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Toni Morrison: Decentering the White Gaze and Challenging the Master Narrative

Biography

Toni Morrison was born on February 18th, 1931 in Lorain, Ohio with the birth name of Chloe Anthony Wofford. Childhood experiences with racism and culture in many ways informed the themes of her novels. At the age of two, the white landlords of the apartment building set her family's apartment on fire while they were still inside because her parents could not pay the month's rent. From then on, her father developed a strong hatred for white people. Witnessing racist acts and seeing her father develop a strong resentment toward white people informed the creation of characters and the building of character dynamics in her books (Alexander). Additionally, black culture, including folktales, songs, stories, and religion, held a strong presence in her home, another influence we can see in novels like *Beloved* and *Sula* ("Toni Morrison | Biography, Books, Beloved, the Bluest Eye, and Facts.")

To cope with the financial struggles she and her family faced, Toni Morrison turned her attention to academic studies and became an avid reader. After developing very close relationships with her Catholic cousins, at the age of twelve, she converted to Catholicism and was baptized under the name "Anthony," leading her to later adopt the nickname "Toni" (Alexander).

In the documentary of her life, "Toni Morrison: The Pieces I Am," Morrison reflects on a formative experience as a child. She saw other children writing the f-word with chalk on the sidewalk, and so she did the same. When her mother saw her chalk writing, she broke down into tears and scolded her. Toni Morrison reflects on this experience: it is then that she realized that words have power. If they could make her mother cry, they undeniably held power (Greenfield-Sanders).

In 1949, Toni Morrison enrolled at Howard University, a historically black university. Here, she earned a bachelor's degree in English. During this time, she had new encounters with racial segregation. As part of the university's theater group, she often toured the South, which was at the time still highly segregated. Here, she witnessed racist social structures and the divisions these racial hierarchies sowed among black people based on their skin tone (lighter skin being considered more desirable due to its closer proximity to the ideal of whiteness). Her time at Howard was incredibly meaningful in that it enabled her to connect with black writers, artists, and activists, who inspired her future work. After graduating from Howard, Morrison earned a master's degree in English from Cornell University. Later in life, she would go on to earn an honorary Doctorate degree from the University of Oxford due to the excellence of her work (Alexander).

Morrison began her professional life as a teacher: she taught first at Texas Southern University and later returned to Howard, where she taught future civil rights activists and met her husband. The next key segment in her professional life was editing: Morrison moved to Syracuse, New York and became an editor for Random House Publishing's textbooks (Alexander). As she gained work experience, she specialized in editing fiction and books by black authors, including Angela Davis, Muhammad Ali, Toni Cade Bambara, and Gayl Jones (Marc).

Toni Morrison began her writing journey on the side, while she was still an editor for Random House. As a single mother, she wrote early in the mornings, before her young children woke up. Morrison published her first book, *The Bluest Eye*, at the age of 39. Her second book, *Sula*, was published 3 years later. As Morrison found success in writing, she decided to quit editing and pursue writing full-time. Over her entire career, Morrison wrote 11 novels, 9 nonfiction works, 5 children's books, 1 short story, and 2 plays (Alexander).

Toni Morrison's storytelling style consists of an intriguing blend of folk and postmodernist techniques. In her 1986 interview with Christina Davis, a part of the series "Conversations with Toni Morrison," Morrison reflects on how she brings together historical realism with myths and supernatural tales she learned as a child, describing her style as "enchantment." She says in the interview, "There was

this other knowledge or perception, always discredited but nevertheless there, which informed their [black people's] sensibilities and clarified their activities…they had some sweet, intimate connection with things that were not empirically verifiable" (Morrison). Toni Morrison brings these intangible truths, not necessarily based in historical reality but nevertheless an essential part of the traditions of the black experience in America, into her works–whether by showing how loved ones' spirits haunt the homes of the living or vividly describing the power of music and dance to build community.

In her famous 1990 interview with Bill Moyers, Morrison talks about how love is a central idea across her oeuvre. She says, "You can love yourself. It's already possible" (Morrison). Our ancestors have suffered for us to be where we are today, and so we must love ourselves and each other. Morrison explains how love is present in so many different forms. As humans born into this world, "we have a duty to do something nurturing and deserving of respect before we go," and that love is the most "interesting, complicated, and intellectually and morally demanding" thing we can possibly do (Morrison). She reflects on the key factor motivating her to focus on love in her books: the devastating reality of black people in this country, where white people have tried to strip away from them the full expression of love by time and time again separating them from their loved ones. As a result, black people have tried to love less, for it hurts too much to love something and lose it. Morrison reflects on the importance of engaging in love, precisely because it is challenging but rewarding like nothing else (Morrison).

In the same interview, Morrison reflects on the process of writing her books – they often begin as questions, questions so intriguing she needs to seek out the answers. What will a woman do for her child in the name of love? What does unmediated friendship between black women look like? Toni Morrison discusses how she draws inspiration for strong, resilient, full-of-love black female characters from the black women that surrounded her during her childhood. She also reflects on how becoming a mother was an incredibly liberating experience, leading her to ask more questions and put a new lens to the world: the untainted, innocent, inquisitive eyes of her children (Morrison).

Toni Morrison earned an incredible number of accolades for her work. She won the Pulitzer Prize and earned the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Barack Obama. In 1993, she became the

first African-American woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. She was chosen by the National Endowment for the Humanities to give the Jefferson Lecture, and she was honored with the National Book Foundation's Medal of Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. In 2000, she was given the distinction of "Living Legend" by the Library of Congress (Alexander).

As one of the first to speak black voices, decenter the white gaze, and write black stories for black people, Morrison has inspired a wide range of authors to carry on her legacy (Atari). Authors who reflect on how Toni Morrison has inspired them include Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Margaret Atwood, and Octavia Butler (Christensen). By creating a space for race to be discussed in literature, Toni Morrison has inspired the emergence of Afrofuturist literature (Christensen).

Close Reading of Three Works

This essay will focus on two novels of Toni Morrison–*Beloved* (1987) and *Sula* (1973)–and her only short story, "Recitatif" (1983).

Beloved

The widely-acclaimed novel *Beloved* is set in the immediate before and after of the Civil War. Characters recall their time as enslaved individuals, their journeys as fugitives, and their lives in post-Civil War Cincinnati. Sethe, a fugitive, kills her infant daughter Beloved when the slavecatchers march into her home with weapons to bring the family back into slavery. The novel tracks the presence and influence of the ghost of Beloved on Sethe's home, family, and community. Toni Morrison explores numerous themes, including the nature of generational trauma, how one moves on from unimaginable personal traumas, what freedom and self-reclamation mean for black women, and the sacrifices inherent in motherhood.

