



Unlikely Antiphony: Whitman's Call and Morrison's Response in "Song of Myself" and Song of Solomon

Denise Heinze
North Carolina State University

ISSN 0737-0679 (Print)
ISSN 2153-3695 (Online)

Copyright © 2015 Denise Heinze

Recommended Citation

Heinze, Denise. "Unlikely Antiphony: Whitman's Call and Morrison's Response in "Song of Myself" and Song of Solomon." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 33 (2015), 85-113. <https://doi.org/10.13008/0737-0679.2192>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

UNLIKELY ANTIPHONY:
 WHITMAN'S CALL AND MORRISON'S
 RESPONSE IN "SONG OF MYSELF" AND
 SONG OF SOLOMON

DENISE HEINZE



AT THE END of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, in the aftermath of the hatred and violence that has felled Pilate, Milkman cradles his indomitable aunt's head as she makes a dying admission: "I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would of loved 'em all. If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more."¹ It is this moment, arguably more than any other in the novel, in its remarkable insistence on love in response to the deranged Guitar's rancid vengeance, that triggers Milkman's triumphal leap into the "killing arms of his brother" (SS 341). Yet, while transformative for Milkman, Pilate's near-death sentiments nevertheless have received relatively light scholarly treatment, most likely because they are upstaged by Morrison's dazzling finale, which celebrates Milkman's bravado even as it confounds readers with the indeterminacy of his fate. Pilate's last words, however, resonate, not just within the pages of the novel, acting as the exclamation point on the central motif of agape love, but also outside of it, harkening back to Walt Whitman, whose own quest for the all-illusivous universality of the human soul seems to have engendered, at least in one specific linguistic utterance, *simpatico* in Toni Morrison. The striking example of their camaraderie, to borrow a coveted Whitman term, is found in section 6 of "Song of Myself," "A child said *What is the grass?*"² In it, the speaker attempts to capture the essence of nature's most mundane but ubiquitous manifestation. Calling it hope, the visible evidence of God, the offspring of vegetation, and an ancient language spoken by, hence connecting all humanity, the speaker than abruptly shifts course, coupling grass with death, the "uncut hair of graves" (LG1891 33). At this point, the speaker ceases his phenomenological musings about grass to focus on all those in graves carpeted by it.

The contradiction between the vibrant “curling grass” springing from the corpses of “young men” appears to be too much for the speaker as he sighs about the deceased, in words nearly identical to Pilate’s, “It may be if I had known them I would have loved them” (LG1891 33). Here the speaker’s longing for the young men appears singular, separate from his subsequent reflections on all others who have died, suggesting perhaps, given Whitman’s penchant for homoeroticism in his work, an expression of sexual rather than platonic love. Yet, his ardent profession, like Pilate’s, is also transcendent, a recognition of his relationship to and participation in the family of human beings, coupled with his awareness of the limitations in earthly form to consummate a universal oneness.

The similarities between Pilate and the poetic voice in “Song of Myself” might end there, were it not for what Pilate, in her dying breath, saves for last. “Sing,” she begs Milkman. “Sing a little something for me” (SS 340). What Pilate intends by this request is not clear. Perhaps it is a desire to ensure that her knowledge about family and culture does not end with her, or that she teaches Milkman one way to give back, to care for others, even though he “knew no songs, and had no singing voice that anybody would want to hear” (SS 340). Perhaps she simply wishes for the sound of singing, which had sustained her so often in life, to usher her into the afterlife, albeit coming as it does from a tone-deaf nephew. Or, finally, it just might serve as a reaffirmation of the breathless announcement that opens Whitman’s own epic song: “I celebrate myself, and sing myself” (LG1891 29). Whitman would have applauded Pilate’s admonition to Milkman to sing, even as Milkman chooses to honor Pilate, “Sugargirl,” rather than himself. For on the heels of Pilate’s death, Milkman’s singing becomes more urgent, “louder and louder” (SS 340), until it soon propels him towards his own liberation.

Certainly Pilate’s verbal echoes are hardly evidence of a direct line of literary descent, a conclusion Morrison would surely balk at given her distaste for such comparisons,³ but they are also more than an interesting coincidence, especially when viewed within the context of the most obvious, and overarching, linguistic (re)iteration, the novel’s title, *Song of Solomon*, which shares a kinship with “Song

of Myself” at the level of grammar and diction; in its riff on biblical scripture; and as a musical trope that resonates well beyond literality. Yet, here again, the evidence is slim, fraught with difficulties since the grammatical construction is not identical (one title employs a proper noun, the other a possessive pronoun); and semantically, “Solomon” has far different connotations than “Myself,” especially in regards to the scriptural antecedent, which then further destabilizes the already slippery signifier “Song” in each title. Finally, tropes, by nature, are wildly indeterminate, even more so in comparison to one another. And yet, it is precisely because of these titular differences, as well as ensuing textual evidence, that a case can be made for Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* as an antiphonal re-voicing of motifs in Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” specifically in sections 1 and 6: the (re)cognition of the human soul as a prerequisite to the transformative power of a universal consciousness, and the unlimited expressions of love that enable it. For while Morrison, like Whitman, celebrates the pursuit of this cosmic oneness, she nevertheless responds with her own contrapuntal vision about what it takes to get there, a journey that begins not with attention to the self, but others.

Such a fundamental philosophical departure in Morrison’s quest for universality as more a communal than an individual endeavor would appear to nullify any meaningful comparisons to Whitman. In fact, some Morrison scholars would take exception to any scholarship that links Morrison not only to Whitman, but to any white writers, and the mostly Eurocentric tradition they embody, arguing instead that Morrison (re)constructs, hence privileges, an Afrocentric logos.⁴ Other scholars, however, challenge this essentialist characterization of Morrison’s fiction, arguing that she recognizes the dangers inherent in, and thus refuses to displace, one logocentrism with another.⁵ In this second camp are those who insist on Morrison’s understanding of, connection to, immersion in, and ultimate creative use of a highly charged multi-racial and cultural history, as well as the complex diversity of modern American life.⁶ In forging her art, then, Morrison does not, David Cowart says in his article about the influences of Faulkner and Joyce on *Song of Solomon*, “borrow from or rewrite” white writers who may have influenced her, but “undertakes a similar

act of ethnic definition, and at times she urges her program in terms virtually antithetical to those [writers].”⁷ Consequently, she “extends and modifies an inherited literary tradition, and . . . reveals her power as she integrates her precursors . . . into a fiction of universal humanity and moral authority.”⁸ Thus, while Morrison may take exception to Whitman’s methodology for achieving universality, that does not preclude analysis of a literary kinship but demands it; indeed, the sheer fact that she appears to speak to Whitman’s “Song,” especially in (not in spite of) antithetical terms at times, suggests an even more energetic and intimate connectivity, heretofore unacknowledged, between two seemingly disparate but celebrated works in American literature.

