Chapter III

African-American Women as Subalterns: *Tar Baby, Beloved* and *Jazz*

The three novels that have been studied in the previous chapter highlight how certain Morrisonian characters remain suppressed in multiple ways and in different forms in American society. This is carried onward in Morrison’s next few novels which include some where we find fewer subalterns, while there are others littered with subalterns. One also finds that Morrison’s depiction of the subaltern in her different novels varies in degree and intensity. Her characters are rooted in reality and history which make her fictional world full of, what Barbara Christian says, “fantastic earthly realism” and “resonates with mixtures of pleasure and pain, wonder and horror.”¹

The fictional narratives of Morrison exhibit a likely problematic stance of the writer as to how to be free as well as situated and how to convert racial thinking into non-racial ideology. This stance involves her political and aesthetic choices. Her endeavour, nonetheless, remains to shape African-American experience within an imaginary space that gives not just expression but credibility to that experience. She also attempts to incorporate her own experience that better represents her ethnicity. As Lucille P. Fultz remarks, at the core of Morrison’s fiction is the issue of how to “construct race as a discursive subject and simultaneously create individual subjectivities and the possibilities for intersubjective relations.”²

Dissimilar to Eva in *Sula*, and Pilate in *Song of Solomon*, we come across Jadine Child, a grown up and educated version of Pecola Breedlove in
In fact, *Tar Baby* is the journey of a black woman who struggles to come to terms with her aspirations as a modern materialistic black woman as the metaphor of "tar" indicates. It is the struggle of a modern black woman for self-fulfilment. Jadine is a black woman who ultimately loses her roots from both the worlds, and becomes a double orphan, a pariah figure. At a very early age she has lost her father and mother, and is adopted by her uncle Sidney and aunt Ondine. As Sidney and Ondine work for a white family called the Streets, she is under the care and protection of Valerian and Margaret Streets. As a result, she loses her touch with the worlds of both the Streets and of the Childs. In Jadine Child, Morrison depicts the problems of a contemporary black woman.

Something else has also changed. The laboring poor of *The Bluest Eye*, the self-sufficient women and drifting men of *Sula*, the avaricious middle class and defiantly marginal citizens of *Song of Solomon*—they are gone, replaced, in *Tar Baby*, by the rich, their servants, their dependents, and the sans culottes who threaten their security. Though much is made of money, fashion, commodities as consciousness, and the experiences open to the privileged, the cultured, and those clever enough to hustle a piece of the action, the people living on Isle des Chevaliers, “voluntary exiles all, seem to inhabit a world that is oppressively parochial and provincial.”

Images of detachment, exile, and indecision pervade the novel and remain fixed presences throughout; thus, unlike *Song of Solomon*, for instance, there is a decided lack of transmutation in *Tar Baby*. Patrick Bryce Bjork suggests:
Each character, in one way or another, remains disconnected from identity and place, from community and memory; and whatever past they retain remains inaccessible, held separate by dreams and dream visions. Yet, like her earlier novels, even these fixed and complex images of lack continue to reflect and express the urgency, difficulty, and, in this novel perhaps, the impossibility of preserving a generational continuity and a collective (un)consciousness within an increasingly individual, fragmented Western culture.¹

The title of the novel, *Tar Baby* takes its point of departure from the old folk tale of briar rabbit: A farmer sets out a *Tar Baby* dressed in bonnet and skirt to trap a troublesome rabbit. The rabbit hits the *Tar Baby* when it does not answer 'Good morning.' He gets stuck and when caught he begs the farmer, "boil me in oil, skin me alive but please don't throw me in the briar patch." The farmer falls for the trick and throws him in the briar patch and the clever rabbit escapes.

In the context of this folktale, Jadine Child is a tar baby who traps Son, the black man who stands for Afrocentric values but falls a prey to the white materialistic values and the world order that is represented by Jadine. In addition to this, Morrison also suggests another meaning of the word *Tar Baby*:

I found that there is a tar lady in African mythology. I started thinking about her. At one time, a tar pit was a holy place, at least as important, because tar was used to build things....it held things together. For, the tarbaby comes to mean the black woman who can hold things together.
The story [the novel \textit{Tar Baby}] was a point of departure to history and prophecy.\textsuperscript{5}

It is this quality of tar—to hold things together—that Jadine is missing and as a result she acts as a \textit{Tar Baby} created by a farmer (the white man) to catch a rabbit (Son, the black man).

L'Arbe de la Croix, the magnificent tropical winter mansion that Valerian and Margaret Street own, serves as the site of repression, and as such, each character remains safely cloistered in the Isle's controlled freedom from difference and thus in its denial of lack. The household members appear to luxuriate materially and psychologically in their illusory peace, but in order to do so, they assume inarticulate, unempathic, or inaccessible positions. Individual experience unshared dominates the household scenes.

By situating the action of the novel on a Caribbean island far away from America, Morrison succeeds in universalizing the baneful impact of capitalism on man and nature. Though an American, Valerian Street becomes a sign, a symbol, a representative of white capitalism and imperialism which in its monstrous greed and lust has routinely inflicted severe violence upon diverse people of the world. Valerian Street is a retired, resigned, no longer vigorous or forceful industrialist, a former candy manufacturer who has inherited and brought to corporate success his family candy business. Now he has bought an island in the Caribbean “for almost nothing; built a house on a hill away from the mosquitoes . . . over the years, he sold off parts of it, provided the parcels were large and the buyers were discreet.”\textsuperscript{6}
The process of giving the island the shape of an independent colony owned by Valerian is similar to colonialism or capitalism. His authority symbolizes power which he exerts on the people who would come on the island. He has servants who are blacks and exerts his power and domination on them also. No doubt, they are not treated as slaves, but they still are under the pressure of white domination. Valerian also provides education to the niece of her house servant Jadine which, in a way, tears her apart from her ancestral African heritage. The creation of subalternity in this novel is indirect and discreet. But the suffering because of it is more a psychological one than at the physical level. This produces anxiety and loneliness in them which furthers their trauma and hence suffering.

The enslavement of people is interlinked artistically with the myth associated with the island when the novelist tells us how this island “three hundred years ago had struck slaves blind the moment they saw it.” (TB: 6) For the whites, the French horsemen with their steel sabers poised represent aggressive and brutal action, a necessary evil for development. As a result of the imperialist ideology of the whites, the island, once a subtropical paradise, is now the “end of the world,” an expression suggesting not only apocalypse and upheaval but also the hapless victim of exploitation. (TB: 7)

Valerian, when not enclosed in the silence of his greenhouse, speaks condescendingly to Margaret and often appears not to understand her thoughts or wishes. Margaret is alone in her hope that her now adult child will visit for Christmas. Sidney and Ondine offer variant views on their masters. He defends
Valerian's isolated mode of retirement. Ondine calls Margaret "the main bitch of the prince." (TB: 29) And although Sidney and Ondine are proud of their niece, both servants tend only to speculate about Jadine's motivations or intentions, and seldom communicate with her directly.

Jadine seems the most detached from the others. Her most engaging encounter in the household comes with her fur-skin coat. She lolls naked upon "the skins of ninety baby seals," and lets her body caress "its dark luxury." (TB: 77) From the reader's standpoint, the scene casts an unsympathetic light on Jadine as she uses her coat of dead babies for erotic stimulation. Not only in the juxtaposition of a nude Jadine with a fur coat does the scene reinforce her detachment and objectification, but it also suggests a symbolic imperviousness to her maternal "other."

