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The Forgotten Women of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon*

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Introduction

In the afterword of *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison writes that, in the novel, she sought to focus “on how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female” (210). Through Morrison’s close-readings of her own novels, we know that—at the level of form—Morrison painstakingly crafts her novels with particular goals in mind, that the gaps she leaves are just as important as the stories she tells. Morrison’s female characters exist in these gaps, sometimes filling them and sometimes getting obscured by the literary shadows. The women on the margins of Morrison’s novels—mothers, daughters, and sisters—buttress plot development and provide necessary subjectivity in regard to their gendered and raced experiences. Toni Morrison’s treatment of certain female characters in *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon* simultaneously mirrors societal marginalization and elevates the voices of these “vulnerable” members of society. In the pages that follow, I explore the significance of these female characters by analyzing how Morrison’s narrative form ignores or neglects certain social actors, and by taking a closer look at the rarer moments in which Morrison gives these actors the opportunity to speak. Through an exploration of both novels, I suggest that Morrison’s character development and narrative form challenge the reader to become more aware of one’s own forgetting. By giving these characters limited space—in paragraphs, chapters, or entire sections—Morrison reminds us how utilizing different female voices and stories is necessary in representing the multitudes of standpoints and experiences that constitute American Blackness.

Contextualizing Morrison's Forgotten Women: Black Feminist Thought

As Patricia Hill Collins states in her book *Black Feminist Thought*, "individuals who stand at the margins of society clarify its boundaries. African-American women, by not belonging, emphasize the significance of belonging" (68). By paying particular attention to women at "the margins of society," Morrison works with tools and themes in her writing that invoke the tenets of modern feminist theory and Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought*. While Morrison's fiction does not read as scholarly, her focus on Black women aligns with the apparatuses of Black feminists, in particular: intersectionality, standpoint theory and situated knowledge. Collins's scholarship on Black feminist thought is an end in itself; its very creation embodies her attempt to challenge hegemonic knowledge production. In this way, the book's construction echoes its vision, and Morrison's novels embody a similar commitment to challenging conventional forms of knowledge production. Her philosophy reacts to the long history in which the Western system of education continues to validate and highlight the knowledge of elite white men, while silencing and ignoring the knowledge of any and all marginalized peoples.

Conventional scientific objectivity relies upon the process of examining one variable at a time. According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, the results of scientific research "are not, or should not be influenced by particular perspectives, value commitments, community bias or personal interests" ("Scientific Objectivity"). While this process enables scientists to carry out consistent experiments that produce reliable results, this idea of scientific objectivity has pervasively and negatively permeated into the nonscientific world. The scholarship of standpoint feminists like Collins has challenged this emphasis on scientific objectivity by arguing that it is never possible to completely remove

bias in any form of knowledge production. Furthermore, this unattainable objectivity is not reflective of—and fails to take into account—the complexities that encompass human life. In her scholarship, Collins explains how Black women are the perfect example of this dissonance by outlining the principles of the feminist theory of intersectionality.

In life, intersecting oppressions—like racism, sexism, and classism—shape the lived experiences of Black women. Intersectional theory unpacks the way in which these identities inform, exacerbate, and reinforce the other, creating “interlocking systems of oppression” (Collins 221). The experiences with and reactions to these intersections circumscribe the social identity of Black women. Black women, and Black women writers, are forced to navigate a realm in which “racialized experience is defined largely, if not solely, by men of color, and gendered experience is defined largely, if not solely, by white women” (Washington 81).

