

“YOU CAN’T JUST FLY OFF AND LEAVE A BODY”: TONI MORRISON’S  
ABOLITIONIST VISION OF JUSTICE

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By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores two of Toni Morrison’s novels — *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Jazz* (1992) — alongside a growing body of scholarship and activism surrounding the contemporary prison abolitionist movement. I argue that Morrison can be read not just as a celebrated author, but as a “theorist of justice,” whose fiction highlights the white supremacist origins and practices of the current U.S. Criminal Justice system and consequently advocates for justice that is rooted in healing, accountability, and repair. I also argue that Morrison’s overall literary project can be interpreted as an attempt for readers to understand that every one of us is capable of harm. Morrison’s determination for us to identify with, or at the very least, see the motivations and desires that drive her characters directly combats the “Otherness” that incarcerated people face in their daily lives, both during their time in the prison system and after their release. Throughout the thesis, I connect the literary community of Morrison scholars to people whose work challenges the structures of the U.S. Criminal Justice system and ultimately calls for their destruction while simultaneously envisioning what true justice might look like and how we can best meet the needs of our fellow people.

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## INTRODUCTION

*“History has always proved that books are the first plane on which certain kinds of battles are fought”<sup>1</sup>*

In the late Toni Morrison’s guest bathroom, just above the toilet, there hung a framed letter from an Alfred Knopf editor explaining that the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) had banned Morrison’s 1997 novel *Paradise* from the state’s prison facilities. Morrison is no stranger to literary censorship. Her novels *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Beloved* (1987) are two of the most banned works in 20<sup>th</sup> century American literature. Both of those novels, as well as some of her others, have met with criticism, often from educational institutions for the representation of violence and sex, as well as for the inclusion of racial slurs.<sup>2</sup> So while the censoring of Morrison’s novels is not a groundbreaking decision, the banning of *Paradise* from correctional facilities in Texas can be interpreted as a definitive example of how the prison system can use its power to exert both bodily and ideological control over specific populations, further alienating and harming the people and families entangled in these systems. This letter presents one of the most overt ties between Morrison and the United States Criminal Justice System. It offers a scholarly aperture through which I would like to examine the ways Morrison’s work forces readers to recognize the essential racist foundation for our American sense of justice by showing how the typical structures we associate with the law are driven by antiblack motivations and goes even further to offer readers examples of how we could create a

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<sup>1</sup> *Toni Morrison: The Pieces I Am*, directed by Timothy Greenfield-Sanders (2019; New York: Perfect Day Films), 27:55.

<sup>2</sup> “Banned & Challenged Classics,” American Library Association, Accessed October 1, 2020. <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/classics>

more just society by eschewing our current systems and building new ones imbued with care and accountability.

The February 20, 1998 notice sent to Morrison explained that there were multiple potential reasons a piece of literature might be banned from Texas prison facilities: the publication “contains contraband;” the publication contains information including the “manufacture of explosives, weapons, or drugs;” the publication could be read as “detrimental to rehabilitation because it would encourage deviant sexual behavior;” or the publication gives specific instructions to enact or avoid detection of “criminal schemes.” Any one of those reasons are worth a more in-depth inquiry and explanation, yet it is the final criterion, the reason for the ban of *Paradise* that to me is the most intriguing and relevant to my project in this thesis. The letter stated that Morrison’s novel was banned because it “contains material that a reasonable person would construe as written solely for the purpose of communicating information designed to achieve a breakdown.”<sup>3</sup>

Toni Morrison herself believes that the word “breakdown” is used here to mean a prison riot and though the novel mentions the idea of a prison riot, citing Attica, it is far from the novel’s major plot lines.<sup>4</sup> Morrison does write about the realities of prison in the novel. For example she writes, “Only prison could be as blatant and as frightening, for beneath its rules and

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<sup>3</sup> Angela Davis and Toni Morrison, “Literacy, Libraries, and Liberation.” LIVE from the NYPL. October 27, 2010. Video, 1:52:00, <https://www.nypl.org/audiovideo/angela-davis-and-toni-morrison-literacy-libraries-and-liberation> (transcript available for download).

<sup>4</sup> Toni Morrison, *Paradise*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 132. The uprising that Morrison mentions in the novel, often referred to as the “Attica Prison Riot” took place at the Attica Correctional Facility in Upstate New York on September 9, 1971. In her book, *Blood in the Water: The Attica Prison Uprising and Its Legacy*, Heather Ann Thompson seeks to dispel myths about the event while focusing on the causes for the uprising, the terror inflicted on the incarcerated people in an effort to quell the uprising, and the government’s subsequent attempt to silence much of the historical record of the event.

rituals scratched a life of gnawing violence,” yet this connection between prison and violence does not seem to constitute enough danger for a ban.<sup>5</sup> *Paradise* explicitly bemoans the lack of racial justice in the United States, but by only including a brief mention of Attica and simply explaining the cruelty of prison life, it would appear that the TDCJ’s statement that the text was “solely written” to “achieve a breakdown” is incorrect. However, Morrison was not discouraged by the ban and once publicly stated, “It seemed like an extraordinary compliment that *Paradise* could actually blow up into a riot in a prison.”<sup>6</sup>

In deeming the novel to be “designed to achieve a breakdown,” even if that was not Morrison’s main inspiration, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice seems to have recognized the potential for Morrison’s writing to threaten the order of the prison system itself. The TDCJ did not give any other evidence, aside from the assumed threat to the functioning of the prison system, for the ban. This event creates an explicit linkage between Morrison’s fiction and the Prison-Industrial Complex (PIC) and invites broad inquiry into both what the actual aims of our prison system are, and what it is about Morrison’s writings, specifically, that a prison system would find dangerous. Is the ultimate goal of prison to keep our society safe or to punish people? Is the prison system effective? To what degree is criminality inscribed in our racial prejudices in the United States? How does the prison system allow white supremacy to thrive and grow? How can words and fictional characters threaten a way of life dictated by concrete cages and barbed wire? In this thesis, I hope to explore these questions, and to connect Morrison’s fiction writing to a growing body of activism and scholarship that seeks new pathways to and re-conceptualizations of justice.

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<sup>5</sup> Toni Morrison, *Paradise*. (Vintage Books, 1997), 254.

<sup>6</sup> Angela Davis and Toni Morrison, “Literacy, Libraries, and Liberation.”

The word “breakdown” in the notice Morrison received in February 1998 implies that the Texas prison industrial system is functioning well. I believe this is an important note because many people who call for prison reform cite that the system is “broken.” However, the prison system itself does not seem “broken” at all. It is working exactly as it was intended: to control bodies as a physical and emotional punishment for people deemed guilty of what the law states is criminal. The threat of any “breakdown,” inspired by the plot of *Paradise* or not, serves as a threat to the central missions of the prison system. Thinking of Morrison’s work, which is deeply concerned with the lack of racial justice in the United States, not just as controversial, but instead as dangerous to the current justice system can illuminate structural flaws that desperately need to be examined but ultimately, radically changed.

More than a decade after the initial ban, a spokesperson for the Texas Department departed from the original language of a “breakdown” and instead stated that *Paradise* was banned for its inclusion of racial slurs. The ban was overturned in 2001 because the language was taken in the context of the novel as a whole.<sup>7</sup> Personally, this explanation seems like an attempt to assuage the idea that Morrison’s fiction is dangerous and instead blame the language of the novel itself. Nevertheless, the ban on literature that includes “racial slurs,” no matter the context, is not unique to Morrison. In her 2014 book *Locked In, Locked Down: Why Prison Doesn’t Work and How We Can Do Better*, Maya Schenwar briefly touches upon the implicit racial biases that inform prison regulations surrounding reading materials for incarcerated people. Schenwar cites a 2011 report from the Texas Civil Rights Project that found, “prisoners in that state are permitted to receive white supremacist texts like *Mein Kampf* and the *Aryan*

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<sup>7</sup> Rich Motoko. “‘Paradise’ in Texas Prisons.” *Arts Beat: New York Times Blog*, (New York: NY), June 9, 2009.

*Youth Primer*, but can't receive some books by Henry Louis Gates, Sojourner Truth, Studs Terkel, Noam Chomsky, and Al Sharpton, on the pretext that materials containing racial slurs are prohibited — even if the 'slurs' are included because they're being critiqued."<sup>8</sup> This is a clear disservice to many African American texts that use racial slurs either for historical accuracy, for the community's vernacular, or for a study of racial prejudice in this country.

Studying which books incarcerated people are allowed access to while in prison alerts us to the larger issue of our Criminal Justice System: the omnipresent influence of white supremacy. Like a disease, when left untreated, or ignored, white supremacy thrives in and through many U.S. institutions, and is rampant in prisons and jails. Individuals face implicit racial biases at every stage of their experience with the prison system, from arrest and conviction to "re-entry" into society and parole regulations. Due to long histories of being criminalized in order for white populations to maintain control, wealth, and property in the United States, Black Americans are increasingly overrepresented in our prison population.<sup>9</sup> Many attribute this to the history of racial strife in the United States and the use of stringent laws to control Black populations after the end of chattel slavery, though contemporary scholars often believe these practices have increased dramatically since the "War on Drugs" allowed for increased police presence, especially in Black communities.

One of the best known advocates for this viewpoint is the legal scholar Michelle Alexander, whose 2010 book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of*

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<sup>8</sup> Texas Civil Rights Report. *Banned Books in the Texas Prison System: How the Texas Department of Criminal Justice Censors Books Sent to Prisoners* (Austin: Texas Civil Rights Project, 2011). Retrieved from <https://txcivilrights.org/>. Quoted in *Locked In, Locked Down: Why Prison Doesn't Work and How We Can Do Better* (65).

<sup>9</sup> Black people make up 13% of the American population, yet make up 40% of the U.S. prison population, according to <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/profiles/US.html>

*Colorblindness* brought the gross racial disparities in the U.S. prison system to the attention of the general public.<sup>10</sup> One of Alexander’s major arguments in her book is that the discriminations imposed often on racial minorities in our current era of “mass incarceration” is akin to the racist laws of the Jim Crow South, which effectively limited all aspects of African American life. The punishment an incarcerated individual faces extends far beyond his or her prison sentence. As Alexander explains, “Once you’re labelled a felon, the old forms of discrimination — employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of educational opportunity, denial of food stamps and other public benefits, and exclusion from jury service — are suddenly legal.”<sup>11</sup> Ava DuVernay’s documentary *13th* (2016) hammered home Alexander’s arguments by linking the legal disenfranchisement of felons to the second clause of the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which effectively sanctioned legalized slavery for criminals.<sup>12</sup> This de jure segregation continues in other avenues of American society as well. Many people believe that the very fact of being Black in the United States makes an individual a target for the Criminal Justice system, even before or without committing a criminal offense. This is one of the major arguments in Khalil Gibran Muhammad’s 2010 book *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*.<sup>13</sup> The association between Blackness and criminality did not spontaneously occur in this country; it was cultivated by white supremacist attitudes and policies that are still very much present in 2021.

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<sup>10</sup> Michelle Alexander. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. (New York: The New Press, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Alexander, 2.

<sup>12</sup> *13th*, directed by Ava DuVernay (2016; Oakland, CA: Kando Films)

<sup>13</sup> Khalil Gibran Muhammad. *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010).

Perhaps the bonds between white supremacy and the U.S. prison system are the reason why the Texas Department of Criminal Justice considered Toni Morrison's fiction dangerous. Her novels rarely miss the opportunity to explore how racism infects and harms *everyone* in our country through its reliance on white superiority. After Donald J. Trump was elected President of the United States, Morrison wrote in *The New Yorker*: "So scary are the consequences of a collapse of white privilege that many Americans have flocked to a political platform that supports and translates violence against the defenseless as strength."<sup>14</sup> Here, Morrison claims that the destructive tendrils of white supremacy in the United States doesn't merely harm racial minorities, although those vulnerable communities have of course felt the worst effects.

Aside from her consistent and strong condemnation of white supremacy, there is at least one other plausible reason why the Texas Department of Criminal Justice chose to ban Morrison's novel *Paradise*: her exploration of the multiple failings of the United States Criminal Justice System. In her novels, her characters often face questions of accountability and justice outside of the prison system. An in-depth analysis of how Morrison interrogates justice in her novels prompts readers to ask if our prison system is necessary. In the following sections of this paper, I argue that Morrison goes further than to just highlight how our Criminal Justice System fails to facilitate any sense of healing and often seeks to disable the well-being of anyone entangled in its complex meshes. She also imagines new possibilities for justice that could render the wide reach of our prison system — for individuals, families, and communities even if they are not literally locked in a cell — unnecessary.

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<sup>14</sup> Toni Morrison. "Making America White Again," *The New Yorker* (New York, NY), Nov. 21, 2016 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/11/21/making-america-white-again>

As I have alluded to earlier, many people — scholars and the general public alike — would agree that we are in the midst of an era of “mass incarceration,” though, as many would also note, there is not a unified consensus of how to bring an end to this era, or how to reconcile how it has harmed so many people, families, and communities. Often a discussion of the U.S. prison system cites the statistic that the United States contains only 5% of the world’s population, yet it accounts for 25% of the world’s prisoners.<sup>15</sup> John Pfaff illuminates these inconsistencies in his 2017 book *Locked In: The True Causes of Mass Incarceration and How to Achieve Real Reform*. He writes, “The criticisms over ‘mass incarceration’ essentially boil down to claims that we have too many people in prison, although we don’t really know how many too many; and that we should reduce that number, although we don’t really know what that new goal should be.”<sup>16</sup> Just as the calls for prison reform are increasing, so too are the calls for prison abolition, and the dismantling of this highly oppressive system, though abolition is still far from a mainstream goal. Prison abolitionists believe that our prison system cannot be reformed because its entire structure hinges on white supremacy and that attempts at reform only further make us dependent on increasing the scope of the prison system, not decreasing it.

