FREEDOM SEEKING AND SELF-MAKING IN TWENTIETH CENTURY BLACK WOMEN'S LITERATURE

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of Georgetown University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts in English

By

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ABSTRACT

Patricia Hill Collins writes of the importance of self-determination in *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), citing the consistent denial of equity and justice for Black women as one of the main reasons for Black women to commit themselves to self-determination. Collins and her directive is but a continuance in the long line of black feminist critics who consider the ways Black women are able to direct their efforts to make spaces, homes, and communities for and among themselves. The possibilities, the processes, and the pains of self-making are evident in *Passing* written by Nella Larsen and published in 1929, *The Street* by Ann Petry and published in 1946, and *Sula* authored by Toni Morrison and published in 1973; as three of the most discussed novels written by black women in the twentieth century, the decision to focus on these three was born out of the stunning parallels between them and the radical tales of self-making they contain. The processes of self-making, as Larsen, Petry, and Morrison examine is a complicated one fraught with negotiations of history, physical space, and lingering trauma.

Ultimately, thesis seeks to consider both how relational identities within community/communal space are sites of subversion for Black women. Larsen, Petry, and Morrison question the limitations and possibilities within community, writing of women who reflect and refract the images of their female friends, mothers who baptize and
sacrifice their children by fire, and characters who deem their intersections of race and gender to be “the same as being a man”.

The research and writing of this thesis is dedicated to my parents, my sisters, my brother, and the mentors and friends who encouraged me as I composed this work.

Many thanks,
Grace
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INTRODUCTION

Patricia Hill Collins writes of the importance of self-determination in *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), citing the consistent denial of equity and justice for Black women as one of the main reasons for Black women to commit themselves to self-determination. Collins and her directive is but a continuance in the long line of black feminist critics who consider the ways Black women are able to direct their efforts to make spaces, homes, and communities for and among themselves. Self-determination for the Black woman was and is complicated through that which Black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw defines “intersectionality.” The means by which Black women could come into a full sense of agency, economic security, physical protection, and personal liberation have historically been quite sparse considering the Black woman’s existence within what critic bell hooks calls “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy”.

As the twentieth century gave way to individualism, consumerism, and increasing commodity culture, the abundant economic opportunities that marked the turn of the century were perhaps least generous towards the Black woman in the United States. From popular culture to advertisements, expressions of anti-blackness were persistent and reinforced the prevailing bias that Black communities were comprised of second-hand citizens. Beginning before the 1900s but reaching well beyond the turn of the century, the Black woman existed between compounding forces of racism and sexism. Racism and sexism combined to uniquely shape the perceptions of Black women and their bodies during slavery and post-emancipation, creating the need for narratives contrary to the assumptions about Black women and their capacity for labor. Writers like Nella Larsen, Jessie Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, Ann Petry, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison are some
of the standout Black women writers to pen stories about Black women characters who engage in self-making through subversive and morally complex means.

The possibilities, the processes, and the pains of self-making are evident in *Passing* written by Nella Larsen and published in 1929, *The Street* by Ann Petry and published in 1946, and *Sula* authored by Toni Morrison and published in 1973; as three of the most discussed novels written by black women in the twentieth century, the decision to focus on these three was born out of the stunning parallels between them and the radical tales of self-making they contain. The processes of self-making, as Larsen, Petry, and Morrison examine is a complicated one fraught with negotiations of history, physical space, and lingering trauma. *In the Wake* by Christina Sharpe, engages concepts like memory and history, suffering and space, to examine the traumas and violence committed against Black people in the United States. Sharpe references thinkers like Trouillot stating “in the wake, the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present” and offers “pastness” as a position (Sharpe 9). It was, originally, this idea of the past and its omnipresence that prompted this thesis. If the past, and all of its ugliness is ever-present, how do black women forge paths to freedom for themselves?

Keeping in mind Sharpe’s claim that the past is a position and a force with unrelenting influence over the present, this research observes how self-making is narrated during the twentieth century, paying close attention to the ways that subjugation of Black female characters within *Passing, The Street*, and *Sula* persists or evolves. Each novel contains lingering aspects of the slave narrative and each novel in this review responds to the previous, offering divergent or increasingly subversive illustrations of freedom-seeking and self-making. For these purposes, “slave narrative” references narratives of
enslaved peoples that may involve any combination of the following: objective appraisal of the black body as a means of determining value and/or potential to create profit for the owner, physical/sexual attack, observation of black body as property or a site to claim ownership, the idea, aspiration, or desire for “freedom” through mental liberation or destination. Fighting against predetermined frameworks that govern their opportunities for liberation and selfhood, the women of *Passing, The Street,* and *Sula* attack their attackers, disguise and present their bodies to subvert and manipulate the male gaze, negotiate their individual identities with the identities that tie them to others, and find their freedom in death rather than the physical/spatial conception of freedom as a singular location or destination. The economic and social disparities between Black and white communities coupled with the difficulty of *existing* as Black woman, however, challenge the potentiality for liberation in a capitalist, patriarchal, and white-supremacist structure. Thus, the need for reimaginings of freedom, reinterpretations of community and motherhood, and redefinitions of the Black woman’s bodily or spatial limitations became points of consideration, or sites of construction, for the Black woman writer of the twentieth century.

As the production of Black women writers reached increasing audiences, and the intellectual community contributing to black feminist criticism grew, there became a need for clearer definition of the field. In 1980 McDowell writes, “although there is no concrete definition of Black feminist criticism, a handful of Black female scholars have begun the necessary enterprise of resurrecting forgotten Black women writers and revising misinformed critical opinions of them” (154). And indeed, in the last 40 years, new interventions within Black feminist criticism have broadened, yet sharpened the
parameters of Black feminist criticism. More recent scholarship – theoretical like Sharpe, theoretical and public-facing like Roxane Gay’s *Bad Feminist*, or fictional like Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing* -- meditate on how the body is recognized in a legal or political context and how the body – especially a body that visually signals blackness or womanness – is fraught with expectation for specific types of labor or performance.

As Barbara Smith points out, “thematically, stylistically, aesthetically, and conceptually, Black women writers manifest common approaches to the art of creating literature as a direct result of the specific political, social and economic experience they have been obliged to share” (Smith 4). Though Smith does not complete her examination of these shared spaces in a way deemed sufficient by McDowell, this project is an attempt to begin charting some of the parallels of twentieth-century Black women writers in their discussion and handling of space. For each of these three novels, the role of physical spaces – like bodies and buildings – has been well discussed. In this manner, this thesis seeks to consider both how relational identities within community/communal space are sites of subversion for Black women. Larsen, Petry, and Morrison question the limitations and possibilities within community, writing of women who reflect and refract the images of their female friends, mothers who baptize and sacrifice their children by fire, and characters who deem their intersections of race and gender to be “the same as being a man,” as Sula says in Morrison’s novel.

Critics examine the similarities between these three novels, paying particular attention to the avenues each novel poses for freedom or self-making and the call and response between novels like *Passing* and *Sula*. Seeking to better understand the parallels and consistencies in the narratives of Black women, this project considers how these
women perform at the intersections of their identity to forge and fight for space to realize new versions of themselves, establishing agency and political autonomy in the face of oppressive systems and repressive ideologies. Of particular focus, is how Larsen, Petry, and Morrison describe and discuss physical space considering both the body as space and the physical community as space. As within Passing, Larsen writes the body as both subject and object of performance, considering how presentation of the body allows for a specific kind of social reception and engagement. Petry takes up this consideration of physical space interrogating ways that certain bodies or spaces restrict opportunity for self-determination and the ways that public perception often supersedes personal performance or ideological alignment. Morrison continues the investigation into the power and potential of space as she questions the possibility for self-making within community.

Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929) imagines how the physical presentation of the Black woman’s body inhibits or allows her access to economic and social capital. Larsen depicts how, in 1920s American culture, self-fashioning correlates with ownership and consumption in a way that objectifies women. In the shared social spaces of Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield, where the memory of slavery lingers in the appearance of the main characters and in the exotic pieces of art decorating their homes, *Passing* serves as a meditation on the possibilities of freedom for women still firmly within patriarchal and anti-Black communities. As Larsen unpacks, the opportunities that come with racial passing cannot be considered as truly freeing given the deep costs to the actor, as seen through her depiction of emotional support within the community, the allure of female friendship between Black women, and the mental burden of Otherness.
Though Ann Petry’s novel *The Street* (1946) is a departure from the upper-middle class world of *Passing* the novel also considers how the physical body prompts specific social responses. Within *The Street*, black and female bodies become hypersexualized and are seen as sites for pleasure or gain – making them socially hyper visible and politically invisible. Petry considers how spaces, both as body and building, attract certain affronts and violence. Further, the novel reinforces the conclusion that upward mobility, in the traditionally American sense of pulling oneself up by their bootstraps, is futile if the body attempting to transcend space does not fit within hegemonic considerations of beauty or respectability. In the life of Lutie Johnson, where her lack of social currency as working-class Black mother create obstacles or dangers for her at each turn, *The Street* is “one of the best delineations in literature of how sex, race, and class interact to oppress Black women” (Smith 4). What Petry imagines then, is what avenue for escape exists for the Black woman without the ability to distance herself from her race, gender, or class status. Therefore, Petry considers how self-making occurs within liminal spaces and rarely in the most direct or accessible way.

Lastly, *Sula* (1973) by Toni Morrison ponders how the self becomes caught within a web of history, both cultural and familial. this reading considers how the construction of good and evil, the dissolution of female friendship between Nel Wright and Sula Peace, and the symbolism of natural elements work to deconstruct the binaries of right and wrong, black and white, male and female. To this end, Morrison’s work presents a subversive kind of freedom, one that is achieved only with an isolation or separation from others, and suggests again the futility of self-making for black women within spaces of community.
CHAPTER ONE

MISREAD BODIES: READING THE CONSTRUCTION OF RACE AND COMMUNITY IN PASSING

“The woman felt that [Helga’s] story, dealing as it did with race intermingling and possibly adultery, was beyond definite discussion. For among Black people, as among white people, it is tacitly understood that these things are not mentioned – and therefore they do not exist.”

Quicksand, Nella Larsen

“This exchange clearly demonstrates that the society Helga moves in is one in which identity itself is a socially defined public construct rather than an expression of inner or true self.”

Meredith Goldsmith, 2001

By 1929 American consumerism had refashioned the word “freedom” to fit a more material culture and personal identity seemed attached to ownership and accumulation. Yet, considerations of freedom, ownership, and accumulation excluded marginalized groups, and reified that exclusion through marketing and advertisements. Heralding the fantastic and luxurious, popular American culture during the 1920s centered whiteness as target audience and prime consumer. The wake of the Great Migration, however, gave way to an influx of ambitious and hopeful Black people, bringing with them an enduring commitment to cultural expression and potent sense of self-determination (Chapman 24). The emphasis on consumer culture meant that buying power became a means of exhibiting some sense of agency. Though Black consumers were not marketed to in the same way, the idea of purchasing and owning became a viable means of establishing social capital across ethnic lines. The line of separation for Black and white consumers remained evident, as segregated spaces for travel, entertainment, and daily-life goods or services were firmly maintained in many, if not most, public spaces. To this extent, the ability for members of marginalized groups to
establish personal identity was complicated by their barriers to ownership and consumerism.

It is this complication of self-making as it relates to ownership that frames the racial and sexual fluidity of Clare Kendry in *Passing*. *Passing* tells the story of Irene Redfield, an upper middle class Black woman who occasionally passes for access to coveted goods and spaces and Clare Kendry, a childhood acquaintance of Irene’s who passes as white, concealing her racial background from her husband and social circles. While ownership became a point of emphasis or pride for many Americans, Larsen parses out the different examples of ownership and thus, different avenues for self-making offered to the Black woman – the least likely owner during that time. Racial passing becomes a viable option for Clare and her story becomes the means through which Larsen examines the potential and processes of self-making through subversive means.

