Summer 1994

A Literary Evaluation of Black Female Interaction in Toni Morrison's "Beloved", "Sula," "Jazz"

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A LITERARY EVALUATION OF BLACK FEMALE INTERACTION IN TONI MORRISON'S BELOVED SULA JAZZ

by

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B.A. August 1992, Norfolk State University

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of
Old Dominion University in partial fulfillment of the
Requirement for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

ENGLISH

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY
August, 1994

Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

A LITERARY EVALUATION OF BLACK
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This Master's thesis consists of three chapters that examine the roles, circumstances and effects of racism and sexism on the black female characters in three of Toni Morrison's novels, Beloved, Sula and Jazz. I propose that the elements of racism and sexism have left the female characters, Sethe, Denver, Ella, etc. in Beloved with few choices in life. Further, I suggest that the theme of "choice versus no choice" perpetuates hatred and self-hatred among black women and results in "metaphoric scarring." I explore in the characters, Sula, Eva, Hannah, Nel, and the black Bottom women, the damage inflicted on black women in the novel Sula. Consequently, the patterns of blatant racism, subtle racism and sexism demand some form of intervention to heal these black women. The theme of

healing is the ideal undergirding reconciliation in the novel Jazz.

A version of "Reconciliation in Toni Morrison's Jazz" was presented at the Works-In-Progress Conference at Old Dominion University in May, 1994. A modification of this same chapter was presented at the Mid-Atlantic Writer's Association Conference in October, 1992. A variant of "Choice versus No Choice" was presented at the First Annual Old Dominion University Graduate Conference in 1993.

Index of Words: African-American Literature
African-American Women
Morrison, Toni

DEDICATION

This Master's Thesis is dedicated to the memory of my father, John L. Davenport (1922-1974), who would have been proud.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Dr. James W. Howell and Ms. Mary Wright for reviewing the chapter drafts of this thesis.

I appreciate the patience from my two sons, Dagan and Akio Brewer, for the six years they have had to live with their "student" mom.

I also acknowledge the guidance from Dr. Charles E. Wilson, Jr., in the writing of this thesis. He noted my flaws, recognized my potential, and encouraged me on.

Finally, I am grateful to my friend Larry T. Ferguson for his encouragement and computer help throughout the composition of this thesis.

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Introduction

As a writer, Toni Morrison is distinguished for her attention to resolution. She reveals that her intentions are to explore the black woman's sense of self and the imaginative recovery of black women's history (Spillers 65-66). This Master's thesis will explore three themes, "choice versus no choice," "metaphoric scarring," and "reconciliation" in three of Morrison's novels, Beloved, Sula, and Jazz. I intend to examine a host of characters who have few choices available to them, because they are black and female. These limitations result in perverse interactions, which damage their interpersonal relationships. Black women are forced, then, to mend themselves using techniques unique to them as black women.

My interest is linking the above three themes with the interaction of the black female characters and the distinctively different ways they relate to other women, children, men, and their community. I want to explore the interactional rituals of the women in the novels as they negotiate their past, present, and future within a society

hostile to them. Further, I intend to unveil some of the social and political forces at work in order to explain why these black women's interchange with others is perceived as unconventional in relation to norms set by those who are white and/or male.

The goal of this paper is to expose racism and sexism as social constructs that overtly impede positive bonding for black women. These elements hinder black women because the choices they are forced to make promote hatred and self-hatred, thus, becoming the reason for black women's antipathetical behavior towards each other. Morrison's black female characters have incorporated into their lives learned devices of communication because of several factors related to sexism and racism: 1) the devaluation of black womanhood by the political forces of masculine hierarchy, 2) the disregard of personhood that societal myths about black women perpetuated, and 3) the lack of community that developed from racism and sexism.

Racism, as an imposition for black females, is analyzed in "Uprooting Racism and Racists in the United States" by James Boggs. Boggs defines racism as "the systematized oppression by one race of another" (138). He further categorizes racism into various forms of oppression--

economic exploitation, political subordination, cultural devaluation, psychological violation, sexual degradation, etc.--that I believe amplify the patterns of discontent for black females.

In "The Dynamics of Patriarchy," Shelia Ruth states:

> Sexism is a way of seeing the world in which differences between males and females, actual or alleged, are perceived as profoundly relevant to important political, economic, and social arrangements and behavior. (53)

The differences that sexism is predicated on are

> functionally relevant traits such as character, competence, and so on are related to, and in fact determined by, one's biological sexual identity. (53)

The relevance of Boggs's definition to the forces that inhibit black women, such as Morrison's female characters, is revealed as

> processes which operate so normally and naturally and are so much a part of the existing institutions of the society that the individuals involved are barely conscious of their operation. (138)

In Beloved, it is apparent that slavemaster James Garner and his wife believe they are fairer than most whites to allow Sethe the choice of a husband. However, it is just as obvious that their regard for her is not humane--one person's concern for another person. The black women of

Medallion, Ohio, in Sula, are just as oblivious to their circumstances--at the bottom of the social, economic and political heap--which is why they begrudge Eva Peace's economic independence, Hannah's social disregard for what they think, and Sula's political stance on what is expected and proper for a woman. Jazz presents black women who have insulated themselves by isolating their feelings and desires. Their emotional isolation infringes on their mental well-being and results in the need for reconciliation.

Chapter One presents the devaluation of black womanhood when America's economic foundation dictated that the stolen bodies of black women could be commodified as a resource for America's growth. In Beloved, the theme of "choice versus no choice" dramatizes the tale of what happens when enslaved African women were snatched from their homelands, conditioned to submission on the Middle Passage by rape, impregnated against their will, and forced to relinquish their children to further promote white America's economy. Morrison's female characters' roles hint at this barbaric practice, and the effects thereafter. One choice Sethe makes on her own results in the horrific crime of infanticide and isolates her from her community for almost

two decades.

In Chapter Two, I explore and expose the damage black women do to other black women and to themselves as I examine the theme of "metaphoric scarring" in Sula. The duality of racism and sexism affects several generations of black women within the Peace household of Medallion, Ohio. I scrutinize the relationship between Sula and Nel to illustrate, metaphorically, the destruction that divides black women from sister bonds, estranges them from their family and their men, detaches them from the nurturance of their black female community, separates them from America as a whole, and sequesters them from "self."

In Chapter Three, I introduce the theme of reconciliation for black women as examined in the strained interchange between Violet Trace and Alice Manfred in Jazz. Initially, two women impose and accept the oppression that their sex and race dictate. Violet almost succumbs to the loss of her identity when her world is shattered by her husband's infidelity. However, Violet and Alice eventually strengthen the bond that they have, in an attempt to repair historical psychological damage done to both of them.

The conclusion reinforces my underlying argument that black women need to re-examine their history and understand

the complex nature of their sister-relationship in order to correct the ills that are often still perpetuated.