The goal of Black feminist thought is to establish Black women’s subjectivity and to validate this subjectivity—this unique “way of knowing” (Collins 221)—as knowledge. The emphasis on knowledge through experience correlates to the importance in feminist theory of valuing multiple voices. Since our conceptions of reality are bound by the social groups to which we belong, our perspectives are partial and not generalizable across groups. This is especially true for dominant voices that tend to speak over others. Each voice constitutes what Sandra Harding, among other feminist theorists, labels a “situated knowledge.” As a fundamental aspect of feminist epistemology, situated knowledge is “knowledge that reflects the particular perspectives of the subject” (“Feminist Epistemology”). Harding theorizes that, as a result of this situated knowledge, “each oppressed group will have its own critical insights about nature and the larger social order

to contribute to the collection of human knowledge” (9). This idea aligns with Collin’s emphasis that the focus of theory should be “outsider groups.” These outsider groups are often those who have historically been ignored, erased, and forgotten. To be forgotten means to be omitted and neglected; it implies a removing of complexity that reduces its subject to a stereotype or a nobody. To shift the focus from dominant groups to these forgotten individuals is itself a radical act. Through literature and feminist scholarship that values the lived experiences of forgotten women, these writers stress that the perspectives of certain marginalized and oppressed individuals are not only valuable but also *necessary* in creating a more objective understanding of how our society works.

Feminist theory contends that custom, tradition, and dominant powers demand a neatness not reflective of the bulk of human experience. Accordingly, feminist theory seeks to draw attention to, deconstruct, and dismantle these systems. Morrison’s novels encapsulate this rejection of neatness, in fact embracing and reveling in the messiness. While oppression functions on the individual, group, and societal levels, it is just as important to identify these oppressions as it is to recognize the different ways of responding and reacting to oppressions. Through her depiction of women characters in *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon*, Morrison gives voice to this messiness and offers unique, individual tales of oppression, self-definition, and resistance—stories in which personal experience become factual evidence, and Black feminist thought becomes knowledge.

Forgotten Girlhood and Womanhood in *The Bluest Eye*

The Bluest Eye, like most of Morrison’s novels, centers on a female character. The blue eyes for which Pecola Breedlove yearns inevitably become the novel’s namesake, causing many to deduce that Pecola is the protagonist of the novel. In this case, though, it seems

that through the crafting of additional narratives and intricate subplots, Morrison's secondary characters overshadow the protagonist to the extent that we lose track of Pecola all together. In her presentation of multiple narratives, Morrison draws attention to the experiences of supporting characters, such as Pecola's mother, Pauline. In providing a monologue by Pauline, Morrison finally fleshes out this woman's character and allows her to speak. Still, this communal "losing track" is responsible for how Pecola's traumas went unaddressed by every character in the novel, and how an entire community turned their backs while Pecola deteriorated.

However, the residents of Pecola's community were not the only ones guilty in forgetting Pecola. The novel asks the question, what does it mean when we, as readers, are complicit in forgetting about Pecola Breedlove frequently throughout the course of her own novel? By paying literary attention to these forgotten female characters, Morrison demands active participation from the reader and an examination of our own internalized hegemony; we are made intensely aware of the characters to whom we assign worth, and those to whom we do not.

In a 1970 review of *The Bluest Eye*, critic Haskel Frankel asserts that a major fault of the novel is that its "protagonist," Pecola Breedlove, is ignored. Specifically, Frankel complains that "Pecola, whose story this eventually is, too often [plays] a secondary role until the novel zeroes in on her for the ending" (3). In reading the novel, it is easy to lose Pecola in the story of an entire community. Frankel's apprehension stems from Morrison's refusal of conventional form; for instance, Morrison introduces Pecola in a dependent clause: "We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow" (5). Here, Morrison introduces Pecola indirectly, as a result of

circumstance and external forces. The subject of the sentence is the MacTeer girls, “we,” and the object is “the marigolds.” Pecola, subjugated by sentence structure, functions as a rationale for the stunted growth of marigolds—for life cut short before it even begins. Her own life, marked by sexual abuse and societal neglect, gets buried and forgotten. In response to Pecola’s condition, Frankel asks for a plot that centers around this young, broken girl—a girl whose story certainly deserves to be told. So what does it mean that Morrison names a character with a uniquely tragic story, only to neglect her for the bulk of the novel?

