sciendo *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia (2024): 193–219*
doi: 10.14746/stap.2024.58.10

"BE A BREEZE. A COOL COOL BREEZE". THE AIR AND WIND AS MEDIUMS OF BLACK NON/BEING AND LOVE IN TONI MORRISON'S *SONG OF SOLOMON*

DOROTTYA MÓZES[1]

ABSTRACT

Even though the critical commentary on *Song of Solomon* focuses on the motif of Black flight and the protagonist Milkman's quest for identity, the specific questions and problems raised by the motifs of air and wind have not been attended to. Therefore, this paper conducts close readings of airy and windy scenes that blow up, flow, and float in *Song*. If air and atmosphere signify the totality of the antiblack climate, forced aerial movement in *Song* symbolizes how individual and collective lives are moved, uprooted, and swept up in Middle Passage, racial slavery, and its afterlives. However, the paper also shows how airborne affects, ecologies, and motion – including gingery air, cool breezes, strong winds, or airy flights – disrupt the antiblack atmosphere by creating microclimates of connection, joy, and queer potentiality.[2]

Keywords: Black ecologies; air; wind; flight; African American literature; Toni Morrison; queering.

1. Introduction

One of *Song of Solomon*'s central motifs is flight, a "resistant and shape-shifting response" to the forces of racial oppression (Bryant 1999: 102). Published in 1977, Toni Morrison's acclaimed third novel opens with Mr. Robert Smith, a member of the Seven Days revolutionary group, leaping into the air but failing "to fly from Mercy to the other side of Lake Superior" (*Song*, 3). That is, "the place for which escaping slaves aimed who were dead set on leaving the 'mercy' of Euro-America's alleged 'civilization – the rationale for slavery'"

[1] Assistant Professor, North American Department, Institute of English and American Studies, University of Debrecen, Egyetem tér 1. Main building 116/1, 4032 Debrecen, Hungary, email: mozes.dorottya@arts.unideb.hu.

[2] At the 36th MELUS Conference in New Orleans, the author presented an early draft of this paper with the support of the University of Debrecen's Faculty of Humanities Scholarly Fund.

(Lubiano 1995: 100). It is no accident that the protagonist Macon "Milkman" Dead III's birth coincides with Smith's suicidal flight, or with Pilate Dead, his aunt and midwife, calling him "little bird" and recognizing Milkman's ancestral potential for flight (*Song*, 9). The rest of the novel elaborates on Pilate's deep knowledge concerning Milkman's ambition to soar into the air. When he discovered as a boy of four "that only birds and airplanes could fly – he lost all interest in himself" (*Song*, 9). At school, "his velvet suit," symbolic of his middle-class background, "separated him from the other children" (*Song*, 9, 264). By the time of young adulthood, his privilege as a propertied Black man corresponded to his flâneur-like alienation from the social as well as the natural world: "He was bored. Everybody bored him. The city was boring. The racial problems … were the most boring of all" (*Song*, 107). While Milkman's father Macon Dead II triggers his son's capitalist quest for gold, Pilate plays a critical role in transforming that quest into a "historical search, through memory and language, for cultural identity" (Bryant 1999: 102). In addition to mnemonic and linguistic aids, the struggle to let go of (in bell hooks' terms) the imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchal "cocoon" that was his "personality" is mediated by the environment. In community with southern men, animals, earth, grass, and wind, Milkman releases the things that hold him back from freedom: "his money, his car, his father's reputation, his suit, or his shoes" (*Song*, 277). Milkman's search for his rural southern roots becomes complete when he solves the puzzle of his "inheritance", and discovers that, rather than remain a slave, his great-grandfather flew back to Africa. After he reconnects with his people and the land, he takes Pilate back to Shalimar to give her father a proper burial on ancestral ground. Pilate flies off in the guise of a bird while Milkman takes flight in the arms of his best friend and – in my reading – lover, Guitar Bains. As the motif of Black flight and Milkman's quest for identity are inextricably intertwined in this complex novel, the critical commentary on *Song* focuses on the historical and mythical aspects of flying Africans as well as Morrison's portrayal of the ambivalent, ontologically fraught issue of Black masculine flight (see Blake (1980), Lee (1982), and P-Flores (2020)).

In the first book-length ecocritical study on Morrison's body of work, Anissa Janine Wardi (2021) examines the biophysical world. Her chapter on *Song of Solomon* focuses on moments of enchantment with the plant world that provide respite from the unrelenting and ubiquitous racism in which the community is enmeshed. As well, my article looks for such microclimates of pleasure: "everyday miracles, exceptional events which go against (and perhaps even alter) the accepted order of things; and … epiphanies, moment of being in which, for a brief instant, the center appears to hold, and the promise is held out of a quasi-mystical union with something larger than oneself" (Landy & Saler (2009: 1) qtd. in Wardi 2021). Even though such pleasures

and epiphanies abound in Black literature (including Morrison's oeuvre), critics have for a long time excluded these literary works from ecocritical inquiry. This is because, as Dianne Glave (2010: 3) explains, African Americans have been left out of white environmental histories and movements, which stereotyped them as "physically and spiritually detached from the environment". In *Black to Nature*, Stefanie Dunning (2021: 5) elaborates on these Black "ruptures" from nature, discussing a) discourses of primitivism; b) forced agrarian labor, that is, chattel slavery; c) and pastoral violence, that is, lynching. This emerging body of Black ecocriticism serves as a blueprint for this paper, which looks for *Song*'s calamities as well as epiphanies in the atmosphere.

While the emerging field of Black ecocriticism has explored the ecologies of land, water, and those in-between in detail, air has not received as much attention.[3] What is more, the specific questions and problems raised by the elements of the air and wind in *Song* have not been attended to in previous scholarship. When I examine the representation of air and wind in *Song*, I draw on the following historical, environmental, and perceptual factors: a) air and wind as mediums of transatlantic slavery, the plantation system, and the afterlife of their violences, that is, lynching and the police/vigilante violence; b) pathologies of air induced by Covid-19 or climate change, and the disproportionate exposure of Black people to polluted and unhealthy air (for an overview, see Tabuchi & Popovich 2021); c) atmospheric modes of Black life, sociality, and love. The intersection of the social and ecological aspect of air can be seen recently in the so-called "twin pandemics" of racism and Covid-19. These catastrophes share one element: air. Indeed, suffocation, breathlessness, and what Frantz Fanon calls "combat breathing", have long been considered to be the strange fruit borne by lynching and antiblack violence. The disparate death rate and impacts of the pandemic on communities of color and George Floyd's death precipitated the nation-wide wave of protests in what became known in some circles as the "red summer of 2020", a period of political awakening and racial reckoning in the US. George Floyd repeatedly said, "I can't breathe," but Derek Chauvin dismissed his persistent pleas for respiration and knelt on Floyd's neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, asphyxiating him. Floyd's utterance, which Christina Sharpe calls a trope of *aspiration*, or the act of "keeping and putting breath back in the Black body in hostile weather", has been utilized by the Black Lives Movement as a way to counter the enclosure of state-sanctioned breathlessness (Sharpe 2016: 113).

Thus, this paper considers air to be an otherwise portal to "Black ecologies", a framework and concept developed by J. T. Roane and Justin Hosbey (2019),

---

[3] A notable exception is Sara Gabler Thomas's "Humid Air, Humid Aesthetics" (2020), which explains how humidity can make feelings stick in the context of the archipelagic Americas.

which names the disparate susceptibility of Black communities to "the effects of climate change, including rising sea levels, subsidence, sinking land, as well as the ongoing effects of toxic stewardship". They call for an examination of the ways in which racial capitalist discourses, ideologies, and policies play into the uneven unfolding of our environmental catastrophe. While racialized ecologies produce "ongoing injury, gratuitous harm, and premature death", they also reveal a body of "insurgent knowledge" and visions of "an environmental future free of the relations and geographies engendered by the racial apitalocene" (Roane & Hosbey 2019). The term Capitalocene was/has been used by Jason W. Moore (2017) and Andreas Malm (2016) (and later[4] Donna Haraway (2015)) as an alternative or addition to the more recognizable Anthropocene, proposed initially by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer in 2000. This new geological era identifies humans as geological agents responsible for environmental destruction on an unprecedented scale. Though the debate rages on as to the beginning of the Anthropocene, its dominant periodization has the Industrial Revolution as the origin of an accelerating climate crisis. Against the Anthropocene's "shallow historicization" and abstract universalization of humanity, Moore (2017: 594) argues for the Capitalocene, "understood as a system of power, profit, and re/production in the web of life". According to him, capitalism operates by "converting the living, multi-species connections of humanity-in nature and the web of life into dead abstractions – abstractions that connect to each other – as cascades of consequences rather than constitutive relations" (Moore 2017: 598). He invokes a longer history of capitalism that begins in the era of Columbus, the slave trade, and the colonization of the Americas, the first epochal signs of the reshaping of global natures and the expulsion of racialized, gendered, sexualized etc. humans from Humanity. Francois Vergès's (2017) "racial Capitalocene" is compatible with such racial-colonial accounts of the Capitalocene; it proposes that the extractionist, exploitative, and violent systems of colonialism and slavery underwrite the socio-ecological crises of the Capitalocene. Resting on Cedric Robinson's hugely influential concept of racial capitalism (2005), and writings by Black Studies scholars such as Sylvia Wynter (1971, 1994) and Christina Sharpe (2016), the term makes visible the centrality of the global color line to the environment-making of capitalism.