With each character dreaming separate, inaccessible dreams, and each character detached physically and psychologically from one another, there exist no connections to the past, no clearly shared values, and no collective experience. As each character remains suspended in his or her individual assertions and experience, another character surfaces to append his own dream to the island paradise. A few days before Christmas and prior to Michael's expected visit, Margaret is shocked to discover a bedraggled black man hiding in her clothes closet. Sidney escorts the stowaway down to the dining room where Valerian, Margaret, and Jadine had earlier eaten dinner.

Morrison describes Jadine as a person who loses her identity as a black woman, internalizes the white values and forces Son, a criminal turned lover
and later on her husband, to abandon his identity as a black man. She internalizes white values so much so that like any other white woman, when she finds Son in her closet, she thinks that being a black man he would rape her. Son's response is very revealing:

"Rape? Why you little white girls always think somebody's trying to rape you?"

“What?” She was startled out of fury. “I’m not . . . you know I’m not white” (TB: 121)

Quite contrary to Jadine, Mr. Street protects Son and tries to help him. Jadine thinks that Mr. Street was mistaken. She says "I know you are an animal because I smell you." (TB: 121-122) The very act of smelling recalls the canine species. This is analogous to the act of: One dog sniffing at hindquarters of another, and the female, her back to him, not moving, but letting herself be sniffed, letting him nuzzle her asshole as the man had nuzzled hers, the bitch never minding that the male never looked in her face or ran by her side or that he had just come up out of nowhere, smelled her ass and struck penis in, humping and jerking and grinding away while she stood there bearing, actually bearing his whole weight... and other dogs too, waiting, circling until the engaged dog was through and then they would mount her also in the street in broad daylight no less, not even under a tree, or behind a bush, but right there on Morgan Street in Baltimore. (TB: 123-124)
It was in the background of this event, as a conscious person, Jadine decides at the age of twelve never to be broken in the hands of any man. However, she cannot escape from falling in love with Son.

Although Son never tries to rape anyone in the Street house, his body signifies an aggressive stance that defines power. From Jadine’s perspective, his hair is “physically overpowering, like bundles of long whips or lashes that could grab her and beat her to jelly.” (TB: 113) At other instance he behaves like a brute and “uncrossed her wrists and swung her around, holding her from behind in the vise of his arms. His chin was in her hair.” (TB: 121) In other words, Son shows the amorality of the trickster by refusing to recognize any limitations on his movements or his behaviour.

Son, in fact, symbolizes power that has a repressing note and creates fear and anxiety in Jadine. This is more a psychological oppression than a physical—one more traumatic, resulting in anxiety of existence. Jadine, in such instances becomes a subaltern who, though unmindful of her bitter experiences as a black American, suffers pangs of oppression from the man she would later live with.

Though Jadine is a black woman, she is an anti-thesis of the black folk and community values. She is Sorborne educated, widely traveled, leading the life of an internationally successful model, who keeps herself away from the black values and ancient properties and is ashamed of herself and her heritage. Michael, son of Margaret and Valerian, asks her as to why she was studying art history at a snotty school instead of studying the history of her own people and
her race. Thus, by neglecting the history of her race she rejects her real self and in place of it, she tries to transplant the white "self."

Though Sidney and Ondine are all the family she has, Valerian provides everything for her. But she never understands that Valerian has been taking care of her because her uncle Sidney and aunt Ondine have been working for the Streets all their lives. However, all the education that she receives, does not tell her anything about her own people and their history. Thus Jadine is trained, educated and brain washed to ignore her own history, culture and also the history and culture of African-American people. By living in a white house and by living in the proximity of white culture, she learns more about the whites and their values. Hence she considers Son as backward in the initial stage of their relationship and also later when she gets an opportunity to live with him in Eloe, the birth place of Son.

The very presence of Son in L'Abre de la Croix, the house of Streets, was repulsive to her in the beginning but later on her detestation turns into fascination for him. As a result, she falls in love with blackness. Son's very presence "restores something of her black awareness" and "prompts her to recall the guilt she felt two months before when a beautiful African woman in a canary yellow dress spit on her in disgust in a Paris street." It is the awareness of blackness that awakens her and generates passion.

Jadine steps away from the window so Yardman shouldn't see her nakedness, wondering what he would think of the black man in the guest room. She goes to bed where the skins of the ninety baby seals are sprawled. She lies on top of them and runs her fingertips through the fur. She presses her things
deep into its dark luxury. Then she lifts herself up a little and let her nipple brush the black hairs, back and forth, back and forth. Before this event, Jadine was also challenged in Paris by a black woman in yellow dress.

The vision of the black woman was too much for her. Under her long canary yellow dress, Jadine knows, there was too much hip, too much bust. The agency would laugh her out of the lobby, so why was she and everybody else in the store transfixed? Whether it was the height of the woman or her skin like tar against the canary yellow dress? The woman walked down the aisle as though her many colored sandals were pressing gold tracks on the floor. And again:

Jadine followed her profile, then her back as she passed the store window—followed her all the way to the edge of the world where the plate glass stopped. And there, just there—a moment before the cataclysm when all loveliness of life and breath in the world was about to disappear—the woman turned her head sharply around to the left and looked right at Jadine. Turned those eyes too beautiful for eyelashes on Jadine and with a small parting of her lips, shot an arrow of saliva between her teeth down to the pavement and the hearts below. (TB: 43)

The woman's apparent reaction to her has a tremendous and devastating effect on Jadine. Jadine is haunted by the thought of the woman and the look in her eyes as she spat at her. That "arrow of saliva" is clearly a sign of the African women's disdain for Jadine and what she represents, yet she “couldn't figure out why the woman's insulting gesture had derailed her, shaken her out
of proportion to incident. Why she had wanted that women to like and respect her?" (TB: 44)

Morrison shows Jadine's confusion about her cultural identity through her reaction to the African woman. Jadine is a black woman who has been hitherto playing by Western rules and values. After this incident in the market, Jadine begins questioning her life and the direction in which she is heading. She travels to the island to be with her relatives and benefactor in order to think and sort out her confusion. Thus her encounter with the "woman in yellow" causes her to realize that her acceptance of Western values has lost her the potential for exploring and realizing her own history and culture.

Jadine now seems to realize what it is to be a black and a black woman. Like any other African American suffering racial bigotry and indignities in the US, she finds it hard to remain supine in the social set-up. Her confrontation with the woman in yellow forces her to feel her own ethnic background and become conscious of what has remained in her unconscious. She attempts not to remain an oppressed being—a subaltern who could be victimized easily. That is why she comes to the island and grasps fully what it is that makes her ‘other’ and hence so different in the capitalist society.

Jadine is made to evaluate herself on the basis of a visual exchange and gestures that offer an external definition of self by the "other." No doubt she is not destroyed by the African woman's look. It becomes an important catalyst as the woman had made her feel lonely. Barbara Christian has aptly pointed out that Morrison uses the image of the African woman in the yellow dress as a symbol for the authenticity that the jaded Jadine lacks. It is this woman's inner
strength, beauty and pride manifested in the defiant stance of her body that haunts Jadine's dreams and throws her into such a state of confusion —"cultural confusion." However, once she accepts Son, she moves away from her whiteness to meet the genuine and authentic blackness represented by Son and his world.

