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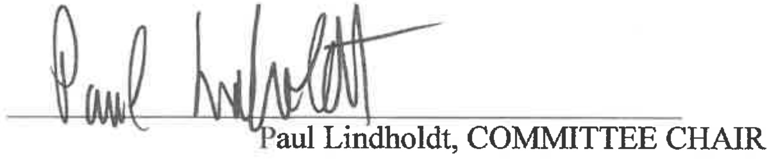

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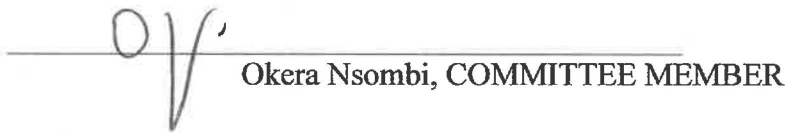

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In her 1977 novel *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison challenged herself for the first time to write a story centered on a male protagonist. In her Foreword to that novel, she explains that the death of her father inspired her decision. That father's continued influence, even after his death, proved almost corporeal. The primacy of fathers in the novel, then, has a biographical connection. Morrison's gynocentric outlook, however, made it hard for her to fulfill her challenge to herself. Her storyline becomes as much about her female character, Pilate, who possesses supernatural abilities that set her apart from the others. Utilizing those abilities in positive ways to aid her family, Pilate functions in the plot chiefly as a spiritual guide for the nominal protagonist Milkman Dead.

From a young age, Toni Morrison had been interested in ghost stories and tales of the supernatural. In *Toni Morrison: Nobel Prize-Winning Author*, Barbara Kramer discusses Morrison's life and how she achieved the Nobel Prize. In her chapter, "Stories, Ghosts, and Dreams," Kramer elaborates on Morrison's connection to ghost stories. "Storytelling was an important part of the family's entertainment. Morrison remembered her parents telling wonderful ghost stories. 'My father's were the best,' she said, 'the scariest. We were always begging him to repeat the stories that terrified us the most'" (14). Morrison had been exposed to ghost stories from a young age, perhaps explaining the supernatural occurrences in both *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. "When Milkman was twelve years old, his Aunt Pilate, his father's sister, came to town. Pilate carried a bag of human bones and wore a brass box as an earring. She practiced voodoo and made her living by supplying bootleg whiskey to town residents . . . . Pilate lived with her daughter and granddaughter in a shack without modern conveniences" (49). Kramer, briefly describing *Song of Solomon*, characterizes Pilate as a central character whose natural practices are taboo.

Song of Solomon nominally concerns protagonist Milkman Dead and his search for heritage and belonging, but Morrison also presents key female characters in Pilate and the midwife Circe, who both display aspects of the extranormal that lie outside of societal norms. Morrison utilizes these female characters to aid Milkman. They provide mystical support for the storyline, making Pilate and Circe crucial to the protagonist's development. Their magical and mystical powers create godlike figures removed from the traditional expectations of their societies. Pilate and Circe are freed from traditional confines by their anomalous conditions. Pilate is a root worker with indigenous blood, a natural healer who has deep compassion for the troubled souls whom she encounters. She is a wise woman, in the early American locution for those forms of knowledge. Circe is a less rounded but equally important character whose many abilities aid Milkman in his quest. Endowing her female characters with esoteric qualities, Morrison affords them the ability to stray beyond their social stations.

Themes of the extranormal and supernatural are key to the progression of the novel and the growth of the characters. Although both concepts are closely related, any appearance, action, or event that is humanly possible and outside of the norms of a society is extranormal, whereas what lies beyond the humanly possible is supernatural. Morrison's characters of Circe and Pilate are portrayed as being superior, possessing knowledge and abilities beyond the norm. Their sorcery is extranormal because their motives are always beneficent, their purposes helpful and profound. Within the pages of Morrison's novel, extranormal events and abilities are strictly positive. Both Pilate and Circe aid others, especially Milkman, in reaching their full potential.

In the present article, *indigenous* and *Native American* will be used interchangeably with respect to the various North American native tribes. The term *root worker* is used by Morrison in association with a trade that Pilate learns and practices throughout the novel. The *Oxford English*

Dictionary defines a root worker as "a person who uses roots to cast spells; a conjuror." Morrison develops Pilate into a conjuror by conferring on her powers that are extranormal. A *conjure woman* can be defined as one who practices rituals that can either help or harm. A woman who utilizes natural resources to create remedies and spells is often considered a witch, a designation that does not always stipulate actions in concurrence with notions of good or evil. If Pilate and Circe are witches by any definition, they are indisputably good witches. They are both positive influencers, using their extranormal abilities to aid others.

The formative power of names, studied by the linguistic device known as onomastics, is likewise an extranormal force in Morrison's work. Onomastics examines the development of proper names. According to *The Oxford Handbook of Names and Naming*, Carloe Hough writes, "The study of names, known as 'onomastics,' is both an old and a young discipline. Since Ancient Greece, names have been regarded as central to the study of language, throwing light on how humans communicate with each other and organize their world" (1). Naming and the study of names is crucial to understanding why and how Morrison created her characters. The names of characters are meant strategically to reflect limitations, purposes, and liberations. Milkman Dead's first name is bestowed on him by Freddie, a janitor who observes Ruth Foster Dead's abnormally long breastfeeding regime. That late-in-life breastfeeding results not only in his lifelong nickname but also in his tainted views of women that ensue. The surname Dead derives from a Union soldier's mistake, which affected the entire family line and alludes by implication to enslavement, entrapment, and imprisonment. Pilate's naming entails her ability to control situations and steer events, while Circe derives her name through her implied comparison to the sorceress in Homer's *The Odyssey*. The complexity of these characters is contingent in large part on their naming and the force of their names. In *Toni Morrison: Imagining Freedom*, Lawrie

Balfour asserts the great power in language. In "To Manipulate American English," Balfour writes, "Yet Morrison's relationship to the words with which she plots paths to freedom is always double-edged: the English language is liberating and imprisoning, plastic and resistant; it is open to the creation of new meanings, and, like other imperial tongues, it always carries with it the sedimentation of racist ideas and assumptions" (35-6). Morrison's characters are initially captive to their names but liberated by actions that follow. Captivity, reinforced but not limited to naming, is integral to their development and associated with the extranormal.

