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"Creating Something Else to Be": Negotiating African American Female Subjectivities in Toni Morrison's *Sula, Beloved,* and *Jazz*

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in English
at Massey University

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1996

ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison's novels, *Sula, Beloved,* and *Jazz* delineate the struggles of African American women to attain subject positions in a society where blackness and femaleness mark them as 'others,' and where women are objectified in the male pursuit of subjectivity. Negotiation of a variety of psychoanalytic and feminist theories in reading these texts demonstrates the complexities of African American female subjectivities, and the difficulties of achieving representation of them within a patriarchal and racist order.

Morrison's themes and narrative techniques foreground the political implications of acts of reading, writing, and representation, and envisage female subjectivities which disrupt dominant narratives of identity, gender and race. These subjectivities cannot be wholly represented within the dominant order without appropriation, but can be glimpsed as mobile and multiple subjectivities which refuse the masculine economy's structures, and break open prevailing narratives to imagine a female subjective space beyond patriarchal culture, and to re-imagine African American female narratives of self.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like first to thank my supervisor, Dr. Doreen D'Cruz, for her insight and guidance in my writing of this thesis and in my grappling with theoretical issues, and for her patient re-readings and invaluable comments.

Thanks also to Massey University for awarding me a Massey Masterate Scholarship which provided much-needed financial support, to the English Department for providing me with valuable tutoring experience in my thesis year, to Professor Dick Corballis, Dr. Karen Rhodes, and Dr. Greg Crossan for their time and their references, and to Ms. Deborah Laurs for her tutoring assistance and advice.

Much appreciation is due to my friends and cohorts both within and beyond the English Department, whose conversation and laughter made the most difficult stages of writing this thesis bearable: thanks and hugs to Andrea, Angela, Angela K, Blair, Hannah, Jane, Lennie, Louise, Steve, Simon, and our long-distance colleague, Steven. Thanks also to all other friends and advisors who listened to and counselled me during my many minor crises.

For their continued and unfailing patience and support, my parents, Kel and Marilyn, deserve all my love and thanks. And finally, endless love and gratitude to Brett, who always has faith in me, and whose enduring support and sense of humour continually remind me of what is really important.

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PREFACE

A few words seem necessary to provide a context for this thesis and its terms, particularly those of the title. The mention of "female subjectivities" signals this reading's employment of feminist theories in approaching Morrison's novels. I use "female" in full awareness of the debates that have ensued over the sex/gender and female/feminine divide, and do not intend to locate women's selfhood in biology, but to acknowledge the cultural, historical, and physical effects of being designated 'female' in a society that polices the male/female division with fervour. I choose the term "subjectivities" in an effort to conjure ideas of identity and selfhood which are not stable and singular, but, as the plural implies, multiple and many-faceted. "Subjectivities" also relates to the Lacanian theories I draw upon which consider the ways in which we are 'subject' to language, and, I will suggest, to narratives of subjectivity, rather than being masters of it/them.

The specification "African American" indicates both Morrison's and this thesis's focus upon black, predominantly African American women, and anticipates my use of black feminist theories in an effort to problematize issues of gender with those of colour, culture, history, and race - and issues of colour, culture, history, and race with those of gender. As a result, my theory often tends toward discussion of 'women' and/or 'African Americans' as a group; such generalizations seem necessary for theoretical purposes, even as my readings of Morrison's novels demonstrate the individuality of her female characters, and their refusal to be categorized within any amorphous entity.

Lastly, the expression "Negotiating African American Female Subjectivities" designates its initial word as verbal participle - "*the performance of* negotiating African American female subjectivities" *and* adjective - "African American female subjectivities who negotiate" - in order to convey this thesis's focus both upon the politics of black women's subjectivities, and upon Morrison's female characters as agents who strive to form and enact subjective positions within racist and sexist systems hostile to

conception of black women as subjects rather than objects. Further, the notion of "negotiation" portrays the act of gaining and sustaining subjectivity as one which requires constant give and take, and often partial or complete capitulation to the more powerful representatives of patriarchal and racist systems; "negotiation" simultaneously insists upon those who negotiate as agents, actively seeking self-determination. "Negotiation" also figures within this reading as a continual, eternally incomplete process, enacted and re-enacted in confronting and dealing with obstacles on the road to subjectivity; ultimately subjectivity is attained not at the end of that road, but in the process of travelling it, and alters constantly as one renegotiates one's subjective position.

The politics of "negotiation" also bear relevance to my theoretical position, which attempts to negotiate a variety of feminist and psychoanalytic theories in order to problematize, and to convey the complexity of, African American female subjectivities. The use of a variety of theories also indicates the impossibility of encompassing all pertinent concepts and philosophies, and undermines any conception of this reading - or any other - as authoritative. My Introduction refers to theoretical standpoints as narratives, and, as Chapter Three discusses, any narrative involves certain reductions and omissions which undermine any claim to mastery. For example, my use of Lacanian and French feminist theories often derives from others' readings of those theories - narratives of the narratives - simply because readings of complicated and frequently difficult writings of someone such as Lacan prove more accessible than the writings themselves. Of course, something is lost in this re-reading, and no summary of Lacan or any other theorist employed herein is offered as an adequate replacement for a reading of original works. Theoretical negotiation is, however, a process of re-narrating and interposing narratives, and remains valid and valuable if practised in full awareness of the implications of, in Gayatri Spivak's words, what is "left out" (18).

Finally, I offer my acknowledgement of my own position as a white, New Zealand feminist, in order to situate my thesis as itself a narrative which strives to negotiate several theoretical and literary discourses with no claim to authority; this I declare in response to bell hooks, who writes that the assumption

> that women of color represent this group whose experiences and whose writing is so removed from that of white women that [white women] cannot address such work critically and analytically.... may very well enforce racism. It helps... take the burden of accountability away from white women and places it solely onto women of color. (1989 47)

For hooks, it is important for white women "to share their ideas about black women's writing...without assuming that their thoughts would be seen as 'definitive' or that they would be trying to be 'the authority'" (48). This thesis thus enacts, through the lenses of multiple theories and readings, a white woman's grappling with the complexities of African American women's subjectivities as depicted in three of Toni Morrison's novels, and the implications they possess for issues of race, gender, representation, and narrative. It is not intended as an authoritative and absolute portrayal of these issues; I do, however, stand by its 'conclusions' which work continually to indicate persistent difficulties in asserting any conclusion, even as they insist upon the need for action and struggle.

I focus upon *Sula, Beloved,* and *Jazz* because, of Morrison's six novels, they offer the greatest focus upon black women, they interact productively with one another, and their themes and characterizations most vividly engage my imagination. My readings of these novels, necessarily, gloss over and omit many aspects of the stories, and cannot do justice to Morrison's multi-layered texts; once more, however, this thesis strives to indicate those omissions wherever possible.

Ultimately, this thesis offers an understanding of the diverse and tangled interactions of narrative, fiction, and politics in allowing or denying space in which African American women may re-imagine themselves, reject the monolithic and limiting narratives of the past, and re-inscribe themselves as speaking subjects whose self-narratives disrupt those of the past, and endeavour to create new forms for the representation and agency of black women.

INTRODUCTION

Negotiating Theoretical Narratives: Feminist Rewritings of Subjectivity

> ...humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being.... She is defined and differentiated with reference to man, and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute - she is the Other. (Beauvoir 16)

> *Where is she?*
>
> Activity/passivity,
> Sun/Moon,
> Culture/Nature,
> Day/Night,
>
> Father/Mother,
> Head/heart,
> Intelligible/sensitive,
> Logos/Pathos.
>
> Form, convex, step, advance, seed, progress
> Matter, concave, ground - which supports the step,
> receptacle.
>
> Man
> ---
> Woman (Cixous 1975 90)

Simone de Beauvoir and Helene Cixous here point to the construction of woman as 'other' to man's 'same'; Cixous's poem indicates the pervasive binary oppositions which structure systems of language and thought through hierarchic positioning of positive 'masculine' terms against negative 'feminine' terms. Subjectivity, as constructed within the dominant culture, thus becomes something anathema to femaleness which is positioned on the 'object' side of the subject/object opposition. The struggle to overthrow these

oppositions, and to conceive of female subjectivities which reject objectification and 'othering,' constitutes the primary concern of the feminist theories discussed in this Introduction. Similarly, black writers have contended that blackness has also been constructed as the negative pole; consequently, black women must confront multiple oppression as 'other' to white and male subjects. Morrison's novels offer vivid and varied portrayals of these women's striving to achieve subjectivity amid the processes which inscribe them as Other, as objects in the male's drama of subjectivity.

This Introduction interposes a variety of theoretical outlooks as narratives which proffer interacting, if often contradictory, concepts of subjectivity, each with something to offer for an interpretation of African American female subjectivities in Morrison's novels. Psychoanalytic, feminist-psychoanalytic, feminist standpoint, black feminist, and feminist-poststructural theories build upon and rewrite each other's narratives of self-formation and 'femaleness' or 'femininity'; the interplay between them offers multiple and mutually informing readings of *Sula* (1980), *Beloved* (1987), and *Jazz* (1992), while the imagery and ideas of French feminist theories, specifically those of Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Cixous, simultaneously link and disrupt psychoanalytic and feminist narratives, providing suggestive interpretive approaches to Morrison's novels, and foregrounding the prevailing conflicts in formations of African-American feminist/female subjectivities.

If we view the history of thought as texts or narratives which construct and establish normative comprehension of reality,[1] including our understanding and enactment of gendered subjectivity, the Freudian narrative assumes significance in the representation of woman as 'other.' This narrative delineates a family in which women constitute lack through their failure to possess the penis; the penis is the mark of difference, and the fear of losing it/horror of not having it, defined as the castration complex, galvanizes the processes of individuation and construction of gendered subjectivity, ending both the boy's and the girl's close relationship with the mother, and orientating both, in different ways, toward the father, and the

---

[1] See the interview entitled "The Post-Modern Condition: The End of Politics?" in Spivak 1990, for a discussion of narrating, and of the "grand recits" of rationalist thought as narratives.

masculine power that he seems to possess.

In "Femininity," Freud declares that the mother functions as "the first object of love" for both the boy (a circumstance labelled the Oedipus complex) and the girl (Freud 118). However, while the boy to an extent retains the mother as his love object (118) even as he separates from her to enter the masculine world, the girl must transfer her affection to her father, to embark upon her own Oedipal relationship. Freud situates the girl's accession into femininity with this turning away from the mother, the termination of their powerful, pre-oedipal attachment; he also credits this transfer to the girl's discovery of her own 'castration,' which engenders feelings of hostility toward her mother: "girls hold their mother responsible for their lack of a penis and do not forgive her for their being thus put at a disadvantage" (124). This turning from the mother inserts the girl child into the feminine role of normative heterosexual relations:

> Passivity now has the upper hand, and the girl's turning to her father is accomplished principally with the help of passive instinctual impulses.... The wish with which the girl turns to her father is no doubt originally the wish for the penis which her mother has refused her and which she now expects from her father. The feminine situation is only established, however, if the wish for a penis is replaced by one for a baby.... Her happiness is great if later on this wish for a baby finds fulfilment in reality, and quite especially so if the baby is a little boy who brings the longed-for penis with him. (Freud 128)

The perpetuation of feminine/masculine roles in this narrative is thus enabled by the separation of both son and daughter from the mother, who, through the father's prohibition, becomes absent/devalued. The pre-oedipal relationship with her is repressed, engendering the movement in the patriarchal world where other women become mother-substitutes for (male) subjects.

The positioning of female as 'other' therefore occurs both because she lacks the penis, and because, as mother, she must serve as the child's first object of desire; both factors indicate that feminine otherness is constructed from the male/child's vantage point, rather than that of the female/mother. The Freudian narrative depicts as necessary the disruption of the mother-daughter relationship, through the daughter's devaluation of the mother and her phallus-less status.

This process of constructing woman/mother as 'other' is explored more fully within the Lacanian narrative of subjectivity. Jacques Lacan developed Freud's ideas on selfhood, and related them to language. He posited an Imaginary period as part of the child's development, in which, during the mirror-stage, the child views and identifies with its image in a mirror (or in others), and begins to conceive of itself, mistakenly, as a stable and unified 'I.' This Imaginary incorporates the infant's pre-oedipal and pre-verbal connection to the mother; only when this dyadic mother-child relationship is sundered by the Law of the Father, as represented in the threat of castration, is the child able to enter into the Symbolic order of language. Toril Moi reads the Lacanian narrative and its terms in this way:

> The Imaginary corresponds to the pre-Oedipal period when the child believes itself to be part of the mother, and perceives no separation between itself and the world. In the Imaginary, there is no difference and no absence, only identity and presence. The Oedipal crisis represents the entry into the Symbolic order. This entry is also linked to the acquisition of language. In the Oedipal crisis the father splits up the dyadic unity between the mother and child and forbids the child further access to the mother and the mother's body. The phallus, representing the Law of the Father (or the threat of castration), thus comes to signify separation and loss to the child. The loss or lack suffered is the loss of the maternal body, and from now on the desire for the mother or the imaginary unity with her must be repressed.... the speaking subject only comes into existence because of the repression of the desire for the lost mother. (99)

Jacqueline Rose's interpretation of the Lacanian narrative similarly emphasizes the role of (maternal) absence in the constitution of the subject and his access into the Symbolic and language, noting that the division in the "fiction" (Rose 30) of the mirror image, and the "instability" of the pronoun 'I' which stems from the (mis)recognition of self in the mirror image (31), has implications for the functioning of language: "...there is equally loss, and difficulty, in the word. Language can only operate by designating an object in its absence. Lacan takes this further, and states that symbolisation turns on the object *as* absence" (Rose 31). This absence is specifically associated with the mother's absence, as the first absence that the child recognizes and attempts to alleviate through symbolization:

> Symbolisation starts, therefore, when the child gets its first sense that something could be missing; words stand for objects,

> because they only have to be spoken at the moment when the first object [the mother] is lost. For Lacan, the subject can only operate within language by constantly repeating that moment of fundamental and irreducible division. The subject is therefore constituted in language *as* this division or splitting... (Rose 31)

Lacan's Symbolic functions through the movement of desire which stems from this lack - the separation from the mother, and the division inherent in the misrecognition of self in the mirror-image. The myth of sexual relation "acts as a barrier against the division, setting up a unity through which this division is disavowed" (Rose 46). It does this through the concept of oneness in sexual relation, in which the command "'Love your neighbour as yourself...lays down the abolition of sexual difference'" as the "very ideology of oneness and completion which, for Lacan, closes off the gap of human desire" (Rose 46). This "fantasy of 'sameness'" operates within language and sexual relation (Rose 47), and 'Woman' functions as a category in the Symbolic's myth of unity: "woman is constructed as an absolute category (excluded and elevated at one and the same time), a category which serves to guarantee that unity on the side of the man" (Rose 47). Woman "is defined purely against the man" (Rose 49):

> As negative to the man, woman becomes a total object of fantasy (or an object of total fantasy), elevated into the place of the Other and made to stand for its truth. Since the place of the Other is also the place of God, this is the ultimate form of mystification.... The absolute 'Otherness' of the woman, therefore, serves to secure for the man his own self-knowledge and truth. (Rose 50)

Woman's position, then, in the normative discourses which construct sexuality and subjectivity, alternates between that of the (mother)object which must be absent, and that of the idealized locus of truth: both equally phallic constructions which attempt to elide the division Lacan describes, and to assert the unity of the male-as-universal and unified subject.

Margaret Homans provides an incisive analysis of the parallel between the absence of the mother and the absence of objects upon which language is dependent:

> ...language's system of differences and absences... becomes a system for generating substitutes for the forbidden mother. Renouncing his desire for his mother, the child turns next to searching for substitutes for her that would be permissible within

> the Law of the Father. That quest is constituted simultaneously by heterosexual desire and by language as desire in a series of substitutions along a chain of signifiers that refer, not to things, but always to other signifiers. (1986 7-8)

This understanding of language positions women as the devalued literal:

> What the son searches for, in searching for substitutes for the mother's forbidden body, is a series of figures: "someone *like* his mother." At the same time, language is structured as the substitution for the (female) object of signifiers that both require the absence of the object and also permit its controlled return, something *like* the lost object. Figuration... allow[s] the son, both as erotic being and as speaker, to flee from the mother as well as the lost referent with which she is primordially identified. Women must remain the literal in order to ground the figurative substitutions sons generate and privilege. (9)

In such a narrative, women remain the matter, the substance, upon which speaking (male) subjects stand.

Morrison's novels offer extensive material for a psychoanalytic interpretive approach, particularly in her portrayal of the forces which continually disconnect African American women from their children, and the literal maternal absence which this enacts, in imitation of the processes of objectification and erasure of the mother which psychoanalytic narratives depict/enact. Oral motifs within Morrison indicate the pervasiveness of maternal absence. In Lacanian narrative, oral desires signify the initial physical needs of the child for nourishment; these are overlaid by demand, in which objects such as food or drink represent connection to the (m)other, but cannot provide the "imaginary union or identification" (Grosz 61) with the other sought by the child once it becomes conscious of the mother's potential absence. The lack of such "impossible plenitude" (Grosz 62) instigates desire, in which demand for the (m)other becomes desire for the Other, and entry into language ameliorates lack through continual movement along Symbolic signifiers. In *Beloved*, thematics of milk, breastfeeding, and ingestion of sweet food situate the women characters within the order of maternal absence, but, as argued in Chapter One which explores the representation of mother-daughter relationships in the texts, the novel refuses to wholly accept maternal absence, and conceives, to an extent, of an order which re-presents the mother as subject.

Consideration of blackness also indicates the relevance of

psychoanalytic theories in reading Morrison, even as it demonstrates how race necessitates alteration of those theories. Many of the black men depicted by Morrison experience the denial of subjectivity which the psychoanalytic narrative reserves for women, and seek to alleviate the fragmentation they experience through normative means. In *Sula*, for example, the shell-shocked Shadrack exhibits the symptoms attributed to the pre-oedipal child, of physical fragmentation, of lack of control over his body, specifically his hands, and of a blurring of self and other symbolized by the fusion of his hands with his shoelaces.[2] His confusion over language and meanings locates him as someone yet to be constituted as subject within the Symbolic, and his process of gaining that subjectivity commences with an enactment of the mirror-phase, when he views his reflection and apparently regains control over his body:

> There in the toilet bowl he saw a grave black face. A black so definite, so unequivocal, it astonished him. He had been harboring a skittish apprehension that he was not real - that he didn't exist at all. But when the blackness greeted him with its indisputable presence, he wanted nothing more. In his joy he took the risk of letting one edge of the blanket drop and glanced at his hands. They were still. Courteously still. (13)

The image in the bowl provides Shadrack with a sense of identity, the 'fictive' nature and the dangers of which become apparent later, as discussed in Chapter Three.[3] The processes depicted firmly situate Shadrack, and several other Morrison characters, within psychoanalytic discourses of subjectivity, and these two examples of oral motifs and mirror-imagery in Morrison's texts indicate the value of psychoanalytic theories in reading her novels, even as they imply the need for rewritings and disruption of those theories.

Numerous readings of Freud and Lacan, specifically those with feminist orientations, function as interventions in and rewritings of their theories, in

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[2] In "The Mirror Stage" Lacan asserts that the identification with the mirror-image contrasts "with the turbulent movements that the subject feels are animating him" (1977 2), and that the mirror stage "manufactures for the subject...the succession of phantasies that extends from the fragmented body form to a form of its totality that I shall call orthaopaedic" (1977 4).

[3] Lacan states in "The Mirror Stage" that the mirror-image identification "situates the agency of the ego...in a fictional direction" (1977 4).

attempts to counter their "androcentric bias" (Homans 9), and to alter their narratives of feminine sexuality. Often these rewritings endeavour to re-interpret and re-value the mother-child relationship from a female point of view, in an effort to extricate women from their objectified position, and to conceive for them sites of subjectivity.

The work of Nancy Chodorow demonstrates this effort to reconsider feminine identity and the mother-child relationship, particularly in her exploration of the implications of the girl's gender sameness with her mother. Chodorow analyzes dominant ideologies of family and motherhood as psycho-sexual structures which ensure the "reproduction of mothering":

> Mothers tend to experience their daughters as more like, and continuous with, themselves. Correspondingly, girls tend to remain part of the dyadic, primary mother-child relationship itself. This means that a girl continues to experience herself as involved in issues of merging and separation.... By contrast, mothers experience their sons as a male opposite. Boys are more likely to have been pushed out of the preoedipal relationship, and to have had to curtail their primary love and sense of empathic tie with their mother. A boy has engaged, and has been required to engage, in a more emphatic individuation and a more defensive firming of ego boundaries. (1978 167)

The girl's gender sameness with her primary caregiver, traditionally the mother in white Western culture and psychoanalytic theory, thus provides her with "more flexible or permeable ego boundaries," and instills in her "a fundamental definition of self in relationship," in contrast to the masculine personality, which is "defined more in terms of denial of relation and connection (and denial of femininity)" (169). These different "relational capacities...prepare women and men to assume the adult gender roles which situate women primarily within the sphere of reproduction in a sexually unequal society" (173).

The relational identity accorded here to women offers a concept of self-in-relation which many feminist theorists valorize as an alternative to the 'masculine' self of autonomy and domination of the other. Chodorow situates herself in an "object-relations" context, which draws upon the work of Melanie Klein, in positing

> a course of transactions that help form our first subjectivity and sense of self, and that throughout life are renegotiated to recreate the sense of self and other in terms of connection,

> separation, and in between. These transactions give depth and meaning to experience, by resonating with the past and with constructions of the past. (1989 10)

The self-in-relation proves a valuable interpretive concept for Morrison's novels, which insist upon interpersonal connectedness and its influence upon female subjectivity, and the importance of interpersonal processes in providing the subjectivity which enables naming and speaking of experience, and connection of self to the past. Chodorow's work, however, emphasizes that this relational identity has subordinated women within an order which defines subjectivity as autonomous and implicitly masculine, and which devalues women's position within the private and relational sphere.

Dorothy Dinnerstein, like Chodorow, locates this sexual inequality in the lack of male participation in the early stages of the child's life. Dinnerstein suggests that the nature of the child's early relation with its mother, its initial inability to distinguish itself from its mother, followed by the realization of the mother's 'otherness,' and her power over the dependent child, informs the construction of mother as object and monster. Mother is inescapably associated with "[t]he loss of this infant illusion of omnipotence - the discovery...that there exist centers of subjectivity, of desire and will, opposed or indifferent to one's own" (60). Only when "the realm of the early non-self [is] as much a female as a male domain" will the figure of the mother cease to be the repository for these projected childhood fears, cease to be seen as the one "who wants to engulf, dissolve, drown, suffocate [her loved ones] as autonomous persons," even though the expectation that mother will devote herself wholly to the reflection and nurture of others' subjectivities ensures that "women...are in reality most likely to be distracted, drowned, suffocated as individuals" (112).

Thus, constructions of women have been deeply coloured by both the familial structure which designates mothers primary caregivers, and male retrospective interpretation of the mother-infant relationship as simultaneously a lost, idealized, secure unity, and a threatening blurring of self and mother, a time of vulnerability to the omnipotent mother. The assymetrical power relations of this first relationship lead to construction of the mother in terms of infantile aggressions, desires, and dependence, rather than as subjects in their

own right, and prompts perception of the mother as the area of "non-identity" (Waugh 74) which man fears and flees. These fears instigate the valorization of separation and autonomy as crucial to subjectivity. At the same time, as suggested in the work of Lacan, and expanded upon by Homans, the construction of this early relationship as a lost, idealized unity motivates the system of language and the entire Symbolic order as a series of substitutions for the presence and literality of the mother-child relationship. Thus, "the death or absence of the mother sorrowfully but fortunately makes possible the construction of language and of culture" (Homans 2). Women remain concurrently idealized (as objects/absent/fantasies) and denigrated (as subjects); they are identified with the literal which "both makes possible and endangers the figurative structures of literature":

> That we might have access to some original ground of meaning is the necessary illusion that empowers the acts of figuration that constitute literature.... At the same time, literal meaning would hypothetically destroy any text it actually entered by making superfluous those very figures - and even, some would argue, all language acts.... This possibility is always, but never more than, a threat, since literal meaning cannot be present in a text: it is always elsewhere. (Homans 5)

The existence of woman as a fantasized other remains necessary for the Symbolic, but the presence of woman as a subject threatens to destroy the systems of oppositions, delineated by Cixous, which undergird man-made language and the Symbolic order; Homans declares this subjective female presence impossible, and locates the "literal meaning" associated with femaleness "elsewhere."

Feminist attempts to operate within these pervasive narratives of women as absent and as objects thus encounter difficulty in defining and representing female subjectivity. To aspire to the subjectivity ostensibly granted men is to participate in devaluation and objectification of the mother and to perpetuate patriarchal gender systems. Adrienne Rich declares that it is "[e]asier by far to hate and reject a mother outright than to see beyond her to the forces acting upon her" (235), and encourages awareness of the mother's subjectivity and the male interests vested in dividing mother and daughter. Morrison's novels accentuate the many forces and systems which influence mothers, as well as emphasizing the subjectivity of these women,

and the perpetuation of sexist/racist structures enabled by objectification and devaluation of mothers. If accession to subjectivity on the psychoanalytic model entails devaluation of the mother and repeats the objectification of women, another alternative may lie in the revaluation of 'feminine' attributes, in embracing relational identity, connection, and presence as elements of a female subjectivity.

The revaluation of 'feminine' qualities, history, and culture participates in what is frequently termed feminist standpoint theory. According to Eve Browning Cole, this theory asserts that women's different lives have furnished them with "world views and self-concepts" (88) that diverge from those of men, and that women's experiences within the private sphere, and their subordinated position in the public world, enable them to "speak two languages" (90), and to develop greater mediation skills, and awareness of the other, "a basic ability to...mentally negotiate that balance between one's own needs and theirs which will best serve mutual or common interests" (91).

Homans to an extent employs standpoint theory in viewing the daughter's "continued attachment to the mother" positively: "...she has the positive experience of never having given up entirely the presymbolic communication that carries over, with the bond to the mother, beyond the preoedipal period. The daughter therefore speaks two languages at once" (13). This concept of women's - and by extension oppressed groups such as African Americans' - access to different languages and orders of representation, by virtue of their marginality, weaves throughout Morrison's novels, in the efforts of her women characters to find space for their subjectivities within the dominant order, which, as discussed in Chapter Two, many critics suggest are enacted through the black women's abilities to draw upon different, potentially disruptive, languages, and to negotiate such different levels because of their relational, other-directed qualities.

However, the revaluation of 'feminine' qualities, and unqualified valorization of such standpoint values as the "ethic of care" promoted by Carol Gilligan, remain problematic. While many feminist critics embrace concepts of relational identity, moral decisions grounded in personal responsibility and connectedness to others, and the ethic of care, others "are alarmed about the possibility that women's subordination is simply valorized

and ratified by making caring a central moral directive" (Cole 109). This revaluation risks entrenching women in 'feminine' roles from which society benefits; if society and culture remain patriarchal, the female acceptance of the qualities and experiences assigned women - such as child-rearing and care-giving - as specifically female implies acceptance of hierarchic gender oppositions and of all the binary oppositions which relate to gender division and the devaluation of women. Within Morrison's novels, the danger of locating self wholly in relation emerges in the characterization of Nel in *Sula*: consumed by her roles as wife and mother, she exists only to nurture others' subjectivities. The struggles to balance the needs of self and others, and to disrupt the division of 'masculine' and 'feminine' attributes, traverse the narratives of Morrison's African American women.

Black feminist theories intersect with elements of feminist standpoint theory in their efforts to reclaim the history and culture of black women, and to acknowledge the shaping effects of black women's experiences upon their subjectivities. Once more, motherhood is a significant factor in the construction of black women; due to the dislocations of slavery, and contemporary racial and economic factors, father figures are often absent in black households. In 1965, the Moynihan report attributed the low social and economic status of African Americans to the black family's 'matriarchal' structure, insisting that "the absence of male authority among Black people" was of greater impact than "the racial discrimination that produced unemployment, shoddy housing, inadequate education and substandard medical care" (Davis 13). Such a view, while valuably indicating the frequent absence of paternal authority, failed to acknowledge the recurrent pattern of the wider family network of "other relatives" and "adoptive kin" (Davis 14), and the social and economic powerlessness of most black mothers, and exhibited once more a misogynistic projection of (male) childhood fear of the powerful mother. The different patterns of black family structures indicate the insufficiency of white feminist texts such as that of Chodorow for approaching black women's/mother's perspectives, and thus the necessity of incorporating issues of race and class in psychoanalytic and feminist theories.

Black feminists often focus on the mother, usually in a revaluation of the mother-daughter relationship, which counters Moynihan's negative

stereotype and Freudian devaluation of the mother, and which insists upon racial/cultural specificity within mother-daughter relations, by centring upon the African-American woman's role as transmitter of culture. This creative role, in African tradition, constitutes story-telling and articulation of self and culture; an African-American daughter may learn from her mother not only stories, but the ability to construct - or re-member - her heritage for herself and others. Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* emphasizes the importance of black female culture and its creative forms, including baking, quilt-making, and gardening, forms often ignored or devalued by male aesthetic theory. Gina Wisker discusses the African female folkteller, or *griot*, as an "engaged performer" in passing on cultural history (7); Gay Wilentz similarly acknowledges the significance of African American women "in forging a diaspora culture" through "cultural transmission" (387), participating actively in forging racial and cultural subjectivity:

> Throughout the African diaspora, women writers are in the process of unscrambling the letters and (re)naming herstory; their work gives voice to the formerly voiceless members of their communities - the wife, the barren woman, the young child, the mother, the grandmother, women friends, female ancestors. They see their existence as a continuum from their ancestors to their descendants. Their aim is to find a usable past, to educate in the broadest sense of the word; their creativity is based in the oral traditions of their foremothers. (389)

These elements of continuity, creativity, and oral expression thus become aspects of a black feminism which celebrates African-American female culture in the tradition of feminist standpoint theory.

Patricia Hill Collins delineates an Afro-centric feminist epistemology which adopts a standpoint position, declaring that "African-American women, as a group, experience a different world than those who are not Black and female" (747), and that articulation of their standpoint asserts subjectivity, giving black women "the tools to resist their own subordination" (772). She depicts the dominant, positivistic approach to knowledge claims as incompatible with African American feminist epistemology due to the former's call for objectivity, objectification of the subject of study, and adversarial debates. The knowledge system of "Africanistic consciousness" (755), combined with feminist standpoints, calls instead for concrete experience as a

significant "criterion of credibility" (759), dialogue and group participation in the validation of ideas (763), an "ethic of caring," "the appropriateness of emotions in dialogues," and "the capacity for empathy" (766), and, finally, the "ethic of personal accountability," the expectation that people take responsibility for their knowledge claims (768-9). Such black feminist theory provides a valuable context for Morrison's novels, which portray the necessity for her women characters to learn to value their African-American heritage and their femaleness, and to counter white and sexist hegemony with assertions of their own knowledges - formed in dialogue with other women, and permeated by the importance of responsibility to others, of articulation of concrete experience, and of personal accountability. In this way, black women may assert a subjectivity which rejects white, patriarchal concepts of identity.

If restricted to standpoint theory, however, black feminism replicates the risks discussed above, in locating black female identity within the binary oppositions, the experiences, and the traditions constructed by racist and sexist systems. As Hazel V. Carby, herself a black feminist, points out, we cannot forget "the sexual ideologies that defined the ways in which white and black women 'lived' their relation to their material conditions of existence" (17). Often, black feminist writings seem to subscribe to monolithic categories of selfhood, experience, and a teleology of wholeness: Barbara Smith's 1977 "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" valorizes an unproblematic representation of "Black female" experience and a "black female language" (174); bell hooks perceives her "thinking" and "writing" as "an act of reclamation, enabling me to be whole" (1989 31), and Audre Lorde depicts "knowledge" as "that dark and true depth which understanding serves, waits upon, and makes accessible through language to ourselves and others" (68). Such images present language as a tool for uncovering the true, whole, and common identity of black women. Carby criticizes this "search for or assumption of a black female language":

> ...no language or experience is divorced from the shared context in which different groups that share a language express their different group interests. Language is accented differently by competing groups, and therefore the terrain of language is a terrain of power relations. This struggle within and over language

> reveals the nature of the structure of social relations and the hierarchy of power, not the nature of one particular group. The sign, then, is an arena of struggle and a construct between socially organized persons in the process of their interaction; the forms that signs take are conditioned by the social organization of the participants involved and also by the immediate conditions of their interactions. Hence...we must be historically specific and aware of the differently oriented social interests within one and the same sign community. In these terms, black and feminist cannot be absolute, transhistorical forms (or form) of identity. (16-7)

Thus, while the black feminist determination to value women's roles as mothers, wives, and community women, and to speak their experiences and valorize their activities, is in itself valuable, such a focus can, without constant qualification, reinstate acceptance of these experiences and activities as 'naturally' 'feminine,' or 'female,' and reinsert black women into the hierarchic oppositions of white, male society.[4] The female characters in Morrison's fiction repeatedly strive to attain subject status, often through the assertion of a black feminist standpoint, only to find themselves re-appropriated within the white, phallocentric order, as when Baby Suggs's speech of self-love, discussed in Chapter Two, grounds itself in black/white hierarchic oppositions. Lacanian, poststructural, and French feminist theories thus become useful, in emphasizing that, in many ways, the discourse in which we speak already speaks us, and is complicit with the patriarchal order we seek to disrupt.

