

Formation of Identity in Toni Morrison's African-American Fictional Characters

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Abstract: Many of Toni Morrison's African-American characters attempt to change their circumstances either by embracing the white culture that surrounds them or by denying it. In this article the researcher explores several ways in which the characters do just that—either embrace or deny the white culture's right to dominion over them. This discussion is, of course, a slippery slope in that both cultures' histories are for better or worse inextricably linked. But the following questions seem to remain for Morrison's characters: From what angle and in what way should this problem be attacked? If the characters decide to turn their backs entirely on the white culture are they unrealistic idealists, and if they decide to embrace the white culture are they betraying their own cultural identity? Finally, is there perhaps some middle-ground between these two extremes? Morrison's novels are about the politics of social structure. How living spaces can shape her characters' personas is a question central to her novels. Her novels also question how the construction of identity is influenced by the types of clothing her characters wear. The central question appears to be whether or not the African-American characters' homes and clothing should reflect the white culture. Some of her characters fight to be different.

They build or live in houses that are strange or different. They wear loose and ragged clothing that is not respectable. Some of the women shave their heads. They repurpose rooms and make cellars into bedrooms. They wear glamorous flashy clothing—clothing that calls attention to precisely what they are: African-American women. Fundamentally, the characters react to the pressures put on them by the white community in one of two ways: they either given in to or fight the influence of the dominant culture.

Some of Morrison's characters attempt to exert some control over their own lives by controlling and organizing objects—sometimes objects as small and seemingly insignificant as cans of food, but these small objects are far from insignificant in characters' lives. These tiny objects symbolize the characters' desires for cultural autonomy, and they function as talismans for the characters, helping them to channel their discontent into something tangible. These objects facilitate change. Some of her characters are unable to deal with the pressures put on them by both the white and the African-American communities. These characters, hungry and desperate for fellowship and equity, turn on and fight with other characters within their own African-American communities. Their displaced anger causes a chain reaction which eventually affects entire communities. Morrison's novels suggest that this displaced anger should be

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*Received 6 May 2010; accepted 10 August 2010

redirected and turned outward towards the dominant white culture that serves as the African-American culture's oppressor.

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

Keywords: Tony Morrison; Formation of identity

1. FORMATION OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN IDENTITIES IN TONI MORRISON'S NOVELS

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

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

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

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

Morrison's novels argue that an attempt to fit into the larger cultural context at the expense of her characters' own unique cultural voice is the equivalent of cultural suicide.

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

Attachments to structures and things hold people back from being able to realize their true selves because the structures reflect the values of the larger culture rather than the value of the individual; the culture which states that an individual is nothing if he or she does not own a house, or property, or fancy gadgets, but the fact ultimately remains that these objects end up owning both the white and the black characters in Morrison's novels. The places in which Morrison's characters live are often sites of tragedy. These dwellings are often the sites of tragedy because Morrison sees an attachment to material objects, including attachments to houses, as unhealthy. This phenomenon appears to be especially true of any object that is manufactured by the dominant white culture and then utilized by the black culture. Interestingly, Elizabeth B. House in her article "The 'Sweet Life' in Toni Morrison's Fiction" has argued that these houses are healthy spaces in which women thrive outside the restrictive forces of patriarchal society, but the researcher argues that these houses and structures function as sites of containment. They serve to keep the women restrained within its architectural confines. Built by the patriarchal white society, these houses often figuratively imprison the women who live within them. True freedom in Morrison's novels is equated with thinking for one's self and celebrating one's own existence. In the novel *Beloved* Baby Suggs and Denver are two examples of characters that are emotionally and literally free beyond the need to consume goods and property. Baby Suggs, holy, the female self-appointed preacher, tells the black community to whom she preaches to love themselves. "'Here,' she said, 'in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. ... This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved'" (Morrison 108). It is the Clearing where Baby Suggs, holy, preaches to her community that Sethe, mother of Denver, "along with the others...had claimed herself" (116). In this church of nature, the Clearing, Sethe manages to claim and celebrate her own identity as a freed person, as a person rather than an inhuman slave. She therefore defines her existence not by what she is not: a white member of the ruling class, but rather by what she is: a funky African-American woman. But those characters that celebrate their own African-American funkiness are often marginalized by people of their own race. They do not play by the rules and subscribe to white standards of propriety. They do not aspire to be white. Those characters that thrive while living in opposition to the white culture are shunned by their own race and marked as pariah.

