Ghosts, Orphans, and Outlaws: History, Family, and the Law in Toni Morrison's Fiction

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Ghosts, Orphans, and Outlaws:
History, Family, and the Law in Toni Morrison’s Fiction

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
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Department of English
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Table 1: A Brief Register of the Triptych

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This dissertation explores Morrison’s most prevalent motifs: the ghost, the orphan, and the outlaw. I argue that each figure advances a critique of dominant narratives, specifically those that comprise history, family, and the law. In the first chapter, I argue that Morrison’s ghost stories contrast two methods of memory, one that is authoritative and another that is imaginative, in order to counter the official renderings of history. Her ghosts signal forgotten aspects of American history and provide access to another storyline, one that lies in the shadows of the novel’s principal narrative. This chapter compares the ghosts of Love and Home in order to show how Morrison uses ghosts as conduits of individual and communal memory. In my second chapter, I assert a reading of Morrison’s orphaned characters as blues figures. The orphan attests to the destructive effects of race, class, and gender oppression, which render her characters biologically and culturally orphaned. I conclude this chapter by comparing Paradise and A Mercy to show the way Morrison’s orphaned characters posit an alternative model of kinship that is built from the shared project of liberation. Chapter Three examines Morrison’s treatment of the law and its foil—the outlaw. I argue that Morrison foregrounds criminality in the absence of the law and its apparatuses (courts, police) in order to subvert the social institutions that give rise to the ghost and the orphan. I compare the crimes at the heart of Tar Baby and Jazz in order to posit another notion of justice that operates in Morrison’s fiction. When looked at together, Morrison’s triptych threatens the coherence of governing ideologies and offers a meditation on the transformative possibilities of narrative.
INTRODUCTION

“Once upon a time. . . .” So begins the folk tale, the child’s story, and the Nobel Prize acceptance speech of an American author, Toni Morrison. Rather than give a speech proper, Morrison offers a parable, casting herself as the parable’s griot, and her esteemed audience members as the curious children of her story, demanding to know “what is life? What is death?” (204).1 The children’s questions reveal a desperate need for guidance and a longing to understand: “Is there no context for our lives?” the children insist: “No song, no literature, no poem full of vitamins, no history connected to experience. . . to help us start strong?” (205).

The children demand a narrative, a history that explains their experience, but by the parable’s conclusion, the children’s incessant demand becomes a telling of their own. They find in themselves what they sought from the woman: “See how lovely it is. This thing we have done together,” the woman responds (207). Morrison’s fiction, like her parable, hopes to incite the curiosity and inquisitiveness of children seeking to make sense of their lives. Her popularity suggests that her readers crave the telling because, like the children of the parable, they are the starved subjects of under-told stories.

Morrison’s imprint on the American literary landscape cannot be ignored. As an editor for Random House, she helped introduce African American writers, such as Angela Davis, Gayl

1 I am indebted to Cheryl Lester for this observation. In “Meditations on a Bird in the Hand: Ethics and Aesthetics in a Parable by Toni Morrison.” Lester writes, “By telling this story, Morrison assumes the position of the wise old storyteller and she places her distinguished audience in the place of the inquiring children who have come to visit her. Perhaps her audience, like those children, want proof of Morrison’s wisdom, answers to their questions” (128).
Jones, and Toni Cade Bambara, into the literary mainstream. As an author, Morrison reigns as “one of the most preeminent authors of our time” (Stein 1). Her first novel, *The Bluest Eye,* (1970) was originally rejected by twelve publishers, and it remained out of print for several years (Stein; Suranyi). Despite this bumpy start, Morrison’s second novel *Sula* (1975) was nominated for a National Book Award, and her third, *Song of Solomon* (1977), won the National Book Critics Circle Award. Two decades after her first publication, Morrison was the first African American woman to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature for *Beloved.* In addition to this grand honor, Morrison’s work has generated multiple awards, including the Commander of Arts and Letters (1993), the National Book Foundation’s Medal of Distinguished Contribution to American letters (1996), and the Presidential Medal of Freedom (2012). Her work in children’s literature garnered a Grammy Award nomination in 2008; and in 2011, she received two Honorary Doctorates, one from Rutgers University and the other from the University of Geneva.

Morrison’s fame is shaped in part by the advocacy of black women both within and outside of the academy. When *Beloved* was overlooked for both the 1987 American Book Award and the Pulitzer, forty-eight writers wrote a denunciation of the decision and published their letter in *The New York Times.* Morrison later acknowledged that this “support and recognition by her own writerly community was one of the most meaningful ‘awards’ that she has ever received” (Tally 2). The following year, *Beloved* won the Nobel Prize for Literature, and within a decade *Song of Solomon* was included as one of Oprah Winfrey’s Book Club readings. Winfrey also included *Paradise* and *The Bluest Eye,* and she worked with Morrison to transform *Beloved* into a major motion picture.
The popularity of Morrison’s work attests to the social purpose of the novel, which she describes in her seminal essay, “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation.” In this work, Morrison explains that the novel “has always functioned for the class or the group that wrote it” (57). For Morrison, the novel should serve a social purpose, “which is to say yes, the work must be political” (Morrison 64). If the novel “isn’t about the village, or about the community or about you,” Morrison contends, “then it is not about anything” (64). The novel “is needed by African Americans now,” Morrison continues, “in a way that it was not needed before—and it is following along the function of novels everywhere” (57-58). For Morrison, the shared function of novels everywhere is to teach, but significantly Morrison’s novels intentionally avoid a didactic resolution: “It should have something in it that enlightens; something in it that opens the door and points the way. Something in it that suggests what the conflicts are, what the problems are. But it need not solve these problems because it is not a case study, it is not a recipe” (emphasis mine 59). I locate these conflicts within dominant narratives of history, family and the law; and I argue that Morrison’s ghosts, orphans, and outlaws facilitate her narrative project. Morrison’s triptych “opens the door” for her readers, but her novels resist an easy transferal of the novel’s meaning to a passive consumer of the text. Her fiction emerges from a collective demand to confront that which has been rendered absent from the national

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2 Timothy Aubrey’s reading of Paradise offers an excellent example of the way Morrison’s works resist an easy transference between the author and the reader—even when they are foregrounded within the popular medium of the Oprah Winfrey Show. Paradise presents a complex history of African American life that spans three generations. Aubrey documents the audience’s frustration with the form of the novel, and he explains their desire to “get it” is “not entirely auspicious; it seems to entail a disturbing desire for mastery, for possession, rooted in class-climbing pretensions, as if the comprehension of literary works were simply another form of acquisition, capable of procuring for the consumer higher status within a class hierarchy” (354). Paradise, like all of Morrison’s novels, demonstrates that the purpose is not to convey a narrative that is “got” by the reader; instead, it is to facilitate a critical engagement with a novel that generates more questions than answers. Her fiction requires readers to work with the text, to cull the significance of the conflict at the heart of her novels.
imagination, to engage with the social structures that give meaning to national narratives that make up history, family, and the law. This study extends the premise put forth by Gurleen Grewal in *Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle: The Novels of Toni Morrison*. Grewal writes, “If Morrison’s writing makes aesthetic sense to the reader, it is not in spite of but because of the ideological vision propelling the art” (xii). The form of the conflict manifests differently in each novel, but all find their origins in dominant narratives of history, family, and the law.

Morrison’s interrogations of these narratives offer up a reading that is akin to what Trinh T. Minha refers to as a “speaking nearby.” A Speaking nearby is:

- a speaking that does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from a speaking place.
- a speaking that reflects on itself and comes very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it.
- a speaking, in brief, whose closures are only moments of transition opening up to other possible moments of transition. . . . It is an attitude in life, a way of positioning oneself in relation to the world (Chen and Trinh 443).

Morrison’s triptych *speaks nearby* dominant narratives in order to interrogate and invigorate them. Moreover, the prevalence of these motifs (see Table 1) in all of Morrison’s work attest to

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3 The phrase “national narratives” is informed by Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, which argues that the stories we tell give meaning to the concept of the nation.

4 Grewal’s observation skirts the tendency to separate Morrison’s aesthetic choices from the political message. Interpretations of Morrison’s work often find themselves on either side of a figurative line, drawn most explicitly by Harold Bloom’s introduction to *Modern Critical Views: Toni Morrison*. On one side, stands the aesthetic (style, stance, tone, prose, rhythm, and mimetic mode) on the other, social purpose (ideology and polemics). Bloom locates Morrison’s work within the aesthetic traditions of Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner. The essays compiled in Marc Conner’s *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable* “seek to demonstrate” the way “Morrison’s writings talk back to this aesthetic tradition in a number of ways—crucial, cautious, satiric, approving” (xiii). “But at the same time,” Conner reasons, “to take up something like the ‘western aesthetic tradition,’ and to apply that tradition to the work of a writer who is certainly engaged in putting much of western thought and culture into question, is at best a deeply problematic and contentious project” (xiii). Therefore, I propose a reading of Morrison as “speaking nearby,” rather than talking back, because it allows us to bridge the divide between the aesthetic and the polemic as one is not privileged over the other.
the way Morrison *speaks nearby* her own literary tradition. To facilitate my reading of Morrison’s work as “speaking nearby” dominant narratives of history, family, and the law, I rely on memory studies, postcolonial theory, feminist critiques of the family, and critical race theory. My analysis is divided into three parts, each of which lays bare the theoretical framework associated with the figure. I conclude each chapter concludes with a comparative reading of the two novels that best articulate the figure’s strengths. I intentionally avoided lengthy discussions of Morrison’s earliest novels because the significance of these figures becomes self-evident, and I aim to tackle those writings that are underexplored within Morrison’s scholarship. Thus, this study examines Morrison’s less popular literature (in the scholarly sense) and offers the first comprehensive reading of Morrison’s most significant motifs.

In Chapter One, “Spectral Imaginings of Love and Home,” I argue that Morrison uses ghosts to tell two stories, which contrast two methods of communal memory: one that is authoritative and another that is imaginative. Her ghost stories merge memory with imagination in an effort to counter official renderings of history, which, Morrison’s specters suggest, are always made in error. Ghostly encounters underscore her trick of time as we are

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5 Discussions of the folk elements in Morrison’s work reveal that she is always works within and beside multiple narratives. The In *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison*, Trudier Harris argues that Morrison is not presenting her readers with a static articulation of folk beliefs and practices, but rather she is *showing us the processes* through which such traditions become enacted through the lives of her characters. Moreover, Morrison’s ghosts, orphans, and outlaws could be read as part of what Marilyn Sanders calls the “folk aesthetic,” which privileges the performance of rituals, celebrates the vernacular, and endows archetypal characters with a “mythical grandeur” (8, 11). Correspondingly, Chiji Akoma’s *Folklore in New World Black Fiction* asserts that the folklore elements in Morrison’s works serve to both question and celebrate the components of oral culture. Marilyn Sanders Mobley’s *Folk Roots and Mythic Wings in Sarah Orne Jewett and Toni Morrison* and Alma Billingslea-Brown’s *Crossing Borders through Folklore: African-American Women’s Fiction* attests to the transcultural and transformative potential of folk traditions.
Table 1. A Brief Register of the Triptych

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Novel</th>
<th>Ghosts</th>
<th>Orphans</th>
<th>Outlaws</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>The Bluest Eye</em></td>
<td>Pecola</td>
<td>Cholly, Pauline, Soaphead</td>
<td>Claudia, Prostitutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sula</em></td>
<td>Sula</td>
<td>Deweys, Tar Baby</td>
<td>Sula</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Song of Solomon</em></td>
<td>Macon Dead, Circe, Ryna</td>
<td>Pilate, Macon</td>
<td>Seven Days, Pilate, Milkman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Tar Baby</em></td>
<td>blind horsemen, swamp women</td>
<td>Jadine, Son</td>
<td>Son, blind horsemen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Beloved</em></td>
<td>Beloved</td>
<td>Sethe, Denver, Paul D.</td>
<td>Sethe, Sixo, Stamp Paid (underground railroad)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Jazz</em></td>
<td>Wild, Dorcas</td>
<td>Dorcas, Joe, Violet, Wild, Golden Gray</td>
<td>narrator, jazz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Paradise</em></td>
<td>Mavis’s twins (Merle and Perle) Convent women (Mavis, Gigi, Pallas, Consolata)</td>
<td>Consolata Mavis, Gigi, Pallas 8-rock families</td>
<td>Consolata</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Love</em></td>
<td>L, Celestial, Cosey</td>
<td>Heed, Junior</td>
<td>L, Celestial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>A Mercy</em></td>
<td>Rebekka’s shipmates, Florens’s mother</td>
<td>Florens, Jacob, Lina, Sorrow, Rebekka</td>
<td>Florens, Lina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Home</em></td>
<td>Unnamed man, child</td>
<td>Frank and Cee</td>
<td>Frank</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

confronted with images from the past that bear significance for the future. This chapter reviews the significance of the ghost in all of Morrison’s work and concludes with a close reading of *Love* and *Home*, both of which require the audience to mimic the characters’ ritual of return. By ritual of return, I mean that once readers become attentive to the story that lies beneath the dominant narrative, they must return to the novel’s primary action and reconsider its significance. I compare *Love* and *Home* because they highlight the cognitive work necessary to reconstruct the significance of the novel’s original telling.

This chapter relies on definitions of haunting put forth by sociologists and literary critics. In general, contemporary ghost stories are interpreted as an attempt to fill an absence within
official renderings of history. Slavoj Žižek’s reflections on the role of ghosts attest to the significance of ghosts and hauntings. “Ghosts,” Žižek writes, “are not simply to be dismissed as fantastic, since they haunt us on account of their very excessive, unbearable reality, like the holocaust” (69). The specter emerges from a reality that “cannot be fully ‘accounted for,’ integrated into our social reality, even if we know (almost) all about it on the level of historical facts” (70). “The fantasmatic narrative,” Žižek continues, recalls a “spectral event that definitely ‘did not really happen’” and is marked by the “traces of an event that definitely did happen but was too traumatic to be integrated into historical memory” (70). The ghosts of Morrison’s novels indicate a concerted effort to reclaim a memory that can only be understood as an apparition, which haunts because it must be told even if it cannot be fully realized. This chapter reviews the way Morrison uses ghosts to supplement the redacted elements of American history, but it also argues that Morrison uses ghosts as “agents of that which is yet to be fulfilled” (Blanco 16).7

Despite the overwhelming presence of ghosts in all of Morrison’s fiction, only one work offers a comparative reading of Morrison’s haunted texts. Melanie Anderson’s Spectrality in the Novels of Toni Morrison compares the seven novels published between 1977-2008.8 My work differs from Anderson in two significant ways. First, Anderson reads Morrison through the

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6 As Avery Gordon contends in Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination, “we are haunted by that which modern history has rendered ghostly” (8). Furthermore, Kathleen Brogan’s Cultural Hauntings: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature identifies a panethnic treatment of haunting in American literature that “signal[s] an attempt to recover and make social use of a poorly, documented partially erased history (4).

7 Maria del Pilar Blanco’s Ghost Watching proposes another definition of haunting that addresses the ghost’s significance for the future. Blanco does not discuss Morrison (or Faulkner) because “the bountiful criticism of them has already begun a hauntology of the U.S. South,” but her assertion that ghosts can function as “agents of change” remains central to my reading. Like Blanco, I argue that the ghosts of Morrison’s fiction bear significance for the future.

8 Much of the critical attention on ghosts in Morrison’s works focuses on the eponymously named Beloved, which scholars contend represents the individual and collective hauntings of slavery (see for example Berger; Erickson; Kawash; Redding).
theoretical frame of magical realism whereas I read these hauntings through the lens of memory studies. Second, Anderson employs an expansive definition of the ghost, including those that are merely “social ghosts” because they are severed from family and community, and those characters “that appear to be alive but have more in common with the spirits” (10). My analysis, however, focuses on the novel’s literal ghosts—those that have died but remain within the realm of the living. Moreover, my work includes a reading of Morrison’s most recent novel Home in order to posit a theory of Morrison’s ghosts as conduits of subversive communal and individual memories that force readers to rethink the novels primary action, and by extension, to rethink any narrative that fails to make epistemic sense to the reader.

Chapter Two, “Orphans in the House that Race Built,” takes its title from Wahneema Lubiano’s The House That Race Built: Original Essays by Toni Morrison, Angela Y. Davis, Cornel West, and Others on Black Americans and Politics in America Today.9 Morrison’s contribution to the collection, titled “Home,” distinguishes the concept of home as a “world-in-which-race-does-not-matter” from that of home as the master’s house, where fantasies of racial dominance “magnify the matter of the matter” (9, 11). The racial house of global capitalism, which finds its origins in the slave trade, creates the “anxiety of belonging” that accompanies the displacement of so many exiles, refugees, immigrants and migrants (“Home” 10). The racial house of American literature, which creates and reifies race even as it imagines itself outside of racial constructs, creates the “anxiety of belonging” for authors and readers that find themselves out of the promises of American liberty (“Home” 10). In both articulations, displacement defines the house. Morrison’s metaphor of the home seeks to domesticate the

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9 Lubiano’s collection addresses the advancements and setbacks of the Civil Rights Movement, and explores the ways in which racism remains an integral component of American culture.
process of un-racing the world—to provide a place of belonging despite the backdrop of
dislocation. This chapter argues that Morrison’s orphan stories parallel this desire for belonging
and community as they seek to find a home outside the strictures of the master’s house.\footnote{Morrison describes her literary project as seeking to create a “home as world” where we may “decipher the de-racing of the world” not as a utopian perfection but as a domestic vision (10). According to Morrison, the construct of race “concerns legitimacy, authenticity, community, and belonging,” all of which are intimately tied to questions of the home: “an intellectual home; a spiritual home; family and community as home; forced and displaced labor in the destruction of home; dislocation of and alienation of within the ancestral home” (5). Through her narrative command, Morrison attempts to create another space—a redesigned house which is no longer a windowless prison but an “open house”—where we “can imagine safety without walls, can iterate difference that is prized but not privileged,” and we can find a home (12). Morrison’s narratives attempt to redesign this house; but, she wonders, would residing there mean “eternal homelessness” and the forever-nostalgic longing for a race-free home that she (nor any of us) has ever known (10). For it is colonial claims to the home, which are intimately tied to claims of belonging, that justify the displacement of so many (and in so many ways).}

Morrison’s orphans illustrate the dangers of being untethered from the community, and
they also attest to the ways new kinships can form from the shared project of liberation. The
chapter builds from discussions of nationhood and its attendant concepts of the family and the
home. Morrison’s orphan stories expose the colonial conditions that disempower mothers and
fathers.\footnote{Rather than a safe haven, the home signifies contested terrain. Ann Stoler identifies how the quotidian rituals of the home, which she refers to as the “economy of the everyday.” The domestic sphere reveals “patterns and rhythms of rule” where racial domination and economic exploitation are enacted (194). Amy Kaplan’s The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture illustrates the significance of the home in the projects of nation building. Kaplan argues that visions of the home helped shape national discourse regarding U.S. expansion westward. Correspondingly, Alexandra Schultheis Moore’s Regenerative Fictions: Postcolonialism, Psychoanalysis, and the Nation as Family discusses the paternal underpinnings of the metaphor of the nation as a family and the possibility for reimagining subject formation outside the confines of paternal law.}

I extend the premise put forth by Diana Loercher Pazicky in her Cultural Orphans in
America. Looking at religious texts, political documents, and literary works, Pazicky examines
the trope of orphanage in the literature composed during the colonial period through the
revolution and the great migration. She locates her study within the metaphor of the family,
and she argues that early American orphan narratives share a thematic concern with identity
within the imagined national family: “the orphan tale becomes comprehensible as a ritualistic
effort to master the threat on the identity of the dominant culture as white, privileged,
Protestant, and predominantly Anglo-Saxon. The formula also represents codification in novelistic forms of the “family values” that have shaped American culture since its beginnings” (Pazicky 199).\textsuperscript{12} Morrison’s novels flip the script; she privileges the point of view of the orphan in order to disrupt the dominant articulations of the family. I conclude this chapter with a close reading of \textit{A Mercy} and \textit{Paradise}, both of which point to storytelling as means for defying the mythology of a national family that is born from the benevolence of Founding Fathers.

Chapter Three, “The Letter of the Law and the Law of Love,” contributes to the burgeoning field of law and legal studies and identifies Morrison’s literary project as sharing the objectives of Critical Race Theory.\textsuperscript{13} This chapter explores the alternative models of justice operating in Morrison’s fiction, which “puts into crisis the law of the land and the judgment of the witnessing jury of readers” (Grewal 1). Criminality propels the plot of all of Morrison’s fiction, but the law and its apparatus (e.g., courts, police, and prison) remain absent or ineffective; this absence ultimately undermines the ideological function of the law. I argue that Morrison foregrounds criminality in the absence of the law in order to counter the formulaic

\textsuperscript{12} To illustrate her point Pazicky reviews Puritan religious texts, the political writings of Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson as well as Susan Warner’s \textit{The Wide Wide World} (1850) and Maria Stuart Cummin’s \textit{The Lamplighter} (1854). She concludes her study with a comparative reading of orphan imagery in Frederick Douglas’ \textit{My Bondage}, \textit{My Freedom} and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin}, which reveals that the “fictional orphan tale of the nineteenth century expresses the desire for social control found in the factual orphan tale” (200). Moreover, Karen Sánchez-Eppler’s “Raising Empires like Children: Race, Nation, and Religious Education” identifies the semiotic relationship between national identity and the education of children.

\textsuperscript{13} Critical Race Theory (CRT) contests the terms and conditions of dominant legal discourses. Kimberlé Crenshaw likens this practice to Edward Said’s “antithetical knowledge,” which Said attributes to those works that stand in opposition to orthodox and dogma. Said recognizes that knowledge construction is situational, social, and therefore, political. Antithetical knowledge is produced by those scholars that recognize knowledge as a contested category rather than a fixed entity. Crenshaw identifies two strands of thought that inform CRT: “The first is to understand how a regime of white supremacy and its subordination of people of color have been created and maintained in America, and in particular, to examine the relationship between that social structure and professed ideals such as ‘the rule of the law’ and ‘equal protection.’ The second is not merely to understand the vexed bond between law and racial power but to change it” (xiii).
prescriptions of legal discourse.\textsuperscript{14} I read Morrison’s outlaws as a vehicle for an alternative epistemology. They stand in direct confrontation with the laws of the land—those perpetuated by the courts and by a racist and sexist culture. From the vantage point of the margins, the outlaw offers a critique aimed at the structures that oppress. I contrast the outlaw with its in-law counterpart. The in-law may behave “criminally” but it is a criminality that mirrors the legal codes, which find their origins in slavery. The outlaw, however, skirts these legal codes for a more expansive and forgiving model of justice. The in-law’s “criminality” is sanctioned by the logic of the law—but not the logic of the novel. I argue that Morrison’s novel presents an alternative notion of criminality that contrasts with legal definitions. The outlaw posits an alternative theory of justice that subverts the social institutions that give rise to the ghost and the orphan. The outlaw challenges the law’s foundational assumptions regarding property and ownership, and they point to alternative judicial models that place community above property. I compare Morrison’s in-laws and outlaws to show how Morrison challenges the law’s foundational assumptions. Like their trickster counterparts, the outlaw disrupts the foundational assumptions and transgresses boundaries; but unlike the trickster, they always

\textsuperscript{14} Despite the prevalence of criminal acts in Morrison’s work, very few critics interpret it within the realm of legal studies. For example, Terry Otten discusses Morrison’s use of extreme criminality in \textit{The Crime of Innocence}, but he locates his analysis within the Biblical concept of the fall. According to Otten, all of Morrison’s fiction “contain gardens emblematic of a state of innocence, serpent figures projecting the unconscious self, duality portraying the paradoxical nature of good and evil, the nakedness of conscious awareness, and the ambiguity of existence east of Eden” (7). Moreover, Gloria T. Randle’s discusses Morrison’s “outlaw women,” but she defines them as “not criminals necessarily, but misfits and miscreants, women who situate themselves decidedly outside the law of the community” (68). Randle interprets Pecola, Sula, and Sethe as outlaw women who are ostracized precisely because they challenge the imagined stability of the community. Only two critics, Megan Sweeney and Marisa Ann Pagnattaro, discuss the rule of law in Morrison’s fiction. Sweeney’s articulation of the law as a kind of exchange, which she calls the “logic of commensurability” and Pagnattaro’s discussion of the Fugitive Slave Act inform my reading of Morrison’s work. For more on these works, see Chapter Three.
operate on behalf of the community.\textsuperscript{15} Moreover, Morrison’s outlaws assert an ethics of love that contrasts with the law’s measurement of crime and justice.\textsuperscript{16} I conclude this chapter with a comparative reading of \textit{Tar Baby} and \textit{Jazz}, both of which challenge legal doctrines that fail to give adequate context for the criminal action.

\textbf{The Triptych at Work}

The thrust of each figure requires an isolated investigation, but a new significance comes forth when we examine their relationship to each other. I locate Morrison’s triptych within this parable, and I hope that by looking at ghosts, orphans, and outlaws together readers can appreciate their pedagogical importance. Recall that the parable concerned an old woman, the “daughter of slaves, black, American” who “lives alone in a small house outside of town” ("Nobel" 198). The children visit her because, she believes, they want to refute her wisdom, to expose her as a fraud. And so, they “ask the one question the answer to which rides solely on

\textsuperscript{15} VanSlette and Boyd identity the shared objectives of the trickster and the outlaw, which are to resist and disrupt dominant beliefs. Morrison’s outlaw figures function as a central part of her “trickster aesthetic,” defined by Jeanne R. Smith as an implicit challenge to “an ethnocentric as well as phallocentric tradition” (Smith 11). Morrison’s outlaws, like the trickster, invite interpretation in order to “challenge unquestioned univocal concepts and world views” (Vega González 275). They challenge perceived boundaries and borders in order to disrupt the dominant articulations of justice. While the trickster relies on humor, and often offers a morally ambiguous message; “the outlaw, on the other hand, generally pursues a clear agenda, albeit one that may be perceived as outside of acceptable or appropriate options” (VanSlette and Boyd 597). By showing Morrison’s outlaws as “trickster-driven,” I contribute to discussions of the trickster in African American literary theory by examining the way these outlaws challenge the economic and political situations that give rise to the ghost and the orphan (VanSlette and Boyd 600).

\textsuperscript{16} My definition of the outlaw is shaped by studies in the rhetoric of resistance, and is heavily informed by John M. Sloop and Kent A. Ono’s "Out-law Discourse: The Critical Politics of Material Judgment." Sloop and Ono assert that outlaw discourse employs a theory of justice that is fluid and subjective—but always grounded in material conditions. To illustrate their point, Sloop and Ono refer to Atlanta’s race riots in 1906 during which white mobs, responding to the alleged rape of a white woman, attacked African American neighborhoods. During the four-day assault, residents of Atlanta’s slum, “Darktown,” protected the neighborhoods by fighting back against the white mobs. As one injured resident, William Crogman, observed, “. . . at our very doorstep the whites kill these good men. But the lawless element in our population, the element we have condemned, fights back, and it is [to] these people that we owe our lives” (50). The white mobs attack “under a banner of justice,” but it is the “justice of the outlaw, those already living by a code of justice outside of dominant litigation, to which Crogman and others owed their lives” (50-51). The outlaw, Sloop and Ono reason, is one who disrupts dominant modes of thinking and thus transforms modes of judgment.
her difference from them, a difference they regard as a profound disability: her blindness” (“Nobel” 198). The question concerns a bird in their hand: is it alive or dead, the children ask. “I don’t know,” the woman responds, “but what I do know is that it is in your hands” (199).

The woman is described as both “the law and its transgression,” and so I read her as an outlaw figure. She incites an alternative reading, a unique perspective that challenges the children to reconsider their motive. She is an author, an “experienced word worker,” and for her the bird in the children’s hand represents language, which is at once powerful and dangerous. The woman defines dangerous language as “the malign language of law-without-ethics, or language designed for the estrangement of minorities, hiding its racist plunder in its literary cheek” (emphasis mine 201). This kind of language “moves relentlessly toward the bottom line and the bottomed out mind,” and the woman contrasts it with living language that is “able to limn the actual, imagined and possible lives of its speakers” (201, 202). In distinguishing between these two kinds of language, Morrison’s word-worker highlights the difference between in-law language and outlaw discourse.

Significantly, the woman posits another interpretation of the Tower of Babel story, which gives insight into her outlawed vision. The original version recalls the period after the great flood, when all the people of the world shared a common language. Working together, the people set out to build a tower that would reach all the way to heaven. The construction was abandoned when the Lord decided to “confuse their language, so they will not understand one another’s speech. . . . Therefore [the tower] was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad all over the face of the earth” (New Oxford Annotated Bible 11:7). The tower is conventionally believed
to be a disaster because its builders never reached Paradise, but Morrison’s outlaw suggests another reading:

Perhaps the achievement of Paradise was premature, a little hasty if no one could take the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives period. Had they, the heaven they imagined might have been found at their feet. Complicated, demanding yes, but a view of heaven as life; not heaven as post-life. (202)

In her revision of the Tower of Babel story, this outlawed woman asserts a model of language that values difference—be it a difference in form or vision—and it is this difference that is not only reconcilable but also divine. The hope for understanding outweighs the difficulty of interpretation as the project promises to provide heaven on earth. Living language, expansive language that includes rather than excludes, allows for the possibility of understanding and reconciliation. While dead language—the language of commerce and of the law—intends to divide, to preclude the achievement of heaven on earth. The woman knows that language, living or dead, is an instrument of power, and that the responsibility for that power rests in the hands of its holder.

I read the children of this parable as cultural orphans who seek out this griot precisely because they lack the knowledge they need to make sense of their lives. Her assertion of responsibility fails to satisfy them because they insist they have no bird in their hands, only questions: “Is there no context for our lives,” the children insist.” Your answer is artful,” they continue, “but its artfulness embarrasses us and ought to embarrass you. Your answer is indecent in its self-congratulation. A made-for-television script that makes no sense if there is
nothing in our hands” (205). They have heard all their “short lives to be responsible,” but “what could that possibly mean in the catastrophe this world has become?” (205). In their minds, narratives of the nation constitute lies: “Do you think we are stupid enough to perjure ourselves again and again with the fiction of nationhood?” (205). They are without a useful history, as they presently “stand waist deep in the toxin of your past” (205). And, significantly they describe their “inheritance as an affront” (205). Without community to guide them, and without an innocuous history that makes sense of their experience, the children lament that this woman has “no song, no literature, no poem full of vitamins, no history connected to experience that you can pass along to help us start strong” (205). The children seek connection with this woman, but they interpret her answer as the failure to recognize their needs because, as they insist, they have no bird in their hands. Without a history, and without the language to give voice to their experiences, they have no hope of freedom, no hope of understanding their place within this world.