In the company of Son, Jadine temporarily finds something that is restorative in his impulsiveness and powerful black pride. However, Son cannot live comfortably in Jadine's self destructive paradise. When Son takes her to his lost garden in Eloe, it is apparent that she cannot live in his world. For it is apparently a world of poverty, ignorance and isolation. Eloe, in fact, embodies all the "blackness" she had long struggled to escape from. Their trip to Eloe is also very important. It is on the island that she learns about authentic blackness and the love Son has for Jadine.

In her personal involvement with Son, Jadine rejects spontaneity for control, feeling for art. In the trip to Eloe, she rejects spiritual affinity with black people as well as the history that ties her specifically to black women. She sees the morality of the women as the height of the primitive and cannot see that their assumed poverty is really their refusal to give up self-control for welfare. Their doings and wants, to her mind, are at an elementary stage in the evolutionary cycle of sophistication with which she characterizes herself. Her life, in this way, is not about having forgotten her ancient properties; it is a refusal to recognize the existence or values of such properties. It is this refusal that makes a vacuity of belongingness in her and creates a subaltern out of her. This is done through the metaphor of her experiences of a non-black woman.
(for she has never experienced what it is to be a black in America) in a patriarchal set-up.

It is after this trip with Son that Jadine begins to confront her own inner ambiguities and tensions. On one occasion, for instance, she walks into the forest in order to get out of the swamp, and suddenly finds herself sinking in a quagmire. Mud covers her from her waist down and threatens to pull her in deeper. The image is that of a woman cut in half. Half of her covered with blackness, the other half white. The image highlights her wavering self that moves like a pendulum without any anchor or fixity. The more she comes to terms with being able to recognize her ethnic self the more she finds herself on the crossroads unable to decide what to choose and what to put off.

Thematically, *Tar Baby* is much tighter than Morrison’s earlier novels. It is a “highly realistic novel, full of the actual riddles, the unanswerable questions, of our present lives,” says Mayreen Howard. It is through the conversation or rather debate between Jadine and Son that the novelist explores the best way for blacks to be independent of the white man’s world. Their arguments, sometimes lengthy and tedious, vividly expose the novel’s racial tension. This tension is conveyed through suspicion and prejudices of the black characters. John Irving writes:

It is the white world that has created this, and in the constant warring between Sidney, Ondine, and Jadine, and between Jadine and Son... Morrison uncovers all the stereotypical racial fears felt by whites and blacks alike. Like any ambitious writer, she’s unafraid to employ these
stereotypes—she embraces the representative quality of her characters without embarrassment, then proceeds to make them individuals too.\(^\text{10}\)

What one witnesses in *Tar Baby* is the fact that Morrison has used European Americans as major characters in it. They would serve as “invisible foes,” Doreatha Drummond Mbaliia asserts, in earlier novels that are hindered at, referred to, laughed about, or ignored totally.\(^\text{11}\) This shows Morrison’s heightened class consciousness for she knows now the dialectical role they play as the ruling class in the African’s exploitation and oppression. While Pecola Breedlove struggles with the question of racial approbation, Sula struggles against the traditional role of African women, and Milkman struggles with the issues of race and class, the two protagonists in *Tar Baby* must struggle together to resolve their opposing class interests in order to unite. All these characters, nonetheless, become, in one way or the other, subalterns and suffer in numerous ways against a background of the existing power structure.

Unlike *The Bluest Eye, Sula, Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby* Morrison's *Beloved* deals with the life of a female slave, Sethe, who kills her own daughter called Beloved, to prevent her from the ancient suffering. Sethe's is an act of mercy killing; an act performed by a mother out of concern for her own daughter and her community. *Beloved* is a product of invention of Morrison's imagination, but it is based on a factual story. It grew out of one of her Random house projects, *The Black Book* (1974), a 'scrapbook' detailing three hundred years of the folk journey of black America.

In fact, Morrison became aware of the story of Margaret Garner when she was gathering materials for *The Black Book*. A fugitive from Kentucky,
Garner attempts to kill her four children rather than have them re-enslaved when they are all captured in Ohio in 1850. She succeeds in killing only one, whose throat she slashes with a handsaw. Acknowledging the sources while writing *Beloved* Morrison told Martha Darling:

I did research about a lot of things in this book in order to narrow it, to make it narrow and deep, but I did not do much research on Margaret Garner other than the obvious stuff, because I wanted to invent her life, which is a way of saying I wanted to be accessible to anything the characters had to say about it. Recording her life as lived would not make me available to anything that might be pertinent.  

Though *Beloved* in general is about slavery, it is not a call for the abolition of slavery as it is a story narrated to a twentieth-century audience. It is mainly a story of a black female slave who develops awareness about her own sub-human status on the Sweet Home Plantation which ultimately awakens and forces her to develop a “quest for meaning and wholeness in slavery and in freedom.” It records the cruelty, violence and degradation which makes a female slave, Sethe, to understand her situation and awakens her from deep slumber. Stanley Crouch states:

*Beloved*, above all else, is a blackface holocaust novel. It seems to have been written in order to enter American slavery into the big-time martyr contest, a contest usually won by references to, and works about, the experience of Jews at the hands of Nazis. As a holocaust novel, it includes disfranchisement, brutal transport, sadistic guards, failed and
successful escapes, murder, liberals among the oppressors, a big war, underground cells, separation of family members, losses of loved ones to the violence of the mad order, and characters who . . . have been made emotionally catatonic by the past.  

Crouch has made an incisive statement highlighting the plight of black Americans in the process of their enslavement by the whites. They would live a life of subordination and subjugation under white duress on the American continent. The characters in the novel, particularly the women, represent subalternity that has to bear the affronts of slavery and later of Jim Crow America.

At first reading *Beloved* strikes one as an unusually hybridized text—part ghost story, part historical novel, part slave narrative, and part love story. Indeed, some of its generic forms seem to rub shoulders, to co-exist uneasily, in a state of tension, if not antagonism. At the same time, *Beloved* can be seen both as a tragedy, involving a mother's moment of choice, and as a love story, exploring what it means to be a Beloved. In fact, it is the institution of slavery that supplies the logic underwriting the novel, the thematic glue that unifies this multifaceted text.

In its opening sentences, *Beloved* announces part of its generic identity in no uncertain terms:

124 was spiteful. Full of baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own
way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims. The grandmother, Baby Suggs, was dead, and the sons, Howard and Buglar, had run away by the time they were thirteen years old—as soon as merely looking in the mirror shattered it (that was the signal for Buglar); as soon as two tiny handprints appeared in the cake (that was it for Howard)... Each one fled at once—the moment the house committed what was for him the one insult not to be borne or witnessed a second time.\textsuperscript{15}

\textit{Beloved} is clearly a ghost story, dealing with the "spiteful" or "sad" or "rebuked" spirit of a baby girl who died in a horrible way some years previously. The girl, \textit{Beloved}, manifests herself initially as a poltergeist, haunting 124, Bluestone Road and those who have in some way betrayed her. Despite the fact that the spirit is a baby, she "throws a powerful spell." (B: 4) But Paul D., the last of the Sweet Home men, exorcises this ghost soon after his arrival, and the restless and relentless spirit is forced to take more drastic means.