The following analysis will focus on one of Toni Morrison's key projects in this novel: decentering the white gaze from the documentation of the black experience. The white gaze refers to a fundamental assumption in many pieces of literature: that the reader is white, and so descriptions of people of color are written from the white reference frame so that the supposedly-white reader can "adjust" themselves into learning about non-white communities. Toni Morrison intentionally removes the white gaze in documenting the experiences of black people through enslavement by flatly describing white characters and highlighting the power of music and dance in returning ownership from the oppressor to the oppressed.

Flat Descriptions of White Characters

Toni Morrison provides minimal, largely superficial descriptions of white characters. While some white characters are given names–for instance, the white woman who delivers Sethe's baby is named Amy–whenever Sethe tells family members about this incident, she refers to her simply as "whitegirl." For example, after Sethe finally makes it to Ohio, she tells Baby Suggs the story of her birth and refers to Amy as "whitegirl" and "thing": the text states, "Even when I was carrying her [Denver], when it got clear that I wasn't going to make it…she pulled a whitegirl out of the hill. The last thing you'd expect to help" (83). Amy's appearance was a magic trick in its absurdity–it was the "last thing you'd expect to help" (83). Yet, it was also a blessing, as it saved Sethe and Denver's lives.

Mr. Garner, the former plantation owner, is referred to by his last name throughout the book, showing a level of deference. On the other hand, his nephew, who inherits the plantation after his death, is always referred to as "schoolteacher"–his name is never revealed. Even when Sethe describes to Denver how awfully schoolteacher treated her, she does so in an understated manner. The text states, "'Nothing to tell except schoolteacher. He was a little man. Short. Always wore a collar, even in the fields.'" (71-72). Sethe describes the slaveowner in superficial terms, only referencing his obvious physical features

Furthermore, when Toni Morrison switches from third-person narration to first-person narration from the points of view of Beloved, Sethe, and Denver, white people are referred to as the "people

without skin." We can see this in the poetry written from Beloved's perspective, which describes an imaginative dialogue between Beloved and her mother, Sethe where Beloved finally gets to ask the questions that have been weighing on her mind. The text states, "Where are the men without skin? / Out there. Way off. / Can they get in here? / No. They tried that once, but I stopped them. They won't ever come back" (254). This description of white people as "men without skin" strips them of the very thing that gives them their power in this society–their white skin. In using this description, Morrison highlights an almost absurd irony–in society, the most superficial aspect of a human, the one most prone to external damage, dictates social power structures. Toni Morrison removes this superficial feature to examine–what remains? This is an open question that is not answered.

The effect of these minimal, oftentimes flat, descriptions is to minimize the presence of whitepeople against this backdrop of oppression so as to draw focus to the stories of resilience and perseverance of the black main characters. Even though the institution of slavery is run by whitepeople, their presence as humans with emotions and ambitions is minimized through superficial descriptions. Toni Morrison is rewriting the narrative from the black perspective.

In addition to flat descriptions of white characters, Toni Morrison shows how encounters with whitepeople have influenced black peoples' general perceptions of whitepeople, leading them to develop one-dimensional views of whiteness. Toward the end of her life, Baby Suggs tells Sethe: "'Those white things have taken all I had or dreamed,' she said, 'and broke my heartstrings too. There is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks'" (171-172). Sethe later remarks on how she now believes Baby Suggs: "Once, long ago, she was soft, trusting…That for every schoolteacher there would be an Amy; that for every pupil there was a Garner…or even a sheriff, whose touch at her elbow was gentle and who looked away when she nursed. But she had come to believe every one of Baby Suggs' last words and buried all recollection of them and luck" (359). Whitepeople are first presented in the form of a binary–good and bad. Mr. Garner practiced a kinder form of slavery, and so was better than schoolteacher, who regularly abused the enslaved. However, as the novel progresses, whitepeople become flattened into an archetype: there is no such thing as a good whiteperson, as they all deprive black people of their dignity. In a way,

this one-dimensional view of white people turns on its head the view that whiteness often shows toward other marginalized groups–flattening them to their worst characteristics and stereotyping the entire group.

Music and Dance

By vividly illustrating the power of music and dance in building community, Toni Morrison reframes oppression through a lens of power for black people. Even in the most unimaginable conditions of dehumanization and exploitation, they move with rhythm and dance to song.

This rhythmic experience is evident in Toni Morrison's diction. For example, when Paul D and his brothers are at Sweet Home, permanently chained up after being caught trying to escape, the text states, "They chain-danced over the fields, through the woods to a trail that ended in the astonishing beauty of feldspar" (129). There is beauty and pain in describing the motions as "chain-dancing"–even in bondage they dance, and they dance together. Toni Morrison's clear word choice empowers the oppressed: even as they are forced to work in the fields from sun-up till sun-down, they find personal fulfillment and community by choosing to move their bodies in rhythmic ways. Morrison goes on to write about their songs: "They sang it out…garbling the words so their syllables yielded up other meanings. They sang the women they knew; the children they had been; the animals they had tamed themselves or seen others tame. They sang of bosses and masters and misses; of mules and dogs and the shamelessness of life. They sang lovingly of graveyards and sisters long gone…" (128). Black people are deprived of the most fundamental of freedoms: they are forbidden from education, separated from their families, and bound to labor. Yet, they reclaim ownership of their experiences through song: they jumble up the words of the songs they've heard from white people to create new meanings that become theirs. These songs and dances become shared experiences, creating a deep sense of allegiance to one another in a world that is against them: "a man could risk his own life, but not his brother's" (129). Morrison emphasizes how music and dance are things that cannot be taken away from the oppressed because they come from the soul. Music and dance enable survival through unimaginable circumstances.

We see again the power of music and dance during Baby Suggs' speeches in the Clearing. Baby Suggs decides, after she becomes free, to become an "unchurched preacher." (102). In her sermons, she tells the children to laugh, the men to dance, and the women to cry. Then, these groups keep switching roles until they become exhausted, and after that, Baby Suggs "offer[s] up to them her great big heart" (102). She exhorts her community to love themselves–love their very flesh, for "yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it'" (102). She explains how back there, the white people only love the flesh in bondage, and they are quick to kill the flesh if it fails to serve their needs. She goes on to say, "'more than lungs…more than your life holding womb and your life-giving private parts…love your heart. For this is the prize'" (102). Music and dance come from the heart and are able to convey things that words cannot articulate. After preaching these wise words, Baby Suggs dances "with her twisted hip the rest of what her heart had to say while the others opened their mouths and gave her the music" (102). This quote highlights how Baby Suggs' words gave way to dance and music: for only dance and music can finish the trailing words and thoughts that are necessarily incomplete. Music and dance speak truth to the unimaginable experiences of enslavement and build community and solidarity among people who have faced and overcome these challenges.