Within Lacanian theory, Rose asserts, the continued emphasis is upon "the fictional nature" of sexual categories (29), of the mirror-image as guarantor of fixed identity (30), and of the concept of "ultimate certainty and truth" (40). These concepts are fictional because "[l]anguage is the place where meaning circulates - the meaning of each linguistic unit can only be

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[4] These essentialistic traits are not necessarily representative of black feminist theory as a whole, nor, even, indicative of the overall tenets of the individual writers here cited. hooks, for example, presents diverse concepts of self and language both in this and other works. For greater analysis of this debate within black feminism see Smith 1977, McDowell 1980, Carby 1987, Wall 1990, and Christian 1990. Their arguments indicate the difficulty black feminism encounters in negotiating the standpoint valuation of black female culture, discussed above, and the poststructural views upon the constituting effects of language and the shifting nature of subjectivity, commented upon below.

established by reference to another, and it is arbitrarily fixed.... there can be no final guarantee or securing of language" (33). This lack of "ultimate certainty or truth" thus runs counter to most standpoint epistemologies, including that of Collins which implicitly assumes universal truths may be established through Afro-centric feminist epistemology. The grounding of epistemological processes in concrete experience, expression of emotion, an ethic of caring, and personal accountability, while offering useful disruptions of past adherence to models of objectivity, cannot ascertain, any more than positivism or any standpoints which challenge positivism, "ultimate certainty or truth." Further, to subscribe to belief in, for example, the concrete experience of black women as a unified and homogenous category is to replicate objectification of 'woman' or 'black' as singular, and to deny the diversity of African-American women and their experiences. Finally, the emphasis placed upon speaking the self, and developing knowledge claims through dialogue, as discussed above, assumes a transparency of language which does not exist. If sexist and racist narratives have in the past been able to objectify and make absent black women as subjects, black women cannot simply step outside those totalizing narratives, and, in struggling to form their own narratives, must battle with the processes of objectification - of themselves or others - which language consistently perpetuates. In Homans's words:

> ...given that the story is written from the son's perspective, beginning with the earliest examples of Western literature, followed by a literary history that has only reinforced the myth already written, it is scarcely possible to imagine a gynocentric myth, or even a more equitable one, for androcentric myth has, in effect, shaped female experience. Although women writers past and present have made important and bold attempts to give voice to women's silenced story, we will perhaps never know the extent to which such revisionary myths (based on women's "experience") have unintentionally reinscribed the pervasive androcentrism of our culture. (14-15)

Feminist theorists must thus confront the contradiction in their efforts to "seek equality and recognition of a gendered identity which has been constructed through the very culture and ideological formations which feminism seeks to challenge and dismantle" (Waugh 119). Poststructural theories offer approaches which reject stable and unified categories of identity

and experience and which may, potentially, overthrow the tyrannical hierarchies which objectify and devalue women.

Poststructural theories embrace "[t]he plurality of language and the impossibility of fixing meaning once and for all" (Weedon 85), and perceive unified identity and categories such as 'women's experience' as fictions, constituted "through a very selective reading of a life world.... [H]ighlighted pieces of complex, contiguous, fluid, messy agglomerations of temporalities are being snatched out of context and patched together to create the desired story" (Ferguson 128). Any act of narrative - of self, history, culture, or theory - is thus subject to the same desires for unity and identity that have motivated male construction of woman as other, and that attempt to override the shifting and unstable nature of Symbolic signifiers. The postmodernism described by Jane Flax therefore has value in disrupting dominant narratives which deny female subjectivity:

> The post-modernist engagement in and preference for play, fragmentation and differentiation have quite a serious, even normative, purpose. The sceptical and disrespectful rhetorical, anti-foundational and anti-essentialist moves of writers such as Lyotard, Foucault or Derrida are partially strategic devices. They are meant to disrupt and erode the power of the grand 'normalizing' discourses that put into action and legitimate patterns of dominance characteristic of post-Enlightenment states. This deconstructive project is to contribute to the clearing of spaces in which many disorderly or local forms of life could flourish. (1992 198)

At the same time, however, postmodernism also disrupts narratives which attempt to further the feminist struggle to assert rights as subjects. Ferguson describes the kind of "play" associated with some poststructural approaches:

> Language that attends to the semiotic.... accepts and plays with the paradox of using language, to point to the limits and excessiveness of language, invoking indirect strategies of metonymy and metaphor to indicate its own gaps, doublings, and fissures. (130)

For Chris Weedon, this deconstructive play is valuable in "decentring the hierarchical oppositions which underpin gender, race, and class oppression," but "the implicit assumption that there is a free play of meaning not already located in a hierarchical network of discursive relations is to deny social power by rendering it invisible and therefore to reaffirm the status quo" (165).

Participation in Symbolic processes of language without constant awareness of their centring and structuring operations risks re-appropriation of one's self-expression. For example, the Lacanian narrative, although it acknowledges the lack of an ultimate truth *beyond* language, delineates the structuring and centring processes *within* language, and, in its own phallocentric narrative, positions the entire Symbolic in relation to the phallus, thus 'fixing' in place binary oppositions based on one term which "generat[es] a non-reciprocal definition of the other as its negative" (Grosz 124). Hence, women trapped within psychoanalytic narratives are marginalized, not by a "free play of meaning," but by the hierarchy and power relations which 'fix' meanings; in feminist poststructural thought it therefore remains important to acknowledge and challenge these hierarchies. The female subject may thus come into being in a process of disrupting the 'fixings' of meaning perpetrated by the phallic order, even as she remains aware of their constitutive power.

The female subjectivity conceived of within deconstructive/ poststructural discourse is, consequently, more of "a subversion of the categories of identity, a counter-subjectivity" (Ferguson 121). Linda Alcoff's reading of Derrida conveys a deconstructive view of 'femininity' in the refusal to define 'woman':

> Derrida's interest in feminism stems from his belief...that woman may represent the rupture in the functional discourse of what he calls logocentrism, an essentialist discourse that entails hierarchies of difference and a Kantian ontology. Because woman in a sense has been excluded from this discourse, it is possible to hope that she might provide a real source of resistance. But her mechanism will not be at all effective if she continues to use the mechanism of logocentrism to redefine woman: she can be an effective resister only if she drifts and dodges all attempts to capture her. (Alcoff 417)

This understanding of the 'feminine' offers a concept of subjectivity which is unstable and indefinable, perpetually mobile in challenging dominant perceptions of identity and of women.

Poststructural feminisms insert into deconstructive ideas the specificity of female experience and oppression, and assert some agency for female subjects within the constitutive forces of language. Weedon interprets a "poststructuralist position in subjectivity and consciousness" as one which "relativizes the individual's sense of herself" as "an effect of discourse which

is open to continuous redefinition and which is constantly slipping," but insists that this "is not to deny the importance of particular forms of individual subjective investment which have all the force of apparently full subjectivity for the individual and which are necessary for our participation in social processes and practices" (106). Flax also insists upon female specificity, "aspects of subjectivities rooted in intimate social relations" (1992 202-3); intriguingly, she locates postmodern feminist subjectivity in the object-relations and self-in-relation concepts discussed above, positing a social, "differentiated, local and historical" self (203), shaped by

> relations with others and [her or his] feelings and fantasies about them, along with experiences of embodiedness also mediated by such relations.... Such a self is simultaneously embodied, gendered, social and unique. It is capable of telling stories and of conceiving and experiencing itself in all these ways. (203)

Once more, this offers a valuable interpretive context for Morrison's novels, as her characters grapple to form subjectivity through naming and re-constituting sundered personal connections, and narrating their histories without succumbing to the desires for unity and mastery which inform slavery practices.

The return of Flax's postmodern feminism to feminist psychoanalytic theories suggests the complex ways in which these theoretical narratives interact, as well as implying that any concept of a female subject may return inevitably to the problematics discussed above of enacting a relational subjectivity within the patriarchal order. The theories of Kristeva and Irigaray usefully delineate the conflict between the 'feminine' as disruptive, on the one hand, and the 'feminine' as a mode of expressing female difference and subjectivity beyond the binarisms of the phallic order, on the other. Kristevan and Irigarayan theories also interact with the psychoanalytic and poststructural issues considered in the feminist theories discussed thus far.

Elizabeth Grosz provides a thorough and effective comparison of Kristeva's and Irigaray's stances, suggesting that while Kristeva is a "dutiful daughter" to Lacan and his assertion of woman's lack of subjectivity, Irigaray is a "defiant woman" who refuses to accord Lacan the position of "the subject-supposed-to-know" (Grosz 185). Kristeva and Irigaray have certain concepts in common, particularly in their focus on the role of mother-child

relations in the constitution of subjectivity:

> Both focus on the relation obscured in Freud's and Lacan's work - the mother-child relation (for Kristeva), and the mother-daughter relation (for Irigaray). In articulating the mother-child relation as a site for both the transmission and the subversion of patriarchal values, both affirm the archaic force of the pre-oedipal, which although repressed is thus also permanently preserved. Both affirm the fluid, polymorphous perverse status of libidinal drives and both evoke a series of sites of bodily pleasure capable of resisting the demands of the symbolic order. (Grosz 149)

However, their different understandings of the mother-child relationship, and of the powers of the Symbolic, result in different concepts of female subjectivity.

For Kristeva, the pre-oedipal, or semiotic, is *necessarily* repressed, to engender the Symbolic, which subsumes and regulates "the chaotic, semiotic fluxes" to use them as "ordered, meaningful, signifying elements" (Grosz 152). Grosz states that although Kristeva is interested in the occasions when "[t]he semiotic overflows its symbolic boundaries in "instances...which reveal the coercive forces vested in the domination of the symbolic over the semiotic" (153), she believes that the disruptive semiotic energies "cannot be sustained in a self-contained or a-symbolic semiotic. Sooner or later...the semiotic is recodified, reconstituted into a new symbolic system which has incorporated and absorbed its subversive potential" (154).

Kristeva adheres to the Lacanian concept that there can be no female subject and, as Grosz reads her, denies female subjective specificity in the mother-child bond, designating the semiotic "as a feminine and maternal phase," but

> disembod[ying] the feminine and the maternal from women, and particularly from the female body. As she understands it, femininity is identified with a series of processes and relations that the pre-oedipal child of either sex experiences and wants before the imposition of sexual difference. It has no special or particular connection to the differences between the sexes. (Grosz 161)

Consequently, maternity is also "a process unregulated by any subject, especially not by a female subject":

> Maternity effects a subject annihilation, the fading of sexual identity. It is the establishment of the grounds of *space* (and time) for the child. The chora is a nameless receptacle, an

> enveloping ground of identity which has no identity of its own.... This then is a maternity which *women* as such can never inhabit. It is a maternity, a space, an energy, which, in so far as it is semiotic, cannot be spoken, *especially* by mothers. (Grosz 161-2)

Grosz delineates Kristeva's belief that a woman cannot be a speaking subject from the site of the 'feminine,' but only on the terms of the 'masculine' order, for to be 'feminine' is to accept existence within the semiotic: "She remains locked within a mute, rhythmic, spasmic, potentially hysterical - and thus speechless - body, unable to accede to the symbolic because 'she' is too closely identified with/as the semiotic. 'She' is the unspeakable condition of the child's speech" (163). Such views align Kristevan theory with that of "Lacan's conception of an unknowable feminine *jouissance*" (163). Kristeva's own words assert the role of the 'feminine' as that of counter-subjectivity: "If women have a role to play...it is only in assuming a *negative* function: reject everything finite, definite, structured, loaded with meaning, in the existing state of society" (Kristeva 1974 166). While Kristeva does not deny the 'feminine' of all representation, it remains restricted to "indirect or oblique expression or evocation" (Grosz 163), often through avant-garde and male-authored texts, through irruptions of the semiotic which have little to do with women's concrete experiences of oppression, and which are constantly "rechannelled" within the Symbolic (Grosz 165).

Morrison's works also grapple with the importance of disrupting claims to wholeness, dependent as they are upon the "coercive forces" which suppress and annihilate black and female differences as 'otherness'; they thus share some basic concepts with Kristeva. However, Kristeva's insistence upon the re-subsumption of subversive forces beneath the coda of the Symbolic sits awkwardly alongside Morrison's texts which, while acknowledging the difficulty of escaping the old systems of oppression, demand acknowledgement of black and female subjectivity. Thus, Irigarayan theory, in its non-subservient approach to Lacanian narrative, offers valuable imagery for a reading of Morrison.

Grosz declares that Irigaray seeks to undo the repetition of hierarchic oppositions enacted in Kristevan theory as semiotic/Symbolic, and the subsequent denial of the possibility of female subjectivity. Irigaray employs

psychoanalytic theory to analyze "the construction and reproduction of patriarchal forms of subjectivity" (Grosz 169), the "androcentrism" of dominant narratives discussed by Homans, and to undertake "the exploration of a new theoretical space and language which may be able to undermine patriarchal and phallocentric domination of the sphere of representations and, more positively, to provide a mode of representation for women as women" (Grosz 168-9). Irigaray declares that the Imaginary and Symbolic have been depicted from the male child's perspective; through "affirm[ing] the particularity and unrepresented forms of pre-oedipal mother-daughter relations, and a feminine imaginary," she strives to deconstruct the concept of difference as opposition, as (female) deviation from a (male) norm, and replace it with "a difference understood as Saussurian 'pure difference' - a difference without positive terms" (Grosz 172). In this way, Irigaray challenges Lacan's 'fixing' of the system of language in relation to the phallus as a transcendent signifier, which positions the sexes "in terms of dichotomous opposition" (Grosz 124); she advocates instead a more poststructural view of language and relations where "*each* term is defined by all the others; there can be no privileged term which somehow dispenses with its (constitutive) structuring and value in relations to other terms" (Grosz 124).

This deconstructive approach to the Lacanian narrative thus enables consideration of "an altogether different space for women, one not defined in relation to men, but in their own terms" (Grosz 172). Within this different space, woman no longer functions as an object which "reflect[s] the masculine subject...as a form of self-externalization" (Grosz 173); Irigaray's work attempts "to pass *through* the looking glass into the 'wonderland' of woman's own self-representations 'on the other side'" (Grosz 173).

While many critics accuse Irigaray of essentialism, and of locating her images of woman's language and space in female biology (see, for example, Weedon 65), Grosz points out that Irigaray is, rather, concerned with achieving representation of female difference from a non-objectifying perspective:

> She forgoes all recourse to anatomy to develop instead an understanding of the morphology, the social/psychical representation, and lived reality, of the female body, which is closely based on Lacan's understanding of the 'imaginary

> anatomy'. The female body and specificity she seeks is not a pure or given identity, lying underneath a patriarchal overlay. Rather she seeks an active rewriting, this time from women's points of view, of the female body, and of the possibilities of the female body as a site for the production of knowledge. (171-2)

The rewriting which Irigaray attempts offers potential also for African American women in their search to claim not only female difference, but African difference, and to assert female genealogy and connectedness. As women and as African they have been victim to the processes Irigaray concerns herself with, as described by Grosz:

> The patriarchal order leaves no space or form of representation for women's autonomy. It effaces women's earliest formative relations, particularly through the 'inexorable' repression of the pre-oedipal mother-daughter relation - which leaves women without a pre-history and a positive identificatory model... (174)

New narratives may thus be conceived, which strive to recover such denied history, not as a single and objectified point of origin (the mother-object), but as a multiple series of representations which share only an affirmation in the possibility of black and female subjectivity.

To enable the conception of these representations, Irigaray asserts the representability of female *jouissance*, which Lacan and Kristeva deny:

> ...if this *jouissance* is 'beyond the phallus' it is not, for that matter unsignifiable. This is not a *jouissance* that woman cannot know or say; rather, it is a *jouissance* that Lacan cannot *hear* for he does not know how, or even where, to listen. (Grosz 175)

However, the representation of this jouissance in a language that will not reduce it to Kristevan 'femininity' remains problematic, and is usually figured in poststructural refusal of fixity:

> Irigaray does not aim to create a new woman's language. Her project, rather, is to utilize already existing systems of meaning or signification, to exceed or overflow the oppositional structures and hierarchizing procedures of phallocentric texts. She stresses their possibilities of ambiguity, their material processes of production and renewal. She affirms the plurality and multiplicity, dormant in dominant discourses, which cover over and rely on the inclusions and exclusions of femininity and its associated attributes. (Grosz 176)

Irigaray's own words indicate her major concerns as those of mimicking and accentuating the absences and objectifications of women in order to point to

an "elsewhere" through "disruptive excess":

> That "elsewhere" of feminine pleasure can be found only at the price of *crossing back through the mirror that subtends all speculation....* a playful crossing, and an unsettling one, which would allow woman to rediscover the place of her "self-affection".... the issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the *subject* or the *object*, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal. Which presupposes that women do not aspire simply to be men's equals in knowledge.... but rather, repeating/ interpreting the way in which, in discourse, the feminine finds itself defined as lack, deficiency, or as imitation and negative image of the subject, they should signify that with respect to this logic a *disruptive excess* is possible on the feminine side. (Irigaray 1985b 77-8)

In particular, Irigaray offers a counter-approach to the denial of female subjectivity at the centre of Kristevan theory, and creates space for conception of the mother as subject, and of interpersonal (and cultural) continuity as shaping forces of subjectivity:

> ...psychoanalysis does not allow a space for restructuring or reconceptualizing female relations, or re-inventing a body-to-body and woman-to-woman relation with the mother. For Irigaray this possibility can be concretized only by a multi-directional quest - the search for a history that has been rendered invisible by the refusal to accord women a name and place of their own; as well as the construction of a future which involves the painful process of giving up the mother as haven, refuge or shelter in return for seeing her as a woman. (Grosz 182)

Irigaray thus insists upon the subjectivity of women and of mothers, rejecting, continually struggling to break open, the psychoanalytic narratives which objectify, mutilate, and erase women from culture; as in Morrison's novels, a central concern becomes the struggle to represent women in different terms, even while confronting the difficulty of leaving behind the structures of the masculine Symbolic, and of foregrounding the "elsewhere" of female subjectivity that avoids appropriation within the Symbolic.

Cixous is similarly concerned to encourage women to speak/write themselves in modes which disrupt the phallocentric order, and to envisage a place "beyond" that order:

> Now women return from afar, from always: from "without," from the heath where witches are kept alive; from below, from beyond "culture"; from their childhood which men

have been trying desperately to make them forget... (1976 246)

Cixous urges women to reject the silence enforced upon them, and to re-present the female body, so long condemned: "Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth" (1976 250). Further, the female subjectivity and representation envisaged in both Irigaray and Cixous draws upon a relation to the other which eschews all thought of domination in favour of connection and reciprocity, grounded in a reclamation of the mother-daughter relationship:

> There is hidden and ready in woman the source; the locus for the other. The mother, too, is a metaphor.... Touch me, caress me, you living no-name, give me my self as myself. The relation to the "mother," in terms of intense pleasure and violence, is curtailed no more than the relation to childhood (the child that she was, that she is, that she makes, remakes, undoes, there at the point where, the same, she mothers herself).... In women there is always more or less of the mother who makes everything all right, who nourishes, and who stands up against separation; a force that will not be cut off but will knock the wind out of the codes. We will rethink womankind beginning with every form and every period of her body. (Cixous 1976 252).

Thus, French feminist theories, specifically those of Cixous and Irigaray, strive to conceive of a female identity which does not function as the negative, or lack, to man's positive, or presence, and which rejects the binary oppositions of phallocentric culture in favour of a woman who is not opposite, but different, and of a female sexuality which does not conform to the linearity of phallic culture, but is polymorphous, multiple, and infinite. Both assert that women's multiple and fluid nature has been excluded by the phallic, monolithic structures of male desire, and envisage a 'feminine' language and sexuality derived from the repressed mother-daughter relation, the insistence upon the presence of the female body in language, and a relation to the other grounded not in antagonism and the desire to dominate, but in mutuality and openness.

Morrison's works struggle with many of these concepts, and her themes and forms seem to share common ground with the insistence upon female subjectivity, the emphasis upon multiple images and figures for (black) female subjectivity, the dramatization of the damage inflicted by the linear and fixed logic of the white phallic order, and the difficulty, but necessity, of

negotiating a narrative which leaves space for the other and refuses to appropriate difference. Morrison's novels also interrupt and shape such concepts with the material and historical specificity of African American women's lives, and interpellate into images of mother-child and self-other relations the violences and ambivalences occasioned by struggles to negotiate intersubjective connections and personal boundaries.

The theories of Irigaray and Cixous offer images and concepts which participate in and connect the feminist views thus far discussed: psychoanalytic and feminist-psychoanalytic theories which analyze the processes of gender division, and the effects of mother-child relationships and language in the constitution of subjectivity; standpoint and black feminist theories which valorize female culture and history, and the speaking of the self; poststructural-feminist views, which seek to disrupt the categorizations and binary oppositions of all former narratives as egotistical efforts to attain unified subjectivity in the objectifications of others and the controlling of experience.

These poststructural-feminist and French feminist theories also offer valuable material for conceiving of the agency available to African American women. The concept of agency for black women, while problematic, remains necessary to any conception of African American female subjectivity. Morrison's novels delineate struggles which, although not always successful, challenge the debilitating depiction of the Law of the Father and Symbolic processes as total. While this thesis consistently portrays the re-appropriation of black women's narratives and attempts at self-expression by the dominant order, there remains in the texts the perception of black women as articulate and determined subjects, many of whom assert individuality, and contradictory, shifting subjectivities. In the narratives that form a background to this investigation of these novels it is thus useful to include other feminist theories which, like those of Irigaray and Cixous, conceive of active female subjects, and refuse to accept the the eternally re-appropriated semiotic of Kristevan theory as the sole mode of 'feminine' expression.

Kathy E. Ferguson's concept of "mobile subjectivities" [5] forms to some extent from the interplay of those feminisms touched on above - the self-in-relation, the poststructural self-in-flux - and the difficult balancing act demanded in constant renegotiation of these theories: "Living with the tensions and incompatibilities that result from such a strategy requires an ironic stance, a wry shrug at the impossibility of complete resolution and a concomitant willingness to keep struggling for partial victories" (182). This idea of mobile subjectivity enabled by the use of a variety of feminist concepts shares common ground with Carole Boyce Davies' theory of black female selfhood in terms of "migratory subjectivity":

> *Migrations of the subject* promotes a way of assuming the subject's agency.... the subject is not just constituted, but in being constituted has multiple identities that do not always make for harmony. The subject here is Black women as it is Black women's writing in their many meanings. Migrations of the subject refers to the many locations of Black women's writing, but also to the Black female subject refusing to be subjugated. Black female subjectivity then can be conceived not primarily in terms of domination, subordination or "subalternization," but in terms of slipperiness, elsewhereness. Migratory subjects suggests that Black women/'s writing cannot be located and framed in terms of one specific place, but exist/s in myriad places and times, constantly eluding the terms of the discussion. It is...formulated...as a migratory subject moving to specific places and for definite reasons. In the same way as the diaspora assumes expansiveness and elsewhereness, migrations of the Black female subject pursue the path of movement outside the terms of dominant discourses.... Black female subjectivity asserts agency as it crosses the borders, journeys, migrates and so re-claims as it re-asserts. (1994 36-7)

Davies' theoretical approach also has implications for my own theoretical perspective; she employs Zora Neale Hurston's courtesy of "going a piece of the way" home with visitors to propose "going a piece of the way with" a variety of theories:

> This comes from the recognition that going all the way home with many of these theoretical positions - feminism,

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[5] Ferguson states that her "mobile subjectivities" draw concepts from several other theorists/theories of subjectivity: "Haraway's cyborgs/situated knowledges, Trinh's splitting and re-connecting pronouns, de Lauretis's eccentric subjects, Spivak's intersections of Marxism, feminism, and deconstruction, Riley's contentious identities and Butler's local possibilities" (154).

> postmodernism, nationalism, Afrocentrism, Marxism, etc. - means taking a route cluttered with skeletons, enslavements, new dominations, unresolved tensions and contradictions. (46)

"Going a piece of the way" with these theories instigates a process of "*[c]ritical relationality*," which

> means negotiating, articulating and interrogating simultaneously a variety of resistant discourses relationally and depending on context, historical and political circumstances. It is not opportunistic, in the sense of conveniently articulated, but progressively multiply articulated in the face of a variety of dominant discourses. (47)

Davies suggests that while the intersections of these theories might be perceived as sites "of conflict, confusion, anger," they may also function as "a nexus of engagement," and enable "ways in which we can negotiate a variety of identities, theoretical positions and textualities without falling prey to schisms and dualistic or binary thinking that dismisses one dynamic to privilege another" (57). Davies' perspective thus offers not only a model for black female subjectivity, but a multiple theoretical approach to the reading/critical process, which is the envisaged mode of practice for this thesis, and is also discussed in relation to these novels in Chapter Three.

The theoretical perspectives of Alcoff and Teresa de Lauretis also emphasize the potential agency and mobility of black women, and relate subjectivity to the narrative of self and history valorized by black feminist theories. Alcoff's "concept of positionality" (428) envisages positional, shifting identity, relative to others, and to changing cultural and political conditions (433). The female subject envisaged is thus historically and culturally determined, but also has space for her own actions and construction of meaning (434). Alcoff draws upon Lauretis, interpreting her "Feminist Studies/Critical Studies" in this way: "...the identity of a woman is the product of her own interpretation and reconstruction of her history, as mediated through the cultural discursive context to which she has access" (434). This concept of the significance of interpretation and reconstruction of history, is, as discussed in Chapter One, a crucial part of the negotiation of African American female subjectivities in Morrison's novels. In the words of Lauretis,

> the feminist concept of identity is not at all the statement of an

> essential nature of Woman, whether defined biologically or philosophically, but rather a political-personal strategy of survival and resistance that is also, at the same time, a critical practice *and* a mode of knowledge. (9)

Narratives of self thus provide for black women temporary and strategic sites of subjectivity, and create a "personal history" which is "interpreted or reconstructed by each of us within the horizon of meanings and knowledges available in the culture at given historical moments, a horizon that also includes modes of political commitment and struggle" (Lauretis 8), providing

> the concept of a multiple, shifting, and often self-contradictory identity, a subject that is not divided in, but rather at odds with, language; an identity made up of heterogeneous and heteronomous representations of gender, race, and class, and often indeed across languages and cultures; an identity that one decides to reclaim from a history of multiple assimilations, and that one insists on as a strategy... (Lauretis 9)

If somewhat optimistic, in terms of the multiple oppressions confronting black women, these concepts of mobility and self-narrative demand space for women within the poststructural field of interminable play, and find liberation in the shifting nature of poststructural 'identity,' when it is enacted in specific and local situations as a personal narrative which constructs one's history and one's (provisional) selfhood.

Throughout this reading of Morrison's novels, the narratives of Freudian and Lacanian theory, and the feminist narratives which draw upon, alter, and re-write Freud and Lacan, function as a backdrop or frame of reference for interpretation. Chapter One employs psychoanalytic tenets of subject-formation and familial dynamics, alongside the concepts of self-in-relation and the mother-daughter relationship as asserted by Chodorow and, differently, by Irigaray. The chapter introduces the texts and their dominant characters and thematics through the analysis of mother-daughter relations between the novels' characters, and the effects of these relationships, and of the distortion or destruction of these relationships, both by slavery/racist structures and by the patriarchal narratives which divide mother and daughter, upon the women's negotiation of subjective positions and of interpersonal relations. This analysis not only employs theoretical writings and re-writings, but asserts that the women characters engage in struggles to write and re-write their own narratives, even as they find themselves trapped in racist and patriarchal

codes which reinscribe them as objects.

Chapter Two considers how the destruction of mother-daughter relations indicates the male appropriation of female forms for the perpetuation of the phallic order, and confronts the need simultaneously to disrupt the logic and misogynistic representations of the Symbolic, and to conceive of different representations of women and female subjectivity. It contemplates sites of Otherness/alterity as potential positions for disruption of the monolithic, masculinist order, and as offering material for representations of African American women which might enable them to assert subversive subjectivities. 'Cosmic' feminist theories offer conceptions of women as closer to nature, and of spiritual forces as a source of strength for women, ideas which share common ground with some black feminist theories. Nevertheless, these constructions risk reinstating women within stereotypical images, and locating them beyond culture, in the position of the Lacanian Other, the male fantasy of truth which enables male subjectivity at the expense of female subjectivity. Kristevan and Irigarayan views of women's alterity complicate and problematize this Otherness: Kristeva asserts that this alterity can exist only at the margins, within the terms of the Symbolic, which continually re-accommodates it; Irigaray, however, considers that 'otherness' does offer space for conceiving of a feminine order and language which, it often seems, may only be represented within the Symbolic in terms of its unrepresentability, but which refuses to accept the Symbolic as eternal and unalterable. Within Morrison's novels, the dangers of and damages inflicted by constructions of women's 'otherness' continually re-surface, and the attempts of women characters to gain access to the otherness which offers a feminine economy are repeatedly re-appropriated within the dominant order. However, the texts provide glimpses of a feminine space - enabled by the difficult negotiation of subversive and self-assertive strategies - which escapes the Symbolic, and which emphasizes the 'elsewhere' beyond the text that returns in the text's absences to threaten the apparent unity of the phallic order.

Chapter Three considers the politics of a narrative which desires to make space for African American female subjectivities, to represent, without appropriating, a female 'elsewhere,' and to enact the non-antagonistic attitude to the other demanded for the self-in-relation. Given the relational identity

valorized above, and the respect for difference advocated by Irigaray and Cixous, reading and writing the other becomes problematic: the novels' themes delineate both the need for connection and openness to the other in attaining subjectivity, and the simultaneous difficulty of connecting to the other without imposing totalizing (mis)readings and appropriating difference. The texts, in their multiplicity of potential meanings and withholding of judgements, enact narrative practices which emphasize the absences of certain narratives, and the unavailability of one, single, unifying reading of any text, and of any 'other.' Ultimately, the gaps and silences of the texts, as well as their emphasis upon the fallibility of narrators, enact a poststructural conception of subjectivity as open, fluid, shifting, and multiple, and an Irigarayan/Cixousian self-other/reader-text relationship which privileges reciprocity over the dominating and colonizing self-other and critic-text models of the past; this relationship also links with African-American and black feminist concepts of dialogic relationships. Finally, African American women within the novels both struggle to assert selfhood through narrating themselves and their histories, and negotiating relational subjectivities, and remain 'elsewhere,' an elsewhere which impinges upon the texts by foregrounding what remains absent and unrepresentable, and thus what disrupts any totalizing reading or narrative.

The Conclusion, in summarizing the thesis's implications, discusses the potential for 'in-between' spaces which challenge the binary oppositions of the Symbolic, mediate self-other relations, and provide forms for representation of shifting, multiple, black female subjectivities. The philosophies of Irigaray and Cixous, alongside the celebratory affirmations of feminist theories, offer hope for African American women's attainment of "positionality," "mobile subjectivities," and "migratory subjectivities," and Morrison's texts foreground the continuous struggles of such women to achieve, and negotiate the politics of, subjective representation.

CHAPTER ONE

"Her Face is My Own": Mothers, Daughters, and Relational Subjectivity

Sula, *Beloved*, and *Jazz* portray numerous models of female subjectivities, relationships, and families, and each dramatizes, in different ways, the distortion, denial, and destruction of the mother-child relationship, and the roles of mothers and daughters both within and beyond that relationship. Dominant models of selfhood base themselves upon these distortions, and Morrison's characters experience the subsequent limitations of selves grounded upon processes of repeated matricide, as well as the equally destructive dangers of idealizing the pre-oedipal realm as a locus for guaranteeing stable identity. Occasionally the texts provide a glimpse of alternative subjectivities, which, through re-imagining mother-daughter relations, or forging female friendships, open spaces in the dominant order for shifting and relational selves who continually negotiate relations with (m)others, and renegotiate traditional narratives, sometimes succeeding in creating their own.

Sula

Sula proffers two different sets of mother-daughter relationships, and consequently two different conceptions of female selfhood, one based upon conformity to the Oedipal model of feminine sexuality - passive and dependent - and one grounded in the valorization of fluidity and inconsistency of self celebrated by postmodern theory. *Sula* shows how Nel's passivity and dependence is constructed and reproduced, and at the same time asserts her ability to reject her limited role if she confronts her complicity in its reproduction. The novel also shows that Sula's selfhood, while offering valuable freedom and experimentation, is one enacted in isolation; her failure to negotiate relations with others results in aloneness and the attempt to possess absolutely. This suggests that the fluid and multiple subject

advocated by poststructuralist theory holds its own dangers, particularly in its abdication of agency and ethical responsibility toward others. Eva functions as a mother-figure who claims subjectivity, and yet insists upon the inevitability of connection to and responsibilities to others. Any concept of female subjectivity implicitly advocated within this novel is therefore grounded in relations with (m)others which, while granting others space for their own subjectivity, must simultaneously acknowledge the interconnection of self and others.