Understanding the relationship between *Song of Solomon* and “Song of Myself” requires more than an assertion that Morrison participates in and ultimately re-shapes the literary canon by signifying against Whitman, or that she melds Whitman’s Eurocentric sensibilities with Afrocentric ones, which is especially problematic given Whitman’s life-long interest in non-Western cosmologies, including India’s Vedic traditions, but especially ancient Egyptian beliefs.⁹ Rather, what transpires between them resembles a sublime call and response, a musical dialogic, appropriate in light of the invocation of song in the title of both works, in which a leader “lines out” a phrase that is then repeated by a listener, but with a marked difference. Whitman is the “leader” in that chronologically he arrives first in literary history, but also because his message must have caught the ear of Morrison, the “listener” who “hears” the text and responds through the auricle of her own unique historical and cultural perspective. Marilyn Sanders Mobley identifies Morrison’s call and response strategy within *Song of Solomon* as a “multivoiced network of ongoing dialogues,”¹⁰ and though Mobley’s application seeks specifically to illuminate African American culture and identity as communal, interconnected, and expressive, it also provides a window into Morrison’s apparent affinity to Whitman. Mobley explains that in *Song of Solomon*, “Milkman’s initiation [into the black community] is not merely a matter of acquiring his own voice but one of recognizing that the relationship between the voice of the self and the voices of the community is not either/or but both/and. By extension, the relationship between the reader and the text

is interactive and participatory.”¹¹ Given Mobley’s analysis, Morrison fictionalizes the very process by which she, as a reader herself, engages other irresistible texts, those that beckon even if “lined-out” by an icon of an oppressive Western literary tradition. In celebrating song, Whitman perhaps unwittingly, given his operatic training, opens up space for the Afrocentric expressive speaking voice. Conceivably even more provocative to Morrison is Whitman’s deliberate and conscious decision in section 6, “A child said *What is the grass?*,” to do the unheard of in nineteenth-century racist America—deign to conflate various nationalities and races of people into the human family, insisting that life, in the guise of ubiquitous grass, does not discriminate, “Growing among black folks as among white” (LG1891 33). By specifically using the term “Cuff,” another reference to black Americans, in the following line, Whitman in effect calls out to and hence invites into the discourse previously disenfranchised groups. Whitman’s inclusiveness would be surprising given his enculturation, but as Steven Tapscott demonstrated, Whitman’s interest in ancient Egypt included “The belief in the equality of life before the throne of gods. . . to which Whitman apparently responded with fervor.”¹² It is entirely possible, then, that Morrison, in reading Whitman, heard the invocation to join in the formerly exclusive conversation of Western arts, and, in the process of talking back, Morrison “fosters intersubjectivity and creates community in the context of shared experience.”¹³

Morrison’s response strategy is characterized in related terms by Judith Pocock as “Guerrilla Exegeses,” which Osayande Obery Hendricks explains “is the bringing or leading out of oppressed/suppressed/ don’t-get-no-press meanings by sabotage subversion or other non-traditional appropriations of hegemonic renderings.”¹⁴ Pocock points to the raft of biblical names in *Song of Solomon* as an exemplar of an exegete on the lam, who “juxtapose[s] implied narratives, images, and symbolic motifs to heighten contradictions and conjure up meaning.”¹⁵ Morrison as linguistic saboteur, in taking on the bible, employs the interpretive practice of Christian typology in which scripture in the Old Testament is perceived as laden with types or portents of Christ, which are then revealed in the New Testament in the form of antitypes.¹⁶ Northrup Frye explains that this mode of

interpretation “is traditionally given as ‘In the Old Testament the New Testament is concealed; In the New Testament the Old Testament is revealed.’”¹⁷ In a similar fashion, excluding the religious connotations, the call and response is also a typological dynamic in which the original iteration, or call, contains the seeds of the reiteration or response. But as Pocock’s rogue exegete, “Morrison is not simply interested in mobilizing the power of analogy. Typology in her hands becomes a vehicle for revealing contrast and contradiction as well as unity and the universal.”¹⁸ The one who calls, then, is something of a visionary who may be able to anticipate and inspire subsequent articulations; the one who listens, through her/his own acts of interpretation and exegesis, reveals the signs in the call in what is simultaneously acknowledgement and defiance. In this way, call and response as typologic “points to future events that are often thought of as transcending time, so that they contain a vertical lift as well as a horizontal move forward.”¹⁹ Embedded, then, in “Song of Myself” is this other one, a song that itself presages a further expansion of human consciousness; in effect, the poem and the novel can be understood as not just works about transcendence but as living, timeless collaborators of it.

Despite these shared impulses, it is rare that Morrison and Whitman ever appear together in literary scholarship (where they are usually compared favorably in a passing remark), perhaps because of differences in race, gender, geography, chronology, and possibly sexuality. Yet, Pilate, one of Morrison’s most endearing creations, demonstrates an unlikely camaraderie with Walt Whitman,²⁰ more specifically Whitman’s poetic voice in “Song of Myself,” which whispers similar, albeit far more protracted, sweet nothings to the “En-Masse” (LG1891 32). Indeed, the same labels scholars have attached to Morrison’s Pilate²¹ are also applicable to Whitman’s persona. Both are shamanic forces whose incantations, or songs, have the power to heal and transmute. In fact, the first time Pilate appears in *Song of Solomon*, the opening scene in which Robert Smith is perched on top of the hospital determined to fly of his own volition, she is singing: “O Sugarman done fly away / Sugarman done gone” (5). Pilate is not aware of the import of her song as it applies to her personal history—a commemoration of her grandfather’s mythic flight out of slavery, no

less—and will not realize it until nearly the end of her life. But, she does intuit that the verse is appropriately occasional, befitting the heroic but ultimately failed efforts of the disturbed Robert Smith. So mesmerizing is her performance that the crowd gathered to witness the impending suicide is momentarily stilled and “transfixed” (SS 6). Like many of those in the attendance, Guitar, the boy who years later will become Pilate’s executioner, listens to her “with at least as much interest as he devoted to the man flapping his wings on top of the hospital” (SS 7). Ultimately, Pilate’s song does not prevent Robert Smith from falling to his death; instead, it acts as an invocation to do what he had promised—fly, for he had “heard the music, and leaped on into the air” (SS 9).

Just as Pilate does in her initial appearance, Whitman’s persona in “Song of Myself” bursts into song. But unlike Pilate there is, at first-glance, a self-awareness that she does not possess, but which appears smug and self-absorbed. Pilate, after all, sings for the delusional man on the roof, while Whitman’s speaker begins with a presumptuous panegyric of himself. Yet, this seemingly narcissistic pronouncement quickly fades as the speaker becomes inclusive, admonishing all of those other than him to “assume” (LG1891 29) or adopt his awareness of the shared composition of human life: “For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (LG1891 29). So it is for Pilate who does not regard Robert Smith as a titillating spectacle outside of and beyond her. She recognizes their shared humanity and thus acts to witness rather than watch, participate in and facilitate, rather than obstruct, his full expression of himself, even if it leads to his death.

