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Toni Morrison: Womanist in What Light, by What Right (or Left)?

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One of Toni Morrison’s “womanist” texts, *Song of Solomon*, published in 1977, ironically employs both traditional androcentric Western and African monomyths, as in describing Milkman Dead’s journey to spiritual enlightenment and ancestral discovery (Mori 21). However, though Morrison does not directly focus on the narratives of the women in her novel, Ryna and Hagar, their stories emerge, despite their suppression by a white supremacist, misogynistic narrative that attempts to define transcendence and beauty. The irrevocable damage inflicted upon Ryna and Hagar results from the interlocking systems of domination, sexism and racism. Although Milkman hears both their stories, propelling him into a self- and social critique of androcentric attitudes, Morrison still reveals these tales through other women. As bell hooks writes, “once this thinking is unlearned, it [is] possible for black males to break with patriarchal thinking challeng[ing] them to receive a redemptive vision of freedom” (hooks 75). Thus, Milkman works towards his own transcendence in recognizing the dangers of a phallogocentric narrative. This lack of direct voice disallows Ryna and Hagar’s full realization of self, or full resistance to the master narrative. Both Ryna and Hagar are accused by Susan Byrd, directly and indirectly, of loving the men in their lives too obsessively, and of being too dependant on them—Solomon for Ryna and Milkman for Hagar. Thus, Morrison critiques these two women, in addition to Milkman and Solomon, for their submission to a system of patriarchy. Yet, at the same time, she finds hope in the two women who relay stories to Milkman. Susan Byrd nurtures black female oracy in her community while Pilate lives independently, free of an employer and municipal water bills; they allow Milkman to work together “in collective solidarity with black women who are active in progressive movements for black self-determination,” as black feminist theorist bell hooks advocates to black males (hooks 95).

Though Milkman appears to be the protagonist of *Song of Solomon*, he actually serves as a male vehicle for women’s voices and suppressed stories, such as those of Ryna and Hagar. Morrison uses Milkman for her own purposes; as he learns, so do the readers. Ryna and Hagar,

supposedly only minor female characters, serve as the primary examples by which Milkman becomes educated about the oppression and disfigurement of women. As Morrison herself so aptly states, she chose Milkman, a male protagonist, not because he was a particularly heroic or traditional character, but because, ““he had more to learn than a woman would have”” (Erickson 52). By refusing to entirely indict the males in her novel, especially the protagonist Milkman, while still exposing the dangers of a phallogentric text, Morrison does not emphasize sexism over racism. Michael Awkward criticizes Morrison’s choice of a male protagonist as a continuation of the traditional African myth as well as the Western mono-myth, challenging her to break out of the exclusionary bounds of such myth structures. Additionally, he points out that choosing a single character like Milkman reproduces Western individualism at the expense of the communalism needed to break from oppression. But Morrison refuses prematurely to give up on the black male, instead suggesting that a better means of examining and challenging the dominant narrative lies in the rejection of the position that varying social struggles exist as “separate axes of power;” they must, instead, be considered at their point of convergence (Butler 433). Similarly, Morrison ventures beyond previous definitions, such as that by Frances Beal, of the term “double jeopardy” (of racism and sexism) to include men among those affected by double jeopardy. Milkman moves from a hopeless, wandering existence to a recognition of the masculine oppression of Ryna and Hagar. His progress in challenging sexism works to create “the life-affirming, redemptive, transformational politics that would counter the rampant despair and sense of hopelessness in black life” (hooks 76).

