Cultural Trauma and Cultural Identity: 
A Study of Pilate in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* 

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C-essay 
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Abstract

This essay is a study of the character Pilate in Toni Morrison’s novel *Song of Solomon*. It employs a postcolonial theoretical perspective in order to explore the cultural trauma that Pilate experiences in the aftermath of slavery. Furthermore, it analyses the impact of that trauma on the formation of Pilate’s own cultural identity.

When defining cultural trauma and cultural identity, the works of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Frantz Fanon are used. In this discussion, terms such as “double consciousness”, “unhomeness” and the “Other” are employed as a theoretical background to the analysis.

Pilate’s trauma consists of being an orphan. Moreover, she is rejected as “Other” both by her brother as well as by each society that she settles into. Although suffering from this trauma and being all alone in the world, Pilate manages to both affirm her cultural heritage as well as to use it in a positive way when dealing with the trauma and creating her own cultural identity. In her case, she is able to stay close to her roots and to avoid the feeling of double-consciousness and unhomeliness. Instead she has a solid foundation in her ancestral past and the cultural identity it represents.

Keywords: African-American, cultural trauma, cultural identity, identity formation, double consciousness, unhomeliness, the “Other”
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1 Introduction

The African-American experience of slavery and its impact on many generations forward is a recurrent theme in the fiction of Toni Morrison. In her 2010 study Race, Trauma, and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison, Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber says that Morrison’s characters “struggle for self-definition free of racial encumbrances and they often rely on different aspects of ‘home’ to survive their racial trauma” (1). Pilate in Song of Solomon is an example of such a character. Being African-American with former slaves as ancestors, she suffers from the trauma experienced by black people in America in the aftermath of slavery. She has suffered a traumatic past as an orphan since her father was killed by white men. Together with her brother, she was the witness of this tragic event when her father was shot sitting on a fence refusing to leave his property. Additionally, Pilate has never known her own mother, as she died giving birth to her. The trauma of Pilate is further emphasized by being marked as “Other” both by her brother and each community that she settles into. Schreiber claims that due to the rejection and isolation experienced by Pilate, she can rely on no one but herself, a knowledge that helps her to build her own identity (100).

Lois Tyson states, in his 2006 work Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide, that “a good deal of postcolonial criticism addresses the problem of cultural identity” (419) and he refers to critics such as Edward W. Said and Homi Bhabha when he seeks to define what cultural and postcolonial identity is built on. He states that a merger of the indigenous, pre-colonial culture and the culture of the colonizer has formed the postcolonial culture of the colonized people (419). During many years of colonization, the colonizer claimed that their culture was superior to the one of the colonized (Tyson 419). Western values, language, government, education etc. were imposed on the colonized people with the result that the indigenous culture was suppressed (Tyson 419). As the colonizer believed that their culture was the only civilized one, they defined native people as “savage, backward, and undeveloped” (Tyson 419). Thus, the native people were considered “Other”, different, inferior and not fully human.

Further, Tyson states that the colonial subjects often are described as having a “double consciousness”, a term first established by W. E. B. Du Bois in 1903, meaning that they perceive the world as being divided between two cultures: “that of the colonizer and that of the indigenous community” (421). This “double consciousness” often produces an unstable sense of self, a feeling of being caught between cultures and a sense of not belonging to any of them (Tyson 421). This trauma of cultural displacement is referred to by Homi Bhabha as
“unhomeliness”, which means “to feel not at home even in your own home because you are not at home in yourself” (Tyson 421). According to Tyson, another problem for the colonized people after emancipation is to reclaim their pre-colonial past (422). During many generations of colonial domination, when the native people were taught to believe in Western superiority and their own inferiority, much of their pre-colonial culture has been lost (Tyson 422).

The terms “Other”, “double consciousness” and “unhomeliness” referred to by Tyson have been widely explored by leading critics such as Edward W. Said, Homi Bhabha and Frantz Fanon. The definition of these terms will be further explained in the theory section of this essay. Additionally, several works of African-American writers, such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Toni Morrison, testify on the experience of being regarded as “Other”. In their works, the themes of cultural identity as well as the impact of colonialism, such as the feeling of “double consciousness” and “unhomeliness” are explored. Moreover, the fiction of Toni Morrison has been studied by several scholars both on a general level as well as through more extended analyses of each individual work. A selection of these various works will be used in this study of Pilate in *Song of Solomon*.

This study will employ a postcolonial perspective exploring the themes of cultural trauma and cultural identity. It will investigate the importance of the cultural heritage of Pilate’s ancestors in her process of dealing with her own trauma, as well as in the forming of her own cultural identity. I will argue that through her solid foundation in her roots and ancestral past, Pilate is able to build her new postcolonial cultural identity. It also helps her to find a way to avoid the feeling of “double consciousness” and “unhomeliness” in spite of her traumatic past due to slavery and its aftermaths.

2 Theory

2.1 Cultural Trauma and Cultural Identity

Ron Eyerman states that cultural trauma reflects the problems of black Americans being defined as other by the white culture and their exclusion from that culture (cited in Schreiber 3-4). Such exclusion and separation leads to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, something that causes a need to re-evaluate the past and its meaning when it comes to identity formation (Eyerman cited in Schreiber 4).

