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"Undone by Murmurs of Love": Traumatic Legacies and the Struggle for Personal and Communal Identity Formation in Toni Morrison's Trilogy

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“Undone by Murmurs of Love”: Traumatic Legacies and
the Struggle for Personal and Communal Identity
Formation in Toni Morrison’s Trilogy

Fida Yasin

27 Nov. 2010

*For my Palestinian friends who will have their freedom when it
doesn't mean a damn thing.*

Abstract

Implications of racial oppression on personal and collective African American identity formation in Toni Morrison's trilogy are explored in this thesis. Morrison reconstructs African American history in her trilogy, but she also enacts a cultural healing through content and form. Impossible choices are made by characters in *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise* who are influenced by the racial trauma they experience and inherit. The legacies of oppression—traumatic memories, fragmentation, stereotypes and negative associations—distort the way these characters view themselves and one another. They are disoriented, isolated, and displaced. Characters recover from their past trauma— together—when they share their stories. Invited in this healing process are readers who are forced by Morrison's narrative techniques to experience fragmentation and displacement. Multiple endings, perspectives, and voices allow readers to share control of the narrative as they engage in understanding and interpreting the text. Readers find themselves forming relationships with texts that force them to make choices that reveal their own racial consciousness. Readers also remember what Morrison does not want anyone to forget: An untold history that includes the personal stories and experiences of ordinary African Americans.

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Traumatic Legacies

Toni Morrison in *Unspeakable Things Unspoken* maintains that “the trauma of racism is, for the racist and the victim, a severe fragmentation of self...” (141). The legacy of racial oppression on personal and collective African American identity formation is a major concern in *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*. Morrison’s novels restore African American history and a process of collective healing that are achieved only through relationships. Displaced characters living in racist societies consumed with stereotypes and negative images are burdened with past trauma that influences their choices and behaviors. Facing severe changes, they struggle to recover from their past and only succeed when they do so together. Invited to engage in this process are readers who are positioned by Morrison to experience the characters’ chaotic fragmentation. Characters take control of the narrative as they redefine their past experiences and one another. Morrison shares this control with her readers who are offered multiple stories, perspectives, and voices. According to Rafael Perez-Torres in “Knitting and Knotting the Narrative Thread—*Beloved* as Postmodern Novel,” the lack of authoritative view is made apparent to the reader who experiences the summoning of oral and written discourse, the shifting from third person narration to interior monologue, and the iteration and reiteration of words, phrases, and passages that reflects Morrison’s concern with the production and meaning of language (92). Morrison invites her readers to rethink and make sense of the past along with her characters. Both characters and readers learn to de-naturalize ideological representations of the past. Linda Hutcheon in *The Politics of Postmodernism* explains how the “official accounts of victors” are

countered by the “usually unrecorded perspective of the victims of history” whose stories and perspectives are personalized in narratives like Morrison’s (61). These unrecorded experiences are dramatized in content as characters in *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise* struggle to recover from their personal and collective traumas of slavery by resisting the definitions imposed by dominant society and claiming their personal and communal identities. The experiences of marginalized black people are also dramatized in form as Morrison counters traditional exclusionary narratives with inclusive narrative techniques. This thesis explores the legacy of racial trauma within the African American communities in Morrison’s trilogy where characters and relationships are influenced by the racist ideologies and practices they experience, inherit, and relive. Characters remember pieces of their scattered histories and are made whole only when they share their stories. Included in this healing process are readers who are encouraged by Morrison’s narrative techniques to not only explore hidden ideologies and racist assumptions, but also to remember, imagine, create and recreate endless stories together.

Morrison dedicates *Beloved* to the sixty million or more slaves who suffered the Middle Passage. In an interview with *Time Magazine*, she discusses her inclusion of the taboo aspects of slavery in her novels. She addresses these censored issues by personalizing the slaves’ experiences. *Beloved* “was not about the institution –Slavery with a capital S. It was about the anonymous people called slaves. What they do to keep on, how they make a life, what they’re willing to risk, however long it lasts, in order to relate to one another” (22 May 1989). The historical story of Margaret Garner who is dramatized in a “more chaotic, contradictory, and unpredictable [way]—creates a necessary

place for resistance, agency, and counternarratives” (Peterson 209). Garner’s story is freed from the single vision of a biased account of the past in *Beloved*. Similarly, Morrison’s narrative, *Jazz*, offers the perspectives of ordinary black people struggling to live in 1920s Harlem as they come to terms with the traumas of their past that spans from the present around the historical event of 1917 St. Louis race riots back to the 1800s. The last novel of the trilogy, *Paradise*, chronicles the experience of historically mistreated black veterans of World War I and World War II who are haunted by their ancestors’ traumatic abuse in searching for a place free from racial terror after Reconstruction. The black community of Ruby inherits the ancestor’s trauma and become oppressors of their own people while forcefully preserving their singular history.

Morrison’s characters struggle to redefine themselves and their communities in racist societies where “definitions belong to the definers—not the defined” (*Beloved* 190). Morrison explores both the physical and emotional humiliation of slaves in *Beloved*. Judith Herman explains how “victims of repeated trauma...suffer from a ‘contaminated identity’ and become preoccupied with ‘shame, self-loathing, and a sense of failure’” (qtd. in Bousan 94). Sethe’s sense of self fragments as a result of the shame when she internalizes schoolteacher’s definitions and the meanings attributed to them regarding her worth. Sethe’s internalization of the shame leads to her alienation from the community that also shames and uses her as scapegoat. Paul D’s judgment of Sethe stems from his own self-disgust and internalization of racist definitions that result in his own alienation, numbness, and dissociation. Paul and Sethe are socially conditioned to feel ashamed of their limited choices and relive painful memories of the impossibility of achieving the dominant ideals of motherhood and masculinity under slavery. Morrison offers many accounts of

the same event, a narrative strategy that allows her readers to question the circumstances behind these characters' behavior.

In addition, J. Brooks Bousan in *Quiet as It's Kept* points out how *Jazz* "verbally expresses" pride, race, shame, and the impact of internal oppression on the construction of African American identity (173). Characters in this narrative are also driven by their troubled pasts as they struggle to live in the violence of post-migration 1920s black Harlem. Violet is disconnected from her sense of self. She is dismissed as violent and crazy by those around her, but Morrison's narrative compels readers to be more inquisitive of Violet's actions and behavior—and of Joe's: Why does Joe shoot Dorcas, and why does Violet attack the corpse's face with a knife? Why does Violet refer to herself in third person at times? The narrative informs readers of the couple's traumatic pasts: both Joe and Violet are abandoned by their mothers and are longing for the motherly love that was denied to them by the inherited inequities of black life in the post-slavery era. Violet internalizes her grandmother's standard of beauty that excludes her and results in her self-loathing as she measures her self-worth through racist eyes. Violet's longing for love and her grandmother's love for Golden Gray cause her obsession with him and her desire to appropriate whiteness. Violet obsesses over Dorcas' body in an attempt to understand what makes her husband's dead lover beautiful and lovable—what she feels she is not.

The characters in Morrison's *Paradise* also deal with traumatic pasts that shame and haunt them. The cultural inheritance of shame and trauma, Bousan explains, like racist and sexist stereotypes, cause the "transmission of racial wounds and the damaging impact of the color-caste hierarchy on the collective black identity" (193). The shame and trauma of the residents of Ruby are

inherited from their ancestors who suffered racial oppression and humiliation during and after slavery. Secrets shame the families and leaders who turn this shame into arrogance. Their internalization of oppression produces their self-hatred, guilt, and self-contempt which they inflict on others. The narrative positions readers to question what causes these men to pull the trigger and justify their actions. Change and loss of authority threaten the men of Ruby, and the women of the Convent threaten this singularity and exclusion. The men kill defenseless women, as Morrison says in an interview with Charlie Rose, because of “how easy it is to find reasons for one’s interior decay outside in somebody else;” how it is so “satisfying” to find fault elsewhere, transferring the guilt and avoiding having to face what was really going on (16 March 1998). What is really going on in Ruby is that the leaders are trying to preserve their idealized Haven with a single version of interpretation and singular history that privileges their authority. The men of Ruby are the definers, and as a result, women and the younger generation’s alternative perspectives and interpretations are suppressed and silenced. Ruby’s narrow beliefs and controlled meaning fragments the community. The women of the Convent offer alternative visions and meanings that pose a threat to the self-righteous & rock who oppress women and lighter-skinned blacks by forcing them to conform to their racist and sexist definitions. These definitions fail Mavis, Grace, Seneca, Pallas, and the women of Ruby who have all been victimized by men. Physical, sexual, and emotional abuse cause these women to seek shelter in the Convent, a place which functions as a community free from exclusive definitions and predetermined judgments of race and gender constructs. It is a shelter from their violent lives, and from the shame and past trauma that they have not yet faced. It is only when they resist isolation and develop relationships that these

marginalized characters learn to love themselves and each other, freeing themselves from their consuming grief by sharing their stories. These relationships allow them to acknowledge their worth and validate one another. They collectively create alternative definitions to counter the ones that burden them. They nurture one another, help each other come to terms with their repressed pasts and perform African American rituals together that help them heal from their suffering. A communal effort is made by the Convent women who confront their traumatizing past, embrace their changing identities, and begin to heal.

Morrison's readers also confront the conflicts these characters experience in her narratives. Readers may struggle with their own fears and find themselves facing them. Trauma narratives, which Laurie Vickroy defines in *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* as "fictional narratives that help readers access traumatic experiences," engage readers in social and psychological issues experienced by victims(2). Readers of Morrison's trilogy are encouraged to engage in struggles of individual trauma, collective responsibility, and communal healing. These narratives offer alternatives to institutionalized and depersonalized history by highlighting the way social, economic, and political structures create and perpetuate trauma; they also "reshape cultural memory through personal contexts, adopting testimonial traits to prevent and bear witness against such repetitive horrors" (Vickroy 5). Readers share the experience of survivors; this experience rejects normal chronological narration or modes of artistic representation as characters continue to experience past traumas moving the blurred line between present and past. She explains how

uncertain, self-reflexive, and ambivalent elements of trauma narratives challenge oppressive ideologies and practices. The works' structures and characterizations reveal how this experience resists narrativising and chronologizing, but also moralizing. The re-created process of traumatic memory allows writers to guide the readers to understand the characters' experience. This structure informs the readers and engages them in a revision of the past. Engaged by the narrative voice and invited to participate and create, readers are not allowed to passively read the stories.

Representations of trauma include explorations around the formation of self and "the relational and situational properties of identity" (Vickroy 22). Many voices, emotions, and experiences are intertwined in these trauma narratives to produce individual and collective memories to counter silence and memory loss. Vickroy points out how trauma writers situate their readers in disoriented positions similar to the narrators and characters through memory, time shifts, affect, and consciousness (28). She illustrates her point by referencing the conclusion of *Beloved*, emphasizing that *Beloved* signifies something different to each character whose behavior represents his/her own troubled relationships with the past. Narratives, Vickroy maintains, reveal the tensions and conflicts in the process of retelling and re-experiencing traumatic events despite the characters' desire to forget. Knowledge emerges from many forms: decontextualized memory fragments; episodes of present life experience influenced, and often distorted, by past traumas; "overpowering" narratives; and

“witnessed narratives,’ wherein an observant distance and perspective is maintained in a narrative voice even when describing overpowering events” (29). Writers of trauma narratives represent a conflicted relation to memory through deliberate narrative strategies, including textual gaps in content and layout, as well as “repetition, breaks in linear time, shifting viewpoints, and a focus on visual images and affective states” (29). Toni Morrison and her readers engage in the struggle to bear witness to the African American experience by confronting slavery and its legacy.

Morrison’s fiction works to contest narrow accounts of the past that deny the dynamic personal histories of African Americans. In his “Introduction” to *The Contemporary African American Novel*, Bernard W. Bell views the “African American novel holistically as a socially symbolic act and imaginative reconstruction of the quest of African Americans for personal and social freedom, literacy, and wholeness” (3). The African American novel is “a hybrid narrative whose distinct tradition and vitality are derived basically from the sedimented indigenous roots of black American folklore and literary genres of the Western world” (2). According to Denise Heinze in *The Dilemma of “Double-Consciousness,”* Morrison’s own position as a minority and a part of the literary establishment, that is, as an outsider within gives her two perspectives she incorporates throughout her work, which allows her to challenge traditional values and express a spiritual life where human beings are offered the possibility of growth and development denied in their real lives (149). Morrison creates

narratives that offer alternative perspectives of biased history and of American literary fiction's representation of African Americans. Postmodern novels, like Morrison's trilogy, problematize dominant representations and reveal the unacknowledged politics behind literature and history which are, Linda Hutcheon insists, human constructs (49). *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise* question notions of closure, authority, and the universality of traditional narratives. These novels encourage readers to rethink mainstream social and political representations that are based on a culture's dominant ideology through an investigation of the social and ideological production of meaning that allows readers to "de-doxify our assumptions about the representations of the past" (49). Truth and authority are challenged by this trilogy that embraces the creation of alternative realities.

