

and in her advice to Sula. In an interview Morrison heralded the community as both a refuge and a haven: “In the black community where I grew up, there were eccentricity and freedom, less conformity in individual habits—but close conformity in terms of the survival of the village, of the tribe.”<sup>15</sup> Eva, the maternal character, represents the body and voice of survival/community.

## Song of Solomon

### *Paternal Law versus the Maternal Spirit of Sacrifice*

The Bible, maternal ethics, socially inscribed black bodies, cultural boundaries, and demonic parody play significant roles in Morrison’s literature, beginning with *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* but increasing in greater magnitude in *Song of Solomon*. Morrison reveals that virtually everything is subject to parody, in its negative and positive, profane and sacred discursive polarities. Divided into two books, *Song of Solomon* presents a “commuting” between both books and parodied subjects thematically, semiotically, and picturesquely. In the essay “Are Parody and Deconstruction Secretly the Same Thing,” Robert Phiddian states that parody can indeed distance the reader “from identification with both the model discourse and the parodic text, setting us on a constant commuting between deconstructed and deconstructing poles/venues.” In this instance readers fail to “arrive at a ‘true’ understanding” of either texts “because each constantly displaces the other.”<sup>1</sup> Book 1 and book 2 follow Phiddian’s parodic fluctuations, but the magical protagonist Pilate arrests the commuting between both books: one of violence and the other of *agape* love and Christ-like sacrifice.

In book 1 Morrison’s hypertext parodies the historical hypotext of the naming and identifying of blacks after the Civil War, their exclusion from the professional space of medicine and real estate, and their violence as victims who unfortunately perpetrated the violence against them. The male protagonist Macon (Milkman) Dead III is the inheritor of a name that signifies the hypotext of the legacy of slavery and whites having the power to name blacks indifferently, yet significantly. Mercy Hospital is renamed, parodically, “No Mercy Hospital” because of its refusal to grant the town’s one black doctor hospital privileges. The Seven Days gang, which targets whites, is a parody of the Ku Klux Klan and the killing of blacks; both engage in acts of racial hatred and violence.

The critic Ralph Story identifies Robert Smith’s violent suicidal leap as both a heroic and a revolutionary act of the racial solidarity of the Seven Days,<sup>2</sup> based on Guitar Bains’s boast, “And if it [revenge] ever gets to be too much like it was for Robert Smith, we do that [commit suicide] rather than crack and tell somebody” (159). In contrast to Story’s critique of the “racial solidarity” of the Seven Days, Morrison appears to interrogate black male solidarity in her sarcastic description

of the “Blood Bank,” a demonic parody of black-on-black urban crime in cramped spaces of identity where oppressed blacks perform the violent work of hegemony in acts of self-sabotage. The image/semiotics of the men’s blood flowing “freely” in their segregated spaces is an ironic inversion of their spatial immobility, which mocks their violent excesses.

Demonically parodying their violence, the narrator is caustically sarcastic: “They believed firmly that members of their own race killed one another for good reasons: violation of another’s turf (a man is found with somebody else’s wife); refusal to observe the laws of hospitality (a man reaches into his friend’s pot of mustards [greens] and snatches out the meat); or verbal insults impugning their virility, honesty, humanity, and mental health” (100). The function of sarcasm in this verbal parody of black-on-black crime stresses the banality of self-perpetuating violence in an always already violent social order, with which blacks must contend. In the narrator’s attack on the Seven Days and Guitar Bains, who ultimately attempts to kill even his best friend, Milkman, Morrison again extends her use of parody.

With her multiple uses of demonic parody, Morrison critiques the representation of beauty in *The Bluest Eye*, economic dispossession in *Sula*, and naming and identity in *Song of Solomon*, and in each of these works she addresses the violence of spatial politics and the social order. She reveals an absence of bias in her selection of parodic targets, notwithstanding controversy, especially regarding black-on-black violence. As with other scholars’ criticism, Ralph Story’s analysis of the Seven Days’ racial solidarity appears incisive on its own merit, without recognition, as Dentith states, of “the style or discourse to which allusion is being made.” However, failure to recognize the intertextual play between the Seven Days and the Ku Klux Klan, between No Mercy Hospital and discrimination in the field of medicine, and between the Dead family’s name and the legacy of slavery makes Morrison’s parodic practices practically invisible, once again.

Book 2, in contrast to book 1, which contains symbols of materialistic bodies and their physical and social death, tests Robert Phiddian’s theory of the constant commuting between the parodied text and the parodying text. In book 2 Morrison offers her readers a picturesque haven of Arcadia, with its emphasis on beauty and peacefulness, annexed from the chaos of book 1. While book 1 symbolizes Macon Dead’s paternal law of acquisition and possession, book 2 represents the maternal sacrifice of life, captured in Morrison’s religious parodic reenactment of Golgotha and the Crucifixion, with a woman, Pilate, as the Christ-like figure of *agape* love.