Nel Wright's matrilineal heritage is dominated by her mother Helene's control and repression, formed in opposition to the sexual lifestyle represented by Helene's prostitute mother, Rochelle. Rochelle may symbolize here the fluid, sexual female subjectivity devalued and repressed in Western philosophy's theory of the self as fixed, autonomous, and implicitly male. Helene attempts to reject her mother, in accordance with the Oedipal narrative of the girl's devaluation of the mother, attaining an enclosed, domestic life in Medallion, and denying maternal connection and racial heritage. This action entrenches insecurity beneath her mask of poise and restraint; insulted by a conductor for entering the white part of a train, Helene suffers "All the old vulnerabilities, all the old fears of being somehow flawed" (20), and, moving aside for the conductor, smiles ingratiatingly, eliciting looks of hatred from the black soldiers in the train.

Nel also re-enacts the Oedipal narrative, devaluing her mother, and dreading that she, like her mother, is flawed in the eyes of others: "If this tall, proud woman...if *she* were really custard, then there was a chance that Nel was too" (22). Nel thus becomes aware of her subjectivity through the desire to be different from her mother, and in terms of an other's gaze - in this case the hostile gaze of angered black soldiers, refracted through the gaze of the white man which undoes her mother: "She wanted to make certain that no man ever looked at her that way. That no midnight eyes or marbled flesh would ever accost her and turn her into jelly" (22). In this hierarchy of objectification, the black woman is the most despised object of the white, and black, masculine gaze. When Nel returns home, she claims an identity through separation, in opposition to her family role, her role as daughter: "'I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me.'" (28). The connection

between Nel's first conscious relation to her own identity and the critical male gaze intimates the shaping factors of her later relationship with her husband, Jude, and her dependence upon him for self-definition.

Nel's construction of identity in terms of the male gaze attempts to evade the position of the despised object of that gaze. She seeks approbation from Jude in order to gain a sense of worth; her identity becomes constructed by and subsumed in her role as wife. As discussed in the Introduction, in psychoanalytic discourse the mother is both the first 'other' to confirm the (male) self, and also the object from which separation must be achieved in order for (male) individuation and maturation to occur; within this discourse, Nel enacts the role of Jude's substitute mother. She becomes the object which he is permitted to desire in place of his mother, and the other who confirms his subjectivity in the domestic sphere when his self-definition as a man is continually undermined, in a world where 'masculinity' depends upon work, and work and the white definition of 'manhood' are denied to black men. Jude thus marries his mother-substitute in order to claim for himself the 'masculinity' guaranteed him as the husband within the patriarchal institution of marriage:

> 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.... The two of them together would make one Jude. (83)

Jude's motives for marriage emphasize Nel's position as mother-substitute, existing solely as an other enabling Jude to construct his subjectivity.

Maternal imagery augments this perception of Nel's position as other and mother-substitute. Jude's arrival home from work while Sula is visiting triggers Nel's shift from a subject position - talking and laughing with Sula and rediscovering her own pleasures - to someone wholly other-orientated:

> ...Nel, high-tuned to his moods, ignored her husband's smile saying, "Bad day, honey?"
>
> "Same old stuff," he replied and told them a brief tale of some personal insult done him by a customer and his boss - a whiney tale that peaked somewhere between anger and a lapping desire for comfort.... He expected his story to dovetail into milkwarm commiseration, but before Nel could excrete it, Sula said she didn't know about that - it looked like a pretty good life to her. (103)

Imagery of milk, lapping, and excretion implicitly recalls the mother-child relationship in which the child gains self-confirmation through the satisfaction of his need - specifically the need for food in the form of mother's milk.

Jude and Nel thus operate within the order discussed in the Introduction, which perpetuates fear of the mother. This order's lack of any representation of the early, inchoate relationship with the mother means a continual, if unacknowledged, tendency to regress - in Irigaray's words, "the danger of going back to the primal womb, seeking refuge in any open body, constantly living and nesting in the bodies of other women" (1991 40). Jude enacts this process; in a subjectivity based on repression of the connection to the mother, he is condemned to dependence upon that to which he has opposed himself and which he has devalued - maternity. Writes Patricia Waugh, "Men look to women to confirm a subjectivity defined in terms of separateness and autonomy (though their need for its recognition continually undermines its autonomous status)" (43). Jude portrays the consequences of the Freudian submersion of the mother - consequences tragic both for Jude and for Nel, who substitutes for his mother-object, whom he needs and yet hates because he needs.

Nel's emphatic declaration of identity upon her return from the journey, her rejection of her mother's role as the despised object of the male gaze, leads only to a similar position, as a rejected and abandoned object, because her determination to define herself in opposition to her mother fails to recognize her mother as subject and to examine the systems which shaped Helene. Nel's devaluation of her mother in response to the critical male gaze, with no concept of Helene's motivations, reproduces the patriarchal structure which permits women only to be idealized or despised, and forecloses any positive access for her to a maternal origin. Defined wholly by her ability to love and support her husband and children, Nel becomes the 'good' community woman, with the same conservative values about female sexuality as her mother. Such values lead to her rejection of Sula, destroying any possibility that she learn from Sula's independence and wilfulness to gain a subject position, and repressing both the sexuality which Rochelle represents, and the maternal connection repeatedly stunted and rejected by the internalization of patriarchal values and patriarchal constructions of identity.

Sula's grandmother, Eva, in contrast to Nel, endeavours to combine her mothering role with a strong sense of identity and personal boundaries, functioning as "creator and sovereign" of Sula's home (30). The depiction of Eva as mother mocks psychoanalytic and early feminist theorizing about the mother-child relationship, and indicates why it became necessary for a black feminist approach which included the experience of poor, often single black mothers. Abandoned by her husband, Eva attempts to feed and care for her three young children. The dominance of basic human needs over desires becomes prominent when Hannah, as an adult, asks Eva if she loved them. Eva counters with recollections of the difficult times when she struggled to feed her children, and Hannah responds: "'I didn't mean that, Mamma. I know you fed us and all. I was talkin' 'bout something else. Like. Like. Playin' with us. Did you ever, you know, play with us?'" (68). Eva reacts with anger, emphasizing the nature of her role as a poor, single mother who lived one day to the next, striving to keep her children alive: "'Don't that count? Ain't that love?.... what you talkin' 'bout did I love you girl I stayed alive for you can't you get that through your thick head or what is that between your ears, heifer?'" (69). Eva's anger at Hannah's implied accusation implicitly demonstrates how factors of race and class disrupt the assumptions of white middle-class nuclear familial structure that inform psychoanalytic theory, and demands acknowledgement of how being a mother, specifically under conditions of hardship, affects the mother's own subjectivity. The debilitating sacrifice of selfhood that nurturing can entail is literally depicted in Eva's loss of her leg, rumoured to be a deliberate self-mutilation to gain insurance money with which Eva shelters and feeds her children.

Eva's relationship with her son Plum demonstrates the complex effects of motherhood upon female subjectivity. Her deep mother-love is first established with the depiction of her efforts to relieve him of pain as a baby. When we next see Plum, he has returned from the First World War "with just the shadow of his old dip-down walk" (45), and has become drug-dependent. Eva takes it upon herself to burn him to death, an action described ritually, when after holding and rocking the sleepy Plum, she bathes him in kerosene (47).

Eva's action relates directly to her perceptions of her role as mother and

the conflict she feels between enacting that role and maintaining her own, separate selfhood:

> 'It was such a carryin' on to get him born and to keep him alive.... After all that carryin' on, just gettin' him out and keeping him alive, he wanted to crawl back in my womb and well...I ain't got the room no more even if he could do it. There wasn't space for him in my womb.... I had to keep him out so I just thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man.' (71-2)

Eva thus disrupts the male idealization/loathing of women and maternity by privileging the female point of view. Her narrative of Plum's regression contrasts dramatically with Sartre's depiction of woman:

> ...[t]he obscenity of the feminine sex is that of everything which 'gapes open'. It is an appeal to being as all holes are.... Beyond any doubt her sex is a mouth and a voracious mouth which devours the penis - a fact which can easily lead to the idea of castration. The amorous act is the castration of the man; but this is above all because sex is a hole. (Sartre cited in Waugh 71)

For Eva, however, the concept of Plum returning into her is not greeted with devouring joy; she rejects the male fantasy of the mother-function to privilege her own interpretation. Plum's dependence and apparent regression threaten Eva's subjectivity; she fears to become subsumed back into the role of mother, and demonstrates the reversal of Helene and Nel's fears that they should become like, or indistinguishable from, their mothers: this mother dreads a re-enactment of the fusion of mother and child, an usurpation of her body and her selfhood by her son.

Simultaneously, however, Eva fails to acknowledge her son's subjectivity, his identity outside his role as her son. Further, Eva takes it upon herself to define manhood, and to judge and condemn Plum for his failure to attain her definition of masculinity. Despite her love, in asserting her own subjectivity as someone no longer willing to mother a dependent child, she curtails and destroys her son's subjectivity. The blurred boundaries within the mother/child relationship and between love and destructiveness demonstrate the difficulties for women of achieving and maintaining a strong sense of self while nurturing and remaining empathic toward others, and fulfilling familial and community roles.

Nel, then, figures as a woman who, in attempting to negotiate this

balance between self and other, inclines dangerously toward the submersion of self beneath familial and community role; her object status links inevitably to her inability to construct her selfhood through an understanding of her mother and patriarchal processes. Eva more successfully maintains a strong sense of self shaped by relationships, both claiming power and privilege for herself, and 'loving' her children by keeping them alive through self-sacrifice. Her continued mother-love emerges in her brave but futile attempt to save Hannah from burning to death by throwing herself from a second-story window. However, Eva's action of killing Plum to preserve her subjectivity violates the rights of the other to self-definition. The dangers of such a privileging of self over other, and denial of relation, appear in more dramatic form in the character of Sula.

Sula offers an alternative female sexuality which rejects the constraints of normative gender roles within the community; however, while she seems to gain a subject position through self-expression, her subjectivity remains problematic and limited due to her isolation. Sula's self-devotion and lack of connection with others also partly derives from her relationship with her mother, Hannah. Sula is deeply affected when she overhears Hannah comment that she loves, but does not like, Sula (57). While still quite young Sula must confront the realization that her mother does not exist solely for her daughter, that she has a subjectivity of her own. It is to avoid confrontation of this fact that Freudian theory denies the mother's subjectivity, constructing her as object existing only to confirm her son's subjectivity. This enforced perception of the (m)other as a subject thus disrupts the concept of self as unified and fixed. Immediately afterward, Sula joins Nel in play at the river's edge, and, when they encounter young Chicken Little, she swings him around in her hands until he slips into the water and disappears, to be found drowned some days later. The text states specifically the effects of both Sula's matrilineal heritage and these two events upon her identity:

> Eva's arrogance and Hannah's self-indulgence merged in her and, with a twist that was all her own imagination, she lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her. As willing to feel pain as to give pain, to feel pleasure as to give pleasure, hers was an experimental life - ever since her mother's remarks sent her flying up those stairs,

> ever since her one major feeling of responsibility had been exorcised on the bank of a river with a closed place in the middle. The first experience taught her there was no other you could count on; the second that there was no self to count on either. She had no center, no speck around which to grow. (118-9)

Hannah's comments shatter Sula's other-reliance, her illusion of fixed identity based on the mirror-reflection, and Chicken's death confirms the disruption of self implicit in the surrender of other-reliance. Sula commences a life of self-experimentation in which self is not fixed around an assumed centre, has "no ego" (119), but fluctuates and shifts.

This acceptance of the fluidity of self enacts both a feminist rejection of the concept of fixed self, grounded in objectification of the (m)other, and a poststructuralist embrace of an alternative subjectivity which acknowledges the illusion of self-unity and wholeness. Yet the novel soon demonstrates that Sula's fluidity masks an inability to accept responsibility, linked to her refusal to acknowledge her intersubjective connection to others, and her subsequent abdication of any action which demonstrates compassion and ethical concern for others.

Only in her relationship with Nel does Sula experience the benefits of mutuality and connectedness. Many critics, and Morrison herself, have discussed the concept of Sula and Nel as opposites and complements, as two halves of the same person. Nel functions as the voice of community and responsibility, Sula as the voice of spontaneity, experiment and self-satisfaction, conveying, as Morrison declares, "that there was a little bit of both in each of those two women, and that if they had been one person, I suppose they would have been a rather marvelous person. But each one lacked something that the other one had" (Stepto 476).

The strength and beauty in the friendship of the two girls emerges in Sula's recollection of her time with Nel - for her "the closest thing to both an other and a self" (119): "Nel was the one person who had wanted nothing from her, who had accepted all aspects of her.... Nel was the first person who had been real to her, whose name she knew, who had seen as she had the slant of life that made it possible to stretch to its limits" (119-20). As well as contrasting, then, the two girls also share certain qualities, an acceptance of the other, a shared vision of life, grounded in their lowly, objectified position in

the white culture's hierarchy: "Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be" (52). The girls thus claim for themselves a different subjectivity, constructed relationally, and not in objectification of the other. Nel finds simultaneous selfhood and connectedness to an other through Sula:

> Her old friend had come home. Sula. Who made her laugh, who made her see old things with new eyes, in whose presence she felt clever, gentle, and a little raunchy. Sula, whose past she had lived through and with whom the present was a constant sharing of perceptions. Talking with Sula had always been a conversation with herself. Was there anyone else before whom she could never be foolish?.... Sula never competed; she simply helped others define themselves. (95)

Together, Nel and Sula create a seemingly ideal relationship, a space in which both can concurrently maintain a focus on self and other, each holding a subject rather than object position, to the point where self and other no longer stand apart and opposite one another but are filtered through one another, leading Eva to reminisce to Nel "Just alike. Both of you. Never was no difference between you" (169), and Sula to think of "the days when we were two throats and one eye" (147).

Ultimately, though, their complementarity implicitly recalls the heterosexual relationship valorized by Victorian ethics: the passivity, naivity, and dependence of the wife, and the autonomy, activity, and knowledge of the husband. Such contrasts surface in Nel and Sula's life decisions - Nel to marry and define herself through others, Sula to leave the community and experiment with her self. Inevitably, such a relationship becomes polarized due to its inherent inequalities and the difficulty of communication. The depth of this division materializes in Sula's affair with Jude and Nel's reaction to it, events shaped by their different attitudes to female sexuality and subjectivity.

Sula, as a child, learns from Hannah "that sex was pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable" (44). Hannah indulges in sexual pleasure with many men to fulfil her desire for "some touching every day" (44), but does not enter into long-term relationships. Sula is thus surprised by Nel's rejection after her affair with Jude, because,

> having had no intimate knowledge of marriage, having lived in a

> house with women who thought all men available, and selected from among them with a care only for their tastes, she was ill prepared for the possessiveness of the one person she felt close to. (119)

Sula's respect for her own and others' subjectivities, like her mother's, does not prepare her for Nel's possessiveness, which emerges from Nel's creation of identity through others.

However, Sula's treatment of men also differs significantly from her mother's behaviour. She has found, in her travels, that no man can be the companion she desires:

> ...it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade and could never be - for a woman. And that no one would ever be that version of herself which she sought to reach out to and touch with an ungloved hand. There was only her own mood and whim, and if that was all there was, she decided to turn the naked hand toward it, discover it and let others become as intimate with their own selves as she was. (121)

The freedom that Sula thus gifts to others is a refusal to confine or objectify them according to her own desires; this freedom is what Nel refers to as Sula's non-competitiveness and her ability to help others to define themselves. But Sula's refusal to impose definition on the other stems from a certain selfishness - or self-devotion - which surfaces in her perceptions of the sexual act:

> ...she leaped from the edge into soundlessness and went down howling, howling in a stinging awareness of the endings of things: an eye of sorrow in the midst of all that hurricane rage of joy. There, in the center of that silence was not eternity but the death of time and a loneliness so profound the word itself had no meaning. For loneliness assumed the absence of other people, and the solitude she found in that desperate terrain had never admitted the possibility of other people. She wept then. (123)

Thus, if Sula's act of sex is a celebration of her self, her power, and her independence, it is also a confrontation with the fact that her self-sufficiency grounds itself in "the absence of other people" and a profound loneliness.

Ultimately, it is this self-focus that differentiates Sula from her mother, alienates her from the community, and angers Nel. Where Hannah, while gaining the touching that confirms and satisfies herself, confirms and satisfies the other also, making "the man feel as though he were complete and wonderful just as he was" (43), Sula has little regard for the other she uses as

a path to herself, incensing the women who lay claim to these men: "Hannah had been a nuisance, but she was complimenting the women, in a way, by wanting their husbands. Sula was trying them out and discarding them without any excuse the men could swallow" (115). Sula's lack of dependence on others feeds off a lack of compassion for them; while she provides space for them to define themselves, she has no concern for their experiences or feelings, and despite her genuine affection for Nel, she cannot be open to Nel's perceptions.

Nel's anger at Sula stems from both her fear at having lost her self-defining role as wife, and her indignation that Sula never loved Jude and discarded him, an action which undermines Nel's investment of her self-worth in Jude. Nel's capacity as mother subsequently becomes the major role through which she defines herself. Her love for her children becomes needy and distorted, twisted "into something so thick and monstrous she was afraid to show it lest it break loose and smother them with its heavy paw. A cumbersome bear-love that, given any rein, would suck their breath away in its crying need for honey" (138). The words "suck" and "crying" equate Nel's love for her children with a child's hungering need for its mother, a dependency which, as Nel is adult, can only be unhealthy. Patricia Waugh points out that Chodorow's theories demonstrate how the turning "to children to fulfil emotional or even erotic desires unmet by other men or women means that a mother expects from infants what only another adult should be expected to give" (86), and occurs because relations with men cannot replicate the daughter's relationship with the mother - as men define themselves against the mother - and because of unresolved ambivalent feelings toward the mother (86). Nel's dependency on her children for self-definition falters when her children, maturing, seek out alternative others to confirm themselves:

> She had looked at her children and known in her heart that that would be all. That they were all she would ever know of love. But it was a love that, like a pan of syrup kept too long on the stove, had cooked out, leaving only its odor and a hard, sweet sludge, impossible to scrape off. For the mouths of her children quickly forgot the taste of her nipples, and years ago they had begun to look past her face into the nearest stretch of sky. (165)

Again, for Nel, her loss of subjectivity circles around being seen; having

constructed her life around being the desired - rather than despised - object of the gaze, she confronts the reality of not being looked at at all, and, unlike Sula, has little or no self-knowledge to sustain herself.

Nel must also confront the manner in which her self-identification as object of the gaze masks her complicity with patriarchal processes. As with Sula, Nel's perception of self relates directly to issues of responsibility; Sula denies responsibility for others, and Nel evades it by accepting the position of object. Eva, now an old woman, accuses Nel of throwing Chicken Little in the river, and when Nel protests that Sula was responsible, Eva comments, "'You. Sula. What's the difference? You was there. You watched didn't you? Me, I never would've watched'" (168). Eva similarly castigates Sula for her interested viewing of her mother's death, an incident which demonstrates that dispassionate observation constitutes deliberate inaction. Eva asserts the inescapable complicity of any observer in the processes he or she observes, a complicity Nel has tried to escape by accepting an objectified position. Finally, she must accept her guilt, an act which Eva refuses to perform for her:

> "You think I'm guilty?" Nel was whispering.
> Eva whispered back, "Who would know that better than you?" (169)

To confront her guilt, Nel must realize how her position as object perpetuates other processes of objectification, and how accepting responsibility makes possible the claiming of subjectivity.

Although Sula does not exhibit the other-reliance of Nel, she, too, despite, or perhaps because of, her constructed self-sufficiency, must encounter the dangers of the desire to possess, the dependency upon the other for self-definition. Her previous ability to allow others the freedom to be themselves, depends, as discussed above, upon a lack of connection or relation to any other, a deep loneliness. Sula's connection with Ajax changes her outlook, and initially appears to constitute an ideal heterosexual relationship. Rather than replicating Jude's desire for Nel as an other to confirm him, Ajax desires Sula for her independence. Sula's attention during sex to his face, and the focus of her thoughts upon him contrast sharply to her previous indifference to men, and their intercourse portrays a union that Sula has never experienced in a heterosexual relationship: "He swallowed her

mouth just as her thighs had swallowed his genitals" (131). This intermingling of flesh implies an equivalent emotional communication, a breaking down of the boundaries between self and other, one in which woman is not all-consuming and man is not invading, but where intertwining is mutual.

Once more, however, the difficulty of negotiating and sustaining a mutual self-other relationship emerges. Just as Eva extended her love and nurturing of Plum to violation of his subjectivity, and deprivation of his life, so Sula's relation to Ajax becomes one of "possession, or at least the desire for it" (131). She focuses upon the other as if he were herself - "...Sula...was flooded with an awareness of the impact of the outside world on Ajax" (133) - and responds to him as a mother-substitute, there to shore him up and tend to his needs: "Putting her fingers deep into the velvet of his hair, she murmured, 'Come on. Lean on me.'" (133). It seems that here Sula exhibits an aspect of the feminine ethic of care, what Nell Noddings has termed 'motivational displacement,' where the self acts "from the other's needs and perceptions" (Crosthwaite 5). But Sula fails to strive for openness to the "other's sense of self and world" (Crosthwaite n.15 21), a difficult faculty to cultivate, given the "problematic assumption that we can be transparent to one another" and "the diversity of individuals, groups, experience and values" (Crosthwaite 19). She projects her own concerns upon Ajax, failing to perceive that he feels no need for her maternal comfort. This imposition of her (mis)interpretation of Ajax emerges when she discovers later that she did not know his real name. Ajax flees the "scent of the nest" (133), and Sula, drained by the unnatural experience of dependence and the desire for possession, deprived of the other she longed to possess, and alienated from any other form of connection, can only die.

Sula's inability to rely on other or self, derived from overhearing her mother declare that she does not like her daughter, and from her accidental role in the death of a child, results in her experimental life exploring her fluid sense of self. She inherits her mother's easy attitude towards men and sex, but her focus on self results in a complete disinterest in satisfying the other. Further, to confirm her sense of self she abandons her familial roles, watching with interest when her mother burns, and consigning Eva to a rest home, refusing to accept responsibility and connection to others. Her consequent

inexperience in relationships, and in the kind of other-reliance demonstrated by Nel, leads to both her affair with Jude, perceived as a violation of their friendship by Nel, and her unpreparedness for possessive desires in her relationship with Ajax. Both factors cause her final aloneness and death, and although she claims a glory for herself - "'...I'm going down like one of those redwoods. I sure did live in this world'" (143) - and prefers her loneliness as her own, in contrast to Nel's - "'Now your lonely is somebody else's. Made by somebody else and handed to you. Ain't that something? A secondhand lonely'" (143) - ultimately, the emptiness of the large house at her death symbolizes the hollowness of a wholly self-made subjectivity. The fact that, despite her rejection of her mother and grandmother, Sula dies in her grandmother's room and bed, next to the window boarded up since Eva leapt through it at Hannah's death, signals the inescapability of those matrilineal ties, and the interconnectedness that may be negotiated once those ties are more fully acknowledged and understood.

Similarly, the fact that Sula's last thought conveys a desire to share her experience with her friend - "'Wait'll I tell Nel'" (149) - emphasizes that her most powerful sense of self derives from her relationship with an other, a friendship that lowered the boundaries of self, and yet provided only a clearer sense of self. This, too, is Nel's final realization within the text: that the greatest part of her self did not lie in her objectification as Jude's (m)other:

> "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)

Finally, then, the formation of subjectivity occurs in this female-to-female friendship; symbolically, also, it lies in the balance between the two types of self that Nel and Sula represent, being neither self-definition through familial roles and others, nor self-definition through solitude and rejection of others, but self-definition at some point in between - in relation to an other who enables you to define yourself, but does not undertake that definition for you. Sula and Nel temporarily achieve this kind of relationship together, but their polarization forecloses communication, suggesting the difficulty of negotiating boundaries within the self-other relationship.

Ultimately, as suggested by Chodorow, perceptions of personal

boundaries stem from the time in which they began to form, and are influenced always by the relationship which challenges those boundaries, that of the mother and child. Construction of this relationship has been dominated by the ambivalences and threat to identity associated with it, rather than acknowledgement of the mother as subject. Any alternative concept of identity must commence with the maturing child's recognition that the mother has her own subjectivity and does not function simply as a mirror-object; that, consequently, identity is not as fixed and unified as earlier perceived, but is shifting, contradictory, and constantly influenced in relations to others.

Beloved

Beloved dramatically portrays the complexity of issues of subjectivity, objectification, and intersubjective relationships, delineating the disruptions of the mother-daughter relationship under slavery, and the gaps in psychoanalytic and feminist theories that attempt to explain this relationship in terms of the 'universal' subject who is white, middle-class, and from a nuclear family. The novel's shifting familial configurations portray the dislocating effect of slavery upon black families, the potential for a multiplicity of ties that bind many differently-constituted 'families,' and the effects of slavery and black parent-child relations upon the formation of subjective positions for black women. The repressed mother-daughter relationship, lacking representation within the dominant culture, surfaces temporarily as a force which threatens patriarchal, racist narratives, but the novel implies that there is little or no space for the expression of this force, and dramatizes its incorporation by the dominant order.[6]

Beloved herself functions as the return of the repressed (Phelan 723). On one level, she embodies the "Sixty Million and more" African Americans estimated to have died in slavery, and her story urges 're-memory.' More immediately, Beloved enacts both the return of Sethe's child, the daughter

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[6] In the discussion of mothers and daughters in *Beloved* that follows, lack of space enforces the omission of discussions of significant mother-daughter relationships and female characters within the novel, including greater analysis of Denver, of her relationships with Sethe and with Beloved, and of Sethe's relationship with her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs.

whose throat Sethe cut in order to protect her from enslavement, and the partial re-emergence of the mother-daughter relationship, destroyed and distorted by white slavery practices, and ignored, devalued, and repressed by white, Western, theoretical, political and social practices. Beloved's story is one of a struggle for subjectivity and the desire for recognition, the drive which, according to Lacan, shapes our egos and our movements throughout life (Grosz 64-5). Further, despite the fact that Beloved is ostensibly a young adult, her tale depicts her engagement with the Imaginary, pre-oedipal stage of development, and with all its accompanying rage and desire. Finally, her adulthood both suggests that repression of mother-child relations distorts adulthood into a permanent re-enactment of childhood fears and angers, and denotes the inadequacy of any theoretical model for defining and explaining the identity-formation of African American women in or after slavery: Beloved's entanglement in Imaginary relationships demonstrates that processes of identity-formation which objectify (black, female) others, have denied her, and women like her, the opportunity to gain a self, by engendering the slavery and racial systems that both literally and metaphorically bring about the death of self.

The return of repressed/disrupted mother-daughter relationships occurs throughout the novel, often in images of feeding and eating. The mother-daughter relationship here is not only symbolically repressed through the processes of the Oedipal complex and accession into the patriarchal Symbolic - which Beloved has not experienced, a factor explaining her greater access to the mother-daughter bond - but is physically and brutally exorcized through the actions of white slavetraders and holders. Sethe barely recalls her own mother, who was brought from Africa:

> "I didn't see her but a few times out in the fields and once when she was working indigo.... She must of nursed me two or three weeks - that's the way the others did. Then she went back in the rice and I sucked from another woman whose job it was." (60)

Sethe, like other children of slaves, never formed the relationship with her mother symbolized in the nourishment of mother's milk, but sucked from a woman who nursed all the babies, white ones first:

> Nan had to nurse whitebabies and me too because Ma'am was in

> the rice. The little whitebabies got it first and I got what was left. Or none. There was no nursing milk to call my own. I know what it is to be without the milk that belongs to you; to have to fight and holler for it, and to have so little left. (200)

Therefore, Sethe as a child often did not even receive what Lacan takes for granted, the fulfillment of basic needs. Her restricted access to those objects which might represent recognition of her by the (m)other demonstrates the forces behind black women's limited access to subjectivity and their fragmented sense of identity.

Sethe's anger at this enforced disruption of her relation to her mother - more concretely and irrevocably enacted in her mother's execution - becomes fierce determination to retain her own children and to give them her milk, and to attain unified identity in her role as mother. In the escape from Sweet Home, desperation to give her milk to her baby girl drives her on, alone, pregnant, and almost dead from a whipping. And when she tells Paul D about the whipping administered by Schoolteacher and his nephews, her most traumatic memory is the violation that preceded it, the boys' sucking of her milk:

> "After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came there for. Held me down and took it. I told Mrs. Garner on em. She had that lump and couldn't speak but her eyes rolled out tears. Them boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still."
>
> "They used cowhide on you?"
>
> "And they took my milk."
>
> "They beat you and you was pregnant?"
>
> "And they took my milk!" (17)

Sethe's determination to nurture her children demonstrates her frustration at being denied a relationship with her own mother, her desire for a family, and her willingness to accept the responsibility of nurturing that family: "...sure enough, she had milk enough for all" (100). However, Sethe faces the danger of herself being consumed, in subscription to the idealization of the self-sacrificing mother denied her own subjectivity.

Sethe's attempts to assert subjectivity through her motherhood reinsert her into the psychoanalytic narrative of the self-sacrificing, idealized mother. Davies suggests that the symbolism of nurturing breasts and mother's milk in *Beloved* participates in "monolithic constructions of romanticized African-

American motherhood" (1991 50), and that, in defying slavery's severance of black mother-child relations, Sethe "too fully accepts the given paradigm of motherhood as exclusive responsibility of the biological mother," and exudes "the kind of mother-love which the society enforces for women" (54). Thus, where Eva scornfully castigates Hannah for her romanticized vision of mother-child relationships, Sethe takes an attitude of supplication toward Beloved, in recognizing her as her daughter and attempting to placate her for her death:

> Rather than understanding that mothering carries with it the conflict of guilt and selfishness, holding and letting go, her needs and the child's needs, she abandons the world and her life to the demands of nurturing a child exclusively. (Davies 1991 55)

In this way, Sethe becomes consumed with guilt and surrenders her sense of self in an attempt to recapture the multiply repressed and denied African-American mother-daughter relationship. Such a reading emphasizes the dangers of romanticizing the pre-oedipal relationship, which must be acknowledged as a construction of the Symbolic order. Sethe's assertion of her subjectivity in terms of her maternity enables her re-absorption into the Symbolic which subsumes female subjectivity under its own construction of motherhood. As discussed in Chapter Two, there is no unmediated access to the realm of the pre-oedipal, already always appropriated and circumscribed by the Symbolic, constructed by processes of projected ambivalence and insecurity. The Symbolic order's re-appropriation of Sethe as mother-object signals the marginal and precarious nature of her self-assertion through the dominant language, and anticipates her eventual inability to escape the psychoanalytic narrative.

Beloved documents the struggle of its black women to make space for their narratives within the dominant discourse. The text takes shape through the stories and re-memories of Sethe, Paul D, Beloved, and other characters, and shifts frequently from the present to the past and back, until we can comprehend Sethe's view of the simultaneity of past and present: "'Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place - the picture of it - stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world....'" (36). This understanding of the processes of memory and storytelling envisages re-membering, ostensibly an abstract practice, as one of literally (re)embodying the past, including the mother-daughter relationship,

and offers a strategy for opposing repression and acknowledging the multiple effects of the past upon present selfhood, a strategy which Sethe strives to employ in claiming subjectivity.

For black feminist theorists such as bell hooks, such speaking of self, Sethe's reconstitution of her past in stories, is the step from object to subject:

> Speaking becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject. Only as subjects can we speak. As objects, we remain voiceless - our beings defined and interpreted by others. (1989 12)

Sethe thus fulfills hooks's edict on "the need to speak, to give voice to the varied dimensions of our lives" (1989 13), retelling the story of Denver's birth and naming: how, as an almost-dying fugitive slave, Sethe gave birth to her on the banks of the Ohio river, with the help of a white girl named Amy Denver. Denver, however, feels threatened when Sethe tells other stories of Sweet Home: "Denver hated the stories her mother told that did not concern herself, which is why Amy was all she ever asked about. The rest was a gleaming, powerful world made more so by Denver's absence from it" (62). Denver is threatened by any perception of her mother as a person outside her maternal role, as a subject rather than object, as someone with her own needs and experiences, not someone simply to satisfy Denver's demands.

In contrast, Beloved longs to hear of Sethe and her past, and, in response, Sethe begins to re-member herself for Beloved, an act which also re-members the lost, repressed mother-daughter relationship. Beloved's request for stories is a demand for objects which represent access to the (m)other, recognition, and eventually the fusion she desires; storytelling is "a way to feed her," and "her thirst for hearing it" makes Sethe's telling of difficult things "an unexpected pleasure" (58). Imagery of feeding and thirst denotes Beloved's request as one grounded in demand for access to the mother-daughter relationship, and Sethe thus draws upon her repressed past and the art of storytelling to speak herself, to reclaim herself and to reconstitute, if unconsciously, the mother-daughter relationship denied her. However, the discourse in which Sethe is situated is one dependent upon the absence of the mother as subject and the objectification of (black, female) others. The obstacles to achievement and representation of an African

American female subjectivity within this discourse become apparent when Sethe confronts her severance from the language of her mothers.