The woman’s answer fails to make epistemic sense at first, but as the children continue their search for answers, their insistence to be told becomes a telling that is all their own. The significance of this telling warrants a lengthy excerpt from the parable:

Tell us about ship turned away from shorelines at Easter, placenta in the field.
Tell us about wagonload of slaves, how they sang so softly their breath was indistinguishable from the falling snow. How they knew from the hunch of the nearest shoulder that the next stop would be their last. How with hands prayed in their sex, they thought of heat, the sun. Lifting their faces as though it was there for the taking. They stop at the inn. The driver and his mate go in
with the lamp leaving them humming in the dark. . . . The inn door opens: a girl and a boy step away from its light. They climb into the wagon bed. The boy will have a gun in three years, but now he carries a lamp and a jug of warm cider. They pass it from mouth to mouth. The girl offers bread, pieces of meat and something more: a glance into the eyes of the one she serves. One helping for each man, two for each woman. And a look. They look back. The next stop will be their last. But not this one. This one is warmed. (206)

In their imagining, the children present a domestic scene; the shared food and shared looks provide warmth despite the chilling air. In this telling, the children obtain access to an aspect of history that is not toxic, however slight it may be. Their telling illustrates the way language allows them to recall a scene that they have never experienced. Significantly it is the captives’ soft song that signals the transition within the children’s telling. With the mention of the song, the children move from a generic image of slaves to a clear articulation of the captives’ thoughts and feelings, to the particulars of the setting, and to the mood of this imagined scene. Once they finish describing this scene, the woman responds, “Finally, I trust you now. I trust you with the bird that is not in your hands because you have truly caught it. Look. How lovely it is, this thing we have done—together” (207). The children have caught the bird, which also remains free because the play of language allows them to grab hold of a contradiction. They find in themselves what they sought from the woman, and the woman finds in them what she sought from language. Together, this outlawed woman and these orphaned children reveal a history that can never be directly experienced but is known nonetheless. It is the outlaw’s claim to living language that affords the perspective the children need to conjure the story. This
telling symbolically un-orphans these children as they have now found the history they needed, and the connection they wanted. Together, the orphans and the outlaw give significance to this bird: “it is in your hands” (“Nobel” 199).

I interpret the bird as the parable’s ghost—it is at once alive and dead, present and absent. The bird serves the function of the ghost; it facilitates the journey from ignorance to wisdom, from innocence to experience. Like the other specters in Morrison’s fiction, the bird shows the past’s relevance in both the present and the future. The outlaw woman recognizes the bird’s significance whereas the children do not. Only in pursuing the phantom does each come to understand the other. For these orphaned children, the bird symbolizes an unknown history—a history that presents the possibility for self-knowledge, one that will help them understand what it means to be responsible despite the trash heap of history that they have inherited. The woman’s answer suggests that the history they seek lies in living language, and only by claiming that language—by telling their own stories—can the orphans access a useful history. Thus, catching the bird means locating the individual experience within the patterns of history, where an imagined memory can give light to a lived experience. The parable reminds us that the personal cannot make sense without a collective history to counter the pernicious narratives that seek to regulate and legislate, to replace communal memories with the “state sanctioned versions of the past” (Mageo 4). Understanding the ghost, like catching the bird, requires cognitive effort on the part of her readers who must reconsider their own understanding of events, and to revise this understanding in light of the new knowledge provided by the ghost.
When considered in the parable, the triptych reveals the enormous task Morrison lays before her readers. The bird, alive or dead, is in our hands; we are responsible for how we chose to remember the past—the stories that we choose to pass on (in both senses of the phrase). This choice determines the possibility for kinship, despite the disruptive pattern of history. Moreover, the choice determines whether or not justice, in the more meaningful sense of the word, can ever be served. In contrasting the in-law with the outlaw, Morrison provides two avenues for dealing with this responsibility—one that is predicated in judicial exchange (i.e. an eye for an eye, or the more contemporary version, “you do the crime, you pay the time”) and another that challenges the law without ethics that constitutes dead language. Together the triptych reveals the transformative potential of narratives that seek to undo and redo dominant conceptions of history, family, and the law.

Beloved concludes by repeating the phrase, “It was not a story to pass on” (274).
CHAPTER ONE: SPECTRAL IMAGININGS OF LOVE AND HOME

In a 2004 interview on NPR’s Morning Edition, Toni Morrison speaks of haunting as a sign of the vigilant observer who is capable of recognizing “the life that exists beyond the life that is on top” (NPR). For Morrison, hauntings are not spooky but illuminating, something to “relish rather than run from” (NPR). And relish she does. Hauntings are the common thread that binds an otherwise diverse body of work. From the subtle rustle of trees to the invisible imprinting of hands in a cake, specters abound. Her ghosts register differently for characters and readers, but they all serve a pedagogical function—to enlighten rather than frighten. The hauntings that form Morrison’s novels ask readers to recognize the ghosts of the world—the physical, written, and aural signs, which culminate as the preternatural, the phantoms of another world, another time. In her early works, hauntings are characterized as past memories forcing themselves into the present and culminating in a belated recognition. In her later works, ghosts are depicted as the life-force that drives the plot’s trajectory. They facilitate the characters’ journey from ignorance to wisdom, and they operate as interpretative guides for readers who must rely on them to understand the characters’ attitudes and actions. Some ghosts linger in the margins, shining light on the narrative events, while others function as primary actors in those events. All impel a ritual of return whereby characters and readers must go back to the novel’s principal action, armed with the knowledge the ghost confers.

This chapter offers a comparative analysis of the predominant ghosts in Morrison’s novels and concludes with a close reading of Love and Home. I begin by reviewing the
significance of ghost studies in American literature in order to preview the predominant interpretations of haunting as commentary on a traumatic and nearly eradicated past. My analysis begins with this familiar interpretation of ghosts, and extends these discussions by following Maria del Pilar Blanco’s call to examine the way the ghost bears significance for the future. Blanco distinguishes ghost-watching from dominant studies of haunting, as she interprets ghosts as “not simply as useful metaphors for enduring and difficult memories of things past but commentaries” on the present as well as the future (6). Rather than merely exorcising the demons of the past, Morrison’s ghosts deal with contemporary concerns, and they symbolize a “prolonged evocation of future anxieties” (Blanco 6). My purpose is to show that while ghosts deal with a traumatic past they also shed light on how these ghosts serve as “agents of that which is yet to be fulfilled” (Blanco 16). Morrison uses ghosts and ghostly imagery to articulate the reverberating and devastating effects of slavery and the diaspora it caused, but she also uses them as a medium for communal recollection and textual representation. I review the function of ghosts in her earlier works in order to set the stage for an analysis of Morrison’s later fiction, where ghosts serve a different, yet related function. In the second half of the essay, I offer a comparative analysis of Morrison’s less-famous ghost stories, Love and Home. In these works, Morrison points to the value of naming the ghosts and putting them to rest, to finally exorcising the demons that render her characters incapable of love. In these works, Morrison stresses the importance of addressing what lies beneath the surface, but rather than name the source of trauma, Morrison proposes a celebration of the agency of its survivors—those that navigate their past trauma and survive it. In these two
novels, characters experience redemption by remembering an event that is never named in the principal narrative.

**An American Haunting**

Ghosts symbolize that which has been forgotten or cut away from contemporary thought, and so they are a forceful metaphor for scholars and artists that seek to undo and redo the imprint of a colonial past on the continuing present (Cameron 383). As Avery Gordon contends in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, “we are haunted by that which “modern history has rendered ghostly . . . the ghost is not simply dead or a missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that sense site where history and subjectivity make social life” (8). Pursuing the phantom allows the haunted “to be drawn in, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge but as transformative recognition” (Gordon 8). In *Cultural Hauntings: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature*, Kathleen Brogan identifies *Beloved* within a common phenomenon of haunting that “signal[s] an attempt to recover and make social use of a poorly, documented partially erased history (4). Brogan distinguishes contemporary hauntings from more familiar ghost stories of Henry James, Edith Wharton, and H.P. Lovecraft. These earlier ghost stories study the psychological projections of the self as it was understood by the “Freudian-era psychology,” whereas contemporary ghost stories of Louise Erdrich, Cristina Garcia, and Toni Morrison “foreground the communal nature of ghosts” (Brogan 5). These works “share a plot device of ghosts as go-between” characters, cultures, past and present; and they all share a plot trajectory of negative to positive haunting. Stephen Hart locates these phantoms within a magical realist tradition as “the projection within
an ideologically driven nation of a subaltern forced to ‘disappear’ as a result of lying (in both senses of the term) on the wrong side of the political, gender, or race line” (115).

Correspondingly, K. Zauditu-Salessie locates Morrison’s ghosts within an African spiritual tradition that was threatened by erasure and that emerges from an interplay of culture and memory.

Morrison’s most famous ghost, Beloved, certainly signals the need to confront the unspoken elements of slavery—those things that are too horrific to recall. As Arthur Redding observes in his discussion of Beloved, slavery begins with a “theft of the body” and culminates with a theft of memory as the child is separated from the mother. Fragmented memories constitute “the unspeakable at the heart of a national history, an unspeakable of which literal infanticide, literal lynching, are instantiations” (Redding). The dead visit the living, Redding concludes, because it is we who need something from them; “in this regard it is not so much the dead that haunt the living, but the living that obsessively haunt the dead” (Redding). In “The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison’s Beloved,” Linda Krumholz explains that Beloved resonates with readers because it presents slavery as a national trauma that inflicts personal pain, a pain that persists because of the imaginary belief that we are beyond the past. Krumholz reads the novel as a “ritual of healing,” and Beloved as a trickster figure, “an eruption of the past and repressed unconscious” that incites the healing ritual but that also resists giving the reader either a thematic or narrative closure. Thus, Krumholz concludes, “as the reader leaves the book, we have taken on slavery’s haunt as our own” (397). Daniel Erickson echoes the dominant discussions of Beloved, as he describes this ghost as not merely a “fancy but is inextricably tied to both the ‘unfinished businesses’ of the past and to
ideas of communication and figuration” (5). Erickson also places Morrison’s specters within a magical realist tradition, and he asserts that Morrison “uses the self-reflexive metaphor of the spectral in order to register the crucial importance of issues of representation and interpretation to the history of slavery and to the reclamation of that history” (18). The ghost of Beloved thus signals the need to give voice to the silences and erasures of historical renditions of slavery and African American experience.

Melanie R. Anderson’s Spectrality in the Novels of Toni Morrison expands discussions of Morrison’s hauntings by pursuing the phantoms that appear in the seven novels published between 1977-2008 (10). Anderson indicates that ghostly figures are more than episodic events; they inhabit a central position in Morrison’s fiction, a habitation that Anderson attributes to the tradition of magical realism. According to Anderson, Morrison uses spectrality as means to “disjoint and interrupt” master narratives (10). Morrison’s “social ghosts” (Pecola and Sula) and those “that appear to be alive but have more in common with spirits” (Pilate and Consolata) are the “perfect vehicles for emphasizing the multiplicities of experience that lie beneath the master narrative” (10). Building from Brogan, Anderson reads Morrison’s many specters as “conduits of communication” capable of crossing “generations, races, classes, genders, life and death, and past and present” (145). They are “spiritual guides” for ghosted characters and pedagogues for readers; they shine light on those “veiled spots in history and those horrifying events that defy description” (148).

The tendency to read Morrison’s ghosts as part of a magical realist tradition, however, ignores the way Morrison’s ghosts register within multiple storytelling traditions: African (Zauditu-Selassie), African American (Andrews), Greek and Roman mythology (Pallidino), as well
as magical realism (Anderson). Folklore and mythology make epistemic sense to the audience because they allow readers to locate themselves within a tradition of memory, a chain of recognition from one generation to the next. In our efforts to remember (through telling and hearing), we arrive at the story, and “we can fit ourselves into the tradition and make the community’s experience our own” (Nutting par 5). Elizabeth Lofgren Nutting compares Morrison to Walter Benjamin’s “Storyteller” and explains that the story is enacted and accessed only through memory, which creates links between the audience and the teller, between the living and the dead. Morrison’s ghosts serve the pedagogical function that Morrison attributes to mythology and legends; they hint about the future: “The legends—so many of them—are not just about the past. They also indicate how to function in contemporary times and they hint about the future” (Conversations 27-28). The ubiquitous presence of ghosts in her fiction illustrates the need to reclaim and reinvent another model of communal memory,. Her purpose is not only to foreground that which has been rendered ghostly in the national imagination and thus the national memory, but also to celebrate the modes of surviving that attest to the possibility of reconciliation. By signaling multiple story-telling traditions, Morrison reminds readers they exist in a longstanding tradition of storytelling.

Consider the Dick and Jane refrain from The Bluest Eye and the joke that opens Sula. Both point to the purposes of storytelling as a means of shaping experience, but Morrison stresses that they register in different ways. White readers of Dick and Jane may recognize themselves in these pages, but they also recognize Pecola’s attempt to alter her self-image to find herself in those pages (Brivic). Correspondingly, the punch line of the joke in Sula resonates differently with black and white readers. It was the kind of joke white “folks tell when the mill
closes down, and they’re looking for comfort somewhere. The kind colored folks tell on themselves when the rain doesn’t come, or comes for weeks, and they’re looking for a little comfort somehow” (5). While the refrain and the joke register differently, Morrison shows us that both constitute a shared history, a shared memory that can only be accessed by the stories we tell.

The value of the haunting lies in the haunted’s response, in the haunted’s willingness to pursue the phantom, to uncover and look below the life that is on top. Morrison’s ghosts signal the need to reclaim a memory that is always already threatened by erasure. Thus Morrison’s novels always tell two stories by interweaving two methods of memory, which Jeannette Mario Mageo defines as “intergroup memory” and “intragroup memory.” The former refers to those “state sanctioned versions of the past” while the latter refers to those memories that counter the singular, authoritative accounts of history (Mageo 4). Intragroup memory thus tells another story. These stories constitute legends, mythology, songs, poetry, visual arts and “other technologies of memory” that echo and overlap to convey an orderliness or system to life (Mageo 14). These habits of memory portray a sense of “history as a things falling apart,” and they ultimately “inspire regret—a sense that if we had only understood at the time” (Mageo 15). In Sula (and other works) the conventions of intergroup memory haunt the principal narrative. The chapter titles document the progression of dates (from 1920 to 1965) but the

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18 The joke tells the story of the Bottom’s origins: “A good white farmer promised freedom and a piece of bottom land to his slave if he would perform some difficult chores. . . . Freedom was easy—the farmer had no objection to that. But he didn’t want to give up any land. So he told the slave that he was very sorry that he had to give him valley land. He had hoped to give him a piece of the Bottom. The slave blinked and said he thought the valley land was bottom land. The master said, ‘Oh no! See those hills? That’s the bottom land, rich and fertile . . . when God looks down it’s the bottom. That’s why we call it so. It’s the bottom of heaven—best land there is” (5). When all was said and done, the former slave got the “hilly land,” and the blacks that would come to populate the hills took “small consolation in the fact that every day they could literally look down on white folks” (5).
narration mocks this rendering. Readers are denied the steady sequence that accompanies a chronological telling. The story opens in 1965 at the site of a used-to-be place, the Bottom. Right away the narrator uncovers what lies below the surface (“where they tore nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots”), and points to what lies below the shiny symbols of prosperity (the Medallion City Golf Course), pulling readers back to the events that circle the novel’s progression (3). Part Two echoes with all the plot components of Part One, as each section of the book looks back: we witness Eva’s motherly care for Plum as a boy and her murderous love for him as an adult; we first witness the drowning death of Chicken Little and later the drowning of the townspeople; we witness Jude leaving Nel before Ajax leaves Sula. The novel’s conclusion suggests that the recollection of memory is the only recourse from the violent repetitions of history. In the final pages, Nel experiences a flood of memory (“a bright space opened in her head and memory seeped into it”), which culminates into an epiphany: it was Sula, not Jude, that she had been missing (174). The stir of leaves, the shift of mud, and the “smell of overripe green things” signal the long-dead Sula’s presence in Nel’s present (174). In this epiphany, Morrison conflates haunting with memory and memory with a too-late recognition. It may be too late for her and Sula to restore their friendship, but it is not too late for Sula’s readers. The novel elicits its meaning by implicitly invoking that which comes before. In this ghostly encounter and in her other ghost stories, Morrison employs an intragroup model of memory in order to invite the “living possibility for re-envisioning values” (Mageo 15).

Morrison’s ghosts allow her to privilege African lore and African American experience within the supreme bearer of communal memory: its literature. Morrison recognizes literature to be a repository of communal memory—it is both an ambit of amnesia and a vessel of
memory. To understand American sensibilities, Morrison turns to our authors: “National literatures, like writers, get along the best they can, and with what they can. Yet, they do seem to end up describing and inscribing what is really on the national mind” (Playing 14). Morrison accesses this memory by looking for the tensions and the absences that make up the literature: “Through significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts, through the way writers peopled their work with the signs and bodies of this presence—one can see that a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americaness. And it shows” (6). She examines those figures on the margin of the narratives, the slaves and domestic servants whom Thulani Davis describes as “surrogates and enablers,” those “lurking, ignored yet defining all others in so much American fiction” (31). This Africanist presence is itself a ghost, a phantom conjured to alleviate “internal fears and to rationalize external exploitation” of slavery and its offspring, Jim Crow (Playing 38). Morrison refers to this presence as an Africanism, which as a trope can be expanded to mean “anything about denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify” (Playing 6). Within literary discourse, Africanism is a “disabling virus” that functions as both a “way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formations, and exorcises of power, and meditations on ethics and accountability” (Playing 7). In other words, this Africanist presence becomes the stage for exploring all the anxieties of a fledging nation seeking to achieve freedom against a legacy of slavery. The apparition—that “fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm”—haunts the nation’s earliest works, manifests in the slave narratives of the nineteenth century, and emerges through the modernism of the twentieth century. In her work, Morrison foregrounds these figures from the margin and makes them
center stage. If we are to understand the novel’s meaning, we must pursue the phantoms, look what is below the surface. Morrison uses ghostly encounters to underscore her trick of time in order to expose the arbitrary characterization of intergroup memory where history is understood as the continual march of progress.

Morrison’s ghosts incite a ritual of return for both characters and readers, and it is a ritual that culminates into a useful memory. Through ghostly encounters, readers access memories of an imagined past that point to a possible future. Like Blanco’s ghost-watching, I interpret Morrison’s ghost as reflecting contemporary matters and signaling the possibilities of future reconciliation. To understand what I mean by a *useful memory*, it is helpful to turn to John J. Su’s ruminations on what he refers to as “racial memory” (364). Building from the work by Satya Mohanty, Su urges readers to “consider the epistemic significance of essentialism,” which allows for “certain personal experiences to yield reliable knowledge about broader social patterns of exploitation” (364). This appeal to racial memory is not a claim of genetic inheritance, or an embodied memory, but rather a memory acquired in order to understand the significance of an individual experience as emblematic of larger cultural patterns. Su insists that appeals to “racial memories refer to knowledge that individuals do not possess, at least initially, but must acquire in order to counter negative social inscriptions of themselves” (373). Such memories are those that give past meaning to a present experience. They are not stable and static representations of a racial essence but instead “imaginative explorations of existing portrayals of minority populations from alternative points of view” (381). In short, racial memory is obtained through the conscious experience with larger social patterns; the “racial memory” can only be realized when historical patterns explain, illuminate, or correspond with a
contemporary experience.\(^\text{19}\) This essay builds from these discussions of memory in order to assert a theory of Morrison’s ghosts as sites of useful memory where characters (and readers) ascertain a memory that sheds light on their contemporary experience. Morrison’s literary project insists that how we remember holds as much meaning as what we remember. Her novels suggest that a healing memory can only be achieved through supernatural intervention and investigation.

As in Beloved, Morrison uses ghosts to point to memories that can only be imagined because of the systematic attempts to forget. Morrison’s ghosts remind readers that they are encountering something beyond, before, and yet born from, history. In Song of Solomon, for instance, readers witness the working of an old myth (the flying African) into an imaginative journey into a past that is begging to be claimed. Merging existing mythology with her own inventions, Morrison demonstrates the practices of communal memory. In short, she shows readers how to remember that which cannot be recalled. The novel presents a merging of memory and imagination in order to counter the archives of amnesia where dominant renderings of history are always made in error. In documenting Milkman’s quest for identity, the plot contains all the conventions of a Eurocentric novel in which a hero overcomes obstacles to achieve a redemptive awareness (Blake 80). As Harold Bloom contends in his review of the novel, “Milkman Dead . . . is a true Faulknerian quester, driven by a metaphysical need for his true name, and for the transcendental folk-values that have been alienated from

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\(^{19}\) Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos’s feminist reading of The Bluest Eye, makes a similar point, but she discusses the novels in general and is not specifically interested in Morrison’s haunting. Demetrakopoulos reads Morrison’s work as imparting a “sense of connection with a collective memory. . . . Transpersonal, at one with history, I find myself at the bank of a river drinking out of the collective stream of feminine strength and I knew this was what I was thirsting for without consciously knowing my need” (147). Demetrakopoulos’s recollections resonate with what Peter Middleton and Tim Woods characterize as the “discourse of memory” in which “memory is assumed to be the making of history” through which an individual memory can give access to social histories (5).
him” (xi). Morrison complicates this Eurocentric reading of the novel by locating Milkman’s quest as an extension of the “Gullah folk tale about African-born slaves” who rose from the fields they were working in and flew home to Africa (Blake 82). As Susan L Blake observes, “In basing Milkman’s identity quest on a folktale, Morrison calls attention to one of the central themes of her fiction, the relationship between individual identity and community, for folklore is by definition, the expression of community—of the common experiences, beliefs, and values that identify a folk as a group” (77). Morrison’s imaginative rendering of this familiar tale serves as a pedagogical guide for readers. Milkman recovers what he needs from his past, but he does not linger there: “he takes what will serve him and leaves” (Blake). “In the same way,” Blake continues, “Morrison has gone back to a folk story but taken only what suits her sense of contemporary reality” (82). In other words, Morrison decides what to leave in and what to take out in her imaginative rendering of Milkman’s nearly erased past. Just as Milkman only needs bits of Circe’s recollections to give meaning to his contemporary experiences, so too can readers gain insights into a past that is threatened by erasure.

This is an especially important gesture for those who sought to cull black heritage from the scraps of a shattered history, what Arthur Redding appropriately refers to as the “diaspora of memory.” Some authors, Morrison explains, responded by calling for “our own myths,” but “I didn’t make any, I just tried to see what was already there, and to use that as a kind of wellspring for my work” (Conversations 114). The ghosts of Song of Solomon appear as “spiritual guides” for Milkman and Pilate, but their ambiguities distort the characters’ interpretation of them (Anderson). Pilate for instance misinterprets her father’s refrain “Sing” as she believes it is a command rather than the bereft naming of his wife who died in childbirth.
just as Milkman misinterprets Circe’s willingness to haunt the master’s house. Milkman’s encounter with the ghostly Circe helps him to unravel the mysteries of his family, but he remains lost to its significance. Milkman is only able to access his ancestry by remembering Circe’s words and applying them to his experiences in Shalimar. In other words, Milkman accesses this memory through the supernatural interventions of Pilate and Circe as well as his own willingness to interpret the signs of the world. Thus, in pursuing the phantom, in looking below the surface, Milkman experiences what Susan Vega-Gonzales describes as the “healing of his amnesia and the ensuring rebirth those renewed links with his ancestor render” (“Memory”). Milkman’s surname (Dead) once symbolized the errors of official history (a drunken soldier inaccurately completed a form during Reconstruction), but by the novel’s end, Vega-Gonzales points out, Milkman’s name underscores his close relationship with the dead (“Memory”). By presenting these memories as ghosts, Morrison escapes entrapment; she resists a reading that “drops the latch” on the novel’s meaning (“Nobel” 200). Her ghosts epitomize the practice of communal excavation, of pulling up memories that register meaning on multiple frames and in multiple ways.

The ghosts of Tar Baby also register differently for characters and readers. Tar Baby is a novel about difference that was written and published during the calls for unity amongst black nationalists and feminists. The novel’s ghosts critique both threads of thought as they complicate unity by highlighting difference. In this work, as in her earlier ones, Morrison presents two stories: the folk tale of the tar baby and a love story. As Morrison indicates in an interview with Thomas LeClair, the Tar Baby tale is an example “of black folklore as history … both as prophecy and reflection of the past” (119). Evelyn Hawthorne summarizes the novel as
a “contemporary re-vision of racial history” (100). The blind horsemen who haunt the island symbolize an alternative to the bourgeois, white capitalist world represented by Valerian (who significantly is named after a sleep-inducing root). Like the story of the flying Africans in *Song of Solomon*, Morrison’s description of the blind horsemen comes from an existing mythology that has “its roots in the many real maroon societies whose existence depends on seclusion and invisibility” (103). As Susan Willis observes, “blindness is another way of giving metaphoric expression of social difference and freedom” (103). The swamp women reveal another layer to this metaphoric expression. These supernatural figures haunt the edenic island, and they point to the island’s violent past. This violence is imprinted on the island’s landscape. Like the now covered Bottom, the island is threatened by another invasion: the construction of vacation houses. Sculpting the land to fit consumer demand redirects the flow of the river, which create a disturbing swamp: the river “crested, then lost its course, and finally its head. Evicted from the place where it had lived, and forced into unknown turf, it could not from its pools or waterfalls, and *ran every which way*” (emphasis mine 1). This description recalls the diasporic results of the slave trade, and the swamp it creates a witches’ brew of black, sticky tar (Goyal). This “poor insulted, “scatterbrain,” and “brokenhearted river” forced to “sit one place like a grandmother and became a swamp the Haitans called “Sien de Vielles. And witches’ tit it was: a shriveled fogbound oval seeping with a thick black substance” (10). This substance is the stuff of the novel, the tar baby of the title, and the governing metaphor for the plot.

The Tar Baby story, its African and American telling, is an intertext that represents another kind of haunting, that of communal memory, another site that complicates Morrison’s meditations on the values of memory. The ghostly presences symbolize the role of memory
recreation and recollection: in the familiar tales of the folk tradition and in the daily encounters that render the characters symbolically blind, blind to the restraints of gender (as is the case with Son) and to the psychological effects of class privilege (as is the case with Jadine). Thus, both are removed from “their ancient properties”—the women, mothers, and wives, that haunt Jadine but that Son can never see. Only by accessing these ancient properties—only by remembering that which came before—are we able to dislodge ourselves from the tar producing effects of slavery. The swamp women and ghost riders signify the difficulty of obtaining a communal identity when the conditions of experience are so different. As Yogita Goyal explains, the novel offers no easy answers; it “delineates complicated, shifting, and deeply equivocal interactions between gender, diaspora, and nationalism” (393). Morrison’s controlling metaphors illustrate the difficulties of the novel’s primary questions, defined by Goyal: “Can racial unity offer a clear alternative to Western oppression? Can a unified and black diasporic identity prove a guide to modern black subjects, furnishing a usable past?” (383). Like the swamp, and the tar it produces, (communal) identity is a sticky matter that lends no easy refuge. In this novel, Morrison’s ghost complicates traditionalist calls for a unified culture.

In her sixth novel, Jazz, Morrison returns to another consequence of the diaspora: the Great Migration which brought over a million black people from the South to the North. The move signifies another kind of forgetting—a forgetting that is emblematized by the dominant presence of the City. The City gives refuge from the violence of post-Reconstruction, but it’s a refuge at the expense of memory. They love the city because of the “specter they left behind” (Jazz 125), but the trauma of familial loss continues to silence the characters. The City epitomizes the amnesia that defines modern life. It is a haunting manifestation of modernity,
which Adorno and Horkenheimer characterize in their “Theory of Ghosts” as the reduction of “individuals to mere succession of instantaneous presents, which leave behind no trace, or rather the trace of what they hate as something irrational, superfluous, and utterly obsolete” (178). Readers of Jazz may hear echoes of this description in the characterization of Joe Trace, whose name comes from his abandonment: his father left him without a trace. The City reinforces this abandonment because its newness reiterates the belief that “history is over, you all, and everything is ahead at last” (7). There is no space for what you will need from yesterday: “Here comes the new. Look out. There goes the sad stuff. The bad stuff. The things-nobody-could-help stuff” (7). As Andrew Scheiber explains, “The City, then, represents the chimera of life as a purely aesthetic proposition, as a stage on which the individual is encouraged to strut his or her stuff. Urban lives are above all subject to stylization, with sensory appeal emphasized over the latent processes of labor, self-mutilation, and alienation that underwrite it” (477). Following the design of the City means following the design of commerce: “The city thinks about and arranges itself for the weekend: the day before payday, the pre-Sabbath activity, the closed shop and the quiet school hall; barred bank vaults and offices locked in darkness” (50). The City “spins you,” gives the illusion of freedom and makes it seem as if “you can jump into thickets if you feel like it.” The aesthetic orientation of the City facilitates an obsession with style and appearance—a superficiality that is highlighted by Joe and Violet’s work in the beauty industry. The City promises progress, but it is a progress embedded in the superficiality of the perpetual present. The city offers semblance of community and the illusion of mobility, but both are grounded in the discourse of commerce, making it a difficult territory for engaging with the ghosts of the past. When they arrive in the
City, “they love that part of themselves so much they forget what loving other people was like”; the city does little for love, “but it does pump desire” (33-34). Ann Stave explains, “the city as Morrison articulates it is bold and flamboyant, inviting and provocative, yet it resists the attempts to put down roots, to establish a secure life; in fact, it is the antithesis of security in its rashness, its daring, its invitation to walk on the wild side” (61). The promises of the City include everything but sociopolitical development—there are no banks and no high schools—and it promises freedom: freedom of movement, but there is nowhere to go “everything you want is right where you are” including “every club, organization, group, order, union, society, brotherhood, sisterhood or association imaginable” (10).

