DARING TO LOVE:
EMOTIONAL ECONOMICS AND THE CULTURE OF SURVIVAL
IN THE FICTION OF TONI MORRISON

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

By

David Villeta Student, B.A.

Washington, DC
August 5, 2009
Acknowledgments

I would like to take a moment to thank the following people whose help made the completion of this thesis possible:

Professor Merish, for her helpful suggestions as an engaged and active member of my exam committee.

Professor Mitchell, for her constant support of my work, her enlightening ideas, and her steady hand as my advisor.

Katie, whose love made the good days great and the bad days better.

And finally, my parents. This thesis is dedicated to you. Your constant love and support (and copy-editing skills!) helped me at every step along the way. I choose to live, and not just to survive, because of you.
# Table of Contents

Prelude................................................................................................................................................................. 1  

Introduction. Falling through the Air: The Weight of Living and the Culture of Survival in Toni Morrison’s Fiction.......................................................................................................................... 2  

This is Not a Story to Pass On: The Failure of the Love Ethic in *Beloved*.............. 27  

Lifting up the Record Needle to Create Music: The Interplay of Improvisation and the Past in *Jazz* ......................................................................................................................................................... 48  

Endless Circles of Sorrow: Cultural Repression and Female Friendship in *Sula*........ 67  

Surrendering to the Air: Rejecting Survival in order to Live in *Song of Solomon*........ 89  

Rediscovering Childhood, Authoring Lives: Concluding Thoughts......................... 115  

Postlude................................................................................................................................................................. 129  

Works Cited............................................................................................................................................................. 130  

Bibliography............................................................................................................................................................ 135
No silk roses fluttered in the wind or rested on the snow. No woman sang out to the body before it dropped. No blue wings were connected to the man’s arms as he fell through the air. The day I saw a man drop from the sky and hit the pavement right across the street from my house was a hot evening just before the sun went down. The crowd gathered outside was not for the event that was about to happen. Instead, the residents of the Sursum Corda housing complex were attempting to get away from the even more oppressive heat inside their apartments.

I stood outside my rowhouse, glancing at the activity on the opposite side of the street, when the body made its way into my line of vision. It bounced once, neatly, a clean experiment in Newton’s first law. Only after the body was still on the pavement did I realize that it was a man. I don’t remember hearing any shouts. No one ran away. The crowd just milled around in different concentric circles. Someone approached the body quickly and took out what appeared to be the man’s wallet. Before I could call the police, they had arrived.

A police car was usually stationed just down the block as a deterrent to the many drug dealers and petty criminals that plagued Sursum Corda. Several times a week, our bedrooms that faced the street and the TV room in the basement would be filled with the flashing lights of fire trucks whose ladders were never raised and ambulances whose back doors were always propped open, shining the light from inside onto K Street. The sirens from each could be heard by the time I closed my front door.
Falling through the Air: The Weight of Living and the Culture of Survival in Toni Morrison’s Fiction

This project began with my witnessing the death of an individual several years ago, and it is at the level of the individual that the discussion of the culture of survival and emotional economics must begin. More than a year after I saw this man die, I picked up *Song of Solomon* and read about the demise of Robert Smith. The falling of Smith from No Mercy Hospital with which the novel opens stood in stark contrast to Milkman’s flight at the end of the novel, and I could not help but consider the qualities that set Milkman apart from his predecessor. Although the ending is ambiguous in terms of whether Milkman and Guitar survive their conflict, Toni Morrison viewed her novel as a joyful one that transcended the pain and anger of Dead family’s narrative: “I thought *Song of Solomon* was jubilant! Not because everyone is happy, I’m not interested in happiness in my work. I’m interested in survival—who survives and why they survive. Therefore I have to put my characters under duress” (Giddings 15). The word “survival” has always stuck in my head while reading African-American texts. Although characters often survive their narratives and their odysseys of pain and suffering, there seemed to be a notable lack of *living* in these novels and short stories. Morrison’s emphasis on survival echoes Zora Neale Hurston’s description of the importance of survival in her “Characteristics of Negro Expression”: “Discord is more natural than accord. If we accept the doctrine of the survival of the fittest there are more fighting honors than there are honors for other achievements” (Hurston 88). Survival can imply a victory of sorts, and those who endure carry on the human race,
but the concept of survival is not one without consequence. This question of survival is often the focus of texts about African Americans, and it is the focus of this thesis to explore the culture of survival that develops within Toni Morrison’s fiction and the significance of this survivalist mentality on her characters’ identity and subsequent ability to love. To this end, I will be analyzing *Beloved, Jazz, Sula, Song of Solomon,* and Morrison’s children’s literature to determine how the psychology of survival impedes emotional growth and how her characters might still be able to choose love as a response to the traumas of life.

Morrison’s interest in who endures in her novels (and why) might allow her characters to transcend their pain, but survival in Morrison’s texts is not always as jubilant as the ending of *Song of Solomon.* Often, survival seems to come at the expense of Morrison’s characters’ sense of humanity. Sethe, Paul D, Shadrack, Eva Peace, and Nel are alive by the end of their narratives, but the endings of *Beloved* and *Sula* are not “jubilant.” Instead, the ghosts of Sula and Beloved occupy a space as large as the living characters by the end of each work. What then are the forces that comprise this culture of survival? The culture is predicated on, and sustained by, the shame of the past, the repression of this shame, and the resulting fragmentation of the self. This fracturing of the individual psyche manifests itself in Morrison’s texts through what I define as the characters’ system of emotional economics, the dominance of parasitic love, and the violent catharsis of rage that accumulates from such systemic repression. The primary question at the heart of emotional economics is: What can African Americans afford to feel? Essentially, emotional economics is the psychic dissonance
that allows the characters in Morrison’s novels to destroy their physical bodies and the
to bodies of their children rather than expend their emotional selves. It is the means by
which Eva Peace might sacrifice her own leg for her children but murder her son for
requiring emotional care that she cannot give him, why Joe Trace might shoot Dorcas
rather than experience the pain of seeing her with another man, and why Sethe might
murder her child rather than endure the pain of seeing her enslaved. This emotional
economy is intricately linked to the parasitic love that causes the characters to view love
not as a means for two individuals to form a mutual partnership based on respect and
care but as a way of possessing another person completely. The burden of this system
of emotional economics and parasitic love on the self already fractured by the trauma of
the past results in the complete destruction of the self—whether it is Hagar’s attempts at
killing Milkman and her subsequent breakdown or the community of the Bottom
destroying the tunnel project and themselves in the process.

The concept of survival and its effect on the human psyche is not merely a
literary convention, however. After the turbulent 1960s, Samuel Yette considered the
economic hardships facing African Americans and determined that continued existence
was the central problem facing the community: “A people whom the society had always
denied social value—personality—had also lost economic value. Theirs was the
problem of all black America: survival” (Yette 18). In Salvation, bell hooks recognized
the significant costs of survival for the African-American community: “Survival in a
racist society often dictated that black people adjust to values and social mores imposed
on us by the white world, which often affected our capacity to be loving” (Salvation
22). Here, hooks describes the ways in which survival required the sacrifice of the self and of that self’s ability to love. In this way, the self that survived was a construct rather than an innate quality. As a result, hooks argues that communication is likewise hindered by this assimilation, or what she calls “masking”:

Masking invites us to create a false self, to misrepresent and dissimulate (that is, to take on whatever appearances are needed for a given situation). While masking was sometimes crucial to survival during the period of racial apartheid, those strategies destroy our capacity to be truth tellers when we adopt them in contemporary life. (86)

Love and honest communication require agency at the level of the individual. From the Latin root “agere” meaning “to drive, lead, act, do,” agency is the process by which characters who are traumatized by their past might enact their own transformations through actions initiated solely by the individual. The trials of survival strip men and women of their sense of self, however, thereby hindering their ability to communicate. Their bodies live on, but this emphasis on survival often results in emotional passivity. This emotional indolence is the result of the lack of a language able to relate such emotional feelings. As Joseph White writes in The Psychology of Blacks: “The spoken word in the Black community is the pervasive force that connects human experiences. Human contact, the connecting linkage, between people, is established by the spoken word” (White 35). As the vehicle for one’s heritage and tradition to be passed down, the spoken word is crucial within the African-American community, yet the lack of an appropriate emotional vocabulary and the inability to be “truth tellers” disrupt the formation of communal bonds. White describes how “the language of soul folks… is characterized by the interrelatedness of speaker and listener. The act of speaking is a dramatic presentation of one’s personhood to those who share a background of similar
acculturation” (35). When each individual possesses a trauma which is rendered unspeakable by the masking necessary for survival, however, this interrelatedness deteriorates as repression becomes the dominant method of survival.

As there is no emotional language with which to communicate, repression is the fundamental tool by which the culture of survival maintains itself. In her article “In the Kingdom of Culture’: Black Women and the Intersection of Race, Gender, and Class,” Darlene Hine argues that this survivalist mentality affects women in particular: “Survival mandated that [women] develop private identities and inner worlds known only to their own” (Hine 342). Indeed, this emotional repression snakes its ways through each of the female relationships in Morrison’s texts. For the purposes of this thesis, I will be exploring the relationships between Nel and Sula, Sula and Eva, Sethe and her surrounding community, and Violet and Alice through this lens of repression and emotional economics. Hine also highlights the effect that such an emphasis on survival can have on women: “survival dictated that black women, when necessary, reconfigured and reimagined families, communities, and themselves” (Hine 341). Baby Suggs’s work in the Clearing, Joe and Violet’s reconstructed family life, and Pilate’s nonconventional family each reimagine the ideas concerning community and the nuclear family within Morrison’s novels. These relationships are hindered at both the individual and communal level, however, by the inability of many of the characters to make these private worlds that Hine describes public. As a result of the repressive framework through which the culture of survival operates, those living within this culture instead rely on externalizing hate, anger, and evil and contending with outside
threats while ignoring the internal conflicts present within themselves. Because there is no emotional language with which to communicate, the characters in Morrison’s novels must attribute the violent emotions that they feel to external evils. In this way, Sula and Sethe are ostracized as those who threaten the cohesiveness of the community while the individual members of the community ignore their own pain welling up inside of them. These conflicts with outside forces might be survived, but the cost of the emotional repression and self-destructiveness that African Americans adopt lingers long after these threats are vanquished. The culture of survival can be as destructive a threat as any external foe, particularly when the end result is a violent or tragic catharsis as in the ending of *Sula*.

While much of my thesis centers on the dominant theme of love in Toni Morrison’s work, it will be necessary to begin with an emotion that exists at the heart of many of her characters and which most often impedes their desire and ability to love—rage. In *Black Rage*, a psychological portrait of African Americans in the 1960s, Drs. William Grier and Price Cobbs document step-by-step the anger that pervades African-American life and hinders social progress. The book, published in 1968, a year fraught with racial hostility, is dated, but the text reveals a number of facets of cultural phenomena that are still socially significant. In the face of staggering racism as well as economic and social restraints, African Americans have managed to survive and even succeed in daily life. But at what psychological cost? The repression of rage and despair coupled with the inability to create a viable emotional language has created a population that looks on its own members as suspicious and hateful. In a study at
Temple University in 1982, participants were asked to evaluate Michele Wallace’s statement that there is “distrust, even hatred, between black men and women.” Only 34 percent of men, and 26% of the women, disagreed with this statement” (Patterson 5). Granted, the study was not global enough to warrant creating a universal portrait of all African Americans, but when more than three quarters of a given subset of the black population believe there is hatred between its members, cultural critics must be alarmed. In particular, women reported a higher degree of anger toward family members than toward co-workers and that the anger lasted longer (5). The results of this study reverberate throughout the plots of Morrison’s novels as Denver, Sula, and Violet each try to confront their anger towards their family in different ways. Because of the surprising amount of anger within the African-American family and community, the culture of survival mandates that individuals suppress this anger. In discussing the relationships between African Americans and the world in which they live, Grier and Cobbs link once more the concepts of survival and emotional distance: “For black people the ability to divorce oneself emotionally from an object is necessary for survival” (Grier 107). The violence of characters such as Sethe, Eva Peace, and Joe Trace is the result of this unhealthy emotional distance whereby individuals disassociate from their family, their friends, and even their own bodies. Self-destruction as protection is the type of paradoxical approach to life which characterizes the culture of survival and keeps African Americans mired in murky swamps of violence and anger.

The emotional distance described by Grier and Cobbs might allow for physical survival, but the remaining survivors find themselves unable to dream of a better future.
for themselves that revolve around living, rather than simply surviving, their lives. The
two writers discuss the problem of dreams within black society and determine that the
difficulty is intrinsically linked to the reality that black men and women face each day:
“Black people have shown a genius for surviving under the most deadly circumstances.
They have survived because of their close attention to reality. A black dreamer would
have a short life in Mississippi” (Grier 208). In light of the brutal nature of society,
African Americans are often taught by their families the necessity of survival rather
than the value of dreams or hopes. Indeed, African-American culture is neither a
culture of life nor a culture of death. Black culture, whether urban or rural, has become
a culture of survival with far-reaching consequences for its population. While it might
seem hopelessly optimistic to stand up and declare the need for an emphasis on hopes
and dreams, especially in the face of vicious racial hatred, the culture of survival that
currently exists is as detrimental to black society as the slavery from which it has
supposedly escaped. How does a person achieve individuality or strive for a cohesive
identity when physical survival is the only available goal?

Although men and women might use the term individual to describe any human
being, the concept of individuality is more easily said than lived. In Love and its Place
in Nature: A Philosophical Interpretation of Freudian Psychoanalysis, Jonathan Lear
argues that “precisely because the individual is a psychological achievement, it is not a
given and cannot be taken for granted” (Lear 23). Years before Lear’s proclamation
that the individual is not “a given,” Richard Wright criticized what he considered to be
the lack of real emotions within the black community:
After I had outlived the shocks of childhood, after the habit of reflection had been born in me, I used to mull over the strange absence of real kindness in Negroes, how unstable was our tenderness, how lacking in genuine passion we were, how void of great hope, how timid our joy, how bare our traditions, how hollow our memories, how lacking we were in those intangible sentiments that bind man to man, and how shallow was even our despair. After I had learned other ways of life I used to brood upon the unconscious irony of those who felt that Negroes led so passionless an existence! I saw that what had been taken for our emotional strength was our negative confusions, our flights, our fears, our frenzy under pressure… I wondered if clean, positive tenderness, love, honor, loyalty, and the capacity to remember were native with man. I asked myself if these human qualities were not fostered, won, struggled and suffered for, preserved in ritual from one generation to another. (Wright 37)

Instead of individuals living their lives, Wright saw blacks as creatures surviving their lives, fleeing from emotions and loyalties. Feelings that people considered universal became acquired skills in Wright’s mind. The individual was then something to be “struggled and suffered for.” Like Lear, Wright saw that the individual was not something to take as a given, and the emotional issues that Wright documents in this passage reflect themselves in the personalities of Morrison’s characters. Milkman “avoided commitment and strong feelings, and shied away from decisions. He wanted to know as little as possible, to feel only enough to get through the day amiably and to be interesting enough to warrant the curiosity of other people—but not their all-consuming devotion” (Solomon 180). In Beloved, Paul D hides his emotions in the “tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be” (Beloved 72), and when Nel states “I’m me” in Sula, she experiences a moment of indeterminacy as she “didn’t know quite what she meant, but on the other hand she knew exactly what she meant” (Sula 28). After her own experience with Chicken Little, Sula realizes that she too lacks an emotional self to depend on: “there was no self to count on either. She had no center, no speck around which to grow” (Sula 119). The lack of emotional cores in
each of these characters is intertwined with the problems of emotional expression within the culture of survival.

Wright was correct in identifying the problematic issues concerning emotions, but he underestimates the nature and importance of memory within the African-American community. It is not the hollowness of memories but the weighty flesh of memories that impedes the struggle for the “real” and “positive” emotions around which an individual might create himself or herself. In a dialogue with Amalia Mesa-Bains, bell hooks argues that “memory allows us to resist and to heal: we know ourselves through the act of remembering,” yet Morrison’s characters frequently turn away from their memories and try to suppress them in the misguided hopes of keeping the past at bay (Homegrown 107). The memories of each horrific event in the characters’ pasts and the accompanying damage to the body and spirit begin to accumulate in Morrison’s novels until the traumas become a physical presence in the text—whether in the debilitating repression exhibited by the characters, their violent actions against themselves or their loved ones, or in the ghosts that haunt each individual. The shame that accompanies both the memories themselves and the repression of the memories then becomes the inheritance of the next generation.

The shame that afflicts Morrison’s characters is the result of the simultaneous experience of pain and the need for distance from that pain. In her discussion of the psychological ramifications of shame, “Shame, Repression, Field Dependence, and Psychopathology,” Helen Block Lewis highlights this conflict between awareness and willful forgetting: “the paradox of shame is thus an acute, painful self-consciousness,
occurring together with an acute momentary need for unconsciousness, a ‘turning away’ from the experience” (Lewis 234). In this way, the self is pulled both toward and away from acknowledgment of the trauma as the person must lose himself or herself in the process: “In the case of shame, which is about the self, the immediate discharge seems to be at least temporary oblivion of the self” (235). This “oblivion of the self” is less than temporary in Morrison’s fiction, however, and as this shame is passed on through the family to each successive generation, shame and obviated individuality becomes cultural. In *Homegrown*, bell hooks details this generational transition from remembrance towards forgetting: “there was a tension and conflict between the world that my grandmother ushered us into and the world that my mother wanted to create. One world was about ancestors, memory, and the past; the latter was about the present, the new, and the disposable. In that world, forgetting became a rite of passage” (*Homegrown* 19). Forgetting never signals a conclusion in Morrison’s fiction, however. Instead, her characters grapple with trying to psychically expel a past that inevitably comes back to haunt them. Sethe and Paul D, Joe and Violet, and Nel and Sula each struggle to forget the past even as their actions demonstrate that they are consumed by memories of their personal histories. Morrison even goes so far as to create Beloved as the physical manifestation of the characters’ repressed past. Jonathan Lear details the very real effect that the repression of memories might have on the human body: “These traumatic memories are *alien to consciousness*, and it is in large part due to their remaining unconscious that they are able to have a pathological effect” (Lear 34). The pathological effect of these “foreign” bodies is the result of the conflict between
memories thought to be separate from the self and the self that ultimately recognizes these memories as familiar. This struggle manifests itself in the system of emotional economics that Morrison’s characters adopt as a result of the shame that they feel and ultimately in the breakdown of the individual in each of the texts.

Shame hinders the individual’s ability to create the boundaries between the self and the outside world that are necessary for growth. Helen Lewis describes the formation of the self as a three-step process: “First, there is the registration of experience as one’s own… Second, the self registers its boundaries, safeguarding its own identity… Finally, the self involves a localization of experience as occurring within the self or occurring outside the self” (Lewis 240). Within Morrison’s novels, however, the self is never able to own its experiences or create these boundaries. In “Signifyin(g) Abjection: Narrative Strategies in Toni Morrison’s Jazz,” Angela Burton discusses how feelings of shame and traumatic memories can disrupt this process:

We constitute our sense of a stable healthy identity by constantly taking ideas in and assimilating positive, whilst expelling negative, views of ourselves. If this dynamic exchange mechanism breaks down, and we introject unassimilable yet unejectable concepts—which Kristeva terms ‘the abject’—into the psyche (for example, untenable views of ourselves), we experience psychological abjection, and suffer a breakdown of identity (Burton 171).

This breakdown via psychological abjection is the result of Morrison’s characters being unable to expunge feelings of guilt and shame that are tied to their traumatic pasts. The traumas that interrupt the process of individuation in Morrison’s novels are intricately linked with slavery and racial violence and the shame associated with such experiences. The enslaved self cannot register his or her experience as his or her own and cannot
control the physical boundaries that it might impose, and as a result, the self is unable to develop properly.

In psychological terms, Lewis posits shame as a form of enslavement in which individuals cannot control their emotions or situation in life: “I use the term ‘shame’ to cover a family of feelings: humiliation, mortification, feeling ridiculous, painful self-consciousness, chagrin, shyness, and embarrassment. Each of these states differs from the others, but all have in common that the self is helpless” (Lewis 239). This feeling of helplessness is no different than the helplessness of slaves such as Halle who can do nothing as his wife is raped and who loses his mind as a result. As Morrison herself asserts: “the trauma of racism is, for the racist and the victim, the severe fragmentation of the self, and has always seemed to me a cause (not a symptom) of psychosis—strangely of no interest to psychiatry” (“Unspeakable” 381). This fragmentation of the individual can be traced, therefore, through the insults of segregation to the tortures of slavery to the unspeakable horror of the Middle Passage. In *The Melancholy of Race*, Anne Cheng quotes Saidiya Hartman’s assertion that slavery disrupts standard binaries as well as the individual’s understanding of agency:

> owing to the brutality of slavery, the ‘distinctions between joy and sorrow, toil and leisure’ no longer provide productive measures of analysis. By implication, under such extreme conditions, survival and the management of grief exceed our vernacular understanding of agency, of what it means to take control of oneself and one’s surroundings. (Cheng 21)

Here Hartman details how slavery disturbs such notions of joy, sorrow, and agency while weaving together the concept of agency with the “management of grief” and survival. Within this brutal context, violence becomes one of the few acts of agency available to enslaved men and women, and death becomes one of the only forms of
freedom. Paul Gilroy argues that “slaves’ intimate relationship to death signals not merely a reaction to probable threat but also a choice” (Gilroy 20). This idea complicates the concept of the culture of survival as the choice of death, rather than survival, becomes the ultimate symbol of agency. Indeed, “Gilroy does not see this turn toward death as a giving up or empty victory; he sees it as an active act of will in a situation devoid of will. Since slavery depends on the slave being alive, the threat of suicide in this context bespeaks an unlawful act of rebellion and self-assertion” (20). Through this lens, the infanticide committed by Sethe, and her real-world counterpart Margaret Garner, becomes less of a defeat and more of a final act of rebellion and a victory of sorts. Theoretically, Gilroy’s comments are interesting, but the aftermath of such violent acts in Morrison’s novels demonstrates that moments such as Sethe’s murder of her daughter are not victorious ones.