Chapter 1

Choice Versus No Choice

Beloved

Black women's paradoxical experiences in America's complex social system have impacted their well-being, and are the basis for who they are today. This conflict can easily be observed in the literature that fictionalizes history, because fiction allows a voyeuristic insight into the characters' lives and psyches. One such medium that presents the theme of choice versus no choice for black female characters is Toni Morrison's fifth novel, Beloved. Morrison, winner of the 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature, is one author who successfully presents the internal frustrations of America's black women. Choice versus no choice becomes the antithesis, in relation to the influences on black women's social and political construct and female interaction, that forces peculiar outcomes.

Much of the research about why Morrison's characters behave the way they do addresses social factors that impact black women. These are the social factors that leave black

women economically powerless, thus, economically dependent on whites and on black men; factors that make it difficult for black women to live harmoniously with other black women because of the stress produced from lack of care and respect for each other; and factors that cause black women to victimize each other because of their lack of empathy. These are the influences hostile to them because they are females--sexism, and in particular because they are black--racism, that are the essence of her struggle. Psychologist Harriet G. McCombs insists that "For black women ... the struggle ... is one of necessity and not of choice" (76). In addition to the social determinants plaguing black women in America, the political factors are equally dynamic. The political factors examined are findings and research conducted by bell hooks in her book, Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism, in which she insists, "No other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women" (7).

As black women struggle to live in America's oppressive society, their decisions are usually motivated and instigated by forces beyond their control. Research reveals that because black women are socially and economically

disadvantaged and controlled by a patriarchal society, their options are virtually few, or they have no choices as they attempt to negotiate their lives.

One story that emphasizes some of the limits black women once experienced is found in Morrison's Beloved. This story is set just prior to and during America's Reconstruction Era. This narrative reflects the before and immediate aftermath of the system of slavery. The plot centers around the desperate actions of a slave woman, Sethe to protect her children from becoming casualties of slavery; and the repercussions of her decision to take the life of one of those children. It is also an account of the other female characters' lives--Denver, Baby Suggs, Beloved--who are directly affected by Sethe's action. Additionally, the plot of Beloved reveals the brutal scars slavery leaves on black women because they are women, because they are black, and because they are powerless. The characters, the devices Morrison employs, and the themes of rememory, healing, and oppression illuminate the plight of the black female's attempts to cover the scars.

Some of the worst conditions for black women are evident when Morrison's narrator sums up how Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law, found her life controlled by slavery:

> In all of Baby's life, as well as Sethe's own, men and women were moved around like checkers. Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought out, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized. (Morrison 23)

The system of slavery made personal relationships arbitrary due to what Baby Suggs called the "nastiness of life." Sethe's case is unusual, because as an enslaved woman, she has no real choice as to who her sexual partner would be (hooks, Ain't I ... 25). However, Sethe is fortunate in that she is allowed to marry Halle "who had fathered every one of her children. A blessing she was reckless enough to take for granted" (Morrison 23). The irony of Sethe's situation is that her decision is contingent on increasing Sweet Home's value, with her children as the commodities. The liberty to choose, given by Mr. Garner--Sweet Home plantation's first slavemaster--allows a redefinition for Sethe as a person.

After Sethe's escape from Kentucky to Cincinnati, Ohio, she experiences "twenty-eight days--the travel of one whole moon--of unslaved life" (95), enough time for her to shed the checks of subjugation. In those twenty-eight days, Sethe begins to develop as a real person, to meet and learn people, to learn things, all of which "taught her how it

felt to wake up at dawn and decide what to do with the day" (95). Sethe, interacting with her new community, is an example of what bell hooks sees as a black woman proving her worth (hooks, Ain't I ... 70). The white master of Sweet Home, Schoolteacher, attempts to wrest away this new and liberating feeling by re-enslaving Sethe and her children, but he only intensifies Sethe's determination to remain free.

Morrison gives long overdue recognition to black women for being the source of strength for their families, as a major support for their community, and as warriors for their own right to exist in this society. The choices the female characters make, made virtually because they have no choice, are significant because they reflect the female hero--the "shero." Josie P. Campbell explains that Morrison is quite successful in presenting her females as heroes. She cites that "Heroes are always special people who are marked or defined in such a way as to set them apart from their society" (395). Campbell continues by affirming that Morrison's mission is "to regain family ties that have been broken" (395). Morrison successfully portrays a female hero by presenting a mythic element of the supernatural--the ghost of the "crawling already?" baby. By killing the baby,

Sethe does not save the world, but she does save one child from the grips of slavery. Hooks notes that black women demonstrate their love by incredible self-sacrifice (hooks, Ain't I ... 70); thus, Sethe believes "there was nothing to be done other than what she had done" (Morrison 89). As with all heroes, Sethe's sacrifice is great--the loss of her two-year-old daughter.

To understand Sethe and the other black women's choices, one must examine the original conception for the economic growth of America, at the expense of black women. One of the political forces supporting the perceptions about black women began with the enslavement of African women. White slavers' observations of them in Africa revealed:

> The African woman schooled in the art of obedience to a higher authority by the tradition of her society [and]... accustomed to performing arduous work in the fields while also performing a wide variety of tasks in the domestic household, ... [became] very useful on the American plantation. (hooks, Ain't I ... 17)

White planters also capitalized on another economic gain by the breeding of black slave women. The offspring of slave women would become "the property of the owner to whom the female slave belonged" (16).

Before this profitable venture was possible, white

planters had to dehumanize African women and men. "The prideful, arrogant, and independent spirit of the African people had to be broken" (hooks, Ain't I ... 19). The methods used to accomplish this task were devised to ensure total submission. Research reveals that these methods are the key factors impacting the mental state of black women and the ideas perpetuated about them today. The most effective methods, used on the slave ships from Africa to America, were rape and physical abuse that terrorized African women:

> The significance of the rape of enslaved women was not simply that it "deliberately crushed" their sexual integrity ... but that it led to a devaluation of black womanhood that permeated the psyches of all Americans and shaped the social status of all black women once slavery ended. (hooks, Ain't I ... 52)

Consequently, "the black female was exploited as a laborer in the field, a worker in the domestic household, a breeder, and as an object of white sexual assault" (hooks, Ain't I ... 27).

Morrison's Beloved unabashedly reveals how females, as victims of America's sexism and racism, were treated. Sethe and other female characters experienced slavery first hand. America's political system of slavery becomes the impetus

for Sethe's attempt to kill her children. Sethe's memory of her own bondage on the Sweet Home plantation is all too vivid. She recalls how she had little choice when the nephews of Schoolteacher raped her. Sethe laments on how "Two boys with mossy teeth, ... suck[ed] on my breast the other holding me down, their book-reading teacher watching and writing it up" (Morrison 70). To add insult to this injury, Sethe's body is further violated by the flogging inflicted on her by Schoolteacher.