Humiliating memories of racial oppression have devastating impacts on the identities of Sethe (*Beloved*), Violet (*Jazz*), and Pat Best (*Paradise*) in Morrison's trilogy as they internalize inferior constructions of their racial identities. Each of Morrison's characters is burdened with her past. Each is, as Du Bois describes in "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (2). These characters struggle with physical oppression and/or the emotional trauma of humiliation and memories, which J. Brooks Bouson in *Quiet as It's Kept* defines as "uncontrolled remembering and reliving of emotionally painful

experiences”(135). Violet, Sethe, and Pat Best are held in contempt by both white and black societies. They are plagued with feelings of shame that arise from viewing themselves through the racist perspectives of others. How they are viewed by others influences how these characters view themselves. Internalizing the racist attitudes and feelings toward blacks exhibited by the privileged society leads to each character’s fragmentation and sense of shame as Morrison dramatizes the impact of this emotional humiliation on the formation of African American identity. Trauma for Violet, Sethe, and Pat Best leads to self-fragmentation.

Chapter one, “Self, Interrupted,” explores how characters in Morrison’s novels suffer from a culturally imposed sense of inferiority that shatters their psyches, and how their lives are interrupted by these past traumas that hinder their ability to function within a larger community. Isolation leaves them unable to view themselves beyond fixed categories that entrap and hurt them. Chapter two, “Clamor for a Kiss,” explores how trauma alters relationships in 124 Bluestone Road (*Beloved*), the City (*Jazz*), and the town of Ruby (*Paradise*). These communities internalize racial oppression and redirect it toward one another. The community of *Beloved* holds Sethe up to impossible standards and views her from schoolteacher’s shaming gaze. Alice’s reduction of Violet to stereotypes and categories reveals Alice’s own self-loathing which causes her own isolation from the City and its people. The town of Ruby, hurt by the rejection of their ancestors’ dark skin in the Disallowing, create an exclusive

town for dark-skinned 8-rocks only. Ruby is not immune to the racial oppression that excludes them from the larger white society, but they redirect this oppression on their families and children that results in black-on-black violence. Healing exists through relationships that allow characters to reach out, empathize, and end their isolation. The characters validate themselves and one another by redefining themselves outside the parameters of racist stereotypes and past racist representations. Chapter three, "Spaces Between," focuses on how readers are set up to rethink these stereotypes and forced to reevaluate their racist assumptions while encountering textual difficulties that defy simplistic representations.

Chapter 1: Self, Interrupted

"I wasn't born with a knife."

Slavery and all wars are over in *Jazz*, and characters are excited about their new freedom. The unreliable narrator describes them as "happy" with nowhere to look but ahead: "Here comes the new. Look out. There goes the sad stuff. The bad stuff. The things-nobody could help stuff. The way everybody was then and there. Forget that. History is over, you all, and everything's ahead at last" (*Jazz* 7). It turns out, however, that history is not quite over for Violet who "had stumbled into a crack or two" and sat in the middle of the street "[w]ay , way before" Joe ever saw Dorcas (23, 17). The narrative eventually reveals the source of Violet's "private cracks" but not before a misprediction of violent behavior is made: "What turned out different was who shot whom" (6). The narrator assumes the characters will continue to behave violently before the characters defy her expectations with their unpredictability. Violet's personal story reveals the impact her traumatic history has on her sense of self, detailing how "children of suicides are hard to please and quick to believe no one loves them because they are not really here"(4). Violet's choices--not having children, kidnapping a baby, cutting Dorcas--are presented as products of her oppressive past that hinder her ability to control her thoughts, behavior, and language. She behaves strangely; she blurts disconnected words that make little sense to those around her and to her own self and is unaware of her actions at times. Violet's

identity splits when Violent intrudes. The narrator describes Violet's fragmentation as:

cracks because that is what they were. Not openings or breaks, but dark fissures in the globe light of the day. She wakes up in the morning and sees with perfect clarity a string of small, well-lit scenes. In each one something specific is being done: food things, work things; customers and acquaintances are encountered, places entered. But she does not see herself doing these things. She sees them being done. (*Jazz* 23)

Violet's language is also severed from her control as her "[w]ords connected only to themselves and pierced an otherwise normal comment" (23). When she is questioned about her odd responses and choice of words—"Two o'clock if the hearse is out of the way"--Violet maneuvers her way out of these instances of self-splitting through denial and silence: "Extricating herself from these collapses is not too hard, because nobody presses her....Maybe everybody has a renegade tongue yearning to be on its own. Violet shuts up. Speaks less and less until 'uh' or 'have mercy' carry almost all of her part of a conversation" (23). However, she experiences other instances of splitting that are beyond her consciousness and control: "Less excusable than a wayward mouth is an independent hand that can find in a parrot's cage a knife lost for weeks. Violet is still as well as silent" (23). Violet has no idea "who on earth that other Violet was that walked about the City in her skin; peeped out through her eyes and saw other things" (89). Violent and Violet are two separate, conflicted selves. While Violet sees a "lonesome chair left like an orphan...facing the river," the "other Violet" sees a

“weapony glint” (89). When Violet sees a poor child in ill-fitting clothes, that Violet slams past the woman; when Violet passively turns her face away, that Violet intently listens in the “mean March wind” (90). That Violet knows what Violet does not: The location of the funeral and the whereabouts of the knife. Violet had been searching for the knife a month before finding herself aiming it at Dorcas; she is surprised at the situations the other Violet creates. The out-of-control Violet is violent, angry, kicking, and growling; that Violet is proud of trying to kill deceased Dorcas, but Violet feels the lingering disgust and shame. Bousan explains that what Violet experiences is “depersonalization” where she feels “a sense of unreality about the self” as “the real self is distanced” and observed from the outside (173). This feeling is a result of Violet’s past trauma that continues to haunt her in her solitude. What both Violet and Violent have in common, however, is their feelings of unworthiness: ““I love you” was exactly what neither she nor that Violet could bear to hear” (92). The past follows Violet in the bustling City that promises a future. Violet is plagued with the “spellbinding tales” of True Belle’s days that are beyond her reach (102). Her longing to be loved and validated like Golden Gray evokes her desire to appropriate whiteness. The narrator hints earlier in the narrative that Violet is a hairdresser from all the years of listening to her hero grandmother tell stories about working for Miss Vera Louise in her “fine stone house on Edison Street, where the linen was embroidered with blue thread and there was nothing to do but adore the blond boy who ran away from them depriving everybody of his

carefully loved hair” (17). Violet ‘s feelings of inferiority manifest because of the love Golden Gray receives for his paleness and blondeness. Golden Gray is adored simply for the fact that he was not born black like his father; his golden hair and paleness redeem his worth. Violet cannot attain this notion of beauty and is convinced that she is therefore unlovable. Her feelings of inadequacy induce her self-loathing and her belief that Joe loved Dorcas simply for her pale complexion.

What surfaces from the intrusion of her past is Violet’s fear of ending up like her broken mother. Recalling how her mother pretended to drink from a cup before jumping into a well, she realizes she “didn’t want to be like that. Oh never like that...pretending to sip when it was gone; waiting for morning when men came” to strip their humanity and tip her mother out of her chair “like the way you get the cat off the seat if you don’t want to touch it or pick it up in your arms” (98). The ambiguous “I” in Morrison’s narrative wonders about the “final thing she [Rose Dear] had not been able to endure or repeat,” as glimpses of haunting experiences of ordinary African Americans under white racial oppression are revealed:

Had the last washing split the shirtwaist so bad it could not take another mend and changed its name to rag? Perhaps word had reached her about the four-day hangings in Rocky Mount: the men on Tuesday, the women two days later. Or had it been the news of the young tenor in the choir mutilated and tied to a log, his grandmother refusing to give up his waste-

filled trousers, washing them over and over although the stain had disappeared at the third rinse...Might it have been the morning after the night when craving (which used to be hope) got out of hand? When longing squeezed, then tossed her before running off promising to return like an India-rubber ball? Or was it the chair they tipped her out of? (101)

The impact of these experiences on the identities and relationships of the characters surpass time. Though the city forces the characters to change—to adapt to their new circumstances by improvising—their past experiences are imbedded in their psyche and inform their decisions and choices. The racial oppression that denies Rose Dear her integrity and humanity causes her death. Remembering the oppressive circumstances that made freedom by death preferable to her mother, Violet decides that the “important thing, the biggest thing Violet got out of that was to never never have children. Whatever happened, no small dark foot would rest on another while a hungry mouth said, mama?” (102). Fear induced by past trauma informs her decision to not have children, but it is a decision she painfully regrets later when her relationship with Joe fractures as a result of unshared past memories that result in Violet’s twoness: The lonely Violet who sleeps with a doll and a grief-stricken Violet who cuts a dead girl and steals a baby. Earlier in the novel, Violet is described as comforted by the baby she carries away in her arms as “running light traveled her veins” (19). That Violet laughs helplessly at the thought of taking it home, which ignited different “[o]pinions, decisions popped through the crowd like struck matches” (20). Violet’s “public craziness” is directly linked to her past

trauma—her mother’s suicide: “The memory of the light, however, that had skipped through her veins came back now and then...when certain corners in the room resisted lamplight; when the red beans in the pot seemed to be taking forever to soften, she imagined a brightness that could be carried in her arms. Distributed...into places dark as the bottom of a well” (22). Rose Dear’s agonies in life, caused by the racial tensions of her time that made death more desirable, set the trail for Violet’s own disassociation. Violet faces the difficulties and limitations of the racial tension of her own time by day as the “well sucked her sleep” at night (102). She runs away from the violence of the South to the broken promises of the North without leaving the legacies of her past traumas behind.

“They...eventually had the satisfaction of seeing the dung buried. Most of it anyway.”

Though excluded from Ruby’s history and society, Pat spends her time making decorations for the Nativity school program and piecing together a history project for the people of Ruby that consists of documented family trees and genealogies of the fifteen families of the town. This gift is rejected by citizens of Ruby who have many secrets to hide—secrets about why some women—like Pat’s mother—have only one name and why other women had generalized last names. Exploring the relationships between the fifteen families turns into an “intensive labor streaked with bad feelings” (*Paradise* 188). Only the town’s official story “elaborated from pulpits, in Sunday school classes and

ceremonial speeches” were public knowledge. Dissatisfied with the history being told, Pat makes “footnotes, crevices, or questions” to interpret with her imagination when proof was unavailable to answer the many questions her project raised: What is the significance of the line scratching out Ethan Blackhorse’s name in the Blackhorse bible? What was hidden beneath the blot next to Zechariah’s name in the Morgan bible? Excluded from the secrets of Ruby, Pat is even more determined to collect the scattered personal stories of ordinary people in Ruby--from students, gossipy women at picnics, grandmothers, churchgoers, and homemakers. Files she makes cast doubt on the truths being told. In the Morgan file, Pat wonders about the killed-in-Europe boy whom Ruby married and suspects from his photograph that “there wasn’t a brush of Private Smith in his son. K.D. was a mirror of Blackhorse and Morgan blood” (191). Another file labeled “Zechariah Morgan (aka Big Papa, ne’ Coffee) m. Mindy Flood [nota bene Anna Flood’s great-aunt]” records the names of their nine surviving children and keeps track of a complex interwoven history and family tree for Pat who alters established history with her analyses as she makes annotations in her history book, creating space for alternative interpretations (191). She challenges Ruby’s controlled version of history that is violently enforced to preserve power and is interested in what is not included in this grand narrative; she engages in rewriting this rigid version of history by filling in gaps with a fresh perspective on old ideals. Next to of the original families’ names, Pat includes a mark, “8-R,”the “Blue-black people, tall and graceful,

whose clear, wide eyes gave no sign of what they really felt about those who weren't 8-rock like them " (193). Pat exposes Ruby's secrets and documents violations: Her father, Roger Best, was the first to break the 8-rock's blood rule: "The one nobody admitted existed. The one established when the Mississippi flock noticed and remembered that the Disallowing came from fair-skinned colored men" (195). The "quietly throbbing" rule that no one spoke of except for a "hint" in Zechariah's words on the Oven: "Beware the Furrow of His Brow" (195). The ambivalence of these words welcomes multiple meanings from Ruby's citizens. Some see it as commanding; others interpret it as threatening. The teenagers insist on changing it to "Be the Furrow of His Brow" (195). The latter appeals to Pat who remembers how the now broken Menu was forced by 8-Rock to give up his light-skinned fiancé.