Above, we see music's power help individuals endure unimaginable circumstances and heal from past traumas. However, the culmination of music's power is seen when it eradicates the ghost of Beloved. Toward the end of the novel, thirty black women march together to Sethe's house and stand in front of the door. The text states, "They stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what the sound sounded like" (305). We see here how music is an innate medium of connection, for sound preceded words in the creation of the universe. Toni Morrison builds a crescendo of the scene: "Building voice upon voice…they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees…Sethe trembled like the baptized in its wash" (308). Paul D's violence could not rid Sethe's home of the ghost: it simply returned in human form, tormenting Sethe even more personally. But music, the collective voices of thirty women who come to support Sethe despite their resentment at her

for killing her own child, did. The women come together to help a fellow sister who they saw was suffering from something they believed no mother should ever have to endure: the ghost of her dead child. Once the ghost of Beloved is eradicated, Sethe is able to carve out a life for herself. This example shows that when voices sing together the truth of oppression and embody the story of resilience, nothing can combat their power. We continue to see the importance of music and dance in the black community today, especially in black churches churches, highlighting the enduring power of music and dance to foster solidarity, give word to struggle, and connect with spirituality.

Thus, through minimized, flat descriptions of white characters and vivid descriptions of self and community reclamation through music and dance, Toni Morrison documents the history of black people in a way that emphasizes black people's resilience, community, and strength, and removes the white gaze.

Sula

Sula, written during the 1970s, is widely regarded as a core feminist work. While Toni Morrison explores numerous ideas, including the decentering of the white gaze and the foundations of strong community, her central project in this book is to investigate what freedom means for black women. Toni Morrison explores economic, personal, and sexual freedoms for women, which she describes as being inherently intertwined–one cannot be accomplished without sacrificing another. She asks the key question: what makes one woman's actions, in the name of freedom, acceptable by society, while another's is not? *Sula* is an investigation of the power structures of race and gender that define what is and is not acceptable for black woman to do. Toni Morrison explores this complex theme through strong characterizations of the key female characters Sula, Nel, Eva, and Hannah, where each character acts as a different "point of the cross," as Toni Morrison says, to investigate the complex social structures built on race and gender.

Sula

Sula is the most daring in challenging social norms in the pursuit of personal and cerebral freedom. She is the character that has the greatest clarity in her ambitions and aspirations: she seeks to be beholden to no one else's definitions.

We are introduced to Sula's strong-minded ambition through her conversations with family members. She refuses to follow social norms: when Eva, her grandmother, tells her to get married and "settle down," she responds: "'I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself'" (92). She takes full ownership of her mind and body, refusing to let anyone dictate what she can and cannot do. When Eva tells her a fire is burning inside her and that she is throwing away her life, she responds, "'Whatever's burning in me is mine!...[my life] is mine to throw'" (93). Sula is free in a way that others are not: she recognizes her power of choice and is willing to fully accept whatever consequences come with them. What she believes distinguishes herself from other black women is her sense of self-ownership. We see this in her conversation with her childhood friend Nel at the end of the book. The text states, "'I know what every colored woman in this country is doing. Dying. Just like me. But the difference is they dying like a stump. Me, …I sure did live in this world.' 'What have you got to show for it?' 'Girl, I got my mind…Which is to say, I got me.' 'Lonely, ain't it?' 'Yes. But my lonely is mine. Now your lonely is somebody else's. Made by somebody else and handed to you…A secondhand lonely'" (143). Through this quote, we see that Sula would much rather die on her own and in full control of her mind and body than have someone else dictate the nature of her life. Her "lonely" is not lonely at all, for she is in tune with her mind in a way no one else is. Sula has a level of insight into the nature of the power structures defining women's lives that enables her to see how they control black women and consciously break out of them.

Sula is infamous for lying easily with men, but she does so not for sexual gratification but to discover herself in the silence of the aftermath. The text states, "She waited impatiently for him to turn away and settle into a wet skim of satisfaction and light disgust, leaving her to the postcoital privateness

in which she met herself, welcomed herself, and joined herself in matchless harmony" (123). Sula is solely focused on engaging with her own mind and views intimacy as a way to reach this place of connection with self; she does not view intimacy itself as a gratifying endeavor, as the women of the town assume she does. She further reflects on the irony of such moments of intimacy: "There was utmost irony and outrage in lying under someone, in a position of surrender, feeling her own abiding strength and limitless power" (123). Through these quotes, we can see how, contrary to societal assumptions of Sula's powerlessness in falling into bottomless pits of casual sex and "immorality," Sula actually finds an opportunity after intimacy to engage with her own mind, explore her own thoughts, and claim power over herself.

Furthermore, Sula asks and answers questions in ways that challenge people's preconceived notions of the world, whether the nature of faith or the expectations of womanhood. Her questions and responses create extreme resentment among the women of the town, whose very identity centers around these pillars. The text states, "The fury she created in the women of the town was incredible–for she would lay their husbands once and then no more…Sula was trying them out and discarding them without any excuse the men could swallow" (114-115). Even when Nel, Sula's childhood friend, asks her why she slept with her husband and then left him, Sula responds by saying that he filled up a place in her mind, and once that place was filled, she no longer needed him. Sula does not ever present a coherent reason for discarding a man, which infuriates the women who long for explanations and justifications. Furthermore, Sula asks thought-provoking questions that challenge people's ideas of morality. In her very last exchange with Nel before she dies, the text states, "'How you know?' Sula asked. 'Know what?' Nel still wouldn't look at her. 'About who was good. How you know it was you?' 'What you mean?' 'I mean maybe it wasn't you. Maybe it was me'" (145). The context for this exchange is Sula explaining to Nel the albeit unsatisfactory reason she slept with Nel's husband, Jude. Nel, a faithful woman and caring mother, believes she is in the right. But Sula asks her this question: how can she know what is right and wrong? How can she appoint herself the judge of morality? Didn't Nel leave Sula for Jude in the same way? This question ruminates in Nel's mind and continues to bother her, as it challenges the very core of her

morality and sense of self. In this way, we see how Sula does not accept definitions of morality but rather questions them. This questioning is seen by most women as a challenge to their moral authority, leading them to hate Sula.

Hannah, Sula's mother, is an interesting contrast to Sula. While both lay easy with men, attaining "sexual freedom," Sula is outcast from society while Hannah is accepted, to a degree, because she is understood and does not threaten their men in the same way. The text states, "Hannah had been a nuisance, but she was complimenting the women, in a way, by wanting their husbands." (114). Hannah loves men for who they are–"it was manlove that Eva bequeathed to her daughters" (41). As such, the women of the town feel gratified when Hannah lays with their men because it signals to them that their men are in "high demand" in this economy defined by sexual relationships.

Unlike Sula, Hannah defines boundaries for her relationships with men. The text states, "She would f– practically anything, but sleeping with someone implied for her a measure of trust…So she ended up a daylight lover" (43-44). Thus, we can see that because Hannah has experience in marriage and values the trust and commitment of this holy bond of matrimony, she draws a line for herself that she will never sleep with men in order to honor her late husband.