Such double oppression appears throughout *Song of Solomon*, as with Milkman’s own distant ancestor, Ryna, who proves an unfortunate example of the lionization of the male at the expense of the female. During the second section of *Song of Solomon*, Milkman’s individualistic, masculine quest becomes interrupted by his discussions with Susan Young. In beginning to realize

the injustice done to his great-grandmother, Ryna, Milkman moves towards a higher state of consciousness. Ryna’s story, actually her husband’s story, lauds the achievements of an oppressed African slave who escapes from his bondage through flight. However, Morrison warns of Solomon that, ““whenever characters are cloaked in Western fable, they are in deep trouble, but the African myth is also contaminated,”” noting that his very narrative should signal to readers an inherent fault within both Western and African narrative traditions (Afro-American 51). Ryna and Solomon, then, suffer under such contamination. As the narrative behind Solomon’s story, Ryna must be acknowledged, though it does not erase the significance of her husband’s commendable, though problematic, attempt to gain freedom. bell hooks astutely notes, “one of the major barriers impeding our capacity as black people to collectively challenge sexism and sexist oppression is the continued equation of black liberation with the development of black patriarchy” (hooks 63). Morrison, following a similar educational trajectory to hooks, points beyond Solomon’s individualistic, androcentric approach to freedom to Ryna and her children. She allows for Milkman’s education about Ryna for a gender inclusionary, rather than exclusionary, approach to black liberation. Thus, individual and group transcendence relies upon a full awareness of both the disclosed and concealed narratives, which also recognizes the political and social causes behind concealment and disclosure.

Ryna, as one of the concealed characters, enters the novel accordingly as the nameless wife of Milkman Dead’s great-grandfather, Solomon, who, according to local legend, took to the sky and escaped to Africa, leaving ““the baby and the wife right next to him”” (*Song* 326). Susan Byrd relays such oral stories of the town to Milkman. Ryna suffers the double oppression of being both black and a woman—left to take care of her children under the vicious system of slavery. She staggers under the weight of the consequences inflicted by Solomon’s solitary, self-interested flight, carrying the burden of “educator of the children into the culture” (Wilentz 143). Ryna only garners

mention in the story through her potentially “illegitimate” relations to Solomon as his probable wife. Though still possibly maintaining a degree of independence due to her name, Ryna nevertheless bears the responsibility of her children, without the “legitimate” connection of sharing Solomon’s name with them. She must exert all the effort without the benefit of continuing her family legacy or passing on her story through the children. In contrast, though Solomon gets to attach his name to the children, rendering them his property and furthering his lineage, he holds no accountability for them. By imparting to Milkman the local legend, Susan details Solomon’s flight first, then foregrounds this in his abandonment of ““everybody...wife, everybody, including some twenty-one children”” (*Song* 326). Thus, Ryna gains significance and recognition in her role as a wife, first, and as a mother, second, but not as an individual divorced from these roles. She only maintains her value to the extent that she assumes the role of a woman—in a household, the domestic sphere, with her husband and children.

Susan, in relaying Ryna’s story, acknowledges Ryna’s attempts at garnering recognition of her presence by the Shalimar community. Susan Byrd speaks into Ryna the ability to see, which, even if a passive act, still contains within it a means of observance, thus presence. Ryna, then, can see the history her husband enacts, but she cannot change it or have her story passed on in her own words. Byrd says, “the wife saw him and the children saw him” while working in the fields (*Song* 326). Beyond seeing, though, Susan finally reveals Ryna’s name in conjunction with a specific sound—the eerie wailing that issues from a nearby gulch. From the gulch’s rocks, people often ““hear this funny sound that the wind makes. People say it’s the wife, Solomon’s wife, crying. Her name was Ryna,”” Susan explains to Milkman (*Song* 326). This small town attaches Solomon’s name to a big double-headed rock, though, which they call “Solomon’s Leap,” Whereas Solomon’s landmark announces a victorious symbolic and actual action, Ryna’s simply refers to an open, unhealed trench in the land used for the absorption of others’ wastewater. Ryna does not gain

notoriety from dealing with the painful responsibilities of an abandoned mother caring for an excessive amount of children, but her husband becomes lauded as a hero in her community, lionized for his one leap. Solomon’s abandonment of his family clearly demonstrates that “the patriarchal paradigm as a model for social organization undermines the unity of family and community” (hooks 68). By leaving Ryna behind, Solomon emphasizes his own well being over that of hers. As hooks writes, “family is a significant site of socialization and politicization because it is there that most of us learn our ideas about race, gender, and class” (hooks 72). Therefore, Solomon furthers the master narrative’s privileging of the masculine over the feminine in his own family, with the impact of his decision further rippling out into the community, shaping others’ consciousness. Meanwhile, Ryna’s steady suffering on the ground goes either unnoticed or written off as weak, as when Susan tells Milkman,