In a letter to her mother, under the title labeled, "Roger best m. Delia," Pat's personal trauma she inherits from this interracial oppression is shared:

Daddy, they don't hate us because Mama was your first customer. They hate us because she looked like a cracker and was bound to have cracker-looking children like me, and although I married Billy Cato, who was an 8-Rock like you, like them, I passed the skin on to my daughter, as you and everybody knew I would. (196)

The problem with blood rules, Pat discovers as she answers questions and fills the crevices of a rigid history, are the un-talked-about "takeovers" where preachers did not approve of marriages. Young widows "take over a single man's house," and a "widower might ask a friend or distant relative if he could

take over a young girl who had no prospects” (196). The problem, then, is that incest happens: Pat’s husband’s mother was taken over—with Blackhorse permission—by her mother’s uncle; as a result, she became wife to her own great-uncle. Distant-or-not incest was preferable to the 8-rocks than risking their racial purity with light-skinned offspring—more preferable than “marrying a wife with no last name, a wife without people, a wife of sunlight skin, a wife of racial tampering” (197). The rulers of Ruby refuse to help Pat’s mother, “the dung we leaving behind,” and bring on her death (201). Pat’s reaction to the town’s ostracizing of her mother is to marry an 8-rock “partly (mostly?) because he had the midnight skin of the Catos and the Blackhorses, along with that Blackhorse feature of stick-straight hair” (198). She adopts the racist values of the town of Ruby that punish her and her daughter for their light skin. Her mother’s experience with racial oppression influence her choices and behavior; she feels that the town of Ruby “had the satisfaction of seeing the dung buried” but then adds, “Most of it anyway. Some of it is still aboveground, instructing their grandchildren in a level of intelligence their elders will never acquire” (202). Her feelings of inferiority and her awareness of her “dung” status anger her, but they also fuel her desire for being accepted by the 8-rock.

This desire leads her to punish her own daughter not for “what she had seen but what she feared to see” (202). Pat sees her daughter publicly hanging out with two brothers near the Oven and, like the town of Ruby, labels her daughter as promiscuous. The rage Pat takes out on Billie—“running up the

stairs with a 1950s GE electric iron called Royal Ease clutched in her fingers to slam against her daughter's head"—manifests from her own sense of inferiority. Pat, "the bastard-born daughter of the woman with sunlight skin and no last name" who was always proving to everyone that she was "of great worth and inestimable value," ponders what it was that caused her violent behavior and realizes that since Billie was born, she was thought of as a "liability:" "Vulnerable to the possibility of not being quite as much of a lady as Patricia *Cato* would like" (203 emphasis mine). In other words, Pat feared Billie would not measure up to the ideals of 8-rock who ultimately condemn Billie at the age of three for pulling down her panties in the middle of the street. Pat Best knows that had her light-skinned daughter been an 8-rock, they would have viewed her as an innocent baby and not a whore for the rest of her life. Pat wonders "if she had defended Billie Delia or sacrificed her" for 8-rock approval and if she is still sacrificing her (203). She understands that her violent need to hurt her daughter with a heavy iron was "to smash the young girl that lived in the minds of the 8-rocks, not the girl her daughter was" (204). Pat's othered child is a reminder of her own outsider status within the community. She decorates for a play her family is excluded from and refers to the Ruby community as "they"-- excluding herself—but defends its people and its ideologies (214). When Richard Misner, who is considered an "outsider" and "enemy" in a town where "those two words mean the same thing," questions the exclusion of two of the nine original families from

the play, Pat dismisses his questions and genuine attempt at understanding the people of Ruby (212).

Previously locked in a singular pursuit of an unattainable ideal of the racially pure and uncontaminated identities of 8-rock, Pat did not “encourage change,” but her encounter with Reverend Misner offers her new insight (210, 209). She realizes that the town’s righteousness disgusts her and how all the “nonsense she had grown up with seemed to her like an excuse to be hateful;” she becomes aware that she has been defending Ruby’s “people and things and ideas with a passion she did not feel” and decides that Misner is right to question the exclusion of families (214). The heated discussion with Misner inspires her to pursue this question. Pat recalls the elimination of the Cato line from the play and her own exclusion from performing in the play as a child; wondering which other family was rejected, Pat question her evasive father about the fewer holy families:

“It was the skin color, wasn’t it?”

“What?”

“The way people get chosen and ranked in this town.”

“Aw, no. Well, there might have been little offense taken—long ago. But nothing hard.”

“No? What about what Steward said when you got married?” (216)

There is “harm in asking,” Pat decides as she realizes that what she did to Richard Misner is “what everyone else does. When he asks a questions, they

close him out to anything but the obvious, the superficial. And I of all people know exactly what it feels like. Not good enough to be represented by an eight-year-old on a stage” (216). Skeptical about the survival of this pursuit of a singular history and purity of race, Pat burns her papers: “Did they really think they could keep this up? The numbers, the bloodlines, the who fucks who? All those generations of 8-rocks kept going, just to end up narrow as bale wire?” (217). Though Pat provides Misner with two versions of the official story of the massacre of Convent women, she withholds her own: The first story consists of nine men who persuade the Convent ladies to change their ways or leave. A fight took place, and the women transformed into other shapes and vanished.

The second version Pat gives is the Fleetwood-Jury perspective: Five men went to throw out the Convent women and killed the old woman before the four others could stop them. These four men were attacked by the women who ran away in their Cadillac. Pat leaves Misner to choose or reject either version but does not share hers: “that nine 8-rocks murdered five harmless women (a) because the women were impure (not 8-rock); because the women were unholy (fornicators at least, abortionists at most); and (c) because they could—which was what being an 8-rock meant to them and was also what the ‘deal’ required”(297). Like the town of Ruby, Pat Best engages in an inescapable “intermixture of ideas” with Misner but never transcends her double consciousness; the identities of the characters in Morrison’s trilogy are, to

borrow the words of Paul Gilroy, “always unfinished, always being remade”(120).

“He couldn’t have done it if I hadn’t made the ink.”

Plagued by schoolteacher’s definitions and measurements of their worth, Sethe and Paul D search for meaning in their troubled lives. As Paul D struggles to define his masculinity, Sethe struggles with her maternal subjectivity. Sethe’s “rough choice” challenges Paul D, members of the community, and readers—to “approve or condemn” her but not before Morrison beats them “up by the claims of both” (*Beloved* 217). Sethe’s shame leads to what Leon Wurmser describes as the “conviction of one’s unlovability’ because of an inherent sense that the self is ‘weak, dirty, and defective’...[Sethe] feels exposed and humiliated—looked at with contempt for being inferior, flawed, and dirty—and thus wants to hide or disappear. Fear...leads to the wish...to be viewed as different than one is” (qtd. in Bouson 10). Tough choices—killing her child and prostituting for an inscription—result in her feeling dirty, animalistic, and ashamed. This shame leads to her numbness and dissociation. The judgment and neglect of the community alienate Sethe, contributing to her dilemma.

Another interpretation of Sethe’s violent choice is that it is a consequence of racial oppression. Baby Suggs, for instance, cannot condemn Sethe’s behavior because she understands the anguish of being a black woman in a racist economy that denies motherhood to slaves. As Claudine Raynaud explains in “*Beloved or the Shifting Shapes of Memory*,” “Sethe mourns a child

that she herself has put to death, but mourning shifts to the ‘undoing’ at the core of slavery that made her do what she did. She also acts out in infanticide the ambivalence of giving birth—which is also giving death—that motherhood exemplifies” (53). Sethe kills the best part of herself—the part she does not own under the racist system of slavery but risked loving anyway. This was a risk Baby Suggs would not take; she could not approve Sethe’s choice of excessive love because her own defense against this denial of motherhood was to not love her children at all. Laurie Vickroy in *The Dilemma of “Double-Consciousness”* explains how writers, like Morrison, challenge these idealizations of motherhood by “emphasizing the social, cultural, and economic forces that mediate nurturing. A mother’s role in nurturing and socializing her children is compromised when mechanisms of oppressive control such as violence, economic, or sexual exploitation, and cultural/mythological representations of women all limit her options and rights” (37). The circumstances of oppressed mothers are emphasized by Morrison who engages in “demystifying [her characters’] motivations and presenting them as full subjects deeply conflicted between social demands of motherhood, their own needs, and their children’s well-being” (37). At Sweet Home, Sethe is conflicted between the demands of Mrs. Garner and the needs of her babies:

I tied Buglar up when we had all that pork to smoke. Fire everywhere and he was getting into everything. I liked to lost him so many times. Once he got up on the well, right on it. I flew. Snatched him just in time. So I knew

we'd be rendering and smoking and I couldn't see after him, well, I got a rope and tied it round his ankle. Just long enough to play round a little, but not long enough to reach the well or fire. I didn't like the look of it, but I didn't know what else to do. It's hard, you know what I mean? by yourself and no woman to help you get through. (*Beloved* 186)

Her dilemma intensifies after schoolteacher's arrival when she realizes the implication of his experiment on her life. Her inability to meet her children's needs leads to her self-fragmentation when she fails to "compensate for her own motherlessness by being a supermother to her children" (Keizer 112). Sethe's "love is too thick" because she suffers from her own mother's abandonment (*Beloved* 191). From her perspective, "'love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all'" (191). She sends her three children off to safety to stay behind for Halle who never shows. Though Schoolteacher's nephews violate her for their scientific study, Sethe escapes Sweet Home with only one thing on her mind: getting her milk to her baby. In "*Beloved: the Possessions of History*," Jill Matus maintains that Sethe's longing for her "mother, her identification with her—'mark the mark on me too'—suggests that in regarding her children as extensions of herself and in seeing their protection as the preservation of the best part of herself, she replays her longing for a mother who would similarly protect and stay with her" (111). Sethe's determination to feed her hungry babies is linked with her traumatic childhood experience of being separated from her slave mother and later abandoned by her in search of freedom; when Sethe tells her story to Paul D years later, it is obvious that she is most traumatized by

the violent confiscation of her milk. Even when Paul D reminds her that “we was talking ‘bout the tree,” she continues to talk about those boys who “came in there and took my milk” (*Beloved* 25). When Paul D asks, “They used cowhide on you?,” she replies, “And they took my milk” (25). When he asks, “They beat you and you was pregnant?,” she exclaims, “And they took my milk!” (25).

Haunted by her past trauma, she recalls painful memories of how her mother worked in the fields and how she was left with little or no milk, since the white babies were nursed first: “I know what it is to be without the milk that belongs to you; to have to fight and holler for it, and to have so little left” (231). Her obsession with nurturing her baby despite her torture and the killing of her child reflects her desperation to fulfill the role of mother; her children were “her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing—the part of her that was clean” (289).

Toni Morrison in *Profiles of a Writer* describes Sethe’s choice as “the ultimate gesture of a loving mother. It was also an outrageous claim of a slave; the last thing a slave woman owns is her children.” She says it is another way of saying, “to kill my children is preferable than having them die.” Her intention was to send them somewhere safer and spare them the listing of their “characteristics on the animal side of the paper” (*Beloved* 289). “Whites,” Sethe says, “might dirty her allright, but not her best thing” (289). She tells Paul D that “[i]t worked;,” “[t]hey ain’t at Sweet Home. School teacher ain’t got em” (191). She insists, “[i]t ain’t my job to know what’s worse. It’s my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that” (192). After the

Misery, she contemplates suicide to reunite with crawling already? but is conflicted about abandoning her remaining children. Matus explains that it is “through Sethe’s emerging memories of her mother, [that] Morrison suggests a genealogy of mothering under slavery that would logically produce the excesses and extreme forms of Sethe’s maternal subjectivity” (111). Sethe’s desperate choice and the impact of that choice on her children and her community years later illustrate the legacy of the traumatic effects of slavery on individual and collective identities. Her reaction to the Fugitive Bill, her capture, and her own feelings of abandonment ignite her desperation and her fear, and she is left without her family.

Further, it is significant that the graphic scene involving Sethe’s attempt at murdering her children in the woodshed is told through the eyes of her white master. Sethe’s value is derived from her ability to produce more profit to service her owners. Claudine Raynaud points out how school teacher stands for “the normative white male system” that creates “‘knowledge’ from a priori and racist hypotheses and its link to power” (46). Schoolteacher’s perspective are constructed as fact and handed down generation after generation. This effect of schoolteacher’s racist discourse influences her desperate choices. According to Matus, this perspective allows Morrison’s readers to “understand more compellingly Sethe’s horrific actions. School teacher’s perspective reveals why Sethe cannot permit her children to be captured and taken back into slavery, for they will be returning to the world effectively signaled in his dehumanizing,

bestializing view of slaves" (107). This is the view Sethe accepts for herself but refuses to allow her children to feel. However, Sethe's children inherit her past trauma much like the way she inherits her mother's. Three generations of women in *Beloved* are impacted by the past that interrupts their lives. Sethe's daughters react to this trauma differently: Denver associates her mother with violence, and *Beloved* sees Sethe as a part of herself. Denver turns deaf and fears her mother. *Beloved* cannot be appeased and threatens Sethe. All are isolated from 124 Bluestone Road.

