

“Pass It On!”: Legacy and the Freedom Struggle in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*

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*Oh, I wish I could fly
Like a bird up in the sky
And then wake up one morning
To find out for myself, oh
You don't even have to die*

*Listen, I'd fly if I could fly, you see
To the sun and then down
To the deep blue sea
Then I'd sing, yes
I'd sing about freedom*

—Solomon Burke (“I Wish I Knew”)

Toni Morrison has written often about the relationship between her writing and black music. In “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” the novelist explains that “[f]or a long time, the art form that was healing for Black people was music. That music is no longer *exclusively* ours . . . Other people sing it and play it . . . So another form has to take its place, and it seems to me that the novel is needed by African-Americans now in a way that it was not needed before” (58). Morrison does not specify when that shift occurred; Craig Werner, however, hears it happening in the mid-1960s. In *A Change is Gonna Come: Music, Race, and the Soul of America*, he tracks a key change from Mahalia Jackson’s soulful gospel performance at the 1963 March on Washington to Diana Ross’s unprecedented commercial “crossover”

success in the final years of that decade. Nina Simone provides backup for Werner's claim in her autobiography, *I Put a Spell on You*, effectively connecting this key change to shifts in political vision. Simone identifies 1963 as a pivotal year in the civil rights movement, a time when activists like her felt compelled to choose between two very different ways forward—the integration and passive resistance model advocated by Dr. King and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the black power vision promoted by Stokely Carmichael and other young militants increasingly at odds with SCLC as well as members of their own group, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). It is into this space—a crossroads in the freedom struggle—that Morrison's *Song of Solomon* enters.¹ And it does so by referencing slavery and Jim Crow, linking characters to historical figures in the civil rights movement, and conjuring up the spirit of a gospel singer named Solomon Burke.

A Pulitzer Prize-winner and Nobel laureate, Toni Morrison has occupied a wider circle of influence than has Solomon Burke, a soul singer with gos-



Toni Morrison, 2008. Used with permission of the photographer, Angela Radulescu. Image courtesy of *Wikimedia Commons*.

pel roots who never achieved the name recognition of Otis Redding, James Brown, or Aretha Franklin. Called the King of Rock and Soul in the 1960s, Burke grew up in his grandmother's church, where at the age of seven he would begin preaching. At fourteen, he was singing in a gospel quartet, and at fifteen, he signed his first contract with Apollo Records. Burke's music merges the spiritual with the secular, his albums provoking the same kind of emotional response his sermons at *Solomon's Temple* inspired. A charismatic figure and native of Philadelphia, Burke lived most of his life near Danville, Pennsylvania and Shalimar, Virginia—the homes of the ancestors of *Song of Solomon*'s protagonist, Milkman Dead. Burke's godfather was Father Divine, mentioned in the novel's opening scene: when Mercy hospital personnel go outside to find out why a crowd has gathered and a black woman is singing, "[s]ome of them thought briefly that this was probably some form of worship. Philadelphia, where Father Divine reigned, wasn't all that far away" (6). And in a parallel that simply cannot be a coincidence, Solomon Burke, just like Milkman's great-grandfather Solomon, had twenty-one children.²

Burke's spirit permeates Morrison's novel from the title to the final scene at Solomon's Leap. When Milkman journeys south, he confronts the name Solomon everywhere: "Everybody in this town is named Solomon, he thought wearily. Solomon's General Store, Luther Solomon (no relation), Solomon's Leap, and now the children were singing '*Solomon* don't leave me' instead of '*Sugarman*.' Even the name of the town sounded like Solomon: Shalimar, which Mr. Solomon and everybody else pronounced *Shalleemone*" (302). The unusual pronunciation of Shalimar suggests the presence of another singer—Nina Simone. An active participant in the civil rights movement, Simone recorded "I Wish I Knew (How It Would Feel to be Free)" in 1967. The following year, Burke recorded the same song for Atlantic Records—but with a difference. Whereas Simone sings, "Well I wish I could be / like a bird in the sky / How sweet it would be / If I found I could fly," Burke sings, "Oh, I wish I could fly / Like a bird up in the sky / And then wake up one morning / To find out for myself, oh / You don't even have to die." Simone's wistful lyrics, easily interpreted as a metaphor for freedom, are thus extended in Burke's version to include a "you" who does not have "to die." In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman yearns to fly, the narrator telling us that "when the little boy discovered, at four, the same thing Mr. Smith had learned earlier—that only birds and airplanes could fly—he lost all interest in himself" (9). The key to Milkman Dead regaining this interest in himself is more than just the discovery of his great-grandfather Solomon's flight: it is the acceptance that he carries within himself Solomon's spirit (the "you" who does not have "to die") as well as the spirits of *all* the dead whose names bear witness to the lives they lived in a country that denied them civil rights.