At the simplest level of syntax, Morrison’s treatment of Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* demands a reevaluation of form in which we reconsider our accepted notions of importance. This idea applies to sentence structure (independent and dependent clauses) and character development. Morrison’s constant revealing of important details in dependent clauses grounds this notion and makes the reader question what we value as “important” information within sentences. The narrator describes Pecola, in a dependent clause, as a site of fallowed earth: “just as Pecola’s father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt” (6). While literally a fragment, this clause takes on phenomena larger than Pecola’s individual experience. The possessive pronoun, “his,” implies a gendered ownership of female bodies under patriarchal and paternalistic family structures. “Black dirt” racializes Pecola and depicts her as something we step on and walk over—a fertile resource that, when used, becomes depleted and fallow, stripped of what makes it habitable for growth. Here the narrator (not Claudia MacTeer and not Morrison) is omniscient, suggesting some objective reality from an authority standpoint. While not

telling the reader how one *should* perceive Pecola, the narrator illustrates how Pecola *is* perceived by her community and society as a whole.

In this vein, Pecola as a “secondary” character makes sense because her character is essentially a site onto which society projects its ideals and racist ideologies. At the end of *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola then becomes an example of the psychological trauma that arises from being this site for others. Pecola only becomes “ugly” because of the labels others place on her. Light-skinned Maureen attacks Pecola by taunting, “I *am* cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly” (73). Even her own mother says, “I knowed she was ugly” (126) as soon as her daughter is born. By being the target of her community’s projections, by being Black and ugly, Pecola becomes a scapegoat. She confirms the fears Black women (and men) have about ideal beauty—that this beauty cannot possibly exist within the body of a small, poor Black girl. In this way, Pecola takes on what Morrison calls “something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race” within her person. By forgetting about the person underneath the projections, one Black girl is forced to bear the weight of centuries of Western beauty standards rooted in racist ideology. *The Bluest Eye*, by mirroring society’s neglect of Pecola, questions the reader, “how complicit were you in this forgetting?”

While Pecola’s yearning for blue eyes (the ideal beauty standard symbolizing Whiteness) is the central theme of the novel, the failure of her family and community to support her is the ultimate cause for her break from reality. Other than the MacTeers giving Pecola a place to stay temporarily, no one in *The Bluest Eye* offers Pecola advice, support, or empathy. As Claudia narrates in the last page of the novel, “when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live” (206). The entire community “acquiesced” in the face of Pecola’s trauma, allowing her to be forgotten to the point of

bereavement. The weight of her trauma shouldn't have been hers to bear in the first place, yet she was a vulnerable and available vessel for projection. Pecola, who rarely speaks, is unable to tell her own story in *The Bluest Eye*; she was never given the tools to understand her own Blackness or to cope with her own trauma. Consequently, her psyche fractures and she falls apart. Through multiple narrators, Morrison tells Pecola's story, highlighting the importance of each standpoint. The ending of *The Bluest Eye* functions as a critique of reality as well as a warning to the reader. Pecola's brokenness reminds us what can happen when vulnerable members of society are rendered invisible and what will happen if we continue internalizing and projecting learned hegemony.

In *The Bluest Eye*, in addition to her treatment of Pecola Breedlove as a forgotten girl, Morrison discusses black womanhood through her attention (or lack thereof) to the character of Mrs. Breedlove (Pauline or "Polly"). Despite Morrison's general lack of focus on Pauline's character development throughout the novel, the section narrated by Pauline elevates her voice and provides an indispensable perspective about Black femininity. This particular section ties together African American oral tradition with feminist standpoint theory—both of which elevate women's voices and encourage us to listen.

