THE SEARCH FOR CULTURAL IDENTITY: AN EXPLORATION OF THE
WORKS OF TONI MORRISON

Jennifer S. Conway, B.A.

Thesis Prepared for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

December 2007

APPROVED:

David B. Kesterson, Major Professor
John R. Ross, Committee Member
Robert Upchurch, Committee Member
David Holdeman, Chair of the Department
    of English
Sandra L. Terrell, Dean of the Robert B.
    Toulouse School of Graduate Studies

Many of Toni Morrison’s African-American characters attempt to change their circumstances either by embracing the white dominant culture that surrounds them or by denying it. In this thesis I explore several ways in which the characters do just that—either embrace or deny the white culture’s right to dominion over them. This thesis deals primarily with five of Toni Morrison’s novels: *The Bluest Eye, Beloved, Paradise, Sula,* and *Tar Baby.*
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am greatly indebted to David Kesterson for his insights into the world of Toni Morrison’s fiction, and for his patience with and understanding of the writing process. His influence has made all the difference.

I must also express my gratitude for both Haj Ross’ and Robert Upchurch’s involvement. Their thoughtful contributions helped me to generate many ideas for this and future projects.

I would be remiss not to also acknowledge the constant support of my friend, Krystal Hart, who has taught me not to panic, and most of all, I must thank my husband, Bradley Conway, who believed in me even when I forgot to believe in myself.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapters</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. CONSTRUCTING AFRICAN-AMERICAN IDENTITIES</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. TONI MORRISON’S DENIAL OF LACANIAN SUBJECTIVITY</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. RESISTING CULTURAL INSCRIPTION: TONI MORRISON’S SUBVERSIVE USE OF FOOD IMAGERY AND THE CANNIBALISM MOTIF</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

WORKS CITED | 71 |
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Many of Toni Morrison’s African-American characters attempt to change their circumstances either by embracing the white culture that surrounds them or by denying it. In this thesis I explore several ways in which the characters do just that—either embrace or deny the white culture’s right to dominion over them. This discussion is, of course, a slippery slope in that both cultures’ histories are for better or worse inextricably linked. But the following questions seem to remain for Morrison’s characters: From what angle and in what way should this problem be attacked? If the characters decide to turn their backs entirely on the white culture are they unrealistic idealists, and if they decide to embrace the white culture are they betraying their own cultural identity? Finally, is there perhaps some middle-ground between these two extremes?

Morrison’s novels are about the politics of social structure. How living spaces can shape her characters’ personas is a question central to her novels. Her novels also question how the construction of identity is influenced by the types of clothing her characters wear. The central question appears to be whether or not the African-American characters’ homes and clothing should reflect the white culture. Some of her characters fight to be different. They build or live in houses that are strange or different. They wear loose and ragged clothing that is not respectable. Some of the women shave their heads. They repurpose rooms and make cellars into bedrooms. They wear glamorous flashy clothing—clothing that calls attention to precisely what they are: African-American women. Fundamentally, the characters react to the pressures put on
them by the white community in one of two ways: they either given in to or fight the influence of the dominant culture.

Some of Morrison’s characters attempt to exert some control over their own lives by control and organizing objects—sometimes objects as small and seemingly insignificant as cans of food, but these small objects are far from insignificant in the characters’ lives. These tiny objects symbolize the characters’ desires for cultural autonomy, and they function as talismans for the characters, helping them to channel their discontent into something tangible. These objects facilitate change.

Some of her characters are unable to deal with the pressures put on them by both the white and the African-American communities. These characters, hungry and desperate for fellowship and equity, turn on and fight with other characters within their own African-American communities. Their displaced anger causes a chain reaction which eventually affects entire communities. Morrison’s novels suggest that this displaced anger should be redirected and turned outward towards the dominant white culture that serves as the African-American culture’s oppressor.

Some of Morrison’s characters not only survive but seem to thrive in the worlds of her novels. Interestingly these are the characters that make the biggest cultural compromises. They exist with their feet in both the African-American world and the white world. Somehow they inhabit a middle ground between the two extremes, and though Morrison and her novels seem uneasy with the characters that refuse to choose between the two worlds, it is an unavoidable fact that they are the individuals who prosper in her novels. Morrison seems to be asserting that for better or worse these characters are to be the inheritors of the African-American race’s future.
CHAPTER 2

CONSTRUCTING AFRICAN-AMERICAN IDENTITIES

Many of the characters in Morrison’s novels exist in an in between state, not enslaved and not entirely free. The characters in her novels construct identities for themselves that are compatible with the standard dominant culture. They construct their homes in the image of the master culture, and they dress themselves in garments that are acceptable to that same culture, but rather than facilitate the characters’ growth towards spiritual and emotional freedom, the structures in which they live and the garments they choose to wear keep them from becoming emotionally healthy people. Helene Wright’s house in *Sula* is such an example. The house is a perfect white house, and everything is always very neat and very clean. Nothing in the house is messy, unkempt, or unusual. The house is in no way what many of Morrison’s characters would term funky. The term funky is employed by Morrison’s characters to describe people who are decidedly different and do not subscribe to the standards set forth by general white society.

In many of Morrison’s novels her characters want to better themselves socioeconomically through the acquisition of goods and property, but Morrison’s novels suggest that the American dream of owning a home and being respectable is a fallacy, that there is nothing inherently valuable about owning a home, or objects because the characters become enslaved to the ideology of consumption. Her novels also suggest that the dominate white culture forces the characters in her novels to buy objects in order to be included—in some minor way—in that dominant culture. This dominant culture commodifies—makes into a product—any individual who literally buys into the
system by buying goods. Rather than Morrison’s characters simply owning products created by this white culture, the culture then owns the characters through ideological programming and by encouraging debt. The characters become enslaved to the ideology of the system—the ideology which asserts that an individual must consume commercial products in order to be included in that particular society. When the characters become indebted they are not unlike sharecroppers because of a financial obligation they incurred by purchasing the products and houses necessary to included in the dominant society.

The fact that the characters do not understand their own value is aggravated by the fact that they exist in contiguous relation to the larger culture to which they hope to gain entrance. Rather than being proud of themselves and not requiring outside validation, the characters turn their sights outwards and seek validation from individuals in the larger social context. Her characters move from their subjective inner lives towards their objective external lives; some of them focus almost entirely on the objective world.

Because many of Morrison’s characters cannot afford to own property, they are rootless drifters living transitional lives. This transitional, rootless nature is, in part, a result of the fact that many of her characters often deny their own intrinsic, cultural nature while buying into—literally and conceptually—the larger white culture. They stifle who they are as African-American’s in an effort to fit into the larger cultural context by owning homes that look the same and by dressing in the same fashion and by wearing their hair in the same way. This desire to be accepted is entirely understandable; it is a universal human impulse, but Morrison’s novels argue that an attempt to fit into the
larger cultural context at the expense of her characters’ own unique cultural voice is the equivalent of cultural suicide. 

Some of these characters who are rootless drifters are outside or beyond all cultures. They are in between two worlds: the world of white culture and the world of black culture. Being in between two worlds means that her characters do not necessarily have to identify with any particular cultural set; their options are many and varied. They do not see their circumstances this way, however. As Homi K. Bhabha discusses in *The Location of Culture* “The move away from the singularities of ‘class’ or ‘gender’ as primary conceptual and organizational categories, has resulted in an awareness of the subject position – of race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation – that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world” (2). The subject’s position Bhaba refers to is the individual’s position within the social discourse and culture. In other words, the individual becomes hyperaware of their position within the social structure, but Bhaba argues, as I argue too, that the movement away from a particular standard, authoritative discourse facilitates a more multidimensional approach to living and individual identity. This liminal existence, examined so closely in Morrison’s works, facilitates the decentralization of cultural identity which allows for a more inclusive culture and discourse. If one exists outside of the singularities, the specific gospel truth of white society, one is not limited by its definitions. If one exists outside or in liminal relation to the dominant culture one has a greater opportunity to move disregard the cultural demands and influence of a particular society. Contrary, however, those residing within the culture are, therefore, enslaved by
it. By navigating through this in between state, the individuals are free to create a new identity for themselves in a new culture of their own making.

Attachments to structures and things hold people back from being able to realize their true selves because the structures reflect the values of the larger culture rather than the value of the individual; the culture which states that an individual is nothing if he or she does not own a house, or property, or fancy gadgets, but the fact ultimately remains that these objects end up owning both the white and the black characters in Morrison’s novels. The places in which Morrison’s characters live are often sites of tragedy. These dwellings are often the sites of tragedy because Morrison sees an attachment to material objects, including attachments to houses, as unhealthy. This phenomenon appears to be especially true of any object that is manufactured by the dominant white culture and then utilized by the black culture. Interestingly, Elizabeth B. House in her article “The ‘Sweet Life’ in Toni Morrison’s Fiction” has argued that these houses are healthy spaces in which women thrive outside the restrictive forces of patriarchal society, but I argue that these houses and structures function as sites of containment. They serve to keep the women restrained within its architectural confines. Built by the patriarchal white society these houses often figuratively imprison the women who live within them.

True freedom in Morrison’s novels is equated with thinking for one’s self and celebrating one’s own existence. In the novel Beloved Baby Suggs and Denver are two examples of characters that are emotionally and literally free beyond the need to consume goods and property. Baby Suggs, holy, the female self-appointed preacher, tells the black community to whom she preaches to love themselves. “‘Here,’ she said,
‘in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. …This is flesh I’m talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved’” (Morrison 108). It is the Clearing where Baby Suggs, holy, preaches to her community that Sethe, mother of Denver, “along with the others…had claimed herself” (116). In this church of nature, the Clearing, Sethe manages to claim and celebrate her own identity as a freed person, as a person rather than an inhuman slave. She therefore defines her existence not by what she is not: a white member of the ruling class, but rather by what she is: a funky African-American woman. But those characters that celebrate their own African-American funkiness are often marginalized by people of their own race. They do not play by the rules and subscribe to white standards of propriety. They do not aspire to be white. Those characters that thrive while living in opposition to the white culture are shunned by their own race and marked as pariah.

Baby Suggs is another example of a funky woman from the same novel. When Baby Suggs, holy, multiplies her feast in order to feed the community in a manner reminiscent of the biblical Jesus Christ, the community partakes of the bounty she provides and then shuns her and marks her as an outcast. The community wonders:

How come she always knows exactly what to do and when? Giving advice; passing messages; healing the sick, hiding fugitives, loving, cooking, cooking, loving, preaching, singing, dancing and loving…to take two buckets of blackberries an make ten, maybe twelve, pies; to have turkey enough for the whole town pretty near, new peas in September, fresh cream but no cow, ice and sugar, batter bread, bread pudding, raised bread, shortbread—it made them mad. (168-69)

Though it is arguable whether or not Baby Suggs truly has the power to multiply a harvest, it is unarguable that Baby Suggs culturally enriches the community by
encouraging them to celebrate its own unique identity. Baby Suggs encourages the other members of her community to construct their own identity through self-love. Baby Suggs, as the community’s preacher, brings the community together and encourages them to love themselves—because the white community, she says, will not love them. But this bounteous celebration of blackness causes the community to wonder why Baby Suggs is “always the center of things” (168). The community is angry that a member of their community could thrive in their midst while embracing blackness and funkiness and subverting whiteness, and for this reason, Baby Suggs and everyone within the walls of 124 are ostracized and marginalized by the community. The inhabitants of 124 are punished for constructing their own African-American identity while simultaneously denying the cultural inscription forced on them by the white society. In other words, the community resents Baby Suggs and her family for being individuals rather than cultural lemmings.

In the article “The Comfortable Tasty Framed Cottage: An African American Architectural Iconography” Barbara Burlison Mooney explores the idea the African-American’s post Civil War and pre-Civil Rights movement were forced to comply with a white dominant culture’s view of the world. According to Mooney, African-American’s were pressured to be as neat and tidy as was possible in order to win favor from the white establishment. “The unpleasant fact is that many white people have believed and continue to believe that black people are somehow metaphorically or literally deficient in clean living. This prejudice serves as an underlying premise of an African American architectural iconography that appropriated white built forms and social values in an attempt to counter racism” (Mooney 48). According to Mooney, African-Americans
adopted a policy of hyper vigilant cleanliness in order to counter this horrendous misperception. The rationale follows that an “orderly, enlightened, domestic environment makes the African American worthy, not only of freedom, but of acceptance into American social circles, churches, and politics” (Mooney 49). Mooney and I both posit that Morrison argues through her literature against the philosophy that African-Americans must prove their value to the larger and dominant white culture by mimicking its values and customs while sublimating their own culture.