The idea of prison abolition is not new. The movement itself echoes the goals of the abolitionists in the time of chattel slavery. Political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal defines abolition, in both the historical and current moment, as “a deep, committed movement of social transformation that seeks to bring down institutions that needlessly inflict pain upon the People.”<sup>17</sup> The concept of “prison abolition” entered the realm of public discourse most notably

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<sup>15</sup> *13th*, directed by Ava DuVernay (2016; Oakland, CA: Kandoo Films)

<sup>16</sup> John F. Pfaff. *Locked In: The True Causes of Mass Incarceration and How to Achieve Real Reform* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 8.

<sup>17</sup> Mumia Abu-Jamal. “From One Struggle to Another: Lessons from the First Abolition Movement” *Abolition for the People*, Level Medium. Oct. 26, 2020.

with Angela Davis' 2003 book *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, which argues that we will not be able to change our Criminal Justice system without thinking about a world that is not governed by the prison system. Angela Davis is a political activist who was incarcerated for approximately eighteen months while awaiting trial in 1971-1972. Her case garnered national attention and since her acquittal, she has dedicated her life to exposing the evils of the American prison system and fighting for some of the most vulnerable communities in the country.<sup>18</sup> The prison abolition movement is summed up best when Davis writes, "The most difficult and urgent challenge today is that of creatively exploring new terrains of justice, where the prison no longer serves as our main anchor."<sup>19</sup> For Davis, "abolition" is not just a destructive strategy, it is one based on *building* new systems that eliminate the need for prisons. She writes, "A major challenge of this movement is to do the work that will create more humane, habitable environments for people in prison without bolstering the permanence of the prison system."<sup>20</sup> This is no easy task. The prison system is seen as an essential pillar of our society, but it also reinforces racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and solidifies white superiority. There is no "one-size-fits-all" solution, but that does not mean that we should wait for and accept more politically palatable resolutions.

While Toni Morrison did not often explicitly condemn the prison system in her nonfiction writings, the relationship she shared with Angela Davis could certainly link her to the same prison abolitionist ideas Davis espouses: Morrison was Davis' editor at Random House.

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<https://level.medium.com/from-one-struggle-to-another-lessons-from-the-first-abolition-movement-d78dd24bbcd3>

<sup>18</sup> Ibram X. Kendi. "Angela Davis: 100 Women of the Year." *TIME Magazine*, March 5, 2020

<https://time.com/5793638/angela-davis-100-women-of-the-year/>

<sup>19</sup> Angela Davis. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 21.

<sup>20</sup> Davis, 103.

She was instrumental in getting Davis to write and publish her 1974 autobiography. The two were good friends until Morrison's death in 2018. In October 2010, Angela Davis and Toni Morrison appeared together for a New York Public Library panel entitled, "Literacy, Libraries, and Liberation." The writers spoke about how African Americans have been denied access to literacy throughout American history and how incarceration continues that tradition. Angela Davis shared her own experiences with literature while incarcerated, noting that "I could receive the books and I could read the books myself. It was okay for me to read them, but don't share them" and that she was part of clandestine reading groups with other women<sup>21</sup>. Davis' insight complicates the notion that the literature itself was thought of as dangerous, and instead gives the impression that it was the spread of ideas, the sense of the community, and the possibility of collective action that were seen as threatening by correctional officers. These same themes can directly be traced as through-lines in Morrison's work as well as in the collaborative nature of the prison abolition movement.

How, then, can we as readers think of Toni Morrison not only as a celebrated author, but as a theorist of justice? How can we grapple with her status both as a Nobel Laureate and an author whose work was considered too dangerous for imprisoned individuals to read in Texas? Both the Nobel committee and the TCDJ recognized a power in Morrison's novels, yet the TCDJ did not celebrate the impact of Morrison's words and instead censured them. I believe that we can seek answers to these questions if we examine how the U.S. prison system dehumanizes incarcerated people. Employing the term "criminal" or "felon" is a linguistic injustice that serves to designate individuals who break a law as "othered" and leads to real consequences. When

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<sup>21</sup> Angela Davis and Toni Morrison, "Literacy, Libraries, and Liberation."

speaking to Davis at the New York Public Library, Toni Morrison expressed her views on what justice means in America, theorizing the difference between vengeance and justice; she claimed,

We have to assume that if we want justice for some bad activity by a bad person we want punishment, we want restraint, we don't want rehabilitation, and that assumes that there is something called "the other," there is a stranger, that your neighbor or the criminal, the so-called criminal, is some other thing, is an other.<sup>22</sup>

The problems of linguistic labelling that Morrison identifies here also surfaces in Maya Schenwar's book. She quotes Mariame Kaba, a prominent prison abolitionist, when she writes, "We use the word 'harm.' The question is, 'What have you done to someone else? How have you harmed another person?'"<sup>23</sup> I plan to follow Schenwar's nod to Kaba and will use the term "harm" in this paper, unless specifically referring to a legal "crime." Many of Morrison's novels mention prison and nearly all of them involve workings of the Criminal Justice System without being set in prison (*Beloved* does include flashbacks to some scenes in prison, but it is not the dominant setting). However, I believe that Morrison's multiple allusions to the prison system, and its complicated relationship with the African American community, need to be thoroughly examined in order to ask and attempt to answer the question of what a racially just society could look like. To read Morrison as a "theorist of justice," we must inspect how the characters in her novels come into contact with the Criminal Justice system, but that any sense of actual justice achieved is only possible outside of those systems.

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Due to her literary success, Toni Morrison is the subject of a large body of scholarship. However, many Morrison scholars do not often analyze her novels for new solutions to the

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<sup>22</sup> Angela Davis and Toni Morrison, "Literacy, Libraries, and Liberation."

<sup>23</sup> Maya Schenwar. *Locked In, Locked Down: Why Prison Doesn't Work and How We Can Do Better*. (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc., 2014), 205.

current U.S. Criminal Justice system, even though her writing centers the racial injustices in our country and offers examples of how we can do better. Scholars have often focused on Morrison's exploration of the interiority of the Black experience, her lyricism in her prose, as well as her classical and Biblical allusions, but I believe that even though her novels are set often in historically distinct time periods, her complication of the term "justice" is another avenue worth study that can help bring about change in our contemporary lives.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, I would argue that readers of Morrison have a moral imperative to analyze her works for new approaches to humane treatment of others in the wake of continued racial terror, mass incarceration, and police brutality.

Megan Sweeney offers a commendable example of this work in her article "Racial House, Big House, Home: Contemporary Abolitionism in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*."<sup>25</sup> Sweeney's article also begins with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice's ban of *Paradise*. She goes on to assert that Morrison's 1997 novel should be interpreted as allied with the prison abolitionist movement. Sweeney gives an in-depth definition of what a prison abolitionist framework entails by citing an important group in the movement, Critical Resistance, when she writes "[it] foregrounds the historical and ongoing ways in which racial and economic inequalities contribute to highly disproportionate rates of incarceration for poor people and

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<sup>24</sup> For a more comprehensive understanding of current scholarship on Morrison's fiction, see: *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present* ed. Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Amistad, 1993) and *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison* ed. Justine Talley. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Both of these collections offer multiple reviews and critical essays surrounding Morrison's contributions to literature, and Appiah and Gates' collection anticipates her Nobel Prize. The majority of these essays focus on Morrison's structure, historicity and allusions in her novels, though they also offer important and insightful readings of individual characters as well.

<sup>25</sup> Megan Sweeney, "Radical House, Big House, Home: Contemporary Abolitionism in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*," *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* vol. 4, no. 2 (2004).

people of color.”<sup>26</sup> This article reminds us that to study Morrison fully we must remember the traditions in which she was writing, and differentiates between the sacred African cultural traditions that Morrison draws on and oppressive American regimes that we must work to break down. Similarly, in a talk given for the Division of Narrative Medicine in Columbia University’s Department of Medical Humanities and Ethics, literary scholar Dr. Farah J. Griffin posits that Morrison’s fiction works within a larger “ethics of care,” specifically focusing on *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Song of Solomon* (1977), and *Home* (2015). Griffin’s connection between Morrison’s ability to consider the ethics of Black life in the United States and to offer new solutions is an important work to understand the prevalence of healing in Morrison’s fiction. Griffin helpfully links an “ethics of care” to an “ethics of justice.”<sup>27</sup> This new subset of Morrison studies, focused on new pathways to justice and the importance of care as an essential part of Morrison’s overall literary project, is emerging at the same time as the recent uptick of abolitionist monographs and anthologies which seek to understand and expand the public’s ideas of the abolitionist movement.<sup>28</sup> I hope that this thesis can be one of the first of many works to establish a connection between Morrison studies and the prison abolitionist movement.

Just as the prison abolitionist movement requires community building and collaborative effort, so too does academic scholarship. I hope to incorporate this collaborative mindset into my

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<sup>26</sup> Sweeney, 41.

<sup>27</sup> Farah J. Griffin, “An Ethics of Care: Restorative Justice and Healing in Toni Morrison’s Late Fiction,” October 3, 2019. Columbia University Narrative Medicine Rounds. 1:11:00. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/ethics-care-restorative-justice-healing-in-toni-morrison/id465492751?i=1000452204916>

<sup>28</sup> For example, Haymarket Books is releasing their “Abolitionist Papers” series edited by Naomi Murakawa throughout 2021, which includes: Mariame Kaba, *We Do This ‘Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2021); Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Change Everything: Racial Capitalism and the Case for Abolition* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2021); Angela Davis, Gina Dent, Erica Meiners, and Beth Richie *Abolition. Feminism. Now.* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2021).

thesis as a whole by drawing on voices from multiple academic fields — literary studies, history, sociology, and criminology to name a few — and engaging with writers and activists whose work lies outside of University gates and takes place in local organizing spaces, including our prisons. Like Megan Sweeney, I also believe that Morrison can be allied with the many of the values of the prison abolitionist movement. Though Morrison never publicly identified herself as a prison abolitionist, in this paper I seek to understand what the larger prison abolitionist movement can gain if we read her as one. Similarly, I analyze the ways in which readers can apply a prison abolitionist framework to Morrison’s novels and envision new pathways to justice aside from the ones we rely on today in our country. While Morrison’s novels can be read solely for their beauty of language, I propose that reading her fiction can serve as an entry point into discussions of prison abolitionism and perhaps serve as an example for imagining justice without prison gates. Reading Morrison’s novels alone will not prompt any change to the Criminal Justice system. However, by situating her novels in broader traditions of accountability, repair, and healing, I believe these novels generate ideas that advocate for the creation of a new and better world without needing one overarching punitive system.

Although I can envision an argument linking any of Morrison’s eleven novels with theories of abolitionism — and I broadly invite others to continue this work — I have chosen to center this paper around two novels: *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Jazz* (1992). When thinking about the possibilities for prison abolition, Angela Davis writes, “It [the prison system] has become so much a part of our lives that it requires a great feat of imagination to envision life beyond the prison”<sup>29</sup> With this in mind, I chose *Song of Solomon* and *Jazz* because while defining justice is at the heart of each novel, Morrison does not directly rely on our carceral

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<sup>29</sup> Davis, 19.

system to structure either text. Morrison's characters strive to find justice without seeing the inside of a prison cell. In both novels, she is careful to highlight the injustices faced by marginalized communities in the United States while simultaneously exploring new solutions for the systemic problems she illuminates. Morrison's solutions for justice may not all be perfect, or even fully attainable, but they are worthy of prolonged study because of the possibilities they offer and the conversations they can spark.

Unintentionally, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice may have been correct. Perhaps reading Morrison's fiction does force people to consider a "breakdown" of the U.S. prison system. And perhaps that "breakdown" is exactly what we need to fulfill the American promise of "justice for all."

CHAPTER 1: FROM RETRIBUTION TO REPAIR: THE TURN TOWARDS  
ACCOUNTABILITY IN *SONG OF SOLOMON*

With the publication of her third novel, *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison rose from relative obscurity to the literary celebrity that would come to define her life. Unlike Morrison's first two novels, *Song of Solomon* features a male protagonist, and the setting connects the modernity of the Northern U.S. to the rural South, rather than solely center around the politics of a small town. However, that does not mean that understandings of community aren't vital to *Song of Solomon*. In fact, the novel's protagonist, Macon "Milkman" Dead, comes to realize that his identity is inherently tied to those of his neighbors, and more importantly his ancestors. When asked by Charlie Rose in 1993 about the central "question" that animates the plot of *Song of Solomon*, Morrison responded, "I was trying to figure out how somebody who's in his late 20s or 30s got educated ... And what would help inform him to learn how to be a complete human being."<sup>30</sup> This drive to learn more about oneself ultimately gives Milkman a glimpse into what life looks like beyond his immediate experience, forcing him to reckon with his actions, his past, and what it means to be a part of an African American community.