She assumes a human shape, at the age she would have been had she lived, and returns to confront Sethe, the mother who has wronged her in two ways, first by murdering her, second by denying her. For eighteen years Sethe has been systematically keeping the past at bay, her days devoted to the "serious work of beating back the past" (B: 73). The reincarnation of \textit{Beloved} compels Sethe to confront her personal past, a past that up till then had been unspeakable, to come to terms with the fact that she murdered her baby
daughter. In this novel, then, "nothing ever dies," especially our private ghosts, the skeletons we think safely locked in our closets, at least until we put them to rest (B: 36). Because "anything dead coming back to life hurts," what Sethe must undergo is an agonizing private exorcism of her own. (B: 35)

Seen in this light, the novel takes on a supernatural character; it is a ghost story about one beleaguered woman's struggle with a real, but personal, demon. But Beloved is more than that. It is a novel that describes how a girl child is killed by her mother and how the dead girl attempts to evade her subaltern being. Though Sethe and Beloved both are subalterns, their sufferings are different. Sethe knew what it is to be a slave in America. Sethe's killing her own daughter was not out of spite or any negative notion. She killed the unnamed child because she wanted her not to witness the travails of slavery.

The murdered child identifies herself immediately after her appearance as "Beloved," the name that Sethe had had inscribed upon the unnamed baby's tombstone. She asks Sethe about the "diamond" earrings she (Sethe) used to wear, earrings that had been confiscated from Sethe during her imprisonment eighteen years earlier. Beloved has the skin and complexion of a newborn despite her eighteen years; her sole disfigurements—three parallel scratches on her forehead and a neck scar, "the little curved shadow of a smile in the kootchykootchy-coo place under her chin"—would seem to be the stigmata left from Sethe's assault upon her (B: 239). Finally, Beloved hums a song that Sethe had herself made up and sung to her children, a song no one else could
possibly know. Hearing the song, Sethe becomes convinced of "a miracle that is truly miraculous," the return of her baby girl (B: 176).

Until that point, however, Sethe believes that there is a naturalistic explanation for Beloved's appearance: "she believed Beloved had been locked up by some whiteman for his own purposes, and never let out the door. That she must have escaped to a bridge or someplace and rinsed the rest out of her mind" (B: 119). Morrison's dedication of the novel, to the "sixty million and more," points out a way of pursuing this line of reasoning. The dedication honors, Morrison says, "the number of black Africans who never made it into slavery—those who died either as captives in Africa or on the slave ships." The dedication suggests the possibility that Beloved might herself be one of those unfortunates who experienced the slave ship passage, presumably smuggled in sometime before the Civil War and the establishment of the Northern blockade.

This hypothesis proves to be a powerful instrument of naturalistic recuperation. For one thing, Beloved's previously obscure, if not opaque, monologue becomes accessible, if not transparent. The monologue reveals that Beloved is haunted by the slave ship experience; for her "it is always now there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too" (B: 210). Troubling references within the monologue—to the crouching, the men without skin (the white slavetraders), the dead man on Beloved's face, the rats, the iron circle on her mother's neck, the noisy clouds of smoke (from the slavetraders' guns)—can all be fitted into the passage
experience. This reading also explains Beloved's "unnatural" attachment to Sethe. The monologue specifies that the woman with Beloved's face (her mother) quite literally abandoned her daughter by throwing herself into the ocean:

I cannot lose her again my dead man was in the way like the noisy clouds when he dies on my face I can see hers she is going to smile at me she is going to her sharp earrings are gone the men without skin are making loud noises they push my own man through they do not push the woman with my face through she goes in they do not push her she goes in the little hill is gone she was going to smile at me she was going to.

(B: 212)

Beloved's mother goes in of her own accord; she prefers death to slavery (at about the same time Sethe is making a very different decision when confronted with very similar circumstances). Having been abandoned by her original mother, Beloved attaches herself to the reincarnation of that mother (Sethe) like a parasite.

All this is representative of the mental and psychological pressure that Beloved indirectly claims she has experienced. This involves fear and anxiety and a certain detachment that carries the burden of being a member of the oppressed class. The process of othering that a concerned reader may find here involves the dialectic of the subjugation and oppression attached to slavery.
behaving differently, symbolize multiple holdings of perception. They tend or attempt either to surrender before the powers and lose their individual beings or escape by jumping into the sea or throwing their infants into the sea just to be drowned. The whole episode throws light on how traumatic the experiences of the subalternity were which forced them to do all this.

Further, this and other episodes in *Beloved* highlight the adverse and destabilizing impact of slavery on the consciousness of the subaltern. Deborah Ayer Sitter has a point when she says that “the meaning of slavery’s impact on a people encompasses more than maternal love; it involves the way internalization of oppressors’ values can distort all intimate human relationships and even subvert the self.” We sometimes get baffled on the question: who is the beloved—Beloved or Sethe. For much of the novel Sethe is unable to recognize Beloved for slavery has denied her wholeness and motherhood. Beloved remains infatuated to her mother who becomes Beloved for the daughter. Pointing out the dehumanizing pressure of slavery, Elizabeth Ann Beaulien asserts:

Slavery’s debilitating impact reached beyond the institution of motherhood though. By denying the possibility of family, slavery not only disrupted the natural maternal bonding process a mother and her child share but denied all blacks, regardless of gender, participation in the most symbolic microcosm of American society.
Other references in the text fill in the rest of Beloved's history, confirming Sethe's original speculations about the girl. Beloved herself admits that she knew one white man (119). Presumably, he had kept her hidden and locked up her entire life, including a period of eight years after the end of the Civil War, using her for truly unspeakable purposes. This possibility is validated by a rumor Stamp Paid relates to Paul D.: "Was a girl locked up in the house with a whiteman over by Deer Creek. Found him dead last summer and the girl gone. Maybe that's her. Folks said he had her in there since she was a pup" (B: 235). The fact that the white man calls her "Beloved in the dark and bitch in the light" explains the name she chooses for herself. Other mysterious circumstances—the earrings, the scars, the song—can be accounted for by not-improbable incidents drawn from her personal history or from her close association with Denver in the days following her arrival at 124. In some such way, one can fully naturalize Beloved's existence, appearance, and behaviour. Beloved is in this reading the ultimate victim of slavery, a living reminder of the brutality of the institution.

The novel consistently foregrounds the relation of mother and child and the dangers and delights of mother love. Morrison has admitted elsewhere an interest in this relation:

One of the nice things that women do is nurture and love something other than themselves—they do that rather nicely. Instinctively, perhaps, but they are taught to do it, socialized to do it, or genetically predisposed
to do it —whatever it is, it's something the majority of women feel strongly about. But mother love is also a killer.¹⁹

The novel examines as to in what circumstances can mother love be a 'killer'. Can we relate this thematic framework, this discourse on maternal love, to the logic informing the novel's multigeneric identity?