Significantly, however, Mooney suggests that African-Americans are pressured not only by the dominant culture but also by people within their own African-American communities. As an example, Mooney cites W. E. B. Du Bois’ attempt to encourage the architectural reform of his race through two pictures he published in *The Crisis* of a before and after of what the affluent and respectable black persons’ dwelling could and should become. Du Bois contrasted the picture of a rundown shack entitled “The Old Cabin with a picture of the mansion of J. W. Sanford in Memphis, Tennessee” (57). The message seems clear: affluence may be achieved through the adoption of the architectural iconography of the white culture. Many of Morrison’s novels intentionally sublimate this vision of what African-American dwellings should be. Most of the African-American homes in Morrison’s novels are decidedly cabin-like and certainly far from perfectly clean and ideally tidy.

The only homes in which cleanliness is privileged tend to be the homes of more rigid characters, characters that deny their funkiness, their unique cultural heritage, at the expense of being upwardly mobile. “According to Rossa B. Cooley…in the early twentieth century, postemancipation architectural alterations included withdrawing to a
more private site, differentiations functions within interiors, painting trim in decorative colors, and refusing to refer to their domiciles as cabins" (Mooney 60). Interestingly, this is precisely the opposite of what Baby Suggs does in *Beloved* when she moves into the house at 124 Bluestone Road. Baby Suggs moves the kitchen back into the house, making the house much more cabin-like.

They had a kitchen outside, too. But Grandma Baby turned it into a woodshed and tool room when she moved in. And she boarded up the back door that led to it because she said she didn’t want to make that journey no more. She built around it to make a storeroom, so if you want to get in 124 you have to come by her. Said she didn’t care what folks said about her fixing a two-story house up like a cabin where you cook inside. She said they told her visitors with nice dresses don’t want to sit in the same room with the cook stove and the peelings and the grease and the smoke. She wouldn’t pay them no mind, she said. (Morrison 254)

Most of the action in the novel that takes place within the walls of 124 takes place either in the kitchen or in the keeping room. This narrative choice essentially reduces what is a two-story, two-bedroom house to a two-room cabin with one combined kitchen and living area and one sleeping area. Cooley also suggests that freed slaves were concerned with “differentiating functions within interiors” (Mooney 60), something with which Baby Suggs was decidedly unconcerned. Most all of the activities in 124 took place in the kitchen/living space, everything from cooking, eating, and sleeping to lovemaking. In *Beloved* there is no precise division of space and activities, but a beautiful overlapping of different spatial functions. Because all the characters perform many different activities in the same shared spaces, they interact and communicate with one another. They are not estranged from one another.

Mooney suggests that “in *The Bluest Eye*, the desire for a pretty green-and-white house, with the assimilation it promises…is so powerful that the inability to possess it
can, like the inability to posses blue eyes, destroy integrated black personhood” (65),
and Morrison “asserts that such a set of behaviors is an unnatural repression of the
‘funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human
emotions’” (Mooney 65). The black community of Morrison’s novel’s often seeks out this
funkiness, this undeniably African-American selfhood, and annihilates it. “Wherever it
erupts, this Funk, they wipe it away; where it crusts, they dissolve it…” (Morrison 83).
They destroy what is intrinsically African-American about their culture in order to fit into
the white culture, and this includes the houses in which they live. This funkiness is
utterly repressed in the relatively affluent young women in Morrison’s novels. These
clean, tidy, repressed young women are even present in *The Bluest Eye*.

Such girls live in quiet black neighborhoods where everybody is gainfully
employed. Where there are porch swings hanging from chains. Where the grass
is cut with a scythe, where rooster combs and sunflowers grow in the
yards...Such girls have bought watermelon and snapbeans from the fruit man’s
wagon...They are not fretful, nervous, or shrill...their eyes do not bite. (Morrison
82)

Such African-American girls are not funky; they are clean and well groomed and “wash
themselves with orange-colored Lifebuoy soap, dust themselves with Cashmere talc,
clean their teeth with salt on a piece of rag, soften their skin with Jergens Lotion. They
smell like wood, newspapers, and vanilla” (Morrison 83). Though they live in safe
havens of suburban bliss, they are traitors to their race, and though the accusation is
casual and gentle, the narrator tells us that these young girls go on “to instruct black
children in obedience” (Morrison 83). In other words, they propagate the message that
African-Americans should be compliant and culturally white—not funky, nor different.

Morrison’s novels underscore the idea of the ridiculousness of this stringent
white/blackness by presenting characters and scenes that are representative of this
funkiness, as a counter to the super-clean girls from the ideal black suburbia.

Sometimes her novels underscore this ridiculous philosophy through narrators that state something like the following: “colored people were neat and quiet' niggers were dirty and loud” (87), obviously a ridiculous and hateful statement coming from one African-American narrator attacking another African-American character—a rhetorical strategy that essentially amounts to a hate crime.

This rhetorical self-loathing is, however, understandable to the reader, as none of the African-American characters want to be labeled as uncivilized, or worse yet, inhuman. Hence the line from *The Bluest Eye* that states “the line between colored and nigger was not always clear. Subtle and telltale signs threatened to erode it, and the watch had to be constant” (Morrison 87). Threatened from without and from within, there is little wonder that the black community put so much emphasis on the outward appearances of both themselves and their homes.

A post emancipation freed slave like Baby Suggs, Morrison’s work *Beloved* seems to suggest, has no cultural center; he or she does not have time or space enough to discover who he or she is. “…the sadness was at her center, the desolated center where the self that was no self made its home...fact was she knew more about [her children] than she knew about herself, having never had the map to discover what she was like” (Morrison 172). Characters like Baby Suggs, and other freed slaves like her, struggle with finding their personal identity at the same time that the architectural iconography movement emerges.

While still working as a slave in the home of the kindly Garner family at Sweet Home, Baby Suggs thinks that “it’s better here, but I’m not,” (Morrison 173) meaning
that embracing and being a part of the white culture—however pleasant it might be—is not the culture of Baby Suggs and her people. Baby Suggs is not better in the environment at the Garner’s house because it is still an alien culture, and she is still a slave. The metaphor may be extended to the entirety of the African-American race—though they may be existing in better physical circumstances at the beginning of the twentieth-century in white houses in a white culture, they are still emotionally and spiritually impoverished because they don’t have a core racial identity. This cultural identity crisis occurred at a time when the architectural iconography movement was in full swing.

The narrative of The Bluest Eye, Toni Morrison’s first novel, is interwoven with a Dick and Jane early reader for children that depicts a white family living a harmonious suburban life. “Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy….Mother is very nice….See Father. He is big and strong…See the dog. Bowwow goes the dog” (Morrison 3). The excerpts from this Dick and Jane early reader literally begin the novel, The Bluest Eye, and are interspersed between the novel’s core narrative about several African-American girls. Thus, the reader of the novel is to assume that this Dick and Jane reader is being read by one of the young black girls in the story. This white children’s narrative of idealized suburban life is nothing like the lives of the young black girls in the novel. In fact, as the beginning of the novel’s core narrative indicates, one of the main characters, a young black girl by the name of Pecola, is “having her father’s baby” (Morrison 5). This story of Pecola Breedlove and her family is nothing like the narrative of the young white children in
suburbia. Ultimately, Pecola meets with a sad ending because she embraces the cultural values of the white society, her first intimate introduction to that culture being the Dick and Jane early reader. Because Jane has blue eyes, Pecola believes that she should have blue eyes, in order to have value and be relevant to the white society that is in charge of her value assignation. It is the African-American people’s “contempt of their own blackness” (Morrison 65) that makes insult possible, self-loathing inevitable.

Coming home is difficult for Pauline Breedlove, mother of Pecola, in the novel *The Bluest Eye*. The only time she is happy is when she is at the movies, immersed in the white world, embracing the iconography of the foreign culture. “White men taking such good care of they women, and they all dressed up in big clean houses with the bathtubs right in the same room with the toilet. Them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure” (123). The lives of these fictional and wealthy white characters in the movies are juxtaposed against Pauline’s own life, which is decidedly less glamorous. Pauline works as a maid for a white family while the characters in the films she watches have maids. Pauline’s narrative is contrasted against the movie characters’ narratives in the same way that the young girl Pecola’s narrative is contrasted against that of the affluent young children, Dick and Jane. Through both contrasts, Morrison’s novel foreground the decidedly less than ideal lives of the African-American characters in her novels.

In Morrison’s second novel, *Sula*, the reader experiences the first decidedly transgressive African-American home dweller that is to emerge in her literary canon. One of the novel’s main characters, Eva Peace, disregards the laws of propriety. Eva very actively resists the traditional moral teachings of the black community that encourage black people to deny their funkiness and embrace what are thought of as
tradi
tionally white values by being neat, clean, tidy, and more respectable than the white people who are trying to oppress them.

Helene Sabat, on the other hand, is an excellent example of the respectable sort of black person portrayed in Morrison’s novels. Most importantly, Helene works arduously to be seen as respectable to the white community, which is something that Morrison’s works rail against. Though born to a “Creole whore” (Morrison 17) in a house of prostitution with “red shutters” (Morrison 17), which advertised precisely what went on within the walls of the Sundown House, Helene Sabat is taken away from that unrespectable African-American life by her grandmother. Her grandmother grooms her to be a respectable young black woman—obsessively tidy and compulsively respectable. Her grandmother guarded her “for any sign of her mother’s wild blood” (Morrison 17). It is interesting, however, that the mother, the Creole whore, is later characterized by the narrator as breezy, beautiful, and free-spirited creature, an object of adoration/admiration for the young Nel, daughter of Helene Wright. Helene is rewarded for her respectable behavior with a “lovely house with a brick porch and real lace curtains at the window” (Morrison 17). Both physically and architecturally, Helene projects the image of absolute respectability, so image, then, is directly tied to respectability for many of the African-Americans in Morrison’s novels, and good grooming is directly tied to good neighborhoods, pretty houses, and upward mobility. It also should not go without notice that Helene Sabat lives in the valley, in the town of Medallion where the white people live—rather than in the hills, in the community known as the Bottom, where the black people live.
Significantly, the culmination of Helene’s life, “the culmination of all she had been” (79) was her daughter Nel’s wedding. “A real wedding, in a church, with a real reception afterward, was rare among the people of the Bottom” (80). Typically, “There was no need for that formality” (80), but Helene Wright with her hyper vigilant concern with respectability would have rather died than not have a beautiful, respectable, and showy wedding for her daughter.

Nel’s husband craves respectability through construction of structures, rather than dwelling in structures. He tries to get a job working on the construction of the new road and tunnel that is scheduled to run through Medallion and connect it to Porter’s Landing, the town across the river. Nel’s husband, Jude, desires to construct his respectability not through dwelling in and maintenance of a nice house, but through construction of a new road and tunnel, a road and tunnel which represented not only avenues towards newer, brighter, more prosperous futures for the African-Americans of the Bottom and Medallion, but also represents an opportunity for Jude to construct his manhood, and as the text seems to suggest, he desires to be a man, not a black man, but more specifically a man. He wants to be able to say that he “‘built that road’” (82). It is this desire to become a man, by his own definition and construction, which pushes him to marry Nel. Because he was not able to work on the New River Road—because he was African-America—he becomes angry. This “rage and determination to take on a man’s role” (82) drives him to ask Nel to marry him, so Jude constructs his masculine African-American identity through the architecture of cultural respectability, through the ultimate signifier of adulthood: marriage and fatherhood.
The construction of clothing comes up as a signifier of a character’s inward desires and needs. Jude’s own personality and psychological makeup is compared by the narrator to “the cut of his garment [and] there would always be the hem—the tuck and fold that hid his raveling edges” (83), that unraveling hem is Jude’s unraveling personality, the unraveling edge of his psychological makeup, his compromised black manhood. Work or marriage legitimates Jude, constructs and justifies his existence in the same way that pretty houses and cleanliness legitimate many of the women in Morrison’s novels.