Ella, one of the first black women Sethe meets in Cincinnati, Ohio, struggles over the memory of her own personal experience with slavery:

> Her puberty had been spent in a house where she was shared by father and son, whom she called "the lowest yet." It was "the lowest yet" who gave her a disgust for sex and against whom she measured all atrocities. (119)

Bell hooks contends that this "systematic devaluation of black women" (hooks, Ain't I ... 74) caused them to de-emphasize their sexuality with men and instead to commit to motherhood. However, Ella and most black women have no choice about what happens to their bodies, or the children they are expected to bear. Ella's only defense against slavery is to allow her babies to starve in five days rather than endure even twenty-eight days in bondage. She chooses

never to love anyone or anything, especially the babies she is impregnated with against her will. For the Cincinnati women, like Ella, and even Baby Suggs, Sethe's choice to free herself and her children from slavery is too bold. Sethe crosses over the line of self-preservation and kinship by killing her child. Baby Suggs explains, "Everything depends on knowing how much.... Good is knowing when to stop" (Morrison 87). Sethe does what black people believe only white people are capable of doing--going too far.

Morrison's female characters behave according to what they believe is best. Shelia Ruth states that sexism, perpetuated by whites during slavery, functioned, "not to self-affirm or self fulfill the black woman, but as a method to trade, consume and ultimately use up her black body" (225). Because of sexism, black women have never been in control of their life decisions. Additionally, black women have never had a choice in determining the views held about them.

Sethe escapes to freedom, and the choices thereafter have an impact on her for the rest of her life. The price she pays for her desperate decision, to take the life of her children rather than have them taken back to Sweet Home by Schoolteacher, is the death of the "crawling already?"

baby's life:

> When she saw them coming and recognized Schoolteacher's hat ... [Sethe] collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. (Morrison 163)

Sethe's oppressive state and the feeling that there is no other choice under the hand of slavery, yields her a loss for which there is little comfort; and an isolation from the black community that lasts for eighteen years.

Other black women recount their experiences under this brutal method that results in either their children being born half white, or their suffering the same fate. Such an example is the black school teacher, Lady Jones:

> Lady Jones was mixed. Gray eyes and yellow woolly hair, every strand of which she hated--though whether it was the color or the texture even she didn't know. She had married the blackest man she could find. (247)

Lady Jones is chosen to attend "a coloredgirls' normal school in Pennsylvania" (247), because of her mixed heritage; she chooses to repay what she has gained from her formal education by teaching the unpicked, those darker in hue than herself.

Sethe attempts to explain to Paul D, one of the Pauls

from Sweet Home, why she killed her two-year-old daughter and tried to kill the others, when he tells her that her "love is too thick" (164). The very notion that Sethe loves her children enough to see them dead, rather than enslaved as she once was, is an indication of choice and free will. Her choice of "thick" love is all she knows and the only feeling not determined by others. Sethe knows to not love, or to love in varying degrees as Paul D has suggested, is having no choice. She retorts, "Too thick? ... Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all" (164). Paul D, speaking from his maleness, is sexist. He judges Sethe by what he has defined as enough love, thereby labeling her an animal because she does not meet this requirement. He tells her "you got two feet, Sethe, not four" (165). How easy it has become for Paul D to pass judgment on Sethe, considering "his cold-house secret" (165), where he had no choice when he was forced to take a bit of foreskin (108) in exchange for his life.

Sethe commits infanticide because she knows she and her children have no choices under slavery's cruel system. The only receipt Sethe has to present for the cost of her actions is at least "they ain't at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain't got em" (165). Paul D minimizes her

reasoning by telling her "maybe there's worse" (165). But to Sethe, the choice at that time is the best she could make: "It ain't my job to know what's worse. It's my job to know what is and to keep them [her children] away from what I know is terrible. I did that" (165). Sethe's choices against slavery are limited. She felt that she would have been remiss in her duty as a mother to allow the certain harm of slavery to overtake her children's lives.

The choice to love one's children, or to protect them, under the "no choice" policy of slavery, is as uncertain as what a slave's future would be like. Baby Suggs knows this because she was born a slave and grew up in slavery. She had few options about what she could do until she was sixty-years old, when her son, Halle, bought her freedom. Baby Suggs believes she has no right to judge Sethe's action to take the life out of everything she has given life to, rather than see them enslaved: "She could not approve or condemn Sethe's rough choice" (180). Given the same circumstances, Baby Suggs may have resorted to the same alternative. The one decision Baby Suggs makes is to "quit the Word" in the "Clearing--a wide-open place cut deep in the woods" (87)--where black folks laid down their burdens. She then chooses to "go to bed to think about the color of

things" (177). Her action is the submission of a black woman who has been beaten upon enough by life. She lies down "to fix on something harmless in the world" (179), some other thing she had never experienced before, like colors. Though "The whitefolk [have] tired her out at last" (180), Stamp Paid urges her to return to the clearing, to inspire the people. He does not understand her decision to just lie down.

Denver's choice to stay away from people, especially whitepeople, is due to Baby Suggs's advice to her. Grandma Baby believes it is her duty to warn her only granddaughter about the evils lurking beyond 124 Bluestone. She tells Denver about the people who can take away her choice:

> There was no defense they [whitepeople] could prowl at will, change from one mind to another, and even when they thought they were behaving, it was a far cry from what real humans did. (244)

One such evil surprises Denver one day while she is attending Lady Jones's school. Nelson Lord tells her about Sethe: "Didn't your mother get locked away for murder? Wasn't you in there with her when she went?" (104). Denver chooses to stop talking rather than respond to this horrible truth. Those words "close[d] [her] ears shut" (243), so "she went deaf rather than hear the answer" (105). Not

until Denver is eighteen-years-old does she choose something outside her mother's and grandmother's experience. On a warm April, she ventures from the security of 124, and her mother's protective "murderous love." She "leave[s] the yard; step[s] off the edge of the world ... and [asks] somebody for help" (243). Denver braves the expected and unexpected; she realizes that "the house is no fortress, that while the outside world is fraught with danger, interaction with it is necessary in order to live and grow" (Schmudde 413). Denver's choice is a step towards liberating herself from the fear of her mother's self-imposed isolation.

Morrison's rhetoric requires us to ask, who is guilty for the sacrifice of the "crawling already?" baby's life. Is Sethe the sole perpetrator of the crime?; can we honestly place all the blame on the system of slavery?; or do we fault Sethe--an oppressed black woman and desperate mother--alone?; is infanticide the only crime committed?; and are we qualified to choose the culprit of this heinous crime? Morrison requires that we choose, so as not to "pass this on." We are to read and understand so that we ensure this is never repeated.