The primary characters conduct a kind of “tongue-suicide” as they confront (or avoid) the violence of their past because they are left without the adequate language to express this trauma (200). Violet suffers from “cracks … dark fissures in the globe light of day” that transform her from a woman with a “snatch-gossip tongue” to one that “shuts up” and “speaks less and less until ‘uh’ or ‘have mercy’ carry all of her conversation” (25-26). Living together but “barely speaking to each other,” Joe suffers from Violet’s silence, and he seeks a lover “to tell . . . things he never told his wife” (36). He finds this in his lover Dorcas, who also suffers from the inability to articulate her pain. She refuses to name her murderer just as she refused to give witness to the deaths of her mother and father: “she never said. Never said anything about it. She went to two funerals and never said a word” (57). While the City provides refuge from the institutionalized racism, and the violence of the Klan, it cannot provide solace from the haunts of history precisely because that history cannot be articulated. There are no words for the
trauma experienced, and they remain haunted because they cannot give voice to their pain.\(^{20}\) Morrison points to the musical genre of jazz as means for expressing that which cannot be named. In this work the traumatic becomes expressed through a life force that is not technically a ghost (as in *Beloved* or *Tar Baby*) but that is alive—beating with the rhythms of another story, another mode of expression. Jazz itself becomes the means for naming trauma, for storytelling. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. observes in his review of the novel, “Morrison’s new novel serves to redefine the very possibilities of narrative point of view. Like Duke Ellington, Morrison has found a way paradoxically, to create an ensemble of improvised sound out of composed music” (52).

Ghosts themselves can be quite boring, as Morrison notes in an interview with Elissa Schappell: “they have nothing on their mind but themselves and aren’t interested in themselves” (77). This description resonates with readers of *A Mercy* in which Rebekka’s mystic visitors that were “like all ghostly presences, they were only interested in themselves” (106). Though self-interested, their presence proves useful to Rebekka who lies dying from fever: “Better false comfort than none, thought Rebekka, and listened carefully to her shipmates” (107). In life, these castaway women provided comfort; and in death, they once again accompany Rebekka’s crossing from life into death. My point is that these ghostly presences serve Rebekka’s interests even as they are only interested in themselves. In short, the significance of a haunting depends upon the one experiencing the ghost: the haunted rather than the phantom.

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\(^{20}\) For more on the relationship between silence and trauma in Morrison’s fiction, see Grewal’s *Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle: The Novels of Toni Morrison*; Carolyn Denard’s “Some to Hold, Some to Tell: Secrets and the Tropes of Silence in Love”; Ryan McDermott’s “Silence, Visuality, and the Staying Image: the ‘Unspeakable Scene’ of *Beloved*”; and Molly Abel Travis’s “Speaking from the Silence of the Slave Narrative: *Beloved* and African American Women’s History.”
Morrison’s apparitions are often associated with a scent, which underscores their purpose as a memory inducer for those they haunt. In a Proustian fashion, Morrison identifies smell as the primary memory trigger, and it is a physiological action that itself relies on memory to function. As Helen Field notes, “Memory and smell are intertwined; it’s through memory that we learn to remember smells, and disorders that take away memory also take away the ability to distinguish scents” (par 1). Morrison’s ghosts are marked by a smell, which then triggers a memory in characters whose lives are marked by memory loss. Sula’s ghost registers as overripe green things, an earthy smell that suggests missed opportunities—a fruit not picked. In *Song of Solomon*, Pilate’s father (whose life history is unknown to his children) is associated with a “ginger, a spicy sugared ginger smell,” that “enveloped them” (335). The ginger smell “speaks of home,” Dorothy Lee notes, and Pilate’s release of her father’s bones means that the “son of Solomon can now rest at this spot where his father leaped toward Africa” (21).

Correspondingly, Milkman’s ghostly encounter with Circe is also characterized by smells: “a hairy animal smell, ripe, rife suffocating,” and then “a sweet spicy perfume. Like ginger root—pleasant, clean, seductive” (239). The suffocating scent highlights the destructive elements of racism (this is the house of his grandfather’s murderers), but the pleasant smell captivates Milkman and he follows the smell which leads him to Circe. Milkman’s journey culminates in this supernatural encounter as she sends him to his ancestral home where he undergoes his final transformation. In *Tar Baby*, Thérèse recognizes Son (who is associated with the ghost riders) because of his smell, a scent that is also described as tar. Correspondingly, the arrival of Beloved is marked by the scent of rotting roses, and later she smells of milk—an association that highlights the violence of slavery that renders daughters motherless and mothers childless.
In *Love*, Cosey’s and L’s haunting are characterized by their scent: Cosey’s aftershave and L’s cinnamon bread—both of which underscore their role in the community (Cosey is a wealthy “good man” while L is a cook in his kitchen). Morrison uses smells to highlight the significance of the ghost’s haunting—some are good, others are not. Those scents associated with the home (ginger and cinnamon) offer the possibility of reconciliation, but the fabricated scent of aftershave and the rotting smell of animal flesh register as something harmful, to be avoided.

Thus far, I have attempted to provide a general overview of how Morrison’s uses ghosts to combat the rituals of forgetting that compose intergroup memory by employing the elements of intragroup memory. In the remainder of this essay I compare two of Morrison’s under-examined ghost stories: *Love* and *Home*. I compare these novels because they have similar structures that disarm the readers with unconventional narrative techniques. Both novels weave an italicized first person narration with the semi-omniscient articulations of the characters’ histories. Both novels are set in mid-century America, and both uncover a nearly forgotten moment in American history. *Love* documents the days of segregation, when Morrison explains, “there were these fabulous black schools, high schools, insurance companies, resorts. . . . They had worked very hard to have their resorts outside Detroit and New Jersey where they were all black and very upscale. Those stores are gone; those hotels are gone’’ (Langer 209). The novel offers another side of the Civil Rights Movement by examining what was lost in the project of desegregation. In highlighting this difference, *Love* shares some of the same principles of *Tar Baby* in that it challenges monolithic renderings of African American experience. In effect, the novel attempts to deepen our understanding of this important historical moment. Similarly, *Home* addresses the way in which dominant depictions
of history limit our understanding of the time period. Several reviewers commented on the
shortness of Home, but I contend that it is lean for a reason. The story is not so much what is
on the page as it is about what’s behind the page. In an interview with Emma Brockes, Toni
Morrison explains, “I was trying to take the scab off the 50s, the general idea of it as very
comfortable, happy, nostalgic. Mad Men. Oh, please. There was a horrible war you didn’t call a
war where 58,000 people died. There was McCarthy.” In Home, Morrison excavates the ruins
of a history, long overshadowed by images on a screen. Morrison’s depiction of 1950s America
exposes the violence beneath the veneer. Against the backdrop of war of “The Forgotten War,”
a war that Grace Cho characterizes as “black hole in collective memory,” we witness the
customary violence of the everyday (12). By comparing Love and Home, I hope to show the way
Morrison forces readers to mimic the ghosts’ ritual of return whereby we must be attentive to
the story that lies beneath the narrative.

Ethereal Love

Love contains all the conventions of gothic fiction: family secrets, compromised
inheritance, and ghostly interventions set the plot in motion. The primary conflict concerns a
question of inheritance: who is the true heiress to Bill Cosey’s estate, his wife Heed or his
granddaughter Christine? Once childhood friends, Heed and Christine are now in their sixties,
bound together by love shrouded in hate. Both imagine themselves to be the “sweet Cosey
child” from Cosey’s will, and both have formulated plots to secure their right to the treasure:
Christine hires a lawyer, and Heed hires Junior, a child runaway, just released from a juvenile
correctional facility (34). Love, like its predecessors, is a novel that tells two stories, one familiar

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21 See, for example: Heller McPain; Ron Charles; and Sarah Churchwell.
22 This definition of the gothic is informed by Brogan’s Cultural Hauntings.
(a man claiming a future from a tattered past) and one lesser known (two used-to-be friends claiming a past from a tattered future). In order to show us love supreme, Morrison must first distinguish it from all the patriarchal signifiers of love. Cosey’s ghost emblematizes love as ownership; it is a ghosted love that is always already denied life. He celebrates life at the expense of love. Cosey’s haunting secures his place as the original king of One Monarch street and symbolizes the violence of commoditizing love and sexuality, but by the novel’s conclusion, readers witness the other side of this tale: the deferred dreams of two little girls, whose friendship shined with the sincerity of a love marked by a “mix of surrender and mutiny they can never live without” (199).

Cosey was once the proprietor of Cosey’s Hotel and Resort, a swinging hotel and haven, the “best and best-known vacation spot for colored folk on the East Coast” (6). Although Cosey has been dead for decades and most of his swinging resort sits twenty feet below the sea, the narrative projection follows his life, and the chapter titles suggest admiration for this original king of One Monarch street. As Anissa Janine Wardi observes, each chapter title contains masculine descriptors of a “good man:” Friend, Stranger, Benefactor, Husband, Father. The opening and closing chapter, respectively titled Portrait and Phantom, illustrate that a good man is a kind fiction, a framed image that is unfinished and ephemeral. The remaining seven names “suggest Cosey’s continuation of the identifying roles of father, husband, and so on” (Wardi 205). The final chapter forces a re-reading of Cosey’s life, and forces the readers to return to the beginning, to reevaluate not only Cosey but the values we attribute to “good men.” Jean Wyatt likens this process of memory to Freud’s concept of “Nachträglichkeit

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23 The phrase “deferred dreams” is inspired by Langston Hughes’s poem “A Dream Deferred.”
(variously translated as deferred action, après-coup, and afterwardness)” (194). In Freud’s rendering, a traumatic experience may be forgotten, or misunderstood, because the experiencer lacks the knowledge needed to appropriately interpret the experience; in other words, the subject arrives to it “either too early or too late” (Wyatt 194). Heed and Christine lack the experience to interpret the violation they endure (Heed’s sexual violation, and Christine witnessing), and so they act from a place of shame that ultimately poisons the well of their friendship. Readers reach the novel’s conclusion and experience the recognition that comes with understanding. The novel’s last chapter “performs this overthrow of prior significations and brings the reader to see that, as in this instance, her misinterpretation of the text’s significance was at least in part the result of her own prior investment in a patriarchal signifying system” (Wyatt 210). In life and in death Cosey symbolizes this patriarchal signifying system that culminates in his commodification of love.

Morrison frames her tale with the first-person musings of L—a former cook in Cosey’s Resort—who is both a character and narrator of this story. L later works for Maceo’s Café Ria, but it really should be named for L because it was her side dishes that brought the customer’s back. They outdid the main course just as L’s hum complements the novel’s main course, Bill Cosey. L’s narrative supplements this dish and uncovers the novel’s primary secret. Her italicized passages open the novel, and she describes her telling as a hum—the kind of background music that plays during a movie’s love scene and criminal act. L straddles life and death, silence and sound. She lives through narrative events but also passes before the novel’s conclusion. At once a living character in the novel and its ghosted narrator, L is symbolically dead long before her death: “Even children, who have a world of time to waste, treat me like
I’m dead and don’t ask about me anymore” (65). The heterodiegetic narration of L necessitates another reading of the novel’s meaning. She is at once all seeing but also discreet, picking and choosing the bits to tell. She is witnessing a trial, but can only watch, not participate, save for her humming. L’s hum is “mostly below range, private; suitable for an old woman embarrassed by the world; her way of objecting to how the century is turning out” (4). L judges without punishment. She only intervenes at the site of real danger, when Cosey’s original will threatens to evict all the women from his house and when Heed and Christine threaten to go into death without reconciling their friendship. Her actions get to the heart of the novel’s ambiguities. She threatens to tell the characters’ secrets but has the most to hide.

Working as a cook for Cosey’s Hotel and Resort, L’s labor symbolically underscores her role as a physical and spiritual caregiver but it also highlights her status as the primary catalyst of change. She is a confidant to Mr. Cosey (“Mr. Cosey never lied to me”), and she offers sanctuary from the conflict of Cosey’s house (Christine hides under L’s bed for two days; Heed “could never have navigated those treacherous waters if L hadn’t been the current”) (67, 76). L nourishes the family and is a confidant to Cosey, but she is also his murderer. She feeds him the herb that stops his heart. Then, before the “undertaker knocked on the door,” she tore up his “malicious will” that gave everything to his mistress Celestial, “the real sport of [his] fishing boat” and the final love of his life. On the back of one of her menus, she scratched out a new command, one that willed everything to “sweet Cosey child” (201). The ambiguity gave the women a reason to stay together, fighting over who can claim themselves the true Cosey child: his child-bride Heed or his granddaughter Christine. L’s is the final word on Cosey. She masters the telling, but it resists a single interpretation; her main purpose is to tie the women together.
until they “maybe figure out how precious the tongue is” (201). The tongue functions as the
teller of secrets and the source of life—a food that both nourishes and destroys.

L’s musings are at once a meditation on the value of silence and a manifesto on the
importance of speaking, of naming not only the traumas of the past but of celebrating the
brazen and brave navigators of this past. As Carolyn Denard observes, Morrison “employs
silence as a trope in the culture and explores what it means in the black community not to
speak—either because one cannot and will not, or because one does not think that one should”
(83). Through the coded language spoken by Heed and Christine (igaday), the theme of keeping
secrets that runs throughout the novel, and L’s humming lament for those women that fail to
be discreet, Morrison comments on the significance of silence as “not just evidence of erasure
and oppression but as willful resistance and cultural decorum—as agency rather than
disempowerment” (Denard 79). The novel’s emphasis on masculine descriptors “affirm literary
traditions” while L’s “omissions protect Bill from blame, making the reader focus on the man
and expecting the narration to be about him” (Wyatt 206). Through L, Morrison “constructs a
narrative that jives with patriarchal, capitalist values whereby women (and girls) are reduced to
commodities,” Wyatt explains (206 Morrison’s method of narration “celebrates revision as a
way to involve the reader in the making of a story” (Palladino 336).

L’s hum however
symbolizes another story; one that contrasts with the one story of Cosey. Her hum highlights
the significance of language and silence. It is like the code language of Heed and Christine, a

24 Mariangela Palladino interprets L’s grisly love as emblematic of Morrison’s central project, which Palladino refers
to as an “ethics of narrative” (336). Building from Adam Newton’s Narrative Ethics, Palladino explains that the
“ethical turn of this mode of narration is considerable: not only is the reader exposed to events and left to
interpret them, but s/he is also asked to reassess previous information. . . . Morrison’s writing denies the reader
any ethical guidance; hence the reader is left to interpret the event, to name what is only shown, to actively judge
the facts and the characters by him/herself” (336).
language that tells another story. Although L chooses to remain silent on some things, she does speak on others; and it is this difference that provides the axis for the novel’s meaning.

Cosey’s “wide wallet” buys the affection of many, including his second wife Heed who (we later learn) was purchased from her parents at the age of eleven (to seal the deal he gives her father 200 dollars and her mother a handbag). Cosey’s chief motivation is avenging the sins of his father, Daniel Robert Cosey: “Whites called him Danny Boy. But to Negroes his initials, DRC, gave rise to the name he was known by: Dark” (68). Dark worked as a police informant, willing to expose any infraction—legal or not, anything from selling liquor, buying property, agitating for the vote, or collecting money for a school. He was well paid, “tipped off and favored for fifty years,” and his death landed Cosey a large inheritance of Dark’s “blood-soaked” money (69). Cosey buys a failing resort from a man hit hard by the depression, and he builds a hotel made for all the things his father despised: “good times, good food, good music, dancing till the sun came” (68). The resort offered a place to play for the wealthy, and it provided work alternative for (some) members of the Up Beach community who were otherwise fated to work in the cannery. The cannery deformed your hands, broke your back, and workers carried its smell everywhere. Cosey’s Resort required stockings and nice dresses; it was special. In marrying Heed, Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber explains, Cosey asserts his dominance that serves to “highlight the status of the Up Beach community as a despised, inferior group that finds is status elevated by these men of social standing. As a consequence, May [Christine’s mother] and Heed cling to their new status because it would be social death to lose the Cosey name and position” (98). In challenging his father’s model of financial success in which Dark was the “eyes and ears of white power,” Cosey ultimately replicates the same power structure in his
home and his hotel (Denard 136). As Mary Paninicia Carden observes, “Cosey’s hotel/household is a perfect model of patriarchal hierarchy, with the father /owner at its undisputed top and worshipful dependents arrayed below, in order of their importance to him” (135).

Readers witness violence masked as love in Bill Cosey’s treatment of Heed (he waits to consummate the marriage until she begins menstruating) and in the sexual assault of Junior by a Guidance Counselor (“he was there for her”) (117). While Heed has no recourse to protect her from this violation (her parents sold her), Junior subverts the counselor’s advances by pushing him over a rail, where “he fell one story. Only one” (117). This single story, like the counselor’s story and the one corroborated by the administrator, is enough to secure more jail time for Junior, and it is the one story running through the novel: the perception of women as inconsequential objects, as mere playthings for men. In marrying Heed, Cosey found “a girl he could educate to his tastes” who would serve him by learning “to manicure, pedicure, keep all his nails in perfect shape. And how to shave him too” (124). Heed is at once a wife, servant, and child to her husband, whom she calls Papa, who keeps her in line with a spanking, that is “methodically, reluctantly, the way you would any other brat” (126). Heed serves a practical purpose, but she also helps avenge a past wrong he committed while working with his father as an informant. As L explains, “I remember him telling me a tale about some child running after a posse and how white folks laughed. . . . He repeated it every time he needed an example of heartless whites, so I supposed the point was he laughed too and apologized for it by marrying Heed” (139). Cosey’s paternalist motivation to avenge a former sin confers Heed into a “merger of servant, sexual object, and child,” which Carden explains, “is a logical outcome of a
paternalistic privilege that arrogates all to itself” (140). Cosey’s ghost exerts the same influence over Junior, who proves to be a secondary rendition of Heed.

Junior reminds L of Celestial and Susan Vegás-Gonzales agrees; Mariangela Pallidino however interprets Junior as a reincarnation of L herself, which she reads as another version of love. Junior also shares many parallels with Heed which are worth noting here. Junior proves to be a secondary rendition of Heed. Heed came from a place of absence: this Up Beach girl had no bathing suit, no nightgown, no table manners; she slept on the floor and used newsprint as toilet paper (75). Heed’s poverty highlights a lack of decorum, of appropriateness such as table manners and toilet paper, but Junior’s hometown the Settlement offers a distressing double of Up Beach. Each day is marked by a scratched out attempt at survival: “they built their own houses from other people’s scraps . . . used stream and rain water, drank cow’s milk . . . ate game eggs, domestic plants . . . if there were no earnings they stole” (54). Heed and Junior symbolize the vulnerability of poor working class women—a vulnerability that culminates with rape, which recalls Florens’s mother’s observation in A Mercy who states, “a woman is an open wound in this place” (191). Both were driven by their homes at age eleven, Heed by marriage and Junior (significantly) by the threat of rape. This threat of being handed over to the “old man in the valley who liked to walk around with his private parts singing hymns of praise” (57) is enough for Junior to give chase. The uncles follow, eventually running her down with their car. The injury merges Junior’s toes together—an image that invokes the arthritic, and fused fingers of Heed—a fate that affects many cannery workers, though Heed never works there. Junior split town when she healed, and in two years, she like Heed, “was fed, bathed, clothed, educable, and thriving. Behind bars” (59). For Heed, marriage meant sleeping in a bed, but it
resulted in another kind of poverty. Her wealth alienates her from her family (they were always asking for money), and her marriage alienates her from her best friend (who like others believes she “is quick in the skirt-raising department” (139). For Junior, the correctional ensured housing and food but it cannot protect her from sexual assault. Neither are protected from a violence masked as love.

Even in death, Cosey enchants. He is a stranger to Junior, but when she gazed on his portrait “they recognized each other” immediately (118). She knew him as her Good Man, and she did not mind that sat at the foot of the bed watching her sleep; she liked it when he whispered into her ear, praising and encouraging her. She enjoyed the tap of his foot and the drum of his fingers on the windowsill. It pleased him to see her taking care of his wife just as it pleased him to watch her and Romen wrestling naked in the back seat. His presence was marked by the smell of aftershave, and he was “more understanding than any G.I. Joe” (116). Junior’s allusion to the doll is significant. When Junior runs away from home at eleven, she wandered the streets unnoticed for wee ks— that is until she stole a G.I. Joe from an “Everything for a Dollar” store. In stealing the doll, Junior challenges the primary claim of the store’s title and its capitalist motivation: everything for a dollar. Junior’s attachment to the doll underscores her total isolation, and it is her only means for exerting her power: she refuses to return the toy, she bites the woman who attempts to take it, and she eventually lands in Correctional. The G.I. Joe doll fills the absent role of father in Junior’s life but significantly this symbolic father is embodied by a figure of war. This Good Man however would visit her dreams

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25 Her attachment to the doll evokes Claudia’s disgust for her Christmas dolls in The Bluest Eye. In Morrison’s earlier work, the doll emblematizes standards of beauty within a white supremacist society. While the dolls of The Bluest Eye emblematize white standards of beauty that justify white supremacist ideology, Junior’s G.I. Joe doll epitomizes the violence associated with Cosey’s “love.”
and lift “her up to his shoulders” so that she could ride “through an orchard of green Granny apples” (118). He shapes her thoughts and actions, as she performs for him, fondling the symbols of his success, “enjoying herself in front of him” (119). She stroked his ties; smelled his shoes; rubbed her cheek on his seersucker suit. The overt sexuality of this scene presents a humorous rendition of the commodity fetish. Junior recognizes that the only avenue to Cosey’s wealth is through an emulation of his value system. She performs for him, and she internalizes his “imperial gaze, which bell hooks defines as “the look that seeks to dominate, subjugate, and colonize” (Black Looks 7). The violent sex she enjoys with Romen echoes with the violence of Cosey’s assault of Heed. As Denard observes, “as their sexual relationship becomes increasingly violent, Junior’s position as the child/lover of an absent-yet-all pervasive ‘Good Man,’ seeking yet never certain of his approval, demonstrates that no one who must depend on patriarchal favor to secure her place can be truly safe or really at home” (142). Furthermore, Junior’s alliance to Cosey causes her to literally and figuratively pull the rug out from Heed—first by naming herself as the benefactor of their forged will and later by causing Heed to fall one story—an action that recalls her attack on the counselor and that finds her imprisoned again, but this time in L’s room.

Junior’s ultimate fate is unknown, but once again it will be decided by a ghost—the ghost of Heed. After her fall from hatred into grace, a fall that takes her from life into death, Heed and Christine discuss what is to be done with Junior. “Should we let her go, little

26 Tessa Roynon reads this violence as central to Morrison’s concern about “the role of the classics in the construction of America’s prevailing myths of origin and creation” (34). According to Roynon, Cosey symbolizes the American dream, and the mythology that surrounds his success (it was a fairytale) as emblematic of America itself, and she interprets the novel as engaging with classical literature of ancient Greece and Rome but also the classics of the American mythology regarding the discovery and colonization as a sexual violation. Shadows of these violations appear in Junior and Romen’s rough sexual romps, and in Christine’s sexual relationships.
rudderless, homeless thing?” Christine asks. “We could let her stay, under certain circumstances,” Heed replies. The implication is that both women now recognize Junior’s vulnerability—a recognition that highlights Christine’s original failure to recognize Heed’s vulnerability. L’s presence in the final pages incites ritual of return through which Heed and Christine are able to reclaim the brazen, outlaw acts from the analogues of memory. In these scenes, the characters are finally able to recall the sexual violation that blanketed their childhood with the shame that ultimately severed their relationship. Heed and Christine’s shout out “Hey Celestial” illustrates the value of remembering and naming those that assert their agency in whatever means available to them. The smell of cinnamon bread signals L’s spirit in the novel’s concluding scene between Christine and Heed, and it is in this scene that these two spiteful women are able to reclaim their original love. The women remember the source of their original shame, the sexual violation that blanketed their childhood and severed their relationship, but (significantly) they never give voice to this memory, “even in igaday they had never been able to share a certain twin shame. Each one thought the rot was hers alone (190). Sitting with their backs to the wall, bodies broken and hearts pounding, the women share a memory that neither names but that still leads them to a place of reconciliation. L provides the vehicle for this reclamation, as the two women finally learn the value of the tongue as evidenced by their calling out “Hey Celestial.” By naming Celestial, by calling attention to their boldness the women conjure the repressed memory that had poisoned the well of their friendship. Through this ritual of return—the naming of Celestial, not the naming of the sexual trauma—Heed and Christine are finally able to exorcise Cosey’s ghost and recognize him as merely a phantom—an epiphany that comes too late for the women but not
for the reader as we witness a primordial love. That love exists outside of the laws of the patriarchal and capitalistic motivations.

Celestial’s presence at the novel’s conclusion offers yet another narrative thread to the novel. Although she is subject to patriarchal claims of her sexuality as ownership (she is a prostitute), Celestial manages to escape the deadly punishment of the police-heads, those protectors of morality for whom “there was no escape: fast as lightening, nighttime or day, Police-heads could blast out of the waves to punish wayward women or swallow the misbehaving young” (7). Cosey’s sexual encounters with other women had always led to their demise, including the woman who had a stroke at the cannery. Celestial however stood “right under their wide-rimmed hats, their dripping beards, and scared them off with a word—or was it a note?” (201). This reader knows it is both. Celestial’s word is captured in her final, low-down longing song that she sings for Cosey at the novel’s end; it was “one of those down-home, raunchy songs that used to corrupt everybody on the dance floor. . . . Once in awhile her voice is so full of longing for him, I can’t help it. I want something back. Something just for me. So I join in. And hum” (201). L’s background music takes a back seat to Celestial’s signing because hers was a tale that could heal a wound so deep, unlike L’s hum which is really just the stuff to scare wayward women and children. The healing nature of Celestial’s song is highlighted by the disappearance of her scar—the one thing that marred an otherwise stunningly beautiful face. Unlike L’s story, which seeks to scare, Celestial’s song heals even those wounds where “the cut is deep no woe-is-me tale is enough” (5). L’s haunting hum offers a bereft musing on the future—an account of how to use the tongue, not to name trauma but to celebrate the bold and brazen survivors of this past history. Celestial’s blues song, like jazz in Jazz, becomes the
means through which to articulate an experience that is otherwise rendered silent. L interprets her telling as “just another story made up to scare wicked females and correct unruly children” (10). She knows she needs more: “Something better. Like a story that shows how brazen women can take a good man down. I can hum to that” (10). The novel gives this story of brazen women taking a good man down, but seeing how they take him down requires a ritual of return whereby readers must recreate the pieces of plot that L slowly unveils.

The final chapter not only identifies the original trauma that is never named by either character, but it brings up two memories for Christine and Heed respectively. These memories warrant consideration here because they provide the governing metaphors for *Home*, which I will turn to in the remainder of the essay. Under L’s spell, Christine recalls a familiar scene from the novel (her sixteenth birthday party), but here we are given another layer of memory: Heed dancing with a man in the green zoot suit. The scene is a scandalous affront to Cosey’s authority. The political (and economic) associations of the zoot suit make them forbidden in Cosey’s Resort, and Heed’s sexuality (she wears a red slip-dress whose shoulder strap falls) offers a counter story to the novel’s depictions of rape. The scene underscores Heed’s defiance, a willingness to act against her husband to assert her own desire. We witness this agency again in Heed’s affair with Knox whose broken promises shattered Heed’s heart, but it was rendered whole again when she found out that she was pregnant. After eleven months of gaining weight and swelling breasts, but with no new-born baby to account for these changes, Heed had to admit that her “oven’s cold” (174). These images (a zoot suit, and a cold womb) provide the thematic frame for Morrison’s later work *Home*. The ghosts of this novel include a man in a zoot suit and the smiling face of an unborn baby. Both present a material memory, flashing up
in a moment of danger, which allows them to recognize the significance of their experience within a larger chain of events: the violence of war, of men pitted against each other.

**The Hauntings of Home**

Much like *Love, Home* is a novel about being alert to what’s beneath the surface. In short, it is a novel about ghosts. This lean novel is divided into seventeen chapters, told from an omniscient narrator that follows the lives of Frank Money and his sister, Cee. Like L’s passages in *Love*, Frank’s periodic ruminations interrupt the novel’s trajectory as he clarifies assumptions and revises the narrator’s explanations of events. Frank’s words open the novel as he talks back to the unknown narrator: “Since you’re set on telling my story whatever you think and whatever you write down, know this: I really forgot about the burial I only remembered the horses” (5). The novel opens with Frank’s admission of a partial memory, the forgotten burial and the horses, remembered because of how they looked: “They were so beautiful. So brutal. And they stood like men” (5). This symbol of beauty hides the terror from the burial, which (we later learn) was of a man killed in a battle royal of father pitted against son. Frank and Cee witness this burial because they ignored all the “scary warning signs” and climbed through a “crawl space that some animal had dug” where they met “harm juice and clouds of gnats,” before witnessing a murdered man buried by his murderers (3). Like Heed and Christine, Frank and Cee are too young to understand the significance of the event, but the memory haunts Frank. He insists that the horses marked him, not the burial, but the novel’s ghosts remind him of the memory that is too terrifying to name. Through Frank’s ritual of return, by repeatedly correcting the narrative, he is able to access the recollection needed to give meaning to this death and the countless others he witnesses in his life. Placing Frank’s recollections and
corrections alongside the dominant narrative vision allows Morrison to expand the meaning of the novel’s ghosts.

The ghosts of *Home* are that of the murdered man ("a small man in a funny suit swinging a watch chain"), and of a child with one of those “toothless smiles that babies have” (144, 132). Unlike Morrison’s previous ghosts, these ghosts do not intervene in the narration; they offer no smell to incite memory. They merely linger along the sidelines, watching the characters. The zoot suited man primary haunts Frank, the novel’s prime protagonist, whereas the child-ghost haunts Frank’s sister Cee. By the novel’s end, however, both Cee and Frank appropriate the haunting of the other as they are able to see (and name) what they could not identify before. The smiling baby face that haunts Cee, thus symbolizes, not only the Cee’s maybe baby ("she picked me to be born to") but she also symbolizes Frank’s largest war crime ("I shot the girl"). By equating these traumas, Morrison links the violence at home with the wars abroad. This ghost haunts Cee because it symbolizes what could have been, but for Frank the ghost symbolizes what has been. Together the ghost symbolizes the dual reflection of a haunting as “both history and prophecy” (Morrison qtd in LeClair 122).