Pilate’s camaraderie with Whitman’s speaker is further evident in her lifestyle, which is antithetical to, and hence a powerful denunciation of, any ideologies of Western culture that would attempt to constrain it—those “Creeds and schools” (LG1891 29) that Whitman neither accepts nor rejects. In particular, Pilate dismisses the patriarchal model, along with the capitalist economy with which it shares a symbiotic relationship. A single self-supporting mother in an all-female enclave, her home makes a mockery of the Cult of Domesticity, divested as it is of all the contrivances of convenient living—electricity, gas, plumbing—slipshod about meals which are never “planned or

balanced or served” (SS 29), containing almost no furniture, yet cluttered, and inhabited by an “unkempt” (SS 37) woman sans cosmetics or other evidence of commodifying feminine wiles. In place of those values in Pilate’s home, which Gay Wilentz characterizes as “a traditional African village compound,”²² are the intangibles of her African heritage—song, stories, magic, visions, and unconditional love—the constituent educative elements in the socialization of African children, which is the primary responsibility of (grand)mothers who, Filomina Steady explains, embody “the ultimate value in life, namely the continuation of the group.”²³ Even further from the American ideal of mid-twentieth century domesticity and its economic counterpart, Pilate provides for her family and works at home, a bootlegger whose wine business and daughter Reba’s knack for winning prizes are their only sources of income. While Pilate’s livelihood might suggest an entrepreneurial spirit, in the best tradition of American capitalism, it is not an embrasure of the hard-work ethic for the primary function of generating and accumulating wealth. Pilate works whenever she feels like it and the profits she makes from the wine-selling are not stock-piled or re-invested, but disappear “like sea water in a hot wind” spent by women who buy whatever strikes their fancy—cheap trinkets for granddaughter Hagar and gifts for Reba’s boyfriends (SS 29). Money, property, middle-class respectability mean little to them, much to the chagrin of Pilate’s brother, Macon Dead, a hard-driving, ruthless businessman who, though exhausted himself from the rough and tumble of unbridled mercantility, is infuriated by his sister’s unwillingness to toe the line, as it is delineated by a white, patriarchal, capitalist, heterosexist society. Nevertheless, her private space is a refuge, far removed from its counterpart, the tastefully decorated, efficiently managed, culturally middle-brow household that acts more as a showcase of, rather than a sanctuary for, the successful male who inhabits it.

Poor as Pilate and her family are, living in what others perceive as economic and societal disarray, they offer an intriguing alternative to bourgeoisie, one that is prefigured in Whitman’s opening salvo in “Song of Myself” in its insistence on the soul as the source of intrinsic, hence authentic, value. After the speaker announces himself in song,

then claims kinship with all other humans (1-3), he invites his soul in for a leisurely and prolonged, perhaps perpetual period of introspection. He extends the invitation to himself first, then, by implication, all those progenitors who made his existence possible—the soil, the air, and “parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the same” (LG1891 29). Essentially, he encourages anyone who is willing, just as Pilate does in her home, to “lean and loafe at . . . ease” (LG1891 29), in effect, to still one’s body as a precondition of reflection on the essence of being as it is observed in phenomena even as seemingly insignificant as “a spear of summer grass” (LG1891 29). Such an invitation certainly captures the imagination of Pilate’s twelve-year-old nephew, Milkman, visiting her for the first time. Macon Dead’s only son, Milkman has been raised in an apparently ideal situation, a traditional nuclear family, with the so-called finer things in life—relative comfort and abundant material possession. But his family’s life is as arid and soulless as the Dead surname intones, buried as it is under the sheer weight of the patriarch’s greed, which compels him to view all things and people, even his own kin, as commodities. So it is that the newcomer Milkman is immediately taken with the simplicity and authenticity of Pilate’s home, its soft candle light, smells of “pine and fermenting fruit,” (SS 39) and spartan decor. What Pilate offers him—a perfect egg and a slice of family history—is of little commercial value, but in her preparation and execution of both, she teaches him the intangible worth of leisurely but focused observation and contemplation, which requires that he do essentially nothing at all, simply be. It is enough for Milkman, who takes one look at his centered, wise, and powerful aunt and declares that “nothing—not the wisdom of his father nor the caution of the world—could keep him from her” (SS 36).

Though Macon Dead takes every measure to insulate his son from Pilate’s influence, he is not immune to the allure of his sister’s household even as it acts as a refutation of all that defines his own. Trapped in a loveless marriage to a wife he suspects of having had incestuous relations with her father, driven to acquire all that his father lost when he was murdered, estranged from his own children and the community he as a slum lord exploits, Macon resorts to fondling the

keys of his properties, as well as occasional prostitutes and destitute female tenants, for comfort. That he is suddenly drawn to Pilate's home early in the novel after a particularly difficult afternoon with Porter, a drunken, suicidal tenant, speaks to the emotional and spiritual bankruptcy of his life. Drained by the sheer energy required to make and keep money, he reflects on Pilate's birth, a confluence of the extraordinary, if not bizarre, for she is born on the heels of her mother's death and without a navel. Macon becomes Pilate's surrogate mother, until a confrontation over gold they discover in a cave when Pilate is twelve and Macon sixteen leads to an irreparable split, and to Macon's distorted and inaccurate perception that his once-beloved sister is both embarrassing and dangerous. Nevertheless, he realizes, even as a young man expert in assessing commercial value, that Pilate was a rarity, that "there was probably not another stomach like hers on earth" (SS 28). His memories, the altercation that day with Porter, and the terrible loneliness of his position in the community as a money-grubbing landlord, send him scurrying to his office, a route which takes him past his sister's house. Determined not to "even look to his left as he walked by it" (SS 28), he is suddenly arrested by the sound of their voices raised in song. After an initial attempt to resist it, he envisions what waits for him at home—a family with whom he has no real emotional connection—then turns back, "pulled. . . like a carpet tack under the influence of a magnet" (SS 29). He peers into the window and witnesses the "effortless beauty" of the women who are doing nothing more than caring for each other: Pilate stirs a pot, Reba trims her nails, Hagar braids her mother's hair, they all sing. Macon "relished" (SS 30) the tableau and, even after the music stops, longs to stay. But he can't, invested as he is in his own mode of being, never again, in the duration of the novel, to return.

Though Macon appears to be the outsider, lurking as he does at the edges of Pilate's life, it is Pilate who suffers from ostracization, a victim, initially, of rigid and narrow societal expectations but eventually a Whitmanesque champion of her own independence. Early on in her life she opts to ignore, or for lack of a formal education is ignorant of, the mores and institutions of the Western tradition which Whitman's speaker suggests have had their day, "Retiring back a while"

though “never forgotten” (*LG*1891 29). There exists in Whitman’s pronouncements a measure of respect for received knowledge, but also a clear and conscious decision not to allow it to stymie his own potential for discovery and invention. Pilate does not have the luxury of choice; her declaration of freedom from it is born of necessity. By virtue of the conditions of her birth—a poor uneducated black female—she automatically limns early twentieth-century racist and sexist White America, barely tolerated, despised, dismissed, endangered. In addition, as the daughter of a former slave, she has virtually no family history to draw on, not even her mother’s name. Certainly more damning, because it ensures her nearly complete isolation from the only haven afforded her—black society—is the missing navel. As a child, without a mother to tell her any differently, she views her smooth belly as perfectly natural, just another difference between boys and girls. It isn’t until she is orphaned, estranged from her brother and on her own that she realizes, at the age of fifteen after her first sexual experience, the truth, as it is cruelly delivered by the very people whose own experience with discrimination does not prevent them from stigmatizing her. Rather than tolerated, let alone celebrated, Pilate’s anomaly is feared and reviled. She is cast out of or abandoned by every African-American community she joins, ensuring that while she is exposed to both the Eurocentric and Africanist traditions, she does not enjoy the luxury of either formal education or the teachings imparted by surrogate mothers and grandmothers. She thus becomes an autodidact, left to her own conclusions about such phenomena as the epistemology of a geography book or genealogy of a song about flight. Eventually, Pilate learns to hide her difference, but it only serves to alienate her further. She refuses to marry a man she loves in fear of discovery and the swift exclusion it will effect, and takes to the road as her only path to self-hood. After a while, tired of the deception, and the hypocrisy of men who would reject her but little else sexually, she decides not to hide her stomach any longer. As a result, she is completely cut off from most all social trappings. “Already without family” she was denied “every other resource” including “partnership in marriage, confessional friendship and communal religion” (*SS* 149).