Central to the issue of maternal love, at the ethical heart of the novel itself, is the tragic action that Sethe takes against her children, her loved ones, an action that she feels is "right because it came from true love" (B: 251). The normative dimension of the novel thus hinges upon our assessment of Sethe's action, about which there is certainly no critical consensus. Martha Bayles blasts the novel, just because it excuses Sethe from "lasting blame": "a slave commits a crime, but it is not really a crime because it was committed by a slave. The system, and not the slave, stands unjustly condemned for a deed that would possess another meaning if committed in freedom." ²⁰ In a similar vein, Stanley Crouch argues that the novel tends to exonerate Sethe:

[It] explains black behavior in terms of social conditioning, as if listing atrocities solves the mystery of human motive and behavior. It is designed to placate sentimental feminist ideology, and to make sure that the vision of black women as the most scorned and rebuked of victims doesn't weaken.²¹

What is necessary to notice through such remarks is the tragic character of a subaltern unable to decide how to bring up a girl who is a subaltern like her.
The oppressed mother is rather forced by the racist dehumanizing pressure of the whites to kill her daughter.

The novel's treatment of slavery makes clear that the institution perverts the relation between Self and Other, master and slave, by dehumanizing both the parties:

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 to this place 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. Touched them every one. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly, worse than 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. (B: 98-99)

As Margaret Atwood has noted, slavery serves in the novel as a "paradigm of how most people behave when they are given absolute power over other people." As the above passage graphically depicts, such power reduces people to animals, a truth brought chillingly home to Paul D. when he is forced to wear a bit in his mouth after an aborted escape attempt. Sethe's eyes are opened to the reality of her status at Sweet Home when she realizes that to the
schoolteacher she is nothing but a creature whose value is determined in an accounts ledger enumerating her human and animal characteristics.

Slaves as animals, slaves as objects, slaves as commodities —the common denominator here is the denial of selfhood to the slave, the conversion of the Other into an Object, the reduction of human beings into checkerpieces, counters, or commodities. This motif figure is most forcefully in Baby Suggs’s personal history: in the way in which her seven children are taken from her only to disappear forever; in the fact that for most of her adult life she has no name but Jenny, the name on her bill of sale. When her owner finally asks her what she calls herself, her response is telling: "Nothing . . . I don't call myself nothing" (B: 142). Insofar as she is characterized by a "desolated center where that self that was no self [makes] its home," she is indeed nothing (B: 140).

The novel makes it clear that this denial of humanity and selfhood takes place even under the more benign forms of slavery, such as Garner's, as Paul D. comes to realize: "Garner called and announced them men —but only on Sweet Home, and by his leave. Was he naming what he saw or creating what he did not? . . . Did a whiteman saying make it so? Suppose Garner woke up one morning and changed his mind? Took the word away" (B: 220). In the master/slave relation, definitions belong to the definer —not the defined, and there can be for the latter no sense of self-definition. Such is the inexorable logic of slavery. In extreme circumstances, such logic leads from personal degradation to self-annihilation, from debasement to extinction.
It is an awareness of this extremity that Sethe acts on when she tries to destroy her children:

That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself no more. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up. And though she and others lived through it and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own (B: 251).

And, the novel says, if one contests or rejects the logic of slavery, as Sixo does, then one is quite literally reduced to nothing.

A sense of self is thus contingent upon personal freedom and autonomy. In this respect, Baby Suggs's son Halle, a slave all his life, is instinctively wise; he knows that there is nothing like freedom in this world, that it is the most precious gift he can give his mother. When Baby Suggs at last breathes the air of freedom, she looks at her hands and realizes that they belong to her; she becomes aware, for the first time, of the beating of her heart. In a very real sense she takes possession of herself; at the same time she assumes her rightful name. Sethe experiences a similar kind of ego formation immediately after her arrival at 124: "Bit by bit, at 124 and in the Clearing, along with the others, she had claimed herself. Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (B: 95). Indeed, Sethe draws upon the agonies endured during her desperate escape attempt in order to construct and validate
that selfhood, a selfhood she identifies with those she has suffered for, as she later tells Paul D.:

I did it. I got us all out. Without Halle too. Up till then it was the only thing I ever did on my own. Decided. And it came off right, like it was supposed to. We was here. Each and every one of my babies and me too. I birthed them and I got them out and it wasn't no accident. I did that. I had help, of course, lots of that, but still it was me doing it, me saying Go on and Now. Me having to look out. Me using my own head. But it was more than that. It was a kind of selfishness I never knew nothing about before. It felt good. Good and right. I was big, Paul D., and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. I was that wide. (B: 162)

Given the circumstances, Sethe's is a story of personal triumph, but her telling of it is troubling. The frequent recurrence of the first person pronoun in the speech, for example, indicates the extent to which Sethe's identity is connected with this experience. This identification of her selfhood with the fates of her children, this "selfishness," determines Sethe's subsequent actions and informs our judgment of them.

The fact is that Sethe so identifies her Self with the well-being of her children that she denies their existence as autonomous Others, in so doing unconsciously perpetuating the logic of slavery. The root cause of Sethe's action is indeed the institution of slavery, whose most terrible legacy is an
awful logic of human relationship. The novel "drives home the meaning of slavery," one critic notes, by showing how, within Sethe, "the roles of master and slave, mother and child, have been fused." And yet, as Paul D. argues, Sethe's action was not only futile but also counterproductive; the novel acknowledges the awful power of slavery but finally holds Sethe responsible, insists that there had to be "some other way" (B: 165). At one point Sethe says that she "wouldn't draw breath without her children" (203). It is this conflation of Self and Other that underwrites Sethe's justification of her actions: "The best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty her all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful magical best thing -- the part of her that was clean" (B: 251). The language Sethe uses here suggests that she has both appropriated and depersonalized her children. It is this aspect of Sethe's love that shocks Paul D., forcing him to condemn her: "This here Sethe talked about love like any other woman; talked about baby clothes like any other woman, but what she meant could cleave the bone. This here new Sethe didn't know where the world stopped and she began" (164).

When Paul D. condemns Sethe, telling her that "what you did was wrong," he adds that there has to be "some other way" (B: 165). Sethe denies the possibility of alternatives, but other episodes in the novel tend to undercut that blanket denial. The action of Beloved's mother on the slave ship represents one such alternative — suicide, the extinction of the self. Sethe's own action at the end of the novel—attacking the master who would deny the Selfhood of the
other—represents another alternative. Indeed, it has been argued that it is just this action, Sethe's turning on the enslaver in order to save her best thing, that serves to exorcise her personal ghost and enables her to get on with her life.

The alternative to "thick love," the kind of love that subsumes the identity of the other, is the love that Sethe manifests for Paul D., love that respects the integrity and inviolability of the loved one. Sixo explains the kind of love he shares with Thirty-Mile Woman as follows: "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" (B: 272-73). This kind of love befriends the other, gathers up the fragmented pieces of the Other, restores the other to itself. Only after Sethe has learned the limits of love, the reciprocity of love, only then do she and Paul D. have a future; only then can they look forward and not backward. The two of them, Paul D. says at the end of the novel, have had too much yesterday and not enough tomorrow.