The plot of *Song of Solomon* spans more than three decades of the middle twentieth century and traverses a large geographic area of the United States, giving the novel an expanse in which readers can analyze both personal and institutional racial conflict, especially those involving violence. Although much of the novel takes place outside of traditional legal channels and only peripherally questions institutions of policing or prisons, Morrison forces readers to ask the same questions that need to guide our understanding of the criminal justice system. Do our

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<sup>30</sup> Toni Morrison, interview with Charlie Rose, *Charlie Rose*, PBS, May 7, 1993.  
<https://charlierose.com/videos/18778>

current systems actually offer us justice? If not, which I argue is the conclusion Morrison hopes readers come to, we need to imagine new, more humane possibilities, such as those offered by Dr. Angela Davis in her 2003 book *Are Prisons Obsolete?* and other seminal abolitionist texts.<sup>31</sup> While reading *Song of Solomon*, readers must posit how Black people can ever achieve justice in a country whose politics has always kept them on the margins. In this section, I will argue that in *Song of Solomon*, Morrison explores the implications of even well-intentioned harm, explicitly shows the racial injustices faced by Black communities, and most importantly offers a combination of accountability and love that can be read in tandem with theories of abolitionism to move the country forward in its conceptualization of justice.

Readers first meet Milkman Dead on the day of his birth, but quickly he ages into a young Black man whose comfortable upbringing leaves him both insulated from the harsher realities of the world and devoid of empathy for others. The Dead family lives in a luxury that sets them apart from the rest of their community. Milkman's father, Macon Dead Sr., values financial success above all else. He owns many of the poorer properties in the neighborhood and his uncharitable nature alienates him from others just as his material possessions do. Macon even refuses to associate with his own sister, Pilate, because of a disagreement in their past as well as her undignified family and work as a bootlegger. For example, he owns a large green Packard, an expensive car in the 1930s, and takes his family on rides every Saturday afternoon as "a way to satisfy himself that he was indeed a successful man."<sup>32</sup> This simple example of Macon's desire for luxury puts material wealth at odds with inclusive community values, which can be read as signifying a larger chasm between capitalistic tendencies and humane relations with others that

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<sup>31</sup> Davis, 108.

<sup>32</sup> Toni Morrison. *Song of Solomon*. (New York: Vintage, 1977), 31.

align with a broader abolitionist vision of the world as one where meeting people's needs ultimately will satisfy many "crimes" that we are plagued with today. Our current capitalistic society's desire for profits and cheap labor is one of the driving forces of the prison system; therefore, many believe that in order to abolish prisons, we must first abolish capitalism, or at the very least, the form of racial capitalism that we live under today.

Macon Dead represents a permutation of twentieth-century racial uplift theory, focused on individual wealth and work ethic. Combined with Milkman's mother, Ruth's, apparent deference to Macon, this materialistic lifestyle helps to form Milkman's self-centeredness. In contrast, Guitar Bains, Milkman's best friend since childhood, is primarily motivated by working towards the future and the success of the black race through community-building, and therefore, serves as an opposite to Macon Dead Sr.. Guitar, whose own father was killed in a workplace related accident, has a much better understanding of hardship that Milkman does and channels his own pain into attempts at revenge and violence.

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In an interview with Jane Bakerman in 1977, Toni Morrison stated, "I write about... how to survive in a world where we are all of us in some measure, *victims of something*. Each one of us is in some way at some moment a victim and in no position to do a thing about it."<sup>33</sup> This certainly holds true for the characters in *Song of Solomon*. Readers often learn and care about the plights of the characters before Milkman does, but throughout the novel, he comes to realize how the interior lives of others have shaped the man he has become. While the ability to see inside the lives of multiple characters makes for interesting and captivating fiction, I believe that we can

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<sup>33</sup> Toni Morrison, interview with Jane Bakerman in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. Danielle Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1994), 41.

direct this narrative empathy into the world outside of *Song of Solomon*, specifically when thinking about criminal justice reform because it helps readers see how harm affects different people. Rather than read *Song of Solomon* just for the nonlinear narrative or its lyricism, I claim that reading the novel as a case study for the failings of retributive justice and the need to focus on accountability can serve as a bridge into an abolitionist mindset.<sup>34</sup>

There are many individuals in Milkman's life who could be described as victims. Yet Milkman, for his part, is rarely aware of that reality, reminding us that we don't know the inner turmoil of others, which in essence is the cornerstone of empathy. For example, Milkman's mother, Ruth Foster Dead, leads a life of quiet desperation. Her husband does not love her and is physically abusive towards her when he believes he has been tricked into helping to conceive a child. Milkman, too, accuses his mother of breastfeeding him for too long — a truth that she cannot deny, and the source of Milkman's pejorative nickname — yet she reminds him that her actions were done out of love when she asks him, "What harm did I do you on my knees?"<sup>35</sup> Ruth's question reinforces the importance of "harm" when thinking about our relationships to other people. Perhaps she did breastfeed Milkman for too long, but she also fought for his life when Macon Sr. tried to destroy it before he was born. Similarly, Hagar, Pilate's granddaughter and later Milkman's girlfriend, is hurt due to Milkman's callous rejection after three years when she was a "quasi-secret but permanent fixture in his life."<sup>36</sup> However, unlike Ruth, Hagar wants to seek revenge and kill Milkman, but cannot bring herself to do so. Hagar is not complete without Milkman and eventually dies of grief and hurt. These two characters are just a few

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<sup>34</sup> For scholarship interrogating Morrison's narrative structure, see: Philip Page. *Dangerous Freedom: Fusion and Fragmentation in Toni Morrison's Novels*. (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1995).

<sup>35</sup> Toni Morrison. *Song of Solomon*. (New York: Vintage, 1977), 126.

<sup>36</sup> Toni Morrison. *Song of Solomon*. (New York: Vintage, 1977), 98.

examples of people who Milkman inadvertently hurts and they serve important roles in the novel because they reinforce Morrison's message that everyone is a victim of something. We cannot end all instances of harm, but we can mitigate the pain if we focus on healing.

Despite the multiple examples of individuals who are harmed as well as those who have harmed others within *Song of Solomon*, Morrison also is careful to not limit herself to the personal conflict between characters; the focus on racially motivated harm and violence directed towards Black communities serves as a throughline in the novel, connecting the past to the present and the Northern U.S. to the South. In her book, *Toni Morrison: Writing the Moral Imagination*, Valerie Smith comments on the new critical attention to the historical context presented in *Song of Solomon* and how commentary now focuses on "the ways in which African Americans have survived in the spaces within and between the institutions, practices, movements, periods, and grand events that punctuate the official historical record."<sup>37</sup> Smith's attention to this theme of survival calls readers' attention to the threats on Black lives that exist in all of Morrison's novels, though are mentioned often in *Song of Solomon*. Antiracist violence takes place both on the individual level and on the institutional level. These levels are, of course, not mutually exclusive, but recognizing their differences is inherent to seeing how many ways Black communities suffer harm, which unfortunately holds true more than forty years after *Song of Solomon* was published.

While Morrison makes allusions to many historical acts of antiracist violence in the novel, perhaps the most famous is the murder of Emmett Till. This inclusion forces readers to grapple with questions of justice in a way that reroutes our conventional narrative that guilt

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<sup>37</sup> Valerie Smith "Song of Solomon and Tar Baby" *Toni Morrison: Writing the Moral Imagination* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 42. This chapter also gives a comprehensive overview of the entirety of the novel.

implies the need for and deserves the full weight of discipline or punishment. Morrison fictionalizes the event in *Song of Solomon*, naming her character, Emmet Till (only a slight spelling difference), but the actions are the same as the real case. Present-day readers know that Carolyn Bryant Donham, the white woman who accused teenage Till of harassing her, has recanted her claims, but at the time of Morrison's writing, Emmett Till was viewed widely as "guilty" of whistling at Donham.<sup>38</sup> This minor offense led to his brutal death at the hands of two white men and the case reached national prominence when Till's mother decided to host an open casket funeral for her son, so that everyone could see what these men did to her child. Emmett Till's murder was a huge moment of inspiration for the Civil Rights Era that erupted in the 1960's and has characterized the quest for racial justice for decades. Even with Till's proven innocence, the sign marking where his body was found continues to be riddled with bullet holes, a grim reminder that the United States still does not view racial equality in a uniform manner.<sup>39</sup>

Readers of *Song of Solomon* are expected to be familiar with the story of Emmett Till, yet Morrison's version of the story focuses on his supposed guilt and questions whether or not that actually matters because the "punishment" was so severe and unjust. Morrison writes, "'So he whistled! So what!' Guitar was steaming. 'He supposed to die for that?'"<sup>40</sup> Even though the verb "steaming" is emotion-packed, Guitar gives a reasonable response in this moment when he essentially is stating that it is unfair, cruel, racist, and unusual for a teenager to be killed for

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<sup>38</sup> Richard Pérez-Peña. "Woman Linked to 1955 Emmett Till Murder Tells Historian Her Claims Were False," *The New York Times*, January 27, 2017.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/27/us/emmett-till-lynching-carolyn-bryant-donham.html>

<sup>39</sup> Kayla Epstein. "This Emmett Till Memorial was vandalized again. And again. And again. Now it's bulletproof" *The Washington Post*, October 20, 2019.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2019/10/20/this-emmett-till-memorial-was-vandalized-again-again-again-now-its-bulletproof/>

<sup>40</sup> Morrison. *Song of Solomon*, 80.

supposedly whistling at a white woman. Later in the scene, another character tells Guitar, “‘They say Till had a knife,’ and Guitar responds, “‘They always say that. He could of had a wad of bubble gum, they’d swear it was a hand grenade.’”<sup>41</sup> This exchange both soberly and presciently reflects many of the same conversations that have followed the murders of many young black men, including (but far from limited to) Trayvon Martin and Tamir Rice. Despite Guitar’s righteous anger, his commentary is sound and vital to the understanding of how Black men are perceived and how easily they become targets for white men.

Racial profiling, although not explicitly named, is employed as another example of systemic harm that similarly targets young Black men in America. When driving back from attempting to rob Pilate’s house for gold, Guitar and Milkman are pulled over presumably by a white police officer and thrown in jail until Macon Dead Sr. and Pilate can bail them out. The men are thrown in jail because they are caught carrying suspicious material: a bag of bones they have stolen from Pilate’s house. Milkman recognizes the injustice of his encounter with the law: “‘What’d they stop us for? We wasn’t speeding. Just riding along.’” But he lacks the language to understand its basis. Macon must explain to his son that the stop was racially motivated and replies, “‘They stop anybody they want to. They saw you was colored, that’s all. And they’re looking for the Negro that killed that boy.’”<sup>42</sup> This is a necessary conversation that Black parents and children continue to have in the present day because racial profiling is rampant and “routine” interactions with the police or questioning sometimes end in violence, as seen with George Floyd in May 2020. Macon introduces class into this conversation as well when he claims it was his wallet that got them out of jail in only two hours and berates Milkman for involving Guitar.

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<sup>41</sup> Morrison, 81.

<sup>42</sup> Morrison, 204.

Macon tells Milkman, ““And that would have been the end of it, except for that Southside nigger. Hadn’t been for him, they wouldn’t of had to get Pilate down there.”<sup>43</sup> Here is one of the moments where Morrison singles in on the divisiveness inside the Black community over family lineage and wealth that governs Macon’s dislike of many of his Black neighbors, emphasizing the harm and judgement can come from inside of the same community without forgetting the role of larger institutions that are founded on logic that privileges whiteness and pits all nonwhite people against each other.

One commonality between all of these instances of harm, both individual and institutional, is the lack of resolution or meaningful justice given to the victims by any law enforcement or locus of authority. Without any justice from the governing institutions, many of Morrison’s characters in *Song of Solomon* are burdened with creating justice for themselves, but it becomes apparent that they do not all operate with the same ideas of what constitutes justice. Therefore, in the novel, justice is not a monolithic ideal, and as the novel’s protagonist, Milkman is exposed to all of these justices and readers are shown the “options” or visions. Rather than be didactic, Morrison gives her readers the tools to build their own imaginings of a more just future. In the following section, I will outline two of the major theories of justice in the novel, each represented by a central figure in Milkman’s life, and argue that Morrison aligns with current abolitionist thinkers and activists to define justice in a way which allows for healing and also prioritizes rethinking our societal values to move forward.

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One cannot begin to examine justice in *Song of Solomon* without a deep exploration into the origins of, and the motivations behind the novel’s depiction of the “Seven Days,” a secret

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<sup>43</sup> Morrison, 204.

radical sect that harms white citizens whenever Black citizens are hurt or killed. Guitar joins the Seven Days because he understands the white supremacist nature of the U.S. Criminal Justice system and believes that the best way — indeed the only way — to achieve justice for antiblack violence is to commit antiwhite violence. Guitar discloses his role to Milkman and explains the rationale of the group: “When a Negro child, Negro woman, or Negro man is killed by whites and nothing is done about it by *their* law and *their* courts, this society selects a similar victim at random, and they execute him or her in a similar manner if they can.”<sup>44</sup> Morrison’s emphasis on “their” shows that Guitar believes that the structures that govern our country work only for white people and ignore, or worse, do active harm to Black communities. Milkman is appalled by the violence and the casual nature with which Guitar discusses the act of murder, but Guitar views the actions of the Seven Days as justifiable because they are not unprovoked and instead are only used to “even the score.” The Seven Days’ beliefs can be seen as an extreme embodiment of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s message: “Justice too long delayed is justice denied.”<sup>45</sup> Racial violence is a reality in the United States. That is uncontested, and it is only how we choose to end racial violence that is debatable. According to Guitar, there is no way to stop white people from murdering Black people, so the only solution is to murder white people in an even ratio. Guitar continues, “The earth is soggy with black people’s blood. And before us Indian blood. Nothing can cure them, and if it keeps on there won’t be any of us left and there won’t be any land for those who are left. So the numbers have to remain static.”<sup>46</sup> Milkman regards most of Guitar’s

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<sup>44</sup> Morrison, 154 (emphasis Morrison’s).