In the Preface to *The Civil Rights Reader: American Literature From Jim Crow to Reconstruction* (2009), Julie Armstrong and Amy Schmidt argue that the “simple yet compelling” standard narrative of the civil rights movement has, in the last decade, been challenged by civil rights scholars and activists because of what that narrative leaves out: “In terms of leadership, focusing on a handful of high-profile, nationally recognized figures fails to recognize the hard work of everyday people who made change happen in ways small and large. [. . .] In terms of chronology, focusing on the 1954 to 1968 years leaves out everything that came before or happened after” (xx). The “expanded historical vision” informing the selections included in this anthology is fully realized in *Song of Solomon* as Toni Morrison echoes and responds to Solomon Burke’s call. Indeed, Burke’s 1968 version of “I Wish I Knew” underscores the need for an immediate and particular response: “Let me hear you say / I’d sing, yes, I’d sing, come on / Sing, children, sing about love now / Sing, sing, sing about peace / Sing, sing, sing about the joy / Sing, sing, sing, ohh . . .” Burke’s call for the children to “sing” links him to Pilate’s father, Jake, who comes to his daughter several times after his death, each time saying the same thing—*sing*. It also links him to Pilate’s mother, whose name is Sing (Byrd) and to Pilate herself, who, in her last breath, tells Milkman to “Sing . . . Sing a little somethin for me” (336). The freedom song that Morrison sings in her civil rights novel uses names to allude to the civil rights movement both directly and indirectly, thereby engaging not only with conventional definitions of the movement, particularly models of leadership provided by Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, but also prompting a reconsideration of those definitions, suggesting we move beyond restrictive dates and geography, and instead consider the freedom struggle in terms of legacy and responsibility.

Many Thousands Gone: 350 Years of Freedom Struggle

The narrative arc of *Song of Solomon* stretches back to slavery, with Solomon’s flight from the cotton fields, and to the Emancipation Proclamation, when Solomon’s son Jake and his wife Sing’s journey north to what would become their farm, “Lincoln’s Heaven.” By framing the novel’s opening scene—Robert Smith’s suicidal leap off the roof of Mercy hospital in 1931 Detroit—with local history and geography, Morrison begins with the assertion that the promise of freedom for black Americans has gone unfulfilled. The narrator tells us that in 1896, the only colored doctor moved to the city. This means that Dr. Foster, the protagonist’s maternal grandfather, moved to Mains Avenue the year the Supreme Court issued its “separate but equal” ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. To the consternation of the city legislators, Dr.

Foster's patients begin calling Mains Avenue "Doctor Street," and as time passes and more blacks move to the street, letters begin arriving at the post office addressed to Doctor Street. The politicians then set out to reestablish what they consider to be proper distinctions and boundaries:

Some of the city legislators, whose concern for appropriate names and the maintenance of the city's landmarks was the principal part of their political life, saw to it that "Doctor Street" was never used in any official capacity. And since they knew that only Southside residents kept it up, they had notices posted in the stores, barbershops, and restaurants in that part of the city saying that the avenue running northerly and southerly from Shore Road fronting the lake to the junction of routes 6 between Rutherford Avenue and Broadway, had always been and would always be known as Mains Avenue and not Doctor Street. (4)

In response to these official notices, the black residents begin calling the street "Not Doctor Street" and the hospital at its northern end, "No Mercy Hospital." Later in the novel, we learn that Dr. Foster's arrival in this segregated northern city coincides with the birth of Pilate, Solomon's granddaughter and perhaps the most fascinating character in Morrison's oeuvre. Pilate's birth is an "unnatural" event that occurs *after* her mother Sing's death and leaves her with no navel, an aberration that marks her not just as different, but as a threat to various communities that rebuke and scorn her. Among Pilate's prized possessions is a fourth grade geography textbook. Her interest in geography reminds the reader not just of the segregated nature of American life in the mid-twentieth century, but also of the distance some black folks had traveled from their past. Like August Wilson's *Piano Lesson*, set in 1936 Pittsburgh, *Song of Solomon* suggests that the great migration to the (unfulfilled) promised land of the urban North separated blacks from an essential source of strength: the belief in the presence and power of the ancestors.

While black resistance to white power—both before and after *Plessy v. Ferguson*—took many different forms, the civil rights movement represents the most concerted effort to challenge segregation in the twentieth century. In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison refers to this struggle in direct and indirect ways. The men in Tommy's barbershop huddle around the radio, hearing the news of Emmett Till's murder in Mississippi. Guitar reacts to the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham that resulted in the deaths of four black girls. And either the narrator or a character mentions President Truman, the Commission on Civil Rights, the sit-ins, Bilbo country, Governor Orval Faubus, Elijah and "that red-headed Negro named X" (160). Indirect

references include Freddie's story of his mother dying from fright at the sight of a white bull, an image that calls to mind Bull Connor, the infamous Birmingham police chief who turned fire hoses and dogs on black children in 1963. Also, Dr. Foster's daughter Ruth is repeatedly called the "rose-petal" lady, a veiled reference to Rosa Parks, the forty-two-year-old seamstress who initiated the Montgomery Bus Boycott and is considered the mother of the civil rights movement. The first black woman allowed to give birth inside of (No) Mercy Hospital, the fictional "rose-petal" lady is the focus of one short but crucial passage and two lengthy ones. In the short passage, she nurses her son in a small room that the narrator tells us contains only two items: a dress form and a sewing machine. In both of the longer passages—the cemetery visit and her trip across town to confront Hagar—she rides a bus.