The genesis of the system of emotional economics that allows such violent actions to become “proper” responses to the outside world can therefore be found in the experience of slavery. The physical is easier to sacrifice because the enslaved self has never been able to protect its body from slave owners, and the physical body has never been connected to the inner sense of self. Angela Burton comments that “[Morrison’s] major protagonists resort to bizarre types of crisis resolution including murder, incestuous rape, bestiality and self-mutilation, often within the context of parent-child relationships,” and it is in these types of crisis resolution that the manifestation of the system of emotional economics can be found (Burton 170). To approach the concept of the individual within Morrison’s world thus requires a rethinking of the individuation
process. As bell hooks argues, “Once slavery was abolished, there were no scholars ready to interview the slaves about post-traumatic stress disorder. Few documents recorded anything about the emotional well-being of the newly freed slaves. All the emphasis was on material survival” (Salvation 96). Material survival is never enough for Morrison’s characters to achieve a sense of self, however. Neither Sethe’s escape from slavery nor the Dead family’s financial success provides the characters with a sense of self or freedom from the past. In The Melancholy of Race, Anne Cheng asks a different type of question concerning the development of the individual, one which proves useful in exploring Morrison’s texts: “How does an individual go from being a subject of grief to being a subject of grievance? What political and psychical gains or losses transpire in the process?” (Cheng 3). Through an exploration of the culture of survival and emotional economics, I hope to uncover the means by which Morrison’s characters succeed or fail on their journey towards achieving selfhood within the community instead of merely surviving their circumstances, how they become “subjects of grievance.” Once again, Cheng provides a useful lens through which to view this problem of individuality. Cheng sees individuation as a process where the suffering of the self must be considered as an integral piece of the development of the self: “When it comes to facing discrimination, we need to understand subjective agency as a convoluted, ongoing, generative, and at times self-contradicting negotiation with pain” (15). Within Toni Morrison’s texts, a character’s ability to confront the pain of his or her past honestly and without repression is most often the key to the salvation of the self, and mastering this negotiation with pain has consequences for the individual, for
the family unit, and for the community at-large.

It is not only through the struggles of individuals but also through the strained relationships of family and the violence of mothers and children that the culture of survival and its system of emotional economics reveals itself. The experience of slavery requires a re-ordering of the concept of the individual as well as a reconstruction of notions of home and community. In a conversation with Amalia Mesa-Bains, bell hooks discusses how slavery destroyed any concept of home for the black men and women scarred by their experiences:

> if you study the slave narratives and other artifacts from slavery, home is an imaginary place. Given the conditions, slaves had to rapidly refashion among themselves the idea of home, since every place they stay might be temporary. Not surprisingly, freedom in slave narratives is always connected to an ability and capacity to create independent homes, instead of merely caring for the homes of white people. (Homegrown 98)

The creation of these “independent homes” is hindered, however, by the inability of the characters to find a cohesive sense of self. The fragmented communities, broken families, and severed relationships in Toni Morrison’s fiction evolve from these psychic traumas that prevent individuality. As bell hooks writes, “community cannot take root in a divided life. Long before community assumes external shape and form, it must be present as a seed in the undivided self: only as we are in communion with ourselves can we find community with others” (Visions 127). The divided self then is perhaps the reason why experiments such as Baby Suggs’s gatherings in the Clearing, families such as the Deads and Peaces, or neighborhoods such as the Bottom fail.

The breakdown of the individual is crucial to understanding the problems of the African-American family and community in Toni Morrison’s fiction, but the philosophy
of survival is equally as problematic within the context of the family. For Grier and Cobbs, the family is “a functional unit designed for one primary purpose—the protection of the young; and while it serves other vital social purposes, none is more important than the function of *protection*” (Grier 80). The black family unit is troubled by the task of protection, however, as across the nation “its members are subjected to physical and verbal abuse, humiliation, unlawful search and seizure, and harassment by authorities. Its members are jailed, beaten, robbed, killed, and raped, and exposed to this kind of jeopardy to a degree unheard of in white families” (81). While the climate of 1968 and the early 1970s is not the climate of today, Morrison’s characters experience such abuse and black families must still contend with racist institutions and the effects of high incarceration rates, hate crimes, and economic restraints. As a result, the family unit within African-American culture and Morrison’s novels is often “prevented from performing its most essential function—its *raison d’être*—protection of its members” (81). This inability to protect the members of the nuclear family further complicates the portrait of the world that parents provide their children. Grier and Cobbs see this perceptive influence of parents on their children as the next duty assumed by the family:

As they mold their lives together and form a matrix from which children grow, the next most important function of a family, second only to protection and survival, comes into focus: to provide an accurate interpretation of the world to its children. Children must above all be taught what the world is like, how it functions, and how *they* must function if they are to survive and eventually establish their own families (Grier 85).

When the first goal of the family unit is impeded, however, there can be no doubt that the lens through which children begin to see the world is also skewed. Often, the lone
lesson that children learn is the necessity of survival at the expense emotional growth or connection to others. In an interview with Donald Suggs, Toni Morrison attempts to describe new types of overlapping family and communal units, but she acknowledges the system of emotional economics when she declares that the parent-child relationship is strained by emotional dependence:

I have women friends who raise their children alone and are working, whose children relate to her friends like family members. They call on one another in times of crisis and duress. They really use each other as a kind of life-support system, so that you don’t have this kind of single, one-on-one relationship that is too tense for the child and too tense for the parent. (Suggs 36)

This tension is the result of individuals who are trying to achieve the emotional distance needed for survival while simultaneously trying to ensure the survival of the children who require love in addition to their physical needs. It is this tension that allows Eva Peace to say that she loves her daughter but that she does not like her. Survival also requires a form of assimilation that involves lying to such a degree that inevitably these masks seep into families where individuals are unable to differentiate between authentic and counterfeit selves. Such assimilation, or “masking,” hooks explains, exists at the heart of the breakdown of the family unit: “The reliance on lies, subterfuge, and manipulation used to get by in the world outside the home often became the standard of behavior in the home” (Salvation 24). In the face of traumatic experiences and stifling environments, therefore, individual and familial bonds begin to break down.

While the failure of families to teach emotional methods of communicating is a factor in propagating the culture of survival, the family unit is by no means the sole problem. Anne Cheng discusses how racial discrimination complicates notions of love in children and families: “For a child coming to racial discrimination, affective
formation and distinction (how one tells the difference between love and hate) become so entangled and twisted that love and hate both come to be ‘fabricated’ and ‘fraudulent’” (Cheng 17). Already contending with the emotional distance of family members, children must also struggle to differentiate between love and hate, between real and counterfeit emotions. In the course of his own work concerning African-American families and psychology, Jerold Heiss recognizes that the black family unit has been unfairly targeted: “An indictment has been handed down against the black family; it has been held responsible for many of the problems of black people” (Heiss 3). Heiss has in mind psychologists such as E. Franklin Frazier who believe that much of the blame lies within the black community surrounding the family: “Life among a large portion of the urban Negro population is casual, precarious, and fragmentary. It lacks continuity and its roots do not go deeper than the contingencies of daily living” (Heiss 6, emphasis added). Frazier may be harsh in his judgment, and to ignore the social and economic threats to the family unit would be a gross oversight, but the African-American population cannot afford to ignore the effects of the culture of survival on identity formation and emotional growth. When the emphasis on survival is the central legacy transferred from one generation to the next, the cycle of repression and self-violence can only continue. In Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries, Orlando Patterson highlights the importance of cultural heritage in the face of survival and external threats: “A group’s behavior in any given area of life is always the product of their responses to the proximate exigencies and challenges of their social environment at given periods of time, and of the inherited
cultural resources they deploy in meeting these challenges” (Patterson 158, emphasis added). What inherited cultural resources do African-American children possess when they are taught that life is meant to be survived and not lived? Samuel Yette posits an important question in regard to this issue: “[African Americans] want to survive, but only as men and women—not longer as pawns or chattel. Can they?” (Yette 18). The question is a central one in Morrison’s fiction, particularly for women. Where then might a solution be found for this cycle of emotional avoidance and survivalist mentality?

Identifying the problem is the first step. Thomas Parham, a psychologist who focuses on the modern African-American community, acknowledges that “although the notion of mental enslavement is not a new concept, it is nonetheless one that the masses of our people have not yet embraced” (Parham 45). Once knowledge of emotional repression and its effects is accepted, freedom from mental and emotional constraints might be addressed. Parham considers the “most daunting challenge as African Americans [to be] the need for mental liberation” (Parham 44). This ‘mental liberation’ might be achieved through an acceptance of the rage and anger that exists within African-American culture. In Salvation, bell hooks reiterates the importance of this acceptance and ties this recognition to Cheng’s idea of agency as a “negotiation with pain”: “as long as black folks normalize loss and abandonment, acting as though it is an easy feat to overcome the psychological wounds this pain inflicts, we will not lay the necessary groundwork for emotional well-being that makes love possible” (Salvation 31). An acceptance does not equate to adopting such anger as the predominant emotion
or allowing rage to overtake the self, however. Having lived in the ashes of the emotional fallout from slavery and segregation, African Americans must look to rebuild the emotional core of the self.

Cornel West is a vital voice against the nihilism perpetuated by the culture of survival that is present in black society, or what West defines as “the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness” (West 40). As a response to the pessimism grounding African Americans, West centers the healing process on his love ethic. This love ethic revolves not only around love of friends and family but also on love of the self: “Self-love and love of others are both modes toward increasing self-valuation and encouraging political resistance in one’s community” (West 43). As dangerous as emotional attachment can be for African Americans, it is necessary to reform the bonds with the self before a proper community might be able to develop. Like Cornel West, bell hooks recognizes the importance of a love ethic which “presupposes that everyone has the right to be free, to live fully and well” (Visions 87). She views love (rather than death as in Gilroy’s assessment) as the primary means of agency:

Love is profoundly political. Our deepest revolution will come when we understand this truth. Only love can give us the strength to go forward in the midst of heartbreak and misery. Only love can give us the power to reconcile, to redeem, the power to renew weary spirits and save lost souls. The transformative power of love is the foundation of all meaningful social change. Without love our lives are without meaning. Love is the heart of the matter. When all else has fallen away, love sustains. (Salvation 16-7)

With love of self and love of others as the focus, there might still be room for anger, but all-consuming rage would no longer predominate. Love also provides the means for this revolution to begin at the level of the individual where Morrison’s characters still
struggle to find a cohesive sense of self. Although Freud did not have the African-American population in mind when he studied the phenomenon of love, he still provided valuable insights into the ties between love and individuality: “For Freud, love is manifested in human life in the process of individuation. It is in response to a loving world that a human is able to distinguish himself from it. By internalizing that love, the human establishes himself as an individual I, a locus of activity and subjectivity distinct from the rest of nature” (Lear 177). Such a loving world is rarely present in Morrison’s fiction, however, and my thesis will explore how love might still be a factor in her characters achieving this individual “I.” The necessary shift in black society must come, therefore, from within the self and revolve around the will to live rather than the will to survive, and a love ethic is the central component in such a shift.

As part of this love ethic, Morrison’s characters succeed and fail according to their ability to allow memories of the past to co-exist with their present lives and their capacity for expelling their shame. Before a character can love another person, whether it is a wife, husband, or a child, he or she must face the past and the potentially painful memories that surface. As bell hooks tells Mesa-Bains, “memory becomes a thread that can bend, bind, and gather broken bits and pieces of ourselves” (Homegrown 108). Rejecting or repressing memories therefore hinders the process of individuation. Such a recovery of the past often feelings of shame, but taking ownership of one’s faults is necessary to achieving a cohesive (and authentic) sense of self. Helen Lewis provides several ways that individuals might discharge the shame that afflicts them: “it has been suggested that shame can be discharged in renewed dignity (Lynd 1958) and ambition
(Izard 1979)” (Lewis 235). This renewed (or new) sense of dignity can come only when an individual discovers that he or she is worthy of dignity and of love. This act of individuation through a love ethic and a release of memories and shame mirrors Morrison’s act of authorship. As Carlo Strenger notes in *Individuality, the Impossible Project: Psychoanalysis and Self-Creation*, “the true self represents the state of life informed by authorship, the false self the state of fatedness” (Strenger 234). It is when Morrison’s characters discover that they are the authors of their fate, that neither slavery nor trauma, parents nor children, Morrison nor the narrator controls them, that they might take the first steps towards individuality.

Throughout the following chapters, the obstacles that the culture of survival and its system of emotional economics presents to the process of individuation will be documented and explored. The ultimate purpose of this thesis, however, will not be to wallow in suffering or grief but to understand and highlight ways of transcending this pain. Morrison’s characters often exhibit the flaws that Richard Wright catalogued in *Black Boy*, but she does not use her authorial voice to merely catalogue faults or condemn individuals. Instead, she calls her readers into the Clearing of her texts for their own confrontation with trauma and subsequent transformations. In “‘The Self and the Other’: Reading Toni Morrison’s *Sula* and the Black Female Text,” Deborah McDowell reveals the importance of the relationship between Morrison’s readers and her texts: “Morrison has commented on the importance of the ‘affective and participatory relationship between the artist and the audience,’ and her desire ‘to have the reader work with the author in the construction of the book’” (McDowell 160).
Returning to the idea of falling versus flight, the reader of this thesis will see that not all of the flights of Morrison’s characters are “away from” some form of horror or violence but that many flights move towards some type of redemption. In discussing the concept of flight, Morrison details how flight is possible only through a release of one’s burdens and a complete control of one’s self: “You would have to be able to surrender, give up all of the weights, all of the vanities, all of the ignorances. And you’d have to trust and have faith in the harmony of your body. You would also have to have perfect control” (Dixon 101). Drawing on her own experience, hooks provides a real-world example of this type of flight: “Being alone and celibate gave me the psychic space to confront myself and examine my relationship to intimacy. Soon it was obvious that I had chosen partners who were not particularly ‘into’ intimacy, because then I had never had to make a leap of faith, to trust, or to risk” (Communion 91; emphasis added). Similar to Milkman’s leap at the end of Song of Solomon, hooks’ choice was a risky one that might prove harmful to her sense of self, but she allowed herself the opportunity to love, to achieve a cohesive sense of self. This turning toward the potential for love is also a decision to make a place for oneself in the world and avoid oblivion as hooks declares in All About Love: New Visions that “turning away [from love] we risk moving into a wilderness of spirit so intense we may never find our way home again” (Visions x-xi). Despite the social constraints that African Americans face on a daily basis, they must find within themselves the ability to discover such a home, to dream, to love, and to fly rather than submit to the stagnant forces of nihilism and the culture of survival which breeds such hopelessness. It is my intention that this thesis will provide a lens
through which to see and understand the trajectory from survival to life and that it will
serve to answer the question of how a culture might transition from the falling death of
Robert Smith to the life-affirming flight of Milkman.
This is Not a Story to Pass On: The Failure of the Love Ethic in Beloved

The term “beloved” can be found throughout the Bible, particularly in the epistles of John and Paul. These epistolary writings were often concerned with members of the early Christian community succumbing to heresies and division and were meant to guide such communities through turbulent times where the individual members might succumb to outside pressure or inner strife. Groups as disparate as the Corinthians, Ephesians, and Colossians were joined not only by their belief in the resurrected Lord but also by the love of Jesus, who could also be referred to as “Beloved.” It is no coincidence that Toni Morrison uses a selection from Paul’s letter to the Romans as an epigraph for her novel or that she chooses Beloved as the title since her work acts as an epistle to the African-American community in which she addresses the concept of the newly liberated individual and its place in the community. As with the early Christian communities that had been freed from sin and death, groups of blacks found themselves in a new and unfamiliar state of liberation when they escaped the bonds of slavery. Individuals in each of these communities existed in a precarious position within the society around them as they had to create a new sense of selfhood within a world that had largely stayed the same. In such tumultuous times, the concept of love was crucial to each group’s redefinition. Christians found a God who was more loving and self-sacrificing than the Old Testament God of floods and plagues and were told that to love one’s neighbor as oneself was the ultimate commandment. Former slaves who had never been able to love freely or cherish themselves were now able to start families and create a home for themselves. In each case, the transition was not
always a smooth one. As Sethe states: “Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (*Beloved* 95). In an interview with Ann Hostetler, Toni Morrison discussed the importance of love in religion and the difficulty of demonstrating that love: “Love is in all of the world’s religions, but it keeps getting covered up. The basis of all of them is love, but it gets mangled” (Hostetler 198). In Toni Morrison’s novel, love is mangled and obscured in much the same way as her characters struggle to mentally liberate themselves from the bonds of slavery.

To comprehend the failure of the love ethic in *Beloved*, one must understand the psychic traumas that haunt the characters as a result of their enslavement. The very structure of the novel attempts to mirror the experience of slavery as the opening of *Beloved* works to upend the reader’s position in terms of the novel:

> The reader is snatched, yanked, thrown into an environment completely foreign, and I want it as the first stroke of the shared experience that might be possible between the reader and the novel’s population. Snatched just as the slaves were from one place to another, from any place to another, without preparation and without defense. (“Unspeakable” 396)

Here Morrison describes how she wanted her reader to experience a fraction of the temporal and spatial displacement that slaves felt. Freedom becomes more complicated when one realizes that the characters find themselves free in a time and space that they were never allowed to possess as their own. While ownership of one’s space and the creation of a home in the world are important, it is possession of the individual and his or her memories that becomes the central issue in Morrison’s novel.

Within Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, the ownership of absence and the subsequent creation of space for a new presence parallel the characters’ need for ownership of their past and the creation of a new history for themselves. This ownership is essential to the
creation of a future: “If, as Morrison has said, “the act of imagination is bound up with memory,” then memory itself—both collective and personal—becomes central to the issue of true liberation” (Scruggs 178). Thus, the absences in the consciousness of each of the characters require a process of rememory in which the absence can become a presence that can be possessed in time by the protagonists. Rememory is one of the examples of the “reconfigurations of the past” in Beloved in which the characters attempt to confront their personal histories (Jablon 12). In The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women’s Fiction, Angelyn Mitchell describes rememory not only as a reconfiguration but also as “the process of remembering not only what one has forgotten but also what one wants to forget and cannot. Memory may be described as the selection of images; rememory is the replaying of selected images” (Mitchell 12). The process of rememory allows Morrison’s characters to take ownership of their traumatic pasts. With this possession of the past, a future can be created and actual freedom achieved, but the past proves more difficult to subdue.

Beloved is a novel that revolves around the reluctance of the characters who populate the narrative to explore their past and take ownership of it. The culture of survival that manifests itself in the communities of newly freed slaves is the result of their attempts to build a new world where they might raise a family for the first time. This focus on a new world, however, comes at the expense of their past traumas. With the present as a focal point, the characters feel as though they cannot afford to look back at the horrors from which they have escaped. The need for rememory, therefore, begins
with the initial repression of the past. The chokecherry tree on Sethe’s back functions as both a symbolic and physical representation of her past. Discussing the scars, Sethe relates how “I’ve never seen it and never will. But that’s what she said it looked like. A chokecherry tree. Trunk, branches, and even leaves,” and in rubbing his cheek on the scars, Paul D relates that he “learned that way her sorrow, the roots of it; its wide trunk and intricate branches” (Beloved 16-7). The choke cherry refers to a North American species of cherry “with astringent properties” and “the trees, Prunus borealis and P. hyemalis, the latter called more fully black choke cherry” on which the cherries grow.\(^1\) Morrison no doubt knew the properties of the tree and its color connotation because she used the phrase “chokecherry tree” when the word is usually hyphenated or left separate in the same way that she created the words “whitepeople” and “coloredpeople” out of their respective phrases. The astringent berries of the tree are also important in that they symbolize the bitter fruit that Sethe’s past has produced in her life. The scars are from Sethe’s past, but though she refuses to look at them, she knows that they are there. As a result, she has no feeling in her back—“She straightened up and knew, but could not feel, that his cheek was pressing into the branches of her chokecherry tree” (17). This lack of feeling is the price of avoiding the exhumation of painful memories. The process of rememory might be painful, but without allowing herself to feel this pain, Sethe is unable to achieve genuine catharsis of the rage, shame, and sorrow that afflicts her. Indeed, the skin on Sethe’s back has “been dead for years,” thereby symbolizing the effect that the past has had on her life both physically and mentally (18). 

---

\(^1\) Information acquired from www.oed.com; emphasis theirs.
horrible scars on Sethe’s back mirror her repressed past as well as the pasts of each of the black characters in the novel, who bear their painful memories in solitude while attempting to avoid rememory of what has happened to them.

In *Beloved*, the trauma induced by slavery haunts each of the characters, and despite their attempts at forgetting, the physical and emotional scars from their respective pasts are always right beneath the surface of their consciousness. This sentiment is echoed earlier in the novel by Sethe when she explains to Denver the nature of rememory:

I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it’s not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world… I mean, even if I don’t think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened. (36)

Though Sethe admits that the past will exist whether or not she has rememories of it, she nonetheless attempts to repress her memories and put a halt to any process of rememory, while fearing the new memories that Paul D will bring with him to 124. Indeed, Sethe comments that each day there is “nothing better than [working dough] to start the day’s serious work of beating back the past” (73). Caught between a past that they shun and a present they have yet to accept, the protagonists in *Beloved* struggle to create a place in time for themselves.

Each of the characters in 124 is haunted by the past and their attempts to avoid their history. In each case, the revelation of an element from the past has dire consequences. Denver is struck deaf when her mother tells her about the murder of Beloved, and Paul D compares Sethe to an animal when she reveals her actions. Paul D
discusses how after his escape from prison “he had shut down a generous portion of his head,” and he asked for no more than that because “more required him to dwell on Halle’s face and Sixo laughing. To recall trembling in a box built into the ground” (41). Susan Neal Mayberry argues that “Paul D… survives escape by learning to love small,” but it is precisely because the characters attempt to love small that they fail to love at all (Mayberry 178). Sethe is likewise in a constant mental conflict in which she refuses to let herself remember or feel the pain of the past. These attempts prove fruitless, however. After Paul D relates to Sethe the story of Halle’s breakdown, the narrator states: “[Sethe’s] brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day” (70). In the same vein, Paul D relates how he refused to stay in one place for more than three months because he feared being chained up again. Paul D also comments on the fact that he consciously represses memories and emotions which bother him: “He would keep the rest where it belonged: in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut” (73). Although the characters speak of leaving the past behind them, they are always carrying the burden of their respective histories with them.

Each of the characters in Beloved remain burdened by their pasts, yet Sethe and the members of her community are able to find momentary relief from their pain. Baby Suggs’s work in the Clearing presents one example of how individuals might use the love ethic described in the introduction to begin this process of reclaiming the world for themselves. In Salvation, bell hooks describes how the absence of communal spaces for
emotional release hinders the ability of individuals to move beyond their grief: “the absence of public spaces where that pain could be articulated, expressed, shared meant that it was held in—festering, suppressing the possibility that this collective grief would be reconciled in community even as a way to move beyond it and continued resistance would be envisioned” (*Salvation* 214). Baby Suggs creates just such a space for communal healing in the Clearing. Each group in the Clearing is given a special task by Baby Suggs. She tells the children in the crowd to laugh, the men to dance, and the women to cry before switching the tasks of each group. It is no coincidence that Baby Suggs chooses the Clearing for this process rather than any church or house as “another way Black people resisted assimilation into the dominating culture was by reaffirming their relationships with the earth” (*Homegrown* 99). Having never been given permission to own themselves let alone the land that they worked on, freed slaves had to incorporate the earth into the process of reclaiming themselves. The “religion” that develops within the Clearing is not based, therefore, on how the people might change their lives to avoid sin but on how they might change their lives to live, to avoid the culture of survival that has them focusing on their physical survival at the expense of their emotional lives.