Pauline Breedlove, with her many names—Mrs. Breedlove to her own children, and Polly to the white family for which she works—plays a different role for each person in her life. Her role as a mother is most precarious, as her daughter is the very "vulnerable member" of society Morrison describes in the afterword. Despite her pivotal role, Pauline remains on the periphery of *The Bluest Eye*. The narrative voice in the novel alternates between the first-person narration of Claudia MacTeer and an omniscient third-person narrator. Yet, in the middle of the novel, this form is interrupted—suddenly with italicized

font. This italicized monologue belongs to Pauline and takes up about 10 full pages of the novel's total 206. Using accessible, colloquial language, Pauline's monologue acts as an oral history. As a historical site of African-American knowledge production, the tradition of storytelling arose in response to legal sanctions (anti-literacy laws) and Jim Crow policies banning the literacy of slaves and free African-Americans. Since many slaves and their children were prohibited from writing their own histories, these stories were passed on orally from generation to generation. In *The Bluest Eye*, this instance of storytelling is a moment in which Pauline's voice is elevated, in which she finally gets to tell her side of the story.

Pauline is by no means an ideal protagonist. She exists quietly on the margins of the white families for whom she works, and often appears callous and indifferent towards her children behind the storefront housing her own, black family. But in this instance, this moment of storytelling, Pauline offers the readers a personal account of how she negotiates what the narrator calls the "funkiness" (83) of Black womanhood. While the narrator's previous descriptions of Pauline characterize her as self-absorbed – "she kept this order, this beauty, for herself" (128) – Pauline's storytelling complicates this idea. The narrator sums up a central theme in the lives of certain Black women as "the careful development of thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners" (83) or "in short, how to get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions" (83). This theme runs continually through Pauline's narrative. Here "funkiness" could be replaced with "blackness" and the passage would retain its meaning, yet "funkiness" assigns an elusive and slippery property to Blackness. Funk, relating directly to the Black musical traditions of blues and soul, floats and swells

and disrupts. In quelling this funkiness in favor of “thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners,” Pauline attempts to get rid of what makes her stand out from white society. By internalizing these stereotypes and working to combat them, Pauline distances herself from what makes her different from and looked down upon by white others. These stereotypes or controlling images are “designed to make racism, sexism, and poverty appear to be natural, normal, and an inevitable part of life” (Collins 68). Pauline’s policing of herself indicates that, on top of the already constant policing coming from external individuals, groups, and systems, these controlling images are so invasive that policing becomes internalized.

On top of negotiating this “funkiness,” Pauline delves deep into the demands and pains of Black womanhood, specifically those of motherhood. When thinking back to her labor, Pauline complains—justifiably—of the racism of the medical professional at the hospital who claimed “they [Black women] deliver right away and with no pain. Just like horses” (125). The doctor’s scientific “objectivity,” grounded in racist assumptions about Black women, affected Pauline’s experience as a mother. Even in this most intimate moment, Pauline resists and “moaned something awful” (125) just to prove: “I hurt just like them white women. Just ‘cause I was hooping and hollering before didn’t mean I wasn’t feeling pain” (125). This passage parallels physical pain of childbirth to the experience of Black womanhood in a more general sense; Black women have learned to live under racism just as they’ve “knowed how to have a baby with no fuss” (Morrison 125). Pauline’s awareness of her own triple-consciousness informs her frustration with the dismissal and dehumanization of Black people that white society has so normalized. Morrison’s presentation of Pauline’s argument reinforces a criticism of white society: that to negate

the pains of Black women by assuming their unwavering resolve is to belittle and invalidate the gendered and racialized struggles of Black women.

Pauline's section of *The Bluest Eye* and her depictions of these struggles epitomize the triple-consciousness of Black women in the US. This triple-consciousness expands upon W. E. B. Du Bois's idea of the double-consciousness of African-Americans by adding and emphasizing women's gendered experiences under patriarchy. The omniscient narrator explains the weight of this consciousness as, "everybody in the world was in a position to give them [black women] orders" (138). From the demands of white folks to those of Black men, Black women have always been expected to work a double-shift—requiring constant physical and emotional labor. When working for white folks, Black women working as domestic laborers "ran the houses of white people, and knew it" (138). In their own homes, Black women often dealt with the patriarchal power dynamics produced by toxic masculinity (i.e. Pauline's relationship with Cholly Breedlove). In conjunction with this continuous labor, Pauline's narrative demonstrates the acute level of "knowing" that binds the lived experiences of many Black women. Just as Pauline "knew" she ran white households, she "knewed [Pecola] was ugly" (126) as soon as her daughter was born. This knowing is not an opinion, but a fact, a knowledge informed by experience in a gendered and raced world. Pauline, now an adult woman, has accumulated knowledge regarding whiteness, beauty standards, and masculinity—all from the vantage point of a Black woman. This unique perspective allows her to understand the world in a way that those in positions of privilege cannot; it elucidates societal demarcations and provides the knowledge-set needed to navigate these oppressive realities.