Morrison presents two methods of seeing in this novel: seeing what is there and seeing what is underneath. Her frequent allusions to popular culture underscore these two methods of seeing the world. Morrison’s *Home* straddles history as she appropriates these battles from the past and offers them up as an image of the future. Like *Love*, *Home* uses two narrators to tell two stories: one is the internal workings of a war veteran; the other is an outward vision compiled from the veteran’s actions. Frank acts and the narrator reacts. The novel’s action begins in a psychiatric ward where Frank lies strapped down and drugged up. Confined to the
“nuthouse” for an infraction he can’t remember, Frank contrives a plan to escape. His sister needs rescuing: ‘Come fast,” the letter had read. “She be dead if you tarry” (8). To facilitate his escape, he fakes a drug induced “semi-coma, like playing dead facedown in a muddy battlefield” (8). Barefoot and shirtless, he sneaks down the hall, out the fire escape, jumping from the icy railing to the warmer snow below. He makes his way to AME Zion Church where the Reverend Locke gives Frank some clothes, some money (looked like a poker pot), and The Negro Traveler’s Green Book, which outlined safe spaces to travel through the segregated south and the not-so segregated north. “Listen here,” Locke commands Frank, “you from Georgia and you been in a desegregated army and maybe you think up North is way different from down South. Don’t believe it and don’t count on it. Custom is just as real as law and can be just as dangerous” (19). So begins Frank’s journey home to his sister Cee and to his one-time hometown of Lotus, Georgia—”the worst place in the world, worse than any battlefield” (82). Lotus, Georgia recalls the lotus flower, which grows from muddy waters and symbolizes the rebirth, a site of enlightenment and transformation. Both Frank and Cee run from Lotus (Frank joins the Army; Cee runs off with a man), and the return home haunted by what they found outside of this small town. Brother and sister return home from their respective battles, and both undergo a ritual of return, that culminates with the two of them “looking directly at the slaughter that went on in the world” (143).

Morrison contrasts this slaughter with the slick images of television and movie screens, which Morrison associates with the practices of forgetting. Frank’s memories are described as “pictures” that only “fade” and “move behind a screen in his mind” when he meets his Lily: “with her, the nightmares folded away and he could sleep” (21). Frank’s mental breakdowns
are characterized as a loss of color on a film screen. The first time this happened, he watched a woman’s “flowered skirt,” which was a “world’s worth of color,” blackened, and her “red blouse draining of color until it was milk white” (23). Then everything, the entire landscape was drained of color; all “color disappeared and the world became a black-and-white movie screen” (23). Frank’s color-blind state invokes the color line that W.E.B. Du Bois stated would be the problem of the twentieth century, and the “post-racial” claims of a color-blind society that characterizes the twenty-first century (Collins). Once again, Morrison shows a vision of our dreams. Like the horrible image of a little black girl with blue eyes in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison shows us the disturbing vision of a world without color. Is this how wolves see the world, Frank aptly wonders. When the bits of color slowly return, he was “pleased to know he wasn’t going color-blind and the horrible pictures might fade” (23). The movie screen serves as a site of communal memory, but Frank’s mental break illustrates that is also a site of forgetting.

In interpreting his memories through the image of film, Frank illustrates the pervasive elements of visual culture, a culture that is characterized by the novel’s predominant white family: the doctor and his wife for whom Cee works. The doctor’s wife, Mrs. Scott, looks “every bit the queen of something who belonged to the movies” (60). Her long white gown flows to the floor, and she is as superficial as she looks. She spends most of her time satiating a laudanum habit, painting flowers, and watching television: “*Milton Berle and The Honeymooners* were her favorites. She had flirted with *I Love Lucy*, but hated Ricky Ricardo too much to watch it” (65). Mrs. Scott’s interest in sitcoms highlights visual culture as a means of cultural representation and artistic expression. The plotline of the show she refuses to watch exemplifies the cultural anxieties of mid-century America: Lucy resists the limitations of
Marriage (Ricky repeatedly thwarts her escapades); moreover his Cuban heritage reflects the changing relationship with Cuba, from cozy to hostile. Mrs. Scott’s distaste for Ricky Ricardo illustrates the ways in which individual prejudices shape the consumption of this culture.

Morrison has described her writing as “literary archeology,” as she reconstructs world according the present world: “On the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply” (92). The artifacts of Home include the representations of dominant culture that is created and maintained through television and film. Morrison contrasts these cultural artifacts with the artifacts of a subversive culture: experimental art of the theater house and the zoot suit.

Morrison contrasts these black and white images with the theater house where Lily had worked before the director was arrested and the theater was shut down because of a controversial play, “The Morrison Case” by Alfred Maltz. Morrison’s reference to Maltz recalls the national efforts to curtail artistic expression in its efforts to stop the spread of communism. The play was never staged in the U.S. as Maltz was imprisoned and blacklisted because he refused to testify before McCarthy’s House of Un-American Activities Committee. Popularly known as one of the Hollywood Ten, Maltz’ play recounted the trials and protested the efforts to curtail democratic and artistic expression. The play’s protagonist, Pete Morrison, fails to receive a fair trial and is never able to face his accusers (Wertheim). Morrison’s nod to Maltz shines light on under-told and never-heard stories, silenced in the interests of American values. Unlike Pete Morrison, Frank’s story is told precisely because he is able to talk back to his accusers (all of them, the narrator, the reader and himself). These frequent allusions highlight
the different worlds that Morrison’s novel straddles: the façade on the screen and the violence in the streets. Morrison’s brief allusion to this censorship documents the need to see beyond the façade, to uncover and discover that which has been erased from cultural memory. The ghost that haunts Frank signals the need to see beyond the façade, beyond the beautiful image of horses “standing like men” to the horrific image of the murdered man’s leg shaking as if it could jump from the grave.

The principal narrator puts the plot in motion while Frank’s real story lies in what is underneath. As a soldier in the Korean War, Frank not only saw his homeboys die in battle, but he saw himself take pleasure in the killing. After the deaths of his friends, the narrator tells us, “there was not enough dead gooks or Chinks in the world to satisfy him. The copper smell of blood no longer sickened him; it gave him appetite” (98). Frank identifies a different source for his trauma, but first he must uncover and expose it—an action that can only occur through a ritual of return for Frank and readers. Frank’s recollections interrupt the narrator as he periodically (and occasional belligerently) bates the narrator. “Write about that . . . describe the heat if you know how,” he commands. “You are dead wrong,” he warns, “you don’t know much about love. Or me” (69). “You never lived there,” “you were never there, so you don’t know,” he repeatedly reminds the narrator and the readers (103). Finally Frank breaks down, “I have to tell you the whole truth . . . I shot the Korean girl” (133). The girl was a child who came scavenging for food scraps around the army’s base. Her hand searching through the waste, looking with her hands rather than her eyes, recalls Joe’s outstretched hand in Jazz as he blindly seeks out his mother. This incident is never mentioned by the primary narrator, but Frank’s
recollection, his admission of guilt, explains his final motivation to find the source of his original memory: the feuding horses and murdered man whose ghost accompanies him on his journey.

Frank’s ghost is characterized by his purple zoot suit—a complicated image that recalls Malcolm X’s famous blue zoot suit and the casualties from another war: the zoot suit riots of 1943. The zoot suit symbolizes the transference and co-optation of culture from one marginalized group to another. Kathy Peiss’s study of this cultural phenomenon trace the suit’s origins to Harlem and its spread to the west coast where Mexican American and poor whites donned the suits as a subversive cultural expression. As the U.S. prepared to enter the Second World War, the suit’s exaggerated and flamboyant style challenged the austerity needed to support the war effort. The government condemned the suits, which likely contributed to their rise in popularity among the working-class youth of other marginalized groups, such as Italian Americans and Jews. The suit came to symbolize resistance to American ideals as its wearers were perceived as agitators unwilling to conform to (white) American culture. Born from the uniquely American art form of jazz music, the zoot suit presented an alternative cultural expression that differed from white America. The zoot suit, with its “flamboyant drape was seen as the marker of delinquents,” rendered “clothing as a political arena for cultural hegemony” (Obregón 12). The zoot suit riots of the forties exemplified the anxiety that surrounded this form of expression. The suit serves as a symbol of danger. As Peiss observes, “On the one hand it may seem like a trivial style,” but it is style that is often interpreted according to its “economic and cultural meaning,” which was perceived as dangerous threat to the American war efforts (qtd in Unger). During the Zoot Suit Riots, a band of sailors sought out,
beat, and murdered Mexican Americans precisely because they wore zoot suits. The suit thus exemplifies the crossroads between visual culture and violent reactions to this culture.

It is important to note that Frank fails to recognize the cultural significance of the suit. He does not identify with the zoot suit’s exaggerated codes of masculinity nor its political implications. His thoughts on the zoot suit reveal Frank’s coded masculinity, a masculinity that seems plucked from racist depictions of Africans in television, film, and print: “If they were the signals of manhood, he would have preferred a loincloth and some white paint artfully smeared on his forehead and cheeks. Holding a spear, of course. But the zoot suiters chose another costume: wide shoulders, a wide brimmed hat, watch chains, pants ballooned up from narrow cuffs beyond the waist to chest. It had been enough of a fashion statement to interest riot cops on each coast” (34). Frank’s preference for the “African” image evokes the racist depictions of African men as savage warriors, holding a spear of course. Frank’s characterization of his mental illness as “going ape” reinforces the ways in which Frank internalizes the dominant depictions of black masculinity. Interestingly, Frank does not conjure an image of masculinity that is informed by his service in the army. We are given this image in a photograph he sends home to his sister: “In the photograph he’d sent home, a smiling warrior in a uniform, holding a rifle, he looked as if he belonged to something else, something beyond and unlike Georgia” (53). Together these images of manhood (the African warrior, the American warrior, and the zoot suiter) invoke the violence of the era—a violence that is at once symbolic and literal. The zoot suit becomes a symbolic alternative to the literal threat of real weapons (the spear, and the gun). The ghost of the murdered man impels Frank’s ritual of return, which culminates in another interpretation of masculinity—not as violent but as a redemptive nonviolent act.
The novel’s final scene returns to the original one as Frank attempts to trace the history of the man’s murder. The novel reminds us that nonviolence can only emerge from a violent context, and asks the readers to determine the source of this violence. Frank forgot about the original, brutal, burial until he’s told the story by Salem and Fish Eye’s porch chorus. He recognizes the memory and acts on it. Just as he identifies his guilt in killing the Korean girl, Frank is finally able to fully recall the scene from his youth. Like Frank, readers learn that the site of the original scene used to be a “stud farm” but had burned down a while back (138-39).

It was the site of fatal battle royal, staged between a man and his son, both stolen from Alabama, roped up, and brought to the old stud farm to entertain the men: “The game was set up so only the one left alive could leave. So one of them had to kill the other” (138). The son’s knife inflicted the wound that would kill his father, but he is not his father’s murderer. He is killed by a philosophy of war that pits man against man: a stud farm. The horses stood look like men, fighting each other, but the final scene indicates that manhood derives from a lack of violence, the father’s passivity and surrender for the sake of the son. Frank excavates the bones of this murdered man just as he mines his memory, and the memory of the men who helped the murdered man’s son escape. Frank conducts a ceremony for the murdered man—”Carefully, carefully, Frank placed the bones on Cee’s quilt, doing his level best to arrange them the way they once were in life. The quilt became a shroud of lilac, crimson, yellow and dark navy blue” (143). They lay the bones below “the sweet bay tree—split down the middle, beheaded, undead—spreading its arms, one to the right, one to the left” (145). The outspread “arms” of this tree evoke the crucifixion, and serves as an appropriate site for a man who sacrifices his life to save the life of another. Frank tops the grave with a painted wooden marker
that reads, “Here Stands a Man” (145). “Wishful thinking, perhaps,” the nameless narrator tells us, “but he could have sworn the sweet bay was pleased to agree” (145). The moniker recalls the “I am a Man” mantra that defined the Civil Rights movement that the novel’s setting preludes. Unlike the horses that “stood like men” when fighting, this configuration of manhood depends upon non-violent resistance. The ceremony exorcises these ghosts as brother and sister return home. But, true to Morrison’s style, this is only half the story.

The murdered man’s shroud symbolizes another source of healing and haunting for his sister Cee. Cee creates the quilt while recovering from the violence inflicted by her employer, the “good doctor” whose name evokes the “Good Man” of Love. Cee works as an assistant to this doctor who is fascinated by the internal workings of women’s reproductive system (60). “He is more than a doctor,” his wife tells us, “his inventions help people. He’s no Dr. Frankenstein,” she insists (60). Indeed, Dr. Frankenstein intends to bring a new life to the dead whereas this doctor seeks to bring death to the living. Cee fails to recognize this important distinction. She admires his bookshelves, crowded with the titles of eugenics literature, such as The Passing of the Great Race and Heredity, Race, and Society—and “her admiration for the doctor grew even more when she noticed how many more poor people—women and girls, especially—he helped” (64). Cee trusts the doctor and willingly offers herself for experimentation. After the doctor’s mysterious surgery, Cee believed the doctor’s analysis (it was just a minor side-affect), but the women of Lotus know better. They roll their eyes and suck their teeth at the idea of Cee working for the doctor, and no amount of justification from Cee would change their minds (122). The women provide their own prescription for healing.

When Cee’s fever subsides, and she finally tries to explain what happened to her, “nothing
Cee remembered—how pleasant she felt upon awakening after Dr. Beau had stuck her with a needle . . . how passionate he was about the value of the examination . . . nothing made them change their minds about the medical industry” (122). Cee’s dreamy recollection of the doctor, the sexual associations of the prick of his needle, underscores Cee’s own fascination with the doctor’s authority. The women of Lotus reject the doctor’s claim to Cee’s body, and they offer their own prescription for recovery: “The final stage of Cee’s healing had been, for her the worst. She was to be sun smacked, which meant spending at least one hour a day with her legs spread open to the blazing sun. Each woman agreed that that embrace would rid her of any remaining womb sickness” (124). By having Cee spread her legs, and literally expose her wound to the world, the women of Lotus call attention to and confront the very system that denies their participation. The quilt symbolizes her mending health, the community of women who healed her with their various ways. It is an alternative image of the diaspora from *Tar Baby.* Here the women hold Lotus together, but theirs is an image of unification rather than division. The stiches show, of course, but the pattern reveals a beautiful image.

Morrison’s novels remind us that to be haunted means to be alert to what lies beneath the surface. Morrison’s hauntings requires readers and characters to be vigilant observers, to recognize the signs that signal the story beneath the story. In her earlier works, readers witness the ghosts of memories forcing themselves into the present. In her later works, ghosts are the life-force that drives the plot. All incite a ritual of return that forces characters and readers to return to an original scene and reevaluate it according to the knowledge the ghost confers. In this chapter, I examined the sites, forms, and purposes of haunting in order to examine Morrison’s meditations on the present and her musings about the future. In *Love* and *Home,*
Morrison presents two narratives through which she reminds readers to celebrate those survivors of a traumatic history. Her purpose is not to name the ghost of trauma but to celebrate those that survive through the means available to them. The ghosts of *Love* and *Home* present useful memories for readers and characters because they explain the violence at the heart of the novel. To understand the phantoms of *Love*, readers must return to the assumptions laid bare by the novel’s chapter headings. The ghosts of *Love* intervene to pull the reader and characters back to the source of a trauma in order to force a reconsideration of Cosey’s imprint on this community. Moreover, readers of *Home* must return to the novel’s opening scene to understand the significance of the final one. Frank’s haunting invites a new definition of manhood as redemptive, rather than violent. Morrison’s ghosts shine light on the gaps in official history, and they point to the possibilities of another story, which can only mean another future.
CHAPTER TWO: ORPHANS IN “THE HOUSE THAT RACE BUILT”

If, as Houston Baker asserts, the blues encompass a network of meaning—an “enabling script in which Afro-American cultural discourse is inscribed” (3-4)—then Morrison’s orphans calibrate the score. Witness Cholly Breedlove in The Bluest Eye. Cholly’s story epitomizes the blues; it is one of dispossession, dejection, and alienation. Blues imagery appears all throughout the “pieces of Cholly’s life,” which “could only become coherent in the head of a musician” (159). His father ran off, and his mother abandoned him on a junk heap. The site of his abandonment—the railway track—symbolizes the blues juncture, a multi-directional crossing that doubles back in its meditative possibilities. Cholly’s life turns in on itself, looping back to the trauma of his original abandonment. He finally finds his father at another railway station, hanging with a group of gamblers who follow the rhythm of chance. The gambling man entertains his audience, with his own blues performance: “Chanting a kind of litany to which the others responded, rubbing dice as though they were two hot coals, he whispered to them. Then with a whoop the cubes flew from his hand to a chorus of amazements and disappointments” (154). Cholly’s father fails to recognize his son and cannot see anything beyond the bills on the ground. The pain of this rejection leads to Cholly’s “dangerous freedom” whose danger lies in the absence and desire that it encompasses (159). It was a freedom that “only a musician would sense, know without even knowing that he knew that Cholly was free. . . . Free to be tender or violent, to whistle or weep” (159). It was in this state of god-like freedom, that Cholly came “with his own music,” but when he violates his daughter sexually,
there was no music, only “a hollow suck of air in the back of her throat” (126, 163). Morrison foregrounds the pain of Cholly’s orphanage, a pain that only a musician could convey, in order to prevent a reading of Cholly as wholly villainous. She emphasizes that his “dangerous freedom” came from being completely alone, an orphan, belonging to no one, not even himself. Cholly’s orphanage incites a sympathy that is shrouded in critique.

In this chapter, I review Morrison’s treatment of the orphan in order to illustrate the extent of her critique. Looking specifically at her earlier works and the trajectory of her later works, I hope to show the way Morrison indicts the ideology of a national family. Building from Valerie Loichet’s *Orphan Narratives: Post Plantation Literature of Faulkner, Glissant, Morrison, and Saint-John Perse*, I argue that Morrison’s “orphan narratives” challenge the restrictive codes of family and kinship whose origins can be traced back to the economy of slavery. Loichet describes the literary articulations of the “postplantation universe” as one dominated by stories of “failing fathers; the obsessive quest for an origin bound to fail; alternative modes of self-birthing; the oppression of women ‘pressed small’ in their condition and in their text; the drive for racial purity (whether “white” or “onyx”); the economic or temporal fragmentation; and above all the reduction of familial and sentimental relationships to mathematical equations” (159). The diasporic conditions of slavery result in a biological as well as cultural orphaning that necessitates the “construction of collective and bifurcating genealogies” (Loichet 171). Like the other “orphan narratives” that Loichet examines, Morrison posits a vision of family that is violent and painful but also (potentially) redemptive as characters create alternative families
that provide the “only constructive escape from narrow, family, plantation, and national units” (195). 27

Morrison’s articulation of disrupted family ties reveals the way class and gender function as cornerstones of “the house that race built.” Morrison’s orphans offer reflections of the master’s house, reflections that recall Jadine’s description of Valerian’s eyes in *Tar Baby:* “they were . . . like mirrors chamber after chamber, corridor after corridor of mirrors, each one taking its shape from the other and giving it back as its own until the final effect was color where no color existed at all” (74). In this house of mirrors, readers witness the construction and reification of race within controlling concepts of the home and family, both which are themselves born from a slave economy. Significantly, *The Bluest Eye* begins with “Here is the house,” and the Dick and Jane refrain from children’s primer. The school primer identifies and reinforces the dominant vision of the American family that ignores the chasm of class and race that it enshrouds. The orphans of *The Bluest Eye* reveal the way this dominant vision fractured the Breedlove’s family.

I begin with a discussion of the Breedlove family in *The Bluest Eye* in order to show the way economic relationships trump maternal and paternal ties. Then I turn to Morrison’s second novel *Sula* to illustrate Morrison’s gendered critique of the options available to African American men and women, as represented by Shadrack and his counterpart Sula. In *Tar Baby* and *Beloved,* Morrison builds from her class and gender critique in order to take on the annals of American literary history. I conclude by offering a comparative analysis of *Paradise* and *A Mercy* to show the ways Morrison indict the concept of a national family as one guided by a

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27 Loichet’s study specifically examines Saint-John Perse’s *Éloges,* William Faulkner’s *Light in August,* and Édouard Glissant’s *Case du Commandeur,* and Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon.*
paternal impulse and colonial claim to origins. In these novels, Morrison allows us to move outside of restrictive articulations of motherhood by presenting it as both a physical act of giving birth and a creative act of storytelling. In restoring the creative agency of motherhood, Morrison unravels a pattern of history that has sought to reduce people to what Orlando Patterson describes as a “social nonperson” with “no family, no history, no community no past, no future” (155). Morrison’s orphans challenge the artificial boundaries of citizenship and race, family and gender, and uncover the myth of a national family working towards a common future. In redesigning the master’s house and its notion of family, Morrison’s fiction restores the creative agency of motherhood, symbolically un-orphaning her readers from “the house that race built.”

**Here is the House: The Bluest Eye and Sula**

Morrison’s intention to “domesticate the racial project” suggests that the dynamic relationship between the public and the private necessitates a reading of the racist house as more than institutionally enacted, but as performed within the domestic sphere (“Home” 4). Rather than a safe-haven, the home represents a contested terrain, providing comfort for some and work for others. The father-headed nuclear family, normalized by white, middle-class values, replicates the patterns of the public sphere and the market it serves. This is particularly clear within a slave economy, which regulated itself through the reproduction of motherhood and mothering practices. An enslaved mother had no claim to her offspring just as she had no claim to her body. The mother’s captor owned her child just as he owned her; and even if he

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28 For more on the cultural significance of the domestic sphere, see Kaplan’s *The Anarchy of Empire*; Alexandra Schultheis Moore’s *Regenerative Fictions: Postcolonialism, Psychoanalysis, and the Nation as Family*; and Ann Stoler’s *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power.*
was the biological father, his claim to the child was one of possession, not kinship. As Hortense Spillers explains, “the offspring of the female does not ‘belong’ to the Mother, nor is s/he ‘related’ to the ‘owner,’ though the later ‘possesses’ it, and in the African American instance, often fathered it, and, as often, without the whatever benefit of patriarchy” (469). In other words, a white child may reap the social, psychological, and financial benefits of patronage while her enslaved sister lacks such promise. Family (and the kinship it implies) “loses meaning since it can be invaded at any given and arbitrary moment by the property relations” (Spillers 469). The regulation of motherhood came to characterize the uniquely cruel nature of American slavery because, as Henry Louise Gates Jr. points out, American slavery was predicated on the belief that enslavement was a “natural and proper condition for the particular races of people” (155).

The reverberations of the slave economy can be seen in the twentieth century as domestic servants were expected to raise the children of their employers as well as their own. Patricia Hill Collins’ description of mothering practices illustrates the way slavery continues to shape family dynamics. Collins writes, “for women of color, the subjective experience of mothering/motherhood is inextricably linked to the sociocultural concern of racial ethnic communities—one does not exist without the other” (47). Consider Pauline Breedlove. Although Pauline was born into a family of eleven children, she “never felt at home anywhere or that she belonged anyplace” (111). Despite her large family, Pauline’s childhood is described in terms of lack: no nickname, no funny jokes, no saving of food or special orders, no teasing. Pauline finds her “assigned role in the scheme of things,” within the home of a well-to-do family, working as an “ideal servant” (126-27). “Here she found beauty, order, cleanliness,
and praise,” which highlighted the poverty of her own house, her children, her man—all of which became “after thoughts” (127). Here she found the nickname she longed for as a child (Polly), and here she could soothe the tears of “the little pink-and-yellow girl” but not the tears of her daughter who had a “head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly” (126). Pauline negates her daughter, her son, and her husband in order to mother the young Fisher girl—a mothering that can only be expressed through servitude. Mrs. Breedlove finds pleasure and place only within the stigmatized role as servant, but her daughter is left to experience the same isolation and alienation that shaped Pauline’s childhood. Her “assigned role” comes at the expense of her daughter’s sense of place: “Somehow she belonged to them,” Pecola thought, but she could not understand how (45). In accepting the role that race bestows on her, Pauline enacts the orphaning effects of the slave economy that renders mothers into servants, and her children into symbolic orphans.

Morrison’s class critique culminates in her description of Cholly, whose father sees his son as nothing but a bill to be paid; upon laying eyes on his son, he responds “tell that bitch she got her money” (157). The verbal assault causes Cholly to lose his place in the scheme of things; he forgets his mother’s name; he cannot say “I’m your boy” because that sounded disrespectful; and perhaps more importantly Cholly wonders, “Whose boy was he?” (156). Cholly is claimed by no one, and so the presence of children in his life left him “dumbfounded” and totally “dysfunctional” (160). He cannot understand a biological relationship to a child, as bloodlines were not enough to secure the love of his father or his mother. Bourgeois conceptions of paternal inheritance mean nothing to him: “Had he been interested in the accumulation of things, he could have thought of them as material heirs; had he needed to
prove himself to some nameless ‘others,’ he could have wanted them to excel in his own image and for his own sake” (160). Cholly’s violation of Pecola underscores the devastating consequences of kinship denied. He longs to give his daughter the love she deserves, and so obviously needs, but he lacks a model of paternity that exists outside the strictures of a slave economy that render children into material possessions. Pauline’s mothering practices occurs within the subjugating role of a servant while Cholly expresses his love through a violent taking of this daughter—a girl he hated because she dared to love him when there was nothing “his heavy arms and befuddled brain could accomplish that would earn him his own respect, that would in turn allow him to accept her love” (162). Pecola’s subsequent pregnancy and miscarriage underscore this theme of distorted love and disrupted bloodlines. She absorbs this recursive, generational trauma: “The damage down was total” (204). Pecola encompasses one aspect of the racist house: a little girl grotesquely transformed into a ghastly site; “her head jerking . . . elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she failed her arms in a futile effort to fly . . . beating the air, a winged but grounded bird” (205).

In this early work, Morrison lays bare the psychological trauma caused by the internalization of the values encrypted into the racist house. In her second novel Sula, Morrison extends her critique by giving another vision of the redesigned house. The description of Eva Peace’s home echoes with Morrison’s description of the redesigned house. Using insurance money obtained from losing her leg, Eva expands her house as she kept “adding more stairways . . . 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; others that you could get to only by going through somebody’s bedroom” (30). The multiple entrances
signal the many ways into this house, but some routes won’t take you very far and others required that you traverse private spaces. Moreover Eva never enters these other spaces save for when she leaves her room to kill Plum and when she throws herself from the window to protect Hannah. Eva’s house functions as a de facto orphanage, a refuge for all kinds of children, boarders, and vagrants. She informally adopts Tar Baby and the discarded and disowned Dewey boys, mothering them by giving them names and a place to live. She jokingly nicknames the white alcoholic Tar Baby, and she names all the boys Dewey, despite the fact that “each Dewey was markedly different than the other two” (38). Under Eva’s care, however, the boys became in fact and in name “a dewey—joining with the other two to become a trinity of a plural name . . . inseparable loving only themselves” (38). When one misbehaved, all were punished; “they spoke with one mind, thought with one mind”—a mind that always remained that of a child (39, 84). Playing their favorite game, “chain gang,” the boys symbolize the extension of slavery into their lives, enacting the unseen chains that link them to each other (75). As Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber explains, the Deweys “function like blacks in white culture, interchangeable unmanageable bodies” (188). But they also represent the value of the community in individual society. They grow into each other, helping themselves at the expense of all others. As Susan Neal Mayberry remarks, the “dewey system and the chain gang serve the group well by protecting the collective self, but they simultaneously consume the individuality of Lost Boys and prevent their maturation” (261). The boys symbolize the restraints of a racist house that seeks to deny difference while all the while maintaining difference. They represent the monolithic and myopic vision of race that swallows the individuality of its constituents. Tar Baby’s name underscores his difference whereas the Deweys resist any claim to difference.
Together these orphaned characters illustrate the limitations of the reimagined house where there is race specificity without the recognition of difference. Eva’s orphanage houses everyone, but she can hardly be read as the novel’s moral center. She fails to give Tar Baby the guidance needed to maintain his will to live, and the Deweys fail to grow up, instead growing into each other. Even as Eva expands the constrictions of the family sphere by including everyone, she still wants to cast Sula into the role of mother: “When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It’ll settle you,” Eva states (92). Sula insists on making herself, which results in her total isolation as she places Eva in a retirement home and lives her final days as a “spiritual orphan” in Eva’s house (Rubenstein 132).

Morrison’s setting (the Bottom) functions as more than a neighborhood but as a kind of family that contains “this life-giving . . . strong sustenance that people got from the neighborhood . . . all the responsibilities that agencies now have were the responsibilities of the neighborhood” (Stepto 11). The war veteran, Shadrack, functions as a foil to the novel’s eponymously named protagonist, Sula—both are orphans and both lobby a critique from the outcast margins of society. Shadrack is an orphan of the state, a shell-shocked veteran who hopes to manage the horror of seeing men killed in battle. In her description of Shadrack, “Morrison deals with the physical and psychological damage done to black soldiers” during the First World War; and in naming him Shadrack, Morrison alludes to the Biblical character with the same namesake who is thrown into a fiery pit for refusing to worship a golden idol (Surányi 18). Shadrack’s need for order in a maddening world culminates in his creation of “National Suicide Day” where everyone could conduct the business of dying in one specially designated day. Shadrack’s call for a national day of action functions a kind of protest “against the
privatization of madness” where “to call him Private is to hail the traumatic condition of Shadrack, the public insanity of war, as one of his own making” (Grewal 55). Shadrack thus symbolizes a maddening social structure that permeates not only his consciousness but the seemingly isolated Bottom within the national community that houses it. In linking the Bottom with the nation, Shadrack represents the madness of a society that not only sends its children to war but also abandons them when they survive it. Sula, like Cholly, possesses the dangerous freedom that derives from the loss of being completely without a family or home. Untethered from Nel and isolated by the Bottom community, Sula finds herself alone: left to wait out her death in what was once a house of many. The narrator reminds us that this fate would not be so terrible, if she had “paints, or clay, or knew the discipline of the dance, or strings; had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor. . . . And like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous” (121). Sula lacks the mediums necessary to give vision to her isolation. She attempts to own herself, rather than allowing others to own her, but this attempt at belonging leaves her without a home. Like Cholly who attempts to reconcile his loss through marriage, Sula attempts to reconcile her loss through her friendship—but for both of these characters, the expectations of marriage prove to be to further isolating. Sula rejects the restrictive spaces of motherhood and marriage because she wants to make herself, but this project results in total isolation from the community and (most significantly) from Nel. Sula fails to find a home in this place because the only space for a woman in the Bottom is through the sexually restrictive confines of motherhood and marriage. Committed to make herself (“I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself”) Sula fails to adhere to the gendered expectations of motherhood and family (93). Through her relationship with Nel, Sula attempts
to create an alternative family, a sisterhood made from “the we was girls together” days of their childhood when they shared everything, including boys: “Marriage, apparently, had changed all that, but having no intimate knowledge of marriage . . . [Sula] was ill prepared for the possessiveness of the one she felt close to” (119). Sula assumes that Nel’s husband is just another thing to be shared between the two, but Nel assumes that marriage means mine. It is this assumption that makes “Nel belong to the town and all of its ways” (120) and left Sula with nothing but the solitude that is all her own: “But my lonely is mine. Now your lonely is somebody else’s,” she tells Nel. “Made by somebody else and handed to you” (143). Nel will always be lonely because she accepts the confines of womanhood, and Sula will always be lonely because she does not. In Sula Morrison demonstrates the double bind of womanhood where “You can’t do it all. . . . You can’t be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you want, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you want” (142). This is a freedom that only men can know. Sula challenges Nel’s claims of womanhood, but this challenge comes with a price.