Sethe recalls her Nan, the woman who nursed her, and the stories that she gave Sethe just as she had given her milk. These stories provide subject positions, both for Nan, who tells of how she and Sethe's mother were brought from Africa on the ship, and for Sethe, who learns that her mother rejected many of her children as the issue of white men who raped her, but kept Sethe and gave her "the name of the black man" whom she loved (62). Sethe confronts experiences which are multiply repressed because they belong to another order, another system of signification, for Nan "used different words," words of an African language lost to Sethe:

> Words Sethe understood then but could neither recall nor repeat now. She believed that must be why she remembered so little before Sweet Home except singing and dancing and how crowded it was. What Nan told her she had forgotten, along with the language she told it in. The same language her ma'am spoke and which would never come back.... she was picking meaning out of a code she no longer understood. (62)

Therefore, Sethe's entry into the white patriarchal world of slavery forecloses her access to the language of her mother(s), and positions her in a discourse wherein black women are always other. Sethe's attempts to re-member herself are thus entangled with the difficulties of speaking her story in the language of her oppressors, and the effects of this upon her subjectivity are implicit in her stuttering until she met Halle.

The monologues of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved compellingly articulate the struggle to represent female relationships and subjectivities, as well as the ambivalences of those relationships, caught up in mechanisms of the Symbolic, its negative connotations of blackness, femaleness, and maternity, and the frustrations and desires engendered by disruptions of mother-daughter relationships, the latter conveyed in the language of fusion and eating/drinking that denotes the pre-oedipal connection. Sethe, feeling the need to excuse herself to Beloved, even as she asserts that "I don't have to explain a thing" (200), speaks of her unsatisfactory relationship with her mother, the lack of mother's milk, and the appropriation of her milk by the whiteboys; Denver expresses her loneliness, her fear of her mother, and her adoration of her absent father; and Beloved speaks her memory of the Middle Passage, or, on

another level, her experience of being dead. Beloved's most persistent memory is of abandonment by a mother-figure whom she identifies as Sethe, and her ultimate vision is of a joining, an obliteration of personal boundaries:

> in the night I hear chewing and swallowing and laughter it belongs to me she is the laugh I am the laugher I see her face which is mine .... I have to have my face .... I reach for her chewing and swallowing she touches me she knows I want to join she chews and swallows me I am gone now I am her face my own face has left me .... Sethe's is the face that left me Sethe sees me see her and I see the smile .... it is the face I lost she is my face smiling at me doing it at last a hot thing now we can join a hot thing (212-3)

Such fusion both challenges belief in unified, autonomous selfhood, and simultaneously forecloses the possibility of any subject-to-subject dialogue by simply reinstating the mother-infant relationship - inevitably as constructed and portrayed by the Symbolic - as the model for an adult relationship, complete with its processes of objectification, and the ambivalences occasioned by the asymmetry of power. Barbara Schapiro points out that repetition of the word 'mine' in the monologues suggests the "possession and incorporation of the other as an object" (202):

> This form of possessing and objectifying the other...cannot satisfy - it imprisons the self within its own devouring omnipotence, its own narcissism. True satisfaction or joy, as Benjamin explains, can only be achieved through "mutual recognition" between self and other, between two subjects or selves. (203)

Beloved and Sethe's relationship, unable to be negotiated through a discourse which values mother-daughter connection, thus remains grounded in the ambivalences associated with early childhood.

Beloved, as a child denied the chance to mature, to learn autonomy, and to balance individuation with connection, is driven by desire and childish rage. Like the child described by Lacan, Beloved demands a series of objects which represent the eternal recognition and love of the (m)other (Grosz 61-2): "lullabies, new stitches, the bottom of the cake bowl, the top of the milk" (240). These objects do not bring about the imaginary union with her mother that she seeks, and Beloved begins to wear down Sethe, refusing to accept her explanations for killing her. The unhealthy reversal of the mother-child relationship becomes apparent, and the result of Beloved's assertion of power

is the swallowing up of Sethe's self:

> Beloved bending over Sethe looked the mother, Sethe the teething child.... The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became.... She sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur. (250)

The consequence of slavery's disruptions of the mother-daughter relationship, and of the Symbolic's repression of the relationship, is the distortion of mother-daughter relations and of the effort to represent them in the Symbolic, perverting them into the parasitic power-play which threatens Sethe to the point of physical illness. This is only halted, it seems, when Denver steps out into the community, discovers a sense of self, and initiates a process which brings the community to Sethe's aid and causes Beloved to disappear, seemingly rescuing Sethe from dissolution.

This interpretation, however, accepts too completely the model of selfhood grounded in psychoanalytic narratives, and the dominant order's foreclosure of any positive representation of the mother-daughter relationship, and of the intermingling of self and other. An alternative reading of *Beloved*'s conclusion can indicate the complex concepts of black female subjectivity at work here, and provide a glimpse of alternative models of selfhood and relationships.[7]

Numerous readings of the novel's ending valorize Denver's actions as those of someone re-entering community and claiming a subjective position. When a friend tells Denver to take care of herself, she ponders, "It was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve" (252). Subsequently, she steps out into the world, and procures a job in order to provide for and rescue herself, Sethe, and Beloved: "Somebody had to be saved, but unless Denver got work, there would be no one to save, no one to come home to, and no Denver either" (252). Barbara Schapiro contends that when Denver approaches Lady Jones for help, and Lady Jones sympathetically murmurs "Oh, baby," that the "empathic recognition of the hungry baby within finally

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[7] I am indebted to my supervisor Doreen D'Cruz, and my reading of her unpublished manuscript, for initiating my considerations of this alternative interpretation, and the subsequent insights with which this reading provided me.

frees Denver from the trap of her infantile needs" (206). The narrative seems to confirm such a reading: "Denver looked up at her. 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" (248).

Other critics place similar emphasis upon Denver's journey into the world. Writes Davies: "Denver finally is able to break out of the narrowly-defined, self-destructive circle of family relationships of the house" (1991 54). For Susan Bowers, Denver functions as a Christ-figure: "Denver not only represents the future; she brings it into being.... Her efforts lead to everyone's salvation: the reunion of the community" (69). But Denver's shift into the world may also appear as entry into the patriarchal and racist economy which Sethe rejected in relinquishing her job as a cook for white people - itself a replication of her Nan's role of providing milk for white babies. Denver seeks employment with the white Bodwins, and when Mr Bodwin comes to collect Denver for work, Sethe sees him as the returning slave-catcher, coming to take away her daughter. The fact that he comes for Denver and not Beloved is immaterial; Sethe's misrecognition construes Denver's imminent participation in the white-controlled job-market as a mimicry of the return to slavery which Sethe killed Beloved to prevent. Further, the fact that the Bodwins are those who "hated slavery more than they hated slaves," and who enthusiastically appropriated Sethe's killing of her daughter as ammunition for the abolitionist cause - "Good years, they were, full of spit and conviction," thinks Bodwin (260) - emphasizes that Denver's step into their world is necessarily an alienation from her family, her race, and the history of both.

The text indicates the nature of Denver's actions as conformity with a patriarchal system. Following the psychoanalytic narrative, Denver has feared her mother and idolized her absent father, associating him with some exciting world external to family. Her entry into this world aligns her with her father: "...her father's daughter after all, Denver decided to do the necessary" (252). When Paul D encounters Denver after Beloved's disappearance, he thinks that "she looked more like Halle than ever," and Denver herself confirms her severed connection with Sethe: "'I think I've lost my mother, Paul D'" (266). If, according to some critics, Denver has acceded to a strong sense of self, she has done so in the traditional, psychoanalytic manner, through separation

from the mother, and in a way that compromises relationship with her racial history. She has gained entry into the Symbolic, and is being taught, or in her own words, experimented on, by her white employer (266). In our last glimpse of her, she turns from Paul D, surrogate father figure, to a young man, "her face looking like someone had turned up the gas jet" (267), enacting the psychoanalytic narrative of heterosexual love. Such a reading implies that if Denver is inaugurated into the world as a woman, it is as the 'woman' of patriarchal and white theoretical construction.

Similarly, interpretation of Sethe's subjective position at the novel's end engenders conflicting readings, indicating the struggle over meanings and representation enacted by Beloved and Sethe at the margins of the Symbolic. Paul D enters 124, and finds Sethe in bed, in a state of weariness. He offers to bathe her, thinks of her kindness in the past, when she saw him collared like a beast but never said so, and comes to a decision: "Only this woman Sethe could have left him his manhood like that. He wants to put his story next to hers" (273). When Sethe bemoans the loss of Beloved with "'She left me.... She was my best thing'" (272), Paul D takes her hand.

> "You your best thing, Sethe. You are." His holding fingers are holding hers.
>
> "Me? Me?" (273)

Numerous critics represent this scene as one of affirmation which looks to a future mutual relationship between Sethe and Paul D. Bowers declares that the reader observes "Sethe and Paul D rejoining their stories to each other's," the re-establishment of "the intimate connection that will allow them each to find his or her own self and love it," and Paul D's undertaking of a nurturing, traditionally female role: "...he mothers Sethe as her own mother never could" (74). David Lawrence also interprets this ending as one of celebration:

> Her wondering response, "Me? Me?," implies its own affirmation. Reviving her with the knowing touch of his words, Paul D rescues Sethe from mute oblivion, reconnecting her with the talking spirit of companionship and community. (199).

In the context of these readings, Paul D, by nurturing Sethe and refusing to silence or incorporate her story, sets himself alongside her and begins to bring her back to the 'real' world, and to constitute for her a coherent sense of self.

Yet the text suggests inconsistencies in such interpretations. Paul D

enters the house with his mind bent upon his own story, and not Sethe's, focused upon the benefits his relationship with Sethe has conferred upon him, as explained by Sixo about the Thirty-Mile Woman: "'She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order. It's good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind.'" (273). Most of all, Paul D makes the decision to be with Sethe when he recalls how she refused to objectify him when he was at his most vulnerable - a gift similar to the one Sula grants others. But the fact that this gift enabled Paul D to hold on to his "manhood" introduces problematic concepts of 'masculinity' into Paul D's relationship with Sethe, and recalls his earlier judgements of her.

Paul D's anxiety about his identity circles around the way in which his former owner, Garner, labelled his slaves 'men,' and the way in which Schoolteacher denied them that label. Paul D struggles with the concept of 'masculinity,' how to attain it, and who has the right to bestow the label. His sense of masculinity is threatened when he realises that Beloved is gradually moving him out of the house, and when he cannot resist her sexual advances. He experiences shame because, despite the fact that "he was a man and a man could do what he would" (126), he feels that Beloved has power over him, and consequently he considers that he cannot enact the patriarchal role required of him in the white male construction of masculinity: "...the danger was in losing Sethe because he was not man enough to break out, so he needed her, Sethe, to help him, to know about it, and it shamed him to have to ask the woman he wanted to protect to help him do it, God damn it to hell" (127). Paul D replicates Jude's marriage to Nel to assert patriarchal masculinity when he expresses a desire to have a child with Sethe, or, in his own words, to have Sethe pregnant: "And suddenly it was a solution: a way to hold on to her, document his manhood and break out of the girl's spell - all in one" (128). But Paul D's attempt to impose the patriarchal narrative upon Sethe is thwarted by Sethe's thoughts, grounded in the concrete experience of motherhood:

> ...she was frightened by the thought of having a baby once more. Needing to be good enough, alert enough, strong enough, *that* caring - again. Having to stay alive that much longer. O Lord, she thought, deliver me. Unless carefree, motherlove was a

> killer. What did he want her pregnant for? To hold on to her? have a sign that he passed this way? (132)

Sethe recognizes Paul D's attempt to mark her as heterosexual, female, and mother, and is conscious of his motivations, his resentment of the women's relationships: "They were a family somehow and he was not the head of it" (132). Paul D is thus guilty of attempting to ground a secure sense of self within a discourse of masculinity which demands objectification of women, particularly mothers. Sethe's pregnancy, then, might be one way of placing her as object/mother and confirming his own masculinity as head of the patriarchal family.

Paul D's desire to mark Sethe in this way replicates Schoolteacher's whipping of Sethe; his later judgement of her also associates him with Schoolteacher and demonstrates how the discourse of masculinity employed by black men may re-enact, upon black women, slavery's processes of objectification. In the past, Schoolteacher instructed his pupils to characterize the slaves, including Sethe, by placing their animal traits on one side of the page and their human on the other. When Sethe tells her story to Paul D, explaining the killing of her child, Paul D, supposedly later willing to place his story alongside this one, judges Sethe as animal: "'You got two feet, Sethe, not four'" (165). He refuses to acknowledge any validity in her decision, or even the impossibility of her situation, seeing only the all-powerful dangerous mother who threatens subjectivity, and condemning her love as "too thick" (164).

Despite his own insecurities about his masculinity, and his despair and rage at past experiences when he was treated like an animal, Paul D assumes the position of 'objective' viewer and defines Sethe as animal. But as Eva tells Nel, the observer is implicated, and, just as Nel projects her own fears onto Jude, Paul D projects his fear that he is less than man onto Sethe, constructing her as the embodiment of his deepest fears, in the way that white ideology projects its greatest fears onto the African race.

This is not to suggest that Paul D does not love Sethe, repent his criticism, and wish to be reunited with her. But ultimately, Paul D may be read as representing a patriarchal system that denies those relationships and concepts of subjectivity which threaten its self-definition. As Davies

suggests, final empowerment and definition of Sethe belongs to Paul D: "...what is installed in the process is heterosexual dominance, the woman operating without a certain clarity and agency in creating her own subjectivity..." (1994 145). Paul D's actions at the end of the book reinstate him as the paternal figure, who accepts Sethe because of what she means to him, that is, because of how he defines her.

And finally, even as Paul D takes Sethe's hands and prepares to put his story next to hers, he does not hear her story, brushing aside her reference to Beloved, and failing to recognize that continued repression of Sethe's desires has foreclosed the possibility of any sense of self:

> Sethe closes her eyes and presses her lips together. She is thinking: No. This little place by a window is what I want. And rest. There's nothing to rub now and no reason to. Nothing left to bathe, assuming he even knows how. (272)

In this reading, Sethe no longer wishes to claim a subjective position in a world where such a position necessitates objectification and judgement of others, and repression, even obliteration, of the mother-daughter connection.

Does the fleeting recovery of this connection, then, as symbolized by Beloved's return, offer the possibility of a new conception of self? If Denver enacts the attainment of the female position in the psychoanalytic schema, Beloved may be read as the more fluid female self, defined in relation to (m)others, rather than in separation from them, as well as the return of the 'residue' created by white, patriarchal processes of oppression and objectification of black women.

Like Sula, Beloved is frequently associated with water, from the moment she first appears and drinks several glasses of water while Sethe voids water like "water breaking from a breaking womb" (51). Water imagery dominates her monologue, portraying the sea into which she lost her 'mother' and the river where she waited under the bridge for Sethe, and surfacing in utterances such as "I am standing in the rain falling.... I am falling like the rain is" (212). Beloved's sense of self, however, is not simply intersubjective, but is fluid to the point of merging, as symbolized in the aggressive, possessive fusion she desires with Sethe. Perhaps, though, as Irigaray suggests, "the absence of any representation" of the early relationship with the mother is

what renders the mother and connection to her threatening (1991 40); thus, the feminine principle of connection that Beloved represents only becomes sinister because it has been repressed, just as Sethe's motherlove becomes murderous when denied and perverted by the slavery system and white ideology. Even Paul D must acknowledge, as he reconstitutes his family, that 124, without Beloved, lacks something, exhibits

> [a] bleak and minus nothing. More like absence.... Something is missing from 124. Something larger than the people who lived there. Something more than Beloved.... He can't put his finger on it, but it seems, for a moment, that just beyond his knowing is the glare of an outside thing that embraces while it accuses. (271)

Banished once more, the mother-child relationship, the relation of embrace, is repressed in the cause of identity gained through separation and objectification, as Paul D. objectifies Sethe by reading her story in his own way.

Finally, then, this interpretation of *Beloved* suggests that mother-daughter bonds and claims to subjectivity can form a space from which to challenge patriarchal structures; simultaneously, however, those structures have codified objectification of the other into their very foundations, and into the workings of the discourse within which Sethe must operate. Further, repression distorts this female connection, rendering it conceivable only in terms of the phallic order's systems of possession and mastery. The novel offers a vision of the subversive power of female relationships; Beloved and Sethe form a relationship which undermines and challenges the grounds for constructions of selfhood in separation, patriarchal configurations of family, and white and male objectifications of black women. However, the lack of space and means within the dominant order to represent such interconnection, and the lack of a discourse with which to negotiate the intermingling of personal boundaries, renders the mother-daughter relationship prey to the totalizing and possessive drives of the Symbolic. Beloved herself is "[d]isremembered and unaccounted for" as she "erupts into her separate parts"; hers "is not a story to pass on" (274-5).

Jazz

Jazz also explores concepts of selfhood, focusing upon the relationships between Joe and Violet Trace, Dorcas, the young woman with whom Joe has an affair, and Alice Manfred, Dorcas's aunt and guardian. As with the other novels, the ways in which relationships form identity, and early family experiences shape concepts of self, figure prominently, and the mother-child relationship, disrupted, destroyed or lost, haunts the characters of this novel as they negotiate constructions of the self. Awareness of the past, and the struggle to reclaim connection to the mother and to assert subjectivity, are dramatized in *Jazz* as a preoccupation with origins, portraying the value and dangers of the desire for and the search for a source from which to derive identity.

Violet Manfred, a fifty-year old woman living with her husband in the City, struggles to reconcile her divided selves, to find a centre of self. Her fragmentation is linked to the loss of her mother: "the children of suicides are hard to please and quick to believe no one loves them because they are not really here" (4). Her mother's suicide forestalls Violet's constitution of self; she both loses her mother as the object that confirms identity, as does Sula, and must confront the concept of her mother as an individual who chooses to leave her child. Consequently, the narrator asserts, Violet constantly seeks confirmation of, and doubts, her own existence; like Beloved, she hungers for a love that she will never believe in.

In the self-realization that the novel documents, Violet must also destroy the object-image she substitutes for her mother, an ideal white image which she introjects, and which echoes the images of Shirley Temple and white baby dolls that Pecola aspires to in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. When her grandmother, True Belle, returns to Violet's childhood home, she "fill[s] Violet's head with stories about her whitelady and the light of both their lives - a beautiful young man whose name, for obvious reasons, was Golden Gray" (139). Golden Gray is the illegitimate son of the white woman by a black slave. His outward appearance undermines the imposition of racial identity on the basis of the gaze - "his flesh was radiantly golden, and floppy yellow curls covered his head and the lobes of his ears" (139) - and simultaneously offers

Violet a model of subjectivity falsely grounded in physical, white appearance.

True Belle's construction of Golden Gray valorizes the male, Oedipal mode of accession to subjectivity, describing "the cavalierlike courage he showed when he was a young man and went to find, then kill, if he was lucky, his father" (142-3). In her narrative, Golden Gray attains the love that confirms him through his physical beauty - whiteness - and reaches manhood with separation from the female household that has nurtured him, and determination to seek out and destroy the father, thus claiming the phallic position of power and subjectivity within the Symbolic order. Again, however, racial difference undercuts the Oedipal model of identity; Golden Gray wishes to kill his father because his father's blackness questions the son's right to gain access to phallic privilege, reserved for white men who may claim for themselves 'masculinity,' a quality denied the slave or black man.

Violet's resolution of identity thus depends upon her recognition of this image as a false image of self, as the misrecognition of the mirror-image in which she strives to find herself. When she tells Felice about Golden Gray and the desire he stirred in her to be "somebody else.... White. Light. Young again" (208), she acknowledges that her grandmother's tales of him functioned as objects of demand which she absorbed in her need for connection to an other:

> "...My grandmother fed me stories about a little blond child. He was a boy, but I thought of him as a girl sometimes, as a brother, sometimes as a boyfriend. He lived inside my mind. Quiet as a mole. But I didn't know it till I got here. The two of us. Had to get rid of it." (208)

In her rejection of Golden Gray as the object which constitutes her selfhood, Violet articulates the wish to renegotiate herself in terms of her relationship with her mother, not solely on the basis of the Imaginary relationship, traversed with misrecognitions, objectification, and an imbalance of power, but in terms of the adult relationship that might have been: "'Now I want to be the woman my mother didn't stay around long enough to see. That one. The one she would have liked and the one I used to like before...'" (208). Necessarily, Violet's self-construction as the one her mother *would* have liked involves a construction of her mother as well, based on Violet's remembered perceptions; however, the emphasis on adulthood and affection indicates a

concept of self not dependent upon the repression of childhood desires, but the rewriting of them in terms of mutuality and respect.

Violet's struggle to name the self that she aspires to be is maintained through a process of shifting her concepts of self in relation to her history, to Joe and to three other women - Dorcas, Alice, and Felice. The novel describes her experience of 'madness' and confusion, again bound up with desire for the intimacy of the mother-child connection, desire grounded in her lack of a daughter. She keeps a doll under her bed "to take out in secret when it couldn't be helped" (108), thinks of her miscarried children, and imagines a daughter whom she feeds and sings with, whose hair she dresses. Violet's obsession with this mother-daughter relationship positions her entirely in the realm of fluid connection: "Violet was drowning in it, deep-dreaming" (108). Only Joe's murder of his lover drags Violet from this state: "When she woke up, her husband had shot a girl young enough to be that daughter whose hair she had dressed to kill" (108-9). This conflation of Dorcas with Violet's imagined daughter anticipates the Imaginary relationship which Violet constructs with the dead Dorcas, and which enables her to envisage a more sustainable subjectivity.

Violet commences gathering information about Dorcas, regularly visiting Alice, Dorcas's aunt. When Alice temporarily gives Violet a photograph of Dorcas, and Violet places it upon the mantelpiece at her and Joe's home, the nature of her relationship with her construction of Dorcas becomes clear. The photograph becomes a focal point for both Joe and Violet, "a necessary thing for their nights" (11), which "seems like the only living presence in the house: the photograph of a bold unsmiling girl staring from the mantelpiece" (11-12). To Violet, "[t]he girl's face looks greedy, haughty and very lazy.... An inward face - whatever it sees is its own self. You are there, it says, because I am looking at you" (12). Again, Violet seeks an other, an object-image, against which to constitute a sense of self. She both gains recognition from the photo as she constructs it, and resents its power to confer such recognition, the image's apparently self-created subjectivity.

The image of the empty birdcages and their mirrors confirms Violet's actions as part of a search for identity through a re-enactment of the Imaginary stage. On the opening page Violet sets her birds free "to freeze or

fly" (3), signalling a detachment from her previous concepts of self. Now, in the apartment, "the rooms are like empty birdcages wrapped in cloth" (11), and the parlour has "birdcages and mirrors for the birds to look at themselves in, but now of course, there are no birds.... Now there are just empty cages, the lonely mirrors glancing back at them" (13). The empty mirrors suggest a space congruent with the Imaginary formation of identity from the mirror-image, and position Dorcas's photo as the object which will instigate a new process of identification for Violet.

As Violet works through this process, however, her re-memberings convey the experiences and perceptions that mark her insecure position within the Symbolic order - her almost-stealing of a baby, the time when she simply sat down in the street, the "public crazinesses" which indicate that Violet's lost/repressed relationship with her mother and her misrecognition of herself as Golden Gray puncture the seamless existence posited by the public world's false image of wholeness. Such public incidents stem from "private cracks" which suggest the submerged, forgotten world of female connection and its occasional, marginal subversion of the male-ordered Symbolic:

> I call them cracks because that is what they were. Not openings or breaks, but dark fissures in the globe light of day. She wakes up in the morning and sees with perfect clarity a string of small, well-lit scenes. In each one something specific is being done: food things, work things; customers and acquaintances are encountered, places entered. But she does not see herself doing these things. She sees them being done. The globe light holds and bathes each scene, and it can be assumed that at the curve where the light stops is a solid foundation. In truth, there is no foundation at all, but alleyways, crevices one steps across all the time. But the globe light is imperfect too. Closely examined it shows seams, ill-glued cracks and weak places beyond which is anything. Anything at all. Sometimes when Violet isn't paying attention she stumbles onto these cracks, like the time when, instead of putting her left heel forward, she stepped back and folded her legs in order to sit down in the street. (22-3)

The wholeness for 'man' aspired to within patriarchy depends upon female passivity in the process of the construction of 'woman' as Other, and the denial of subjectivity to her. Thus, Violet "does not see herself doing these things," but "sees them being done." This illusory autonomy and independence reserved for men is fissured with cracks which reveal its

dependence on the "anything at all" of non-meaning, that which is 'other,' that which is the fluidity of (female, maternal) non-identity and must be denied.

The globe, the dominant order, is constructed by language which tries to repress this otherness through the system of signification which constructs meaning and confers identity, yet which is not based, as it seems, on a solid foundation, but on alleyways and crevices. As Sethe experiences her dislocation within the patriarchal order in relation to language as stuttering, so Violet encounters the cracks in the system which has produced her identity by feeling "the anything-at-all begin in her mouth. Words connected only to themselves pierced an otherwise normal comment" (23). Eventually Violet remains "still as well as silent" (24), in an effort to control the "anything-at-all" within and stop it from seeping through the cracks in her existence.

The relationship that Violet develops with the constructed Dorcas enables a re-traversing of the Imaginary process which previously remained repressed and incomplete for her, as well as a recapturing of the mother-daughter relationship, a kind of "falling in love" through "whispered conversations with the corpse in her head" (15). At the same time, her re-visioning of herself involves a re-telling of Joe's narrative of love for Dorcas from her own point of view, which opens up a space for her self, a subject position.

Violet contemplates "that other Violet...that walked about the City in her skin; peeped out through her eyes and saw other things," (89), the Violet that sees the "weapony glint" in the black poles of railings and takes a knife to Dorcas's body "while she looked on in amazement" (92). However, envisaging the romance between her husband and Dorcas, Violet discovers that she is not inhabited by a stranger, and that *that* Violet is also herself. Imagining Dorcas and Joe together in bed, at the theatre, at a club, Violet inserts herself into the narrative:

> ...where was I? Sliding on ice trying to get to somebody's kitchen to do their hair? Huddled in a doorway out of the wind waiting for the trolley? Wherever it was, it was cold and I was cold and nobody had got into the bed sheets early to warm up a spot for me or reached around my shoulders to pull the quilt up under my neck...and maybe that is why the butcher's knife struck the neckline just by the earlobe. That's why. And that's

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

Violet thus acknowledges the repression that has alienated her from aspects of her self, and that has aroused violence in her. She participates in a process described by Audre Lorde as vital to the black woman's imagining of herself as a subject:

> ...I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live. My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restriction of externally imposed definition. (120-1)

Lorde, and Violet, thus grasp a unity of "different selves" which is not the "need for unity...misnamed as a need for homogeneity" (Lorde 119), but a coming to terms with the difference within oneself.

In this way, Violet's telling of her own story, and her 'putting it next to' her version of Joe's, brings about a self-recognition and a connection with a lost part of herself, all processes of her Imaginary stage, and opens up space for a relationship within language where she may express what has been repressed and what pushes through the cracks. She must also, however, move on from this Imaginary fantasy to a more reciprocal relationship enacted with someone less able to be constructed according to her own desires, inverting the process which Elizabeth Abel criticizes in some "novels of female friendship" where "a living process of interaction between women, with its exhilarating fusions and frightening threats to autonomy, often yields to a safer relationship with an absent other who can be recreated in imagination and memory" (441). Violet first experiences a growing sense of self in an Imaginary relationship, but her story acknowledges that her development towards subjectivity depends upon the negotiation of selfhood through and with an other who is also a subject. Violet discovers this other in Alice Manfred.

Alice, too, has experienced repression which she tries to inculcate in Dorcas; she views this repression of sexuality as necessary in a sexist, racist world,

> where whitemen leaned out of motor cars with folded dollar bills peeping from their palms.... where salesmen touched her and only her as though she were part of the goods they had condescended to sell her.... where she, a woman of fifty and independent means, had no surname. (54)

Alice fears the world as predatory and dangerous, and relates the predation to the "pregnant possibilities" of women (76), to the sexuality she quells within herself. But the sexuality seeps out in the "lowdown music" (56) that Alice links to "the silent black women and men marching down Fifth Avenue to advertise their anger over two hundred dead in East St. Louis, two of whom were her sister and brother-in-law, killed in the riots" (56-7). The multiple repressions of this society, then, of black people as a race and as individuals, and of female sexuality, engender a site of oppression which this novel literalizes as jazz music, where the "'how long, how long, how long'" (56) of a woman's song connotes subjugated desires, and the music itself exists as an entity:

> ...the part she hated most was its appetite.... It made her hold her hand in the pocket of her apron to keep from smashing it through the glass pane to snatch the world in her fist and squeeze the life out of it for doing what it did and did and did to her and everybody else she knew or knew about. Better to close the windows and the shutters, sweat in the summer heat of a silent Clifton Place apartment than to risk a broken window or a yelping that might not know where or how to stop. (59)

Images of appetite connote the demands of the repressed pre-oedipal relationship, and, again, it is repression that distorts what it represses, rendering it violent. The demand becomes desire through expression, which is, however, marginalized: "She knew from sermons and editorials that it wasn't real music - just colored folks' stuff" (59). Yet the fact that it is acknowledged as harmful (59) emphasizes the subversive nature of the music which, for all Alice's lessons, delights and seduces Dorcas.

Alice and Violet thus share the experience of repression, and the violence that may stem from repression; even as Alice castigates Violet for her behaviour and declares that she doesn't understand "[w]omen with knives"

(85), her awareness of the threats that cause women to arm themselves, and her own violent fantasy about revenge on the woman for whom her husband left her, demonstrate the common ground she shares with Violet. Their relationship forms around the small, practical, creative activities of women, as Alice sews Violet's coat lining and cuffs, and as she irons, and their conversations do not dwindle into the co-dependence of Nel and Jude, but depend on acerbic honesty and self-assertion. "'Don't chastise me. I won't let you do that,'" Alice warns, demanding acknowledgement as an adult rather than a child. At the same time, the oppression that each has experienced and the loss that they feel expresses itself in an unwillingness to accept responsibility for their own selfhood, as well as their involvement in each other's selfhood. When Violet demands that Alice tell her "something real," and Alice responds that she should know enough to behave, Violet questions,

> "Is that it? Is that all it is?"
> "Is that all what is?"
> "Oh shoot! Where the grown people? Is it us?"
> "Oh, Mama." Alice Manfred blurted it out and then covered her mouth.
> Violet had the same thought: Mama? Mama? Is this where you got to and couldn't do it no more? The place of shade without trees where you know you are not and never again will be loved by anybody who can choose to do it? (110)

For these women, consideration of their selves and lives inevitably conjures up the feelings of powerlessness associated with childhood, as well as the demand for the recognition of the other, first provided by the mother-figure, and the fear that the demand will never be met again.

These are the hidden feelings that Alice must face because "something opened up" (83) when Violet came to visit. This "something," access to a different concept of self, challenges and changes the two women, creating a female relationship not based on social codes and etiquette: "With [Violet] she was impolite. Sudden. Frugal. No apology or courtesy seemed required or necessary between them. But something else was - clarity, perhaps. The kind of clarity crazy people demand from the not-crazy" (83). Thus, in a reversal of the valuation of such terms, it is those outside the rational Symbolic order who demand clarity, and those designated "not-crazy" by the order who depend upon a misleading code which represses what is important.

Finally, it is Alice who gives Violet something real, something concrete, something which is not abstract moralizing: "'You want a real thing?' asked Alice. 'I'll tell you a real one. You got anything left to you to love, anything at all, do it.'" Violet, reluctant to be seen as a passive victim accepting her husband's infidelity, responds, "'You saying take it? Don't fight?'" Alice, slamming down her iron, responds with a long speech which culminates in a demand that Violet take responsibility for her life and self: "'Nobody's asking you to take it. I'm sayin' make it, make it!'" (113). Out of the fragments of their lives and the ambivalent feelings formed from experiences of oppression and loneliness, the two women develop selves in mutual relationship, reaching the point where they may posit for themselves identities coherent enough to act by, and subjective positions which offer potential for future reciprocal relations.

Violet achieves a reciprocal relationship with Joe by the novel's end. First, however, Joe must undergo his own journey, which literally enacts the search for his origins. Joe, in telling his story, articulates his awareness of the shifting nature of identity, declaring that before he met Dorcas he had "changed into new seven times. The first time was when I named my own self, since nobody did it for me, since nobody knew what it could or should have been" (123). Asked to provide a surname for school, Joe calls himself Trace, deducing from his stepmother's comment - that his real parents "disappeared without a trace" - that "the 'trace' they disappeared without was me" (124). Subsequently, Joe's life takes the form of tracing and tracking as he learns that "to be a man" is to "live independent and feed myself no matter what" (125), and adopts a "hunter's hunter" (125) as a father-figure. While acknowledging the necessity of this shifting of identity, Joe also feels that the instability contributed to his murder of Dorcas: "'I changed once too often. Made myself new one time too many'" (129). Some of his identity changes occur with maturing, or geographical and job changes, but others are triggered by violent oppression: "'...after those whitemen took that pipe from around my head I was brand new for sure because they almost killed me'" (128). Thus, the openness to change and fragmentation valorized by poststructuralism must contend with the physical and psychic fragmentation of self brutally imposed upon African Americans. It is this

instability which propels Joe, on three separate occasions, to seek out his mother.