*Passing*, is a meditation on a woman (or women) who construct identities for themselves out of what is *not* mentioned. The novel follows characters who deny or default to their inner and truest selves as a result of the tensions that emerge in the face of an expectant social community or public identity. In that, Larsen comments on the possibility of mobility for the Black woman, recognizing it as possible through the omission of certain aspects of identity rather than the inclusion of the same. Larsen does not propose this omission with the belief that it is the best available option – but suggests the sacrifice of cultural capital as one of the most effective ways to acquire some
financial and social capital in the American 1920s ¹. In fact, Margaret Gillepsie speaks to
this at length noting that Larsen works to critically engage “key concerns of the period
and most notably the place of mixed-race or "mulatto" woman in interwar America”. She
argues that the “currency of deception and falsehood belies a more sophisticated
reflection on the cultural production and performance of identity” and it is precisely this
profitability of deception that motivates Clare’s passing. *Passing* takes great pains to
illustrate the costs of such omission and subversion, however, as the ambiguity of Clare’s
life and personal identity is mirrored in the ambiguity of her death.

Larsen emphasizes the internal turmoil that emerges as a result of passing and the
ways that passing disrupts one’s idea of community. As she grapples with the
sociocultural implications of being Black and female through Clare and Irene, she
deconstructs gender, race, and national identity. Larsen depicts, not that passing is
denying one’s colored history or an obscene form of salvation, as critics suggest, but
suggests that the manipulation of the body through passing is a means to an end as it
relates to self-hood and self-realization. Yet, Larsen identifies passing as a performance
work that requires the sacrifices of cultural capital and community to such extent that the
action troubles the idea of freedom.

**Omnipresent Pasts**

The ability to negotiate self-identity and establish the self is complicated for Black
women in the United States where race, class, and gender comprise a unique set of social
experiences. For Clare Kendry, passing required a temporal and spatial distance from her
past and her community of origin. As her community leaves her framed by race, class,

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¹ For more on cultural, financial, and social capital, specifically how they are reified
through institutions or exchanged, see “The Forms of Capital” by Pierre Bourdieu.
and gender, her distance from her community is precisely the space within which she is allowed to reimagine and refashion herself. Clare comes from a working-class background, her mother dies when Clare is young and Clare lives with her father. Raised by her white aunts, “religious and as poor as church mice,” (25) Larsen uses Clare’s backstory to examine how Clare is trapped within the intersections of her identity – even among those with no economic capital, Clare is subjugated as her race, gender, and class identities situate her as less powerful.

Though her aunts are economically disadvantaged and presumably do not have much class status to risk by raising Clare, a Black child, they conceal her racial background. “For all their Bibles and praying and ranting about honesty, they didn’t want anyone to know that their darling brother had seduced…a Negro girl” (26). There is a sense of shame attributed to miscegenation; not only is Clare born out of wedlock an affront to their Christian sensibilities, but her birth is a source of angst because Clare’s mother is Black. The aunts “could excuse the ruin, but they couldn’t forgive the tar-brush,” (27) and it becomes clear that the aunts regarded Clare as lesser because of her blackness – identifying both Clare and her racial identity as deserving of scorn and something that separates Clare from ever being welcomed by even the poorest of white people.

What Larsen illustrates is the complications that gender, race, and class posed to self-determination within early twentieth century America. In order to pass and maintain the performance of whiteness, Clare must maintain a distance from blackness – her blackness – and must, in some ways, create a mental distance between her present and past self. In fact, Irene’s re-encounter with Clare is precipitated by a letter from Clare saying, “you
can’t know how in this pale life of mine I am all the time seeing the bright pictures of that other that I once thought I was glad to be free of...It’s like an ache, a pain that never ceases…” (11). Larsen takes care to suggest that were Clare to continue her life as a Black woman, especially a Black woman with fair skin as a product of miscegenation, she presumably would carry with her the taboo of her parents’ actions and the sociopolitical burden of being Black and female. Her desertion of her cultural capital earns her social, and ultimately economic, capital. Clare’s sacrifice of her community is not to be seen as a net loss but a costly exchange, one that leaves her without any firm connection to her (original) community, and leaves Clare in a gray space, belonging nowhere and able to access almost anywhere.

Larsen leverages the passing narrative neither to suggest performative whiteness is the only real means of success for Black people nor as a blatant denial of one’s heritage. Rather, this analysis of Clare and her signification relies on Martha J. Cutter’s argument that “passing is more than just a racial strategy: it is a strategy ‘to be a person’…Only when ‘passing’ becomes a subversive strategy for avoiding the enclosures of a racist, classist, and sexist society does it become truly liberating” (Cutter 75). It is with this idea of strategizing to “be a person” that Larsen presents Clare as a woman refusing commitment to the social communities or sociopolitical identities that would contain her. Instead, Clare strategizes to achieve the freedom only afforded women outside of her community. Sinead Moynihan draws connections between Passing and The Great Gatsby, examining the ways that both texts chart self-making through performance and accumulation in ways specific to the 1920s. As both novels depict, however, this social
mobility relies just as much on omission of the past as it necessitates a careful presentation of self.

As Larsen depicts racial passing does not inherently result in freedom. Passing is a subversive means of making the self – its futility lies in the fact that passing requires the fractioning of self. Clare is only able to visit Irene and reconnect with her “other” half when Jack must travel for work. Further, her interactions with Jack belie the odious racism of her partner and indicate the subtle yet injurious commentary Clare must endure to maintain her performance and protect the capital she accumulates in her passing. Much scholarship regarding *Passing* agrees that Clare “uses ‘passing’ as a way of avoiding the enclosures of unitary identity…Clare chooses not to be confined by any one signification, be it of race, class, or sexuality” (Cutter 75). Clare is not the tragic mulatto in the sense that she is left entirely helpless, unaware of her sacrifices and unable to exert some agency in her choices. Rather, “using the tools offered by a burgeoning consumer culture to alter how (her body is) perceived… (Clare) simultaneously manipulates (her body) to gain access to objects of elite consumption” and appears to “embrace (a) willfully inauthentic, performative (self)” (Cutter 97). Clare is keenly aware of the costs of her passing and of the personal sacrifices she must make for her performance, though she comes to find with time (and after some closeness to Irene) that the cost is too steep. Initially, however, Clare is inclined to believe that her decision to forego her community and culture is, “all things considered…worth the price” (Larsen 28). Though this route of self-determination leaves Clare at a loss for intimate community, she deems the price worthwhile as her separation from community allows her the space to define herself in other ways.
Clare’s distancing from her past, and by extension, her communities of origin, frees her of any relational tie or obligation to a generally upheld sense of morality or respectability. Instead, Clare’s distance from her childhood community where her identification as young and orphan and Black and female leaves her powerless, enables her access her desires and become an consumer of goods, services, and life without the scrutiny and constrictions of race and class. As Clare distances herself, through the manipulation of her bodily presentation, from the places, people, and labels that restrict her, Larsen uses the space between Clare and her community on the South side as the ambiguous space that allows Clare’s refashioning. Clare is able to conceal her racial background, and is seen by her white neighbors as a good, Christian, white girl – empowering her to pursue a young romance with Jack Bellew before eloping for marriage. Without the prejudices leveraged against her for physically embodying blackness, Clare is able to achieve class mobility but her daily negotiations between her public and private selves situate Clare in a social no-man’s land as consequence. Though her freedom first comes as she takes on the relational title of “wife”, Clare’s relationship with Jack relies upon a false premise that she is a white woman. Hence, Clare’s taking on of this identity is not a repressive or oppressive one; marriage is not the “out” for Clare, but one step in a journey to achieve a semblance of autonomy within a structure determined on her subjugation. Larsen, in acknowledging the loss of Clare’s cultural capital, considers the lengths one would have to go to access economic and social capital that would allow for the freedom to own that so heartily characterized selfhood within American culture of the 1920s.
Bodily Presentation and Performance

Irene and Clare gain access into spaces exclusive to whiteness as their bodies are misread. While Clare makes passing an intricate and complicated experience of (re)constituting personal identity, Irene’s situational passing is motivated by consumerist desires (and racial/class anxieties) leaving her identity to the mercy of those who receive her self-presentation. As her body is misread her skin becomes a commodity that allows her to move in and out of spaces to access goods and services. Yet, she is permitted access to certain spaces because her body and bodily performance situates her within white femininity. As Irene enters spaces to consume, her bodily performance is a production, and situates Irene by extension, as a product. Irene’s attempts at access, and consequently her attempts at self-making through consumption, means that she becomes both product and consumer, donning the performance of white respectability only temporarily. The difficulty with temporary performance is the anxiety of being discovered as actor and exposed. Irene passes situationally to gain access to goods and services that would not be afforded to her as a Black woman (100). To acquire this access to capital Irene regularly slips in and out of her performances white femininity. Passing is a performative work but that performance blurs the line between the aspirational and the actual – as Irene and Clare speak and act from positions informed by their ability to access whiteness denying the social constructions and biological facts that would exclude them from these spaces.

Irene’s anxiety and fear of being discovered cannot be attributed exclusively to any contempt towards her race or even being known as black. Rather “it was the idea of being ejected from any place…that disturbed her” and leaves her preoccupied with how
her body is read (Larsen 16). As she is first caught in the gaze of Clare Kendry, she
adjusts her hat, checks her makeup, and glances down at her dress, before the “small
inner disturbance, odious and hatefully familiar” rises to Irene’s consciousness and she
wonders if “that woman, could…somehow know that here before her very eyes on the
roof of the Drayton sat a Negro?” (16). There is a particular obsession with being seen for
Irene but her anxieties suggest an awareness and apprehension around the act of
appraisal, a fear of being seen, valued, and judged inadequate. This preoccupation with
bodily presentation operates suggestively, reminding readers of a historic preoccupation
with Black women’s bodies and the risks and rewards of being viewed and deemed
acceptable. Irene’s anxiety, however, comes from her performance and the (mis)reading
of her body, as at any time there exists the risk of being read more accurately. Yet, this
risk of discovery and embarrassment is the price Irene must pay for her social capital. Her
desire to have motivates her temporary passing but is not enough for her to pass
permanently. As Irene determines her freedom, at least early in the text, as being able to
own. Larsen writes Irene then to examine the social and political identity of a white-
passing woman who still identifies, publicly, as Black. Despite her duality, Irene is
unable accept the same fluidity, and comes to resent the allure of Clare’s flexibility. This
rigidity forces Irene to imagine herself solely within the white supremacist patriarchal
and capitalist structure that characterized American culture. To this end, Irene sees her
moves in and out of performative whiteness, as just that – performance.

As woman and consumer, Irene’s interests in passing seem reasonable; she
passes to shop for her family as her sense of identity making hinges on her relational
identities of mother and wife. Using her ability to pass as a means of acquiring goods for
herself and her family, Irene defines herself by her relationships to others and ability to give and gain in her interpersonal relationships. Irene’s passing and performance becomes a mask, something that she takes on and off, and this masked identity is made more or less realistic depending on the company she keeps. To this end, Larsen establishes Irene and her identity, directly correlating it to how Irene is perceived and the company with which she aligns. Irene’s attempts for self-definition then, as Larsen illustrates, are futile as Irene subscribes to middle-class moralities that place an emphasis on her performances as wife and mother. While her priorities are based upon how she is seen, physically, socially, and economically, Clare’s idea of freedom and liberation extends beyond her ability to consume and freedom seems to be just as much about the limitlessness of the body as it is about the freedom to spend/acquire/own.