<sup>45</sup> King Jr., Martin Luther. “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” *Atlantic*, Apr. 2018, pp. 74–83. *EBSCOhost*,

[search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,uid&db=aph&AN=134398805&site=ehost-live&scope=site](https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,uid&db=aph&AN=134398805&site=ehost-live&scope=site).

<sup>46</sup> Morrison, 158.

thoughts on these important issues simply as “his race bag”; however, Guitar’s focus on not just community survival, but also community building evidenced through his mention of “land” shows that he truly believes his actions are in the best interest of Black people.

The good intentions held by the members of the Days leads the majority of current scholarship to connect the group’s search for justice to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960’s. In his article, “An Excursion into the Black World: The ‘Seven Days’ in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*,” Ralph Story argues that the Seven Days can be read as an extension and radical imagining of the Civil Rights movement with its focus on collective progress. Story argues that “the challenge Guitar (speaking for the Seven Days) extends to Milkman is that he and his comrades are no longer willing to wait for justice for black people or for the quality of life to improve for the race.”<sup>47</sup> Certainly, the urgency and expediency with which the Days act can be seen as a direct disavowal of the lengthy process for justice to be achieved, in the rare instances when it is achieved, through traditional legal channels. Similarly, John Brenkman argues that “The story could not have been told before King’s movement and his death, before Malcolm X and his death, before the Black Panthers and their deaths.”<sup>48</sup> Milkman himself connects Guitar to Malcolm X when he tells his friend, “You sound like that red-headed Negro named X. Why don’t you join him and call yourself Guitar X?”<sup>49</sup> The allusion to Malcolm X explicitly connects Guitar’s passions for racial justice to the Civil Rights Era, while similarly reminding readers — especially readers who were not alive during the 1960’s — that not all Black people agreed on the best practices to evoke change. While the current research connecting the divide between

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<sup>47</sup> Richard Story. “An Excursion into the Black World: The ‘Seven Days’ in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*.” *Black American Literature Forum* 23, no. 1 (Spring 1989), 155.

<sup>48</sup> John Brenkman. “Politics and Form in *Song of Solomon*.” *Social Text*, no. 39 (Summer 1994), 57.

<sup>49</sup> Morrison, 160.

Milkman and Guitar to the differing strategies of Civil Rights activists, such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X is informative and apt, I find the focus on the years between the narrative end of *Song of Solomon* in 1963 and its publication in 1977 to be too limiting and is not focused on the central element of racialized terror groups. I am more interested in looking at the connections between the Seven Days and the trend of individual, vigilante justice that has characterized United States history.

I believe that the retribution delivered by the Seven Days can be interpreted as a response to as well as a paradoxical reading of the terror inflicted on Black people by the Ku Klux Klan starting during Reconstruction and reemerging in the 1920's. The connection between the KKK and the Seven Days is made briefly, yet explicitly, in the novel when Guitar himself separates the Days from the Klan by telling Milkman, "The Mafia is unnatural. So is the Klan. One kills for money, the other kills for fun. And they have huge profits and protection at their disposal. We don't."<sup>50</sup> By bringing these violent organizations into conversation, Morrison makes her readers understand the similarities between the KKK and the Seven Days: both groups commit violence based on the victim's race, both operate in order to ensure justice that cannot be achieved by the institutions we currently have in place often using violent or brutal methods, and both groups require a level of secrecy--although we know that the infamous white hoods and robes often did not keep people from knowing the true identities of Klan members, many of whom were local leaders. By connecting the Seven Days to the KKK, Morrison achieves one of the overall goals of all of her writing: to decenter whiteness. Similarly, the actions of the Seven Days highlight that anyone is capable of harming others, and that violence is the norm rather than an aberration in the history of the United States. Rather than focus on the white men who are able to kill and

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<sup>50</sup> Morrison, 158.

terrorize Black people, Morrison chooses instead to focus on the Black men who have a love for their community that is so strong that they would kill for it.

Guitar defines the intentions behind his involvement in the Seven Days as motivated by love. He tries to explain his rationale to Milkman by stating, “What I’m doing ain’t about hating white people. It’s about loving us. About loving you. My whole life is love.”<sup>51</sup> Guitar’s declaration of love shows readers that love, while not easily quantifiable, *cannot* be left out of conversations about justice, but that any form of love is not enough to ensure justice. While the idea of professing love as the cause for murder may seem illogical, for Guitar, it is the only alternative that gives Black people some semblance of justice. Although his radical stances can elicit some sympathy, it is important to note that Morrison does not advocate for or accept the Days’ attempt at retributive justice. Just as Americans have generally come to denounce the Ku Klux Klan for their racial terror, the Seven Days also should be denounced for their actions, even if they are a response to racial violence. Morrison makes it explicitly clear: the Seven Days are not models of justice because they perpetuate vigilante-type violence and they are unable to bring about any meaningful or structural change due to their secrecy and individualized retribution. Morrison makes sure that by rendering the Seven Days an ineffective means to justice, readers understand that love and good intentions must be paired with uplifting actions, otherwise “justice” ends up becoming a reification of violence forced on a different target.

Although the Seven Days believe they are acting in the best interest of Black people, it is impractical to assume that these seven men could answer for the antiblack violence that plagues the United States. Guitar speaks of “keeping the numbers static,” but that is impossible since these men cannot account for every Black person murdered by a white person. This shows how

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<sup>51</sup> Morrison, 159.

widespread the violence is, but it also establishes the Seven Days as a symbolic entity, not one that can bring about real change. Whereas Milkman is often seen as the more naive character, he does see the problems with the Seven Days and tells his friend: “Guitar, none of that shit is going to change how I live or how any other Negro lives. What you’re doing is crazy. And something else: it’s a habit.”<sup>52</sup> Milkman’s doubt over the Seven Days encapsulates the basis of Morrisonian justice. At his core, Milkman believes the maxim that two wrongs do not make a right, which strongly contrasts with the views of Guitar, who believes that doing something is better than sitting around waiting to be the victim.

The conversation between Guitar and Milkman brings the strong desire for justice of the Seven Days in conjunction with the morals of killing human beings, and one cannot conceive of justice in *Song of Solomon* without thinking of both. As I mentioned earlier, Toni Morrison rejects the notion that racial justice can be achieved through groups that propagate violence like the Seven Days. The most obvious repudiation of the mindset held by the members of the Days comes at the end of the novel, where Guitar believes Milkman is cutting him out of a pile of gold, though there is no actual gold. Upset at Milkman’s apparent betrayal, Guitar has given him the message the Seven Days use before they kill someone: “Your day has come.”<sup>53</sup> The violence that Guitar claims is done out of love for black people, out of love for Milkman, drives him to turn his weapon towards his best friend. The final page of the novel pits the two men against each other, and even though Guitar puts down his rifle, Morrison writes,

Milkman stopped waving and narrowed his eyes. He could just make out Guitar’s head and shoulders in the dark. “You want my life?” Milkman was not shouting now. “You need it? Here.” Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees — he leaped. As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did

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<sup>52</sup> Morrison, 160-161.

<sup>53</sup> Morrison, 262.

not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it.<sup>54</sup>

Milkman's leap acts not just as an example of African oral tradition emphasizing flight as freedom, it is also the final and most dramatic rejection of the model of justice provided by the Seven Days because he refuses to die at the hands of a vigilante murderer, but he also gives his life to fulfill Guitar's (impassioned, yet uninformed) needs. Just as Guitar earlier mentioned that he kills white people because he loves Milkman, Milkman is willing to kill himself out of love for Guitar. It is this type of communal love, not love that requires murder, that constitute a measure of justice for Morrison. This level of self-sacrifice is important for Morrison's view of justice because it recognizes that we need to be willing to care for others, even if this is an extreme example. The Seven Days do manage to kill white people, but they are unsuccessful at securing justice for their community and importantly in this final example, Guitar helps to cause the death of one of the very people he claims to protect in his role as part of the Days. Milkman's final leap is less about his own death than it is about the life of Guitar. In an interview with Charlie Ruas in 1981, Morrison explains her interpretation of the ending of the novel, "They are willing to risk the one thing that we have, life, and that's the positive nature of the action."<sup>55</sup> Acting for the good of others leads Milkman away from Guitar's retributive style of justice, and in this final moment, he chooses selflessness.

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*Song of Solomon* directly questions what constitutes justice for nonwhite Americans who live in a country founded on white supremacy and accurately shows the failings of the current

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<sup>54</sup> Morrison, 337.

<sup>55</sup> Toni Morrison, interview with Charles Ruas in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. Danielle Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1994), 111.

institutions of the justice system specifically for African Americans. Yet, Morrison pushes this discussion even further because the novel advocates for an alternative conceptualization of justice, one not found in formulaic conventions, sentencing measures, and consequences founded in (often carceral) punishment. Not only do readers gain insight into the current injustices of retributive actions, the novel also gives examples of what a more just ideology might look like. While retribution is shown through an organized community, the *Seven Days*, readers can sense a pattern of better options demonstrated by individual characters.

One of the essential pillars of justice in Morrison's work — in *Song of Solomon*, especially — is love for others. Without the ability to care about the well-being of others as well as the recognition that we are all human beings, even those of us who commit unspeakable harm, true justice cannot exist. Care and justice must be thought of in tandem; we cannot prioritize one or the other. Unfortunately, our justice system is grounded in measurable evidence, so where do we fit in this potentially abstract idea of community love and care? Further still, how can we shift our priorities from punishing people to instead working to hold them accountable for their actions? Both involve consequences, but oftentimes punishment does not give significant room for repair or healing. Contemporary abolitionist thinker and community organizer Mariame Kaba has often shared her views that we need to focus on the importance of care and love in order to create a world that promises safety for everyone, which is *not* actually ensured in the systems we currently have in place. In her article "Free Us All," Kaba quotes Saidiya Hartman when she writes, "Care is the antidote to violence."<sup>56</sup> Hartman's statement is deceptively simple because it

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<sup>56</sup> In the Wake: A Salon in Honor of Christina Sharpe: Featuring Christina Sharpe, Hazel Carby, Kaiama Glover, Saidiya Hartman, Arthur Jafa, and Alex Weheliye. Barnard College, February 2, 2017 quoted in Mariame Kaba, "Free Us All," *The New Inquiry*. Published May 8, 2017 <https://thenewinquiry.com/free-us-all/>

logically makes sense, but actually represents a radical departure from our punishment-based structures of law enforcement and incarceration. Kaba continues, “In the end, a practice of abolitionist care underscores that our fates are intertwined and our liberation is interconnected.”<sup>57</sup> With this framework of communal care in mind, I would like to offer an example of a character in *Song of Solomon* — Pilate Dead — who meets these criteria for accountability and also holds the love for others that is essential to this concept of justice advocated by abolitionist thinkers and put forth in the novel by Morrison.

Pilate, Macon Dead’s younger sister and Milkman’s aunt, stands apart from other major characters as well as others in the community in the novel. She shows love towards others, but the care is not always reciprocal. While her differences make her an intriguing character, I believe her “Otherness” can be interpreted as an attempt to highlight her alternative ideology, one that can bring us closer to a more racially just and humane America. Readers glean this sense of “Otherness” from Pilate’s physical description, namely because she has no navel. Morrison writes, “It was the absence of a navel that convinced people that she had not come into this world through normal channels; had never lain, floated, or grown in some warm and liquid place connected by a tissue-thin tube to a reliable source of human nourishment.”<sup>58</sup> While these are just rumors, they provide the fodder for the sense of “Otherness” that Pilate experiences. Valerie Smith reads Pilate’s lack of a navel as a symbol of independence. Smith writes, “The absent navel symbolizes her complete independence, suggesting that even as a fetus she did not need to rely on another person for sustenance.”<sup>59</sup> The symbolism surrounding the absence of a navel

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<sup>57</sup> Mariame Kaba, “Free Us All,” *The New Inquiry*. Published May 8, 2017  
<https://thenewinquiry.com/free-us-all/>

<sup>58</sup> Morrison, 28.

<sup>59</sup> Valerie Smith “Song of Solomon and Tar Baby” *Toni Morrison: Writing the Moral Imagination* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 47.

could signify both literal and figurative detachment, yet although Pilate does exist outside of many social norms for 20th century America in terms of her family life and personal values, she still chooses to care for the members of her community. For example, the first time Milkman and Guitar visit Pilate, she offers to cook them an egg, another symbol of nourishment and fertility. She does not turn her back on other people, like some do to her after seeing her bodily difference. While I believe Pilate's socially independent character in *Song of Solomon* is worthy of further analysis, I argue that Pilate's life choices do more than just oppose those of others; Pilate helps readers imagine a world that could be. A better world. She is an vehicle for a radical imagining of Morrisonian justice.

I believe that it is most useful to understand Pilate's positionality and connections to an ideology of justice by first comparing her lifestyle to the person who once knew her best, her older brother Macon Dead, Milkman's father. The two siblings were incredibly close and had a relationship founded in caregiving. Pilate is described as Macon's "first caring for": however, after the murder of their father, young Pilate and Macon Dead went their separate ways and when readers are introduced to him, Macon pursues a very traditional successful life in American culture, motivated by capitalistic impulses for personal wealth.<sup>60</sup> He prioritizes hard work, earns his income owning properties of his Black neighbors, and is disliked by his tenants for his inability to offer them compassion if their payments are late. One tenant, the grandmother of Guitar Bains, expresses her frustration when she tells her grandson: "A nigger in business is a terrible thing to see. A terrible, terrible thing to see."<sup>61</sup> For people like Mrs. Bains, a Black man in business becomes concerned only with profit and not for the wellbeing of his people.