In their 2001 work *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*, Ron Eyerman and Steven Seidman discuss cultural trauma as well as its impact on
identity formation. According to Jeffrey Alexander et al., cultural trauma always engages a meaning struggle for the victim, who must identify the nature of the pain when dealing with a traumatic event (cited in Eyerman and Seidman 3). This trauma process is expressed by Alexander et al. as “a crisis of meaning and identity” (cited in Eyerman and Seidman 3). The cultural trauma process thus involves finding alternative strategies and voices as well as reinterpreting the past in order to reconcile present and future needs. It also involves “an openness to new forms of identification and the attempt to leave others behind” (Eyerman and Seidman 4). To recover from trauma, it is thus necessary to re-evaluate the past into present needs when forming a new cultural identity.

In his 1961 book *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon argues that a consequence of colonization is that the past as well as the culture of the colonized people are destroyed. The claim of the colonizer is that he will save the indigenous population from itself as well as from the misfortune and darkness they live in (Fanon 149). By demeaning indigenous history prior to colonization, the white oppressor imposes his laws, culture and values on the colonized people leading to the colonized confessing that their culture is inferior to the one of the colonizer. As a result, the colonized feel as if they are losing themselves and thus aim to find renewed contact with the oldest, inner essence of their people (Fanon 148). In this past, prior to colonial domination, they find that their culture is not shameful but something glorious and dignified to be proud of (Fanon 148).

To summarize, separation and exclusion due to trauma leads to a loss and crisis of identity and meaning. In dealing with this trauma and creating hope for the future, it is important to establish a connection to the ancestors and their culture when forming a new, postcolonial cultural identity.

2.2 “Double Consciousness” and “Unhomeliness”

In his 1903 work *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois claims that the feeling of double consciousness is a sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, i.e. the whites (cited in Schreiber 6). The effect is a wish to merge one’s double self into a better and truer self, without losing any of the older selves: “He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American” (Du Bois cited in Schreiber 5-6). Here, Du Bois defines the identity of the African-American as a merger between the old as well as the new cultural identity. When he argues that it is important not to lose the older selves, he means that the African ancestral heritage is important for the formation of a new African-
American identity. Thus, a solid foundation in the ancestor’s cultural identity is essential when dealing with cultural trauma and forming a new cultural identity in the present. Eyerman and Seidman also cite the work of Du Bois, stating that blacks in the United States are “American – by citizenship, political ideals, language, and religion – and African, as a member of a ‘vast historic race’ of separate origin from the rest of America” (63). Further, Eyerman and Seidman state that the suffering and trauma of slavery produce “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (63). The soul of the African-American is thus not unified and coherent but is rather two souls, characterized as a double consciousness (Eyerman and Seidman 64).

John McLeod explores the concept of “home” and migrant communities in his 2000 work *Beginning Postcolonialism*. In his analysis of Salman Rushdie’s essay “Imaginary Homelands” he states that migrants occupy a displaced position as they live far away from their original home. As the present “home” is in a different place than in the past, it is not possible to reclaim precisely what has been lost (McLeod 211). Further, McLeod argues that race may be a factor that excludes the migrant from being recognized as part of the community in the new homeland (212). This disqualifies him from claiming his new land as his home (McLeod 212). Referring to the essay “The Rainbow Sign” by Hanif Kureishi, McLeod claims that the position of migrants and their children is to live “‘in-between’ different nations, feeling neither here nor there, unable to indulge in sentiments of belonging to either place” (214). In his 1994 book *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha describes this position of being in-between homes, cultures and identities as “unhomeliness” and he views this position as a space where new forms of postcolonial identity are initiated (13, 2).

### 2.3 The “Other”

In his 1978 work *Orientalism*, Edward Said employs the term of the title to describe the Western approach to the Orient (73). He claims that the Orient is considered to be an image of the “Other” that has “helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” (1-2). Thus, by using this definition it is implied that the Orient is different to the West and that the Western ideology is the desired norm. For example, as the Oriental is described as irrational, depraved, childlike and different, the European would then be the opposite, thus rational, virtuous and normal (Said 40). Another meaning of Orientalism according to Said is that as the Western style dominates and has authority over the Orient, the Orient is not “a free subject of thought and action” (3). This leads to cultural hegemony, a
form of cultural leadership where “certain cultural forms predominate over others, just as certain ideas are more influential than others” (Said 7). The result is an unequal society where the Orient is dominated by and considered to be inferior to the West.

Homi Bhabha is also occupied with the “Other” or “the colonised subject” as he defines it in his works. In his essay “The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism” (The Location of Culture, 2004), he limits the definition of otherness or difference to the term stereotype (111). The key signifier of this stereotype identity is skin colour, which is a sign of inferiority and negative difference (Bhabha 108-114). Further, negative characteristics such as savagery, cannibalism, lust and anarchy are attributed to the stereotype (Bhabha 104). Colonial discourse, Bhabha further claims, “turns on the recognition and disavowal of racial/cultural/historical differences” (100). The objective “is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction” (Bhabha 101). In this marking out of a “subject nation”, the government directs and dominates its various spheres of activity (Bhabha 101). Thus, in marking out the stereotype as different in a negative way and claiming their inferiority, the colonizer justifies his own possibility to rule and impose his laws, values and culture on the colonized.