The dream Sula has just before her death underscores Morrison’s critique of gendered expectations encoded within the racist house. She dreams of the lady from Clabber Girl baking powder, smiling and beckoning her. Sula’s dream illustrates the choking effects of white visions of the domesticated woman, clearly symbolized by the product’s label. Baking powder is the leavening agent that allows bread to rise, but the domestic scene on its cover illustrates the framing and sinking consequences of restrictive gender expectations.²⁹ The Clabber Girl label

²⁹ Emma Parker argues the “disintegration of the Clabber Girl Baking Powder lady in Sula’s dream prefigures the disintegration of the black community more generally” (16). Parker reasons that “Like the cakes toward the end of the novel that do not rise . . . neither woman is able to “rise above” her pride to make friends again, and so Sula
features a young blonde girl offering a tray of biscuits to the assumed consumer. Behind her is a cozy, domestic scene in the kitchen where children play and their mother knits. This image documents the generations of women confined to the kitchen, forever serving an unknown other. As Sula approaches, the girl dissolves into a fine, white dust, which Sula attempts to stuff into her blue-flannel housecoat: “The disintegration was awful to see, but worse was the feel of the powder—its starchy slipperiness as she tried to collect it by the handfuls. The more she scooped, the more it billowed. At last it covered her, filling her eyes, her nose, her throat, and she woke gagging and overwhelmed with the smell of smoke” (147-48). The more Sula tries to capture it, the more it expands and the more difficult it is for her to grasp. The Clabber Girl’s disintegration into white powder illustrates the façade of the image, but its choking effects on Sula attests to its devastating consequence. Sula’s distinction (it was awful to see, but worse to feel) underscores the real outcome of this ubiquitous image of womanhood, which is at once as flimsy and allusive as powder and as destructive and pervasive as billowing smoke.30

**Cultural Orphans in *Tar Baby* and *Beloved***

In Morrison’s subsequent fiction, readers witness multiple instances of orphans seeking alternative family lives, sometimes at the expense of their biological ties, but often because of them. In *Tar Baby*, for instance, Morrison extends the theme of orphanage in the character of Jadine, who is raised by her aunt and uncle but is formally educated by their employer, Valerian Street. Jadine’s social and cultural education causes her to identify more with her financial
dies alone and Nel is left alone. Their emotional hunger for each other is mirrored by the more general threat of hunger that the community as a whole faces” (16).

30 Jill Matus interprets Sula’s dream as the traumatic reincarnation of Sula having watched her mother burn. Paula Gallant Eckerd associates the image with Plum’s death at the hands of Eva. Moreover, Eckerd reads the description of the Clabber girl as “white girl” and “white lady” as a reference to the street names for heroin, which is Plum’s drug of choice. Brooks Bousan links the image to the death of Hannah, Plum, and Chicken Little.
stewards than with her impoverished Aunt Ondine and Uncle Sydney, making her what Mobley refers to as “cultural orphan” (284). Jadine’s presence serves as a substitute to the Street’s always absent son, Michael, who, readers later learn, was physically abused by his mother. Jadine functions as a surrogate daughter to the Street family at the expense of herself and her biological family (Goyal; Gonzales). Morrison contrasts Jadine’s cultural orphaning with the character of Michael, who is Valerian’s biological son, but who lacks the paternal guidance that fatherhood implies. While Jadine becomes a globe-trotting model, Michael becomes a “poet, presumably, and a Socialist” (91). Valerian describes Michael as “typical anthropologist, a cultural orphan who sought other cultures he could love without risk or pain. Valerian hated them, not from any hatred of alien or minority culture, but because of what he saw to be the falseness and fraudulence of anthropological position” (74). Both Valerian and Jadine reject the legitimacy of the culture studied. Valerian’s hatred of what he calls anthropologist fraudulence resonates with Jadine’s observation that “Picasso is better than an Itumba mask. The fact that he was intrigued by them is proof his genius, not the mask-makers” (74). In Valerian’s mind, Michael is a disappointment, “a perpetual loser” while he sees Jadine as having “fifty times the sense he does” (75). Jadine and Michael seek in others what they cannot find in their own families: Aunt Ondine comforts Michael when his mother abuses him, and Valerian provides the financial means for Jadine to attend the Sorbonne. While readers never meet Michael (he only appears in the memories of other characters), we witness another articulation of Loichet’s “postplantation universe” as Michael usurps the rule of his father by valuing human relationships over financial ones, and Jadine chooses individual freedom (at the expense of her family’s needs) in a line that resonates with Sula’s desire to make herself. By the novel’s end,
Valerian suffers a mental break upon learning of his son’s abuse, but the family dynamic remains the same. Michael stays away and Jadine leaves her aunt and uncle to pursue a career in Paris. Michael and Jadine attest to the way orphaned characters must seek out alternative kinships at the expense of familial ties.

The garden of the “Tar Baby” story functions as a metonym for white America, so too does the Sweet Home plantation in *Beloved*. In *Beloved*, readers witness slavery’s imprint on motherhood as Baby Suggs’s children are “moved around like checkers” (3). Moreover, Morrison’s dedication to the “sixty million and more” lost in the trans-Atlantic slave trade epitomizes the cross-generational orphaning effects of slavery. Garner’s rule over the Sweet Home plantation offers another version of “the house that race built.” Garner imagines himself to be morally superior to other slave owners because he refers to his captives as men, an act that deviates greatly from the practices of his contemporaries. However, as Jewell Parker Rhodes points out, “Garner’s vision elevates his slaves from the bestial level,” but “it is a modest and cruel step forward—men who are disenfranchised sons eventually learn within the context of slavery that the meaning of both words (disenfranchised and sons) degenerates into an illusion” (80). The extent of the illusion becomes realized with the death of Garner and the reign of schoolteacher whose brutality forces Sethe to first flee without Halle and to later murder her child to in order to keep her out of slavery. Moreover, in telling Sethe’s story (which is also the story of Margaret Garner), Morrison lays bare the way the story of slavery functions within American society—as both a story to pass on (as in told) and to pass on (as in forgotten). In plantation society, slaves were deprived of both a biological ancestry and a
linguistic history; thus the story of slavery is under-told in dominant culture, but it is one that must be told in order to start the work of healing the fractured family.

In all of these instances of families undone and remade, Morrison reminds readers that material circumstances necessitate women-centered networks that challenge the patriarchal conceptions of the family. Andrea Reilly refers to these alternative sites of motherhood as a “politics of the heart” that seeks to empower children and mothers (20). Morrison reclaims maternal identity from the constraints of patriarchy and reasserts motherhood as “as site of agency and authority for women” (Reilly 20). Reilly’s analysis builds from a tradition of examining the unique conditions of African American mothers who must nurture their children against a backdrop of racism and exploitation (Collins, D’Cruz, and Elbert). Morrison’s orphans start new familial modes that are predicated on familiar conceptions of fatherhood and different articulations of motherhood (what Barbara Christian calls Othermothers). In *Jazz* for instance, the friendship between Alice Manfred and Violet Trace eases the pain of suicide and a love affair. In *Love*, the surviving members of the Cosey family are bound together only by their hatred, but it is a hatred that culminates in an expression of love. In *Home*, Cee finds comfort in the women of Lotus who give her the license to heal herself from the pains inflicted by loved ones and by strangers. These women-centered families attest to the possibility of, and necessity for, creating alternative families that challenge the myopic vision captured and maintained by the Dick and Jane refrain.

As the previous section attempted to reveal, all of Morrison’s work engages with themes of family and orphanage, but Morrison most explicitly returns to them in her seventh novel, *Paradise* and her ninth, *A Mercy*. Both novels recreate pivotal, but under-examined,
moments in American history: post-slavery (1890s) and pre-slavery (1690s) respectively. Both seek to explain the present day by looking back and asking what might have been and what could be. Both take the trope of a national family to task, exposing the limitations of this metaphor by underscoring each character’s orphanage. Both examine the origins of the family by locating it within a burgeoning slave trade that sought to identify one class of people as genetically conditioned to slavery. Both present the master’s house in contrast to a de-facto orphanage that is first described the original’s double but is later reconfigured as a site of resistance.

At Home in “the House that Race Built”

The primary setting of Paradise is the mid-century, all-black town of Ruby, Oklahoma, but the narration carries the readers through different American settings. It recalls the history of recently freed slaves seeking to survive the violence of Reconstruction, and their next of kin seeking to survive the violence of mid-century America. Both homes stem from a kind of orphaning, one symbolic, the other literal. Morrison names the original founders of Haven (which provides the model for Ruby) Big Poppa and Big Daddy (lest we miss her point). Leading a group of nine families, all burdened with the weight of their only belongings, they leave their homes, and survive the voyage by eating trash and “dreaming of a roof, fish, rice, syrup” (96). Along the way, they are rejected, first by the “rich Choctaw and poor whites” and later by prostitutes and their children (13). But the worst insult came from the already established black communities. This rejection “changed the temperature of their blood twice;” first it boiled; then it cooled into a “cold-blooded obsession” with the injustice of their rejection. “Us free like them; was slave like them,” one of them asks, “What for is this difference?” (14). The children
of these “founding fathers” (Deacon and Steward) interpret the disallowance through a prism of class. Although they shared the same racial markers as the already established freedmen, this similarity does not equate to solidarity. Class divides them: “In short, they were too poor, too bedraggled-looking to enter, let alone reside in the communities that were soliciting Negro homesteaders” (14). Deacon and Steward attempt to salve this wound by accumulating property.

The citizens of Ruby represent the symbolic orphaning of people from county and community; they attempt to mend the break by celebrating the very thing that justified their disallowance, but in doing so, they replicate the conditions that rendered them cultural orphans. They carry the scars of an earlier generation’s rejection, and they witness the reverberating consequence of this original orphaning. When they return from the horrors of the First World War, they experience the “Disallowance part two” (197). Once home, they heard stories of emasculation, tales of “missing testicles of other colored soldiers” and about medals being torn off by gangs of rednecks and Sons of the Confederacy” (198). The removal of these symbols of masculinity—one private (testicles) and the other public (medals)—incites the paternal impulse to remake and relocate, to find a new Haven with a different name.

The New Fathers of Ruby exert their masculine claim to origins through the metronymic re-naming of the town.31 Originally named New Haven, the settlers change the name to Ruby (the sister of Deacon and Steward) in order to commemorate and honor their recently passed sister. The naming of Ruby underscores the representative power of women as boundary

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31 In Colonialism/Postcolonialism, Ania Loomba writes, “If the nation is an imagined community, that imagining is profoundly gendered. . . . National families be they colonial, anti-colonial or postcolonial, also play upon the connections between women, land or nations. To begin with, across the colonial spectrum, the nation-state or its guiding principles are often imagined literally as a woman” (180).
markers. She signifies the town’s collective history as one marked by absence and violence (6). Ruby dies because no doctor will come to the all-black town and no hospital will treat this “sweet, modest laughing girl” that Deacon and Steward had protected their whole lives (113). They “gave her” to an army buddy who was later killed in the war and all that remains of their union is the young K.D. who continuously disappoints his uncles. Ruby’s death warrants the fledgling town’s first funeral, which retroactively serves as the town’s commencement ceremony whereby the town’s “New Fathers” can authorize the existing order. The haunting presence of Ruby (her plastered name and her lingering memory) symbolizes and justifies the contours of the eponymously named town.

Encoded in her name is the culmination of history, labor, and domesticity. Like the 8-rock families, whose name refers to their work as miners, Ruby’s name evokes the mining process of the rock’s extraction. As she now exists in name only, Ruby serves as a “founding mother” of the town while the novel’s living mothers are reprimanded for their imagined disobedience. The death of Ruby, and the naming of the town, reminds readers that women literally (and figuratively) rear the national family, posthumously born from “Founding Fathers”; yet, they are often left out of the narratives that give meaning to that citizenship. The longing for an absent mother incites the violence that culminates in the attack against to the convent women—an action that is done “for Ruby” (18). Coming to the defense of Ruby, the men secure their relations to origins, and consequently to power.

As a motherless child who is also rejected by the community, Patricia Best offers another interpretation of the disallowance—an interpretation that highlights the correlations between race and class. Patricia is the orphaned daughter of parents despised by the
community, despised because her father Roger Best violated the unspoken blood rule when he married a light-skinned woman: “a wife with no last name, a wife without people, a wife with sunlight skin, a wife of racial tampering” (197). Patricia recalls the Disallowing as a new separation: “light skinned against blacks” materialized and maintained by the consolidation of “8-Rock blood”—a reference to the deep level of coal mines (194). The coal mining history underscores their poverty, and the celebration of their dark skin signifies their difference (“the one and only feature that distinguished them from their Negro peers”) (193). Yet it is policing this difference that threatens the cohesion of their paradise. As Stephanie Li explains, Ruby’s “citizens reinscribe the very prejudice they sought to flee by prizing dark skin. . . . It is not racial difference that threatens the creation of paradise, but the need to racialize that expose the lie of Ruby’s false home” (48, 50).

Patricia’s alternative reading of the disallowance offers another register of meaning of Morrison’s critique of paradise, which always already requires the exclusion of some in order to ensure the inclusion of others. Through Patricia, Morrison casts her critique of bourgeois conceptions of liberation where freedom is defined as ownership: ownership of “authentic” racial divisions. Patricia’s mother symbolizes the violation of the “one drop blood rule,” which imagines that racial difference is rendered on the flesh. Patricia reminds us that the paradise of Ruby exists in name only, an embodied absence that justifies the men’s violence. One of the projects of Paradise is to challenge they myopic vision of race as unified (and recognizable) by confronting one “of African Americans most sacred cows, the myth of unity and perfection in black society relieved from white oppression” (Kubitschek 67). Moreover, the novel calls attention to the class differences that operate within the black community. Patricia symbolically
mines the town’s history, excavating that which is covered up (and systematically forgotten) from the town’s origin story, and her book functions as an alternative repository of Ruby’s history.

In their murderous defense of Ruby, these men imitate the character of racist white America whose nexus lies in the cultivation and preservation of “the cult of true womanhood.” Hazel Carby explains that “the cult of true womanhood” refers to the dominant ideology that “set the boundaries of acceptable behavior from the 1820s to the Civil War” and helped shape ideal conceptions of the family (23). It depended upon raced expectations of womanhood with white woman enacting the ideology’s doctrines of submissiveness, sexual purity, piety, and domesticity—all of which were pitted against conceptions of black women overtly sexual and prone to taboo sexual practices (32). Within the culture of slavery and its attendant definitions of true womanhood, the planter class valorized the white woman and demonized her enslaved sister. “Overt sexuality,” Carby explains, “emerged in the images of the black woman where ‘charm’ revealed her relationship to dark forces,” and was used to justify the actions of men who could not be expected to restrain themselves against the “rampant sexuality of female slaves” (27). Thus, on the one hand, the female slave solidifies the “conjugal sanctity of the white mistress,” while on the other, her imagined sexual prowess always threatens to undo this sanctity (Carby 27). The black women of Ruby further complicate this image as they are expected to adhere to white codes of femininity as sexual purity (they did not “powder their faces, and they wore no harlot’s perfume”) whereas the women of the convent (whose race remains ambiguous) are interpreted as sexual deviants: “pink shorts, skimpy tops, see through shirts; painted eyes, no lipstick; obviously no underwear. No stockings. Jezebel’s storehouse
raided to decorate arms, earlobes, necks, and ankles, and even a nostril” (143-56). The narrator’s reference to “Jezebel’s storehouse” underscores the interlocking of raced and gendered expectations. Patricia Hill Collins interprets the myth of the jezebel (and her contemporary counterpart, the hoochie) as a controlling image that “becomes a racialized, gendered, symbol of deviant female sexuality” (91). In applying this label to the women, the men police the boundaries of their sexuality and their town, all the while mimicking the patterns of racial oppression that defined the first disallowance and culminated in the death of Ruby.

Morrison highlights the arbitrariness of these sexual divisions in her description of Billie Delia, the daughter of Patricia Best and 8-rock member, Robert Cato. Billie’s light skin carries the same “visual glitch” of her mother and grandmother, and it is clear that she was not “quite as much of a lady as Patricia Cato would like” (203). The community spurns Billie from a very early age because she “had no qualms about “pressing her nakedness on a horse’s back but preferred it;” and at three years old, she “would drop her drawers in public on Sunday just to get the thrill of it” (151). This move rendered Billie “wild,” despite her age and the obvious innocence of her actions. Billie is a virgin, but she is perceived as “the fastest girl in town and speeding up by the second” (59). Billie’s imagined promiscuity leads to symbolic orphaning from the community and a literal orphaning from her mother. When her mother sees Billie socializing with the boys from town, she assumes the worst and attacks her daughter. Their argument culminates with swinging fists that draw blood. Billie runs away and eventually makes her way to the convent. Only Dovey Morgan and her sister Soane treated Billy like the child she is—”stopping her in the street to adjust the bow in her braids, praising her work in the kitchen.
garden; and once when Mrs. Dovey Morgan stopped to wipe the what she thought was make up from Billie Delia’s rosy lips, she did it with a smile and no hateful lecture” (151). Their kindness, along with the return of Anna Flood, ensures Billie Delia’s survival because they never made her feel the “freakishness of being an only child” (151). Within the confines of slavery, Billie’s pale skin would have given her closer access to being a lady, but in the minds of the 8-rocks, Billie will always be perceived as an easy score, a sexually promiscuous Jezebel, just like the women at the Convent.

By contrasting the Covent with the town of Ruby, Morrison presents readers with two kinds of paradise: one represented by the Convent women, the other by the people of Ruby—”each is a study of a kind of race-free home” (Li 44). While the women of the Convent create a race-free space, the site is not without patriarchal influence. The Convent was originally owned by an embezzler who fashioned his mansion into a sexual playhouse and is later owned by Nuns who transform the Convent into a school for Native children. The embezzler’s stamp remains throughout the design of the mansion: “female-torso candleholders in the candelabra ... the nipple tipped doorknobs. . . . A Venus or two among several pieces of nude statuary beneath the cellar stairs . . . male genetalia ripped from sinks . . . testicles designed to release water from the penis” (72). The nuns attempt to remove all of the sexual paraphernalia, but these objectified reminders of sexuality cannot be fully erased as they linger within the house’s architecture, carved into every crevice, and molded into all of its hardware. This influence is clearly demonstrated by the convent’s original owner, the embezzler, who, Cynthia Dobbs points out, figures “for the quintessentially American (white) masculinist social design of mastery (111). Under the guidance of the nuns, the Convent can neither be race-free nor
gendered free. Their original purpose for the boarding school for Arapaho girls is to teach them to sit and forget—forgetting, of course, is a controlling element of all national projects which depend upon an “obligation to forget” (Bhabha 230).

Under the care of Consolata, however, the convent becomes a safe-haven for runaway women and girls—a safety that comes from the cultivation of memories. The women are all strays, some literal orphans other figurative ones, but they create a makeshift family under the caring eye of Consolata. In this sense, they are the same as the citizens of Ruby, but unlike Ruby, they are not under the patriarchal guidance but a maternal one. Consolata alone guides them, and her guidance seeks to heal their traumas rather than merely replicate them. The women of the misnamed Convent threaten the cohesion of the town precisely because they challenge the values of Ruby’s founding fathers (the myths of racial purity and pious patriarchy). Unlike the town of Ruby, which is race-specific, the convent symbolizes a race-free home where race does not matter. Only when the men enter this sphere and “shoot the white girl first” does race become enacted and emphasized through the violence of their intrusion (3).

Consolata experiences several stages of orphaning: “When Mary Magna died, Consolata, fifty-four years old, was orphaned in a way she was not as a street baby and never as a servant . . . her rope to the world had slid from her fingers” (247). Mary Magna’s death highlights the extent of Consolata’s isolation, and she spirals into alcoholism: “She had no identification, no insurance, no family, no work”; only the bottle could quell the pain of her thoughts (248). Consolata, however, experiences a spiritual transformation that changes her from a “play mother who could be hugged or walked out, depending on the whim of the child,” into a “new
and revised Reverend Mother, feeding them bloodless food and water alone to quench their thirst” (262-65). As a mother to these wayward women, Consolata teaches them to love the flesh of their body, to privilege it over their spirit, but it’s a privileging that promises to feed the spirit. The women trace their forms on the cellar floor, and the loud dreaming begin—a dreaming that allowed each woman to enter the tale of the dreamer, to feel the pain and pleasure of these unintelligible, yet clearly felt, dreams. Steeped in their memories, and the memories of their Convent sisters, the women paint their pain on the forms rather than carry it on their flesh (Seneca stops cutting herself, and “she chose instead to mark the open body lying on the cellar floor” (265). The ceremonies allow the women to exorcise their memory: “unlike some people in Ruby, the Convent women were no longer haunted” (266). Dobbs explains, “Like Baby Suggs in Beloved, Consolata sees the body as the space for a self-claiming—a site for decolonization, regendering, and regeneration. The racialized and gendered body is historically a contested location for battles of domination and control. This most intimate and individual territory, Consolata insists, must be reclaimed first” (141). Through Consolata’s maternal guidance and the inscribed telling of their traumas, the women reclaim themselves. Significantly, the women’s telling does not depend upon language but rather a reimagining of themselves, drawn on the floor of the master’s house. Their self-reclamation derives from their inscriptions onto the master’s house, but it’s a limited freedom because the architecture (and its patriarchal imprint) remains the same; moreover these images help to justify the men’s violence against the women.

Paradise is a myth in the making. It is a novel about how communities remember, and it is a novel about how they forget. For example, Steward Morgan originally describes his
ancestor’s journey as consisting of “one-hundred and fifty eight freedmen,” but later the number drops down to “seventy-nine” (13, 95). The novel’s final passages underscore Morrison’s critique of communal memory, a critique that Stéphanie Robolin characterizes as “an alternative to narratives grounded in regimes of absolute Truth and Knowledge. Fashioned on a resistance to hegemonic, putatively pure accounts of the past (and present), these novels open up a different way of telling a story” (301). Readers witness these different ways to tell a story in the inconsistencies surrounding the murder that propels the novel’s plot. The characters were “changing their telling to make themselves look good” (296), which results in three different interpretations of the event: one, the women “took other shapes and disappeared into thin air;” two, the women attacked the men, and so they murdered them; and the third comes from Patricia Best—“that nine 8-rocks murdered five harmless women (a) because they were impure; (b) because they were unholy (fornicators at the least, abortionists at the most) and (c) because they could—which is what being an 8-rock meant to them and was also what the ‘deal’ required” (296). Patricia’s interpretation most explicitly correlates with the events of the novel, but a critical difference arises. She only acknowledges five dead when the Convent housed nine women. Moreover the reader witnesses the reconciliation of four women with their family, and the descriptions suggest that the women continue the fight outside of the convent. Gigi (wearing the clothes of a soldier) visits her father in jail. Pallas (carrying a sword) appears before her mother who is unable to call out to her. Mavis (with recently shorn hair) reunites with her daughter. Seneca appears before her sister with “blood running down her hands” (316). In each character, Morrison presents the signs of a soldier, and finally of Christ-like figure whose bleeding hands recall the stigmata of Christ. The novel’s last page describes
Piedade singing a song whose “words evoke the memories that no one has ever had”, “next to her is a younger woman whose head rests on the signing women’s lap” (318). In this final image, Morrison recreates the mythology of Christ and replaces him with a maternal image. This final image requires readers to recognize and rethink that paternal mythology that renders mothers as invisible actors.

**Bloodlines and Life-lines in *A Mercy***

Morrison returns to the project of myth-making in her 2009 novel, *A Mercy*. Like *Paradise*, Morrison gives us a vision of the master’s house and its double. Like the Convent women, the novels’ prime character, Florens, leaves her marking on this double vision of the master’s house in order to not only confront but expel the painful memories of living in “the house that race built.” Like *Paradise*, Morrison celebrates the creative agency of women, reclaiming them from the paternal impulse that denies their creative agency. The novel begins with a command and caveat: “Don’t be afraid. My telling cannot hurt you” (1). Morrison’s teller is Florens, a young slave girl who is driven by an overwhelming compulsion to record her memories, to tell “her confession” (1). Without the traditional media of ink and parchment, Florens must carve her words onto the floors and walls of master’s unfinished house. Her arms ache with the task of holding a lamp in one hand and carving with another. Florens’s “confession” is story of resurrection and transformation. She sleeps among her words, and the “telling goes on without dream”; the more compulsive her writing, the more she recalls (186). She remembers living with her mother on D’Ortega’s plantation where Reverend Father taught her stylized and orderly penmanship, rapping her fingers and making her do it again if it was messy. She learned to “write from memory the Nicene Creed including all the commas . . . I
forgot almost all of it until now,” she remarks (6-7). The Nicene Creed is a declaration of faith that reaffirms the command of God the Father, and “through him all things are made” as he is the “giver of life who proceeds from the Father and the Son.”32 The novel troubles this paternal articulation of life as it glorifies an earthly mother over a heavenly father.

Florens’ telling differs from Reverend Father’s teachings in two important ways: one, it is “disorderly” and two, it is original. Reverend Father symbolizes the “dead language” that Morrison refers to in her Noble Prize lecture. Dead language “cannot form or tolerate new ideas, shape other thoughts, tell another story, fill baffling silences” (200). Florens’s recollections fill those silences as they transform Vaark’s tomb into a “talking room” (188). Reverend Father sought to train a docile mind and body but docility fails Florens; she returns from one journey “feral” and her second one “wild.” Florens’s writing transforms the master’s house into a reservoir of history, and she conjures the creative agency needed to become “A minha mãe too. I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full” (189). Florens claims ownership of herself, an act of creative agency that Morrison equates with motherhood in order to restore the creative agency that motherhood encodes. She too has become a mother, but Morrison complicates motherhood: it is no longer the production of a person, or the ownership of land, but it through telling the story that produces a new Florens—a Florens that is unified in her contradictions: “Slave. Free. I last” (189).

The novel’s setting, the “mess of Virginia” in the last decades of the seventeenth century, evokes the origins of motherhood interrupted. By motherhood interrupted, I mean the conditions that render mothers unable to care for their children. The Virginia Act of 1662 laid

32 This quoted passage comes from the Encyclopedia Britannica’s definition of the Nicene Creed.
the foundation for American slavery because it determined that children born of indebted mothers would inherit their mother’s debts (Harris). The law paved the way for the cross-generational bondage that would distinguish American slavery from all other manifestations of the peculiar institution. Morrison recalls this birthright of bondage in her depiction of Scully, an indentured servant, who works indefinitely to finish paying off his mother’s debts. He was the son of a woman “sent off to the colonies for ‘lewdness or disobedience,’” and “her death transferred her contract to her son” (67). The absent mothers of *A Mercy* suffer from a patriarchal subjugation that denies women authority over their offspring, be they free, indentured, or enslaved—as Florens’s mother states, “to be a woman in this place is to be an open wound” (191).

At the age of eight, Florens’s mother trades her to Vaark in order to save her daughter from the sexual subjugation of living in D’Ortega’s house. Florens is under-mothered; she does not understand the trade that left her without a mother nor does she understand the language of her new home. Lina, a Native woman who is an orphan herself, informally adopts Florens, mothering her mind with stories of mothers trying to protect their children from the “evil thoughts of man” (720). The novel opens eight years after the trade that orphans Florens, and the story unfolds through Florens’s recollections of this original trauma. Her memories frame the histories of all the members of her master’s “imagined family” (69). Her first person narrative opens the novel and initiates the third-person histories of her captors: Jacob Vaark, a Protestant farmer turned rum entrepreneur, and his wife Rebekka, an immigrant from England whose arranged marriage to Vaark saves her from sexual subjugation but leaves her without a family. Vaark is motivated by a paternal impulse to “make a place out of no place,” and so he
assembles a makeshift family of orphans and misfits, which consists of Lina, the “praying savage;” Sorrow, a sea captain’s daughter and sole survivor of a shipwreck, and Florens, who is traded to settle D’Ortega’s debt (139). The novel traces the same traumatic event, motherhood-interrupted, as we witness intersecting articulations of the free, the indentured, and the enslaved—“but they were orphans each and all” (69). Morrison’s orphans show that the violation of motherhood interrupted extends beyond the mother and daughter; it is an act of violence with reverberating consequence.