‘You don’t hear about women like that anymore, but there used to be more—the kind of woman who couldn’t live without a particular man. And when the man left, they lost their minds, or died or something. Love, I guess. But I always thought it was trying to take care of children by themselves, you know what I mean?’ (*Song* 326-327)

Susan also allows herself to admit another factor in Ryna’s grief: the assumed responsibility of caring for her children single-handedly, which leads Ryna to the point of insanity.

Although Solomon’s abandonment victimizes Ryna to some extent, the community does not recognize his move as such—rather, they place the blame on Ryna, the woman supposedly too weak to handle her own mental faculties without her man. She, a twice-over victim of her sex and race, ironically becomes faulted for this victimhood due to her husband’s alleged triumph over his own racial victimization. However, the defense that sexism exists as an outcome of racism ignores the power allotted to black men based on their masculinity by a “white supremacist capitalist

patriarchy” while at the same time undercutting the significance of sexism by defining the issue, fundamentally, as one always of race. This sexism, even if enacted by black men, is also done so willingly, not just as a part of one’s subconscious. Resultantly, we must hold Solomon accountable for his victimization of Ryna as a woman, while still recognizing his action as part of an overarching system of domination under which he himself falls prey. Ryna’s victories remain glossed over, unremembered even in black female-based oracy, unknown to both Milkman and the reader. No doubt remains, however, concerning the fact of Solomon’s flight—of his pseudo-triumph. His abandonment of Ryna simply proves his flight; she serves as the witness to mentally record his departure, and then relay it to the community. Subsequently, female oracy records his flight in remembered history.

Solomon defines freedom as solely within the realm of masculinity, choosing not to carry his wife with him. Rather, he attempts to take the product of their relationship, the manifestation of his loins’ prowess: the youngest son of his twenty-one children. In the decision to take his son, Solomon acknowledges the leaving behind of the rest of his family; he assumes that his wife will pick up the slack he has thrust upon her. Ryna’s children, regarded as “those flying Africans” by the Shalimar community, deserve such a title of survival and success, even upward departure, in relation to Ryna’s support of them, not for their relation to an esteemed flying father. Such equation of black liberation with black manhood promotes and condones black male sexism, to the detriment of black women and young girls.

According to Susan Willis, “the function of song in all marginal cultures [is] the unwritten text of history and culture,” so that the Sugarman/Solomon children’s song, narrates the past for future generations; this song, however, proves problematic, excluding Ryna’s integral role in the Sugarman story (37). Karla Holloway also examines the relation between oracy and the relating of Solomon’s journey in *Song of Solomon*. She sees a specifically maternal link existing between song

and spirituality. Yet the Sugarman song about Solomon remains flawed and exclusionary, despite its origins in and continuation by black females in the Shalimar community. Spirituality thus begins to shine through in several lights: in the fact that Solomon escaped from slavery, but also in the very holes of his narrative: namely, Ryna. These women, Holloway argues, pass on ancestral knowledge and cultural heritage through such oracy. Therefore, in the gaps of Solomon’s story lie the proof, the historical documentation of the oppressive forces of patriarchy, furthered not only by men, but by women themselves, who left Ryna out of the song.