Hannah, unlike Sula, is a person whose motives the other townspeople can understand. Understandable quantities are not threatening. The text states, "Hannah exasperated the women in the town—the 'good' women, who said, 'One thing I can't stand is a nasty woman' the whores, who were hard put to find trade among black men anyway and who resented Hannah's generosity; the middling women, who had both husbands and affairs, because Hannah seemed too unlike them" (44). Because Hannah's actions can be explained and antagonized by different classes of women in the society, she is still accepted. Married women frame her as morally apprehensible, putting themselves in a position of moral superiority. In a way, Hannah's "base" behavior enables other women to view themselves as morally superior and gain pride from this self-appointed title. Because Hannah enables them to claim this moral power in a necessarily hierarchical society, they accept Hannah into the fold of their society.

Nel

Nel is Sula's childhood friend. As a child, Nel has a formative experience that makes her intrigued by the concept of self-reclamation and freedom, but later in life, she falls into the acceptance of the protection marriage promises and loses her sense of herself.

In her youth, Nel is introduced to the concept of self when she meets her grandmother. As she is sitting on the train back home, the text states, "'I'm me,' she whispered. 'Me.' Nel didn't know quite what she meant, but on the other hand she knew exactly what she meant. 'I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me.' Each time she said the word me there was a gathering in her like power, like joy, like fear'" (28). As a child, Nel becomes fascinated by the idea that she is an independent human being, defined not by her relationships with others but by her own mental and physical features. She becomes seduced by this new worldview, as reflected in how she feels power, a mix of joy and fear, accumulate in her every time she says the word "me."

When Nel meets Sula, she is intrigued by Sula's strong sense of self. Soon enough, they become inseparable friends. Morrison contrasts the freedom Nel finds in her company with Sula with the suppression of individuality she faces at home: "Her parents had succeeded in rubbing down to a dull glow any sparkle or splutter she had. Only with Sula did that quality have free rein" (83). Nel gains the freedom to be herself only when she is with Sula, for at home she is held hostage by her mother's expectations of femininity.

When Nel gets married, she becomes consumed in the endeavor of making her partner, Jude, feel whole, and loses sight of herself and her needs. Jude longs for a sense of true manhood and a woman who cares for him day and night. The text states, "Whatever his fortune, whatever the cut of his garment, there would always be the hem—the tuck and fold that hid his raveling edges; a someone sweet, industrious and loyal to shore him up…Without that someone he was a waiter hanging around a kitchen like a woman. With her he was head of a household pinned to an unsatisfactory job out of necessity. The two of them together would make one Jude" (83). The marriage is a one-sided game–how the two can make Jude

feel more sure of himself and fit into his dream of what manhood looks like. As Jude draws Nel toward him, Nel distances herself from Sula and the free-reigning spirit this friendship brought out in her. She trades the cerebral freedom she achieved with Sula for the superficial physical recognition and feeling of being "needed" she finds with Jude. The text states, "Nel's response to Jude's shame and anger selected her away from Sula…greater than her friendship was this new feeling of being needed by someone who saw her singly. She didn't even know she had a neck until Jude remarked on it…" (84). In the quest for feeling needed and seen singly, Nel distances herself from what she truly needs–to exercise her individuality. Nel grows closer and closer to Jude over the course of the book until Jude is suddenly stolen from Nel by Sula, who sleeps with him. In the wake of this sudden event, Nel crumbles on the inside, and then pours all of her energy into motherhood and tending to her children. At the very end of the book, she says: "'All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude.' And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. 'We was girls together,' she said as though explaining something. 'O Lord, Sula,' she cried, 'girl, girl, girlgirlgirl'" (174). Only when it is too late–when Sula has passed, when Jude is gone, when her children have left her–does Nel realize who she was longing for all this time: Sula. She longed for the freedom of spirit she found in this miraculous friendship.

As we can see, Nel goes from being inquisitive about self-discovery to finding sense of self in the presence of Sula to immersing herself in the responsibilities and sacrifices of marriage and motherhood to regretting deeply her loss of personal freedom and friendship.

Eva

Eva achieves economic freedom, i.e. economic self-sufficiency, due to dire circumstances. In the process, she is forced to make personal and maternal sacrifices.

Eva endures an abusive marriage, which itself represents an assault to her personal freedom, after which her husband leaves her. The text states, "He [Eva's husband] did whatever he could that he liked, and he liked womanizing best, drinking second, and abusing Eva third. When he left…Eva had $1.65, five eggs, three beets and no idea of what or how to feel. The children needed her; she needed money, and

needed to get on with her life…she had to postpone her anger for two years until she had both the time and the energy for it" (32). In the wake of this abrupt change, Eva is forced to ignore her genuine feelings to confront the bleak reality she faces – as a single mother, she has to now provide for her children. Too proud to continue taking help from her neighbors, Eva finds as many housecleaning jobs as she can, working work long hours. She even amputates her leg to gain an insurance policy that would buy a house for her and her children: we learn this from rumors that Eva either "stuck it under a train and made them pay off" or "she sold it to a hospital for $10,000" (31).

Eva begins to discover the freedom to own her emotions after her former husband pays an unexpected visit and she sees his new partner. The text states, "Knowing that she would hate him long and well filled her with pleasant anticipation, like when you know you are going to fall in love with someone and you wait for the happy signs. Hating BoyBoy, she could get on with it, and have the safety, the thrill, the consistency of that hatred as long as she wanted or needed it to define and strengthen her or protect her from routine vulnerabilities" (36-37). Allowing herself to feel strong hatred toward someone no longer present in her life enables Eva to move on. Thus, Eva represents a case in which she is forced to abandon her personal freedom to express emotions for a long time, during which she achieves true economic freedom. After achieving economic stability, she allows herself the freedom to feel. Her single-minded achievement of "economic freedom" (in the sense that she becomes an independent earning woman) necessitates sacrifices–not being able to spend time with her kids and teach them what it feels like to be loved.

Recitatif

"Recitatif" is Toni Morrison's only short story. It follows the lives of two young girls, Twyla and Roberta, who are raised in an orphanage and later navigate inter-personal animosity, regret, and racial tensions of the 1960s. Morrison's central project in this piece is to illuminate the reader's own racialized tendencies and blind spots. She does this by luring the reader into a literary experiment in which they are

the main character. She catches them at the end to show: *you too, are raced. You are a pawn in the game that whiteness has created. Will we really keep playing this game?* Toni Morrison accomplishes this project through the omission of racial information for the main characters and clever juxtaposition of nonracial and racial descriptions of society.

Absence of Racial Information

The absence of information–what is not written, as opposed to what is written–is key to Toni Morrison's message. Morrison herself comments on this in the "Art of Fiction" interview, in which she says, "it is what you don't write that frequently gives what you do write its power" (Morrison).

