "dead," whereas a family name like
"Dead" demarcates the beginning of a true life for the named. This is
precisely why Sing, the Native American wife of Macon Dead's father,
demands that her husband keep his new name.

The Bible is another source of bizarre names by virtue of its
strange, fascinating graphic symbolism.[7] However, and notwithstanding
Pilate's astonishing acquaintance with the Bible (208), biblic literacy is
by far less important in the choosing of names. Skimming through the
Bible, parents have simply made a "blind selection of names" (18) for
their sons and daughters by choosing groups "of letters that seemed" to
them "strong and handsome": Magdalene—whom everybody call Lena,
Hagar, Pilate (the woman without a navel), and even the bizarre phrase
First Corinthians. Pilate's father, for instance, "copied out of the Bible"
(53) the only word he ever wrote, his daughter's name, which, quite
significantly, happens to be a man's name. Nonetheless, the proud,
powerful, and mysterious Pilate will literally bear and treasure her
name. She will "house her name" written on a "scrap of brown paper"
in an earring made out of a little box (168). Later on, in the family's
tradition, Pilate will also use the sacred nomenclature to pick up a name
for her daughter Rebecca (shortened to Reba) (147-148). In general, the
named do not abandon but keep these names, trying, as I have pointed
out, to "dignify" them, to bestow on them a sense likely to neutralize
or "rationalize" their odd origin. Creating their own life, people
recreate, as it were, their names. These retroactively become a matter
of free choice and "deep personal pride" (38) and are therefore treated
with "respect" and "awe" (19). As Lucinda H. Mackethan observes,
"What Milkman can learn from all his relationships is that the power to
give a name is a trifle; the power to give a name its meaning is the
power over life itself" (1986-1987, 206). This explains why the
character becomes very "possessive about his name" (38), which he
originally hated (88) as much as he hated the nickname "he was never
able to shake" (15). Significantly, Milkman's father, Macon Dead, also

detests the "nickname that stuck in spite of his own refusal to use it or acknowledge it." In fact, "it was a matter that concerned him a good deal, for the giving of names," he thinks, "was always surrounded by what he believed to be monumental foolishness" (15). Nonetheless, though he has since long lost the ability to "read" the stories (Fabre 1988, 108) behind names, Macon Dead still feels that his son's nickname is not "clean":

> Without knowing any of the details, however, he guessed, with the accuracy of a mind sharpened by hatred, that the name he heard school-children call his son, the name he overheard the ragman use when he paid the boy three cents for a bundle of old clothes—he guessed that this name was not clean. Milkman. It certainly didn't sound like the honest job of a dairyman, or bring to his mind cold bright cans standing on the back porch, glittering like captains on guard. It sounded dirty, intimate, and hot. He knew that wherever the name came from, it had something to do with his wife and was, like the emotion he always felt when thinking of her, coated with disgust. (15)

Macon's intuition is correct, though, insofar as he vaguely senses the "story" lurking underneath his son's nickname. As a grown boy, Milkman was still nursed by Ruth, whose relation with her father carries over into the oedipal scene involving herself and her son.

Etymology and eponymy are constant preoccupations in *Song of Solomon*. They represent forms of the same mythopoetic deciphering of the name, of the same archaeological reading of surface names in order to retrieve and appropriate the hidden ones. Certainly, no linguistic rigor is to be expected here, but a certain kind of poetic imagination that stimulates onomastic readings such as the one Guitar attempts in the southern town where the quest for a mythic past has led him and Milkman:

> Everybody in this town is named Solomon, he thought wearily. Solomon's General Store, Luther Solomon (no relation), Solomon's Leap, and now the children were singing "*Solomon* don't leave me" instead of "*Sugar-man.*" Even the name of the town sounded like Solomon: Shalimar, which Mr. Solomon and everybody else pronounced *Shalleemone.* (305)

In fact, poetry here implies an imaginative reconstruction of the meaning of a word or proper name, a semantic operation which Morri-

son's characters undertake by resorting to myths, legends, and tales
handed down from generation to generation. They rename and/or
redefine the already-named, thus bringing out a particular ethic of
naming, an ethos of freedom. Renaming the name essentially asserts the
individual's right of questioning the extant rules of naming. From a
syntactic viewpoint, these rules raise the question of *ordering*, of the
political implications of any taxonomy.[8] Semantically, they center on
what Roland Barthes (1971) has called the "geologic perspective" of the
sign. In this view, one could argue that Morrison's characters "X-ray"
names, which brings out *la mythologie blanche* 'the white mythology'
(Derrida 1972, 274-324) that eternally complicates the onomastic text by
involving the name's "truth" in a continuous self-differentiation. In
other words, beneath names' phonic body, a secret truth lies, a meaning
which reveals the fictions, tropes, myths, tales and eponymic values that
constitute it and somewhat hints at its wrong, abusive, or simply
unsatisfactory explanation. In this sense, Morrison's "genealogical
archaeology" (Fabre 1988) may recall the Nietzschean notion of
genealogy. Very much like Nietzsche's, Morrison's own genealogy sets
out to uncover the politics[9] belying the act of naming, the passions,
struggles, and conflicts at stake in the invention of names.