In his 1952 book Black Skin, White Masks, Frantz Fanon describes the reality of being a Negro in the Antilles. His testimony of “otherness” is similar to the one expressed by Said and Bhabha. He defines the colonial situation as a confrontation between civilized (white) and primitive (black) men; a society where the colonized is made inferior and discriminated as well as robbed of all worth and individuality (85-98). In this society, the collective unconscious has created a myth of the “bad nigger”; a myth describing the Negro as an animal, who is bad, mean, ugly, savage, brute, illiterate, sinful, immoral etc (Fanon 92, 113-117). All these attributes are in opposition to the ones of the whites: “Sin is Negro as virtue is white” (Fanon 139). The reality of being black is not only to be black, but to “be black in relation to the white man” (Fanon 110). Fanon argues that it is not a feeling of inferiority but of nonexistence. This feeling of nonexistence causes the colonized to feel guilty without knowing of what, only knowing that he is not good (Fanon 139). His conclusion is drawn from situations in which black people are met with utterances such as “Dirty nigger!” or “Look, a Negro!” and where they realize that a colonized person is not a subject but “an object in the midst of other objects” (Fanon 109). Fanon argues that such statements imply that the white world is the only honourable one and that this white world bars the black people from all participation in it (114). They become objects in a world where the customs of the
“Other” are wiped out as they are in conflict with the western civilization imposed on them, a civilization they do not know (Fanon 110).

In conclusion, the works of Said, Bhabha and Fanon describe the Orient as the “Other”, a construction created by the West in order to justify their own superiority over the colonized. In this construction, the colonizer defines himself as the “Self”. Consequently, the Orient is characterized as the “Other” and something opposite to this Self. This opposition is always uttered in negative terms, describing the “Other” as inferior and without worth, for example by giving it attributes such as bad, ugly, sinful, and immoral.

3 Analysis

3.1 Pilate and Cultural Trauma: General Background

Sidney S. Furst claims that self-esteem and the feeling of belonging to a family or community protect against trauma (cited in Schreiber 9). Further, according to the research of Furst, the most severe and dangerous trauma is when dependent children are separated from their parents (cited in Schreiber 9). As children are more vulnerable than adults, they are in greater need of the safety of home as well as the care of parents and community (Furst cited in Schreiber 9). Pilate is the victim of trauma such as described by Furst as she is separated from both her parents since childhood. Despite being motherless, as her mother died giving birth to Pilate, she lives a happy life together with her loving father and brother until the age of twelve when her father also dies. A former slave, now free and owning his own property, her father is fooled by white people to sign a paper transferring his property to the white men. Being illiterate, he does not understand what he has signed and refuses to leave his land. Sitting on his fence, he is shot and killed by the white men who lay claim to his property, with his children witnessing this tragic event. At first, Pilate and her brother, Macon, stay together, hiding in the woods. After a while, however, when Macon kills a white man in self-defence and they find his sack of gold, they disagree on what to do with the gold and have a severe fight. The fight results in their splitting up and Pilate is left all alone in the world.

As will be argued, the trauma of Pilate is further emphasized by her being marked as “Other” both by her brother and each community that she later settles into. Pilate is thus destined to deal with the trauma all by herself and to form her new cultural identity without help from family or other relations.
3.2 Pilate and Cultural Identity

3.2.1 Pilate Reclaiming the Past

Franz Fanon argues that in the quest to escape the white culture, the colonized often feels alienated and finds it difficult to choose between the two contradicting cultures. In order to find hope for the future, it therefore becomes important to reclaim the past and to reunite with the ancestors in the recent history instead of the past as they no longer exist there (The Wretched of the Earth 163). When Pilate’s father is murdered, she loses not only him but also her brother and thus also her natural connection to her ancestral past and her cultural identity. However, a renewed contact with this past is established, represented by the spiritual contacts Pilate has with her dead father.

After his death, Pilate is in constant spiritual contact with her father, who gives her advice and helps her to claim her ancestral past and cultural identity. Shortly after his death, when she and her brother hide in the woods, their father appears for the first time. Pilate then realizes that he is looking out for them when he helps them to find shelter in a cave: “showing them what to do and where to go” (169). Later in life, Pilate tells her sister-in-law that she relies on her dead father who provides her with advice: “He’s helpful to me, real helpful. Tells me things I need to know. … It’s a good feelin to know he’s around. I tell you he’s a person I can always rely on. I tell you somethin else. He’s the only one” (141). With this statement, Pilate affirms that she relies on her ancestral past, represented by her dead father. Actually, when saying that her father is the only one she relies on, it is implied that the cultural identity he represents is the only one that is important for her own cultural identity. This conclusion can be drawn from Pilate’s rootedness in African art such as old folk songs and her supernatural powers as well as her rejection of the modern, material lifestyle in America.