Ryna, though, deserves recognition for her accomplishments. While Solomon journeyed back to Africa, his homeland, Ryna connected to the African community at hand, staying true to those around her and howling out her grief at night, alone in the gulch created necessarily in relation to the rise of the surrounding hills, named for her husband, Solomon. Ryna, though not directly passing on her story to Milkman in her own voice, communicates her pain enough for her name to be remembered, allowing him to place a name to the damage inflicted by his great-grandfather, Solomon, in leaving his family behind, follows the traditional pattern of a masculine narrative. Ryna educates Milkman in leading him to question his own relations with Hagar, who pays the price of Milkman’s need to propel himself into supposed manhood.

Morrison uses Milkman as the vehicle to uncover Ryna and Hagar’s stories, laying bare the inadequacies of such typical narratives of the past as Solomon’s and even Milkman’s, presumably, before the reader becomes aware of Morrison’s subtle strategy. While three generations of women lie between Ryna and her great, great-granddaughter, Hagar, Susan Byrd sees these two women’s lives as parallel, similarly belonging to their masculine partner and ending in tragedy. Ryna purportedly goes insane, crying endlessly after Solomon leaves her, whereas Hagar’s misery leads her to murderous attempts on her unrequited love, Milkman, eventually concluding in her own suicide. Hagar’s devastation at Milkman’s, and her own, hands serves to educate him about the

effects of the objectifying gaze of males. Ryna’s silenced role and Hagar’s submission to and destruction by white consumerist aesthetics both serve as examples of female characters submerged in, and obliterated by, a master narrative which defines everything from transcendence to beauty. This eventually allows for a self-reflective, apologetic moment in Pilate’s basement, where he accepts his actions towards Hagar as similar to those his great-grandfather, Solomon, enacted upon the wife, Ryna, he also left behind. Milkman, as a male, must accept himself as contributing to a patriarchal system before Morrison can allow the novel to challenge or critique sexism.

Milkman, in the first part of the novel, plays into his socially conditioned role as a misogynistic male. For instance, Milkman’s very first admiration of Hagar comes not from her incredible intelligence, as with Pilate, but rather, from her appearance—as Morrison writes, “Milkman had no need to see her face; he had already fallen in love with her behind” (*Song* 43). Hagar becomes recognized not even for her body, but for a body part—her lack of unification and fragmentation, coupled with objectification, shines through in his assessment of her. Hagar exists for Milkman as a permanent fixture, never a threat or competition to any of his public girlfriends, up until the age of thirty-six, at which point she becomes nervous—about her age and her relationship status with Milkman. At this point, “she placed duty squarely in the middle of their relationship; he tried to think of a way out” (*Song* 98). Milkman will not commit to her as she has to him. However, Hagar accepts his infrequent visits, until he writes her a Christmas card, which, along with an “I love you,” includes the cold words “thank you” and “gratitude” in conjunction with Milkman’s expressed need to move on with his life (*Song* 99). These words send Hagar “spinning into a bright blue place where the air was thin...and where everything was frozen,” with Morrison’s language reflecting the top of a snowy mountain peak, Milkman’s detachment and his harshness symbolically freeze the heart that once burned with desire for him (*Song* 99). Nevertheless, Hagar cannot relinquish her need of him. Milkman thrives off the dependency that he creates in Hagar.

He brags that because “he fucked her, she was driven wild by the absence of his magnificent joint...[thus] it told men and other women that he was one bad dude, that had the power to drive a woman out of her mind, to destroy her” (*Song* 305). bell hooks articulates this conception by writing, “Within the context of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy one can assert manhood simply by demonstrating that one has the power to control and dominate women” (65). Milkman, therefore, emphasizes his manhood—his penis not only to other men, but to women, too, to indicate his control. But before mentioning his dominance over women, Morrison writes of Milkman as “one bad dude,” indicating that proving his masculinity ranks as his first priority. However, the two concepts are inextricably linked, as shown through Morrison’s usage of a comma rather than the word “and” to string them together. However, “bad,” though a popular term interchangeable with “cool,” also contains strongly negative connotations, indicating the necessity of males to damage others to prove their masculinity.