In her italicized monologue, Pauline alludes to the power of sexuality as a means of navigating her reality. Establishing Black female sexuality as empowering counters the stereotype of the oversexed and rapacious black woman – a stereotype established to act as an explanation and justification for the white rape of black women under slavery. When she has sex with Cholly, and when he climaxes, Pauline narrates, “I feel a power. I be strong, I be pretty, I be young” (130). In this way, Pauline reclaims her sexuality away from that of the white male gaze, and sex allows her to subvert the established power dynamic between Black men and Black women. Empowerment through sexuality offers Pauline a temporary means of feeling in control in a society that constantly works to control Black women. Morrison allows Pauline to narrate this short section of *The Bluest Eye* in order to highlight the standpoint of a woman who might otherwise be dismissed for being a bad mother or for perpetuating the mammy trope. By narrowing the focus in on Pauline—even just for a fraction of the novel—Morrison offers a larger insight into Black motherhood, sexuality, and individual empowerment.

Reclaiming Subjectivity in *Song of Solomon*

While *The Bluest Eye* focuses on the marginalization of certain actors by an entire community, *Song of Solomon* shifts the locus from the communal to the familial. In a novel dedicated to fathers, Morrison remains committed to developing complex female characters. As scholar Harry Reed suggests, Milkman's quest is "buttressed by his female relationships. The fluid constellations of black women loving him, supporting him, guiding him and even rejecting him confirm the nurturing aspects of black life" (Qtd. Ahmad 54). The character of Pilate plays a pivotal role in Milkman's maturation, as she loves, supports, guides, and rejects him at different points of their relationship. As one of the few women in

his life who Milkman views as a fully formed human being, there is no forgetting Pilate. As for the women Milkman does not respect, Morrison offers an important commentary in her portrayal of Ruth, Magdalene called Lena, and Hagar. Morrison's conscious literary abandonment of these characters mirrors that of Milkman's own neglect of the women in his life, and underscores the larger theme of men's abandonment of women in the novel. In a novel in which men "fly off," Morrison addresses the consequences of forgetting female characters who are placed in supporting roles—the women who are left behind.

In an attempt to explain herself to her son, Ruth tells Milkman: "I am not a strange woman. I am a small one. [...] I don't mean little; I mean small, and I'm small because I was pressed small" (124). This smallness relates to Ruth's developmental psychology and to her identity. Despite her financial privilege, Ruth was still a small, lonely, Black girl. Throughout the course of her life, it is Ruth's smallness that allows her to be overlooked, ignored, and forgotten. By using passive voice, "I was pressed small," Ruth attributes her relative invisibility to external forces. She was not born small; she was made small.

Ruth's entire proclamation occurs in reaction to Milkman's accusations of her perversions in regard to her breastfeeding of school-aged Milkman and her alleged sexual relationship with her deceased father. Ruth's story is first told by others, in this case by her husband, Macon Dead. Milkman initially accepts his father's version of events at face value, in part because of his assumed male authority. Morrison is quick to poke holes in Macon's authority, though, as the narrator prefaces his first accusations in the novel with "Little by little he remembered fewer and fewer of the details, until finally he had to imagine them, even fabricate them, guess what they must have been" (16). Here, Macon forgets what actually occurred, his testimony relying completely on his own projected insecurities and

imagination. As a result, Macon uses his power to deprive Ruth of sex for the remainder of their marriage. Ruth's retelling of her own story to Milkman authenticates and reclaims her subjectivity. While we cannot—at face value—accept Ruth's account as fact, Morrison suggests her knowledge, as informed by experience and emotional reactions, is valid and, in that sense, a form of truth.