Morrison seems to suggest that a black American is always insecure in a capitalist society marked by the Jim-Crow attitude. For Morrison's characters, African Americans in a racist, slave society, there is no reliable Other to recognize and affirm their existence. The mother, the child's first vital other, is made unreliable or unavailable by a slave system which either separates her from her child or so enervates and depletes her that she has no self with which to confer recognition on the child. The consequences on the inner life of the
The novel also suggest a second functionality of an oppressed class — ventilation of one’s anger, resentment, and humiliation onto the members of its own class. D Scot Hinson maintains that in *Beloved*, the community denies its propensity to focus its anger and humiliation on its weaker members:

The community represses and is unable to identify the violence, white oppression that is the root of its collapse and entrapment in cycles of violence. Consequently, Beloved labors to return to the more immediate origins of violence in the community, a system of slavery that pits members of the same community against each other, creating conflicts that must be reckoned with before the community can find peace in the present. Those horrors from the past constantly intrude on the text, dominating both it and the lives of Beloved's characters, demanding that they be acknowledged and worked through as past.  

*Beloved* departs from Morrison's other novels in its willingness to identify slavery and white oppression as a source of violence in African American communities. Morrison depicts how, when a white man rides into Sethe's yard to take her and her children back into slavery, she strikes out at one of her own, exerting herself in the only way possible in the face of the violence of slavery. She shows how Beloved's murder triggers a chain of reciprocal violence that entangles the community in the past and initiates a plot...
which is equally bound to the past. The community's crisis of violence is reflected in a recursive narrative pattern, shaped out of repetitions and returns of the repressed memories of white violence in slavery. Through this recursive narrative, *Beloved* speaks the unspeakable secret of violence in the African American community.

Toni Morrison takes us to the streets of Harlem and its Jazz age in her next novel *Jazz* (1992). Like her earlier novels, she represents her community and portrays its dramatic oppressed life in this novel. *Jazz* in fact, is the product of slavery, segregation, poverty, and disenfranchisement. In addition to this, it is many things: a complicated anger, the carefree indulgence of the now; a marginalized population's assertion of selfhood, of cultural vitality and artistic pride; the hope for musical synthesis through conflict. Created in an era of socially sanctioned African-American invisibility and stigmatization, it is also the affirmation of individual and group worth: the soul's manifestation of its love for its complement, the rejected flesh. A tribute to the soul's resilience, it is ultimately one process through which it may heal itself.

The novel involves a love triangle set in the Harlem of the 1920s, when Afro-American people were searching for better life and trying to deal with the still strong memories of slavery. The character of Dorcas, the sexy young girl who becomes the middle-aged Joe Trace's lover (she is dead in the present of the story), is complex. Though on the one hand she is a *femme fatale* and home wrecker, Morrison shows us she is actually unsure of her attractiveness, having been rejected by a young man her own age. Dorcas seems to base her sense of
worth on her ability to attract men, and turns to Joe to prove this to herself. Her discarding of Joe, a man who really likes women, for the younger Acton, a conceited woman-hater, precipitates Joe's murder of her.

Equally interesting is Violet, Joe's rejected wife, who neglects to have children and then in her fifties finds herself taking a baby from a carriage. She develops a friendship with Dorcas's Aunt Alice that is full of an unspoken closeness both women obviously come to cherish. To some extent, Alice is one of Morrison's thin brown girls, but she is rendered much more sympathetically than in earlier novels. The most fascinating character is Joe's mother, a crazed wild woman who abandoned Joe as a baby and lives in caves.

In an interesting twist on the males searching for their fathers, Joe longs to make contact with this enigmatic mother, but he never gets her to speak. She appears to exist in that preverbal "wild zone" that Morrison characters, male and female, sometimes penetrate, usually deriving some revelation beyond the words of the patriarchy. She is, Katherine B. Payant suggests, “a haunting image of the hurt the world inflicts on women,” but she is also the “frightening image of the untamed woman entirely outside the laws of the fathers.”

In the story, we find a variety of oppressed class—a young woman made ‘other’ by her lover’s rejection, a man psychologically suppressed by the abandonment of his parents, and a wife mentally disturbed by her husband’s love affair with a young girl. The mother of Joe represents a woman who is turned into a subaltern because of reasons unexplained in the text.
Morrison has written about human passion all her life, but never more systematically than in *Jazz*. She begins by choosing the title because the word originally was a slang term for sexual passion, and of course because the same word attached itself to the most famous kind of black American music, a special kind of music that aspires to come from and produce pure emotion. Appropriately, the text itself then begins with a sound rather than a word as such. "Sth," begins the narrator, and from then on the story flows like an extended piece of progressive, improvised *Jazz*.

Like many *Jazz* pieces, the novel has a fast opening, establishing a dominant note and theme, and then it breaks into different parts — various stories (passages) and voices (instruments); various motifs, images, and relative themes. Talking about the novel and its basic preoccupation, Karen Carmean writes:

As the novel—*Jazz* piece goes on, it comes back again and again to the dominant issue of human passion. The energizing, life-giving force of *Jazz* originates from mystery, continues with surprises, and ends in a sense of renewal; and this is how the novel works, too. *Jazz* is inspired by the whole range of human feelings. As the complicated story moves along, it modulates back and forth in sometimes very unexpected ways. In the end, human passion is urged on as a creative force, with the narrator telling us that we (the readers, the listeners, and by implication also the participants in the whole story) are "free" to "remake."
The novel incorporates several things. There is, no doubt, Jazz musicality but, at the same time, there are romantic or erotic experiences which are combined with history. Of the intersection of Jazz music, history, and the erotic in the novel, Morrison states:

At that time, when the ex-slaves were moving into the city, running away from something that was constricting and killing them and dispossessing them over and over and over again, they were in a very limiting environment. But when you listen to their music—the beginnings of Jazz—you realized that they are talking about something else. They are talking about love, about loss. But there is such grandeur, such satisfaction in those lyrics.... the/re never happy —somebody's always leaving —but they're not whining. It's as though the whole tragedy of choosing somebody, risking love, risking emotion, risking sensuality, and then losing it all didn't matter, since it was their choice. Exercising choice in who you love was a major, major thing. And the music reinforced the idea of love as a space where one could negotiate freedom. For some black people Jazz meant claiming their own bodies. You can imagine what that must have meant for people whose bodies had been owned, who had been slaves as children, or who remembered their parents' being slaves. Blues and Jazz represented ownership of one's own emotions.²⁶

Morrison got her idea for Jazz from a book of photographs of dead Harlem residents entitled The Harlem Book of the Dead, for which she wrote
the Introduction. One of the pictures shows a young girl who had been shot at a
dance in 1925. She invented a name for the girl, Dorcas Manfred. Then she
invented the events leading up to, and following, her death. These events form
one of the two major strands of the novel’s narrative. The other strand has to do
with the ancestry of the girl, of the girl’s married lover, Joe Trace, and of his
wife, Violet. The events of this second strand of narrative go back to the
Reconstruction period in the late nineteenth century. What the two parts of the
novel’s plot have in common is the theme of the failure of love.

_Jazz_ has ten sections, many more than Morrison’s earlier novels. The
sections are often subdivided, with extra blank spaces providing a visual gap
between parts of the text. Completely blank pages separate the larger sections.
This typography accents the large number of sections and subsections to create
a sense of disconnection between the novel's segments. Overall, the novel tells
the story of Joe and Violet Trace over more than fifty years. Both are born in
rural Vesper County, Virginia, and orphaned young. Joe's mother abandons
him to a neighboring family. Violet's father must be absent because his political
activities are so dangerous. Unable to cope alone with the financial and
emotional difficulties of her young family, Violet's mother, Rose Dear, goes
mad. Joe and Violet marry young. When the nearby town of Vienna is burned
by vengeful whites, they leave the Virginia countryside for New York City.