Hagar’s anger at her own damage, though, does not become destructive until she sees Milkman claiming as his own the master narrative’s conception of female beauty—one with the more Anglicized features of straight hair and light-colored eyes. She attempts to murder him after she sees Milkman’s arm around the shoulders of a girl with “silky copper-colored hair...and gray eyes,” at which point her passion becomes directed as if honed into the slim but deadly blade of a “skinning knife” (*Song* 126-127). As LaVon Walther writes “What begins her downward spiral is not merely Milkman’s ending the relationship but rather Hagar’s seeing him with a girl who fulfills the white standards of female beauty” (780). Hagar’s reaction to Milkman’s racially-based oppression of her speaks to the dangers of “linking sexism and racism in ways that condone one as a response to the other...[which] pits black males and females against one another” (hooks 87). Thus, Hagar responds in an unhealthy manner—through violence. She internalizes a self-hatred that

permeates her being, leading her to seek out and murder that which she sees as propelling her hatred—namely, Milkman, and her blackness.

After countless failed attempts, Hagar retreats to her room, hiding out and stroking her hair until one day, looking into a compact she exclaims, ““No wonder he didn’t want me. I look terrible”” (*Song* 312). By looking into the mirror, Hagar becomes an object of the overarching white male gaze, embracing a system of representation, in which what she looks like takes precedence over her selfhood (Wolf). Hagar’s only answer to Milkman’s rejection rests in her appearance, not in her character, thus demonstrating what she values most: beauty. Morrison, in a piece of nonfiction, reminds her audience, “the concept of physical beauty as a *virtue* is one of the dumbest, most pernicious and destructive ideas of the Western world, and we should have nothing to do with it” (*Behind* 89). Hagar, to solve her dilemma with her unsatisfactory appearance, heads off to the department store with Reba’s money, buying everything from nylon slippers—one white, one pink, I. Miller No Color hose, a fawn colored nightgown, peachy powders, milky lotions, and cream, all products that center on the colors of white and a light flesh color, in essence allowing her to cloak herself in an assumed Anglo appearance. As Hagar passes the perfume counter, “lipsticks in soft white hands darted out of their sheaths like the shiny red penises of puppies” (*Song* 315). LaVon Walther writes, “this commercial image defines female beauty as white and pampered...the eroticism of the image clearly connects male sexual desire to this ideal of beauty” (780). Thus, the whiteness Hagar wafts over herself becomes integrally tied to her sexual appeal—signifying the inability of her blackness to achieve the same results.

Despite Hagar’s mass amounts of purchased products as well as her newly smoothed down hair, nature takes its own toll on her material, temporal goods. As Hagar returns to Pilate’s home, “it was in their [Pilate’s and Reba’s] eyes that she saw what she had not seen before in the mirror: the wet, ripped hose, the soiled white dress, the sticky, lumpy face powder, the streaked rouge, and

the wild wet shoals of hair” (*Song* 318). The gaze of Reba and Pilate reveals that Hagar’s adornments are all a façade: “the female gaze is able to discern true beauty and authenticity” (LaVon Walther 782). Hagar’s hair, which she latches onto in dismay, bemoaning its lack of silkiness, curliness, or penny-colored qualities, becomes a fixation which symbolizes her racial identity, something other than “lemon-colored skin” and “gray-blue eyes” (*Song* 319). Pilate explains to Hagar that Milkman has to love her hair, for the very same hair sprouts from his own head and armpits. Pilate asks Hagar, ““How can he love himself and hate your hair?”” (*Song* 319). Pilate’s inquiry to Hagar forms the basis of Morrison’s conception that Milkman must embrace the black women in his life, striving not to objectify or oppress them, in order to love himself, or oppose the various systems of oppression that work against his own narrative, which include the same capitalism and racism that weigh upon Hagar.