This scene is so pivotal because, previously, Milkman “never [had] thought of his mother as a person, a separate individual, with a life apart from allowing or interfering with his own” (75). In fact, Milkman reasons, “she was too insubstantial, too shadowy for love” (75). Her perceived insubstantiality—her smallness—made Milkman dehumanize and objectify his own mother to the point where he could not even love her. The moment in the text where Ruth advocates for herself shows a woman “dying of lovelessness” (151), as Pilate puts it, while simultaneously claiming a subjectivity that is valid and substantial despite its smallness. Ruth is not strange. She has value, a unique perspective, and a desire for human connection; she is small.

Just as he refuses to view his mother as a full person, Milkman extends this dehumanizing attitude towards the other women in his life. Milkman's sister, Magdalene Called Lena, suffers the same fate as their mother. Always a peripheral character, she is constantly forgotten and made invisible by Milkman. This neglect of women in his life is so entrenched in his subconscious that Milkman can barely tell the women in his family apart from one another: “He had never been able to really distinguish them (or their roles) from his mother” (68) and “all three had always looked the same age to him” (68). By condensing the identities of his sisters and his mother, Milkman removes the respective humanities from these women. Because each woman is so insignificant to him, Milkman forgets about

each one continuously and without guilt. In a story that centers around Milkman, the emotional neglect of the women in his family transfers directly to Morrison's literary neglect of these women in the novel. For if Milkman rarely thinks of Corinthians, Lena, and Ruth in his daily life, why would his quest narrative divert, just to delve into the character development of these forgotten women?

Milkman remains blissfully unaware of his male privilege until Lena addresses his misogyny and entitlement. In this scene, Morrison gives Lena a platform to speak—literally raising her voice. Alluding to the incident in their childhood in which Milkman accidentally pees on Lena during a family excursion, Lena informs Milkman, “there are all kinds of ways to pee on people” (214). She singles him out, telling him, “You’ve been laughing at us all your life. Corinthians. Mama. Me. Using us, ordering us, and judging us” (215). In her condemnation of Milkman, Lena also issues a justified tirade against the everyday sexism that is manifest within her family structure. Inundated with male privilege, Milkman is cruel to Lena, Corinthians, and Ruth. He makes light of issues that are important to them, and he expects domesticity and obsequiousness from them that is innately gendered. Lena verbalizes his most offensive entitlement when she asks, “where do you get the right to decide our lives?” (215). She answers her own rhetorical question with “I’ll tell you where. From that hog’s gut that hangs down between your legs” (215). Here, Lena stresses the power that comes from Milkman’s manhood, from his maleness, and from his sexuality. While their father “would parade [Lena and Corinthians] like virgins through Babylon, then humiliate [them] like whores in Babylon” (216), Milkman possesses the social and sexual mobility not allowed to his sisters, and he takes this privilege for granted.

It's important to note that this conversation between Magdelene called Lena and Milkman is one of the few moments in the novel where Lena gets to speak. Her anger and frustration seem totally warranted, yet the reader barely catches a glimpse of this inside perspective earlier in the novel. The novel's extremely close focus on Milkman, and on fathers, suggests a mirroring of society's traditional valuing of male protagonists. In her own words Morrison conveys this idea when she discusses the challenges of creating "an overtly, stereotypically male narrative" (xii). For Morrison, this "radical shift in imagination from a female locus to a male one" (xii) involved crafting male characters after traditionally male narratives and after the men she had known in her life. By largely forgetting and throwing away the women in his life, Milkman continues a tradition of overtly masculine protagonists whose quest narrative rarely leaves room for female characters in supporting roles. In Lena's confrontation with Milkman, Morrison allows a very real and undervalued subjectivity to throw Milkman's subjectivity into question. Lena's indictment reminds the reader that, while the plot may privilege Milkman, women—and specifically Black women—bear the burden of raising these men only to be walked over and "peed on." Her accusations highlight the much-overlooked intersections of Black identity, specifically the intersection of race and gender. Lena's situated knowledge reflects her marginalized identity and informs her lived experiences as a woman. While Milkman brashly navigates his way into adulthood as a Black man, attempting to find out who he is, the Black women closest to him are not allowed the same opportunity for self-discovery. Instead, they are ignored, discarded, and forgotten.