Morrison's use of the supernatural appears in other contemporary novels. In her 1987 novel *Beloved*, which followed *Song of Solomon* a decade later, Morrison explored the plight of her protagonist Sethe who experiences extraordinary events. Morrison opens that novel with Sethe's familial relationships and the trials involved in coping with the child she murdered to save that child from slavers. Supernatural imagery extends her grief beyond the human condition. Only when a healthy adult woman named Beloved walks out of the water does Morrison provide the reader with actual, physical evidence of the supernatural. By the conclusion of the novel, the character Beloved is revealed to be the physical manifestation of Sethe's grief in the form of her dead daughter now fully grown. Morrison's supernatural events afford her the opportunity to convey her compassion concerning loss, grief, and slavery in the South. *Beloved*'s precursor *Song of Solomon*, the subject of this essay, articulates similar themes. In *Toni Morrison's Spiritual Vision: Faith, Folktales, and Feminism in Her Life and Literature*, Nadra Nittle compares Morrison's female characters. "Pilate and Baby Suggs, for example, are spirit-filled women who do not view themselves as the world does" (110). Due to Morrison's past experiences with ghost stories, she implements both the supernatural and spiritual into *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. Each novel features three-women households and supernatural

practices. The reader may better understand *Beloved*, Morrison's most well-known and successful novel, by first experiencing *Song of Solomon*.

Morrison's earlier book is built around two major instances of extranormal occurrence. The first involves Pilate's shapeshifting after Milkman Dead and Guitar Bains steal a bag of bones from Pilate. The second takes place when Milkman visits Circe during his search for his familial heritage. Circe resides in an abandoned mansion that at first smells appalling, due to the pack of dogs that live within it, but the scent of ginger mystically fills it after Milkman enters. Circe appears to Milkman outwardly to be an old woman, but she shape-shifts to possess a youthful voice and manner, thus underscoring her nature-based powers. Along with these two major events, Morrison leaves a trail of smaller bits that likewise display extranormal capacities.

Morrison's *Song of Solomon* begins and ends with extranormal events. Pilate and Circe function as spiritual guides who aid the quest of protagonist Milkman. They also enhance the atmosphere of the novel by providing traditional, mystical, and supernatural facets to the storyline. Pilate's and Circe's generous extranormal behaviors and earth-based mysticism prove liberatory, not only for themselves but for Milkman throughout his delayed maturation.

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Nominal protagonist Milkman Dead, born to Macon Dead and Ruth Foster Dead, was saddled with a surname from a mistake the family was forced to accept. "His own parents, in some mood of perverseness or resignation, had agreed to abide by a naming done to them by somebody who couldn't have cared less. Agreed to take and pass on to all their issue this heavy name scrawled in perfect thoughtlessness by a drunken Yankee in the Union Army" (18). Thus, arbitrarily assigned to the family, the name Dead constrains and limits the development of the entire family line. Patriarch Macon Dead, Sr., self-absorbed and tyrannical, is brutal to his wife

Ruth and critical of his offspring and his sister. He is dead to healthy social relations. He takes undue pride in status and control. His male offspring, Macon Jr., is burdened by that same name.

Pilate, Macon's sister, interferes effectively with her brother’s plans. She arguably becomes a second protagonist in the novel. Prior to Milkman's birth, Pilate administers a philter to rekindle the lust between Macon and Ruth. The term *philter* finds its definition in a potion to promote love and desire in an individual. This power becomes evident when "even before his birth he was a strong feeling – a feeling about the nasty greenish-gray powder Pilate had given her to be stirred into rain water and put into food. But Macon came out of his few days of sexual hypnosis in a rage and later when he discovered her pregnancy, tried to get her to abort" (131). Though Macon reverts to his previous oppressive behavior, there is no denying Ruth's pregnancy and the resulting birth of his only son. In that process Pilate, Milkman's aunt, had revealed her extranormal abilities, which she uses with compassion and forethought. They are attributable to her genealogy which is unknown till the novel’s end. Her mother, Sing, of an unknown Native American bloodline, is a contributing factor to the mystical nature of Pilate, while her father, Jake, was a former slave.

Morrison begins her novel with two extranormal events. The first concerns Robert Smith, an insurance salesman, who claims he intends to fly and leaps from the roof of Mercy Hospital. His fellow townspeople watch and wonder how or if he would manage that supernatural feat. Pilate emerges from the crowd, unidentified yet, and “suddenly burst into song. The singer, standing at the back of the crowd, was as poorly dressed as the doctor’s daughter was well dressed” (5). Ruth Foster Dead is the doctor’s daughter. Pilate’s song foreshadows the genealogical discoveries that serve as climax for the book:

O Sugarman done fly away

Sugarman done gone

Sugarman cut across the sky

Sugarman gone home (1-4).

Pilate's song assuages the crowd's anxiety and commends Smith's desire for flight. He falls to his death. Pilate sings in lament of his passing, hoping to ease his journey into the afterlife. Pilate then addresses Ruth Foster Dead. "'You should make yourself warm,' she whispered to her, touching her lightly on the elbow. 'A little bird'll be here with the morning'" (9). Pilate's divination of Ruth's son's birth, and her urging Ruth to prepare for his delivery, openly displays the extent of her supernatural powers. One of her functions is to unravel their intricate genealogy, with Milkman as an unwitting agent to achieve that goal.

Morrison introduces the naming of Pilate by explaining the events of her birth. Macon Dead remembers "How his father, confused and melancholy over his wife's death in childbirth, had thumbed through the Bible, and since he could not read a word, chose a group of letters that seemed to him strong and handsome; saw in them a large figure that looked like a tree hanging in some princely but protective way over a row of smaller trees" (18). The naming of Pilate was causal in nature, offhanded. Her namesake, the Roman governor of Jerusalem in the New Testament, represents a character who is renowned for washing his hands, representing his refusal to accept the responsibility for the fate of Jesus. Known for his apathy in allowing Jesus to be crucified, his original gesture has endured. The midwife turns to Jake, Pilate's father, and they converse about her naming:

"'It's a man's name.'

'Say it.' 'Pilate.'

'What?'

'Pilate. You wrote down Pilate.'

'Like a riverboat pilot?'