An interdisciplinary approach enables a reading of *Song*'s airy and windy scenes as bringing into focus Black life and death on the plantation and beyond.

---

[4] As Donna Haraway (2015) explains in a footnote, "Personal email communications from both Jason Moore and Alf Hornborg in late 2014 told [her] Malm proposed the term Capitalocene in a seminar in Lund, Sweden, in 2009, when he was still a graduate student. [She] first used the term independently in public lectures starting in 2012."

My paper draws on multiple and overlapping frames such as Black Studies, ecocriticism, and queer ecologies (Lorde 2007; Tinsley 2008; Chen 2012) that examine the relationships between Black people and larger systems such as the Capitalocene, heteropatriarchy, and racial capitalism. While my perspective includes an ecocritical one, particularly insofar as it foregrounds literary ecologies of the air and wind, my main concern is mapping and analyzing these ecologies in detail. I discuss the ecocritical aspects of the novel when these intersect with the necro-, socio-erotic dimensions of air and wind. Admittedly, the paper eludes certain ecological implications of air and wind, for it concentrates on air and wind as mediums that reveal the violences of the racial Capitalocene as well as oppositional practices, relationalities, visions, and forms of life. As we shall see, Black and Indigenous characters are *blown five feet up into* or *shoved* through the air while others have learned to disrupt the totality of the antiblack atmosphere by soaring in the air. I draw on theorizations of the wind as ungraspable, unpredictable, and ephemeral to argue that the winds by which characters are made to hear, breathe, and smell the air wake them up to beauty, joy, and dreams of freedom, and also to Black life's proximity to domination, disaster, and death.

2. Air as a medium of Black death/deadness

Taking up Eva Horn's recent call to treat air as a medium of sociality, I examine air as a condition of Black death and dying (Horn 2020a). Throughout the novel, white supremacist violence *blows* Black bodies *into* or *through* the air. Milkman's grandfather Macon Dead I (known as Jake) buys the land known as Lincoln's Heaven. A Black landowner and farmer in the post-emancipation South, "Macon would have been an exception" (Wardi 2021). Prior to his bloody murder, Jake's exceptional land ownership signified hope for the newly emancipated African American community. However, the white establishment contrived to steal his land; as Morrison (1994: 54) notes, Jake's character was inspired by Morrison's grandfather: "Those people didn't really understand what was happening. All they knew is that at one point they didn't own the land anymore and had to work for the person who did". The theft of Jake's land and his murder (the ultimate price paid for resisting dispossession) illustrate the non-event of emancipation, which "appears less the grand event of liberation than a point of transition between modes of servitude and racial subjection" (Hartman 1997: 6). As Pilate explains to Milkman, Jake was guarding his land when the white Butler family "*blew him* five feet up *into the air*. He was sitting on his fence waiting for 'em, and they snuck up from behind and *blew him* five feet *into the air*" (*Song*, 40; emphasis added). While Solomon's flight connotes air as a medium of life and freedom, Jake's forced flight suggests air to be a medium

of death, disaster, and detention by force. In her essay "Air as a Medium", Horn suggests that "Air as weather carries surprise and even disaster; it is a bearer of life or death" (Horn 2018: 13). For Jake's children Macon II and Pilate Dead who stood by and witnessed the premature and gratuitous death of their father, air was certainly a bearer of disaster and death. To them, air appeared as a closing in on, surrounding, and suspending of his body. Christina Sharpe's conceptualization of the weather as "the totality of our environments" is relevant here; "the weather is the total climate; and that climate is antiblack" (Sharpe 2016: 104). She calls the pervasiveness of the antiblackness the "weather" because she finds the production of Black death and the violent suspensions and annotations of Black life to be constitutive of our world order. As Afropessimist Frank B. Wilderson puts it, the "structure of the entire world's semantic field … is sutured by anti-Black solidarity" (Wilderson 2010: 58). Jake's murder in and through the medium of air registers the atmosphere of Black death, servitude, and dispossession as normative. It reveals to us that slavery is far from over, and that its afterlife still imperils and devalues Black lives. The atmosphere is a way to think about the ordinariness and insidiousness of this disregard for Black lives. As noted by Wilderson (2010: 55), the position of the slave/Black is such that it is generally dishonored, perpetually open to gratuitous violence, so that this anti-human subject is void of ontological capacity, "a sentient being for whom recognition and incorporation is impossible". A cross-over between subject and object, Jake's insubordinate body magnetizes bullets and, as it flies up and down in the air, it epitomizes the structural and continued vulnerability of blackness to overwhelming atmospheric forces. "Normally", air remains elusive, it "remains in the background of our perception as long as it functions without disruption or corruption" (Horn 2018: 20); however, the brutal force of the gunshots sweeps Jake's body high up into the air in such a way that air becomes an agent of disaster and death. Contemplating Jake's body as it is caught up in the heavy flow of air calls for an understanding of the dislocation of Black life by air flows. For it is impossible to imagine the vertical displacement of Jake's body without the horizontal displacement of African people, whose forced movement across the Atlantic was enabled by winds. Black life has always already been engulfed by strong winds.

Morrison's literary depiction of the Baptist church bombing of 1963 also intimates releasing the increased pressure of the antiblack atmosphere in and through the air. Milkman's best friend Guitar Bains, a member of a clandestine guerilla organization, cannot forget the "[f]our little colored girls [who] had been *blown out* of a church" (*Song*, 173; emphasis added). Guitar shares a survivor's shock at the force of the explosion, which sent the girls flying through the air "like rag dolls" (Gado 2013). Being *blown up into/out* of the air symbolizes how individual and collective Black lives are moved, uprooted, and swept up in the

antiblack atmosphere. Through the verb "blow," Morrison brings together movement by the wind, windborne air currents, and flights precipitated by brutal explosions.[5] As in the case of Jake's murder, *blownup* Black lives reference what I call "the airy wake", i.e., "the air currents behind a body in flight" (Sharpe 2016: 21). Following Sharpe's exploration of the multiple and paradoxical meanings of "the wake" – a watch or vigil for the dead, grief, tracks left by bodies moving in air or water, forms of awakening and consciousness – I turn to these meanings to investigate "what, if anything, survives this insistent Black exclusion, this ontological negation". More specifically, I employ the intersecting meanings of "the wake" to investigate how air and wind "observe and mediate this un/survival" in *Song* (Sharpe 2016: 14).

In addition to air being a medium of death, it is also a vehicle of what Axelle Karera might call "life-death" (Karera 2019: 33).[6] Perhaps no other family in Morrison's oeuvre figures the deep enmeshment of deadness and aliveness as complexly as the Dead family (by virtue of their name) in *Song*. Macon II "loved his father" deeply and intimately and worked "right alongside" him (*Song*, 234). After his father's murder, he was one of the young boys who "began to die and were dying still" (*Song*, 234). Not only was Macon II living a life of death, but he conferred upon members of his family and community what Mbembe calls the status of the "living dead" (Mbembe 2003: 39). To bring a term with atmospheric implications, Macon II came to be a "kicker" (*Song*, 102). In Guitar Bains's words, "First time I laid eyes on him, he was kicking us out of our house" (*Song*, 102). The verb "kick" underlies Macon II's forceful ejection of the Bains family from the air of Black sociality, defined by Terrion Williamson as "the register of black experience that is not reducible to the terror that calls it into existence" (Williamson 2016: 9). The inextricable link between Macon Dead II's logic of capitalist accumulation, respectability politics, and violence is expressed in and through the air.

---

5 There is not enough space to do justice to the intricate way in which (internalized) racism and the resultant violence is portrayed in *Song* in and through *blowups* and *-outs*. It is worthwhile to mention, however, that Henry Porter, a Black radical on a drinking binge – who cannot carry the love of blackness – threatens to "*blow* [his] brains *out*" unless a woman is sent up to his apartment. In contrast to the Black women "hollering" below who hear in Porter's threats his yearning for (Black) life without gratuitous violence, Macon Dead II disregards his tenant's suffering. He fixates instead on the rent owed him and admonishes Porter, "Float those dollars down here, nigger, then *blow* yourself *up*!" while planning to "*blow* [Porter] *out* of that window" (*Song*, 25, 24; emphasis added).