New York, presented as the City throughout the novel to designate it as
an active character, becomes a refuge for the African Americans suffering
subjugation and exploitation from the racist whites. In an atmosphere full of the
Jim Crow attitude, Rose goes mad as she is unable to cope up with the grim situation she surrenders before. She is a subaltern who loses her existence because of the forces powerful enough to humble down an African American in America. Even Joe and Violet have to leave Vienna for their ethnic background. They become homeless in a country that boasts of being just, equal and egalitarian. That the black Americans suffer because of the corruptive influence of racism prevalent in America is noticeably evident in the novel.

Joe and Violet, however, enjoy the City, their financial status improves, and all appears well until, in late middle age, Violet begins to long for a child. When she withdraws emotionally, Joe feels abandoned again. Joe chooses a sixteen-year-old girl, Dorcas, as his lover. After some months, she prefers a boy of her own age to Joe. Joe follows Dorcas to a party and shoots her while she is dancing to Jazz. Refusing to go to a hospital or to reveal Joe's identity, Dorcas bleeds to death from a shoulder wound. Violet causes a scene in the funeral home by stabbing Dorcas's corpse.

At this point, it should not be forgotten that a woman in a patriarchal society is doubly oppressed. This is clearly obvious in the case of Dorcas who is an oppressed class herself. The life of this young girl highlights how an old man attempts to make the girl an ‘other’ for his exploitation and use. Morrison has very finely portrayed the process which involves the suppression of one man by the other at multiple levels.
As Joe, Violet, and Dorcas's aunt Alice try to figure out the meanings of these events, the reader learns piecemeal about much of their past experience. Violet establishes relationships with Alice and with one of Dorcas's friends, Felicity. Felicity frequently visits Joe and Violet, who re-establish their emotional intimacy.

The novel opens with the narrator gossiping about Violet who has disrupted the funeral of a young girl by knifing the corpse. Later we learn her husband's name, Joe Trace, and the girl's name, Dorcas. The attack is only Violet's first vengeful act. Later, she takes a silly revenge on Joe by conducting a brief, meaningless affair in their home.

The narrator suggests that Violet's actions stem from the long-ago suicide of her mother, Rose Dear. Although Violet's grandmother, True Belle, arrived to rescue her daughter from destitution and loneliness, Rose Dear did not recover from her emotional paralysis. Mentioning that True Belle tells Violet and her sisters stories about a boy named Golden Gray, the narrator hints that he will be important to our later understanding of the Traces.

Finally, the narrator notes some of Violet's oddities. Wanting a child so much, she half-consciously kidnaps a baby and, when caught immediately, indignantly denies it—and believes herself to be telling the truth. Violet becomes increasingly inward-focused and less aware of the external world. Once she simply sits in the street to rest, and she often makes mistakes in choosing words. By the end of the first section, the narrator has communicated
the outlines of Violet's history, which are fleshed out in sections Four and Six. Joe's story is largely delayed until sections Five and Seven.

What one observes in the case of Violet is her odd behavior at certain places which, after a close analysis, may be the result of the maltreatment she has received from the people in power. Living in a patriarchal society where man overpowers woman, her craziness can be seen as an outrage of the suppressed annoyance and antipathy which destroy her inner calm and reasoning. The emotional betrayal of her husband seems to have shaken her mind leading to her illogical or maverick behaviour. We rather find her oddities to be a result of the subaltern consciousness she suffers from. The cruel act or the attempt of cutting the head of the dead Dorcas is more a result of this consciousness than the will to avenge.

Section Two of the novel narrates the past actions and shows Joe and Dorcas exchanging information about their lost mothers. Joe bonds emotionally with Dorcas, unaware that she remains aloof. To facilitate their love trysts, Joe rents a room from a neighbor, Malvonne. Section Three introduces a new character, Alice Manfred, who is watching the July 1917 march protesting the East St. Louis riot that has killed both parents of her seven-year-old niece Dorcas. Alice emerges as a repressed woman who fears the energies of the new music, Jazz. In rearing Dorcas, Alice passes on her parents' fear of sexuality. After Dorcas's death, Alice ponders womanhood and analyzes why particular women become victims. This section includes Joe's first, accidental meeting with Dorcas and Violet's initial visit to Alice after the girl's death. In Violet's
presence, Alice remembers for the first time in many years her own violent potential when she was faced with her husband's infidelity.

Violet meditates on herself, feeling split off from the woman who stabbed Dorcas's corpse. To make sense of her experience, she considers her past. Choosing Joe as a husband, she realizes, had something to do with her grandmother's stories of Golden Gray. Naturally she drifts into thinking about what brought her grandmother, True Belle, into her childhood home. Hearing that Violet's mother, Rose Dear, has been left destitute with five children, True Belle arrives with financial and emotional support. She is too late for Rose Dear, who commits suicide by jumping in a well. Two weeks after her death, her husband returns. Only at this point does the reader learn the reason for his long absence: his work for civil rights has made it too dangerous for him to live openly in Virginia. The teen-aged Violet cannot figure out what made her mother's life unbearable and decides not to have children.

In the novel there are instances which relate to the history of America. During the 1920s when Harlem was in vogue, the African Americans engaged in civil rights movement were lynched mercilessly and their families hanged cruelly after being molested. That the husband of Rose left her destitute was not because of reason other than this that he was a fighter—a soldier fighting for his community—for equality, justice, and freedom from the Jim Crow attitude. People like him were always subalterns going through sufferings on account of difference of their colour and features.
In the novel's present, we find Joe sketching his life, noting that he has recreated himself seven times. He remembers his early life as the Williamses' informally adopted child, then his training in woodcraft with a man so expert that he is called Hunters Hunter. Joe's recollections follow major social events such as the 1893 burning of his Virginia hometown, his move to the City with Violet in 1906, the riots and protest march of 1917, and their personal disaster of 1925, when Violet begins to sleep with a doll. Joe is proud of choosing Dorcas as his lover, feeling that this is his first choice because Violet chose him for a partner.

*Jazz*, like her other novels, traces the painful history of her ethnicity. John Leonard asserts that this novel is about “dispossession and haunting. Novel by novel, Toni Morrison reimagines the lost history of her people, their love and work and nightmare passage and redemptive music.” In sharp compassionate vignettes, plucked from different episodes of their lives, the novelist portrays people who are put together simply because they were put down together, people tricked for a while into believing that life would serve them. They are shown powerless to change their fate against a background of racial bigotry.

In Section Six, the narrator mentions True Belle's attempt to rescue Rose Dear, then segues into True Belle's earlier life in Baltimore. There Rose Dear lived with the white woman who originally owned her, Vera Louise, and Vera Louise's child, Golden Gray. The narrator imagines and then reimagines eighteen-year-old Golden Gray's life after Vera Louise reveals that he is not
wholly white (as he has always assumed) but of mixed race. In the narrator's scenario, Golden Gray sets out to find and perhaps kills his black father. Unsure even of his father's name, he is looking for "Henry LesTroy." (The man is really named Henry Lestory, and he has the nickname Hunters Hunter.) On the way Golden sees a pregnant, naked young black woman who knocks herself unconscious fleeing from him. Carrying her in his buggy, he arrives at the empty cabin belonging to his father.