In a novel packed with unforgettable names—Pilate Dead, Milkman, Guitar, Railroad Tommy, Hospital Tommy, Empire State, First Corinthians, Circe, Sweet, Sing—Robert Smith's is perhaps the most symbolic. A member of The Seven Days, a secret vigilante group that avenges the murders of blacks by killing whites in similar fashion, Smith dons blue wings and leaps off the roof of Mercy hospital in the novel's opening scene. Robert Smith may be an indirect reference not only to the many thousands gone, but also to the murders of civil rights leaders such as Robert Kennedy, the Attorney General known for fighting organized crime for the Department of Justice. Kennedy's assassination followed Martin Luther King's assassination by two months in 1968, the year historians mark as the end of the modern civil rights movement. In the novel's opening pages, the narrator points out that Robert Smith works for the North Carolina Insurance Company, going door-to-door collecting \$1.68 a month from Southside residents. The narrator reminds us of this date—1968—throughout the novel, telling us, for example, that in 1963, when the novel's final scene takes place, Pilate is 68 years old. We are also constantly reminded that Pilate's father Jake was shot, "blown 5 feet in the air," while sitting on a fence in Danville, Pennsylvania. In 1963, Robert Kennedy's brother, Jack Kennedy, was shot while sitting on the back seat of a convertible in Dallas, Texas. One could argue, then, that *Song of Solomon* encompasses nearly 350 years of civil right history—from 1619, when the first slave ships arrived in Virginia, to 1968, when two well-known dreamers, one black and one white, were shot dead. These dreamers, and the dream they had for an America that lived up to its promise(s), live on in Morrison's protagonist, Milkman Dead.

A Change is Gonna Come: Milkman's Dreams from His Fathers

Critics continue to draw attention to *Song of Solomon's* male protagonist as a distinct departure from Morrison's other novels. Morrison herself

identified the challenge of writing her third novel as “manag[ing] what was for me a radical shift in imagination from a female locus to a male one.” So she chose a journey, “with the accomplishment of flight, the triumphant end of a trip through earth, to its surface, on into water, and finally into air. All very saga-like. Old-school heroic, but with other meanings” (“Foreword” xii). Critics have used different frameworks to discuss Milkman’s heroism. In her introduction to Oxford’s *Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon: A Casebook*, Jan Furman uses Joseph Campbell’s work to put Milkman’s journey in a universal context: “His is a timeless human tale based on the premise that every purposeful endeavor is a search for vitality” (5). In contrast, Gerry Brenner uses Otto Rank’s monomyth to delineate all the ways Morrison’s protagonist does in fact satisfy the requirements of a classic hero before boldly declaring Milkman a miserable failure. Milkman’s “heroism” acquires new meanings when considered within the context of the civil rights movement with its charismatic male leaders as well as all the unsung heroes (male *and* female) who went to mass meetings in Montgomery, went to jail in Birmingham, went missing in Mississippi, and went to Washington to demand liberty and justice for all. Reading Milkman within this historical context highlights his role as a change agent, as an unlikely hero whose “triumphant end” is but the promise of a contract those of us witnessing his flight must execute. Like his great-grandfather Solomon, what’s more important than what Milkman *does*, is what he leaves behind.

The shame surrounding the protagonist’s nickname—folks call him Milkman because his mother breastfed him long after he could walk—has obscured his connection to Martin Luther King: MLKman. Like other names in the novel, this one is both instructive and ironic; after all, Milkman spends almost the entire novel caring about no one but himself. He only begins to define himself in relation to others after a hunting trip with black men who gather at King Walker’s defunct gas station in Shalimar. (From 1960 to 1964, Wyatt T. Walker served as Martin Luther King’s chief of staff.) Writing in 1982, Dorothy Lee discusses the “dual effect” of names in *Song of Solomon*, pointing out that they “widen the reader’s perspective to mythical connotations and simultaneously provide ironic commentary on the historical plight of the American black” (66). Such commentary can be detected in Morrison’s decision to associate Milkman with dreaming. In 1963, the year Milkman takes off from Solomon’s Leap, MLK delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, telling his audience, “And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back” (103). King was referring, of course, to challenging segregation and working towards the goal of an integrated society. As the first black baby born in (No) Mercy Hospital, Milkman symbolizes that integrated society. Listen carefully, however, and

you will hear a drumbeat of caution in Morrison's novel: in marching ahead, we must *continually* "turn back."

Although for most of the novel Milkman neither marches forward nor turns back, he definitely represents a change that's gonna come. In a pivotal scene at the Dead family dinner table, Milkman takes a step toward claiming his manhood when he responds to his father's fist hitting his mother's face by throwing the older man into the radiator. Shortly after, Milkman goes to his bedroom and looks at his reflection in the mirror:

Taken apart, it looked all right. Even better than all right. But it lacked coherence, a coming together of the features into a total self. It was all very tentative, the way he looked, like a man peeping around a corner of someplace he is not supposed to be, trying to make up his mind whether to go forward or to turn back. The decision he made would be extremely important, but the way in which he made the decision would be careless, haphazard, and uninformed. (70)

After hearing his father's explanation for why he physically assaulted his wife, Milkman takes to the streets. Deep in his troubled thoughts, he nonetheless notices two things: everyone is walking in a different direction than he is, and nobody, "[n]ot a soul," is walking on the other side of the street. The narrator points out that this observation does not lead to further reflection: "Milkman walked on, still headed toward Southside, never once wondering why he himself did not cross over to the other side of the street, where no one was walking at all" (78). Later, in a conversation with Guitar, Milkman will refer to this moment as a dream, as "one of those waking dreams he was subject to whenever indecisiveness was confronted with reality" (179).