6 Achille Mbembe has conceptualized *disposable* and *raw life* in the postcolony as a realm of non-being in which "life and death are so entangled that it is no longer possible to distinguish them" (Mbembe 2001: 197). His notion of a *life-as-death* or *life-in-death* fits the half-existence of the Dead family who are simultaneously alive and dead.

While *blowups* reflect the 400-year long history of racial capitalist and ecological violence in the Americas, the violence Macon II visits upon his wife and daughters reflects how these violences intersect with misogyny. In a scene pivotal to Milkman's development, Magdalena Dead (called Lena) accuses her brother of peeing all over her sisters his whole life. Lena, a grown woman, relays an incident that connects her brother's interference in Corinthians' love life with their father's deadening violence. She recalls their father driving the family to an ice-house, where the Dead children were eating ice creams together with other Black children; their father was talking to men from the community while keeping an eye on his car and daughters. The Dead family was being social, engaging in Black forms of lived sociality, which meant "sharing the same air" (Horn 2020a: 21). To show off his family, so they could be seen and envied, Macon tolerated breathing the same air as Blacks with lower social status. The Dead girls enjoyed coming together in the air together, the medium of community, closeness, and joy. However, the event of their sociality was fleeting and fragile, as a young boy – who in my reading is little Henry Porter, the future lover of Corinthians Dead and member of the Seven Days – approached them and felt Corinthians' hair, who in turn offered him "her piece of ice". As soon as their father saw the boy touching Corinthians and breathing the same air, he "was running toward [the girls]. He *knocked* the ice out of her hand into the dirt and *shoved* [them] both into the car" (*Song*, 215; emphasis added). The verb "knock" suggests the force with which Macon II strikes the ice into the air, making it plummet down and into the ground. "Shove" further emphasizes how Macon II pushed the girls through the medium of air and isolated them from Black forms of sociality. With the help of these verbs, Morrison makes the girls' flight through the air absolutely present, drawing attention to their dislocated, shoved, what Sylvia Wynter might call "throwaway lives" (Wynter 1994: 10). Air thus reveals itself as a material affective presence, a thickness. The suddenness with which Corinthians and Lena are deprived of the pleasures of sensibility and sociality is indicative of the sharpness and severity of their father's deadened love. His brutality bends the air; the air currents in the wake of his *kicks*, *knocks*, and *shoves* disseminate violence. This atmosphere of misogynoir engulfs and swallows the girls, depriving them of life-force.[7]

[7] Such scenes of airborne violence are familiar to us as they epitomize Black women's struggles to live and thrive in the perilous atmosphere of misogynoir, the particular form of antiblack sexism facing Black women and femmes (Bailey 2021). A Black girl was knocked out of her chair and thrown across the classroom by a white male school resource officer at Spring Valley High School in South Carolina. A teenage Black girl in a bikini was shoved to the ground by a white officer at a pool party in McKinney, Texas. Megan Thee Stallion was shot in the foot by Tory Lanez after a pool party. Before wounding her, he had shouted, "Dance, bitch!" at her. This spectacle of airborne subjection is reminiscent of the "horrible exhibition" of gendered blackness in blackface minstrelsy.

Significantly, Lena uses the metaphor of airborne violence to refer to Macon II's breakup of Porter and Corinthians' adult love, "Now he has knocked the ice out of Corinthians' hand again" (*Song*, 215). Her metaphor speaks to the air as a medium of deadness in and through which Corinthians' newfound aliveness begins withering. This is not the only use of air to exemplify the prevailing atmosphere of deadness or the modalities of a deathly life under racial and gendered regimes of violence, coercion, and dispossession. Throughout the novel, the Dead girls appear to be under the influence of sudden atmospheric turbulence that makes them stumble or spill things: "they tripped over doorsills and dropped the salt cellar into the yolks of their poached eggs" (*Song*, 11). As I suggested, death and deadness are modalities "environed" by the omnipresent, antiblack medium of the air. When we examine *what air does*, rather than what it is, the nature of air "as an environing medium becomes all the more perceptible" (Horn 2020b: 6–7). Indeed, whether it is through Jake's vertical flight into the air, the Birmingham girls' horizontal flight, or the Dead girls' forced movements in and through the air, the air registers the vulnerability of Black people to spectacular as well as quotidian forms of violence. However, Black people's propensity to fly through the air cannot be reduced to a structural vulnerability because, as we will see shortly, flying also actuates the inexhaustible potentiality of blackness.

3. Wind as a multi-sensory medium of Black life

In "Airborne: Air as a Social Medium", Horn writes that the wind can transport both "good" and "bad" airs associated with health or disease. Way before concerns about climate change and air pollution, the wind was thought to spread diseases and other pathogens. At the same time, writing in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, Horn (2020a) emphasizes that the air is also a medium of life, and a medium of society, "To socialize with someone means not only to breathe the same air, but also to occupy the same atmosphere as they do. … Air is society; society is the shared experience of 'being in the air'". She thus reminds us of the necessity, desire, and risk of connecting to both the planet's atmosphere and social being through breathing. In *Song*, the wind transports sweet airs that link Black people to each other and Black ecologies. "On autumn nights, in some parts of the city, the wind from the lake brings a sweetish smell to shore. An odor like crystallized ginger, or sweet iced tea with a dark clove floating in it. There is no explanation for the smell either since the lake … was … full of mill refuse and the chemical wastes of a plastics manufacturer" (*Song*, 184). Given that the industrial refuse and waste harm the willows on the shore, kill wildlife, and cause infections for those swimming in the lake, one would expect the circulating and swirling wind to carry disease, "or transport sediment and other debris"

(Macauley 2010: 27). But rather than materialities produced by the racial Capitalocene and/or the racial odor projected onto Black neighborhoods shaped by segregation, the wind in *Song* circulates a magical ginger smell.[8] The source of the sweetly scented air is untraceable to a single, geographically and ecologically real location. The conditional marks the aromatically sweet, strong, and sensuous scent as Ghanian, the air "could have come straight from a marketplace in Accra", as well as sensually evocative of the East: "there was this heavy-sweet smell that made you think of the East and striped tents and the *sha-sha-sha* of leg bracelets" (*Song*, 185, 184). Like the name *Sha*limar (the vernacular version of Solomon) that Morrison gives to Milkman's flying forefather and the Virginian town presumably named after his ancestor, the ginger conjures associations with the exotic luxuries, pleasures, and fantasies of the East. Furthermore, the wind acts as an olfactory link between Accra and Southside (a predominantly Black neighborhood in an unidentified city in Michigan), carrying an/the Afro-diasporic history, culture, and forms of sociality.

Morrison's literary ecology combines the real and the fantastic, where the air and wind are not common to all those who live in the same area. The "heavy spice-sweet smell" blew past the wealthy (white) homes near the lake which due to their air conditioners had their windows shut and moved through the streets until it reached overheated Southside houses whose residents kept their windows open to let in the cool breeze (*Song*, 184). As mentioned before, racial disparities with regard to air pollution and extreme weather events are well documented. Air is thus not represented as a universally shared influence, but one inflected by racial, socioeconomic disparities as well as cultural differences. Indeed, throughout *Song*, regardless of where it pops up, the spice-sweet fragrance is only available to descendants of African slaves – Milkman and Guitar are among those who breathe it in,[9] and thus awaken to the historical memory, political dreams, social relations, and cultural affects at the core of a windblown "Black Atlantic":

---

8 According to Mark Smith (2006), it is imperative to investigate the role of the senses in structuring racial blackness. The notion of an innate Black smell and sound was crucial to the construction and maintenance of the color line, particularly when visual markers of blackness failed. In Morrison's *Beloved*, Cincinnati's stench travels to the country by way of the wind. The hot, moist, and stinking air is the atmosphere of the racial Capitalocene, indicative of pollution, extreme temperature, and toxicity that disproportionately harm exploited African American laborers.

9 The ginger smell manifests magically; e.g., Milkman perceives a "sweet spicy perfume" in the midwife and witch Circe's house who reveals his ancestral history, "[l]ike ginger root – pleasant, clean, seductive" (*Song*, 239). As will be discussed later, the smell of ginger appears quite suddenly when Corinthians and Porter make love for the first time, and surrounds the burial of Macon Dead I, which returns his remains to his land. In short, ginger-scented air reveals the potentiality of Black life and love.