As readers try to decode the races of the main characters Twyla and Roberta over the course of the story, they come to realize their tendency to fit people into racialized categories and stereotypes. Descriptions of Twyla and Roberta–their speech patterns, appearances, occupations, and family backgrounds–are purposefully vague so they cannot be definitively construed as white or black. For example, Twyla's mother, who we know dances all night, is described as having "those green slacks I [Twyla] hated and hated even more now because didn't she know we were going to the chapel? And that fur jacket with the pocket linings so ripped she had to pull to get her hands out of them" (3-4). Roberta's mother, who we know is sick, is described in the following way: "She was big. Bigger than any man and on her chest was the biggest cross I'd ever seen…And in the crook of her arm was the biggest Bible ever made" (4). These are the only physical descriptions we receive of the mothers, which do not elucidate any clues about race: piety, sickliness, dancing, and size are difficult to construe to racial categories.

Furthermore, readers are often positioned to look for clues of speech patterns that deviate from the white standard rather than to look for clues of white speech itself. However, the speech patterns of Twyla and Roberta are highly similar and do not give away hints of African American vernacular (examples of this dialogue are provided in the Synthesis of Style section).

By using tight language in dialogue and providing ambiguous descriptions, Toni Morrison purposefully leaves the racial identities of the two main characters impossible to definitively conclude. By

luring the reader onto the path of trying to decipher the characters' races, Morrison proves her point–we are pre-conditioned by society to search for evidence of deviations from the white standard. In this way, we blanket people under stereotypes as opposed to trying to get to know them through their concrete experiences and actions. We as readers are taken through an in-depth journey of Twyla and Roberta's lives, from childhood through young adulthood through motherhood, getting to know their lives intimately. Yet, the question of race lingers always in the back of the mind, creating a gap between reader and character, and the end is unsatisfying in answering the question of race.

Juxtaposition

Toni Morrison juxtaposes two different lenses on society in quick succession. She frames the story's society first as a nonracial one defined by in-groups and out-groups, then later reveals brewing racial tensions. The effect of this is to get the reader to place these two visions of society side-by-side and ponder–*how different are they, really?* Race, too, creates in-groups and out-groups and perpetuates power structures. Just as the omission of racial information of the main characters forces the reader to realize their own racial tendencies, putting two contrasting views of society side-by-side encourages the reader to think critically about the structure of their own society.

Society Defined by In-Groups and Out-Groups

Toni Morrison examines the architecture of society by showing the divisive nature of wealth and the role of children in helping sustain social power structures.

We see multiple examples of the nonracial in-group vs. out-group society. For example, in the middle of the story, Twyla wonders how Roberta made it into a gentrified neighborhood. The text states, "I was dying to know what happened to her, how she got from Jimi Hendrix to Annandale, a neighborhood full of doctors and IBM executives. Easy, I thought. Everything is so easy for them. They think they own the world" (8). The "they" in this series of sentences is unclear, but it most certainly refers to the people in power. These people control the intellectual capital and are able to afford houses in

expensive neighborhoods. This description of power structures is non-racial: the boundary between in-groups and out-groups is defined by wealth, and no racial labels are put to the wealthy or the poor.

Furthermore, we see these divisive social structures through the pure lens of children, i.e. Twyla and Roberta's perspective: the text states, "Two little girls who knew what nobody else in the world knew–how not to ask questions. How to believe what had to be believed. There was politeness in that reluctance and generosity as well. Is your mother sick too? No, she dances all night. Oh–and an understanding nod" (9). Through this quote, Toni Morrison shows how unjust systems require compliance in order to propagate. This compliance is built into educational systems, as we can see how Twyla and Roberta, two little girls, are expected to act politely and submissively. They know not how to ask questions, a reflection of how educational systems are failing to cultivate critical thought and skepticism. Through this example, Toni Morrison comments on how the maintenance of power structures relies on forces that begin at a young age, namely, education or lack thereof.

Nuanced Racial View of Society

The race-based view of society is abruptly thrust upon us when Toni Morrison introduces the concept of racial strife. As she goes on to describe this strife, she consistently explains it in an understated manner. The text states, "Strife came to us that fall. At least that's what the paper called it. Strife. Racial strife. The word made me think of a bird-a big shrieking bird out of 1,000,000,000 B.C…All day it screeched and at night it slept on the rooftops. It woke you in the morning and from the Today show to the eleven o'clock news it kept you an awful company" (12). Racial strife is described as an antiquated concept, "a shrieking bird out of 1,000,000,000 B.C." (12). Furthermore, it is described as simply an annoyance, something that is taking up time on the news, a sharp contrast to its true social impact. Twyla reflects on the busing policies being instituted in her city: "I knew I was supposed to feel something strong, but I didn't know what…Joseph was on the list of kids to be transferred from the junior high school to another one at some far-out-of-the-way place and I thought it was a good thing until I heard it was a bad thing. I mean I didn't know. All the schools seemed dumps to me…" (12). Here, Morrison

describes the racial strife through the mind of Twyla in an ambivalent and understated way. Twyla does not hold strong feelings toward these policies: all schools are "dumps" and it does not matter to her where her son goes.

Twyla goes from a place of indifference to fervent support for busing, and Twyla and Roberta's friendship degrades into deep animosity and resentment. The reason for this change is not related to the principle of busing but rather the desire to provide the other one wrong. Their central struggle revolves around conceptions of motherhood–do mothers have the right to control where their kids go to school? Who gets to decide where a child goes to school? The conflict is personal, as both go on to attack the other's "motherhood," an argument stemming from their own traumatic experiences with absent mothers in their lives. Both begin participating in protests, carrying signs that only make sense when taken in context with the other's: the text states, "As soon as she hoisted her MOTHERS HAVE RIGHTS TOO I began to wave my new one, which said, HOW WOULD YOU KNOW?...My signs got crazier each day, and the women on my side decided that I was a kook" (15). Whatever initial opinions the two had on the principle of busing have degraded into outright personal attacks.

Through the above quotes, we see how Toni Morrison presents a nuanced race-based view of society. It is sudden–racial strife falls from the sky in the middle of the story. It is a nuisance–a pestering bird. It is a cloak under which Twyla and Roberta can claim moral highground while in reality attacking each other due to their own personal struggles. The result? Racial issues are ignored.

Reconciliation of these Two Lenses

Toni Morrison reconciles these two visions of society–one whose architecture of power structures is clearly laid out, and one that acknowledges racial tensions–when she describes what happens to Maggie. Maggie is a mute, disabled woman who works in the kitchen at St. Bonny's orphanage. One day, in the orchards, the "big girls" beat her up and laugh at her while Twyla and Roberta watch. The text states, "Roberta and me watching. Maggie fell down there once. The kitchen woman with legs like parentheses…We should have helped her up, I know, but we were scared…Maggie couldn't talk…She

was old and sandy-colored and she worked in the kitchen" (2). At this point, we know that Maggie is disabled, but we are unsure of her race.