Hagar is the perfect example of a woman Milkman so easily discards and forgets. While Milkman finds Hagar attractive and their relationship exciting at first, he never views her as

a fully formed person, and this neglect inevitably kills her. To justify ending their 12-year relationship with a callous and impersonal letter, the narrator explains, “she was considered his private honey pot, not a real or legitimate girl friend” (91). Neither real, nor legitimate, Hagar is entirely objectified, her only characteristics being her sweetness and available sexuality. Hagar’s reaction to this heartbreak, a homicidal rage, embodies—at one extreme—the psychological impact of being discarded.

The reader learns about Hagar’s murder scheme in a conversation between Milkman and his childhood friend, Guitar. Indirectly, we learn that Hagar has been attempting to murder Milkman once a month for six months. Six months pass before we hear about Hagar, a woman who was a fixture in Milkman’s life for twelve years. When Guitar presses him about having a target on his back, Milkman responds that he is simply “tired of dodging crazy people” (118). While Hagar’s behavior certainly points towards her compromised mental health, her character is reduced to that of “crazy people.” To clarify, Milkman is the murder-target of just one person: Hagar. But to Milkman, Hagar is not even an individual person. In failing to mention what the last six months looked like to Hagar, Morrison mirrors Milkman’s forgetting of Hagar. Through this forgetting, Hagar becomes less empathetic to the reader. Following the momentum of Milkman’s quest narrative, there is no time to stop and reflect upon the emotional manipulation Hagar endured at Milkman’s hand. Rather, she becomes lumped into a group of “crazy people” who are out to get him, thus establishing Milkman as the victim.

By the time the narrative form returns to Michigan from Milkman’s journey to the South, Hagar is immobile and her eyes “empty” (307). During Milkman’s quest for self-discovery, Hagar was deteriorating. If she was not objectified enough simply by virtue of

her womanhood, the feeling of being discarded like trash objectifies her anyway. In conjunction with the consequences of Hagar's romantic and emotional neglect, Hagar is haunted by the same Euro-centric beauty standards as Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*. In portraying Hagar's manic attempts to change and "fix" (308) her appearance to be more attractive to Milkman, Morrison draws attention to how Hagar attributes a wrongness and ugliness to her own Blackness. Furthermore, Hagar associates these Euro-centric beauty ideals, of "silky hair ... Penny-colored hair... And lemon-colored skin ... And gray-blue eyes" (316), with Milkman's love. In reality, Hagar remains a "pretty little black-skinned girl" (307) despite her mental deterioration, underscoring the insidiousness of both her trauma and societal pressures.

When Hagar dies, Morrison does not even tell the reader directly. Once again, Morrison cloaks this information in a dependent clause: "It didn't amount to much, though, and it was touch and go whether she'd have a decent funeral until Ruth walked down to Sonny's Shop and stared at Macon without blinking" (316). Here, we see Hagar subjugated by sentence structure in the same way Pecola was. This complex sentence obscures what appears to be its most pertinent information: the literary delivery of Hagar's death. Hagar's death exemplifies the psychological and physical toll of extreme heartbreak and marginality; it shows us what can happen when the pressures of Blackness and the pressures of womanhood intersect. It matters, in this instance, that Hagar is Black, and it matters that she is a woman.