Nel’s funky “enthusiasms,” as the narrator describes them, were “calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter’s imagination underground” (18). The text is clear here: use of one’s imagination through deviation of any sort will not to be tolerated by the respectable and unfunky blacks. This idea of deviation includes everything from modes of dress to styles of architecture. Deviating from the standards of acceptability would threaten the tenuous position the respectable black people had achieved. Deviation or difference, then, understandably frightens many of the black characters in Morrison’s novels, and though it would be going too far to state that the respectable black people, those black people who are culturally white, are vilified in her novel, they are at least, most carefully scrutinized. Morrison’s narrator is sure to give back stories about the characters, reasons why they have become the sorts of characters that they have become, but her narrators do not, nor do her novels, excuse what is seen as a transgression, a slight against their own culture. Their motivation for doing so is always made understandable to the reader, but they are never, as I have already stated, excused from their actions.
Helene wants to join a Catholic church, though there are none in Medallion. Catholic churches are known for their decidedly traditional—and white—architecture. Once again Helene wishes to embrace white architectural iconography—even through her religious affiliation.

When Helene is forced to return to the South, to New Orleans to visit her dying grandmother she even dons the dress of a very conservative white person that she, herself constructs. "Helene thought about the trip South with heavy misgiving but decided that she had the best protection: her manner and her bearing, to which she would add a beautiful dress" (Morrison 19). The dress, the construction of it, may be seen as a different sort of architectural construction, a structure made up of cloth, rather than wood or metal or mortar, but an architectural construction, none the less. The dress is constructed of velvet and is "heavy but elegant" (19). The dress has literal weight, and Helene hopes it gives her a certain figurative weight, a certain a gravity while she travels into the Deep South.

In contrast to the somber, heavy respectability of women such as Helene, there are many in Morrison’s novels who are perceived as wild—women who embrace their funky African nature. These women are never criticized by the narrators in Morrison’s novels, though they are often criticized by the communities in which they live. Nel’s grandmother, Helene’s Creole whore mother, is one such woman. When Nel and Helene meet the grandmother she is described as looking “so young” (25), and possessing “the softness and glare of a canary” (25). She even brings a “gardenia air” (25) when she walks in the room. Everything about her combats the oppressive and “somber house that held four Virgin Marys, where death sighed in every corner” (25).
Though she is a whore by trade, the reader cannot help but feel relieved by her presence, especially when it is textually thrust up against the heavy presence of Helene herself and the funereal atmosphere of the house. Significantly, the mother’s respectability is perceived by Nel as oppressive while grandmother’s amorality is perceived as refreshing. Not only is respectability perceived as oppressive, but also respectable—and white—architecture.

Eva Peace, the grandmother of what becomes Nel’s best childhood friend, Sula, is Helene’s philosophical opposite. Eva’s home is described as “a house of many rooms that had been built over a period of five years to the specifications of its owner, who kept on adding things” (30). There is an illogic in the architecture of the Peace house, “there were three sets to the second floor—more rooms, doors and stoops. There were rooms that had three doors, others that opened out on the porch only and were inaccessible from any other part of the house…” (30). The architecture of Eva’s house is decidedly funky, messy, and transgressive; it is trasgressive because it does not follow the rules of architectural iconography dictated by the respectable African-Americans of that time. The architecture of and lack of cleanliness in Eva’s house contrasts strongly with Helene’s house, and though they are from different generations the comparison holds true, for they both serve the same function in the novel. They serve as matriarchs, controlling and in control. Helene’s house is described as having an “oppressive neatness” (29). While Eva’s house is described as “wooly…where newspapers were stacked in the hallway, and dirty dishes left for hours at a time in the sink” (29). Both women, Helene and Eva, serve—respectively—as examples of what the African-American community’s propaganda of the time stated that a black woman—and her
house—should and should not be. Though Eva commits heinous acts in the novel, acts such as setting her own child on fire, she is characterized, ultimately, as the more likeable of the two characters. Her faults are somehow forgivable because she lives life on her own terms, speaks her mind, and does not let anyone push her around. Eva never gives up her ground while Helene is the victim of her own conservative blackness.

Eva’s daughter Hannah is also aligned with a generally transgressive way of living. “She was unquestionably a kind and generous woman and that, coupled with her extraordinary beauty and funky elegance of manner, made them defend her and protect her from any vitriol that newcomers or their wives might spill” (44-45). Hannah Peace “simply refused to live without the attentions of a man” (42), and because the Peace house was constantly full of people coming and going “Hannah would take the man down into the cellar in the summer where is was cool back behind the coal bin and the newspapers, or in the winter they would step into the pantry” (43). Hannah, however, disliked having sexual relations with men in what would be considered the customary place, her bedroom. Hannah disregarded the rooms’ dedicated functions and used different rooms for her lovemaking—rooms that would normally be used for storage or conversation. She would rather take men into “the seldom-used parlor” (43), so Hannah—like her mother—transgresses against the architectural iconography of the time.

While Eva transgresses against the codes of propriety of the African-American community Medallion and the Bottom by building a decidedly messy, funky, and illogical house, Hannah transgresses against the codes of the community not only by having sex with other women’s husbands, but she has sex in strange places, going against the
unwritten code of propriety. She transgresses the African-American architectural iconography and propaganda of the era that states that everything should be clean, that a house should be well painted, and that rooms should have specifically dedicated functions. She conflates, for instance, the primary function of the cellar, storage, with a secondary function, lovemaking.

Also, Hannah does not construct her outward appearance in such a way that would convey respectability in the community’s understanding of the word. Contrary to the heavy wool dress of Helene Sabat, Hannah Peace’s dress is “her same old print wraparound, [and she is] barefoot in the summer, in the winter her feet [are] in a man’s leather slippers with the back flattened under her heels…” (42) She is without guile and refuses to bow to the whims of the community for the sake of propriety.

Even Shadrack’s house, the house of the World War I veteran suffering from post traumatic stress, is a single-room structure reminiscent of a cabin, which is counter to the interests of the freed slave who desired to have distinct functions for distinct rooms (Mooney 60). Though to Sula’s young eyes it appears to be a “sweet old cottage” (62), it really is little more than a modest cabin. With many dedicated functions included in the one room, “With its made-up bed…with its rag rug and wooden table…” (62). The cabin is neat, restful, “…tiny, so common, so unthreatening” (61). The cabin was arranged in such a way that it was comfortable, not formidable; it was not decorated to impress. The cabin was arranged to serve a purpose, to be a comfortable dwelling for the slightly crazed fringe member of the black community. Through Shadrack’s behavior throughout the novel the reader comes to understand that Shadrack is not interested in impressing anyone with his respectable behavior or dress. The logic therefore follows that he has
no intention of impressing others with his home. Quite to the contrary, Shadrack’s behavior invites scorn from the rest of the community. His “National Suicide Day,” the one day a year in which he invites any and all of the members of the community to join him in a mass suicide, invites scorn rather than praise from his fellow community members.

When Jude leaves Nel after having an affair “virtue, bleak and drawn, was her only mooring” (139). Once again, respectability emerges as an unfulfilling companion to a character’s unhappy life. Nel’s anger, which has been buried in her, has been refined almost out of existence by her parents. “Her parents had succeeded in rubbing down to a dull glow any sparkle or splutter she had” (83) and that sparkle included any righteousness or anger. Respectability causes her to veil her true intentions even from herself when she visits Sula on her deathbed. “[Respectability] hid from her the true motives for her charity” (139) and gives her a mask behind which to hide. “…it gave her voice the timbre she wanted it to have: free of delight of lip-smacking…” (139).

Sula rails against this mask of propriety Nel wears. When Nel tells Sula that she “look[s] fine” (141) Sula’s response is decidedly antagonistic. “You lying, Nellie” (141), and when Nel continues to push the conversation in the direction of pleasantries and commonalities Sula stops her with a blunt remark. “You want to talk about that?” (141). Nel and Sula, as Helene and Eva, respectively represent opposite ends of the propriety spectrum. Nel wears the veil or mask of propriety while Sula goes boldly through her life without guile and without the protection of the mask of civility.

On her death Sula sees the unconventional architecture of her grandmother’s house, specifically the boarded up window out of which Eva had jumped years before,
as reassuring. “Looking at those four wooden planks with the steel rod slanting across them was the only peace she had. The sealed window soothed her with its sturdy termination, its unassailable finality” (148).

In the Morrison’s novel *Paradise* the entire town of Ruby is ironically constructed in the image of the white communities that shunned the African-American inhabitants. The characters in the novel attempt to escape from a white racist society and ironically create their own black racist society. The reader sees the dichotomy emerging between those who are proper, clean, and part of the system, and those characters that are funky, messing, and decidedly transgressive.

Perhaps the most transgressive and funky of all the women in the novel are the convent women. They are perceived as dirty and lawless. They have turned a house constructed by a white person and used as a convent for Catholic nuns into a unique oasis for women who do not fit into the larger society. So these funky women, then, live without men—in a manner not condoned by the upstanding community of Ruby. They eat, sleep, and live in whatever room they desire, repurposing rooms, sleeping in root cellars, drinking and shaving their heads and generally embracing a sort of idol worship that is reminiscent of some other society in a third world on some foreign continent. They syncretize religions, combine several religions, to create something new that serves their small community of women. They tailor the existing cultures to suit themselves, rather than tailoring themselves to suit the existing cultures. When several men break into the convent they discover that “each woman sleeps not in a bed, like normal people, but in a hammock” (7). They resist the dictates of standard society which suggest that people should sleep in beds. These women do not have “clothes in their
closets [and] wore no-fit dirty dresses and nothing you could honestly call shoes” (7). These women are not normal, intentionally so. They wish to be comfortable and happy, not correct.

The mansion turned convent turned home for wayward women has been repurposed by its inhabitants not once, but twice. Connie, the women’s leader, allows the Convent to become a place that fosters individuality rather than Catholicism and rigid thinking. The women embrace their funky selfhoods much to the chagrin of the male and female inhabitants of the town of Ruby. For this transgression, they are destroyed, hunted and killed by the men of the nearby town. Because these women do not respect the architectural iconography of the time, which advocated cleanliness and dedicated purposes, they are murdered.

In contrast, the women of the neighboring town of Ruby are crisp, clean, proper, and obedient. What Morrison’s novels would term funkiness has be diluted, squashed, or thwarted. “Certainly there wasn’t a slack or sloven woman anywhere in town,” the narrator tells us (8). In contrast to the Convent women’s clothing, Soane Morgan’s attire is crisp and expensive. She wore “expensive oxford shoes, sheer stockings, wool cardigan and [a tailored] dress: summer-weight crepe, pale blue with a white collar” (43).

As is in Sula there are two female characters who serve as philosophical opposites in Paradise. These matriarchal figures are Connie of the convent and Soane of Ruby. Though the novel is peppered with strong female characters representing both philosophical poles, these two characters emerge as central to the narrative’s evolution.
Particularly in the case of *Paradise* Morrison’s narrative seems uncomfortable with the future of the funky woman. In this novel all of the funky women are destroyed and live on only in a sort of mythologized version of the narrative. They take on a Christ-like quality and come and go at will through the lives of people they have known in their pasts, loved ones, friends, family. Those two characters that do seem to thrive in the novel and continue on to carry a more liberal message of tolerance into the future of the town of Ruby are two misfits, Anna and Richard, two individuals who are not entirely inside or outside of the constructed circle of the town called Ruby. Interestingly, these characters are neither funky nor overly proper, they inhabit some middle ground between the two ways of existing. Both Anna and Richard are temperate in disposition, and as I shall explore in the final chapter of my thesis, these two characters, as well as some of Morrison’s other characters, seem to suggest that the future of the African-American race lies neither in the funky nor the properly white and clean mode of existence. There is some other possibility, one of which I will argue Morrison, herself, is not entirely comfortable.
CHAPTER 3
TONI MORRISON’S DENIAL OF LACANIAN SUBJECTIVITY

According to Lacanian theory, "human subjectivity is not established simultaneously with birth" (Booker 35). Individuals must first disengage themselves from the world around them. In other words, in order to successfully achieve Lacan’s subjective stage of human development, an individual must define him or herself in terms of what he or she is not; the subject must delineate between his or her subjective self and the objective world around them. By delineating between subjective self and objective world, an individual enters into what Lacan terms the Symbolic Order (Booker 36). In the Symbolic Order language helps the individual to define what is separate from his or her self; thus, the employment of language pushes the subject further from his or her nascent experience in which the individual feels connected to and a part of the objective world. According to Lacan’s theory, the language employed by the subjective self posits—through the use of that language—its “masculine authority and superiority” (Booker 37).