We remain unsure or perhaps unbothered by the question of Maggie's race until Twyla and Roberta meet later in life. Roberta tells Twyla, to veil her own regret over doing nothing to help Maggie, that Maggie was black and Twyla helped kick an old black woman down. The text states, "'You're the same little state kid who kicked a poor old black lady when she was down on the ground…You kicked a black lady who couldn't even scream'" (14). In an attempt to claim a position of moral superiority, Roberta accuses Twyla of having tried to kick Maggie down. Twyla retorts "Liar!" though remains troubled by the question of whether Maggie is black or not (14). While neither Twyla nor Roberta actually kicked Maggie, the reader now begins to wonder about "sandy-colored" Maggie's race (2).

Later on, after Twyla's son graduates from high school and Twyla cools down, she confronts, in her mind, the "race thing" (16). She realizes her resentment toward Maggie stems from her personal trauma with her mother. The text states, "I was puzzled by her telling me Maggie was black…She wasn't pitch-black, I knew…it dawned on me that the truth was already there, and Roberta knew it. I didn't kick her…but I sure did want to. We watched and never tried to help her and never called for help. Maggie was my dancing mother. Deaf, I thought, and dumb…Nobody who would hear you if you cried in the night…I knew she wouldn't scream…just like me and I was glad about that" (16). Similarly, Roberta reveals, "'Listen to me. I really did think she was black…But now I can't be sure…She'd been brought up in an institution like my mother was and like I thought I would be too. And you were right. We didn't kick her. It was the gar girls. Only them. But, well, I wanted to. I really wanted them to hurt her'" (17). Both girls reveal how though they did not actively partake in the beating of Maggie, they took pleasure in seeing Maggie get beaten because they saw an element of their own personal trauma reflected in Maggie–whether Twyla's dancing yet absent mother or Roberta's mentally-handicapped mother–circumstances that resulted in them being sent to an orphanage. In the attempt to regain control in a powerless situation, they desire to exploit the person below them in the social hierarchy who cannot scream for help or fight back.

By bringing together the open question of Maggie's race and the concept of social hierarchies, Morrison illustrates how racial power structures demand that those on the top exploit those below them. The gar girls exploit Maggie because they have the physical ability to. Twyla and Roberta desire to exploit Maggie because they see their traumas reflected in her. This cycle of exploitation perpetuates to the very bottom until the people who have no outlet, who are powerless–in this case, Maggie–are exploited. Toni Morrison ends the story with the line, "'Oh shit, Twyla. Shit, shit, shit. What the hell happened to Maggie?'" (18). This line again frames Maggie's unfortunate fate as something that "happened" as opposed to something that was "done to her." In this way, we as members of society distance ourselves from accountability by casting injustice as manifestations of unfortunate fate as opposed to actively putting the blame on the people, ideas, and systems that perpetuate that injustice.

Analysis of Themes, Central Ideas, and Projects

Intersection of Projects

Three key projects of Toni Morrison's were discussed. In *Beloved*, Morrison decenters the white gaze to document the black experience through slavery and freedom. In *Sula*, she explores what freedom means to a black woman in a society whose power structures are defined by race and gender. In "Recitatif," Toni Morrison experiments with language to draw attention to our hypocrisy in a racialized society–while we say we are above racial prejudice, we nevertheless seek out and reinforce our racial biases. Here, we will explore the intersection of projects across pieces: how themes criss-cross between books.

In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison explores the concept of the white gaze by intentionally decentering it from her narrative. In *Sula*, Toni Morrison explores the white gaze by opening the door on the opposite end–investigating what it is like to introduce the reader to the black society, "The Bottom," through the lens of an outsider. Morrison writes in her foreword to the book, "[Of all of my books], only Sula has this

‘entrance.’ The others refuse…the seductive safe harbor; the line of demarcation between . . . them and us. Refuse, in effect, to cater to the diminished expectations of the reader, or his or her alarm heightened by the emotional luggage one carries into the black-topic text. . . . [In] my new first sentence I am introducing an outside-the-circle reader into the circle. I am…letting a stranger in, through whose eyes it can be viewed. This deference, paid to the ‘white’ gaze, was the one time I addressed the ‘problem’” (xiv-xv, Foreword). This outsider introduction into the story is purposeful–in order to address the problem of the white gaze, Morrison decides to put it front and center at the beginning of the book by gradually adjusting the reader to the view of black society.

Specific examples of this outsider lens, as well as critiques on what this lens misses, can be found in the first chapter. Morrison writes, “...if a valley man happened to have business up in those hills—collecting rent or insurance payments—he might see a dark woman in a flowered dress doing a bit of cakewalk, a bit of black bottom, a bit of ‘messing around’ to the lively notes of a mouth organ…it would be easy for the valley man to hear the laughter and not notice the adult pain that rested somewhere under the eyelids…He’d have to stand in the back of Greater Saint Matthew’s…otherwise the pain would escape him even though the laughter was part of the pain” (4). Here, Toni Morrison leads us into “that place,” where they later “tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course” (1). Before this black town became commercialized, it was called “The Bottom.” She explains how a valley man (a white man) would only venture into this area with a business mind. As this hypothetical man, whose lens is the reader’s, views the townspeople, he sees only their superficial aspects–skin color, dress, and laughter. As an outsider, he cannot realize that hidden under the laughter is pain. He can only notice the pain if he steps into the church, a cornerstone of black community, and even so, he can never fully appreciate its depth. Thus, by using the white gaze, Morrison critiques it, showing how it fails to recognize or appreciate depth underneath superficiality. These outsider descriptions of the black community are highly impactful as they reflect qualities of our own world, where viewing minority communities from the outside results in stereotypes and an inability to appreciate

the struggle and resilience hidden beneath appearances. Toni Morrison is calling attention to our social blind spots, specifically in how we view communities outside our own.

In *Sula*, Toni Morrison explores what freedom–economic, sexual, personal–means to a black woman. We can see similar themes in *Beloved* through the characters of Denver and Baby Suggs. Denver, who for most of her life has defined herself in relation to others and has not left the house, develops a sense of self-ownership after visiting her childhood schoolteacher. The text states, "Denver looked up at her [Mrs. Jones]. She did not know it then, but it was the word 'baby,' said softly and with such kindness, that inaugurated her life in the world as a woman. The trail she followed to get to that sweet thorny place was made up of paper scraps containing the handwritten names of others" (292). As Denver becomes "inaugurated" as a woman, she starts to discover means of exercising her personal freedom through employment and even simply walking around town, holding her own in conversations with passerby. Thus, Denver is a positive example of a young woman's desire to find personal freedom and fulfillment.