'No, not like no riverboat pilot. Like a Christ-killing Pilate. You can't get much worse than that for a name. And a baby girl at that.'

'That's where my finger went down at'" (19).

Her personality does not, at all, reflect that of the biblical character. Adra Nittle continues in her Christian analysis, “Pilate might share a name with the Roman official who ordered Jesus’s crucifixion (her illiterate father liked how the name looked), but her good works and supernatural gifts make it clear that the Holy Spirit dwells within her” (118). Unlike the historical Pilate, she proves to be an apt leader and guide. She does not shirk responsibility for the wellbeing of others. Pilate must overcome the dreadful meaning of her family name. The surname *Dead* means an absolute ending or nonexistence. Only by overcoming the totality of these names will Pilate be freed from her captivity.

The name Milkman derives from the observations of Freddie the janitor who jokingly suggests it as a nickname for the child. When Ruth sees Freddie’s face at the window, she "jumped up as quickly as she could and covered her breast, dropping her son on the floor and confirming for him what he had begun to suspect—that these afternoons were strange and wrong" (14). Macon Dead III, from then on known as Milkman, detests the nickname and its connotations. He blames his mother for his misfortunes. His blaming transfers to his negative treatment of women. "So Ruth kept close to home and had no afternoon guests for the better part of two months, to keep from hearing that her son had been rechristened with a name he was never able to shake and that did nothing to improve either one's relationship with his father" (15).

Milkman eventually became distant and indifferent to other members of his family, just as his father had done before him, though he stands up to his abusive father and assaults him.

Pilate is extranormal in many ways. First, her physical abnormalities distinguish her from her peers. She wears a homemade earring in her left ear, dresses shabbily, and makes bootleg wine and whisky. She also differs from the norm in possessing no navel, which is a supernatural aspect of her physiology. Macon views his sister Pilate as being abnormal in more than just a physical manner. He expresses distaste for her, even to the point of forbidding Milkman to consort with her. Macon recalls the time when Pilate ceremoniously preserved her name in the piece of paper, which was pressed within the pages of a Bible. It stayed there until "the baby girl turned twelve and took it out, folded it up into a tiny knot and put it in a little brass box, and strung the entire contraption through her left earlobe. Fluky about her own name at twelve, how much more fluky she'd become since then Macon could only guess" (19). Pilate's earring contains her name written on a parchment, secured within a tiny box, and placed within her left earlobe to preserve it as a constant reminder of her heritage and ancestry. Such a peculiar action openly characterizes her unrest. Macon scolds Pilate when he comments, "'Why can't you dress like a woman?' He was standing by the stove. 'What's that sailor's cap doing on your head? Don't you have stockings? What are you trying to make me look like in this town?'" (20). Macon Dead's desire for social status and control contrasts with Pilate's differing standards. Comparatively poor, she seems to wear whatever is available. She lives in a primitive manner, caring little for possessions. Macon decides that Pilate is a bad influence, and "finally he had told her not to come again until she could show some respect for herself. Could get a real job instead of running a wine house" (20). Pilate derives a moderate income from making blackberry wine, which secures her financial independence but provides little more. "She had no electricity

because she would not pay for the service. Nor for gas. At night she and her daughter lit the house with candles and kerosene lamps; they warmed themselves and cooked with wood and coal, pumped kitchen water into a dry sink through a pipeline from a well" (27). Pilate remains aloof from mainstream society, using her knowledge of natural resources to meet her needs. She deliberately removes herself from most social norms. "It was the absence of a navel that convinced people that she had not come into this world through normal channels; had never lain, floated, or grown in some warm and liquid place connected by a tissue-thin tube to a reliable source of human nourishment" (27-8). Pilate's lack of that human physical attribute marks her as being a product of the supernatural.

She distinguishes herself as supernatural especially by not being birthed in a normal way. In "Song of Solomon: To Ride the Air," Dorothy H. Lee speculates about Pilate that "her lack of a navel reinforces this sense of divinity, testifying to her miraculous birth and suggesting even the original earth mother. Her 'pebble voice' seeming to rise from the earth itself, she offers knowledge (apples) and rebirth (eggs); and she volunteers to be a literal pilot for Milkman" (65). Milkman's aunt, so estranged and different from her status-seeking brother, pivots upon extranormal concepts. Lee alludes to Pilate's extranormal origins above when she appropriates "divinity," and to the realm of the natural when she likens her to "the original earth-mother" possessed of a "pebble voice." She also recognizes Pilate as a compass for the others.

Milkman's first meeting with Pilate is, for him, a lifechanging event. This meeting changes his preconceptions. He now views Pilate as a guide. Milkman and Guitar "found her on the steps sitting wide-legged in a long-sleeved, long-skirted black dress. Her hair was wrapped in black, too, and from a distance, all they could really see beneath her face was the bright orange that she was peeling" (36). Pilate's appearance, smacking of a destitute vagabond, is to Milkman

an irresistible attraction. He sees in her a rejection of the external appearances his father abides by. He arrives with his close friend Guitar, and “as they came closer and saw the brass box dangling from her ear, Milkman knew that what with the earring, the orange, and the angled black cloth, nothing – not the wisdom of his father nor the caution of the world—could keep him from her” (36). Milkman's attraction to Pilate is more than just physical. She enchants him. He sees her as possessing unfathomable knowledge that he cannot do without. He also views Pilate as a visionary who can aid him along his journey. He becomes fatefully attracted to her through his own observations and not due to any supernatural events. Pilate's demeanor is based on pieces of the natural world: “her voice made Milkman think of pebbles. Little round pebbles that bumped up against each other. Maybe she was hoarse, or maybe it was the way she said her words, with both a drawl and a clip. The piny-winy smell was narcotic” (40). Milkman had previously viewed women as weak and easily manipulated, but his consideration of Pilate's voice alone is symbolic of a nature-based power, always in motion and paradoxically incapable of impoverishment. She radiates commanding and authoritative confidence. Milkman's assumptions are of his own making and are in no way initiated by Pilate, though her aura of authority transfixes him. Dorothy Lee observes, "Milkman's entry into the dark, cold interior of Pilate's house suggested his passage of The Magic Threshold, which is the ‘transit into a sphere of rebirth’” (68). Once Milkman steps into the sphere of Pilate's influence, he becomes pliable and susceptible to her powers. After all, she had been instrumental in his very conception in his mother’s womb by means of the aphrodisiac. Pilate becomes an unofficial spiritual guide for his transformation, his maturation, and the beginning of his search for his heritage.