The orphans of A Mercy epitomize the pain and isolation of living in a house that race built whose foundations, the novel suggests, rest on the paternal impulse of an orphaned man, most clearly symbolized by the founding father, Vaark. My term “paternal impulse” is influenced by Annette Kolodny’s phrase “pastoral impulse,” which she defines as the primary “metaphor of the move to America, a regression from adult life—a return to primal warmth of womb or breast” (6). Vaark carries the pangs of his orphanage (his mother died in childbirth and his father abandoned him) as an embodied inferiority that is heightened by the ritualized incantations of the domestic sphere. He undergoes a metaphorical return to the primal first by inheriting land (“it softened the chagrin of being misborn and disowned”) and later under the patronage of the slave-trader D’Ortega (36). In the novel’s primal scene—the one that leaves Florens with only the memory of her mother, whispering something she cannot hear—Vaark goes head to head with D’Ortega over an unpaid debt. Vaark envies the grandeur of D’Ortega’s planation, but he is disgusted by the slave trade that procured all of D’Ortega’s wealth. Valerie Babb interprets Vaark as representing the possibility of an “alternative white maleness that does not take advantage of arbitrarily constructed race and gender privilege,” and she
attributes his downfall to “excessive avarice” (155). Greed certainly motivates him, but it is a greed born from a biological mis-inheritance: his orphanage. Although Vaark initially recognizes the encounter scene for what it is: “a staged performance meant to humiliate him,” the more he participates in D’Ortega’s common customs the more incorporated into the imperial paradigm he becomes (26). In the wilderness, Vaark felt a safety in his skin but when he undergoes D’Ortega’s domestic rituals, he feels poisoned, polluted, corrupted, impure—like “a soiling of the blood” (26, emphasis mine). This description recalls the boiling blood experienced by the original founders of Haven in Paradise, and it attests to the way Vaark internalizes D’Ortega’s value system—as he feels impure under D’Ortega’s gaze.

D’Ortega’s home symbolizes the master’s house, and his ceremonies of the body reinforce his dominance. In this house, common needs (such as clothing and food) perform as symbols of superiority. The house was “more like a place where one held court” surrounded by wide iron gates and a prideful entrance with “grand pillars suitable for Parliament” (16). Graven idols and candles, wasting during midday, adorn the parlor table where D’Ortega’s sons sit, “silent as tombs” (22). Overdressed in fanciful wigs and “sumptuary silk stockings,” D’Ortega seemed as if he “were at a ball or a court of law” (22). The D’Ortega family embodies the approved texts that legitimize the enslavement of others; his outlandish costume, pompous strut and call for “canonization” all evoke the performative ceremonies that seek to legitimize authority (Connerton). With the lift of his eyebrow, “as though on its curve an empire rested,” D’Ortega’s enacts the powers of parliament (22). His skin remained “dry as parchment,” just like the legal papers used by the courts, churches, and tradesmen (22). The profane place offers neither spiritual nor physical satisfaction for Vaark: a whispered prayer amongst “graven idols”;

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over-seasoned, and fried foods that provide little nutritional value and even less flavor; watered-down wine compensating with sugar what it lacks in alcohol (22). Vaark identifies the cracks in the façade, but when confronted with the D’Ortega’s captives, Vaark accepts the conditions of the performance and the attendant notion of D’Ortega’s superiority. Agreeing to accept Florens as payment for D’Ortega’s debt, Vaark feels that his soiled blood has been cleansed as he felt “an inside shift from careful negotiation to the raw boy that once prowled the lanes of town and country” (29). His bravado unleashes an emotional memory as he returns to the wildness of his youth and a “feeling of license, a newly recovered recklessness” (30). Vaark realizes “not for the first time, that only things, not bloodlines, or character, separated them” (31). Here in the domestic sphere, Vaark misremembers these observations, as the meaning of them has now changed; owning slaves—literal bloodlines—had distinguished Vaark from D’Ortega, but now it is the thing that unites them.

The “trace of raccoon blood” on Vaark’s hand once symbolized his gentleness (he freed a raccoon from a hunter’s trap) now symbolizes his guilt (21). Believing he has bested D’Ortega, Vaark accepts Florens and ignores the terror in her eyes: “But thinking also, perhaps Rebekka would welcome a child around the place. This one here, swimming in horrible shoes, appeared to be about the same age as Patrician, and if she got kicked in the head, it would not rock Rebekka so” (30). Stephanie Li interprets Vaark’s ability to recognize Florens as a child capable of love as indicative of the fact that “he is not a racist motivated by deep-seated fear and hatred of the other, but rather a savvy entrepreneur, seeking the comforts of the still familiar American dream” (35). Morrison reminds us, however, that the comforts promised by the American dream depend upon the discomfort of others. Later as he reflects on the injustice of
the trade, “forced to settle for a child as a percentage of what was due him,” he rationalizes the purchase as a benevolent deed (38). His gesture saves Florens from D’Ortega’s sexual subjugation, but like the trapped raccoon that he once freed, “limped off, perhaps to the mother forced to abandon it or more likely into other claws” (12). Vaark’s imagined benevolence echoes apologists for slavery who cast the colonized into the role of children in need guidance from a white benefactor. Morrison disrupts this paradigm by staging Vaark’s devolution, returning him to the uncivilized child that gives him license to claim ownership over another being. Here, Morrison inverts slave codes that rendered slaves into perpetual children under the tutelage of white masters. Instead, Vaark experiences rejuvenation, a self-birth that he believes is evidence of having defeated D’Ortega. Rather than besting D’Ortega, however, Vaark merely imitates him by expanding his trade to include the rum coming out of Barbados. This trade depends on the same “wretched business” that initially disgusts Vaark, but after “rescuing” Florens he rationalizes away the hypocrisy: “there was a profound difference between the intimacy of slave bodies at Jubilio and a remote labor force in Barbados. Right? Right?” (40). His justification invokes the mythologies of American exceptionalism, which maintain that imperial projects abroad differ from those of our predecessors because ours are guided by morality whereas those were guided by greed (Pease and Kaplan). Vaark justifies his greed by displacing his guilt within the public, rather than private sphere. So long as the exploitation occurs outside of his house, he reasons, and so it is not problematic. The unseen colony supports the metropolis, just as it does for D’Ortega, but because D’Ortega brings material representations (the enslaved) into his home, it will forever remain impure. Vaark fails to recognize the captive women in his own house, just as he fails to recognize his responsibility
for the enslaved workers in Barbados. Like D’Ortega’s plantation, Vaark’s house demonstrates his own power and prestige rather than a place of shelter or comfort.

The pox that later kills Vaark symbolizes his inscription into the imperial paradigm: a psychological affliction visualized on the flesh. His blistered skin and silenced lips evoke the marked bodies of D’Ortega’s captives. Like the widespread disease in Barbados, the infection spreads to his wife, Rebekka. Her flesh covered in blisters, her tongue too swollen to speak, and her hands tied to prevent picking at wounds, present a physical incarnation of the enslaved bodies of D’Ortega’s Jublio and Vaark’s sugar plantation. The narration skims over the wounds of the enslaved, each mark a silent history, but they are realized on the flesh of the captors. By focusing on these wounds, Morrison inverts a familiar refrain. This time, the owner’s flesh is displayed, rather than the enslaved, and it signifies the psychological death that can only come from Vaark’s wretched business. The colonial system imprisons him as he too becomes a product of racism. Vaark may not be a racist proper, but his wealth derives through the enslaved reproduction of labor—a reproduction that regulates the categories of race: “there are births. The place is a stew of mulattoes, creoles, zambos, mestizos, lobos, chinos, coyotes” (35). The diversity of Barbados echoes Vaark’s childhood, “the years spent with children of all ages” (38). Once born into D’Ortega’s system, Vaark fails to recognize the link between the children of Barbados and the children of his youth. Vaark builds a replica of D’Ortega’s plantation from this colonized wealth, and he invokes the domestic fantasy of the national family, posthumously born from a Founding Father. Sitting high on the hill, and supposedly untainted as D’Ortega’s house is, Vaark’s plantation echoes John Winthrop’s spiritual vision of
colonial America as the City on the Hill. Vaark’s death incites the breakdown of his imagined family: “As long as Sir was alive it was easy to veil the truth: that they were not a family, not even a like-minded group. They were orphans, each and all” (69). All the members of his “imagined family” are touched by Vaark’s disease. Both Lina and Sorrow survived it—Lina by luck and Sorrow by the holistic healing of Vaark’s hired hand and Florens’s lover, the Blacksmith. Rebekka is saved by Florens, who heads west to find the Blacksmith.

Florens’s journey takes her to the home of Daughter Jane and Widow Ealing where we witness another instance of motherhood interrupted that is materialized through an image of literal bloodlines. Like the women of the Convent in Paradise, Widow Ealing and Daughter Jane live on the margins, in-between and in opposition to the patriarchal claim of ownership. Without a husband, Widow Ealing lacks an original (patriarchal) claim to her child, and so she is the target of pious men who covet her pasture. The men accuse the girl of witchery, and Widow Ealing attempts to prove her daughter’s humanity by ritually cutting her daughter’s “flesh to ribbons” (127). Their home is a locus betwixt worlds: “This be the death,” Daughter Jane remarks, “we have come here to die. . . . No thrashing, she says, can change it, though my flesh is cut to ribbons” (127). Daughter Jane’s body carries the marks of her history—a cartography of religious persecution motivated by material greed, but her eyes tell another story: “one of her eyes looks away, the other is straight and unwavering as a she-wolf’s. Both are black as coal” (128). Daughter Jane represents a dual vision; she sees things differently, looking askew in order to see head on. With the unwavering eye of a she-wolf, lying on a straw bed, Daughter Jane evokes the wildness that surrounds her. She recognizes that “it is the pasture they crave

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33 For more on Winthrop, see Michael Parker’s John Winthrop: Founding a City upon a Hill.
and that “demons do not bleed” (128). She warns Florens by silently circumventing her prayer with a gesture, and she recognizes that the letter will not save Florens from the “first death” (127). The blood lines running down Daughter Jane’s legs evoke D’Ortega’s captives, and Vaark’s observation that “things not bloodlines” stood between them. Her wounds sparkled “like jewels,” which illustrates the layers of Morrison’s metaphor. Without a patriarch to lay claim over the women and the land, the bloodlines do little to determine her humanity, but they can be used to determine her financial worth (it is the pasture they crave).

The “preliminary” meeting in Widow Ealing’s house reverberates with the details of the novel’s primal scene and underscores the symbolic significance of the home and the body. This scene invokes the former and gives voice to the silences from the first. This women-centered sphere strongly contrasts with the epicurean domesticity of D’Ortega. Their home offers the cozy comforts that D’Ortega’s house lacked. The room pacifies Florens, and the food (hard bread and warm porridge) nourishes her. Despite the comforts, this is a wild place: “two geese waddle in followed by a strutting hen. Another flies through a window joining the search for scraps” (129). Like the murderous men of Paradise, the pious men disrupt the house. Although this is an unofficial meeting, there are “several witnesses,” including a young girl that reminds Florens of herself when “my mother sent me away” (130). At the sight of Florens, the men lose interest in Daughter Jane: “Without touching me they tell me what to do. To show them my teeth, my tongue. To see if she has as split tongue, to see if her navel is in the right place” (133). They focus on her mouth, a source of language, and the navel, a source of life, which indicates the real threat to patriarchal power: the creativity of women. Florens’s recollections fill the silences of Vaark’s original inspection of the enslaved: “They look under my arms, between my
legs. They circle me, lean down to inspect my feet. Naked under the examination I watch for what is in their eyes. No hate is there or scare or disgust but they looking at me my body across distances without recognition” (133). The lack of recognition, a stare across distances echoes the silence of Vaark’s inspection of D’Ortega’s slaves, a silence so intense that it caused Vaark to “imagine an avalanche seen from a great distance. No sound, just the knowledge of a roar he could not hear” (26). The chasm of race looms before Vaark but is fully realized by Florens. In this encounter, Florens receives her racial education, what Stephani Li refers to the “visual sign of racial difference” (42). Correspondingly, Rebekka’s letter implicates Florens’s ownership through a visual mark: “She is owned by me,” the letter reads, “and can be knowne by a burne marke in the palm of her left hand” (132). Like the blood on Vaark’s hand, which can be washed away, this burn on Florens’ hand, however, will forever signify her relationship to Vaark. The location of this mark is significant because hands “represent a visible relation to labour and to money. Hands are the dangerous boundaries where labour and money, industry and domesticity literally touch” (McClintock 16). Vaark and Florens symbolize this boundary as each represent a link in the colonial chain. Rescued by the life-saving angel, enacted by the demonic Jane, Florens escapes this house and returns to her original journey. The scene recalls Amy Denver’s help with Sethe in Beloved and the rescuing of Wild by Golden Gray in Jazz. In these novels, Morrison presents white characters helping another—often because they are orphans themselves.

Like Vaark, Florens experiences a rebirth, a realization that underscores her cultural and biological orphanage: “Inside I’m shrinking . . . I am not the same. . . . I am loosing something with every step I take . . . I can feel the drain. Something precious is leaving me. I am a thing
apart. With the letter I belong and am lawful. Without it I’m a weak calf abandoned by the herd, a turtle without a shell, a minion with no telltale signs, but a darkness I am born with, outside . . . and the inside dark is a small, feathered and toothy” (135). Florens is described as a series of contradictions: she has the hands of a slave, and the feet of a lady; she is lettered but does not read; she writes her spoken confession. Her conscious reflection about these two selves, an interior and exterior one, correlates with the contradictions that she embodies.

We witness a similar division in the novels’ other orphan, Sorrow. Sorrow conjures a separate self to help her survive the psychological impact of being the only survivor of a foundering ship. Her father (the ship’s Captain) and the rest of the crew were all killed: “After searching for survivors and food, fingering spilt molasses from the deck straight into her mouth, nights listening to cold wind and lapping sea, Twin joined her under the hammock and they’ve been together ever since” (138). Only this fictionalized extension of Sorrow knows her real name—“the name Captain used” (137). Sorrow exists in a twilight mode of consciousness, between the dichotomies of life and death, male and female. When found, her rescuers relay the finding: “We thought from your clothes you were a lad. However, you’re not dead” (139). The “however” implies that manhood and death are equivocal; you’re not dead, therefore you’re not a lad. This strange reporting of Sorrow’s survival underscores her duality. Twin emerges as Sorrow’s only friend, an invisible sister-in-arms, who stands in the way of her interacting with the other members of Vaark’s imagined family. Like Daughter Jane, Twin guides Sorrow, instructing her about who to speak to and what to tell. She consoles Sorrow after the death of her first born baby, who came too soon and died before it had a name: “Sorrow wept, but Twin told her not to. ‘I am always with you,’ she said” (145). Twin remains as
a psychological salve for Sorrow until the birth of her second child. Twin was absent at the
birth, and when the child survives, Twin disappears, “traceless” and for the first time Sorrow
was “convinced that this time she had done something, something important by herself” (157).
Motherhood propels her to claim ownership of herself, to name her daughter as well as herself.
Looking into her daughter’s eyes, Sorrow honors herself, “I am your mother. . . . My name is
Complete” (159). Sorrow conjures Twin to handle the psychological break caused by her
orphaning and later by the death of her child, but she achieves unification that Florens
perceives as limiting but admirable: “Sorrow is a mother. Nothing more nothing less. I like her
devotion to the girl. She will not be called Sorrow. She has changed her name and is planning
her escape. She wants me to go with her but I have something to finish here” (187). Through
Sorrow’s creation of Twin and later through her recreation of herself as a mother, Morrison
reminds readers that W.E.B. Du Bois’s articulation of double consciousness is “a strategy, not a
prophecy or a cure” (“Home” 12). Sorrow creates Twin as a method for healing the pain of her
orphanage, but in becoming a mother, Sorrow achieves a unified self.

Florens’s ultimate creative gesture is to set fire to the master’s house, which is also the
inscribed manuscript of all of her recollections. She wants her “careful words” to be read,
offering up a bright omen, a sign for those who “read the world” but not the “letters of talk”
(188). The blaze will allow her words to “fly up then fall, fall like ash over acres of primrose and
mallow” (188). The allusion to the falling ash recalls Lina’s tale of colonial desire and in it
Morrison captures the thematic palimpsest for the novel. Lina’s story recalls the trade that
orphaned Florens, and it identifies the colonial claim—mine—that structures the novel’s plot.
The significance of this tale warrants a lengthy excerpt from the novel:
One day a traveler climbs a mountain nearby. He stands at its summit admiring all he sees below him. The turquoise lake, the eternal hemlock, the starlings sailing into clouds cut by the rainbow. The traveler laughs at the beauty, saying “This is perfect. This is mine.’ And the word swells, booming like thunder into valleys, over acres of primrose and mallow. Creatures come out of caves wondering what it means. Mine Mine. Mine. The shells of the eagle’s eggs quiver and one even cracks. The eagle swivels her head to find the source of the strange, meaningless thunder, the incomprehensible sound. Spotting the traveler, she swoops down to claw away his laugh and his unnatural sound. But the traveler, under attack, raises his stick and strikes her wing with all his strength. Screaming she falls and falls. Over the turquoise lake, beyond the eternal hemlocks, down through the clouds cut by rainbow. (73)

The story is one of many whispered by Lina to Florens. Both Lina and Florens stand as living reminders of the colonial claim. Their cultural background ensures different methods of dissemination (one by disease, the other by trade) but the consequence remains the same, orphanage. Lina’s story identifies motherhood interrupted as a rich metaphor for the colonial conditions. The orphan stands as the haunting consequence of the original violence, the colonial claim, which renders mothers unable to care for their children. Lina’s story relays the complexities of the colonialism, the entwined codes of patriarchy that assert dominion over all, which we witness in the novel’s primal scene. The trade that orphans Florens underscores the extent of this claim as Florens’s mother also sings a song “about the green bird fighting then dying when the monkey steals her eggs” (195). This song resonates with the thematic elements
of Lina’s story. It is interrupted by the voices of men, and Florens’s mother (like the mother eagle) seeks the source of these strange voices, taking her baby boy and Florens to “stand in their eyes” (195). Vaark laughs at the first sight of Florens—a loud, chest heaving laugh” that booms like the thunderous laughter and declarative “Mine” of the traveler (30). Just like the mother eagle, Florens’s mother attempts to defend her children, not from the laughing man, but from D’Ortega. Living with D’Ortega guaranteed her daughter’s sexual subjugation, but this “tall man with yellow hair,” who “hated the food,” and who “did not trust Senhor,” offered another possibility for Florens: “There is no protection but there is difference” (195). By trading her daughter for herself, Florens’s mother circumvents D’Ortega’s claim to them and pursues the only form of agency granted to her. In setting Vaark’s house on fire, Florens’s words replace the mother eagle and give life to the land below. This final creative gesture concludes Florens’s section and initiates Florens’s mother’s memory of the domestic encounters that left her without a daughter. The mother’s song, Lina’s story, and Florens’s telling identify women as life artists who each who “left her mark in the only material she could afford, and in the only medium her position in society allowed her to use” (Walker 243).

Similarly to Paradise, the novel ends with the restoration of a family lost, but in A Mercy the family restored is a severed one, that can only be accessed through the song sung by Florens’s mother, and the stories told by Lina and Florens. The novel ends by giving voice to a previously silenced mother, which can only be achieved through an act of defiance—in both Paradise and A Mercy this defiance manifests in flames, which raises the question: for an author so interested in the cultivation of readers, in the value of language and of story-telling, why does she choose such destructive imagery for these histories? Moreover, as these histories
are gathered from women whose authority is typically denied and so often discredited, why
does Morrison resort to the image of fire? What does this do for her readers? In burning down
the master’s house, and in the burning of the Patricia’s book, Morrison symbolically destroys a
textual house of lies.

*A Mercy* is a slave narrative with a difference. The slave narratives of the American
literary tradition serve as polite advertisements on the horrors of slavery. Florens’s telling
documents the orphanging consequence of slavery, but hers is one out of the “sixty million and
more” that can never be fully known. Patricia’s book and Florens’s talking room are repositories
of a history that is misremembered, misinterpreted, and misused by patriarchal attempts to
regulate women and motherhood. Florens’s words, falling like ash, promise to give life to
wherever they land, as they “flavor the soil of the earth” (188). Her bright omen brings light to
the incongruities of the master narrative; she writes not to abolish but fulfill the principles that
Vaark’s house symbolizes. Her flames light the father’s house, but her purpose is to glorify a
nearly forgotten mother. Florens’s original journey is one of dispossession and dislocation, but
like the women of the Convent, her final journey finds her fully possessed. In writing her tale,
Florens travels through the landscapes of her memory. She originally writes to the Blacksmith, a
lover that spurned her, but by the novel’s conclusion, Florens writes to her literal mother and to

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34 Fugitive slave narratives often followed an abolitionist approved format, which highlights the profound
ambivalence and beseeching silence that accompanies American literary sensibility. Prefatory material written by
white abolitionists sought to authenticate the stories and underscore the moral lessons to be gained from reading
the narrative. Such validation implies an ultimate ownership of the text, as Henry Louis Gates states, it enshrouds
the “black message with a white envelope” (133). As Morrison points out, writers refrained from giving too much
detail about the sordid particulars of their experience; “they were silent about many things, and they ‘forgot’ many
other things” (Morrison 91). Slave narratives cast light upon the ambivalent hypocrisy of a nation founded on
liberty but built upon slavery. The abolitionist and Unitarian minister, Theodore Parker, lauded the genre as an
“indigenous and original” portrayal of the nation’s “original romance” (37). Parker reasoned that the quest from
bondage “could be written by none but Americans” (37).
Lina, her adoptive mother: “I will keep one sadness. That all this time I cannot know what my mother is telling me. Nor can she know what I am wanting to tell her. Mae, you can have pleasure now because the soles of my feet are hard as cypress” (189). The cypress tree is often associated with death and mourning as it represents the “immortal soul and eternal death” (Lehner 57). Despite its association with loss, this evergreen tree also gestures towards the heavens, offering up a symbol of hope. Florens reference to the soles of her feet refers to her mother’s concern that her disposition for shoes, and “prettify ways,” invited the unwanted attention from D’Ortega: “only bad women wear high heels” (4). While Florens’s mother stressed the immorality of heels, it was Lina who worried about their impracticality: “As a result, Lina says, my feet are useless, will always be too tender for life and never have the strong soles, tougher than leather, that life requires.” In referring to the hardened soles of her feet, Florens conflates the concerns of her biological mother with those of her adoptive one. Moreover, Florens seeks out Lina’s help in setting fire to the house because she knows Lina loves fire more than she loves their mistress, Rebekka.

In A Mercy Morrison presents the nation’s colonial infancy, recalling a primordial past of intercultural beginnings and weaving a mythical transnational pedigree for the nation. Coalescing the narratives of the enslaved and the indentured with the tales of the free, Morrison’s novels bear witness to the reverberating and devastating effects of the colonial claim—mine—that ultimately renders fathers and mothers ineffectual and their children orphans. In her articulation of America’s violent history, Morrison identifies the domestic

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35 For more on the significance of the cypress tree, see Ernst and Johanna Lehner’s *Folklore and Symbolism of Flowers, Plants and Trees.*
rituals that render mothers invisible, and she unhinges the mother from her prescribed role as the reproducer of boundaries by restoring the creative agency that motherhood encodes.

This chapter offers a comparative analysis of Morrison’s orphans whose potency lies in their close proximity to conceptions of the nation, the family, and the home—conceptions that are all putatively imagined through a prism of race. Morrison privileges the point of view of the orphan in order to expose the colonial conditions that disempower mothers and fathers. Visions of the national family echo patriarchal concepts of the family, which imply equality while often leaving a lot of people out; the “home underscores this difference” (Stoler 198). Paradise and A Mercy offer a mythical commencement ceremony for the nation that includes the women that are often left out of national narratives. Like the men of Ruby, Vaark ultimately recreates the conditions of the master’s house. He attempts to un-orphan himself and the other members of his “imagined family,” but the project fails him as it is predicated on the economic conditions of servitude and slavery. Lina and Florens, like the Convent women, establish kinship through their shared struggle for liberation. This kinship defies cultural and biological boundaries as it is founded on the common component of storytelling. The disrupted bloodlines of A Mercy and Paradise are thus replaced by the life giving force of narrative.

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36 As Jacqueline Stevens explains, “the intertwined ‘race’—‘family’—‘nation’ itself constitutes a rope, each word simultaneously stringing together a set of meanings that gain their particularities through their associations in their interweaving” (18). Morrison’s orphans symbolize an unweaving and retying of those ties that bind.
CHAPTER THREE: THE LETTER OF THE LAW, THE LAW OF LOVE

That Justice is a blind goddess
Is a thing to which we black are wise:
Her bandage hides two festering sores
That once perhaps were eyes.

—Langston Hughes, “Justice”

In these brief lines, Hughes puts the mythology of American justice on trial. Hughes composed “Justice” in response to the infamous trial of the “Scottsboro Boys” (as they came to be known) who were wrongfully charged and convicted of raping two white women. The ease of the conviction, the racial dynamics (white jury, black defendants), and the lack of evidence all attest to the limitations of the “blind goddess” that we call Justice. The circumstances of the Scottsboro trial and Hughes’ poetic rendition expose the central irony encoded within the goddess’s blindfold: it is meant to signal a judicial innocence enacted through a blind process of law; but instead it hides the festering wound of racism that ultimately shapes the concept and implementation of justice. Hughes’s use of the singular “black” in his second line documents this racist vision as the plural is rendered into a representative one. Hughes’s poem, Richard Wright’s characterization of the blind Mrs. Dalton in *Native Son*, and Ralph Ellison’s metaphor of blindness in *Invisible Man* attest to a literary tradition that has sought to make injustice visible to white society; or to borrow Hughes’s metaphor, to expose the bandage. Like her predecessors, Toni Morrison’s fiction and nonfiction question the sanctity of a legal process that is always already wrapped up in cultural narratives of guilt and innocence—words that are themselves marred by racial conventions. This chapter examines Morrison’s measure of the
law, of crime and punishment, in order to explore the ways in which her novels expose the law as merely a legal system, not a just one.

Morrison’s fiction contains all the trappings of the crime novel; murder propels the plot of all of her novels (save for the Bluest Eye, although Pecola is certainly rendered lifeless). Her fiction is marked by narratives of confession, filled with vigilante justice, and littered with fugitives, but readers rarely witness the traditional judicial features. Morrison’s works are filled with all sorts of violations that shine light on the injustice at the heart of the legal systems that shape social customs. Beginning with the opening line of The Bluest Eye, “Quiet as it’s kept,” Morrison points to her violation of social code, the exposure of a secret that is meant to be kept quiet. Like the Brrrrrriiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiinng of Richard Wright’s Native Son, Morrison’s book sounds an alarm (7). Her novels contain deeply problematic openings that set the stage for an investigation, an exploration of the transgression that sets in motion the novel’s action and resolution. Song of Solomon opens with suicide; Tar Baby and Home open with a man’s escape—one from military ship, the other from a mental institution. Jazz, Paradise, and Love open with allusions to murder while Beloved introduces the ghost of a murdered baby. Florens’s confession opens A Mercy, and like the secret exposed by Claudia in The Bluest Eye, readers are forced to consider the criminal actions that put the plot in motion. The absence of the law’s signifiers (police, prison, and courts) ultimately undermines the ideological functions

37 In Sula, both Sula and her grandmother kill another (Sula, accidentally and Eva, intentionally). In Song of Solomon, the murder of Macon Dead results in the division between brother and sister that propels the novel. Guitar, of the same novel, works with the vigilante group, the Seven Days who avenge the murder of innocent black people by targeting random white people. In Tar Baby, Son runs his wife down with a car because she had an affair, and the murder of the “crawling already? baby girl” who is never named until after her death is the primary act of Beloved. In Jazz, Joe murders his lover Dorcas “just to keep the feeling going” and Paradise opens with the mass murder of the convent women. In Love the murder of Bill Cosey propels the plot, and in A Mercy Florens attempts to murder the blacksmith. And finally in Home, Frank and Cee witness the burial of a murdered man.
of these institutions. By leaving these institutions out of her narratives, Morrison transfers the burden of judgment to the reader, which ultimately serves to “interrupt the current law-and-order discourse that has such a grip on the collective imagination, facilitated as it is by deep and hidden influences of racism” (Davis 278). The brief references to lawful authorities underscores the way the law tends to respond to imaginary infractions rather than the novel’s principal crime. This chapter calls attention to the how the novels strategically refer to crimes but ignores the law and order discourse that is usually associated with criminality.

Consider the role of crime and punishment in The Bluest Eye. The sexual violation of Pecola propels the plot, but it is damage to property (trying to burn down the house) that guarantees Cholly’s punishment. He is sentenced to four days in jail for an infraction that seems petty when compared to the crime committed against Pecola. Although we are given intimate details of Cholly’s life, we only hear of his arrest through the voice of Claudia. Claudia also interprets Cholly’s actions as criminal—not because of the destruction of property—but because it results in the displacement of his family: “To be put outdoors by a landlord was one thing—unfortunate, but an aspect of life over which you had no control, since you could not control your income. But to be slack enough put oneself outdoors, or heartless enough to put one’s kin outdoors—that was criminal” (17). In the eyes of the law, Cholly’s crime is the destruction of property; in the eyes of Claudia, it is the dislocation of his family. Claudia’s distinction points to the illegality of collective crimes that result in the heartless act of putting someone out. Despite her critique, Claudia does not incriminate Cholly. Through the metaphor

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38 As Angela Davis observes, the abstract nature of crime and punishment prevents a legitimate “engagement with the real issues afflicting the communities from which prisoners are drawn in such disproportionate numbers” (271). “This is the ideological work that the prison performs,” Davis continues, “it relieves us of the responsibility of seriously engaging with the problems of late capitalism” (271). Prisons and “the punishment industry” function as a “perfect site for the simultaneous production and concealment of racism” (278).
of the marigolds that will not grow, Claudia indicts the unyielding land, the ingrained system of laws that rupture the black family. In implicating the land, Claudia exposes an entire social system, including the laws the system produces, as a barren and desolate place where no flowers can grow.

Claudia’s critique points to the collective crimes of the African diaspora and Native relocation projects. These collective crimes attest to the legality of criminal acts, which not only reinforce the laws but also give greater legitimacy to those that operate within the law. As Cheryl Harris explains, property and ownership undergird the law and are intimately tied to the racial categories that emerged through the colonial period and continue today. In general, only whites could hold property—a privileges that afforded new privileges. As white indentured servants and African slaves come to recognize their shared plight as exploited workers, capital intervened with legislation intended to highlight and exploit difference (Harris). This legislation functioned as another method of subordination, equating race with slavery in order to sever the solidarity between white and black laborers. Harris explains that most white people have no power save for the virtue of their whiteness, which functions as a “valuable asset,” a “treasured property in a society structured on racial caste” (277). Claims of inalienable rights blind people to the fact that rights are “not givens or inevitabilities, they are conscious selections regarding the structuring of social situations” (Harris 280). Central to this structure is the protection of property over the rights of people.