Arresting the commuting between the parodic hypertext and the parodied hypotext, Pilate in her bodily sacrifice is a unifying metaphor for both books in *Song of Solomon*, even with the novel’s sacred and profane parodies that can evoke reader anxiety. Pilate’s name and rhetorical question “What is true in the world?” (149) are a religious parodic hypertext of the biblical hypotext of the New

Testament and Pontius Pilate, who asks flippantly, “What is truth?”—as he hands Christ over to a mob to be crucified. Although her father names her vengefully after Pontius Pilate because God did not save his wife, the life-affirming Pilate is a powerful maternal metaphor of Morrison’s (re)appropriation of the master discourse on gender and cultural politics.

Morrison shows, however, that with a metaphorical linkage, the commuting between hypotext and hypertext can be desisted. This is done with a flexible character such as Pilate, who collapses the breach of parodic discourse and shifts the locus of the dialogue away from violence and onto the interiority of identity, as when Milkman discovers his name and his real identity. In book 1 Pilate is responsible for Milkman’s birth since she created the magic potion that induced in Macon Dead a desire for his spurned wife, and she practices the art of voodoo to persuade him not to abort the baby. In addition, Pilate cooks Milkman’s first perfect egg. His awakening desire to be more than he is is echoed in his plea “I got a right to be what I want to be, and I want to be a egg” (166). Pilate acts as a maternal conduit between the narrow paternal and racist constrictions of Milkman’s society in book 1 and his rebirth in book 2.

A classic Bildungsroman, *Song of Solomon* traces the rebirth and transformation of Milkman Dead as rituals of lovelessness and death form the pattern of book 1 in Morrison’s third novel, which spans the period of Jim Crow America to the early 1960s. Continuing to appropriate the Bible to suggest its importance to African Americans, Morrison takes her book’s title from the Old Testament narrative “Song of Solomon.” From 961 to 922 B.C. Solomon was king of Israel and the black son of David and Bathsheba, and his name is associated with wisdom, a characteristic that Morrison connects to the maternal and to Pilate as well as to Milkman’s quest for identity. Death, life, and resurrection are the narrative schemata of his maturation in the text. As the symbolism of his surname, Dead also reveals that his relationship with his father is basically nonexistent as a result of his father’s obsession with power.

As a real estate investor in Michigan, Macon Dead II experiences racial discrimination, and Morrison parodies this particular form of racism in the professional field of real estate with Macon’s knowledge that as a “Negro he wasn’t going to get a big slice of the pie” (63). However, even with Macon Dead’s limited success, he links the value of life to the accumulation of property, treating his adult daughters and his wife as appendages of his wealth. He denies them his love. In his advice to Milkman, Macon valorizes ownership of property over self-knowledge and communal bonds, and he denigrates the maternal in a classic, though general paternal fantasy of self-making: “Pilate can’t teach you a thing you can use in this world. Maybe the next, but not this one. Let me tell you right now the one important thing you’ll ever need to know: Own things. . . . Then you’ll own yourself and other people too” (55).

Theoretically, Morrison sets up relationships between Macon, Milkman, and Pilate that reveal Milkman's struggle for his soul. He wrestles with materialism versus spirituality and a patriarchal independence versus a connected, maternal, and black cultural sphere, represented by Pilate. Macon's bourgeois capitalist advice underscores the fissures of identity in his family and community, and his dialogue with Milkman becomes "the sign of a failure of relationship," as Carol Gilligan explains in her analysis of paternal aggression and violence. Gilligan continues, "As women imagine the activities through which relationships are woven and connection sustained, the world of intimacy—which appears so mysterious and dangerous to men—comes instead to appear increasingly coherent and safe." The literary critic Qin Sheng offers a cultural context in which we can place Gilligan's overarching remarks about women when she argues that Morrison makes known the role that "African American women" such as the fictional Pilate have played "in the reconstruction" of black cultural heritage to effect healing.<sup>3</sup> Although Morrison is sympathetic to the discrimination Macon faces in public and professional spaces, she rejects his cultivation of false values as a way to gain control of his emasculated body and embattled male ego and embraces the life-sustaining values of the maternal Pilate.