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

How come she always knows exactly what to do and when? Giving advice; passing messages; healing the sick, hiding fugitives, loving, cooking, cooking, loving, preaching, singing, dancing and loving...to take two buckets of blackberries an make ten, maybe twelve, pies; to

have turkey enough for the whole town pretty near, new peas in September, fresh cream but no cow, ice and sugar, batter bread, bread pudding, raised bread, shortbread—it made them mad. (168-69)

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mooney suggests that “in *The Bluest Eye*, the desire for a pretty green-and-white house, with the assimilation it promises... is so powerful that the inability to possess it can, like the inability to possess blue eyes, destroy integrated black personhood” (65), and Morrison “asserts that such a set of behaviors is an unnatural repression of the ‘funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions’” (Mooney 65). The black community of Morrison’s novel’s often seeks out this funkiness, this undeniably African-American selfhood, and annihilates it. “Wherever it erupts, this Funk, they wipe it away; where it crusts, they dissolve it...” (Morrison 83).

They destroy what is intrinsically African-American about their culture in order to fit into the white culture, and this includes the houses in which they live. This funkiness is utterly repressed in the relatively affluent young women in Morrison’s novels. These clean, tidy, repressed young women are even present in *The Bluest Eye*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In Morrison’s second novel, *Sula*, the reader experiences the first decidedly transgressive African-American home dweller that is to emerge in her literary canon. One of the novel’s main characters, Eva Peace, disregards the laws of propriety. Eva very actively resists the traditional moral teachings of the black community that encourage black people to deny their funkiness and embrace what are thought of as traditionally white values by being neat, clean, tidy, and more respectable than the white people who are trying to oppress them. Helene Sabat, on the other hand, is an excellent example of the respectable sort of black person portrayed in Morrison’s novels. Most importantly, Helene works arduously to be seen as respectable to the white community, which is something that Morrison’s works rail against. Though born to a “Creole whore” (Morrison 17) in a house of prostitution with “red shutters” (Morrison 17), which advertised precisely what went on within the walls of the Sundown House, Helene Sabat is taken away from that unrespectable African-American life by her grandmother. Her grandmother grooms her to be a respectable young black woman—obsessively tidy and compulsively respectable. Her grandmother guarded her “for any sign of her mother’s wild blood” (Morrison 17). It is interesting, however, that the mother, the Creole whore, is later characterized by the narrator as breezy, beautiful, and free-spirited creature, an object of adoration/admiration for the young Nel, daughter of Helene Wright. Helene is rewarded for her respectable behavior with a “lovely house with a brick porch and real lace curtains at the window” (Morrison 17). Both physically and architecturally, Helene projects the image of absolute respectability, so image, then, is directly tied to respectability for many of the African-Americans in Morrison’s novels, and good grooming is directly tied to good neighborhoods, pretty houses, and upward

mobility. It also should not go without notice that Helene Sabat lives in the valley, in the town of Medallion where the white people live—rather than in the hills, in the community known as the Bottom, where the black people live. Significantly, the culmination of Helene's life, "the culmination of all she had been" (79) was her daughter Nel's wedding. "A real wedding, in a church, with a real reception afterward, was rare among the people of the Bottom" (80). Typically, "There was no need for that formality" (80), but Helene Wright with her hyper vigilant concern with respectability would have rather died than not have a beautiful, respectable, and showy wedding for her daughter.

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

Nel's funky "enthusiasms," as the narrator describes them, were "calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter's imagination underground" (18). The text is clear here: use of one's imagination through deviation of any sort will not be tolerated by the respectable and unfunky blacks. This idea of deviation includes everything from modes of dress to styles of architecture. Deviating from the standards of acceptability would threaten the tenuous position the respectable black people had achieved.

Deviation or difference, then, understandably frightens many of the black characters in Morrison's novels, and though it would be going too far to state that the respectable black people, those black people who are culturally white, are vilified in her novel, they are at least, most carefully scrutinized. Morrison's narrator is sure to give back stories about the characters, reasons why they have become the sorts of characters that they have become, but her narrators do not, nor do her novels, excuse what is seen as a transgression, a slight against their own culture. Their motivation for doing so is always made understandable to the reader, but they are never, as I have already stated, excused from their actions. Helene wants to join a Catholic church, though there are none in Medallion. Catholic churches are known for their decidedly traditional—and white—architecture.