Her pariah status eventually infuriates her to the point that, like Whitman's speaker, she breaks with all aspects of civilized society, tossing aside "every assumption she had learned" and starting "at zero" (SS 149). Stripping away layers of acculturation, she cuts off her hair and dresses like a man, then tackles the great existential questions—how she wants to live, what is important to her, what makes her happy, how she will survive, and "What is true in the world" (SS 149). Pilate's pursuit of knowledge leads her to a seminal truth: remove the fear of death, which she has eradicated by virtue of her conversations with her dead father, and she becomes fearless. That courage, coupled with a compassion for and racial consciousness of other disenfranchised people, "kept her just barely within the boundaries of the elaborately socialized world of black people" (SS 150). She dismisses the frivolities of fashion, and the niceties of etiquette and hygiene, but develops "a deep concern for and about human relationships" (SS 150). She becomes a healer and a peacemaker, a businesswoman for whom charity is the ultimate bottom line. After twenty years of her peripatetic life, Pilate makes a critical, and difficult, decision to re-integrate into black society, not for herself or any fundamental changes in belief, but because her granddaughter Hagar "needed family, people, a life very different from what she and Reba could offer" (SS 151). So, around thirty-six years old, the same age as Whitman's speaker, and possessed of similar sentiments about her power and authority, Pilate takes her rightful place in the Dead family. As if Whitman's concluding lines in section 1 of "Song of Myself" were written with the likes of Pilate in mind, she will "in perfect health begin, / Hoping to cease not till death" (LG1891 29). A woman strong, wise and forthright, she "permit[s] to speak at every hazard" (LG1891 29) in order to protect herself and her family. And in her commitment to living the truth as she knows it, she embodies one of the most exuberant and joyous manifestos in American literature: "Nature without check with original energy" (LG1891 29).

Yet, while Pilate approximates Whitman's ideal state of being, perhaps even exceeding that of the more cultured and erudite speaker, innocent as she is of the great books, theater, opera, and lectures that enriched and shaped Whitman's life, she becomes who she is quite

differently, existing in something of a vacuum, divested of the various reservoirs of information available to Whitman, as well as more clarifying instruction in African orature or her own personal history, that would provide her a context within which to more completely understand herself. She is indeed an unchecked force of nature, “not in any way unintelligent,” but nevertheless “hampered by huge ignorances” (SS 149). In her efforts to discern value and meaning, “Her mind traveled crooked streets and aimless goat paths, arriving sometimes at profundity, other times at the revelations of a three-year-old” (SS 149). Pilate, then, falls short of Whitman’s coveted universality of the soul since it is marred, as her navel-free body suggests, by the lack of, or disconnect, from history. In essence, she births herself, arriving from nothingness into being, but one that is incomplete. Her basic mode of knowing is not intellectual but intuitive, a finely honed skill she utilizes in practicing her basic tenet of caring for other people. But intuition alone, though one of the hallmarks of transcendentalism and Emerson’s *Over-Soul*, both of which influenced Whitman, is not a formula for nirvana since the aftermath of her family’s tattered past in post-slavery America, of which she has very limited knowledge, affects those she cares for in ways that result in frustration, disappointment, and tragedy, despite Pilate’s best efforts to the contrary. Her deceased father talks to her in a code she can’t accurately decipher, which leads her to the erroneous life-long belief that she was complicit in the murder of an innocent man. Her brother is estranged, even hostile to family and community, a loveless and unloved ghost ship of a man moored only by his brick and mortar property. Pilate’s daughter Reba “live[s] from one orgasm to another” (SS 151), and Hagar is a petulant, self-indulged but essentially empty woman en route to self-destruction. That Pilate cannot anticipate or prevent the various tragedies that befall her or her loved ones attests to the limited wisdom, experience, and knowledge that she possesses. Indeed, it will take her dysfunctional nephew, Milkman, to supply the missing pieces she will need to make sense of it all. But by then, it is on her deathbed, and mere seconds from being almost too late.

As problematic as Pilate’s exploration of the soul as an avenue to universal oneness is, the mode of becoming that Whitman’s speak-

er strives for and which is the reverse of Pilate's efforts, is no less mired in contradiction. While Pilate emanates "original energy" without the requisite knowledge for total awareness, Whitman's speaker attempts to return to a state of untutored innocence, an impossibility given his considerable exposure to the vast archives of human endeavor. Philosophy, history, art, literature, music, science, and math, all conspire to co-opt his burgeoning autonomy. He cannot, therefore, extricate himself from the burden of it. He may ignore it "a while" but it is "never forgotten" (LG1891 29). He may even explore non-Western cultures and religions, in an effort to free himself of the constraints of a Eurocentric upbringing. His declaration of self, then, as a separation from the very body of knowledge and family history that speaks to who he is, is a necessary though ultimately futile precursor to universal consciousness. This is the antithesis of Pilate, desperately in need of a connection to family and recorded history to make her whole; she must know who her ancestors are in order to know herself. She wisely invests in Milkman to realize this critical dividend as he, in his own search for meaning, uncovers the truth about their family's history and conveys it to Pilate.

Though Pilate and the speaker's individual endeavors to achieve a universal oneness are uniquely shaped by their experiences, they nevertheless share the same epiphany about its essence, as section 6 of "Song of Myself" demonstrates in its insistence on love as the highest expression of humanity, what Whitman calls the "kelson" of creation (section 5; 95). Both the speaker's declaration of love in section 6 for the young men who have died, and Pilate's regrets about unfinished love after she is fatally shot, come in the face of mortality. For Whitman's speaker his sudden avowal of love arrives abruptly, in the heat of his disquisition on grass, and the haunting irony of its function as an organic quilt for graves. Whitman's efforts to understand grass, which is a synecdoche for life, lead him to an awareness of his inextricable relationship to the En-Masse: "I give them the same, I receive them the same" (LG1891 33). The graves then confound him, since they represent an apparent paradox: human mortality in the midst of perpetual life. He eventually goes on in section 6 to reconcile the paradox, but not before he laments how physical death robs him of

the opportunity to experience unlimited love.