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<sup>60</sup> Morrison, 28.

<sup>61</sup> Morrison, 22.

Similarly, Macon Dead's desire to conform to the traditional definition of a successful life is evidenced by his nuclear family. He marries a woman and has three children, and even though he does not have loving relationships with any of them, they are evidence that he has "made it" as a man in America. He tells his son Milkman, "Let me tell you: right now the one important thing you'll ever need to know: Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then, you'll own yourself and other people too."<sup>62</sup> This desire for ownership is rooted in exploitative practices that disregard the humanity of others, yet it is often coveted by those who live in a society that rewards these behaviors.

On the other hand, Pilate's life choices appear antithetical to her brother's and instead she prioritizes love over wealth. She searches for her father's family, or his "people," after his death, but is shunned by communities when they see her smooth stomach. Her negative experiences, however, do not deter her from living with an abundance of love and with no ill-will towards others, as evidenced by the warmth and intimacy shown in her small family. Pilate's small family is a "multigenerational matriarchal household," which is a far departure from the typical patriarchal head of household in the mid-20th century.<sup>63</sup> Pilate lives with her daughter, Reba, and Reba's daughter, Hagar. Reba is described as lucky and is known for winning contests, but she often gives the prizes away. Hagar, who is only a few years older than Milkman, values material possessions unlike her mother or her grandmother, and out of the desire to see Hagar happy and satisfied, Pilate and Reba indulge her wishes as much as they possibly can.

Pilate's little family's way of living too defies the definition of success that Macon Dead worships. Morrison describes her household as lacking many of the conveniences or

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<sup>62</sup> Morrison, 55.

<sup>63</sup> Smith, 47.

technologies of the time , and stands opposed from the big Packard that Macon drives: “They warmed themselves and cooked with wood and coal, pumped kitchen water into a dry sink through a pipeline from a well and lived pretty much as though progress was a word that meant walking a little farther on down the road.”<sup>64</sup> In this last line, readers can see how Pilate’s lifestyle choices are unconventional to how progress is understood by those whose only goal is to “get ahead” of others. However, even without electricity or gas, Pilate, Reba, and Hagar live comfortably. Pilate also exists outside of the law because she makes money as a bootlegger selling wine, though as Macon notes, “profits from their wine-selling evaporated like sea water in a hot wind.”<sup>65</sup> After years of separation, Pilate moves to the same city as Macon, but he is unhappy to see her and is ashamed of her life choices because he fears associating with her will hamper his professional success: “He trembled with the thought of the white men in the bank — the men who helped him buy and mortgage houses — discovering that this raggedy bootlegger was his sister.”<sup>66</sup> Reunification is not in Macon’s interest and he too becomes one of many who disapprove of Pilate.

Finally, unbeknownst to Milkman at the start of the novel, Pilate furthers herself from society with her knowledge of potions and other supernatural forces. It is Pilate who makes the concoction that draws Macon to have sex with his wife Ruth when Milkman is conceived, and it is Pilate who saves Milkman’s life in-utero when Macon tries to kill the child, whom he feels was unfairly created. Because of this, Macon forbids Milkman from visiting Pilate, an order that is often ignored because it is in her wine house where Milkman finds a sense of happiness. The moment where he first meets his aunt is significant for a teenage Milkman partially because “he

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<sup>64</sup> Morrison, 27.

<sup>65</sup> Morrison, 29.

<sup>66</sup> Morrison, 20.

was surrounded by women who seemed to enjoy him and who laughed out loud.”<sup>67</sup> Though his mother certainly loves him, Milkman experiences a new sense of family and community in Pilate’s home.

Pilate’s difference from others — both physical and ideological — has led many scholars to tout her independence and her ability to accurately observe the state of society. By being different from other people, Pilate then is able to act in ways that might not be accepted by a traditional society but whose actions can be seen as a way to rethink our societal values. Brenda Marshall gives a similar reading of Pilate in her article, “The Gospel According to Pilate” when she writes, “Pilate is outside society, often outside the laws of man, and seemingly outside the laws of nature, and yet she is the most reliable commentator on society, man, and nature.”<sup>68</sup> Marshall believes that because of her alienation from most of society, Pilate can more easily observe the actions of others. This viewpoint of Pilate’s character helps readers to understand her place outside of traditional society, but I would like to build upon those scholars to offer Pilate as an example of Morrisonian justice.

Pilate serves as a model for Milkman who advocates for a lifestyle that differs greatly from Macon Dead’s selfishness and Guitar’s focus on retribution. By no means is Pilate a perfect character, but she takes responsibility for her actions and actively seeks repair and healing. While many scholars analyze justice in *Song of Solomon* solely through an in-depth exploration of the Seven Days — which is certainly worth study for evidence of structural racial injustice and the failings of revenge — I believe that understanding Pilate’s response to harm serves as an

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<sup>67</sup> Morrison, 47.

<sup>68</sup> Brenda Marshall, “The Gospel According to Pilate,” *American Literature* 57, no. 3, (Oct. 1985): Accessed December 3, 2020, [https://www-jstor-org.proxy.library.georgetown.edu/stable/pdf/2925786.pdf?ab\\_segments=0%252Fbasic\\_SYC-5187\\_SYC-5188%252Ftest&refreqid=excelsior%3A1d0c8192cf332f49af7cff3aeeda3c29](https://www-jstor-org.proxy.library.georgetown.edu/stable/pdf/2925786.pdf?ab_segments=0%252Fbasic_SYC-5187_SYC-5188%252Ftest&refreqid=excelsior%3A1d0c8192cf332f49af7cff3aeeda3c29)

example of what the foundation of racial justice should look like. Even though she is only one individual, the fact that she is set apart from others in her community allows for her choices and actions to be highlighted in ways that readers should pay attention to, and I would argue, that we should work to emulate in our society too.

The most salient example of Pilate's orientation towards justice comes after the murder of her father. Without a place to live or a parent to guide them, Macon and Pilate seek shelter in a cave, but this security only lasts one night because when Macon wakes up, he sees an old white man. Out of fear for their lives, as well as anger at the recent death of his father, Macon kills the man and realizes that the man also possesses a stash of gold. Morrison describes Macon's reaction: "Life, safety, and luxury fanned out before him like the tail-spread of a peacock, and as he stood there trying to distinguish each delicious color, he saw the dusty boots of his father standing just on the other side of the shallow pit."<sup>69</sup> This moment marks the point where Macon appears to understand that money is necessary for survival, a belief that will stay with him into adulthood. However, Pilate is guided by a stronger moral compass and tells her brother, "That's stealing. We killed a man. They'll be after us, all over. If we take his money, then they'll think that's why we did it. We've got to leave it, Macon. We can't get caught with no bags of money."<sup>70</sup> Whereas Macon sees the money as their saving grace, Pilate reminds him of the life they just took and both the practical and moral reasons why they cannot take the gold. This disagreement causes the siblings to break their bond, to split up. It also plants the seeds for a misunderstanding that fuels most of Macon Dead's animosity towards his sister for decades. Each sibling eventually returns to the cave, without the knowledge of the other, and for very

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<sup>69</sup> Morrison, 170.

<sup>70</sup> Morrison, 170.

different reasons. Macon returns in search of the gold, and finds that it is gone, later recounting to his son: “She took it, Macon (referring to Milkman). After all that, she took the gold ... Now you tell me she got a green sack full of something hard enough to give you a hickey on your head when you bumped into it. That’s the gold, boy. That’s it! ”<sup>71</sup> Macon’s evidence, however, is circumstantial and clouded by his own desire for wealth. Pilate, who has to explain what is actually contained in the green sack to the police officers when Guitar and Milkman try to steal the “gold,” had returned to the cave and taken the white man’s bones. Pilate tells the police that the bones belonged to her late husband, but tells Milkman, Macon, and Guitar the truth. Specifically to Macon, she begins, “But you should of known better than to think I’d go back there for them little old bags. I wasn’t struttin ’em when I first laid eyes on ’em, I sure wasn’t thinking about them three years later.”<sup>72</sup> Pilate was not interested in the gold just as she does not value personal wealth in her life with Reba and Hagar. It is important to note that Pilate’s commitment to justice is shown through her decision to salvage the bones and keep them with her for decades and is not to tell the police the true details of the bones. Although the police are thought to be harbingers of justice in the United States, Pilate understands that they do not seek repair for crimes or harms, but instead only want to punish the guilty party. Had Pilate told the police the truth, she knew she would be putting her family and Guitar at risk for possible conviction and incarceration, which to her, does not signify justice. In that moment, Pilate chooses to imagine her own conception of justice, rather than cooperate with a system’s definition of justice that unsettles her. This decision aligns with thinkers mentioned earlier like Angela Davis, who argues that the search for justice (and abolitionism in general) is largely

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<sup>71</sup> Morrison, 171. (parenthetical mine)

<sup>72</sup> Morrison, 208.

imaginative because the structures that currently promote justice are irreversibly flawed. In an article for the series “Abolition for the People,” Davis highlights the need to think outside the world and institutions we have now to achieve justice when she writes, “Abolitionist approaches ask us to enlarge our field of vision so that rather than focusing myopically on the problematic institution and asking what needs to be changed about that institution, we raise radical questions about the organization of the larger society.”<sup>73</sup> Pilate’s decisions that stray from traditional justice seeking allow readers to “enlarge their field of vision” and see new possibilities for justice.

Readers discover — along with Macon, Milkman, and Guitar — that Pilate has returned to the cave three years later to recover the bones of the man they killed, highlighting her willingness and capacity to repair the harm her and her brother caused. Pilate tells the men that her late father spoke to her often and told her, “You just can’t fly off and leave a body.”<sup>74</sup> Readers later come to learn that this is likely a reference to his own father’s leaving, but Pilate interprets this message as one of obligation and responsibility. Pilate continues, “He meant that if you take a life, then you own it. You responsible for it. You can’t get rid of nobody by killing them. They still there, and they yours now. So I had to go back for it.”<sup>75</sup> This line and its sentiment of responsibility for one’s actions, even when they are unspeakable, is a cornerstone for accountability. Even though Pilate isn’t the one who has actually committed the crime of murder, she takes responsibility for the bones, whose weight literally symbolizes the burden of hurting someone else. In her book, *Until We Reckon: Violence, Mass Incarceration, and a Road*

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<sup>73</sup> Angela Davis, “Why Arguments Against Abolition Inevitably Fail,” Level-Medium, published October 6, 2020. <https://level.medium.com/why-arguments-against-abolition-inevitably-fail-991342b8d042>

<sup>74</sup> Morrison, 208.

<sup>75</sup> Morrison, 208.

to *Repair*, Danielle Sered offers “accountability” as an alternative to violence or punishment that stands at the center of the American concept of justice, and defines it as such:

Accountability requires five key elements: (1) acknowledging responsibility for one’s actions; (2) acknowledging the impact of one’s actions on others; (3) expressing genuine remorse; (4) taking actions to repair the harm to the degree possible, and guided when feasible by the people harmed, or “doing sorry”; and (5) no longer committing similar harm.<sup>76</sup>

I believe that Pilate’s decision to return for the white man’s bones shows Sered’s definition of accountability in action. Even though it was Macon who actually killed the man, Pilate understands the moral wrong committed and seeks to repair it through assuming the responsibility for the bones; that is her way of “doing sorry” and even if it does not have an immediate effect on the victim, her connection to the bones and the event do guide her life choices to make sure she minimizes future harm. Though not specifically putting it in the context of criminal justice reform, Morrison similarly expresses this need to change one’s own behavior in order to achieve justice in a 1983 interview with Nellie McKay. Speaking about how Milkman is to blame for the death of Hagar, Pilate’s granddaughter, because of his blunt rejection of her after years of a relationship, Morrison explains, “He will always regret that, and there is nothing that he can do about it. That generally is the way it is — there is nothing that you can do about it except do better and don’t do *that* again.”<sup>77</sup>

While Morrison may be oversimplifying the repair that someone can take, she certainly is echoing Sered’s fifth tenet of accountability. Morrison seems to corroborate Sered’s definition of accountability in her interviews and Sered’s words also come to mind with other characters in

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<sup>76</sup> Danielle Sered, *Until We Reckon: Violence, Mass Incarceration, and a Road to Repair*. (New York: The New Press, 2019), 96.

<sup>77</sup> Toni Morrison, interview with Nellie McKay in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. Danielle Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1994), 146.

*Song of Solomon* who fulfill certain pieces of accountability, but not all of them. Whereas Guitar and the rest of the Seven Days consistently take responsibility for their actions within the group, their ultimate aim is “committing similar harm” in the future and although their motives are for the betterment of the Black community, their methodology perpetuates cyclical violence. Therefore, Pilate’s actions best align with Sered’s definition.