In her essay “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation”, Toni Morrison states that for a long time, music was the healing art form for black people (340). In the case of Pilate, this is true as she often sings an old folk song about her earliest ancestor, Sugarman or Jake, a song that has been passed down through generations. Her nephew understands the source of the song when he searches for his roots and hears children singing it in the village that his family originates from: “… that was when they fell to their knees and sang Pilate’s song” (303). Pilate first starts to sing it when she is depressed after her daughter is born and her dead father tells her to sing: “Clear as a day, her father said: ‘Sing. Sing,’ … To sing, which she did beautifully, relieved her gloom immediately” (147). Her singing has a healing power and it is
her father who has helped her to come to this knowledge. That she sings an old traditional song about her earliest ancestor is a further representation of her rootedness in that culture.

Superstition and magic are other forms of expression closely linked to the culture of black people according to Morrison (“Rootedness” 342). As previously discussed, Pilate acknowledges this heritage through her spiritual contacts with her dead father. However, this is not the only way in which she holds supernatural powers. Another example is when she unconsciously knows about the marital problems of her sister-in-law, Ruth, who wants another baby: “Pilate came to see Macon right away and soon as she saw me she knew what my trouble was” (125). By providing Ruth with natural cures, Pilate is implicated in Macon’s renewed attraction to his wife:

“She gave me funny things to do. And some greenish-gray grassy-looking stuff to put in his food. … It worked to. Macon came to me for four days. He even came home from his office in the middle of the day to be with me. He looked puzzled, but he came. Then it was over. And two months later I was pregnant. When he found out about it, he immediately suspected Pilate … (125)

Thus, Ruth becomes pregnant with the help of the supernatural powers of Pilate. These powers originate from the culture of her ancestors, a heritage that Pilate affirms and one that she is in close connection with.

Pilate not only affirms her ancestral cultural heritage but also rejects the new culture in the modern American society and the materialism it represents. A description of her home in the 1960s affirms this thesis:

At night she and her daughter lit the house with candles and kerosene lamps; they … cooked with wood and coal, pumped kitchen water into a dry sink through a pipeline from a well and lived pretty much as though progress was a word that meant walking a little farther on down the road. (27)

The lifestyle of Pilate is here characterized as backward and old-fashioned. She has, thus, not adopted the modern lifestyle and material standard of her time. This is further emphasized by the facts that her home hardly has any furniture and that she is indifferent to money for life (39, 139). By showing that material things and money are not important to her, Pilate also shows that she rejects the society it represents, i.e. the modern American society.
In conclusion, Pilate has a strong connection to her ancestral heritage and the cultural identity it represents. Furthermore, she has found a renewed contact with the oldest, inner essence of her people in her reclaiming of the past. Her spiritual contacts with her father as well as her affirmation of African art and culture are representations of this. When she says that her father is the only one she relies on, it is implied that the cultural identity he represents is the only one that is important for her own cultural identity. This is further confirmed by her rejection of the modern, material American society. It can thus be argued that she is not in the position of being in-between cultures and identities, the “unhomeliness” expressed by Homi Bhabha as a common feature of colonized people (13). On the contrary, she has a solid and single foundation in her ancestor’s cultural identity.

3.2.2 Pilate’s Name Representing Her Cultural Identity

The name is an important expression of a person’s identity. According to Eyerman and Seidman, the taking of a new name therefore became important for former slaves after emancipation (189). Their previous names symbolized enslavement as they had been given to them by their masters. As a consequence, their new names became the symbol of a new beginning as free men and women as well as a washing away of “an imposed identity and a relation to an imposed past” (Eyerman and Seidman 189). Thus, the renaming was an act of self-determination as it was a rejection of slavery and the cultural heritage imposed by the white enemy. Additionally, it was a pathway leading to redemption and liberation from the past (Eyerman and Seidman 189-190).

As Pilate’s father, Jake, is a free man when Pilate is born, he is able to choose her name according to ancestral tradition and his own preferences. He finds her name in the Bible and by the visual appearance of the name he believes that it is an appropriate name for his daughter. Being illiterate he chooses “a group of letters that seemed to him strong and handsome; saw in them a large figure that looked like a tree hanging in some princely but protective way over a row of smaller trees” (18). He writes it down on a piece of paper, copying the letters from the Bible and proclaims: “That’s the baby’s name” (18). Although other people find the name inappropriate, Jake is determined in his choice and keeps the note in the Bible, where it stays until he is killed twelve years later. It is important for him to follow black customs when giving his daughter her name. This is an expression of his liberation from the slave past and his possibility to choose a name himself, not being forced to follow any white man’s decision. It is an act of self-determination and a way to claim the cultural identity of his daughter.
After the tragic murder of Pilate’s father, the note with Pilate’s name written on it becomes an important symbol of her connection to her ancestral past and the cultural identity it represents. For instance, Schreiber expresses that Pilate’s earring containing the note with her name is important as it represents Pilate’s ability to claim her own identity (98). When she becomes an orphan, Pilate folds up the piece of paper with her name on it and puts it in a little brass box that has belonged to her mother. Out of these two objects originating from her parents she creates an earring that she carries hanging from her ear for the rest of her life. Although her parents are no longer physically present, the earring symbolizes their presence in Pilate’s life as well as her close connection to her ancestral past and cultural identity.