For Pilate it is her own impending demise after a life brutally cut short that triggers her final reflections on love. But what appears to be wasted, perhaps even foolish sentiments, uttered as they are by one who is a casualty of hate, is actually the fourth, final, and most complete articulation in the novel of the emotional nexus of universal oneness. It is only after three previous iterations of love by the Seven Days members, Robert Smith, Porter, and Guitar, all of them distorted and confused, that Morrison, in effect, gives Pilate the last word. Certainly other characters in the novel struggle in their often tortured efforts to express love, especially the women who, in pursuit of their objects of desire, are by turns passive-aggressive (Ruth Dead), promiscuous (Reba), proud (Corinthians), or murderous (Hagar). But while the women's expressions of love are more personal and particular, those of the trio of violent men are a warped attestation of the universal, a dysfunctional discourse that Morrison insists Pilate must not only engage in but reclaim. These multiple perspectives are an example of what Cedric Bryant calls Morrison's "closural practice" in which she uses "narrative fragments that ultimately form interconnected circles within circles that resist simple finality or closure by stressing . . . human ties that bind in constantly changing ways."²⁴ At first glance, then, Pilate appears to echo, not repudiate, Robert Smith, the delusional insurance agent who, at the beginning of the novel, in his desire "to fly away on [his] own wings," falls to his death. Leaving behind a note addressed to his community, Smith begs their forgiveness, justifying his daring attempt as an act of altruism: "I loved you all" (SS 3). Yet, just as Robert Smith's flight is incomplete, a failed precursor to Milkman's, so too is his declaration of love, a truncated version of Pilate's expansive generosity. Smith's desire is to escape the insanity of the Seven Days, a group that advocates indiscriminate bloodshed for the sake of racial justice. This philosophy becomes an untenable one for Smith, and other members of the group, including Porter, who cannot ultimately justify such tortured and tormenting logic. Smith, then, sees his attempted flight as a more liberating and empowering *fait accompli*, but one which necessitates the desertion of the community he has sought to serve and protect.

Partially in commemoration of Robert Smith, but acting out in a different fashion to the Seven Days, specifically its insistence on secrecy and isolation, the drunken Porter perches himself on a windowsill with a loaded shotgun, then threatens to kill himself. But his demands are specific and unique to Robert Smith's: he wants a woman to have intercourse with. Since no one in the community outside of the Seven Days is aware of his secret life as an assassin, his carnal desires, rather than a source of fear, pity or disgust, elicit a ribald response from the crowd; in effect, he becomes a joke. Having failed to secure the comfort of a woman, and now the object of ridicule, hence exclusion from the very community he has sacrificed so much for, Porter cries, "Don't act like that. . . . Don't you see I love ya?" (SS 26). He then compares himself to Jesus, with whom he feels he shares the burden of love (SS 26). Worn out from the confused logic of killing white people as an expression of love for black people, Porter asks Jesus, "Ain't love heavy?" (SS 26). His words perceived by the crowd as little more than the ramblings of a drunk, Porter gives up, falling asleep as his gun clatters to the ground nearly killing a bystander. His outpourings of love, then, are a resounding failure, delivered as they are by a man whose desperate, dangerous, and ultimately selfish actions result in the very self-imposed loneliness he has sought to alleviate.

Guitar, the most entrenched and demonstrably intractable member of the Seven Days, provides the novel's only extended discourse on love. His first pronouncement of it comes, ironically, when he explains to Milkman his motives for membership in a hate group that targets white people, primarily justifying it as a way to prevent racial genocide. Milkman, after exhausting a litany of arguments against the Seven Days, finally questions Guitar's allegiance to a cause that denies him the benefits of family and children. Though not one to give much thought to his own or other's emotional needs, Milkman states flatly, "There's no love in it" (SS 160). An animated Guitar shoots back, "What I'm doing ain't about hating white people. It's about loving us. About loving you. My whole life is love" (SS 160). Milkman calls him "confused," a clipped but appropriate response to an irrational position, which Guitar continues to defend as an act of altruism. Yet Guitar's love is a horrific distortion that cannot ultimately guarantee

even its most basic premise—to “keep the [racial numbers] the same” (SS 156). Even worse, as Milkman points out, his violence does not punish the guilty, is enacted without public awareness of its purpose, which might result in political change, and results in no direct benefit to African Americans. Finally, the secretive nature of Guitar’s work excludes him from not just his own community, but the human family, and thus the skein of relationships that ensure its survival. Though Guitar offers little by way of explanation as to how he has arrived at his notions about love and the resultant dismal juncture in his barren life, it is perhaps born of his need to avenge, over and over again, one tragic death—that of his father in a work accident and his subsequent life without him. In essence, each and every time an innocent African American is the victim of greed, malice, or indifference, it becomes for Guitar a trigger that re-ignites this original traumatic loss, what Ashraf Rushdy identifies as a primal scene: “the critical event (or events) whose significance to the narrated life becomes manifest only at a secondary critical event, when by a preconscious association the primal scene is recalled.”²⁵ But rather than an opportunity for re-evaluation and “self-discovery” that Rushdy says follows such a memory (303), Guitar is driven to concomitant rage, which he must express no matter who or what is destroyed in the process. Useless to everyone, even himself, Guitar becomes a victim of his own twisted tautology, which has nothing to do with love and everything to do with indiscriminate and unjustifiable vengeance. Milkman calls him on this, arguing that because killing can become a habit, a fixation devoid of rhyme or reason, the group could even begin to “off anybody you don’t like,” including “Negroes” (SS 162). Guitar scoffs at that assertion, though Milkman is, of course, prescient as Guitar eventually turns his sights on Milkman, then ends up murdering Pilate.

How Guitar can victimize the very people he claims to love is hinted at later in the novel in a conversation he has with Hagar, Milkman’s cousin. Emotionally distraught and dangerous, Hagar is bent on destroying the object of her love, Milkman, who has jilted her. After yet another failed attempt to murder him, Hagar is left broken and alone in Guitar’s apartment. He finds her there, and, in an attempt to soothe her, challenges her assumptions about her own intrinsic

value: “You think because he doesn’t love you that you are worthless” (SS 309). It’s not clear if that is indeed what Hagar thinks, because she does not speak, but Guitar is undeterred, adding that she should never assume that Milkman’s or anyone’s “judgment and opinion of you are correct” (SS 309). He then dismisses what he believes is Hagar’s sense of entitlement to Milkman: “It’s a bad word, ‘belong.’ Especially when you put it with somebody you love. Love shouldn’t be like that” (SS 309). Stressing that “You can’t own a human being,” Guitar gently, as if speaking “to a very young child,” (SS 310), drives home the point that neither should Hagar give herself away to another, since no one can “value you more than you value yourself” (SS 310). All of this appears to be rather standard advice, what any wise and caring person might impart to a spurned lover. But on the heels of his ministrations, Guitar, privately, in his own thoughts, engages in a scathing indictment of Hagar, calling her one of those spoiled little girls who “grew up to be the stingiest, greediest people on earth and out of their stinginess grew their stingy little love that ate everything in sight” (SS 310). Guitar’s sudden vitriol is surprising, if not taken in the context of his own life. An orphaned child whose father dies and mother deserts him, he appears to resent Hagar and those like her who enjoyed what he did not, the luxury of parents deeply involved in his up-bringing. So, when he scoffs at women who “could not believe or accept the fact that they were unloved” (SS 310), he is perhaps re-living the moment at which, as a young boy abandoned by both mother and father, he realizes that love was something he was not, or ever would be, entitled to. The fact that the Hagers of the world refuse to accept the harsh reality, as he did, disgusts him: “Why,” he asks, “did they think they were so lovable? Why did they think their brand of love was better than, or even as good as, anybody else’s?” (SS 310).