The cultural imagination with its mythic and folkloric projections
reshapes, alters extant nicknames and surnames or creates new names
or new meanings for the persons, places or things already named. One
may contend, in this respect, that Morrison's people act like Platonic
logothetes of sorts, with a political agenda. They challenge the social
and even divine authority on the ground of creation of/by names. This
is perhaps the symbolic meaning of the Bible as a rewritten nomencla-
ture in *Song of Solomon*. One of the novel's characters, for instance,
overtly rejects the absoluteness of the great "Book of Names;" he
becomes far more attracted by the "gossip, stories, legends, specula-
tions" (327) molding the mythic sense of the name, a sense violently
repressed by the blunt principle of the onomastic list or "identification
card." This reference characteristically spins out a sort of compensatory
world of fabulation, a fundamental element in the text's fictional
apparatus. Again, names are condensed stories and, if not elucidated
through available tales, cast a spell on people, carry them away, project

them into a whole fictional universe, finally even transport them—figuratively and literally—to an original, southern geography that had witnessed the names' creation. This is actually the symbolic journey that Milkman and Guitar undertake, a journey in space and time, as I argued above, but a journey in the history of names as well. In the South, where "collective memories [are] kept alive through names" (Fabre 1988, 113), names and stories of naming still belong to the same world. Unlike the northern places where the main characters of *Song of Solomon* live, the southern rural world of their ancestors rests on the co-presence of reality and myth and uses the latter to explain or, better put, to "interpret" the former. In fact, as I mentioned, the origins or explanations of names are in Morrison almost always problematic. Even though one could identify the event or the person responsible for the naming, further modifications of the name or interpretations of its meaning always complicate, re-encode that origin or sense. In this view, Milkman, the main searcher for origins—that is, for names' origins—in the novel, cannot but always surmise, conjecture, venture a guess. While a southerner like Calvin seems to live in intimate touch with natural objects "as a blind man caresses a page of Braille, pulling meaning through his fingers" (282), Milkman feels alienated, shut off from nature, customs, folklore, and, of course, names, with their strange sounds and incomprehensible meanings. Starting off as a search for Pilate's "gold," Milkman's quest for the past, for his own past and the stories borne by the names in his family, turns into an initiation in a language "before language,...before things were written down" (281). This adamic, universal language through which beasts, trees, and humans talked to each other, in which there was no gap between the name and the named, lives on in stories of naming. Closest to this natural mode of communication, children's songs open up to him an entirely new universe:

> He almost shouted when he heard 'Heddy took him to a red man's house.'
> Heddy was Susan Byrd's grandmother on her father's side, and therefore
> Sing's mother too. And 'red man's house' must be a reference to the Byrds
> and Indians. Of course! Sing was an Indian or part Indian and her name
> was Sing Byrd or, more likely, Sing Bird. No—Singing Bird! That must
> have been her name originally—Singing Bird. And her brother, Crowell

> Byrd, was probably Crow Bird, or just Crow. They had mixed their Indian names with American-sounding names. Milkman had four people now that he could recognize in the song: Solomon, Jake, Ryna and Heddy, and a veiled reference to Heddy's Indianness. All of which seemed to put Jake and Sing together in Shalimar, just as Circe had said they were. He couldn't be mistaken. These children were singing a story about his own people! He hummed and chuckled as he did his best to put it all together. (307)

"Putting together," finding the "many many missing pieces" (308), conjecturing and making up for the lacking or fallacious information are part of the initiation Milkman goes through but also a core component of the novel's narrative apparatus. Again, this is an initiation in the language names and naming tales speak while conveying "unbelievable but entirely possible stories" (35). Milkman becomes suddenly alert to the onomastic world, to names, titles, signs, roads, "wondering what lay beneath the names...how many dead lives and fading memories were buried in and beneath the names or the places in this country...the other names...[u]nder the recorded names" (333).