Chapter Two: Clamor for a Kiss

Another legacy of racial oppression in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, *Jazz* and *Paradise* is the severing of relationships between families and communities.

Toni Morrison explores this theme in *Beloved* as she dramatizes the dilemmas of many slaves who attempt to reclaim these relationships together. This theme is also explored in *Paradise* as the women of the Convent reject Ruby's definitions and embrace an alternative family free from male authority and its vision. A forced encounter with otherness also leads to new realizations and relationships for the lonely women in *Jazz*. The most effective way for Morrison's women to survive their traumatic past is if they do so together. By learning to share their stories and validate themselves and one another, they redefine their lives on their own terms.

"...me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow."

Maintaining relationships is a struggle for survival in *Beloved* as slave mothers and fathers are severed from their children and from each another. One reaction to this loss of love for the slave is denying it; as Ella says, "If anybody was to ask me I'd say 'Don't love nothing'" (*Beloved* 109). Others, like Sethe, loved a little too much. For a slave mother to love her children was "very risky;" the best thing was to love just a little bit, so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you'd have a little love left over

for the next one" (*Beloved* 57). Sethe's intimate experiences and the varying perspectives of her choices highlight the legacies of this trauma on the families of slaves and their descendents.

For instance, abandonment is the reality for slaves in *Beloved*. Sethe's mother, who eventually leaves Sethe behind to escape slavery, cannot love her children conceived by rape on a slave ship; she throws them all overboard but keeps Sethe, her child from a black man. Although her mother chooses to keep her, Sethe remembers seeing her "but a few times out in the fields and once when she was working indigo"; by the time she woke up in the morning, "she was in line" (74). "Sundays," Sethe says, "she slept like a stick" and only nursed her "two or three weeks—that's the way the others did" (74). Sethe remembers how her mother could not sleep in the same cabin most of the time and how she showed her "the circle and a cross burnt right in the skin" on her rib, so Sethe can identify her in case something happens to her face (74). Knowing what freedom was, Sethe's mother attempted to reclaim it, leaving her behind. Sethe suffers from her mother's abandonment and death throughout her life, which perhaps explains the obsessive love she has for her own children for whom she goes to extremes not to abandon.

Further, male slaves were prevented from protecting and feeling responsible for their loved ones, and black women were forced to redefine their families as a result. Sethe sends her three children across the river and goes back looking for her husband. She is then violently assaulted and milked by

Schoolteacher's nephews who are experimenting with her "animal characteristics" (*Beloved* 261). Pregnant and violated, Sethe is determined to get what is left of her milk to her baby. Later, Paul D informs Sethe that Halle had broken down from helplessly watching Sethe's violent assault. His inability to protect her from her white male captors emasculates and shames him; slavery denies him the role of father and husband and causes him to lose his mind. Halle's traumatic inaction and imposed absence limit Sethe to tough choices. With the absence of a mother, a husband, and a community, Sethe's family unit is threatened, causing Sethe, who does not own herself or her children, "to love and protect them with the only means at her disposal" (10). Reacting to the racist laws that threaten separation from children for profit, Sethe kills her baby. The slave system's destructive effect and impact on family and nurturing is illustrated through the paralleling of Sethe's experience as a slave child with her experience as a slave mother.

Though she could not claim her own body let alone those of her babies, Sethe does not she deny them her love, which was a common defense of slaves for emotional survival; the effect of racial oppression destroys Sethe's sense of worth. Faced with the severing of psyches and relationships, slaves in *Beloved* learn to engage in a communal process of claiming their identity. Baby Suggs, like a preacher, gathers people and invites them to participate in communal imagining of freedom from their past. She encourages them to "imagine" loving

themselves: "Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. You got to love it, you!" (105). They counter dominant society's definitions by developing their own. Issues and policies, such as the Fugitive Act are also discussed at these gatherings, which empower the former slaves and encourage them to help one another. As Nancy Jesser Peterson asserts in "Violence, Home, and Community," "communities serve as places to gather strength, formulate strategies, and rest, even as they are insufficient to the task of 'solving' institutional and social ills" (325). The Clearing allows them to feel free. According to Peterson, "freedom as the place where love is possible becomes the inspiration for Baby Suggs' preaching...She reclaims her family relationships and reclaims her relationship to her God, and to her place in the community" (325). They participate in the process of restoring their identities to celebrate the bonds that they were denied as slaves. Loving one's self allows the loving of one another, which is required to survive the ongoing threat of racial oppression and its effects and thus to function in the present. The importance of building communities for survival is emphasized when 124 Bluestone Road fails to warn Sethe of the four approaching horsemen who would cause Sethe to "out hurt the hurter" (*Beloved* 189). This exclusion threatens the safety and unity of the community; Baby Suggs dies alone when schoolteacher comes into her yard, and Sethe kills her baby. It is only when Denver reaches out to the community to save her mother that Ella is able to

relate to Sethe's experience as a slave mother. She learns to empathize with Sethe, deciding that she would not want a ghost of the past invading her present after reflecting on her own abuse by white men and her refusal to nurse her white baby. Ella embraces a new understanding of Sethe's dilemma of being a black mother under slavery and aids Sethe. The black women end the isolation of 124 Bluestone Road. Morrison's characters in *Beloved* find freedom in gathering together and sharing their collective grief.

"It never occurred to me that they were thinking other thoughts, feeling other feelings, putting their lives together in ways I never dreamed of."

Grieving in isolation from her own traumatic past, Alice Manfred who "had been frightened for a long time" lumped people together and isolated herself from her community (*Jazz* 54). She saw only "cold black faces" on Fifth Avenue where she expected ordinary people to commit countless crimes. Jazz music threatens her though she "did not know for sure, but ...suspected the dances were beyond nasty because the music was getting worse...Songs that used to start in the head...had dropped on down, down to places below the sash...Lower and lower, until the music was so lowdown you had to shut your windows..." (56). Alice wonders if the change of the "dirty,-get-on-down music" mirrors the political turmoil on Fifth Avenue: Two hundred killed in riots in East St. Louis, two of whom were Dorcas' parents and the cheated black veterans who were back from war and denied promised services while facing violence by whites who feared black migration to the North (58). However, she quickly

dismisses her suspicion, deciding that it was not the War, the devalued veterans, or the migration of blacks searching for livelihood; it was the music that made blacks do "disorderly things" (58).

Alice views the world through the distorted lens of her newspapers. She is aware that there are too many deaths for whites to print and is somewhat conscious of a "gap" between words and reality—a lack of "connection, something to close the distance between" Dorcas' experience and the "crazy, out of focus" print (58). However, this does not prevent Alice from internalizing the stereotypes and associations of the papers: "She knew from sermons and editorials that it wasn't real music—just colored folks' stuff: harmful, certainly; embarrassing, of course; but not real, not serious" (59). Alice is ashamed of being associated with the working class blacks she categorizes. They are inherently violent, according to the articles she reads that terrify her. She dismisses the harsh circumstances of their lives and labels their resistance and expressions as dirty and frivolous. Alice, repressing her emotions and sexuality, fights the music and the longing it evokes; she holds her hand in her apron to "keep from smashing it through the glass pane to snatch the world in her fist and squeeze the life out of it for doing what it did and did and did to her and everybody else she knew or knew about" (59). She saves her newspapers to read over and over to "figure out" the people's secrets, watches people from a distance, and makes associations based on their behavior without mingling in the street and getting to know the people she oversimplifies; the narrator explains,

“If she had come out more often, sat on the stoop or gossiped in front of the beauty shop, she would have known more than what the paper said. She might have known what was under her nose” (73). From Alice’s perspective, Joe and Violet are voiceless and inferior; their identities are fixed and their behavior is predictable.

When Alice thinks of Joe, she thinks of the “impunity” of “the man:” “He just did it. One man. One defenseless girl. Death. A sample-case man. A nice, neighborly, everybody knows-him man” (73). Mathew Treherne in “Figuring in, Figuring Out” explains how Alice pins people and their actions in nouns much like the nouns in newspapers that influence her interpretation of the world and its people. These nouns function “in Alice’s mind as metonyms for the crimes described;” the nouns are used to explain actions that reduce people into categories (4). He illustrates with Violet’s laughter, which carries different associations for different people who interpret her behavior differently: “Would a sneak-thief woman stealing a baby call attention to herself like that at a corner not a hundred yards from the wicker carriage she took it from? (*Jazz* 220).” Would a “kindhearted innocent woman” take a stroll with a baby she was asked to watch while the sister ran back to the house, “and laugh like that?” (20). Treherne points out that it is not “the people’s direct, actual knowledge of Violet” that is elicited, but stereotypes that are “mapped on to her behavior, and that behavior is subsequently given meaning” (4). Frightened by these violent stereotypes, she avoids the streets that make her feel “unsafe because the

brutalizing men and their brutal women were not just out there, they were in her block, her house. A man had come in her living room and destroyed her niece. His wife had come right in the funeral to nasty and dishonor her” (*Jazz* 74). Alice locks Joe and Violet into inferior categories and denies them their history and humanity. From Alice’s outlook they are “brutal” not because of the oppressive circumstances of their lives but because of their class and race from which she distances herself. Her perspective of Joe and Violet and their behavior echo the dehumanizing news accounts she reads: “Man kills wife. Eight accused of rape dismissed. Woman and girl victim of. Woman commits suicide... Five women caught. Woman says man beat. In jealous rage man” (74). These “subdued and broken” female victims “had not been broken,” according to the articles which dismissively insist that “black women were armed” and not by any means “easy prey” (74). These associations impact Alice’s expectations as she projects them onto “Violent” whom she believed “would end up in jail one day—they all did eventually”(79). Alice’s absorption of white racist ideology leads to the denial of her race. Alice also paints working class African Americans with these stereotypes: “Black women were armed; black women were dangerous and the less money they had the deadlier the weapon they chose” (77). Alice associates violence with her own race but maps out these stereotypes on to a particular class as well. Alice waits for “the woman with a knife” who is a certain “kind of Negro...the kind she trained Dorcas away from. The embarrassing kind. More than appealing, they were dangerous. The husband

shot; the wife stabbed. Nothing...Gambling. Cursing. A terrible and nasty closeness. Red dresses. Yellow shoes. And, of course, race music to urge them on" (79). Working class African Americans are reduced to Alice's fixed perceptions that cause her to overlook the unique factors in each of their lives that evoke different reactions from disenfranchised people. Engaging in a discussion with Violet, Alice exposes her internalized racial consciousness: "Your husband. Does he hurt you?"; "Did he beat on you?" (81). Violet challenges Alice's racist and classist associations: "Joe? No. he never hurt nothing" (81). Violet defies Alice's expectations with her unpredictable behavior and unsettles Alice whose language and categories cannot contain Violet: "At first I thought you came here to harm me. Then I thought you wanted to offer condolences. Then I thought you wanted to thank me for not calling the law. But none of that is it, is it?" (82). Violet surprises Alice with her response, "I had to sit down somewhere" (82).

The dialogue exchange between Violet and Alice leads to new realizations for both characters. Alice changes; she begins to look forward to Violet's random visits: "The thing was how Alice felt and talked in her company. Not like she did with other people. With Violet she was impolite. Sudden. Frugal. No apology or courtesy seemed required or necessary between them. But something else was—clarity perhaps" (83). What Alice feels around Violet is comfortable. She does not suppress or repress her feelings and behavior around Violet who invites her to step outside of herself. When Alice stereotypes "fancy

women,” Violet offers an alternative perspective, defending their humanity; when Alice comments, “I don’t understand women like you. Women with knives,” Violet insists, “I wasn’t born with a knife” and questions Alice, opening her up to new experiences and circumstances (85). “Wouldn’t you,” challenges Violet who reminds Alice of her own memories of loss and dreams of blood and vindication for her dead husband’s mistress. “You don’t know what loss is,” Alice challenges Violet as they share their personal stories and ease one another’s pain (87). Violet and Alice reflect—together—on their individual pasts, leading Violet to empathize with her mother’s experience: “Mama. Mama? Is this where you got to and couldn’t do it no more? The place of shade where you know you are not and never again be loved by anybody who can choose to do it?” (110). Their shared thought leads to a shared silence that ends with a loving gesture from Alice who tries to ease Violet’s pain with an offer to sew her coat. This reveals Alice’s change of heart. She reaches out to the woman she had othered after an encounter through dialogue that exposes her simplistic “metonymies and...complacent modes of thinking” (Treherne 5). She advises Violet to “make it, make it” and love “anything left to you to love” (*Jazz* 113,112). This exchange pulls Violet and *that* Violet who embrace spring together in the City at the same time.

Violet finally takes control of her narrative when the voice shifts from third person to first. She explains her choices and behavior by offering an alternative perspective of her personal history that destroyed her sense of self.