Toni Morrison’s work denies this Lacanian reading of language and culture as inherently and superiorly masculine (and white) by criticizing her character’s subjective relationship to that objective world. She asserts, through her work, that this subject-object relationship is inherently flawed because the subjective self is falsely dependent on the objective world to define that self, leaving the subject—her character—powerless, marginalized, and subservient. Her work argues for new labels and definitions for the object to which her subject relates, changing not the object itself, but her characters’ relation to it. It demands a multiplicity of interpretation, one that is inclusive of and makes room for meanings that exist outside of the dominant discourse.
Jeanna Fuston-White quoting bell hooks refers to this new multiplicity as a “radical black subjectivity” (461). By resisting the labels and meanings already attached to objects and reinscribing those objects with new meaning, her characters create their own language through which they may negotiate a world of their own making. By re-labeling objects her characters then destabilize the central text of the dominant culture. Re-labeling objects, or reinscribing objects, with new meaning, then, is a transgressive act, one that resists the dominant culture’s imposition of meaning not only on the objects, but also on the marginalized subjects themselves. These marginalized subjects, then, have been treated as objects—as things rather than persons—by the dominant culture, but through the subversive act of re-inscription the objectified subjects empower themselves.

Some of the marginalized subject/characters of Morrison’s novels, however, attempt only to control objects in an attempt to renegotiate their world. In a first step towards a re-inscription of object meaning, the characters first attempt to move objects about in space. They attempt to control objects: their hands, a plate, a can food, or a picture by ordering and containing objects, by exerting physical control over an object’s placement in literal space. These characters attempt to symbolically exert control over their environment by organizing and containing small objects in their immediate surroundings, by creating new contexts for the objects through reorganization.

Shadrack is an example of a character who attempts to control his life by controlling objects. Shadrack is a character in the novel *Sula*; he is a World War I veteran who has post-traumatic stress. After returning from the war he has difficulty negotiating the reality of his world. Because of this difficulty, he likes to order the objects in his world. In one passage Shadrack sits in front of a plate of food that is segmented,
by dividers in the plate, into three separate areas. These three different areas contain and separate three different types of food. The dividers separate his meat from his rice and from his tomatoes. These compartments give Shadrack comfort because they establish an order for his food. Even the smallest details, the smallest objects, the smallest things in his life must be arranged in order to give him a sense of control over his life. This sense of control, however, is false. Shadrack feels that his life is out of control, so he has to orchestrate organizational actions as a defense against the chaos of living. Shadrack sees this chaos as being imposed on him by outside forces. Significantly, he sees this imposed chaos as beyond his control. If Shadrack can at least control the commingling of his rice and tomatoes, then he can control some aspect of his life: he can control some tiny portion of the chaos. Shadrack also sees his hands as hideous and huge when he feels out of control. Rita A. Bergen Holtz posits that his “monstrous hands are a metaphor for his inability to reach out and touch other people” (95), but that assertion can be extended. Shadrack’s monstrous hands also serve as a metaphor for his inability to control people or objects or circumstances in his life.

Shadrack also orchestrates a day known as National Suicide Day, a day in which any individual may commit suicide; it is a day in which death is limited to and contained by ritualized suicide. On this day Shadrack roams the streets barking at the town’s folk, inviting them to join him in the act of suicide. Much like Shadrack’s plate of food, if death is limited to a single day, then death is in some way contained. Shadrack, thusly, maintains some amount of control over the chaos imposed by these outside forces. He also controls his fear of death by calling attention to death and by welcoming it into his life only one day a year. On this one day in January death is also welcomed into the
lives of all the inhabitants of the Bottom. The people control death by staying metaphorically one step ahead of the inevitable, by volunteering to die before death takes them.

The mother in *The Bluest Eye*, Pauline Williams, has a limp caused by an accident with a nail when she was a child. As a result, she was “restricted, as a child, to [the] cocoon of her family’s spinning, she cultivated quiet and private pleasures, she liked most of all to arrange things” (Morrison 111). In other words, she is restricted to the imagined safety, or relative safety, of her home. In this relative safety, almost imprisoned within the structure of her home, Pauline seeks to organize and arrange certain objects as a defense against the emotional strain caused by her confining life. Through this action of organizing the “portable plurality,” (111) as the narrator calls the objects in Pauline’s home, the character creates order, structure, and therefore identity. In other words, the ordering and structuring of the objects creates categories, nomenclatures of which they inherently belong. These categories, which are suggestive of social subsets, create context for the objects. The created context of these objects creates a place in which they might have identity because they belong to a collective of like kind, an organized subset of objects. Pauline creates for herself a society of objects, which can be her friends, but they can also exist in objective relationship to her subjective self. Identity is an act of belonging, a process of being named either by the self or other. For Pauline, organization is an act of naming, an act of creating a society of objects for herself. Because Pauline creates a society for her objects, she vicariously creates society for herself. If she controls the organization of the cans, she also
symbolically controls the chaos impinging upon her. As a result, she is comforted by the control she is able to exert over the objects in her environment.

While objects are sometimes employed by the characters as an emotional defense against a larger world over which they have no control, objects also often serve as reminders of that very world that is beyond the characters’ control. Because people who do not have a lot of money often have less food, food products often serves as a way to distinguish between people who have the power to control their environment and people who do not have that power. In *The Bluest Eye* a young white girl Rosemary Villanucci, the daughter of a business owner, taunts two hungry and impoverished young sisters, Claudia and Frieda, by eating a piece of bread and butter in front of them. The sisters react angrily, the narrator tells us: “We stare at her, wanting her bread, but more than that wanting to poke the arrogance out of her eyes and smash the pride of ownership that curls her chewing mouth” (9).

The pride of ownership, therefore, as well as the literal possession of objects, helps to even more strongly delineate between those who have power and those who do not. Rosemary’s pride of ownership and possession of a desired food object distances her from the two sisters, but Rosemary is further distanced, both socio-economically and spatially, from Frieda and Claudia by virtue of the fact that she is sitting in a new Buick in 1939. During The Great Depression when many people were very poor Rosemary’s family has an overabundance possessions and food. Rosemary, cloistered inside the new Buick, denies the sisters access to her more privileged class, symbolically represented by her father’s Buick; she states that the sisters “can’t come in” to the car (9).
This privileged class, however, is negatively characterized in Morrison’s novels. According to Carolyn M. Jones, the desire to own “objects, moves into deadly stasis” for the characters in Morrison’s novels (485). In other words, the preoccupation with the consumption and ownership of objects in Morrison’s novels is characterized as a stagnant way to live. Further, Morrison’s novels privilege a resistance to the consumerist ideology advocated by Rosemary and her family because the consumerist ideology disempowers the already marginalized culture.

The sisters’ only possible avenue towards empowerment is through resistance of Rosemary’s meaning inscription. They intuitively understand that they must resist Rosemary’s meaning inscription on them. However, they “don’t know what [they] should feel or do” if Rosemary does offer “something precious” (9). They only know that their “own pride must be asserted by refusing to accept” (9). The sisters intuitively understand that they must refuse to accept something special from someone in a superior socio-economic position because it is the only form of resistance to the dominant discourse’s meaning inscription available to them. The sisters become superior by denying the precious gift. By denying the offering, they also deny its value and worth through their refusal. This refusal amounts to nothing less than a repudiation—on the part of the sisters—of the social contract that exists between them and the relatively wealthy little girl. Because the act of accepting anything from someone of a more affluent class automatically puts an individual in an inferior, less active, receiving position, the sisters must refuse to accept anything given to them by Rosemary. In this potential social exchange with Rosemary, the sisters have the opportunity to assign value, rather than having value assigned to them. The have the
opportunity to position themselves in intersubjective relation to Rosemary, rather than objective relation to her.

This process of value assignation is fundamentally a process of value coding. The ruling class in control of the dominant cultural discourse is also in control of the process of value coding. Light skin and affluence might then be coded, for instance, with a higher cultural value than dark skin and poverty. Such is the case *The Bluest Eye*; the novel’s narrator, Claudia, intuitively understands this fact.

Claudia destroys a white doll she is given as a gift because she refuses to accept the dominant culture’s negative value coding of her own appearance. She regards the doll disdainfully and is “physically revolted by and secretly frightened of those round moronic eyes, the pancake face, and orangeworms hair” (20). The doll—a product of the dominant, ruling culture—not only frightens Claudia but also literally resists and scratches her (20). Rather than passively accepting the dominant culture’s assertion “that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child” wants—and wants to be—Claudia actively resists by dissecting and dismantling the white girl doll (20). She “poked the glassy blue eyeballs, twisted the yellow hair...break[s] off the tiny fingers, bend[s] the flat feet, loosen[s] the hair, twist[s] the head around...take[s] off the head, shake[s] out the sawdust, [and] crack[s] the back against the brass bed rail” (20). Claudia destroys the symbol of the white dominant culture’s superiority, and resists the dominant culture’s value coding in the process. These objects attain an iconic status in the world of the marginalized, and Morrison, as Bill Brown states, “records the subject’s interpellative failure as the unwillingness to identify with a dominant icon” (956), the dominant icon being the white girl doll.
Houses also function as desired and desirable objects in Morrison’s novel. The possession or occupation of a house often helps to distinguish between characters that are more or less affluent. Sometimes these houses, these desired objects, take on a life of their own and act as characters in Morrison’s novels. Morrison begins her novel, Beloved, by introducing one of the most central characters of her novel, the house at 124 Bluestone Road. Curiously, the narrator does not state that in the house there was a sense of unrest; rather, the narrator states that “124 was Spiteful” (3). Through the act of referring to the house as 124—without first establishing it as an inanimate object—the narrator is establishing the house as a character in the unfolding drama. Additionally, the house is introduced, not only in the first chapter, or paragraph, but, rather, it is introduced in the very first sentence of the novel, without context clues or outside information. As a result, the reader understands intuitively that the house is a character worth close scrutiny and careful attention. By introducing 124 first—before introducing any other person or object—the author establishes 124 as something or someone central to the story. The house is characterized as a powerful force capable of driving away two young men, Buglar and Howard, two of the children of one of the main characters, Sethe. The narrator or author thus establishes in the first page of the novel the power of matriarchy. Significantly, the house drives away all but the women of the family, “leaving their grandmother, Baby Suggs; Sethe, their mother; and their little sister, Denver, all by themselves in the blue and gray house on Bluestone Road” (3).

Significantly, the house does not commit “the one insult not to be borne or witnessed a second time” against the women; 124 only commits the inexcusable insults against the men. The house even assaults, rather violently, the male family dog, Here
Boy. 124 slams “him into the wall hard enough to break two of his legs and dislocate his, so hard he went into convulsions and chewed up his tongue…” (15). These transgressive acts marginalize what may be seen as Lacan’s patriarchal dominant discourse and culture, privileging a minority voice and the influence of the women of the household. In another instance of the privileging of a feminine minority, Beloved, hostile to Paul D’s presence and occupation in the house, slowly but surely drives him out of the house.

Denver’s relationship to the object-subject, the house, is special. Denver, with her sensitivities to her environment, family, and community, sees the house as a person: “…Denver approached the house, regarding it, as she always did, as a person rather than a structure. A person that wept, sighed, trembled and fell into fits. Her steps and her gaze were the cautious ones of a child approaching a nervous, idle relative (someone dependent but proud)” (36). If, as the text suggests, the house is dependent, then, it could be suggested that there exists an unhealthy relationship of some sort between the house and those who inhabit it. The fact that Denver perceives of the house as a person suggests that, at least, her relationship to the house she inhabits is special, that of one person to another person. The house is associated in Denver’s mind with the idea of a relative, which suggests that home and family are inextricably linked.