The way in which Pilate attaches the earring to her body is a representation of her struggle to deal with her cultural trauma and to affirm her cultural identity. According to Alexander et al., a trauma victim must identify the nature of the pain when dealing with the identity crisis due to a traumatic event (cited in Eyerman and Seidman 3). The pain and infection Pilate causes herself by attaching the earring to her ear can be interpreted as a symbol of the pain she feels in losing her father. It is her way of identifying the nature of the pain and dealing with the identity crisis caused by the trauma of becoming an orphan:

Pilate rubbed her ear until it was numb, burned the end of the wire, and punched it through her earlobe. Macon fastened the wire ends into a knot, but the lobe was swollen and running pus. At Circe’s instruction she put cobwebs on it to draw the pus out and stop the bleeding. (167)

Her infected ear is the representation of the trauma she experiences. Further, as she nurses herself to “stop the bleeding” she is dealing not only with her bleeding ear but also with her separation and trauma. Thus, Pilate’s nursing her ear is a symbol of her dealing with the trauma of losing her father. In her essay “Knowing Their Names: Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon”, Marianne Hirsch argues that when Pilate pierces her own flesh, she creates an artificial, bodily connection to her father as she literally incorporates his word into her own body (81). Thus, as her father is no longer physically present, she creates an artificial connection to him; represented by the earring with the note he wrote and attaches it to her ear. In that way, she has a physical connection to him although he is no longer in this world with her. This is her expression of claiming her own identity, keeping in touch with her ancestral past and being proud of it.
Pilate’s last name, Dead, originates from the white society and is thus not important to her as it does not have any connection to her older cultural identity. The name was given to her father Jake by a drunken, white officer in the Freedmen’s Bureau when registering after emancipation:

He asked Papa where he was born. Papa said Macon. Then he asked him who his father was. Papa said, ‘He’s dead.’ … Well, the Yankee wrote it all down, but in the wrong spaces. Had him born in Dunfrie, wherever the hell that is, and in the space for his name the fool wrote, ‘Dead’ comma ‘Macon’. (53)

Being illiterate, Jake does not find out what he is registered as until his wife later tells him. However, he decides to keep his new name as his wife thinks “it was new and would wipe out the past. Wipe it all out” (54). Although the new name was given to Jake by the white society, he received it as a free man and his wife considers it as a symbol of the new beginning as well as the washing away of an imposed identity and past as stated by Ira Berlin:

A new name was both a symbol of personal liberation and an act of political defiance; it reversed the enslavement process and confirmed the free (black’s) newly won liberty just as the loss of an African name had earlier symbolized enslavement. (Cited in Eyerman and Seidman 189)

Although her father keeps this name as a free man, Pilate does not identify with it and only uses her first name when she meets people: “Pilate had learned, whenever she was asked her name, to give only her first name. The last name had a bad effect on people” (146). The association to death is probably what makes people react negatively to it. However, this is not the reason for Pilate not using it. Death is a natural part of her life and nothing that worries her: “death held no terrors for her (she spoke often to the dead)” (149). However, this name was not chosen by her father or given to him according to ancestral tradition and is therefore not that important to Pilate and her cultural identity.

By rejecting her last name, Pilate also rejects the white society that imposed it on her. She rejects it as it originates from the Western culture and not her older, ancestral culture. By using only her first name, she claims her own identity and affirms her cultural heritage from her father as that name was given to her according to ancestral tradition and not by the white society. Further, in her active choice of the old culture over the new culture, she is not
suffering from double-consciousness, i.e. her soul is unified and not consisting of two souls (the African and the American) as expressed by W.E. B. Du Bois (cited in Eyerman and Seidman 63-64). She has avoided the feeling of being caught between cultures and the sense of not belonging to any of them. To affirm both names would symbolize that double-consciousness as one name represents the old culture and the other represents the new. Pilate uses only her first name, an expression of her close connection to her ancestral past and the oldest, inner essence of her people.

3.3 Pilate Representing the “Other”

A significant fact, which makes Pilate unique and different from everybody else, is that she has no navel. She was born naturally but after her navel-string was cut “the cord stump shriveled, fell off, and left no trace of having ever existed” (28). As a child and young woman, she does not realize that her lack of navel marks her as different to everyone else. She knows that her brother has a navel but she has only thought of it as “a way in which males and females were different” (143). However, from the horror expressed by an older woman first questioning Pilate on her “abnormality” she realizes that there is something wrong with not having a navel (143).