On June 12, 1963, Richard Heffner's PBS television show *Open Mind* confronted the reality of "Race Relations in Crisis." Heffner invited four men to discuss what was happening in the streets of Southern cities like Birmingham as well as northern cities like Detroit: Wyatt T. Walker, executive director of SCLC; James Farmer, leader of CORE, Congress of Racial Equality; Malcolm X, national spokesman for the Nation of Islam; and Alan Morrison, New York editor of *Ebony Magazine*. Chosen because they represented different ways of addressing what W.E.B. Du Bois, in 1903, had called "the problem of the twentieth century," these men agreed that the solution to racial inequality in America would probably not come from the courts. Even Malcolm X, much less sanguine about the future for blacks in America, argued that the fight must occur in the streets. *Song of Solomon* offers a subtle critique of such political views—views that "looked all right"

when “taken apart” but “lacked coherence.” The novel suggests that while marching in the streets to gain access to voting booths, restaurants, restrooms, and universities such as Ole Miss (all places where blacks were “not supposed to be”) is necessary, such protests will not be the primary means by which we shall overcome.

To be an effective change agent, Milkman must “cross over” to the other side “where no one was walking at all” (78). He will then become a “total self,” which should be understood as a “coming together” *not* of different races or of multiple perspectives on the problem of racism, but of different dimensions of space and time. Late in the novel, Milkman begins to understand reality in a profoundly new way. After leaving Susan Byrd’s home in Shalimar, he thinks about his ancestors and how Pilate had told him that her dead father visits her and always says *sing*: “Jesus! Here he was walking around in the middle of the twentieth century trying to explain what a ghost had done. But why not? He thought. One fact was certain: Pilate did not have a navel. Since that was true, anything could be, and why not ghosts as well?” (294). Immediately after accepting that anything could be true, Milkman checks his wrist and realizes that Grace Long, Susan’s friend and a seemingly insignificant minor character (who teaches at the Normal school), has pilfered his watch: “‘Damn,’ he murmured. ‘I’m losing everything’” (294). Indeed, Milkman is losing his grounding in Western notions of time and space, a loss that will allow him to connect with the sustaining power of his ancestors and to fly “To the sun and then down / To the deep blue sea.”

Unlike his historical counterpart, Milkman has absolutely no sense of his role as the keeper of any “dream,” no sense of the “extreme importance” of his decisions, not even to himself. Morrison, however, makes her protagonist’s role clear well before he meets (amazing) Grace in Shalimar. Milkman’s journey south begins in Danville, Pennsylvania, at the home of Reverend Cooper, who exclaims, “I know your people!” (229). Milkman spends several evenings talking to Cooper and his friends about his father’s material success in the north. In turn, the old men tell Milkman stories about his grandfather’s legendary prowess and prosperity. The narrator underscores the reciprocal nature of Milkman’s relationship with these men: “Looking at Milkman in those nighttime talks, they yearned for something. Some word from him that would rekindle the dream and stop the death they were dying” (236). Milkman’s dream is to find the gold that his father is convinced remains in a cave near the house where Circe provided shelter for Macon and Pilate after their father died. But rekindling the old men’s dream and stopping the “death they were dying” will have nothing to do with gold. An obsession with material wealth and power—gold, ivory, rum, tobacco, sugar, cotton, spices and slaves—is what caused all the dying. What is needed now is “some word.”

In the myth of the flying African, *Song of Solomon*'s most central framework, a young witch doctor utters a "strange word" and all the slaves working in the cotton fields drop their hoes and fly home. The grandson of the first colored doctor to move to Mains Avenue, Milkman's fascination with flight finds expression in his dreams. Milkman's last dream, which he has just before deciphering the children's song about his family history, indicates that he is starting to understand that his eyes are on the wrong prize:

It was a warm dreamy sleep all about flying, about sailing high over the earth. But not with arms outstretched like airplane wings, nor shot forward like Superman in a horizontal dive, but floating, cruising, in the relaxed position of a man lying on a couch reading a newspaper. Part of his flight was over the dark sea, but it didn't frighten him because he knew he could not fall. He was alone in the sky, but somebody was applauding him, watching him and applauding. He couldn't see who it was. (298)

Milkman's flight recalls his great-grandfather Solomon's flight from the plantation but with significant differences. While neither man needs an airplane to "cut across the sky," Solomon flies *away*; Solomon goes *home*; Solomon leaves everybody *behind*. Grounded in the everyday events recorded in the newspaper, Milkman belongs to the country of his birth, even as the laws of his country deny him civil rights based on the color of his skin.

The sacrifices made, the blood spilled, to make that belonging a reality is the lesson imparted by Reverend Cooper and his cohort in Danville. Using Milkman "as the ignition that gunned their memories," these men shout in a manner that recalls the call-and-response of Solomon Burke's gospel performances:

We live here. On this planet, in this nation, in this country right here. *Nowhere* else! We got a home in this rock, don't you see! Nobody starving in my home; nobody crying in my home, and if I got a home you got one too! Grab it. Grab this land! Take it, hold it, my brothers, make it, my brothers, shake it, squeeze it, turn it, twist it, beat it, kick it, kiss it, whip it, stomp it, dig it, plow it, seed it, reap it, rent it, buy it, sell it, own it, build it, multiply it, and pass it on—can you hear me? Pass it on! (235)

In the dream where he sails "over the dark sea," Milkman cannot see the ancestors, but he can hear and feel them. Milkman's responsibility is to merge

the spiritual (the evidence of things unseen) with the secular, identifying not just with Reverend Cooper and the black men who knew his grandfather, but with the many thousands gone, all the Africans lost during the Middle Passage and all the slaves who worked the land and suffered the lash. What will keep their dream from dying is the knowledge that everything they worked for is being passed on. Morrison expresses this desire in the epigraph to *Song of Solomon*: "The fathers may soar / And the children may know their names."