Sethe’s relationship to the house differs from that of her daughter, Denver. For Sethe the house represents her first real home, a place with a constructed floor, not a dirt floor. Because of the house, there will be “no more running” for Sethe and her family (18). Sethe, recalling a prior conversation with Paul D about the house thinks disdainfully of his suggestion to leave 124:
This house he told her to leave as though a house was a little thing—a shirtwaist or a sewing basket you could walk off from or give away any old time. She who had never had one but this one; she who left a dirt floor to come to this one; she who had to bring a fistful salsify into Mrs. Garner’s kitchen every day just to be able to work in it, feel like some part of it was hers, because she wanted to love the work she did, to take the ugly out of it, and the only way she could feel at home on Sweet Home was if she picked some pretty growing thing and took it with her. The day she forgot was the day butter wouldn’t come or the brine in the barrel blistered her arms. (28)

The house for Sethe represents autonomy, a place away, a place where she is free to be Sethe, not judged, not watched, and not forced to do anything. Within the walls of 124, Sethe is free to be herself, and Sethe takes great comfort in that fact. Within the walls of 124 Sethe is free to define herself on her own terms, not on the terms—or in the language of—the dominant discourse. Eventually, however, Sethe’s relationship to the house does develop into something unhealthy.

The house at 124 Bluestone Road grows angry when Paul D and Sethe couple for the first time in the kitchen. 124 is angered by the fact that Paul D and Sethe bond in a way that supercedes the house’s relationship with Sethe. Because the intersubjective relationship between Paul D and Sethe threatens to supersede the subject-object relationship that exists between Sethe and the house, 124 reacts violently against Paul D and Sethe’s relationship. If “merely kissing the wrought iron of her back had shook the house,” then surely the progression of a relationship between Paul D and Sethe would enrage the house (25).

Significantly, Paul D’s arrival at 124 is an introduction of an unknown element which changes the dynamic of the relationship between the family and the house. Paul D through his exorcism of the spirit or spirits inhabiting the house, decenters and destabilizes the relationship between the family and the house. This destabilization of
the family-house dynamic facilitates a new and healthier intersubjective relationship between the characters populating the novel. Most especially, the destabilization creates an avenue through which Paul D may grow closer to Sethe.

The ghost of the dead beloved, Sethe’s dead daughter, is inextricably linked to the power and presence of 124. 124 is haunted by baby ghost—the daughter referred to as Beloved—and yet, paradoxically, the house is also conceived of as its own autonomous presence, a powerful and violent force. This paradoxical fact suggests that 124 is occupied and haunted by the dead ghost child and by other things as well. It is haunted by other voices and memories. Although the structure is a presence in itself, it is a presence because it is given life by the people who live in and react to it. The occupants of the house give it life because they name it, because they, as subjects, live in subject-object relation to it.

When the spirits of 124 manifest themselves in corporeal form, they enter the physical world as the character Beloved. When Sethe first meets Beloved in the front yard of 124, she feels an uncontrollable urge to void her bladder. Sethe initially compares it to a horse voiding its bladder, but then realizes that this urge to urinate is much more like “flooding the boat when Denver was born” (63). In other words, Sethe likens the evacuation of her bladder upon first seeing Beloved to the process of giving birth. Therefore, it is suggested by the text that Beloved’s relationship to Sethe will in some way be similar to Denver’s relationship to Sethe. The text, therefore, suggests that Beloved’s relationship to Sethe and Denver will in some way be familial. Beloved is the manifestation of the dead daughter, but Beloved is also the embodiment of the sixty million and more who perished in passage from Africa to America. Beloved is the
personification of the pain and suppression suffered by the American slaves at the hands of their slave owners. Beloved is the memory of an iron collar, or raped slave woman. Beloved is the pain and humiliation suffered by Sethe at the hands of Schoolteacher’s relatives who are either his sons or his nephews. Beloved is an undeniable and powerful feeling of transgression.

Memories function to remind the characters in Morrison’s novels of their painful pasts. These memories, which are part of the characters’ subjective lives, have been marginalized and treated as objects, essentially distanced from the characters themselves. These memories are often associated with objects which remind the characters of their past. As Phillip Novak, quoting Robert Grant suggests, “In Sula there are ‘missing’ objects…absent persons are ‘missed’…and missing persons are evoked in the memory through [the] objects” (189). The memories associated with objects are typically bad, suppressed memories that come unbidden into the conscious mind of the character. These memories are the denied part of the characters’ subjective selves. The bad memories, which have been suppressed by the characters, return unbidden to the surface of the individual’s consciousness.

Interestingly, Beloved acts as a catalyst for the recollection and excavation of these “painful or lost” memories (72). She, as the incarnation of the hurt and suffering of the past, brings the submerged memories to the surface so that these lost memories may return to their owners. Much in the same way that the memories emerge from the waters of the unconscious, Beloved emerges from the waters of the Ohio River. Beloved is the walking personification of the denied suffering of the African-American people. She comes into existence because she has been denied.
Sethe calls these returned memories rememories. Once accessed, the formerly suppressed memories can have a debilitating effect on the characters, and they often take on a life of their own. Rememory involves the memory’s willful, often painful, reassertion into the conscious mind of the characters. Because rememory is thought of by the characters as having a will of its own, it may also be seen as a character in the novel, a subject in the novel.

To continue, when Sethe discussed her painful past with Denver “something privately shameful…seeped into a slit in [Sethe’s] mind right behind the slap on her face and the circled cross” (77). Sethe, in this instance, recalls the fact that her mother after being raped and impregnated by the white sailors in the passage from Africa, disposes of her children, more than likely, immediately after giving birth. These discarded children are never named. Sethe remembers that she was the only one of her mother’s children given a name. Because Sethe is the product of a willing and loving sexual encounter, she is named and allowed to have a subjective life of her own.

Beloved gets a “profound satisfaction” out of hearing Sethe’s newly recalled memories. (72) These memories are so painful that both she and “Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable” and yet, these stories “feed” Beloved. (72). Beloved craves the difficult and painful stories that constitute Sethe’s past. Beloved has a “thirst for hearing” the stories of Sethe’s past. This desire to hear Sethe recount the stories of her past may be seen as Beloved’s need to hear about her own past, her past as the beloved daughter of Sethe and her past as the collective experience of slavery.
Because Beloved wants people to bear witness to the atrocities of the past, her presence, in the lives of the Sethe, Denver, Paul D, and their surrounding community may be seen as a sort of physical confrontation with the past and with the dominant discourse that has defined slavery and the experience of the slave in objective relation to the dominant discourse. Put simply, the slaves and former slaves are not real people, real subjects, to the larger culture; they exist only in objective relation to the larger culture. Beloved rages against this notion, and her presence is a way for the past to literally confront the people living in the present who are not mindful of the atrocities of their individual and collective histories. Because the characters in many of Morrison’s novels are unwilling or unable to think and speak about their past experiences at the hands of the white oppressor, Beloved comes into being.

Beloved is, on some level, the embodiment of these suppressed memories. One could even say that part of what comprises her essence is the manifestation of the rage that these memories have of being suppressed and objectified. Beloved’s emergence from the beyond is the coming into being, the actual materialization of the memories.

In Morrison’s novels the characters are often the personification of a certain will or mindset. Personification serves as an example of the inverse relationship that exists between objects and subjects. Morrison’s novels imbue objects with human characteristics. Because of this consistent phenomenon, or through this consistent phenomenon, a synergistic relationship is created between character and object, object and character. A character might become, through personification, a season. Pecola’s father in The Bluest Eye, Cholly Breedlove, is an example of this phenomenon; he is personified as winter.
This process of personification that is present in Morrison’s novels is cyclical in nature. The environment, specifically objects in the environment, act on the characters while the characters act on the environment. One is personified as the other. A person is personified as winter; winter is personified as a person, as moving into a person, inhabiting and becoming that person. Importantly, when objects inhabit people by taking on their human characteristics, they lose their thingness, become something else. The objects metamorphose into something else, something eerily human, and become what could be termed object-subjects. These object-subjects, in turn, assume a superior position in the hierarchy of subject and object.

Because Morrison’s characters are always in the process of becoming, they exist in marginal relation to the larger cultural context. Their cultural identities are never fully formed, and they are not allowed their own subjective lives. The characters always exist in objective relation to the larger intersubjective culture. Put more simply, the marginalized characters are treated as objects by the dominant culture, and the dominant culture refuses to see the marginalized characters as fully human.

To continue, Morrison’s characters are always caught paradoxically between two worlds, perhaps, in part because that is the condition of the African-American experience, to be caught between. Thrust into a new world, forced into a circumstance, and sold into slavery many of the characters in Morrison’s novel do not even own their own bodies. The characters exist merely as owned objects. When Baby Suggs remembers her past she thinks of herself as “the self that was no self” (172). In other words, she feels she had no core identity because her selfhood had been denied; she was treated as an object. Because she was a slave and owned by someone else, her
sense of identity was not allowed to form. Baby Suggs' ability to develop a sense of identity is hampered by the fact that the slave owners and free white people tell her that she is not human, subhuman perhaps, but not human.

The slaves exist in paradoxical relation to their own bodies: although they inhabit their bodies, work in their bodies, eat, sleep, work, have sex, give birth, love, fight, hate, and desire out of their own bodies they do not own their own bodies; therefore, they do not own their own experience. Even after Baby Suggs is a free woman she has suppressed memories that she doesn’t fully own as her own; she allows them to remain suppressed. The slaves cannot own anything, let alone their bodies.

Many of Morrison’s characters speak of not quite understanding what the ownership of their own bodies really means. Many of her novels characters revel in the idea of being free, but don’t really know what it means to be free. Many of her characters, in their freed states, recall the time before they were free. They have difficulty negotiating their way conceptually through their freed existence. The process of ownership of self is a progressive act; it is an evolution towards an autonomous self, one capable of imposing meaning, of defining rather than being defined. Morrison’s novels posit this idea of movement towards independent self as a constant process.

Beloved, the character, is always in process. She is transitioning from the beyond, the world of the dead into the world of the living. She is the incarnation of the past, but also the past becoming and moving into the lives of the living. Even her belly is in transition, growing as she becomes more and more a part of Sethe’s life. As she begins, in essence, to feed on Sethe’s life force, her belly grows, she becomes more
fully manifested while Sethe fades away. Both of the characters are in the process of becoming and unbecoming.

Beloved comes from the beyond in order to make contact—at least in part—with Sethe. Morrison’s characters always live on the threshold of a new experience, and often times they literally dwell in a house or storefront, which is owned by someone else and rented by them. Even the characters living arrangements are temporary and in transition. The characters in Beloved don’t fully own their own experience, and they do not own their environment, so they do not completely own their own experience. Once again, they exist as marginalized object in the larger cultural exchange rather than active subjects. Ownership of objects bears a metonymic relation to the ownership of self. Perhaps, it may be suggested that the ownership and organization of objects is a step in the process of understanding what it means to own the subjective self.

When the objects or forces of nature come to life and act upon the characters in the novels, it is often the character’s fear or anxiety personified through the active object. The individual's subconscious is represented by the object, which comes to life in the world of the novel. The objects and the forces of nature may then be seen as extensions of the individual perceiving of the phenomenon of marginalization.

Towards the end of Beloved Sethe recalls the clearing in the woods, the place where she is safe, where people dance, where happiness and anguish are felt. It is a place where individuals from the community dwell in truth in the presence of Baby Suggs, holy. She recalls the women who “searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words” (321). In this instance the women’s voices combine to create on unified greater voice which acts to personify the African-
American people’s desire to break apart the language which has been imposed on them by white society. It is a foreign language that names objects in a foreign symbolic system, but the women break apart this symbolic system and create a new means of communicating in an intersubjective relation to one another. For Morrison, it is the women who possess the ability to break the chains of communication, which shackle the black community.