While the boys intently listen, Pilate recounts her father's death. "But Papa came back one day. We didn't know it was him at first, cause we both saw him blowed five feet into the air"

(40). Though the boys don't understand this first rendering of events, Pilate herself is aware of its significance. This story marks the moment when she became aware of supernatural forces and their consequences. “The boys watched, afraid to say anything lest they ruin the next part of her story, and afraid to remain silent lest she not go on with its telling. ‘Shaking like leaves,’ she murmured, ‘just like leaves.’ Suddenly she lifted her head and made a sound like a hoot owl. ‘Ooo! Here I come!’” (43). Pilate uncannily senses her daughter and granddaughter approaching. Telling about her father, Pilate becomes aware that she was an integral part of it. She realizes she possesses powers beyond her own knowledge to the point of premonition. Such aptitudes set Pilate apart from others. She uses her uniquely earth-based powers only with positive and helpful intent. She resists the temptation to misuse her great capacities.

In the office where he has begun to manage his father’s real-estate interests, Milkman listens as Freddie the janitor recounts the events of his mother's death. In so doing, Freddie discloses his belief in ghosts:

“‘It was on account of the way she died that nobody would take me.’

‘How’d she die?’

‘Ghosts.’

‘Ghosts?’

‘You don’t believe in ghosts?’

‘Well’ – Milkman smiled – 'I’m willing to, I guess.’

‘You better believe, boy. They’re here’” (109).

Freddie's belief in the supernatural, the existence of specters, sparks the interest of Milkman. He is already aware of Pilate's revelation concerning her own father's death. Freddie continues to emphasize his parents’ deaths. “My mama fell down on the ground in labor pain right then and

there. When I was born, and they showed me to her, she screamed and passed out. Never did come to. My father died two months before I was born, and they couldn't get none of my people and nobody else to take a baby brought here by a white bull'" (110). Freddie's belief in the supernatural derives from the tale of his mother's encounter with a woman who turned into a white bull before her eyes. Milkman laughs in disbelief, ready to dismiss the story as just an old man's tale. "'Okay,' Freddie said, and threw up his hands. 'Okay, laugh on. But they's a lot of strange things you don't know nothin about, boy. You'll learn. Lot of strange things. Strange stuff goin on right in this here town'" (110). Freddie's ghost stories make Milkman more credulous. He knows that if Pilate had heard such accounts, she might immediately attest their authenticity.

Milkman follows Ruth, who is visiting her father's grave, prompting a rare conversation between the two. "'Pilate. Old, crazy, sweet Pilate," Ruth proclaims. "Your father and I hadn't had physical relations since my father died when Lena and Corinthians were just toddlers. We had a terrible quarrel. He threatened to kill me, I threatened to go to the police about what he had done to my father" (125). Ruth recounts to Milkman the events of her elderly father's death and Macon's withholding of the old man's medication. Ruth remained in her adverse marriage with Macon until Pilate's intervention. "'She gave me funny things to do. And some greenish-gray grassy-looking stuff to put in his food.' Ruth laughed. 'I felt like a doctor, like a chemist doing some big important scientific experiment. It worked too. Macon came to me for four days" (125). Pilate utilizes herbs as an alternative medicine. By creating the philter or aphrodisiac for Ruth to administer to Macon, Pilate demonstrates her extranormal practice of herbalism. In so doing, she assumes agency in Milkman's birth and accepts the role of being his life guide. Though Pilate is yet unaware of her true heritage, her medicinal applications are reminiscent of those practiced by Native Americans. In the article, "Medicine among the American Indians," David C. Crockett

analyzes Native medicine and earth-based connections: “Much of the Indian medicine practice is psychosomatic; it is directed at the mind as well as the body of the patient. Traditionally, the tribal medicine man frequently has been considered to have powers beyond that of physical healing” (400). Pilate's use of the philter, and its resulting effects, is reminiscent of a Native American medicine woman who can manipulate behavior through nature. Her potion temporarily heals the love bond between Ruth and Macon.

Morrison’s narrator expands upon the connection between Pilate and Ruth. “Their similarities were profound. Both were vitally interested in Macon Dead’s son, and both had close and supportive posthumous communication with their fathers” (139). Pilate assumes that the spirit of her father still lingers in her presence. She views his various appearances to her as the sharing of a spiritual and supernatural relationship. Ruth’s memory of her father helps her to cope with the overbearing nature of her husband. “Ruth wiped her glasses clean, so she could see the street signs as they passed (‘Eat cherries,’ Pilate had told her ‘and you won’t have to wear them little windows over your eyes’”) (134). Pilate's advice underscores her penchant for healing and the use of natural medications. She recommends the consumption of cherries to heal bad vision naturally.

During years before, Pilate had studied under a root worker, an herbalist involved in the study of plant-based medicine. "But they was good people and treated me fine. I stayed with them for three years, I believe, and the main reason I stayed on was a woman there I took to. A root worker. She taught me a lot and kept me from missin my own family, Macon and Papa. I didn’t have a thought in my head of ever leavin them, but I did. I had to" (142). Pilate's time as an apprentice, mentioned in passing, taught her many techniques in identifying plant-based remedies which are beneficial to humankind, known in academic circles as ethnobotany. Like

Pilate does, a Native American medicine woman relies upon the healing powers and beneficial attributes of naturally produced medicines.