Furthermore, Morrison's narrator describes Macon as a victim of ironic self-parody, for he participates in rituals of his own social death. As an oppressed black male who overcompensates for his marginality by robbing others as a landlord, Macon reverts to the same patriarchal Western greed responsible for scripting the racial and cultural boundaries that have circumscribed spaces for African Americans and limited his life. As a testimony to the emptiness he feels in his small, ego-centered world, Macon walks by Pilate's house but "heard the music. They were singing. All of them. Pilate, her daughter Reba, and Reba's daughter, Hagar," and he "walked on, resisting as best he could the sound of the voices that followed him" (28). Singing in Morrison's narratives is often a sign of the characters' resistance to oppression and their soulful and spiritual regeneration. As Gay Wilentz remarks, "Even Macon, who deserted his sister, sees the house as a place of music, warmth, and caring, not realizing that he has destroyed the music in his own house," but "three generations' worth of women in Pilate's house can live and breathe and sing in harmony."<sup>4</sup> As an embodiment of black bourgeois society and paternal law, Macon recognizes in himself and his family a sense of loss; however, his male bourgeois "fantasy of self-genesis"<sup>5</sup> prevents him from seeking the transformation that Milkman desires and seeks, primarily from women in Morrison's sweeping display of maternal ethics.

My reading of *Song of Solomon's* Pilate as a Christ-like maternal figure differs from that suggested by other scholars but suggests too the various roles that can be assigned to her. Like Eva, Pilate is wide-spirited. Joseph Skerrett's treatment of Pilate focuses on her as a looming embodiment of a female blues singer, a teller

of tales, and a teacher who instructs Milkman and Guitar how “to talk properly.”<sup>6</sup> Wilentz and Marilyn Sanders Mobley see her, respectively, as an exemplar of Afrocentricity and an alternative voice in the community. Wilentz and Mobley offer two different, yet similar images of Pilate. In appropriating Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s theory of the double-voicedness of signification in the black community and Bakhtin’s concept of the heteroglossia of speech acts, Mobley connects Pilate’s storytelling and song of flying Africans to the children’s songs and communal voices in the narrative, significantly. As cultural bearer, Pilate carries the “narrative thread” of the song of flying Africans that links other heteroglossia voices in a dialectic structure of “call and response.”<sup>7</sup> Her song offers an alternative image of black identity with a woman, as Sheng and Wilentz remind us, assuming the responsibility for transmitting and maintaining generational and cultural continuity.

As one of Morrison’s most authentic and androgynous characters, Pilate emerges as such a mystical figure that virtually any careful scholarly analysis of her function in the narrative is not only plausible but also necessary in order for readers to appreciate the expansive scope of her magic. To Skerrett’s, Wilentz’s, Sheng’s, and Mobley’s multiple descriptions of Pilate as teacher, blues singer, Afrocentric cultural bearer, and voice of the community, add the sacred biblical image of the loving sacrificial lamb who teaches Milkman and Guitar not only how to “speak properly” but also how to forgive, live, and die. Pilate’s absence of a navel suggests her sacred and miraculous conception. Like Christ, she is unattached to corporeality and thus freed from the Jim Crow racial strictures/markings of a disabling society. Pilate assumes, like Eva, a wider maternal function, unlike Ruth, who breast-feeds Milkman well beyond his infancy and manipulates the maternal body to overcompensate for her loveless marriage to Macon Dead. Skerrett’s reference to Milkman and Guitar’s greeting of “Hi” to Pilate (who would prefer the more correct greeting of “Hello”) gives Morrison another occasion to teach and parody a minihistory of lynching in the South.

Understandably, Skerrett’s criticism misses the parody of this history, just as Morrison’s parody of black-on-black violence is overlooked in Story’s interpretation of black men’s “racial solidarity.” Skerrett’s and Story’s otherwise legitimate criticisms reveal the risks that Morrison takes as a parodist whose play on that which is essentially absent from the text challenges readers to know her cryptic historical allusions. Without knowledge of Morrison’s use of parody, critics will miss her authorial intent. For example, Robert Phiddian cites Brian McHale’s analysis that the “flicker between parody’s vacillation between presence and absence” represents an “anomalous spacing of discourse observable” in “the simultaneous moment of parody and *difference*.” Phiddian then argues, “Parodies stand for the things they displace, but they do not merely repeat them, as translations aspire to do, or extend them like imitations. They displace, distort, differ, and defer.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Pilate’s retort and rejoinder to Milkman and Guitar’s colloquial greeting

of “Hi” presents Morrison with another opportunity to give lessons in history. In Pilate’s correction of the men’s greetings, she describes them as “the dumbest un-hung Negroes on earth” (37). Such a description represents Morrison’s hypertext, playing on the tragic hypotext of a reported lynching of 3,386 black people in the South from 1882 to 1930.<sup>9</sup>

When Guitar and Milkman break into Pilate’s home to steal what they believe is a bag of gold, they foreshadow and eventually parody the two biblical thieves who hung on crosses with Christ at Calvary. The narrative configuration of their identity as two thieves is encoded further, but stereotypically, in a case of racial profiling as white police officers stop them in a search “for the Negro that killed that boy” (205). In this example of racism, Morrison targets and criticizes police harassment of any black body seen in the area of a crime. She uses demonic parody here not to distort or defer but rather to depict the volatility of black male bodies/identities-in-crises subjected at any time to searches and the destabilization of identity for the rich Milkman as well as the poor Guitar. Despite Milkman’s status as a wealthy black man with his friend, the two are stopped and subjected to police brutality because of their race and gender. When the two are taken to jail and the real nature of their crime is revealed, a gracious Pilate tells the police an African “trickster tale” about the stolen bag of bones just to free Guitar and Milkman (208). In her trickster tale of bones, lynchings, and jokes played on an old woman, Pilate (re)stabilizes Milkman’s and Guitar’s black-male bodies/identities. She therefore rescues them from a hostile public sphere while relating a tortured history of white male aggression against black males to which, by inference, she connects the “innocent” white police officers.