In Morrison’s works, the road towards empowerment is facilitated by a transgression of the dominant discourse’s proscribed boundaries. In order for Morrison’s characters to move beyond their marginal status as objects and appendages to the larger cultural, they must invert the social paradigms by resisting the dominant discourse’s cultural inscription on them. Her characters must destroy their bondage to that discourse by reinscribing themselves with new meanings as subjective entities, by inventing a new language in which they may define themselves.
CHAPTER 4
RESISTING CULTURAL INSCRIPTION: TONI MORRISON’S SUBVERSIVE USE OF
FOOD IMAGERY AND THE CANNIBALISM MOTIF

A binary opposition exists in Morrison’s works, one that foregrounds the
difference between healthy consumption and unhealthy consumption. Morrison’s novels
delineate cannibalism and eating and several critics of Morrison’s works have spoken
about cannibalism in loose connection with the idea of hunger, for both are acts of
consumption. I push this idea further by foregrounding cannibalism in my discussion
and examination of several of Morrison’s works. Emma Parker in her article “A New
Hystery: History and Hysteria in Toni Morrison’s Beloved” speaks in terms of food and
cannibalism as but a link to a Freudian reading of that novel, while Alan Rice in his
article “‘Who’s Eating Whom’: The Discourse of Cannibalism in the Literature of the
Black Atlantic from Equiano’s Travels to Toni Morrison’s Beloved” reads Morrison’s use
of cannibalism as a “trope to indict the slave trade” (115). I direct the discussion in yet
another direction, however, by asserting that the cannibalism present in Morrison’s
novels is an indictment of the marginalized communities’ treatment of each other.

Morrison’s novels characterize cannibalism as a desire to consume. Further, they
suggest that this cannibalistic and destructively consuming desire, which is in essence
rage, should be turned outward—away from the individual and his or her collective
community—towards the dominant culture that serves as the oppressor. Within the
scope of Morrison’s work, cannibalism may then be seen as a character’s metaphorical
hunger for place within a community, which results in metaphorical and sometimes
literal consumption of others within the communities in which the characters reside.
Morrison’s characters fight for what they perceive to be limited space in limited place,
resulting in cannibalistic acts. Because both cannibalism and eating are consumptive activities, I will discuss both metaphorical and literal cannibalism and its relationship to the act of food consumption.

Healthy people in healthy relationships in Morrison’s novels are often discussed in connection with food and eating. In Sula the character Ajax comes “bearing gifts: clusters of black berries still on their branches, four meal-fried porgies wrapped in a salmon-colored sheet of the Pittsburgh Courier, a handful of jacks, two boxes of lime Jell-Well, a hunk of ice-wagon ice…and more gleaming white bottles of milk” (125). Feeding others exists in opposition to the idea of cannibalizing others, or in some way diminishing another person; the act of feeding another person is a way to enhance that person, giving him or her literal energy. Feeding another person is an expansive and selfless act of giving to another.

Barbara Offutt Mathieson, however, discusses feeding another person as a potentially negative act. She specifically discusses the consuming mother and child relationship in Morrison’s novels as something that “degenerates quickly into a nightmare” (215); she notes briefly that in Beloved “cannibalistic imagery permeates the daughter’s language as the beloved child begins to consume her mother’s energies” (216). Mathieson suggests that children instinctively consume their mother’s resources, most specifically the mother’s milk, and she also suggests that the consuming nature of a child’s love knows no limits. Ultimately, Mathieson suggests that both mother and child demand and consume love in a destructive—though not necessarily cannibalistic—manner. Contrary to my argument, Mathieson suggests—using Freud as a theoretical foundation—that the mother and child relationship is intrinsically
consumptive. I extend Matheison’s argument by suggesting that most of the human relationships presented in Morrison’s novels are on some level destructively demanding and ultimately cannibalistic.

Many of the relationships in Morrison’s novel *Paradise* degrade into something negative and cannibalistic. Specifically, the male characters, in a violent act of aggression, stalk and kill the women of a convent located just beyond the city limits of a town called Ruby. This act of aggression, of hunting and devouring, what essentially amounts to the town’s own kind, is a result of the suppressed anger and hostility that the inhabitants of Ruby feel towards the dominant white culture who have marginalized the inhabitants of Ruby. Through the town’s violent exclusion of the Convent women, the men begin a cyclical process of becoming the oppressor. As the character Richard Misner conjectures, the male inhabitants of Ruby have an “incipient hunger for violence” (160). Though the members of Ruby’s community desire to consume and eradicate the women of the convent in order to sustain their safe haven of stasis, the men resist the idea that they themselves have become the oppressors, the ones who figuratively cannibalize their own kind. One man, while searching for the women in the Convent, refuses to look in a mirror because “he does not want to see himself stalking females” (8). In other words, he does not want to see himself acting as a cannibalistic predator, preying on his own kind.

The residents of Ruby, however, not only figuratively feed on the liminal citizens, the Convent women, they also turn on themselves. “The glacial wariness they once confined to strangers more and more was directed toward each other” (161). In a vicious and stagnating cycle of aggression, and cannibalism, the closed community of
Ruby is sustained by metaphorically feeding on itself. The town’s young people attempt to cannibalize the power of the elders by altering the meaning of one of the town’s central symbols, the town’s first oven. If a symbol is taken to mean an object that stands in for something else, then the town’s oven is a symbol. At different points in the novel, this symbol stands for different ideologies. The oven initially represents the town’s unification under a patriarchal structure, but when the town’s young people spray-paint a militant fist on the side of the oven’s wall, it then stands for the desired destruction of the older generation’s cultural values. The youth, then, cannibalize the oven by devouring the oven’s meaning while allowing the symbol itself, the oven, to remain intact. The youth, in a timeless cycle of cultural meaning destruction, inscribe their own meaning over that of the preceding generation, employing the oven as a symbol for their own means.

Additionally, the male leaders of the town cannibalize the power of Ruby’s women and youth by giving them place but not voice. The place they are given, ironically, is—in keeping with Morrison’s broad theme—a fallacy. Because the women and youth are given a place conditionally, their place within the community is not secure. The women and youth are allowed to exist within the context of the society by subscribing to the patriarchal culture’s values. The only way that the women and the young people are able to have voice is through subversive means, by painting graffiti on the oven’s wall or by maintaining subversive relationships with the Convent women that do not subscribe to the society’s patriarchal values. Also, Arnette Fleetwood desires to cannibalize her own body by aborting her fetus, by removing a part of her body while
leaving the rest of it intact. Soane Morgan, another Ruby inhabitant, threatens to do the same.

The women who inhabit the town of Ruby and the women who inhabit the Convent are kindred in their desire to have place, but what they unwittingly desire is not place but fellowship, fellowship in an equitable community. Even the Convent women are not beyond the desire to cannibalize. Consolata literally bites the lip of her lover Deacon and “hum[s] over the blood she lick[s] from [his lip]” (239). She is “a woman bent on eating him like a meal” (239), and although “regularity of meetings… [has] smoothed her hunger to a blunt blade” (236), irregularity of meetings eventually “knife[s]” her hunger, turning her desire into something cannibalistic that ultimately destroys the relationship (236). Consolata cannibalizes her lover Deacon in an effort to create a place for herself within the context of their relationship.

Some of the Convent’s women even turn this extreme desire on themselves in an effort to consume and eradicate haunting feelings of emotional pain and humiliation. Seneca, for example, cuts into, almost carves up, her own flesh in order to distract herself from the emotional pain caused by her past. Under Consolata’s instruction, however, the women of the Convent begin to extricate themselves from the self-perpetuating—and therefore static—cycle of metaphorical, and sometimes literal, cannibalism. The Convent women “understood and began to begin” (265). In other words, they begin the process of the ultimate becoming, of transcendence, and move beyond the stasis induced by their own cannibalistic behavior. As Morrison posits in this novel, this process of becoming involves moving beyond the desires and needs of the body. As the character Soane Morgan notes, “Unlike some people in Ruby, the Convent
women [are] no longer haunted” (266); specifically, they are no longer haunted by the
wants and cannibalistic desires of the flesh. In other words, as a result of Consolata’s
training, the women forget their physical beings and separate themselves completely
from their bodies’ desires and needs. They move beyond cannibalistic desires, and they
even have “to be reminded of the moving bodies they [wear]” (265). Thus, the women’s
spiritual bodies, divorced from their physical bodies, become invulnerable to the
predatory and cannibalistic acts of Ruby’s men. Perhaps this is why the men of Ruby
are not ultimately able to destroy the women of the Convent. The fact that the women
are no longer haunted by the wants of the flesh allows them to transcend their physical
bodies. In Consolata’s own words their “[bodies] are nothing [their] spirit everything”
(263).

Interestingly, the suspended state in which the town has existed for over twenty
years, “since nobody dies in Ruby,” (217) is shattered not by the violent, cannibalistic
acts of the men, but, rather, by the women’s deaths and Christ-like disappearances. If,
as the Christian doctrine indicates, Christ died for humanity’s sins, then it may be
inferred that the women of the Convent died for the sins of the people of Ruby. The
town elders murder—or perhaps more correctly cannibalize—the Convent women in
order to sustain their false version of a paradisiacal existence. As the title and the
novel’s content seem to suggest, the concept of paradise is a fallacy an abstract
concept aspired towards, but never attained. Unfortunately, after the women’s deaths
and bodily disappearances, the townsfolk continue to devour themselves, destroying
their hard won and unhealthy equilibrium in the process.
The women’s Christ-like sacrifice of their physical bodies, however, offers a new hope to the people of Ruby. Richard Misner and Anna Flood, the only two characters who see the door/window through which the women escape, function as the women’s apostles. Their decision to stay in Ruby serves as a suggestion that they will carry the new message of hope back to the inhabitants of the town. They will bear witness to the possibility of a life beyond the cannibalistic, self-inflicting, devouring world of Ruby. As the character Richard Misner reflects when he contemplates the symbolic function of the cross and Christ, “the cross…[is] abstract; the absent body [is] real, but both [combine] to pull humans from backstage to the spotlight, from muttering in the wings to the principal role in the story of their lives” (146). It must not go without notice, however, that the act of communion—the eating of Christ’s flesh and the drinking of Christ’s blood—is also a symbolically cannibalistic act. Morrison, thus, creates a problematic ending for readers, one that is both positive and pessimistic. Perhaps then, the women’s materially present convent and absent bodies may function in the same way as Christ’s present cross and absent body foregrounding the citizens of Ruby in their own human drama of cyclical consumption and destruction. The structure called the Convent may then serve as a symbol that the town’s folk may devour in much the same way that they devour the symbolic body and blood of Christ.

In *Sula* the novel’s protagonist, Sula, “discover[s] what possession” is (131). In other words, she discovers what ownership feels like. Interestingly, Sula is a character that begins the novel without the need for any sort of ownership; she has very few possessions and has spent nearly a decade traveling in the United States. Sula is essentially a drifter before she returns to Medallion. This newly born desire to possess
something—specifically here another person—is transformed into a cannibalistic need to consume another person. Her hunger for her lover, Ajax, becomes an unhealthy and cannibalistic obsession.

Ajax, however, is initially interested in Sula because she is “not interested in nailing [or possessing] him” (127). Sula’s “life [is] her own” (127); she is autonomous, and has no need to cannibalize others, to take from others in order to complete herself. For years, she intentionally lives outside of the cannibalistic cycle created by society by living as a drifter, not tied to any particular community.

Initially, Ajax demands excellence of her. “He seemed to expect brilliance from her, and she delivered” (128). The relationship between Sula and Ajax, while in its healthy state, exemplifies all of the healthy qualities desirable for a relationship in Morrison’s novels. Sula and Ajax are both part of the African-American community existing equitably, conducting themselves respectfully towards one another. Initially, they commune with one another, rather than consume one another. They give emotional and physical nourishment to each other.

Before the relationship begins to degrade, Ajax finds Sula’s indifference to outside influences “delicious” (132). Ajax infers from Sula’s indifference that she has no desire to own him, metaphorically. Ajax and Sula are initially able to maintain equity in their relationship because there is no one else in there closed social sphere. There is no reason for Sula to claim ownership because there is no one else in the society who might be vying for the privilege of owning Ajax. The fact that Sula has not, at this point in the novel, considered the outside world indicates to Ajax that she has not yet thought in terms of wanting to own or objective him.
The dynamic of Ajax and Sula’s relationship changes, however, when Sula realizes that someone else might want to lay claim to Ajax, and when Sula begins to consider the outside world’s impact on Ajax’s life, she becomes possessive. As the relationship deteriorates, cannibalistic thoughts begin to encroach on Sula. When Ajax discloses to Sula that he has been to jail, she begins to think in terms of the “impact of the outside world” (133). Sula’s new awareness of a desiring, possessing world outside their society of two causes a shift in Sula’s perceptions and desires. Sula becomes possessive, as the outside world is possessive and cannibalistic. For Sula, as for so many in the community of the Bottom, ownership implies some degree of permanence. In other words, if Sula owns something, that something is less likely to be taken away from her. Permanence is a phenomenon with which the black community, in the larger sense, at the beginning of the twentieth-century had very little experience. A sense of permanence may be described as what has become known as the American dream.