Milkman returns to Pilate's house, against his father's wishes, and learns more about her past. "She also managed to get pregnant, and to the great consternation of the island women, who were convinced their menfolk were the most desirable on earth—which accounted for so much intermarrying among them—Pilate refused to marry the man, who was eager to take her for his wife" (147). Pilate's refusal to marry adds to the mysteries of her being. She does what is contrary rather than what is expected. Though the women on the Virginia island seem enthralled by their male counterparts, Pilate is unmoved. "And true to the palm oil that flowed in her veins, she never had a visitor to whom she did not offer food before one word of conversation—business or social – began. She laughed but never smiled and in 1963, when she was sixty-eight years old, she had not shed a tear since Circe had brought her cherry jam for breakfast" (149). Though others think her odd, Pilate views herself as naturally communing with nature. Her preference in all things is for those that are natural in origin. In the article, "'Apple Pie' Ideology and the Politics of Appetite in the Novels of Toni Morrison," Emma Parker discusses the significance of food in *Song of Solomon*. Parker writes, "Pilate finds the physical restraint unbearable, but her patience snaps the day that Circe brings them cherry jam. She cannot bear the too sweet foods that whites eat and longs for natural cherries" (636). Pilate's dissatisfaction with the presentation of cherry jam represents her aversion to being assimilated into white culture. The cherries signify the natural state of being, which she is inherently drawn to. Though she is unaware of her Native American heritage, she is uncannily aware of the extranormal implications of that heritage. Parker continues, "In addition, Pilate uses food as a means of subverting social law. Her free spirit and disregard for convention are reflected in the fact that mealtimes in her

house have no structure or timetable. The woman who always has something in her mouth refuses to swallow patriarchal bourgeois rules" (636). Pilate prefers a self-governing environment, one that does not restrict her to a society that she exists outside of. Her rules are simple. She lives her life renewed each day. She treats others with the respect that they deserve and is always accommodating.

Pilate's belief system, and her tendency to use natural resources to affect an outcome, make her “a natural healer,” Morrison wrote, “and among quarreling drunks and fighting women she could hold her own, and sometimes mediated a peace that lasted a good bit longer than it should have because it was administered by someone not like them” (150). Pilate, after long absence as a young woman, moves to her brother’s town, intending to mend relations. He is cold to her. “Pilate would have moved on immediately except for her brother’s wife, who was dying of lovelessness then and seemed to be dying of it now as she sat at the table across from her sister-in-law listening to her life story” (151). Pilate's first encounter with Ruth is profound. She sees her as a soul in need, which Pilate's selfless helpfulness cannot ignore. She administers her natural knowledge to aid Ruth in confronting her dilemma and to relieve the tensions between her and her husband. When Pilate’s daughter, Reba, is threatened by a man, Pilate does not hesitate to put him in a chokehold and dip a knife into his sternum. “We do the best we can, but we ain’t got the strength you men got. That’s why it makes us so sad if a grown man start beating up on one of us. You know what I mean? I’d hate to pull this knife out and have you try some other time to act mean to my little girl” (94). Pilate acknowledges the superior strength of men but shows resolute conviction by wielding her weapon. Since she dwells outside of society, she has no fear of consequences or reprisals. Her extranormal condition gives her great strength.

Circe is introduced within the context of Pilate's father's death. Pilate and Macon journey as children to the Butler mansion where Circe resides. They stay for several days. "Bewildered and grieving, they went to the house of the closest person they knew: Circe, the midwife who had delivered them both and who was there when their mother died and when Pilate was named. She worked in a large house – a mansion – outside Danville, for a family of what was then called gentlemen farmers" (166). Those farmers are also slaveholders responsible, directly or indirectly, for the death of Pilate and Macon’s father. Circe at first appears to be a minor character. However, she assumes the role of guardian to Pilate and Macon, secreting them in one of the mansion’s rooms and sneaking food to them. She also aids Pilate with the earring. "Pilate rubbed her ear until it was numb, burned the end of the wire, and punched it through her earlobe. Macon fastened the wire ends into a knot, but the lobe was swollen and running pus. At Circe's instruction, she put cobwebs on it to draw the pus out and stop the bleeding" (167). Circe reveals her knowledge of natural healing processes that complement and inform Pilate’s. Spider webs are alleged to have natural antiseptic and antifungal properties, besides being rich in vitamin K.

Pilate and Macon leave the mansion and have a supernatural encounter. "On the third day they woke to find a man that looked just like their father sitting on a stump not fifty yards away. He was not looking at them; he was just sitting there. They would have called out to him or run toward him except he was staring right past them" (168). The apparition of the man sitting on the stump, they both recognize as their father's ghost. Later, they again encounter the apparition standing in the mouth of a cave. His appearance prompts them to follow. Within the cave they encounter an old white man, whom Macon stabs and kills in a fit of confusion. The apparition, now with her father’s own face, appears before them in the cave. "'It is Papa!’ said Pilate. And as if in answer to her recognition, he took a deep breath, rolled his eyes back, and whispered, 'Sing.

Sing,' in a hollow voice before he melted away again. Pilate darted around the cave calling him, looking for him, while Macon piled the sacks of gold into the tarpaulin" (170-1). While Macon's attention is on the dead man's gold sacks, Pilate experiences a revelation. She envisions communication with her father.

Morrison and Pilate shared that experience. In the Foreword to *Song of Solomon*, Morrison discusses her father as a spiritual guide. “I think it was because I felt closer to him than to myself that, after his death, I deliberately sought his advice for writing the novel that continued to elude me” (xii). Indeed, Morrison’s Foreword to the novel underscores the potent presence of her father in the genesis of the book. In *Toni Morrison: A Biography*, Stephanie Li, in “Early Literary Career,” discusses Pilate’s similarity to the author. “She cites the conversations she had with him in her head as critical to her growing understanding of how men function in the world. Like Pilate, who converses with her dead father and continues to be guided by his life, Morrison drew upon her close relationship with her father to create this soaring novel” (53). Her likeness to her character Pilate is reflective of her relationships interwoven with her interest in the supernatural. Morrison, herself, communicated with her dead father and gained comfort and useful guidance from him.

Macon's obsession with his discovery in the cave foreshadows his greed. Much later he sends Milkman to retrieve what he believes is the bag of gold hanging from the ceiling in Pilate's house. After doing so, Milkman and Guitar are arrested. The bag reveals not gold, but bones. In amazement, Guitar and Milkman converse as to how Pilate knew of their arrest and the location of their incarceration:

"'Cops must have told her everything when he picked her up and brought her to the station.'

'Uh uh. They don't do that.'

'Then how did she know?'

'Who knows what Pilate knows?' Milkman shook his head.

'Only The Shadow knows'" (205-6).

This conversation between Milkman and Guitar expresses their belief in the extranormal powers of Pilate. The “Shadow” alludes to the fictional character, first presented in a dramatic radio series, that hides within the shadows and solves crime through deduction. Pilate seems to have the powers to foresee events to come.