As Baby Suggs tells those gathered in the Clearing, it is up to each individual to imagine, and thereby possess, the grace of being truly free: “the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it” (*Beloved* 88). This grace is possible only through the acceptance of a love ethic, however. Suggs tells the crowd about how other people do not love their eyes,
hands, mouths, or necks, and that they must love these parts themselves: “You got to love it, you!” (88). Baby Suggs does not plan on changing the world but on changing the community’s orientation to that world and to itself. As Angelyn Mitchell writes, “unlike Sethe, Baby Suggs chooses to accept her inability to change her circumstance and to turn her energies, once free, to spreading a message of love to her community” (Mitchell 100). Under the direction of Baby Suggs’s love ethic, Sethe relates how she was able to release her pain and anger: “her heavy knives of defense against misery, regret, gall and hurt, she placed one by one on a bank where clear water rushed on below” (Beloved 86). Although each individual must take ownership of the love of his or her body and self, the process is still a communal one. Sethe describes how sharing in the emotions of the community heightens the power of her own feelings: “Days of company: knowing the names of forty, fifty other Negroes, their views, habits; where they had been and what done; of feeling their fun and sorrow along with her own, which made it better” (95). Ultimately, however, the community in the Clearing fails Sethe as her decision to murder her own child makes her an outcast and destroys Baby Suggs’s will to lead.

The Baby Suggs of the Clearing is not the Baby Suggs that the reader is introduced to in Beloved. Baby Suggs has lost all eight of her children, and the narrator relates to the reader that the absences have worn Suggs down to the point where Baby is:

suspended between the nastiness of life and the meanness of the dead, she couldn’t get interested in leaving life or living it, let alone the fright of two creeping-off boys. Her past had been like her present—intolerable—and since she knew death was anything but forgetfulness, she used the little energy left her for pondering color. (Beloved 3-4)
Baby thus exists in a period outside the bounds of time as she “abandons all hope and takes to her bed to contemplate color, the very entity that has determined her life” (Mitchell 100). Baby Suggs gives up on living and succumbs to a life of surviving not only because of her personal tragedies but also because of Sethe’s decision to murder her child and the community’s failure to come to Sethe’s aid. Sethe’s act of infanticide unearths Baby Suggs’s previous shame at being unable to protect her own children and the system of emotional economics which requires Sethe’s incomprehensible choice as a loving mother who must decide between death or enslavement for her child. Ato Quayson argues that “the absolute ethical undecidability of Sethe’s choice makes it impossible for Baby Suggs to operate under the aegis of the faith she had exercised hitherto,” and it is this undecidability that causes Baby Suggs to exist in a paralytic state in bed, unable to condemn or approve of Sethe’s actions (Quayson 112). Her work in the Clearing also proves futile as “the community’s cooperative, collaborative, and nurturing aspects are short-lived. The mainstays of slavery—divisiveness, inhumanity, alienation—prevail over the community of newly free citizens who, in the process of organizing themselves in an atmosphere of freedom, succumb to insecurity and jealousy” (Mitchell 103). The process of alienation from the community that had already begun is sealed by Sethe’s horrific act. Rather than share in Sethe’s sorrow and attempt to heal with her, the community decides to shun her as a necessary action for their own survival.

When faced with the failure of the Clearing, Baby Suggs succumbs to the same repression that plagues Sethe and the rest of the community. She relates to Sethe that
she cannot remember almost anything about the absent children. This absence in her memory is a conscious decision as Sethe tells her: “That’s all you let yourself remember” (5). Indeed, each of the characters tries to control the past by not thinking about it, but their repression does not make the presence of the past any less of a reality: “For [Morrison], memory symbolizes a starting point, not an end: ‘Memory (the deliberate act of remembering) is a form of willed creation’” (Scruggs 188). Rememory allows for creation and not imprisonment, yet the process of creation and replacement of absences can lead to painful encounters with the past. For individuals who had just recently escaped from slavery where pain was the only constant in their world, these encounters with the past are often avoided. Survival requires emotional economy and spending part of the day confronting the past that needed to be escaped is often seen by the characters in Beloved as a needless exercise in grief. In the words of Amy Denver, however: “Can’t nothing heal without pain” (78). The process of healing and the creation of space for these absences can be a process as arduous as rememory itself.

The absence of slavery for the freed blacks in Ohio becomes the need for the creation of a new present that exists outside of the shadow of the past. After Sethe’s escape from slavery, she relates the difficulty in accepting her new life as free: “Sethe had had twenty-eight days—the travel of one whole moon—of unslaved life” (95). Morrison intentionally refrains from saying “free life” because no sense of a free life has developed yet, only an “unslaved one.” This negation demonstrates that the slave past is still very much a present in terms of how the black characters in the novel think. As Paul D states: “If a Negro got legs he ought to use them. Sit too long, somebody
will figure out a way to tie them up” (10). Even after he has gained his supposed freedom, therefore, Paul D recognizes that he has just been “unslaved” and not really freed. Sethe also relates the difficulty in changing one’s mentality: “All taught her how it felt to wake up at dawn and decide what to do with the day… Bit by bit, at 124, and in the Clearing, along with the others, she had claimed herself. Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (95). The issue is not the presence of freedom but rather the absence of slavery and the need for ownership of this troubling past. To use a Morrisonian neologism, the former slaves have an “unhistory,” a gap in their past which makes the future difficult to manage and even harder to own. Thus, the presence of freedom has replaced the absence of slavery, but the new life of the freed slaves still requires the ownership of that new presence—an ownership that can come only from recognizing and reconfiguring the past.

The ownership of absences is integral to the narrative which revolves around the possession of both physical entities and thoughts and where each new presence creates a new absence. Just as the ghost (coupled with the boys’ fear of Sethe) caused Howard and Buglar to leave 124, Paul D’s entrance into the story signals the end of the presence of the ghostly presence in the house as he confronts the house openly until it quiets itself. Paul D asks if Sethe’s sons are still around, and when he finds out that they are gone, he feels more comfortable residing in 124. As Sethe relates to the reader: “There was no room for any other thing or body until Paul D arrived and broke up the place, making room, shifting it, moving it over to someplace else, then standing in the place he had made” (39). The issue of creating space becomes apparent when Paul D tells Sethe:
“I thought—well, I thought you could—there was some space for me” (45). Beloved echoes Paul D’s thoughts after her arrival when she states: “I was looking for this place to be in” (65). Initially, Sethe believes that Paul D is trying to possess Denver’s place by his presence, but he is instead attempting to create a place for himself at the house where only an absence existed. Later, Sethe realizes:

Paul D was adding something to her life—something she wanted to count on but was scared to. Now he had added more: new pictures and old rememories that broke her heart. Into the empty space of not knowing about Halle… that empty space of no definite news was filled now with a brand-new sorrow. (95)

With Paul D’s presence in the house, Sethe recognizes that there had been an absence in the house before Paul D’s arrival in the same way that the orange patches in Baby Sugg’s quilt made the lack of color in the house evident: “there wasn’t any [color] except for two orange squares in a quilt that made the absence shout… In that sober field, two patches of orange looked wild—like life in the raw” (38; emphasis added). Just as she fears Paul D’s addition to her rememory, Sethe realizes that the absence of color in 124 was a deliberate choice based on her past sadness: “It was as though one day she saw red baby blood, another day the pink gravestone chips, and that was the last of it” (39). This absence is thus the direct result of Sethe’s repressed memories of murdering Beloved and the shock of seeing the redness of her blood.

Whereas Sethe and Paul D are grateful (albeit wary) of the new presence of each other in their lives, Denver is spiteful of the connection that Sethe and Paul D have because it excludes her and changes the possession of absences:
They were a twosome, saying “Your daddy” and “Sweet Home” in a way that made it clear both belonged to them and not to her. That her own father’s absence was not hers. Once the absence belonged to Grandma Baby… Then it was her mother’s absent husband. Now it was this hazelnut stranger’s absent friend. Only those who knew him (“knew him well”) could claim his absence for themselves. (13)

Ownership of her absent father is thus important to Denver because her possession of her father in absentia gives her a piece of the past that is her own. Indeed, Denver hates the past because she does consider herself a part of it, instead she only asks about the story of her birth because “the rest was a gleaming, powerful world made more so by Denver’s absence from it” (62). Later, when Paul D realizes that the presence of Beloved is pushing him away from Sethe, he wishes that Sethe would have his child because he sees the creation of a new baby as a presence which would counteract Beloved: “And suddenly [the baby] was a solution: a way to hold on to her, document his manhood and break out of the girl’s spell—all in one” (128). In the same way, Sethe believes that she can start a new life with Paul D in which “trust and rememory” are a natural part (99). Finally, Sethe begins to demonstrate less fear concerning the revelation of their respective pasts: “the things neither knew about the other—the things neither had word-shapes for—well, it would come in time” (99). The empty word spaces, or absences, are no longer frightening for Sethe. Instead, she is willing to create a presence instead to “make a way out of this no way” (95). Both characters prove unable at least initially to own their future, however. Despite the shifting balance of presence and absence which allows them to live on their own, Sethe and Paul D remain enslaved by their pasts. The power that the past holds over the two is so powerful, in fact, that it allows Beloved to be resurrected in a physical form.
This presence of Beloved disrupts the temporal affinities of each of the main characters, both precluding and assisting the process of rememory. Angelyn Mitchell argues that Beloved is not a ghost that haunts the characters—rather she is “a spirit who serves as the repository of memory and thus uses those memories to promote change in the narrative’s other characters” (Mitchell 88). While Beloved does create the opportunity for change in the lives of the characters, she eventually begins to disrupt their ability to live in the present. As the physical embodiment of the past, Beloved forces the characters to remember and thus begin the process of rememory while also attempting to force Sethe and Paul D to remain ensconced in the past as though it were a prison. At the beginning of the novel, Paul D is focused on the future that he envisions for Sethe and himself, but with Beloved’s appearance, he is driven out of the house in stages and reverts to his previous attitude and method of leaving each woman after a short stay. Beloved also scares Paul D because his encounter with Beloved in the cold house causes the rusted tin in which he had kept his repressed memories to open and thus allow rememory to take place: “he didn’t hear the whisper that the flakes of rust made either as they fell away from the seams of the tobacco tin. So when the lid gave he didn’t know it” (Beloved 117). Though Paul D does not notice the effects of the encounter immediately, he returns to Sethe at the end of the novel because his “red heart” has been freed from the tin. Denver, on the other hand, thinks neither of the past which she believes does not involve her nor the future—instead the “present alone interested Denver” (119). When Denver begins to see the destructive effect that Beloved has on Sethe, however, she begins to consider the future for the first time:
“Somebody had to be saved, but unless Denver got work, there would be no one to save, no one to come home to, and no Denver either. It was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve” (252). Thus, Denver matures as a result of Beloved’s presence though she eventually uses this newfound sense of maturity to enlist aid against Beloved.

For Sethe, “the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay,” yet Beloved’s presence begins a slow process within Sethe of reintegrating the past into her life (41). This rememory surprises Sethe: “Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling. It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved) because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost” (58). Sethe is able to confront the past at least partially because of Beloved, yet as Beloved’s strength over Sethe grows near the end of the novel, Sethe begins to reject her work and her relationship with Paul D wondering instead “how she could hurry time along and get to the no-time waiting for her” when she would be with Beloved in 124 (191). Sethe desires to be in this location outside of time but in doing so, she rejects her present and future. This temporal disruption is a malevolent one in that it destroys the relationships which Sethe had known and it throws Sethe’s life into a draining stasis where she becomes obsessed with the past which once terrified her. Indeed, Sethe and Beloved become so “busy rationing their strength to fight each other” so that “everything was gone [from 124] except two laying hens” (239). Thus, the presence of the past in the form of Beloved is malevolent because while she initiates the process of rememory, she desires that Sethe and Paul D live in the past rather than confront it. Just as she did in
the Clearing, Beloved both strangles and soothes Sethe in the same way that Paul D and Sethe’s past both upsets and comforts them.

The process of rememory culminates in the closing chapters of the novel in which Sethe and Paul D are no longer victims crippled by their past but active participants in, and owners of, a present which has the ability to become a mutual future. The final struggle in which Sethe and the community interact to confront their pasts allows for the process of rememory to transcend the act of remembering and become an act of ownership. The community rallies to save Sethe from her past just as they taught her once to become acclimated to, and own, her life away from slavery: “They stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they knew what that sound sounded like” (259). The beginning also signifies a time before the tragic past and a time in which the past has no hold on the present or on any of the characters. When Edward Bodwin appears, Sethe believes he is the schoolteacher coming to claim Beloved from her, and she flies toward him with an ice pick in an obvious attempt at harming him. Her action creates a “hill of black people,” who attempt to stop her because they understand that Bodwin is innocent, but the action also symbolizes the community coming together to preserve Sethe in her fight against the past (262). Her past is no longer something to be feared but something to face head-on, and Gurleen Grewal argues that “by facing the past, Sethe is released into the present” (Grewal 116). With this “victory” in mind, Cornel West viewed Beloved as a literary work that might raise up the black community from the nihilism that he saw destroying its members:
Beloved can be construed as bringing together the loving yet critical affirmation of black humanity found in the best of black nationalist movements, the perennial hope against hope for transracial coalition in progressive movements, and the painful struggle for self-affirming sanity in a history in which the nihilistic threat seems insurmountable. (West 43-4)

While the characters in Beloved begin to move toward such a “self-affirming sanity,” the novel’s trinity of conclusions demonstrates the inherent difficulties in sustaining the self and maintaining a love ethic in the African-American community.

Each of the endings of Beloved is complicated by the inability of the characters to fully possess their past in such a way as to allow for a love ethic to flourish in their lives. The community comes together to save Sethe, but after the women prevent Sethe from attacking Bodwin, they leave her to waste away in the same way that Baby Suggs had. When Paul D returns to see Sethe, he finds her by herself with no plans for the future. Paul D comes back to 124 because he “wants to put his story next to [Sethe’s],” and this creation of a story and eventually a history of their own might complete the process of rememory because the couple can still decide in favor of life (273). As Paul D tells Sethe: “me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow” (273). This statement is a partial reversal of Sethe’s earlier assertion that “Today is always here… Tomorrow, never (60). Sethe and the future that Paul D had envisioned in the opening of the novel become the focus, and Beloved as well as Paul D and Sethe’s pasts are no longer the emphasis. Instead, Paul D focuses on Sethe: “You your best thing Sethe. You are” (273). Sethe is reluctant to share in the present as she is still tied to her grief, however, and she answers Paul D’s declaration with her final questioning words in the novel: “Me? Me?” (273). Sethe still has not learned to love herself or to value herself as someone to be loved, having forgotten Baby Suggs’s
advice in the Clearing: “hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize” (89). Paul D is ready to bathe Sethe and wash away her traumas, but as Sethe relates: “if he bathes her in sections, will the parts hold?” (272). Afraid to move forward and without the daily support of the community, Sethe (and her relationship with Paul D) is left in limbo.

Toni Morrison’s exploration of psyches traumatized by slavery highlights the problematic task of confronting the past, yet Morrison actively promotes a confrontation with that past rather than an evasion from it. The third “ending” of Morrison’s novel, however, demonstrates that the characters have not learned the necessary lessons concerning the effects of repression and a forgetting of (rather than a rememory of) the past. The narrative voice in the closing moments of the novel seems to admonish the reader not to act like the inhabitants of 124 and the other townspeople who knew of Beloved. As time passes, each individual allows or actively promotes the forgetting of Beloved. The narrator states quite clearly, however, that forgetting Beloved does not mean that she is gone: “Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don’t know her name?” (274). Beloved, who in many ways represents the collective pasts of the novel’s characters, still has power over the individuals who try to forget her. In fact, the fear of Beloved’s power returning to haunt the characters still manifests itself in their actions: “Sometimes the photograph of a close friend or relative—looked at too long—shifts, and something more familiar than the dear face itself moves there. They can touch it if they like, but don’t, because they know things will never be the
same if they do” (275). Thus, the characters in the novel allow their traumatic pasts to continue to dictate their present course of action. They choose to survive in an emotional and temporal limbo rather than risk the potentially painful catharsis of their grief. Morrison herself commented on the tendency to repress the painful trauma of the past as she “expected Beloved to be the least read of all her books because ‘it is about something that the characters don’t want to remember, I don’t want to remember, black people don’t want to remember, white people don’t want to remember, I mean, it’s national amnesia’” (Bowers 228). Though Morrison admits that there is a natural tendency to blot out the pain of the past, her narrator continues to warn the reader that Beloved must not be forgotten.

With each brief section documenting the forgetting or disremembering of Beloved by the characters, the narrator repeats “It was not a story to pass on” (274-5). Although the phrase is an uncertain one, it seems that the story which should not be passed on is not the story involving Beloved’s appearance, but rather the forgetting of Beloved by each of the characters. In fact, after the passage which begins “So they forgot her,” the narrator shifts from the phrase “It was not a story to pass on” to “This is not a story to pass on” (275). The story that must not pass on is the tale of a past which haunts characters that cannot bear to turn their eyes to look at it face-to-face. In her dialogue with Amalia Mesa-Bains, bell hooks describes how the refusal to remember keeps African Americans in stasis: “If we engage in these practices of forgetfulness, as in the dominating culture, we will likely invent narratives where we are conquerors. Instead of fantasies, we need to work our genuine relationships of mutuality. If we stay
in the nostalgic framework, it's paralyzing” (*Homegrown* 114). The individuals in Beloved may have been slaves in the past, but they might still be successful as long as they do not try to forget their experiences and the emotions surrounding these experiences. In his essay “Fleshly Ghosts and Ghostly Flesh: The Word and the Body in *Beloved*,” David Lawrence explores this tenuous relationship between a past that wants to be a forgotten and a present/future that is impossible without it:

Morrison suggests a way through the door of memory, even if that way entails a precarious balancing act between the danger of forgetting a past that should not be forgotten and of remembering a past that threatens to engulf the present. While the painful heritage of slavery cannot simply ‘pass on,’ cannot die away (to use another meaning suggested by that ambiguous phrase), enslavement to that heritage, Morrison implies, must ‘pass on,’ must die away, in order to undertake the task of re-membering and re-articulating the individual and the communal body. (Lawrence 244)

In this way, Morrison’s ending does not promote either repression or silence but rather the understanding that the past is an integral part of creating a healthy psyche and a unified community.

The answer for Morrison’s characters is to neither deny nor forget the past since such forgetting compromises one’s future. Rather, after the initial repression of the past and the fear at confronting memory, the process of rememory allows for the redefinition of the past as one’s own which allows the individual to possess it completely. This act of redefinition permits a present and a future in which the cycles of violence and fear of the past that have enslaved the black characters long after they have escaped their physical chains can be vanquished—though not forgotten. In Morrison’s literature, “the path to wholeness lies in claiming the slave past through identification with it, living with it, and then leaving it consciously and decidedly for the sake of life itself” (De Weever 160). Thus, Morrison’s novel is by no means in favor of repressing or
forgetting the past but rather incorporating it into one’s life so as to become stronger. It is through this confrontation with the past that true liberation might be achieved. As Angelyn Mitchell states, “Morrison proposes a paradigm of metaphysical liberation: she shows that freeing the soul requires the individual to take a journey, both physical and metaphysical, in which one confronts one’s past” (Mitchell 88). The community’s final act of forgetting, therefore, signals a failure on their part to participate in the process of rememory and an obstacle to their actual liberation. Quayson’s interpretation of the closing coda demonstrates that this ending avoids the opportunity for epiphanies on the part of the main characters:

The last two pages of the novel, where there is an incantatory repetition of the formula ‘It is not a story to pass on,’ is then the refusal of the invitation to interpret lodged in the string of epiphanies that have littered the text. For each element invoked in those closing pages—bad dream, a photograph, the stream, and the footprints—are phenomena that are saturated with the past. Yet rather than take up the invitation to interpret these phenomena, it is implied that the community must ‘remember to forget.’ In other words, there is a conscious decision not to allow the past to swamp the present via any such mundane details that are nonetheless pregnant epiphanies. (Quayson 111)

The community may have decided to forget Beloved, “to make it easy for the chewing laughter to swallow her all away,” but the past still manages to “swamp the present” (Beloved 274). The former slaves who inhabit Morrison’s novel have freed themselves physically, but they are still trapped emotionally by a past that has put a hold on their present and threatens to consume their future. Indeed, the final line of the novel is a declaration of “Beloved,” and it is her name and its reference to the past that reverberates in the minds of Morrison’s readers long after the novel is complete.
Lifting up the Record Needle to Create Music:  
The Interplay of Improvisation and the Past in *Jazz*

Toni Morrison saw *Beloved* as the first novel in a trilogy, and *Jazz* is a fitting sequel to the discussion of how trauma, memory, and survival intertwine and ultimately hinder an individual’s ability to love. The migration of African Americans to the North in the early 1900s created a physical distance from the horror of their former existence, but their respective pasts remained a potent force in their lives. The communal forgetting that takes place at the end of *Beloved* insinuates itself in *Jazz* as Joe and Violet, who step in for Paul D and Sethe, attempt to create a life for themselves without addressing the severe sense of loss from their early years in the South. The narrator of *Jazz* states that “part of why they loved [the city] was the specter they left behind,” yet the specter of the past is still very much a presence in the novel (*Jazz* 33). Throughout the novel, the individual falls prey to “mangled” visions of love— Violet, because “the children of suicides are hard to please and quick to believe no one loves them because they are not really here,” and Joe, because he feels abandoned by his own parents (4). Using the true story of a young girl who refused to reveal the man who shot her, Toni Morrison found herself interested in the question of “Who loves *that* intensely anymore?” (Giddings 13; emphasis theirs). This intense form of love is not the love ethic proposed by Cornel West and bell hooks, however, and Morrison positions the City as one of the factors that leads to this extreme form of love: “in the jazz age, in the large city, where people now were in a position *not* to marry who was next to them, who lived next door, or to whom they had been given, but to actually choose to fall in love, it’s an overwhelming passion… it becomes, again, excessive” (Rushdie 56;
emphasis theirs). In explaining Joe’s act of violence to Salman Rushdie, Toni Morrison connects his inability to achieve a sense of self with his sense of the past as a fixed entity that controls the present. For Morrison, the issue becomes “how to own your own body and love somebody else. Under historical duress, where one fights for agency, the problem is how to be an individual, how to exert individual agency under this huge umbrella of determined historical life” (56). Love is possible only through such agency as well as the characters’ ability to improvise, and initially the characters in Jazz struggle to maintain their sense of self which leads to violent actions in the name of love. Like Sethe and Beloved, Joe murders Dorcas because of a distorted sense of love, and Violet lashes out at Dorcas’s corpse and the community because her love has been rejected. In each of these instances, the present actions of the characters have been dictated by the past.