Relenting a bit in his harsh condemnation of her, Guitar again speaks directly to Hagar, attempting to connect to her by admitting to his own experience with unrequited love—the loss of his parents, and more recently, a woman who left him—but without the awareness that his own version of love is eerily similar to hers. Just as she would “kill for love, die for love” (SS 310), so too would Guitar, whose beloved is none other than the African-American community he feels

belongs to him. So possessive is Guitar and Hagar's love, they both would, as Guitar accuses Hagar of doing, "kill anybody who got in its way" (SS 310), including not only those who might harm their beloved but even the beloved itself—Milkman in Hagar's case, other African Americans in Guitar's. At the heart of their rage is a mistaken notion that in their respective suffering, they have been somehow separated from the human family, a positioning they can reconcile only by lashing out at the very source of their longing. Hagar dies of a broken heart, though Milkman has never stopped loving her, as indicated by his actions at the end of the novel when he requests Hagar's hair as a keepsake. Guitar's heart has been broken so early and often, he fears that love dissolves rather than cements relationships; as a consequence, his admission to Hagar that he was afraid if he "loved anything it would die" (SS 311) becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Like Smith, Porter, and Guitar, Pilate also expresses her love, but not until she nears death. Mortally wounded, she laments her imminent and premature departure, since it represents lost opportunities to give and receive love. But Pilate's inclinations are to reach toward, rather than separate herself from, others as the definitive expression of her humanity. Thus, she is able to succeed where Smith, Porter, and Guitar have failed. In addition, as a victim of the very demagoguery that Smith and Porter have turned away from, one that had promised never to, as Guitar says, "off Negroes" (SS 162), Pilate, in the few moments that remain to her, chooses to transcend her own racial construct. Rather than engage in the exclusivity explicit in Smith's decision to pin his farewell note to his door so that only his neighbors will see it—the "you all" of the African-American community for whom he has sacrificed so much—an exclusivity embraced by Porter and Guitar, Pilate testifies to Milkman her longing for a chance to have known "[them] all," the great sea of "people" (SS 340) of which she is a constituent part.

Ultimately Pilate and Whitman's speaker make their peace with death as an obstacle to everlasting love because of their respective beliefs in the indestructability of, if not the body, then the soul. For Pilate the evidence of eternal life, informed by her African roots, is found in her relationship with the dead; for Whitman it is the transcendentalist

reverence of nature infused by ancient Egyptian cosmology consistent with prevailing Africanist beliefs. Thus, neither fears death; rather, they see it in very similar ways, as a segue into another, more expansive, dimension of consciousness. For Whitman, this occurs in the second half of section 6, “*What is the grass?*” There, the speaker’s earlier regrets about lost love as a function of physical death—those “young men” he “would have loved”—are short-lived, as he quickly returns to the paradox of life and death, one he tentatively resolves by conflating grass with eternal life. The grass, he says, is born of the fecund bodies of the dead, “old people” as well as the very young “taken soon out of their mothers’ laps” (LG1891 33). Grass then becomes the offspring not only of indiscriminate death, but the very womb of life itself: “And here you are the mothers’ laps” (LG1891 33). Momentarily dissatisfied with this rationalization, Whitman opines that the grass nevertheless is much too green and alive to have sprung from “the white heads of old mothers,” the “colorless beards of old men,” or “the faint red roof of mouths” (LG1891 33). He struggles to articulate or “translate the hints about” the dead and what “has become of [them],” finally concluding that, based on the only—and incontrovertible—evidence nature provides, “They are alive and well somewhere” (LG1891 34). For him, that “somewhere” is everywhere, for “The smallest sprout shows there is really no death” (LG1891 34). Even if the speaker were to acknowledge the actuality of death, it exists to lead “forward life,” not “arrest it,” thus losing all of its power “the moment life appear’d” (LG1891 34). He concludes with a resounding, unqualified declaration of his faith in immortality: “All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses, / And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier” (LG1891 34). In these lines, Whitman reflects ancient Egyptian belief, in that he “locates the course and the realization of immortal life on earth, within a physical body, even while he recognizes the fact of physical death.”²⁶ Whitman’s reverence of both the body and soul “may have rested on the view that the life in the next world was but a continuation of the life upon earth.”²⁷ Whitman’s speaker insists that death is not cessation or ruin; it is instead surprising good fortune because it acts as a portal to a higher—perhaps the highest—level of consciousness in which barriers to a universal oneness, and

the eternal love of which it consists, no longer exist.

Pilate's musings on immortality, while not as lyrical as Whitman's, are no less emphatic, and strikingly complementary. Not unlike ancient Egyptians, contemporary Africans, with whom Pilate concurs, believe, according to John Mbiti, "that death is not a complete destruction of the individual. Life goes on beyond the grave."²⁸ In a conversation with Ruth Dead, Pilate's sister-in-law whom she aided in giving birth to Milkman, she assures Ruth that the marauding Hagar, Milkman's jilted lover, will not be the death of her son: "Ain't nothing going to kill [Milkman] but his own ignorance" (SS 140). Ruth is skeptical, insisting that "Nobody lives forever." When Pilate gently questions her assumptions Ruth replies that death is not only inevitable, but natural. Pilate, losing patience, shoots back, "Ain't nothin natural about death. It's the most unnatural thing they is" (SS 140). Ruth, patronizing Pilate, asks if "people should live forever" and if so, who is to decide. Pilate unhesitatingly responds that not only does each and every individual determine when s/he is going to die, but if (SS 140). Ruth is chilled by this revelation since "She'd always believed that her father wanted to die" (SS 141). But she does not admit this to Pilate, instead reminding her that she witnessed the death of her own father. Unwavering, Pilate responds with a perspective on death that challenges every assumption about it: "I saw Papa shot. . . . but not only did I not see him die, I seen him since he was shot" (SS 141). In other words, Pilate refuses to accept conventional indicators of death—the visible destruction of the body and the resultant cessation of vital signs. Here again, Pilate reflects Africanist faith that the departed "are still a part of the family" and remain close to survivors.²⁹ Incredulous, Ruth speaks to Pilate as if she were "a child," reminding her that she buried her father. Pilate corrects her, stating that it was her brother who buried him, then insists that not only did she *and* Macon see their father days after the burial, she still sees him (SS 141).

His visitations are so filled with wisdom and insight, Pilate confesses, they are essential to her well-being—he is the only one she "can always rely on" (SS 141)—as well as invariably timely, coming as they do at critical junctures in her life. Her father, then, becomes what