To secure their release from jail, Pilate shapeshifts into an old and frail woman, complete with vocal pitch, height, and mannerisms. Milkman is amazed at the sight. “As she stood there in the receiving room of the jail, she didn’t even come up to the sergeant’s shoulder—and the sergeant’s head barely reached Milkman’s own chin. But Pilate was as tall as he was” (206). Milkman's confusion over seeing an old woman shorter and much older than Pilate is the most extranormal event in the novel to display her powers. It affirms her as a character in possession of supernatural abilities. She is uncannily aware of the story that both Milkman and Guitar had told to the police. "When she whined to the policeman, verifying Milkman's and Guitar's lie that they had ripped off the sack as a joke on an old lady, she had to look up at him. And her hands were shaking as she described how she didn't know the sack was gone until the officer woke her up." Pilate's acknowledgment of the absurd story that both Milkman and Guitar attest to is amazing, in that she seemed to know even the minor details with no evidence of any naturally occurring foreknowledge. Pilate’s precognition and ultimate actions concerning the events can be attributed, once again, to her uncanny abilities. On the drive home, during conversation, Milkman observes Pilate closely. "And again there was a change. Pilate was tall again. The top

of her head, wrapped in a silk rag, almost touched the roof of the car, as did theirs. And her own voice was back" (207). Significantly, Macon does not notice, or at any rate does not remark on, his sister’s remarkable shifting shape. Although Pilate is unaware till the end that she has Native American blood, her shapeshifting ability appears to be uncannily akin to a skin-walker: an individual who can transmute into another person or an animal.

After Milkman and Guitar are released from jail, Pilate explains her connection with the spirit of her father. She recounts the story of the cave and why she returned. "'I went cause Papa told me to. He kept coming to see me, off and on. Tell me things to do. First he just told me to sing, to keep on singing. ‘Sing,’ he’d whisper. ‘Sing, sing'" (208). At that point Pilate has yet to learn her mother’s name is Sing and that she is perhaps misunderstanding his communication. His prodding her to sing occurs throughout her life, though in differing situations. When Robert Smith, at the beginning of the novel, leaped from the Mercy Hospital roof, Pilate was either spiritually prodded or emotionally moved, causing her to sing. Singing helps relieve the dead of burdens and summons the name of her mother. Pilate begins to speak of the bag of bones. In conversing with her father's spirit, she begins to assume responsibility for the grievous event. "He meant that if you take a life, then you own it. You responsible for it. You can't get rid of nobody by killing them. They still there, and they yours now. So I had to go back for it. And I did find the cave. And there he was" (208). Pilate had taken the bones of the dead man back to her house and hung them from the ceiling as reverent ownership of the murder that Macon had committed. In many indigenous cultures, the bones of the dead become sacred objects to be treasured. They assume the power to communicate with unearthly worlds.

Milkman goes to see Circe before returning to the cave to find the sacks of gold, and he converses with the Reverend Cooper, who reveals his knowledge of Circe:

"'Sorry I didn't come out here long time ago,' Milkman says. 'I would have liked to meet her. She must have been a hundred years old when she died.'

'Older. Was a hundred when I was a boy.'

'Is the farm nearby?' Milkman appeared mildly interested" (233).

People are confused about the age of Circe because it seems as if she was always there. Circe's alluring power is based upon Cooper's observations of her countenance. She appears to be old but speaks with a young voice. Milkman tries to hide his interest but considers the possibility that Circe is immortal. He begins to equate the supernatural with what he has been told of Circe and finds himself astonished and eager to meet her, as if he senses she is destined to be a second spirit guide to complement Pilate on his life journey to find his roots.

Milkman's anticipation turns to apprehension or fear when he first meets Circe. In her presence he senses a dreadful odor of decay. "He leaned in. The smell prevented him from seeing anything more than the absence of light did. A hairy animal smell, ripe, rife, suffocating. He coughed and looked for somewhere to spit, for the odor was in his mouth, coating his teeth and tongue. He pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket, held it over his nose, backed away from the open door" (239). The odor in the room, disgustingly pungent, soon began to change. "Quite suddenly, in its place was a sweet spicy perfume. Like ginger root—pleasant, clean, seductive. Surprised and enchanted, he retraced his steps and went inside" (239). The change in the room mirrors Circe herself. She appears old, beyond years, but has the voice of a young woman. Her actual age is a mystery. She seems to have lived entire lifetimes already. "But Circe is dead. This woman is alive. That was as far as he got because although the woman was talking to him, she might in any case still be dead – as a matter of fact, she had to be dead. Not because of the wrinkles, and the face so old it could not be alive, but because out of the toothless mouth came

the strong, mellifluent voice of a twenty-year-old girl” (240). Milkman's observations of Circe's appearance and actions put her completely out of step with human normality. She is supernatural, appearing to reside between a state of life and death. A corporeal representation of a spirit, she intends never to step beyond the doors of the mansion but to haunt it till it crumbles.

Circe mistakes Milkman for his father, Macon. She addresses him: "'I knew one day you would come back. Well, that's not entirely true. Some days I doubted it and some days I didn't think about it at all. But you see, I was right. You did come'" (240). Circe soon recognizes her mistake as Milkman enters the mansion. Behind Circe is a pack of Weimaraner dogs. “He looked down and there, surrounding him, was a pack of golden-eyed dogs, each of which had the intelligent child’s eyes he had seen from the window” (240). These canines seem to have been human and thus conjure skinwalkers. It is as if they are transformed. Human-supernatural boundaries again prove porous. Homer's *Odyssey* contains the narrative where humans are transformed into swine by the sorceress Circe. In "Signifying Circe in Toni Morrison's 'Song of Solomon,'" Judith Fletcher expands upon the significance of Homer's Circe in relation to Morrison's Circe: "Morrison's Circe is by no means simply a carbon copy of Homer's, but she does invite the reader to recall the traditional heroic saga from which she seems to be imported. It is by examining how she both signifies that narrative tradition and operates as an agent of its rupture that we understand the full implications of her presence and power" (408). Morrison’s Circe ruptures the Dead family history. The mysterious nature of Circe's surroundings, and their questionable origins, adds to her importance as a character displaying inexplicable and supernatural traits. Milkman questions Circe about Pilate's mother, his grandmother:

"'Some friend of Reverend Cooper said she looked white. My grandmother. Was she?'