Harris’s observation necessitates an important distinction between the in-law and the outlaw—two concepts that will serve as my analytical point of departure. The in-law operates

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39 My use of “criminal acts” here refers to Claudia’s description of criminality, which is at odds with the law’s definition of criminality.
within legal codes and social custom that are born from a slave economy. The outlaw, on the other hand, confronts the communal crimes of slavery and its offspring, and in doing so, is always perceived as criminal. Together, the in-law and the out-law offer up something similar to what Judylyn S. Ryan describes as a “contested vision,” which expands the novels’ meaning by opening up “several interpretative possibilities” (Ryan 63). To articulate a definition of a contested vision, Ryan builds from Barbara Christian’s observation that, for “black women [and] third world” writers, theorizing happens in narrative (stories, riddles, parables) where the play of language resists closed and definitive readings (qtd in Ryan 63). I argue that Morrison’s outlaws generate a contested vision as they posit a theory of justice that is at once a critique and a method of resistance. While criminal characters fill her works, Morrison’s outlaws are those that define justice as an ethics of love. Claims of ownership and property are systematically challenged by the novels’ outlaws—those who may be “criminal” in the legal sense, but who but who satisfy the judicial codes operating within Morrison’s fiction.

The outlaw stands in direct confrontation with the laws of the land—those perpetuated by the courts and by custom—and forces the reader to evaluate the communal crimes that characterize the law. They operate within a moral code of love that stands in opposition to the judicial codes that reduce human interaction into an economic exchange. The outlaw invites another model of justice, one that engages with the social causes and conditions that create the circumstances for the criminality. Morrison romanticizes their liminality in order to highlight the object of criticism. Her fiction articulates a code of justice that is fluid and subjective, but grounded in the material conditions that produced the infraction. Morrison’s outlaws articulate a code of justice as an ethics of love for the community. They disregard the law and operate on
behalf of the community—even if the community ultimately rejects them. They incite new methods of judgment as they critique the value systems that give meaning to the judicial system. Morrison lends these outlaws a kind of power that stems from their status as outsiders, and she contrasts them with those who traverse a dangerous path of criminality that lacks the ethical code of love. Morrison’s novels foreground criminality in order to posit a larger critique, to chastise the tendency to, as Jennifer Gillan describes it, focus on the wrong front. We can’t rest comfortably in the cradle of this community and imagine that it happens to them, not us. Or, to borrow a phrase from Justine Talley, Morrison reminds us that “all our necks are on the line” (1).

The Intersections of Law and Literature

This chapter contributes to a stream of literary studies that began with John Boyd White’s *The Legal Imagination* (1973). White’s work was written specifically for law students, but his examinations of the literary components of legal texts point to the fruitful intersections of law and literature. White’s publication incited a growing interest in the questions raised by

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40 Gillian’s analysis of *The Bluest Eye* reveals that while Morrison focuses on the interior lives of members of a black community in Ohio, she is also examining the tensions and inconsistencies of this community’s relationship to the entire nation. To prove her point, Gillian considers the three prostitutes who (alone) befriend Pecola. As prostitutes, they exist outside the conventions of society and as characters they symbolize a critique of war efforts abroad. Their names, “China and Poland signify the European and Asian fronts,” whereas “Maginot Line refers both literally and metaphorically to focus on the wrong front” (285). Thus, while this novel provides a study of a young-girl’s psychological deterioration, it also provides a critique of the entire society that produced this girl—not just the fictional community but the literal one that Morrison operates in. Moreover, in selling their bodies, these women function as total affront to the system of justice whose origins always trace back to slavery. They own their bodies and their labor, which is of course a direct confrontation of the two basic premises of slavery. The presence of these outlawed figures expands the parameters of the novel’s critique and point to not only the battle fought abroad but to the domestic battles fought at home. Imprinted on these outlawed figures is an image of resistance to the oppressive legal codes that render black women as physical objects without agency. They are an affront to the codes of domesticity, but these outlawed figures manage love in spite of the ugliness that surrounds them. The prostitutes operate within an ethos of love as they alone befriend Pecola. Claudia too follows their ethical code, but by then it “is much much much too late” (206). Correspondingly, Sula is an outlawed woman that represents a feminist perspective at odds with that of her in-law friend Nel, for whom the recognition of Sula’s point of view comes much too late.
an examination of laws and literature, questions that range from the investigations of fictional depictions of the law to its rhetorical language used by law (Heald). My study builds from the premise that literature functions as a vehicle for understanding and influencing the law (Heald).

In his study of the law and literature, *Whispered Consolations*, Jon-Christian Suggs asserts that “all African American fiction carries the question of legal status of blacks as its subtext” (8).

Suggs argues that the historical force of the law creates and defines the very concept of the African American subject: “The creation and definition of an African American subject is not only socially constructed in a culture that masks its class determinants . . . but is determined and redetermined by the law” (9). Thus, classical African American literature, those narratives composed between 1820-1954, engage with “the questions of the legal status of African Americans or have as its assumed and even unspoken ground the struggle over that status” (9).

The movement to end slavery and Jim Crow sought equal protection under the law, to use the courts, legislatures, and legal documents as a vehicle of black liberation. This struggle culminates with the Brown vs. Board of Education decision because it acknowledged that America had been a “prison-house of lies” that held “half its people in bondage while proclaiming them free” and held “that bound half responsible for the failure to produce the consequences of liberty while locking away the instruments of that freedom” (Suggs 15). Suggs explains that the legal actions that resulted from the civil rights movement signaled a shift in the law and literary interrogations of the law: “The cultural and political challenge thrown up by black nationalism and the Black Arts movement was not a challenge to merely redefine the fundamental assumptions of the civil rights movement, but a challenge to it to confront white epistemological hegemony with a “Black” epistemology based on the power of language to
redefine experience” (Suggs 286). In post-civil rights literature, Suggs concludes, “All law is replaced by narrative and its devices” (296). To illustrate his point, Suggs looks at Beloved and concludes that “although the precipitating cause of the story is the law itself, and the resolution can be read as a commentary on vengeance and restitution . . . [but] what Morrison makes of the law is hard to read” (295). This chapter builds from Suggs premise that post-civil rights literature replaces “law with narrative and its devices,” and it seeks to answer the question of what Morrison makes of the law.

I argue that Morrison’s fiction and non-fiction shares the motivations of Critical Race Theory (CRT), which critiques the notion of an objective or neutral legal system. Proponents of CRT investigate legal matters from the social and political forces that helped shape the law in order to “fashion a set of tools for thinking about race that avoids the traps of racial thinking” (Crenshaw xxxii). A central concern of CRT is to interrogate what Gary Peller refers to the as “integrationist ideology” that would come to define the civil rights movement. Peller defines integrationist ideology as the belief that discrimination is enacted individually rather than institutionally. The principal premise of this version of racial justice is enacted by “dismissing [race] as an arbitrary characteristic” that should be ignored in accessing the character of a person. Racism thus becomes an individual behavior that can only be rectified individually, particularly through the integration of schools and later workplaces and other institutional apparatus. In other words, according to this mindset, only people practice racism, and the structural conditions that create a racist society are presumed innocent of racist ideology. Morrison’s outlaws challenge these assumptions as they function as conduits of “antithetical knowledge” that necessitate new understandings of justice as an ethos of love.
Consider the murder of Beloved in the novel of the same name. It is by now well known that Morrison’s novel offers an imaginative rendering of the case of Margaret Garner. In 1856, a group of slaves, including Garner and her four children, escaped from her captor’s Kentucky plantation (Pagnattaro 137). When the threat of capture appeared, Garner attempted to kill all of her children; three survived. All of the escaped slaves were arrested under the jurisprudence of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Like the representative “black” in Hughes’s poem, all of the defendants were charged with complicity in the infant’s death (Pagiannaro 138). The two-week trial generated arguments regarding the constitutionality of the Fugitive Slave Act, but not with the institution of slavery. Garner’s attorney argued that the Act required citizens to carry “fuel to hell,” but the Commissioner rejected this appeal as it was the slaves were “a question of property”—not of humanity (qtd in Pagnattaro139). The fugitives were returned to slavery, and “nothing came of the murder charges” (Pagnattaro 140).

Beloved makes no mention of this trial and instead chooses to create what Marissa Anne Pagnattaro describes as “an interior life for her character to ‘yield up a kind of truth’ about slavery” (136). In her depiction of the effect of the slave code on the lives of Sethe and her children, Morrison “asks her readers to scorn the law and to consider whether Sethe’s acts are justified” (Pagnattaro 143). Sethe, and her readers, must create an alternative ethical system because the legal one fails her. Beloved implies that Sethe’s murderous act is not only logical but a justifiable response to the collective crime of slavery (Sweeny). By leaving the trial out, Morrison circumvents the legal claims to property and forces the readers to recognize the institution from the perspective of humanity that the law leaves out. Sethe’s action illustrates an aspect of Morrison’s judicial ethos in which she depicts extreme criminality as an act of what
Terry Ottan refers to as “horrific love.” Horrific love refers to the “creation of forces so brutal that they can transform conventional “signifiers” of cruelty and evil into gestures of extraordinary love—incestuous rape, infanticide, and murder articulate not the immorality condemned by the dominant culture but the inverse. They become acts ‘signifyin(g) a profound if often convoluted love” (Otten 652).

Witness the murderous love of the Seven Days in *Song of Solomon*. This vigilante group seeks to counter the violence inflicted on the African American community; for each black person lynched, the Seven Men murder a white one. The Seven Days must enact their own system of justice to counter the custom of killing black people with impunity. They attempt to rectify this injustice by recreating the conditions of the legal system that denies their participation. Through the character of Guitar, Morrison exposes the twisted logic of justice by giving voice to a character who believes he is acting judicially. As Susan Neil Mayberry explains, “The Seven Days’ brand of violence, however, counters white madness with like-minded indifference, determination and cold-blooded logic. . . . Arguing that he has a ‘better’ motive for murder because they do not involve enjoyment, power, public attention, money, land or anger, Guitar kills to keep the black-white ratio ‘balanced’ and to ‘make a world where one day white people think before they lynch’” (101). From Guitar’s perspective, he kills to keep the black community alive, but in doing so he recreates the conditions of white madness that he attempts to remedy. These men replicate what Megan Sweeney refers to as the “logic of commensurability,” which “replicates the logic of commodification that undergirds slavery” (442). As Sweeney explains, encoded within legal discourse, and its attendant symbol of the scales of justice, is the insistence that the “punishment fit the crime,” which relegates judicial
matters to an economic exchange. Sweeney’s analysis reveals that “the language of justice reifies commensurability, making it seem like a natural given, yet justice is a derivative concept that arises from commerce” (441).

Morrison depicts Guitar (and the other members) sympathetically, but she uses Pilate as their revolutionary foil. Pilate is the ultimate outlaw of Song of Solomon because she operates within an ethical system that can only be defined as love. Her name, which recalls the verb pilot, highlights her role as a guide for readers and characters, and its Biblical connotation underscores her role as a divine judge. Moreover, her father chooses this name because he likes the way it looks on the page: like a strong tree, hovering over and protecting the little ones. Pilate operates outside the laws of nature (she is born without a navel) and the laws of society (she has a child, but no husband). When Guitar and Milkman are arrested for trying to steal what they believe is gold from Pilate, she rescues them from the police by circumventing their authority. In this encounter, Pilate exploits the police’s expectations to save the men from the police. As Brenda Marshall explains, “The policemen expect and know how to handle a Butterfly McQueen character, so that’s the character she puts on. But she adds a little something to her part for her own amusement. Pilate’s dignity is secure as she mocks the policemen with a joke she doesn’t need to let them in on” (487). Although these men have stolen from her, she rescues them and later when she is shot by Guitar, her dying words express a sentiment of love, “I wish I’d a knowed more people,” she tells Milkman, “I would of loved ’em all. If I’d a knowed more, I would a loved more” (340). In these works and others, Morrison posits a code of ethics that is akin to Cornel’s West’s declaration that “justice is

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41 The economic underpinnings of the judicial system is further highlighted by the current practice of low wage labor and the rise of private prisons; for more, see Davis.
something that love look like in public. It’s not some privatistic, personalistic relation with a significant other in any narrow way. It spills over” (par 28). Morrison’s judicial critique is a situational one as each novel constructs its own ethical system of crime and punishment—none of which satisfy legal codes because they attest to the humanity encoded within the criminal behavior. Morrison contrasts Pilate’s love with the drive for vengeance that motivates the Seven Days. Vengeance fails them as they succumb to suicide and lunacy: Robert Smith (another Days member) commits suicide at the novel’s opening, and Guitar’s extreme paranoia causes him to shoot at his best friend (a shot that kills Pilate). Through the character of Guitar, Morrison points to the dangerous path of vengeance that ultimately leads to the recreation of the dominant social order. While Guitar believes he has better motives than the white murderers who kill black people for greed and sport, in attacking his best friend, Guitar operates within the same motivational system that leads to the death of so many: greed. Morrison returns to the theme of vigilante justice in Paradise as the men of Ruby function as another incarnation of the Seven Days. Morrison’s negative outlaws, those that I refer to as the in-laws, create their own laws that merely replicate the logic of legal codes. The men of Ruby in Paradise, for instance, informally police the town, creating their own laws that mirror those of the dominant system. The women of the Convent threaten the imagined coherence of Ruby because they assert an outlawed love (love for themselves, and each other). Like Sula, these outlawed women function as a scapegoat for the novel’s in-law. They are perceived as criminals, but the men’s murderous claim to them illustrates that it is the men—not the women—who are the novel’s real criminals. Pilate’s unconditional love and Consolata’s
teachings of self-love counter the murderous love of the Seven Days and the men of Ruby who act in favor of the community but who ultimately cause more harm than good.

Morrison further complicates her image of the in-law in her depiction of the Police-heads in *Love*, which are described as “demons” whose sole purpose is to “harm loose women and eat disobedient children” (5). Morrison contrasts these mythical Police-heads who regulate outlawed behavior with the actual police who function outside of the law in order to satisfy the codes of “Dixie law” (68). Dixie law conflates legal transgressions with political action: canvassing for the vote, raising money for schools, and buying property are treated as criminal actions—even though the information is obtained illegally. As a police informant, Daniel Robert Cosey (known as Dark), was the “one police could count on to know where a certain colored boy was hiding, who sold liquor, who had an eye on what property, what was said at church meetings, who was agitating to vote, collecting money for school” (68). Dark’s son Cosey attempts to reconcile the damage down by his in-law father—“The father was dreaded; the son was a ray of light. The cops paid off the farther; the son paid off the cops” (68). While Cosey opposes his father’s values (“what the father corrected, the son celebrate”), he ultimately replicates, rather than revises, the system. As Mary Paniccia Carden points out, Cosey “repeats the same general pattern of pandering to white power, ignoring the needs of his family and betraying the community” (137). Through these in-law characters, Morrison demonstrates the dangers of the outlaw who operates without an ethical code: they become killing machines, rather than complete human beings.

As the narrative of *Love* unfolds, readers learn that L poisoned Cosey with foxglove, and she destroyed his will and replaced it with a new one. L’s outlawed actions parallels the one
constructed by Pilate and Consolata. She acts out of love and in the interest of love. In murdering Cosey, L attempts to curtail his hold over his wife, Heed, and his granddaughter, Christine. Through L’s narrative musings, readers learn that Cosey married Heed when she was eleven, and it is this marriage that disrupts the friendship between Heed and Christine. L’s murderous actions forces these women to not only reconcile their friendship but to recognize their obligations to another young woman, Junior. By the novel’s conclusion, Heed and Christine restore their friendship, and as Mar Gallego points out, in doing so readers witness a kind of that is a “perfect paradigm, transgressing racial, gender, or class barriers, and disregarding family and community restrictions” (98). L’s outlawed acts contrasts with the in-law behavior of Cosey who merely replicates the system that he seeks to challenge. Moreover, through L’s narration readers learn that Cosey’s murder is not the novel’s principal crime; instead, it is Cosey’s marriage to Heed. While this marriage is within the realm of the law, it is not within the ethical codes operating within the novel. It is only through L’s outlawed intervention that readers able to fully appreciate the harm Cosey has done to these two women; moreover it is only L’s criminal act that these women are able to restore the friendship that had been denied.

Morrison’s outlaws may be read as “trickster-driven outlaws” because they share the objectives of the trickster figure in African American literature (Boyd and White 600). Henry Louis Gates locates this trickster figures within the “related parts of a larger, unified figure” that he collectively refers to as Esu. Esu serves as a messenger for the gods, and it is Esu who teaches his friend Ifa to read these messages. Whereas Ifa merely reads the image, it is Esu, however, “who retains dominance over the act of interpretation precisely because he signifies
the very divinity of the figurative (21). Morrison’s outlaws function like Esu, guiding the readers how to interpret the text as they point readers to the outlawed morality operating within the novel. Like the trickster, outlaws invite interpretation, defy formal boundaries, and circumvent reigning conventions. They signify on the law’s ontology by making meaning from the meaning-making processes of the law (Suggs 11). Sarah Hagedorn VanSlette and Josh Boyd explore the intersections of outlaw discourse and a trickster aesthetic: “The trickster myth and outlaw discourse, as they appear in the modern world, speak about the normative assumptions and accepted ideological frameworks of modern society. In concert with one another, they encourage observers to question, critique, and renounce that which culture takes for granted” (601). The trickster relies on humor and offers a morally ambiguous message in order to disrupt structure and challenge authority; the outlaw, “on the other hand, generally pursues a clear agenda, albeit one that may be perceived as outside of acceptable or appropriate options” (597). Readers witness the interpretative capabilities of the trickster enacted by Morrison’s outlaws, which signify on the law’s foundational assumptions.

To understand the circumference of Morrison’s critique, it is helpful to consider her non-fiction essays on the O.J. Simpson trial and the Clarence Thomas hearing. In these essays, Morrison illustrates the need to reevaluate dominant narratives of the law and legal matters.42

In her introductory essay to Birth of a Nation’hood, Morrison examines the O.J. Simpson case from a different premise. Dismissing the fact of guilt or innocence, she instead wonders why it

42 This observation is informed by Richard Schur’s “Unseen or Unspeakable? Racial Evidence in Baldwin’s and Morrison’s Nonfiction,” which compares Morrison’s critique of justice with Baldwin’s and concludes that “in contrast to the civil-rights-era critics, Morrison attacks the limitations of the legal process. For Morrison, the language of the law and the cultural narratives that influence the law constitute a faulty structure of legal perception and vision, not a logical error that undermines the rationality of legal doctrine” (217).
is so easy to believe that a once-upon-a-time football star and national hero could so quickly and easily assumed to be a murderer. Looking only at the evidence provided, intentionally leaving out any racial classifications, Morrison failed to create a believable narrative of Simpson’s guilt: “Without the support of black irrationality,” Morrison writes, “the fictional case not only could not be made, it was silly” (xii-xiii). Correspondingly, Morrison locates similar racial tropes in the spectacle that was the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings where Hill’s “behavior seems irrational and ambivalent because her actions, especially her hesitancy to come forward, did not match dominant white, male standards for responding to an assault” (Schur 214). In these essays, Morrison articulates the limitations and transformative possibilities of narrative. Thus, cultural narratives demand revision in order to seriously engage with questions of social justice.

In the remaining section of this chapter, I offer a comparative analysis of two novels that on the surface seem to have little in common: *Tar Baby* and *Jazz*. I compare these works because they are concerned with the ideological function of justice and both use theft as a vehicle of interrogation. These novels share little in form or setting, but when looked at together, they best articulate Morrison’s critique of the law. In both novels, however, Morrison reclaims aspects African American culture (the folk story and the music of jazz) that have been appropriated for white American audiences. The failure to recognize the origins of these cultural traditions ignores the pivotal role that African Americans have made in the construction of a national identity, and even more significantly, it undermines the projects of black liberation, which depends upon the articulation of black cultural traditions. Both novels present a world in isolation, a world created and maintained according to the expectations of
race. One is a world created by the white patriarch, Valerian Street, who flees his American home to recreate another image of it on a fictional Caribbean island. The other depicts Harlem as a refuge for blacks fleeing the violence of the South and documents the migration north. In these works, Morrison contrasts the in-law with the outlaw to posit a critique of the systems that oppress. In *Tar Baby*, Morrison characterizes the in-law as Valerian Street whose authority is reinforced by all members of his household. Morrison contrasts him with Son who functions as the novel’s principal outlaw. Son is perceived as criminal, but his critique reveals the real crime of the novel. In *Jazz* Morrison locates the in-law within the sterile language of newspapers. The narrative styling of *Jazz* (the novel and the music) interrogates the principal claims of the newspaper that, like the law, purports to tell just the facts.

**The In-Law and Outlaws of *Tar Baby***

*Tar Baby* revisits a familiar tale of the folk hero, Briar Rabbit, and a farmer who’s desperate to keep the rabbit out of his garden. To keep the thieving rabbit out, the farmer constructs a figure of tar. The rabbit is initially indifferent to the tar figure, but then becomes enraged when “she” refuses to acknowledge him. So, he punches it—not once but twice and becomes stuck and vulnerable to the farmer’s dire plans. But, the rabbit outwits the famer; exploiting the farmer’s prejudices, the rabbit begs to be returned to the “terrible” briar patch that is his home. As Morrison explains in the brief introduction to her novel, the rabbit “knows the farmer would reckon this return to the ‘hood as supreme torture, worse than death, so into the briar patch he is unceremoniously flown” (xii). The linchpin of this tale is the question of ownership and access as both the rabbit and farmer believe they have a right to the garden’s goods. The axis of the folk tale turns on what Lovalerie King describes as the “stereotype of the
black thief” (30). King explains, “because enslaved Blacks, defined legally as property were forbidden to own property above certain basic items, the means to acquire property above certain basic items was necessarily defined as outside of the law, as theft” (30, emphasis in original). King’s analysis reveals that the subject of theft in African American literary works reveals a complex critique of the American judicial system that reifies blackness into thievery and characterizes liberty as property. King describes this tension so nicely that it bears repeating here:

In the slaveholders’ mind, the American south existed as a paradise (a space where Freedom is easily realized) in which he (or, occasionally she) served as absolute ruler and definer of good and evil. Blackness and Blacks stood as signs of evil outside paradise where resources were stockpiled. The South, its plantations, and the resources produced therein became smaller representations of America as a new Eden for Europeans making the transition to the New World. This system of representation supported the institution of slavery and gave rise to negative images of Blacks as, among other things, natural born thieves seeking illegal entry into the garden (paradise) of American resources. (29)

The folk tale, and Morrison’s reimagining of it, engages with these themes of paradise. In this tale, and in Morrison’s reimagining, theft functions as a form of resistance to colonial claims of ownership. By recalling and revising the motif of theft operating in the folk tale, Morrison challenges the central assumptions of the law and offers a postmodern parable of resistance. The stolen fruit that propels the novels’ action attests to the way the farmer’s garden depends
upon denying others goods. *Tar Baby* challenges the principal premises of the law, specifically by questioning the legal notions of ownership and possession. Furthermore *Tar Baby* illustrates the way rethinking concepts of ownership and theft can serve the interests of selfhood and liberty. Morrison’s treatment of theft and other legal matters reveals the “faulty logic and ideological assumptions advanced through institutional apparatus (including the systems of laws) that supported American chattel slavery and race-based discrimination” (King 10). *Tar Baby* depicts outlawry as a method of resistance and she uses the form of the narrative as a means for articulating an alternative ethical code.

Son functions as the rabbit of Morrison’s reimagining as he slips from one metaphoric garden to another. He is the novel’s principal outlaw; not because he is a criminal but because his presence manages a gesture of critique against the dominant system that the farmer’s garden symbolizes. The novel opens with one of Son’s transgression; he jumps ship that is appropriately titled the *Stor Konigsgaarten* (King’s Garden). His escape recalls a passage through dimensions, as if pulled through time into another place. The current forms a “bracelet of water”—recalling a chain that pulls him into a “wide, empty tunnel. . . . He went down, down, and found himself not at the bottom of the sea, as he had expected, but whirling in a vortex. He thought nothing except I’m going counterclockwise” (5). In this description Morrison signals an unravelling of the center, a turning and turning of Yeats’ widening gyre. On the run from (accidently) killing his wife, Son spends seven years traveling the world as a soldier and a sailor; he had “seven documented identities and before that a few undocumented ones, so he barely remembered his real original name himself” (139). Son is perceived as an ignorant southerner, but he has received a solid education from the margins of society. Since his retreat
in 1971, “Son had been seeing the United States through the international edition of *Time*. . . . It seemed sticky. Loud, red and sticky. It’s fields spongy with the blood of all the best people. As soon as a man or woman did something generous or said something bold, pictures of their funeral lines appeared in the foreign press” (167). Son’s education generates an alternative epistemology as he becomes “suspicious of all knowledge that he could not feel in his bones” (167).

We witness Son’s disruptive capabilities when he arrives at the L’Arbe de la Croix—the most impressive and “blessedly unrhetorical house in the Caribbean” (11). The novel’s setting recalls the colonial origins of slavery, highlighting the way the past leaves its imprint on the present (11). The economic system has shifted from production to consumption, but what remains is the hierarchy. Here lives the liberal patriarch Valerian Street and his wife, Margaret, “the Principal Beauty of Maine,” and their black servants, Ondine and Sydney. Valerian is an heir to the Street candy business, which points to the economic significance of inheritance. Moreover, the Caribbean’s natural resources (sugar and cocoa) and its cheap labor point to the intersections of colonialism and capitalism that characterize the candy industry (Willis 176). All of Valerian’s relationships are marked by economic exchange. In marrying Margaret, Valerian takes her from extreme poverty to excess wealth. Sydney and Ondine work for him, and Jadine refers to him as her patron—a word that underscores the economic undertones of their relationship. Ondine and Sydney have worked for the retired millionaire for years, Ondine as a cook and Sydney as a butler. The nature of their labor illustrates a kind of love as both worry about maintaining Valerian’s health. Years of standing in the kitchen have destroyed Ondine’s feet, and she has lost the ability to do physically demanding tasks, such as killing chickens or
doing the laundry by hand (which is the way Valerian prefers it). To help Ondine, the Streets hire Thérèsa and Gideon, whom they refer to as Mary and Yardman respectively. Ondine and Sydney believe that Yardman and Mary are their hired hands, as Ondine refers to them as “my help” and Sydney believes that he (rather than Valerian) should be the one to chastise them when they fail to follow through with their assignments (207). In their relationship with Theresa and Gideon, Sydine and Ondine replicate the hierarchy of the Street household.

Son shakes up the entire social dynamic of the Street household—not only because he is a terrifying discovery but because the characters racialize their fear of him. Morrison is careful to highlight Son’s harmlessness as he had been there unnoticed for days, eating stolen chocolate bars and drinking bottled water, and he is only discovered when boredom causes him to explore the house. The characters’ reactions to Son exemplify the intersections of fear, crime and racism that Davis attributes to the “ideological reproduction of a fear of black people” (269). Margaret describes the discovery as finding “literally, literally a nigger in the wood pile” a “real live dope addict ape” (82, 87). Moreover, the thought of him touching her things repulses her as she conflates his presence with sexual perversion and imagines him “probably jerking off. Black sperm was sticking in clots to her French jeans or down in the toe of her Anne Klein shoes . . . she’d throw them all out and buy everything new from scratch” (86). Margaret conflates theft with sexuality, making the leap from the black thief to the black rapist (Emberley).

Moreover, her characterization of Son as a “nigger,” a thief, a drug addict, and a rapist illustrates the way blackness functions as a sign of criminality. Moreover, the description of Son’s dreadlocks attests to the ideological association of blackness with criminality: his hair “looked overpowering—physically overpowering, like bundles of long whips or lashes that could
grab her and beat her to jelly. And would. Wild aggressive, vicious hair that needed to be put in jail. Uncivilized, reform school hair . . . chain gang hair” (113). Jadine shares Margaret’s fear of Son as she sees him as “raggedy ass black man . . . with rape, theft, or murder on his mind,” and she worries about Valerian’s lax attitude as “he could not have known even now, what that nigger was up to” (92). Although Jadine frequently refers to Son as a “nigger,” she cringes when Margaret describes Son as a gorilla: “Jadine’s neck prickled at the description. She had volunteered nigger—but not gorilla” (129). Jadine can call this man a “nigger” because in her mind, nigger refers to criminal and unrefined behavior, but gorilla could refer to all black people. Jadine’s disgust at the word gorilla, and her characterization of Son as a nigger, echoes the attitudes of Sydney and Ondine who have no racial solidarity with the intruder. Interestingly, Margaret imagines forming a posse akin to a neighborhood watch, “All the neighbors would have to be told that a black man had been roaming around, and it could happen again. They would have to share security and keep in touch with each other” (84). In imagining her vigilante group, Margaret illustrates her blindness to the black men that are already “roaming around” the island as they work for the island’s inhabitants, but because of her encounter with Son, she now sees these men through a lens of criminality. Her imagined group functions as a means to simultaneously criminalize and police the black community.

Valerian’s invitation for Son to stay for a drink and for the night forces all the characters to reconsider their place in Valerian’s household. He is given a room upstairs, on the same level as the Streets, which is particularly troubling to Ondine because Son is black; “If he’d been a white bum in Street’s closet, well, she would have felt different. . . . The man upstairs wasn’t a Negro—meaning one of them. He was a stranger . . . even if he didn’t steal, he was nasty and
ignorant” (102). In these reflections, Ondine articulates the cause of her hurt. Ondine believes his blackness should secure him a space outside of the house—or at the very least, on the same level as her and Sydney. In their mind, Valerian is treating a “nasty and ignorant” black man better than he treated those who had spent years serving him. Jadine can stay on the same level as Valerian because she has been educated by him whereas Son is perceived as a “stinking ignorant swamp nigger . . . a wild-eyed pervert who hides in women’s closets” (100). Here Sydney underscores Ondine’s original critique. Son’s lack of education and his coarseness render him unworthy of Valerian’s kind treatment—especially if that treatment is better than they themselves have received. Years of treating Valerian with the love and kindness of a friendship wrapped in servitude has not been enough to warrant the dignity and respect that Ondine and Sydney deserve. Through Valerian’s treatment of Son, Sydney and Ondine are forced to reconsider their relationship to Valerian—a reconsideration that ultimately undermines Valerian’s authority within the house.