As Schreiber points out, the absence of a navel marks Pilate as “Other”; something that leads people to reject her as evil and that isolates her from the rest of society (100). As examples of this otherness and isolation, Schreiber refers to the facts that Pilate is bereft of both her parents as well as her brother (100). As will be discussed later in this essay, she is also rejected by each society that she settles into (Schreiber 100). Further, in her essay “Song of Solomon”, Trudier Harris argues that Pilate’s “flat stomach becomes the metaphor for her “otherness” (11). Harris compares this otherness to similar metaphors used by Morrison to describe characters in her other novels. As explained in the theory section, “otherness” represents inferiority, worthlessness, ugliness, dirtiness and other negative attributes. This is also how Pilate is described by both her brother and other people she encounters in her life, something that shows how Morrison makes Pilate represent the “Other”.

Pilate’s brother, Macon, regards Pilate as the “Other” as he believes that she is inferior to him. Being a successful businessman who owns a lot of property, he belongs to the black upper class. Pilate, on the other hand, is part of the underclass society, running an “unaccepted” business in making and selling wine. Although sharing the natural bonds of
blood relations, Macon does not allow Pilate to be a part of his life. He is ashamed of her and does not want other people to know that he is related to her:

He trembled with the thought of the white men in the bank – the men who helped him buy and mortgage houses – discovering that this raggedy bootlegger was his sister. That the propertied Negro who handled his business so well and who lived in the big house on Not Doctor Street had a sister who had a daughter but no husband. A collection of lunatics who made wine and sang in the streets “like common street women! Just like common street women!” (20)

Thus, in Macon’s quest for social status and respect in the white as well as the black society, money and property are more valuable to him than his relationship with Pilate. He rejects her and isolates her from his life, despising her inferiority and worthlessness. This is illustrated by his behaviour when Pilate moves to the city where he lives after their long separation. She decides to find him as she wants to make peace with him and as she believes that her grandchild needs the stability of family that Macon represents. However, when she finds him and reunites with him, he is “truculent, inhospitable, embarrassed, and unforgiving” (151). Although he remembers the time when “she had been the dearest thing in the world to him” he now despises her as he believes that she is inferior to him (20). He states: “How far down she had slid since then. She had cut the last thread of propriety. … Now she was odd, murky, and worst of all, unkempt. A regular source of embarrassment, if he would allow it. But he would not allow it” (20). With this statement he affirms the otherness of Pilate as somebody who is inferior, ugly and dirty, not worthy of his companionship.

Macon also rejects Pilate because of her skin colour when referring to her as “murky”. In his determination to climb the social ladder, he has married Ruth, the daughter of “the most important Negro in the city”, a former doctor (22). Ruth’s skin is fair, something that marks her higher status within the black community. She is also the total opposite of Pilate, whose skin is very dark. In Black Skin, White Masks, Frantz Fanon discusses the problem of skin colour in a white society and claims that being a Negro is shameful (116). However, it is not only the white society that rejects people of colour but also the black people themselves as they wish to escape this shame. Fanon gives the account of a similar experience to the one of Pilate: “I attach myself to my brothers, Negroes like myself. To my horror, they too reject me. They are almost white. And besides they are about to marry white women. They will have children faintly tinged with brown” (Black Skin, White Masks 116-117). Thus, both Fanon and
Pilate hold the same feelings of being “Other”, i.e. being rejected as inferior not only by the white society but also by relatives and other people who have a higher social status within the black community.

As previously discussed, Pilate’s lack of a navel marks her as “Other” and this is the reason for other people than her brother rejecting her. Without parents and without any contact with her brother, her trauma is thus further emphasized by the fact that people reject her in each community that she settles into. At the age of fifteen, after a sexual experience with a boy, and people finding out that she does not have a navel, she realizes that she is “abnormal”. The group of people she is staying with asks her to leave them although they like her and in spite of the fact that she is “a good worker and a big help to everybody” (144). The same thing happens in other societies that she settles into. Once people become aware of her lacking a navel, they reject her or leave her behind as they are terrified of being “in the company of something God never made” (144). For example, people show their fear of Pilate being unnatural and frightening when they hide their children in the presence of Pilate: “Men frowned, women whispered and shoved their children behind them” (148). Thus, people are afraid of Pilate and want to protect their children from her. They consider her to be unnatural and therefore do not want her to be a part of their society.

The fact that Pilate lacks a navel further excludes her from intimate relationships. It occurs to her that “although men fucked armless women, one-legged women, hunchbacks and blind women, drunken women … they were terrified of fucking her – a woman with no navel” (148). The fear she is met with isolates her from love and marriage. From this experience she learns to hide her stomach from her lovers in future relationships. When she later falls in love and becomes pregnant, she refuses to marry the father of her child as she fears that she will not be able to hide her stomach from her husband forever. She is afraid that the love of her life will reject her too when he finds out that she lacks a navel. Therefore, she decides to leave him as she does not want to get hurt.

Although wanting to be part of a community and loved by someone, Pilate feels that she is too different for other people to accept her as part of their community. She realizes that “every other resource is denied her: partnership in marriage, confessional friendship, and communal religion” (148). She continues to search for a stable relationship, though: “Having had one long relationship with a man, she sought another, but no man was like that island man ever again either” (148). This statement confirms that she feels isolated as she wants to be loved and part of a community. However, the knowledge of being “Other” than the rest of
society and her fear of being rejected is a catalyst of Pilate deciding to rely on only herself and to form her own life according to her own choices.