Beloved provides a nest of latent sexist and racist

offenses that accompany the theme of choice versus no choice. Often the black female characters are defeated before they ever try, or resistance meets them with each choice they make. In short, black women are left with few choices. Not until the final episode is the answer given to what black women must do to have choice. Ella and the community of black women who gather in Sethe's defense exercise a choice that unites them. The two factors that have separated them for eighteen years become the elements that pull them together--their femaleness and their blackness.

Chapter 2

Metaphoric Scarring in

Sula

"Metaphoric scarring," as a theme for the effects of racism and sexism on Morrison's black female characters in her novel, Sula, is the focus of this chapter. Metaphoric scarring refers to the social and political factors that separate or impede black women in unitary sisterhood. The scars examined here come in several forms: the injury black women inflict on other black women, as they both hate and self-hate; the definitive and disfiguring marks left by the separation of black mothers from their children, men, community; and the breach of sisterhood, kinship and friendship between black women, such as that of Sula and Nel.

The hatred black women inflict on other black women, and the self-hatred that affects black women, are associated with the complex socialization of African-American women. One theory as to the cause of black women's disaccord is found in social research done by Kathy E. Ferguson. She

suggests that the reason most women treat each other the way they do is that "women like men, are social beings formed by the expectations and sanctions of patriarchal society" (7). Ferguson's study also reveals that "women are ... their own worst enemies because that is what they have been taught to be" (7); thus, self-hatred is inevitable. Helene Cixous, in "The Laugh of the Medusa," contends that sexism is designed to divide women:

> Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be the executants of their virile needs. They have made for women an antinarcissism! A narcissism which loves itself only to be loved for what women haven't got! They have constructed the infamous logic of antilove. (878)

Unfortunately, the socialization process causes a rift among black women, especially those who challenge the norm--that is, the expectations others have for them. This opposition mars black sisterhood, bonding, and interpersonal relationships, because black women challenge, compete with, and malign the names of other women. Ferguson further contends that women internalize the dominant culture's portrait of them. She also argues that until women "shake free of this definition and arrive at their own

self-definition ... [they] are not free at all" (7).

Shaking free is exactly what the Peace women in Sula seem to do. It is evident that they honor another code of rules, or establish their own, as they overstep the Bottom women's definition of who they should be, and how they should behave. Eva, Hannah, and Sula Peace redefine black womanhood as autonomous, and they feel free to choose their own way. Only in regard to their men do the Peace women differ. Eva, the one-legged matriarch of the Peace household, find men to be reassuring of her femaleness, but unnecessary otherwise; Hannah, Eva's daughter, finds men to be necessary for the physical touching she longs for; and Sula, Hannah's daughter, needs men to stimulate her mind, the one area of her body that she discovers is her erogenous zone.

In applying Ferguson's findings to Morrison's black female characters, one finds that the hatred forms as women oppose other women. The black Bottom women reject the Peace women for several reasons: one, the Peace women are not ideal respectable and decent women. This notion of respectability that the Bottom women use to judge the Peace women are models set-up by whites, but have little to do with how whites, especially white males, treat black women.

Second, the Peace women are believed to be too free with their love, too free with how they feel about themselves, and too unconcerned about what others say about them. Finally, because the Peace women do not solicit other women for advice about how to run their lives, the bonds for sisterhood are further diluted.

A different assessment of hatred between women is found in Robyn Rowland's Woman Herself. Rowland suggests that in order to break bonds of sisterhood, men have created an ambivalence in women's relationships with women. Because women are "reared to compete for male attention ... [they] learn to distrust other women" (142). Rowland further hypothesizes that women have always tried to define themselves, even though men have written that women "are too much in competition with each other ... to be friends" (142).

Judith Briles reveals that women's distrust of women is the build up of anger, caused by their insecurity and hurt. Briles also suggests that women easily find themselves in the trap of victimizing the victim--other women (55). Sula's distinctly different attitude of "feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her" (Morrison 118) makes her the perfect person for the

displacement of the Bottom women's woes and displeasures. Because "women will devalue women who express a power of being" (Raymond 195), Sula's every move is scrutinized as odd and evil. The way she looks at people is interpreted as "[her] smellin' you with her eyes and [not] ... lik[ing] your soap" (Morrison 117); "the plague of robins" is blamed on her return from up north; they believed that Sula was laughing at their God because she came to "their church suppers without underwear" (114); finally, the black Bottom women are insulted because Sula "would lay their husbands once and then no more. Sula was trying them [men] out and discarding them" (115).

Much of Sula's personality is attributed to her matrilineal background, her grandmother "Eva's arrogance and Hannah's [her mother] self-indulgence [that] merged in her [Sula]" (118). The fact that Eva Peace is disabled, yet not dependent because of her one leg, bothers the Bottom women. However, the men are fascinated with her one remaining leg; "it was stockinged and shod at all times ... her dresses were mid-calf so that her one glamorous leg was always in view" (31). This proud woman--too proud for most--is the matriarch of the Peace household. "Under Eva's distant eye, and prey to her idiosyncrasies, her own children [and

grandchild] grew up stealthily" (41). She is the example with whom Hannah and Sula grew up and after whom they modeled their ideas about what was for them and what was not.

Hannah patterns her mother's attitude as she "exasperated the women in the town" (44), by further extending the metaphoric scar, and making the ideal of sisterhood or bonding impossible. "Hannah seemed too unlike them, having no passion attached to her relationships" (44). Hannah is unable to conform, which "involves people's subordinating their own judgments and standards to the judgments and standards of others" (Zick Rubin 75). Instead, Hannah redefines who she is, and who she, as a woman, should get along with best. She finds that she cannot get along with the women, so she customs her life relative to the men in the Bottom. Hannah's priority to favor men over women is what bell hooks cites as "the most important aspect of a woman's life [--] her relationship with a man" (hooks, Ain't I ... 82).

Jealousy, for Eva and all the Peace women, begins when Eva's loss gains her a new place, unnamed in America's society. This permanent scar is defined by economics when the loss of Eva's leg becomes the monetary means that

enables the Peace women to survive. The unidentified "somebody," the narrator informs us, "said Eva stuck it [her leg] under a train" (31) for the money. Susan Willis interprets Eva Peace's self-mutilation as:

> The individual's direct confrontation with the oppressive social forces inherent in white domination.... Self-mutilation is portrayed in Morrison's writing as liberational. (40)

This physical injury that separates Eva from her leg also separates her from other women. Eva severs the image of the traditional black woman as she separates herself from the women at the Bottom with her financial independence. Ten-thousand-dollars provides the means for Eva to overcome the debilitating poverty she seemed destined to endure at the bottom of America's society.