Violet expresses her profound loneliness and her reasoning behind that Violet's aim at Dorcas' neck, explaining that Joe's absence left Violet with no one to warm her own neck. "That's why," she explains, "And that's why it took so much wrestling to get me down, keep me down and out of that coffin where she was the heifer who took what was mine, what I chose, picked out and determined to have and hold on to, NO! that Violet is not somebody walking round town, up and down the streets wearing my skin and using my eyes shit that Violet is me!" (95). New perspectives lead Violet to confront her split self and take control of it while revisiting events of her past. The intense physical labor she does for Whites, her first encounter with Joe, and her loss of Joe to Dorcas are linked with events of her traumatic childhood. Violet wonders if Joe loved Dorcas because she was "a young me with high-yellow skin instead of black" (97). Violet is able to understand the conditions that cause her erratic behavior. Violet not only becomes aware of how True Belle's white image of the perfect child fragments her sense of self, but also of how it severs her relationship with Joe: "Is that what happened? Standing in the cane, he was trying to catch a girl he was yet to see, but his heart knew all about, and me, holding on to him but wishing he was the golden boy I never saw either. Which means from the very beginning I was a substitute and so was he" (97). Violet's awareness of her deep yearning for Golden Gray and what he symbolizes leads to some insight into her pre-Dorcas disintegrating relationship with Joe. Their unshared pasts and its pain separate them from one another. Remembering the past in a way that is not destructive

to themselves and their relationships with others proves to be an ongoing process that cannot be achieved alone.

Sharing “personal stories they like to hear again and again” and imagining new ones, Violet and Joe also reconcile as they reevaluate their relationship (223). Violet kills that Violet then kills “the me that killed her,” leaving one Violet: “Me” (209). What she kills is Golden Gray’s idealized image “living inside” her mind—the blond, young, and light child she wanted to be and whom her grandmother loved. Violet engages in the endless process of becoming whole by unsettling the racist thinking she inherits from her grandmother. In an exchange of experiences, she tells Felice, “Now I want to be the woman my mother didn’t stay long enough to see. That one. The one she would have liked and the one I used to like before” (*Jazz* 209). Freeing herself from the definitions and associations of others, Violet sees herself through no one’s eyes but her own. Old memories visit Violet’s happy dreams, releasing laughter that no longer “hangs on to wells and a boy’s golden hair” (228). Future ahead, they make way for new stories told and revised in an endless work of feeling whole, together.

“Do you think this was a short, pitiful life bereft of worth because it did not parallel your own?”

Similarly, the women of the Convent in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* also gather together against their fragmented grief by deconstructing race and gender categories and the meanings and values placed on them by a racist and sexist society. The diverse women of the Convent are beyond the rules of Ruby’s

black patriarchy, and their alternative womanhood threatens these New Fathers' narrow ideals of race and femininity. To preserve their singular ideals and maintain the system of inequality which privileges them, the leaders of Ruby murder the defenseless women of the Convent. The women of the Convent do not conform to the Ruby's idea of a woman's place. The Convent serves as a refuge for women—and men—who have been marginalized and who yearn to escape from the intrusion of their past on their present lives. According to Linda J. Krumholz in "Reading and Insight in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*," the women of the Convent "carry no ideals of family or society in their wanderings, but together they tackle the anxiety of belonging and create an open house by challenging the social and historical strictures that surround them and by confronting the scary things inside themselves" (24). Mavis, Grace, Seneca, and Pallas have all been victimized by ideals that violently demean them. Mavis finds comfort in the Convent after causing her twins' death in an attempt to meet her husband's expectations and avoid being beaten by him. Grace embodies sexuality and embraces it by exhibiting her desire unapologetically in the Convent. Traumatized by the abandonment by her mother, the sexual abuse in foster homes, and the longing for love that triggers self-inflicted mutilation, Seneca finds a family and a home in the Convent. Neglected by her father, betrayed by her mother and lover, and later raped, Pallas is nurtured and welcomed in the Convent as well. Menus, drunk and traumatized by Ruby's exclusionary laws that prohibit him from marrying his love, is also welcomed.

The Convent functions as a community free from narrow definitions and judgments of race and gender constructed by Ruby's patriarchal society.

The Convent is juxtaposed with Ruby, an all black town established by fixed ideals of gender that excludes light-skinned blacks and silences women. Ruby privileges men and oppresses women who are judged according to Ruby's patriarchal ideals of womanhood. Krumholz points out that "Ruby describes woman as both enshrined jewel and dangerous sexuality. The Morgan twins' shared memory of the nineteen Negro ladies in summer dresses as a nostalgic and idealized vision of womanhood contrasts sharply with Steward's memory of his desire to punch a black prostitute" (24). The patriarchs of Ruby have placed women into narrow black-or-white categories; the Convent women do not meet the men's ideal of femininity and are blamed for the fragmentation of Ruby's community:

A mother was knocked down the stairs by her cold-eyed daughter. Four damaged infants were born in one family. Daughters refused to get out of bed. Brides disappeared on their honeymoons...And what went on at the Oven these days was not to be believed...the one thing that connected all these catastrophes was in the Convent. And in the Convent were those women. (11)

The Convent women are used as scapegoats for Ruby's failure because they refuse to abide by Ruby's unchanging ideals, and the women's alternative definitions for womanhood threaten Ruby's authority. The younger children's

rebellion toward the ways of the New Fathers who exclude them also amplifies the threat of change for Ruby's rulers. The Convent women are nothing like the Morgan twins' ideal of femininity; they do not fit in the mold of the idealized image of nineteen voiceless women. They are women who help the silenced residents of Ruby find refuge from an imposed narrow vision of their male-dominated lives.

Further, the Morgan twins try to preserve their idealized Haven by controlling an interpretation and a history narrative that privileges the rulers. The black men of Ruby are the definers, and as a result, the younger generation's subversive perspectives and interpretations are rejected, and the women of Ruby are expected to conform to Ruby's oppressive ideologies. Krumholz asserts that the "Morgan twins epitomize authority and have one purpose, one belief, and one memory;" the patriarchal society of Ruby is embodied in Steward and Deek who interpret the inscription on the Oven "based on their privileged relationship with the inscription" (22). Their narrow interpretations and their belief in their own self-righteousness create the fissures in their community. The younger generation struggles with the old ways of those in power who demand complete allegiance to narrow definitions and interpretations that perpetuate fixed authority. The rulers of Ruby deprive the younger generation and women their own stories and reject alternative voices. The young rebels and the women of Ruby attempt to escape this oppression by visiting the Convent.

After visiting the Convent and struggling to understand this change occurring in Ruby, Soane steeps a drug-like tonic given to her by Connie to help with her depression while bitterly expecting Deek proudly throwing quail on her clean floors “Like he’s giving me a present. Like you were already plucked, cleaned and cooked” (*Paradise* 100). She reflects on how Anna and Kate could not scrub the painted fist with red fingernails on the wall of the Oven. Although she is aware that the younger generation is deprived of socializing near the Oven where little children are also denied from playing, “Soane couldn’t understand it. There were no Whites (moral or malevolent) around to agitate or incense them, make them ugly-up the Oven and defy the adults” (102). Soane is aware of the fragmentation of Ruby, but she does not seem to be aware of its cause. She longs for the Haven days where the community gathered, celebrated, and congratulated one another after a baptism near the Oven and ponders how the Oven lost its value in Ruby; it was no “longer the meeting place to report on what done or what needed; on illness, births, deaths, comings, and goings” (111). The women of Ruby “nodded when the men took the Oven apart...But privately they resented the truck space given over to it—rather than a few more sacks of seed, rather than shoats or even a child’s crib. Resented also the hours spent putting it back together” (103). The New Fathers exclude women from the decision-making process and from financial matters; Soane does not understand why Deek cannot help Menus, Fleet, and Roger out with their money problems. When Soane sees Deek’s satisfaction at their friends’ economic trouble and says

she does not understand, he smiles and says, "I do...You don't need to" (107).

The return of things to the way they "ought to be" is what obsesses Deek and depresses Soane who finds comfort in tonic and in conversations with Connie at the Convent (107). Soane, not unlike the younger generation, is required to strictly adhere to the expectations and ideals of a patriarchal society. The women of Ruby are dominated by male authority and conform to their fixed place as define by them; some, like Soane, temporarily escape this male repression by walking to the Convent where gender, race, and sexuality are not rigidly categorized.

Adding to the fragmentation of Ruby is the disconnect between the older generation and the younger one; the older generation cannot and will not understand the needs of the young who yearn for the change that could transform Ruby from a racist and sexist society into an inclusive community that welcomes alternative voices. The young men and women of Ruby struggle with their identities as the Ruby leaders stunt the growth of the community with its fixed interpretations and adherence to its past. The values and ideals of a racist and sexist society are reinforced at the expense of the younger generation and women. It is in the rulers' benefit for Ruby to remain the same; the Morgan twins are threatened by the change Misner inspires: "A man like that could encourage strange behavior; side with a teenage girl; shift ground to Fleetwood. A man like that, willing to throw money away, could give customers ideas. Make them think there was a choice about interest rates" (*Paradise* 56). With their 8-

rock blood rule and silencing of the powerless, the Ruby patriarchs become like their white oppressors; they ironically exclude light-skinned black families from their own stories like they exclude Pat's family from the play. According to Phillip Page in "Furrowing All the Brows: Interpretation and the Transcendent in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*," "the attempt to retain the ideal of purity and righteousness, to repeat the past without change, creates the greatest change of all: Communal spirit shifts to individual acquisitiveness, old interpretations and memories...squench dialogue and dissent, and values rigidify into repressive dogma"; they become what they and the Old Fathers had escaped, and their community shatters as a result (27). By demanding adherence to a racist ideology that services their needs at the expense of its citizens, Ruby suffers from a severe fragmentation of its people.

Similarly, the powerful rulers of Ruby become what the women of the Convent tried to escape. The Ruby patriarchs expect women to live up to their ideals; the women's conformity and obedience to their definitions of womanhood reaffirm their masculinity and authority. The Ruby patriarchs are threatened by women like Arnette and Billie Delia who hang out around the Oven when their place, according to Deek, is "to be somewhere chopping, canning, mending, and fetching" (*Paradise* 111). Threatened by the alternative choices women make, the men oppress women to further their own ideals. Arnette's reality is dismissed when the Ruby leaders ignore her pregnancy. Her family and K.D.'s family—all men—only focus on K.D.'s abuse of her, which the

Morgan twins imply she deserved. Steward is thrilled when K.D. associates Arnette with Billie Delia who is labeled by “the fastest girl in town and speeding up by the second” (59). When Misner asks what caused K.D. to hit Arnette, the Morgan twins, Arnold, and Jeff all fall silent. Arnette’s family is seemingly concerned with her reputation, but this concern is relieved with the Morgan twins’ money. The Morgan twins ridicule the Fleetwoods with Arnette’s sexuality, but they do not take issue with K.D.’s; they free K.D. of taking responsibility for the reality of Arnette’s condition by refusing to acknowledge her condition. The rulers preserve their masculine ideals at the expense of women like Arnette. Rejected by the men in her life, she temporarily takes refuge at the Convent until she harms herself with a self-induced miscarriage. She is beaten on her wedding night by K.D. and never gets over the loss of her firstborn; she blames the Convent women in hopes of repairing her reputation with the harsh view of a male-dominated town. Controlling women is Ruby’s way of maintaining their masculinity and authority. According to Krumholz, women are used by men “to symbolize national and community values,” and “women embody the threat of change to men” with their connection to birth and death (26). The women pose a threat to the purity of 8-rock blood with their natural ability to reproduce and with possible adultery. Community values are reinforced by women who are used to display the patriarch’s control and power to other men. The Ruby patriarchs maintain authority by perpetuating inequality as they hold women up to their masculine definitions.

Through the distorted lens of Ruby's leaders, the Convent women are "nasty," "dirty," "sloven," "messy," and "satanic" (*Paradise* 8-18). The Convent is viewed as "diseased" with "revolting sex, deceit and the sly torture of children" (8). The rulers do not see the women of the Convent as human beings; they dehumanize them in the same way Schoolteacher dehumanizes Sethe. Like the white patriarchal system, Ruby's black patriarchy severs the relationships Consolata forms with Mavis, Grace, Pallas, and Seneca. The male rulers of Ruby outnumber the women and violently separate the redefined family of women, which they interpret differently. The Convent's inclusivity and embrace of change threatens the Ruby authority who condemn them, believing God to be on their side. The Convent functions as a family and an inclusive community free from racism and sexism. As a result, the men of Ruby decide to dominate the women with violence and justify this violence with religion in an attempt to fragment this community of women, which is reminiscent of how white patriarchal slavery fragmented black families in *Beloved*. However, the rulers of Ruby only succeed in fragmenting their own community by alienating the younger generation, creating family feuds, and distancing the women of Ruby from one another. Their authority over interpretation and history is questioned as the people of Ruby interpret and reinterpret the events of the massacre with different versions of the story that they share with one another to gain many perspectives.