While the characters in Jazz seem to repeat the mistakes of the community in Beloved, Morrison offers a new vision of rememory, or confrontation with the past, in both the physical structure and plot of the novel. Gurleen Grewal argues that “in Jazz, history is more like an unfinished plot that must work itself out in the life of the present; as such the novel is in many ways the denouement of Beloved” (Grewal 133). The tool needed to manage the past is the musical form of jazz itself. In his essay concerning Morrison’s novel, Craig Werner uses the words of Ralph Ellison to highlight the rebellious and singular nature of jazz: “true jazz is an act of individual assertion within and against the group…each solo flight, or improvisation, represents…a definition of his identity: as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition” (Werner 87). Thus, jazz is a tool by which African Americans might use their
powers of improvisation to develop their own identities and which is intimately linked with the characters’ sense of agency. Morrison emphasizes the cultural work that the genre of jazz can accomplish as the music “symbolizes an incredible kind of improvisation, a freedom in which a great deal of risk is involved” (Micucci 275). This improvisation is not limited to the realm of music, however. In her interview with Rushdie, Morrison agrees with his assessment that her characters are in essence “trying to improvise life” (Rushdie 51). While the narrator, Joe, and Violet recognize the new forms of music and culture developing within the City, they initially ignore what lies at the heart of the genre—improvisation and agency.

Throughout Jazz, the characters struggle to become agents in their present by relying on passive rather than active forms of invention. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator explains that the City offers African Americans the opportunity to escape their abusive and traumatic pasts: “Part of why they loved it was the specter they left behind” (Jazz 33). The City is painted as a paradise where only the new, the bright, and the joyful exist: “There goes the sad stuff. The bad stuff. The things-nobody-could-help stuff. The way everybody was then and there. Forget that. History is over, you all, and everything’s ahead at last” (7). Likewise, the City culture, which contains “every club, organization, group, order, union, society, brotherhood, sisterhood or association imaginable,” seems to offer more opportunities for community (10). As the novel develops, however, it is clear that the past overwhelms the ability of the characters to create their new lives and new selves in the City and that these clubs exist only at the periphery of the story. Though the narrator is effusive over the transition to the urban sprawl, she subtly reveals several key features of the city which make the
transition difficult: “I’m crazy about this City… 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” (7). This statement by the narrator points to the new individualized nature of African Americans in the urban environment and echoes the focus on the present and future that Paul D and Sethe seemingly found by the end of *Beloved*. Like *Beloved*, however, the past is never completely vanquished, and “despite the promise of Harlem to be posthistorical… Joe and Violet find that the past comes along to haunt them, that they have to reckon with it in order to resuscitate themselves as individuals and as a couple” (Peterson 205). In fact, the newfound sense of individualism among African Americans dispersed throughout the City makes it harder for them to confront their past and even their present.

The City also removes each of the characters in *Jazz* from nature, which further complicates ideas of community and cultural healing. In *Homegrown: Engaged Cultural Criticism*, bell hooks comments on such difficulties within the context of Morrison’s novels:

Morrison says all of hands-on experience of being one with nature created a culture of belonging, an eros in everyday life that is cut off as Blacks migrate to northern cities. Most importantly, in the North there was no contact with a natural world to serve as a constant reminder that white people were not all-powerful. (*Homegrown* 99)

Without the space and opportunity for a Clearing, individuals found it harder to feel ownership over the earth and themselves. Indeed, the racial violence which greeted African Americans migrating from the South was in many ways more difficult because they “found that they had lost the collectivity that in the South had enabled them to cope with [such violence]” (Peach 136). Within the City, therefore, the attempt to combat
the traumas of one’s past becomes an individual, rather than a collective, endeavor, and often, the community in the City is ill-equipped to handle the powerful emotions of its members, preferring instead to attend to physical needs which are more easily met.

After Violet’s scene at the funeral, the Salem Women’s Club discusses helping her before deciding that Joe needs to stop feeling sorry for himself and that they will instead focus on a family who has lost everything in a fire: “The Club mobilized itself to come to the burnt-out family’s aid and left Violet to figure out on her own what the matter was and how to fix it” (4). Here, the focus is again on physical survival rather than the healing of emotions required for living life. Later in the novel, Felice tells Joe that “animals in a zoo were happier than when they were left free because they were safe from hunters” which reflects this uneasiness which African-Americans felt despite existing in a “free” world (Jazz 207). Freedom meant survival in a world either ambivalent or hostile towards those attempting to make a place for themselves, and as a result, living a free life was often considered a luxury. In opposition to the rural blacks of Beloved, the City dwellers in Jazz are a new phenomenon in Morrison’s fiction in that they constitute a community composed entirely of exiles. Dispossessed of their homes in the rural South, they have migrated toward the North, but their Southern birthplaces continue to exist as “home” in each individual’s consciousness. In the City, they feel disconnected from the past and from each other (Harding 107). While these City dwellers are a new phenomenon, the problems which they encounter—racial violence, disconnection from the past and the community—are in many ways similar to the struggles of their rural counterparts.
The themes from *Beloved* resurface in the text of *Jazz* in what initially seems to be a case of history repeating itself. The reader is introduced to another couple, Joe and Violet, who are struggling with their pasts, and informed that the violence (Joe murdering his lover Dorcas) will perpetuate itself when Violet invites Dorcas’s friend Felice into their household: “that’s how the scandalizing threesome on Lenox Avenue began. What turned out different was who shot whom” (*Jazz* 6). Just as Sethe and Baby Suggs are initially abandoned by the community, Violet is ostracized by those in her neighborhood, and she resists the rejection of the community: “You’d think that being thrown out the church would be the end of it—the shame and all—but it wasn’t” (6). Just as Paul D is unable to stay in one place for more than a few months, Violet finds that “as she grew older, [she] could neither stay where she was nor go away” (102). Joe, on the other hand, reflects the possessiveness of Beloved and Sethe who insist on claiming each for themselves when he discusses his lover Dorcas: “I chose you. Nobody gave you to me. Nobody said that’s the one for you. I picked you out” (135). Here, Joe’s statement reflects the “overwhelming passion” that Toni Morrison alluded to in her interview with Rushdie. Having never been given the ability to choose for himself, Joe is unable to love appropriately. Like the characters in *Beloved*, Violet and Joe must both contend with “psychological amputations” that manifest themselves in various ways throughout the novel as a result of their traumatic pasts (Peterson 208). It is not merely the pain in confronting the past, however, but the lack of connection to the character’s histories which plagues Morrison’s characters in *Jazz*.

This lack of connection to the past is the result of another absence—that of an ancestral figure. This trend begins in *Beloved* since Sethe is never sure whether she saw
her mother’s corpse, and Paul D reflects his own desire to have such ancestors when he states:

> Once, in Maryland, he met four families of slaves who had all been together for a hundred years: great-grands, grands, mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, cousins, children. Half white, part white, all black, mixed with Indian. He watched them with awe and envy, and each time he discovered large families of black people he made them identify over and over who each was, what relation, who, in fact, belonged to who. (*Beloved* 219)

In the same way, both Violet and Joe struggle with their inability to draw connections to the past since Joe never knew his parents, and Violet’s mother committed suicide when she was still very young. The missing parent or ancestral figure proves to be a crucial figure in Toni Morrison’s novels: “whether the novel took place in the city or in the country, the presence or absence of that figure determined the success or the happiness of the character. It was the absence of an ancestor that was frightening, that was threatening, and it caused huge destruction and disarray” (Higgins 59-60). The importance of the figure is a result of the African cosmology in which ancestors “are one’s foundation” and without this link to the past “a person has no roots and thus becomes a fragmented, incomplete individual” (62). Joe and Violet find themselves tied to memories of the past, yet they have no “foundation” in that past because of the unanswered questions concerning their parents, and as a result, they both lament their fragmented sense of self.

In his portion of the narrative, Joe relates how before he met Dorcas, he had “changed into new seven times” (*Jazz* 123). This constant redefinition of his character is the result of his lack of any substantial foundation, and this absence causes Joe to become the type of fragmented individual that Therese Higgins describes. He even admits that he married Violet “just because I couldn’t see whether a wildwoman put out
her hand or not,” which refers to his attempts at finding his real mother who is known as Wild (181). In this way, Joe was unable to exert his own agency in terms of choosing whom he loves until he reached the City, and once given the power to love, Joe is unsure what to do. This uncertainty results in his obsessive and eventually deadly affair with Dorcas. The narrator in the novel also relates how Violet has a “renegade tongue” which speaks out of turn as well as “cracks” in her personality which cause her to do such things as sit in the middle of the street or attack Dorcas’s corpse (24). In discussing her actions at the funeral, Violet literally splits herself in two, describing how certain actions were those of “that Violet,” or the one known as Violent, and herself (90-1). As she does in Beloved, Morrison returns to nature for an explanation of these cracks in the psyche of the individual.

Morrison’s use of nature imagery symbolizes the need for ancestry among African Americans. Just as the chokecherry tree symbolized the trauma of Sethe’s past, a tree that Joe finds while searching for his mother reflects the struggles of the couple in the novel to find a footing in the past. Joe describes the tree he sees as “huge, isolated, it grew in unlikely soil—entwined in its own roots” and when he searches for his mother a third time, he searched “the hillside for the tree—the one whose roots grew backward as though, having gone obediently into earth and found it barren, retreating to the trunk for what was needed… to get there you risked treachery by the very ground you walked on… A step could swallow your foot or your whole self” (178;182). This tree symbolizes the fates of the characters as they are wrapped up in their pasts (or “roots”) which makes it difficult for them to plant or stabilize themselves in their environment or to create a connection with those around them. Like the tree, Joe and
Violet are attempting to retreat to the past to search for an ancestral figure, and the process of straightening out these roots is a dangerous one which threatens to swallow a person whole or fragment one irreparably. They are in essence growing backwards. Thus, while each of the characters in Jazz (like those in Beloved) must reconnect with their memories and ancestral roots in order to reclaim their true selves, the method of confronting and reconfiguring these respective pasts proves to be different.

The central characters of the novel—whether it is Violet, Joe, or the narrator—each make the mistake of believing that invention or change prompted by external forces is the same as improvisation that comes from within—that the world inevitably shapes man and never the other way around. Indeed, passivity and instability form the basis of many of their interactions with their histories and the creation of their new identities. In discussing her belief in the impending violence that she is sure will repeat itself by the end of the novel the narrator states:

Take my word for it, [Joe] is bound to the track. It pulls him like a needle through the groove of a Bluebird record. Round and round about the town. That’s the way the City spins you. Makes you do what it wants, go where the laid-out roads say to. All the while letting you think you’re free… You can’t get off track a City lays for you. Whatever happens, whether you get rich or stay poor, ruin your health or live to old age, you always end up back where you started (120).

Thus, the City which had once been the place where everything was ahead is actually an environment which leads people into the same self-destructive cycles. Joe Trace reiterates this belief when he discusses his opinion of life: “In this world the best thing, the only thing, is to find the trail and stick to it” even though he admits that sometimes the trail leads one to commit murder (130). The trail then becomes a destructive groove in a record where the music is always mournful. The trail might exist and the record
might continue to revolve on the Victrola, but the essence of jazz is improvisation, the creation of the new and the personal, rather than the repetition of the old and the similar.

Initially, Joe’s improvisations are singular moments where he asserts his independence. The first of his seven changes occurs when “I named my own self, since nobody did it for me, since nobody knew what it could or should have been” (123). Here Joe creates the presence of a name where only an absence existed. He is the agent of his change. His later transformations, however, are the result of external forces and thus do not mirror the independent improvisations of jazz music. The next change occurs when Joe “was picked out and trained to be a man” (125). Here Joe is chosen by Hunter’s Hunter and raised by this man, thus negating his own agency in the transformation. Later, his changes are based on the results of white hatred such as when Vienna is burnt to the ground or he is nearly killed in a riot: “after those whitemen took that pipe from around my head, I was brand new for sure because they almost killed me” (127). Joe even admits that his form of improvisation and invention has left him without a self to rely on: “I changed once too often. Made myself new one time too many. You could say I’ve been a new Negro all my life” (129). Later in the novel, Violet mentions this same idea when she stresses to Felice that she must take ownership of her life in the world lest she lose herself in the process: “If you don’t [change the world], it will change you and it’ll be your fault cause you let it. I let it. And it messed up my life… I just ran up and down the streets wishing I was somebody else” (208). Rather than improvising life, Andrea O’Reilly argues that Violet merely substitutes a new persona which distances her from herself:
Violet’s life moves along a chain of substitutions. With each link on the chain—forgetting, replacing, becoming the lost mother—Violet is further alienated from her original self. Each attempt to recover her lost self through a replacement of her mother deepens the cracks of her splintered subjectivity and distances her from her real original mother, Rose Dear. (O’Reilly 158)

Instead of changing her world to create her own identity, Violet had invented a person who was not her own and lost her agency in the process. Often then, the improvisations of Joe and Violet lead them to forsake their own feelings and identities in order to survive.

Underlying the musical structure and improvisation of jazz lies the heart of cultural change—agency. It is only through such an exercise of free will that a real identity can be formed, a “me” that exists within but also apart from the world. After struggling with her decision to disrupt Dorcas’s funeral and her own emotions involving Joe’s infidelity, Violet is able to take ownership of her feelings and determine that she was in fact the agent behind her seemingly insane actions:

And that’s why it took so much wrestling to get me down, keep me down and out of that coffin where she was the heifer who took what was mine, what I chose, picked out and determined to have and hold on to, NO! that Violet is not somebody walking round town, up and down the streets wearing my skin and using my eyes shit no that Violet is me! (95-6)

Violet no longer hides from her emotions and is finally able to admit that she is the Violet who commits these actions. Whereas Sethe and the characters in Beloved attempted to repress the past, Violet and Joe willingly explore their personal histories and even desire to hold onto their memories. After Joe murders Dorcas, Violet travels to the girl’s middle school and high school, as well as to the beauty parlor in their neighborhood, in order to find out everything she can about the girl. She even brings a picture of Dorcas to the apartment, inviting the past into their home. In the same vein, Joe does not wish to repress any of the horror which he caused—“he minds her death, is
so sorry about it, but minded more the possibility of his memory failing to conjure up the dearness… he is trying to sear her into his mind, brand her there against future wear” (28). Joe wants, therefore, to keep Dorcas in his memory. Though they can consider the past without as much resignation as the characters in Beloved, Joe and Violet still need to connect with others in order to counteract the lack of connection they have with the past. The introduction of Felice, or the third part in the scandalous threesome, allows Joe and Violet and even Felice to understand their feelings concerning Dorcas’s death. The agency of the characters also allows them to begin to heal as Alice takes in Violet and the Traces invite Felice into their home. The past is never entirely removed from the present, but now Joe and Violet have become agents in their own lives rather than passive characters to be manipulated and moved. Missy Dehn Kubitschek argues that “to prevent another disaster, [Jazz’s] characters must change their self-images from static, destructive blues roles to dynamic jazz roles,” and by the end of the novel, they do avert such a disaster (Mayberry 195). By avoiding another outbreak of violence and by exercising their agency, the characters in the novel disrupt the narrator’s hold on the proceedings.

The breakdown in the character of the narrator in Jazz demonstrates that attempts to set up a cohesive narrative in the vein of traditional narratives are no longer viable. In the beginning of the novel, the narrator is confident in her knowledge of the characters, telling the reader the entire back-story and revealing that the new triangle on Lenox Avenue will end in murder. In describing Joe, she relates how “I know him so well” and validates the power of history and the inevitability of people’s actions by asserting that Joe is following the groove of a record (119-20). The narrator’s
confidence begins to wane, however, as the novel progresses and the characters delve deeper into their histories. In discussing Golden Gray, the half-white, half-black man with golden hair, who was raised by Violet’s grandmother and whom Violet obsesses over, cracks begin to show in the narrator’s hold on the story. The narrator states that it is “risky, I’d say, trying to figure out anybody’s state of mind,” but she continues with her narrative because she says it is “worth the trouble if you’re like me” (137). Though the narrator is supposedly well-informed, she knows almost nothing about Golden Gray or his meeting with his father, and the entire flashback episode of the novel is one seen through her imagination. As the imaginary episode continues, the narrator’s hold on the story spirals out of control.

At first, the narrator berates Gray for caring more about his clothes than the naked woman whom he finds on the side of the road, but then she details how “he scrapes the mud from his Baltimore soles before he enters a cabin with a dirt floor and I don’t hate him much anymore” (151). She then calls Gray a hypocrite for “shaping a story for himself to tell somebody, to tell his father, naturally,” but in this way, the narrator highlights the fact that she is very much like Golden Gray, crafting a story for others and if she is shaping a story like Golden Gray, she is a hypocrite as well (154). Upon discovering that perhaps Golden’s actions are the result of missing the ancestral link with his father, the narrator chides herself for her mistaken assumptions: “What was I thinking of? How could I have imagined him so poorly… I have been careless and stupid and it infuriates me to discover (again) how unreliable I am” (160). Despite her admission of unreliability, the narrator refuses to give up on her account of the events:
Now I have to think this through, carefully, even though I may be doomed to another misunderstanding. I have to do it and not break down. Not hating him is not enough; liking, loving him is not useful. I have to alter things... Lie down next to him, a wrinkle in the sheet, and contemplate his pain and by doing so ease it, diminish it. (161)

The narrator reveals in this passage that she is attempting the process of rememory, of altering history for the sake of healing, but she is doing it for other people (namely Violet, who is the one connected to Golden Gray, and Gray himself) rather than exploring her own history. She attempts to instill Gray with the power which rememory can have: “he will remember it, and if he remembers it he can recall it. That is to say, he has it at his disposal,” yet it is not her place to begin this personal process (161). In essence, she is creating feelings and memories, which do not exist, for her characters. As the various characters recount the stories from their pasts, “Morrison’s novel suggests that history is never over, that a conscious historical connection is absolutely necessary for the psychological well-being of the individual and community” (Peterson 207). This ownership of one’s history and manipulation can only be assumed by the individuals themselves, however. Emphasizing the individual and his or her connection to the past and the community is integral to Morrison’s fiction:

Following individual lives closely makes it possible for Morrison to (re)construct a history that remains faithful to the past but is not predetermined. The danger of a grand narrating monumental history lies in creating a master narrative in which there is no space to articulate any local narratives that run counter to it... Individual lives, outside of such a grand narrative, however, are much more chaotic, contradictory, and unpredictable—which creates a necessary space for resistance, agency and counternarratives. (209)

The contradictory nature of human lives is reinforced by the narrator in Jazz who admits to her failure by the end of the novel: “So I missed it altogether. I was sure one would kill the other. I waited for it so I could describe it. I was so sure it would happen. That the past was an abused record with no choice but to repeat itself at the crack and no power on earth could lift the arm that held the needle” (220). While she had predicted
that the relationship between Joe, Violet, and Felice would end in violence, the relationship instead resulted in healing—a counternarrative to the narrator’s attempted master narrative. In attempting to create a grand narrative about the City, therefore, the narrator misses the opportunity to discover how individuals are able to resist the pull of the record needle: “It was loving the City that distracted me and gave me ideas. Made me think I could speak its loud voice and make that sound sound human. I missed the people altogether” (220). The human sound that the narrator misses is like the jazz music that she also ignores. It is the sound of the interplay of improvisation and agency.

The narrator who had defined herself as “curious, inventive and well-informed” realizes that the characters are actually human beings and not her inventions; she was trying to control other people with her own improvisations rather than create something new for herself (137; emphasis added). In so doing, she missed the improvisatory nature of jazz and life. Life no longer follows the groove of the record where everything leads back to the past, and the narrator finally understands that the characters are no longer enslaved by their history: “When I see them now they are not sepia, still, losing their edges to the light of a future afternoon. Caught midway between was and must be. For me they are real” (226). What the narrator sees as a repeating of history is in fact an attempt at healing—“by talking about their individual lives and pasts, Felice, Joe, and Violet heal themselves through a collective and reciprocal effort to face, tell, and renegotiate what has happened to them” (Peterson 215). Likewise, Violet befriends Alice Manfred, Dorcas’s aunt, and together the two women work out their repressed anger. Though Alice understandably rejects Violet at first, she begins to look forward
to Violet’s visits because the two women are able to experience the type of community which black women in the South often had. If as the critic Deborah Barnes states: “all of Morrison’s novels inscribe… the varied maladjustments of blacks who lose contact with or have been denied access to native, enculturating, and authenticating communities,” then the relationship between the two women and the “scandalous threesome” are actually attempts at re-creating communities within the urban environment (Barnes 285). In creating these communities and healing themselves through discussing their anger and feelings concerning Dorcas’s death, the characters defy the narrator of the novel who attempts to put the frame of a traditional narrative on the characters’ lives. Joe and Violet do not need a narrator to guide them in their recovery. Instead, they take the healing process into their own hands and remove themselves from temporal prisons in which the past dictates their present. It is through this active agency, therefore, that they are able to move one step closer to freedom and free themselves from both the past and the narrator’s idea of the present. In this way, the ending of Jazz is one of Morrison’s most uplifting conclusions because it points to a breaking free from history for African Americans. History is no longer fixed, and as a result, it cannot put a hold on the present.

Unlike Beloved, however, the history of characters remains remembered, and Joe and Violet still possess the violent images of their past by the end of the novel: “Lying next to her… he sees through glass darkness taking the shape of a shoulder with a thin line of blood… Meanwhile Violet rests her hand on his chest as though it were the sunlit rim of a well and down there somebody is gathering gifts… to distribute to them all” (225). In this passage, Joe thinks about shooting Dorcas in the shoulder while
Violet thinks of the well in which her mother threw herself, but they are still together by the end of the novel. While it seems as though Joe and Violet are still haunted by their pasts, they have in fact confronted and reconfigured their histories. More importantly, they went through the process together, forming bonds with Alice and Felice, and reversing the breakdown of the community in the urban environment. Unlike the community in *Beloved* which forgets about most of the past by the end of the novel—allowing Beloved to linger on—Joe and Violet are constantly re-examining life: “a lot of the time… they stay home figuring things out, telling each other those little personal stories they like to hear again and again” (223). In this way, they avoid forgetting without obsessing over the past. Indeed, “in the ending paragraphs of *Jazz*, as in the concept of rememory so central to *Beloved*, Morrison claims the power of engaging and compelling narratives and stories to contest and displace disabling hegemonic narratives and stories in a culture’s memory” (Peterson 217). While Morrison avoids endings which provide the reader with a definite sense of closure, she does admit that in *Jazz*, there is a form of redemption for her characters:

In their somewhat helpless adult life in the city, which is less about the city than it is about that sort of intensity where all of the unresolved problems of their personal histories are mangled in the city. They do terrible things because they haven’t sorted it out yet. But they do sort it out. There is some redemption, in a way, for them. (Hackney 127)

This redemption is the result of Joe and Violet’s improvisation, their ability to break free from the narrator’s story and construct a new narrative for themselves—imperfect yes, but *theirs*.