Clare’s self-making means that she is allowed to be consumer, to be “having” – but at the cost of her cultural capital. Outside of any community, she is free to be anything to anyone and to have anything. Clare’s ability to move between and navigate within both white and Black communities serves as a testament to the dual consciousness W.E.B. Du Bois speaks of in “Of Our Spiritual Striving”. He offers that “one ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” This duality, presents more areas of conflict for the characters than it does clarity. In fact, Clare endures great indignity by her husband as he refers to her with a racial slur. Upon the first dialogue between Irene, Clare, and John, Irene is taken aback by his casual use of a slur to describe Clare whom he suggests, in jest, has become darker and darker as time as gone on (Larsen 35). Not only does Larsen depict
the double consciousness of her characters but frames it in such a way as to reveal that Clare and Irene, though uncomfortable, must maintain their silence. As Goldsmith notes, “the social performances of Larsen’s characters provide an important insight into the split between agency and social construction that theorists have described as characteristic of performativity” (Goldsmith 97). Passing, Larsen suggests, impacts the ability of the individual to recognize and respond to affronts to their personal or communal values, as the very substance of their personhood is constantly in flux.

Why then, endure a splitting of one soul into two? Larsen frames Irene’s passing as a means of engaging the consumerism and freedom to consume that is afforded to white folks. Clare’s passing allows her to marry a man, have his child, and secure her class position – however, Clare wants it all and her refusal to quell that desire (of things and people) flies in the face of the middle-class morality and ideals that Irene adheres so firmly to. “Metaphorically, the trouble with Clare is that she…will not curtail her ‘having’ ways…for Clare, ‘passing’ becomes a mechanism to get what she wants – which is not a singular identity…but an identity that can escape the enclosures of race, class, and sexuality, enclosures that would limit her “having” ways” (Goldsmith 84). Clare seems content with and is made powerful by manipulating others and manipulating the presentation of her body in order to achieve some sense of escape. As Judith Butler notes, Clare’s ability to pass relies in the spectacle of sight, and the ability to be seen or misread. Clare passes, even with her husband, not only “because she is light-skinned, but because she refuses to introduce her blackness into conversation” (Butler 171). Just as Irene experiences anxiety of being discovered atop the Drayton and Clare must ensure that her responses to her husband’s insults are measured, Larsen illuminates the subtle
areas of sacrifice one must endure in passing, troubling the idea of passing as a simply a means of escape and framing it as a sacrificial performance for the achievement of social mobility.

**Physical Space and the Global Stage**

Self-making is complicated by physical space, as certain socially constructed ideas take on new meanings in different surroundings; Black Southern life in the 1920s was notably distinct from the lives of Black Northerners and the experience of being Black in African or Afro-Latino spaces is different from the experience of being Black in America.

Beginning roughly around 1915 and continuing well through the 60s, the Great Migration refers to the movement of Black people, families, and communities from the South to major northern cities like Chicago or New York, both of which are featured in *Passing*. This mass exodus was prompted by an array of factors like increased industry in the North and the violent racism of the South. Yet, Larsen examines the potentiality for freedom-seeking and self-making in both liminal domestic spaces and global ones, through her juxtaposition of Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry.

Irene moves in and out of social spaces with ease but the proposition of a physical move to Brazil as her husband Brian suggests, comes with its own set of anxieties. Brian sees the cost of his pride and dignity to be a price too exorbitant and proposes a physical move from America to Brazil, seeking to orient himself and his family towards an awareness of self and culture. Clare, however represents the Global North, as she

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2 Brian’s desire to live as an expatriate in a country where his skin and culture were accepted or celebrated is reminiscent of Marcus Garvey’s aim to organize Black communities across continents and Garvey’s desire to imagine political possibilities for men and women living outside of colonial societies. [http://www.history.com/topics/Black-history/marcus-garvey](http://www.history.com/topics/Black-history/marcus-garvey)
frequents Europe and North America with her husband. Larsen uses Brian and Clare to represent two distinctly different ideals and Irene as the manifestation of anxieties for those who pass. Irene is unable to fully understand or appreciate the perspective of her visibly Black husband. During an argument about when and how to educate their children about the experiences and plight of African-Americans in the United States, Irene is upset that Brian wants to articulate the perils that face the Black community, specifically Black men (103). Brian, conversely, is infuriated that Irene would even consider withholding the ugly truth from their children. Irene, having had lived experiences as both white and Black woman, cannot fully understand or appreciate the Black experience Brian speaks of. Though Irene knows she is Black, and recoils at the idea of permanent passing, Irene experiences a tension because she accepts a public American identity but faces complex moral dilemmas in her private life because of her cultural connections to blackness. She is limited in her ability to liberate herself in ways distinct from Clare. While she fears being discovered on a situational basis she is less oft to pass and does so to engage in consumer culture. Clare, however, takes it a step farther and passes for material gain and social access, relying on her accumulated cultural and social capital and the public, private, and political identities therein.

The culture and time in which Passing is set greatly influences Irene’s perspectives of the world as it does for her husband, Brian. Brian offers a compelling juxtaposition; without the luxury of moving in and out of spaces, gaining temporary reprieve, he desires to make his children aware of the futures facing them, and is characterized by his persistent restlessness to move abroad. In this, Larsen captures the dissonance of Irene’s belief that she is an American, when her husband, partner, member
of the same household and country, sees the world so differently. Brian offers an insight to the popular attitudes, despite being middle-class. He has an awareness of his social positioning. The anxiety Irene feels in the beginning of the novel, the fear of being found out, is no match for Brian’s consistent lived experience as Black man.

Brian, having only ever experienced life as a Black man, cannot fully appreciate Irene’s idea that “she was an American. She grew from this soil, and she would not be uprooted” (107). As Irene regularly engages in the performance of whiteness, Larsen illustrates that Irene’s physical self may allow her to align herself with whiteness, but it comes at the cost of Irene’s ability to understand or empathize with the nuanced experiences of Blackness. Consequently, Irene is left with two options – to follow Brian out of the country or to risk staying and losing her family. The bleakness of these options is captured through Brian’s proposition to Irene that they move the children to Brazil. Though Irene rejects this proposition, as she believes America to be her home it becomes clear that Brian, sees his social positioning as fixed by nature of his racial and ethnic identity. To be freed from the constrictions and limitations placed upon the Black (male) body, Brian proposes a physical move from one country to another. In this way, Brian seems to signal what Larsen does – that passing is only useful for the ability to access spaces that would be forbidden for a Black person but, passing is rarely the route to new freedoms or liberation. Instead, Larsen leverages dual and dueling identities throughout the text, black and white, Global North and South, to examine the inherent complexities and complications of self-making and considers the different expressions of racial anxiety as mediated by physical space and the body.
A move to another country would make Irene’s ability to pass presumably useless – and with that idea comes the anxiety of dispensability and subjugation that Irene actively tries to avoid through the accumulation of her social, cultural, and economic capital. Staying in the United States without her husband and children would cost her the social capital and respectability that comes with the identity of wife and mother. While Clare seems burdened by and, at times, indifferent towards these labels, Larsen reminds the reader that Clare’s indifference is more so a product of her ability to be anything where Irene’s anxiety is motivated by the belief that she is nothing without the aforementioned labels.

The ambiguous social space that Clare and Irene operate within, having an intimate knowledge of the Other but a public alliance with dominant culture, presents both risk and reward, as Larsen establishes early on in the text, and complicates the novel’s definition or framing of “freedom”. Irene is fatigued and close to the point of fainting when she is whisked up from the “sweating bodies” below to the luxury of the Drayton’s rooftop. Irene’s ability to access the rooftop is based in a misreading of her body but, in the sight of someone more knowing, Irene fears being found out. It is this anxiety, ever present for Irene that alerts her to the watchful eyes of Clare, but also what allows their serendipitous encounter. As the two discuss the concept of passing, Clare’s perspective on her ambiguous reading empowers her to be anything to anyone, Irene is stricken with the possibility of being read as nothing to no one, as being subjugated and subjected to public embarrassment. Clare, then, embodies a reckless kind of self-making, a self that has been created without any grounding or allegiance to relational identities or communities.
Clare does not move up and away from blackness and her childhood by outright presenting herself as white. Rather, Clare plays with the distance and proximity of blackness and whiteness as a means of getting closer to herself or better yet, as a means of getting closer to the space in which she could fashion an autonomous sense of self. As the novel progresses, Clare moves farther from the whiteness which defines much of her life and with that distance, comes the pressure of upholding the labels and identities she moves away from. Her white child, she comes to resent as the label of mother confines her to the home. Her identity as wife, she finds exhaustive. And, the more time with Black people, the more intimate Clare becomes with Blackness and the closer she gets to jeopardizing the secret she keeps from her husband. Larsen utilizes the consumerist tendencies of both Irene and Clare to examine the impact of class and capitalism on the individual – examining how both women must negotiate who they biologically are with who they would like to be. Irene, as Black woman, desires to be respectable – a wife and mother – and because she does not view passing as a permanent action, she holds her other identities more closely. Irene is motivated by middle-class morality and ideals. Clare, as Black woman, desires to be free, and in her quest for freedom she engages the identities of wife and mother, and does not see passing as permanent because she does not want any one label to be permanent. Though Clare is far from complete and total agency (and by extension, total liberation) she determines what she desires for herself and strategizes to achieve it. Both women attempt to establish themselves through their accumulation and access to white social spaces, however, their fair-skin becomes a sort of social currency that allows them to subvert dominant culture and the presuppositions of whiteness as normative. As Judith Butler writes, racialization in Passing is “a matter of
being able to read a marked body in relations to unmarked bodies”, and the importance of sight and appraisal both in the ability to identify and pursue commodity and in the process of passing shape the narrative of the novel.

**Conclusion**

Irene passes situationally enabling her engagement with blackness and black culture. Clare, however, lives as a white woman and though her companionship with Irene is borne, perhaps out of a desire to revisit the relationships of Clare’s childhood, her proximity to Blackness puts her at increasing risk. “Clare occupies a shadowy racial borderland, masquerading as a white woman in her marriage yet making sorties into Harlem to recover the Black world she has lost through passing” (Goldsmith 110). The closer Clare gets to Blackness in the text, the closer she gets to being found out by her husband. With proximity, however, comes association and the only thing worse than actually being Black, according to Clare’s husband, is being close to Blackness (Larsen 40). “Each is passing, Irene for a day and Clare for life, to enjoy the pleasures of the white leisure class. Irene justifies her passing to herself as a magical self-transformation in which she has no agency…Clare is aware that her passing contains…dangerous possibilities…(and) passes despite, if not because of, the constant risk of exposure” (Goldsmith 111). Larsen implies racialization to be as much a product of ancestry and lineage as it is socialization and proximity. Clare’s husband calls her “Nig” the first time she invites Irene over. Jack bumps into Irene and her (visibly Black) friend after Clare’s attendance at the gala. And Jack discovers Clare’s identity when he ambushes her at a party that was predominantly Black.
Clare’s actions, creating a closeness and proximity to Blackness as the novel goes on, belie an interest in experiencing life on both sides of the color line, and resist the reading that this story is one of the tragic mulatto – rather serves as an example of the subversive means to achieve the autonomy necessary for self-hood and self-realization, not offered to black women. In this, Larsen illustrates a proximity to Blackness as being almost (if not just as) damning as being Black. Clare is able to take on the appearance of being white and use that to operate in society as a white woman, thus allowing herself the freedom to live and move as she would have liked as a Black woman. However, Clare develops a closeness to Blackness over the course of the novel, through her relationship with Irene, that betrays her sympathies and preferences for Black company. This physical closeness is what allows for Jack’s discovery of Clare’s secret and is what facilitates his understanding of her secret. Though he does not have concrete proof that Clare is Black, her closeness to Blackness concretizes the suspicion that she may be.
CHAPTER TWO
FIGHTING THE GOOD FIGHT: ANTAGONISM OF PHYSICAL SPACE IN
THE STREET

Ann Petry imagines the consequences of “bare life” for the Black woman years before Giorgio Agamben unpacks the concept of bare life and biopolitical dispensability in *Homo Sacer*. Bare life is “a lucid outlining of the philosophical mechanisms by which bodies are stripped of their political significance” (Brown 3), and demonstrates the power of the modern state to exclude certain bodies and render these bodies dispensable. *The Street*, penned by Petry in 1946 follows the life and longings of Lutie Johnson to examine the lack of sociopolitical agency extended to the Black woman, in order to illuminate the perceived social disposability of Black women.