Toni Morrison's designation for the black section of Medallion, Ohio--the Bottom--metaphorically indicates not only the social status of the black community, but also the mental depths that oppression has left on them. It is unfortunate that the black people at the Bottom also begrudge Eva's fortune. Eva is not only able to remain independent of their charity, but also able to build her world as she sees fit.

A black woman, garnering a ten-thousand-dollar fortune,

also affects white folks. Mr. Reed expresses his disapproval that a

> "Nigger gal[s] legs goin' for $10,000 a piece?" As though he could understand $10,000 a pair--but for one? (Morrison 31)

Black women were not expected to succeed without white folks, and certainly not without men to take care of them. Bell hooks explains Eva's status as that of the matriarch:

> Within the matriarch society[,] woman was almost always economically secure.... The matriarch was most often the owner of property ... within the woman-centered society...[and] assumes the authoritative role. (Ain't I ... 73)

Eva's fortune places her outside the restrictions imposed on her black sisters who are dependent on white people, black men, and their own means to survive. Willis labels Eva as

> "Sovereign" of an entire household, which includes three generations of Peace women as its nucleus (Eva, Hannah, and Sula).... Eva's household represents a radical alternative to the bourgeois family model. (40)

that the black Bottom women strive for. Eva and Hannah dare to be autonomous, a stance black women had never been socialized to take. Black women

> are often competing with one another, with other black women we do not even know. The roots of this competition are again related to most black women's

> feelings that we are invisible. (hooks, Sisters 170)

The Peace women cause anything but peace in Medallion, Ohio. However, they seek just that for themselves, by any means necessary. When Plum, Eva's only son, returns from the army strung out on drugs, Eva ensures his and her peace by setting him afire to end his misery. When Eva kills Plum, she wounds before she can be wounded. Hannah's peace comes in brief interludes with the men with whom she spends much of her time. "Hannah would take the man down into the cellar ... into the pantry ... the seldom-used parlor, or even up to her bedroom" (Morrison 32). These moments of spontaneous lovemaking give her more tranquility than she ever got from associating with black women. Sula discovers that she has only to use her thoughts, while making love to any man, to achieve more mental satisfaction than physical.

The Peace women's ways of coping with life through self-gratification shields them from the wounds that could be inflicted on them by life. The fortress they occupy is within the "house of many rooms" (30). They add things to their lives rather than people, such as

> more stairways ... more rooms ... [inaccessible] rooms that had three doors ... [or those] that opened out on the porch. (30).

The only additional people they include become permanent fixtures associated with their dwellings, like the Deweys. Susan Willis contends that Morrison portrays Eva's

> household, in which individual differences between three women function to test the social dynamics within a group, and between it and society at large. (41)

The dynamics of the triad, in the Peace household, is not the basis for the relationship between the teenage girls, Nel and Sula.

Sula's and Nel's friendship signals a possible healing of the scars exacted by the Peace women. Nel and Sula seek out one another, as females, to bond in friendship. This friendship forms a bridge between the matriarchal private household of Eva and the patriarchal public domain of black females in the Bottom. Sula's lack of ties with other black girls, because of the community's feelings about Eva (and Hannah), is one reason she, too, is prevented from bonding with other females. Up to Sula's thirteenth year, she has been unaffected by Eva's and Hannah's influence, as is noted when she first meets Nel. But now, the discovery of her sexuality and Hannah's information of not liking Sula cause her to consider another side of her "self." To Sula, Nel is everything Sula is not, and she has everything Sula does not

have. Lillian Rubin cites that "sometimes we choose a friend who mirrors our fantasies, dreams of a self we wish we could be" (43).

The differences in personality between the two friends is the element that solidifies their relationship. Nel knows Sula as a person who "never competed; she simply helped others define themselves" (Morrison 95). The only scar Sula bears is the one created, she believes, with the breaking of her and Nel's sister-friendship. But even Sula challenges Nel's logic to her definition of friendship when Nel tells Sula, "You didn't love me enough to leave him [Jude] alone.... You had to take him away" (145). Sula responds, "I didn't kill him, I just fucked him. If we were such good friends, how come you couldn't get over it?" (145). What is relevant to Sula, in friendship, is that they remain friends, no matter what.

Self-hatred is not a natural part of Sula's life, but she is accidentally wounded by what she overhears her mother tell two of her mother's girlfriends. Hannah tells Patsy and Valentine, "I love Sula. I just don't like her" (57). This revelation sends Sula "flying up the stairs" (57). This first sign of self-hatred swells inside Sula and unravels the mother-daughter tie between them. When Sula

escapes to one of the many rooms, she decides to love herself better than she loves anyone else, except, of course, Nel. Hannah's expression of her relationship with her daughter bears the same markings of broken connectedness between mother and daughter, as with her own mother, Eva. At some time in Hannah's life, maybe when Eva leaves her children with a neighbor and returns with one leg, the mother-daughter cord is severed. Critic Janice G. Raymond warns:

> The lack of mother-mentoring can follow a woman throughout her life. Women pass on to daughter[s]-daughters who become mothers, counselors, and friends of women.... [They] breed neglect for women.... and they often create guilt about the wrong things. (188)

The result is Hannah, like Eva, learns to dislike femaleness, but they do appreciate autonomy and the freedom to love themselves.

Nel, as Sula's sister-friend, knows Sula, yet she attempts to define Sula by standards set by society about women, and by standards set by the black Bottom women. Sula's disregard for the guidelines set by other black women and society indicates that she has overstepped her community's boundaries. As a single women, Sula is a threat to the social order of the Medallion women. Most women were

expected to choose husbands--or be chosen--and then have children. Sula upsets these social norms by doing neither. Sula's needs are basic: the uniqueness of Nel's sister-friendship and the freedom to live her life.

Sula's choice to live her life as she please breaches the idea Nel has of what a colored woman should do, and the way she should act. In the dialogue between Sula and Nel below, Sula expresses what is important to her.

> "But you a woman and you alone." "And you? Ain't you alone?".... "You can't have it all, Sula," ... "Why? I can do it all, why can't I have it all?" "You can't do it all. You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can't act like a man. You can't be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don't." (Morrison 142)

Nel acquiesces to the limits sexism and racism place on black women; Sula does not. Nel conforms to what society expects of her; she marries, she bears children, and she lives in a home where her life is based on what her husband wants and her children need.

Naturally, Sula's argument to Nel is lost because Nel has conformed to the standards placed on her. Nel does not see that Sula has had to do everything for herself, so she claims the right to have what she wants, which includes a brief affair with Nel's husband. Sula's ten-year absence,

from the Bottom, has exposed her to the realities of American society. Sula knows there is little difference, to white people, between her as a black woman and a black man. She tells Nel, "You say I'm a woman and colored. Ain't that the same as being a man?" (142).