After Mother's death, Connie assumes the role of mother and enables

the Convent women to heal by taking them on a spiritual cleansing that unifies both their bodies and their spirits through the sharing of their stories. The Convent women heal when they gain perspective of themselves and one another through the use of “templates” and “loud dreaming”; Page contends:

the templates are analogous to fictional selves, doubling the self and thereby allowing each woman to ‘see in’ to herself, to interpret herself, and thus to find a viable identity. The other ingredient of the healing process is loud dreaming through which Connie engages the women in sharing their life-stories. In loud dreaming they not only unburden themselves of their traumatic pasts, but as each one talks, the others enter her story, in full empathy with her...As they do so, they heal themselves, achieving individual harmony as they acquire communal harmony. They gain self and community. (642)

By redefining their identities, validating one another, and living on their own terms, the Convent women challenge the definitions of Ruby with their openness to change. It is their presence and redefined family model consisting of women who find freedom through tolerance that threatens Ruby’s narrow definitions. The theme of healing through relationships and love in *Paradise* is reinforced as it ends with the women gathered in their Black mother’s arms.

Chapter3: Spaces Between

"That's what I like about this place. They let you choose."

Although Morrison dramatizes the self-loathing of her characters that develops from internalized racist representations and stereotypes in her trilogy, she also enacts collective healing. Members of African American communities in Morrison's narratives must share their stories in order to heal. Baby Suggs calls out to her neighbors who respond and engage in this process of healing. It takes a community to gather around and soothe Sethe's grief. Violet challenges Alice to understand her, and Alice does. The empathy Violet and Joe eventually feel for one another leads to new outlooks, new stories, and renewed love. The narrator of *Jazz* also learns to view Golden Gray and Wild from a perspective free of racist assumptions and representations. The Convent women embrace their differences and share their traumatic stories to heal. Readers are offered possibilities to alter their perceptions through relationships, too. However, the relationship readers develop is with Morrison's texts.

Morrison's way of welcoming her readers into the world of her trilogy is by positioning them in a state of confusion. If readers feel frustrated when *Beloved* opens with its ambiguous epilogue—"I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved"--they are reaching the intended path of an endless process of understanding with no

definite solutions. Multiple voices, narratives, perspectives and endings within Morrison's trilogy challenge readers to figure out—and refigure—the narratives as they face their own fears. Both readers and characters must make sense of the present by connecting it to the past through scattered flashbacks. A lack of titles and chapters in *Beloved* further dazes the reader who is expected by Morrison to participate in a game of piecing eighteen years worth of chaotic events together by relying only on memory to make sense of the fragmented-but-interconnected stories of the characters. Facing an overwhelming array of past memories that intrude on the present, readers must actively engage in keeping up with the complex history of Morrison's characters—via these intrusions of fragmented memory-- in order to understand the circumstances of the slaves' dilemmas and choices.

Morrison clues her readers in from the very first page: "124 WAS SPITEFUL. Full of baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter were its only victims" (*Beloved* 9). The story is outlined in the beginning, as are the fates of the characters, but answers to the questions the text raises here, and will continue to raise, are left entirely up to the readers: Who is *Beloved*? What caused the ghost's spite? Is she a ghost or Sethe's baby—or both? Do they forget her? Should readers forget? Readers are seduced into remembering and eventually understanding as they labor—unsuccessfully—for definitive meaning. Answering the questions the text generates "lies in the

ability of her characters and readers to reintegrate and reconcile past and present...For Morrison's readers, reconciliation is intimately linked to their ability to recover the past, to dissolve the lineality of time, and overcome the fragmented and distorted notion of past, present, and future" (Heinz 176). Ambiguities in *Beloved* torment readers, but they also make plural meanings and interpretations possible. Characters who confront the power of hatred find love when a collective effort is made to redefine their identities and revise their histories. Their own versions of history counter the grand narrative that attempts to contain their identities and conquer their narratives. Plural stories, voices, perspectives, meanings, and interpretations contest single visions and neat categories. Morrison's narrative techniques heighten readers' sense of uncertainty but promise inclusivity; they remind readers that they can only imagine and give meaning to what cannot be completely described or understood. The form of Morrison's fiction humbly conveys its limits in fully capturing the complete history and experience of a people.

The historical justification of racial oppression and its effect on victims is explored through a structural paralleling of contesting voices and perspectives of the characters. As the narrative progresses, characters' stories are personalized, and readers, who are challenged to revise their own prejudices and biases, are placed in a position of understanding the circumstances of the lives of these violently-changed-by-history characters. Characters and readers work together to remember what everyone wants to forget; Morrison admits in "The Pain of

Being Black,” “This has got to be the least read of all the books I’d written because it is about something that the characters don’t want to remember, I don’t want to remember, black people don’t want to remember, white people don’t want to remember. I mean, it’s national amnesia (22 May 1989).” The past is, according to Morrison, either romanticized or absent because “[t]his culture doesn’t encourage dwelling on, let alone coming to terms with, the truth about the past” (qtd. in Gilroy 222). The structure of her fiction does not allow readers to forget the alternative “truth about the past” which she fictionally reconstructs. This alternative history allows readers to escape their own culturally conditioned oversimplification of African Americans and their experience. Readers are accommodated with a space between narratives and perspectives in *Beloved* that liberates them from socially imposed categories and associations based on race.

Morrison moves beyond the limits of conventional narratives and tells many versions of the same event in *Beloved*. The many voices and perspectives give readers the power to choose alternatively as they engage in determining the many meanings of the text. Like the characters, they are involved in Morrison’s enactment of collective memory as “[m]ultiple discursive fields overlap” to represent slavery “as a contested site of memory” (Kreyling 6). With her use of “contested voices and shifting interests, crucial elements of the collective memory process,” Morrison “creates power through irresolution” (8). Readers confront conflicting ideals in *Beloved* as they are exposed to the characters’

dilemma of reconciling them. Morrison expects her audience to navigate shifting points of view and multiple pasts of African Americans who—as Morrison insists in “Unspeakable Things Unspoken”—“are the subjects of our own experience, and, in no way coincidentally, in the experience of those with whom we have come in contact. We are not, in fact, ‘other.’ We are choices” (208). Morrison provides her readers—like her characters—with the dignity of choice, but before choosing, readers experience an intense blend of history and fiction without the comfort of chronology. Time shifts back and forth from stories about Sweet Home and stories eighteen years later, which are told simultaneously in fragments. The narrative forces readers to remember and rethink past events “into the advancing present in such a way as to energize them with a sense of living urgency: to remember...the wounds of slavery in the living bodies of the survivors—to witness” (Kreyling 13). For instance, the first perspective of the woodshed incident offered to readers is schoolteacher’s. Readers are forced to participate by keeping up with the voice of the narrative and gathering the string of clues in order to identify this particular point of view as schoolteacher’s. Through schoolteacher’s eyes, readers are exposed to a racist version of the incident that led to crawlingalready?’s death. Words such as “negroes” and “nigger” are repeatedly used in this section to express schoolteacher’s prejudiced take on events (*Beloved* 172). The identities of the “nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child” and “the old nigger boy” who snatches the baby from the mother are withheld from the reader (172). Readers are offered only

pronouns by Morrison who expects them to work hard at remembering each character's scattered past to understand the story. In this account Sethe is equated by schoolteacher--and his nephews who adopt his views--to an animal. His logic reflects historical theories and dehumanizing justifications: lamenting the loss of Sethe's "breeding years," schoolteacher "chastised that nephew, telling him to think—just think—what would his own horse do if you beat it beyond the point of education" (174). Readers enter the mind of schoolteacher, who had "[e]nough nigger eyes for now. Little nigger-boy eyes open in the saw dust; little nigger-girl eyes...little nigger baby eyes...old nigger" (175). From this perspective, readers view Sethe as animal-like and learn that her value depends on how much profit she can reproduce. What becomes evident is how race constructs and assumptions based on nineteenth-century biology, science, and religion allow schoolteacher, his nephews, and perhaps even readers to dehumanize Sethe and justify it, too.

The dehumanizing system of slavery—as well as the slaveholders' construction of otherness—is exposed to the reader, but the impact of trauma on the identities of slaves is withheld in this perspective. Readers see Sethe through racist eyes and are free to dismissively categorize her the same way without—at this point-- knowing her story or understanding her circumstances. The nephew's reaction to the woodshed incident reflects schoolteacher's racist gaze. From their view, Sethe's violent act justifies racist theories and scientific assumptions of black inferiority . Readers also end up wondering, "[w]hat she go

and do that for,” in this representation, where Sethe is “constructed as the racial Other, the uncivilized, violent primitive. Sethe’s actions are explained as an example of degenerate African behavior, a reversing to animal savagery” (Bousan 145). Sethe’s violent act feeds into the racist ideology of schoolteacher and his nephews who disregard the political, economic, and social factors that impact Sethe’s choices and leave behind “the damndest bunch of coons they’d ever seen. All testimony to the results of a little so-called freedom imposed on people who needed every care and guidance in the world to keep them from the cannibal life they preferred” (*Beloved* 175). This racist perspective and narrative sets readers up to pass judgment on Sethe. Approving and condemning become inevitable for readers who may or may not realize the role of their own racial consciousness in this process.

Morrison does not exclude her readers by telling them what to think. Instead, she offers a myriad of perspectives and a space for readers to reconcile these visions and change. Readers are given Stamp Paid’s take on events after he shows the newspaper clipping to Paul D, who also passes judgment on Sethe. This section validates the reader’s suspicion that Sethe is the slave who runs to the woodshed to kill her children after recognizing a hat—a hat belonging to schoolteacher described in the previous chapter where she is never named. She is referred to as “a pretty little slave girl” and “a pretty woman” by Stamp Paid (183, 184). Paul D’s insistence that the picture in the clipping is not Sethe but someone who resembles her except for the mouth and Stamp Paid’s flashbacks

of the details of Sethe's life, as well as her own relationship with others, leads readers to ambiguously conclude that the "pretty woman" is in fact Sethe. They learn that it is Stamp Paid who chops wood and snatches the baby in schoolteacher's account of the woodshed story where he, with dehumanizing discourse, refers to Stamp Paid as "the old nigger boy" (183). The next chapter exposes readers to yet another account of the same event; negotiation is demanded from readers as Sethe "creates a counternarrative" to the slavemaster's "narrative of her animality and wildness" (Bousan 147). Sethe struggles to share her story with Paul D. This time Sethe does not "shudder or close her eyes" at the memories that broke her smile "into two and became a sudden suck of air" (*Beloved* 186). Neither does she abruptly end her story as usual; its continuation allows readers to understand Sethe's dilemma of trying to be a nurturing mother under an oppressive system that makes it impossible. The dilemma of being a mother and a slave is underscored in Sethe's desperate need to protect and love her children without having the freedom to fulfill this need. She torturously holds herself up to standards she cannot achieve as a slave mother though she is aware that she "couldn't love them proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love" (188). What becomes apparent to the reader is that from Sethe's perspective in the detailed account of her experience as a slave mother, there was no other way to save her children from what she felt was worse than death:

the truth was simple, not a long drawn-out record of flowered shifts, tree

cages, selfishness, ankle ropes and wells. Simple: she was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher's hat, she heard wings...Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one can hurt them. (190)

The account of the primitive and beastly murder of Sethe's child— schoolteacher's property-- within schoolteacher's account is pitted against Sethe's own account of her brutal and protective act of love. Two accounts of history are provided—one impersonal and dehumanizing and the other personal and humanizing. Before readers weigh in on these accounts, they are positioned to take into consideration the effect of this dehumanization on Sethe's loving act—or, to readers overlooking the impact of physical and psychological trauma on Sethe, her crime. The black community holds Sethe up to these impossible mothering standards and condemns her. Paul D also judges Sethe by telling her what she did “was wrong” and that there “could have been a way. Some other way” (192). When Sethe inquires about this alternative way, Paul D absorbs schoolteacher's ideology and dehumanizes her: “You got two feet, Sethe, not four” (192). Internalizing this racism causes Paul D and the black community to view Sethe as inferior and animalistic. Paul D eventually realizes that it is his own self-loathing and disgust that cause him to scapegoat Sethe: “Later he would wonder what made him say it. The calves of his youth? Or the conviction that he was being observed from the ceiling? How fast he had moved from his

shame to hers. From his cold-house secret to her too-thick love” (192). Readers continue to judge Sethe but may question their choices as the narrative slowly unfolds and long after it ends.