Mbiti identifies as the “living dead,” those deceased family members who appear to survivors openly, or in dreams and visions in which they “claim to encounter the spirit of the living dead, to talk to it, and to receive certain instructions or requests from it.”³⁰ Yet Pilate’s ability to “read” her father’s visits as positive events in her life is not always borne out by what is left in their wake. His initial post-mortem appearance occurs as Macon and Pilate, fleeing from the Butler’s house into the woods, wake up one morning and see him sitting on a stump in broad daylight, dressed in “the coveralls and heavy shoes he was shot in” (SS 150). The children want to call out to him but his presence is anything but reassuring; in fact, they are so frightened, they run away. Persistent, the haint ensues, following them all day long, as a protective father is wont to do, yet scaring them in opposite directions. Eventually, the ghostly figure, in its unpredictable and startling manifestations in the most benign places—near a duck pond, “by the Y of a sycamore tree”—has become so terrifying, he spoils for Macon and Pilate, “the land itself” and “all the affectionate things that had peopled their lives ever since they were born” (SS 169). As dusk falls, the exhausted and traumatized children seek out a shelter for the night, espying a cave at the mouth of which their father awaits. As he beckons them into the cave’s interior, Pilate and Macon hesitate, no longer certain that this presence is their father, or just “a man who looked like their father” (SS 169). Such uncertainty calls into question Pilate’s ability to interpret the phenomenon she witnesses, perhaps because her liminal relationships with black communities do not afford her access to a “diviner” or medicine man who is often called on to decipher the messages delivered in spirit manifestations,³¹ and thus casts doubt on her insistence to Ruth that her father was her most trusted and comforting confidant. After all, no father described as “real helpful” (SS 141) would haunt his own children soon after they have witnessed his brutal death, are in immediate danger of becoming the next victims of his murderers, and who are left homeless. And no father characterized as reliable would then lead his children into the darkened interior of the cave, the tragic *mise-en-scène* in which Macon assaults the old white vagrant, an act that precipitates the sibling confrontation over the gold and their

life-long irreconcilable rift. A more likely possibility than their father intentionally adding to their misery is that who or what dogs Macon and Pilate throughout the day, then directs them into the cave, is not only the father, but also the vagrant. In their fear, grief, and confusion, the children cannot adequately discern the spirit from the flesh; thus, a lonely drifters attempts to aid the children but, to his own incredulity, ends up a victim. Moments after Macon stabs the white man repeatedly, then discovers the gold, both he and Pilate recognize their father's "dusty boots" (SS 171). But again, what he imparts to them, "Sing. Sing," appears to have nothing to do with the events at hand, and offers no assistance whatsoever in terms of what to do with the gold.

Pilate's inability to reconcile the ambiguous apparitions that day and to make sense of the messages they seem to impart, do not deter her from seeking out her father's advice and counsel throughout her life. Rather, they are indicative "of the reciprocity between the living and the dead in African culture" ("Limping or Flying" 63). Several years later, after Reba is born, Pilate, lonely and depressed, once again is visited by her father who repeats an earlier message, "Sing. Sing," followed by "You just can't fly on off and leave a body" (SS 148). Still a teenager at this point, an outcast and drifter, Pilate lacks the family history about her mother, named Sing, and her grandfather who left a wife and twenty-one children behind, or a black community she trusts to inquire about it, to make sense of this information; and she will not have access to it until Milkman provides it for her near the end of her life. Consequently, she misinterprets her father, thinking he has commanded her to sing, and then, as a moral imperative she must obey, to retrieve the bones of the white man she believes her brother murdered. Though Pilate is technically wrong on both counts, she nevertheless derives some peace since singing "relieved her gloom immediately" (SS 148), and, taking care of what she thinks is the white man's body becomes an act of atonement for her perceived sins. Thus, Pilate is guided by her father, if not the literal content of his message, then the sound of his voice and his spectral presence. Indeed, when her father materializes after Reba's birth, he is dressed differently, no longer in the coveralls and heavy shoes he was murdered in, but a

“white shirt, a blue collar, and brown peaked cap” (SS 150), perhaps suggesting his transmutation from victim to oracle.

In one last visitation, perhaps the most cryptic of all, Pilate, determined to find her brother, make amends, and provide a proper home for her granddaughter Hagar, asks her father where he is, but he just “rubbed his feet and shook his head” (SS 151). Rather than read these gestures as a warning not to look for him, Pilate interprets them as uncertainty, and thus “for the first time” sought help from the white community, going first to the police, which sets in motion a chain reaction leading to her brother (SS 151). Whether her father thinks reuniting with Macon is in her best interests or not is irrelevant since his function is not to tell her what to do but rather to aide her in deciding what is right and true for her. Thus at nearly every important juncture in her life, Pilate somehow taps into a dimension outside of and beyond the world as she knows it, as it is funneled through the five senses with which she perceives it. What she witnesses in the guise of her father, whether real or imagined, is a loving, living presence whose guidance, while not always clear, is nevertheless vital to her, not only as she negotiates the labyrinth of her life, but comes to grips with how she will meet and embrace the fact of her own mortality.

Pilate’s notions about death come into play when she is shot. Her belief that one chooses when and if to die begs the questions as to whether she elects to die at that moment and in such a violent way—or even if she dies. Certainly it is hard to imagine Pilate self-selecting murder, especially given her strength and fortitude, unless one takes into consideration this particular juncture in her life. She has lived a long time, often under very difficult circumstances, made perhaps finally unbearable by the death of her granddaughter, a tragedy she could not prevent, and which she may have unintentionally, in pampering her, contributed to. Her brother, once a beloved surrogate father, is and will always remain estranged. She has imparted to Milkman nearly all she possibly can: she orchestrates his conception, saves his life by insuring his birth, acts as a mentor and guide, rescues him from jail, and leads him to a life-changing revelation about his family as well as teaching her own lessons about the care and attention necessary for its well-being and survival. She has made arrange-

ments for her father's interment and tended to all her immediate kin, except for Reba, whose responsibility she is now quite comfortable bequeathing to Milkman. Though Pilate does not say "It is finished," there is, nevertheless, a sense of completion about her life that, while distressing to the readers who have fallen in love with her, is perfectly consistent with who she is. It would not be out of character, then, for Pilate to choose her death on the very spot she has finally put her father, and the family tragedy that befell her at such a young age, to rest. A final indication that she is ready to leave her earthly form is her last wish that Milkman "sing a little somethin'" (SS 340). While it may initially appear that Pilate's request is yet another indication that she has misunderstood her father's urgent need to reveal his wife's name, information that Milkman has already provided her, in actuality, she is fully aware, speaking now from a position of knowledge rather than ignorance, choosing to appropriate her father's message and infuse it with new meaning and purpose. Rather than a compulsive iteration of a forgotten loved one's name, a type of restitution her deceased father is compelled to pay for never having mentioned it while alive, Pilate's missive to Milkman is a celebration of song as an affirmation of the human spirit. In effect, she is able, at long last, to make sense of, and *for*, herself—a critical aspect of becoming that had eluded her for a lifetime.

As to whether or not Pilate actually dies, the textual evidence points to everlasting life. While not as straightforward as Whitman's assertion that the deceased are "alive and well somewhere" (LG1891 34), there is every indication that Pilate's spirit or soul has gone, as Whitman's speaker says, "onward and outward" (LG1891 34). Indeed, her last breath is followed almost immediately by the appearance of a bird, the very sign of transcendence, which swoops in and "scooped something shiny in its beak [sic] before it flew away" (SS 340). What the bird snatches, of course, is Sing's snuffbox with Pilate's name in it, one of Pilate's most cherished—and only—possessions that she covets until moments before she is shot, separating it from the body she will no longer need. Milkman accurately interprets the bird as life after death, a transmutation that liberates itself from the limitations of earthly existence. He realizes that "Without ever leaving the ground,

[Pilate] could fly” (SS 340). She is, Bryant says in terms that could also describe Whitman the poet and, in time, Morrison the novelist, the “embodied Muse” “whose death subverts the ideas of finality and the ‘end’ through the reclamation of life by the living.”³² Inspired by her messages before as well as after death about loving and caring for others, Milkman takes a leap towards Guitar, knowing it does not matter “which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it” (SS 341). In other words, Milkman has no fear of death, it being in many ways an illusion that keeps one from fully living. Milkman, then, takes a leap of faith into the realm of infinite knowing and boundless love, his act a resounding affirmation, in fiction, at least, of what Whitman envisioned in verse over a century earlier—a soul both a part of the collective life-force and a uniquely triumphant expression of it. Thus it is at this juncture beyond time and place, when Milkman is suspended in thin air, when self-possession becomes indistinguishable from a more universal one, that the silver-haired crone of post-industrial Lorraine, Ohio, heeds the calls of the white-bearded sage of nineteenth-century Brooklyn, and, in her own inimitable riff, responds.