Wild, as the mother who refuses to mother, embodies utter rejection of human society, familial structure, and patriarchal roles, and, in her silence, a refusal of the language through which normative identity is constructed. Her association with the animal world shapes Joe's first realization of her as his mother, when Hunter scolds Joe and Victory for speculating on what it would take to kill her: "'I taught both you all never kill the tender and nothing female if you can help it. Didn't think I had to teach you about people. Now, learn this: she ain't prey. You got to know the difference.'" Then Hunter turns to Joe: "'You know, that woman is *somebody*'s mother and *somebody* ought to take care.'" Joe proceeds to hunt Wild, once hearing her singing and tracing it to an "opening" in a rock formation, a second time waiting at the opening and begging for a sign, for her to put out her hand. His anger at her lack of response leads him to characterize his mother as "simple-minded" and animalistic, "unhousebroken" and "[t]oo brain-blasted to do what even the meanest sow managed: nurse what she birthed" (179). Joe's resentment at her denial of milk, that initial source of nourishment connected to the first relationship which shapes self, leads him to characterize the pre-oedipal realm represented by the mother as the realm of non-identity: "She was powerless, invisible, wastefully daft. She was everywhere and nowhere" (179). He longs for any other type of mother: "He would have chosen any one of them over this indecent speechless lurking insanity" (179). The world of the mother is again constructed as that of non-speech and madness, and Joe throws himself into physical labour to claim his 'masculine' identity.

Finally Joe penetrates his mother's lair, finding it empty, but with clear signs of her existence there. The nature of his hunt for her becomes clear as recollections of it intersperse with Joe's armed search for Dorcas, who has left him and taken up with a young man. Joe's predatory tactics link unavoidably with gender constructions and their relation to the feared mother, the dreaded power of the female, and the patriarchal systems designed to leash that power:

> The girls have red lips and their legs whisper to each other through silk stockings. The red lips and the silk flash power. A

> power they will exchange for the right to be overcome, penetrated. The men at their side love it because, in the end, they will reach in, extend, get back behind that power, grab it and keep it still. (181-2)

Joe's frustrations at not finding Wild, and at his inability to keep Dorcas still, conflate, as, remembering the empty cave, he narrates in his mind a touching scene of reconciliation with Dorcas, very different to the narrative he enacts upon finding her.

Joe's lack of a relationship with his mother, and the events of his life that force him to change, lead him to desire a point of origin, a trace of the place where his identity began. Joe finds the only element of stability in his identity in travelling a set path toward a clear conclusion, the fixation of the hunted in death:

> In this world the best thing, the only thing, is to find the trail and stick to it. I tracked my mother in Virginia and it led me right to her, and I tracked Dorcas from borough to borough.... if the trail speaks, no matter what's in the way, you can find yourself in a crowded room aiming a bullet at her heart, never mind it's the heart you can't live without. (130)

Joe here acknowledges the paradox of this mode of self-definition which seeks to 'fix' the other as the object that confirms the self, and thus destroys the other whose recognition one's selfhood depends upon. His entry into Wild's cave parallels his hunting and shooting of Dorcas; both are attempts to fix the women into positions which will confirm his own identity and minimize their power.

If Joe demonstrates predatory and objectifying tendencies in his relation to Wild and his killing of Dorcas, his relationship with Dorcas nevertheless demonstrates some potential for equity. Dorcas herself has experienced the loss of both her parents as a child, and Joe finds that the "inside nothing" of not knowing his mother is matched in Dorcas "who knew better than people his own age what that inside nothing was like. And who filled it for him, just as he filled it for her, because she had it too" (37-8). Dorcas and Joe's relationship is thus situated in the Lacanian discourse of lack, bound up with the loss of/separation from the mother, and the movement of desire, generated by that lack and regulated by the Father's law, toward substitutes. Again, images of eating suggest the connection to the pre-oedipal relationship

where the self was confirmed through oral nourishment. The novel's narrator describes Dorcas as "Joe's personal sweet - like candy" (120). Joe himself identifies Dorcas with candy and eating:

> All I know is I saw her buying candy and the whole thing was sweet. Not just the candy - the whole thing and picture of it. Candy's just something you lick, suck on and then swallow and it's gone. No. This was something else. More like blue water and white flowers, and sugar in the air. I needed to be there, where it was all mixed up together just right, and where that was, was Dorcas. (122)

Joe thus wants Dorcas to provide him with the connection, recognition and confirmation of self that his mother denied him, and, in desiring that it be more lasting than the objects which substitute for this connection, he also attempts to construct the relationship on mutual terms, where he does not simply consume and incorporate Dorcas into himself, as Jude wishes to incorporate Nel, but wishes to "be there" with her.

However, Joe's desperation to hold on to Dorcas, finally enacted in his murder of her, can also be seen in the stream of gifts he plies her with:

> I brought you treats, worrying each time what to bring that would make you smile and come again the next time. How many phonograph records? How many silk stockings? The little kit to mend the runs, remember? The purple metal box with flowers on top full of Schrafft's chocolates. Cologne in a blue bottle that smelt like a whore.... Just for you. Anything just for you. (134)

Joe's fear of losing this love leads him to supply objects to stop up the gap within Dorcas, even as he knows that they can only be transient substitutes. His eagerness to see Dorcas smile recalls Beloved's despair when the mother-woman will not smile at her; another's smile is construed as the other's recognition of self.

Dorcas herself, in her love for candy that marks her cheeks, experiences the same desire for recognition of self, but the lack and instability the loss of her parents creates in her leaves her desperate also for a secure sense of identity. Just as Joe succumbs to the desire to 'fix' Dorcas, to keep her still in a way that he could not fix his mother, his point of origin, and thus his sense of self, Dorcas seeks fixity, which Joe, in his efforts not to consume and objectify her, does not provide.

Like Nel, Dorcas perceives herself, her body and identity, as granted or

denied worthiness by the male gaze. At a dance in her early teens, Dorcas is implicitly rejected by two young brothers, who gaze at her as she approaches them, and then turn away:

> Dorcas has been acknowledged, appraised and dismissed in the time it takes for a needle to find its opening groove. The stomach-jump of possible love is nothing compared to the ice floes that block up her veins now. The body she inhabits is unworthy.... So by the time Joe Trace whispered to her through the crack of a closing door her life had become almost unbearable. Almost. The flesh, heavily despised by the brothers, held secret the love appetite soaring inside it. (67)

Dorcas's appetite finds temporary mitigation in her relationship with Joe, but she chafes at the secrecy imposed on her, needing not only Joe's recognition of her self, but the world's acknowledgement that she is the desired one. Joe's refusal to objectify her does not alleviate her desire to assuage the male rejection of the past by being the seen and desired object. With Acton, Dorcas delights in being watched, particularly by the girls who want her place as the desired object. Dorcas contrasts her position in her relationships with these two men:

> "[Joe] didn't even care what I looked like. I could be anything, do anything - and it pleased him. Something about that made me mad. I don't know.
>
> "Acton, now, he tells me when he doesn't like the way I fix my hair. Then I do it how he likes it. I never wear glasses when he is with me and I changed my laugh for him to one he likes better. I think he does. I know he didn't like it before. And I play with my food now. Joe liked for me to eat it all up and want more. Acton gives me a quiet look when I ask for seconds. He worries about me that way. Joe never did. Joe didn't care what kind of woman I was. He should have. I cared. I wanted to have a personality and with Acton I'm getting one." (190)

Dorcas, too, feels that the fragmentation and loss in her life has led to debilitating instability, and, like Nel, she defines herself in terms of the male gaze, and seeks identity or "personality" as the ideal object. The suppression of her subjectivity emerges in her alteration of self-expression and physical appearance, and the repression of her desires in Acton's restriction of her appetite.

Simultaneously, however, Dorcas senses the power of subjectivity offered her by Joe: "'With Joe I pleased myself because he encouraged me to. With Joe I worked the stick of the world, the power in my hand'" (191).

Nevertheless, caught up in the Oedipal model of femininity, Dorcas can only hope, in her subscription to romanticized versions of 'masculinity,' 'femininity,' and 'love,' that Joe will come to find her, that in this room of people she will be seen and acknowledged as the desired object of two men. She expects Joe's arrival, and accepts her death, a fact corroborated by Felice, her friend, who tells Joe and Violet that Dorcas "let herself die" (209) by refusing to have an ambulance called or go to the hospital. Felice, while acknowledging that Joe killed Dorcas, insists that Dorcas, too, was responsible for her own death. Dorcas thus achieves ultimate objectification; motivated by the desire for recognition, she forges her sense of self through the approbation or disdain of the male gaze, and exchanges the opportunity of shaping her self through Joe for the position of the desired object, a fixity which leads inevitably, and literally, to the death of self.

It is Felice who enables the reconstitution of Joe and Violet's family, through reciprocal relations quashed by the patriarchal order. The relationships renegotiated through and around Felice also centre upon gift-giving, but the gifts are less transient. Felice offers Joe and Violet another reading of Dorcas, which relieves Joe of some of his guilt, and she enacts a release of repressed emotion in her crying that opens caring relations between herself and the couple. Violet offers Felice her own newfound awareness of a different concept of self, which asserts the need to write one's own narratives to challenge the dominant order: "'What's the world for you if you can't make it up the way you want it?'" (208). Felice expresses doubt at her own ability to create change, and Violet emphasizes that to accept the position of passive viewer is to abdicate responsibility, and to be complicit in the suppressions perpetrated by the patriarchal order: "'If you don't [change the world], it will change you and it'll be your fault cause you let it'" (208). Felice identifies with Violet's experience of the internalized object-image that divides the self, and senses how dominant models of self and love provide no active role for herself, and constitute only "'A present taken from whitefolks, given to me when I was too young to say No thank you'" (211). Further, she acknowledges Violet's new sense of self as a "me" formed with motives that differ from desires to objectify or to be objectified: "'Not like the 'me' was some tough somebody, or somebody she had put together for show. But like,

like somebody she favored and could count on. A secret somebody you didn't have to feel sorry for or have to fight for'" (210). Felice, too, begins to experience a new worthy self formed through connection to Joe and Violet.

Joe extends to Felice the gift of self-determination that he offered Dorcas, although this time the relationship is not distorted by desperate desires formed from unfillable lacks. Again, new identity is formed around Dorcas; Joe offers Felice a different, more compassionate reading of Dorcas, and Felice shares with Joe Dorcas's last words, her feelings for Joe. Her connection with Joe also forms around the gaze of the other, but this new relationship depends on a different kind of gaze:

> "Mr. Trace looks at you. He has double eyes. Each one a different color. A sad one that lets you look inside him, and a clear one that looks inside you. I like when he looks at me. I feel, I don't know, interesting. He looks at me and I feel deep - as though the things I feel and think are important and different and...interesting." (206)

Felice, Joe and Violet thus together negotiate selves through others, constituting new identities. Felice attains a subjectivity that the narrator defines as the rejection of object positions: "she's nobody's alibi or hammer or toy" (222).

Meanwhile, Violet and Joe reconstitute themselves and their relationship around music, a new bird, shared time, and shared stories of their past, "those little personal stories" (223) that provide narrative subjectivities for both teller and listener. Their new, mutual love does not forget the maternal past, for Joe perceives a shape resembling "a bird with a blade of red on the wing" which signifies his mother, and Violet "rests her hand on his chest as though it were the sunlit rim of a well and down there somebody is gathering gifts...to distribute to them all" (225), in a rewriting of her mother's death and her father's advances of gifts instead of familial connection. These memories, fleeting, often painful connections with their first other, are reconstructed now through their memories of each other. The narrator asserts that their love both rejects the elements of fear and objectification that characterize heterosexual relations in the Symbolic order, and yet negotiates the public and private divide:

> They are under the covers because they don't have to look at themselves anymore; there is no stud's eye, no chippie glance to

> undo them. They are inward toward the other, bound and joined by carnival dolls and the steamers that sailed from ports they never saw. That is what is beneath their undercover whispers.
>
> But there is another part, not so secret. The part that touches fingers when one passes the cup and saucer to the other. The part that closes her neckline snap while waiting for the trolley; and brushes lint from his serge suit when they come out of the movie house into the sunlight.
>
> I envy them their public love. (228-9)

Violet and Joe thus achieve a mutual love, attained when each confronts past losses and fragmentations of self, as well as past wrongs and abdications of responsibility, when they realize themselves as substitutes for each other's lost (m)other(s), and renegotiate the idealized/devalued relation with the lost mother, to open a space, through personal narrative, for subjectivity and reciprocity.

Each of these novels, then, provides space for readings which perceive the inevitability of maternal, pre-oedipal influence upon the formation of selfhood. Whether mother-child relations are disrupted by systems such as slavery, as in *Beloved*, or simply rejected and devalued, as with Sula and Nel, the processes which repress mother-child connection belong to the dominant patriarchal Symbolic order, which fears the threat to unified identity posed by the mother, and attempts to sublimate the initial powerlessness of the child by constructing the mother solely as other to constitute the child's subjectivity.

The African American female characters of these novels thus encounter the difficulties of negotiating subjective positions in an order which 'fixes' black and female otherness as antithetical to subjectivity. Nel and Dorcas accept positions as objects, becoming complicit in patriarchal processes which fear and devalue the mother; Sula also rejects intersubjective connection, and, while embracing a subjectivity valuable in its fluidity, refuses to acknowledge her responsibilities to those others who shape identity. For African American men, past experiences of physical and psychic brutality and fragmentation can engender the desire to obtain fixed, unified selfhood through objectification of women: Joe finds his sense of identity dependent upon gaining mastery over his point of origin, the mother who eludes him; Jude and Paul D seek masculine subjectivity in objectification of female others. Sethe struggles to

regain connection to the fluid, pre-oedipal, intersubjective relation of mother and child, but her idealization of this relationship, itself a construction, enables her reappropriation within the Symbolic as the ideal mother, and ensures Beloved's partial erasure from representation, reinstigating the psychoanalytic narrative of the patriarchal family. The conclusion of *Beloved* suggests that the desire of the forgotten daughter lives on, but will only be embodied as a new subjectivity when we break open a space for it within patriarchal discourse.

Nevertheless, pre-oedipal connection remains a mode of negotiating subjectivity, when rewritten as an "inspirational fiction"[8] which enables the renegotiation of that first relation with an other in terms of mutual respect and love. When Joe and Violet work through their idealization and anger toward their abandoning parents, they are able to connect to their mothers with those images they find most useful; with Felice they enact a forging of self in relationship that mimics and yet transforms the pattern of a traditional family, just as it mimics and yet transforms the Imaginary relationships constructed between Joe, Dorcas, and Violet. Relational subjectivities seem possible, even as the novels emphasize the continual repressions and objectifications of black women perpetrated by the discourse and the dominant monolithic narratives within which these women struggle. The mother-daughter connections sought within these novels form part of a struggle to envisage and attain representation of female subjectivity; Chapter Two explores in greater detail the effort to imagine this subjectivity, within pervasive discourses of woman as other and object.

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[8] The term is Ferguson's: (100, 114).

CHAPTER TWO

"Black, Liquid Female": Otherness and Alterity as Sites of Subjectivity

> "...the cave is not just the place from which the past is retrieved but the place where the future is conceived, the 'earthen womb'...from which the new land rises." (Gilbert and Gubar 102)

The disruptions and destructions of mother-daughter relationships discussed in Chapter One, both within racist systems such as slavery, and within psychoanalytic narratives of subjectivity, deny women the images and materials for positive representations of this connection and of female subjectivity. Frequently within dominant narratives, women and darkness/ blackness have been conflated as the unknown, the mysterious, as when, in "Female Sexuality," Freud compares the discovery of the pre-oedipal mother-daughter relationship with that of the buried Minoan-Mycenaen civilization (226). Such burial of female and black sites indicates the erasure of a potential African-American female imaginary. If woman is the 'dark continent,' the African American woman is doubly so, and may find herself represented as total otherness, her race and gender viewed as multiply alien to the subject constructed and perceived as white and male. For Cixous, however, it is precisely the 'difference' and 'otherness' conveyed in these images that makes them potentially liberating representations for women, despite masculine efforts to devalue them:

> As soon as [women] begin to speak, at the same time as they're taught their name, they can be taught that their territory is black: because you are Africa, you are black. Your continent is dark. Dark is dangerous. You can't see anything in the dark, you're afraid.... And so we have internalized this horror of the dark....
>
> ....*The Dark Continent is neither dark nor unexplorable*. -It is still unexplored only because we've been made to believe that it was too dark to be explorable. (1976 247-8, 255)

Cixous calls for exploration of the uncharted darknesses which have constituted representation of women, and the creation from them of images

for women which are not "monuments to Lack" (255). This chapter considers ways in which, within Morrison's novels, constructions of femininity, blackness, and black women, specifically in terms of alterity, otherness, nature, mythic spirituality, and fluidity, may offer space for and representations of black female subjectivities, positing connections to multiple points of origin, or may simply reinscribe gender and racial essentialism, and relegate black women to a category of Otherness, or an objectified origin, which is exploited by dominant patriarchal narratives.

The presence in Morrison's novels of women with connection to mystical, mythical African forces, and to animate nature, indicates a potential space for African American female subjectivities, and the celebration of black women who are strong, enduring, and draw upon powers inaccessible to others. Simultaneously, however, such constructions, if not tempered with awareness of their fictionality, and if upheld as the sole, authentic subjectivity for black women, risk perpetuating sexist and racist stereotypes, biological essentialism, and the homogenization of 'black woman' in a category which serves only to promote the illusion of unified subjectivity for 'man' and/or 'whites.'

The troping of women as dark, strong, and connected to nature occurs within some black feminist theories, as when Lorde writes of an African spirituality which lies within as part of a female collective unconscious:

> For each of us as women, there is a dark place within, where hidden and growing our true spirit rises.... These places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through that darkness. Within these deep places, each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling. The woman's place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep. (36-7)

Lorde's images partake of a feminism that Ferguson identifies as "cosmic feminism," which "stresses the self-in-place with relation to a larger and higher natural/spiritual order of things" (61).[9] Like the self-in-relation discussed in the Introduction, cosmic feminism re-evaluates the qualities

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[9] Significant 'cosmic' feminist works worth referring to are Susan Griffin's *Woman and Nature*, and Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology*.

previously assigned to 'woman,' celebrating a closer, caring relationship, this time with nature, and reappraising woman's subordinated position in the culture/nature hierarchy, perceiving "the natural world" as "a benevolent order in which all things are related and are in themselves worthy of respect" (Cole 35). This worldview challenges Western philosophical theories grounded in "the competition for the possession of mother earth" (Irigaray 1985b 32), and for possession of women.

In Morrison's fiction, metaphors drawn from nature to represent women and personified portraits of nature thus convey a close relationship to nature which challenges humanistic and discrete conceptions of self, and the colonizing, destructive relationship with the earth and animals cultivated by men. But such constructions may also confirm misogynistic association of women with animals and nature, with muteness, and with wildness, and reinforce binary oppositions in which woman occupies the devalued lower term. Celebration of woman's connectedness to others and to nature may enact a valuable transvaluation of these oppositions, but does not disrupt the hierarchic gender division and fear of difference which informs them.

Similarly, celebration of black women as bearers of mythic and cultural African forces may conflate with idealization of the black woman as nation/nature/Mother of the People, which itself participates in an Othering of woman enacted by racist and sexist stereotypes. Wisker disparages "[r]epresentation of Black women as earthy, magical matriarchs at the centre of society, rooted" as replicating "the 'mother Africa' stereotypes and myths, the white racist-based folklore which designates Black people and particularly Black women, as the source of a dark, fertile, wild power, an alluring, dangerous Otherness" (15); this dissolves into misogynistic representations of black women as "'embodiments of female evil: and sexual lust'" (hooks cited in Wisker 15). Barbara Christian indicts 1960s black nationalist poetry for similarly 'Othering' black women by idealizing them as "Mothers of the Universe," and making them "symbolic holders of the moral condition of blacks" (1985 16). Such perceptions of women enact the process described by Claudia Tate in her study of nineteenth-century black women's writing, in which black women aspire to the idealized position of mother to procure the rights and living standards of whites, and to ensure the continuity of the

African American race; such aspirations risk acquiescence to a sacrifice of subjecthood, as discussed in relation to Sethe in Chapter One. These categorizations, of women as somehow more spiritual/mystical/natural than men, thus deprive women of subjective specificity, and relate to the Lacanian concept of the Other discussed in the Introduction, a construction which mystifies 'woman' in order to provide (male) subjects with (the fantasy of) self-knowledge.

The positioning of 'woman' as Other has, however, created space in feminist psychoanalytic theorizing for positing the employment of this fantasy, this categorization, as a means to finding something else, beyond the phallic order, to which women may have access by virtue of this Othering. This 'something else' may be discovered in the break which occurs between woman as Other, and woman as subject:

> The woman is implicated, of necessity, in phallic sexuality, but at the same time it is 'elsewhere that she upholds the question of her own *jouissance*' (PP, p. 121), that is, the question of her status as desiring subject. Lacan designates this *jouissance* supplementary so as to avoid any notion of complement, of woman as a complement to man's phallic nature (which is precisely the fantasy). But it is also a recognition of the 'something more', the 'more than *jouissance'*, which Lacan locates in the Freudian concept of repetition - what escapes or is left over from the phallic function, and exceeds it. Woman is therefore placed *beyond* (beyond the phallus). That 'beyond' refers at once to her most total mystification as absolute Other (and hence nothing other than other), and to a *question*, the question of her own *jouissance*, of her greater or lesser access to the residue of the dialectic to which she is constantly subjected. (Rose 51)

The concept of "access to the residue," and of an "elsewhere" for the female subject, has been drawn upon by French feminist theorists such as Irigaray, who suggests that women may have access to a different mode of expression beyond the phallic. Rose, however, accuses such theories of claiming the maternal body as a point of origin outside the Symbolic in their call for rediscovery of the mother-daughter bond and female interconnection, and thus of refusing the "loss of origin" (Rose 55) which constitutes Lacan's order:

> The objective is to retrieve the woman from the dominance of the phallic term and from language at one and the same time. What this means is that femininity is assigned to a point of origin prior to the mark of symbolic difference and the law. The privileged

> relationship of women to that origin gives them access to an archaic form of expressivity outside the circuit of linguistic exchange. (Rose 54)

She asserts that such a concept is impossible in the Lacanian schema:

> For Lacan...there is no pre-discursive reality... no place prior to the law which is available and can be retrieved. And there is no feminine outside language.... the 'feminine' is constituted as a division in language, a division which produces the feminine as its negative term. If woman is defined as other it is because the definition produces her as other, and not because she has another essence.... If the status of the phallus is to be challenged, it cannot, therefore, be directly from the feminine body but must be by means of a different symbolic term (in which case the relation to the body is immediately thrown into crisis), or else by an entirely different logic altogether (in which case one is no longer in the order of symbolisation at all). (56)

We thus confront the psychoanalytic narrative's assertion of the impossibility of undermining current conceptions of women and the feminine from within the Symbolic, and the concurrent impossibility of stepping, or conceiving of the feminine from, outside the Symbolic order.

Such an approach to the 'feminine' and its 'otherness' links to the Kristevan theories discussed in the Introduction, which, while acknowledging the subversive potential of the semiotic/feminine, and the force with which it is suppressed and regulated, deny women agency and subjectivity, conceding to them only a "negative function," and asserting the inevitable recapitulation of the 'feminine' to the dominant order. Juliet Mitchell holds a similar view of the realm of the 'feminine' or 'carnival' associated with the pre-oedipal connection to the mother, suggesting that because this 'feminine' or 'carnival' is *produced* by the dominant order - like the Kristevan semiotic which is created and manipulated by the Kristevan symbolic - it cannot be the site for subversion of that order. She declares that, if

> the Oedipal with the castration complex is what defines the pre-Oedipal, then the only way you can challenge... both the Oedipal and its pre-Oedipal, is from within an *alternative symbolic universe*. You cannot choose the imaginary, the semiotic, the carnival, as an alternative to the symbolic, as an alternative to the law.... It was suggested in another paper at this conference that this area of the carnival can also be the area of the feminine. I don't think so. It is just what the patriarchal universe defines as the feminine, the intuitive, the religious, the mystical, the playful, all those things that have been assigned to women.... It is not

> that the carnival cannot be disruptive of the law; but it disrupts only within the terms of that law. (1984 291)

Mitchell thus points out that Kristevan feminine 'otherness,' by definition, remains subsumed by and marginal to the male Symbolic order.

These theories of feminine otherness are thus problematic: while cosmic feminism provides positive images of women, it fails to disrupt the binary oppositions of the patriarchal culture; while Lacanian Otherness accepts the potential access of 'woman' to the 'beyond,' it simultaneously mystifies and objectifies 'woman,' denying her subjectivity; and while Kristevan 'otherness' conceives of the disruptive potential of repressed, marginalized, 'feminine' forces, it divorces them from female subjects, and re-subordinates them to the phallic order. Alone, such concepts cannot provide both the positive subjective representations of women *and* the disruptive energies necessary for the creation of alternative African American female subjectivities.

Somehow, then, images of female subjectivity must combine with poststructural disruptions of prevailing categories and oppositions, which will unsettle the masculine/feminine categories present in 'cosmic' and other feminisms, and potentially those perpetuated in psychoanalytic narrative. Mythic/spiritual and 'natural' tropes remain valuable as metaphors employed in representation of black female subjectivity, if countered with awareness of any tendency to "serious essentialism" and "a pervasive metaphysics of presence" (Ferguson 109), and if acknowledged as fictions which should not surrender to the discourse of truth and absolute knowledge.

Poststructural theories offer an understanding of the 'feminine' as fluidity, as chaos, as that which cannot be defined, questioning dominant perceptions of self, and offering female subjectivities through metaphoric play. The Derridaean perception of woman as the "rupture" within discourse described by Alcoff in the Introduction shares some similarities with this understanding of 'woman.' Metaphoric representation of women may thus draw upon this disruption to posit subjective positions for women derived from fluidity and motion; it is this aim upheld by Irigaray and Cixous in their troping of women as fluid, as excess, as multiple. Irigaray rejects "the circularity of [Lacanian] law" (1985b 88) according to which, as discussed above, the act of "interrogating" phallic organisation "undermines any

absolute definition of the 'feminine'at all" (Rose 56-7); she conceives of a female subjectivity which disrupts dominant hierarchies and oppressions through an 'otherness' which is an embrace of sexual, and "pure," rather than oppositional, difference (Grosz 24-5).

Irigaray's celebration of otherness as a subversive and alternative mode of subjectivity for women offers a re-troping of blackness or darkness, and emphasizes the necessity of women re-imagining and re-connecting to their origins, severed and denied them in psychoanalytic discourse, and, in these novels, in racial discourse:

> Has not history forced this impossibility upon [women]: they must continue to live, cut off from their beginning, and from their end?
>
> Woman must ceaselessly measure herself against her beginning and her sexuate determination, beget anew the material within her, and give birth within herself to mother and daughter in a never-completed progression. She who possesses, in the darkness, the subterranean resource is mother; she who moves on the surface of the earth, in the light, is daughter. She becomes woman if she can unite within her the most secret energies that lie deepest in her body-womb, with life in the broad light of day. Then, an alliance no longer means being drawn into an abyss, but an encounter in the blossoming of a new generation. (1991 109)

To avoid appropriation within the phallic order, and the collapse into Kristevan notions of the 'feminine' or 'otherness,' such images must continually emphasize their effort to conceive of another order which rejects binary oppositions in favour of "pure difference," and must accentuate the 'otherness' of this order by foregrounding its relation to an 'elsewhere' beyond the masculine Symbolic, which cannot be adequately represented within that Symbolic.

The difficulty of maintaining this concept of deconstructive subjectivity emerges in the examination of one image of the 'feminine.' Irigaray's reference to woman's "body-womb" is suggestive of Lorde's black feminist and 'cosmic' evocation of "a dark place within.... [t]he woman's place of power"; cosmic imagery often employs such representations of the womb as signifiers for women's creativity and power. Irigaray's other writings, however, indicate the complexity of attempting to use such images as metaphoric representations of women, and thus, once more, the difficulty of

achieving positive representations of women within the masculine Symbolic. As discussed in this chapter, Morrison's novels, particularly *Sula* and *Jazz*, use images of wombs, usually by association with natural imagery such as that of caves, to signify woman's 'otherness' and powers; a brief analysis of this image in theoretical narratives demonstrates the problematics of positively conceiving of and representing women's powers and subjectivities in the dominant order.

Conflation of cave and womb imagery in representation of women conveys once more both the valorization of female creative power encountered in cosmic feminism, and the inevitable shaping of such imagery by patriarchal devaluation of the mother and her perceived powers. In a chapter entitled "The Parables of the Cave," Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar conduct a feminist analysis of cave imagery, moving from Freud's depiction of a cave as "a female place, a womb-shaped enclosure, a house of earth, secret and often sacred" (93), to Beauvoir's anecdote of a family of Tunisian women working and existing entirely in a "subterranean cavern," growing withered and old. Such images proffer both the idea that "the womb-shaped cave is...the place of female power" (95), and the contradictory concept that "individual women are imprisoned in, not empowered by, such caves" (95). Gilbert and Gubar suggest that "every woman might seem to have metaphorical access to the dark knowledge buried in caves" (95), but accentuate the difficulty of "reconcil[ing] the cave's negative metaphoric potential with its positive mythic possibilities" (95).

Irigaray, in her analysis of Western philosophy in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, conducts a complex interpretation of Plato's *Hystera*, circling around images of the cave/womb. Susan Sellers summarizes the implications of this work:

> Irigaray suggests that the purpose of Plato's philosophy is to create a system of differences, determined in relation to a single idea, capable of leading 'man out of the cave' of his origin to a state of order. She argues that the formless and amorphous *khora* or cave, metaphor for the matrix or womb, is perceived by Plato as a place of error and non-differentiation, and that this fear initiates a desire for order which entails the repression of origin.... the 'so-called virginity and muteness' of the *khora* are re-constructed as a reflective space that will henceforth mark only his law's system of divisions. (8)

Within Plato's cave, in Irigaray's reading, representations of the matrix/womb erase all concept of female power and creativity: the men face the back of the cave, "[t]hus keeping up the illusion that the origin might become fully visible if only one could turn round" (1985a 244), and are positioned "[h]ead forward, eyes front, genitals aligned, fixed in a straight direction, and always straining forward, in a.... phallic direction, a phallic line, a phallic time, backs turned on the origin" (245). This philosophical narrative, as deconstructed by Irigaray, reveals man's disconnection from the maternal origin, and his attempt to appropriate and re-present it and its creative power. The womb is commandeered for a process of symbolization which constructs it as a place of darkness and ignorance, employing it in a master-discourse that denies maternal subjectivity and power, and disassociates the womb from a female subject, objectifying maternity through partial and phallic misrepresentations, and asserting masculine primacy.

Kristeva's understanding of the chora/cave, in contrast, largely adheres to Plato's concepts, associating the *chora* with the child's early state of perceived fusion with the mother:

> For Kristeva, the *chora* delineates the non-unified, dis-ordered state which precedes subjectivity and language: the pre-Oedipal plenitude in which there is as yet no articulation of absence and hence no division between the symbolic and the real. (Sellers 49)

For Kristeva, detachment from this unrepresentable "immediacy" (Grosz 154) is necessary to enable symbolization. In Platonic/Kristevan representation, therefore, the cave/womb is perceived as threatening, and distance from it/reconstruction of it within the masculine Symbolic must be achieved to enable symbolization. For Irigaray, all representations of the womb within such narratives have been shaped by fear and objectification of the mother's power, and the male desire to appropriate such power; new concepts of the point of origin must be conceived, which do not deny maternal subjectivity in this way. In the analysis of this one image, we can thus see the necessity and the difficulty of counterbalancing positive and 'cosmic' images with poststructural refusal of fixity and feminist assertion of female subjectivity.

Each of the three novels offers imagery of women which partakes of cosmic feminist concepts, as well as more poststructural/French feminist philosophies: African American women as mystics, as part of or connected to

nature, and as wielders of an African alterity, as well as images of black women as fluid, undefinable, and elusive. The characters of Sula, Beloved, and Wild offer the clearest examples of women who assume agency and attempt to achieve self-representation which subverts and exceeds the phallic code. Thus, they demonstrate to an extent the enactment of the "mobile subjectivities" and "migratory subjectivities" discussed in the Introduction, and use imagery of fluidity and otherness in the struggle to achieve Lauretis's "shifting identity...an identity that one decides to reclaim from a history of multiple assimilations, and that one insists on as a strategy" (8). At the same time, the instances within these novels in which attempted subversions by these and other characters result only in the entrenchment of prevalent hierarchies serve as reminders of the difficulty of negotiating/escaping existing patriarchal and racist structures, and of representing female subjectivity in a new and different code which strives to draw upon the excess and elsewhereness envisaged by numerous feminist theories.