While the physical spaces that Petry’s characters inhabit are described gloomily, their physical surroundings are often described as being connected to the cost of space and the amount of labor that was completed in exchange for the dollar. In this way, Petry maintains the relationship between the physical body and the dollar in *The Street* and utilizes this connection to depict the ways in which gender, race, and most importantly, class, prevent or create access to certain physical spaces. Petry leverages her descriptions of physical space, physicality, and materiality to confront the partialness of the “American Dream” for the Black woman. In so doing, Petry suggests that the only means to establishing self-hood for the Black woman is through a manipulation or subversion of physical presentation and performances of the body.

This relationship between money and space is evidenced through the very physical spaces Petry’s characters inhabit and attempt to break free of. Lutie Johnson, a Black and working class single mother, feels confined to her drab apartment but sees the
apartment as the best she can do, considering her financial circumstances. Her apartment is an extension of her capability and, in many regards, is the reward of her physical labor. Lutie and her body are preyed upon by many of the men within the text and Lutie slowly begins to recognize the ways in which her physical self carries some currency as it relates to freeing herself from her physical environment. The type of labor that Lutie is able to do makes her socially valuable but also informs the physical spaces she inhabits. As domestic worker, Lutie’s income is only enough to secure a small and dim apartment like the one she settles in (Petry 8). Mrs. Hedges, the first-floor tenant in Lutie’s apartment building, utilizes her apartment’s space and makes it a brothel of sorts, in order to generate additional income. For both Lutie and Hedges, the social regard of their bodies requires them to reimagine the avenues for their freedom. Neither woman can possibly achieve liberation through normative measures. Lutie cannot be freed of her space and move elsewhere simply through financial discipline and Hedges cannot freely enter society without scrutiny and alienation due to her physical appearance. Both women, then, manipulate the fetishizing of their bodies to leverage themselves into new opportunities for selfhood and personal gain.

**Something in the Atmosphere: Volatility of Space in The Street**

There was a cold November wind blowing through 116th Street…it drove most of the people off the street in the block between Seventh and Eighth Avenues except for a few hurried pedestrians who bent double in an effort to offer the least possible exposed surface to its violent assault.

It did everything it could to discourage the people walking along the street. It found all the dirt and dust and grime on the sidewalk and lifted it up so
that the dirt got into their noses, making it difficult to breathe; the dust got into their eyes and blinded them; and the grit stung their skins. It wrapped newspaper around their feet entangling them until the people cursed deep in their throats, stamped their feet, kicked at the paper. (Petry 1-2)

The street is a space characterized by violence and Petry furthers the perspective of space as a literal and metaphorical force by describing the street through its unrelenting wind. From the opening of the novel, the wind acts almost as a living thing, violating the body and the comfort of the women who pass through the street. The wind operates as a force of nature that alludes to the force enacted upon and liberties taken with Black female bodies. Petry describes the wind that blows through 116th Street and the “pedestrians who bent double in an effort to offer the least possible exposed surface to its violent assault” (Petry 1). By drawing out this illustration Petry reminds her audience that the street is a physical space that creates the parameters within which these characters live.

By painting the street as a violent space, and the wind as an operator on behalf of the street, Petry reminds us that this is not a predictable space and not one that can be assumed as a safe or neutral zone. By describing the wind rushing through the open air and attacking the pedestrians, Petry equates the lingering threat of violence and danger, in consistency and force, to the very air that these Harlemites breathe. This physical space, however, offers Lutie the opportunity to establish herself outside of the home of her father and his girlfriend, and away from the burdensome memory of her failed marriage (Petry 6). Yet, Petry signals to her audience that this move will not be a seamless or easy one as the street would do “everything it could to discourage the people walking along the street” (Petry 1). The street attacks the bodies of those like Lutie Johnson while
simultaneously serving as the space within which the street’s inhabitants foster community. Thus, the street is painted as an entity with the power to both bring her into communion with others but also the power to destroy her body.

The constant threat of physical danger alludes to the almost fated failure of Lutie, who seeks to liberate herself while still within the physical space of the street and living within her racialized and gendered body. This ever-present danger illustrates something significant about the value of Lutie’s labor; as an intersectional laborer, she finds the price of her physical labor and exploitation is only enough to exist among constant danger and instability (Brown 4). There is a vulnerability to assault for the inhabitants of the street that requires readers to reimagine what liberation and self-hood looks like for the Black woman within this particular physical space. These pedestrians expect and anticipate some measure of harm or attack by virtue of where they live as they “double” their intentional efforts to avoid the wind and “offer the least possible exposed surface” (Petry 1). The pedestrians are aware that some part of their bodies will be directly impacted by the force of the wind but seek to protect the majority of their bodies and offer a piece of themselves as sacrifice. Thus, liberation (by Lutie’s definition, and more generally) is not possible in this space, at least not without some partial sacrifice of the body. To this end, the consequences of “bare life” is that the lack of Lutie’s sociopolitical power, places Lutie and her hopes in a precarious space and requires a reimagining of the means through which her liberation is possible.

Lutie’s positioning as a working-class Black woman, then, requires her to use her body to manipulate the desires of her body – the social desires of her productive and reproductive ability. It is, as Petry illustrates over the course of a few hundred pages,
Lutie’s lack of social and political power (the lack that positions Lutie in a bare life or bare-life adjacent status) that allows for her subversion. She seeks to advance herself and subscribes to “the belief that anybody could be rich if (they) wanted to and worked hard enough and figured it out carefully…” (43) (emphasis mine). Lutie fails to realize that each body is not allowed equal access to wealth or equal opportunities for upward mobility. Further, she forgets (or does not believe) that certain bodies are penalized simply for existing as they are. The wind does not discriminate – as it is described as doing “everything it could to discourage the people walking along the street” (1). The attack of the wind, then, is a part of the cost of living within the street. Petry makes evident the inevitability of Lutie’s failure, as Lutie maintains faith in a philosophy that fundamentally disregards the sociohistorical significance of her racialized, gendered, and classed body. However, as the novel progresses and Lutie becomes increasingly aware of the fetishizing of and restrictions because of her body, she must disrupt the forces that seek to confine her. As the opening of this novel indicates through the description of the street, there is no sanctuary for the Black and female and poor. In this opening, Petry suggests both the difficulty Lutie will face as she tries to forge a new path for herself and alludes to the pervasiveness of violence that creates the perfect storm for Lutie’s physical departure from Harlem at the end of the novel.
Embodiments of Fetishization and Labor in Domestic Service Work

Two weeks before Christmas, Mrs. Chandler’s mother came for a visit. A tall, thin woman with cold gray eyes and hair almost exactly the same color as her eyes. She took one look at Lutie and…(leaned) across the dining-room table to say in a clipped voice ‘Now I wonder if you’re being wise, dear. That girl is unusually attractive and men are weak. Besides, she’s colored and you know how they are…’

Queer how that was always cropping up. Here (Lutie) was a highly respectable, married, mother of a small boy, and, in spite of all that…people took one look at her and immediately got that now-I-wonder look. Apparently, it was an automatic reaction of white people – if a girl was colored and fairly young, why, it stood to reason she had to be a prostitute. (Petry 45)

Petry resists the impulse to cast the street and “the ghetto” as the only space with the potential for dysfunction and uses the Chandlers, the white family that Lutie works for, to attest to the dysfunction and violence possible even among the white and wealthy. Petry offers the body as a space that, through the proximity to (or distance from) other bodies, cannot easily subvert the expectations of the community in which the body is recognized and included. This revelation is not immediately apparent for Lutie Johnson and she is taken with the idea that she can perform her way into wealth –by working hard, she is certain that she can eventually achieve the freedom and financial stability that she longs for. Her understanding of wealth and the benefits of being wealthy are motivated largely in part by Lutie’s interactions with her employers. As a domestic worker, Petry places
Lutie into close physical proximity to wealth in order to highlight the disparity between what Lutie longs for and what is accessible to her.

As a young maid in the Chandler home, Lutie is exposed to the luxury and darkness of their lives. It is Lutie’s time with and proximity to the Chandlers that impresses upon her the importance of working hard to move upward. While working for the family, she realizes that violence, death, and loss can still befall even the most affluent and yet their access to money and social network assuage the pain of such losses (Petry 49). It is Lutie’s early experience with the Chandlers that sets the tone for the rest of Lutie’s endeavors as she recognizes that the world the Chandlers occupied was “a very strange world…with an entirely different set of values” (41). In their household, the expectations of her body act with the same amount of vigor and violence as the wind described in the beginning – by sheer virtue of the kind of labor being asked of Lutie. However, the Chandlers are able to exert this power over Lutie’s body as they wield the privilege that comes with their wealth which is, in part, a product of whiteness. To this end, Petry belies the inherent relationship between wealth and whiteness and the dangers of assuming wealth is possible for the Black working woman through the same avenues of the white and upper-class.

Juxtaposing Lutie with the ideals of the Chandlers, Petry illustrates the ways that Lutie is confined and defined by her physical self. Lutie’s ability to do physical work is what the Chandlers appreciate about Lutie but the assumptions surrounding her sexuality, is what prompts their disdain. Ann Petry’s understanding of fetish, value, labor and the laborer is seen, perhaps most clearly, when considering the construction of physical space and implications of Lutie’s physicality for her aspirations of financial stability. Lutie’s
body is seen as many things; as a space with the promise of profitability and sexuality, the potentiality for her body’s labor – physical and reproductive – draw her into precarious power (im)balances with the men of the novel. Petry illustrates through Lutie’s time with the Chandler’s the difficulty Lutie faces as the physical embodiment of all things antithetical to wealth and whiteness within this text.

Lutie’s social positioning both in and out of the street is influenced by her physical appearance. The friends of Mrs. Chandler are largely skeptical of Mrs. Chandler having such a “good-looking colored wench” working in the home offering, “you know they’re always making passes at men. Especially white men” (41). The fetishizing and sexualization of Black women and the positioning of white women in relationship to Black women and white men is also of note here. As Mrs. Chandler and her friends lament the attractiveness of Lutie they acknowledge the power, privilege, and predatory nature of their husbands. Whether their assumptions are motivated by racism or a lack agency within the home, these white women play into the patriarchy and predation of white men. Lutie is absent from the circle of whiteness, privilege, and wealth that allows Mrs. Chandler and company to lounge and make assumptions about her. However, Petry offers that “it didn’t make (Lutie) angry at first. Just contemptuous. They didn’t know she had a big handsome husband of her own; that she didn’t want any of their thin unhappy husbands. But she wondered why they all had the idea that colored girls were whores” (Petry 41). Lutie is subject, as Carby explains, “to the simultaneous oppression of patriarchy, class, and ‘race’” (Carby 390). It is in the Chandler household that Lutie is exposed to the idea that even the achievement of wealth and prosperity comes with some limits for the individual if that wealth is not connected to whiteness.
Lutie’s aspirations require her denial of what is actual, that is, her physical body. To this end, Petry uses Lutie’s aspirations and subscriptions to Benjamin Franklin’s ideals, to assert the idea that self-making is not feasible through the same methods as the white characters described in the novel. Lutie’s ability to “work hard” cements her positioning as laborer and her ability to do physical work translates into a suspicion about her potential for sex and seduction. Lutie’s access to opportunity and physical spaces are informed by the presentation and reception of her physical body. Thus, her attempts to align herself with ideals that do not take into account her physical self are of no use for Lutie.