'No. Mixed. Indian mostly. A good-looking woman, but fierce, for the young woman I knew her as. Crazy about her husband, too. Overcrazy'" (243).

Circe's description of his grandmother's ancestry and behavior reveals much about Pilate's own penchant towards the use of natural resources and beliefs that stem from indigenous animism. Since her heritage has yet to be revealed, readers may not yet equate her nature-based knowledge and extranormal practices to her root-worker apprenticeship. Circe also reveals the true name of Pilate's mother as Sing, Singing Bird, a Native American name. Circe's description of Sing also recalls Hagar's "overcrazy" behavior toward Milkman, behavior that almost leads to murder.

Circe expresses her anger regarding the Butlers, the original owners. She explains why the mansion is in such a deteriorated state. "'They loved it. Stole for it, lied for it, killed for it. But I'm the only one left. Me and the dogs. And I will never clean it again. Never. Nothing. Not a speck of dust, not a grain of dirt, will I move. Everything in this world they lived for will crumble and rot'" (247). Circe witnessed all the events within the mansion for more than a normal lifetime. She was present when the grounds were a plantation and had many slaves. She was aware of the murder of Macon and Pilate's father, Jake, by the Butlers. An avenging spirit, Circe is adamant that she will watch the mansion rot. "'All in pieces. Something gnawed through the cords. Ha! And I want to see it all go, make sure it does go, and that nobody fixes it up. I brought the dogs in to make sure. They keep strangers out too. Folks tried to get in here to steal things after she died. I set the dogs on them"' (247). Only a supernatural being, like herself, can begin to undo the legacy of slavery. Circe's determination to be present when the mansion crumbles and disappears is the ultimate symbol of her long-awaited freedom. Her refusal to participate in any upkeep of the house adds to her adamancy. She does not wish to be a

participant but rather an observer to its end. Those who do not know Circe personally, but only hear gossip, would see her as a witch in the decaying house casting her spells upon others.

After Milkman leaves Circe, he continues his quest for heritage in his ancestral home of Shalimar, Virginia. During his search, Milkman learns more about his grandmother, great-grandmother, and their ancestry. He happens upon Vernell, who is a hunter, and they converse about Sing:

"'This Sing girl was light-skinned, with straight black hair.'

'That's her!' Milkman said. 'She was mixed or Indian, one.'

Vernell nodded. 'Indian. One of old Heddy's children. Heddy was all right, but she didn't like her girl playin with coloreds'" (284).

Once Milkman has linked this new knowledge to his own heritage, he understands Pilate better. Having promoted them to co-protagonists, Morrison must now unravel their shared genealogy. Though Macon had always coexisted with the settler-colonialist ideology and even adopted it, Pilate seeks a more natural existence that is less complicated, less predatory, and more satisfying. Unlike Macon, who is infatuated with wealth and status, Pilate uses nature to serve her own wellbeing. Meanwhile Milkman must search to find a happy medium between the two.

` Milkman is eventually introduced to Sweet, who repairs his tainted regard for women. She cares for him in a manner that has before now eluded him. "Sweet brought him soap and a boar's-bristle brush and knelt to bathe him. What she did for his sore feet, his cut face, his back, his neck, his thighs, and the palms of his hands was so delicious he couldn't imagine that the lovemaking to follow would be anything but anticlimactic" (285). He realizes that not all his experiences with and biases towards women reflect the truth. He continues to be astonished by the reciprocal care the two extend toward one another. "He made up the bed. She gave him

gumbo to eat. He washed the dishes. She washed his clothes and hung them out to dry. He scoured her tub. She ironed his shirt and pants. He gave her fifty dollars. She kissed his mouth" (285). The very actions taking place are mutually beneficial, freeing him from his genetic captivity and allowing him to experience a healthy human condition.

Further into the novel, Pilate grieves over the death of her granddaughter, Hagar. She listens intensely as the minister delivers his "'Naked came ye into this life and naked shall ye depart' sermon, which he had always believed suitable for the death of a young woman" (316). The minister's sermon is generic. He relates birth and death as isolated events. He does not acknowledge the value of the life that resides between them. Pilate bursts into the room and shouts, "'Mercy?' Now she was asking a question. 'Mercy?' It was not enough. The word needed a bottom, a frame. She straightened up, held her head high, and transformed the plea into a note. In a clear bluebell voice she sang it out—the one word held so long it became a sentence" (316). Pilate's instinct is to sing to heal stressful situations. Her father's spirit had told her to do so. So would her mother's name. Now, in her granddaughter's absence, Pilate has again done the unexpected. Nadra Nittle discusses the power of Pilate's singing: "Pilate's enchanting singing voice, visitations from the dead, and rejection of materialism highlight what a force she is spiritually, but her Christian attributes also include her kindness to others" (119). Pilate sings without hesitation or forethought, as she does in other scenes. This spontaneous act is executed as reverence for the dead. "They stopped at the same time in a high silence. Pilate reached out her hand and placed three fingers on the edge of the coffin. Now she addressed her words to the woman bordered in gray satin who lay before her. Softly, privately, she sang to Hagar the very same reassurance she had promised her when she was a little girl" (318). Pilate's singing to

Hagar strengthens the proof that her vocal attribute has extranormal and spiritual power. Pilate's singing derives from Native American funerary practices to help a wayward spirit on its way.

After Hagar's funeral, which Milkman does not attend, he remembers the instance of the ghost and questions the validity of his prior knowledge of Pilate. "And why did the ghost tell Pilate to sing? Milkman chuckled to himself. That wasn't what he was telling her at all; maybe the ghost was just repeating his wife's name, Sing, and Pilate didn't know it because she never knew her mother's name" (294). What Macon had told Milkman of the experience of the old white man and the ghost was puzzling. Milkman connects the tale of the ghost to his new information. He has learned that his grandmother's real name was Sing, as in Singing Bird, but something was still suspicious about the actions of Pilate and her singing. "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). Milkman now believes ghosts are real. He also believes that Pilate possesses the ability to communicate with the dead. Suspicions confirmed, Milkman wonders what other surprises are in store. "Nothing could be taken for granted. Women who loved you tried to cut your throat, while women who didn't even know your name scrubbed your back. Witches could sound like Katherine Hepburn and your best friend try to strangle you" (332). Milkman is in transition, unsure whom to trust and what to believe. However, he still feels that Pilate and Circe remain his best hope to be free and whole, though he does not understand the extent of their abilities and the role they play in his future.