Morrison opens book 2 on a note of brotherly/sisterly love, as if this book takes its clue from 2 Corinthians and the Apostle Paul’s most cited rejoinder to Christians to “live in peace” (13:11). Conversely, Milkman’s sister First Corinthians is perhaps so named to signify on the hellish contentions in book 1, similar to the Apostle Paul’s reference in the first letter to the Corinthians of the “divisions among you” and “contentions among you” (1:10–11). In the spirit of the apostle’s second letter to the Corinthians, Morrison concludes *Song of Solomon* with Pilate’s sacrificial act of *agape* love, as she sacrifices her own life for Milkman, whose rebirth in the womb/cave in Danville forecloses Macon Dead’s symbolic paternal order of lovelessness, materialism, and violence.

Milkman arrives in a town with the rich, verdant beauty of the countryside. Still looking for the bag of gold, he walks to a cave and comes upon a body of water, in which he wades after removing his socks and Florsheim shoes. Signifying the maternal womb, the Danville cave’s walls constrict, and Milkman drops “to his knees” and stretches “out on his stomach” (255). Emerging from the cave/womb, he travels to Shalimar, Virginia, still looking for the bag of gold, but is further initiated into manhood by men who teach him how to hunt and get close to Mother

Nature and by women (with names such as Sweet, Grace, and Susan Byrd) who bathe him and identify his paternal grandmother, Sing. It is here that he learns the myth of the flying Africans and recognizes what Mobley refers to as the “narrative thread” of Pilate’s culture-bearing song, a fragment that he connects to the children’s song and uses to recognize and reclaim his lost genealogy, his real gold. When he returns to Michigan to inform others of his discovery, it is Pilate, the ethnic cultural bearer, who returns to Virginia with him to bury her father’s bones, to bear witness to Milkman’s genealogical discovery, and then to die for him.

In her religious parodic hypertext of the biblical hypotext of Golgotha, the site of Christ’s Crucifixion, Morrison creates a sacred religious parody of Christ’s death. She blots out the profane enactment of paternal hatred and violence in book 1, arresting Phiddian’s commuting between intertextual discourses. The biblical Golgotha or Calvary is the place of a skull, a name signifying the site of Christ’s Crucifixion on a hill in ancient Jerusalem. That Morrison chooses a woman to reenact the Crucifixion of the male Jesus Christ further strengthens the image of the female and the maternal figure as embodying the creative spirit of the supernatural. Images of women as transformational spirits abound in book 2, from Circe, who beckons Milkman with the sermonic call “Come, come,” to Susan Byrd, whose surname implies and affirms a transcendent feminine principle (242). Morrison’s omniscient narrator carefully describes the scene of Milkman and Pilate’s walk, which was “a long way to the top, but neither stopped for breath. At the very top, on the plateau, the trees that could stand the wind at that height were few” (339). At the top, Pilate “opened the sack while Milkman dug,” and the two buried her father’s bones taken from the sack, which Guitar, who has followed Milkman, believes contains real gold. At this moment Guitar shoots at Milkman but hits and murders Pilate, who dies, like Christ, professing her love for humanity: “I wish I’d knowed more people. I would of loved ’em all” (340). Carrying the cross/burden of the community like Eva, Pilate, like Christ, dies between two thieves: a redeemed and spiritually renewed Milkman and an unredeemable Guitar, the paternal assassin of the nurturing maternal body.

My reading of Pilate as a Christ-like figure adds to all other images of her as African cultural bearer, teacher and philosopher, and the healing and singing voice of a fragmented community. She is the overarching picture of the maternal sacrificial lamb. She gives her life to save the lives of others. According to her reading of Pilate as an African cultural bearer concerned with the health and well-being of the community, Wilentz remarks that Pilate is critical of Hagar and Milkman’s incestuous first-cousin relationship, which can “breed” trouble. In her emphasis on the elders’ attention to background in mate selection to avoid the peril of tribal interbreeding, Wilentz posits that Pilate, like an elder, makes no distinction between “cousin” and “brother,” as Hagar maintains in justification of her incest. Pilate asks Hagar and Reba, “I mean what’s the difference