Whereas the Chandlers and their whiteness informs Lutie’s belief about the feasibility of her quest towards financial freedom and stability, Junto, a white business owner that operates at the edges of Lutie’s narrative, restricts her ability to move towards her goal. Despite the dysfunction of the Chandler household Lutie aspires to bring both herself and her son out of a life of poverty – recognizing the Chandlers, despite their problems, as having a more preferable economic position than her. As she sets out to advance herself, whether that is through securing a new apartment or singing with a band in a nightclub, she is thwarted or interrupted at each juncture by Junto. Junto who seeks Lutie’s physical companionship, regularly interferes with her job prospects to get his way. Junto convinces Boots Smith, a musician under Junto’s employ, to make Lutie the lead singer of Boot’s band in hopes of corralling Lutie into some proximity to Junto. Further, Junto has Mrs. Hedges proposition Lutie to work as a part of her brothel with the intention of sending Lutie to Junto.
At each turn, the financial possibilities for Lutie are in the hands of Junto. In *The Street* the plight, success, and shortcomings of the central Black female character is connected to the influence and manipulative acts of the white man at the periphery. Lutie is given numerous opportunities to advance herself financially if she will take on a relationship with Junto and yet Lutie is averse to this idea and thus, finds herself set back at every turn. In many respects, Lutie’s failure to advance financially is a result of the tension Lutie experiences—she seeks to align herself with whiteness by subscribing to upper-class ideals and morality, but maintains a distance from whiteness socially and sexually. Whether the inquiry is made by Mrs. Chandler, Boots, Mrs. Hedges or Junto, the presupposition is the same. As Petry makes clear, Lutie will have to break from the communities she finds herself associated with in order to fully realize the avenues for liberation that afforded to women like herself.

**Risks, Rewards, and Reprieve**

The frozen debris and the icy wind made the street a desolate place in winter and the people found a certain measure of escape from it by standing in front of the Junto where the light streaming from the windows and the music from its juke-box created an oasis of warmth...

All of them – the idle ones and the ones tired from their day’s labor – found surcease and refreshment either inside or outside the Junto’s doors. It served as social club and meeting place. (Petry 143)

If the street is a site of violence and despair, as illustrated in the novel’s opening, Junto’s Bar and Grill is described as an area of reprieve. Junto’s, however, operates within the text as a site of calculated risk. Lutie’s time at Junto’s bar elucidates the difference
between what is hoped for and what is often the accessible reality, thus requiring a new approach to “getting free” for Lutie. In this description of Junto’s, Petry illuminates the stark contrast between the home, the street, and the bar. Whereas her home and street are marked by coldness and darkness, Junto’s is characterized by its light and levity.

The physical space that Lutie calls “home” is dark and deteriorating, making it a place that she spends much of the novel attempting to work her way out of. The street is no better, filled with men of dubious character and women being blown here and there by the force of the wind. The bar, then, appears to be a safe haven though the reader is privy to the imbalance of power and potential for danger inside of the bar which is one of several businesses in the novel owned by Junto. Junto, then, embodies the American Dream as a single business owner who has been able to procure wealth over time as he generates wealth through multiple avenues. This bar is a white-owned establishment and takes what little discretionary income its patrons have for a few moments to forget their surroundings.

Lutie subscribes to Benjamin Franklin’s ideas of financial success, that hard work and frugality will allow for upward mobility (Petry 10). She believes that if she were to simply work hard enough she could raise herself out of her financial situation and her physical environment – a widely held belief during the 1940s (Jones 234). Despite her optimism, Lutie is consistently presented with challenges to her vision. After overhearing Lutie’s laments about the precariousness of their financial situation, Lutie’s son, Bub, attempts to contribute to the household as a shoe shine boy. When Lutie encounters him on the street calling for work, she’s dismayed at the idea that Bub will become stuck in a cycle of hard labor and little pay. She strikes him and on the heels of their encounter,
needs to get out of the house, and into the street – later visiting the Junto Bar and Grill where “people found a certain measure of escape from (the street) by standing in front of the Junto where the light (streamed) from the windows and the music…created an oasis of warmth” (Petry 141). The description of Junto Bar and Grill is that of a heavenly refuge – filled with light and providing a source of comfort for passersby’s, those who stand outside, and the people who find themselves inside of the bar.

Lutie steps into the bar for a moment to comfort herself from the grim reality of her situation in Harlem and, while inside of the bar, buys a drink to experience the atmosphere. It is in this temporary moment of reprieve, one of few throughout the novel for Lutie, that the precariousness of her financial situation becomes even more pressing. Finishing her first beer in one gulp and ordering another she reflects “no matter what it cost them, people had to come to places like the Junto…they had to replace the haunting silences of rented rooms and little apartments with the murmur of voices the sound of laughter” (147). There is the sense that the cost is not the most important factor in patrons’ decision to indulge at Junto’s. Rather, Lutie and the rest of the patrons are motivated to fill themselves, socially and emotionally, and heal the places that are wounded in the street. The juxtaposition of their homes and Junto’s is night and day; whereas Junto’s is described as a safe haven verging on divine as it provides its guests “two or three small glasses of liquid gold so they could believe in themselves again,” the apartments are described with a sense of ominousness and ghoulishness with “haunting silences” and “murmur of voices”. It’s this contrast between the actual space and the aspirational space that brings Lutie to Junto’s. Lutie’s apartment is the symbol of the rewards of her labor – her labor comes with only enough monetary value to secure an
apartment of this size but Junto’s represents the life and access that the inhabitants of the street long for. Petry writes “the inside of the Junto was always crowded, too, because the white bartenders in their immaculate coats greeted the customers graciously. Their courteous friendliness was a heart-warming thing that helped rebuild egos battered and bruised during the course of the day’s work” (143). Yet, even in this space she is unable to forget that her drinks come at a financial cost and she “(rebels) at the thought of day after day of work and night after night caged in that apartment” (147). This moment of indulgence is not free of the burdensome reminder of Lutie’s financial position or the bleak reality that faces her. Further, Lutie’s financial positioning bookends this experience – it is her desperation that drives her to strike her son and apologize by paying for him to go to the theater. Then she proceeds to Junto’s but still cannot ignore the burden that is her financial responsibility.

Petry uses Junto and his bar to consider the ways that Lutie’s physical environment shapes the opportunities for her mobility and to serve as a reminder of the implications of Lutie’s physical self for the opportunities extended to her. Petry establishes the meekness of Lutie’s apartment and the scarcity of her resources through overt statements “…the budget she had planned so carefully was ruined. If she did this very often, there wouldn’t be much point in having a budget – for she couldn’t budget what she didn’t have…she tried to look into the future. She still couldn’t see anything…” (147). The importance of this moment, however, is in the fact that Lutie’s financial concerns remain at the periphery even when in a moment that is designed to be a release. Not until Lutie enters this safe space, of Junto where “the lights were soft, and the music coming from the juke-box was sweet,” does Lutie feels compelled to use her voice and
sing, “there’s no sun, Darlin’. There’s no fun, Darlin’” lyrics that speak almost directly to her perspective living in her apartment and in the street (Petry 147). Lutie is out of the street, away from the literal and metaphorical attacks on her body and is still weighed by and compelled to sing about the darkness of her position. Junto’s is a space that is designed as a reprieve but ultimately, it is significant because it is the space where Lutie is moved to use her voice and later, offer her body as a way of achieving the freedoms and stability she has yearned for. The street as a space, it is unrelenting to the bodies – and by extension, the desires – of the street and its inhabitants. Therefore, Junto’s signals the impossibility of liberation by nature of the location or physical space in which this story unfolds. Further, Petry details, as the exchange continues, that living within this gendered and racialized body will define the ways in which Black women are able to interact with and are acted upon. Inside of Junto’s, Petry makes clear the consequences of bare life for the gendered, raced, and classed bodies of the street – and reminds the reader that the normative avenues for freedom, (here it is using one’s voice and picking up another avenue for work) will not be enough for Lutie. In fact, it will be her undoing as her body is an object of desire for Boots and Junto.

Though much of Lutie and her social positioning is a product of her bodily presentation, and the assumptions regarding her presentation, it is striking, then, that Lutie’s (singing) voice is what captures the attention of the sneaky Boots Smith. Smith, who hears Lutie and offers her the opportunity to sing with his band, appeals to Lutie’s desire for new opportunity, though he only offers in hopes of sleeping with her. Boots is described as a shifty man and Lutie balances her expectations of him and her personal desires seeing Boots, the obstacle, the misogynist, the trickster as a means to an end. “She
couldn’t seem to stop the flow of planning that ran through her mind. A singing job would mean she and Bub could leave 116th Street. She could get an apartment some place where there were trees and the streets were clean and the rooms would be full of sunlight” (151). In a space where Lutie seeks solace and comfort from the obstacles affronting her, she is met with ever more reminders about the bleakness of her current situation and is offered an opportunity for advancement that comes with its own set of issues. Using her voice presents both more obstacles and new opportunity to escape her current situation. It is the voice, and not the visible or tangible, that Petry offers to her character as a means of escape. It is the body, however, that is desired, preyed upon, and leveraged ultimately reinforcing the idea that the transcendence of physical space is impossible in the body that Petry has constructed for Lutie. In this, Petry disrupts the notion that liberation is available through the same avenues for any and everybody – foreshadowing the violence and subversive means of self-hood that Lutie takes on at the end of the novel.

**Desire and Disgust: Reading the Body of Mrs. Hedges**

It was a narrow aperture not really big enough for the bulk of her body. She felt her flesh tear and actually give way as she struggled to get out, forcing and squeezing her body through the small space. Fire was blazing in the room in back of her. Hot embers from the roof were falling in front of her…

She could smell her hair burning, smell her flesh burning, and still she struggled, determined that she would force her body through the narrow window, that she would make the very stones of the foundation give until the window opening would in turn give way. (Petry 244)
For most of *The Street*, Mrs. Hedges is a peripheral character. It is not until the attempted assault of Lutie in the lobby of the apartment, when Hedges comes to her rescue, that Petry takes the opportunity to offer some interiority to the character. Hedges grapples with the biopolitics of her body and her blackness. Though she internalizes the idea that her body is an ugly and unlovable thing, she believes she might be able to find romantic partnership in spite of her body if she has enough income (Petry 240). After a narrow escape from a fire, one that creates significant damage to her body, Hedges maintains distance from anyone that seeks emotional closeness to her. She facilitates a brothel out of her home, for the economic benefit of herself and Junto – her business partner. This brothel, however, allows her to maintain some closeness to socially acknowledged “feminine” bodies that garner (male) attention. Mrs. Hedges, Petry illustrates, will not find liberation or the opportunity to establish self-hood given the violent responses to Black womanhood throughout the text. Thus, Petry requires us to view Mrs. Hedges as a character subverting physical and social expectations through her brothel business to negotiate a new kind of freedom. Petry illustrates the way physicality – be it physical environment or bodily space – impacts the lived experiences of women at the intersections of race, gender, and class through the character that is Mrs. Hedges.

Mrs. Hedges spends the first half of *The Street* more or less as an observer. She is able to study the interactions taking place in the streets below, but remains free from scrutiny because she spends most of her time alone, in her first-floor apartment. After leaving her small hometown in Georgia and moving to New York, Hedges was in the streets foraging for food when she first met Junto. The two went into business together, as he secured and developed properties and she collected rent on his behalf. By situating
Hedges as virtually powerless prior to her meeting with Junto, Petry reminds her reader of what is at stake for the Black and female body in the street and what becomes possible for that same body given its closeness to or distance from whiteness.

Giorgio Agamben argues that part of the concept of “bare life” comes from the idea that some bodies retain or maintain animality in human form. That animality is seen both through the hypersexualization of Lutie and the garishness with which Mrs. Hedges and her body are described. In fact, Hedges is described as an animal on more than one occasion. The consequence of bare life positioning is the total exclusion from social and political agency and power. Yet, Petry speaks from this liminal sociopolitical position of Black female domestic worker to interrogate the possibility for selfhood and agency despite the implications of bare life politics.