Sula

Sula may be interpreted as a black woman who adopts the 'feminine' as her trope of subjectivity. Such a reading has been suggested by Morrison herself in a discussion of the novel:

> I always thought of Sula as quintessentially black, metaphysically black.... She is new world black and new world woman extracting choice from choicelessness, responding inventively to found things. Improvisational. Daring, disruptive, imaginative, modern, out-of-the-house, outlawed, unpolicing, uncontained and uncontainable. And dangerously female. (1989 25)

Morrison also states that she chose "nightshade" as representative of Sula to convey "Sula's double dose of *chosen* blackness and *biological* blackness" (26), and that Nel's "process of becoming" in the novel's final scene "puts her back in touch with the complex, contradictory, evasive, independent, liquid modernity Sula insisted upon" (26). These descriptions of Sula echo Irigarayan constructions of feminine otherness which threatens the patriarchal and 'unified' subject:

> *Fluid* must remain that secret, sacred, *remainder* of the one. Blood, but also milk, sperm, saliva, tears, humours, gases, waves, airs, fire...light which threaten him with distortion,

> propagation, evaporation, burning up...flowing away, in an other difficult to grasp.... All water must become a mirror, all seas a glass.... And so he is protected from that indecent contact...woman. From any possible assimilation to that undefined flow that dampens, wets, floods, conduct, electrifies the gap...makes it glow in its blazing embrace. (1991 64)

As this fluid, elemental self which refuses to operate as the mirror for the (male) subject, Sula threatens the community's structures of identity and ordering procedures, such as Shadrack's modes of stabilization; for Morrison, Sula is "(feminine) solubility" to "Shadrack's (male) fixative" (1989 26).

Many of the natural elements listed by Irigaray as threatening to the masculine economy of the One figure prominently in Morrison's novels, including *Sula*. Eva employs fire to kill Plum, and fire engulfs Hannah as Sula watches; fire may be read as an element that repeatedly and violently reminds human subjects of their vulnerability to destruction. Water figures, then, as a different threat to unified identity; it kills Chicken Little, but Sula adopts it as her motif of self, embracing the lack of centre she feels, and experimenting with fluidity as well as with fire. When Nel notices the "peculiar quality of the May" in which Sula arrives, her description conjures images of water:

> It had a sheen, a glimmering as of green, rain-soaked Saturday nights (lit by the excitement of newly installed street lights); of lemon-yellow afternoons bright with iced drinks and splashes of daffodils. It showed in the damp faces of her children and the river-smoothness of their voices. (94)

And Sula's final thoughts, her slipping into death, recalls Chicken Little's death, and her association of self with water ever since:

> It would be here, only here, held by this blind window high above the elm tree, that she might draw her legs up to her chest, close her eyes, put her thumb in her mouth and float over and down the tunnels, just missing the dark walls, down, down until she met a rain scent and would know the water was near, and she would curl into its heavy softness and it would envelop her, carry her , and wash her tired flesh always. Always. Who had said that? She tried hard to think. Who was it that had promised her a sleep of water always? (148-9)

Sula's association with water and fluidity potentially places her in the position of the feminine envisaged by Irigaray, a 'position' which is multiple and diffuse, challenging the rigid boundaries of self and other erected in the phallic order, which functions upon "a teleology of reabsorption of fluid in a solidified

form" (1985b 110). This conception of the 'feminine' incorporates both images of women as or akin to nature, specifically water, and the understanding of 'woman' as that which disrupts claims to fixed, unified selfhood:

> You remain in flux, never congealing or solidifying.... These movements cannot be described as the passage from a beginning to an end. These rivers flow into no single, definitive sea. These streams are without fixed banks, this body without fixed boundaries. This unceasing mobility. This life - which will perhaps be called our restlessness, whims, pretenses, or lies. All this remains very strange to anyone claiming to stand on solid ground. (Irigaray 1985b 215)

Sula thus threatens the rigid oppositions of self and other that structure her community, but her subversion of that structure remains minimal; in the novel's terms, her position is one of isolation, and is therefore untenable. The foetal position which Sula adopts at her death, and her focus on the "blind window" which represents her aloneness, her severance from her mother and grandmother, suggest that her fluidity, which threatens and disrupts the community's structures, does not accommodate necessary connection to others, nor to the "personal history" Lauretis mentions. Sula cannot maintain this disruptive position because she does not shape her disruption into a positive female subjectivity, nor connect with others, privileging self-exploration over attentiveness to others, and thus remaining isolated.

Sula also aspires to and cannot quite attain a feminine sexuality, a self-validation and self-touching which Irigaray declares has been repressed in the phallocratic order. In "Volume Without Contours" she writes, "...man needs an instrument to touch himself: a hand, a woman, or some substitute. The replacement of that apparatus is effected in and through language.... Man produces language for self-affection" (1991 58). In "This Sex Which Is Not One" she envisages the otherness of female sexuality, in its plurality and self-connection:

> As for woman, she touches herself in and of herself without any need for mediation, and before there is any way to distinguish activity from passivity. Woman "touches herself" all the time, and moreover no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus, within herself, she is already two - but not divisible into one(s) - that caress each other. (1985b 24)

And in "Questions" Irigaray discusses how the syntax of "discursive logic" is "a means of masculine self-affection" which excludes feminine self-affection:

> ...no effort is spared to prevent this touching, to prevent her from touching herself: the valorization of the masculine sex alone, the reign of the phallus and its logic of meaning and its system of representations, these are just some of the ways woman's sex is cut off from itself and woman is deprived of her 'self-affection'. (1985b 134-5)

Sula thus finds that there is no place for her self-affection in a masculine sexual economy:

> She had been looking all along for a friend and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade and never could be - for a woman. And that no one would ever be that version of herself which she sought to reach out to and touch with an ungloved hand. There was only her own mood and whim, and if that was all there was, she decided to turn the naked hand toward it, discover it and let others become as intimate with their own selves as she was. (121)

However, the hand imagery, and Sula's frequent sexual liasons, suggest that, in Irigarayan terms at least, Sula still participates in the masculine economy by using instruments to touch herself. She simply inverts the normative sexual hierarchy by using men as objects to gain access to herself, and the unsatisfactory nature of this reversal is implied in her emotions: "She went to bed with men as frequently as she could. It was the only place where she could find what she was looking for: misery and the ability to feel deep sorrow'" (122). She does achieve a certain self-connection denied women such as Nel:

> When her partner disengaged himself, she looked up at him in wonder trying to recall his name; and he looked down at her, smiling with tender understanding of the state of tearful gratitude to which he believed he had bought her. 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)

In this way, her use of men angers the people of the community because her inversion of sexual roles disturbs their gender hierarchies; nevertheless, her misery, aloneness, and the "light disgust" of her partners intimate that the structures of the phallic sexual economy as a whole remain unshaken. It seems that Sula's subversions fail to reach 'beyond' the phallic order, and

therefore take the form of Kristevan 'otherness,' which disrupts only to be re-accommodated.

Sula's 'semiotic' energies are thus successfully exploited by the community to attain unity among themselves, and to entrench oppositions which devalue and absorb difference, re-constituting the Symbolic order. Sula's embrace of a 'feminine,' fluid position does not destroy, and in fact solidifies, binary structures of good and evil; her rejection of traditional, feminine roles spurs the women of the town to be better mothers, wives and daughters, as they devalue the self-affection and fluidity she embraces, to accept fixation in other-focused capacities.

Still, Sula's actions create an excess which eventually destroys the community, depicting the destructive nature, the "coercive forces," of the order the community clings to, even as, on a larger scale, the structures of the phallic order are rebuilt, in the form of the white neighbourhood that overtakes the black. Rejection of Sula's fluid, continual process of rebellion represses the people's suffering, and makes inevitable a dangerous explosion. Her death causes the crumbling of the structures and oppositions that had been built around her, as the fixity valorized by the people is mimicked by the winter's freezing of fluidity: "late one afternoon, a rain fell and froze.... Grass stood blade by blade, shocked into separateness by an ice that held for days" (151-2). Women begin to resent their duties and responsibilities; illness, "meanness," and "small-spiritedness" pervade the Bottom (154). As communal structures disintegrate, the fixity dissolves: "It was as though the season had exhausted itself, for on January first the temperature shot up to sixty-one degrees and slushed the whiteness over night.... On January third the sun came out - and so did Shadrack with his rope, his bell and his childish dirge" (155).

Shadrack's turn-out for National Suicide Day marks the release of the forces repressed by the oppression and poverty of the black people, and by their assumption of the hierarchic oppositions of the white world. Shadrack, too, senses the dislocation arising from Sula's death, and recognizes the futility of his ordering strategy. The march behind him becomes "a curious disorder" as the people seek release from the hierarchies that they depend upon, calling others "to help them open further this slit in the veil, this respite

from anxiety, from dignity, from gravity, from the weight of that very adult pain that had undergirded them all those years before" (160). The parade turns to the New River Road, where lies the tunnel which offered them work, but which has lain unfinished for years, and which symbolizes their repressed anger at the dominant order:

> There was the promise: leaf-dead. The teeth unrepaired, the coal credit cut off, the chest pains unattended, the school shoes unbought, the rush-stuffed mattresses, the broken toilets, the leaning porches, the slurred remarks and the staggering childish malevolence of their employers. All there in blazing sunlit ice rapidly becoming water. (161)

The attack on the tunnel is an attempt to kill it and all it represents, but the people's previous subscription to the meanings and oppositions of the order they now attack, their categorization and devaluation of Sula and the rebellion and inversions that she enacts, ensures that they can only revolt within the order and upon its own terms.

The people's deaths, resulting from the excess created by Sula and her death, are marked by the return of the repressed elements which threaten stable identity, and are figured as fluidity:

> They didn't mean to go in, to actually go down into the lip of the tunnel, but in their need to kill it all, all of it...they went too deep, too far....
>
> A lot of them died there. The earth, now warm, shifted; the first forepole slipped; loose rock fell from the face of the tunnel and cause a shield to give way. They found themselves in a chamber of water, deprived of the sun that had brought them there. With the first crack and woosh of water, the clamber to get out was so fierce that others who were trying to help were pulled to their deaths. Pressed up against steel ribs and timber blocks young boys strangled when the oxygen left them to join the water. Outside, others watched in terror as ice split and earth shook beneath their feet. Mrs. Jackson, weighing less than 100 pounds, slid down the bank and met with an open mouth the ice she had craved all her life. (161-2)

Significantly, it is not simply the water, the melting ice, that kills the people, but their being crushed against the steel and timber structures of white men, and the panic and movements of the people around them. They are complicit in their own death, but motivated by the oppressions of the white system which structures their lives, and finally overwhelmed by the fluid 'feminine' elements excluded and repressed in the Symbolic order. The constructions

they form around hierarchic oppositions to cast Sula as evil, and to control death and madness, eventually give way to disorder and death, just as the tunnel gives way to melting ice.

The depiction of the tunnel, alongside an earlier scene in the novel, offers suggestive representation of an image both exploited and villified within patriarchy, and proffered by feminist theorists as an image of power and creativity for women: the womb. Earlier, Sula and Nel play beside the river, shortly before Chicken's death, taking up twigs and digging in the dirt with them:

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

Homans reads this scene as an "exploration of the violence of heterosexuality" wherein the joined hole represents Nel and Sula's "common female sexuality," and the death of Chicken Little is an act of violence against a "symbolic target...their vision of the seemingly willing victimization of women in a heterosexual world" (1983 193). The depiction of the hole as a grave aligns the scene with that of the tunnel, where, again, death occurs in the river, alongside soil, and in what Marianne Hirsch terms "a womb-like tunnel" (185). If the tunnel and hole are representations of wombs, their conflation with graves and death denotes them as constructions/devaluations of the womb/woman/mother in terms of the phallic order. The only representation the two girls can create for their female position within the sexual economy they are entering is one of defilement.

The fusion of womb/hole/tunnel/grave implicit in this analysis of *Sula* thus indicates how woman's Otherness, in this case her maternal/creative potential, has been constructed and devalued in Western, male philosophy, as in the fear of woman's 'openness' evinced by Sartre, and the frequent

association of the womb with death. In these terms, the tunnel is a phallic representation of the womb, a male construction built to control and exclude the feminine fluidity symbolized by the river, and made deadly in its use of rigid structures which divide and oppose 'masculine' and 'feminine' elements. The tunnel's collapse may thus portray the return of this repressed 'feminine,' forgotten and erased in misogynistic objectification of women; it destroys some of those who have subscribed to the white, patriarchal structures it represents, and who have constructed systems of opposition in order to exclude and objectify Sula, who also represents feminine fluidity. Alternatively, however, the people's attack upon the womb may also be seen as a brief disruption of the order by marginal forces, which the dominant structures quell through literal crushing.

The 'otherness' glimpsed within *Sula*, while experiencing moments of triumph, and intermittent disruptions of the phallic order, seems otherwise silenced at the novel's end. Sula's fluidity and rebellion is incorporated by the prevailing system, even employed to sustain it, as Kristeva's semiotic, when regulated, sustains the Symbolic. On the level of the black community, but not within the larger society, Sula's death is enough to destabilize ordering systems, and to engender the chaos which overwhelms a community dependent upon hierarchic oppositions, the structures of the tunnel. Such structures prove deadly, as do the forces of the 'feminine' when repressed and denied expression. Also deadly, however, is too great a reliance for representation of female subjectivity upon dominant constructions of woman as 'other,' as represented in the male-constructed tunnel: replica of the womb, appropriation of its creative power, and denial of the female subjectivity bound up in maternity. Once more, the valorization of woman as point of origin masks the male appropriation and objectification of that origin, and indicates the dangers of cosmic celebrations which conflate the womb, the mother, and the cultural, even primal, past. Thus, when Maxine Montgomery interprets Plum's desire to return into Eva's womb as a "latent impulse to recover the psychological wholeness characteristic of Black life prior to slavery" (131), and associates the image of the womb with "an Edenic past outside the ravages of linear history" (129), she commends construction of the mother-womb as an idealized, external point of origin and wholeness. For her, the

womb serves as representation of a psychic wholeness imagined and projected upon the past; the deaths of Plum, Sula, and the people in the tunnel presumably enact a successful (re)entrance into that past. Such glorification of these myths of origins and wholeness co-operates in Othering and mystifying women, and denies them subjectivity.

As Gilbert and Gubar suggest, cave imagery offers "negative metaphoric potential" as well as "mythic possibilities." This novel proffers both the negative portrayals of the womb perpetrated by the phallic order and enacted by Nel and Sula, and the mystical concepts of origins and fluidity associated with the womb; however, the lesson of the tunnel must be that the structures of the white order which attempt to restrain and direct the fluidity of the 'feminine' make (representations of) the womb deadly, enacting the phallic drama of "man's relation to his mother: the desire to force entry, to penetrate, to appropriate for himself the mystery of this womb where he has been conceived, the secret of his begetting, of his 'origin'" (Irigaray 1985b 25). Images of woman's 'otherness' within *Sula* fail to escape the dichotomies of the dominant logic, and Sula fails to sustain her fluidity, succumbing to fixity and objectification of the other in her relationship with Ajax. Having been used by the Symbolic, she is finally destroyed by her inability to create and maintain a subjective position which disrupts the phallic order.

Beloved

In *Beloved*, images of African 'otherness,' of female connection to mystical, cosmic forces, and of fluidity circulate, offering glimpses of marginal disruptions which seem to be re-accommodated in the manner of the Kristevan semiotic, and of Sula's rebellion. The figure of Beloved, however, offers a glimpse of an 'other' female subjectivity beyond the phallic order, even as the novel foregrounds the difficulty of representing this 'otherness' within the Symbolic order.

Sethe's re-memberings embody the connectedness to "personal history" advocated by Lauretis and which Sula fails to create, and enable a construction of the past, and of Africa and African spirituality as a (fabricated)

point of origin which may offer African American female subjectivity. Sethe rememories her mother, and moves through her mother to connection with her African heritage. When about to give birth to Denver, Sethe characterizes her baby as a "little antelope" which "rammed her with horns and pawed the ground of her womb with impatient hooves," although "why she thought of an antelope Sethe could not imagine since she had never seen one. She guessed it must have been an invention held on to from before Sweet Home, when she was very young" (30). Sethe then recalls the song and dance of her childhood:

> Oh but when they sang. And oh but when they danced and sometimes they danced the antelope. The men as well as the ma'ams, one of whom was certainly her own. They shifted shapes and became something other. Some unchained, demanding other whose feet knew her pulse better than she did. Just like this one in her stomach. (31)

Sethe's memories of her childhood and her mother, and the connection she feels with her unborn daughter, interconnect with customs and cultural expression which the slaves carried with them from Africa. The construction of these people as 'other' both positions them as slaves denied subjectivity, and as people whose alterity challenges and threatens dominant perceptions of identity as static, just as their shifting shapes defy categorization, and subvert, if only marginally, the system of enslavement that refuses them subjective positions.

Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law, figures as a 'cosmic' or mystical figure who also employs the song and dance of African culture to celebrate the difference and otherness of blackness denigrated by the white rulers. She asserts celebration of the blackness and physicality by which the dominant culture has defined black people, and calls upon the people of her community to redefine themselves in a way that counteracts the devaluation of white ideology:

> "Here," she said, "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it.... O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either...." Saying no more, she stood up then and danced with

> her twisted hip the rest of what her heart had to say while the others opened their mouths and gave her the music. Long notes held until the four-part harmony was perfect enough for their deeply loved flesh. (88-9)

Baby Suggs thus seems to reclaim for her self and her community a subjective position, in which words and physical motion integrate to assert the value of despised and denigrated bodies. Her words associate her with the mystic discussed by Weedon, who provides an example of "forms of discourse the subjects of which are women who have been historically suppressed or marginalized":

> These discourses are seen as authentic attempts to defy the patriarchal order and to reinstate the feminine. They include the discourses of women mystics, poetesses, witches and artists. Witches, for example, provide a particularly powerful symbol of women's resistance to the dominant order and their punishment for failure to conform. In psychoanalytic feminist celebrations of the repressed feminine, they have come to symbolize female desire and erotic expression through sexuality, song, dance and an immediate physical sense of their own bodies. (72)

The expression of self enacted by Baby Suggs thus challenges the patriarchy in an alternative form of articulation which incorporates dance, song, and a celebration of the blackness, bodies, and sexualities suppressed or impugned by white discourse. However, as the dance of the antelope may confirm for the white viewer the animalism and otherness of the Africans, Baby Suggs's words fail to escape the hierarchies set in place by that racist discourse: the celebration of bodies is structured through opposition to white attitudes (D'Cruz), and simply inverts the valuations upon blackness and physicality, rather than contesting and subverting the simplistic oppositions of white and black, or questioning the processes by which meaning has been imposed upon colour and bodies. Baby Suggs's inability to transcend colonizing structures becomes apparent in her retreat to her bed and in her eventual death; she is finally bowed down and defeated by racism.

The Otherness that Baby Suggs tries to embrace is just another construction of the Symbolic and racist order, and the community remains unchanged by her preaching, resenting her generosity and good fortune, the excess of the feast she offers them, and failing to help her and Sethe when the white men come. Her acknowledgement that "the Word" is "'one other

thing took away from me'" (178) indicates her realization that concepts of the Word and God, masculine constructs of Otherness, enable a 'fixing' of meaning which provides power for white men, and denies power and subjectivity to those black and female. Her celebrations in the forest remain marginal and are easily ignored by the ruling system.

Again, then, the employment of African connection, of such expression of alterity, remains problematic, always vulnerable to becoming the Otherness which benefits the white subject, confirming him in his subjectivity by virtue of African otherness. Yet the positing of these connections to origins, to African and female mysticism and power, offers the possibility of an overflow out of the Symbolic order, into an economy which subverts, even if only from the margins, the law of the Father. For example, when the community of women comes to exorcize Beloved, their collective voice employs a language which is other to the Symbolic, and draws upon song, the alternative form of expression employed in the Clearing:

> For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until 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. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (261)

The use of this sound that "[breaks] the back of words" suggests a drawing upon pre-oedipal, pre-Symbolic, and pre-colonist sites: "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 that sound sounded like" (259). This assertion of an original sound disrupts the patriarchal and theological narrative which positions the Word as the creator and origin of life.

Further, the community of women here claims access to a point prior to, or outside of, the white and Symbolic order. Writes Bowers, "The moment takes them all outside of linear time into a time of apocalypse in which all is reduced to its most fundamental terms, to a purity of emotion and a brilliant clarity" (71). Lawrence emphasizes the concept of an African collective unconscious at work here, as the women "go all the way back to the first page of the text in their collective memory," to a "familiar, original sound"

(197), a "preverbal language," which "bursts forth from the deepest roots of human knowing, tapped by the 'building' of a chorus of individual voices" (198). This belief in collective female access to a point of origin proves empowering and unifying for the women.

However, many theorists remain sceptical of such representations. Flax contends that such an outside point is impossible, and disparages the concept of an ultimate Truth, envisaged from

> an "Archimedes point" outside of the whole and beyond our embeddedness in it from which we could see (and represent) the whole. What we see and report would also have to be untransformed by the activities of perception and of reporting our vision in language. The object seen...would have to be apprehended by an empty (ahistoric) mind and perfectly transcribed by/into a transparent language. (1987 633)

While poststructural thought would concur with Flax's refutation of transparent language and an objective vantage point, it might also contend that Flax's view here implies the impossibility of change, of criticism of the order from within. Deconstruction occurs from some point, and while deconstructive theorists do not claim that point as objective, nor their practices as free of the structures which they critique, they do, implicitly, assert a position not entirely subject to the knowledge they deconstruct. The women's cry, therefore, functions as a potentially disruptive articulation which draws upon elements repressed by the dominant discourse, such as African heritage and female power and creativity, and which can grasp the dangers of complicity with the Word, by virtue of the women's marginal position in relation to the Word's power. They cannot, however, claim unproblematic access to a point which is prior to Symbolic and/or colonial discourse, and free of the Word's influence; this factor is made clear if one considers that Beloved embodies the most threatening alterity within the novel, and that her alterity, and its potential subversion of the masculine order, is exorcized by the women, who thus do the work of the Father/Master.

The novel characterizes Beloved's alterity, as well as her relationship with Sethe, and the mother-daughter relationship as envisaged by Sethe, with images of fluidity: water, milk, blood. Beloved walks out of water (50), and Sethe voids water when she glimpses Beloved, linking this outpouring with her childhood and her own mother, as well as with Denver's birth: "...there was

no stopping water from a breaking womb and there was no stopping now" (51). Margaret E. Turner asserts that Sethe uses her bodily fluids, which mark the indeterminate bond between her self and her daughters, to "counter the ink" (87) which she makes and which Schoolteacher employs in a linear, written objectification of the black other: "'...put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up'" (193). As discussed in Chapter One, Sethe's milk symbolizes a connectedness between mother and daughter disrupted repeatedly by slavery: "Her milk is the code with which they maintain their knowing of each other" (Turner 88).

Once more, however, the struggle to represent women through a rewriting of morphology, and of the mother-daughter relationship, as envisaged by Irigaray, must strive not to re-enact mystification and objectification of women. Stephanie Demetrakopoulos, for example, offers an interpretation of the fluidity of breastfeeding which employs cosmic imagery in suggesting, convincingly, that the act of nursing a child gives women access to a fluid connection between self and other. However, Demetrakopoulos's imagery also presumes that breastfeeding provides women with access to a realm of pre-culture through "a blend of psychic and bodily unification" (1982 432). In her vision, breastfeeding provides for women a "sense of ebb and flow, cyclical fullness," connection "with the earth and its dark, profound mysteries," and "insight into nature on a direct, bodily level" (437), as well as access to "the depths of" the "collective unconscious of women" (442).

Demetrakopoulos's portrayal of breastfeeding might potentially contribute to the perception of an Otherness and fluidity accessible to women which may disrupt the solid sameness of the phallic order, and offer female subjectivity. However, this Otherness, in Demetrakopoulos's vision, never escapes the concept of an ultimate Truth positioned within the Nature to which women supposedly have unmediated access; this notion enables fixation of women in the realm of the mystical Other, and denies subjective specificity to women's differing experiences. The dangers of idealization become clear in Demetrakopoulos's later essay on *Beloved*, in which she re-enacts patriarchal constructions of women and nature, characterizing Sethe as animalistic, the womb as a tomb, and immanence - connection with nature -

as something to be left behind in the teleological quest for transcendence (1992). Her article thus demonstrates the difficulty of making space for women's otherness and fluidity in the Symbolic order without confirming women as idealized/denigrated mothers/murderers driven by natural forces they are unable to transcend.

Beloved thematically asserts that male processes of objectifying women are bound up in fear of fluidity, and of the merging of boundaries between self and the natural world. As discussed in Chapter One, Paul D employs tropes of nature to condemn Sethe with images of animalism, when her lack of solidified boundaries and of unified, autonomous selfhood causes him to declare that her love is too thick: "This here new Sethe didn't know where the world stopped and she began.... It scared him" (164). Sethe's otherness, her fluid boundaries and indeterminate limits of self challenge conventional and humanistic concepts of self; simultaneously, the liberating potential of this subjectivity is mitigated and denied by male representations of such otherness.

The novel strives, however, to foreground a positive representation of female subjectivity which, in its fluidity, simultaneously disrupts the patriarchal culture. Fluidity serves as the figuration of a 'feminine' economy, or otherness, which threatens the solidity of the phallic order. D'Cruz suggests that Paul D's criticism of Sethe - "'You got two feet, Sethe, not four'" (165) - subscribes to a masculinist order in which upright posture signifies "the rigidity of the phallic order" and the position of four feet may connote "the quadruped position of the human in water." Within this reading, the water and mud which rises in the trenches of Paul D and his fellow prisoners exemplifies a feminine fluidity which they cannot accommodate, and the use of the slavedrivers' chain to escape the water signifies an acceptance of the "defining instruments" of the white Symbolic order and its masculinist values, which valorize the stability and solidity represented by dry ground.

The novel repeatedly portrays the difficulties of conveying this feminine fluidity without succumbing to the objectifications of the dominant order. For example, while we may read Paul D's sexual encounters with Beloved as an attempted merging of her feminine alterity with his masuline rigidity, an act that opens the closed tobacco tin which has replaced his heart, and that challenges the "abstract masculinity" with which he "drie[s] out the blood,

sweat, and tears" of slavery (D'Cruz), we must remain aware that Paul D's descriptions of this merging are constructions of Beloved which fit his own needs and interpretations.

He remembers their intercourse toward the novel's end as he surveys the cold house:

> In daylight he can't imagine it in darkness with the moonlight seeping through the cracks. Nor the desire that drowned him there and forced him to struggle up, up into that girl like she was the clear air at the top of the sea. Coupling with her wasn't even fun. It was more like a brainless urge to stay alive. Each time she came, pulled up her skirts, a life hunger overwhelmed him and he had no more control over it than over his lungs. And afterward, beached and gobbling air, in the midst of repulsion and personal shame, he was thankful too for having been escorted to some ocean-deep place he once belonged to. (264)

These associations of Beloved with the ocean, and air, construe her as a creature of the elements and fluids, like Sula; further, the reference to an "ocean-deep place" which Paul D once belonged to suggests this sexual act as a means of reconnection, to the repressed maternal and perhaps African point of origin. This act may thus represent for Paul D a rememory of his origins, and the early relationship with the mother, before masculinity demanded his hardening and separation from others. Yet, as discussed in Chapter One, Paul D proceeds from this encounter to ask Sethe to become pregnant, in an attempt to reinstate the masculinity and the patriarchal narrative which Beloved threatens. Further, his (re)construction of the scene raises questions about his construction of Beloved, suggesting that the Otherness portrayed here is of his own making, and positions Beloved as Other in line with the Lacanian schema, situating her as Woman/Other/God in "the ultimate form of mystification" in order "to secure for the man his own self-knowledge and truth" (Rose 50). This is the danger of embracing otherness for the African American woman; accepting the white construction of African American womanhood as the site of otherness enables a continued appropriation and silencing of the subjective experience of being black and female.

Ann duCille confronts the problematic of the white academic embrace of black womanhood, of "racial and gender alterity" as "a hot commodity" (591), of what hooks terms "[t]he commodification of Otherness" or "eating the Other": "Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning

that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (hooks 1992 21). DuCille analyzes portraits of African Americans in works by white writers, concluding that they "[take] symbolic wealth from the martyred, romanticized black body, but [retain] the luxury of refusing, erasing, or ignoring its material poverty" (616). It is a process which entitles "the privileged white person...to the raw materials of another's life and culture but, of course, not to the Other's condition" (614). Such fantasies of the Other deny subjective specificity to black women, and cordon off racial and gender alterity as an Otherness which the white subject may objectify and perhaps partake of, but which remains an external alterity confirming one's own non-raced position.

In this way, celebrating the Otherness of black women risks replication of the phallic fantasies that constrain 'woman' as the mystified Other which "serves as matrix/womb for the subject's signifiers" (Irigaray 1985b 101): "...it is from (re)productive earth-mother-nature that the production of the logos will attempt to take away its power, by pointing to the power of the beginning(s) in the monopoly of the origin" (102). Representation of the 'otherness' of blackness and femaleness, its potential fluidity, mystery, and connection to nature and to origins, may enable the positing of disruption of the phallic order, but enacting and sustaining such disruption, and envisaging an alternate language and economy deriving from fluidity, without returning African American women to the position of the silenced and fetishized Other, remains deeply problematic.

Beloved's fear of self-dissolution conveys the precarious position of alterity, of an 'other' female subjectivity, within the phallic and racist order:

> Beloved looked at the tooth and thought, This is it. Next would be her arm, a hand, a toe. Pieces of her would drop maybe one at a time, maybe all at once. Or on one of those mornings before Denver woke and after Sethe left she would fly apart. It is difficult keeping her head on her neck, her legs attached to her hips when she is by herself. Among the things she could not remember was when she first knew that she could wake up any day and find herself in pieces. She had two dreams: exploding and being swallowed. When her tooth came out - an odd fragment, last in the row - she thought it was starting. (133)

Her monologue, in which she attempts to speak herself, to represent her

alterity, and the different self-other relationship for which she yearns, is situated in the perilous position of feminist deconstruction, expressed in the dominant language, but struggling to articulate something beyond that language and its structures. Even as she draws upon the dominant discourse, she enacts a fluidity of imagery and articulation that provides a glimpse of the alternative order which her alterity may offer, and challenges that language's structures of selfhood: "I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own and I want to be there in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too" (210).

While many critics identify in Beloved's monologue a possessiveness toward or objectification of the (m)other[10], it seems that this may instead be the inevitable effect of the language in which she must speak. Irigaray discusses the inadequacy of the Symbolic for representation of any alternative subjectivity or relationship, even in the privileged discourse of the 'mystic': "Words begin to fail her. She senses something *remains to be said* that resists all speech, that can at best be stammered out. All the words are weak, worn out, unfit to translate anything sensibly" (1985a 193). The possessiveness which echoes repetitively through the women's monologues thus indicates the distortion of fluidity and inter-connection wreaked by the phallic order in its representation of women as objects and Other. It is this distortion which makes Beloved and Sethe's relationship parasitic, and which eventually ejects Beloved from an incarnate existence within the dominant order, relegating the 'feminine' otherness which she represents to an ephemeral existence in dreams, photographs, water and weather: "wind in the eaves, or spring ice thawing too quickly" (275).

The feminine 'otherness' glimpsed within *Beloved* thus offers conceptions of blackness and the feminine which threaten and disrupt the phallic order, its monolithic constructions of self, and its exclusion of what is other, even as the processes of the Symbolic work to collapse this alterity into Kristevan 'otherness,' excluding it, and thriving upon its controlled existence. Like the 'wildness' which Sethe has seen in the eyes of slaves given the bit (71), 'otherness' can be a product of the hierarchic violences of the dominant

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[10] See discussion of Schapiro's criticism in Chapter One.

order, engendered in the oppressed through the strategies of oppression, and serving to confirm construction of Africans/women as bestial and other. The fear which constructs these images of Otherness for women/Africans, and denies women and black people subjectivity, indicates the violent repressions and fears of 'otherness' and 'difference' which constitute the Symbolic, just as Stamp Paid, Baby Suggs's friend, asserts the nature of processes which dictate the Othering of black people, and which impose otherness in order to confirm white subjectivity:

> Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood.... But it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it.... Made them bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made. The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own. (198-9)

Thus, 'otherness' is difference as feared by whites/men, and as created and imposed upon blacks/women by those who fear it. Any use of it to disrupt therefore risks enforcing those fears and strategies of imposition and devaluation; yet dramatic portrayals of this process in ***Beloved*** demonstrate the presence of the 'other' within us all, and the futile violence of the self-divisions and projections of 'otherness' upon objectified others.