> And there the ginger smell was sharp, sharp enough to distort dreams and make the sleeper believe the things he hungered for were right at hand. To the Southside residents who were awake on such nights, it gave all their thoughts and activity a quality of being both intimate and far away. The two men [Milkman and Guitar] … could smell the air, but they didn't think of ginger. Each thought it was the way freedom smelled, or justice, or luxury, or vengeance.
>
> (*Song*, 185)

This representation of the wind retrieves an older understanding of "medium" as the "in-between," wedding the African diaspora not only with their ancestral lands, but also the gingery air with freedom, justice, and luxury, and all of these to a condition of rage in America (Horn 2020b: 4). Spicy air might be a good medium because, according to Teresa Brennan (2004: 136), our "unimpeded senses" such as smell transmit an "affect" through the air across bodies. As she argues in *The Transmission of Affect*, our emotions and memory bypass our subjectivity, responding to environmental signals: "all the senses … connect the supposedly higher cognitive faculty of linguistic thoughts with the fleshly knowledge or codes of the body". By construing the ginger smell as an "affect" that passes through the Atlantic air from the bodies of Africans to those of their descendants, Morrison links the sensorily invoked "affect" and political drive to the porousness of bodily boundaries. As a medium of transmission, the ginger-laden air emphasizes the embodied, collective character of "affects" and freedom dreams borne of struggle. Such transmission of "affects" via the air undermines the notion of a bounded, boundaried self and dismantles the separateness between Guitar and Milkman, portending their joint ride in the air.[10] The perfumed air produces an ecology of Black freedom that suspends however temporarily the "total climate" of antiblackness. Consequently, we may think of ginger as a product of Black ecologies, not only because it originated from Africa and was transported as a plantation crop, but also because its medicinal and culinary use by enslaved people in the Americas and their descendants conjures alternative possibilities for mutuality, sustainability, and collectivity (see Roane 2018), as we shall see later.

Yet, in *Toni Morrison and the Natural World: An Ecology of Color*, Wardi (2021) argues that ginger is "evocative of sugarcane, as both plants mediate [the African diaspora's] brutal and buried history". According to her, the exploitation and commodification of African bodies is manifest in the ginger

---

[10] When they took risks together as teenagers, "they swaggered, haunched, leaned, straddled, ran all over town trying to pick fights or at least scare somebody … When they succeeded, they rode the wind" (*Song*, 177). This early in the novel, riding the wind enacts male camaraderie and a certain performance of cool masculinity. At the conclusion of the novel, surrendering to the air – while riding it – queers such normative forms of masculinity and homosocial relations.

and sugarcane motifs so that ginger "explores the economic relationship of Africa to the New World". While Wardi's parallel between these two crops is suggestive, I contend that we must differentiate between these crops and their function in the novel. To quickly summarize the significance of sugar, Guitar cannot stand it (sugar's whiteness) because he associates it with the candy stick given him by the mill owner who cheats his family of life insurance after his father "got sliced up in a sawmill." He explains to Milkman that, "It [sugar] makes me think of dead people. And white people. And I start to puke" (*Song*, 61). The sugar thus symbolizes the relationship between Black bodies, forced labor, and death on the sugar plantations. Elizabeth Maddock Dillon (2019: 635) convincingly argues that the capital- and labor-intensive production of sugar was foundational to the invention of the agricultural monoculture that disentangles plants, people, animals, and places in the name of extraction. This plantation model was refined on the island of Barbados and subsequently exported to other American colonies: profits were so immense from the large scale use of slave labor that the food required to feed the slaves and other inhabitants of the island had to be imported from elsewhere. In *Song*, Morrison builds on sugar's historical connection to racial capitalist production and compares the life expectancy of slaves working on sugar plantations (around seven years) with that of a mill hand like Guitar's father. Sugar is inextricably linked to whiteness and a sweetness revolting to descendants of sugar workers because it is linked to diabetes, obesity, and cancer, causing a disproportionate number of amputations and deaths among Blacks (and non-whites). Besides, sugar nauseates Guitar because it epitomizes the plantation's eradication of sociality and "meaning (the deep social/material/cultural/spiritual connections) linking food, land, and people" (Dillon 2019: 634).

Now, we've arrived at the aforementioned differences between sugar and ginger. While ginger participates in the geographies of the so-called Plantationocene (a supplement to the racial Capitalocene used most notably by Haraway and Anna Tsing), which depends on "the relocation of the generative units: plants, animals, microbes, people" (Haraway (2015) qtd. in Dillon 2019: 635), ginger is not disentangled from other plants and its native lifeworld in the same way. Rather, Morrison's use of ginger should be associated with the crops grown for sustenance on the provision grounds of slaves. These so-called plots were given to enslaved people by planters in order to relieve themselves of the burden of feeding slaves and to maximize profits. Nonetheless, as noted by Sylvia Wynter (1971: 99) in her foundational essay on the opposition logics between the plantation and the plot, the plot resisted "the market system and market values" of the plantation, and enabled the "mystical reunion with the earth", which created around the growing of food "the plot of a folk culture – the basis of a social order". In other words, the slaves' cultivation

of plants such as ginger in their gardens could actually repair the severed relations between humans, the land, plants, the sacred, and the social. The growing of ginger, its culinary and medicinal use by enslaved and freedpeople demonstrates the way in which the so-called plot preserved the values and practices of traditional African societies. The value of ginger to the community is underscored by the fact that, presumably brought to the US by enslaved Africans, ginger has remained an important ingredient in African American cuisine. As noted by acclaimed cookbook author and culinary historian Jessica B. Harris (2011: 89), "enslaved blacks observed holidays like Pinkster Day (the Dutch Protestant celebration of Pentecost) with gingerbread and rum. Some of these traditions lasted among the Afro-Dutch descendants of New York and New Jersey well into the twentieth century". Thus, ginger is at odds with the commodification, market logics, profitability, toxicity, and lethality of sugar in the Plantationocene; instead, it is associated with different ways of life, celebration, healing, and health. Rather than emphasize the link between blackness, brutal extractive monocultural agriculture, and slavery, the motif of ginger-scented air in the novel affirms familial, social, ancestral, and intimate connections in the midst of insistent negation. As Thomas (2020: 66) argues about the atmosphere of the cave in Edwidge Danticat's "One Thing," the ginger evokes a "different breath-taking atmosphere", creating "multiple, interwoven temporalities", ecologies, and geographies via what is in the air. In *Song*, this breath-taking ginger-smelling atmosphere reaches back to the life forms and aspirations of ancient African civilizations. Unlike the gold these men want to steal from Pilate, the ginger smell is, like the wind that moves it, joyful, and yet immaterial, elusive, and ephemeral.

In addition to a mode of recalling Africanness, the wind also serves as a medium of Black movement. As a result of his search for roots, Milkman discovers that his "great-granddaddy could fly!" (*Song*, 328) Morrison implies that the wind atop Solomon's Leap was strong enough to defy the forces of gravity and blow his forefather right back to Africa: Solomon "ran up [the] hill, spun around a couple of times, and was lifted up in the air" (*Song*, 322). In the novel's concluding scene, Milkman and Pilate return to the same place to bury Jake's bones. This time, the narrator remarks upon the prevalence and intensity of the winds explicitly, "At the very top, on the plateau, the trees that could stand the wind at that height were few" (*Song*, 335). Milkman and Pilate's multisensory impressions at the peak include the cooling and sugaring of the wind: "A deep sigh escaped from the sack and the wind turned chill. Ginger, a spicy sugared ginger smell, enveloped them. Pilate laid the bones carefully into the small grave" (*Song*, 335). I previously suggested that the sweet ginger smell presents an olfactory image of a sensorily perceived alternative to the easterly flow of winds that enabled the slave trade. For, such "good winds" propelled

the movement of slave ships from the coast of Africa to the Americas; they were praised by ship captains, as they ensured the speedy and efficient delivery of chattel. As Hugh Thomas (1997: 1287) puts it, "When the vessel set off, the captain would believe that, with good fortune, the southeast trade winds would almost automatically take the ship, before the wind, across the Atlantic". While these fatal easterly winds enabled the genocidal, extractionist project of the racial Capitalocene, the heavy, violent winds at the top of Solomon's Leap defied its destruction of non/human life. Like Black ecologies, the animating forces of the wind form sites wherein Black people are threatened by enslavement and premature death, and also sites wherein they forge community and freedom (dreams). From the sensation of coolness, ginger, and the deep sigh, the latter carries remnants of that which survives the insistent negation of Black life en route to or in the Americas.