Hagar, “driven mad” by Milkman, similarly reflects the insanity associated with her distant relative, Ryna, after losing the significant male presence in her life. Insanity, then, becomes a measure of dismissal, but also a means of establishing the opposite—sanity, in that a woman with a man, with an appendage to passively receive into her body, to literally fill up a hole, or a specific orifice, to make her whole, becomes necessary for establishing one’s rationality and stability. This viewpoint proves flawed, though. It renders a female dependant upon a masculine presence. As LaVon Walther asserts, “It is not so much that Hagar is crazed; rather, Morrison uses Hagar to enact the insanity of our own American cultural standards of female beauty. In a society that overvalues visual appearance, which is implicitly based on white consumer criteria, Hagar believes she must buy and put on beauty to attract Milkman’s look and his love” (780). Milkman does not realize his complicity in the destruction of Hagar, first mentally and then physically. Oppressing one’s consciousness, as through Euro-centric standards of beauty, then, can lead to one’s actual physical annihilation, often self-inflicted by one’s very own tainted consciousness, as with Hagar.

Eventually, though, Hagar’s damage suffered at Milkman’s hands hits home for him when he returns from Shalimar. Locked in the cellar by Pilate, he remembers her father’s words ““You just can’t fly on off and leave a body”” and realizes, “[Pilate’s father] was talking about himself. His own father [, Solomon,] flew away. He was the ‘body’” (*Song* 336). Milkman realizes such “heroic” masculine abandonment and destruction as detrimental to both women and men left behind. Milkman finally realizes that he (indirectly) took Hagar’s life when he finds a box of Hagar’s hair in the cellar. He reacts strongly to this knowledge, as Morrison writes, “Milkman rolled his head back and forth on the cellar floor. It was his fault” (*Song* 336). Milkman is wracked with guilt and grief over the hurt he caused Hagar, realizing the ties between his and Solomon’s narratives: Milkman employs the simple pronoun “he” in thinking of the subject who hurt Hagar and abandoned Ryna and her children. Thus, he realizes these threads as part of a larger masculine attack on the feminine. In realizing this, Milkman returns from his journey to Shalimar “with almost none of the things he t[ook] with him” (*Song* 338). In other words, Milkman sheds some of what hooks deems “capitalistic, white misogynistic imperialism” ingrained in his consciousness through socialization since birth. However, Milkman neglects to see that the oppression of sexism falls under the same umbrella as racism, which he does realize Hagar battled with so extensively. bell hooks writes, “there will be no feminist revolution without an end to racism and white supremacy,” indicating that in order to fully combat the sexism Milkman becomes aware of, he must also recognize racism and work to end that in conjunction with sexism.

Though Hagar’s suffering eventually leads Milkman to realize the devastating effects of his male egotism and conquering attitude towards women, especially her, it does not do so until after she commits suicide, ironically. Thus, her actions in life do not lead Milkman to the epiphany that forces a new self-reflection on his actions. Hagar’s final moment of redemption rests in Milkman’s realization of the hurt he caused her, thinking to himself, “[I] hurt her, left her. While [I] dreamt of

flying, Hagar was dying” (*Song* 336). In accepting his guilt in her suicide, Milkman learns from Hagar, through Pilate, the need to love oneself, allowing for the love of one’s race and the understanding of other genders as well. Though Aoi Mori argues that “Morrison attempts to depict her female characters as subjects that emerge from an oppressed situation and who seek survival,” Hagar ultimately proves unable to challenge the racist and sexist forces that work against her, signifying Morrison’s acknowledgement that what she demands from her readers, such resistance and survival, does not, ultimately, prove an easy task, but does prove one well worth the effort invested (29). Morrison, then, does not excuse Hagar’s need to belong to Milkman, even to Milkman himself, who does not necessarily redeem her or view her as possessing any strength. Rather, Hagar exists as a “doormat woman” (*Song* 309). She, lacking Reba’s simplicity and Pilate’s strength, needs a whole chorus of female relatives and community members to teach her, if not to make up her own life as Pilate and Reba do, than at least to live it with a measure of strength and humor. Therefore, although partially her fault, Hagar’s demise also results from a lack of surrounding female relatives and neighbors to take responsibility for and teach her how to navigate the high, cold peaks a female must climb in a world in which men mean to dominate women, either purposefully or accidentally, through their own attempts at bravado, often ending in abandonment of women and raised status amongst other males, that which Milkman seeks from Hagar’s loss.