In just the first few pages of the novel, Petry describes the thin line between animality and humanity, the blurry line of distinction that Agamben proposes as the impetus for bare life. This animality is perhaps, first seen, when describing Mrs. Hedges with eyes “…as still and as malignant as the eyes of a snake” (Petry 6). Hedges is a watchful character, living in an apartment with a birds-eye view of the street below. Hedges is not only characterized as having these watchful eyes but, because of her position to observe the street, Lutie later considers, “perhaps she was a snake charmer and she sat in her window in order to charm away at the snakes, the wolves, the doxes, the bears that prowled and loped and crawled on their bellies through the jungle of 116th Street” (Petry 8). Both snake and snake charmer, Hedges embodies the “bare life” status as her ability to establish power for herself, relies on her positioning at the fringes of her community. Through her description of the wind and the inhabitants of the street as
animals, Petry uses naturalism to denaturalize the violence and animalism of the street. In doing so, she shows the ways in which “racialized spaces reduce the Black body to biological domain with no discursive value” (Brown 15). Thus, the street, comprised of Black bodies reduces this space to a naturalistic biological domain – emphasizing the importance of physicality, both as physical space and the body as space, to the life experiences of her characters.

Conclusion

The physical space(s) that characters embody serve as indicators of the labor and value of labor they produce. It becomes clear that the selfhood and liberation that Lutie or Hedges imagine for themselves is not physically possible given the biopolitics that inform how their bodies are received or perceived. Lutie accepts Boots Smith’s offer to sing the lead for his band, in hopes that her work with him will allow her to get out of Harlem with her son. Instead, she kills him after his attempted assault and must flee Harlem and move to Chicago. While it is not the exit that she imagined but it is a departure that she has dreamt of since the beginning. Petry uses Lutie, perhaps first and foremost, to critique the idea of an “American Dream”. As the years preceding The Street evidenced, and Petry illustrates, given the social and political implications of being Black and woman in the 1940s, there was little possibility of liberation within urban areas of the country, particularly those that relegated Black and brown bodies outside of the reach of financial opportunity because of their proximity to Blackness. The American Dream for the Chandlers and Junto allows them to imagine success without altering or manipulating any parts of their physical identity. For Lutie and Mrs. Hedges, their physical identifiers alienate them and make their bodies objects of fetishization or sexualization or disgust. At each juncture, Petry
makes it plain that Lutie’s physical environment and lived (physical) experience prevent Lutie from obtaining the coveted American Dream. Rather, the closest Lutie gets to freedom from her environment is through an escape from the city after this act of violence. The fetishization of Lutie’s body as a site for (re)productive labor and the constraint of her choices due, in part, to her identity as a mother, reinforce the implications for women deprived of sociopolitical power and highlight the oppressiveness of an identity that includes “Black”, “female”, and “poor.”
CHAPTER THREE

EVIL, LUST, AND FATE IN SULA

The discourse surrounding personhood, autonomy, and physical or sexual liberation in the literature by twentieth-century black women writers would not be complete without Toni Morrison’s second novel, *Sula*, published in 1973. Published on the tail end of the black arts movement, an artistic and cultural movement that celebrated black power, the black community, and black pride – *Sula* is stunning in its alignment with and departures from the movement.

Scholarship on *Sula* is extensive, with much being said about the power and limitations of community. Indeed, the scholarship around Morrison as writer and artist is just as vast. Morrison’s body of work, among many other things, engages with themes of motherhood, generational or cyclical traumas, and the power or limitations of community. *Sula*, in particular, considers the power and limitation of the community as Nel and Sula legitimize each other’s identity. The ability to make some determination of personal identity and claim some agency over one’s body is an act that has a historical significance for Black women. To this end, identifying the self, not as the “other”, but as the individual, becomes the first step towards some sense of freedom or liberation. Morrison speaks of *Sula*’s conception, as well as the novel’s handling of political content, in her 2002 foreword stating, “conventional wisdom agrees that political fiction is not art; that such work is less likely to have aesthetic value because politics – all politics – is agenda and therefore its presence taints aesthetic production” (xi). As Morrison found after her first novel, “in that no-win situation – inauthentic, even irresponsible, to those looking for a politically representative canvas; marginalized by those assessing value by
how ‘moral’ the characters were – my only option was fidelity to my own sensibility” (xiii). Thus, *Sula* emerges as a rich source of analysis to examine depictions of self-making for black women, particularly as the author attempts to maintain a faithfulness to her own sensibilities.

Toni Morrison examines the pitfalls and the consequences of self-making and individualism for Black women in *Sula*– exploring subversive means of establishing and maintaining power, and the limited (or limiting) choices afforded to Black women that seek to maintain a personal sense of agency. Unraveling the lives and longings of two young women, Nel and Sula, Morrison considers the extent to which freedom seeking within a community is futile as self-identity is defined and negotiated through lineage, community, and indomitable forces like nature and generations of trauma. Instead, *Sula* illustrates that true power and possibility lies in the doing away with oppressive binaries of good and evil, male and female, right and wrong.

Morrison considers how the politics of identity, aesthetics of Black womanhood and generational trauma come together to define the lengths and limitations of self-making within a predetermined framework – a community shaped and stifled by racism, patriarchy, and familial trauma. Morrison contemplates “what choices are available to Black women outside their own society’s approval?” (xii). This reading of *Sula* meditates on how, through allusions to evil, fate, myth, and witchcraft, Morrison unpacks the temporal and spatial limitations on self-making for the Black woman. In so doing, she argues that the parameters of possibility for the Black woman require that self-making occur through socially expected or subversive means and, regardless, come at great cost to the individual. Portrayed most stunningly through the titular character as a reckless
kind of self-making, Morrison examines the human tendency towards evil, chaos, and violence as well as the human tendencies towards companionship, belonging, and self-making and illustrating the many ways in which one begets the other.

**Eva and Construction of Evil**

As Claude Pruitt (2011) works to identify the “circle(s) of sorrow” within *Sula*, Pruitt is careful to note the plurality of circles within Morrison’s work. The cyclical nature of trauma is a concept well covered in Toni Morrison’s work but Pruitt suggests reading “iteratively” to examine the circles within the text to understand the “subtexts and intertextual inferences taking shape” (165). The enduring nature of trauma and even sorrow is something that appears subtly within black women narratives of the twentieth century and something to be unpacked further.

It is no coincidence that this story, which speaks about the individuality of desire and pleasure, weaves itself across generations and examines the ways that one story, one moment of liberation, one sacrifice, makes way for the next. Within the Bottom, there is no exception. As *Sula* begins, however, the narrative voice first introduces the reader to Shadrack, a veteran of World War I who suffers from PTSD, and then the Wright household, where readers become familiar with to Nel and Helene Wright. The delay in the introduction of the titular character makes it clear that to fully understand Sula, it is necessary to interrogate the space, time, and community she inhabits. Morrison unsettles the reader’s presupposition that this narrative will be fixed and focused singularly on the titular character, and suggests the impossibility of separating the story of the individual from the community they emerge from. Valerie Smith, in fact, suggests that postmodernist narratives such as Sula “circle the subject” by treating culturally relevant
subjects through the narrative representation of their results or effects (342-43). Delaying
the introduction of Sula to tease out the construction of her community and the
peculiarities of the townspeople within draws attention to the racism, the history, and the
culture that comprises this space.

Meeting Shadrack, a veteran that situates readers within the historical background
of the novel, and meeting Nel, in which readers become acquainted with the governing
ideas of respectability and individuality that motivate many exchanges throughout the
novel, readers finally get some insight to the background and home life of Sula Peace.
Sula “lived in a house of many rooms” yet the “creator and sovereign of this enormous
house…was Eva Peace” (30). The narrative voice mentions Sula, casually and for the
first time, towards the end of the second chapter. Thus, the delay in parsing out the
specifics of Sula make her seem like an essence of the text, a character that draws the
reader ever closer while seeming impossibly inaccessible.

Eva is the point of origin for Sula’s assertive and self-serving ways and the
character Morrison uses to examine the self-making possibilities within Black
motherhood. As Hortense Spillers notes, Eva is one of the “more perplexing characters of
recent American fiction, (and) embodies a figure of both insatiable generosity and
insatiable demanding” (69). Scholarship within the last few decades has viewed the role
of the matriarch within black families or communities through a variety of lenses.
Christina M. T. Stevens rejects the characterization of motherhood as a “purely immanent
process which denies and entraps women’s body in utterly distorted, essentialist terms”
and this is evident in Morrison’s handling of Eva. As Eva embodies mother-love through
her willingness to sacrifice for others, she also maintains a domineering sense of
possession and responsibility for the lives under her guardianship. This is seen most clearly in her disappearance, physical sacrifice, and subsequent return to the Bottom after her husband, BoyBoy, abandons her and their three children. As Eva returns to the Bottom, she endeavors to build out her home, taking in boarders to supplement income and situating herself as the head of household. Eva begins a tradition among Peace women of choice, pleasure-seeking, and quest for ownership/possession.

Morrison designates Eva as “creator” and “sovereign”, situating Eva both as a religious figure and head of the house. Eva is the mother of Hannah, the grandmother of Sula, and the longest to live of the three Peace women. The house itself is a home to many and Eva, from the confines of her wheelchair, “(directs) the lives of her children, friends, strays, and a constant stream of boarders,” filling the house with vibrancy and chaos (30). As Eva, Hannah, and Sula are closely associated with this home – the chaos of the home is associated, in name, with the Peace women. Morrison again breaks from the assumptions we project onto words and reimagines “peace” – suggesting peace (perhaps like family, like self, like love) to be just as much the home bursting with boarders, sex, and transience as it is the picturesque living room, still as dawn. Though this household and the women within do not fit neatly within the pre-approved identities offered through the Bottom as a community, they establish a sense of community and support within the home. Eva’s ability to create a home and raise a family in this bustling space indicates the importance of her role within this home and this space as the mother, caretaker, and provider. These clearly defined roles for Eva indicate Eva’s character to be rooted firmly in a predetermined framework, defined by her race, class, and gender. Eva’s opportunities for liberation, Morrison suggests, must happen through subversive
means or a reinterpretation of words like “responsibility” and “freedom”. As creator and sovereign, it becomes clear that Eva has some relationship with and responsibility to those around her, but she is also powerful within these labels, so much so that Morrison illuminates quiet and boisterous opportunities for Eva’s subversion.

Eva, in her subversive self-making, blurs the line between selflessness and self-preservation as she sacrifices for others and sacrifices others. Eva is not a wicked character, according to the people of the Bottom, but she is capable of both selfish and selfless things. Morrison uses this character to examine variations of self-making in perhaps the most linear way – through an examination of matrilineal household and the women therein. The meeting of Nel and Sula is described as “fortunate” as it allowed the two girls to foster some sense of community. The “daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers (Sula’s because he was dead; Nel’s because he wasn’t), they found in each other’s eyes the intimacy they were looking for” (52). The fathers of these two households are written off in short sentences; their dismissal and the resulting interactions between Nel and Sula are then framed as a direct result of the presences and absences of their mothers and their grandmothers.

Eva, the Latinate counterpart of Eve, derived from Hebrew meaning “life” or “living one”, both reifies the mythological concepts of nature, life, death, and destiny and, as mother character, serves as the genealogical explanation for some of Sula’s tendencies towards arrogance and self-destruction. Eva operates within the novel as the starting point for a clan of women who suffer their traumas because of the actions of others and attempt to find liberation on their own terms. It is reasonable to assess a more positive reading of Eva as one of two female characters that persist until the end, Eva
embodies resistance in her role as the mother. Yet, Eva, along with other women of the
text, proves that within systems of racialized and gendered violence, the liberation she
seeks will be possible – but at a cost that does not allow freedom to feel as full.