Milkman's ascent requires knowing his family history, knowledge he gains through immersion in the rural Southern culture of his ancestors. After his second conversation with Susan Byrd, when she acknowledges Sing's marriage to Jake, Milkman finally understands why Pilate carries her name in a brass box dangling from her ear: "When you know your name, you should hang on to it, for unless it is noted down and remembered, it will die when you do" (329). He hears the story, though not the name, of his paternal grandfather on his first trip to his aunt's house. Pilate tells Milkman and Guitar about her father's murder and also about seeing his ghost for the first time: "It was like looking at a face under water" (43). Pilate's father has joined the ancestors, the "somebod[ies]" whom Milkman will eventually feel and hear as he flies, in his dream, "over the dark sea." Morrison links Milkman with the ancestors by associating him with water throughout the novel. After learning the names of his grandparents, Milkman practically sprints to Sweet's house, shouting that he wants to swim: "Come on, let's go swimming. I'm dirty and I want waaaaater!" Sweet offers to give Milkman a bath, but he scoffs: "The sea! I have to swim in the sea. Don't give me no itty bitty teeny tiny tub, girl. I need the whole entire complete deep blue sea!" (327). As Milkman's "triumphant end" draws near, it is clear that he has gained an interest in himself and his people, but he still has much to learn. What he must do in order to fly is combine the shout with the moan, something he cannot do without help from Guitar and Pilate.

"What Else but Love?": Guitar's Lesson

Morrison links Milkman's best friend, Guitar Bains, to Malcolm X, the black leader often considered the ideological opposite of Martin Luther King and generally associated in the American public's imagination with hate. When Milkman is fourteen, Guitar will become his friend and protector, the older boy serving as the younger boy's link to the Southside, to the rhythms of working class black life, to Mary's bar and Tommy's barbershop. These class differences mirror the different experiences and sensibilities of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. Nurtured by the comforts and trappings of a middle class sensibility, Milkman is as apathetic as Guitar is politically engaged, a

point Guitar makes clear: “You’re not a serious person, Milkman” (102). What Morrison makes clear, however, is that Guitar has as much to learn from the spoiled rich kid as Milkman does from the angry militant. After Milkman calls Guitar’s activities with The Seven Days “crazy,” he asks if there are any other “young dudes” in the secret society, explaining his question by pointing out that “young dudes are subject to change the rules” (161). When Guitar decides to kill Milkman, he is the one changing the rules: The Seven Days only murder white folks. But what Guitar does not realize is that he is signaling a shift of a very different sort when he leaves his “calling card” for Milkman in Shalimar. The owner of Solomon’s General Store tells Milkman that his friend left him a message: “[Y]our day was sure coming or your day . . . something like that . . . your day is here. But I know it had a day in it. But I ain’t sure if he said it was comin or was already here” (262). Indeed, Milkman’s day is coming, and it is the promise of a new day for *both* men.

Morrison chose MLKman as her protagonist, but she writes with obvious affection for Guitar, who (like Morrison’s own father, to whom the novel is dedicated) believes that white people are genetically inferior to black people: “The disease they have is in their blood, in the structure of their chromosomes,” he tells Milkman (157). We can hear Morrison’s own voice in Guitar’s response to Malcolm’s rejection of his slave master’s name: “I don’t give a shit what white people know or even think. Besides, I do accept it. It’s part of who I am. Guitar is my name. Bains is the slave master’s name. And I’m all of that. Slave names don’t bother me; but slave status does” (160). Angry and bitter, Guitar is also generous and kind. After Hagar’s final failed attempt to kill Milkman, Guitar finds her practically comatose and drives her home. On the way, he counsels her: “You think he belongs to you because you want to belong to him. Hagar don’t. It’s a bad word, ‘belong.’ Especially when you put it with somebody you love. Love shouldn’t be like that” (306). Guitar insists that love should not be binding: “You can’t own a human being. You can’t lose what you don’t own” (306). Like his historical counterpart, Guitar suffered devastating losses in childhood, his father dying in a work-related accident and his mother leaving her children when the meager insurance money ran out. Even Milkman, who wants desperately to fly “solo,” away from “real life” where “other people’s nightmares flapped in his face and constrained him” (220), recognizes that what’s missing in Guitar’s life is love. Wholly committed to his work, unable to marry or have children, Guitar scoffs at this observation: *what else but love?* The answer to this question can be found in what we are told about Guitar’s name: he got it not because he plays the guitar, but because when he was little, he yearned for a guitar he saw in a store window, crying uncontrollably when he did not get it. Guitar’s blues—the deep despair fueling his anger—thus finds expression

in violence, violence that threatens to destroy him, as it destroyed Robert Smith. What Guitar needs is to follow his own counsel: “Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down” (179).