Milkman, whose journey embodies that which Morrison creates for her readers, embarks upon a quest that leads him to an awareness of the irrevocable damage inflicted upon two specific women, Ryna and Hagar. Morrison lays bare, through Milkman’s journey, those who are typically “left behind” or left out of such a monomythic tradition. She accomplishes this in a more subtle way, perhaps, than flipping the myth on its head, which takes into consideration the varying degrees of exclusion in traditional Western and androcentric African myths—including both race and gender simultaneously. Morrison does not indict Milkman, or the idea of the flying African myth,

or the oral traditions of black women. Rather, she allows for a potentiality to exist in *Song of Solomon*. She exposes Milkman, and thus her readers, to the system of patriarchy so that he may free himself from the role of oppressor. Only then can he resist the racial oppression subjugating both him and the women he encounters and from whom he learns. Her intentions always political, Morrison demands participatory reading, suggesting in an interview, “My language has to have holes and spaces so the reader can come into it...Then we [you, the reader, and I, the author] come together to make this book, to feel this experience” (Wilentz 144). Morrison renders her writing problematic so that readers must engage to correct and to learn from the holes she includes in her text.

Therefore, Ryna and Hagar’s stories do not ultimately prove failures. Though devoid of actual materialized voices, the events surrounding their lives, and death—for Hagar, cannot be dismissed so readily. Milkman, like the communities these women belong to, must come to recognize the hurt inflicted upon women traditionally “left behind.” For Ryna, her anguished howling imposes itself upon the consciousness of Shalimar, so that even the passing of wind through rocks reminds her community of her pain. Consequently, her self expression, though dismissed in the story of Solomon’s flight, cannot be entirely erased. She even inserts her name into history, if only in association with a gulch to her husband’s hill, “Solomon’s Leap.” Hagar, similarly, marks her sorrow, even if not through her own voice. Her suicide, and subsequent funeral, leads to her aunt Pilate’s public “identifying [of] Hagar” and repeated call for “mercy” (*Song* 322). Pilate will not dismiss Hagar’s victimization as inconsequential. Further, she beckons to the community, asking them to have “mercy” on, to seek understanding of and compassion for Hagar. They must acknowledge Hagar in this moment, despite Hagar’s silencing of her own voice. By the end of the novel, Milkman learns that women, such as Pilate, can fly without leaving the ground, but in the last sentence of the novel, Milkman’s knowledge that, “If you surrendered to the

air, you could *ride* it” invokes not his own name, nor that of his grandfather, Solomon’s (*Song* 341). Rather, Morrison chooses to write the word “you,” signifying that the reader her/himself can leap, fly and leave the ground, whether female or male. The reader can venture further away from the constrictive gender roles of Hagar, Ryna, Solomon, and even Milkman, so that Morrison’s impact moves beyond the text of her novel to her readers. Morrison’s usage of the word “could” instead of “may,” as invoked earlier in the novel, indicates an erasure of the need for permission—the act of flying, of seeking freedom from a phallogentric, racist narrative, rests in one’s own ability to commence learning. Therefore, though Ryna and Hagar do not fly and their voices do not shine through directly in the text, their stories do work to educate Milkman (and readers) of the need to acknowledge oppression at various levels in order to combat one’s own subjugation by a system ruled by unjust forces. Ryna and Hagar themselves could not move beyond the strictures imposed by such a system, confined by their roles as dependant women, but their examples serve to expose dangerous modes of patriarchal, racist thinking and to allow others to go where they ultimately could not.

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