On the other hand, Baby Suggs' life story shows how a woman's freedom to love and give has boundaries. It began with blackberries, which were gifted to her by Stamp Paid. The text states, "Baby Suggs' three (maybe four) pies grew to ten (maybe twelve)" (262). She hosts a party for the town, and even as the townsfolk eat and laugh, the "reckless generosity on display at 124" and the "uncalled-for pride" infuriate them (264). Baby Suggs is shocked by this "free-floating repulsion"–she knows resentment from white folks but this resentment from the black community is new (265). The text states, "Her friends and neighbors were angry at her because she had overstepped, given too much, offended them by excess" (265). Baby Suggs, the townsfolk believe, had it easier than them–she did not need to escape slavery, as her son bought her out with his own life's labor. They are infuriated by her display of abundance and "giving too much," which is a criminal act for someone who has had it "easier" in life. Baby Suggs regrets and repents this party for the rest of her life–she slowly deteriorates in a closed-off room, left to ponder colors for the rest of her life. Baby Suggs' example shows how a black woman is not "allowed" to display abundance or give too much, for this is looked down upon. As a woman, she can give, but not give in abundance, for giving in abundance is seen as a mark of pride, ego, and selfishness.

Import

Toni Morrison traverses American history in her books. *Beloved* is set during the Civil War, *Sula* during the 1920s, and "Recitatif" during the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. The natural question is, where are we heading next? By examining the past, Morrison offers critical lessons on history and delivers perspective on what we must do going forward.

For one, we must have the courage to speak about race. We can no longer delude ourselves into believing we live in a non-racial society or use the blanket topic of race to cover our own traumas, flaws, and inter-personal disagreements, which is illustrated through Twyla and Roberta's conflicts in "Recitatif." Reading this story, we are confronted with our own racial biases and habits, even as we proclaim ourselves to be above racial divisions. We must wake up and realize that our society and systems are raced and we need to restructure them. Through her oeuvre, Morrison has created a space in literature for us to discuss matters of race.

By crafting strong, multifaceted, and varied female characters, Morrison offers perspective on how black women can navigate the future. Sula is the outlaw, an experimental black woman who is beholden to no definitions proclaimed by others. Nel is a nurturing woman, a pillar of community. Denver discovers that freedom means having a name of her own and being able to make her own choices. Baby Suggs openly shares her heart with her community members, even though she is later resented for giving too much. As Morrison reflects in her interview with Bill Moyers, black women are historically equipped to take on multiple roles–as mothers, wives, community members, guardians of cultural traditions, employees, and more (Morrison). The future for black women is not an "either-or" but a "both-and." As Morrison says, "one of the interesting things that feminine intelligence can bring is a look at the world as you can do two, three things, and the boundaries are not quite so defined" (Morrison). Thus, the "New Black Woman" is a nuanced mix of Sula, Nel, Denver, and Baby Suggs–Sula's determination to create her own definitions and achieve personal freedom, Nel's nurturing and community orientation, Denver's inquisitiveness to discover her freedoms, and Baby Suggs' openness in being vulnerable and sharing her

heart to help others heal. In the intersection of these various extremes lies a role for black women, and perhaps even women of color more generally, going forward.

Synthesis of Style

Toni Morrison employs a variety of stylistic techniques across her works. Examples include vivid imagery to create moments of beauty in unimaginable situations of pain; Biblical allusions (particularly to Lot's wife); deep characterization of otherworldly and magical beings (like the ghost of Beloved); abrupt switches in narrative voice (between third-person and first-person); time jumps and stream-of-consciousness writing (to mimic the nature of traumatic memories); switches in form between prose and poetry; and satire. The following analysis will focus on two key stylistic elements featured across her oeuvre: language of dialogue and intentional naming of characters and places.

African American Vernacular English

In *Beloved* and *Sula*, Toni Morrison employs African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in dialogue between characters. Carving out her place in a literary scene dominated by white writing and the "master narrative," she chooses to intentionally use AAVE to elevate black experiences, culture, and ways of life to the literary space, something that was missing before. Toni Morrison is writing about black people to black people–she is not writing for the white person adjusting their lens to view black people (the white gaze). By employing AAVE, she shows that black speech deserves the same literary regard as famous pieces of white writing, whether Shakespeare or Faulkner.

The use of AAVE is seen in the omission of forms of "be" in sentences. For example, in *Beloved*, Baby Suggs says to Sethe, "'We lucky this ghost is a baby. My husband's spirit was to come back in here? Or yours? Don't talk to me. You [are] lucky. You got three left'" (6). Furthermore, the suffix "-s" is

removed from many verbs: in *Beloved*, Halle says, “She need[s] somebody can figure… She need[s] another white on the place” (290).

In *Sula*, AAVE is predominant among most characters. In the last conversation between Sula and Nel, helping verbs are omitted: “‘You [are] repeating yourself.’ ‘How [am I] repeating myself?’ ‘You say I’m a woman and colored. Ain’t that the same as being a man?’” (142). However, there are characters in *Sula*, like Helene Wright, a mixed woman with light skin, who try to avoid association with the AAVE dialect or language to sound “proper.” One example of this is when Helene asks where the restroom is. The text states, “‘Is there somewhere we can go to use the restroom?’ The woman…seemed not to understand. ‘Ma’am?’ Her eyes fastened on the thick velvet collar, the fair skin, the high-tone voice. ‘The restroom,’ Helene repeated. Then, in a whisper, ‘The toilet.’ The woman pointed out the window and said, ‘Yes, ma’am. Yonder’” (42). Helene is ashamed of using AAVE or Creole, the languages she grew up with, for they represent to her the ways of life of her “backwards” mother and grandmother. By omitting this “base” form of speech, she seeks to position herself as more respectable than everyone else in the town. Yet, in many instances, Helene does resort to using AAVE or Creole–whether talking to other black women or when she meets her mother at her grandmother’s funeral. Helene’s internal tensions are illustrative of a struggle many black people face today: in order to advance in society, one must conform to the dominant language of the majority, for language itself is a power structure. Yet, there is a loss of meaning and culture in giving up language.

In contrast to the AAVE employed significantly in *Beloved* and *Sula*, in “Recitatif,” Morrison purposefully uses tight language, inconstruable to AAVE or white speech patterns, to make the races of the main characters indeterminable. The omission of racial information has been deeply explored in the Close Reading section, but the following example of dialogue between Twyla and Roberta contrasts with the AAVE used in the other books: “‘Remember the Easter baskets?’ ‘And how we tried to introduce them?’ ‘Your mother with that cross like two telephone poles.’ ‘And yours with those tight slacks.’...‘What happened to the Jimi Hendrix date?’...‘When he died I thought about you.’ ‘Oh, you heard about him finally?’ ‘Finally. Come on, I was a small-town country waitress.’ ‘And I was a

small-town country dropout'" (10). This language cannot be construed to a racial speech pattern, making it impossible for us to discern the races of the main characters.

In conclusion, dialect plays a key role in Toni Morrison's works–whether in how she uplifts black voices through AAVE, highlights the tensions black people face between staying true to their historical vernacular and learning to talk "properly" for socioeconomic advancement, or makes speech patterns ambiguous so that race is indeterminable.