As there are no police on the island, Valerian alone doles out punishments for perceived grievances. He is the ultimate authority in matters large and small, but his judgments are often grossly misguided. As the farmer of Morrison’s folk tale, Valerian symbolizes the rule of law, the old order of things. Sipping his Blanc de Blancs (White of White) wine, talking to “his ghosts in peace,” and reading only mail because he had given up on books, “the language in them had changed so much—stained with rivulets of disorder and meaninglessness” (14). The reference to “rivulets of disorder” recalls Son’s journey from the King’s Garden to Valerian’s house, and it points to a changing literary landscape that seeks to undo the center’s hold. By the novel’s setting (1979), the literary landscape had shifted to include more voices of women and people
of color as “black women writers were seeking different venues and even different voices for their experience” (Suggs 288). The inclusion of these new voices, and consequently, new narrative techniques, challenge the old order by calling into question the heretofore divine rules that govern the social system. Valerian’s disgust for the “rivulets of disorder” in contemporary literature illustrates his need for an official script, an order to the perceived chaos that surrounds him, and it evokes the chain of water that pulls Son counter-clockwise. His immaculate greenhouse (kept free from soldier ants and other disruptive elements) symbolizes his need to make a world in his own image; accordingly, nothing blooms there. As Terry Otten notes, the greenhouse “is a sanitized world where he can artificially grow the hydrangea that symbolize his innocence,” but readers eventually learn that he is far from innocent. Valerian’s need for order and clarity correlates with his attitude towards his wife, his servants, and his patron. His judgments are really just projections of himself as he seeks to create a world in his image.

While all the other characters racialize Son’s intrusion by characterizing him as a sexual deviant and a thief, Valerian rejects these assumptions by inviting him to stay for dinner and later to join him in the greenhouse. Valerian refuses to act in response to this fear, but his is more of a performance than a belief. As Jadine notes, it was “Style. All style. That was Valerian” (91). Years before, while on a trip in Miami, Valerian had been mugged: “He stood there with his arms over his head, some black teenagers with rags around their heads, ran their fingers through his pockets. One of them looked at him and must have seen the disdain in Valerian’s eyes. He sneered at Valerian and said, ‘you don’t like us do you,’” and Valerian replied, “I don’t know you” (91). Valerian’s comment underscores the novel’s central irony: Valerian is the
novel’s real criminal—and each act of theft reveals this fact. Valerian claims to not know these thieves but he should at least recognize a bit of himself in them as he steals the labor of others, his family business steals the sugar from the Caribbean, and most significantly he steals the apples for Christmas dinner and punishes others who do the same.

As the novel’s outlaw, Son disrupts the order of Valerian’s universe by literally shaking things up for all members of the household, but it is another transgression that reveals the novel’s principal conflict: the theft of Valerian’s apples. Son steals chocolate, but Gideon and Thérèsa steal the apples intended for Valerian’s Christmas dinner, and it is this theft that ultimately usurps the family dynamic. The stolen chocolate signifies a kind of decadence while the apples provide sustenance. For Gideon and Theresa, however, this is reversed. Chocolate is easy obtained on the island, but the fruit is a delicacy—they are considered contraband (only French goods could be bought and sold). Thérèsa had a “craving for them akin to hysteria,” but as they had to be imported she could not have them. Gideon and Thérèsa are charged with the task of bringing the apples from the port to the island—an eighteen mile journey by rowboat that ends with Valerian catching these two “red-handed” for stealing apples from his crate. Valerian fires them not only because of the theft but because of the arrogance when they had been caught: “they didn’t even apologize” and the woman called Valerian names he hadn’t heard since he left the army (205). Their arrogance derives from their refusal to accept the conditions created by Valerian just as they refuse to believe that they have no right to the apples. In this scene, Thérèsa and Gideon symbolize more rabbits in Valerian’s garden. Although these two rowed eighteen miles from the port to Valerian’s island, Valerian laments the inconvenience caused to him and the consulate.
Morrison points to theft as a form of resistance, and an instigator of insight. The theft, like Son’s presence, forces everyone to once again reconsider their relationship to Valerian as Sydney and Ondine believe Valerian disrespected them by firing their two helpers. Valerian however feels justified in firing these two because “somewhere in the back of Valerian’s mind one hundred French chevaliers were roaming the hills on horses. . . . Back straight, soldiers high—alert but restful in the security of the Napoleonic Code” (206). The Napoleonic Code is significant here because of its vast influence on pan-European laws. Among other things, this French civil code “forbade privileges based on birth” (Princeton). Of course this is ironic ground for Valerian to stand as he afforded the apples by virtue of his birth and Thérèsa and Gideon are denied them by virtue of theirs. Valerian fails to recognize this important distinction just as he fails to recognize the way he slighted Sydney and Ondine. Indeed, as John Duvall remarks,

This moment releases years of underlying tensions between master and servants, as well as husband and wife, revealing the following suppressed knowledge—Valerian’s wife, Margaret abused their son when he was a child. Morrison’s ironic inversion of Genesis then, is that the tree of knowledge proves to be the undoing primarily of the island’s self appointed “god” because Valerian is forced to recognize his implication in the abuse of his son. (100)

Moreover, Sydney and Ondine are forced to recognize their powerlessness in Valerian’s house—a realization that is instigated by the arrival of Son and underscored by the firing of Thérèsa and Gideon.

Son’s interior monologue at the Christmas table reveals a strong analysis of the intersections between, ownership, property, racism, colonialism and capitalism. His meditation
challenges the principal logic of the law, and its premise of property and ownership. As Son notes, Valerian is “able to dismiss with a flutter of the fingers the people whose sugar and cocoa had allowed him to grow old in regal comfort ... and made a fortune in order to move near, but not in the midst of, the jungle where the sugar came from and build a palace with more of their labor and then hire them to do more of the work he was not capable of and pay them according to some scale of value that would outrage Satan himself” (203). In pointing to the conditions of labor, and the history of inheritance, Son exposes the central irony of Valerian’s character: he is the novel’s criminal who operates within the laws that are always already unjust. As Son observes, when those workers dare to take something for their dinner, Valerian “dismissed them with a flutter of the fingers because they were thieves, and nobody knew thieves and thievery more than he did and he probably all thought they were a law-abiding man, they all did, and they all always did” (203). The flutter of fingers recalls the fingers that ran through Valerian’s pocket when he is mugged and functions as a link between Valerian’s role as the novel’s primary thief.

It is worth noting that on the night of Son’s arrival, Valerian sees a vision of his own son, Michael. It is this vision that causes him to invite Son to stay. Otten notes that “With a touch of whimsy Valerian compares Son with Michael,” but it is more than a comparison as Morrison’s conflates the two to illustrate the interlocking fears of American society (66). As a socialist, Michael symbolizes a radical, leftist critique that locates oppression within an economic system that creates and exploits racial divisions. Michael exists outside of the principal narrative, as we only hear about him from the reflections of other characters while Son functions as an enemy within. Davis’s reflections on the relationship between the fear of crime and the fear of
communism prove useful for understanding the significance of Valerian’s vision: “The fear of crime has attained a status that bears a sinister similarity to the fear of communism as it came to restructure social perceptions during the fifties and the sixties. The figure of the ‘criminal’ . . . has come to represent the most menacing enemy of American society. . . . Of course the enemy within is far more dangerous than an enemy without, and a black enemy within is the most dangerous of all” (270-71). Linking Son and Michael, Morrison nods to the way radical critiques get funneled through a sieve of liberalism but that ultimately leave the dominant structures intact. Through these descriptions, we get a leftist critique that is usurped by liberal, capitalist ideology.

Son represents the Black Nationalist efforts to challenge the principal elements of integrationist ideology that structures the Valerian household. He joins the blind horsemen—those mythical characters that ride against the Napoleonic warriors—and symbolizes two value systems at war. In joining the blind horseman, Son aligns himself with the marooned outlaws of slavery. These communities operated outside of society and the law as they were neither free nor enslaved: “Every detail of these communities was invariably determined by and steeped in resistance, for their raison d’etre emanated from their perpetual assault on slavery. Only in a fighting stance could the maroons hope to secure their constantly imperiled freedom” (Davis 91). In joining these figures of resistance, Son reinforces his outlawed stance and illustrates that liberation can only be achieved by standing in opposition to those systems that oppress. Son’s fate contrasts with Jadine’s who chooses to return to the romanticized ideal of Paris where European “white was not as bad as white and American” (48). Jadine gains little from Son’s outlaw critique, but the reader witnesses the process of interrogating the principal
foundations of the law and is forced to reconsider the value system that the narration unveils. By the novel’s conclusion, Valerian is an invalid but his empire remains. The institutions remain but are slightly maimed—the conditions may be altered but as Ondine states, Valerian “is still the center of everything” (279).

Through the themes of theft and criminality, the novel critiques the principal assumptions of integration, which maintains that the progress of race reform can only be achieved by “blacks moving into historically white neighborhoods, attending historically white schools, participating in a white cultural activities, and working in white-controlled economic enterprises” instead of “providing the material means for improving the housing, schools, cultural life, and economy of black neighborhoods” (Peller 13). In other words, Peller argues, the objectives of integration propagate the imagined superiority of white culture. According to this ideology, black liberation is achieved through white integration and emulation. Morrison points to the limitations of this ideology in her depiction of Jadine, who characterizes Picasso’s artistic genius as superior to African masks: “Picasso is better than an Itumba mask. The fact that he was intrigued by them is proof of his genius, not the mask-makers” (74). In championing a European aesthetic, Jadine’s character attests to the dangers of integration as a means of legitimizing white supremacy. As Linda Krumholz notes, “this statement makes clear Jadine’s embrace of European aesthetic criteria, but it also situates Morrison’s aesthetic choices in relation to African and European philosophies of art” (274). Jadine signals the way cultural capital functions as vehicle for social and economic mobility. This point is highlighted by Jadine’s literal place in the house: she sleeps on the same floor as Valerian and Margaret while Sydney and Ondine remain downstairs, sleeping next to the kitchen. Sydney and Ondine
recreate Valerian’s values in their treatment of Thérèsa and Ondine. Even as Valerian’s authority is challenged by Son and later by Thérèsa and Gideon, the foundational structure remains the same.

The novel resists a redemptive conclusion as it is “hard to find any character whose point of view is unquestioned,” which seems to be Morrison’s ultimate point (Goyal 409). Son casts an outlawed vision of capitalist motivations, but he is not without his own limitations as he fails to acknowledge the intertwined relationship between economics and patriarchy. Valerian’s law functions as the governing principle of social exchange, and Son challenges the embedded assumptions of economic exchange. The novel represents an “imaginative transit,” not a “final destination” that is filled with many storytellers who invent stories to make sense of their world (DiBattista 162). As Maria DiBattista explains, Morrison’s title aligns her with the oral traditions of storyteller and her use of the fantastic distinguishes her from other novelists: “Morrison is a storyteller before she is a novelist, a rapt teller of tales before she is a detached observer of historically entangled lives” (150). But, DiBattista reminds us, “the sense they make up may not always make sense. Narratives may be a way of knowing, but making up stories can easily occlude as disclose the truth about things” (162). The intricate world that Morrison depicts mirrors the intricate criticism that it produces. Tar Baby resists a singular interpretation. The novel takes to task the white fear of criminality in order to show the readers criminality on an institutional level. The success of the novel underscores Morrison’s ultimate critique in that radical critiques are often mediated through a liberal paradigm that ultimately maintains the

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43 As Ann Rayson argues in “Foreign Exotic or Domestic Drudge: The African American Woman in Quicksand and Tar Baby,” Son recognizes one aspect of the trap that Jadine has fallen into: she has forgotten her ancestral roots, but he defines this ancestry in terms of mothering actions, i.e., mending the pie table in the church basement (94).
status quo. Thus, *Tar Baby* is itself an outlawed tale that requires readers to investigate the underlying assumptions that undergird the American judicial system. It offers no easy answers, save for its critique of the farmer’s garden. Through the form of the narrative, Morrison points to the intersections between tricksters and outlaws, and she forces the reader to reevaluate dominant narratives of law and legal matters.

**“The Newspaper Can Turn Your Mind”: Justice in Jazz**

In *Jazz*, Morrison uses a different narrative method to call attention to the alternative epistemology operating in her work. *Jazz* begins not with a word but a beat: “Sth”—a sound that echoes the strike and silence of crashed cymbals. It is the hum of a high-hat clamped silent, a movement to continue or close a melody. *Jazz* includes many narrators mediated through one dominant voice. The identity of this first person narrator remains contested: it is the book itself (Leonard), it is distinctly feminine (Furman), it is indeterminate, “both and neither” (Gates), and it is jazz (Rodrigues). I propose a reading of the narrator as emblematic of outlaw discourse that challenges the in-law narratives represented by the newspapers. The line that follows the beat—“I know that woman” suggests an investigation. This ambiguous narrator quickly rattles off facts about the novel’s principal characters and the crime of the novel: the woman, Violet, used to live in Harlem with her husband and a flock of birds. Her husband murdered his eighteen-year old lover, Dorcas, because, according to our narrator “he wanted to keep the feeling going” (4). The narrative expands to include solos, duets, trios, and improvisations. Through these narrative techniques, readers come to understand not only the impact of Joe’s murderous love, but also the avenue from which to heal. *Jazz* contrasts the narrative potential of what Morrison refers to as “living language” with the destructive consequences of “dead
language,” which seeks to police and regulate (Nobel Prize). In troubling the identity of her narrator, Morrison continues her project of contrasting trickster-driven outlaw with the collective crimes of the in-law. The novel contrasts the living language of jazz music, and the dead language of newspapers that (like the law) seek to report just the facts. The newspapers are allied to the legalistic world of the law where there is no scope or possibility for forgiveness. The newspapers function as a letter of the law while the improvisation of jazz music, like the improvisation of Morrison’s narrator, struggles against the constraints of formalism that seek to know and understand the mysteries of the world.

Morrison contrasts this narrative improvisation with the decisive language of newspapers, which the narrator warns, could “turn your mind” (72). Dorcas’s aunt Alice keeps newspapers not for practical purposes like wrapping garbage or peeling potatoes but to read them “over and over else why would she keep them? And if she read anything in the newspaper twice she knew too little about too much” (72). For Alice, the papers do not merely report events, they capture the essence of the victims as they “laid bare the bones of some broken woman” (74). The newspaper print adopts an arrogant language that reduces a life lived to the letter printed: “Man kills wife. Eight accused of rape dismissed. Woman girl victims of. Woman commits suicide. White attackers indicted. Five woman caught. Woman beats man. In jealous rage” (74). The newspapers introduce Alice to a frightening world, an armed and violent populace. They document all of the crimes at the heart of the novel, but none of the circumstances that create these conditions. Morrison subverts such reductive accounts of domestic violence through her narratological experimentation; the result illustrates that none of the characters can be reduced to the simplified accounts reported in newspapers. Susan
Knadler historicizes “women with knives” and argues that she is the “New Negress” found in the headlines of the *New Atlantic* and *Amsterdam News*, which Knadler reports, for five consecutive weeks documented “stories of domestic violence” and the frequent portrayal of ‘women with knives” (99). Knadler reasons that these stories of domestic violence “naturalized limits of female autonomy” by reducing women to uncontrollable beings who were motivated by jealousy: “These stories of women with knives were less threatening to male readers than reassuring, for these stories of jealous, out-of-control women reaffirmed woman’s dependence on her man at a time when there was a loosening of traditional gender norms” (101).

Alice internalizes the fear depicted in the newspapers. Alice interprets Joe’s murder as “the impunity of the man who killed her niece just because he could. It had not been hard to do it; it had not even made him think twice about what danger he was putting himself in. He just did it. One man. One defenseless girl” (73). We learn, however, that even though Joe is not punished (in the traditional sense) for his crime, he does repent his crime. Through these narrative musings, readers are invited to explore the circumstances of the crime for which Joe is never prosecuted for because “the dead girl’s aunt didn’t want to throw money to helpless lawyers or laughing cops … Besides she found out that the man who killed her niece cried all day and for him and for Violet that was as bad as jail” (5). Dorcas’s aunt (Alice Manfred) knows the police would be of no help, as “everything she knew about Negro life had made it possible to consider. “To actually volunteer to talk to one, black or white, to let him in her house, watch him adjust his hip to her chair to accommodate the blue steel that made him a man” seemed an impossible idea (74). Even if she could talk to one, a jail cell would be useless too as it only serves the “Beast’s desire for its own filth. . . . Built jails to dwell on and hold on to its own
private decay” (78). Just as Morrison’s portrayal of domestic violence subverts dominant narratives of the jealous-crazed woman, so too does Alice’s relationship with Violet, which allows her to overcome her fear and gives her the freedom break through the reductive parameters of dead language that the newspapers represent. Alice, and her readers, are able to see the beyond the headlines and to recognize the humanity of those that make up the newspapers stories. Thus, what the novel pursues is not punishment but an understanding. The case to be solved is not the mystery of motive, but the “mystery of love” (5).

Morrison contrasts the criminality documented in the newspapers with the outlawed force of jazz music. Alice interprets this music as criminal: “It made you do unwise disorderly things,” Alice thought, “Just hearing it was like violating the law” (58). Alice misinterprets the music, believing that it has caused the race riots rather than economic oppression and cultural subjugation. In blaming the music, rather than the system, Manfred recalls May in Love who fears retaliation from the advancements made by the Civil Rights Movement. Once again Morrison points to the tendency to focus on the wrong front of social injustice. Andrew Scheiber locates Alice’s anxiety with the music within the “cultural and psychological, rather than its religious, efficacy” of the music (478). Alice uses the music a means of ignoring the ills of society—the very ills that the music responds to. She attributed “lowdown music” with the “silent black women and men marching down Fifth Avenue to advertise their anger over two hundred dead in East St. Louise. . . . So many killed the papers would not print the numbers” (57).

Their refusal to print the number of dead underscores the way newspapers not only shape the discourse but consciously redact the facts. Thus the newspaper ultimately
determines the truth of the event, creating and reifying the conditions that satisfy the status quo and erasing that which disrupts or challenges it. The drums of the protesters, however, lay bare what the newspapers refused to acknowledge. Significantly, it is the drums that give meaning to their banners that repeated phrases from the Declaration of Independence: “but what was meant came from the drums” (53). The novel itself sounds the drums of protest. In this two forms of media—newspapers and music—Morrison contrasts the vision of the in-law with that of the outlaw.

While the printed page produces a reified fear of crime in Alice, it creates an outlet of understanding for Malvonne. Like Alice, Malvonne lives alone with newspapers and books, but unlike Alice, Malvonne melds “the print stories with her own keen observations” (41). In this way Malvonne is like Son who comes to understand the world through the international version of Time Magazine. Malvonne’s interest in the people around her gives her insight into the people she works for, but she was not interested in them, “she simply noticed. Her interest lay in the neighborhood” (41). Like the word-worker of Morrison’s Nobel Lecture parable, Malvonne understands language as a production of actions, not the repetition of words. The printed word compels her to act because she recognizes and engages with the humanity behind the page. Malvonne demonstrates that the “vitality of language lies in its ability to limn the actual, imagined, and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers” (Morrison 202).

Significantly, Malvonne is motivated by an act of theft: her nephew (Sweetness) had stolen a mailbag. When Malvonne finds the letters, she knew they required “action” (42). To ensure the completion of the word-act, Malvonne sends the letters herself, making any necessary amendments to explain the delay or to encourage good behavior from those who write of
misdeeds. For example, Malvonne witnesses the experiences of one letter writer whose desperate economic and familial situation forces her to leave the states and her husband. While reading the letter, “Malvonne could feel the wall of life pressed against the woman’s palms; feel her hands bashed tender from pounding it; her hips constrained by the clutch of small children” (42-43). She feels the woman’s desperation, but she also engages with and expands the narrative by imagining further injustices inflicted on this woman and her children, such as the “watering down the children’s milk on the sly and whipping the five year old for mishandling the hot, heavy pressing iron” (43). In reading the paper, Alice views the laid out bones of crime’s victims, but Malvonne does more than look, she feels the pain described. Her concern compels her to add an extra stamp to the letter, hoping that this will get it to the husband faster, an act that suggests the generosity is still possible in the City.

Like Malvonne who interacts with these letters, Alice is forced to reconsider her position on Dorcas’s death and create solidarity with a woman that she once reduced to the dead language of a newspaper headline: “a woman with a knife” (75). Meeting with Violet however forces Alice to renegotiate the conditions of discourse and her expectations of violence: “At first I thought you came here to harm me. Then I thought you wanted to offer condolences. Then I thought you wanted to thank me for not calling the law. But none of that was it, is it” (82). In this last line, Morrison plays with time—asserting a past into the present. Alice interprets Violet’s behavior according to the flat narratives of newspapers where each subject reacts violently or selfishly but never humanely. As Matthew Tretherne astutely states, “what is being presented is an encounter, an encounter that takes place in dialogue” (204). These interactions reveal the value of friendship for these two women who are isolated in the pain of
loss. Correspondingly Dorcas’s friend Felice attempts to build a stronger relationship with her father by reading the newspaper, like he does: “I read about the white policeman who were arrested for killing some Negros and said I was glad they were arrested, that it was about time” (199). Her father responds angrily, shouting “The story hit the paper because it was news” (199). Felice’s grandmother explains, “that for the everyday killing cops did of Negros, nobody was arrested at all” (199). Through dialogue Felice learns the limitations of the newspaper as a means for accessing knowledge. Like the sound of the drums at the protest, Felice’s grandmother must supplement that which is left off the page.

The novel suggests that to understand Joe, we must understand his wife, and to help us understand both, the narration carries us back to before either was born where the details of their lives crossed paths. Morrison locates these interlocking histories in the self-conscious portrayal of Golden Gray and his journey to find his father. Golden is the illegitimate son of Vera and Henry LesTroy (or LeStory), a slave on Vera’s plantation. When Vera’s parents learn of the relationship and the pregnancy, they send her away with a suitcase full of money and a slave, True Belle who is the mother of Rose Dear and the grandmother of Violet. Together in Baltimore, far from her own family, True Belle helps Vera raise this golden child. The circumstances of his birth leave him without a father until the age of eighteen when he goes on a journey to find his father. On the way, Gray encounters a naked, pregnant woman in the woods. We later learn that this woman (Wild) is Joe Trace’s mother whom Joe never comes to know. Like Golden, Joe seeks out an absent parent, but unlike him, Joe never meets his parents. The narrator’s prejudices inform the portrayal of Golden Gray, but as she considers the circumstances of his life, she is forced to revise her judgment. Giving the matter a second
thought, the narrator concludes: “Aw but he is young and he is hurting, so I forgive him his self-deception and his grand fake gestures, and I catch him sipping too quickly the cane liquor he has found, worrying about his coat and not tending to the girl, I don’t hate him at all” (155). Through her portrayal of Golden Gray, “the reader can participate in love as an ephemeral yet circumscribed process. Simultaneously, Golden Gray . . . becomes the readers’ conduit into the ambivalence and contradictions of creative production, whether of artistry or identity itself” (Brown 634). The narrative resists an easy reading of Golden as wholly villainous as the narration turns toward another vision of understanding. In this section, readers become privy to the circumstances of Joe’s birth and of Violet’s upbringing by a grandmother whose work as a slave resulted in her loving Golden Gray more than the children she was forced to leave behind. The narrator reveals an outlawed sympathy for Golden Gray even as it critiques his selfish motivations.

In the novel’s final scene, Morrison returns to the theme of theft as resistance. Significantly Felice visits the Trace household under the guise of retrieving a ring that her mother gave her. The ring signals an extension of the black thief stereotype that operates in *Tar Baby*. Felice’s mother takes the ring from a jewelry store only after the sales clerk assumes that she will steal it, “out of spite,” Felice supposes. Felice reflections on this action reveal the transgressive nature of her mother’s criminal act: “I know she is proud of stealing that opal; of daring to do something like that to get back at the whiteman who thought she was stealing even when she wasn’t. My mother is so honest she makes people laugh. . . . So I know how much taking that ring meant to her. How proud she was of breaking her rules for once. But I’ll tell her I know about it, and that it’s what she did, not the ring, that I really love” (215). Felice’s
interpretation of her mother’s crime, like Son’s reaction to the theft of apples, counters the official account of the law, which King explains “would have reduced the mother’s act to a simple breach of ethics—again challenging the idea of objective truth” (19). Felice’s love for the action reveals an understanding of her “mother’s complex code of ethics” (King 19).

The improvisation of jazz becomes a metonym for Morrison’s vision of justice. The musicians “changed their tune . . . you would have thought everything had been forgiven the way they played” (198). Jazz suggests that all the characters are indicted in Dorcas’s death. The novel’s redemption thus lies not in the characters’ ability to change events but in their ability to change their interpretation, and thus their outcome, of those events. As Jurgen E. Grandt observes, “Violet and Joe’s fragmented lives becomes meaningful and whole again when jazz is reintroduced into their home—literally in the form of the Okeh records Felice brings with her” (313). The novel’s narrator tells the reader how to investigate, how to find out the “secrets you want kept or want to figure those other people have” (72). The narrator’s musings on what would happen if Joe “had stopped trailing that fast little thing all over town long enough to tell . . . who knows how it would go” indicate the objectives of the novel (121). Following the narrative inquiry, Joe is given the space to tell his story. Because the narration functions on another level by giving Joe, Violet and Felice the space to narrate their stories, the characters moved towards wholeness and redemption. The once confident narrator is forced to revise her expectations, “I thought I knew them and wasn’t worried that they didn’t really know me. Now it’s clear why the contradict me at every turn: they knew me all along. . . . That when I invented stories about them—and doing so seemed so fine—I was completely in their hands, managed without mercy (220). Like the children of Morrison’s parable, the characters hold the
responsibility of the outcome in their hands, but they exist outside of the narration as well as they are both the reader and narrator of their own story.

_Jazz_ requires readers to do the work of the outlaw—to “set aside Cartesian logic in order to enter a magic world that cries out for deeper modes of knowing” (Rodriguez). The trickster narrative is a conduit for other modes of knowing as she gives clues about how to read and avoid the traps of misreading the world. Like Violet who “questioned everybody,” the narrator questions all of the characters’ motivations—including her own. Like the blind processes of the law, the narrator had assumed the motives of the characters, but through an investigation that uncovers the histories of all the actors, Morrison exposes the limitations of this vision and forces readers to revise all expectations. Rather than culminate with another murder—as the narrator originally predicts—the murdered lover is replaced by a loving daughter, and Joe and Violet are able to reconcile their marriage. The novel ends with an inversion of the original vision: “I saw the three of them Felice, Joe, and Violet and they looked like the mirror image of Dorcas, Joe, and Violet. I believed I saw everything important they did and based on what I saw I could imagine what I didn’t. . . . That’s what I wanted to believe. It never occurred to me that they were thinking other thoughts, feeling other feelings, putting their lives together in ways that I never dreamed of” (221). Readers witness the transformation and reconciliation that can be only be culled from an act of love.

Justice in _Jazz_ happens organically within the community and without the threat of prison. The community has its own way of reprimanding Joe just as Joe’s psyche has its own method of punishment. This organic sense of justice functions as a kind village law that contrasts the primitive, inorganic law that has no mercy for its victims. Morrison’s fiction
reveals that the law’s inflexible code does not serve the interests of the community even as it purports to do so. In *Jazz* Morrison reworks the concept of justice to include the conditions of the violation. Readers are forced to consider the Joe’s murderous love in the absence of the law, and he is rendered sympathetically, which forces the reader to reconsider the role of judgment that defines the law. Morrison tells Joe’s story in such a way that readers must transgress the bound of the norm, and it is this telling that articulates a notion of justice as love.
CONCLUSION

In a podcast interview with American Public Media, Dorothy Allison describes the emotional force of Morrison’s fiction as a “crumbling inside” (qtd in Gregory). Morrison’s works transform readers, Allison continues, as “they take you inside and make you feel what you never imagined” (qtd in Gregory). For Allison, this invitation to feel what you never imagined is more than an emotional experience, it is a deeply transformative practice. Allison explains, “I believe in political action, I believe in organizing. Oh honey, I believe in marchin’ in the street. But what will change people most profoundly is to be invited inside the mind and soul of characters or individuals that they have always been afraid of” (qtd in Gregory). Morrison triptych invites readers into the minds and souls of terrifying characters, and she requires that we not only understand but empathize. The triptych terrifies precisely because it clarifies; readers find these figures force a reevaluation of all systems of thought, specifically those that comprise history, family, and the law. These are the figures that “arc toward the place where meaning may lie” (“Nobel” 203).

Morrison’s triptych offers an existential balm for readers who have lived by the rules of the master’s house, but who have since witnessed new methods of memory, new concepts of the family, and new judicial systems that are all grounded in an ethics of love for the community. Morrison’s ghosts function as interpretative guides for characters and readers who must pursue the novels’ phantoms in order to understand the significance of the telling. They require the cognitive work of the reader, who must return to the novel’s primary conflict armed
with the knowledge that the ghost confers. As the novel’s life force, the ghost disrupts and dismantles the dominant narrative. It bridges the gaps in official history, and it conjures the communal memories that lie dormant within her characters. Finally the ghost requires readers to do their own memory-work as they must reconstruct the original narrative to make sense of the ghost’s intervention. Her orphans attest to the fracturing effects of living in the “house that race built” (“Home” 5). Morrison’s orphan stories demonstrate the danger of being untethered from a community, and they attest to the possibility of alternative families that are based on a shared struggle for liberation. Through their own narrative acts, Morrison’s orphans find a home outside of the “house that race built.” Her outlaws offer a critique of this house—decentering the authorities that give rise to the ghost and the orphan. They challenge the basic tenets of the law in order to posit another model of justice. By implicating her readers in the judgment of her characters, Morrison charges her readers with the task of developing their own outlawed vision.

Together the triptych provides a key for reading Morrison’s fiction as each asserts a method of interpretation that interacts within, and between, the texts. The combined energy of Morrison’s ghosts, orphans, and outlaws reveals the genius of her vision. These figures possess an enormous energy that transforms a cursory reading of the text into a conscious meditation on the transformative capabilities of narrative. The combined energy of Morrison’s triptych charges the reader with the difficult task of interrogating the dominant narratives of history, family, and the law. Each figure threatens the coherence of dominant discourse, recasting and expanding the parameters of the novels’ critique.
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