The increasingly strained friendship between Milkman and Guitar provides creative tension, allowing Morrison not just to expand the traditional timeline of the civil rights movement but to reconfigure it as a circle. Although Milkman sets off on his journey alone, Guitar is close behind, at first just following his friend and then stalking him with the intent to kill. At each point along the way, Milkman pieces together more of his family history, a story that takes place against a backdrop of commerce that began in 1619 when the first slave ships arrived in Virginia. The first step of Milkman’s journey involves theft. When he and Guitar stand in the dark, ready to steal what they think is gold hanging in a green sack from Pilate’s ceiling, they smell ginger, “this heavy spice-sweet smell that made you think of the East and striped tents and the *sha-sha-sha* of leg bracelets” (184). Although the direct source of this smell is the south river, the narrator points out that both men are breathing “air that could have come straight from a marketplace in Accra” (185). To make the historical context of their theft even more clear, the narrator adds that “[e]ach thought it was the way freedom smelled, or justice, or luxury, or vengeance” (185). At Milkman’s next destination, outside the now dilapidated house in Danville where Circe hid Macon and Pilate after their father was murdered (by the white owners of this house), he smells “a sweet spicy perfume. Like ginger root—pleasant, clean, seductive” (239). And finally, in Shalimar, as he approaches Susan Byrd’s house, he confronts “the smell of gingerbread baking” (287).

Connect these three locations on a map—Detroit, Danville, and Shalimar—and they form a triangle similar in dimension to the transatlantic trading route. In addition to gold and to spices such as ginger, Morrison links these three locations with velvet (cotton), tobacco, and sugar. The most important link, and the commodity that defined America as well as what it meant to be an American, is the black body. For over fifty years, Pilate has carried with her a sack of bones. She calls these bones her “inheritance,” only learning at the end of the novel that they belong not to the white man her brother murdered in the cave, but to her father, the son of Solomon who returns after his death to tell his daughter, “You can’t leave a body behind.” In the novel’s final scene, Pilate and Milkman bury these bones in Shalimar, at the site of Solomon’s mythic flight: “They looked a long time for an area of earth among the rock faces large enough for the internment. When they found one, Pilate squatted down and opened the sack while Milkman dug. A deep sigh escaped from the sack and the wind turned chill. Ginger, a spicy sugared ginger smell, enveloped them” (335). Seconds later and Pilate herself will

sigh, Guitar's bullet having shot through her neck. "I wish I'd a knowed more people," she tells Milkman. "I would of loved 'em all. If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more" (336). Pilate's words link her to three members of the Seven Days: Robert Smith, whose suicide note ends with "I loved you all"; Henry Porter, who screams from the rooftop, "I love ya! I love ya all!" (26); and Guitar, who tells Milkman, "My whole life is love" (159). In this final scene, Morrison holds all three of her primary characters in a tight embrace, reconfiguring the three points of the triangle as a circle while echoing the title of Solomon Burke's "I Wish I Knew." The novel itself comes full circle as Milkman sings a variation of the children's song: "'Sugargirl don't leave me here/ Buckra's arms to choke me / Sugargirl don't leave me here / Buckra's arms to yoke me'" (336). After Milkman lays Pilate's head down, two birds circle around them; "[o]ne dived into the new grave and scooped something shiny in its beak before it flew away" (336). The "something shiny" is Sing's snuffbox, which her daughter had made into an earring to carry the slip of paper with the only word her father had ever written—her name.

Song of Solomon revises civil rights history by mapping a spiritual geography grounded in the circle; central to both West African and Native American traditions, the circle emphasizes process and the continuous flow of energy. Milkman first experiences this energy force on the hunt, when the men and dogs move in a circle and talk to one another: "And the men agreed or told them to change direction or to come back. All those shrieks, those rapid tumbling barks, the long sustained yells, the tuba sounds, the drumbeat sounds, the low liquid *howm howm*, the reedy whistles, the thin eeeee's of a cornet, the unh unh unh bass chords [. . .] it was what there was before language. Before things were written down" (279). The call-and-response of the hunt is repeated during the skinning of the bobcat, when Morrison not only intersperses snippets of an earlier conversation between Milkman and Guitar, but also makes an indirect reference to Pilate, whose soft-boiled eggs have yolks "like wet velvet":

"It is about love. What else?"

They turned to Milkman. "You want the heart?" they asked him. Quickly, before any thought could paralyze him, Milkman plunged both hands into the rib cage. "Don't get the lungs, now. Get the heart."

"What else?"

He found it and pulled. The heart fell away from the chest as easily as yolk slips out of its shell.

"What else? What else? What else?" (282)

What else besides love? Milkman's answer to this question echoes from the mountaintop where Pilate takes her last breath: "*Life life life life*" (337). Solomon and Ryna had twenty-one children, the last one Jake. Jake plowed and irrigated the land, grew peaches, raised hogs and wild-turkeys, and fished in his two-acre wide pond. Circe spent her (unnaturally) long life delivering babies and now breeds Weimaraners. Pilate made sure the Dead family line did not end with her brother Macon, and before laying Pilate's head down, Milkman says something that suggests that this line will not end with him: "'There must be another one like you,' he whispered to her. 'There's got to be at least one more woman like you'" (337).