Morrison suggests, however that the pursuit of the American dream, the dream of ownership, is a fallacy for the African-American community and the country as a whole. Morrison’s novels suggest that ownership does not facilitate any sort of permanent connection to anything else. Ownership does not secure place or belonging. While security is a fallacy, however, belonging to a community is not. Significantly, a place within a community, though it can be attained, can never be secured permanently. The characters in Morrison’s novels may belong to a community, to an abstract social nexus, but they do not belong simply because they own houses or objects. They belong and have place because they share in a communal experience. The only way for the characters to belong is through connection to people, and not through connection to
things. The ownership of objects and houses does not ultimately secure a permanent place for the characters in the novels. Though this idea of permanence—especially permanence attained through ownership of things—is a fallacy, belonging within the context of a community is possible.

Because permanence is perceived to be a fallacy, a place of belonging and community exists in the past in so many of Morrison’s novels, rather than in the novel’s present. In the present of Morrison’s novels the communities are often too strongly tied to and place too much value on the objects in their environment. In *Beloved*, the house at 124 Bluestone Road, for all intents and purposes, belongs to Sethe and her family. In other words, the family is not in danger of ever being evicted from the house that is owned by a white brother and sister who are abolitionists, but Sethe and her family are still not secure in the house. The family’s security is threatened because their primary relationship becomes that of one to objects rather than to one another. Their security is threatened by an angry unacknowledged past that manifests itself in the form of a ghost whose denied subjective and deeply familial relationship demands to recognition. This ghost, Beloved, is the physical manifestation of the denied subjective relationship of the African-American community to its past. The “60 million and more” referred on the novel’s dedication page is this denied past. In other words, the ghost exists and threatens Sula and her family because the past has become disconnected from the present, and has been turned into an unhealthy relationship.

In an effort to achieve the American dream of permanent place, many of the characters in Morrison’s novels cannibalize one another. They have taken from others within their own community, and from others within their own families, in order to make
themselves stronger. This action of taking from others within your own supportive social
circle, of course, causes the community to collapse in on itself.

This collapsing phenomenon is reflected in the relationship that exists between
Sula and Ajax. As Sula begins to cannibalize Ajax, their relationship collapses. She
grows to need Ajax, and this need of his company leads to a consumptive desire to
possess. Because possession falsely implies some degree of permanence, some sort
of permanent hold on an object, Sula and Ajax’s relationship begins to fall apart. Ajax is
resistant to the enactment of this cycle of consumption because he knows that this cycle
will destroy the equity that currently exists between them. As a result of his new
awareness, “every hackle on his body rose” (133).

Ajax and Sula’s relationship begins to collapse when Ajax is thrown in jail.
Because Ajax is accustomed to the cycle of the white world consuming, subjugating,
and oppressing the blacks, he isn’t “bothered by any of it” (133). Sula, however, is
threatened by the possibility of someone or something else owning, and therefore
objectifying, Ajax; she is quite startled by this new awareness of the encroachment of
outside influences. This phenomenon gives Ajax pause, and “his eyes dimmed with a
mild and momentary regret” (133). After the end of the relationship Sula doesn’t
understand why she wasn’t “consumed [by] his magnificent presence” (134). In his
wake Sula surveys her house and discovers that “there was nothing of his—his own—
that she could find” (134). Because Ajax does not possess things in his environment,
because he does not have an attachment to things, Sula is unable to distinguish
anything in her house as his. Ajax refuses to be a part of the consumptive economy that
emotionally enslaves many of Morrison’s characters. To put it simply, Sula can find nothing that is Ajax’s because Ajax refuses to own anything.

Sula is quite an interesting character that the narrator tells us has a “gift for metaphor” (121). Metaphor is a way of moving beyond the boundaries of one’s literal existence. Living with metaphor means to be free to escape from one’s context into another, to escape from one’s own relation to objects. Until Sula meets Ajax, she is forever slipping from one social context to the next, from one city to the next. Initially she escapes from the self-reinforcing cannibalistic society of the Bottom and Medallion. She is able to get out of, and in some sense, survive Medallion. Sula thinks of getting out of the town in terms of the idea of being free of responsibility (118).

Specifically, Sula feels that two events in her life liberated her from this consumptive desire. Sula considers that the experience of overhearing her mother saying that she loved but didn’t like Sula was a liberating experience for her. She also considers the fact that “her major feeling of responsibility had been exorcised on the bank of a river with a closed place in the middle” (118). Sula has no center; she feels “no compulsion to verify herself—be consistent with herself” (119). Specifically, she feels no need to regulate herself in a particular way consistent with the dictates of the society in which she exists. She has no desire to be sanctioned by her society. “She was completely free of ambition, with no affection for money, property or things, no greed, no desire to command attention or compliments—no ego” (119). She is amoral, living beyond the dictates of her African-American community, that is at least until she meets Ajax.
In *Tar Baby*, Jadine falls in love with a woman in a market who appears to Jadine to be transcendent, free of the cultural context that attempts to cannibalize and enslave her; she serves as a symbol of self-love and freedom. Even the woman's food, the “three white eggs” (46), is associated with love and the desire for love, the hunger for it, if you will. As the narrator indicates, “when you have fallen in love, rage is superfluous, insult impossible. You mumble ‘bitch,’ but the hunger never moves, never closes. It is placed, open and always ready for another canary-yellow dress, other tar-black fingers holding three white eggs” (46). Jadine’s hunger for another is closely associated in the narrative with the consumption of food. The desired object, the African woman in the canary-yellow dress, carries in her hand nourishing objects, “three white eggs” (46). Interestingly, the egg is not only a nourishing object, but also a symbolic representation of the beginning of new life, a symbol of inception, completion, and perpetuation.

Ondine and Sydney, Jadine’s aunt and uncle, spend their lives cooking for the white family for whom they work. Although Ondine functions as the family cook, nourishing not only the family for whom she works, she also functions as a provider for her own family. In a way, the fact that she and Sydney work for Valerian is a way of nourishing Jadine, their niece, because their labors ingratiate Jadine to Valerian. Valerian functions as Jadines’s benefactor, putting her through school, and essentially supporting her in everyway, including feeding her, indirectly, with the money he gives her.

Food, in general, is made into a central element in the novel. Those consuming food and those preparing food are on different sides of the socio-economic equation. Valerian, his wife, and Jadine, are all in a position of power. Jadine is particularly
aligned with the oppressor in this novel because she is dependent upon and beholden to Valerian and the power and benefit he bestows on her. Ondine, Sydney, and even Son are on the other side of the power structure because they prepare the food, or—as is the case with the character Son—they steal the food. In *Tar Baby*, food functions to distinguish between those who have and those who do not have power. Those in power consume. Those in a position of submission prepare and serve the food and are on some level cannibalized. In this novel there is a very unhealthy power dynamic associated with food and with hunger. Interestingly, the most emotionally unhealthy people are the consumers of food, the takers of food, while the most emotionally healthy characters are those who cook and serve the food.

In *The Bluest Eye* food serves as both a transfiguring element and as a way to distinguish between those who have power and those whose power is cannibalized by others. Pecola, Frieda’s friend, drinks “some milk in a blue-and-white Shirley Temple cup” (19). Morrison’s novel associates the consumption of milk with the ideas of consuming and being consumed by whiteness. Pecola visually consumes Shirley Temple’s whiteness by gazing at her likeness which is imprinted on the cup: “she was a long time with the milk, and gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple’s dimpled face” (19), and then literally consumes whiteness by drinking the white milk substance. The simple fact that the nourishing liquid is contained within the context of the cup inscribed with the image of a perfect young white girl should not be overlooked. The consumptive act is echoed throughout the novel as negatively transformative and transfiguring, much in the same way that communion is transfiguring. Interestingly,
however, this act of taking whiteness into one’s own physical being is never characterized or presented as transcendental.

Even though the characters do occasionally transcend their circumstances by moving outside of their own sociological circumstances, this movement outside of their own context is characterized as negative, as an incorrect way of getting out of one’s own context because the characters that take the white culture into their own being are rejecting, must reject, their own culture in the process. Many of the characters in *The Bluest Eye* desire to be white because they desire to be the color of the colonizing people. They hunger for the power of the colonizer, so they turn their backs on their own culture by embracing the culture of the white community. This hunger for power becomes the desire to cannibalize the other and the self. In this particular instance, Pecola embraces the commercial culture of the white people by using the cup with Shirley Temple’s likeness on it, which is a mass-produced item designed to promote Shirley Temple. This Shirley Temple is not actually Shirley Temple, the person, but, rather, the artificially constructed and projected image of what a movie studio executive probably thought would appeal to a wide audience of white folks. This image is therefore projected into the African-American society through the white culture’s means of mass production and distribution. These black characters consume this idealized concept as if it were the standard, not only of whiteness, but also of true blackness; this is what Morrison’s novels argue is so dangerous about absorbing the culture of the colonizer into the culture of the colonized. The culture of the colonizer inscribes itself on the culture of the colonized, much in the same that the Dick and Jane primer become internalized in the novel’s story. In a very literal way, the Shirley Temple cup inscribes
itself, writes itself onto the abstract, cultural identity of the little girl, Pecola. The cup, which is emblematic of the white, colonizing culture, is present in Pecola’s African-American world.

There is another transubstantiating moment in *The Bluest Eye* when Frieda eats a piece of Mary Jane candy that displays a picture of a blued eyed, blonde haired little girl named Mary Jane. For Pecola, who desperately wants blue eyes, the act of eating the candy is an act of religious communion with the white culture, and sadly, Pecola, through her desire to be white, cannibalizes and objectifies herself; essentially, she victimizes herself. The white culture represented here by the candy as a cultural object, in many ways represents the Catholic Church that communicates God’s message. Pecola has “nine lovely orgasms with Mary Jane” (50). Her experience with her candy serves as a falsely ecstatic experience. In addition, her orgasms, her ecstatic experiences, are a result of a commerce exchange with a white man, a Mr. Yacobowski, whose gaze at Pecola is “edged with distaste” (49). Significantly, in order for Frieda to achieve orgasm, she must purchase her ecstatic moment from the white oppressor, so the white man is in power, is the colonizer. The white establishment, therefore, cannibalizes Pecola’s first sexual experience by transforming it into a commodity that can bought and sold. The establishment, thus, co-opts Pecola’s sexual agency by absorbing it into the dominant culture, transforming the nature of her own discourse. Interestingly, the color of the wrapper is “pale yellow” much like Mary Jane’s hair and skin, nothing about the color reflects who Pecola is as a person. The cultural artifact, once again, reflects only the white world and the not the black world. In some ways the cultural artifact is an interloper in the world of the African-American community.
Transubstantiation is, in some way, the act of cannibalizing a concept, of devouring that which signifies the transcendent experience and changing it into something else. Thus sadly Pecola’s ecstatic experience is transformed into a false commodified experience she has gained entrance to through an economic exchange. Pecola’s act of communion with the commodified, codified white girl’s image is textually thrust up against the information about the three whores who live in the “apartment above the Breedloves’ storefront apartment” (50). The three women who exchange money for sex are essentially doing the same thing that Pecola does only, rather, in the reverse order. Pecola acts as the john—a prostitute’s customer—to the white culture, exchanging money for an ecstatic, orgasmic act.