Just as both the Seven Days and Pilate have differing interpretations of what their responsibility is to the greater community, they also differ in what love means. Whereas Guitar tells Milkman that love is his motivation for his actions as the Sunday man, Pilate does not couple her vision of love with violence. Guitar tells Milkman that he voluntarily kills white people out of love for “us,” but at what cost? In a 1985 interview, Morrison tells Bessie W. Jones and Audrey Vinson, “You can become just a killer, a torpedo, with the very best intentions in the world.”<sup>78</sup> Morrison here seems to be echoing the character of Guitar Bains, who yearns for racial justice, yet readers are not supposed to admire how he goes about seeking that justice. Pilate’s ideology of love, on the other hand, is best exemplified in her dying words, spoken after Guitar accidentally shoots her instead of Milkman: “I wish I’d a knowed more people. I would of loved ’em all. If I’d a knowed more, I woulda loved more.”<sup>79</sup> In her last moments, Pilate’s only laments were that she did not have the opportunity to love more people, unconditionally. Pilate’s last words and her unfortunate demise at the hands of Guitar teach readers an important lesson about love: it cannot be separated from the search for justice. Our criminal justice system is set

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<sup>78</sup> Toni Morrison, interview with Bessie W. Johnson and Audrey Vinson in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. Danielle Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1994), 178.

<sup>79</sup> Morrison, 336.

up in ways where the humanity of those entangled in its webs is seen as a lesser priority than “appropriate” punishment.

*Song of Solomon* does not shy away from the messy discussions that arise whenever we begin to talk about justice, but the complications should be embraced because they allow for honest dialogue. Morrison reminds readers that we are all capable of harming others; however she also gives us examples of characters whose commitment to accountability and love are laudable.

## CHAPTER 2: ESTABLISHING PRISON ABOLITIONIST IDEALS IN *JAZZ*

The idea for Toni Morrison's sixth novel *Jazz* (1992) began with a photograph. While editing *The Black Book* (1974), Morrison discovered James VanDerZee's *The Harlem Book of the Dead*: a collection of funerary photographs he had taken during the Harlem Renaissance. Morrison was particularly interested in one photograph of a young woman with flowers positioned on her chest. The woman had been shot by her lover at a party, but when asked who had hurt her, she responded "I'll tell you tomorrow" and died. In her last moments, she gave this man a chance to get away even though he had mortally wounded her. Morrison states that the anecdote "seemed to me redolent of the proud hopelessness of love mourned and championed in blues music, and, simultaneously, fired by the irresistible energy of jazz music."<sup>80</sup> The meditations on how one could kill a lover and also on how someone could willingly let their murderer walk free became the basis for the plotline of *Jazz*.

Published in 1992, *Jazz* followed perhaps what is Morrison's most well-known novel, *Beloved*, and though the two share no characters and are set almost fifty years apart, the two are connected in a thematic trilogy (the final novel of the trilogy being Morrison's 1998 *Paradise*) which center the "beloved" and the "reconfiguration of the self" in relationships founded in love.<sup>81</sup> These three novels also seek to explore the relationship between love and violence.<sup>82</sup> Unlike *Beloved*, which focuses on "motherlove," and *Paradise* which concerns itself primarily with love for one's community or group, *Jazz* is about "couple love."<sup>83</sup> *Jazz* rejects the notion that any person is solely good or bad, creating characters who remind us that as human beings,

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<sup>80</sup> Toni Morrison. *Jazz* (New York: Vintage International, 1992), xvi.

<sup>81</sup> Morrison, xiv.

<sup>82</sup> Valerie Smith. *Toni Morrison: Writing the Moral Imagination* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 77.

<sup>83</sup> Toni Morrison. *Beloved* (New York: Vintage International, 1987), 155; Toni Morrison. *Jazz* (New York: Vintage International, 1992), xviii.

we contain multitudes. We can love someone and harm someone else at the same time, and very often we can even harm the people we love. This is not to say that Morrison is condoning violence, quite the contrary; instead, Morrison's *Jazz* forces us to reconceptualize how we label and distance ourselves from others who might act in ways that we disagree with or are disgusted by, when in reality, we are all bound up in the very same human experience.

True to the story Van Der Zee told about the funerary photograph, Morrison writes about a young woman, Dorcas who is killed by a lover, yet Morrison shifts to the fictive realm when she envisions that Dorcas has been seeing a middle aged married man, Joe. At the very heart of *Jazz* are the relationships we have with other people: in love, in hatred, and in community. Readers are drawn into the community of 1920's Harlem with Morrison's writing, taken from the jazz scene of the time. Although Morrison does write about the relationship between the teenaged Dorcas Manfred and her lover Joe Trace, we are also given insight into the marriage between Joe and his wife Violet, as well as Dorcas' aunt and guardian, Alice Manfred. Valerie Smith highlights the importance of jazz music, even though Morrison never actually uses the word "jazz" in the novel when she writes, "Morrison interrogates prevailing notions about the Jazz Age and demonstrates the complexity and multifariousness of African American lives in the north."<sup>84</sup>

This very idea of a community centered novel, where each character's interactions spiral out like a web can be connected to an abolitionist framework that centers community building and mutual aid rather than the current legal, criminal justice system that values isolation and

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<sup>84</sup> Valerie Smith. "Jazz and Paradise" *Toni Morrison: Writing the Moral Imagination* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 79.

“organized abandonment.”<sup>85</sup> Aligning *Jazz* with the ideals of prison abolitionists and community organizers can begin as early as the first lines of the novel: “Sth, I know that woman. She used to live with a flock of birds on Lenox Avenue.”<sup>86</sup> The “Sth,” which, according to Farah Jasmine Griffin, “suggests the indignant teeth sucking of a black woman,” immediately grounds the novel in Black vernacular expression.<sup>87</sup> Griffin interprets the omniscient narration of migration narratives as “play[ing] the role of journalists, streetwise reporters who detach themselves and present the readers with a case for consideration and action.”<sup>88</sup> I actually believe that in *Jazz* this narrator seeks to insert themselves, and therefore the reader who is following along, into the story and the community in which it is set. In *Jazz*, we are never told who this omniscient narrative voice is, or if it is the voice of a person at all, but the technique of having the story be told through someone else’s eyes immediately puts the reader into the narrative and further defines the “neighborhood” or community that serves as the backdrop but also the lifeline for the novel’s plot. However, I agree with Griffin’s interpretation that the narrative voice in *Jazz* functions as a blending between the experiences of the South and the North, “the ancestor” and “the migrant,” to borrow her terms for characters in migration novels. She writes, “It is a voice that is playful, unreliable, appearing to be all-knowing yet constantly undermining itself. It is a voice that embodies oral culture, instrumental jazz arrangements, paintings, photographs, and history.”<sup>89</sup> Griffin’s analysis serves as a helpful reminder that many times the differing opinions

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<sup>85</sup> Jeremy Seahill. “Ruth Wilson Gilmore Makes the Case for Abolition,” June 10, 2020, in *Intercepted*, produced by First Look Media, podcast. <https://theintercept.com/2020/06/10/ruth-wilson-gilmore-makes-the-case-for-abolition/>

<sup>86</sup> Toni Morrison. *Jazz* (Vintage, 1992), 3.

<sup>87</sup> Farah J. Griffin. *Who Set You Flowin’?: The African-American Migration Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 195.

<sup>88</sup> Griffin, 7

<sup>89</sup> Griffin, 195.

of community members are a product of differing backgrounds, specifically on a regional level. I would further that, in helping to create the jazz-style that foregrounds the novel, the neighborly tone the narrator uses foregrounds community, even if that community is imperfect and not monolithic in thought. By knowing who Violet is and where she lives, the narrator is immediately giving the reader an intimacy into the lives of the characters. The omniscient narrator creates a picture of 1920's Harlem in its uniqueness; there were so many people living in the city that everyone was free to do what they wanted, yet there also was a developing sense of community. Morrison simultaneously explores what the Great Migration must have felt like for millions of Black Americans when they moved from the South to the urban North. She captures the newness and excitement of the city when she writes, "A city like this one makes me dream tall and feel in on things... When I look over strips of green grass lining the river, at church steeples and into the cream-and-copper halls of apartment buildings, I'm strong. Alone, yes, but top-notch and indestructible."<sup>90</sup> While the architecture of the city stands tall and lonely, Morrison reminds readers that the people living in the city were connected by the fact that they all lived there.

Throughout the novel, the daily lives of Morrison's characters lead readers into various neighborhood spaces: Dorcas attends parties with young people dancing together, Joe delivers beauty products to the women gathered together, Violet does hair in people's kitchens. For many Black people during the Great Migration, the North could be new and lonely, since most people who moved left their networks of people down South; but after moving North, new communities were formed and often thrived. In fact, Morrison's consistent references to living spaces in *Jazz* can be interpreted as a connection to the strong community ties as well as the opportunity for

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<sup>90</sup> Morrison, 7.

resistance that these residences provided.<sup>91</sup> The unnamed narrator tells the readers, “Hospitality is gold in this City.”<sup>92</sup> Morrison keenly understands that the dynamics of a community may not always fall under the purview of loving thy neighbor and her characters certainly spread their share of gossip, yet that only makes these characters representative of real life. For example, even before the murder of Dorcas Manfred, the community has assumptions about Joe Trace’s wife, Violet. People remember that she was accused of trying to kidnap a baby, but she argued that she was only minding the child when he was left alone in a carriage. This incident reminds the readers that words and stories travel, and that even in a city, one can be known by others. It also reminds us how “guilt” can be a narrative constructed by others, not just a record of a person’s own actions. In creating this network of communication between her characters, Morrison’s attention to community building serves its own historical purpose to stay true to the novel’s settings, but it also connects the novel to the larger conversations of abolitionist theory. Abolitionist Mariame Kaba in an interview recently said, “Nothing that we do that is worthwhile is done alone.”<sup>93</sup> Following that logic, we cannot change any of the structural inequities we face without help from others and that is best done when we spend time investing in our local communities.

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While the background of a vibrant characters and neighborhood dynamics can be interpreted as Morrison’s nod to the importance of community building, the most obvious and

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<sup>91</sup> bell hooks. “Homeplace: a site of resistance” in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. (United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2014).

<sup>92</sup> Morrison, 9.

<sup>93</sup> Ariel Parrella-Aureli. “Nothing that we do that is worthwhile is done alone,” *Chicago Reader*, Feb. 15, 2021. <https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/mariame-kaba-we-do-this-til-we-free-us/Content?oid=86497187h>

important connection between *Jazz* and larger prison abolitionist discourse is the fact that Joe Trace, despite killing Dorcas Manfred, is never charged and does not spend any time in prison. The lack of legal punishment is one of the most uncomfortable truths of Morrison's novel; as readers, we are made to sit with our discomfort when Joe Trace seemingly "gets away with murder," but a closer analysis can read this absence of the hands of the Criminal Justice system as an opportunity to both see its flaws and also imagine more productive and healing-centered possibilities for dealing with harm, even harm of extreme proportions. Although the major plot event of this novel is Joe Trace's murder of Dorcas Manfred, *Jazz* does not follow the traditional structure of a murder novel, pointing to the idea that there is more to the novel than one scene of extreme violence. In the first place, there is no question of who killed Dorcas and Joe's guilt is not doubted by anyone. Morrison explains how in many of her novels, she puts the entire plot on the first page, "[s]o the reader reads the first page, he knows exactly what happened. And if he turns the page it's because he wants either to find out how it happened or he loves the language."<sup>94</sup> While I think many would agree that Morrison's prose does entice readers to turn the page, I would like to argue that Morrison's decision to begin *Jazz* in the wake of Dorcas' death can be interpreted as a shift away from the common ways that we as Americans think about harm and punishment. In our public perception of Criminal Justice, we are repeatedly shown the benefits of denying guilt, a move that highlights how our current systems actively work to devalue truth-telling and accountability. In *Until We Reckon: Violence, Mass Incarceration, and a Road to Repair*, Danielle Sered argues that our Criminal Justice System punishes people who own up to their harm and that people are advised to downplay their

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<sup>94</sup> Toni Morrison, interview with Charlie Rose, *Charlie Rose*, PBS, May 7, 1993. <https://charlierose.com/videos/18778>

involvement in order to receive mercy from the jury instead of actually seeking to repair the harm they have done. We also see the opposite occur when individuals are pushed to admit guilt to an action they did not commit in order to earn a plea bargain. In both of these cases, the court system is not genuinely looking to ascertain what really occurred, but instead wants solely to set a punishment. Healing and repair are not prioritized at all, not for the victim or for the person who committed the harm.

Joe Trace, then, is one of the most interesting characters in all of Morrison's fiction because readers are aware that he has murdered an eighteen year old from the outset of the novel, yet they also learn about his life and his past. I believe that Morrison is working to humanize Joe Trace in an effort to push her readers to rethink how we view violence in our society. (That being said, in no way do I believe that Morrison condones Joe's actions towards Dorcas nor does she ignore the incredible harm he has done.) There are many instances in Morrison's fiction where characters commit acts of almost unfathomable harm, yet I argue that Joe Trace's murder must be examined differently. For example, as I have mentioned previously, Guitar Baines and the rest of the Seven Days seek to murder random white people in *Song of Solomon* as retribution for specific instances of antiblack violence that characterized 20th century America. Readers are not supposed to agree with the actions of the Seven Days, yet the anger and pain that these characters feel as they watch their community members be killed for their race is genuine and impactful. Similarly, in Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved*, readers are given a brutal recollection of a mother, Sethe, murdering her own toddler to save her from living in slavery. In no way is the murder justifiable, yet readers can understand the choice Sethe makes because she truly believes that condemning her daughter to live a life in slavery is a fate worse than death. Sethe did not have the right to take her child's life, but Morrison forces her readers to grapple with the cruelties of

American slavery that guided Sethe's almost — but not quite — unimaginable decision. In *Jazz*, we are given a different narrative; there is no moral justification for Joe's actions. He does not kill Dorcas out of any sort of mercy and is not propelled in this action by the oppressive forces of virulent racism that Morrison's other characters use as their rationale for violence. It is only Joe's own fears of Dorcas' rejection that motivate him to kill her, yet Morrison does not villainize Joe. By not having Joe face a trial or any time in prison for his actions, Morrison is committing to one of the most important tenets of prison abolitionist thought; no matter what actions an individual may have caused, no matter how extreme the harm inflicted, incarceration is not a valid solution for accountability and repair.