The deep sigh escaping the sack and cooling the wind is a sign of release, of letting go, as Jake is returned back to where he belongs. This is not Jake's first sigh; however, when Milkman and Guitar cut down the sack containing his bones (believing it to be the gold Pilate stole from her brother), Milkman "thought he saw the figure of a man standing right behind his friend … there was a huge airy sigh that each one believed was made by the other. … There was the deep sigh again and an even more piercing chill" (*Song*, 186). Brandon LaBelle (2014: 84, 85) a sound studies scholar, hears in the "gentle expression" of the sigh the sounds "of the body collapsing" and "vacat[ing] itself" because sighing "lets out what cannot be held onto [and] produces a form of conclusion, or resolve". Following LaBelle, the huge airy and deep sighs hint at Jake's relief at being cut down from the ceiling and respite from such an unnatural state of suspension. We saw previously that Jake's *blownup* body represented the violent obliteration of his life, his connection and right to land. As well, the hanging of his bones in the air – in a sack – mimics Guitar's recurring vision of "little scraps of Sunday dresses" that "did not fly" in the wind but "hung in the air quietly" (*Song*, 173). The "sensible, if nonvisible, thickness" of air presses on the little girls' bodies from all sides, delivering the deadly effects of transatlantic doldrums (Macauley 2010: 30). The doldrums (also referred to as "calms") occurred when "air movement is reduced to light winds or even completely still air" and could stall westward-bound slave ships for weeks. Such stalled ships had to wait for the wind and ran the risk of running out of provisions: "It was not unheard of for a ship caught in the calms to lose up to 50 percent of the slaves on board" (Falola & Warnock 2007: 143). Such "calms" thus played a pivotal role in the slave ledgers as well as sailors' and captains' documents that narrated the history of Middle Passage and gave birth to new world blackness. The non-being of the enslaved on slave ships caught in the calms is akin to that of Jake's bones or scraps of Sunday dresses hanging in the still, calm air. The sigh signals Jake's delivery from non-being-in-

the-air, which culminates in his final breath at the site of his belated burial. There, sighing voices a kind of rest in and return to the terrain that Jake had *lived on* and, which had been, in a certain sense, *his*. To paraphrase Circe the witch yet again, the dead like it when they're buried (*Song*, 245). Besides a channel of rest for the enslaved and their descendants, the chill, sweet, sounding air enables a "communal being-in-the-air, being-in-the-medium," where the living, the dying, and the dead come together (Horn 2020b: 6–7).

Implicit in this argument is the notion of becoming aware of the wind and the meanings it carries through what Fred Moten (2003: 250) might call the "ensemble of the senses". In what follows, I argue that Milkman's listening to the wind is essential to his overcoming the deadness that buries him. His seeking the family gold brings Milkman to Shalimar, Virginia, where he strikes the wrong note with the young men in Solomon's store by not bothering to give his name and asking for a woman: "His manner, his clothes were reminders that [the men] had no crops of their own and no land to speak of either" (*Song*, 266). After a bloody knife fight, Milkman's initiation into a Black southern, pastoral masculine identity and concomitant forms of homosociality continues when the older men take him bobcat hunting. In the forest, he is deprived of male privilege, his anthropocentric mastery, and his material possessions: "the cocoon that was "personality" – gave way", he "was only his breath", and what "he was born with, or had learned to use" (*Song*, 277). Instead of relying on "old and tired and beaten to death" concepts, he is forced to use his senses, his "[e]yes, ears, nose, taste, touch" (*Song*, 277). With no one there to help him, Milkman realizes that the swinging lamp he uses for guidance blinds him to seeing anything else in the dark. As soon as he surrenders to the darkness and relies on his own sight, his senses are stimulated, and he begins to hear an acousmatic sound (sound without a visible origin): "A long moan sailed up through the trees somewhere to the left of where they were. It sounded like a woman's voice, sobbing" (*Song*, 273). When Milkman hears the "sound of the sobbing woman again" and asks what it is, he is told that "Ryna's Gulch is up ahead … It makes that sound when the wind hits a certain way". His companion Calvin explains to him that according to oral legend "a woman name Ryna is crying in there. That's how it got the name" and this is the source of the echo (*Song*, 274). In this powerful moment, Milkman is, possibly for the first time in his life, listening[11]. Prior to this moment, Milkman has not been listening to people. Guitar knew that Milkman's "dulled ear" was a symptom of his deadness, the ear of someone who does not listen, and that is why he had repeatedly asked Milkman to lend him an ear, "Just listen, Milkman.

[11] A full exposition of the aural motifs and practices in *Song* falls beyond the scope of my article. However, in addition to scholarship on the significance of sound and listening by Fred Moten (2003), Nicole Brittingham Furlonge (2018), and Ashon Crawley (2020), oral exchanges with Maleda Belilgne have shaped my perspectives.

Listen to me" (*Song*, 125, 85). Circe also diagnosed Milkman's deficit when he wrongly assumed she had loved the white family she had served, "You don't listen to people", she told him (*Song*, 247). Hence it is important that one of the first sounds he really hears is that of the wind. As a result of the persistent, lingering sound, Milkman's listening becomes attentive, relational, and deliberate, emerging "from a place of wonder, curiosity, and not knowing" (Furlonge 2018: 2). Insofar as it is a precondition to Solomon's flight from captivity, the wind conveys for Milkman the infinite potentiality of blackness. However, the wind as a sonic remainder of Solomon's wife Ryna – who after his departure screamed out loud for days – plugs Milkman into the suffering of "[t]ruly landlocked people", that is, Black and Indigenous women, who "seldom dream of flight" (*Song*, 162). Because the wind is something invisible, temporary, and ungraspable, it is the perfect medium to pass on traces of the uprooted, the disremembered, and the disappeared, and to activate Milkman's auditory competence.

For Milkman's listening practice to yield historically and socioculturally embedded meanings, he has to keep attuning himself to sounds and songs carried by the wind. Prior to the hunt, he had watched a children's circle game in Shalimar. Rather than listen to and take in the meaning of the verses, however, he dismissed the song as a "rapid shouting of nonsense words" accompanied by the rapid twirling of the boy in the middle who imitated an airplane and crashed to the earth with the last line, "Twenty-one children the last one *Jay!*" (*Song*, 264). After the hunt, when he hears the circle song again, he listens deeply to the shouts, with his eyes closed. With no pen or pencil near, he concentrates on the "rhythmic, rhyming action game" performed repeatedly (*Song*, 303). His hearing awakened, he strives to immerse himself in the children's song and decipher its message. Susan Byrd confirms his interpretation of the verse "*O Solomon don't leave me here*" when she confesses that Ryna was Solomon's wife, crying in a ditch because she couldn't live without Solomon who flew home and left her to raise twenty children by herself: "They say she screamed and screamed, lost her mind completely. … Love, I guess" (*Song*, 323). The sonic echo of Ryna's screams awakens Milkman to the "lengths to which lost love drove men and women" (*Song*, 128). Ryna's wind-mediated howling speaks to the risks of "graveyard loves" establishing a link between Black love, heartbreak, and death, causing Milkman to reflect on his mother and Pilate, the life-giving love of two Black women, who "had fought for his life" from the beginning, even if "he had never so much as made either of them a cup of tea" (*Song*, 128, 331). Faced with the life-affirming and -threatening potential of Black love, Milkman's selfishness dawns on him. He had not loved his cousin Hagar and had taken her life: "He had hurt her, left her, and now she was dead" (*Song*, 332). To repair the damage wrought by his selfish love and wanton disregard of Hagar, he abides by Pilate's feminist commandment, a misinterpretation of Jake's guidance, and keeps a box of Hagar's hair with him

because "You just can't fly off and leave a body" (*Song*, 208). By listening to the wind, Milkman lends his ear to the fear, despair, and pain of Indigenous and Black women as well as to exceptional forms of love that seek to save and give life.

4. Love in/as flight

So far, we have focused on air as a medium of death, death-life, and life; now it is time to turn our attention to the air as a medium of Black love. Corinthians Dead's flight back to her lover Henry Porter proves a form of awaking, of Black being in the air. Corinthians' – Macon II's daughter and Milkman's sister – Bryn Mawr's education renders her unfit for useful work or for the role of a professional man of color's wife. However demeaning, domestic work provides her with an income as well as a sense of accomplishment. When she begins her love affair with Porter, she craves his attention, but at the same time feels that the advances of the shabbily dressed elderly yardman are an affront. After Porter realizes that she is ashamed of him, they have a big fight; as she walks away from Porter's car, she knows he is not going to see her anymore. As she reaches the Dead residence, her body freezes and begins to shake uncontrollably. She envisions her own death: her "ripeness mellowing and rotting" (*Song*, 197). Once she realizes that touching Porter, feeling his heat, is "the only thing that could protect her from a smothering death of dry roses," she flies back to him (*Song*, 199). Propelled forward by her dread of suffocation and her lust for life, she is moving so rapidly and at such a great speed as to be *flying* through the air: "Corinthians ran toward [the car] faster than she had ever run in her life, faster than she'd cut across the grass on Honoré Island … Faster even than the time she *flew* down the stairs having seen for the first time what the disease had done to her grandfather" (*Song*, 197; emphasis added). To run this fast, to fly, she has got to give up "the shit" – her vanity, her pride – that weighs her down. In Guitar's iconic words: "Can't nobody *fly* with all that shit" (*Song*, 179; emphasis added). We can think of her flight as a kind of unmooring from white supremacist heteropatriarchal standards of respectability. As she is flying through the air, she creates alternatives to what her D/dead family thinks is possible and proper for a lady trained for "leisure time, enrichments, and domestic mindlessness" (*Song*, 189). Her bodily, embodied flight back to Porter disturbs the stagnant, smothering air surrounding her, and signifies her awakening from a lifeless "doll baby" to a "grown-up woman" who is "not afraid of her daddy" and is more alive than she'd ever been before (*Song*, 196). When she reaches his car, she raps and bangs on the car-window, but Porter does not move. To stop him from driving away, she throws herself on the fender and lies full out across the hood of the car, "her fingers struggling for a grip on steel. She thought of nothing. Noting except what her body needed to do to hang on, to never let go. Even if he drove off at one hundred miles an hour, she would hang on" (*Song*, 199).