In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison writes how the white schoolteacher beat Sixo, one of the Sweet Home Men, “to show him that definitions belong to the definers—not the defined,” and in many of her novels, Morrison attempts to hand this power of definition
back to African Americans by allowing them to revisit their pasts and reconfigure their histories (*Beloved* 190). Like *Beloved*, *Jazz* is “structured recursively: that is, the narration of present events is continually interrupted by the telling of “background” stories” (Peterson 205). By interpolating time periods, Morrison can create a world in which nothing is predetermined, where the past is just as malleable as the present or future, and “the way in which [*Jazz*] moves without warning from the present in which it is initially set to the past, denies the conventional division of the present, past and future into separate units” (Peach 112). Just as history changes and evolves through the process of rememory and inspection, Morrison’s fiction evolves. *Jazz*’s “experiments with form and language are a development of the history to be found in jazz music itself, but also of the history, together with its occlusions, distortions and ‘absent presences’, to be found in the ‘Great American City Novel’ and in the Southern romance narrative” (Peach 153). *Jazz* is thus an evolution in the progress toward freedom, which has its roots in the process of rememory and ‘absent presences’ detailed in *Beloved*. Once Morrison’s characters have repossessed their pasts through rememory, they can reconnect to the past and re-form communities in order to construct a livable present and a viable future. Instead of an ominous final note then, *Jazz* ends with the realization that individuals can resist the narratives and histories which attempt to designate them to a certain role and enslave them with its set histories. History need not repeat itself in Morrison’s world. Rather, history is a conduit through which one can achieve freedom from the various forms of slavery which exist—whether it be physical or mental bondage—and in assuming ownership of their history, African Americans can create a narrative which tells their story in all of its varied and
contradictory fragments. Then, individuals might find it in themselves to lift up the record needle from the grooves playing the mournful songs of the past and create music that sings the song of their agency in the face of the vicissitudes of life.
Endless Circles of Sorrow: 
Cultural Repression and Female Friendship in *Sula*

*Sula*, Toni Morrison’s second novel, begins with a joke played by a white landowner on his slave and ends with the tragic punchline of Nel’s haunting sobs that reveal the effects of cultural repression within the black community. The section of the Bottom where the African Americans live has its genesis in a hurtful joke that forever positions them as the punchline, as the dupes of a white farmer who managed to trick them out of the land they deserved even as they found their freedom: “A joke. A nigger joke. That was the way it got started. Not the town, of course, but that part of the town where the Negroes lived” (Morrison 4). Morrison juxtaposes the pain of the black community with the “humor” of the white farmers in this moment, and this “joke” insinuates itself in the text as the characters struggle to hide their pain beneath a blanket of laughter: “The black people watching her would laugh and rub their knees, and it would be easy for the valley man to hear the laughter and not notice the adult pain that rested somewhere under the eyelids” (4). Whereas the community in *Beloved* begins to forget its encounter with Beloved by the end of the novel, thereby beginning the process of repression that hinders the development of the self, the inhabitants of the Bottom live each day already in the throes of emotional repression. This emotional repression is the result of the culture of survival which requires that the members of the community ignore the painful feelings that might paralyze them if unleashed. When discussing how hunters would sometimes think that the Bottom might really be the bottom of heaven, the narrator states:
The black people would have disagreed, but they had no time to think about it. They were mightily preoccupied with earthly things—and each other, wondering even as early as 1920 what Shadrack was all about, what that little girl Sula who grew into a woman in their town was all about, and what they themselves were all about, tucked up there in the Bottom. (6)

This focus on “earthly things” precludes their interest in each other, however, as their struggles to survive impede their ability to understand one another.

Though the story of the town’s struggle to own their feelings of loss and rage weaves itself throughout *Sula*, the focus of the novel revolves around the friendship between Nel and Sula. In an interview with Zia Jaffrey, Toni Morrison describes how the concept of friendship prompted the writing of the novel: “I wrote *Sula*, really, based on this theoretically brand new idea, which was: Women should be friends with one another” (Jaffrey 142-3). This rebellious idea calls for females to have mutually respectful and loving relationships with others when love and respect are often luxuries that females in black communities in Morrison’s texts cannot afford. Friendship also requires the type of emotional investment that the culture of survival tells women is impossible. In *Salvation*, bell hooks explains how love in such relationships is rooted in the ability to achieve agency and a sense of self in order to successfully share that self with others: “to choose love, we must choose a healthy model of female agency and self-actualization, one rooted in the understanding that when we love ourselves well (not in a selfish or narcissistic way), we are best able to love others” (*Salvation* 41). Initially, Nel and Sula express such agency and individuality, and their friendship provides each of them with an opportunity to avoid the fragmented psyches of their family members and the emotional repression of their community. Ultimately, however, the relationship between the two women acts as a microcosm of the
community, and the novel explores the ways in which friendship might be hindered by the costs of the culture of survival.

The culture of survival manifests itself throughout Morrison’s work as it attempts to subvert the relationships between her female characters. Morrison writes that “it was in dreams that the two girls had first met,” and it is fitting that Sula and Nel first meet in their unconscious as it is only in the unconscious that freedom is not marred by the community’s emphasis on survival and repression (Sula 51). Indeed, the relationship between the girls allows them to grow outside the families and society that attempt to stunt their growth: “Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on. Daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers (Sula’s because he was dead; Nel’s because he wasn’t), they found in each other’s eyes the intimacy they were looking for” (52). Like Joe and Violet, the girls already exist in a state of limited protection as a result of their largely absent parents, and they must struggle to fend for themselves emotionally. Whereas “any enthusiasms that little Nel showed were calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter’s imagination underground,” Nel’s friendship with Sula allows her to re-envision herself outside the realm of social and familial constraints (18). These moments reflect Darlene Hine’s assertion that the emphasis on survival “dictated that black women, when necessary, reconfigured and reimagined families, communities, and themselves” (Hine 341). Their friendship allows Nel and Sula to conceive of individual personas apart from the community and permits the girls to overcome the failure of their family to give them positive ways to interpret the world: “In the safe harbor of each other’s company they

69
could afford to abandon the ways of other people and concentrate on their own perceptions of things” (55; emphasis added). Within the text, Nel and Sula acquire the knowledge as they mature that they as females must invent such methods of escape in their society: “[as] each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be” (Sula 52). This inventive friendship allows the girls to succeed within the confines of their culture, yet Sula is unable to escape the emotional repression and violence of her family.

Sula’s family rotates on an axis of emotional economics that makes the idea of a love ethic impossible. The matriarch of the family, Eva Peace, is a fascinating portrayal of the extremes to which individuals will go to ensure survival of others while simultaneously destroying these individuals’ ability to live. Eva’s decision to sacrifice her own leg to provide for her family is a tragic symbol of emotional economics and the high price of survival: “Apparently she gives up her leg in order to survive, in order that her children may survive. The sacrifice is, of course, heroic. Survival, it seems, is quite expensive” (Bergenholtz 12). The cost of survival is high and Eva is willing to destroy her own body for her family, but she cannot afford to let herself love them. When Hannah asks her mother if she ever loved Plum and Hannah as children, Eva answers her by saying “No. I don’t reckon I did. Not the way you thinkin’” (67). Eva is not saying that she does not love her children but rather that her love is not tied into the overt signs of affection for which Hannah is searching. For Eva, ensuring her children’s survival is the extent of her ability to love, and since Hannah does not recognize that her
being alive is a sign of that love, Eva becomes increasingly irate. As she tells Hannah, “you settin’ here with your healthy-ass self and ax me did I love you? Them big old eyes in your head would a been two holes full of maggots if I hadn’t” (68). Hannah, however, is searching for evidence of the love ethic proposed by individuals such as Cornel West and bell hooks—a type of emotional attachment that goes beyond the basics of survival. Replying to her mother’s assertion, Hannah states: “I didn’t mean that, Mamma. I know you fed us and all. I was talkin’ ’bout something else. Like. Like. Playin’ with us. Did you ever, you know, play with us?” (68). Hannah’s faltering line of questioning is essentially asking for the emotional side of love rather than the practical, and Eva’s answer reflects the attitude of African Americans who are bound by the practical nature of reality: “Play? Wasn’t nobody playin’ in 1895. Just ’cause you got it good now you think it was always this good? 1895 was a killer, girl. Things was bad. Niggers was dying like flies” (68). The culture of survival precludes such a sentimentalized view of love as the fear of the stark reality in which Eva and her family live shapes her worldview concerning relationships. The fact that Eva’s family survives within a society which rejects them is the sign that she loves them. As she tells Hannah: “I stayed alive for you” (69). The love that Hannah asks about is not connected to the reality of their lives and thus falls outside the boundaries of the culture of survival. This inattention to reality infuriates Eva who considers such emotions ridiculous in the face of the threats to the family’s survival: “You want me to tinkle [sic] you under the jaw and forget ‘bout them sores in your mouth? Pearl was shittin’ worms and I was supposed to play rang-around-the-rosie?” (69). While there is merit to recognizing the
struggle for existence, the lack of emotional connections and love within the culture of survival can be deadly.

Eva’s murder of her own son demonstrates the emotional detachment that occurs when survival becomes the sole focus of the family. Eva sets Plum on fire because she does not have the emotional strength to mother a child who was supposed to have grown up. As she tells Hannah, “he wanted to crawl back in my womb and well...I ain’t got the room no more even if he could do it” (71). Melvin Dixon links Eva’s actions to her inability to resume her role as caretaker: “childlike, [Plum] clearly needed a new identity, a new birth, but one that Eva could neither provide nor accommodate” (Dixon 99). Eva can lose her leg for her children, but she cannot face the emotions that arise from seeing her son return to a childlike state that would require her to relive the sacrifices of the past. Indeed, Eva lacks a sense of self that exists apart from keeping her family alive. In her discussion of Sethe’s act of infanticide, Jennifer Fitzgerald dissects the problem of mothers who murder their children: “slavery severed Sethe’s bond with her mother before she had developed a separate identity; consequently, her sense of self and of the boundaries to that self is dangerously weak… Not recognising the separateness of her children, Sethe makes life-and-death decisions for them” (Fitzgerald 117-18). Having “stayed alive” for her children and not for herself, Eva, like Sethe, now believes that she can make her children’s decisions for them. In Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation, Ato Quayson argues that “motherhood in Morrison is an unstable category that is both mythical and coupled with notions of death,” and Eva is just such a force, at once the most powerful and most
vulnerable character in the text (Quayson 88). While Quayson is correct in identifying the ambiguous nature of motherhood in Morrison’s texts, she overemphasizes Eva’s power and compassion:

Eva performs a series of deity-like functions and acts like a goddess: naming people, being worshipped by people, and ultimately coolly deciding the manner of her son Plum’s death. Significantly however, she performs all these functions out of compassion rather than out of any desire for self-aggrandizement. This is what reinforces her status as a secular goddess figure within the narrative. (Quayson 99)

Eva’s murder of Plum is not a moment of compassion for Plum but rather a moment of release from emotional suffering by Eva. In Salvation, bell hooks pinpoints the emotional deadening that occurs with older black women as a result of the stress of daily life: “In the face of unchanged racist and sexist stereotypes, older black women often harden their hearts so as not to feel pain” (Salvation 108). As a result of the traumatic sacrifices that Eva has had to make, her heart has hardened to the point where survival is the bottom line, and since Plum cannot survive on his own and since his presence risks uncovering Eva’s old pain, his mother chooses to remove him from the world. Like Sethe, Eva decides that death is better than a life of suffering, but also like Sethe, she does not consider an option where hope or love might change someone’s fate. Eva might be able to lose a limb to save her family, but such actions exhaust her ability to confront the costs of children who require emotional support.

This detachment from love becomes a tradition of emotional repression in the Peace household as both Plum and Hannah are unable to live the life that Eva has sacrificed to give them. In Salvation: Black People and Love, bell hooks emphasizes the ways in which mothers such as Eva who sacrifice for their children become filled
with rage and impede the development of their children: “Many females who sacrifice everything are rageful and bitter… More benignly striving to attain an idealized fantasy of mother love, some black mothers have actually hindered the self-development of their children by not teaching them how to be responsible for their lives” (Salvation 39).

Both Plum and Hannah exist in states of arrested development as neither can exist away from Eva, and after Plum’s death, Hannah displays the same emotional detachment as her mother. Early in the novel, Nel and Sula overhear Hannah and Eva discussing their feelings about their children, and Sula’s mother qualifies her love for her children: “You love her, like I love Sula. I just don’t like her. That’s the difference” (57). This difference is created by a culture where survival is the necessary goal and children are seen merely as a burden, as more lives to maintain. It is also the type of emotional detachment that Hannah inherits from her mother. When Sula overhears this debate between her mother and grandmother, she runs upstairs to the window in a suicidal gesture, but Nel’s presence placates her inner turmoil: “Nel’s call floated up and into the window, pulling her away from dark thoughts back into the bright, hot daylight” (57). Nel’s call in this instance stops Sula from attempting to retreat into the darkness of repression, but the girls find themselves consumed by the lack of parental and societal love. Immediately after Nel calls Sula back to the earth, the girls retreat to the woods by the river in an attempt to shed the shackles of their family’s disinterest. Once they arrive, Nel creates a “generous clearing” on the ground, and the girls begin digging in the earth (58). Like the Clearing in Beloved, this return to nature is supposed to be a means for healing after Sula’s traumatic experience, but soon the slow, peaceful digging
of the girls becomes a frantic, consuming activity as they struggle to contain their
emotions:

soon [Nel] grew impatient and poked her twig rhythmically and intensely into the earth, making
a small neat hole that grew deeper and wider with the least manipulation of her twig. Sula
copied her, and soon each had a hole the size of a cup. Nel began a more strenuous digging and,
rising to her knee, was careful to scoop out the dirt as she made her hole deeper. Together they
worked until the two holes were one and the same. When the depression was the size of a small
dishpan, Nel’s twig broke. With a gesture of disgust she threw the pieces into the hole they had
made. Sula threw hers in too. Nel saw a bottle cap and tossed it in as well. Each then looked
around for more debris to throw into the hole: paper, bits of glass, butts of cigarettes, until all of
the small defiling things they could find were collected there. Carefully they replaced the soil
and covered the entire grave with uprooted grass. (58-9)

As each girl attempts to uncover the turbulent emotions lying beneath the surface, they
join forces in a collective effort of discovery. When their tools for digging up these
emotions breaks, however, they give in to burying these emotions and the collective
debris in the ground. As a result, the clearing becomes a grave instead. Despite the
frenzy of activity, “neither one had spoken a word” (59). Since neither girl has an
emotional vocabulary because of their mothers, they are unable to convey what they
mean to say after this failed attempt at catharsis. This failure causes the girls to lash out
violently. When Chicken Little stumbles into the girls’ space, they transfer their anger
and despair to him and taunt him. Whereas their mothers exist above them and so
cannot be punished, Chicken Little is one of the few members of the Bottom who is
within their realm of power. Eventually, Sula twirls Chicken Little around until he flies
out of her grasp and into the river, thereby making the area into an actual grave and
initiating Sula into the violence of the Peace household.

The incident with Chicken Little destroys the innocence of the girls’ friendship
and impedes their ability to generate a healthy sense of self. Sula must repress the
knowledge of Chicken Little’s death, and as a result, she begins to display the same emotional distance as her mother and grandmother. When Hannah self-immolates because of Eva’s inability to give her the love she needs and her horror over Plum’s death, Sula can only watch her mother burn. Though people in the community think Sula was in shock, Eva believes that “Sula had watched Hannah burn not because she was paralyzed, but because she was interested” (78). Like Nel whom Eva says “watched” Chicken Little die, Sula watches rather than sees her mother’s death, and as a witness, she becomes partly culpable in her mother’s death. Sula is able to witness this horrific sight without demonstrating any emotion because she has been taught by the women in her family to use violence and emotional passivity as ways of confronting reality. Ironically, the lessons that Eva has passed down to Hannah and Sula force her to again sacrifice her body by jumping out of the window to try and ensure the survival of her daughter. As Melvin Dixon argues, “Sula’s paralyzing interest in watching her mother Hannah burn necessitated Eva’s leap of rescue out of that window” (Dixon 103). In this instance, Nel is unable to call Sula back from the darkness of the world, and there is no place in nature to return to as the girls’ clearing is the tragic site of Chicken Little’s death. To signify the gap that has developed in the girls’ friendship, Morrison does not resume the narrative after Hannah’s death until four years later when Nel is about to be married.

Nel’s marriage to Jude separates her from Sula and signals her compliance with the community and its preoccupation with survival. The culture of survival relies on the continued existence of the race in the presence of life-threatening violence and racist
institutions, and as a result, women are meant to facilitate the continued existence of African-American culture by marrying and giving birth to a new generation of survivors. The emphasis on sex, as opposed to love or emotional attachment, relates to the need for procreation in the place of the murkier and less productive term of “love.” Relationships between females, therefore, become extraneous as such interactions do not contribute to the basic needs of surviving in a precarious environment. Those females who do not choose to get married or have children are then posited as outsiders or threats to the culture. As Eva tells Sula: “Selfish. Ain’t no woman got no business floatin’ around without no man” (92). Nel’s marriage to Jude signals her step toward acceptance of a more standard female paradigm, and it is fitting that Sula exiles herself from the Bottom shortly after Nel’s marriage. As Wilfred Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems write: “Nel’s marriage to Jude… had given her an identity that required her to forfeit the necessary sense of self that remains salient to Sula” (Samuels 45). Sula recognizes this action as one which prompts Nel’s transition into the structured female model when she states: “Now Nel was one of them” (Sula 120; emphasis theirs). Again, the power of female relationships becomes subservient to a culture which promotes the union of males and females and which has a lasting influence on the identities that women are able to construct.

Indeed, Nel’s friendship with Sula had permitted her to develop a sense of self: “talking to Sula had always been a conversation with herself,” and without this friendship, Nel loses a means through which she might develop her identity (95). In response to the effects that the current culture has on women, Deborah McDowell
argues that “obedience to community also precludes intimacy with self for women” because of the institutionalized roles that they must play (McDowell 157). Concerning the novel *Sula* in particular, McDowell proposes that the often male-centered institution of marriage and such prescribed roles blunt the creative and imaginative powers of females: “The narrative strongly suggests that one cannot belong to the community and preserve the imagination, for the orthodox vocations for women—marriage and motherhood—restrict if not preclude imaginative expression” (157). This crisis in identity and expression is not limited to Morrison’s characters, however, as African-American women must combat such personally restrictive roles and environments on a daily basis. As Darlene Hine writes: “From the outset black women encountered an America that denied their humanity, debased their femininity, and refused them self-possession” (Hine 337, emphasis added). The inability to understand the self permeates Morrison’s texts. When Nel states “I’m me” within the text, she experiences a moment of indeterminacy as she “didn’t know quite what she meant, but on the other hand she knew exactly what she meant” (*Sula* 28). After her own experience with Chicken Little, Sula realizes that she too lacks an emotional core: “there was no self to count on either. She had no center, no speck around which to grow” (*Sula* 119). This lack of ‘self-possession’ is intertwined with the problems in expression within the culture of survival. The lack of self-possession proposed by Hine creates crises in identity, however, which are often hidden from even family and friends, and nearly every character in Morrison’s texts wrestles with unspeakable secrets and emotional repression. Nel’s relationship with Sula had empowered her with such a degree of self-
possession even as she pushes Sula away, a repressive gesture that Nel, like the inhabitants of the Bottom, does not recognize until the end of the novel when it is too late.

When Sula returns to the Bottom, she immediately works to subvert the culture of survival in the community. Her argument with Eva reveals her anger over the ways that the culture of survival and its system of emotional economics took away life from the Peace household. As she tells Eva, “just ’cause you was bad enough to cut off your own leg you think you got a right to kick everybody with the stump… you sold your life for twenty-three dollars a month” (92-3). When Eva responds that it is Sula who has thrown her life away, Sula responds “It’s mine to throw” (93). Her distinction is that Eva sacrificed her life for others’ survival whereas Sula has owned her life and her choices. Shortly thereafter, Sula has Eva removed from the house and is sure to sign her full name “very carefully” on the forms in order to again show ownership of her actions (94). Sula’s brash actions catalyze emotional changes within the community. Whereas Nel and those in the town are content to ignore their feelings, Sula confronts her emotions directly: “with a twist that was all her own imagination, she lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her” (118). Through her refusal to abide by the rules of the community, Sula manages to reform the Bottom and have its residents throw off (albeit briefly) the shackles of survival.

Sula’s arrival not only disrupts Eva and Nel’s households but also the community of the Bottom. Sula’s return allows Nel to regain her vision of the world:
“it was like getting the use of an eye back, having a cataract removed,” and she even discovers that her love for her husband which had “spun a steady gray web around her heart, became a bright and easy affection” (95). Nel is able once again to open herself to love and a life that is not defined by survival. When Nel and Sula are reunited in the novel, laughter acts as a healing balm for Nel. As the two women discuss their past and joke with one another, they both begin to laugh out loud, and Nel experiences a transformative bout of laughter: “It had been the longest time since she had had a rib-scraping laugh. She had forgotten how deep and down it could be. So different from the miscellaneous giggles and smiles she had learned to be content with these past few years” (98). Even Nel’s children are shocked by the sounds of the laughter as they come running into the room “puzzled by the wild free sounds, then delighted to see their mother stumbling merrily toward the bathroom” (97). Sula’s brash nature and disruptive presence allows Nel to possess her own emotions once more and excavate her sense of humor and joy from the layers of repression that life had prompted Nel to bury herself beneath.

Sula initially enacts the same type of change in the community of the Bottom as residents of the town are spurred to action by her arrival. Nel relates how “Sula never competed; she simply helped others define themselves. Other people seemed to turn their volume on and up when Sula was in the room” (95). Whereas Sula offers the prospect of friendship to Nel, she provides the town with the type of evil that must be vanquished, and her return allows the inhabitants of the Bottom to momentarily position their pain outside of themselves:
Their conviction of Sula’s evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways. Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love another. They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst. (117-18)

With Sula posited as the threat, characters such as Teapot’s mother suddenly become models of compassion and care. The presence of an external evil makes it safe to care for loved ones because such evils can be readily identified whereas the inner emotional worlds of the characters are more difficult to confront. The African-American perception of evil is concomitant with the philosophy of survival: “The purpose of evil was to survive it and they determined (without ever knowing they had made up their minds to do it) to survive floods, white people, tuberculosis, famine and ignorance” (90; emphasis added). Survival is again presented as the unconscious focus of African Americans in the Bottom. The people in the town are also suspicious of Sula because she displays none of the scars of survival that plague the townspeople: “Sula did not look her age. She was near thirty and, unlike them, had lost no teeth, suffered no bruises, developed no ring of fat at the waist or pocket at the back of her neck” (115). Because she exists partly apart from the cycle of emotional repression and resists the scars of the culture of survival, Sula reminds the town of what could be if they released their own emotions.