Preventing readers from feeling that they have pinned down the narrative and identities of characters, Morrison riddles them with more ambiguity, further complicating the narrative and the readers’ experience along with it. Morrison’s form disorients readers in the second part of the novel where chapter after guideless chapter, the reader is expected to labor harder and harder to understand who is speaking to whom. This difficulty echoes the frustration of the characters—the frustration which the structure of *Beloved* allows readers to experience. The women feel “free at last” to speak their minds when Sethe is locked in with her daughters, but the following sentence casts doubt on this freedom of the isolated threesome: “Almost. Mixed in with the voices surrounding the house, recognizable but undecipherable to Stamp Paid, were the thoughts of the women of 124, unspeakable thoughts, unspoken” (231). Voices of “the people of the broken necks, of fire-cooked blood and black girls who had lost their ribbons” “roar” and smother Sethe and her daughters in their solitude (209). Many accounts of stories and testimonies reveal the inner lives and frustrations of the characters as the readers’ own frustration increases with each proceeding chapter. The chapters in the second part of the novel begin with the following opening sentences:

"Beloved, she my daughter.

She mine. See."(231),

"BELOVED IS MY SISTER. I swallowed her blood right along with my mother's milk"(237),

"I am Beloved and she is mine." (243)

Consumed with grief, Sethe and Denver neglect themselves for the inconsolable Beloved to the extent this grief threatens to destroy them. Sethe and Denver begin their testimonies with Beloved's name, but Beloved begins hers with "I;" Denver and Sethe desire to reconcile with Beloved but are unable to ease her pain. No amount of love or words can express or ease Beloved's grief. Unable to come to terms with her past and deal with its legacies, Sethe begins to self-destruct as she isolates herself from her family and larger community.

As soon as they begin to feel they have a grip on the novel, readers may beidetracked by textual fragments in the section of Beloved's narrative: "I see her take flowers away from leaves she puts them in a round basket the leaves are not for her she fills the basket she opens the grass" (243). Gaps between words and sentences beg readers to pause, think, and rethink. The lack of punctuation in this section reinforces this need. Is Morrison saying—via the structure of this particular section—that language has its limits and can never fully express the suffering of the Middle Passage or pin down the personal experiences and identities of its victims? Does she leave gaps for her readers to imagine, to empathize, to be included in this historical recovery? Does Beloved,

as Linda J. Krumholz suggests, “come to represent the repressed memories of slavery, both for the characters and for the readers?” (qtd. Bousan 162). The textual fragments hint at *Beloved*’s horrific experiences, but does Morrison try to haunt her readers with them, too? Or, is it as J. Brooks Bousan suggests “cognitive-literary shield to protect her readers from the abject shame and horror of what is being described”—an immunization from contagious trauma? (154). Readers reach for their own understanding, but they enact a memorial for the victims of the Middle Passage in the process.

The actively engaged reader—relying on memory—can make out the speaker in most sections of the narrative with little effort, but as the novel progresses, identifying the speaker becomes increasingly difficult:

Tell me the truth. Didn’t you come from the other side?

You rememory me?

Yes. I remember you.

You never forgot me?

Your face is mine. (*Beloved* 249)

The unidentified speakers in this passage are Sethe and *Beloved* based on the previous pieces of their history the text offers readers. Their identities and Denver’s are separate textually, but then the voices fuse, pushing readers into the realm of uncertainty:

I waited for you

You are mine

You are mine

You are mine (251)

Readers are caught up decoding the text and wondering what is happening with the language and structure of the narrative: The fused identities of the threesome that the textual language cannot convey is up for interpretation. According to Marsha Darling, though Sethe and her girls “exchange thoughts like a dialogue, or a three-way conversation,” they are “unspoken” and ineffective due to their isolation and lack of reconciliation (qtd. in Bousan 152). Sethe and her daughters do not engage in effective dialogue that generates mutual understanding. They are imprisoned with the “black and angry dead” and isolated from the larger community (*Beloved* 230). Sethe cannot remember the past without self-destructing. To heal from their trauma, they must reconcile the past with the present and share their stories with their redefined family, the black community.

Readers never end their experience with *Beloved* because Morrison’s does not offer closure in her narratives. Readers are left with the freedom to interpret and reinterpret meaning after meaning while attempting to understand. As Morrison says, “I don’t shut doors at the end of books. There is always a resolution of a sort but there are always possibilities—choices” (qtd. in Heinze 182). Meaning does not exist in Morrison’s trilogy without a relationship between reader and text. Drawing from Michel de Certeau’s work on the relationship between reader and text, Maurice Wallas in “Print, Prosthesis, (Im)Personation” explains how the “encounter between ‘the world of the text’ and ‘the world of the reader’” leads to “actualization,” which is “the mutual fulfillment of those expectations of the text by the reader, and of those requirements of the reader by the text that produces a meaning-event, ‘a reading’” (6). Readers are given choices in Morrison’s fiction. While grasping meaning, they are offered the possibility of altering their naturalized beliefs as

they step out of their own familiar experiences. Morrison's ambiguous language demands alternative interpretations. What is demanded of readers, much like the characters in the novels, is to make choices. In his analysis of *Beloved* in "Putting 'His Story Next to Hers,'" Steven V. Daniels points out how Morrison does not allow her characters to view themselves as just traumatized victims; they resist slavery's definitions by "accepting a burden of responsibility for their impossible choices that they, in the midst of their victimization" (6). Sethe and Paul D choose "to recognize themselves and their history in the choices history has implicated them in, forced upon them" (6). Morrison recreates their histories and positions her readers to also make difficult choices. Though *Beloved* forces readers to memorialize the victims of slavery, Morrison inconclusively ends her novel with an ambiguous statement: "It was not a story to pass on" (*Beloved* 314). Whether it is a story to forget or a story to remember is left entirely up to the reader to ponder, but as Daniels argues, "[m]emory, we are repeatedly reminded, is also a matter of choice in the novel, but that CHOICE is present in how we remember, not in whether we do. Like *Sweet Home* (like *Beloved*), it 'Comes back,' as Sethe tells Denver, 'whether we want it to or not'" (9). Readers are also left wondering what happened to the Convent women in *Paradise*. Where are they? Are readers "down here in paradise," creating new stories, too" (318)? Similarly, the *Jazz* narrator leaves herself in the hands of readers. She reminds them of their freedom and ability to choose—to "make" and "remake" the text (*Jazz* 229). And she doesn't hide her pleasure in this

reader-text transaction either: “Talking to you and hearing you answer—that’s the kick” (229).

While she enacts a collective recovery of an ignored reality with the help of the reader in *Beloved*, Morrison forces readers to question the narrative and singularity of truth in *Jazz*. Readers participate in a dialogue, to borrow words from Robert Roth, “in which their own purposes and practices come into play” rather than “trying to deduce the writer’s intentions” (qtd. in Heinz 9). The narrator in *Jazz* forms a relationship with her readers who are lured into gossipy chaos within the first sentence: “Sth, I know that woman” (*Jazz* 3). Endless laboring for meaning and alternative interpretations is at play as readers listen to the narrative. Morrison tells the Joe-Violet-Dorcas story on the very first page and describes it as the “melody of the piece, and it is fine to follow a melody—to feel the satisfaction of recognizing a melody whenever the narrator returns to it [...] Bumping up against that melody time and time again, seeing it from another point of view, seeing it afresh each time, playing it back and forth”(qtd. in Bousan 165).

She uses a similar technique in *Beloved* where she gives and takes only segments of the story in the process of narration and then offers a different perspective—and revision--of the stories of her characters. Morrison uses this strategy to give her novel an oral, work-in-progress feel. *Jazz* speaks to readers as they enter into its world of seemingly random, strung-together fragments.

The narrator, for instance, interrupts the flow of the narrative to ask readers questions: “What was I thinking of? (*Jazz* 160) “And although the pain is theirs, I share it, don’t I? Of course. Of course”(219). Questions arise as bewildered readers attempt to conquer the text while groping for meaning that does not exist without their participation:

He was not just on His way, coming, coming to right the wrongs done to them. He was here. Already. See? See? What the world had done to them it was now doing to itself. Did the world mess over them? Yes but look where the mess originated. Were they berated and cursed? Oh yes but look how the world cursed and berated itself. Were the women fondled in kitchens and back of stores? Uh huh. (78)

The narrator’s questions trigger responses from readers who are invited to create alternative meanings. The narrator informs her audience that something “turned out different,” and readers wonder “who shot whom” (*Jazz* 6). What is certain is that the untrustworthy narrator cannot keep a secret and is hardly all-knowing. The narrative structure provokes readers to question the narrator’s authority and control while experiencing the unpredictable jazzy structure of the narrative. Eusebio L. Rodriguez in “Experiencing *Jazz*” describes the inviting rhythm and sound of the text as words blend to achieve “run-on sounds” as the “harsh blare of the consonants, the staccato generated by the commas that insist on hesitations needed to accelerate the beat, the deliberate use of alliteration and of words repeated to speed tempo—all come together to create the impact of jazz” (60). These musical sentences and run-ons, J. Brooks Bousan

explains, allow Morrison “to...remove the print-quality of language to put back the oral quality, where intonation, volume, gesture are all there...She wanted ‘to make the story appear oral, meandering, effortless, spoken;’” what she achieves is a “truly aural novel” where the “reader has to actively participate in the process of musicalizing the text before it will yield up all its meanings” (Bousan 5). Morrison’s experimental form includes repetition, syntax breaks, fragmentation, gaps, and lots of confusion as she “oralizes print” (7). Who is speaking is not always clear because of Morrison’s use of many changing voices, point of views, and narrative interruptions. Like *Beloved*, *Jazz* lacks formal chapter titles and numbers, but Morrison separates the chapters in *Jazz* with blank pages, offering readers room to imagine, improvise and revise. However, textual continuity is maintained by what Rodrigues calls “transitional slurs and glides” that allow sounds to cross these blank-paged sections:(8)” For instance, the repetition of “hat” in a concluding sentence of one section—“In a hat in the morning (*Beloved* 87)”—is repeated in the first sentence--“the hat is pushed back on her forehead” (89)—in the following section. Other words repeated in the end of one section and the start of the following section include “pain” (216,219), and the ambiguous “she,” which refers to both Wild and Dorcas (184-187). Phrases, such as “state of mind” are also repeated in the end of one section and at the start of the next” (135,137). The sounds of these words allow the narrative to flow seamlessly “like nonstop sequences of a jam session” where there are no stops but plenty of “amplifications with improvisations,

variations, and solo statements, a virtuoso display of jazz play” from beginning to end as the narrative plays (7). Further, Richard Hardack, in “A Music Seeking Its Words,” points out that in the first sections of the novel, “each character derives his or her voice from this narcissistically echoing narrator”(9). When the narrator expresses that she “imagine[s] [Joe] as one of those men who stop somewhere around sixteen inside...he’s a kid,” (*Jazz* 121). Felice later expresses the same thought: “he’s like a kid when he laughs” (207). This “narrative bleeding,” Hardack explains, “stands behind the text’s configuration of duality, its insistence that we are possessed by books;” the narrator “feeds off” her characters’ words—off what she projects and constructs as the split-consciousness of her characters”(9). Mathew Treherne likens this bleeding to a performer in improvisational jazz who “takes on the theme of another and plays variations around it, so the different ‘performers’ in the text take each other’s themes, as between sections of the novel” (5). He argues that this illustrates the subjectivity of the narration process; “the narrator is constantly representing her characters, and reading them into her own improvisational text. The narrative space is dialogic rather than transparent, and the process of creating narrative is foregrounded” (5). The narrative structure expresses—and allows readers to express and imagine—(i.e., with gaps, spaces, and a conflicted narrator)— what language cannot. The *Jazz* narrator struggles with her inability to pin down her dynamic characters’ identities, their complex stories, and choices they make. Readers become part of the text by struggling to understand as well. *Jazz*’s

narrator inaccurately predicts, listens, learns, misjudges, revises, and improvises until readers find themselves in a serious relationship with the text.

Morrison captures the characteristics of the Jazz Age--“the past being crushed by the present...invention...[i]mprovisation, originality, [and] change,”—and also makes certain that her novel, *Jazz*, “become[s] them” (Introduction). Readers are given the opportunity to experience this essence—this violent change as the narrator moves back and forth in the time span of thirty-eight years—from 1888-1926—in Morrison’s puzzling reconstruction of African American experience. While stringing together the past events of the personal lives of the characters in the country with the present harsh conditions and larger backdrop of the City, readers, like the characters, feel the impact of migration—the backlash of conflict, change and choice. This infinite process of change saturates Morrison’s experimental strategies. There are countless voices that shift from one sentence or paragraph to the next then change back into the former voices again. A suspicious ‘I’ surfaces and speaks for a short time then vanishes only to resurface once again. For instance, Violet’s first person narrative—“Which means from the very beginning I was a substitute and so was he [Joe]”—is interrupted with a shift in voice; who is speaking is no longer clear-- “Rose. Dear Rose Dear. What was the thing, I wonder, the one and final thing she had not been able to endure or repeat?” (101). Readers, actively participating in listening and remembering, try to keep up with these shifts as they gather clues about the personal history of each character. Morrison’s

narrative techniques leave many choices for readers who already end up—perhaps unknowingly—engaged in the performance of *Jazz*. *Jazz*'s off-beat narrator engages readers in a dialogue with her quirky interruptions. Pronouns like “you” and “I” surface out of nowhere confusing readers (*Jazz* 71).