In order to save her life, she exerts herself violently atop his car. Even as it displays her strength and determination to never let go of Porter, at the same time, the act of hanging on evinces a radical act of vulnerability, which we might call, a surrender to the air.

The air around Porter, who is patiently, expectantly waiting for her in his purring car, is vibrating with otherwise possibilities. Having seen enough of her commitment, he moves around to the front of the car to get her; he gently pulls her into his arms, eases her into the seat, and "wait[s] for her soft crying to wane" (*Song*, 199). In contrast to the roses, which "spoke to [Corinthians] of death", in Porter's house there is "a pleasant smell in the air, like sweet ginger" (*Song*, 198, 199). The delightful ginger aroma expresses how their passionate love making makes her feel "easy", "grateful", and a new kind of "self-esteem" (*Song*, 201). Afterwards, back in the car, she moves as close to Porter as possible and takes "deep breaths of the sweet air her brother had been inhaling three hours ago" (*Song*, 203). As shown before, the sweetened air points "to the necessity of breath, to breathing space" (Sharpe 2016: 109), and also to the breathtaking beauty of their love. Sharpe argues that *aspiration* is linked to the ways "we must continue to think and imagine … multiple Black everydays of the wake" (Sharpe 2016: 113). For Morrison too, acts of relationality and care that disrupt the violences of the hold are linked to the air, particularly, inhaling the windborne ginger smell. The wind thus appears to be an agent of awakening, of living, and of loving otherwise. While Porter finds a way to live "in this fucking world" beyond the retributive violence of the Seven Days, Corinthians flees the deadly atmosphere of her father's "prison" (*Song*, 26, 10). Corinthians and Porter resist destructive atmospheric conditions and live happily ever after in a small house.

To borrow from Milkman, we can say that without ever leaving the ground, Corinthians could fly (*Song*, 336). The prospect that Black people might be able to leave the ground and fly in the air opens up further possibilities for Black life and love. What would it mean to discover new and radical ways of aligning one's being with wind currents? As previously mentioned, the masculine attributes of Milkman and Guitar's flight have been described at great length. P-Flores (2020: 105) reminds us that it stages "an ambivalent scene of mercy and gratuitous violence that blurs the boundaries between life and death, suicide and murder". While keeping some of this ambivalence in play, I suggest that Milkman and Guitar's embrace in the wind is anchored in "blackqueer"[12] forms of relationality. Their jump into the air defies the increased atmospheric pressure of white supremacist heteropatriarchy: "out of a commitment and love and

[12] Ashon Crawley (2020: 7) situates the term "blackqueer" within a Black feminist tradition and uses it with the intention of "producing a fundamental critique against—the normative world, and … a restlessness of word and phrase that seeks ways of existence otherwise.

selflessness they are willing to risk the one thing that we have, life" (Morrison 1994: 111). It matters that Guitar, a member of the revolutionary party of the Seven Days, puts his rifle down and does not blow Milkman's head off because that would mimic the violence of the racial Capitalocene that *blows up* Black lives. Out of love, Milkman gives up his life for his "maimed" and "scarred" brother: "You want my life? … You need it? Here" (*Song*, 278, 337). After another –perhaps his last – breath of sweet air, Milkman "leaped" into the air, "wheeled" toward his "man", and "it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother". Like his ancestor Solomon/Shalimar, Milkman attains the unfinished capacity to levitate in the social medium of air: "For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it" (*Song*, 337). Without denying that their flight is an exhibition of brotherly love, I also read it as a polysemous scene of same-sex eroticism, where the two men bond with each other sexually in and with the air. Their leap into the air is a continuation of the legacy of erotic resistance in the sex-segregated ship holds where queer relationships emerged among captive Africans. If the "black Atlantic has always been the queer Atlantic," then not only Solomon's, but Milkman and Guitar's reverse-Middle Passage can certainly be imagined as queer (Tinsley 2008: 191).

In Morrison's analysis, the possibility of queer sex does not surface, but she does proclaim that Milkman's rising in the air is sexually, even orgasmically, charged: when "Milkman is able to surrender to the air and ride it at the same time … it's the sexual act, the actual penetration of a woman and having an orgasm; … So that the rhythm of the book has this kind of building up, sort in and out, explosion. There's the beat in it, in my books there's always something in the blood, in the body, that's operating underneath the language" (Morrison 1994: 76). What Morrison describes as a quasi-contradiction between a man's domination of and surrender to a woman plays on in the queer oscillation between the men's riding of and surrendering to the air. As the wind is "unlike the other three elements" in that it "signif[ies] the being of non-being, the matter of the immaterial" (Connor 2010: 30, 31), the suspended image of their lifting up and floating in the air suggests to me José Esteban Muñoz's idea of a queerness (2009) that is not yet here with us. While the wind's ephemeral, unpredictable nature contributes to a fleeting sensory and affective experience of joy, Muñoz's work helps us think about the joys of temporary winds and their sense of potentiality.

Song conceptualizes a mode of erotic flight, a way of being together and touching in the air that reaches toward what is not here yet. As for Corinthians, her flying toward Porter resists ongoing conditions of antiblack violence and heteropatriarchal notions of propriety. Fundamentally, the paradox of holding and letting go enables Corinthians' as well as Milkman and Guitar's soaring.

The incompleteness of Milkman and Guitar's aerial takeoff, however, stalls our capacity to resolve it into an interpretation, and we are left with a sense of new relations and Black futures *becoming* in and through the air. This conception of wind as the social and erotic medium of Black life and love resonates the most with Barry Jenkins' beautiful film *Moonlight* (2016) about a queer Black boy coming of age in Miami. *Moonlight* is constructed as a "triptych: three sections work to imagine three different Chirons" (Fowler 2017: 45): "Little", an introverted boy, is increasingly neglected by his drug-addicted mother but is cared for by Juan, a drug dealer, who becomes a father to him; Chiron, a queer adolescent, is traumatized both at home and school, and is eventually betrayed by Kevin, his best friend and the love of his life; "Black", a formerly incarcerated drug dealer, who mimics Juan's masculine identity and cuts himself off from the possibility of queer love. In each section, Chiron feels the gentle, cooling, sensual touch of the wind: in Juan's car, Little *rides the wind* with his hand stuck out the window; Chiron savors the sea breeze as a way of forgetting his deep hurt and shares the joy of it with Kevin; Black stops to take in the sensation of the sea breeze and to remember his intimacy with Kevin before allowing himself to be touched by him again. In each instance, the sensation of the wind is always already entangled with that of the ocean and Kevin's life-saving touch. To make the connection between the winds in *Song* and *Moonlight*, I want to briefly remind us of the moment when the teenagers share the feeling of the sea breeze. Kevin says, "Sometime round the way, where we live, you can catch this same breeze. It come through the hood and it's like everything stop for a second 'cause everybody just wanna feel it. Everything just get quiet, you know?" (Jenkins 2016: 0:52:10–0:52:25) Chiron concurs, as the cool breeze moves in between and through them, and brings them closer than they've ever been, culminating in their first erotic encounter. As in *Song*, where the wind is a sensuous medium of deep connection and transformation, the breeze in *Moonlight* awakens Chiron and Kevin's senses, desires, and imaginations[13]. In both works, *feeling* and *feeling with*, the mobile, free-floating, and multi-sensory blows of the wind orients Black people toward a life of love, joy, care, remembrance, and improvisatory flight.