Eva passes on the tendency toward pleasure seeking (“man-love”) and trauma to
Hannah and, by extension, Sula. Eva is traumatized by life in her own right and is not the
doting mother her children would have wanted. When her husband leaves Eva alone to
care for herself and her children, “the demands of feeding her three children were so
acute she had to postpone her anger for two years until she had both the time and the
energy for it” (32). For the sake of herself and her household, Eva is required to
compartmentalize and endure the sear of abandonment from Boy Boy. The “circle of
sorrow” here suggests a certain fragility to mother-daughter relationships and the ease of
passing trauma on and beyond generations. Perception of black womanhood changed
from the 1920s to the 1970s as war, civil rights, feminism and black power movements
expanded national considerations of “freedom” and “self.” Yet, motherhood remained a
precarious site for negotiation of one’s personal identity. As Eva works to rebound from
Boy Boy’s departure, she must depart from her children to amass enough economic
capital to support the family. Though Eva’s departure can be read many ways if
considering the departure alone, Pruitt’s direction to read the circles of trauma within the
text suggests we look further. Eva’s opportunity for self-determination is not evident
upon her disappearance and is not supported by her return. However, after the sacrifices
of this black woman’s time, affections, and body, Eva takes control of the lives under her
maternal care.
Shortly after Eva’s return to the Bottom, Boy Boy reappears to visit Eva, with a new woman in tow. The return and final betrayal by BoyBoy sends Eva, in some ways to her death, as the narrative voice mentions “after BoyBoy’s visit she began her retreat to her bedroom, leaving the bottom of the house more and more to those who lived there” (37). While Eva maintains her resolve during the visit from BoyBoy and the woman he is traveling with, his reappearance in her life is enough to cause the “creator and sovereign” of the house to “retreat” as if his mere presence was an attack. Eva becomes a mystical figure within the novel, disappearing from town and returning with money and without a leg, retreating upstairs to her bedroom and the narrative voice notes, “after 1910 she didn’t willingly set foot on the stairs but once and that was to light a fire, the smoke of which was in her hair for years” (37). As the “sovereign” of her space, Eva is both responsible for who enters her home and who is banished from it. When Eva’s son, Plum, returns from the war addicted to heroin, Eva makes a rare, long, and painful descent downstairs, holding Plum to her bosom before setting him ablaze. On the edge of falling asleep Plum “felt twilight…He opened his eyes and saw what he imagined was the great wing of an eagle pouring a wet lightness over him. Some kind of baptism, some kind of blessing, he thought” (47). The “baptism”, is nothing more than Eva dousing him in kerosene before setting him ablaze.

As Eva, by name and relationship is the life-giver for this family, her decision to sacrifice Plum rather than seeing him weakened any further by addiction moves the investigation into Eva’s self-making even farther. As her opportunities for subversion and self-satisfaction are fleeting, Eva finds opportunities to both maintain her identity and make choices for herself and others within her identity. Plum’s murder becomes just as
much a punishment for the perceived weaknesses of his drug addiction as it is a redemptive act, something that allowed him to “die like a man” (72). Prior to Eva’s disappearance, she used the last of her resources to save Plum, as a baby, from life-threatening constipation. Thus, her murder of Plum is an expression of love as well as well as an expression of judgement and wrath – Eva gave Plum his life once and saved his life later; though Morrison never illuminates the stretch of time between Eva’s disappearance and her return, it is clear that Eva sacrificed her physical self (her missing leg) to ensure economic stability for her family (presumably through insurance checks). Having committed at regular intervals to sacrificing for her children to save her children, Eva’s murderous act becomes colored both by her love for children and her willingness to destroy anything that contradicts the sacrifices she has made for them.

Death becomes more than a condemnation or judgment, however, as Morrison works, through several of her characters, to frame death as a sort of reprieve as well. Years after Plum’s murder, Hannah questions Eva and Eva makes it clear that she killed Plum to save him from himself saying, “after all that carryin’ on, just gettin’ him out and keepin’ him alive, he wanted to crawl back in my womb and well…I ain’t got the room no more ever if he could do it. There wasn’t space for him in my womb” (71). In making death a sort of reprieve – a means of saving one’s name or manhood – Eva is again written into a role of life-giver and destiny maker, as she makes clear her assumed responsibility and indeed, duty, to stop Plum before he ruins the life she has created, nurtured, and bled for.

It is Eva’s many sacrifices for her children that make her murder of Plum just as much a selfish act (Plum’s inability to adhere to the expectations of his mother results in
his death) as it is a selfless one (despite Eva’s Herculean efforts to keep her children alive, she recognizes death as the best option for Plum). Morrison captures in Eva, both the potentiality for heroism and great sacrifice as well as the possibility of selfishness and destruction of self and others. Though Eva willingly sacrifices her children, as evidenced by her murder of Plum, Morrison also indicates a willingness to adhere to maternal acts of valor or sacrifice. Hannah ventures up to Eva’s the afternoon that she dies. When Eva looks into the yard below and notices Hannah burning she “knew there was time for nothing in this world other than the time it took to get there and cover her daughter’s body with her own” (76). Eva flings herself out of the window to save Hannah, much like Plum, from an accident of her own doing.

Just as Eva gives birth to a line of women committed to their own pleasure, she also passes on trauma. It seems Morrison asks us to imagine where trauma ends or in what ways trauma is passed along and perpetuated. She writes in the novel’s introduction that each of the women (Nel, Sula, Eva, and Hannah) are different directions of a cross and they each meet at an intersection. In this case, the intersection is a site for different types of emotional (and many times, physical) trauma; it is striking that the life source of the Peace women is also the source of their trauma. Years after Eva kills (sacrifices) Plum, Hannah comes to her mother, asking if Eva ever truly loved her and her siblings, to which Eva replies “what you talkin’ ‘bout did I love you girl I stayed alive for you…” (69). Hannah seeks the intimacy and mother love of Eva but cannot access it as Eva closes herself off, literally as she returns to her bedroom after killing Plum and emotionally. It is the emotional distance from Eva that Hannah inquires after, the last question she poses to Eva before Hannah dies. But that emotional distance is a result of
Eva’s attempts at her own self-making. Eva left town and sacrifices her leg to collect insurance checks that will support her and her family. Beyond the pains of birth – Eva represents the pain of motherhood as Morrison depicts a regular experience of pain and sacrifice.

Though Eva and Sula are perhaps the most alike in their willingness to define themselves and their lives as individuals and not as extensions of the men around them, even Eva believes there is a limit to the amount of freedom Sula is entitled to, as they re-encounter each other when Sula returns to town. As Eva, by name, is a life giver, Sula’s rejection of Eva’s limitations is profound – and yet Sula ultimately dies alone and Eva continues to live alone. In this, Morrison betrays no bias or judgment, but exposes the consequences of self-making for each.

**Legitimizing Others, Learned Habits**

Beyond examining Sula’s family members to understand her, Morrison charges her readers to consider the importance of and the obstacle that is the community. Thus, it is just as important to consider the relationship between the titular character and her other half, Nel. Both girls find themselves complemented by the other, and seek the qualities of life offered to the other. Morrison considers the communal possibilities of self-making and continues discourses regarding friendships between Black women and the risks/rewards of finding an intimate or legitimizing other. The parallels between *Sula* and *Passing* is worthwhile to consider here, as both novels feature “selfish” women, characterized by their desires to have and willingness to seek their pleasure above all. One critical distinction is the way Clare Kendry and Sula Peace fulfill desire; Clare’s “having ways” are fueled by a wish to acquire material or economic capital and yet Sula,
as Marie Nigro describes, is a departure from this form of self-making, seeking neither money nor material gain (Nigro 730). Sula has no desire for anything outside of herself, and “artist without art form”, the lengths to which Sula goes to define herself, mark her as reprehensible in the eyes of the Bottom. Nel, however, in her ability to align with heteronormative values of the town, marrying Jude and becoming the image of propriety, maintains favor in eyes of the townspeople. Though Nel lives within the boundaries set for her, she still suffers. The relationship between Nel and Sula is the space to examine the role community plays in self-making and the difficulty of being both in a community while maintaining an individualism. Nel is the daughter of Helene Wright, a woman who makes a regular display of her respectability politics and her issues with Blackness and colorism as evidenced through her insistence that Nel stretches her nose, straighten her hair, and act both “obedient and polite” (18). Helene upholds her own standards of propriety, seeking to distance herself as far as possible from her mother, a former prostitute. Nel, too, comes from a line of women who negotiate self-making in the face of trauma and social frameworks that rely on their bodies to be sources of pleasure or respectability, never both.

Helene works to “(drive) her daughter’s imagination underground” and the Wright household is a subdued one. Within the Wright household, Sula escapes the chaos and fullness of the Peace home, instead finding her peace in Nel’s presence, in her home where Sula can sit “still as dawn”. Sula, however, offers Nel a space full of vibrancy and life. It is the stark difference between their backgrounds and home life that allow the two to fall into an “intersubjectivity” as Cassandra Fetters explains it, a subjective view that is reified through relationships with others who align with one’s view of the world (Fetters
They see each other as mirrors and seeking the love and intimacy denied them by their “distant mothers” the two “mistake each other for the same, (and) they are aggrieved when they learn otherwise” (Fetters 40). As Fetters notes, the “instant connection (between Nel and Sula) arises from the dream-time longing for an intimate, for an ‘other,’ but part comes from their shared loneliness and oppression.”

Both girls find themselves in the other, in a way that appears seamless and almost fated. In 1920 the two meet and, despite being born of different traumas, they merge together through mutual recognition. As their bodies start to mature and they begin to have some awareness of sex and sexuality, their bodies are described as being joined together with increasing intimacy. In the pages leading up to their first dissolution, Nel and Sula are portrayed as experiencing the same physical sensations. The wind “pushed their dresses into the creases of their behinds, then lifted the hems to peek at their cotton underwear” (49). Though the wind acts as a physical assailant, denying the two girls their innocence, the wind also allows Morrison to depict the solidarity of the two. The narrative voice notes that the two had “already made each other’s acquaintance in the delirium of their noon dreams,” reinforcing the idea that there is some nature of erotic component to their friendship (30).

The frequent mention of their physical bodies joining together belies the merging of the two identities that makes their childhood companionship so intense. However, the intersubjectivity of their relationship, as Sula and Nel later discover, prevents them from fully understanding the other. Morrison creates a union between them, as they “ran in the sunlight, creating their own breeze, which pressed their dresses into their damp skin…they lay in the grass, their foreheads almost touching” (58). As they share physical
space together, their bodies are described as one and they begin to trace patterns in the earth before deciding to dig holes. Nel begins and “Sula copied her…together they worked until the two holes were one and the same” (58). At this moment, they both operate their bodies in the same way, to complete the same task, and in the end, “neither one had spoken a word” (59). On the cusp of adolescence and puberty, these girls bask in the last few moments of their childhood in silence and unity. Their relationship “suggests that female bonding, by enabling solidarity…can bring healing and survival” (Fetters 32). The silence between them as they dig holes in the earth signals their security and familiarity with one another, but again, the intersubjective, “narcissistic identification” between the two means the silence persists, and neither of the girls are able to fully articulate their desires, of life or of each other, until the end of the novel as signaled by Nel’s cry to Sula.

In some ways, this hole digging can be viewed as grave digging, as their actions precede the accidental death of Chicken Little and the first fragmentation between the two friends. Morrison works this scene to depict the unspoken and uncontested camaraderie between the two girls, while the budding maturation and symbolic grave digging intimates the looming death of their girlhood and their bond. This fragmentation between the two is the beginning of their endeavors on different paths, one path leaves Nel without the intimacy or relationship she longed for so consistently but with an image of respectability. The other leaves Sula with isolation as the hefty price for her independence, though Sula alleges to take comfort in knowing that her loneliness is her own and not an emotional burden foisted upon her. Though we understand Nel and Sula to be equals in their curiosity as children, they are distinct in
their responses to conflict. Nel is the practical one and Sula responds out of (101). The two girls are both trapped within the same precarious social framework and Morrison continues the novel by writing them on the cusp of adulthood, in the face of major challenged to their individual identities with Nel choosing the more respectable route and Sula electing for the road less travelled: Nel, having decided to marry Jude out of practicality and Sula, leaving town after the wedding.