Nel has become so acclimated to her society that she believes her existence depends upon her having a man and living "respectable." When Nel implies to Sula that she is not living a decent life, Sula responds, "I like my own dirt" (142). Sula would rather name herself than have others label her. For so long her world has been all she has needed; Sula refuses the definitions imposed on her by Eva, Nel or the black Bottom women. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman maintain that "to be given an identity involves being assigned a specific place in the world" (122). Sula refuses to occupy any place except the one she makes for herself.

Sula's desire for more than what her grandmother or mother have shown her of life can be construed as Sula's coming out in womanhood. Sula and Nel may have been destined to be friends because of what social psychologist Lillian B. Rubin discloses is the tendency of interpersonal relationships between friends. She cites that

> the choice of ... seemingly so different [friends] from ourselves ... signal the emergence of a part of the self that had hitherto been hidden from view. (43)

Sula is not trusted by most of the black women in her community, because she dares to claim for herself an identity unlike that of the other black women. "Sula acknowledged none of their attempts at counter-conjure or their gossips and seemed to need the services of nobody" (Morrison 113). Sula remains independent and self-centered, but as "things began to happen" (113), Sula's presence back in the Bottom is labelled "evil." Hooks contends:

> "Evilness" of a given black woman may merely be the facade she presents to a sexist-racist world that she realizes would only exploit her if she were to appear vulnerable. (Ain't I ... 86)

Sula rejects marriage and motherhood--the one prescriptive role of respectability that black women sought. Hooks reveals how "black women attempted to ... [emphasize] their commitment to motherhood" (Ain't I ... 70), as a means of giving value to themselves as women. Sula does not have to aspire to anyone else's expectations.

The assumption that Sula's and Nel's friendship might bind the gash between the Peace women and the black Bottom women is presumptuous. There is no bridge in Sula that brings black women together. Why? The socialization of

black women is the most significant reason. The social process works like an internal cancer and has grown and gone unchecked for too long. Black women have been impeded from healthy growth--socially, politically, and economically--hampering chances for positive healing for them. Black women, like Sula, have been misdiagnosed, because the wrong practitioners have been advising them to follow antiquated prescriptions that were never for their benefit anyway. Hooks argues, "the community [of black women] is the healing place" (hooks, Sisters 152). As long as black women's conditions go unresolved, the likelihood of effective female bonding, sister-friendships with any female is jeopardized.

Chapter 3

Reconciliation in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*

The previous chapters of this thesis examined the themes of "choice versus no choice" and "metaphoric scarring" in two of Toni Morrison's novels. *Beloved* depicts a time during which almost unimaginable conditions initiated the ideas society has about black women, while *Sula* describes a period when the condition of black women is accentuated by their evil thoughts and bad behavior toward each other.

Social researchers and others, such as bell hooks and Lillian Rubin, have found that sexism, as a part of America's complex social system, restricts women with patriarchal standards, aims to define women with male labels, and complicates situations for females, especially black women as they negotiate their lives. In addition, their findings indicate that racism, as an additional exclusionary force, relegates black women outside of American society because of presumptions that discredit

them. The boundaries of sex and race decrease black women's choices, diminish the prospect of healthy interpersonal relationships, and lessen the resources that minister to their well-being.

The focus of this chapter is the reconciliation of black women as they identify with other women and acknowledge other black women in a process of restoration. Morrison, as a black female fiction writer,

> is concerned with identifying [black people's] pain and imaginatively constructing maps for healing.... [Black writers] address the deep, often unnamed psychic wounding that takes place in the daily lives of black folks in this society. (hooks, Sisters 13)

Toni Morrison's narrative intentions are explained by Marilyn Sanders Mobley in Folk Roots and Mythic Wings. Mobley contends that Morrison is concerned with language and the unique ways in which her people use it. Morrison wants to "restore the language that Black people spoke to its original power" (92). Morrison recognizes that black women are restricted in many ways socially, so she restricts the language her characters Violet and Alice use in order to heal them. Violet is unable to express into words what has gone wrong with her, which prompts Morrison to introduce, in a disjointed manner, a voice, a language, a lyrical

interchange unique to these two black women for healing and self-healing.

Morrison accomplishes the idea of the need for reconciliation by calling attention to the near-ruin that the neglect of a black woman fosters in her focal character, Violet Trace. Remarkably, Jazz, as literary instrument, becomes a conveyance for the dynamic interaction of black female characters. This novel demonstrates the effects of continued degradation of black women, as well as evidence of their efforts to heal themselves. While Morrison examines the limits of emotions, she also "explores such losses [love, dignity, respect, etc.] because that's [her] way of saying to the reader, don't let it happen!" (Bakerman 60).

The concept of healing and self-healing, as a process by which black women interact and allay their differences, is demonstrated in several distinct dialogues between the main character, Violet, and the antagonist, Alice Manfred. The process is punctuated by their various discourses; ambivalent ritualistic conversations characterize reconciliation for Violet and Alice and possibly other black women. In Words and Women, Casey Miller and Kate Swift contend that it is only when we notice that we are struggling to cope with nameless things that we begin to

search for words to describe them (140-141). Because Violet does not know what is wrong, she seeks out Alice Manfred. Even Alice is not certain why she lets Violet into her apartment after ignoring her for the past seven months, because

> she did not want to see that woman they began to call Violent.... But after a while, having heard how torn up the man [Joe] was ... she had steeled herself and let the woman [Violet] in. (Morrison 80)

A notable change in the relationship between the two women occurs after Alice

> recognized the knock and never knew if she was eager or angry when she heard it. And she didn't care. When Violet came to visit (and Alice never knew when that might be) something opened up. (83)

Alice fights her natural human need to bond and connect with Violet by presenting an unnatural facade. However, Alice admits Violet into her home, a gesture which suggests an attempt at reconciliation. This is evidence that Alice subconsciously wishes to discard the societal baggage that dictates disagreement among black women.

With each visit, both women introduce themselves, define themselves, validate the other's rights, and express their needs with nonverbal language. Their contact enables them to identify the source of their oppression--the very

society in which they live.

The theme of reconciliation is not easily decipherable in the plot of Jazz, but it is conceivable as the truth of black women's oppression is unveiled. In "Memory, Creation and Writing," Morrison maintains that the things women must forgive other women for unity are

> the grave errors and violent misdemeanors, but the point is less the thing to be forgiven than the nature and quality of forgiveness among women--which is to say friendship among women. (386-387)

Conceivably, this is why Morrison does not ease Violet and Alice into an amicable relationship of two women understanding each other's problems.