In creating a character like Joe Trace, Morrison understands that no one can be reduced to one moment in their life, even if it is an awful one. Joe's character is underscored by how shocked the community was that he could commit murder. In the words of Dorcas' aunt, Joe Trace was, "a nice, neighborly, everybody-knows-him man. The kind you let in your house because he was not dangerous, because you had seen him with children, bought his products and never heard a scrap of gossip about him doing wrong."<sup>95</sup> Some may choose to interpret Joe's kindness as a type of public persona used to mask malicious intent, yet I believe that it is an instance of his character being like everyone we know, a complicated one that changes. Joe's ability to change is further emphasized when the novel picks up his own inner narration for 14 pages, instead of the omnipresent narrative voice that guides readers through the rest of the novel. Joe tells us, "Before I met her I'd changed into new seven times."<sup>96</sup> Joe grew up without any biological family and chose his own last name, Trace, because he was told that his parents

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<sup>95</sup> Morrison, 73.

<sup>96</sup> Morrison, 123.

“disappeared without a trace” and he took that to mean himself.<sup>97</sup> Critics may choose to read this early abandonment as an attempt for Morrison to justify Joe’s later behavior, but I instead read this as a larger reckoning with the fact that we all are victims of something, and that if we don’t, on a societal level, acknowledge the harm and trauma people carry, they are bound to harm others.

The other significant piece to Joe Trace’s character is that he does hold himself accountable for Dorcas’ murder and he shows remorse. As mentioned earlier, our current systems do not prioritize accountability, so Morrison’s acknowledgement of its importance stands in stark contrast to the injustices that surround us. At the end of the novel, Joe tells Felice, a friend of Dorcas’, “It was me. For the rest of my life, it’ll be me.”<sup>98</sup> Danielle Sered argues that accountability is a prerequisite for healing, so Joe’s simple admission of his role as Dorcas’ killer can be read as a step in the direction of repair, even though of course it cannot erase what he did. Sered writes about the difficulties posed by holding people accountable that we are not guaranteed with a prison sentence: “it [requires] facing the people whose lives they’ve changed, as a full human being who is responsible for the pain of others.”<sup>99</sup> Joe Trace does not hide from his actions. Not only does Joe take responsibility for his actions, he also shows remorse for his guilt. His wife, Violet, tells one of her clients, “He thinks about her all the time. Nothing on his mind but her. Won’t work. Can’t sleep. Grieves all day, all night ....”<sup>100</sup> Throughout the novel, Joe cries often and I believe this is Morrison’s way of giving readers a tangible way to understand Joe’s grief and remorse. Morrison writes, “Strange as it was, people finally got used

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<sup>97</sup> Morrison, 124.

<sup>98</sup> Morrison, 212.

<sup>99</sup> Danielle Sered. *Until We Reckon* (The New Press, 2019), 103.

<sup>100</sup> Morrison, 15.

to him, wiping his face and nose with an engineer's red handkerchief while he sat month after month by the window without view or on the stoop, first in the snow and later in the sun."<sup>101</sup> Because we are conditioned to expect carceral punishment for extreme harm, crying might initially not seem like "enough" remorse. Yet, I believe that in repeatedly mentioning Joe's crying, Morrison is showing readers that the people who we label offenders or perpetrators are not detached from their actions and often are capable of remorse. Joe is human, just as much as we the readers are. Similarly, after Joe kills Dorcas, Violet seeks to "love — well, find out about" her husband's young lover.<sup>102</sup> Violet questions everyone who knew Dorcas and even puts a picture of the dead girl on her mantle as a permanent reminder. Dorcas does not disappear after her death and indeed serves as a haunting presence throughout the novel. I believe that the continued meditation about Dorcas is important because one of the more palatable justifications for sending people to prison is that they will have time to "think about what they've done" and hopefully feel remorse. However, Morrison deconstructs that myth and shows us that this level of remorse and reflection is fully possible without a prison sentence.

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It is important to remember that readers are only able to learn so much about Joe Trace as a multifaceted human being who has many different relationships and personality traits because he does not receive any legal punishment for his actions; we cannot reasonably read *Jazz* through an abolitionist lens without analyzing the reasons why Joe Trace does not enter the criminal justice system. According to Morrison, much of why Joe faces no legal punishment directly

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<sup>101</sup> Morrison, 118.

<sup>102</sup> Morrison, 5.

relates to the rightful distrust the African American community has for the current options in place. Morrison writes,

There was never anyone to prosecute him because nobody actually saw him do it, and the dead girl's aunt didn't want to throw money to helpless lawyers or laughing cops when she knew the expense wouldn't improve anything. Besides, she found out that the man who killed her niece cried all day and for him and for Violet that is as bad as jail.<sup>103</sup>

In this one passage, Morrison touches on multiple inequities in the U.S. Criminal Justice System as well as opening the door for possibilities to imagine justice without relying on the carceral state. The phrase “laughing cops” points to the historical relationship between the Black community and the police, which includes not only police brutality but a lack of empathy or care. Not only have Black people been the victims of police violence at every point in this nation's history, they also just are not believed and their pain is often not seen as genuine. Later in the novel Morrison again references this relationship to the police when she writes, “she [Alice Manfred, Dorcas' aunt] would have called the police after both of them if everything she knew about Negro life had made it even possible to consider. To actually volunteer to talk to one, black or white, to let him in her house, watch him adjust his hips in her chair to accommodate the blue steel that made him a man.”<sup>104</sup> Alice Manfred's inability to find any solace or help from the officials who our society designates as the enforcers of justice helps readers to understand that our system does not work for everyone. In fact, we tout high numbers of incarceration, yet we do not stop and think about how many people are harmed but who *choose not to report it* either consciously or because they are afraid of reprisal. Danielle Sered writes, “In recent years, a full 52 percent of violent victimizations in the United States went reported... More than half of the people who survive serious violence prefer *nothing* to everything available to them through law

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<sup>103</sup> Morrison, 4.

<sup>104</sup> Morrison, 74.

enforcement.”<sup>105</sup> Our current system then does not actually prevent harm nor does it actually ensure accountability, it just seeks to punish.

In addition to analyzing Alice Manfred’s decision not to involve the police after the death of her niece, Dorcas, we must also work to think of prison as a cruel and dehumanizing structure in our society and not the default response to harm. In the United States, not only do we physically incarcerate more people than any other country, we also have ingrained the image of the prison into our cultural lives as well, making it seem like a natural and profoundly necessary system, when that may not necessarily be true. In *The Culture of Punishment: Prison, Society, and Spectacle*, Michelle Brown explains the United States to be a “prison culture,” which she defines as, “a society committed to the construction of prisons and the warehousing of mass numbers of people with little regard for the complexities of their lives, the lives of those hired to confine them, and the communities that surrounded them.”<sup>106</sup> Although Alice Manfred’s rationale for not involving the criminal-legal system is not an altruistic or activism motivated one, I believe the decision can be seen as Morrison’s interest in imagining a possibility outside of our traditional prison culture, to the extent she can do so. To fully detach ourselves from the prison culture would require a massive and total restructuring of our society, but Morrison in *Jazz* is able to take the first step by pivoting away from the literal prison cell. Instead of justifying a prison sentence for Joe Trace, Morrison is guiding her readers to ask new questions; in addition to “Why should Joe not go to prison?” we also must ask “What would be the benefits to having Joe locked away?” Though these thoughts may not seem monumental or revolutionary, they are essential in shifting people’s attitudes about punishment and our reliance on

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<sup>105</sup> Danielle Sere. *Until We Reckon* (The New Press, 2019), 34.

<sup>106</sup> Michelle Brown. *The Culture of Punishment: Prison, Society, and Spectacle* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 3.

incarceration as the dominant solution to harm in our society. Joe already holds himself accountable for Dorcas' murder, feels remorse, and is not likely to be a repeat offender and therefore isn't a danger to the community around him, so what would going to prison actually do to repair the situation other than cause him additional abuse? Why do we treat inhumane actions with inhumanity? Although readers may ask these questions in the fictive setting of *Jazz*, they can begin to employ this mindset to our real moment of mass incarceration as well.

Joe's complex character also serves as an important entry point for readers to begin questioning the "violent" and "nonviolent" binary that our criminal-legal system creates. Much of the current movement for Criminal Justice reform is conditional on an offenders' status as either violent or nonviolent. However, as John Pfaff points out, this imposed binary opposition is often a distraction from any true structural change rather than a meaningful distinction. The movement to only seek reform or release for people charged with nonviolent drug offenses, which to many people seems worthy, will not "solve" mass incarceration. Pfaff writes, "To make significant cuts to state prisons, states need to be more willing to move past reforms aimed at the minor offender and focus much more on the (far more politically tricky) people convicted of violent offenses."<sup>107</sup> Releasing any number of incarcerated people is significant; however, Pfaff highlights why we must actively challenge and dismantle the "violent/nonviolent" binary. Morrison takes extra care to describe Joe as someone who is more than just a violent label who can remake himself often, yet Joe's wife Violet actually serves as the best example of the rejection of the violent/nonviolent binary. The very first pages of the novel explain how after Joe murdered Dorcas, Violet interrupts the funeral and tries to desecrate the teen's corpse. Morrison

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<sup>107</sup> John F. Pfaff. *Locked In: The True Causes of Mass Incarceration and How to Achieve Real Reform* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 11-12.

writes, “When the woman, her name is Violet, went to the funeral to see the girl and to cut her dead face they threw her to the floor and out of the church.”<sup>108</sup> The incident at Dorcas’ funeral is not the only example of Violet’s erratic behavior. Before the funeral, Violet one day simply sits in the middle of the street. She “didn’t stumble nor was she pushed: she just sat down.”<sup>109</sup> When a policeman comes to check if she is OK, she “rolled over on her side, covering her eyes. He would have taken her in but for the assembling crowd murmuring, ‘Aw, she’s tired. Let her rest.’”<sup>110</sup> Once she gets back up, she continues about her day. Also, readers learn that Violet had been accused by some community members of trying to kidnap a baby when the child’s older sister left him alone in a carriage and Violet picked him up to stop his crying. While logistically, it makes no sense for her to try to kidnap the child and she had left her hairdressing bag next to the carriage, Violet’s laugh upon being discovered with the child unnerved passersby. Morrison writes, “If she could laugh like that, she could forget not only her bag but the whole world.”<sup>111</sup> The narrator names these off-beat actions as Violet’s “cracks.” She explains to readers: “Sometimes when Violet isn’t paying attention she stumbles onto these cracks, like the time when, instead of putting her left heel forward, she stepped back and folded her legs in order to sit in the street.”<sup>112</sup> This behavior is only amplified by her name itself. The association between Violet and “Violent” may come to the reader naturally, but Morrison makes the connection itself as well when she writes, “The woman who ruined the service, changed the whole point and

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<sup>108</sup> Morrison, 3.

<sup>109</sup> Morrison, 23.

<sup>110</sup> Morrison, 23.

<sup>111</sup> Morrison, 22.

<sup>112</sup> Morrison, 23.

meaning of it and was practically all anybody talked about when they talked about Dorcas' death and in the process had changed the woman's name. Violent they called her now. No wonder."<sup>113</sup> Morrison rejects the notion that someone can either be labelled violent or nonviolent by creating a character who is literally both: Violet and Violent. Violet's ability to defy one label is similarly emphasized when Alice Manfred meditates on the multiple orientations that Black women must have. Black women, Manfred realizes, need to be "armed" in order to avoid being "defenseless" or like her own niece, "easy prey."<sup>114</sup> In some situations, Black people in America need to be violent in order to fight the continual discrimination and oppression they face; violence may not always be the best solution, yet Morrison insists it is not an "either/or" label.

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The search for justice, especially for the Black community throughout American history, is at the center of all of Toni Morrison's literary projects. Her methods in *Jazz* differ from her previous novels which highlighted the failings of American structures of justice, but are still entrenched in them. For example, Sethe's murder of her child in *Beloved* can be read as akin to Joe Trace's murder of Dorcas in *Jazz* because they both involve taking another's life, yet Sethe is thrown in jail while Joe is not. In fact, one of the most integral insights into the U.S. criminal-legal system in *Beloved* is that Sethe is only released from jail because the judge denies her humanity and agency. Margaret Garner, who was the historical inspiration for Sethe, similarly was put on trial but was not charged with murder because the court decided that her child only counted as property not as a human.<sup>115</sup> This example highlights the essential cruelty of American

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<sup>113</sup> Morrison, 75.

<sup>114</sup> Morrison, 74.

<sup>115</sup> Manisha Sinha. *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (Yale University Press, 2016), 530-532.

slavery. In the eyes of the law, even the most severe violation of human relationships is dismissed for the sake of property rights. How is that justice?