When Milkman returns to Pilate's home, he is met with aggression and subdued in his behavior. "Pilate would put him someplace near something that remained of the life he had taken, so he could have it. She would abide by this commandment from her father herself, and

make him do it too. 'You just can’t fly on off and leave a body'" (332). Pilate believes that Hagar's death would have been avoidable. Hagar had been obsessed with Milkman and sought to restore their relationship, causing her to go out in the rain and become ill. Pilate's assumption is that the responsibility for Hagar's action lies squarely upon the shoulders of Milkman.

After Milkman emerges from his confinement, he sits with Pilate and tells her the real story of the cave and why the bones were there. “'Pilate, your father’s body floated up out of the grave you all dug for him. One month later it floated up. The Butlers, somebody, put his body in the cave. Wolves didn’t drag the white man to the front of the cave and prop him on a rock. That was your father you found. You’ve been carrying your father’s bones—all this time'” (333). Pilate recognizes the bag of bones that once hung from her ceiling held significance beyond what she could have imagined. Her keeping and hanging the bag within sight and reach represents the sense of value and reverence for lost family members. "Milkman did not speak; he watched her long fingers travel up her dress, to rest like the wing of a starling on her face. “I’ve been carryin Papa?” Pilate moved toward Milkman, stopped and looked at him for a while" (333). Pilate is distressed. She knows that she had spoken to her father's spirit on many occasions, but she had no inkling that the bones she had held so close were her father’s. Pilate had now begun to piece together the facts of her heritage with her extraordinary abilities.

Milkman and Pilate journey to Shalimar, Virginia, to carry the bag of bones to their final resting place. "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. Pilate laid the bones carefully into the small grave. Milkman heaped dirt over them and packed it down with the back of his shovel" (335). The spicy ginger connects Pilate and Circe. The father's spirit seemed to sigh in relief, the chill wind representing his departure. "Pilate

shook her head. She reached up and yanked her earring from her ear, splitting the lobe. Then she made a little hole with her fingers and placed in it Sing's snuffbox with the single word Jake ever wrote" (335). Pilate rips the earring from her ear in a gesture of self-sacrifice, placing it within the vicinity of the grave. Pilate is no longer slave to her naming. She is free to guide her life in whichever direction she pleases and to acknowledge the full extent of her powers.

Immediately thereafter, Milkman hears a shot and Pilate falls. The shot comes from Guitar, still suspicious that the bones are gold. As she is dying, Milkman confirms his love for her.

“'Pilate? You okay?' He couldn't make out her eyes. His hand under her head was sweating like a fountain. 'Pilate?'

She sighed. 'Watch Reba for me.' And then, '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'" (336).

Though dying, Pilate exhibits her unshakable ability to acknowledge the importance of others and put them first. In reverence to Pilate's urgent request, Milkman begins to sing. "'Sing,' she said. 'Sing a little somethin for me.' Milkman knew no songs, and had no singing voice that anybody would want to hear, but he couldn't ignore the urgency in her voice. Speaking the words without the least bit of a tune, he sang for the lady" (336). Singing had always been part of Pilate's tribute to significant events. Now that Milkman had done the same for her, she was ready to depart. Through the act of singing, Milkman affirms the value of the life of his aunt. By honoring such a request, he is perpetuating an intergenerational ritual. Stephanie Li continues her analysis “Pilate represents a key ancestral figure in the text. As a healer and communicator with the dead, she embodies what Morrison terms ‘discredited forms of knowledge.’ Despite the negative associations with her name, she dies wishing that she could have known more people”

(51). Milkman becomes what Pilate was and all that he ever wished to be. He has arguably assumed a mantle of a North American tribal shaman and will thereafter serve others as a guide.

At the point of Pilate's death, extranormal events multiply. Milkman reflected, "Now he knew why he loved her so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly. 'There must be another one like you,' he whispered to her. 'There’s got to be at least one more woman like you'” (336). Milkman places Pilate above all others, recognizing that she could do what no other could. He feels that he has lost a great friend and guide and wishes that there could be just one more of her stature to assist him. Milkman faces Guitar and confronts him fiercely. "For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it" (337). Milkman's last thought in the novel affirms the entire life of Pilate and repudiates Guitar’s murderous hatred. To Milkman, surrendering didn't mean giving up. It just meant learning to endure with control.

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Pilate is a guide and spiritual influence for the nominal protagonist Milkman. Throughout his journey, Milkman realizes the crucial role that Pilate plays in his life. He comes to believe that his Native American blood bestows upon him the responsibility for a heritage. He comes to believe in the extranormal and the practice of supernatural magic. Pilate’s death serves as a transition. He believes that he can readily communicate with her and live by her guidance as he did before. Milkman has essentially assumed the role that Pilate provided. Nittle concludes that Pilate is essential to the plot and writes, “When the spirit of Pilate’s father visits her and not her brother, the novel establishes that she is ‘the chosen one’ in her family. She will play a crucial role in presenting her family history and ensuring that members of the next generation – namely Milkman – pass on this information” (119). Pilate’s journey is to negate the past and provide a new order for Milkman to inherit. Milkman’s growth and change are an

enduring and proper end to the novel. If there were a sequel to Morrison's novel, Milkman would be served better to engage himself in the workings of Native American cultures, find his origins, and become more aware of his extranormal abilities. This would be the ultimate culmination of the legacy of Pilate.

Toni Morrison's precursor novel *Song of Solomon* anticipates her later *Beloved*, which won her the Pulitzer Prize. In this earlier novel, Morrison introduces concepts and beliefs that her own heritage and family provided. The ghost stories that she was told as a child proved useful and essential to the success of her works. Her own father served her as a guide like Pilate's father did. Because of its extension to the extranormal and supernatural, *Song of Solomon* presages the concepts presented in *Beloved*. *Song of Solomon* is essential because it begins the process of seeking heritage and enlightenment while finding one's place in the world.

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