Finally, the novel's most dramatic triumph is in its evocation of another order which, even though it cannot yet be represented in the Symbolic, can be intimated and (fleetingly) incarnated and articulated, and which remains at the edge and in the gaps of the Symbolic, simply waiting to be grasped by someone with the courage to break open the dominant discourse: "They can touch it if they like, but don't, because they know things will never be the same if they do" (275).

Jazz

In *Jazz*, the predominant figure for an alternative female subjectivity which draws upon African and feminine alterity is Wild. On Golden Gray's travels to face his father, and his black heritage, he stumbles across a naked

and pregnant black woman, who hits her head upon a tree in her hurry to escape him. Golden Gray's encounter with and perceptions of her are caught up in his grapplings with identity and his relations to black people.

Golden Gray's first vision of Wild, like Joe's first realization of her as his mother, associates her with the world of nature and animals: "In the trees to his left, he sees a naked berry-black woman. She is covered with mud and leaves are in her hair" (144). He relates her physical appearance to that of his horse: "...he cannot help noticing that his horse is also black, naked and shiny wet, and his feelings about the horse are of security and affection. It occurs to him that there is something odd about that: the pride he takes in his horse; the nausea the woman provoked" (144). Golden Gray fears the woman as the embodiment of otherness, and dreads the risk of such otherness affecting his 'white' subjectivity: as he bends near her he "[holds] his breath against infection or odor or something. Something that might touch or penetrate him" (144). His terror constructs itself as a fear of violation, the penetration of his ego boundaries by something which is not-him.

Golden Gray must confront an even more physical manifestation of the permeability of human boundaries in his realization of her pregnant state: "Then he notices a rippling movement in her stomach. Something inside her is moving" (145). The fluidity that this conjures in his mind, the instability of subjectivity and the alterity of pregnancy and blackness, coalesces in his characterization of the woman, when he lifts her, as "an armful of black, liquid female" (145). This image denotes the features that bother him most about the woman and against which he defines himself.[11]

For this white man who has just discovered his 'blackness' - the potential of the other within, courtesy of his black father - his self-definition and definition of black others now come into question. The narrative offers his motivations for rescuing Wild:

> When he stopped the buggy, got out to tie the horse and walk back through the rain, perhaps it was because the awful-looking thing lying in the the wet weeds was everything that he was not as well as a proper protection against and anodyne to

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[11] Wild's pregnancy as a representation of her alterity suggestively links with Beloved's apparently pregnant state at the conclusion of *Beloved* (261); the implications of this deserve further exploration.

> what he believed his father to be, and therefore (if it could just be contained, identified) - himself. (149)

Golden Gray desires to pin down and identify blackness, in order to adjust his perceptions of himself, but his constructions of blackness remain too engrained in his subjectivity to be simply altered:

> But who could live in that leafy hair? that unfathomable skin? But he had already lived in and with it: True Belle had been his first and major love, which may be why two gallops beyond that hair, that skin, their absence was unthinkable. (150)

Golden Gray's first object is thus his black "othermother," his mammy, and his constructions of her, and of himself in relation to her, form the foundations for his identity.[12] Constructions of blackness thus affirm him by offering negatives to his positive, in the same way that Morrison asserts that 'Africanism' informs the literary formations of American identity in the nineteenth century:

> Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny. (1992 53)

The absence of black otherness as objectified and created by white ideology, and the acceptance of black subjectivity, remain "unthinkable" for Golden Gray, whose subjectivity depends upon that objectified otherness, even as he must confront the possibility of its existence within himself.

Small wonder, then, that Golden Gray prays for Wild's eyes to stay closed, and cannot face the prospect that they should regard him, that he should be the object observed by a black subject. Simultaneously, he must address her 'fluidity':

> Everything about her is violent, or seems so, but that is because she is exposed under that long coat, and there is nothing to prevent Golden Gray from believing that an exposed woman will explode in his arms, or worse, that he will, in hers. She should be stuffed into the ticking along with the bits of rag, stitched shut to hide her visible lumps and moving parts. (153)

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[12] Patricia Hill Collins, in *Black Feminist Thought,* usefully discusses "othermothers - women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities," and their importance in "the institution of Black motherhood" (119); see Ann duCille on the different implications of white perceptions of their black mammy-figures.

Golden Gray's encounter with this woman thus engenders in him fear of the transgression of his boundaries, by Wild's fluidity and by otherness. Golden Gray fears that her fluidity/fragmentation is contagious, and to an extent is justified: should Wild prove to be a subject, who in her multiplicity and otherness challenges his understandings of subjects as unified and white, his own subjectivity may fall apart.

As a result, he wishes her to confirm his perceptions of black people as animalistic, in order to affirm himself as civilized. The narrator wonders why he does not wipe the blood off her face:

> She is more savage perhaps this way. More graphically rescued. If she should rise up and claw him it would satisfy him even more and confirm True Belle's warning about the man who save the rattler, nursed the rattler, fed the rattler only to discover that the last piece of information he would have on this earth was the irrevocable nature of the rattler. (155)

Wild's later biting of Hunter's Hunter as he tries to tend to her seems to confirm this savagery and raises questions about her disruption of Golden Gray's self-perceptions: does her refusal of 'civilized' life, her fluidity and alterity, offer space for a female subjectivity unappropriated by the dominant order, or does her otherness simply confirm racist constructions of the other and deny her subjectivity?

Wild's subjectivity remains absent from the novel; she does not speak for herself. Having rejected the role of mother, she is located in the site of disruption of mother-child relationships perpetuated by slavery: Hunter "relive[s] that time when his house was full of motherlessness - and the chief unmothering was Wild's" (167). It remains unclear whether the "chief unmothering" is Wild's refusal to mother Joe, or her own motherlessness; Hunter's realization that "she was hungry still" (167) suggests the repeated disconnection of mothers and children portrayed throughout the novels, and thus seemingly positions Wild as another victim of the patriarchal and racist system that denies subjectivity to mothers and black women, and severs the mother-child connection. At the same time, however, her refusal of the mother role functions in the same way as Sethe's mother's rejection of the children she bears to white men as a result of rape; both are acts of resistance and unwillingness to be incorporated as objects into sexist and racist systems

of reproduction. Wild chooses to live beyond the structures of civilization, and to acknowledge a close relationship with nature denied by the strategies of colonization which constitute subject-formation in the phallic order.

Wild's marginality does not prevent her having an effect upon those whom her life touches. The narrative tells us that thirteen years after Joe's birth "the harm she could do was still alive" (165), and that pregnant girls and old men are particularly sensitive to the smell, sight, or sound of her, and must guard against her influence: "the grandfathers - unwarned - went soft in the head, walked out of the syrup house, left their beds in the shank of the night, wet themselves, forgot the names of their grown children and where they'd put their razor strops" (167). The disruption she causes thus takes the form of disordering the men's performance of their masculine roles - as workers, fathers, and men who shave - and unsettling their bodily control, reminding them that unity of self is still an illusion.

The 'traces' of Wild which Joe discovers repeat imagery of caves and wombs, as when Joe finds what appears to be Wild's home:

> He found the opening in the rock formation but could not enter it from that angle. He would have to climb above it and slide down into its mouth. The light was so small he could barely see his legs. But he saw tracks enough to know she was there. (177)

The opening which Wild seems to occupy conjures echoes of the holes which Nel and Sula dig, and the "womb-like" tunnel of Medallion. Yet when Joe penetrates this womb/cave, in order to appropriate his place of origin, he finds it empty of Wild, containing only a series of objects and ornaments, and what seems to be Golden Gray's clothing. As discussed in Chapter One, his inability to see his mother leads to his anger and devaluation of her fluidity and otherness: "The small children believed she was a witch, but they were wrong. This creature hadn't the intelligence to be a witch. She was powerless, invisible, wastefully daft. Everywhere and nowhere" (179). His anger stems from his inability to see Wild, to use his gaze to objectify her, along with the frustration of sensing that she watches him, that he may be the object of her gaze. Her silence and invisibility deny him the opportunity to assert power over her; simultaneously, Joe declares that they make her powerless - an accurate assertion in terms of Symbolic power.

Wild is repeatedly associated with an oak tree, which, like the redwings

that gather near her, functions as a signifier for her:

> ...he had searched the hillside for the tree - the one whose roots grew backward as though, having gone obediently into earth and found it barren, retreating to the trunk for what was needed. Defiant and against logic its roots climbed. Toward leaves, light, wind. Below that tree was the river whites called Treason where fish raced to the line, and swimming among them could be riotous or serene. But to get there you risked treachery by the very ground you walked on. The slopes and low hills that fell gently toward the river only appeared welcoming; underneath vines, carpet grass, wild grape, hibiscus and wood sorrel, the ground was as porous as a sieve. A step could swallow your foot or your whole self. (182)

The tree's roots find the earth barren, as Wild may have found society; her return to nature replicates the roots' growth back toward the tree for nourishment. The tree's proximity to water again associates Wild with fluidity and the elements; whites call the river Treason, perhaps because its fluidity challenges the dominant order in resisting the human drive to master and conquer nature. Similarly, the ground nearby is dangerous and porous; its shifting and swallowing ways threaten to consume and absorb the self.

In this fluid and unstable order, Wild remains absent: "But where is *she*?" Joe demands (184). This "she" of black and female otherness is represented only through metonymic figurations: the oak tree, the redwings, the objects and clothes. Her invisibility forestalls appropriation; she is difficult to decipher and comprehend, her possibilities remain multiple and ungraspable. It seems that we cannot know if she succeeds in creating a subjectivity outside the Symbolic order; if she does, it cannot be represented. Alternatively, her silence may signal her complete marginalization and appropriation by the dominant order; the narrative concerns only those very much within the order, even as they struggle to make space where there is none. Yet she ostensibly achieves some disruption, reminding those she touches of the instability of their subjectivities, the treachery of the ground upon which they build their structures of self and of society. Her womb-like burrows figure her connection to nature, maternity, cultural past, and origins. But ultimately *she is not there*, and the womb does not contain her, nor circumscribe her; she is always elsewhere. Wild, like and yet unlike Sula and Beloved, approximates the model of the ineffable, multiple, and always other

female imagined by Irigaray and Cixous. Her subjectivity remains unnarratable; she is the excess which escapes the story, even as she impinges upon it in significant ways.

Finally, then, we must question how the Otherness, fluidity, and African and female alterity embodied in Sula, Beloved, and Wild, may be represented in the Symbolic discourse. Can such elements be incorporated into a female subjectivity without giving birth to the debilitating fragmentation feared by Beloved, or its opposite, the fixity Sula temporarily lapses into with Ajax? If the ability to be 'elsewhere' is necessary to disrupt monolithic conceptions of self and other, where is that elsewhere, and how may it be imagined and conveyed? The capacity to employ mythic, natural, and polymorphous images and ideals in black women's self-constructions depends upon finding a way in which to access and enact feminist narratives which problematize conventional notions of subjectivity, and foreground the processes of reading and writing self and other. Chapter Three examines the portrayal of these processes both in the content and form of the three novels, and considers whether "mobile" and "migratory subjectivities" may be enacted without subsumption of the other and relapse into the phallic order, or whether the only place for African American female subjectivities in narrative lies in absence and elusiveness, an 'elsewhere' unrepresentable in Symbolic discourse.

CHAPTER THREE

Negotiating (With) the Text: Narrating Subjects/Subjective Narrating

> "Just as he names, so may he be named, caught in the rivalry of names." (Benston 163)

> "...when a narrative is constructed, something is left out.... What is it that is left out? Can we know what is left out?" (Spivak 18-19)

The inevitable interaction with others in any construction of self, delineated in Chapter One, has significant implications for a politics of feminist narrative which aspires to create space for African American female subjectivities. The process of naming self is valorized in black feminist theory, even as it necessitates a certain construction of the other(s) in one's life. However, the implications of imposing meaning upon others in order to claim selfhood must be confronted, along with the acknowledgement of how the written/spoken assertion of identity and rejection of silence advocated by some American feminist and black feminist theories necessarily participates in Enlightenment concepts of self which both exclude and appropriate the other for self-realization. Once more, any alternative concept of self must eschew domination of others and accept the relational, shifting, and contradictory nature of a selfhood which refuses to objectify the other, and must be formed in negotiation between, on the one hand, Symbolic structures of discourse and subscription to unified selfhood, and, on the other, acceptance that there exists always something surplus and inchoate that refuses to be sublimated in the dominant discourse, and that eternally undermines efforts to fully define self or others.

Sula, Beloved, and *Jazz* thematically convey the dangers and violence of acts of self- and other-naming, portraying the futility of attempting to control others through naming and interpreting them, as well as the harm inflicted in the effort to do so. Narratives that attempt to represent alternative

subjectivities for African American women must thus foreground processes of construction, and dramatize female subjectivities which also remain elsewhere and 'unspeakable' to avoid the colonizations of the phallic order. Morrison's narratives enact a voicing of multiple and contradictory viewpoints previously silenced, and simultaneously struggle to disrupt narrative conventions which support hegemonic notions of identity within the dominant discourse. This negotiation of present and absent narratives makes space for a model of reading, writing, and interpretation which draws upon African American traditions such as 'call and response' discourse, and which foregrounds the mutual construction inevitable in self-other and reader-text relationships.

Sula

Sula portrays the wrongs committed in objectifying and delimiting the other when the community exploits Sula's difference and refusal to conform to dominant behaviour by naming her difference as evil, and by constructing narratives that interpret her actions for their own purposes. Thus, the sight of Sula helping young Teapot up from a fall is narrated by Teapot's mother as Sula's act of violence against her child. Dessie's observation of Shadrack and Sula's exchange designates them as "'Two devils.'" (117). Most damningly, the men of the community identify Sula in terms of her sexuality, returning her to the discourse of good and bad women which she defies in seeking to make herself rather than others. The narrative makes clear the physical, almost violent, nature of this construction:

> But it was the men who gave her the final label, who fingerprinted her for all time. They were the ones who said she was guilty of the unforgivable thing - the thing for which there was no understanding, no excuse, no compassion. The route from which there was no way back, the dirt that could never be washed away. They said that Sula slept with white men. It may not have been true, but it certainly could have been. She was certainly capable of it. In any case, all minds were closed to her when that word was passed around. (112)

Threatened by her challenge to stereotypical female roles and her disruption of normative heterosexual relationships, the community labels Sula, imposing meanings upon her.

The act of labelling Sula provides the community with (the illusion of)

the power of discourse which its members lack as blacks in a white world. The name of the community itself, the Bottom, is predicated upon a white man's manipulation of meaning; assuring a black servant that the land the latter has earned is 'bottom' land, so named because it is the bottom of heaven, the white man passes off inferior, hilly, and windy land to the black man. The Bottom's name emphasizes both the subordinated position of these black people, and the entrenchment of hierarchy and power enabled by the control over meaning ostensibly wielded by the white man, and concretely affecting black life. Just as the white man affirms in his own mind his superiority in the display of this naming power, so the Bottom's black folks assert their power in naming Sula, and apportioning value to their labels.

But this assertion of power comes at the price of participation in the very economy which marks these people as inferior. As Lorde comments, in a system of thought dependent on binary opposites, where each opposite is designated good or bad, "there must always be some group of people who, through systematized oppression, can be made to feel surplus, to occupy the place of the dehumanized inferior" (114). Thus, in accepting and internalizing this value system, the community claims subjectivity through the objectification of an other. Sula to an extent engineers this construction; nevertheless, the community is culpable in its embrace of the allocation of meaning. The community's imposition of meaning constructs itself as 'good' and Sula as 'evil,' fortifying the binary opposition of good and evil and re-enacting the hierarchy which places the black community at the 'bottom.'

Sula's objectification functions as part of a larger communal - and human - practice, which attempts to order life and experience through the allocation of meaning, as an effort to control the unpredictable, just as Shadrack creates National Suicide Day to "order and focus experience" (14), to prevent the return of the fusion and fragmentation he has experienced, and to ameliorate "the unexpectedness" of death and dying (14). He thus attempts to gain control of self and of experience, to impose order, through naming. The community accepts National Suicide Day, and employs Shadrack in a similar ordering ritual, in an effort to structure their lives: "Once the people understood the boundaries and nature of his madness, they could fit him, so to speak, into the scheme of things" (15). National Suicide Day

represents an act of naming which provides the illusion of control, and is caught up in the use of discourse: "...they had absorbed it into their thoughts, into their language, into their lives" (15). Thus, in narrating Sula and their experiences, in bestowing meaning, these black people function within and by the rules of the Symbolic.

The novel demonstrates the folly of these processes of naming, in asserting the illusion of stable meaning or identity. The dominant symbol of the absurdity of naming and attempting to 'fix' Sula is the birthmark above her eye, read by various members of the community in different ways. Each of the readings reveals more about the reader than the read: for example, Shadrack perceives the mark as "a tadpole," deducing that Sula is a friend because she bears "the mark of the fish he loved" (156). Others interpret it as a rose, Nel's children perceive it as "a scary black thing" (97-8), and Jude construes it as a snake, associating his reading of Sula with the patriarchal story of Adam and Eve, in which woman is transgressor. The community voice labels it as "Hannah's ashes, marking her from the very beginning" (114). Sula becomes the embodiment of otherness, against which the community forms its subjectivity.

The novel's conclusion, however, reveals the illusoriness of the stable identity gained by belief in control over language and objectification of others, through the return of the repressed, of fear, unpredictability, and death, of all the elements that the folk have tried to control through naming. As discussed in Chapter Two, the collapse of the tunnel is preceded by Sula's death, which heralds the return of the unpredictable, and the breakdown of the system of meanings constructed within the community: "A falling away, a dislocation was taking place" (153). Teapot's mother begins to beat him again, and women who have embraced the roles and the ethic of care spurned by Sula lose interest without her opposition (153-4). The unity and subjectivity founded upon the appropriation of difference fragments.

Sula herself expresses awareness of the role constructions of her play in the struggle to control life, and to impose value and judgement. In her final speech to Nel she foresees the consequences of her death, and the inevitability of the return of the repressed, represented as the disintegration of moral and legal codes:

> "Oh, they'll love me all right. It will take time, but they'll love me.... After all the old women have lain with the teenagers; when all the young girls have slept with their old drunken uncles; after all the black men fuck all the white ones; when all the white women kiss all the black ones; when the guards have raped all the jailbirds and after all the whores make love to their grannies.... after all the dogs have fucked all the cats and every weather-vane on every barn flies off the roof to mount the hogs ... then there'll be a little love left over for me." (145-6)

Sula's vision coalesces around images of sexuality which violate perceived boundaries and categorizations of groups, envisaging a violent intermingling of races, genders, animals, and even objects, which leaves Nel "[e]mbarrassed, irritable and a little bit ashamed" (146). Further, Sula explicitly associates this vision of the eruption of the repressed with the disruption of binary oppositions where one term is elevated above the other by questioning Nel's investment of identity in the role prescribed for her:

> "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." (146)

Sula confronts Nel with the possibility that the moral values by which the latter constructs herself are simply fabrications, that good and evil are contextual and relative, and that they exist in the eye of the beholder, rather than as inherent values in the object of moral judgement.

The narrative position in *Sula* to an extent bears out the respect for the other's subjectivity, and the fluid, inconsistent nature of one's own subjectivity which such respect entails, and which the story seems to advocate. The reader is conscious of many gaps, of untold stories, which indicate the inability of knowing the other, of being able to read, interpret, and fully understand him or her. As McDowell points out, the title of the text suggests that Sula "is the protagonist, the privileged center, but her presence is constantly deferred" (1988 80-1). We do not know the tale of how Eva lost her leg, and the missing leg itself functions as a figure of absence, bearing witness to the constant presence of what cannot be explained. Simultaneously, however, such absence indicates the invisibility and silence of the female position, and the exclusion of female subjectivity and speech in the dominant order.

Hirsch's reading of *Sula* notes the 'lack' which characterizes female subjectivity within the novel, declaring that "Eva's powerful presence is defined by lack," the lack which has in the past defined the female/maternal position in literature and ideology: "...Eva's missing leg is the mark of maternal discourse in the novel and the key to its (thematized) ambivalence toward it" (179). Further, "the absent leg functions as a gap in the center of the text, the unspeakable around which Sula and Nel's stories begin to take shape" (179). While the story of the loss of the leg, and of Eva's absence from Medallion remain untold, several stories are invented which attempt to explain the gap: "...the mother's (self-)mutilation in the service of her own and her children's survival remains, to the end of the novel, unnarrated, and perhaps unnarratable, but the source of endless narration" (179).

The significance of this absence, which Hirsch reads as absence of maternal subjectivity, has implications for any narrative which attempts to offer space for female subjectivity. Hirsch discusses Eva's lack in psychoanalytic terms, as "a very graphic representation of sexual (and perhaps racial) difference, seen as lack" (181). Citing interpretations of Eva as "a kind of phallic mother who assumes God-like powers of control over naming, creation, and destruction," she suggests that Eva's "mixture of power and powerlessness...calls the very notion of phallic mother into question" (181):

> The phallic mother can exist only as a child's projection. If Eva chooses to flaunt her castration, to assume the logic of the lack that is essential to the male posture in order thereby to gain a semblance of male power, she can only reveal how much *that* power depends on a masquerade. With this term I refer to Lacan's definition of femininity as masquerade, as constructed in reference to male desire. Eva's strategy demonstrates that the male phallic position is also a sham, resting on conventional constructions that are easily overturned. Thus Morrison challenges phallocentrism, even as she shows Eva's manipulation of and complicity with the phallic order. (182)

Eva's exhibition of her lack thus enables her to adopt a 'feminine' position of masquerade, which reveals the phallacy of the male order, and the illusion of unified selfhood and control over meaning; at the same time, she remains complicit with, and victimized by, the order. Hirsch suggests that maternal discourse remains "both absent and present in the novel, a mark of difference

which does provide the narrative with its dynamic momentum, but which to do so must remain at the edge of the unspoken" (185). For Hirsch this poses difficult questions about maternal subjectivity and narrative:

> Is the novel suggesting, then, that the maternal plot can provide only the point of departure for the text but not its content, that art is primarily based on the child's drama in relation to the mother? Could it be that maternal discourse can exist in the text only on the condition that it remain fragmentary, incomplete, and mediated through the perspective of the daughter-writer? Could it be that the novel to some degree depends on the conjunction between the maternal and the unspeakable, thus repeating older plot patterns? (185)

Hirsch contends that *Sula* both attempts to represent maternal discourse, and yet replicates its conjunction with the silent and absent. In these terms, lack and absence, the gaps of the text, disrupt the phallic pretence to wholeness by mimicking the elisions of female subjective narrative which the Symbolic order depends upon. At the same time, such narrative techniques risk consigning the narratives of women to silence, something Hirsch suggests occurs, paradoxically, in Nel's final self-voicing.

Nel's self-articulation, repressed for so long, struggles to break free of traditional narratives. Her repression of anger and self in her pursuit of conventional feminine roles and her focus on others is represented in the ball of string and fur which hovers over her, and which explodes when she realizes her connection to Sula:

> "Sula?" she whispered, gazing at the tops of trees. "Sula?"
>
> Leaves stirred; mud shifted; there was the smell of over-ripe green things. A soft ball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze.
>
> "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."
>
> It was a fine cry - loud and long - but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow. (174)

For Homans this howl epitomizes the dilemma of the search for a female language which breaks out of the dominant discourse; this "woman-identified" voice of Nel's is "not a voice for articulation," and "perfectly exemplifies the paradox of separatism in language: what finally expresses her woman-identified self is of necessity non-representational" (1983 193), at least within

the masculine Symbolic. Figurations of women and women's language in terms of absence and non-Symbolic utterances thus traverse the novel, problematizing the narrative portrayal of black, female subjectivity within the prevailing discourse.

The figure of absence also has racial connotations. In a discussion of Morrison, Timothy B. Powell draws upon Gates and Baker in reading racial representations of blackness as "absence, negation, and evil" (748), and interprets this figuration of blackness as unequivocally negative:

> The battle becomes, for the critic and novelist of Afro-American literature, to de-center the white logos, to create a universe of critical and fictional meanings where blackness will no longer connote absence, negation, and evil but will come to stand instead for affirmation, presence, and good - a struggle for the right/write/rite of Afro-American literature to exist. (748)

Such sentiments echo those of black feminists, determined to assert blackness positively, and to claim the right to speak themselves and to achieve wholeness of self. But once more, the process described by Powell is one of inversion, wherein "a black text" consists of "a text whose margins are ruled by the black logos," and where the quest is "not only to de-center the white logos but finally to rebuild the center, to discover the powers which lie hidden in the black logos" (749). Inevitably, such language of "ruling" and "centering" indicates a colonization in which the "black logos" usurps the position of the Master and repeats white processes of domination.

Morrison's novels struggle with a more complex attempt to problematize concepts of centre and authority and to foreground the intricacies and implications of reading and writing the self and the other in a politics where no one position is authentic, and where otherness and selfhood are entwined and mutually informing. In this light, *Sula* is, as Hirsch suggests, a portrayal of the mother's silencing, and of absence as figuration for the black woman. The foregrounding of such absence disrupts the dominant order's pretence to wholeness, as it disrupts readerly expectations of discovering the whole story, and, through masquerade, reveals the illusion of totality and presence to which white male subjectivity subscribes; yet the implication is also that such absence of maternal narrative is integral to literary discourse, and to the child's/subject's narrative, just as the objectification of

the mother in psychoanalysis enables the formation of the child's subjectivity, and just as the 'semiotic' is necessary for constitution of the Symbolic order.

Once more, the struggle to inscribe black women's subjectivities within narrative, to rectify the absence which has surrounded black women's history and experience in the past, and simultaneously to foreground the absences of black women's subjectivities - revealing the gaps which underly the dominant order, and refusing to re-enact colonizations of the other through laying claim to a singular, authentic identity - necessitate negotiation between the assertions of positive subjectivities within cosmic and black feminist theories, and the disruptions of sexual and racial categories within poststructural theories. The narrative strategies of *Sula, Beloved,* and *Jazz* strive to negotiate this divide, presenting the varied viewpoints of many black characters which recreate black history and culture through articulation and dialogue, even as the narratives reveal how simply speaking in the dominant discourse and attempting to claim selfhood within the ruling order replicate procedures of marginalization, opposition, and destruction. The alternation of many black voices with absent narratives and narrators thus emulates the tension formed between the affirmation of black female identity and the impossibility of portraying alternative subjectivities within the (narrative) structures of the phallic order. *Beloved* also strives to foreground the African American woman (and mother) as speaking self, a process undercut by narrative strategies which further problematize the processes of reading, writing, and interpreting, again through the interplay of absent and present narratives, and alternating viewpoints.

Beloved

Beloved thematically illustrates the brutality potentially inherent in the attempt to read/write the other. The act of reading the other is, in the dominant order, caught up in the assertion of one's own subjectivity; as with Golden Gray, the interpretation of the other, specifically the black and female other, becomes an imposition of meaning upon the other, a writing rather than a reading, which objectifies the other, in order to constitute (white, male) subjectivity. In *Beloved*, images of reading, writing, and the black female

body as text emphasize the violent physical and psychological effects of master narratives which demand subservience to one meaning, one truth, and which "rule" the margins from an authoritative centre.

The image of Sethe's mother and the brand which marks her serves to highlight the precarious position of black slave women in the Symbolic discourse. Sethe tells Beloved and Denver of the one encounter with her mother that she recalls:

> "...she opened up her dress front and lifted her breast and pointed under it. Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin. She said, 'This is your ma'am. This,' and she pointed. 'I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark.' .... 'Yes, Ma'am,' I said. 'But how will you know me? Mark me, too,' I said. 'Mark the mark on me too.' " (61)

Sethe's mother's mark is that of a white slaveowner, a brand which categorizes her as cattle, as property. Her claiming of this mark as an indicator of identity indicates a certain, marginal subversion, as Goldman suggests:

> Terrible reminder of the slaveholder's mediation of the mother-child bond, the mother's reappropriation of this scar in the service of a subversive maternal language nevertheless connects the mother and child in defiance of their early separation while simultaneously indicting the context within which such a bond has been formed. (325)

The incident indicates both the girl-child's lack of subjectivity - her perception that identity derives from an externally-imposed physical mark, which earns her a slap from her mother - and the ease with which this marginal subversion is obliterated: when Sethe's mother is executed, the mark of identity can no longer be seen.

Sethe is also marked, and indeed equates the scars on her back with her mother's brand (61). The role of Schoolteacher in inflicting the scars upon Sethe suggests the contiguity between reading/writing and the violence of domination. Schoolteacher, in his time at Sweet Home, dedicates himself to reading and categorizing the slaves, repeatedly imposing upon them animal status. Sethe overhears him instructing one of his pupils to "'line up'" Sethe's "'human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right'" (193). Margaret Turner interprets Schoolteacher's actions as the deprivation of the

slaves' subjectivities:

> ...his asking of questions and measuring of body parts are designed to establish empirically the premises of the education he is giving his nephews: that African slaves are not human beings.... The words of "schoolteacher" control Sethe's world. His authority - his written words which speak lies, his scientific methods based on false premises, his rational conclusion that Sethe is not a person but a creature (184) - dispossesses Sethe of her body and deprives her of her human voice.... Sethe's body becomes text, to be written and read by others while it enforces her own silence... (87)

The absence of black women from "the center of discourse and power" thus relates to Henry Louis Gates's assertion of "the impossibility of a black subject positing a full self in language in which blackness is a sign of absence" (Turner 87). Sethe is thus defined by Western reasoning which designates Africans inferior because they lack writing; writing is then employed to deny Africans subjectivity, history, and language, and to sever them from the oral transmission of their culture.

Baby Suggs's conjunction of bodily movement and oral expression, as discussed in Chapter Two, offers a potentially female and African American form of expression; the novel demonstrates both its liberating value for the community, and its problematic inability to escape complicity in dominant constructions of race, gender, and identity. The oral storytelling depicted throughout *Beloved* becomes a way of laying claim to self and history previously denied, of rejecting the "[e]nforced silence, misnaming, death to self(hood) and subsequent anonymity [which] define the disfranchised" (Owusu 73), and is driven by the need, emphasized in black feminist theory, "to order and reconstruct a life story punctuated with gaps, sudden displacements, and unpredictable turns" (Liscio 36), to "unify...shattering experiences" (Liscio 43). Iyunolu Osagie suggests that Morrison's novel proffers an African psychoanalysis which makes space for the experiences and traumas constituting "the 'herstory' of an African past": "For where history (as written) has failed to account for the African past, Morrison accords respectable significance to the.... oralization of history which gives pre-eminence to its fictionalized constructions" (424). Osagie thus emphasizes the fictive nature of a nevertheless necessary process of reclamation of history and identity which provides material for disruption of dominant

perceptions of subjectivity.

Sethe's concept of the past and re-memory, discussed in Chapter One, thus seems to offer a means of constructing a black and female mode of narrative, which rectifies some of the silences and absences in official history and "creates anticipation for a connective past" (Bjork 150). But, just as Chapter Two demonstrated the pitfalls of claiming constructions of Otherness and Africanism as bases for subjectivity, so *Beloved* conveys the difficulties of achieving subjectivity within the dominant order; as discussed in Chapter One, if Denver and Paul D are most successful in achieving identity, they do so in terms of psychoanalytic narratives, and through readings and writings of/upon Sethe.

The novel does offer glimpses of potential female disruption and assertion of subjectivity, as indicated in Chapters One and Two. Lorraine Liscio suggests that the novel "trop[es] the mother, speak[s] the unspeakable process of signification associated with the mother - what I call writing mother's milk - to tell the invisible 'unofficial history' of blacks during slavery" and to challenge "the language of the white father that relegates them to this invisibility or namelessness" (34). This is enacted through "an alternate mode of signifying, best figured in the preoedipal, mother-infant exchange" (34). The novel's characters thus employ visual and bodily imagery in metaphors and in their charting of time (40), and draw meaning and survival from "nondiscursive signs, images, the unnamed" (41) as when Ella "'...listened for the holes - the things the fugitives did not say....Listened too for the unnamed, unmentioned people left behind'" (Liscio 41). Once more, however, this construction of identity risks reappropriation within the Symbolic, as Liscio admits:

> Morrison's focus on the preoedipal mother/infant daughter bond offers a subversive modality meant to disrupt the symbolic white schoolteacherly language that kills, but it also entails some hazards as a literary strategy. Her use of this trope (and my reading her strategy as such) risks reinstating essentialist beliefs about maternal discourse: association with the mother means to be denied the status of a speaking subject and therefore to be always objectified in others' narratives.... while Morrison's text memorializes a murdered people, it also risks becoming the agent of another kind of murder, fixing in language a past that can never be adequately named. (35)

The dilemma is this: speaking/writing the self, and laying claim to some wholeness of self, is deemed necessary for the black woman's assertion of subjectivity; but in the dominant order, speaking/writing the self seems always to participate in a speaking/writing of/on the other, a practice which has underwritten the atrocities of slavery, racism, and misogyny in the past. As a result, the discourse of the black woman, her speaking of self, becomes in *Sula* and *Beloved* a struggle against what cannot be articulated in the Symbolic. Consequently, the black woman's story and self is often figured as absent, as lacking from narrative, repeating, as Hirsch states, the conjunction of narrative and maternal/female silence which enables psychoanalytic narratives. However, *Beloved* may also suggest that the narrative's foregrounding of the absence of any single, definitive female subjectivity refuses the objectification implicit in reading and defining the other; in this way, the novel's pieces of stories and glimpses of different subjectivities incorporate gaps and absences in order both to assert presence and to indicate what cannot be conveyed within the Symbolic.