Although Sula is at first a force of audacious willpower in the community, she too succumbs to a life of mere survival. Like Eva, Sula’s strength hides her intense fear of the world and rejection from it. In her discussion of Sula and Shadrack, J. Brooks Bouson questions the strength of their rebellion and quotes from Léon Wurmser’s definition of shamelessness as “a form of hiding’ and that the shameless individual is
often ‘someone who was tragically humiliated and learned to defend woundedness with a defiant show of strength’” (Bouson 48). Just as Sula slashes part of her own finger off to thwart the boys’ plan of harassing her and Nel earlier in the novel, she now covers up her fears with a show of force. As Morrison writes, “Sula was so scared she had mutilated herself, to protect herself” (101). When Sula reflects on Nel’s involvement in the community’s cycle of survival, she reveals one of her few moments of vulnerability in the text: “It had surprised her a little and saddened her a good deal when Nel behaved the way the others would have” (120). As a result, she makes love to Jude both as a way of sharing something with Nel again and as a way of displaying her disgust with Nel’s life as a domestic housewife, aging prematurely like the other women in the Bottom. Later, Sula finds love with Ajax, but when she invests herself in him emotionally, Ajax takes flight and leaves like the airplanes which he loves. Melvin Dixon argues that this love for Nel and Ajax is what ultimately defeats Sula: “When Sula experiences the human frailty of love and possessiveness that ultimately destroys her at the same time that it brings her closer to Nel, she becomes just domestic enough to make the adventuresome Ajax lose interest” (Dixon 99). Abandoned by the two people that she had dared to put her trust in, Sula is relegated to a room at the top of Eva’s house where she is constantly reminded of the violence and emotional passivity of the Peace women:

Sula then occupies Eva’s third floor bedroom. Her hibernation behind the boarded window seals her fate in the family and in the community. Sula’s appropriation of height in the upper room does not, however, bring the desired refuge or elevation. Nor does it become the place of performance where the creation of character, the ‘making of oneself’ can take place. Although she repossesses a space, Sula... fails to find therein a voice for her identity. The self she finds in the house where she was born is still incomplete, as fragile and infantile as her uncle Plum. (98)
Whereas Sula had once touted her abilities to exist as her own person apart from the community, she now finds that her sense of self is crumbling. Having taken over the Peace household, she discovers that she is no more in possession of her life than either her uncle or Eva. With this revelation, Sula mimics the end of Baby Suggs’s life, trapped in her bed, unable to do more than stare at the walls and at the quilt that covers her wilting body.

Sula refuses to die as quietly as Baby Suggs, however. In her final conversation with Nel, Sula states that she is dying just like “every colored woman in this country is doing” but that she is “going down like one of those redwoods” instead of the women dying like “stump[s]” (143). Just as she owns her life in front of Eva, she owns her death in front of Nel: “I sure did live in this world” (143). Nel dismisses this show of strength by asking Sula what such an attitude has left her with, but Sula remains defiant: “Girl, I got my mind. And what goes on in it…my lonely is mine. Now your lonely is somebody else’s. Made by somebody else and handed to you. Ain’t that something? A secondhand lonely” (143; emphasis theirs). By resisting the culture of survival, Sula can no longer live in the community, but she can still lay claim to some sense of ownership of the self while Nel feels overwhelmed by her feelings of rage and loss because she has neither a husband nor a friend to lean on. Nel tries to make Sula feel a sense of guilt for her actions with Jude because of their friendship, but again, it is Sula who leaves Nel with a burning question in the narrative: “If we were such good friends, how come you couldn’t get over it?” (145). Nel cannot answer the question, and Sula’s death haunts her for this very reason.
With Sula’s death, the community and Nel attempt to return to their state of emotional repression, but each experiences a tragic catharsis of emotion. By the end of the novel, the community’s repressed rage begins to seep through the cracks in their calm veneer. The community’s catharsis occurs after Sula’s death since the target of their externalized anger is no longer present: “without [Sula’s] mockery, affection for others sank into flaccid disrepair” (153). The connections between wives and husbands, parents and children, and other kin relations disintegrate as they are left to contend with the internal emotions which they had previously projected onto Sula. Shortly thereafter, Shadrack begins his march on National Suicide Day and notices that, for the first time, a procession begins to trail him. In addition, many of the townspeople who had shunned laughter began to laugh at Shadrack and his parade and join in the procession. Morrison initially portrays the laughter as a relief from the internal pain that each person has carried as the people call their brethren “to help them open further this slit in the veil, this respite from anxiety, from dignity, from gravity, from the weight of that very adult pain that had undergirded them all those years before” (160). Laughter might be a healthy release of emotion, but it can also be the sign of repression of uglier emotions: “Just as a person driven by great sorrow may finally go into an orgy of laughter, just so an oppressed and too hard driven people breaks over into compensating laughter and merriment” (Fauset 49). Although the march becomes a release of such anger and hurt, the emotions of the townspeople overflow when they encounter the sight of the tunnel which had been a symbol of hope for the town:
Their hooded eyes swept over the place where their hope had lain since 1927. There was the promise: leaf-dead. The teeth unrepaired, the coal credit cut off, the chest pains unattended, the school shoes unbought, the rush-stuffed mattresses, the broken toilets, the leaning porches, the slurred remarks and the staggering childish malevolence of their employers. All there in blazing sunlit ice rapidly becoming water. (161)

Without the necessary language or tools to contend with their powerful emotions, the inhabitants of the Bottom find themselves possessed by the rage and hurt that they had each kept private from one another. Like Nel and Sula who dug in the clearing slowly before frantically scraping the ground and breaking their sticks, the citizens of the Bottom begin to destroy the tunnel using whatever they find around themselves, spiraling into a frenzied and violent breakdown. The destruction acts as a generational bridge as “Old and young, women and children, lame and hearty, they killed, as best they could, the tunnel they were forbidden to build” (161). The use of the verb “kill” in describing the intangible nature of their frustration and emotional despair reflects the difficulty in managing emotional values. How does one murder disappointment, slay despair, or assassinate frustrations and regrets? Eventually this paradoxical catharsis initiates a destructive chain: “They didn’t mean to go in, to actually go down into the lip of the tunnel, but in their need to kill it all, all of it, to wipe from the face of the earth… they went too deep, too far…” (161-62). As a number of the townspeople are literally swallowed and killed by the tunnel and rushing water, the act of catharsis becomes deadly. The act of going too deep or too far symbolizes the psychological act of unearthing the powerful emotions of rage and despair that become deadly after years of repression. Morrison is not advocating the continued repression of these powerful emotions, however. Rather, she is demonstrating the devastating effects that such
emotional avoidance wreaks on the African-American population as well as the necessity for a means to communicate the complex emotions of human existence.

For Nel, her realization that she had been repressing her feelings concerning Sula is not as overtly destructive, but she remains a tragic figure in the novel, moaning Sula’s name on the final page with no end in sight to her feelings of sorrow. Like the other residents of the Bottom, Nel buries her grief and rage deep within herself. After she catches Jude with Sula, Nel reverts to spending much of her psychic energy ignoring her feelings which Morrison symbolizes as a hovering gray ball: “She spent a whole summer with the gray ball, the little ball of fur and string and hair always floating in the light near her but which she did not see because she never looked. But that was the terrible part, the effort it took not to look” (109). Like the townspeople, Nel expends more energy avoiding her pain than in confronting it and healing. Before her final visit with Eva, Nel begins to exhume her feelings of loss as she discovers that the only love available to her is the stale and distant love of her children:

It didn’t take long, after Jude left, for her to see what the future would be. She had looked at her children and knew in her heart that that would be all. That they were all she would ever know of love. But it was a love that, like a pan of syrup kept too long on the stove, had cooked out, leaving only its odor and a hard, sweet sludge, impossible to scrape off. For the mouths of children quickly forgot the taste of her nipples, and years ago they had begun to look past her face into the nearest stretch of sky. (165)

Like her own mother from whom Nel felt estranged, Nel finds that the gap between her and her children is also growing.

Nel’s recognition of her inner sorrow parallels the Bottom’s catharsis as both realize too late that they have been repressing their actual emotions. As she walks past Shadrack on the street, Nel feels a presence in the air, and with tears in her eyes, she
realizes that it is her friendship that she has been missing: “‘All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude.’ And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. ‘We was girls together,’ she said as though explaining something. ‘O Lord, Sula,’ she cried, ‘girl, girl, girlgirlgirl!’” (Sula 174). The catharsis is a tragic one because Nel is only able to release her emotions after the death of her friend when there is no longer an opportunity for reconciliation. Morrison emphasizes this tragedy in the final line of the novel: “It was a fine cry—loud and long—but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow” (174). The circles represent the never-ending cycle of sorrow that Nel must experience as a result of her emotional repression, and the ending serves a warning to those living by the standards of the culture of survival. Melvin Dixon connects Nel’s ending to the tragic collapse of the tunnel through the public expression of a private grief: “Nel must also acknowledge the grief for Sula she had tried to suppress, only to discover in her solitary walk home that grief like guilt has no prescribed boundaries; it demands open public expression” (Dixon 97). Both the community of the Bottom and Nel attempt to release their anger and grief, but having avoided their pain for so long, neither can appropriately release their emotions.

The dual endings of the novel reflect the failure of the characters to reject cultural notions of forgetting and repression. When considering the residents of the Bottom and their inability to live their lives, Sula ties notions of flight and freefall together with the rejection of survival: “But the freefall, oh no, that required—demanded—invention: a thing to do with the wings, a way of holding the legs, and most of all a full surrender to the downward flight if they wished to taste their tongues or stay

87
alive. But alive was what they, and now Nel, did not want to be. Too dangerous” (120). Living is dangerous because it requires improvisation and total surrender to life with both its joys and its sorrows. The choice to survive is easier, but the psychology behind such a decision only allows people to avoid emotions despite experiencing the same tragedies. With no desire to confront the feelings that accumulate over time, individuals lose the ability to connect with one another, and Sula documents the ways in which such a psychology destroys families, friendships, and marriages. Although Sula wants to embrace such freefall and invention, she still finds herself in the Bottom, in the same house in which she grew up. As Dixon asserts, “Sula longs for flight and song but gets no farther than the upper rooms of Eva’s house of death” (Dixon 94). The tragedy of Sula, therefore, is that before the characters are able to choose life and discover the joyful inventiveness of flight, they have fallen to the earth under the weight of their own attempts at survival.
Surrendering to the Air: Rejecting Survival in Order to Live in *Song of Solomon*

Like *Sula*, *Song of Solomon* revolves in part around a “joke” whose punchline reveals the psychology of the cultural of survival within the African-American community. The joke that bounces back and forth between Guitar and Milkman is centered on Milkman’s surname. When a drunken Milkman tells Guitar that somebody should have shot his father, Guitar replies “what for? He was already Dead” (*Song of Solomon* 89). This joke recurs several times throughout the narrative, and the novel explores the ways in which each member of the Dead family has given up on living their lives, settling instead for surviving in a house and in a family that denies them a cohesive sense of self. Unlike *Beloved* and *Sula*, in which the characters remain entrenched in cultural repression and emotional economics, however, *Song of Solomon* traces the path of Milkman Dead from the throes of the culture of survival to the choice of flight and of life. The very process of writing the novel centered around the idea of flight as Morrison describes how she attempted to create a new narrative imagination: “The challenge of *Song of Solomon* was to manage what was for me a radical shift in imagination from a female locus to a male one. To get out of the house, to de-domesticate the landscape that had so far been the site of my work. To travel. To fly” (xii). Milkman mirrors this process as he must leave his family’s house and travel to the South to uncover his roots and discover the power of flight.

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison explores for the first time black characters who have achieved the upper middle-class lifestyle and attained a degree of success within the community. Despite the Deads’ material signs of success, the family is doomed to
an emotional purgatory by the culture of survival that thrives on the cycle of materialism and social status that Macon desires. Morrison describes each of the family’s possessions in terms of their oppressive weight. The Dead household is a “big dark house of twelve rooms” that was “more prison than palace” (9-10). The green sedan that is a symbol of pride for Macon is known as “Macon Dead’s hearse” in town because “the Packard had no real lived life at all” (33). None of the members of the Dead family, in fact, have such a “lived life.” Instead, each of the Deads is trapped by their possessions, cut off from their town because of their class status and removed from each other because of the absence of a love ethic in the family. In *All About Love: New Visions*, bell hooks explores the ways in which patriarchy and capitalism interweave and subvert the structure of love within the family:

> Capitalism and patriarchy together, as structures of domination, have worked overtime to undermine and destroy this larger unit of extended kin. Replacing the family community with a more privatized small autocratic unit helped increase alienation and made abuses of power more possible. (*Visions* 130)

As the patriarch, Macon refuses to let his family know their relatives and uses his possessions to cut his family off from the community as well. When describing the drives that Macon Dead takes each week, the narrator relates how “these rides that the family took on Sunday afternoons had become rituals and much too important for Macon to enjoy. For him it was a way to satisfy himself that he was indeed a successful man” (31). Macon works to prove his success even as he fails to live his life apart from his possessions, and his advice to his son reflects his obsession with using possessions as a way to achieve freedom: “Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you’ll own yourself and other people too” (55). Rather than owning his
feelings, Macon attempts to own himself through success in business, yet he finds his objects to be a poor substitute for placating his feelings of hatred and loss. In order to feel at ease in the world, Macon grasps his keys to all of the houses that he owns: “[he] curled his fingers around them, letting their bunchy solidity calm him. They were the keys to all the doors of his houses...and he fondled them from time to time as he walked down Not Doctor Street to his office” (17). The keys are unable to provide Macon with the emotional release that he needs, however, as he admits that the “disgust and the uneasiness with which he regarded his son affected everything he did in that city. If he could have felt sad, simply sad, it would have relieved him” (16). Later, Macon finds that he cannot even glance at the homes that he owns because he finds them haunting to look at: “Scattered here and there, his houses stretched up beyond him like squat ghosts with hooded eyes. He didn’t like to look at them in this light” (27). Macon refuses to feel anything besides bitterness, and rather than provide a model for success in the black community, he exists as an example of what not to become. As Mrs. Bains tells her children, “a nigger in business is a terrible thing to see” (22). It is not the success that Macon finds which causes Mrs. Bains to lash out at him, but the fact that he has removed himself completely from the community that he might help to raise up from despair. Unable to love himself, his family, or his community, Macon finds himself living up to his last name.

Like her husband, Ruth is unable to develop a cohesive sense of self and is defined by the objects outside herself. Her identity has been so oppressed by living in Macon Dead’s prison that her one reminder that she exists is a large water mark on the
dining room table. Ruth identifies herself only in relation to a stain in the house, and she states “that she was alive somewhere, inside, which she acknowledged to be true only because a thing she knew intimately was out there, outside herself” (11). Ruth cannot identify either with her husband or with her children as there is no love ethic in the Dead family, and so she must posit her individuality in relation to the flawed possessions around her. Starved for physical affection and intimacy, Ruth breastfeeds her son long after it is healthy to do so because as she puts it, “something else is needed to get from sunup to sundown: a balm, a gentle touch or nuzzling of some sort” (13). Ruth has resigned herself to surviving in a world where her needs and wants are ignored by her family, and so she must disrupt her son’s personal growth and individuality in order to endure another day. Like Sethe, Ruth is unable to view her child as a distinct person, and as a result, she treats Milkman as an obsession: “Her son had never been a real person to her, a separate real person. He had always been her passion” (131). As Milkman grows older, he begins to understand how his mother has been stunted by the life she has led: “Now he saw her as a frail woman content to do tiny things; to grow and cultivate small life that would not hurt her if it died: rhododendron, goldfish, dahlias, geraniums, imperial tulips. Because these little lives did die” (64). Traumatized by her father’s death and her husband’s violence and emotional distance, Ruth contents herself with caring for these tiny lives because they ask for little emotional investment on her part.

Indeed, Ruth admits to living a life as small as these plants and animals when she tells Milkman, “I lived in a great big house that pressed me into a small package”
Both her husband and her father provide Ruth with subtle pleasures once Milkman is too old to breastfeed, however. Ruth aggravates her husband to the point of violence (the only way Macon will touch her anymore) and visits the grave of her father where she desires “to talk. To talk to somebody who wanted to listen and not laugh at me. Somebody I could trust. Somebody who trusted me. Somebody who was...interested in me. For my own self” (125). Emotionally broken by the two men in her life, Ruth still finds herself turning back to these men for attention in a cycle of emotional paralysis. Later, Milkman tells Guitar that his mother has become so small within her world that she cannot demonstrate joy in her daily life: “She smiles sometimes, even makes a little sound. But I don’t believe she has ever laughed out loud” (104). When Pilate sits down with Ruth to discuss Hagar’s attempts on her son’s life, Pilate describes how Ruth “was dying of lovelessness then, and seemed to be dying of it now” (151). Despite Ruth’s subtle displays of power and rebellion in the house, she remains compliant with Macon’s violent household and ushers Milkman into a world where survival and emotional passivity are one and the same.

With two parents whose enmity crushes their very sense of self and two sisters who are distant in both age and emotional attachment, Milkman Dead finds himself with few means of developing as an individual. As the first black child born in Mercy/No Mercy Hospital because of the flight of Robert Smith, Milkman comes into the world with a fascination with flight. When he finds that he is unable to fly, however, Milkman dismisses himself as worthy of attention and love:
When the little boy discovered, at four, the same thing Mr. Smith had learned earlier—that only birds and airplanes could fly—he lost all interest in himself. To have to live without that single gift saddened him and left his imagination so bereft that he appeared dull even to the women who did not hate his mother. (9)

By the age of four, Milkman has begun to display the emotional passivity that his world demands of him, and his sense of self begins to fragment. With no self to rely on, Milkman is unable to think of a future for himself: “It was becoming a habit—this concentration on things behind him. Almost as though there were no future to be had” (35). Like many of Morrison’s characters, Milkman exists in a temporal prison—focusing on the past at the expense of his possible future. After Milkman hits his father, he becomes an independent force in the household for the first time, but when he looks at himself in the mirror, he comments that his face “lacked coherence, a coming together of the features into a total self. It was all very tentative, the way he looked, like a man peeping around a corner of someplace he is not supposed to be, trying to make up his mind whether to go forward or to turn back” (69-70). His one burst of independence leaves him with no sense of self because he does not know where to proceed from this action. With a confused sense of time and space, Milkman survives in his father’s dark house in an emotional stasis—strong enough to hit his father, but not strong enough to escape the Dead household.

Throughout Song of Solomon, Milkman is unable to decide what direction to take in life and how to experience emotional connections with other individuals. Despite having no interest in his father’s business, Milkman finds himself living out his father’s life: “If he had to spend the rest of his life thinking about rents and property, he’d lose his mind. But he was going to spend the rest of his life doing just that, wasn’t
Caught in the record groove of survival that the Traces were able to avoid in *Jazz* through improvisation, Milkman lacks the tools necessary to confront his life. After Milkman learns about his mother’s incestuous relationship with her father from Macon, he finds himself walking down the street in his town, but in an surreal moment of awareness, he sees that “the street was even more crowded with people, all going in the direction he was coming from” (78). Pushing against the wave of people, Milkman finds himself once again looking in the opposite direction of everyone else. Like his time in the Packard where he always looked back, Milkman moves against the current of people pushing him back, unable to change direction or improvise a new trajectory: “Milkman walked on, still headed toward Southside, never once wondering why he himself did not cross over to the other side of the street, where no one was walking at all” (78). This same sense of directionless movement occurs after an argument with Guitar when Milkman wonders whether his friend was right that “his life was pointless, aimless, and it was true that he didn’t concern himself an awful lot about other people. There was nothing he wanted bad enough to risk anything for, inconvenience himself for” (107). This inability to risk himself for others is a symptom of the emotional economy of the culture of survival. To give himself to another in love or friendship requires an emotional investment that Milkman does not consider worthwhile. Having never witnessed the love ethic in his own family, Milkman cannot conjure up an idea of love that does not revolve around his own needs. In an interview with Michael Silverblatt, Toni Morrison discusses the intertwining themes of love and selfishness in her novels:
The question is, how are we able to love under duress, and when we can, what distorts it for us and how can we negotiate the various kinds of claims on love that we choose in order to make it include ourselves, the love of the self that is not narcissistic, not simply selfish. And also how do we love something bigger than ourselves in a way that is not martyrdom, not setting oneself aside completely. How do we negotiate between those two extremes to get to some place where the love is generous. (Silverblatt 171)

This negotiation between the two extremes of love reoccurs throughout the novel as Milkman works towards an understanding of such generous love as he battles with both Guitar and Hagar and their own violent notions of love. Armed only with the advice of his father to let his possessions own other possessions, Milkman initially perceives materialism, rather than love, as the escape from a life of survival. To remove himself from the world of his father, Milkman must therefore reconnect with Pilate and his extended family to encounter a world free from the prison of materialism.

Milkman’s initial visit to Pilate’s household catalyzes his journey towards the discovery of his past and his choice of life by the novel’s climax. The narrator describes Pilate as “the woman who had as much to do with [Milkman’s] future as she had his past” (36). For the first time, the idea of Milkman’s future is addressed, and with Pilate, he is able to look both forward and backward in time and see the connection between the two. Pilate also presents Milkman with a paradigm not only of survival but also of life. Pilate ’s mother dies before she even gives birth, yet Pilate “inched [her] way headfirst out of a still, silent, and indifferent cave of flesh, dragging her own cord and her own afterbirth behind her” (28). Even before she has been born, therefore, Pilate has had to choose life for herself. Whereas her brother cuts himself off from the community by choice, Pilate finds that her lack of a belly button distances her from any chance of community: “Already without family, she was further isolated from her
people, for, except for the relative bliss on the island, every other resource was denied her: partnership in marriage, confessional friendship, and communal religion” (148). Rather than waste away as an individual because of her outsider status, Pilate begins to consider how to live her life apart from the community: “then she tackled the problem of trying to decide how she wanted to live and what was valuable to her. When am I happy and when am I sad and what is the difference? What do I need to know to stay alive? What is true in the world?” (149). This pursuit is not a common one in Morrison’s novels as few characters apart from Pilate attempt either to discover what makes them happy in life or to attribute values to specific emotions. With this new tact, Pilate rejects social norms in favor of understanding human interactions as “she gave up, apparently, all interest in table manners or hygiene, but acquired a deep concern for and about human relationships” (149). As an individual who has thrived in her outside status, Pilate is the perfect model for Milkman’s search for a life with direction.

In addition to opening Milkman’s notions of the past and future, Pilate also disrupts his notions of poverty. Milkman notices that although Pilate does not possess the signifiers of wealth that his father has, she is not defined by this lack of objects: “And while she looked as poor as everyone said she was, something was missing from her eyes that should have confirmed it” (38). Pilate might be poor according to the standards of society, but she is rich in her spirit of living, in her confidence and generosity. In *Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle: The Novels of Toni Morrison*, Gurleen Grewal argues that “Milkman’s tutelage under Aunt Pilate, her turning him toward the past, becomes a question of reconstituting his values,” and it is through
Pilate that Milkman begins to reassess his views on time, freedom, and love (Grewal 61). Although Pilate’s house is much smaller than the Dead mansion, Milkman notices that the “the piny-winy smell was narcotic, and so was the sun streaming in, strong and unfettered because there were no curtains or shades at the windows that were all around the room” (40). The “unfettered” sunlight entering the room directly contrasts with the darkness of the Dead household, and Milkman begins to feel at ease with the family that he has never met before. Soon he finds not only happiness in the house with Pilate, Reba, and Hagar but also love:

Milkman was five feet seven then but it was the first time in his life that he remembered being completely happy. He was with his friend, an older boy—wise and kind and fearless. He was sitting comfortably in the notorious wine house; he was surrounded by women who seemed to enjoy him and who laughed out loud. And he was in love. No wonder his father was afraid of them. (47)

Starved for positive emotional contact, Milkman discovers the freedom and possibility of love that exists apart from the possessions of his father and the lovelessness of his family.