Intentional Naming

In addition to purposeful language, Toni Morrison uses highly intentional naming of characters, places, and homes to convey the importance of names: as memories, personal legacies, framing of historical stories, and community-building. Many intentional names can be noted: Tar Baby, an ironic name highlighting the contrast between the color of tar and Pretty Johnnie's milky-white complexion in *Beloved*; 124, the name of the haunted house in *Sula*; and Baby Suggs, who rejects the name her enslavers give to her. The following section will focus on three key names: Stamp Paid, Peace, and Sweet Home.

Stamp Paid

Stamp Paid is a key character in *Beloved*, and his name represents traumas he can never forget as well as his personal legacy.

Toward the end of the book, when he is talking to Paul D in the church, we learn that Stamp Paid was born with the name Joshua and renamed himself after his wife, Vashti, was raped by their enslaver. Stamp Paid had never had relations with his wife, and after the rape incidents, he begins to harbor deep-seated violent resentment toward her. Stamp Paid recalls the last time he saw his his wife before he fled the plantation: "I looked at the back of her neck. She had a real small neck. I decided to break it. You know, like a twig–just snap it. I been low but that was as low as I ever got.' 'Did you? Snap it?' 'Uh uh. I changed my name…Walked from Memphis to Cumberland.' 'Vashti too?' 'No. She died'" (445-446). In

this moment, Stamp Paid was almost certain he would kill his wife–he had no one else to direct his anger and frustration toward. However, he ultimately decides to leave the plantation without her.

The name Stamp Paid is an apt reflection of his life, for he chooses to spend it in the endeavor to repay the moral debt accumulated through violent thoughts toward his wife and his decision to escape without her. After settling in Cincinnati, he chips away at his moral debt through acts of benevolence toward others. He helps enslaved people, including Sethe, escape through the Underground Railroad. All he asks for in return is that people always open their homes' doors to him. Nevertheless, even while being regarded as a respected member of community, he commits acts that he later regrets–for example, he tells Paul D, Sethe's lover, about how Sethe killed her daughter when the white people came, an act that deeply hurts the people he loves–Sethe, Denver, and Paul D. As such, Stamp Paid's life is constantly structured around trying to repay moral debts that cannot be paid through acts of service, kindness, and humility.

Peace

Another example is the last name "Peace" for the family of Eva, Hannah, Plum, and Sula. In the cemetery, their gravestones together chant "Peace." The text states, "With the same disregard for name changes by marriage that the black people of Medallion always showed, each flat slab had one word carved on it. Together they read like a chant: PEACE 1895–1921, PEACE 1890– 1923, PEACE 1910–1940, PEACE 1892–1959. They were not dead people. They were words. Not even words. Wishes, longings" (171). Through this intentional last name, Morrison highlights an irony and a hope: the irony in how the family was everything but peaceful while they were alive, and the hope that they can find peace together in death.

Names are words of personal longing and hope, but they also are surrounded by community that imbues them with meaning. Even though the townspeople fervently hated Sula while she was alive, they come to the cemetery after the white people leave to sing for her deep from within the soul: the text states, "Not until the white folks left—the gravediggers, Mr. and Mrs. Hodges…did those black people from up in the Bottom enter with hooded hearts and filed eyes to sing 'Shall We Gather at the River' over the

curved earth that cut them off from the most magnificent hatred they had ever known" (173). By using the last name Peace, presenting it in the manner of a chant, and surrounding it with the songs of black people, Toni Morrison shows how rhythm, music, and solidarity are ingrained in the ways of life of the black community. They come together to pray for each other, even those they deeply resented in life, because there is a greater spirituality and solidarity of experience uniting them.

Sweet Home

Intentional naming extends beyond people to describe places like Sweet Home. Sweet Home is the name of the plantation on which Sethe, Paul D, Sixo, and Halle were enslaved. The name itself is an irony: how could this place of enslavement, unimaginable torture, be sweet? Denver asks this very question to Sethe. The text states, "'How come everybody run off from Sweet Home can't stop talking about it? Look like if it was so sweet you would have stayed.'...Paul D laughed. 'True, true. She's right, Sethe. It wasn't sweet and it sure wasn't home.' He shook his head. 'But it's where we were,' said Sethe. 'All together. Comes back whether we want it to or not'" (16). This quote highlights how black people found moments of beauty and togetherness among each other even in enslavement. At Sweet Home, they swayed in the corn fields and found comfort in each other's company. Through names like Sweet Home, Morrison returns power to black people in defining their experiences not by the nature of their oppression but by their ability to find moments of beauty, comfort, and brotherhood in these experiences.

Resonance

Reading Toni Morrison's works, I have discovered that being a writer of color means saying: "see us, even if it's uncomfortable." Her unflinching lens to history's unflattering moments and commitment to speaking from a position of power for black people inspires me to continue my journey of writing my truths as a Sikh-American woman of diaspora. She shows that to write from a minority perspective is not to write for a group, but in conversation with them. By reading Toni Morrison's works, I have come to

appreciate how writing is both a science and an art: being incredibly intentional with each and every word yet creating a moving experience for the reader through language and vivid descriptions. The reading process was challenging, as the pain of history was incredibly palpable through the pages and I had to put down the book many times to process traumatic scenes. I learned to navigate this type of reading experience, which requires numerous re-reads and pauses to truly grasp depth of meaning.

We are confronted with the daunting task of navigating a world structured around racial, unjust systems. Toni Morrison's writing holds immense lessons for us as we embark on this journey. She forces us to look at dark, uncomfortable moments in history–enslavement, displacement of black peoples, violence and negligence during the 1960s Civil Rights protests–so we can learn about the root causes of problems of today, whether educational systems that propagate white beauty standards, commercialization of historic neighborhoods and the associated displacement of minority communities, or occupational inequality, in order to make them more just. She shows negative ways of navigating a raced society: ignoring race and using race-based issues as excuses to pursue our own needs or make personal attacks. She also highlights positive methods of navigating challenge and finding purpose in an unjust society: having the courage to be vulnerable and speak our hearts to our communities like Baby Suggs, having Denver's curiosity to discover what self-ownership means and the responsibilities that come with it, and having Sula's commitment to challenge entrenched absolutes of morality to resist the definitions thrust upon us.

We must read Toni Morrison's works to understand the vital importance of engaging in discussions about race rather than glossing over racial topics. We must read her works to understand the multi-faceted roles of self-empowerment, courage, and community-buiding that black women, and women of color more generally, can inhabit in the 21st century to uplift and strengthen their communities. Reading Toni Morrison's pieces, we open our minds to the possibility that the future is not binary–it is not "either or," but rather "both and." We can both put a critical lens to history and work to remedy our present-day systems to build a brighter future. Black women can both nurture their families and communities as well as find a sense of self and resist the definitions of the definers. In order to move

forward, we must recognize the complex role race and gender play in sustaining power structures and work to break out of these barriers to make a positive impact.

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