In this instance, however, Pecola is a willing victim in the cultural exchange. The white culture is taking her money in exchange for a sexual experience. Pecola purchases her “nine orgasms” with “three pennies” (50). These three pennies may also be associated in the reader’s mind with the holy trinity. The fact that the sexual act is thrust up against the religious act is designed to make the reader uncomfortable. What is being transfigured here is not the white girl but rather the black girl. She is being penetrated by the white culture while simultaneously devouring it, taking the culture into herself and making herself white—at least culturally—in the process; this process reflects a concept evoked by the symbol of the Ouroboros, the contradictory serpent that simultaneously nourishes and devours itself.

The whores, on the contrary, are in possession of the economic power. They function in the same way as Mr. Yacobowski and are the purveyors of power; they dole out the sweet candy of their sexual favors in exchange for money. Mr. Yacobowski acts
as the purveyor of his own sweet treats exchanging money for Pecola’s sexualized candy. The author here sexualizes what is normally associated in the reader’s mind with the innocent act of a child eating candy. Through this conceptual juxtaposition, Morrison’s novel forces the reader to conflate the religious, the sexual, and the innocent.

Interestingly, the Breedloves literally live in what is described by the narrator as a storefront. They become both the purveyor and also the article’s being purveyed. Because they live in a structure they rent from someone else, presumably a white person, they are consuming the white society’s product even as the dwell. The family is even being cannibalized by the white culture that takes their money to live in a structure that just barely serves the family’s needs. The Breedloves are impotent as figurative storekeepers, not selling anything, only inhabiting the space, which was once utilized for commerce. They liminally exist in an in between space, not really a home, and no longer a store, an in between solution for a marginalized culture.

The characters in Morrison’s novels exist in marginal relation to the larger cultural context. They are contiguous to but not included in the cultural conversation of that larger context. They may, however, conditionally gain entrance into the dominant culture by cannibalizing themselves, exchanging a portion of their own cultural identity for a place within the dominant culture. Morrison’s novels not only criticize this problematic cultural trade-off, but also suggest that a place gained by exchanging a portion of an individual’s personal identity is a fallacy; it is a ruse on the part of the dominant culture that is real only in the minds of its victims. Morrison’s novels, therefore, attempt to expose this fallacy and suggest that his cannibalism of self is born of a loathing of ones
own marginalized cultural identity, and in order to effect change and empower themselves, the characters in Morrison’s novels must direct this loathing outward, away from the individual and her community, and towards the dominant culture that confines and oppresses. Only through this redirection may the characters in Morrison’s novels—and the African-American culture as whole—escape a cultural enslavement to an ideology that serves only the larger context.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

Many of Toni Morrison’s novels are told from some future time in which the characters are looking back on their past experiences. Often the characters who are narrating are looking back on their own past lamenting its passing. They are the envoys of a faded way of life. These mourning narratives, which often take the form of homage to dead people and dead communities, is designed to call into question the relevance of the current community structures.

For instance, in *Sula* the novel’s present is book-ended by the novel’s past. We are introduced to the novel’s communities, the Bottom and Medallion, through a remembrance of the way the communities were at an earlier time. The communities are portrayed as idyllic. When Eva, one of the novel’s matriarch’s, is abandoned in winter by her husband she reaches out to the community in order to feed her family of three small children. They give her lard, peas, bread and other necessities. The community helps its own kind, and through this communal experience, they all survive more or less as a single unit. The community, however, begins to break down as the community members become more integrated in the white community, and by the novel’s end we see the beginnings of the disintegration of the African-American community in the Bottom and Medallion. Nel, one of the novel’s main characters, suggests that the communities’ members have exchanged community for integration, a level of acceptance and better standard of living—the suggestion being that the community has sold its self into a different kind of slavery, one that exchanges community and a sense of place for financial gain. What is so problematic about this exchange is that the African-Americans
in the novel become enslaved to a capitalistic economy that cares no more for them than the plantation owners that originally owned their ancestors.

We see this theme emerge in many of Morrison’s novels—the idea that the African-American community has undergone a loss of cultural identity as a result of a bargain they have made with the white community. In other words, the black community has decided to become culturally white through the consumption of products and modes of behavior in exchange for what it perceives to be social equity, but this dream of cultural equity is just that, a dream, a fallacy perpetuated by the black and white communities alike.

Again, the present is not ideal. The only perfect African-American communities in Morrison’s novels exist in the past. These communities were ideal only in that people, the characters, communicated and were connected to one another and supported one another. In the present tense of her novels, the characters turn on one another, live compartmentalized lives, and suffer cultural disconnection.

However, there are several characters in Morrison’s novels whose ways of living are suggestive of an alternative to the cultural suicide that has been committed by most of the characters in her novels. These characters are neither wholly against embracing white culture nor are they entirely mired in the past. These characters straddle the past and the present, learn from cultural mistakes, and look towards the future.

One such character is Jadine Childs of the novel *Tar Baby*. Though she is attacked by several characters for being culturally inauthentic—a cultural turncoat of her black community—she ultimately transcends the boundaries of the black and the white communities and leaves Isle de Chevaliers where she lives to start a new life in New
York City. Interestingly, it is a city which another of Morrison’s novels, *Jazz*, explores and celebrates as a place of reinvention, possibility, and constant change. It is a place of reinvention much in the same way that jazz music constantly reinvents itself through improvisation.

Son, Jadine’s love interest in *Tar Baby*, is her philosophical opposite. Son is a black fugitive trying to get back to his cultural roots. He does not believe in Jadine’s desire to live a cosmopolitan life in a thriving city, integrated and free. Son desires to keep himself separate from white people both culturally and literally. By the end of the novel, Son, unable to deal with Jadine’s decision to move to the big city and live a free life as a black woman, runs off into the woods on the island to live as a wild man with the mythologized horsemen of the island. Son even runs off “lickety-split. Lickety-split. Lickety-lickety-lickety-split” (306). He understands his role in the past, but he does not understand that change is inevitable, and so, he fades into the mythology of the novel’s architecture.

The ending for Son’s character is decidedly mythologized, not unlike the ending created for the characters in *Paradise*. Both endings are entirely unrealistic, conveying to the reader that extreme modes of existence, though perhaps authentic modes of existence, are not realistic lifestyle options for the world as it currently stands.

Significantly, unlike Son, Jadine is no idealist. She is a fashion model with a white boyfriend on the continent. She has a beautiful coat made of perfect seal skins. She embraces her contemporary culture with all of its flaws and all of its benefits. Jadine does not feel that she is compromising a part of herself, cannibalizing a part of herself to be a part of the consumer culture. She is not true to her African-American
culture in the same way that Son is true to his cultural heritage, but she does not need to be. Jadine is looking towards the future, imperfect though it may be.

In Morrison’s first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, the past is very much alive. In fact, all of Morrison’s novels are to a greater or lesser degree mired in the past. At least, the past always serves as a foundation for Morrison’s novels because there are no real futures for the characters who survive unless they are mindful of their past. Without understanding the mistakes of the past those characters are chained to and enslaved by that imperfect past.

*Beloved* is an excellent example of this need to learn from the past. The moral message of that novel is closely tied to an understanding of the African-Americans’ problematic relationship to their past. The one character that learns from the past is Sethe’s young daughter Denver. She goes out into the community, carrying her newly acquired message of hope and reconnection, much in the same way that Anna and Richard in *Paradise* carry their message of hope back to the town of Ruby. It is imperative for the characters’ survival that they understand their own roles in that past so that they can learn, grow, and change in the future that the reader is invited to imagine beyond the novel’s close.

In *Song of Solomon* the ending for the main character, Milkman Dead, is also mythologized. He cannot exist in the thriving, affluent world of his family, and so he escapes into the world of his ancestors. Milkman learns that “if you surrendered to the air you could *ride* it” (337). These last lines of the novel create an ambiguous ending; it is unclear and unresolved as are the endings to *Paradise* and *Tar Baby*. The reader does not really know if Milkman dies or lives to literally soar in the air away from the
man who threatens his life. His pursuer, Guitar, may shoot him, or Milkman may actually fly away from the scene in order to live another day. The former, of course, is the more likely.

Again, as in other novels, Milkman is an idealist. He does not believe in his father’s materialistic and opportunistic way of life—much in the same way that Son does not approve of Jadine’s lifestyle in *Tar Baby*. As a result of the fact that Milkman is an uncompromising idealist, he is unable to survive in the world of the novel. He may survive in the unlikely mythology of the novel and the mind of the reader, but in what would be termed the real world, Milkman dies.

Much in the same way, the Convent women in the novel *Paradise* do not survive because they are idealists. They want to live authentically free of the constraints of the African-American town of Ruby, free of the constraints of any society, really. They, too, escape into the mythology of the novel’s world, as does Milkman and Son. The women survive as Christ-like figures after their true deaths. This ending may be interpreted in two ways. From one point of view they die and their story becomes mythologized and told by the women of the town of Ruby. In other words, they live on in the memory of those who are among the living. From another point of view they truly return from the dead as feminine Christs. Again, like Son’s tale in *Tar Baby*, the former seems more likely. The idealists cannot survive in Morrison’s novels simply because they are idealists, unwilling to make compromises to survive in their worlds.

The future of the African-American race, then, is left to characters like Jadine Childs, whose only allegiance is to themselves, not to a particular country or culture, and though Morrison’s novels’ portray the others, the idealistic characters, as the more
noble, they do not survive in the novels’ worlds, except in the novels’ mythologies. The Convent women, for instance, live on only in an unbelievable narrative about their resurrections. According to Morrison, and her novel *Sula*, there is no place for the Sula’s of this world, no room for authenticity and individuality. Survival is left to the characters like Nel, Sula’s best friend, who compromise and work within the system, so, according to Morrison, the future of the African-American race lies in the hands of characters like Jadine from *Tar Baby*. The future lies with those characters that are self-aware and savvy of the world around them—the characters that use the dominant culture rather than get used by it, and if personal gain is made at the ethical expense of the characters themselves, then that is the cost of life in the real world. Morrison’s readers are charged with being perpetually aware of the not quite ideal world around them, the world of her characters and the world of her readers. Looking towards the future, then, means being conscious of the injustices of the past, working with the inequities of the present, and keeping an eye toward the uncertain future of the African-American race.

While this claim seems counter to an earlier claim that Morrison’s novels posit that an attempt to fit into the larger cultural context at the expense of her characters’ own unique cultural voice is the equivalent of cultural suicide, it is not. A middle ground must be found because her characters cannot live in a vacuum. If they live entirely authentically, they are ostracized or worse yet murdered by their own kind. Some of the characters, such as Son, are able to escape into the mythology of the novel’s narrative, but they escape into an improbable storyline. Jadine is the tar baby—the fabled object that ensnares its victim—but she is the one who goes on to live in the real world. She is the character who is given a life beyond the close of the novel. Son goes off “lickety-
split” (306) to live with the island’s horsemen. The same can be said for Milkman Dead. He takes flight and flies—the reader is to assume—to the land of his ancestors. Much the same happens to the Convent women at the end of the Paradise. They live on after death as Christ-like figures reappearing briefly in the lives of their friends and family. In all three of these examples the characters live on in unlikely narratives. Morrison employs magical realism to foreground the unlikelihood of her idealistic characters being able to survive in a world of a more realistic construction. All of these characters’ storylines are resolved in an absurd fashion, which leads the reader to believe that Morrison either could not or did not want to resolve her storylines in any other way. It is as if the author did not know what to do with the characters. Even Sula escapes the novel’s main narrative into an afterlife in which she can speak—if not to the other characters then at least to the reader. This leaves the reader with more realistic endings for characters like Nel and Jadine and Richard. These characters struggle with their authenticity, their desire to live truthful existences, but ultimately they all compromise. Nel becomes much more like her uptight mother than like Sula. Jadine becomes much more like her white benefactor than like the authentic and earthy Son, and Richard turns his back on the truth of the murders of the Convent women. Interestingly all three of these characters return to the white culture—or in Richard’s case, a facsimile of it. All three characters return changed by their experiences and with a new understanding of what it means to be black in a white world, but they all return none the less. The reader can only hope that the characters’ new understanding about their own culture will arm them for the cultural battles that lay ahead. While Morrison’s canon is critical of the “African American architectural iconography that appropriated white built forms and
social values in an attempt to counter racism” (Mooney 48), perhaps Morrison would ultimately agree that progress can sometimes be made only through compromise—not by yielding to your enemies wishes but my meeting them halfway.
WORKS CITED