With Hagar, Milkman has his first experience with love, but both characters are too hungry for a home in the world to be able to create a mutual relationship with one another. When Milkman first meets Hagar, he relates how “Hagar’s voice scooped up what little pieces of heart he had left to call his own” (49). Likewise, Hagar tells her mother and Pilate that “some of my days were hungry ones,” and Pilate understands that she is not talking about food (48). Although their initial relationship is a passionate one, Milkman begins to resent Hagar’s presence in his life. Once Hagar demonstrates the same easy domesticity that Sula adopts with Ajax, Milkman, like Sula’s lover, loses
interest. Milkman notices that Hagar “began to wait for him, and the more involved he got with the other part of his social life, the more reliable she became” (98). Once Hagar posits “duty squarely in the middle of their relationship,” however, Milkman “tried to think of a way out” (98). Duty is an active part of the love ethic, yet Milkman still maintains the selfish version of love that Morrison describes to Silverblatt. He can love someone else only insofar as they make his life easier or provide him with an escape from his aimless life. When he finally decides to end his relationship with his cousin, Milkman writes Hagar an impersonal note and includes a small amount of money, an act that sends Hagar into a violent spiral of despair:

And he did sign it with love, but it was the word ‘gratitude’ and the flat-out coldness of ‘thank you’ that sent Hagar spinning into a bright blue place where the air was thin and it was silent all the time, and where people spoke in whispers or did not make sounds at all, and where everything was frozen except for an occasional burst of fire inside her chest that crackled away until she ran out into the streets to find Milkman Dead. (99)

Milkman’s gratitude destroys Hagar because his note attempts to create a neat and sterile break to her passionate love. Rather than approach the issue of their relationship mutually, Milkman positions himself as the calm, detached decision-maker and removes Hagar’s voice from the equation.

With Milkman’s note and money as the only objects to hold on to, the love that Hagar feels for Milkman becomes a sickness that like Joe Trace’s obsession with Dorcas can only end in death of one of the lovers. The narrator relates how “her maturity and blood kinship converted her passion to fever, so it was more affliction than affection” (127). This illness is described by those in the town as “one of them graveyard loves,” signaling the inevitable violent outcome of such an affliction (128).
The link between love and death is constant in Morrison’s fiction as parents murder children and lovers kill one another as a result of their misguided notions of love. Having never possessed themselves emotionally, Morrison’s characters are unable to own their love, preferring instead to give themselves entirely to their partners. When these partners refuse to take on this responsibility, the individual has no self on which to rely in order to contend with this rejection in a healthy way. Hagar’s repeated attempts at murdering Milkman, therefore, are desperate pleas for Milkman’s contact and his acknowledgment that she is worthy of his attention.

Love is a dangerous term in Morrison’s novels, and Hagar’s ultimate destruction is an example of how individuals without a cohesive sense of self cannot love coherently. The narrator states that Hagar’s murderous rage was “part and parcel of the mystery of having been ‘lifed’ by love” (129). Here, love is considered a prison rather than as a means for growth and flight, and the violence of Hagar is defined as just another facet of the mystery of love. The love of Hagar is not the love ethic of Cornel West and bell hooks, however. Instead, Hagar exhibits an all-consuming obsession that subjugates her own sense of self and depends on ownership of another. As Guitar tells Hagar later, “it’s a bad word ‘belong.’ Especially when you put it with somebody you love. Love shouldn’t be like that... You can’t own a human being. You can’t lose what you don’t own” (306). Guitar’s words mirror bell hooks’ assertion that “awakening to love can happen only as we let go of our obsession with power and domination” (Visions 87). Love cannot depend on the emotional enslavement of another, yet Hagar decides that since she cannot own Milkman, she will ensure that no one else can either.
Despite needing Milkman in her life, therefore, Hagar cannot control her desire to kill him:

She loved nothing in the world except this woman’s son, wanted him alive more than anybody, but hadn’t the least bit of control over the predator that lived inside her. Totally taken over by her anaconda love, she had no self left, no fears, no wants, no intelligence that was her own. (136-7)

Consumed by what she considers to be love, Hagar finds her very sense of self crushed by the “anaconda love” that she feels. Indeed, when Ruth confronts Hagar about her violent actions, Ruth believes that “she was not looking at a person but at an impulse” (137). Hagar’s individuality has been destroyed by her drive to reacquire Milkman’s love, and when she states that Milkman “is my home in this world,” Hagar illuminates one of the difficulties of love in the culture of survival (137). Rather than build a home for oneself in the world as Pilate has done, Hagar depends on another to create that home for her. Milkman, however, is also searching for a home in the world as he finds his own life to be without purpose. As neither can own their individuality, neither can offer the other the love that they need.

The role of a cohesive sense of self is crucial to the idea of love in the narrative. Guitar warns Hagar about surrendering her entire individuality to Milkman: “You’re turning over your whole life to him. Your whole life, girl. And if it means so little to you that you can just give it away, hand it to him, then why should it mean any more to him? He can’t value you more than you value yourself” (306). Love requires a degree of mutuality that is impossible if an individual does not value himself or herself. Hagar gave all of herself to Milkman, and in return, she received a thank you note with a gift of money, an act that defined Hagar’s value for herself. Like Milkman, Hagar lacks the
ability to improvise, to create a means of escaping her painful obsession because she
was “not strong enough, like Pilate, nor simple enough, like Reba, to make up her life as
they had” (307). Instead, Hagar turns to possessions to reconstitute her value. Hagar
undertakes a new rampage, this time through the downtown, buying dresses, slips,
nylons, and make-up. She tells Pilate and her mother that “‘I need everything’... and
everything is what she got” (310). Surrounding herself with new objects and
possessions does not aid Hagar’s search for self-worth, however, as her sense of self is
so distorted that while trying on a dress, “she was convinced that her whole life
depended on whether or not those aluminum teeth would meet” (310-11). With her new
hairstyle and wardrobe, Hagar returns home only to be drenched in the rain—one of
several scenes in the novel where nature washes away the contrived self. When Hagar
sees herself for the first time in the eyes of her loved ones, she experiences a complete
breakdown as she realizes that no external changes can mask the internal ugliness and
rejection that she feels:

And it was in their eyes that she saw what she had not seen before in the mirror: the wet ripped
hose, the soiled white dress, the sticky, lumpy face powder, the streaked rouge, and the wild wet
shoals of hair. All this she saw in their eyes, and the sight filled her own with water warmer and
much older than the rain. Water that lasted for hours, until the fever came, and then it stopped.
The fever dried her eyes up as well as her mouth. (314)

Having invested all of the household’s money and all of her emotions into trying to
become more sexually attractive to Milkman, Hagar experiences a cathartic release of
emotions that consumes her in sorrow. Like the community of the Bottom, Hagar’s
catharsis proves deadly as she succumbs to her negative self-image.

Hagar’s “anaconda” and “graveyard” love offers Milkman one version of
destructive passion, but it is his relationship with Guitar that functions as the axis upon which the novel operates. As with Sula and Nel, Guitar and Milkman initially find strength in their friendship. Morrison writes that “when they succeeded they rode the wind and covered their mouths to aggravate their laughter” (177). When Milkman struggles to come to terms with his family’s dysfunction, it is Guitar who provides him with an outlet for his thoughts, and once Hagar begins her murderous stalking of Milkman, it is in Guitar’s house that Milkman finds relief: “Milkman began to laugh. Guitar had done it again. He’d come to the door sopping wet, ready to roll over and die, and now he was laughing, spilling tea, and choking out his reply” (115). Although Guitar and Milkman initially resist the strain of the culture of survival, the downfall of their relationship parallels the demise of Nel and Sula’s friendship. Milkman’s reluctance to live his life and his aimless approach to the world around him distances him from Guitar, who has chosen to actively search for a way to create meaning in a traumatic world of racial violence. Although Milkman thinks Guitar criticizes him because of where he lives, Guitar asserts that it is “not where you live—where you hang out. You don’t live nowhere. Not Not Doctor Street or Southside” (103; emphasis theirs). Guitar understands that Milkman has not chosen to live his life, preferring instead to use alcohol and women as an escape from his life. When Milkman tries to define himself as a “man that refuses to live in Montgomery,” Guitar admonishes him by saying: “No. A man that can’t live there. If things ever got tough, you’d melt. You’re not a serious person” (104; emphasis added). Milkman’s passive embrace of the death that Hagar offers him only further distances him from Guitar who dedicates
himself to the survival of the race. The dividing line between the two men, therefore, is agency—with Guitar actively seeking to live and Milkman passively searching for escape.

Agency also distinguishes the idea of love between the two men. Milkman believes that love centers around others loving him for himself. Guitar, on the other hand, believes that his work with the Seven Days is an act of love for others, yet his path towards violence is paved with the psychology of survival. Guitar explains to Milkman that the project is based on the proliferation of the race: “It’s not about you living longer. It’s about how you live and why. It’s about whether your children can make other children. It’s about trying to make a world where one day white people will think before they lynch” (160). Guitar’s aspires to ignite a revolution in the philosophy of living, but his means are weighted down by death and secrecy. Blinded by survival, Guitar argues that his actions are a valid response to a world where African Americans must do whatever they can just to stay alive:

The cards are stacked against us and just trying to stay in the game, stay alive and in the game, makes us do funny things. Things we can’t help. Things that make us hurt one another. We don’t even know why. But look here, don’t carry it inside and don’t give it to nobody else. Try to understand it, but if you can’t, just forget it and keep yourself strong, man. (87-8)

Guitar seems to be advocating a level of introspection that precludes hurting others, but his ultimate advice is to repress whatever feelings and emotions are too strong to cope with—advice that disrupts and destroys the communities in Beloved and Sula.

Although Milkman tries to persuade him that love cannot be linked to murdering other people, Guitar remains grounded in his convictions that the Seven Days is about love: “No love? No love? Didn’t you hear me? What I’m doing ain’t about hating white
people. It’s about loving us. About loving you. My whole life is love” (159). Guitar’s love is one that cannot be shared with others, however, as he must keep his actions secret, and his membership in the group dissuades him from relationships with others. The actions of the other members of the Seven Days demonstrate that this type of love is a cross that becomes too heavy to bear. Robert Smith’s suicide note in which he writes “Please forgive me, I loved you all” reads as a plea for understanding from the community, yet his death leads to no greater awareness on the part of those who witness his death (3). Later in the narrative, Porter drunkenly calls out to a crowd that has gathered by his apartment: “I’ll take hate any day. But don’t give me love. I can’t take no more love, Lord. I can’t carry it. Just like Mr. Smith. He couldn’t carry it. It’s too heavy” (26). In each case, the love that Guitar tells Milkman about is a destructive weight on the psyches of the Seven Days members. Guitar’s love, therefore, is directly intertwined with the all-consuming graveyard love of Hagar.

Despite the increasing divide between the two friends as a result of Guitar’s involvement with the Seven Days and Milkman’s lack of agency, both men fall prey to the culture of survival and materialism. Milkman and Guitar’s plan to rob Pilate of her inheritance revolves around satisfying their physical needs. Guitar requires the money to continue his work with the Seven Days, and Milkman needs the money to escape the temporal prison of his father’s house: “he just wanted to beat a path away from his parents’ past, which was also their present and which was threatening to become his present as well” (180). Hovering over both of the men, however, is Macon Dead’s advice that “money is freedom... The only real freedom there is,” advice that keeps the
men from confronting the emotions that keep them grounded from flight (163). While discussing their plans to rob Pilate, Milkman notices a white peacock that awkwardly flies in brief spurts. Captivated by its flight, Milkman asks Guitar why the bird cannot fly as well as other birds, and Guitar’s answer illuminates the central issue of flight for the characters in the narrative: “too much tail. All that jewelry weighs it down. Like vanity. Can’t nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down” (179). This vanity comes in many forms—whether it is the materialism of Macon, the supposedly righteous wrath of the Seven Days, or the selfishness of Milkman. In each case, men are grounded by their inability to live their lives apart from the negative emotions that threaten to consume them. Just as their plan to rob Pilate comes to fruition, Milkman finds himself terrified by the prospect of making a final decision, and Guitar rebukes him for his passivity: “I just quit listening. You listen! You got a life? Live it! Live the motherfuckin life! Live it!” (183). This call to live catalyzes Milkman’s desire to assume agency in his life:

Milkman’s eyes opened wide. He tried hard not to swallow, but the clarion call in Guitar’s voice filled his mouth with salt. The same salt that lay in the bottom of the sea and in the sweat of a horse’s neck. A taste so powerful and necessary that stallions galloped miles and days for it. It was new, it was delicious, and it was his own. All the tentativeness, doubt, and inauthenticity that plagued him slithered away without a trace, a sound. (183)

For the first time in the novel, Milkman feels an emotion that he can call his own, and his feelings of fear and self-doubt evaporate. As a result, Milkman discovers that the fragmented self that he saw in the mirror after hitting his father begins to coalesce into a cohesive sense of self: “he felt a self inside himself emerge, a clean-lined definite self” (183). This sense of self is built on counterfeit agency, however. Rather than create a
new life for himself, Milkman tries to steal the means for that life from others, and as he and Guitar walk away to rob Pilate, Morrison writes that “far down the road, a long way from Milkman and Guitar, the peacock spread its tail” (184). This final image of the peacock symbolizes the inability of Guitar and Milkman to achieve flight as they are still grounded by the psychology of survival.

Guitar and Milkman’s failure to find the inheritance that they are searching for signals the final break between the two friends as Milkman decides to undertake the journey to find the inheritance on his own. Milkman realizes that he has been attaching himself to individuals whose strength he lacked: “his father, Pilate, Guitar. He gravitated toward each one, envious of their fearlessness” (177). As a result, Milkman desires to experience his journey on his own in order to feel the rush of flight for the first time: “This one time he wanted to go solo. In the air, away from real life, he felt free, but on the ground, when he talked to Guitar just before he left, the wings of all those other people’s nightmares flapped in his face and constrained him” (220). Whereas his father tells him to own material possessions so that they might own others, Milkman soon discovers that there is no physical treasure to be had and instead sets out to discover and take ownership of his history, a step that bell hooks argues is crucial for individuality: “the process of becoming a subject, of owning one’s story, is necessary for self-recovery, for the building of self-esteem” (Homegrown 114). Before his journey to Pennsylvania and Virginia, Milkman declares that “all he knew in the world about the world was what other people had told him. He felt like a garbage pail for the actions and hatreds of other people. He himself did nothing” (120). After his flight
from home, however, Milkman begins to discover his roots in the world. When he
meets Reverend Cooper in Danville, the Reverend tells him “I know your people!”
and Milkman feels a surge of connection to the world around him:

Milkman smiled and let his shoulders slump a little. It was a good feeling to come into a strange
town and find a stranger who knew your people. All his life he’d heard the tremor in the word:
‘I live here, but my people...’ or ‘She acts like she ain’t got no people’ or ‘Do any of your
people live there?’ But he hadn’t known what it meant: links. (229; emphasis theirs)

Having never found evidence of the love ethic in his own family, Milkman is excited to
learn that his family extends beyond the family trapped in Dead mansion and the
woman trying to kill him. Milkman is still burdened by the possessions that threaten to
own him, however, and so part of his journey revolves not only around learning about
his history but also shedding the weight of materialism.

Milkman’s journey of discovery also requires him to free himself of his ties to
earthly possessions and return to the simplicity of nature. This process begins when
Milkman attempts to find the cave where he believes the inheritance is buried. As he
hikes toward the cave, the signifiers of wealth that set Milkman apart from those in
town are stripped away from him: “his hat had been knocked off by the first branches of
the old walnut trees, so he held it in his hand. His cuffless pants were darkened by the
mile-long walk over moist leaves” (238). Later, he notices that his watch has been
damaged in the hike: “it ticked, but the face was splintered and the minute hand was
bent” (250). Without the protection of his possessions and outside the bounds of time,
Milkman looks around and notices nature for the first time: “the low hills in the distance
were no longer scenery to him. They were real places that could split your thirty-dollar
shoes” (257). In Danville, Milkman begins to discover a sense of community and of
connection to the earth, a process that culminates in his fateful decision in Shalimar.

Although Milkman arrives in Virginia once again wearing an expensive suit, he soon finds himself in a fight in the general store where his face, hand, and suit are slashed. Milkman’s flippant attitude about his car and the men whose names he does not ask for distances him from those in the town, but after demonstrating his manliness in the fight, he is invited to rejoin the community of men by hunting with them. In order to participate in the hunt, Milkman must abandon his suit as the men “outfitted [him] completely” (271). Separated from the men early on in hunt, Milkman must rely on himself to follow the sounds of the hunters and avoid becoming lost in the woods. Resting by a tree and unencumbered by “his money, his car, his father’s reputation, his suit, or his shoes,” Milkman experiences a moment of clarity concerning love, an epiphany in borrowed clothes:

Apparently he thought he deserved only to be loved—from a distance, though—and given what he wanted. And in return he would be... what? Pleasant? Generous? Maybe all he was really saying was: I am not responsible for your pain; share your happiness with me but not your unhappiness. (277)

In his own clearing, Milkman realizes the system of emotional economics under which he had been operating—allowing others to love him only insofar as he did not have to spend emotional energy in return. With this new understanding, Milkman is able to free the self that had been imprisoned by his possessions and aimless feelings of anger and resentment: “under the moon, on the ground, alone, with not even the sound of baying dogs to remind him that he was with other people, his self—the cocoon that was ‘personality’—gave way” (277). When Guitar attempts to murder him shortly after this new self emerges, Milkman feels sorrow over leaving a world he had just discovered
and fights to escape his friend’s deadly grasp rather than passively accepting death as he had with Hagar. Finding his way back to his companions, Milkman “found himself exhilarated by simply walking the earth. Walking it like he belonged on it; like his legs were stalks, tree trunks, a part of his body that extended down down down into the rock and soil, and were comfortable there... And he did not limp” (281). Freed of psychological turmoil, Milkman loses his physical defect as well.

With his new understanding of love and revived will to live, Milkman returns from the hunting trip to uncover the historical roots of his family. Ato Quayson argues that Milkman’s quest parallels the reader’s journey through the novel: “Milkman’s initially reluctant but later laborious interpretative exertions on the quest for his heritage mirror our own exertions in trying to piece together the meanings of the novel” (Quayson 88). Like Milkman, the reader must work through layers of mythology and texts to uncover the meaning of flight in the narrative. Through his search, the boy who lost interest in himself because he could not fly discovers that he is the descendant of Solomon, a slave who was rumored to have flown back to Africa, leaving his family behind. This flight, which Morrison describes as an “ambiguous, disturbing” one, left Solomon’s wife to take care of his children (ix). The flight was a physical escape for Solomon, but it had consequences for a host of other individuals, and as a result, Solomon was not really free even if he did make it back to Africa. As the ghost of Pilate’s father tells her, “you just can’t fly on off and leave a body.... A human life is precious. You shouldn’t fly off and leave it” (208). Pilate’s father is referring to his own body, but his statement shades our understanding of Solomon’s flight and
undercuts some of the triumph of the tale. The bodies of his wife and children that Solomon leaves behind constitute a failure on his part as a husband and a father. Grace Ann Hovet and Barbara Lounsberry “conclude that [Morrison’s] black men can fly free only when they establish a strong self-identity yet simultaneously maintain a positive connection to the community” (Mayberry 72). Solomon’s identity is sound, but he cuts himself off from the community in flight. Milkman’s flight by the end of the novel differs therefore from Solomon’s in that Milkman flies toward, rather than away from, his responsibilities.

The self that emerges in the woods does not dissipate when Milkman leaves his hunting friends. Instead, Milkman finds the strength to continue his journey despite the looming threat from Guitar. As he tells Sweet, “I can’t let him direct and determine what I do, where I go or when. If I do that now I’ll do it all my life and he’ll run me off the earth” (294). Before he returns home to find Pilate, Milkman also finds love and exhibits a degree of mutuality in his relationship with Sweet:

He soaped and rubbed her until her skin squeaked and glistened like onyx. She put salve on his face. He washed her hair. She sprinkled talcum on his feet. He straddled her behind and massaged her back. She put witch hazel on his swollen neck. He made up the bed. She gave him gumbo to eat. He washed the dishes. She washed his clothes and hung them out to dry. He scoured her tub. (285)

For the first time in the narrative, Milkman puts into practice a love ethic, one born from mutual respect and care, and one which opens him to the possibility of sharing his new self with another. Although Milkman gives Sweet money before he leaves, it is not the type of empty gesture as it was with Hagar. Instead, it is the final gift that Milkman can offer her after sharing so much in her home. Indeed, it is in Sweet’s bed that he has
a dream foreshadowing his final leap at the end of the novel: “it was a dreamy sleep all about flying.... Part of his flight was over the dark sea, but it didn’t frighten him because he knew he could not fall. He was alone in the sky, but somebody was applauding him, watching him and applauding” (298). This dark sea is the distance between Guitar and Milkman in the final scene, and it is Guitar who applauds Milkman’s act of agency and attempt at flight.

When Milkman returns to Shalimar with Pilate, he has maintained his newfound sense of self by accepting his responsibility in Hagar’s death. He does not fly back to Shalimar to leave her body behind, to escape as his ancestor had done, but to atone for his mistakes and to take her hair with him to bury. When Pilate takes the bullet that was meant for Milkman, she leaves the world, not with anger or resentment, but with love: “I wish I’d a knowed more people. I would of loved ’em all. If I’d a knowed more, I would a loved more” (336). Upon hearing Pilate’s final words, Milkman realizes that it is the desire to love and the strength to open oneself to such love that allows an individual to fly: “Now he knew why he loved her so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly” (336). With this final realization, Milkman turns to face Guitar rather than running away or passively accepting his death. As Milkman’s words echo across the rocks, Guitar recognizes the act of agency on the part of his friend, smiles, and puts down his rifle, murmuring “My man...my main man” (337). Rather than shoot his friend like an animal from afar, Guitar knows that Milkman has chosen to live his life, and he in turn chooses to meet Milkman on his own terms. As Morrison writes in the introduction to her novel, “mercy touches, turns, and returns to Guitar at the end of the
book, and moves him to make it his own final gift to his former friend” (xiii). Milkman meanwhile finds that his boyhood ideas about the impossibility of flight were wrong as he flies toward his friend: “Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees—he leaped... For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it” (337; emphasis theirs). This surrender is not a capitulation of the will, however. Milkman’s final action is a defiant cry of selfhood, a call to agency, and a call to love.