The name "Cool Breeze", otherwise not referred to or used to identify anyone in *Song*, stresses that such an orientation is grounded in the abandonment

[13] While my reading emphasizes how love and freedom are mediated through the sea breeze, it is in conversation with Ashon Crawley's analysis of *Moonlight* in *The Lonely Letters* (2020). Crawley describes the film as sensuous, noting that it engages "various sense experiences—taste, touch, smell, sight, hearing—to be not just the path toward memory, but memory itself" (108). For Crawley, the film foregrounds random encounters of intense feeling grounded in touch: "It's about intimacy, touch, feeling. It's about the search for something so wildly and radically free that he [Little/Chiron/Black] would wait to be touched like that again" (107).

of the self to the wind. This name appears among the list of names (such as Rocky River, Muddy Waters, Pine-top, Moon, Ice Man) that "bore witness": "Names [Black people] got from yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes, weaknesses" (*Song*, 330). According to Milkman, these names are unlike the "real names of people, places, and things" (including the Algonquin name for their land *michi gami* or Mains Avenue called Not/Doctor Street, which commemorates the first Black doctor living there) that "had meaning" (*Song*, 329). The name Cool Breeze not only testifies to Milkman and Guitar's, Corinthians', Pilate's, and Solomon's flowing with the wind, but also to Guitar's desire to merge with it. While Milkman advises caution and an elaborate plan to break into Pilate's house to snatch her gold, Guitar is relaxed and cordial; he smiles at the sun with eyes closed and basks in the expansiveness and luxury of the thought of money, joking with "[his] man," Milkman (*Song*, 174). Though usually critical of Black men's efforts to seem cool, the imperceptible presence of a breeze that recognizes no boundaries and goes wherever it wishes inspires him to "signify" at Milkman: "Be a breeze. A cool cool breeze" (*Song*, 174). Even as Guitar's expansive feelings are enmeshed with the possibility of capital accumulation, these feelings cannot be disentangled from Guitar lifting his face to the sun. I can only assume that the affective presence of the atmosphere motivates his joyful identification with the breeze. For, as Tonino Griffero (2020: 34) points out, "wind cannot be experienced in general or in an abstract way: strong or gentle, still or storm-like in different moments or places". Guitar's choice of words (*a cool cool breeze*) informs us that the air movement in that moment is gentle and chilling. Guitar's description of the wind registers how the wind rejuvenates him, thickening to a sensation that offers relief from the heat that disproportionately affects residents in low-income Black neighborhoods.

Why does the mad revolutionary who practices violence as a way to ensure the self-preservation of Black people invite the disruption of the human involved in becoming the breeze? This desire for escaping the fixity of matter is rooted in his experience of racial objectification, or, in Fanon's words, becoming *an object among objects*. Let's not forget the equivalence between his father's sliced body and the candy he refused as a child. For Guitar, the "bloody transactions" of racial capitalism, the Capitalocene's cutting of ties between food, land, and people, and the "unnatural" pleasures of whites, are congealed in the "sweetness" and "whiteness" of sugar. Similarly, when he sees the white male peacock with the tail full of jewelry, he attributes the bird's inability to fly to its hefty tail, saying "you got to give up the shit that weighs you down" (*Song*, 179). In spite of the fantasies, wonders, and dreams, the idea of Pilate's gold wakes up in him, a part of him puts flight before the permanence of terrestrial, propertied being. "All the jewelry weighs it down", Guitar remarks about the peacock that

appears in Southside. Guitar, a philosopher of the Black Radical Tradition, argues that jewelry is "the shit" that stops folks from attempting a different way of life. I argue that his performative call to identify with the breeze (*be a breeze*) is an undoing of the white supremacist settler colonialist forms of power, value, sociality, violence, and dispossession. While this early call to be-breeze is inspired by reversing the capital relation and the opportunity to steal Pilate's gold, it prefigures Guitar and Milkman's final jump and becoming-breeze – a form of relationality and sociality that is not reducible to the capital relation.

The question is how their jump approximates a mode of existence linked to becoming the breeze. Via Melanie Chen, *being a breeze* does not have to embody sexual relations between Guitar and Milkman, as long as it embraces "improper affiliations" that queer a multitude of hetero/normative notions of subjecthood, sociality, affect, intimacy, and binaries (Chen 2012: 104), appearing productive as well as destructive, active as well as passive, deadly as well as lively, human as well as nonhuman. The wind-borne soaring queers the linkages between affects, elements, and beings; it refuses the subject and the atmosphere binary and creates a profound sense of their interconnection and interanimation. Moreover, opacity wins out over the clarity of their flight; their movement toward the nonhuman abandons the idea of fixed being. As Tonino Griffero (2020: 33) notes, the wind "blows where it wishes … you do not know where it comes from or where it is going." This applies to a certain to extent to Milkman and Guitar who at the moment of their fusion with the gale are "precisely this blowing and nothing else" (Griffero 2020: 37). We do not know how long they stay afloat or where they fly, and for us this queer aerial formation does not exist beyond the blowing of the wind. While their breeze-being is affectively laden with intimacy at its deepest, emotional, and sensual level, it does not have durability. The ephemerality, the uncertainty, the open-endedness, the ambiguity of their flight contributes to its mind-body intensity and relational queerness.

In the end both men align themselves with the wind in an effort to undo a life based on racial capitalist and settler colonialist values of "property, good solid property" (*Song*, 301). The wind is not acquirable, accumulable, and ownable in the same way as land. Even if it has strong currents, the unpredictability of wind means that it does not carry the same meanings. Guitar and Milkman's embrace of the wind extricates them from extractive, exploitative racial ecologies that underline everyday life in the US. Being with what is present, transient, felt – that which rises and falls unexpectedly – develops alternative ontologies as they leave behind a normative way of being and learn to coexist with the ecology of the air. The activation of their ancestral knowledge of the airspace can be read as an extension of the unique knowledge of the enslaved and the Indigenous in navigating landscapes and waterscapes to inhabit a fugitive and transient freedom (see Hosbey & Roane 2021: 70).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, many of *Song*'s scenes involving movement (voluntary and forced) or perception (hearing, smell, feeling) convey the sense of the air as a medium of life, life-death, or death. Throughout, Black people's being *blown up into* or *out* of the air signifies the ongoing dislocation, disfigurement, and demolition of Black life by racial capitalism. In contrast, flight through the currents of the air indicates the deep, interconnected, sensuous life-force of Black Americans that has the potential to disrupt the antiblack atmosphere. My readings of the air as a medium of Black life builds on Horn's (2020a: 3) understanding of air as "a medium of biological life, of metabolism, perception, movement, and of the physical structure of all organisms; but also, more specifically, a medium of the social life of humans". Air is *Song*'s omnipresent "medium", the "in-between", the "environment", shared by its characters. At the same time, the description of the ginger scent carried to Southside by the air suggests that air is not a universal or solid medium, but a socially and racially inflected one that impacts (poor) communities of color differentially. Furthermore, the fleeting and unpredictable nature of the wind generates a temporary affective experience of communal joy.

In her writings, Horn (2018: 17) argues that experiential, affective approaches to being in the air are needed: "While the global and statistical view on the climate as a planetary system has enabled us to discover climate change and its anthropogenic causes, the scientific world-view has robbed us of an experience-based approach to climate, a relation to what it means to be in the air". As the paper shows, *Song* provides such a literary approach to forms of knowledge about being in the air as well as experiences and views from within the air. When Milkman, for instance, notices his exposure to the non-human world and hears Ryna's wind-borne howls, he becomes aware of the environments that surround him, and of his entanglement with these environments (social, cultural, ecological, historical, geographic, and so on). This turning point transforms his capitalist quest for gold into one of interrogating his cultural, ancestral, and climatic heritage. Ultimately, his sensory experiences of the air, including the wind-borne sobs, the cool breeze on his skin, the breath of sweet air, and the smell of ginger, culminate in a conscious, noncoercive, and caring relationship with his surroundings. The final scene, in which he and Guitar leap into and ride the air together, demonstrates his newfound understanding and practice of relationality. The potentiality and reciprocity of their flight hints at a future where air supports the abundance and growth of Black life.

By sensing Black erotics and love in and through the air, the reader of *Song* "gains access to the affective particularity of that moment of hope and potential transformation" (Muñoz 2009: 183). Morrison's use of the second-person

pronoun in the concluding sentence of the novel puts the responsibility of yielding to the air back on the reader: "If *you* surrendered to the air, *you* could ride it" (emphasis added). Affiliating ourselves with the air can be a model and a metaphor for what Daren Fowler (2017: 44) writing about *Moonlight* described as "caring, holding, and loving (queer) blackness without containing, suffocating and freezing its vital movements". Building on the images of the breeze in *Moonlight* and *Song*, we can reach toward an understanding of air as the queering medium of Black love. The erotic power of *giving way to* and *commanding* the air for me brings to mind the energy, the vitality, the vulnerability of "blackqueer" love. For *flying off* is not only a question of what Milkman and Guitar do (sexually) as they rise up in the air; "it is a question of how acutely and fully [they] can feel in the doing" (Lorde 2007). While metaphors of water and the fluidity of the African diaspora and queerness abound, I take the invocation to "surrender to the air" and to "be a breeze" to mean that we should explore what air and wind might do for Black studies and queer ecologies.