Throughout the novel, Pilate acts as a foil for Hagar and the other female characters. Pilate—who is a mother for all, a sexual being, and a gender-less personality—is rarely forgotten. Her exceptionality, though, reminds us that not all women are Pilates. In fact,

most of the women in *Song of Solomon* are not, and all women characters are objects of Milkman's neglect. Hagar's plight points not only to Milkman's neglect but to neglect on a societal level as well. As Guitar muses,

She needed what most colored girls needed: a chorus of mamas, grandmamas, aunts, cousins, sisters, neighbors, Sunday school teachers, best girl friends, and what all to give her the strength life demanded of her—and the humor with which to live it. (307)

The problem here is that, in voicing Guitar's thought-process, the narrator broadens the scope perhaps too widely, overlooking an oft unspoken but desperate demand for male accountability. While Hagar may have benefited from a more extensive network of women in her life, Pilate and Reba provide Hagar with unconditional love and support. Conversely, Milkman's abandonment of Hagar had direct—if not deadly—effects on Hagar's wellbeing. In addition to simply being surrounded by other women, the lives of Black women would directly benefit from being treated with respect by men in their lives. This vacuum of empathy (on the part of men) is itself a societal issue—one that only exacerbates restrictive ideas of gender difference and misogyny—causing women to be left behind and forgotten.

The idea of male accountability aligns with the larger theme of male flight and abandonment in the novel, encapsulated in the recurring maxim "you can't just fly off and leave a body." While Pilate was the first to use this phrase, "you" refers mainly to male characters, and the "bodies" left behind are so often women. In this vein, a "body" is stripped of its humanity; it becomes a "thing" and an "it" rather than a person. Once a person is dehumanized, it becomes easier to "fly off" and to forget them. In the face of a tradition of men's leaving, this maxim acts as a warning. Morrison suggests that

internalizing this maxim may actually lead to a fuller understanding of human relationships. After hearing the children in Shalimar sing “Solomon don’t leave me here,” Milkman finally has a moment of reflection about his mother’s twenty years of forced celibacy. The narrator explains how, up until that moment, “he hadn’t thought much of it when she’d told him, but now it seems to him that such sexual deprivation would affect her, hurt her in precisely the way it would affect and hurt him” (300). Milkman’s realization derives from the act of remembering his mother and actively synthesizing her experience. Prompted by language of “leaving,” Milkman finally values Ruth’s subjectivity, thus gaining insight to the triple-consciousness that colors her life and the lives of other Black women.

Conclusion

Morrison’s novels suggest that by forgetting certain women, we lose access to precious stories and subjectivities. In Morrison’s fiction, Black women characters become invaluable sources of lived experience, social commentary, and societal criticism. At the level of prose, Morrison mirrors these women’s societal marginalization. By providing less dialogue for certain female characters and speaking about these characters using indirect sentence structure (dependent clauses), Morrison herself subjugates these characters. Still, Morrison finds a way to elevate the voices of forgotten women in a way that does justice to the richness and messiness of the Black female experience. In a society that continues to ignore, marginalize, and forget Black women, Morrison’s novels suggest that—while these women aren’t perfect or without fault—they have important things to say. The stories of Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* and Hagar in *Song of Solomon* outline how forgetting women can wreak irreparable psychological harm. Pauline, Ruth, and Lena give insight into the triple-consciousness characteristic of Black womanhood, portraying it as both a blessing and a

curse. As readers, we have no choice but to listen to (and learn from) the experiences, complaints, and afflictions of these forgotten women. Morrison's commitment to depicting truthful complexities acts as a way of combatting controlling images and stereotypes that have been imposed on Black women by White society and by Black men. In resisting a totalizing ("master") narrative, Morrison's novels also resist an easy understanding, demanding that the reader is both participatory and critical.

Simply put, without forgotten women, these stories would not exist. Each woman provides a necessary standpoint, transforming our reading of the text. Morrison takes into account the multiplicities of Black womanhood, highlighting its intersecting and contradictory nature. These forgotten women perceive and respond to the world in ways that people occupying positions of privilege simply cannot. Our conclusions about Morrison's fiction and about the world would be incomplete without them. Masterfully and with great clarity, Morrison echoes society's forgetting of its most vulnerable; in *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon*, she draws attention to this forgetting, challenges it, and forces us to examine our own roles as forgetters.

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