The imaginative rebuilding of the mythic semantics of the word and of the world is particularly productive in *Song of Solomon*. One can illustrate (in all senses) a name, one can treat it aesthetically or manifest it socially in such ways that the name may assume mythic meanings. Furthermore, there is a strange "poetic sensibility" (193) that makes individuals attach themselves to people holding, for instance, a peculiar name like *Corinthians Dead*. The unusual, apparently arbitrary name finally brings out an ethos of renaming and recreation, ultimately functioning as a metaphor of liberty. The subtle interplay of the anthropological, topological, onomastic (mainly patronymic), and political dimensions of names structures the fictional world of *Song of Solomon*. Geographically, socially, and linguistically "de-territorial-ized," dis-placed and fictionally re-placed, named and un-named at the same time, Morrison's characters regain their own place, the symbolic site of naming. Baptizing streets, towns and actually rebaptizing themselves, naming places and placing names, they design and give life to their own, unique room in the language house of being, a privileged space wherein words, fiction, and mythology interweave to articulate an original poetics of naming.

Notes

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1. See, for instance, Robert Stepto's interview with Toni Morrison "Intimate Things in Place: A Conversation with Toni Morrison" (in Mackethan 207).

2. For the crucial relation between name and identity in *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby*, and other novels by Morrison also see Stein (1980), Fishman (1984), Rabinowitz (1983), and Smith (1993). Regarding a more detailed discussion of the issue of naming in African-American literature, see Lucinda Mackethan's comprehensive bibliography (1986-1987), which includes essays by Ralph Ellison, Lloyd W. Brown, Michael Cooke, Kimberley W. Benston, Margaret M. Dunn, and Ann R. Morris.

3. "A name is correct," Michael D. Palmer points out in his analysis of the denomination theory Plato developed in the *Cratylus*, "not only if it successfully (and directly) refers to a real unit or kind of object, but if it also discloses the *ousia* 'essence' of the thing, or correctly describes it. A name is correct, as Socrates says, if 'the *ousia* of the thing named remains in force and is made plain in the name....Since *ousiai*, and not the namemaker's preconceptions about reality, provide the only basis for any distinctions that can be called natural, and since names are given for the purposes of discriminating among things on the basis of these distinctions, Plato's view of the correctness of names may properly be called a 'nature' theory. Names are correct if and only if they are given in accordance with nature and adequately describe what they name" (1989, 127). Accordingly, one may argue, Morrison's novel lays the terms for a political analysis of "unnatural" naming.

4. Burelbach (1993) implies the contrary in his otherwise accurate survey of naming in African-American fiction by women (see especially 249).

5. In his Preface to *The Sublime Object of Ideology* by Slavoj Žižek, Ernesto Laclau insists on Žižek's analysis of "the retroactive effect of naming itself" (Žižek 1989, xiii), an effect that occurs in *Song of Solomon*. The name (the signifier) retroactively shores up the identity of the (named) object; in other words, its reconstruction comes to validate the named as a subject. The name's *reconstitution* through fabulation, storytelling, or concrete, violent resistance (for example, Guitar) practically *constitutes* the named. From a larger perspective, the characters' coming to terms with their names and origins—with the name as a trope of the origin —organizes their identity in the novel, draws their fictional profiles.

6. The Dead family's name makes me think of Derrida's note on the "name of the dead" à propos *Ecce Homo* in *Otobiographies. The Teaching of Nietzsche and the Politics of the Proper Name* (1988). As Derrida writes, "only the name can inherit [a benefit, fame, reputation, etc.], and this is why the name, to be distinguished from the bearer, is always and a priori a dead man's name, a name of death. What returns to the name never returns to the living. Nothing ever comes back to the living" (7). The named's life, Derrida goes on, "will be verified only at the moment the bearer of the name, the one whom we, in our prejudice, call living, will have died" (9). Now, if your name is Dead, if your name names death, it makes you already dead, as Milkman points out to Guitar (38, *passim*). Accordingly, the hero's posterity—the only one likely to return something to him—has already begun, and living means, once again, honoring the name, living in the name's name.

7. As Ruth Rosenberg reminds us in her article on naming in *Song of Solomon*, "it was the custom for the father [in the family of Toni Morrison's grandparents] to open the scriptures at random and allow his finger to travel the page so exposed. Whatever configuration of letters it stopped on, regardless of their meaning, was conferred upon the newborn child" (1987, 196).

8. See for example Foucault's commentary on the Chinese encyclopedia quoted by Borges (Foucault 1970, xix-xx).

9. It should be therefore in order to reproduce the entire context of the Nietzschean quotation I gave above: "Die erfinderische Kraft, welche Kategorien schafft, arbeitet in Dienste des Bedürfnisses, nämlich von Sicherheit, von schneller Verständlichkeit auf Grund fester Konvention von Zeichen; nicht um 'metaphysische Wharheit' dreht es sich.—Die Mächtigen sind es, welche die Namen geben." 'The power of invention, which creates categories, works in the service of necessity, namely of the necessity of certitude, of a quick comprehension grounded in a solid network of semiotic conventions—it is the powerful people who name' [translation mine].

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