Air is a particularly resonant medium of Black life-/death and (queer) love; hence a systematic examination of aerial motifs in Black cultural production is called for. I cannot undertake a full exposition here but can only suggest possible lines of enquiry. The significance of shifts in the wind is evident in, among other slave narratives, Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents*. With the wind ahead, the vessel bearing the fugitives to freedom had been detained; therefore, Linda Brent's grandmother fears that everybody would be discovered and tortured to death, and her house would be burned down. When within a couple of days, the wind shifts, it signals the prospect of freedom. As Brent/Jacobs sails toward the north, she enjoys the "exhilarating breeze … without fear or restraint" on deck, reflecting that she had not realized the significance of air until she had been deprived of it (Jacobs 2001 [1861]: 126, 131).[14]

[14] A notable contemporary example, which thematizes the wind's movement across the ocean's surface is M. NourbeSe Philip's (2011) much discussed *Zong!*, the third section of which is entitled "Ventus" or "wind." As well as in *Song*, Philip's poetry recalls the status of the wind as the elemental, albeit undertheorized, climatic precondition of the triangular trade and its accumulation of blood capital. At the same time, in "Ventus" too, the wind acts as an aesthetic medium carrying letters or word(s)/clusters across the pages, blowing the fleshy fragments into multi-relational, otherwise units of meaning.

REFERENCES

PRIMARY SOURCES

Jacobs, Harriet. 2001 [1861]. *Incidents in the life of a slave girl*. Dover Publications.
Jenkins, Barry (dir.). 2016. *Moonlight*. Pastel, and Plan B Entertainment. 1 hr., 51 min. DVD.
Morrison, Toni. 1994. *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Ed. by Danille Taylor-Guthrie. University Press of Mississippi.
Morrison, Toni. 2004. *Song of Solomon.* Vintage International.
Philip, M. NourbeSe. 2011. *Zong! As told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.

SECONDARY SOURCES

Bailey, Moya. 2021. *Misogynoir transformed: Black women's digital resistance*. NYU Press.
Blake, Susan L. 1980. Folklore and community in *Song of Solomon*. *MELUS* 7(3). 77–82. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/467030
Brennan, Teresa. 2004. *The transmission of affect*. Cornell University Press.
Bryant, Cedric G. 1999. "Every goodbye ain't gone": The semiotics of death, mourning, and closural practice in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. *MELUS* 24(3). 97–110. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/468041
Chen, Mel Y. 2012. *Animacies: Biopolitics, racial mattering, and queer affect*. Duke University Press.
Connor, Steven. 2010. *The matter of air: Science and art of the ethereal*. Reaktion Books.
Crawley, Ashon. 2020. *The lonely letters*. Duke University Press.
Crutzen, Paul J. & Eugene F. Stoermer 2000. Anthropocene. *IGBP Newsletter* 41. 17–18.
Dillon, Elizabeth Maddock. 2019. Zombie biopolitics. *American Quarterly* 71(3). 625–652. DOI: doi:10.1353/aq.2019.0047
Dunning, Stefanie K. 2021. *Black to nature: Pastoral return and African American culture*. University Press of Mississippi.
Falola, Toyin & Amanda B. Warnock (eds). 2007. *Encyclopedia of the Middle Passage*. Greenwood Press.
Fowler, Daren. 2017. To erotically know: The ethics and pedagogy of *Moonlight*. *liquid blackness* 4(7). 42–56. https://liquidblackness.com/s/Fowler-LB7.pdf
Furlonge, Nicole Brittingham. 2018. *Race sounds: The art of listening in African American literature*. University of Iowa Press.
Gado, Mark. 2013. The Birmingham Church Bombing: Bombingham. Crime Library: Criminal Minds and Methods. https://www.crimelibrary.org/terrorists_spies/terrorists/birmingham_church/index.html (accessed 28 December 2022).
Glave, Dianne D. 2010. *Rooted in the earth: Reclaiming the African American environmental heritage*. Lawrence Hill Books.
Griffero, Tonino. 2020. It blows where it wishes: The wind as a quasi-thingly atmosphere. *Venti* 1(2). 31–39.

Haraway, Donna. 2015. Anthropocene, capitalocene, plantationocene, chthulucene: Making kin. *Environmental Humanities* 6(1). 159–165. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3615934

Harris, Jessica B. 2011. *High on the hog: A culinary journey from Africa to America*. Bloomsbury.

Hartman, Saidiya V. 1997. *Scenes of subjection: Terror, slavery, and self-making in nineteenth-century America*. Oxford University Press.

Horn, Eva. 2018. Air as medium. *Grey Room* 73. 6–25.

Horn, Eva. 2020a. Airborne: Air as a social medium. *Venti* 1(1). 21–23.

Horn, Eva. 2020b. Winds, miasma, pollution. Pathologies of the air as an environing medium. In Adam Wickberg & Johan Gärdebo (eds.), *Environing media*, Routledge. 1–24.

Hosbey, Justin & J. T. Roane. 2021. A totally different form of living: On the legacies of displacement and marronage as Black ecologies. *Southern Cultures* 27(1). 68–73. DOI: 10.1353/scu.2021.0009

Karera, Axelle. 2019. Blackness and the pitfalls of anthropocene ethics. *Critical Philosophy of Race* 7(1). 32–56. 10.5325/critphilrace.7.1.0032

LaBelle, Brandon. 2014. *Lexicon of the mouth: Poetics and politics of voice and the oral imaginary*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Landy, Joshua & Michael Saler. 2009. Introduction: The varieties of modern enchantment. In Joshua Landy & Michael Saler (eds.), *The re-enchantment of the world: Secular magic in a relational age*, Stanford University Press. 1–14.

Lee, Dorothy H. 1982. *Song of Solomon*: To ride the air. *Black American Literature Forum* 16(2). 64–70. https://doi.org/10.2307/2904138

Lorde, Audre. 2007. Uses of the erotic: The erotic as power. In Audre Lorde (ed.), *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches*, Crossing Press. 93-103.

Lubiano, Wahneema H. 1995. The postmodernist rag: Political identity and the vernacular in *Song of Solomon*. In Valerie Smith (ed.), *New essays on* Song of Solomon, Cambridge University Press. 93–116.

Macauley, David. 2010. *Elemental philosophy: Earth, air, fire, and water as environmental ideas*. SUNY Press.

Malm, Andreas. 2016. *Fossil capital: The rise of steam power and the roots of global warming*. Verso.

Mbembe, Achille. 2001. *On the postcolony*. University of California Press.

Mbembe, Achille 2003. Necropolitics. *Public Culture* 15(1). 11–40. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11

Moore, Jason W. 2017. The capitalocene, part I: On the nature and origins of our ecological crisis. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 44(3). 594–630. DOI: 10.1080/03066150.2016.1235036

Moten, Fred. 2003. *In the break: The aesthetics of the black radical tradition*. University of Minnesota Press.

Muñoz, José E. 2009. *Cruising utopia: The then and there of queer futurity*. NYU Press.

P-Flores, Adrián I. 2020. Antiphilosophy in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon: Is Black suicide possible? The Comparatist* 44. 96–114. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/com.2020.0006

Roane, J. T. 2018. Plotting the Black commons. *Souls* 20(3). 239–266. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2018.1532757

Roane, J. T. & Justin Hosbey. 2019. Mapping Black ecologies. *Current Research in Digital History* 2. DOI: https://doi.org/10.31835/crdh.2019.05

Robinson, Cedric J. 2005. *Black Marxism: The making of the black radical tradition*. University of North Carolina Press.
Sharpe, Christina. 2016. *In the wake: On blackness and being*. Duke University Press.
Smith, Mark M. 2006. *How race is made: Slavery, segregation, and the senses*. The University of North Carolina Press.
Tabuchi, Hiroko & Nadja Popovich. 2021. People of color breathe more hazardous air. The sources are everywhere. *NYT*, 28 April. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/28/climate/air-pollution-minorities.html (accessed 28 Dec. 2022).
Thomas, Hugh. 1997. *The slave trade: The story of the Atlantic slave trade 1440–1870*. Simon & Schuster.
Thomas, Gabler Sara. 2020. Humid air, humid aesthetics. *Venti* 1(2). 64–75.
Tinsley, Omise'eke Natasha. 2008. Black Atlantic, queer Atlantic: Queer imaginings of the Middle Passage. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14(2–3). 191–215. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2007-030
Vergès, Françoise. 2017. Racial capitalocene. In Theresa Gaye Johnson & Alex Lubin (eds.), *Futures of Black radicalism*, Verso. 156–176.
Wardi, Anissa J. 2021. *Toni Morrison and the natural world: An ecology of color*. University Press of Mississippi.
Wilderson, Frank B., III. 2010. *Red, white, and black: Cinema and the structure of U.S. antagonisms*. Duke University Press.
Williamson, Terrion L. 2016. *Scandalize my name. Black feminist practice and the making of Black social life*. Fordham University Press.
Wynter, Sylvia. 1971. Novel and history, plot and plantation. *Savacou* 5. 95–102.
Wynter, Sylvia. 1994. "No humans involved": An open letter to my colleagues. Forum N.H.I.: Knowledge for the Twenty-First Century 1(1): 1–17.