Morrison’s characters are always engaged in the struggle of their authentic life in an environment of white duress. Golden Gray and Joe keep searching their roots in the process of becoming and leave their subaltern self behind. Philip Page argues in this connection:

[T]hroughout Morrison's fiction, her characters are caught in the endless flux of becoming. In their multiple quests for viable identities, they must negotiate within the white/black polarity, and their explorations into their roles and identities are skewed because that pervasive and unyielding polarity leads to the displacement of additional polarities. Her characters have trouble developing fulfilled selves because they lack adequate relationships with one or more others, such as parents, spouse, family, neighborhood, community, and/or society. 28

The narrator continues to construct Golden Gray's experiences. Henry Lestory returns to his cabin to discover for the first time that he has a son. Both men are distracted by the presence of the unconscious girl, whom Henry
christens "Wild." Wild's baby is born, but she has no motherly instincts or training. Although the novel never explicitly states who the baby is, the reader assumes that it is Joe.

The narrative then turns to thirteen-year-old Joe, who is looking for his mother amid the chaos of Vienna's burning. He makes two more searches for her in later years, the last after he and Violet have married. This search leads him to an underground lair that has clearly been inhabited because it contains the remains of a cooking fire—and clothing that probably belonged to Golden Gray. The story of Joe's last search for Wild is interrupted by a section from Joe's consciousness more than twenty years later, when he is tracking Dorcas to the party where he shoots her. She feels no pain, just weakness and a growing distance from the world around her. Morrison seems to link Dorcas, Stephen Knadler states, “with a familiar image of black female identity that both challenges and reinforces the idea of the abnormal normal hysteric, she attempts to do more than replace one image of femininity with another. She wants to create a revisionist historical novel that will then become a lens for reading backwards into the distorted system of gender codes in the Harlem Renaissance.”

Felicity makes her first visit in search of a ring that Dorcas had borrowed and may have been buried with. Felicity particularly wants the ring because her mother stole it for her after a jeweler in Tiffany's treated them disrespectfully. Felicity describes her life with her grandmother, who cares for her. Her parents, who are servants, are allowed to be with her for only two and
a half days of every three weeks. On her second visit, Felicity tells Joe and Violet how Dorcas died. Felicity is angry that Dorcas did not fight dying, that she did not allow anyone to call an ambulance. Then Felicity reveals Dorcas’s last words, which connect to an earlier conversation between Joe and Dorcas.

Alice Manfred moves from the City. Felicity maintains her attractive independence. Joe and Violet re-form their lives, with new jobs and renewed emotional intimacy. Lying peacefully in bed with Violet, Joe sees the image of a wounded shoulder metamorphosing into a red-winged black bird, the bird associated with Wild. The novel ends with the narrator speaking directly to the reader: “make me, remake me . . . Look where your hands are. Now.”

The reader's hands are presumably holding the book, so that the narrator's words are an invitation to make and remake interpretations. The novel ends here, about for which Elizabeth M. Cannon says:

At the end of *Jazz*, Morrison leaves us with an understanding of black female desire as a desire antithetical to dominant desire and steeped in the need to recognize women as subjects. What is new in her understanding of female desire is its need of violent as well as creative elements. What becomes hazy is whether Morrison is speaking only of a black female desire or is theorizing a more universal concept of female desire seen in a new light because of the African-American context of *Jazz* and the Harlem of the 1920s.
To stop the characters from running away with the story, the narrator delves into their past and the lives of their ancestors. In addition, the narrator adds meditations on the influence of *Jazz*—particularly, sexually explicit *Jazz* lyrics—on the attitudes of people during the time between 1919 and 1929. She also adds descriptions of the ambience of New York at different times of the year, with a heavy emphasis on the changing of the seasons. The text, for its narrative quality, seems to speak of a lot of things simultaneously. Martha J. Cutter calls *Jazz* an excellent example of not only a “speakerly text, a talking book, but an extremely open text” seen from the perspective of contemporary reader oriented critical practices.³²

While the narrative of *Jazz* is not linear, it spells out Morrison’s philosophical idealism more clearly than her previous novels. In the middle of this novel, which is called by Anne-Marie Paquet-Deyris, “an aesthetic of displacement,” Joe Trace goes to track down his mother, whom he has never seen and who supposedly lives alone in a cave deep in the woods.³³ He finds the cave, but the person living there has apparently just left. As Joe comes out of the cave, he senses that someone is hiding in the underbrush nearby. He calls out:

“Is it you? Just say it. Say anything.” ...“Give me a sign, then. You don’t have to say nothing. Let me see your hand. Just stick it out someplace and I’ll go; I promise. A sign.” He begged, pleaded.... “You my mother?” Yes. No. Both. Either. But not this nothing. (J: 178)
This passage reflects Morrison’s rejection of the nihilism that is still fashionable among many contemporary writers and critics. Unwilling to accept nothingness, Morrison keeps looking for signs of transcendence. This, for an African American may be a passport to temporarily forget the status of being a subaltern and fly in the imaginary world full of hope and solace.

Like her earlier novels, Morrison’s *Tar Baby, Beloved* and *Jazz* portray how African-American women, under the white duress, suffer at many levels. Jadine loses her ethnic self when she attempts to emulate the white concepts. She fails in this attempt and seems to be removed away from the white consciousness finding herself lost. She is a representative African American subaltern who is misguided severally by her own instincts and also by the environment she has been brought up in. Like her uncle and aunt, she voluntarily exiles herself from her ethnic self while living in an oppressive parochial world. Her attempts to internalize white values forces Son to abandon his identity as a black man making him doubly others. L'Arbe de la Croix, in fact, is a site of oppression where we see the baleful impact of capitalism on the marginalized people displacing their real self into others.

The experiences and lives of black community in America receives emphatic note in *Beloved* where we find a black woman killing her infant daughter. Sethe, a female slave, kills Beloved just to save the child the pangs of slavery and its fragmenting effects. The novel is about attempts of the black slaves to uncage themselves from the harsh and cruel world of slavery and the hurdles involved in it. Consequently, we find the characters suffering on many
accounts and their attempts to escape the nullifying effects of their oppressed life. The irony of the situation in the novel is quite interesting. Sethe, we find, is a tormented soul who is turned into a subaltern not only by white hegemony but also by her own murdered daughter. She remains haunted throughout her life whether by the white masters or by her own child.

The same note of resentment and anger against the white duress is visible in *Jazz* where we find the black community’s multilayered oppressed life in America. Through the characters of Dorcus and Violet, Morrison has highlighted the subjugated life of the African American women. We also find a variety of oppressed class—a young woman made ‘other’ by her lover’s rejection, a man psychologically suppressed by the abandonment of his parents, and a wife mentally disturbed by her husband’s love affair with a young girl. The mother of Joe represents a woman who is turned into a subaltern because of reasons unexplained in the text.
References


16. Quoted in Otten, p. 83.