Although Toni Morrison groups Milkman’s flight with the “ambiguous, disturbing” flights of Solomon and Robert Smith, the novel’s ending has always been in Morrison’s opinion, a “triumphant” one. Whether or not Milkman or Guitar die in their final battle is not important. Life, rather than death, is the focus of the narrative, and the central act of the novel is Milkman’s choice of life, his decision to shed the weight of vanity and the culture of survival where to risk the self emotionally is to be avoided at all costs. Morrison describes Milkman at the end of the novel “as fleet and bright as a lodestar,” and the choice of “lodestar” is a particular one, as the lodestar is the star that “shows the way” and “serves as a guide.” It is Milkman, rather than Guitar, therefore, who is meant to lead Morrison’s readers to an understanding of love and agency (337). In Can’t I Love What I Criticize?: The Masculine and Morrison, Susan Mayberry argues that flight offers African-American communities the opportunity to transcend traumatic experiences: “Black communities have outlasted immeasurable trauma by calling on flexibility, or flight, expressed physically and through humor, story, and

---

song. *Song of Solomon* explores the gendered manifestations of these forms of survival” (Mayberry 72). This flexibility is the type of improvisation that Joe and Violet demonstrate in *Jazz*; it is the ability to re-order the world so that the self transcends mere survival, and it is this flexibility that Milkman demonstrates in his flight at the end of the novel. Morrison describes how Milkman’s flight acts as a bridge between the trajectories of Robert Smith and Solomon:

Milkman’s flight binds these two elements of loyalty (Mr. Smith’s) and abandon and self-interest (Solomon’s) into a third thing: a merging of fealty and risk that suggests the ‘agency’ for ‘mutual’ ‘life,’ which he offers at the end and which is echoed in the hills behind him, and is the marriage of surrender and domination, acceptance and rule, commitment to a group through ultimate isolation. (“Unspeakable” 393)

Milkman is an agent of mutual life and love because he risks his life for others whereas Guitar takes the lives of others to show his love. In her introduction to the novel, Morrison states that flight can be a form of “escape or confrontation” (xiii). By using flight as a way of defying his past rather than escaping it, Milkman subverts the song of his ancestor and reclaims it as his own, standing as a model to his community and guiding others towards life rather than survival.
In DC Superior Court, Banita Jacks was recently convicted of murdering her four daughters and living in her home with their bodies for nearly eight months. Frederick H. Weisberg, the judge in the case, commented that “whether it was out of desperation or hopelessness, to take them out of their misery or some other reason known only to Banita Jacks, she intended to kill them.”3 The fictional world of Toni Morrison is frequently defined as surreal, a type of magical realism in the vein of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, yet the psychology of her characters is often far from imagined. In a review of Morrison’s fiction in The New York Review of Books, Diane Johnson compared her fiction to the work of Gayle Jones and James Alan McPherson and determined that both her novels and those of Jones were “more painful than the gloomiest impressions encourage by either stereotype or sociology,” asserting that the characters in McPherson’s work “are what more people are really like” (Giddings 14). Besides making the mistake of determining how African Americans “really” act, Johnson ignores the societal pressures and the influence of survival on individual psyches that complicate social relationships. Morrison’s intent is not to assert that African Americans are sociopathic by nature or incapable of genuine emotions. Instead, she explores the hopelessness that might develop as a result of fragmented selves and a system of emotional economics where killing becomes a less taxing option than caring—the type of hopelessness that leads to nihilism according to Cornel West.

Regardless of motives, there are strains of Banita Jacks in Sethe, Joe Trace, and Eva Peace, and for each of Morrison’s fictional characters, there is a Margaret Garner or a young girl who bleeds to death while refusing to divulge the name of the lover who has murdered her. While it might seem odd to discuss the healing of static characters in Morrison’s novels, the psychology of survival has far-reaching consequences for African-Americans and the population at large.

Each of Morrison’s novels is an epistle in which she addresses her readers and invites them into the Clearing of her works. For Morrison, narrative is a primary vehicle for understanding, and her readers are constantly and consistently called to participate in the reading and create their own meaning in her novels. In her Nobel acceptance speech, Morrison asserts that “[narrative] is, I believe, one of the principal ways in which we absorb knowledge” (“Nobel” 7). As a result, her novels attempt to explore the dividing line between love and lovelessness in the community through the lens of survival so that her readers might reach an understanding of how love and life intertwine. Morrison tells Sheldon Hackney that one of her primary interests in her novels is “who survives, what form redemption takes, and I’m very open in the endings because I don’t like the closure that means I, as a writer, know all the answers, even though I certainly do. But I like the reader to participate in this debate, in this dialogue” (Hackney 138). Morrison’s use of ambiguous endings insists that her readers participate actively in the reading of her novels and that they demonstrate the type of agency that so many of her characters struggle to exercise. Morrison describes language as “agency—as an act with consequences,” and so her reader must respond to
her prose with the same degree of agency (“Nobel” 13). Writing is “a craft that appears solitary but needs another for its completion,” and it is through her reader’s agency that Morrison’s novels are completed (“Dancing” 14). This process of completion is personal for each reader, however, as it is not only through their agency but also through their invention and improvisation that they interact with Morrison’s texts:

> These spaces, which I am filling in, and can fill in because they were planned, can conceivably be filled in with other significances. That is planned as well. The point is that into these spaces should fall the ruminations of the reader and his or her invented or recollected or misunderstood knowingness. (“Unspeakable” 393)

These gaps in Morrison’s novels create a dialogue concerning love, redemption, and survival between her and her readers that transcend the pages of her works. Morrison’s characters might not live beyond the final page of the novel, but we will.

More recently, Morrison has tried to create a dialogue with a new audience as she has branched into writing children’s fiction with her son Slade. Adam Langer describes these works as “books written in a faux hip-hop style… [that] attempt modestly to subvert Aesop’s Fables, just as Morrison undermines traditional literary genres in her adult fiction” (Langer 207). Morrison’s endeavor, however, is not as modest as Langer might suggest. Instead, Morrison retells the central story arcs of her novels in the language that a child might understand in order to combat the culture of survival before its effects might traumatize children and prevent them from achieving a healthy sense of self. In Toni Morrison’s novels, childhood is a luxury that few of her characters are able to afford. At a young age, Denver must work to protect her mother, Joe and Violet are abandoned by their parents, and Nel and Sula are responsible for the death of Chicken Little. Thrust into adulthood before their time, these children are
unable to develop a cohesive sense of self and must also contend with the resentment of their lost innocence. The issue of this lost sense of childhood affects each of Morrison’s characters. During Reverend Deal’s sermon at Chicken Little’s funeral, the congregation excavates for a brief moment the inner child that each of the adults mourn:

They did not hear all of what he said; they heard the one word, or phrase, or inflection that was for them the connection between the events and themselves. For some it was the term ‘Sweet Jesus.’ And they saw the Lamb’s eye and the truly innocent victim: themselves. They acknowledged the innocent child hiding in the corner of their hearts, holding a sugar-and-butter sandwich. That one. The one who lodged deep in their fat, thin, old, young skin, and was one the world had hurt. (Sula 65)

It is this younger self within each individual that the adult characters in Morrison’s novels spend so much time trying to protect. Time and again, Morrison explores the various ways that African Americans use repression and emotional economics as a coping mechanism to protect their inner child. Childhood is often the period before the individual succumbs to emotional repression and the survivalist mentality, and as a result, the memory of this period is particularly painful: “the oldest and most devastating pain there is: not the pain of childhood, but the remembrance of it” (65). In her three books with her son, Morrison attempts to warn her audience against the pitfalls of the culture of survival before the layers of trauma, rage, and repression hide this inner child forever.

In The Book of Mean People, Morrison subverts each potential relationship between a child and those responsible for its wellbeing. Parents, grandparents, siblings, baby-sitters, and teachers are each portrayed as characters that yell, criticize, and distort the world for the child protagonist. Morrison is not trying to breed distrust in families, but to teach children that no matter how young they are, they might still be the agents of
change. Age does not have to dictate will. After being told to sit down by its grandmother and to stand up by its grandfather, the young rabbit protagonist responds, “How can I sit down and sit up at the same time?” (Mean People). This response is a childlike yet telling observation as children are most often communicated with through orders and commands that produce conflicting emotions. Later, when the rabbit’s brother reprimands it for using a knight inappropriately in a game of chess, the rabbit replies with “he knows the night goes every day” as it scampers down the beach under the stars (Mean People). After the baby-sitter tells the rabbit to stop wasting time, it responds, “how can I waste time if I use it?” (Mean People). Pascal LeMaitre’s image of the rabbit dreaming of a large sky where it leaps freely into the clouds stands in direct contrast to the angry baby-sitter who wields a huge clock to remind the child of the heavy weight of time. In each instance, the young rabbit refuses to submit to the orders of those around it and instead improvises a way to turn their admonishments into statements of freedom. In a particularly frightening image near the end of the book, the young rabbit is surrounded by a group of individuals whose smiles barely hide their menace, and there seems to be no escape from the mean people in the world. Again, the child asserts its independence by declaring “I will smile anyway! How about that!” (Mean People). The last image is of the rabbit shedding its clothes and returning to nature—away from the rules of society and “the mean people” that tried to crush the child’s individuality.

The Big Box tells a similar story of children who are told what is best by the emotionally-detached adults around them. Patty, Mickey, and Liza Sue live in a room
filled with opulent possessions that do little to hide the prison in which they live. The door to the room only opens one way and has “three big locks,” and shutters on the windows “keep out the day” (*The Big Box*). When their parents manage to visit them, they shower the children with gifts that are meant to substitute for the love ethic and connection to nature that they desire:

Their parents visit on Wednesday nights  
And you should see the stuff they get.  
Pizza and Legos and Bubble Yum  
And a four-color TV set.  
On Christmas Day  
They got a picture of the sky  
And a butterfly under glass  
An aquarium thing with plastic fish  
Made so it would last. (*Big Box*)

The treatment of the children is reminiscent of the way in which Pilate and Reba spoil Hagar: “They brought her lipstick and chocolate milk, a pink nylon sweater and a fuchsia bed jacket” (*Song* 308). These gifts are all artificial substitutes for the freedom and simple joys that nature offers, however. Nature is always locked away from the children or separated from them by glass. Giselle Porter’s illustrations mirror this sense of separation as the children each play in different parts of the room with blank expressions on their faces. After the narrator describes the litany of objects that the children receive, the scene changes to a grassy field where the children play together without any possessions to entertain them, their faces reflecting the joy that they feel outside the constraints of the box. The image evokes the feelings of Macon and Pilate upon their escape from the Butler household. After leaving the protection of Circe, the children discover and delight in their freedom: “the first day out was joyous for them. They ate raspberries and apples; they took off their shoes and let the dewy grass and
sun-warmed dirt soothe their feet. At night they slept in a hay-stack, so grateful for
open air even the field mice and the ticks were welcome bedmates” (167). The children
in *The Big Box*, however, must still contend with the adults that try to constrain their
freedom.

Although the children are engaged with nature and with one another, the
narrator mimics the voice of the adults who believe that the children need restraints in
their lives: “Oh, the seagulls scream/ And rabbits hop/ And beavers chew trees when
they need ’em/ But Patty and Mickey and Liza Sue—/ Those kids can’t handle their
freedom” (*Big Box*). The rest of the narrative concerns each child and how they came
to live in the box. In each instance, the children respect many of the rules that the world
imposes on their freedom but still choose to exhibit their own will by singing out or
playing too loudly. The teachers, tenants, and neighbors who are disturbed by the
childlike behavior of the children then congregate to decide how best to deal with each
child. Morrison does not choose to make these groups of adults villainous as the
narrator mentions that each group “loved” the children, but the adults are very much
attached to the supposed rules of living. As they tell Patty, “you have to know how far
to go/ So the grown-up world can abide you” (*Big Box*). The grown-up world is the
world of survival where dreams and play are dismissed in favor of rules and artificial
joys. Like the young rabbit in *The Book of Mean People*, Patty, Mickey, and Liza Sue
respond to these groups with an assertion of independence: “I know that you think/ You
are doing what is best for me./ But if freedom is handled just your way/ Then it’s not
my freedom or free” (*Big Box*; emphasis theirs). Whereas the adults are prepared to
allow only as much freedom as they think is proper, the children understand that
freedom requires agency. At the end of the book, the children leave behind the weight
of possessions and individuals who tell them how to be free in order to return to nature
and create their own freedom. Liza pushes down one of the walls of the box while Patty
and Mickey climb over the partitions and into the natural world. Surrounding the box
are the beavers, rabbits, birds, and porpoises whose freedom the children emulated. The
final line of the story is a reversal of the adults’ statements: “But Patty and Mickey and
Liza Sue—/ Who says they can’t handle their freedom?” (Big Box). Like the young
rabbit in The Book of Mean People, the children in The Big Box resist the rules of
survival and the counterfeit joys of material possessions in order to express the agency
needed to achieve freedom.

Not all of Morrison’s children’s books end as triumphantly, however. Who’s
Got Game? The Ant or the Grasshopper? details the demise of a friendship between
Foxy G and Kid A and explores the ramifications of one friend choosing the rule-based
life of adults while the other follows his dreams of being an artist. In many ways, the
book retells the story of the friendships between Nel and Sula and Milkman and Guitar,
relationships disrupted by the culture of survival and personal pride. Foxy G and Kid A
begin the story as two best friends who create music together. One day, however, Kid
A decides to leave the freedom of his current life with his friend in order to join the
adult world of consumption and perceived responsibilities. As he tells Foxy G, “time to
dump this place,/ get back in the race./ There’s a lot of work to be done.” (Who’s Got
Game?). Like Sula and Guitar, Foxy G refuses to submit to the perceived rules of
living, preferring instead to be an outsider and focus on his music: “I have to GROOVE, MOVE, PROVE, DISPROVE. I have to RIFF and BLAST and SHOUT!” (Game). As the two friends go their separate ways, however, they each encounter a world made all the more bleak by the sudden absence of their friendship with one another.

The domesticity of Kid A’s new life with his pregnant wife mirrors Nel’s decision to marry and become a housewife while his desire for the comfort of possessions parallels Milkman’s reliance on objects as signifiers of success. Pascal LeMaitre’s images of A’s new existence leaves little room for doubt as to his unhappiness. In one scene, Kid A frowns and sweats over the vacuum cleaner in his house; in another, he is seen pushing a grocery cart, surrounded by individuals all performing the same monotonous task. In the confines of his new home, Kid A spends his time cleaning and stocking up food, but the music of his friend still manages to reach A and re-ignite his spirit: “Kid A did the chores and shopped the stores/ And day and night,/ out of sight,/ Foxy’s music blew clear and wild. It was so sweet with his outrageous beat./ Kid A began to dance./ He popped his fingers, shook his hips,/ a big fat grin on his lips” (Game). The music reminds Kid A of the freedom and simple joys he possessed with his friend, but when the music stops, he returns to cleaning his house and accumulating more goods.

Although the music of Foxy G is inspirational, G discovers that his independent path has its own pitfalls. When winter comes, he finds himself living in a cardboard box, and when he tries to make music with his wings, “he saw their edges crumble./ He tried to patch the delicate parts/ but his fingers only fumbled./ Weak with hunger and
shivering cold,/ he couldn’t make the faintest sound” (*Game*). Unable to provide for himself, Foxy returns home, “battling shame,” to try and find his friend (*Game*). When Foxy G throws himself on the mercy of his friend, Kid A coldly eats a doughnut in front of him and chastises G’s actions and supposed agency: “You’re cold? Hungry? No place to stay?/ Look at you, man./ Well, what can I say?/ I planned ahead and stored up things./ You wasted time on those funky wings” (*Game*). With his eyes full of tears, Foxy G’s “pride returned,” and he tries to appeal to their previous friendship and the intangible gifts with which he had provided A: “I quenched your thirst/ and fed your soul/ you can’t spare me/ a doughnut hole?” (*Game*). Kid A remains unmoved, however, and his answer to G mimics the materialistic language of survival: “my family’s fed./ WHERE’S YOUR HEAD?/ You sleep in a box;/ I’ve got a bed” (*Game*). Although Kid A tries to appear superior to Foxy G, G recognizes the absence of A’s spirit in the things he has accumulated for himself: “Play your own song, kid… Your house is clean,/ but where is your dream?” (*Game*). Kid A is unmoved, however, and with his heart hardened against his friend, he walks back inside his house and shuts the door. As Foxy G stumbles away into the snowstorm, Kid A looks out the window, an expression of concern and concealed sorrow on his face. The image inside A’s house is one of luxury and bounty. His wife watches three TVs stacked on top of one another, presents are piled beneath his tree, and there are multiple refrigerators full of food. Lemaitre darkens the picture, however, and positions the light in the image on the dark window and Kid A’s sadness as he looks out at his friend. Stubborn pride on the part of both friends coupled with the stress that survival places on their lives causes the two
characters to lose the agency and freedom they found in friendship. In the howling wind outside Kid’s A home, it is easy to imagine that Nel’s cries of “girlgirlgirl” might be heard.

Whereas the young rabbit protagonist and Patty, Mickey, and Liza Sue escape from the pressures of survival, Kid A and Foxy G are unable to save their friendship. The younger characters’ success parallels Milkman’s as they achieve flight and the freedom that it brings by expressing agency while the “adults” in all three narratives remain grounded by their pride and worldly possessions. The children improvise a way of living apart from those who seem to know best. In a way, they each become the author of their life story. As Carlo Strenger notes in *Individuality, the Impossible Project: Psychoanalysis and Self-Creation*, “to live a life governed by our desires and by our conception of a life worth living is to have a sense of authorship over our lives” (Strenger 5; emphasis theirs). Looking back at Morrison’s novels, it is easy to see that agency and authorship are inextricably linked for both Morrison and her characters. While the culture of survival convinces individuals that forces outside of their control are the authors of their fate, characters who are successful in choosing life, such as Milkman and the Traces, realize that they are the authors of their lives and improvise new methods of living as a result. To become free requires more than just authorship, however.

Love is the force that bridges the gap between agency and life and binds the various threads in Morrison’s fiction together. To author a life without love is as fruitless as survival without an identity. To love freely requires an acceptance of one’s
past and a dedication to one’s future. In his discussion of psychoanalysis, Strenger asserts the importance of the past in the individual’s struggle to be free: “Freedom consists in assuming one’s past, not in denying it” (Strenger 2). This freedom allows the individual to open himself or herself to love. Whether or not the past is traumatic should not dictate the trajectory of one’s life. As bell hooks puts it, past suffering can be an opportunity for agency in the present: “contrary to what we may have been taught to think, unnecessary and unchosen suffering wounds us but need not scar us for life. It does mark us. What we allow the mark of our suffering to become is in our own hands” (Visions 209). Each of Toni Morrison’s characters contends with this idea of what to allow this mark of suffering to become. For Sethe, the mark becomes a ghostly reminder of her violent act. For Nel, it becomes a feeling in the air and circles of sorrow. For Joe and Violet, it becomes an opportunity for understanding, and for Milkman, it becomes the chance for flight. In each instance, the characters’ search for freedom revolves around their relationship with their past. How they interact with the past, however, is determined by their capacity for love.

Love is the instrument that transforms the mark of suffering into the mark of strength in Morrison’s narratives. In her chapter “Healing: Redemptive Love” from All About Love: New Visions, bell hooks asserts that regardless of what has happened in one’s past, it is a person’s ability to allow himself or herself to love that permits an individual to heal: “no matter what has happened in our past, when we open our hearts to love we can live as if born again, not forgetting the past but seeing it in a new way, letting it live inside us in a new way. We go forward with the fresh insight that the past
can no longer hurt us” (Visions 209). Love then transforms rememory into a process of strength and healing, thereby allowing for healthy emotional catharsis. As Jonathan Lear argues, “the emotional transformation inherent in catharsis is intimately bound up with the type of responsibility one takes for one’s own emotions” (Lear 65). Morrison’s characters might take responsibility for their actions, but their emotions often remain outside the realm of their control because of their fear of living. Survival dictates that love is a luxury rather than a necessity, and the system of emotional economics attempts to posit love as a risk to one’s survival. The desire for love remains constant, however. Regardless of how far individuals move away from the ability to love, human beings still long for emotional connections. According to hooks, a gap then develops between our perception of lovelessness in the world and our desire to love:

As our cultural awareness of the ways we are seduced away from love, away from the knowledge that love heals gains recognition, our anguish intensifies. But so does our yearning. The space of our lack is also the space of possibility. As we yearn, we make ourselves ready to receive the love that is coming to us, as gift, as promise, as earthly paradise. (Visions 221)

It is this gap that Morrison’s characters must ultimately confront and decide whether to risk their lives by committing to flight and making “the principal movement in Morrison’s fiction: the leap from land into sky” (Dixon 94). To leap over this gap can be risky, and often, the choice to commit oneself to flight can be a lonely one. To express the type of agency that opens an individual to the possibility of love requires a rejection of the world with its focus on survival and the empty race to possess. For hooks, it is by turning away from the world that we might find the ability to love it: “It is the deepest revolution, the turning away from the world as we know it, toward the world we must make if we are to be one with the planet—one healing heart giving and
sustaining life. Love is our hope and our salvation” (Salvation 225). The choice of survival precludes the possibility of love or flight, and as a result, most of Morrison’s characters are unable to find the salvation they desire. With the example of Milkman, however, Morrison opens her audience to the possibility of redemption through the rejection of the culture of survival and its system of emotional economics. Calling us into a dialogue with her texts, Morrison invites us to express the agency needed to attempt our own leap into the unknown. We might risk our bodies and our emotional selves with this attempt, but we might also find hope and the will to love. Then, we might actually be able to fly.
****

The apartment building where I saw a man fall from the sky is now a grassy patch of earth along K Street. The city razed the apartment complex to make room for condominiums and mixed-use developments. The Bottom was once again to become the top. Then things became complicated. The city ran out of money according to some. Others say that the plans had been thrown out. Either way, it will be years before the patch is anything more than a vacant lot.

The residents of the apartment complex are scattered throughout the city, free to live anywhere but where they had been. There are high hopes among people who have never lived in or around Sursum Corda that the area will attract a new life. I moved a few blocks away to an apartment building that causes people to say that the neighborhood is up-and-coming. No one asks where the other neighborhood went.

To reduce crime will require more than the exodus of individuals, however. To heal the angry hearts that allowed drugs and violence to thrive in the neighborhood will require a shift in psychology away from survival and towards life. To bring love to this part of the city will mean providing the opportunity for people to do the loving. To revitalize, more will be required than a crane and a bulldozer. Memories do not go away that easily.

****

129
Works Cited

Barnes, Deborah. “Movin’ on up: The Madness of Migration in Toni Morrison’s Jazz.” 

Bergenholtz, Rita. “Toni Morrison’s Sula: A Satire on Binary Thinking.” Modern 

Bouson, J. Brooks. Quiet As It’s Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of 

Bowers, Susan. “Beloved and the New Apocalypse.” Toni Morrison’s Fiction: 

Burton, Angela. “Signifyin(g) Abjection: Narrative Strategies in Toni Morrison’s 


De Weever, Jacqueline. Mythmaking and Metaphor in Black Women’s Fiction. New 

Dixon, Melvin. “Like an Eagle in the Air: Toni Morrison.” Modern Critical 
Interpretations: Toni Morrison’s Sula. Ed. Harold Bloom. Philadelphia: 

American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present. Ed. 

Fitzgerald, Jennifer. “Selfhood and Community: Psychoanalysis and Discourse in 

Giddings, Paula. “The Triumphant Song of Toni Morrison.” Toni Morrison: 
Mississippi, 2008. 10-16.


Bibliography