Confronted with many viewpoints and voices, readers are not only confused, but also, and more significantly, liberated by the narrator's uncertainty. Unsure of events and struggling to narrate the characters' lives, the narrator's self-reflexivity encourages readers to doubt her authority and her vision. She confesses that there is room for error in her narrative: “If I remember right, that October lunch in Alice Manfred's house, something was off” (*Jazz* 71). She also exposes her limitations: “What was the thing, I wonder, the one final thing she had not been able to endure or repeat?” (101); “I've thought about him a lot, wondered whether he was what True Belle loved and Violet too” (143).

Moreover, she expresses her biases, passing judgment on the characters: “I always believed that girl was a pack of lies. I could tell by her walk her underclothes were beyond her years, even if her dress wasn't” (72); “Rat. No wonder it ended the way it did. But it didn't have to, and if he had stopped trailing that little fast thing all over town...who knows how it would go?” (121).

The narrator does not stop there. Assumptions based on race are also expressed: “My own opinion was that one day she would stack up those handkerchiefs, take them to the dresser drawer, tuck them in and then go light his hair with a

matchstick" (118). The narrator's comments and opinions reveal her unreliability as she misjudges the behavior of her characters.

The narrator's inviting and engaging conversational style highlights her shortcomings and corners readers into having to share control of the narrative by second-guessing, remembering, and listening. As a result of the narrator's insecurity, readers and listeners are, like the narrator, free to improvise and attain their own meanings and visions. Morrison includes mini-first-person narratives of Joe and Felice—in quotations—to also undermine the narrator's perspectives and accounts. Joe's narrative begins, "It's not a thing you tell to another woman. I know most men can't wait to tell each other about what they got going on the side...The most I did was tell Malvonne and there was no way not to. But tell another man? No" (121). Joe's complex life is shared in a way the narrator cannot convey. Felice, readers learn from her own mini-narrative, is not a "[l]azy girl" who has "nothing much in her head" as the narrator claims (198). Unpredictable characters make the narrator "nervous"; her insecurities lead her to acknowledge her incompetence: "Busy, they were, busy being original, complicated, changeable—human, I guess you'd say, while I was the predictable one, confused in my solitude into arrogance, thinking my space, my view was the only one that was or that mattered" (220). The audience learns what the narrator demonstrates: There is no single truth or vision. The lives and identities of the characters in *Jazz* cannot be fully imagined by the narrator, so she invites her readers to help revise the narrative--and herself--since "they, too,

are capable of a vision that incorporates double—or even multiconsciousness” (Heinz 185). When the narrator shares her doubts about her own perceptions while attempting to portray Golden Gray, she sways between loving and hating him and confesses her inadequacy as a storyteller, becoming aware of her own lack of empathy for his pain: “What was I thinking of? How could I have imagined him so poorly? Not noticed the hurt that was not linked to the color of his skin...I have been careless and stupid and it infuriates me to discover (again) how unreliable I am” (*Jazz* 160). The narrator tells and attempts to retell Golden Gray’s story though she understands that she “may be doomed to another misunderstanding” (161). Feeling the need “to alter things,” she decides to dream a nice dream for him and contemplate his pain [to] ease it, diminish it [and] be the language that wishes him well” after she accuses him of racism and of hypocrisy for caring more about his clothes than the unconscious black woman he uses for “shaping a story” to tell his father (161, 154). The narrator attempts to understand Golden Gray, acknowledge his pain, and is able to view him alternatively: “he is young, young and he is hurting, so I forgive him his self-deception and his grand, fake gestures...and I don’t hate him at all” (155). Heinz explains that the narrator “engages in the imaginative act of merging with the consciousness of Golden Gray” in a gesture of “generosity that constitutes an act of love and an invitation to the readers to engage in their own process of becoming” (184). Attempting to establish a relationship between text, author, and readers, Morrison expects her readers “to tap into an imagination so vivid,

so all-encompassing that double consciousness becomes as much as their psychic state of being as it is hers" (185). Morrison is not concerned with resolving the dilemma of double-consciousness in her novels; she is interested in , narrator, addressing readers with "you," pleads-- "Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look . Look where your hands are. Now"—and reminds readers that the meaning(s) of the text depend(s) on their participation and interpretation(s) (*Jazz* 229). The structure of Morrison's narratives calls on readers to respond as they attempt and reattempt to understand, interpret, and revise.

The form of *Paradise* also requires the reader to endlessly work at keeping up with the narrative in a struggle to understand. The first sentence in *Paradise*--"They shoot the white girl first"—highlights the ambiguity with its use of a pronoun and an unidentified white female (3). Interwoven past and present events follow adding to the incoherence. The history of Haven intrudes on the narration of the massacre. Individual stories are intertwined, but Morrison puts off revealing the identities of the characters she narrates by ambiguously using pronouns, such as "they," and vague common nouns: "The father," (11), "two men" (9), [t]he brothers" (12), [t]he twins" (14), "one brother" (17), and "[t]he nephew" (14). Understanding is not possible without keeping track of the characters' complex and interwoven histories. Relying on memory, readers are coerced into reconciling past and present fragments of Haven, Ruby, the

Convent, political conflict, religious strife, marriages, deaths, and family histories in search of meaning(s).

Beginning the novel with the male perspective of the Convent women, Morrison sets her readers up to once again judge and question. The Convent ladies are described by the men of Ruby as “abnormal,” “diseased,” and “satanic,” and they “call into question the value of almost every woman he knew” with their “revolting sex, deceit, and sly torture of children” (*Paradise* 8). The women are strange to the gunmen who do not understand them. They are strange to readers who also do not understand them--yet. Morrison offers a few contesting perspectives of the women. Billie Delia, Soane, and Lone—women of Ruby—all feel affection for the Convent women whom have learned to love and accept. Lone describes Consolata as “gifted” and encourages her to embrace her unique healing powers to save lives (246). Soane becomes best friends with Consolata who saves her son and trades a cookie “basket back and forth for years” (247). From Billie Delia’s perspective, the Convent women are kind and nurturing: “They had treated her so well, had not embarrassed her with sympathy, had just given her sunny kindness. Looking at her bruised face and sunny swollen eyes, they sliced a cucumber for her lids...she could tell they would listen if she wanted them to....Mavis was the nicest and the funniest was Gigi” (308). Billie Delia also takes Pallas to the convent for help when she is gang raped and traumatized. The perspective of these Ruby women counters the

narrative of the Ruby men who dehumanize the women they blame for Ruby's failure.

Morrison also pits the Ruby men's racist and sexist othering of the Convent women by naming chapters after the Convent women and telling their personal stories. The form forces readers to collect the scattered events of the Convent women's lives throughout the novel. In an attempt to make her readers aware of their own racial consciousness, Morrison uses racial judgments and stereotypes to describe her characters but deliberately withholds their race. Mavis, for instance, is an abused wife and young 27-year-old neglectful mother whose twins suffocate in a hot car while she is buying "weenies" for her husband who refuses to eat "[s]pam" (22). Facing judgment by a reporter, she wonders what it would be like "to have a husband who came home everyday" (24). Her husband, who has "no screens in his windows and no working television," owns a Cadillac, and borrows the lawn mower from his ridiculing neighbors, and her ill-behaved kids, who drink and spit "Kool-Aid," threaten and abuse her (25, 28). Tragedy leads to a warrant for Mavis' arrest. Judgments made according to race, class, and stereotypes may trigger readers to make generalizations that reveal their own racial prejudices, especially if they believe that people act and feel in prescribed ways deriving from gender, class, or race. However, Morrison's techniques deny this categorization of behavior and class according to race by intentionally withholding the identity of the white girl from her narrative.

By withholding information, Morrison forces readers to become involved in the narrative. For instance, in the “Grace” chapter, Morrison uses ambiguous pronouns to daze readers and make them actively work and engage the novel. Racist images that readers encounter in their daily lives and the meanings attached to these images are utilized to trick the reader into a reevaluation of their own racial perceptions: “pants so tight, heels so high, earring so large” and big hair (53). Figuring out the race of Mavis or Grace based on these descriptions of their actions, behavior, and appearance reveals more about the reader than the character. Further, Arnette’s story intrudes on the story of six-inch-heels-wearing Grace for a while, but more descriptors of Gigi—who “cracked her gum,” exposed her navel and “screaming tits” while looking for the “fucking forever” trees and enjoying “the waves of raw horniness” -- are thrown in to engage readers by creating dialogue that encourages a revision of their culturally imposed racial stereotypes and their associated meanings (55, 63,67). Morrison frustrates her readers with ambiguity; all these events and series intrude while readers are busy figuring out the identities behind the pronouns and ambiguous nouns. The narrative delays revealing the identities of most of its characters, including the woman with the sunglasses who wants to sleep on the floor and the woman who claims she has been raped in the end of the “Grace” chapter.

Similarly, scattered events and histories intrude on Senceca’s story: The Oven debate, the conflict between Reverend Misner and Reverend Pulliam, the founding of Haven, and fragmented histories of Steward, Deek, Sweetie, and

Dovey interrupt the narrative and readers' ability to understand. A brief overview of her past is offered: She is a hitcher who was abandoned by her mother at the age of five in a "brand-new government housing;" her 14 year-old mother left her "meat loaf, string beans, catsup, white bread—and a pitcher of Kool-Aid" (*Paradise* 127). Seneca works in a school cafeteria and her boyfriend is a thief and a murderer. Again, readers are tempted to label Seneca based on her behavior, feelings, and class, but they eventually discover the futility of such effort. What Morrison's strategy does is generate more questions and uncertainty and a rethinking of racial profiling. An encounter with a coatless, "crying woman"—whom readers eventually figure out is Sweetie—follows Seneca's experience in foster homes (131). Morrison exposes and hides bits and pieces of her narrative in an effort to confuse readers who may or may not be aware of their inability to grasp a singular, controlled meaning of her novels. Like the previous sections, many events interrupt the "Divine" chapter. Fragments of Reverend Misner and Pulliam's conflict, events of Billie Delia's life, Arnette and K.D.'s wedding, and more Haven history mingle with the Convent girls' story before Pallas's story surfaces in the "Divine" section. In this section, readers associate Pallas with wealth: "The earrings that hung from Pallas' lobes were eighteen carat; the boots on her feet were handmade, her jeans custom—made, and the buckle on her leather belt was handsomely worked silver" (164). Her sixteenth birthday gift was a "red Toyota with a built-in eight-track tape;" her father is a lawyer and her mother is a painter (166). Credit cards and jewelry

hint her family's high income status as does the "massive check cashing and shopping" (166). Although readers know Pallas is well-off, they know very little else about her. The Convent women's race only matters in a sense that it allows Morrison to promote, what Timothy Richard Aubry describes in "Beware of the Furrow of the Middlebrow," as "an ongoing, open-minded negotiation with and between different kinds of otherness" (363). What occurs between reader and text is "an encounter with otherness" (364). Morrison's trilogy itself is a strange other that confuses readers who make attempts of "dominating or possessing what they cannot understand" (356). Morrison shares control of her narratives with her readers. Meaning does not exist—is not performed--without readers taking into consideration how Morrison structures her novels--to transcend the limits of language--and creates a world where reader and text intertwine forever.

Conclusion

There is a certain kind of peace that is not merely the absence of war. The peace I am thinking of is not at the mercy of history's rule, nor is it a passive surrender to the status quo. The peace I am thinking of is the dance of an open mind when it engages another equally open one . . . Toni Morrison (The Dancing Mind 1996)

Although past trauma fragments Morrison's characters from themselves and from one another, healing is possible with collective effort. Together, characters create their own place of love, freedom, and peace by sharing their stories and healing one another's pain. Denver (*Beloved*) reaches out to her community to save her mother and songs are sung to ease Sethe's pain. Violet and Alice (*Jazz*) share their stories and comfort one another from past pain; Joe and Violet (*Jazz*) also share their stories and learn to love one another again. The Convent women (*Paradise*) combine their individual stories as they paint images of their pain in a communal attempt to heal. Morrison records the individual stories of African Americans who did not make it into American history books. She dramatizes their experiences in the content and the structure of *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise* with narrative techniques that include the readers in the characters' healing process. *Paradise* ends with the women enjoying Piedade's songs as they "rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in paradise" (318). The characters of *Jazz* and *Beloved* and readers also shoulder this "endless work." Morrison's fiction may contain multiple endings, but each ends with a conflicted character in someone else's arms.

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