Nel’s decision to marry Jude is due in part to a “new feeling of being needed by someone who saw her singly” (84). Nel searches for security and safety in marriage, as Jude does -- taking on the qualities of her mate the way she did as a child with Sula. With great consistency, Nel, for all of her declarations that “I am me”, regularly searches for her legitimizing other in the people around her; her mother, Sula, and then Jude standing as primary examples. Nel’s preoccupation with being seen and seeing herself in others is the driving force behind her relationships. While the community is important to the extent that it puts Nel into contact with others, her attempts to self-define while still seeking affirmation from community put her in vulnerable positions and prevent Nel from fully realizing who she is or what she desires (her girlhood friendship with Sula) until it is far too late.

Though Nel and Sula seek to establish and define themselves in distinctly opposite means, both women fall because of the men they allow themselves to be vulnerable with. Nel subscribes to her mother’s ideas of respectability and restricts herself in the sense that she wants to join herself to Jude alone and define herself through their relationship. Sula knows no limits and governs herself by her own pleasures and pains. Thus, Sula establishes, defines, and maintains her sense of self through the pursuit
of her own pleasure. Despite the differences in how these lives are constructed – both women find themselves and their lifestyles toppled by the men that they find some closeness to. Jude’s betrayal forces Nel to reimagine a life for herself other than the one she envisioned for herself. She is unable to project blame onto Jude, however, as it would implicate herself and her ability to make choices and thus, blames Sula. Nel represents a series of binary choices – to be good or bad, to blame oneself or to blame others – and her choices represent a moral ambiguity that colors Nel, upon further inspection, as a less sympathetic character or perhaps, a more fully realized one. Through Nel, Morrison considers the longings and potential for liberty afforded to characters and women like Nel.

Her choices to wed are understandable, born of a desire to be seen as an individual rather than a part of a whole. However, Morrison shows the fallibility of Nel’s pursuit, as the narrative voice betrays Jude’s intentions for marriage. After racists deny Jude and several other men of the Bottom, the opportunity to do road work, it is “rage and a determination to take on a man’s role anyhow that made him press Nel about settling down. He needed some of his appetites filled… but mostly he wanted someone to care about his hurt” (82). He desires to become a fully realized man, relying on Nel as wife to affirm his masculinity and maturity. As Nel integrates with Jude, she sees him again as an extension of herself and this is what makes Jude’s betrayal of Nel, such an emotionally devastating one as it challenges (or rather, rejects) the idea that Nel has managed to find community and partnership with anyone.

The repercussions of emotional trauma within community become clearer in the moments following Nel’s discovery of Jude and Sula. The betrayal is characterized with
increasingly corporeal and visceral images; Nel imagines a life without the love of maleness wondering “what am I supposed to do with these old thighs now, just walk up and down these rooms? they will never give me the peace I need to get from sunup to sundown” (111). As Nel considers the emotional trauma, she describes it in terms of physical loss, asking God “…are you trying to tell me that I am going to have to go all the way through these days…to that box with four handles with never nobody settling down between my legs…” (111). The tragedy of infidelity is not the only trauma she registers, but the loss of physical intimacy. Nel’s ideas of pleasure have only ever occurred through socially accepted means – through girlhood friendships and proper matrimony – and with the devastation by her good friend and her husband, Nel mourns the loss of community and the frustrating denial of her physical self. Further, Jude’s infidelity sends Nel reeling to reconcile her worthiness of experiencing pleasure, considering her willingness to complete physical work, as she wonders, “even if I sew up those old pillow cases and rinse down the porch and feed my children and beat the rugs and haul the coal up out of the bin even then nobody, O Jesus, I could be a mule or plow the furrows with my hands…or hold these rickety walls up with my back if need be…” (111); Nel, in her desire to appear moral and respectable buys into the idea that her ability to do work for Jude results in her ability to experience pleasure and intimacy. His disloyalty, leaves her fearful of being denied physically, romantically, and socially. Without Jude as Nel’s legitimizing other, Nel cannot claim the label of “good wife” and channels her energies into being a moral and wholesome mother, leaving her vulnerable to the “tidy corners of identity” (95) so repulsive to Sula. In Nel’s denial, as Jude’s infidelity is a denial of the self Nel so carefully creates to be his wife, Morrison
articulates the basic futility of self-making through traditional matrimony and highlights the viability or desirability of alternate, subversive means.

Though Nel and Sula are penned as stark opposites, the search for a legitimizing other is a search that weighs upon each of the women of the text, albeit in distinctly different ways. For Sula, without interest in heteronormative, intimate, and monogamous love she becomes a social pariah in the eyes of the townspeople within the Bottom. After Nel is wed, symbolically becoming one with her husband and separating from her girlhood, Sula departs from the Bottom not to return for a decade. Though Morrison never fills in the gaps between Sula’s departure and return, it becomes clear that she returns just as alone and independent as when she left. Though, upon Sula’s return, and her effective ostracization from the community, she begins an intimate relationship with Ajax.

Ajax, for all intents and purposes, appears to be Sula’s match -- neither character relishes in the possessiveness and exclusivity of traditional relationships, both are brazen in who they are and are not. It is this comfort that allows Sula to open herself up to him. When Ajax realizes, however, that Sula’s affection for him has become more serious, he “detected the scent of the nest…his eyes dimmed with a mild and momentary regret” (133). He begins to dream of flight before he “dragged (Sula) under him and made love to her with the steadiness and the intensity of a man about to leave for Dayton” (134). The relationship between Ajax and Sula, however intense, is one that is characterized by physical lust and a mutually understood sense of independence. Thus, Ajax’s departure can be read as the betrayal that deals a death blow to Sula, as he gets her to make a part of herself soft and accessible in ways that were not previously possible. Not only does he
leave her, affirming that she couldn’t rely on others but also reaffirming that she could not trust and rely on herself. Sula’s angst is that she allows herself to become an object of pleasure. “When I was a little girl the heads of my paper dolls came off, and it was a long time before I discovered that my own head would not fall off if I bent my neck”, and she reflects on a formative experience of her girlhood when she learned that she, physically at least, was not the same as her playthings. She reflects, “Nel was the one who told me the truth. But she was wrong. I did not hold my head still enough when I met him and so I lost it just like the dolls.” Sula briefly entertains Nel’s truth and indulges in a new type of self-making – in orienting herself and her pleasures in the direction of ownership and romantic relationship. “Sula began to discover what possession was. Not love, perhaps, but possession or at least the desire for it” (131). She preoccupies her mind with thoughts of Ajax’s visits and “then there was an afternoon when she stood before the mirror finger-tracing the laugh lines around her mouth and trying to decide whether she was good-looking or not” (131). She begins to appraise her body, for the first time, through the male-gaze, rather than seeing herself and her body as her own. There are parallels between Nel and Sula’s relationships with their male partners and in their personal understandings of the self; yet, the distinctions of their pathways make one respectable while the other is deemed reprehensible. While each woman is categorized by the townspeople of the Bottom in ways that pit them against one another but each are unified in the end by their mutual loss as a result of their intimacy with other men. Both Nel and Sula experience a loss that seems to suggest the girls are ill-fated to achieve a full agency and the opportunity to live the lives they desire in the context of community – defined by physical space and location.
Lingering Violence and Histories of Trauma

As Phillip Novak points out, “brutality is a feature not simply of the history the novel narrates” and while violence is “a feature of the narration itself” the graphic mentions come down to “a matter of details” (185). The lingering violence in the detail notes a history of trauma that shapes and predetermines the encounters of the characters. Sula may not have the ideal life or death but perhaps lives the most worthwhile life. There is evidence to the persistence of trauma, one stunning instance being Nel and the grey fuzzy ball that appears in her periphery after discovering Jude and Sula, which does not disappear until her final, grieving cry for her loss upon the close of the novel. Eva, too, in her murder of Plum has a lingering smell of smoke in her hair for years afterward. The persistence of past emotional traumas and violence situates Sula almost as a “continuous presiding over loss” (Novak 188). Morrison makes it clear that Sula and the characters therein are framed, indeed, bound by their traumas and tragedies; the regular mention of evil, witchcraft, and the imposition of natural elements upon situations of disaster and death create the idea that loss for the Bottom and communities like it, is a characterizing element. Chicken Little’s body is swallowed by water, Hannah’s body is consumed by fire, the bodies of several townspeople are crushed in a dilapidated tunnel. In these inevitable acts of violence, Morrison asks us to bear witness, to be present in the past and situates the past as ever present for her characters. Nel’s cry at the end orients sorrow with direction and the novel closes with a reminder that trauma colors and grief fills the spaces of their lives.
Morrison argues that the parameters of possibility for the Black woman require self-making occur through socially expected or subversive means and, regardless, come at great cost to the individual. Portrayed most stunningly through the titular character as a reckless kind of self-making, Morrison examines the human tendency towards evil, chaos, and violence as well as the human tendencies towards companionship, belonging, and self-making and illustrating the many ways in which one begets the other. Further, Morrison portrays that with the steep cost to freedom, that being isolation, liberation is rarely a fully realized experience for the Black woman. In the same way that there are degrees of respectability there are degrees of freedom. Only with the rebuke of binaries of good/evil, male/female, black/white do black women of the early or late twentieth century able to assert themselves.
CONCLUSION

Self-fashioning is inherently resistive and subversive when attempting to do so within social and political frameworks that deny the power and presence of the individual. With the promise of industry and economic gain for the hegemonic forces of American culture, the lingering smoke of black-white race relations was evident. American culture of the twentieth century allowed for new definitions of freedom and selfhood as it relates to consumerism and the ability to own. Yet, as the century continued freedom appears to have taken on more of an emphasis on individualism and personal agency.

This research began with the question – what system(s) impact the ability of the Black woman to achieve and maintain a sense of autonomy and individuality? After my first reading of each of these novels and the surrounding scholarship, I was struck by the emphasis – textual and critical – placed upon the Black woman’s body. Larsen, Petry, and Sula pay particular attention to the ways that emotional scars or traumas of the past persist to frame the present. Yet, each novel takes a daring twist on the means through which the main characters endeavor to achieve some freedom. Larsen takes care to note that Clare is willing, for a time, to sacrifice her cultural capital for some social mobility and economic/class mobility. Petry offers her main character escape under the cover of darkness, away from the small apartments and maternal obligations – suggesting Lutie’s desires can only be achieved outside of the framework with which she is familiar. Sula rebukes any attempts to be held responsible for the making of others, insisting on a loyalty that begins and ends with the self. However, her resistance to communal values situates her outside of her physical community, and she dies alone. There is little evidence of outright victory for any of these heroines, and yet staggering evidence to
their willingness to sacrifice for their freedom, their desire to establish and make themselves, and their commitments to themselves.

It is worth mentioning that each novel is punctuated with death and seems to belie some mutuality between these three Black women writers to consider freedom as something greater and more abstract than a single or tangible destination. The inevitability of violence and death within each novel suggests death as generative for our conceptions of freedom. Though the slave narrative often references freedom as a physical location or temporal liberation, reading death in each novel as a potential site of subversion and/or freedom leaves the possible reading that death or loss is relevant to the definition of the self. As the ambiguity of death intimates the abstract processes of freedom-seeking and the intangible negotiations of self-making. The idea of loss, by extension, is something that frames, frightens, and forces black women out of their communities and into morally complex methods of self-determination and liberation. The emotional (and, at times, physical) concessions that are made by the three central characters elude to the complications of self-making as a black woman in 20th century America. Compounded by historical expectations of Black women and their bodies, along with the cultural and social expectations of morality, respectability, and submission, the Black woman – as Larsen, Petry, and Morrison illuminate – can only get free through daring and costly means. The price of this freedom is such that the final achievement of freedom does not feel (or read) much like a victory, but when reading these narratives through the lens of Black feminist criticism it becomes evident that each author is narrating choice for her characters and agency – suggesting that liberation and self-fashioning are possible when one makes a choice to follow themselves and their
personal sensibilities, community be damned. Indeed, more contemporary black feminist criticism has furthered considerations of the body and the body’s reception in political, legal, and social spaces. However, increased globalization of the current era requires that we consider the construction of space and performances of the physical body in contemporary literature.
WORKS CITED