3.4 The Experience of Trauma and Otherness Forming Pilate’s Cultural Identity

Rejected by her brother and each society that she settles into, Pilate can rely on no one but herself, a knowledge that gives her the agency to build her own identity (Schreiber 100). As Morrison builds the story, Pilate’s otherness in terms of the lack of a navel is an expression of Pilate being “self-born”. This is furthermore an indication of her ability to form her own identity.

Morrison characterizes Pilate as self-born, or as her brother Macon remembers her birth:

After their mother died, she had come struggling out of the womb without help from throbbing muscles or the pressure of swift womb water. … inched its way headfirst out of a still, silent, and indifferent cave of flesh, dragging her own cord and her own afterbirth behind her. (27-28)

The description of Pilate as self-born may either be interpreted as an expression of her as an independent, self-sufficient person or as somebody who is a product of herself. Toni Morrison supports the latter when claiming that Pilate’s lack of a navel is a representation of an individual who has to “literally invent herself” (Harris, 11). On the other hand, in the essay “Quiet As It’s Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison”, J. Brooks Bouson claims that independence and self-sufficiency is the correct interpretation as Pilate’s lack of a navel represents the black struggle for survival in describing Pilate as self-born (68-69). The claim of Brooks Bouson is true in the way that Pilate manages to support herself, her daughter and granddaughter without help from anybody else. Running her own business in winemaking she is successful and becomes a rich woman: “… Pilate had a lot of money; the crash of 1929 had produced so many buyers of cheap home brew she didn’t even need the collection the Salvation Army took up for her” (151). This statement confirms that Pilate is independent and self-sufficient. Thus, the standpoints of Morrison as well as Brooks Bouson are valid as Pilate can be viewed both as a product of herself as well as someone who is self-sufficient and independent. However, as will be argued, the idea of Pilate being a product of herself is a more important representation of how she forms her cultural identity.
Morrison claims that Pilate has “invented herself”, meaning that the description of being self-born is a representation of how Pilate is a product of herself, a statement supported by the following quote: “…when she realized what her situation in the world was and would probably always be she threw away every assumption she had learned and began at zero” (149). That she begins at zero is a representation of how she forms her cultural identity by starting from “nothing”, a symbol of a new beginning. She stops worrying about her stomach and stops trying to hide it (148). Further, she cuts her hair and forms her life following her own thoughts about what makes her happy or sad and what is valuable to her (149). She also asks herself existential questions such as what is true in the world and realizes that she has nothing to fear as she forms this new identity of hers (149). That the new identity is a product of herself and not like anyone else’s is further confirmed by the following quote:

Her mind traveled crooked streets and aimless goat paths, arriving sometimes at profundity, other times at the revelations of a three-year old. … and – the consequence of the knowledge she had made up or acquired – kept her just barely within the boundaries of the elaborately socialized world of black people. (149)

The description of Pilate being on the boundaries of the elaborately socialized world of black people may be a representation of borderlines and in-between places as discussed by Homi Bhabha. He states that it is common to “locate the question of culture in the realm of the beyond” and that this “beyond” exists on the borderlines of the present (1). He further claims that the “’beyond’ is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past” (1-2). Instead, it can be seen as a “transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion” (Bhabha 2). This theory of Bhabha can be applied to Pilate’s identity formation as she both uses acquired knowledge as well as knowledge she makes up herself when forming her new identity. The acquired knowledge would then represent the old, inherited wisdom. Further, the knowledge that she makes up on her own represents what she knows or has learned in her present life. Thus, when Pilate is described as being on the boundaries of the elaborately socialized world, it can be argued that she is in the in-between places as described by Bhabha. These in-between places offer the possibility to elaborate strategies of selfhood “that initiate new signs of identity” according to Bhabha (2). This is true as Pilate’s new identity is a product of herself and not like anyone else’s. The interpretation of Pilate being self-born as her being a
product of herself is thus an expression of how she forms her new identity, the post-colonial identity. In this task, she does not leave the past behind. Rather, she has a strong foundation in her ancestral past. As McLeod claims, a migrant has the possibility to actively intervene in the transmission of cultural inheritance (218). In this process, inherited knowledge is not dismissed; rather it will be given new meanings as it is used in the present (McLeod 219). Pilate does not dismiss inherited knowledge as she takes advice from her dead father when forming her new identity: “But most important, she paid close attention to her mentor – the father who appeared before her sometimes and told her things” (150). By paying close attention to her father, she affirms that his knowledge and the cultural identity he represents guide her in her own cultural identity formation.