Instead, Morrison creates in Jazz a novel about the effect the eighteen-year-old character Dorcas has on the lives of those with whom she has come in contact. Dorcas's death, announced in the beginning of the novel, is obviously the catalyst that propels the actions of the main characters, Joe and Violet Trace and Dorcas's aunt, Alice Manfred. Ironically, Dorcas's death provides an opportunity for two defunct black women--Alice and Violet--to meet, thus, providing an opportunity for black women collectively to bond and connect. Alice's efforts are futile when she attempts to shield Dorcas from reality. Inevitably,

Dorcas's life is complicated by the meeting and subsequent love affair initiated by Joe Trace. Joe's inability to accept his complacent existence with his wife, Violet, causes him to make much more of his affair with Dorcas than he imagined. Eventually, his love for her diminishes his reasoning capacity, so that he plunges to an emotional abyss and commits murder. Violet Trace's discovery of her husband's infidelity subjects her to near-damaging self-destruction. She takes on a detrimental "woman scorned" mentality, which causes her to cut the corpse of Dorcas at the funeral. The notion of reconciliation is presented as dichotomizing negatives--infidelity, death, murder--that are transformed into positive vehicles for bonding, friendship, and recovery for two black women.

On January 3, 1926, Violet Trace bolts down Lenox Avenue through the snow, towards her apartment: "The snow she ran through was so windswept she left no footprints in it" (Morrison 4). The significance of this opening is momentous: although Violet's actions are interpreted as the process of dementia--"private crazinesses"--she has not fully entered the world of the crazy. Violet has just been forced to face the deterioration of her life. She is breaking down emotionally; she has lost control, and what is

being witnessed is her efforts to grasp any and everything to regain her sanity. Violet has become one of those "individuals lacking supportive ties [who] are vulnerable to a wide variety of physical and behavioral disturbances" (Pilisuk & Parks 114), which is why she laments: "I haven't got any muscles, so I can't really be expected to defend myself" (8).

Long before Violet is expelled from Dorcas's funeral, where she has tried to disfigure another lifeless woman, others notice Violet's mental deterioration: "way before.... Joe ever laid eyes on the girl, Violet sat down in the middle of the street. She didn't stumble nor was she pushed: she just sat down" (17). Joe notices Violet's minor concessions when she started hanging an "eight" on everything; that is, she played the number eight when the numbers runner came, and others note her maundering of "Ha Mercy[s]" for no reason. Even Violet notices some of her little "crazinesses," rituals of "door locking, tidying up, cleaning teeth, arranging hair ... preliminaries to the truly necessary things" (27-28), but associates the loss of her "self" with some physical ailment: "instead of putting her left heel forward, she stepped back and folded her legs in order to sit in the street" (23).

The impairment of Violet's psyche is associated with invisibility; she has lost being a viable wife for her husband, she has missed out on making a place within her community, and finally, she has lost touch with herself. Barbara Schapiro suggests that "the denial of one's status as a human subject, has deep repercussions in the individual's internal world" (194). Therefore, what has emerged is a woman--Violet alias "Violent"--who takes a knife to a corpse, even though "[you] can't rival the dead" (Morrison 15), because she has no one she can legitimately fight.

That Violet left no "footprints" is symbolic of her invisibility. The absence of presence in Violet's life is representative of how out of touch she has become with her community, for "nobody knew exactly where on Lenox Avenue she lived" (4); and how out of touch she has become with her husband who bemoaned, "she don't hardly talk anymore, and I ain't allowed near her" (49); and how out of touch she has become with her "self": "she does not see herself doing these things. She sees them being done" (22). The symbolism of invisibility becomes an oxymoron in relation to Violet's last name--Trace. She is traceable only because Joe is her husband.

Since Violet's childhood, she has been conscious of her invisibility. She has been consequential as Joe's wife, Rose Dear's daughter, and True Belle's granddaughter. Violet grew up in the South with a grandmother who deserted her own daughters, Rose Dear and May, when they were young. Violet is then deserted by her mother, Rose Dear, when Rose commits suicide in the well in front of their shack, because she has no one she can turn to for emotional help. From the moment Rose Dear takes her own life, Violet believes "no one loves [children of suicides] because they are not really here" (4).

Violet has had a lifetime of denial in some form or another. She accepts her need for only one person--Joe; and rejects any need for motherhood and friendship. In Sisters of The Yam, bell hooks reveals that:

> Many black women ... walk around in daily life carrying so much hurt, feeling wasted, yet pretending in every area of their life that everything is under control. (29)

It is not until Violet is confronted with the loss of her husband to another woman that she recognizes that most of her needs have never been met. Marc Pilisuk and Susan Hillier Parks reveal that

> when a relationship with a lover is severed ... [there is]" a sense of

> disconnection [that] can be mended by attention to making connections: with kin, friends, or even the community at large. (107)

Their studies further reveal that a woman "must develop a new identification of her 'self' as an individual separate from the husband she no longer has. The friends she has and her skills in connecting with people ... are her resources" (99). Unfortunately, Violet is unable to express her needs, nor does she have the resources and social skills to ask for help.

In The Female World, Jessie Bernard reveals that the most important vehicle of reality is conversation, which is an ongoing process. Nonverbal communication becomes important for all those deprived of power, particularly women (49-50). The greater part of conversation is implicit, not explicit (Lillian Rubin 140); therefore, the discourse between Alice and Violet is appropriate--though nothing they say directly addresses their needs. Evidence of Violet's and Alice's laborious interaction takes place:

> [Violet] knocked on her door so early in the morning Alice thought it was the law. "I don't have a thing to say to you. Not one thing." She had said it in a loud whisper through the chained opening in the door and slammed it shut. (75)

Violet's persistence is evidence of a patient's plea for

help. Violet's need to be validated as a person, along with Alice's need for acceptance of her black femaleness, is the common thread that eventually secures their relationship.

Alice's and Violet's perverse interaction serves as an instrument for Violet's emotional healing and Alice's understanding of her own life and her niece Dorcas's rebellion. The silent messages in Alice and Violet's interaction comes by way of an unassuming form:

> The next day she [Violet] was back and looked so bad Alice wanted to slap her. Instead, she said, "Take that dress off and I'll stitch up your cuff." Violet wore the same dress each time and Alice was irritated by the thread running loose from her sleeve, as well as the coat lining ripped in at least three places she could see. Violet sat in her slip with her coat on, while Alice mended the sleeve with the tiniest stitches. (Morrison 82)

Violet's appearance is a representative action of the Violet who knows about Joe and Dorcas. Violet's life is frayed, chaotic, and disrupted. She is a loose thread; this woman who believed her life to be a neatly sewn quilt unravels. Her sensitive inner life has been ripped, much like the lining in her coat. Alice, a seamstress by trade, is there to repair--put back together--the marred life of Violet. Alice accomplishes this by these visits Violet insists on making to Alice's apartment.