Sethe's attempt to explain to Paul D her murder of her daughter indicates the inadequacy of the Symbolic language and structure for a wholly unappropriated representation of black, female, maternal subjectivity. Paul D, as a black man who subscribes to dominant notions of masculinity, becomes uncomfortable with her efforts at narrative, which do not uphold the linearity and distance demanded by Symbolic disocurse:

> It made him dizzy. At first he thought it was her spinning. Circling him the way she was circling the subject. Round and round, never changing direction, which might have helped his head. Then he thought, No, it's the sound of her voice; it's too near. Each turn she made was at least three yards from where he sat, but listening to her was like having a child whisper into your ear so close you could feel its lips form the words you couldn't make out because they were too close. He caught only pieces of what she said... (161)

Sethe, despite or because of her illiteracy, her marginal position in the Symbolic, realizes the limits of the dominant discourse: "Sethe could recognize only seventy-five printed words (half of which appeared in the newspaper clipping), but she knew that the words she did not understand hadn't any more power than she had to explain" (161). For her, the 'truth' is simple, but

unspeakable; she may circle the room, and the subject, but "she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask. If they didn't get it right off - she could never explain" (163). Sethe's (non)speech brings to mind Irigaray's description of 'le parler femme,'

> in which "she" sets off in all directions leaving "him" unable to discern the coherence of any meaning.... For if "she" says something, it is not, it is already no longer, identical with what she means. What she says is never identical with anything, moreover; rather, it is contiguous. *It touches (upon)....*
>
> It is useless then, to trap women in the exact definition of what they mean, to make them repeat (themselves) so that it will be clear; they are already elsewhere in that discursive machinery where you expected to surprise them. They have returned within themselves. (1985b 29)

Sethe's subjective narrative thus remains "elsewhere", unspeakable by Symbolic standards because it is fluent, and refuses fixation.

Paul D's punishment of Sethe for her refusal to speak herself within the dominant order, and to make her narrative conform, is to assume the dominant, reading position within the order, and to interpret her actions as those of an animal. Ultimately, Sethe's story, her relationship with Beloved, and her self remain unspoken, except in absences and fragments, and in her final, uncertain questioning of the entire concept of identity as delineated in the Symbolic: "'Me? Me?'" (273).

Liscio also emphasizes the guilt Sethe feels over her complicity in making the ink which is used to objectify and silence through the Father's narrative, suggesting that "claiming ownership [of self] through language is not an innocent affair," and indicting the narrator of the novel with equal complicity:

> Crossing over from the mother tongue to the language of the father, inscribing the nourishment of mother's milk in the public language of signification, inevitably implicates the narrative with the white father. In other words, the narrator has written what has been stolen and cannot be written - mother's milk. Acknowledgement of this complicity prompts the narrator to participate in re-erasing her own story. She becomes an agent of invisibility, what Cixous calls writing in white ink. Withdrawing from the figuration that is language, she metaphorically slits her own throat and (in the last two pages) "signifies upon" her own text with the triple repetition: "This is not a story to pass on." (45)

Liscio's reading of "This is not a story to pass on" suggests once more that absence is the final resting place for the African American woman as subject, and that a narrative which creates space for her can do so only through representing her as fragments and silence.

However, it seems also that the narrator's signification, like the fragments and gaps of the novel, offers a female subjectivity which attains presence through a disruptive absence. The novel's grappling with these issues occurs most succinctly in the ambiguous lines of the text's final pages: "It was not a story to pass on.... It was not a story to pass on.... This is not a story to pass on" (274-5). Schapiro reads in this sentiment confirmation of the lack of space in the dominant order for black, female narratives and subjectivities:

> The poignancy of Beloved's story/self is that it is *not* a story/self. She has been denied the narrative of her being, the subjectivity and continuity of inner experience that should be everyone's birthright. Beloved's desolation, her sorrow, is a more extreme version of the same sorrow that all of the black characters in the novel experience.... It is the struggle of all black people in a racist society, Morrison suggests, to claim themselves as subjects in their own narrative. (208-9)

Other critics both point to this meaning and offer another, contradictory interpretation: writes Jean Wyatt, "...Beloved's story, too terrible to find resolution in the logic of the narrative, cannot be passed on from teller to teller, but it also cannot 'pass on,' or die" (484). Consequently, Beloved attains a marginal, shadowy position; her story "continues to haunt the borders of a symbolic order that excludes it" (484). These analyses situate African American female subjectivities and narratives in position of disruptive marginality which potentially offers them the power and agency to challenge the Symbolic.

James Phelan, in a reader-response interpretation of the novel, accentuates the multiple and overlapping meanings of this textual statement: "This is not just a story to tell for amusement; this is not a story to pass by; this is not a story to tell lightly because once you tell it things will never be the same. But this is also not a story that you will ever fully comprehend" (722). Phelan's reading of the novel effectively juxtaposes multiple, contradictory readings of Beloved's character, her confused history, her

relationship with Sethe, and her fate. It also emphasizes the inevitable correlation between the impositions of meaning which occur within the novel, and those which constitute a reading and interpretation of the novel. Phelan suggests that the desire to explain a text in terms of one hypothesis, and the refusal to accept elements of the "stubborn" - "recalcitrance that will not yield" to "our explanatory efforts" (714) - is part of "interpretation's desire for mastery and possession" (721): "the act of interpretation rests upon a desire to make texts yield up their secrets, to take possession of them" (715). Ultimately, we must accept the "stubborn" as that which is unexplainable, much as Sethe finds her act unspeakable. To impose one meaning upon elements of the story is to inscribe ourselves upon them as Schoolteacher writes his reading upon Sethe. Phelan advocates acceptance of the multiplicity of Beloved's subjectivities and stories, without any attempt to integrate them, and acknowledgement of the necessary opacity of the other:

> Letting the stubborn remain stubborn means that we accept the possibility that "the struggle to interpret and perform" a sharable world (Morrison, *Playing* xii) is one we cannot entirely win. In this light, the paradox of the stubborn can be seen as its simultaneous effect of enriching that struggle and preventing it from being completely successful. (716)

Interpretation thus becomes a vital act of connection with others which is always open to its own fallibility, and to the dangers of imposing meaning. Simultaneously, the concept of "the stubborn" is suggestive for the comprehension of potential African American female subjectivities, implying that Beloved's multiplicity and elusiveness is not solely an imposed exile of absence and fragmentation, but a deliberate, stubborn refusal to be reducible in the terms of the Symbolic. Nevertheless, the inevitable effects of that order take their toll upon Beloved: "the girl who waited to be loved and cry shame erupts into her separate parts, to make it easy for the chewing laughter to swallow her all away" (274).

Phelan's interpretation points to an understanding of these texts which acknowledges the struggles within them both to write black female selves, and to avoid repetition of the writing and reading practices which have silenced and objectified them. Morrison's novels may be seen to offer a re-troping of writing and reading practices that emphasizes the mutable and

other-influenced nature of alternative African American female subjectivities. This re-troping draws upon a cultural tradition which Collins deems an intrinsic part of any Afro-centric epistemology - dialogue, specifically as enacted through 'call and response' discourse:

> A primary epistemological assumption underlying the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims is that connectedness rather than separation is an essential component of the knowledge-validation process.... The widespread use of the call and response discourse mode among African-Americans exemplifies the importance placed on dialogue. Composed of spontaneous verbal and nonverbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all of the speaker's statements or "calls" are punctuated by expressions or "responses" from the listener, this Black discourse mode pervades African-American culture. The fundamental requirement of this interactive network is active participation of all individuals. (Collins 763)

This interactive, dialogic discourse is suggestive of the scene in which Denver narrates her birth to Beloved:

> Now, watching Beloved's alert and hungry face, how she took in every word, asking questions about the color of things and their size, her downright craving to know, Denver began to see what she was saying and not just to hear it.... Denver was seeing it now and feeling it - through Beloved. Feeling how it must have felt to her mother. Seeing how it must have looked. And the more fine points she made, the more detail she provided, the more Beloved liked it. So she anticipated the questions by giving blood to the scraps her mother and grandmother had told her - and a heartbeat. The monologue became, in fact, a duet as they lay down together, Denver nursing Beloved's interest like a lover whose pleasure was to overfeed the loved.... Denver spoke, Beloved listened, and the two did the best to create what really happened, how it really was... (78)

Rather than a static monologue, the tale Denver tells becomes a "duet," brought to life by the women's dual involvement and improvisation, and enacts what Maggie Sale terms an African American "theory of art" which is "interactive, process-oriented, and concerned with innovation, rather than mimetic, product-oriented, or static" (41). Denver and Beloved's relationship becomes part of the narrative, shaping the story.

Morrison also advocates this self-other connection, declaring that a story or novel

> should try deliberately to make you stand up and make you feel something profoundly in the same way that a Black preacher

> requires his congregation to speak, to join him in the sermon, to behave in a certain way, to stand up and to weep and to cry and to accede or to change and to modify - to expand on the sermon that is being delivered.... Now in a book, which closes after all - it's of some importance to me to try to make that connection - to try to make that happen also.... And, having at my disposal only the letters of the alphabet and some punctuation, I have to provide the places and spaces for the reader to participate. Because it is the affective and participatory relationship between the artist or the speaker and the audience that is of primary importance... (1984 341)

In *Sula* and *Beloved*, the gaps and absences of narrative, and of subjectivity, thus function as "the places and spaces" which enable reader participation. McDowell suggests that *Sula* "threatens the readers' assumptions and disappoints their expectations at every turn" (1988 85), for example, by positing a chronological, numerical sequence of time and then presenting narratives within chapters which overflow the year allotted them, roving backward and forward (86). Also, "the narrative forces us to question our readings, to hold our judgment in check, and to continually revise it" (86), and the text denies its readers a single, unified interpretation: "Whatever coherence and meaning resides in the narrative, the reader must struggle to create" (87). This reading process alters perceptions of reading as a self-other relationship in which the reader assumes the position of self and constructs the text as other:

> The reader's participation in the meaning-making process helps to fill in the gaps in the text, as well as to bridge the gaps separating the reader *from* the text.... Transgressing that boundary and viewing identity and the self in relation, rather than coherent, separate, and opposed, permits an analogous view of identification in the reading process. Just as the self is fluid, dynamic, and formed in relation, so is identification a process involving a relationship between the SELF and the "otherness" of writers, texts, and literary characters. (McDowell 87-8)

The narratives of both novels present multiple voices and viewpoints; *Beloved* in particular achieves a multilayered retelling of history which "offers several contradictory versions" rather than "collaps[ing] the multiplicity of voices available at any given historical moment into an artificial and repressive synthesis of diverse material, which presents itself as definitive" (Sale 42). In this way, the "factor of perspective is foregrounded" and the "teller is implicated in her or his particular version of the (hi)story" (Sale 42), a (hi)story

which forms around "the contributions of many tellers (writers) and listeners (readers)" (Sale 43). The multiple perspectives presented in *Beloved* counter claims to mastery, enacting "the engagement of multiple others," and gaining access to "a diversity of discourses" and a "subjective plurality" (Henderson 36-7), with implications for an "interactive, dialogic model of interpretation" (Sale 49) which refuses reductive mastery of the meanings and identities of Morrison's characters.

In describing the interaction of reader and text, Morrison puts forward a concept of narrative which I believe she enacts in both *Sula* and *Beloved*:

> To make the story appear oral, meandering, effortless, spoken - to have the reader *feel* the narrator without *identifying* that narrator, or hearing him or her knock about, and to have the reader work *with* the author in the construction of the book - is what's important. (1984 341)

This 'invisibility' of the narrator underlies these two novels; shifting from character to character, and to the narrative description of Beloved's disappearance, *Beloved*'s narrator seems apparent only in his/her self-silencing, as suggested by Liscio, in the line "This is not a story to pass on." Similarly, in *Sula*, the narrator is never foregrounded, except perhaps in what Morrison herself terms an awkward opening scene (1989 24), when the Bottom is introduced to the gaze of the white world. The diverse and shifting perspectives of the characters indeed portray a multi-faceted approach to history and subjectivity, but the orchestration of character shifts remains at best implicit.

As Glenn Jordan and Chris Weedon point out, narrative, while being "central to everyday communication between individuals," and offering subject positions to both speakers and addressees, involves a certain construction of self and other and limitation of possibility: "To narrate is to assume the position of a speaking subject. It involves the exclusion or marginalization of other possible subject positions and other meanings" (218). Further, "the discursive construction of subjectivity most often remains invisible" (218):

> The persuasiveness of many fictional narratives, particularly different forms of realism, lies in their apparently definitive interpretations of experience. Texts naturalize certain meanings and values and mask the ways in which the meaning of experience is constructed for the reader by textuality itself. Realism denies its own fictionality by presenting an apparently

> true and convincing picture of social life. Other forms of writing - most particularly poetry and postmodern writing - acknowledge the principle of the linguistic construction of meaning which, poststructuralism suggests, all language shares. (220)

Thus, the apparent absence of narrative structuring may contribute to the perpetuation of linear, dominant discourse, emulating the supposedly objective stance of the observer/narrator, the 'eye of God,' which has served white, masculine history by categorizing black women as the objects and Others of its study.

Certainly, *Beloved*'s altering viewpoints and disruption of linearity deliberately reject the conventions of realist fiction; indeed, Jordan and Weedon characterize the novel as postmodern:

> It refuses to endorse a single account of the Black experience of slavery, articulating a range of Black voices including those of the dead. The realism of the narrative is set against a plot which challenges the authenticity of realism since the central catalyst for coming to terms with the past is the return of a dead baby daughter as a grown woman. History, in the novel, is depicted as a process in which forms of subjectivity and meanings change. It is not constituted by a single narrative but by many. Moreover, the oppositions between Black and White which underpin racism are shown to be constructed and are changeable. (246)

As discussed above, the disordering of expectations and the thematic concerns of the novel constitute narrative of female subjectivity as a continual negotiation between the act of speaking/narrating within the Symbolic, and the unsettling of linear, monolithic codes through glimpses of what remains unspeakable. Yet the working processes of the narrative remain concealed, risking the undermining of any effort to foreground the construction inevitable in the act of narration, and potentially enabling the fallacious perception of narrative as an unproblematic representation of characters' true selves, offered through the transparent medium of language.

It seems, therefore, that in *Jazz*, Morrison abandons the effort to erase all signs of the narrator's "knocking about." The novel continues to shape images and discourses for female subjectivities in the disjunction between diverse narratives and the unrepresentable, yet simultaneously foregrounds the narrator as a figure whose identity remains indefinite, but whose fallibility and self-implication in the processes of reading and writing others becomes overt.

Jazz

The narrative techniques at work in *Jazz* accentuate the treacherous ground upon which narrative bases itself in its attempt to read the other. The narrative voice undermines conventions of narrative, and makes visible the processes of reading and writing its characters, in order to invalidate the omniscient point of view, the 'eye of God,' which presumes a transcendent observer/creator, overlooking and prescribing the narratives of his subjects.

The story of Golden Gray - his search for his father, and his encounter with Wild - offers the most explicit example of the narrator's foregrounding of self. The narrator commences this section with "I see him in a two-seat phaeton" (143), and repeatedly mentions him/herself in the tale's unfolding. The description of Golden's journey and finding of Wild is told twice, the second rendition presenting details left out of the first, and more closely contemplating Golden Gray's motives and thoughts. Initially, the narrator asserts Golden's thoughts in such a way as to convince the reader of the narrative's accuracy. We read that Golden has "[c]ome all that way to insult not his father but his race" (143), that he fears infection from the black woman, and that he picks her up because in his mind "[t]he scene becomes an anecdote, an action that would unnerve Vera Louise and defend him against patricide" (145). Finally, he arrives at the house, drags the woman inside, helps himself to the owner's liquor, and contemplates the "[b]lack and nothing" people he has encountered (149).

The narrative then retraces its steps, as the narrator more overtly acknowledges her/his role in the construction of Golden Gray. We again see Golden Gray riding in the rain with the black woman next to him; "I like to think of him that way" (151), declares the narrator, going on to contemplate his actions and his/her own responses:

> That is what makes me worry about him. How he thinks first of his clothes, and not the woman. How he checks the fastenings, but not her breath. It's hard to get past that, but then he scrapes the mud from his Baltimore soles before he enters a cabin with a dirt floor and I don't hate him much anymore. (151)

The narrator continues to castigate Golden Gray for his failure to demonstrate care and compassion for the woman: "He wants to brag about this

encounter, like a knight errant bragging about his coolness as he unscrews the spike from the monster's heart and breathes life back into the fiery nostrils" (154). Yet the narrator is unwilling to wholly objectify Golden Gray, to fix him in the role of villain:

> Aw, but he is young, young and he is hurting, so I forgive him his self-deception and his grand, fake gestures, and when I watch 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. He has a pistol in his trunk and a silver cigar case, but he is a boy after all... (155)

When Golden Gray realizes that he is in his father's house, and that his father will soon return, his emotions are delineated, enabling a more rounded construction of him as someone who suffers from the same dislocation and fragmentation as other African Americans, who yearns for and lacks the parental connection severed by racial distinction:

> Only now, he thought, now that I know I have a father, do I feel his absence: the place where he should have been and was not. Before, I thought everybody was one-armed, like me. Now I feel the surgery. The crunch of bone when it is sundered.... What do I care what the color of his skin is, or his contact with my mother? When I see him, or what is left of him, I will tell him all about the missing part of me and listen for his crying shame. I will exchange then; let him have mine and take his as my own and we will both be free, arm-tangled and whole. (158-9)

The narrator accepts blame for an incomplete and imposing reading of Golden Gray:

> What was I thinking of? How could I have imagined him so poorly? Not noticed the hurt that was not linked to the color of his skin, or the blood that beat beneath it.... I have been careless and stupid and it infuriates me to discover (again) how unreliable I am. (160)

Then, the narrator must renegotiate his/her position, considering the nature of her/his role and how to perform it:

> Now I have to think this through, carefully, even though I may be doomed to another misunderstanding. I have to do it and not break down. Not hating him is not enough; liking, loving him is not useful. I have to alter things. I have to be a shadow who wishes him well, like the smiles of the dead left over from their lives. I want to dream a nice dream for him, and another of him. Lie down next to him, a wrinkle in the sheet, and contemplate his pain and by doing so ease it, diminish it. I want to be the language that wishes him well, speaks his name, wakes him

> when his eyes need to be open... (161)

The narrative role portrayed here is one of nearness, openness, and connection.

In this sense, the narrative of *Jazz* is filtered through the narrator as subject-in-process, just as Golden Gray's reading and writing of Wild forms around his altering subjectivity. The narrator strives to become an 'other' for his/her subjects, in order to aid their development of subjectivity, and to form this relationship in terms of the interconnected self-other relationship valorized by Irigaray and Cixous. In discussing a "dead girl" who remains invisible, Morrison herself proffers the figure of "the beloved" as this other, as a part of herself which she strives to recreate:

> I was somebody's parent, somebody's this, somebody's that, but there was no me in this world. And I was looking for that dead girl.... and not only was that girl dead in my mind, I thought she was dead in everybody's mind.... I couldn't find her. I mean, I could see her on the street or the bus, but nobody wrote about her. (Naylor 576)

Morrison goes on to say that, in examining the images providing the impetus for *Beloved* and *Jazz*, she focused upon "what it is that really compels a good woman to displace the self, her self," and worked to invoke an other self, to "project the self not into the way we say 'yourself,' but to put a space between those words, as though the self were really a *twin* or a thirst or a friend or something that sits right next to you and watches you, which is what I was talking about when I said 'the dead girl' " (Naylor 585). In both novels this projected self is Beloved, and "her search, her quest" extends beyond *Beloved* and into *Jazz*, as Morrison explains in her interview with Gloria Naylor:

> TM: Therefore, I have a New York uptown-Harlem milieu in which to put this love story, but Beloved will be there also.
> GN: Always Beloved being the twin self to whatever woman shows up throughout the work.
> TM: She will be the mirror, so to speak. (585)

In these terms Beloved becomes the figure of the woman who is both self and other, and in relation to whom Morrison's characters may attempt, as Violet does, the traverse of the mirror stage to rediscover and reclaim the female imaginary, and to fashion from it a narrative by which one may live in the world. The narrator's foregrounding of self thus demonstrates his/her efforts

to function as this beloved for the characters, rejecting the position of "sovereign subject" (Jordan and Weedon 218), and accepting the "danger.... [t]he effort, the responsibility" of narration that Morrison feels in her role as author (Naylor 585). The beloved is the other in self, and a figure for the acceptance of difference in others which undermines the illusion of stable identity, and engenders multiple subjective positions, and the ability to traverse them.

The entire text functions as an undermining of the opening sentence - "Sth, I know that woman" (3) - for, as the story runs its course, the narrator admits that, as with Golden Gray, she/he does not *know* Violet. The introductory pages, having summarized the death of Dorcas, foreshadow the novel's end:

> It promised to be a mighty bleak household, what with the birds gone and the two of them wiping their cheeks all day, but when spring came to the City Violet saw, coming into the building with an Okeh record under her arm and carrying some stewmeat wrapped in butcher paper, another girl with four marcelled waves on each side of her head. Violet invited her in to examine the record and that's how that scandalizing threesome on Lenox Avenue began. What turned out different was who shot whom. (6)

The foreshadowing technique proves fallible, however, and the narrator must admit the stubbornness of the characters who refuse to conform to the meanings and identities imposed upon them:

> I thought I knew them and wasn't worried that they didn't really know me. Now it's clear why they contradicted me at every turn: they knew me all along.... I missed it altogether. I was sure one would kill the other.... That the past was an abused record with no choice but to repeat itself at the crack and no power on earth could lift the arm that held the needle. I was so sure, and they danced and walked all over me. Busy, they were, busy being original, complicated, changeable - human, I guess you'd say, while I was the predictable one, confused in my solitude into arrogance, thinking my space, my view was the only one that was or that mattered. (220-1)

The position of detached observer is revealed as illusory; the observer is observed by the characters, and his/her authority is undermined as the characters help to form their own narratives, refusing those laid upon them by the phallic, white order:

> I saw the three of them, Felice, Joe and Violet, and they

> looked to me like a 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: how exotic they were, how driven. Like dangerous children. 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 I never dreamed of. (221)

Felice, Joe, and Violet thus refuse the narrative structures grounded in the logic of the mirror, in the principles of distance from and objectification of the other, and of belief in the unity and fixity of self. The narrator learns that he/she cannot construct them and remain un(re)constructed him/herself; the novel becomes a mutual process, in which Joe, Violet, and Felice acknowledge the necessary mediation of each couple by the third, and the narrator, envying them their love, longs for the ability, the opportunity, to narrate his/her own mutual relationship with an other, and to occupy the position of the lover/beloved:

> I envy them their public love. I myself have only known it in secret, shared it in secret and longed, aw longed to show it - to be able to say out loud what they have no need to say at all: *That I have loved only you, surrendered my whole self reckless to you and nobody else. That I want you to love me back and show it to me. That I love the way you hold me, how close you let me be to you. I like your fingers on and on, lifting, turning. I have watched your face for a long time now, and missed your eyes when you went away from me. Talking to you and hearing you answer - that's the kick.*
>
> But I can't say that aloud; I can't tell anyone that I have been waiting for this all my life and that being chosen to wait is the reason I can. If I were able I'd say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now. (229)

This lyrical 'closure' portrays a relationship predicated upon openness to the other, the "remaking" of self which occurs when our ego boundaries interconnect with those of others, the reciprocity, the dialogue upon which such a relationship depends: "Talking to you and hearing you answer." This dialogue is not solely verbal; it relies upon touch and the recognition of the other's gaze. Yet speech becomes necessary also, in a narrative which enables one "to say out loud" until there is "no need to say at all." Again, the process of making/reading/writing self and other is portrayed as dialogic and improvisatory, but threatening; the narrator expresses fear and inability to

relinquish his/her fixed and walled-in identity.

The final pages, like much of the novel, abound with what Phelan terms "the stubborn": phrases, images, which refuse to conform with this or any single interpretation. My own interpretation offers only vaguely connected ideas, linked to the concept of a narrative which emphasizes its own instability and fallibility, and which acknowledges the obscurity of the other, and the "reshaping" of self that occurs in any reading of the other. Like Golden Gray, when we read, we read the other in ourselves, and write ourselves in the other. Alongside such stubbornness, absences of narratives also proliferate in Jazz. As discussed in Chapter Two, Wild's own narrative remains absent, and the end to Golden Gray's tale is never revealed. Those characters who do feature, whose stories are summarized at the novel's end, may also elude us, given that the narrator admits their inscrutability, their determination to write themselves. And, finally, the narrator him/herself is absent, unknown, lacking the (single) identity with which she/he can be fixed.

The shifts of points of view, the narrator's struggle with the representation of the characters, the absent narratives, juxtaposed with fragmented, present narratives, and the intermingling of past and present, enact what has freqently been perceived as a musicalization of the novel and its narrative form (Rodrigues, Walcott, Mbalia). Jazz, with its improvisatory chords and riffs, offers a potent figuration for a potential form of narrative, which draws upon black culture and history, and which has, in the past, offered subjective positions from which to narrate the self for African American women. As the reader/critic traces echoing images and motifs through the text, he or she must, like the narrator, acknowledge the mutual constructing taking place, and resist the desire to 'fix' the multiple meanings and connotations of the novel, in order to avoid the murder of Dorcas/Wild which Joe perpetrates. Therefore, the narrator's second reading of Golden Gray functions as an improvisatory repetition which emphasizes the omissions of the initial reading, while indicating the inevitability of gaps and misinterpretations in any act of reading.

Like *Sula* and *Beloved, Jazz* enacts a negotiation between the assertion of multiple, contradictory narratives which (marginally) disrupt the monolithic narratives of the dominant order, and the displacement of narratives, which

mimics that order's impositions of silence, and thus emphasizes the illusions of wholeness and identity upon which the order depends. Such a negotiation is one which works, in Cixous's terms,

> (in) the in-between, inspecting the process of the same and the other, without which nothing can live...not fixed in sequences of struggles and expulsion or some other form of death but infinitely dynamized by an incessant process of exchange from one subject to another. (1976 254)

Morrison's texts are thus "dynamized" in a continual, often difficult negotiation, which asserts some black female subjectivities and narratives, even as it undercuts and excludes others, foregrounding, particularly in the latter two novels, the processes of exclusion, objectification, and destruction implicit in the acts of reading and writing. The continual confrontation of one's responsibility in reading others, and of the persistent effects of (our own and others') readings and writings upon ourselves, opens space, fraught with dangers as it is, to conceive of African American female subjectivities engaged in narrating themselves.

From this in-between, Cixous declares, "woman takes her forms" (1976 254); the representations of women and their histories, so long repressed, surface now in this disjunction of the speaking self and the unnarratable, of the same and the other. As with McDowell's reading of reader-text relationships in self-other terms, the processes of reading and writing, as well as the narrative negotiation of assertion and absence, form around the notion of a dialogic, intersubjective self-other relationship, in which the refusal of objectification opens the self up to multiple, subjective positions. Such concepts offer endless possibilities; for example, Rinaldo Walcott suggests that *Jazz*/jazz offers a model for pedagogy: "Much like jazz, critical pedagogy should be open to the surprises and detours of the chaotic and to the negotiations necessary to play with meanings.... Negotiated power makes visible the multiple and conflictive subject positions in the classroom" (324). He continues:

> To work against the easy construction of total narratives that attempt to solidify numerous histories/migrations does not mean that one gets lost in fragmentation.... It is rather an attempt to avoid repeating a past fraught with the easy binaries of us/them and the numerous silences constituted by these hierarchical terms. (329)

Morrison's novels encode this struggle against totalization and solidification, in a refusal of singular viewpoints, a rewriting of monolithic narratives, and the piecing together of diverse and infinite histories. The subjectivities gained by her characters shift, and alter, eternally strategic and temporary, but necessarily connected to others and the otherness within. The struggle to inscribe selfhood in terms that resist the structures of imposition, and of sexual and racial domination, demands negotiation of treacherous terrain, but the porous ground and the river Treason of *Jazz* constitute elements of the in-between that nurture the otherness on which African American women may thrive.

CONCLUSION

The representations of African American women within Toni Morrison's *Sula, Beloved*, and *Jazz* negotiate dominant, hegemonic narratives of identity, and succeed, to various extents, in breaking open those narratives, revealing their dependence upon the appropriation and objectification of the maternal origin, and upon the silencing of women which enables construction of them as fantasized/denigrated objects/Others.

As suggested in Chapter One, a different relation to one's origin, one's mother, which acknowledges her as a subject and seeks to form an interactive relation with her, serves as a model for different self-other relations that reject objectification of the other, and consequently enable a different understanding of the subject as multiple and shifting, and of selfhood as relational rather than autonomous. Morrison's novels continually reassert maternal subjectivity and valorize mother-daughter and interpersonal connection, even as they acknowledge the ambivalences of relationships and the difficulty of negotiating self-other boundaries.

The divisions enforced between mothers and daughters, both within slave/racial systems and in psychoanalytic/Western narratives, deprive Morrison's female characters of a vital connectedness to the past and to (m)others, and deny them forms for self-representation. Chapter Two suggests that subjective representation for African American women may be found in images of 'otherness' and alterity, such as the mythic and natural tropes in Morrison's fiction; simultaneously, these tropes, formed and devalued within patriarchal and racist ideology, risk partaking of a Kristevan or Lacanian Otherness, in which women become a fantasized category that enables, through mystification, the subjectivity of males/whites. Yet these novels also impart a vision of a potential female symbolic, which is more than a semiotic exploited in the service of the masculine order. Metaphoric representation of women such as Beloved and Wild conveys an effort to imagine an 'elsewhere' of female difference and otherness, figured within these novels as fluidity and wildness.

The subsequent struggle within Morrison's fiction becomes the effort to envisage this subjective otherness for black women without enabling its subsumption by dominant narratives; this struggle is foregrounded in a negotiation of literary representation and what remains unrepresentable in the dominant order, as explored in Chapter Three. Morrison continually makes her readers aware of what remains unknown, unspeakable within the Symbolic, thus repeatedly referring them to the 'elsewhere' beyond the phallic order, even as she asserts the necessity of black women endeavouring to speak/write their narratives despite all risk of appropriation. These novels thus focus constantly on the politics of narrative, the implications of speaking oneself and narrating/reading others. The novel's themes decry the violences of the past perpetrated in readings/writings of black and female others; at the same time they emphasize the need to continue narrating, but within a more unstable context which acknowledges what is "left out" of narrative, and of the impossibility of fully inscribing any black and female subject within Symbolic narrative.

Finally, the hope for African American female subjectivity lies with the space of the "in-between" discussed by Cixous; the mediating space between self and other, wherein boundaries cannot clearly be defined, wherein, in Beloved's words, "I am not separate from her" (210). Flax similarly discusses an in-between space, drawing on object-relations theorist D.W. Winnicott's "transitional space" which "bridges the gap between self and other and inner and outer reality" (1992 204). This transitional space develops as the child's "space of play and of attachment to special 'not-me' possessions," which, as the child chooses and plays with them, engender her or his "process of symbolization" (204). This space is thus the creative interconnection between subject and other/world, the in-between of self and other, and of the Symbolic within which we struggle to operate, and the elsewhere that we must envisage and gesture toward. It may also be the space between reader/critic and text discussed by McDowell. These in-between spaces thus offer forms for representations of black female subjects that disrupt and diverge from the masculine Symbolic, in the respect for the other, and the merged boundaries of self and other, explored throughout the novels.

The process of negotiation thus remains significant in this conception of

a transitional space; as Davies points out, a point of connection may be one of conflict or an opportunity for engagement and growth. Black women may thus enact a lifelong practice of negotiating and balancing these different possibilities: the need to connect with the dangers of reading the other; the need to narrate the self with the omissions and objectifications perpetrated in the act of narration; the need to assert presence and subjectivity with the need always to emphasize the enforced absences of the past, and the necessary, stubborn absences of the present; the need to envisage and represent positive female subjectivity with the importance of continuing to disrupt and challenge dominant categories of gender, race, and identity.

Ultimately, Morrison's novels act out a fictional negotiation of the multiple feminist approaches demanded in any contemporary analysis of African American female subjectivities. The women of *Sula, Beloved,* and *Jazz* portray negotiations of/with dominant narratives which frequently emphasize their subordinated or disadvantaged positions, and the difficulties of avoiding re-appropriation and complicity; nevertheless, the "inspirational fictions" that they build, the self-representations that they trope, and the subjectivities that they enact remain the most memorable aspects of these novels, which offer us the gaps, the multiplicities, the contradictions of African American female subjects. These gaps, multiplicities, and contradictions disrupt any critical/narrative claim to a position of mastery or objectivity, and assert interactive and mutable subjectivities necessitated by the acknowledgement of black and female subjectivity, and by respect and openness toward the other or the text.

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