To interpret the fact that Pilate is self-born as an expression of someone who has created herself is also important when describing her process of making sense of the trauma she experiences. The research of Daniel J. Siegel indicates that people who have experienced trauma are not destined to repeat their past traumas if they make sense of the impact they have on their lives. An important goal in this making-sense process is to become the author of one’s own life story (cited in Schreiber 16). Pilate “exemplifies the ability to reshape one’s life in this way”, according to Schreiber (16). When creating herself, Pilate thus becomes the author of her own life story. In order to make sense of the trauma she experiences and to build her own identity, she relies on her dead father as well as the cultural inheritance from him, something that heals her from her traumatic experience. This is expressed in the way her father appears to her after the creation of her new identity:

… he no longer came to Pilate dressed as he had been on the wood’s edge and in the cave … Then he had worn the coveralls and heavy shoes he was shot in. Now he came in a white shirt, a blue collar, and a brown peaked cap. He wore no shoes … (150)

The difference in her father’s clothing marks how differently Pilate relates to her trauma before and after creating her new cultural identity. Shortly after his death when she hides in the woods with her brother, she sees him as he was dressed when he was shot. This is an expression of her being in the midst of the trauma. After creating her new identity and making sense of the trauma, she sees a more positive image of him, one from before he was killed and that also reflects her own appearance and preferences. She herself wears a cap and she does not like wearing shoes. For example, this is how she is described by her brother: “… Pilate
continued to visit, her shoelaces undone, a knitted cap pulled down over her forehead, bringing her foolish earring …” (19-20). This expresses how Pilate always wears a cap and although she wears shoes on the occasions described, they are not laced as she prefers to be barefoot as in childhood. An illustration of this is when she hides in the woods with Macon: “They ate raspberries and apples; they took off their shoes and let the dewy grass and sun-warmed dirt soothe their feet” (167-168). In this situation, the bare feet represent something positive and soothing for Pilate. Further, people who knew Pilate in childhood describe her as follows: “Pilate they remembered as a pretty woods-wild girl ‘that couldn’t nobody put shoes on’” (234). From this statement, it can be concluded that Pilate never wore shoes as a child when she lived a happy life with her father. As her father appears to her barefoot when she has made sense of the trauma, it can be argued that this represents her connection to the happy childhood, when she was close to her father and her roots. Thus, through a solid foundation in her ancestral past, Pilate has now made sense of her trauma as well as created her new cultural identity.

4 Conclusion

Pilate is an African-American woman with former slaves as her ancestors. She suffers from the trauma experienced by black people in America in the aftermath of slavery. Her trauma consists of being an orphan after witnessing the murder of her father. This trauma is further emphasized with the separation from her brother as well as being rejected as “Other” both by her brother as well as each society that she settles into.

Although suffering from trauma and being all alone in the world, Pilate manages to establish a renewed contact with her ancestral past, represented by the spiritual contacts she has with her dead father. In these contacts, her father gives her advice and helps her to claim her ancestral past and cultural identity. Pilate affirms that her father is the only one she relies on. With this statement it is implied that the cultural identity he represents is the only one that is important for her own cultural identity. Her supernatural powers as well as her affirmation of African art and culture are representations of this. This is further confirmed by her rejection of the modern, materialist American society. She is thus not in the position of being in-between cultures and identities, neither does she suffer from the “unhomeliness” which is a common feature of colonized people. On the contrary, she has a solid and single foundation in her ancestor’s cultural identity.
Pilate’s earring symbolizes her parents’ presence in her life, as well as her close connection to the ancestral past and the cultural identity it represents. As the earring contains a note written by her father with her name on it, it further emphasizes the importance of the name that was given to her by her father according to ancestral tradition. As that is the only name she is using, never presenting herself with her last name, she affirms her old cultural heritage. By rejecting her last name, she also rejects the white society as that name has been imposed on her by that society. In her active choice of the old culture over the new culture, she shows that she is not suffering from double-consciousness. Instead, she has avoided the feeling of being caught between cultures and the sense of not belonging to any of them. As she only uses her first name, she expresses her close connection to her old, ancestral culture.

Pilate is unique and different from everybody else as she has no navel, a fact showing how Morrison makes Pilate represent the “Other”. Pilate’s brother, Macon, regards Pilate as the “Other” as he believes that she is inferior to him. Macon belongs to the black upper class and in his quest for social status and respect; money and property are more valuable to him than his relationship with Pilate. As Pilate belongs to the underclass society and as she has got very dark skin, Macon rejects her and isolates her from his life, despising her inferiority and worthlessness. Pilate’s lack of a navel further isolates her from other people than her brother as well as from intimate relationships. People are afraid of her and find her unnatural, evil and terrifying. She is therefore rejected by each community that she settles into.

The isolation and trauma experienced by Pilate due to her separation from close relatives as well as being marked as “Other” become a catalyst of Pilate deciding to rely on only herself and to form her identity according to her own choices. In this quest, Pilate’s lack of a navel is an expression of her being self-born. The fact of being self-born is further a representation of Pilate being a product of herself or, in other words, somebody who has invented herself. Additionally, her creation of a new identity is a representation of how she deals and comes to terms with her trauma in order to find hope for the future. In this trauma process, she is in close connection with her dead father, takes his advice and affirms that his knowledge guides her in her own cultural identity formation.

Although living in a white society where Western values and culture are imposed on her, Pilate values her black history and culture more. In her case, she is able to stay close to her roots and to avoid the feeling of double-consciousness and “ unhomeliness” as expressed by Du Bois, Bhabha and Fanon. Instead she has a solid foundation in her ancestral past and the cultural identity it represents.
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