Guitar's lesson, as important as Milkman's and as crucial to our understanding of civil rights history, is to consider what he is passing on. He tells Milkman that his work with the Seven Days makes it more likely that Milkman's "children can make other children" (160). Milkman questions this reasoning in a manner that recalls Martin Luther King's criticism of Malcolm X and, after his break with the Nation of Islam in 1964, Malcolm's questioning of himself: what is generative about anger, no matter how legitimate the grievance? The novel's ending suggests that Guitar may see things differently now. After all, the last thing the militant does is put his rifle down: "'My man,' he murmured to himself. 'My main man'" (337). By claiming Milkman as *his*, Guitar seems to revise his earlier stance on belonging as a "bad word." Morrison seconds Guitar's emotion in the description of Milkman's flight: "As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother" (337). A journey that began with two black men stealing a sack of bones has thus come full circle—encompassing the original theft and the violence done to black people beginning in 1619 and continuing for almost 350 years. When Milkman and Guitar steal what Pilate calls her inheritance, Morrison locates them in a specific moment in time: September 19, 1963. This is the day in American history when 12 black men at Morgan State College in Baltimore, Maryland, founded a black fraternity, Iota Phi Theta. By 1968, Martin and Malcolm had both passed on. *Song of Solomon* honors what these two men left behind—a legacy that speaks to the power of and need for brotherhood.

There's Music in the Air: Pilate's Song

The history of the Dead family is encoded in a children's song about Milkman's great-grandfather Solomon, a slave who "whirled about and touched the sun": one day in the fields, "Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone / Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home" (Morrison 303).

Pilate sings a variation of this children's song in the novel's opening scene as Robert Smith makes his suicidal leap: "*O Sugarman done fly away / Sugarman done gone / Sugarman cut across the sky / Sugarman gone home . . .*" (6). Retold in Julius Lester's 1969 collection *Black Folktales*, the myth of the flying African begins: "It happened long, long ago, when black people were taken from their homes in Africa and forced to come here to work as slaves. They were put on ships, and many died during the long voyage across the Atlantic Ocean. Those that survived stepped off the boats into a land they had never seen, a land they never knew existed, and they were put into the fields to work" (21). The story then focuses on a pregnant woman and the son of an African witch doctor, both working in the hot sun under the watchful eye and sharp whip of a white overseer on a South Carolina plantation. The pregnant woman faints and then receives a lashing. When she faints a second time, the young witch doctor whispers something in her ear, and she whispers it to the next person, and so on throughout the field. After more people faint and receive whippings, the witch doctor utters "a strange word" and all the slaves drop their hoes, spread their arms, and fly home to Africa.

In "Folklore and Community in *Song of Solomon*," published just three years after the novel, Susan Blake identified Morrison's source for the myth of the flying African as *Drums and Shadows*, the Georgia Writers' Project collection of folklore from Georgia Coastal Blacks. This source lists twenty-seven variations of the myth, only two of which feature an individual, *not* a group, flying off. Because Blake (like so many critics who followed) sees Milkman's leap as a solo flight, she concludes that Morrison "has chosen the least common and least communal variants of the story and changed the tale's emphasis" (80). To read Morrison in this way requires turning a deaf ear to the music in the air and at the core of this civil rights novel. It is, after all, "Pilate's song" that Milkman hears the children of Shalimar singing. In Morrison's version of the myth, the granddaughter of an African American slave, *not* the son of an African witch doctor, teaches others to fly and herself flies "[w]ithout ever leaving the ground" (336).

In *Pilate Dead*, Morrison gives us a heroine who nobody can turn around. In a 1993 interview for *Paris Review*, Elissa Schappell asked Morrison if she ever had to tell one of her characters "to shut up." The novelist responds:

Pilate, I did. Therefore she doesn't speak very much. She has this long conversation with the two boys, and every now and then she'll say something, but she doesn't have the dialogue the other people have. I had to do that, otherwise she was going to overwhelm everybody. She got terribly interesting [. . .] I had to take it back. It's *my* book; it's not called *Pilate*. (251)

Critics find Pilate as interesting as Morrison does. Gay Wilentz argues that through Pilate, “Morrison emphasizes the dead-end of both mainstream assimilation [Macon Dead II’s way] and radical separatism [Guitar’s way] by offering an alternative” (144-45). Joyce Wegs sings Pilate’s praises, calling her and Jake “the two guiding figures and true role models in the novel” (178); associated with singing *and* flying, Pilate is “a strong, admirable figure” who represents “a possible new beginning” (181). Reading Pilate within the context of the civil rights movement supports the view of her as an “alternative” in the same way that Ella Baker and Fannie Lou Hamer represented alternatives to the models of leadership provided by Martin Luther King and Malcolm X.

Pilate exemplifies a realistic “by any means necessary” politics of love. At fourteen-years-old, she threatens her brother Macon with a knife to keep him from stealing a white man’s gold. The next time we see Pilate with a knife, she is threatening another man, her daughter Reba’s lover-turned-abuser. Pilate uses violence (she knocks Milkman unconscious with a glass bottle), magic (she leaves a voodoo doll in Macon’s office to keep him from trying to end Ruth’s pregnancy), and minstrelsy (she plays to racist stereotypes to get Milkman and Guitar out of jail) to achieve her purpose, which is always to show “compassion for troubled people” and “concern for and about human relationships” (149). Most importantly, Pilate claims what is hers and loves it fiercely. At Hagar’s funeral, after lifting her voice in song with her daughter Reba (Hagar’s mother), Pilate looks the mourners in the eye, telling each of them, “That’s my baby girl. My baby girl. My baby girl. My baby girl [. . .] And she was *loved!*” (318). A commanding presence in the mostly empty church, Pilate’s call for “Mercy!” brings the mortician, not the minister, to her side. Both Pilate’s appearance and her behavior call into question the efficacy of top-down, patriarchal civil rights organizations like Dr. King’s Southern Christian Leadership Council.³