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

In contrast to the somber, heavy respectability of women such as Helene, there are many in Morrison's novels who are perceived as wild—women who embrace their funky African nature. These women are never criticized by the narrators in Morrison's novels, though they are often criticized by the communities in which they live. Nel's grandmother, Helene's Creole whore mother, is one such woman. When Nel and

Helene meet the grandmother she is described as looking “so young” (25), and possessing “the softness and glare of a canary” (25). She even brings a “gardenia air” (25) when she walks in the room. Everything about her combats the oppressive and “somber house that held four Virgin Marys, where death sighed in every corner” (25). Though she is a whore by trade, the reader cannot help but feel relieved by her presence, especially when it is textually thrust up against the heavy presence of Helene herself and the funereal atmosphere of the house. Significantly, the mother’s respectability is perceived by Nel as oppressive while grandmother’s amorality is perceived as refreshing. Not only is respectability perceived as oppressive, but also respectable—and white—architecture.

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

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

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

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

Even Shadrack’s house, the house of the World War I veteran suffering from post traumatic stress, is a single-room structure reminiscent of a cabin, which is counter to the interests of the freed slave who desired to have distinct functions for distinct rooms (Mooney 60). Though to Sula’s young eyes it appears to be a “sweet old cottage” (62), it really is little more than a modest cabin. With many dedicated functions

included in the one room, "With its made-up bed...with its rag rug and wooden table..." (62). The cabin is neat, restful, "...tiny, so common, so unthreatening" (61). The cabin was arranged in such a way that it was comfortable, not formidable; it was not decorated to impress. The cabin was arranged to serve a purpose, to be a comfortable dwelling for the slightly crazed fringe member of the black community. Through Shadrack's behavior throughout the novel the reader comes to understand that Shadrack is not interested in impressing anyone with his respectable behavior or dress. The logic therefore follows that he has no intention of impressing others with his home. Quite to the contrary, Shadrack's behavior invites scorn from the rest of the community. His "National Suicide Day," the one day a year in which he invites any and all of the members of the community to join him in a mass suicide, invites scorn rather than praise from his fellow community members.

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

Sula rails against this mask of propriety Nel wears. When Nel tells Sula that she "look[s] fine" (141) Sula's response is decidedly antagonistic. "'You lying, Nellie'" (141), and when Nel continues to push the conversation in the direction of pleasantries and commonalities Sula stops her with a blunt remark. "'You want to talk about that?'" (141).

Nel and Sula, as Helene and Eva, respectively represent opposite ends of the propriety spectrum. Nel wears the veil or mask of propriety while Sula goes boldly through her life without guile and without the protection of the mask of civility.

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

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

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

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

architectural iconography of the time, which advocated cleanliness and dedicated purposes, they are murdered.

In contrast, the women of the neighboring town of Ruby are crisp, clean, proper, and obedient. What Morrison's novels would term funkiness has been diluted, squashed, or thwarted. "Certainly there wasn't a slack or sloven woman anywhere in town," the narrator tells us (8). In contrast to the Convent women's clothing, Soane Morgan's attire is crisp and expensive. She wore "expensive oxford shoes, sheer stockings, wool cardigan and [a tailored] dress: summer-weight crepe, pale blue with a white collar" (43). As is in *Sula* there are two female characters who serve as philosophical opposites in *Paradise*. These matriarchal figures are Connie of the convent and Soane of Ruby. Though the novel is peppered with strong female characters representing both philosophical poles, these two characters emerge as central to the narrative's evolution. Particularly in the case of *Paradise* Morrison's narrative seems uncomfortable with the future of the funky woman. In this novel all of the funky women are destroyed and live on only in a sort of mythologized version of the narrative. They take on a Christlike quality and come and go at will through the lives of people they have known in their pasts, loved ones, friends, family. Those two characters that do seem to thrive in the novel and continue on to carry a more liberal message of tolerance into the future of the town of Ruby are two misfits, Anna and Richard, two individuals who are not entirely inside or outside of the constructed circle of the town called Ruby. Interestingly, these characters are neither funky nor overly proper, they inhabit some middle ground between the two ways of existing. Both Anna and Richard are temperate in disposition, and these two characters, as well as some of Morrison's other characters, seem to suggest that the future of the African-American race lies neither in the funky nor the properly white and clean mode of existence. There is some other possibility, one of which I will argue Morrison, herself, is not entirely comfortable.

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