Violet is unable to explain the repairs that need to be made, "the ill-glued cracks and weak places beyond which is anything" (23). Symbolically, Alice's mending of Violet is Alice's way of forgiving Violet for the way she behaved at Dorcas's funeral. It is also Morrison's technique that connects Alice with Violet with Dorcas in a matri-triumvirate bonding of females and communal awareness. Pilisuk and Parks contend:

> Friendship between two apparently dissimilar friends might be based upon certain characteristics of each that are not readily apparent. (103)

Violet depends on Alice's expertise as a woman--as a black woman--who is also a victim of the same pragmatic system that has almost succeeded in defeating Violet. Alice needs Violet as a mirror to examine her own denial. She has lost the capacity to know who she really is and what she needs or desires (hooks, Sisters 24). She lacks love and friendships, and has denied her "self" as a black woman for far too long.

The first indication of a routine of negotiating respect between these two black women is recorded when Alice confronts Violet:

> "What could you want from me?" "Oh, right now I want to sit down on your chair." "I'm sorry. I just can't think

> what good can come of this." "I'm having trouble with my head," said Violet placing her fingers on the crown of her hat. "See a doctor, why don't you?" ... "I'm not the one you need to be scared of." "No? Who is?" "I don't know. That's what hurts my head." "You didn't come here to say you sorry. I thought maybe you did. You came in here to deliver some of your own evil." "I don't have no evil of my own." (Morrison 80)

As far as Alice is concerned, Violet has come to the wrong black woman for help. According to Roger D. Abrahams, this encounter is known as the female style of signifying that black women employ in a situation of conflict with other black women. Their interaction is not dependent on any set rules of behavior (77). Alice expresses the attitude with which she relates to Violet:

> The thing was how Alice felt and talked in her [Violet's] company. Not like she did with other people. With Violet she was impolite. Sudden. Frugal. No apology or courtesy seemed required or necessary between them. But something else was--clarity, perhaps. The kind of clarity crazy people demand from the not-crazy. (Morrison 83)

Alice and Violet face their oppression, and their isolation, using language that is difficult for both of them; the key is that each woman attempts to understand the other--to understand themselves--to form a black female bond of kinship.

The instinctive way Alice questions Violet's behavior at the funeral is part of what goes on between women when one departs from the norms of respectability (Abrahams 77). The two women each share how they confront their frustrations in the following exchange. Alice states:

> "I don't understand women like you. Women with knives" ... "I wasn't born with a knife." "No, but you picked one up." "You never did?" "No, I never did." (Morrison 85)

Though Alice disapproves of the way Violet handled this traumatic situation, "had come right in the funeral to nasty and dishonor her" (74), she does understand why Violet stabbed at Dorcas's corpse. Alice, like Violet, needs to take her anger and disappointment out on someone--something. The only difference between the two women is that Alice has postponed her desire for vengeance, while Violet has been unable to control hers. Alice thinks to herself:

> What she told Violet was true. She had never picked up a knife. What she neglected to say--what came flooding back to her now--was also true: everyday and every night for seven months she, Alice Manfred, was starving for blood. Not his, Oh, no.... Her craving settled for the red liquid coursing through the other woman's veins. (Morrison 85-86)

Violet needs to reclaim her "self" after Joe's affair with Dorcas is made known. Pilisuk and Parks contend that:

> Women not only bear their own grief at the loss of a formerly important relationship, ... they also bear the discomfort and disapproval of society's view of them as somehow inappropriate or soiled. This sense of irrevocable loss can shatter the basic sense of self, altering a woman's fundamental identification.... She must become reacquainted with who she is and how she relates with the larger social environment. (99)

Violet must find an instrument for her emotional healing, so she solicits Alice. Violet struggles to create a reality of the maddening and disorderly events that have just occurred in her life. Alice becomes the unwilling participant as Violet strives to heal herself.

One method of self-healing for Violet is associating with a woman with a similar background close in age and in life experiences. Violet struggles to explain to Alice why she has come to her and what she wants:

> "We born around the same time, me and you," ... "We women me and you. Tell me something real. Don't just say I'm grown and-ought to know" ... "I want some fat in this life". "Wake up. Fat or lean, you got just one. This is it." (Morrison 110)

The fat Violet refers to is the good times, or something better to happen in her life, something to make her happy. Possessing the fat for Violet is "a carefree afternoon to decide to go to the pictures, or just to sit with the

birdcages and listen to the children play in snow" (Morrison 16). As Alice talks to Violet, there is an acknowledgment of something about her own life. Alice's advice to Violet is, "You want a real thing? ... I'll tell you a real one. You got anything left to you to love, anything at all, do it" (112).

As Alice observes Violet's appearance, the result of sister friendship and bonding surfaces:

> Violet, her coat lining repaired too now, her cuffs secure, needed only to pay attention to her hose and hat to appear normal. Alice sighed a little sigh, amazed at herself. (83)

Even Violet acknowledges her "self" "when she thought about that Violet, and what that Violet saw through her eyes, she knew there was no shame there, no disgust" (94). The prognosis for Violet is good when she takes responsibility for herself: "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" (95-96). These incidents are the positive signs of reclamation for Violet, as well as Alice.

The novel's narrator describes the friendship that finally develops between the two women: "the women so easy with each other talk wasn't always necessary.... From time

to time one murmured something--to herself or to the other" (112). These two black women are the most unlikely candidates for bonding, but they solidify their friendship with one of life's oldest remedies:

> Violet was the first to smile. Then Alice. In no time laughter was rocking them both.... Violet learned then what she had forgotten until this moment: that laughter is serious. More complicated more serious than tears. Crumpled over, shoulders shaking, ... She laughed till she coughed and Alice had to make them both a cup of settling tea. (113-114)

The final evidence that Violet has resolved her "self" and that the scars of isolation, loneliness and denial have begun to diminish emerge when Violet says: "I want to be the woman my mother didn't stay around long enough to see" (208). Violet Trace and Alice Manfred are only two of society's forgotten people. They occupy two realms of America's society: the culture of black people, and the culture of women. The depth of their oppression is usually well-concealed and is often misunderstood because of the deep roots that denial and isolation produce in black women's lives. Toni Morrison, black and female, unveils these two cultures and the damage that neglect of this significant group of people may produce.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis was to examine several themes that are woven in three of Toni Morrison's novels, Beloved, Sula and Jazz. These three themes "choice versus no choice," "metaphoric scarring" and "reconciliation" are predicated on the effects of racism and sexism on Morrison's black female characters.

Though black women have suffered emotionally, socially, and intellectually as a result of these various modes of oppression, they have rallied their innate strengths in an effort to surmount seemingly difficult circumstances.

Morrison's black female characters reflect the real-life dilemma that African-American women face in a society where racism and sexism continue to place an undue strain on their female bonding. However, as revealed in Morrison's treatment of how women interact, black women eventually find a commonality that serves to unite them, and a possible means for reconciliation that will eradicate the myths and prejudices concocted about them.

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