North Carolina State University
dheinze@ncsu.edu

NOTES

1 Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Signet, 1977), 340; hereafter, SS.

2 Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself,” *Leaves of Grass* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1891-92), 33-34. Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive* (www.whitmanarchive.org); hereafter, LG1891.

3 Morrison states emphatically that “I am not *like* James Joyce; I am not *like* Thomas Hardy; I am not *like* Faulkner. I am not *like* in that sense. I do not have objections to being compared to such extraordinarily gifted and facile writers, but it does leave me sort of hanging there when I know that my effort is to be *like* something that has only been fully expressed perhaps in music, or in some other

culture-gen that survives almost in isolation because the community manages to hold onto it." From Nellie McKay, "An Interview with Toni Morrison," *Contemporary Literature* 24 (Winter 1983), 426.

4 These studies include Timothy Powell, "Toni Morrison: The Struggle to Depict the Black Figure on the White Page," *Black American Literature Forum* 24 (Winter 1990), 747-760; and Gay Wilentz, "Civilizations Underneath: African Heritage as Cultural Discourse in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," *African American Review* 26 (Spring 1992), 61-76. Powell and Wilentz argue that Morrison excavates a uniquely black logos or an essentialist fiction that has been buried by oppression and which serves to displace Eurocentric language. As Powell says, Morrison as a black writer strives to "bring black meanings out of the semantic shadows of the Master's language" (749), while Wilentz argues that Morrison attempts to "transform Eurocentric cultural discourse through the acceptance of African heritage, told by generations of women storytellers" (62). Morrison, Wilentz says, "directs us to the original message that has been censored, almost effaced, by the language of slavery, oppression and hegemonic discourse" in order to "uncover the civilizations underneath" (74).

5 Richard Heyman, "Universalization and its Discontents: Morrison's *Song of Solomon*—A (W)hol(e)y Black Text," *African American Review* 29 (Autumn 1995), 381-392. Heyman draws on the work of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Kwame Anthony Appiah to challenge the notion of black essentialism. Heyman argues that Morrison de-centers the white logos but refuses to replace it with a black one (382) and that "claims that a sacred, 'authentic' blackness appeal to the same kinds of authority that have led to African American marginalization" (390).

6 John Brenkman says that African-American writing is not just about black history and culture, but "it also encounters the *multiculturalism* and the *modernity* of contemporary American society" ("Politics and Form in *Song of Solomon*," *Social Text* no. 39 [Summer 1994], 62). Ashley Tidey states that "precisely because of the history of slavery in the United States, it is impossible to disentangle African American experience from Western origins." Tidey insists on recognizing both the Euro- and Afrocentric in *Song of Solomon*, since both can be in sync or at odds simultaneously ("Limping or Flying? Psychoanalysis, Afrocentrism, and *Song of Solomon*," *College English* 63 [September 2000], 55, 62. Linda Krumholz reveals how Morrison reflects the tension within an Afrocentric positioning: "In both the Mwindo and the Kambili epics, the tension between the exceptional individualism of the hero and the values of collectivity is elaborated and situated to some extent within gender relations, thus suiting Morrison's own development of this tension" ("Dead Teachers: Rituals of Manhood and Rituals of Reading in *Song of Solomon*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 39 [Fall/Winter 1993], 562-563).

7 David Cowart, "Faulkner and Joyce in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," *American Literature* 62 (March 1990), 94-95.

8 Cowart 100.

9 See Steven Tapscott, "Leaves of Myself: Whitman's Egypt in 'Song of Myself,'" *American Literature* 50 (March 1978), 49-73.

10 Sanders Mobley, "Call and Response: Voice, Community, and Dialogic Structures in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," in Valerie Smith, ed., *New Essays on Song of Solomon* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 42.

11 Mobley 42.

12 Tapscott 58.

13 Mobley 58.

14 Osayande Obery Hendricks, *Guerrilla Exegesis—Struggle as a Scholarly Vocation: A Postmodern Approach to African-American Biblical Interpretation* (January 29, 2004), payne.edu/guerrilla_exegesis.pdf. Cited in Pocock, "Through a Glass Darkly: Typology in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 35 (2005), 282.

15 Pocock 282.

16 Pocock 282

17 Northrup Frye, *The Great Code* (Toronto: Academic, 1981), 79-83. Cited in "Through a Glass Darkly," 282.

18 Pocock 283.

19 Frye, cited in Pocock 282.

20 Morrison, in her interview with Nellie McKay, uses a variation of the term "camaraderie" twice, characterizing the marriages of her parents and grandparents as a "comradeship" devoid of dominance by one gender over the other. This was also true of story-telling, which was "a shared activity between them [as well as the children], and people of both genders participated in it" (415).

21 Joseph Skerrett uses the terms "griot" and "shaman" in his discussion of Pilate in "Recitation to the Griot: Storytelling and Learning in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," in Majorie Pryse and Hortense Spillers, eds., *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and Literary Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 192-202; Joyce Irene Middleton refers to Pilate as a "culture-bearer" in "Orality, Literacy and Memory in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," *College English* 55 (January 1993), 73; Ann E. Imbrie says Pilate espouses a "humanist perspective" in opposition to "Guitar's political one," in "What Shalimar Knew?: Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* as a Pastoral Novel," *College English* 55 (September 1993), 483; Lorie Watkins Fulton calls Pilate "part conjure woman, part rebel, part original woman" in "William Faulkner Reprised: Isolation in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," *Mississippi Quarterly* 55 (Winter 2004/2005), 17; and Melanie Anderson assigns the term "free radical" in *Spectrality in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (Knox-

ville: University of Tennessee Press, 2013), 43. Cedric Gael Bryant calls Pilate a “spirit-guide,” who “becomes an ‘embodied Muse’—at once both Beatrice and Virgil,” in “‘Every Goodbye Ain’t Gone’: The Semiotics of Death, Mourning, and Closural Practice in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*,” *MELUS* 24 (Fall 1999), 106.

22 Wilentz 66.

23 Filomina Steady, ed., *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* (Boston: Shenkman, 1982), 32; cited in Wilentz 64.

24 Bryant 97-98.

25 Ashraf Rushdy, “‘Rememory’: Primal Scenes and Constructions in Toni Morrison’s Novels,” *Contemporary Literature* 31 (Autumn, 1990), 303.

26 Tapscott 61.

27 E. A. Budge, ed., *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* (New York, 1895, rpt. 1967), xi. Cited in Tapscott 64.

28 John Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (London: Heinemann, 1975), 113.

29 Mbiti 117.

30 Mbiti 119.

31 Mbiti 120.

32 Bryant 107.