Milkman’s first encounter with his free-spirited Aunt Pilate includes lessons in how to make a perfect soft-boiled egg, how to remove blackberries from the branch, and how to overcome despair. The latter lesson involves the meaning of words and the healing power of song. When Hagar declares that she has in fact had some hungry days, Reba is alarmed until Pilate tells her that Hagar doesn’t mean food: “Realization swept slowly across Reba’s face, but she didn’t answer. Pilate began to hum as she returned to plucking the berries. After a moment, Reba joined her, and they hummed together in perfect harmony until Pilate took the lead: *O Sugarman don’t leave me here / Cotton balls to choke me / O Sugarman don’t leave me here / Buckra’s arms to yoke me . . .*” (49). Pilate has been singing to overcome despair for most of her adult life. Her dead father visits her for the first time following Reba’s

birth, when Pilate is “extremely depressed and lonely” (147). Jake says, “Sing. Sing” and “Pilate understood all of what he told her. To sing, which she did beautifully, relieved her gloom immediately” (147). Milkman experiences a similar transformation in Danville when, standing outside the Butler house, “[n]ever, not since he knelt by his window sill wishing he could fly, had he felt so lonely” (239). His mood is lifted when he meets a witch (Circe) who tells him his grandmother’s name—Sing.

Morrison’s version of the myth of the flying African casts Pilate in the leading role, putting her at both the margin and the center of the beloved community. “People Who Could Fly” ends this way: “That was long ago, and no one now remembers what word it was that the young witch doctor knew that could make people fly” (23). No one except Pilate. When Milkman returns from Shalimar, he tells Pilate that her father was not telling her to “sing” but simply repeating his wife’s name, a name he would not say after Sing died giving birth to Pilate. But why can’t Pilate’s father be repeating his wife’s name and also be telling his daughter to lift her voice and sing? Indeed, by also repeating, “you can’t just fly on off and leave a body,” the son of Solomon is telling his daughter to remember, and thus to keep alive, all those “bodies,” including her Native American mother, who have been left behind, to remember as the children in Shalimar remember, and to “sing about love now / Sing, sing, sing about peace / Sing, sing, sing about the joy / Sing, sing, sing, ohh . . .” Jake’s refusal to speak his wife’s name was a mistake, as wrong-headed as Sing’s insistence that Jake keep the name “Macon Dead.” Pilate explains her mother’s reasoning to Milkman: “Mama liked it. Liked the name. Said it was new and would wipe out the past. Wipe it all out” (54). *Song of Solomon* insists that you cannot and should not wipe out the past. The son of Solomon returns after his death to correct his mistake and to make sure his daughter honors her ancestors.

Recognizing Pilate’s responsibility underscores the communal aspect of *Song of Solomon* and so its relationship to a freedom movement that continues.⁴ Morrison ends her novel by stating the primary lesson learned by her male protagonist: “For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it” (337). Notice that *Shalimar*, not Solomon, is the source of Milkman’s knowledge. In *Song of Solomon*, the African witch doctor is played by Circe, the mid-wife whom Milkman repeatedly calls a witch. The pregnant woman is Sing (who births Pilate) and also Ruth (who births Milkman). The white overseer who wields the whip is played by the Butlers, who murder Jake, thereby serving the interests of white power. All the slaves in the field are played by Milkman and Guitar, the “brothers” whose fates are linked at the novel’s end and who each, for very different reasons, whisper in other people’s ears. The son of the African witch

doctor who utters the “strange word” is played by Pilate, the granddaughter of Solomon and Ryna, the daughter of Jake and Sing, and the embodiment of African, Native American, and African American spiritual and cultural traditions that strengthen and sustain the beloved community. And the griot, the person keeping the dreams alive and urging the dreamers to “pass it on,” is Toni Morrison, with inspiration from Solomon Burke.

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NOTES

¹ In the most provocative article about this novel, “Politics and Form in *Song of Solomon*,” John Brenkman focuses on the years between the novel’s final scene (1963) and its publication (1977) in order to argue that Morrison is entering a debate between Henry Louis Gates and Houston Baker about African American literary theory.

² Reliable information about Solomon Burke is hard to come by. See Chapter 2, “King Solomon: The King in Exile,” of Guralnick’s *Sweet Soul Music*, a book dedicated to Solomon Burke.

³ Much work still needs to be done on women in the civil rights movement, a point made by Davis W. Houck and David E. Dixon, editors of *Women and the Civil Rights Movement*. Their idea of “rhetorical leadership” can be usefully applied to Pilate, whose voice, whether she is speaking or singing, both mesmerizes and moves those who hear it. Pilate’s leadership model—especially her commitment to enabling the self-development of Hagar, Milkman, and Guitar—can be compared to that of Ella Baker, who encouraged the college students in SNCC to remain independent of SCLC. See Chapter 8, “Mentoring a New Generation of Activists,” of Ransby.

⁴ In 2012, Barack Obama awarded Toni Morrison the Medal of Freedom and recalled: “I remember reading *Song of Solomon* when I was a kid and not just trying to figure out how to write, but also how to be and how to think.” The President’s remarks extend the narrative arc of Morrison’s novel to our own time.

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