The inherent racism in the criminal-legal system, from the time of chattel slavery all the way up to the present era of mass incarceration, forces Morrison to turn outside of the traditional channels to search for what justice may look like. In *Jazz*, Morrison gives readers a snapshot of the injustices that our current criminal-legal system offers, especially for people of color. However, Morrison does more than that. She also offers possible models for justice and repair. While Joe Trace's killing of Dorcas is the most severe example of harm in the novel, it is the relationship between Violet and Alice Manfred that allows readers to imagine more humane options for justice. Mariame Kaba reminds us that harm is fundamentally relational; as she tells writer Maya Schenwar, "We use the word 'harm.' The question is, 'What have you done to someone else? How have you harmed another person?'"<sup>116</sup> Therefore, if harm is centered around our interactions with others, our reconceptualization of justice must mirror that as well as challenge the current systems and structures where these relationships are buried in the name of justice. A sense of justice where we center people rather than punishment lies outside our current systems, but that does not mean it is impossible.

There are already people "doing the work" of building new systems that provide justice for those who have been harmed that don't rely on the cruel abuse of the person who committed the harm; two such examples are practices of restorative justice and transformative justice. While both of these processes are vastly different from our carceral solutions and often have some similar approaches, they are not interchangeable terms. Restorative justice often serves as an

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<sup>116</sup> Maya Schenwar. *Locked In, Locked Down: Why Prison Doesn't Work and How We Can Do Better* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc., 2014), 205.

entrypoint for PIC (Prison-Industrial Complex) abolitionist thought. Kaba defines restorative justice as “focused on the importance of relationships. It is focused on the importance of repair when those relationships are broken, when violations occur in our relationships.”<sup>117</sup> This is different from transformative justice, which Kaba explains, “takes as a starting point the idea that what happens in our interpersonal relationships is mirrored and reinforced by the larger systems.”<sup>118</sup> In order to create a more just society, we must balance our thinking between the individual and the structural; restorative and transformative justice practices are integral tools to do this. Similarly, it is worth noting that within the last decade or so, restorative justice practices are being co-opted by the current criminal-legal system. Sometimes courts will allow defendants to participate in restorative justice programs rather than serve time in prison; while any diversion from prison is helpful, ultimately we will not be able to abolish prisons if these practices are entrenched in the very systems that need to be dismantled.

That being said, the relationship between Alice Manfred and Violet Trace can be read as one that is founded in restorative justice practices, even though Morrison does not name them as such in *Jazz*. The two may not be the perfect example of restorative techniques, nor do the characters themselves achieve a mindset of transformative justice, yet I believe that studying their interactions can prove useful in analyzing Morrison’s efforts to imagine better possibilities, since the term “restorative justice,” not the practices themselves, was only in its very beginnings in the United States at the time of Morrison’s writings. Therefore, although Morrison’s praxis may not look exactly like those of abolitionists today, she is taking important steps in *Jazz* by

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<sup>117</sup> “Moving Past Punishment: Interview by Alana Young” in *We Do This ‘Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transformative Justice* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2021), 148.

<sup>118</sup> “Moving Past Punishment: Interview by Alana Young” in *We Do This ‘Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transformative Justice* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2021), 149.

exploring interpersonal harm and repair in a setting outside of the criminal-legal system. I would characterize the discussions between Alice and Violet as examples of restorative justice rather than transformative justice, because Morrison does give examples of how these Criminal Justice systems are set up to harm nonwhite people, neither character is directly interested in changing those systems. While Joe is the one who murders Alice Manfred's niece Dorcas, Violet does direct harm to Alice too by attempting to wreck the funeral and cut Dorcas' face. After the murder, Violet does go to see Alice Manfred, not to apologize, but instead to learn about who Dorcas was, perhaps in an effort to understand her husband's affair and subsequent violence. What follows is a relationship that grows between these two women that changes over time as each comes to terms with what has happened. The first time readers hear about this relationship is at the beginning of the novel when Morrison writes, "And for a long time she [Violet] pestered the girl's aunt, a dignified lady who did fine work off and on in the garment district, until the aunt broke down and began to look forward to Violet's visits for a chat about youth and misbehavior."<sup>119</sup> Violet first tries to visit Alice Manfred in January, the month of Dorcas' funeral, but Alice worried she was dangerous and was rightfully angry with her and Joe, so she did not let her in. However, in February, Alice and Violet meet face to face and Alice determines that Violet is "odd acting... but not bloody minded."<sup>120</sup> The third time Violet visits, Alice mends a loose thread on her dress and tells Violet: "At first I thought you came here to harm me. Then I thought you wanted to offer your condolences. Then I thought you wanted to thank me for not calling the law. But none of that is it, is it?" Violet responds, "I had to sit down somewhere... I wanted to see what kind of girl he'd rather me be."<sup>121</sup> These visits become more frequent and

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<sup>119</sup> Morrison, 4.

<sup>120</sup> Morrison, 81.

<sup>121</sup> Morrison, 82.

although the relationship seems strange and unlikely, Alice realizes that she is able to talk freely with Violet, “no apology or courtesy seemed required or necessary between them.”<sup>122</sup> Although these two women were bystanders in the initial harm done — the actual killing of Dorcas — both were deeply affected by it. I believe this serves as Morrison’s reminder that no harm just contains the two subjects and that often families or social connections are involved as well. This is similarly true when a person is incarcerated; they are not the only ones who feel the effects of this cruel and punitive system. Maya Schenwar, whose sister was incarcerated for many years, makes a similar point when she explains the toll that her sister’s incarceration had on her family, both emotionally and financially with out-of-state visits and mail. Schenwar quotes Jeremy Travis who compares the Prison Industrial Complex to a modern day slave auction block because “upon the strike of a gavel, people who’ve been convicted may be bussed to far-off prisons, hundreds or even thousands of miles from their families — most of whom are poor and can’t afford to travel far enough or often to visit them.”<sup>123</sup> While this is disheartening for the incarcerated individual, the lack of visitation or resources for visitation is devastating for the family members, who did not commit any crime in the eyes of the law, but still suffer the consequences.

As the relationship between Violet Trace and Alice Manfred progresses, the two women begin to speak more candidly about the affair Joe has had with Dorcas as well as their own subjectivity. I believe these interactions can be interpreted as a move towards restorative-centered dialogue, though of course any current restorative justice training would look different from the conversations these two women have in Alice Manfred’s kitchen. Alice says to Violet,

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<sup>122</sup> Morrison, 83.

<sup>123</sup> Maya Schenwar. *Locked Down, Locked Out* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2014), 40.

“You picked up a knife to insult a dead girl,” to which Violet responds, “But that’s better ain’t it? The harm was already done.”<sup>124</sup> Through this conversation, Violet is able to see how her actions still were harmful even though they occurred after Dorcas was killed, giving her more room to hold herself accountable for her actions. Perhaps the most important line, in my own reading of *Jazz*, is when Alice tells Violet, “Forgiveness is what you’re asking and I can’t give you that. It’s not in my power.”<sup>125</sup> Despite many people’s initial preconceptions, forgiveness is not essential or required in restorative justice practices. In typical restorative justice work, it is only necessary that both parties agree to come together willingly, but there are no guaranteed outcomes. Similarly, it cannot be the only method of repair and often it can bring up past trauma, so it does not directly give healing, but it can hopefully set people on the path to healing. Danielle Sered explains, “if the primary understanding of crime is about a legal infraction, then the most urgent concern is to reassert the power of the state through the enforcement of the law. But if the core concern is that people have been harmed, the priority is to repair the harm.”<sup>126</sup>

As I’ve mentioned before, mapping a restorative framework onto the narrative of *Jazz* is not perfect. For instance, Joe does not partake in these discussions even though he is the primary driver of harm in the situation. Furthermore, these conversations between Alice and Violet do not have any outside mediation and there are no set goals. The relationship is organic and friendly, which of course is also not the case with many restorative justice processes; many people who even do choose to opt into these practices are willing to have a conversation with the people who harmed them, but would not be eager if these people suddenly appeared at their front door. Even on a larger scale, we are only given an example of restorative practices between these two

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<sup>124</sup> Morrison, 85.

<sup>125</sup> Morrison, 110.

<sup>126</sup> Danielle Sered. *Until We Reckon* (New York: The New Press, 2019), 138.

women and the idea of transformative justice through community building is never fully explored. However, I stand by the argument that this is still farther than many novelists are willing to go when they are writing a book whose primary action is murder. Toni Morrison's *Jazz* is giving readers an entry point into restorative justice and the prison abolitionist movement in a way that none of her other novels do.

## CONCLUSION

All within the year 2020, the American public witnessed video footage of a police officer murdering a Black man, the largest and most popular Black Lives Matter protests since the group's inception, the defeat of racist President Donald Trump, and a white supremacist insurrection on the U.S. Capitol building. This has led to the general public becoming increasingly dissatisfied with current American institutions coupled with a new interest in the politics of abolition. This turn to abolitionism and other more broad restorative/transformational justice strategies is evidenced by the fact that Mariame Kaba's new collection of essays and interviews, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice* peaked in the top ten *New York Times* Bestseller list for paperback nonfiction after its publication in late February 2021.<sup>127</sup> Of course these concepts are not new, but this level of public interest and engagement is hopeful. However, we as abolitionists and scholars who engage with this work often need to foster a culture of learning and growing in these abolitionist practices in order to effect any change in an individual's mindset rather than just forcing these beliefs on people, no matter how necessary we know them to be. There are some published pieces that can serve as introductory pieces to a prison abolitionist mindset, yet I believe that literature is a mostly untapped resource that can be a key bridge between some of the abstract and seemingly "unrealistic" goals of abolitionism and the "real world" policies that people like Kaba, Sered, and Davis strive for.<sup>128</sup> Any introduction to prison abolitionism is helpful to the cause, because even

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<sup>127</sup> "Paperback Nonfiction" *The New York Times*. March 14, 2021.

<https://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers/2021/03/14/paperback-nonfiction/>

<sup>128</sup> Colin Kaepernick's Level-Medium "Abolition for the People" collection of essays around prison abolitionism is a very helpful and accessible introductory resource for people interested in this topic. Many of the writers and scholars I quote in this paper contributed to this collection. Similarly, Kaepernick's fame and reputation elevates this work even as he is currently being unfairly treated by the NFL.

if people cannot fully subscribe to the ideology, learning more can help to dispel misinformation and preconceptions.

I believe that Toni Morrison is an important figure in this fight for abolition, although current discourse does not place her in this arena because she never identified as a prison abolitionist. However, as I have argued in this paper, I propose we can study Morrison's fiction not just for literary analysis but to further criminal-legal studies as well. Fiction provides an intriguing nexus for these discussions because writers can create conflicts and solve them in untraditional ways on the page, letting the reader experiment with new possibilities without yet committing them to actions and policies in the real world. For example, many readers immediately despise Joe Trace, but by the end of the novel, their feelings may have changed, causing confusion. In order to work for change, we must allow for and in fact encourage this confusion. Joe Trace lives forever in *Jazz*, but after reading the novel, people may begin to feel differently about people sentenced to the death penalty. *Jazz* ends with the line "Look where your hands are. Now."<sup>129</sup> This is the final guidance the reader gets from the unnamed narrator and it is a gentle reminder that they are reading a novel. By recognizing one's hands, the reader must make the jump from the fictional world that Morrison has created to the one they, the one we, live in. Morrison is inviting the conversations and questions her prose has created into reality. Simply closing the cover and forgetting about the characters is not enough.

Similarly, criminal-legal studies often is a field populated with hard data and facts, though there have been many attempts to "humanize" the field and incorporate anecdotal or qualitative methods as well. Morrison's novels can provide the narrative needed to inspire people to care about these issues in the "real world." It is difficult to place value on love or compassion

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<sup>129</sup> Toni Morrison. *Jazz* (Vintage International, 1992), 229.

when thinking about prison numbers, and discussions of mass incarceration could serve well to remember that the statistics they use are real people with families. In *Song of Solomon*, Pilate Dead explains the importance of love and accountability in ways that cannot be represented through sociology or criminology.

As I mentioned previously, I believe that one could link the ideologies of prison abolition to any of Toni Morrison's novels. This paper easily could have explored how the country's legal system does not see Black people as human as well as how interpersonal harm can haunt us in *Beloved* (1987) or what reparative practices of healing look like in *Home* (2012). Morrison's *oeuvre* opens up many possibilities for further interdisciplinary study and I hope that this moment of new interest in prison abolition provides an impetus for this work to continue.

At the time of her passing in 2019, Toni Morrison was working on the manuscript for a new novel. It is unknown if the manuscript was finished or in what state of editing it was in. This novel would have been Morrison's twelfth novel and the first since her 2015 novel *God Help the Child* was published. In an interview she gave to Alain Elkann in 2018, she nodded towards what most likely was a stack of yellow legal pads and told him, "Look at that. You see that? That's my new novel. I spent the morning talking to my editor about that manuscript. That's called *Justice*."<sup>130</sup> In a piece written in her memory, *TIME* magazine also confirmed the existence of the new novel, but also was unsure if the manuscript would ever be released to the public.<sup>131</sup> While it is all too easy to grieve an unread Morrison novel, its title, *Justice*, seems to offer one final piece of evidence that the subject was at the forefront of her mind. Though, if there's anything we can

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<sup>130</sup> Toni Morrison. Interview with Alain Elkann in *Toni Morrison: The Last Interview: And Other Conversations*. Edited by Nikki Giovanni.

<sup>131</sup> Lucy Feldman. "Toni Morrison Was Writing a New Novel When She Died" *TIME Magazine*. Aug. 6, 2019. <https://time.com/5645194/toni-morrison-new-novel-before-death/>

learn from Morrison's prolonged meditations on justice, it is that justice is a continual and collaborative process, not a commandment set in stone or an ideal wished for by the Founders. Justice is "made and remade," and it is up to us to do so.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Morrison, 229.

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